

Frank and Marina

By Kate Simon

Marina stared out the window at the ocean as Frank drove down the PCH but he beautiful scenery was lost on her. He'd convinced her to go back to her home in LA. She still wasn't sure it was a good idea. The few days she'd spent with her brother Jake and his girlfriend, Mike had been the only time she'd been able to relax in the last three months. Now she had to go back to her house in LA, back to her agents and managers and all the other people who circled her like satellites.

"Are you in any romantic relationships?" Frank asked.

"You haven't spoken in thirty minutes and that's the first thing you think of?"

"I've been sorting through the facts. Whether or not you're in any relationships is relevant to this investigation."

"What's your middle name?" asked Marina.

"What? What's that got to do with anything?"

"I want to know. Mine's Valentina."

"Why do you need know?" he asked.

"Because I'm not safe in my own home!" she yelled. "Because I need an armed guard. Because I've been working in this business for twenty years and became so successful I can't breathe. Because I want to know. So, tell me, God damn it! What's your middle name!"

Frank glanced over at her looking stunned. "Josiah."

Marina smiled and leaned back on the head rest. "Josiah," she said quietly. I like it. Strong. Old school. "Frank Josiah."

"Franklin," he said.

"Even better. Franklin Josiah Nash." She closed her eyes. "It's a good name."

"Thank you. Now, can you answer my question?"

"What question?" she asked without opening her eyes.

"Are you involved with anyone?"

"No. Not for a long time."

"How long?"

Her eyes snapped opened and she looked at him. "Excuse me?"

"How long? What about that was unclear?"

"Two years," she said quietly. "I've answered enough questions for now." She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

What the hell had Jake gotten him into? He owed Jake. His last mission would have gone sideways without him. When he called and said his sister needed help he said yes without hesitation. That was before he knew exactly who his sister was. Marina Sokolov, international movie star and tabloid favorite. He'd worked with enough movie stars, male and female, to know they were a giant pains in the ass. Like spoiled toddlers on a sugar rush. They want what they wanted when they wanted it. She hadn't seemed like that at first. Not until this thing with his name. What the hell was that about?

He knew who she was, of course. Who didn't? It meant his suspect pool was half the planet. He'd seen some of her movies and she was really good. Better than most critics gave her credit for. It was as if they thought anyone that beautiful couldn't possibly have anything going for them except their looks. God help him, she was beautiful. The most beautiful woman he'd ever met. Her dark brown hair framed her crystal blue eyes and high cheekbones. She was about five foot eight with beautiful curves barely concealed by her loose clothing. The one thing that struck him was she didn't wear a stitch of makeup. The only adornment she wore was a small pair of earrings that looked like tiny stained glass windows. He glanced over at her, watching her pretending to sleep. For a split second he saw her in his bed, curled next to him but he chased the image from his mind. It was natural he told himself. She was a beautiful woman. A much younger woman, but beautiful, stunningly beautiful. But she was definitely off limits. She was his friend's sister, someone under his protection.

He could understand why she was apprehensive about going back to LA. Stalkers were hard to catch, especially when they hadn't yet crossed the legal line. Frank had no intention of waiting for that. He wasn't sure she was ready to hear his plan, but he was pretty sure it would work.

She said she hadn't been in a relationship for two years. Was that the truth? If so, how was it possible? How could one of the most beautiful women in the world be so alone?

Marina had managed to fall asleep in the car. She woke when they pulled into a rest stop and Frank pulled up to the pump.

"I'm going to fill up. Do you want anything?"

"I could use a bathroom and a water."

"Okay, let me fill up and then I'll pull the car up to the rest room. Do you have a hat or sunglasses?"

"Yes, but I'm just going to the bathroom. No one will notice me, not looking like this."

He gave her a look that made her heart jump. "Someone like you can't help but be noticed, even dressed like that."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Frank rooted through his wallet for his credit card, apparently trying not to look at her. "People can't help but notice you." When he tried to get out of the car she grabbed his arm.

"Did you just give me a compliment, Josiah?"

He gave her a stern look. "The name's Frank, and I was just stating facts. Now stay put."

She watched as he got out of the car and went to the gas tank. Damn, he was infuriating. Interesting, obviously intelligent and drop dead gorgeous, but infuriating as hell. This was going to be a long road trip.

Frank filled the tank and got back in the car. He pulled up as close as he could to the ladies room without blocking the door. When she tried to get out of the car he stopped her. "Sunglasses and hat?"

"Is this really necessary? I'm walking five feet away."

His voice softened. "Please Marina, let me do my job." She nodded and grabbed her hat and sunglasses from her bag. She put them on and looked back at Frank. "Happy now?"

"Ecstatic." She smiled at him, then stuck her tongue out before getting out of the car. He waited until she closed the bathroom door behind her before he smiled.

Frank handed Marina two bottles of water while he put on his seatbelt. She'd pouted when he made her stay put as he hit the restroom and then inside to get the water. She screamed at him in Russian when she realized he'd locked her in and she couldn't open the locks. His car looked like an ordinary sedan but that was the point. He'd installed a few features that served him in his line of work.

"Was it necessary to lock me in?"

He tried not to smile. "What ever it takes."

"By the way, why aren't we flying? We'd have been in LA two hours ago and we still have what another, what, two hours?"

"More like three."

Marina let loose with a string of Russian invectives.

"Calm down. It is much easier for me to control a situation on the ground than in the air or in an airport. How long do you think it would have been before a passenger posts they're flying with Marina Sokolov? We'd be met at the airport by paparazzi and fans. Crowds of people you don't know and I would have little control over." He reached over and took covered her hand with his. "Marina, I know this is a difficult situation but I need you to trust me. I've been watching over important people since you were in pigtails. I know what I'm doing."

Marina gave him a sly smile. "Did you just say I was important? Was that another compliment, Josiah?"

He stared out at the highway but couldn't fight a small grin. "Perish the thought." He sighed and tried to focus. "And my name is Frank." This was going to be a long road trip.

"I'm hungry," said Marina. "Can we stop?"

"There's a drive thru a couple of miles down."

"Drive thru? Can't we stop? Sit down like real people?" She sighed. "I'm sorry, Frank. I'm whining and I hate whiny."

"It's okay. I know this is stressful."

"Is it at least good drive thru?" she asked.

"Montie's Chicken Shack."

Marina's eyes lit up. "Atomic wings?"

"You know Montie's?"

"Please. Best chicken ever, except for Mama Birdie's."

"New Orleans, Freret street."

She nodded her head. "Nice one, Josiah. Did you have their signature Hurricane?"

Frank smiled. "Damn thing knocked me on my ass."

Marina smiled. "Only one?"

He shook his head and laughed. "Unbelievable."

"What?" she smiled. "I was raised on Stolichnaya. How is a tolerance for Hurricanes unbelievable." She pointed at the road and waved. "Just drive. I'm starving."

Frank stared in amazement as Marina finished off a dozen giant wings. He grabbed some wet wipes out of the bag and handed them to her.

"Ahh, that was so good," she said as she wiped down her hands. She took a deep sip of her drink, then sat back and sigh. "Bliss," she said with a big smile.

Frank laughed. "Good God, woman. Where do you put it all? I've seen linebackers who couldn't burn through that many atomic wings."

She tossed the remains of her meal in the takeout bag and smiled. "Metabolism of a hummingbird."

"Damn. Well, I'm glad you enjoyed it. We should get back on the road."

He saw her smile fade. Marina put on a good face but she was scared. She didn't want to go back and he couldn't blame her. This was going to get worse before it got better.

Frank tossed the remains of their dinner in the trash and got back in the car. "Ready to go?"

"Not yet," she said. "You still haven't told me your plan for when we get home. You do have a plan, don't you?"

Frank sighed and turned to face her. Good God, she was beautiful. Just looking in her eyes threw him off kilter. He couldn't let that happen if he was going to keep her safe. "Yeah, I have a plan, but you may not like it."

"I won't know until you tell me."

"When we go back I'll need to stay close, but we don't want whoever this is to think I'm security. It might make them go underground." He could see her face pale, even in the dim light of the car. He reached for her hand and realized she was trembling. "Marina, I swear to you I will keep you safe. If we're going to draw him out you'll have to be visible but I'll be with you." He took a breath and forged ahead. "This is where your acting comes in. You will need to make people believe I'm a new love interest. It will piss him off because I'm old and unknown. I'm no one a tabloid would normally associate with you. I know it's a stretch but you're a terrific actress, Marina. You could make people believe you'd be interested in me. It's the fastest way to catch him"

Marina leaned back on her head rest. "One thing's for sure, it will piss him off." She gave him a sad smile. "Because I won't have to act." She leaned her seat back and closed her eyes.

Frank stared at her for what seemed like forever before he started the car. What the hell just happened?

Frank stared at the highway trying to sort through what Marina had said. She was one of the most popular actresses on the planet. He was a retired marine, seventeen years her senior. Frank liked order, things in their place. That's why the Marines had suited him. Marina saying she could be attracted to him made no sense. He finally pushed the thought aside. His job was to keep her safe while finding the wack job who was threatening her. Nothing else mattered.

He pulled into his driveway and turned off the engine. She'd slept fairly peacefully for the last hour. "I wonder if she knows she talks in her sleep" he smiled. "In Russian." He hated to wake her but he couldn't leave her in his car.

"Marina," he said as he touched her shoulder. "Marina, wake up." She stretched her arms out like a sleepy kitten.

"Are we home?"

"My home. I'll need to get a few things before I take you home."

"Wait. What? Are you moving in with me?"

"I told you I need to stay close."

"I didn't realize it would be that close."

"We need to keep up the illusion and this should flush him out."

Marina sighed as she pushed her hair back. "I know you're right, Frank. It's just such a bizarre situation."

He reached for her hand. "Marina, I promise I'll keep you safe." He relaxed a bit when he saw her genuine smile.

"I believe you."

Marina looked around the tasteful Colonial home. It was extremely tidy home, just as squared away as he was. "What maid service do you use? They do a great job."

"No maid, just me."

"Really?"

"It's not that hard. I'm away a lot so there's not a lot to clean."

He led her to the comfortable kitchen and opened the fridge. "Drink? I have water, ice tea and orange juice."

"A water would be great, thanks."

"I want to discuss your schedule for next week but first I need to take care of something."

Marina lifted her water bottle in salute. "I'll be here." She heard him unlock his back door and walk outside. As he did, security lights flooded the back yard and in through the kitchen window. She gasped, not believing what she was seeing. Roses. Roses everywhere. Beautiful blooms with bright colors. "Oh my God." She followed him outside and saw him pulling a hose toward his amazing garden.

"Sorry, this will just take a minute. It hasn't rained in a while and I want to make sure they're okay."

She stood next to him as the light spray of water hit the flowers. "They're magnificent, Frank. Truly." She could have sworn she saw a blush, even in this light.

"Thanks."

"It's not something I would have expected from you."

"I spent a lot of years in places with no color. I like seeing the different varieties bloom."

She put his hand on his arm. "They're beautiful."

He shut off the hose and opened an outdoor storage box. He pulled out a pair of clippers and cut a large peach colored rose. "It's called floribunda."

She took the rose from him and whispered, "Thank you."

They sat down at the kitchen table and Frank pulled out his notepad. "What do you have going on this week?"

"A couple of meetings in town, manager, agent and a fitting for this weekend."

"What's this weekend?"

"The Marine Ball. It's a fundraiser for returning and disabled vets. I do it every year. I buttonhole the people I work with to go or at least contribute. Every year I donate a dinner."

"What do you mean, donate a dinner?"

"They auction a dinner with me. Last year it cost a producer fifty thousand. He bent my ear the entire time about his latest project."

Frank gave her a rare smile. "People are willing to pay to watch you suck down atomic wings?"

"And you get the pleasure for free," she smiled. "The Ball is formal. Are you good with that?"

"I'll manage." He closed his notebook. "I will be going with you to all meetings and fittings. We should have some meals in public. Let people see us as a couple."

"You're the boss," she said, then got a big smile. "Jake's coming so that means Mike's coming too. I should call them and check in." She pulled her phone out and tapped Jake's picture. She gave Frank a wise ass smile and began talking to her brother in Russian.

"Hi Jake. Yeah, I'm good. I'm at Frank's now. He's going to pack some clothes before taking me home. Apparently he's moving in with me." She glanced over at him. "He's pushy for a goon."

"Good and he's not a goon," said Jake.

"Good? Did you know he was going to do this?"

"No, but I trust him or I wouldn't have asked him to help us."

Marina sighed. "Fine. Are you still coming to the Marine ball on Saturday?"

"Yes, we're going to fly in the day before and make it a long weekend."

"Great. You want to stay with me?"

"No, I've booked a suite at the St. Regis. "

"Wow, big brother. I'm impressed."

"She deserves it."

"So do you. Is she there? I need to talk to her." Marina switched to English when Mike came on the call. "Hi Mike. I'm so glad your coming. It will be a great time."

"I'm looking forward to it but I'm not used to being on that side on an event. I'm usually the one taking care of some diva's jewelry."

"Hah! That's why I called. Could you take care of this diva's jewelry? I'll send you a picture of the gown. I have a fitting tomorrow."

"I'd love too."

"Yay! I can't wait to see you again. You'll have fun, I promise. I'll call you tomorrow. Tell my brother I said goodbye."

She disconnected the call and put her phone back in her bag. "They'll be here Friday."

"You really like his girlfriend."

"Yeah, I do. She's terrific. And it's fiance, which I can't believe. My glacier slow brother meets a woman, falls in love and gets engaged in the space of a week."

"How long?"

"Yeah, I couldn't believe it either but they seem perfect together."

"Okay, I'm going upstairs and pack. I won't be long."

Marina smiled. "Take your time. I'll just nose around down here. Open your drawers, check in your closets." Frank rolled his eyes and walked out of the room. Marina snickered. "This might be fun."

Marina first went through the drawers in the kitchen, then the cupboards and fridge. They say you are what you eat. Apparently Frank Nash was eggs and white bread. She moved into the living room and found a few family pictures. He bore a strong resemblance to his father. His sister looked like their mother. She squealed when she saw a picture of Frank and his sister when he couldn't have been more than six years old. He looked like he was teaming with mischief. There was a picture of the family on what looked like an east coast beach. There was a picture of a restaurant called the Lamplighter. She was still examining the pictures when Frank came downstairs with a suitcase and a garment

bag.

"You weren't kidding about the snooping."

She gave him a defiant smile. "I told you I would." She held up the restaurant picture. "Family place."

"Yes."

"Did you work there?"

"Yes."

"My, you are a chatty fellow, aren't you?" She pointed another picture. "You look like your father."

"So I've been told."

"Was he Josiah?"

"No, Jonas."

"Who was Josiah?"

"My grandfather. You're not going to let this go are you?"

She gave him her best movie star smile. "Not a chance in hell."

Frank sighed and put his things down. "In the interest of time," He held up the family portrait. He pointed to the older man in the back. "Grandfather, Josiah Nash. He was a Sea Bee in World War II. When he got out of the service he opened the Lamplighter in 1948 in Beaufort, South Carolina." He pointed to the younger man. "Dad, Jonas Nash. Took over his father's restaurant when he retired. Mom, Florence Franklin Nash, full time mom and part time hostess at the family restaurant. Sister, Carolyn Nash Jennings. She's a trauma surgeon in Charlotte. And finally, this is a young yours truly, Franklin Josiah Nash. Retired after thirty years in the Marines and currently babysitter to a pain in the ass superstar."

"You think I'm a superstar?" she smiled.

"Jesus Christ. Get your bag. We're going. Now."

He pulled up to Marina's house and was genuinely surprised. It was a nice home, twice the size of his, but not what he expected. It was a two story colonial in an older section of LA. "No gate?" he asked.

"No."

"You're one of the most famous women in Hollywood and you have no gate and no full time security."

"Nope."

Frank shook his head. "Tell me you at least have an alarm system."

She got out of the car and shut the door. "Yes. And monitored security cameras that are activated when I set the alarm."

"Well, at least there's that."

He grabbed his things and followed her into her home. Again, he was surprised. The house was decorated with overstuffed couches and chairs. Some nice art, but nothing extraordinary. It looked like the home of an upper class professional, but certainly not the home of the highest paid actress in the business.

"Back yard?" he asked.

Marina slid open doors in the dining room that led him to the backyard and a spectacular pool. "I bought the place because of the pool. I swim every day when I'm home, which isn't that often anymore."

"Fenced in?"

"Yes, and wired to the system. If anyone climbs the fence the security lights go on and the police are notified."

"Good."

She looked at him and smiled. "Wow. High praise. I'll try not to let it go to my head."

"Smart ass," he murmured. "Honestly, I'm surprised. I would have thought you'd have something, well, different than this."

"This place has six bedrooms. Even if my entire family came to visit I would still have empty bedrooms. I'm here maybe one week a month if I'm lucky. It's more than enough."

"I need to see upstairs too." Marina showed him the five bedrooms upstairs. They were comfortable but not overdone, just like the rest of the house. She sighed and opened the door to the master suite. It was a large room with a view of the pool. It had a large master bath and it was a bit more girly than he would have guessed. He hadn't seen lace curtains since the last time he'd visited his parents. "I'll take the room across the hall."

"Fine," she said. Tears welled in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and put on a false smile. "Nothing. I'm just tired." She tried to walk past him but he blocked her retreat.

"What's going on, Marina. Talk to me."

The dam broke and she began to weep. "I've worked my whole life for this. High School, college, coaches. I worked my ass off and I paid dues. I made it." She put her hands up almost in surrender. "And now my home is a prison."

Frank knew he shouldn't do it. Part of him said this wasn't a client, she was the friend of a sister. The rest of him didn't listen. He folded her in his arms and let her cry. "I will find who's doing this, Marina. I swear I will."

Frank stood under the shower trying to wake up. The fact that the most beautiful woman he'd ever met was sleeping across the hall wasn't the only reason he'd spent the much of the night staring at the ceiling. He'd made a promise to Marina that he would find the bastard. He hoped to God he could.

He went into the kitchen to find Marina cooking bacon and eggs. When she looked at him and smiled his heart jumped like he was a twelve year old boy.

"Good Morning," she said. "Coffee's ready."

"Thank God." He grabbed the mug she'd set out for him and filled it. He added a little sugar and took a sip. "Ahh. That's better."

"Didn't you sleep? Is the bed okay?"

"The bed's great. I always have trouble sleeping in a hotel, same thing, I think." He looked at her and smiled. "Liar," he thought. He could see her eyes were still a bit puffy from crying. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. It's just a lot to process." She handed him a plate with bacon and mound of scrambled eggs. She put her hand on his arm. "Thanks for last night, Frank."

He didn't trust himself to do anything but smile and nod.

Marina forced a smile on her face. "When I was snooping in your kitchen I saw you have a fondness for eggs. Either that or you hadn't shopped in a while."

"Both," he said. He set his plate down on the table and took her hand. "Marina, you don't have to put on a brave face in front of me. I know this is a difficult situation for you. Don't make it harder on yourself."

She smiled. "Thanks, Frank. Now go eat your eggs before they get cold."

They ate their breakfast and talked about mundane things like home owner headaches. They lamented not being able to find a decent cheesesteak on the west coast. Frank laughed at a childhood story about Jake and a chemistry experiment gone wrong. Apparently the chem lab and his eyebrows took an entire semester to recover.

"What time is your fitting?"

"Eleven. It's downtown town. It shouldn't be too long."

"We can have lunch somewhere after."

"Our first public appearance," she smiled. She reached for his hand and he flinched.

"Okay, Josiah. we're going to have to work on this."

"Work on what and why do you keep calling me Josiah?"

"Work on being physically comfortable with each other. If you back away every time I come near you no one will believe we're a couple."

Frank sighed. "Of course, you're right."

"And I like your name." She pushed the plates aside and took his hand. "As an actor I have to be physical with people I can't stand. What I do is focus on the details and let the big picture take care of itself. So when I reach for your hand like this you should pretend you like it." She wove her fingers through his. "See, like this. We don't have to be too mushy. We aren't kids."

"Me, more than you," he said.

"Knock it off, Josiah and pay attention. This was your bright idea. I'm just trying to make sure it works."

"Go on," he smiled.

"You should reach for me. Pretend you're on a date and you want to seduce me. What would you do?"

Frank could feel his blush. She was right. If this was going to draw the rat out of the woodwork, he was going to have to sell it. He softened his voice "Well, I would look into my dates eyes and tell her how beautiful she is." He took her hand in his, brushing his thumb lightly over the top of her hand. "I would tell her how glad I was to be with her." He smiled and saw her cheeks flush.

"That's good," she said quietly. She withdrew her hand and stood. "Stand up. We will have to pose for pictures especially at the ball. You're going to be walking a red carpet with me."

"I am familiar with walking, Marina."

"Frank, I'm serious." She took his hand and stood at his side. "This is how we'll be standing on the red carpet except I'll be wearing an insanely expensive gown, not a ratty bathrobe. I may have to break away for pictures but you should take my hand back when I'm done. Maintain the physical connection." She stepped aside and then smiled and nodded. He walked to her side and took her hand. "You're supposed to be happy to be together. For God's sake smile."

He did and saw her cheeks flush again.

"Okay, that's good," she said quickly. "Can you dance?"

"I can mange."

"Good. The ball means dancing." She slipped her hand around his neck and extended her hand. "Show me whatcha got," she smiled.

"No music."

Marina shook her head. "And you call me a pain in the ass." She started humming and then began to sing an old Russian song.

He moved her around the kitchen floor and couldn't help smiling. He looked into her eyes and for a moment it felt real. But it wasn't. She was playing a part, convincingly so. She ended the song and they stopped moving.

"Now you should kiss me."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not talking about going for gold. A small kiss after a dance would be normal. People are supposed to believe we're sleeping together."

Frank nodded. She was right. So why did he feel like he was about to make a big mistake. He leaned in and pressed his lips softly to hers. She responded while caressing the back of his neck. She pulled back and then kissed him again. This time it was a little harder. She ran her tongue over his lower lip and he deepened the kiss. She tasted of coffee. He pulled back and smiled. "How was that?" he asked.

"Well done, Josiah," she whispered.

He realized the mistake he'd made. He wanted this to be real.

Marina hid in her room for an hour, pretending to get ready to go out. As if it took her an hour to put on jeans and a blouse. What the hell was she going to do? She'd played love scenes with some of the most popular actors in the world. Yet none of them had effected her the way kissing Frank had. Her heart was still pounding and her face was flushed. He was going to be right across the hall for God knows how long. She was going to go insane.

She finally went downstairs and found Frank in the kitchen, engrossed in his tablet. "Earth to Frank?" He glanced up looking surprised she was standing there.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't hear you come in."

Before he could stop her she snatched the tablet from him. "What had you so engrossed?" She swiped at the locked screen and gasped. It was the Inquisitor web site and the article was about her. The article had pictures of her and her 'Countdown' costar, Peter Kane. The pictures of them were long distance and they were both laughing. They must have waited for ever for these pictures because very little Peter did make her smile. The article intimated that she and Peter were more than costars.

"You said you weren't involved with anyone."

"I'm not. This article is complete bullshit."

"Those pictures make it look otherwise."

"That's the point. We weren't alone. These were taken on set. Everyone else around us has been cropped out." She handed him back the tablet. "An article like this comes out every time I make a movie. Everyone makes assumptions about me because of how I look," she sighed. "Why are you looking at this crap?"

"To get a handle on what's being said about you. It might give me some insight into how to catch this guy."

She tried to dial down her anger but it was a struggle. "You do what you need to do but I want you to remember one thing. If I tell you something, it's the truth." She leaned close. "Don't ever doubt my word, Frank. Marines aren't the only ones who believe in honor."

He nodded. "Copy that."

She pulled out a chair and sat down. "This is the worst part of the business. They

say whatever they want with little danger of reprisal. They word the articles in such a way that they aren't libelous."

"How do you think they got this picture?"

"Who knows? It could have been a crew member. Hell, it could have been a producer. The old adage about no publicity is bad publicity are still words to live by in this town." She glanced at her watch. "We better get going. Alfonso gets bitchy if I'm late."

"Tell me about this Alfonso," he said as they waited in the never ending parking lot that was the LA freeway.

"Alfonso only uses one name, like Cher. Affectatious as hell but a genius with a needle. He understands what I like and doesn't try to put me anything he knows I won't wear. My primary rule is if you have to tape it on me, it's a nonstarter."

"Tape?"

"How do you think all those massively low cut gowns stay put?"

"Huh, the things you learn." He looked over at Marina, who still looked upset about their last conversation.

"Could he be a suspect?"

Marina laughed. "Not in a million years, although I can guarantee he'll hit on you."

"What?"

She reached over and patted his thigh. "Don't worry. I'll defend your honor."

He shook his head and smiled. "Good to know."

Alfonso's store was in the heart of the most expensive retail space in LA. "I'll find a spot," he said.

"No need. There's a valet."

"Seriously? At a dress store?"

"Cheapest dress in the store is probably five grand, so yeah."

He handed his keys off to the valet and followed Marina into the store. A painfully thin young girl approached them.

"Good morning, Ms. Sokolov. Alfonso will be right with you."

"Thank you, Elaine. Frank, Elaine is incredibly gifted in the logistics of all this

madness."

The girl blushed. "Thank you." She extended her hand to Frank. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

Just then a force of nature blew through a door in the back of the store. He was a tall slender black man with a shaved head and an immaculately tailored suit. "Marina, darling. On time, as usual. You're a goddess, darling." He turned to Frank and smiled. "Who do we have here?"

"Alfonso this is Frank Nash." Marina brushed her hand over his arm, a quick but tender gesture. "This is the man who makes me look so good."

Frank shook Alfonso's hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Alfonso gave him a big smile. "It is very nice to meet you."

Marina placed her hand on Alfonso's arm. "He's spoken for."

He looked at her and smiled. "Really?"

"Really," said Frank.

He finally released Frank's hand. "Are you ready for your fitting? I've outdone myself."

"I'm sure you have." She reached over and took Frank's hand. "Come with me, sweetheart. You'll get a preview of my ball gown."

"A regular Cinderella," he said.

"Please," said Alfonso. "There is nothing regular about Marina Sokolov."

Frank looked at her and smiled. "I couldn't agree more."

Frank sat it a not uncomfortable chair while Marina changed into her gown. Marina was right about Alfonso, he was no threat. He gave the appears of a flamboyant personality but underneath Frank suspected he was a shrewd business man. The girl out front could be safely eliminated. She seemed to genuinely like Marina. The notes Marina had been getting had a strong sexual component. He didn't think that was Elaine.

There was a fitter in the room beside Alfonso, who seemed more interested in her cell phone than anything that was going on in the real world. Marina walked out of the dressing room and he couldn't help but gasp. She was wearing a deep red gown, the same shade of red as the piping on the Marine dress uniform. The gown had small straps holding up a curved top. Her breasts were visible but not overly so. The gown could only be described as slinking its way down her body. She walked towards him and smiled. "What do you think?"

He stood and walked toward her with a look of pleasure. "I think you're perfect." He leaned in, kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear. "The dress is nice too."

Marina stood on the platform so the seamstress could pin the hem. "We could bring the neckline down a bit," said Alfonso.

"Or we could leave it right where it is," she said sternly, then smiled. "Why mess with perfection."

"You're right," he said with a smile.

"Frank, could you take a picture for me?"

Alfonso gasped. "Show my creation to the world before the party?"

"Of course not. It's for my jeweler."

"I have some pieces in mind. You can't wear just anything with my creation."

"Do you know Michaela Turner?"

"Sure. Based in Carmel. Genius with colored stones."

"Well, Michaela is engaged to my brother, so she'll be doing my jewelry from now on."

Frank approached and activated the camera on his phone. He took a couple of full length shots and closer shots of the neckline. "How's that?"

She took the camera from him and flipped through the pictures. "Good job," she smiled.

"Good subject," he replied. When Marina smiled at him he needed to remind himself she was acting. She flipped a few buttons and smiled at the screen. She clicked the button and then flipped through some more buttons. When she handed it back to him he saw she'd attached the picture to her contact listing. He didn't know quite how to respond, so he winked. He was rewarded with a girlish giggle.

"Are we almost done here?" she asked.

"Don't worry, darling," said Alfonso. "I'll get you and hot and hunky out of here soon."

"You're the best," Marina smiled.

"Tell me something I don't know."

Frank took Marina's hand as they stood on the street waiting for the valet. "Well, that was interesting."

"He's a character."

"What did he call me?"

"Hot and hunky." She saw his confused look and smiled. "What? You are."

"Oh my God, Marina Sokolov!" A young woman with a torn jeans and purple hair stopped in front of them. "I loved 'The Things We Do for Love.' I cried," she said rapidly. "Could I get a picture?"

"I think I have time for one. Sweetheart, would you hold her phone for...?"

"Marcie."

"Sure," he said, wanting to move it along before they drew a crowd. Marina put her arm around the girl and smiled. Frank thought if Marcie smiled any harder she'd explode. The photo looked good so he handed the girl back her phone.

"Oh Ms. Sokolov my girlfriends are going to be so jealous. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," she smiled. "By the way, you're rockin the purple hair. Nice."

The girl gasped and squealed as the valet brought Frank's car to the curb. As they pulled away from the curb she caught him smiling at her.

"What?" she asked.

"That was nice, what you did for that girl. She's going to tell that story to her grandchildren."

"There are a couple million Marcies out there. Kind people who applaud for me. Their enthusiasm encourages me. It's the good part of all this, the Marcies. Besides, they paid for my house, my car, my very comfortable life. The least I can do is be nice to them."

"I've worked with quite a few celebrities in this town. They're not like you."

Marina smiled, "Why Josiah, another compliment? You're going to turn my head."

Frank laughed. "Okay, smart ass. Where do you want to eat?"

"Arcaro's is around the corner. They have a mushroom ravioli to die for."

They pulled into the small lot and Frank spotted a few paparazzi he'd encountered before. He nodded to where they were. Marina stiffened. "We can go somewhere else if you want."

"No. It's okay. We need to do this."

"Pretend we don't see them when we get out."

"Frank, are you armed?"

"Of course. I will keep you safe. I promise."

Marina tried to smile. "You sure make a lot of promises, Josiah."

"Well, ma'am. It's a Marine thing. Duty. Honor. You know."

This time she genuinely laughed. Frank brushed a loose curl behind her ear. He could tell himself the next thing he did, he did for his mission. He'd be lying. Frank leaned over and gave her a soft kiss. "Marines never go back on their word."

"We should go in," she said quietly.

He got out of the car and walked her into the restaurant, holding her hand. He heard the shutter clicks from 50 yards away. Within an hour the world would assume he was sleeping with Marina.

"Marina, so good to see you." A man, tall as he was round, greeted them.

"Dominick, good to see you too. So you have something for me?"

The man waved his hand dismissively. "Like I would ever tell you no." He looked at Frank and smiled. "Something private?"

"Please," she whispered.

They were led to a small, private dining room with quiet music and elegant decor. They sat at a small booth against the wall. As Frank sat he unbuttoned his sports coat. He heard Dominick inhale sharply.

"Sir, are you armed?"

"Yes, I am. Would you like to see my carry permit?"

Dominick smiled. "Not necessary. I'm just glad she has someone looking out for her. She's too sweet for this town." He smiled and handed them two menus. "How about a nice cabernet to start."

Frank smiled. "None for me, thank you. Sweetheart, would you like a glass?"

"Oh I don't.."

"Go ahead. It's okay." Marina smiled at him. Every time she did he felt like a twelve year old boy with his first crush and it was making him crazy. He had to focus.

"Thank you, Frank."

"For what."

"Nothing. Everything. Consider it an all purpose thank you."

He reached for her hand, threading his fingers through hers just like they'd practiced.

"Nobody's watching," she said.

"I know," he whispered.

Dominick came back in with Marina's wine. "Mushroom ravioli?" he asked her.

"You know me so well."

"And you sir?"

"Make it two. Marina has been raving about it."

"I'll be back shortly."

"Isn't unusual for an owner to be waiting on us?"

"Not for Dominick. He looks out for me."

"How so?"

Marina sat back against her seat. "You mean is he a suspect?"

"Yes."

"I guess that's how it is now. Everyone I know is a suspect. It could be anyone."

She took a sip of her wine "Dominick looks after me like a daughter. Makes sure I eat my salad before I can have dessert. That doesn't say stalker to me."

"It doesn't to me either. Marina, you have to understand. This is what I have to do to find this guy. It's my job."

Marina took another deep sip of her wine. "Yes. It's your job," she said flatly.

Frank couldn't tell her the truth, that she was more than a job to him. So much more. He couldn't allow his schoolboy crush to effect his work. If he lost focus he'd never catch the bastard.

Dominick came back with small salads for each of them. "Eat. Your entrees will be ready in a few minutes."

She reached for the man's hand. "Thank you, Dominick. I appreciate you taking care of me like you have."

"Ragazza dolce," he replied. "When you finish, there is some Death by Chocolate in the back."

Marina broke into a big smile. "Oh Frank you have to have some. It is quite simply the best chocolate cake on the planet."

"Sounds great," he said.

They finished their salads as ordered by Dominick. The ravioli were just as good as Marina had claimed. She was now waiting for her chocolate cake with the excitement of a little girl. She squealed when Dominick came back in with two large pieces.

"Oh, come to mama," she said as she took the plate from Dominick. The look on her face when she took a bite was pure happiness and satisfaction. "Heaven," she purred. "Please give Sophia my regards and tell her how much I love her cake."

"I will," he smiled. "Enjoy."

Frank stared as she savored each bite. He'd never met anyone who enjoyed food as much.

She caught him staring. "What?"

"I can't believe you eat like this and look like..."

"Look like what?"

"Like you. Perfect."

"Another compliment, Josiah. You'll make me think you like this pain in the ass superstar."

"Very funny, smart ass."

Marina gave him a quick smile. "Eat your cake."

They got home about four and Marina kicked off her shoes. "Other than me getting a dress, we didn't get anywhere, did we?"

Frank turned on his tablet and flipped to the Inquisitor website. "Yeah, we did." Front and center of the page was a picture of Frank kissing Marina in the front seat of the car. The headline read "Marina Sokolov and mystery lover."

Marina looked at the page and looked up at Frank. "Congratulations, mission accomplished. I need another glass of wine." She went into the kitchen and pulled a bottle

from a cabinet. She started opening drawers, looking for the opener, slamming the drawers when she didn't find it. "Damn it."

Frank took her by the shoulders and forced her to stand still. "Marina, calm down. It's going to be okay."

"Okay?" she yelled. "You just painted God damn targets on our backs. Everyone is a potential threat and I can't find my God damn bottle opener!" She broke down and started to weep. "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

He wanted more than anything to take this pain from her. He knew the best thing he could do was find this guy. He stroked her temple as she collected herself.

She looked up at him and gave him a soft smile. "Frank," she whispered as she reached to give him a soft kiss.

He pushed her hands off his chest. "Marina, no. We can't."

She looked confused and hurt. "Why?"

"For a lot of reasons. I'm trying to find who's doing this to you. You're Jake's sister. Most of all I'm old enough to be your father."

She pulled back and Frank recognized Marina's temper switching in high gear. "I'm not a twenty year old bimbo and you're not a doddering old man."

"I'm sorry, Marina. No."

Marina resumed her take no prisoners search for a bottle opener. As she did, she looked up and began to yell at God, in Russian. "Is this some kind of cosmic joke, God? I spend twenty years getting bird dogged by half the men in this town and this is what you do to me?" She found the opener and attacked the bottle. Frank let her rant. "You finally send me a good man. A decent man. The genuine article. You make him, hot as hell," she looked up and smiled. "Nice touch by the way. The piercing blue eyes. Some of your best work." She opened the bottle and looked just as violently for a glass. "You send him to me, you make me want him more than any man I've ever known, but he doesn't want me. What did I do?" She leaned her head up against the cabinet. "What's wrong with me?"

"You didn't do anything. Nothing's wrong with you," said Frank...in Russian.

Her head snapped up. "You speak Russian?"

He nodded.

"You bastard. You let me think I was having private conversations with my brother."

A private moment to yell at God. All this time you were lying to me." She found a glass and filled it.

"I didn't lie. You never asked."

"You said you did security in the military. Let me guess." She took a big gulp of wine. "Embassy security, in Moscow."

"That's how I met Jake."

"How long were you in Russia?"

"Four years."

She picked up her wine and started to walked past him.

"What are you doing?"

"I am taking my wine to my room where I intend to drink it. Any other questions Frank?" He shook his head. He watched as she stomped upstairs.

"Well, you certainly screwed that up," he said to himself.

Marina slammed her bedroom door and set the wine on her vanity. What the hell? He speaks Russian, from the sound of his accent, fluently. The bastard. He could have told her, should have told her. Jake should have told her. The truth was she never asked. Damn it. She was still too angry to entertain the concept that Frank was right. She grabbed her wine, sat on the bed and flipped on the TV.

Having no desire for reality of any sort, she clicked past the news channels and settled on a old action flick. She'd seen it half a dozen times but it had a minimal amount of story to interfere with the action. She pulled an afghan up over her lap and finished off her glass of wine.

The wine was fuzzing the edges of her all too sharp reality. Too much had happened. At this point she didn't know what was worse, living with the fear of the last three months alone, or living with Frank. He was all she could think about, all she wanted to think about. Not the stalker, not her career, not even the ball. All she could think about was how much she wished he didn't sleep across the hall. She wished he was sleeping with her.

Frank was going through some emails and requests for service. He told everyone he was unavailable until further notice. He'd been doing security work since he'd retired. Mostly private consulting work, some personal security, like now. Like now, that was almost funny. Nothing had ever been like what was going on now. It was what he feared most, his emotions affecting his job, his judgment. Maybe that's why he couldn't find the bastard. He'd been through all the notes she'd kept. He reviewed the video of the guy putting the flowers at her door. He was smart. He was wearing a baggy hoodie and sunglasses. He stayed hunched so Frank couldn't tell how tall he was. He tossed down his reading glasses in disgust. He couldn't even tell for sure it was a man. All he could tell was the perp was white.

He glanced at his watch and realized it was after seven. Marina hadn't come out of her room in hours. He walked up to the stairs and listened at her door. All he heard explosions and lasers. He tapped on the door. "Marina?" She was never going to hear

him through the noise. He opened the door and saw she was asleep on top of the covers, an afghan fallen on the floor. He stepped in quietly and picked up the blanket, covered her with it, and tucked it over her shoulders. When he looked at her like this he wasn't seeing the movie star. He was seeing Marina, a woman alone and terrified. He'd sworn to protect her and he wouldn't stop until she was safe.

He closed her door and walked into his bedroom. Maybe a hot shower would clear the cobwebs enough so he could tackle the next step head on. He'd gotten a list of everyone who'd worked on her last film. It was a long shot but he'd run each name and see if anything popped.

He stood in the shower and let the jets massage his shoulders. He felt like every muscle in his body was strung too tight. He had to find this bastard fast. He dried himself off and threw on some shorts. He grabbed the list and put it on the bed. He realized he'd left his tablet and glasses downstairs. He retrieved them and was halfway back to his room when Marina opened her bedroom door. She stood in the hall, staring. She looked flushed.

"Marina, are you okay?" he asked. She kept staring. "Marina?"

"Nice ink," she whispered. She walked a little closer. "I need to apologize."

"No, you don't. I should have said something."

"No, Frank. You were right. I never asked. I don't even know what rank you held."

"Colonel."

Marina smiled just a little. "Wow. Full bird?"

"Yeah," he smiled. "Most people don't know what that means."

"In case you haven't figured it out yet, Frank, I'm not most people." She took a breath and forged ahead. "The truth is I was behaving like the pain in the ass diva you think I am, so I apologize."

"I don't think that about you."

"Yes, actually, you do. You think I someone who's used to getting what I want when I want it. You probably think that's why I'm upset you turned me down. It's not." She walked close enough to kiss. "The truth is I meant everything I said. Every word of it. I've played love scenes with the best looking men in the world. I've even dated a few of them. But no one has ever made me feel the way I feel now, just standing close to you." She leaned in

and gave him a soft kiss.

"Marina, no."

She backed up, the hurt clear in her eyes. "All your reasons why it would never work, I wonder what scares you more, Frank? The idea you'd be right or that you'd be wrong." She said one last thing, in Russian. 'For God's sake grow a pair. At this point mine are bigger than yours.' She walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

He walked into his bedroom and tossed his tablet and glasses on the dresser. Grow a pair? Did she actually just say that to me? She has no idea. Damn it, she's going to.

He threw open her bedroom door and saw her leaning on her dresser, like she'd been defeated.

"Don't you knock?" she shouted.

"Apparently not," he shouted back. He closed the distance between them in an instant, taking her by the shoulders. "Grow a pair, really?"

She got a sad little smile. "Your Russian is good."

"Marina, you have no idea what I've been going through, being so close to you. Touching you in public for show when all I wanted was to be alone with you. Not because you're this famous actress or even because you're so beautiful." His voice softened just a bit. "And my God you're beautiful. You said all I see is the diva but you're wrong. I see a magnificent, brilliant, strong, funny woman. But being alone with you is ten times worse because you're here, this close and I can't have you, shouldn't have you. You're affecting my ability to concentrate. I may miss something, Marina, something important," he was shouting at her but couldn't make himself stop. "There is nothing in the world more important to me than to keep you safe. Nothing." He saw her eyes well and something inside him broke. He pulled her into a deep kiss. Marina dug her fingers into his hair and pulled him tight against her. She was responding to him with a fire he'd never felt. He pulled back and looked at her flushed cheeks and kiss swollen lips. "Marina," he whispered.

"Don't you dare start what you don't intend to finish, Josiah. It would kill me," she said.

He shook his head and smiled. "It's too late for that, sweetheart. I may go to hell for this, but it's too late to stop now." She gasped when he scooped her up in his arms.

He placed her on the bed and smiled. He brushed her cheek with his hand. "Sweet girl, sweet beautiful girl," said in Russian. He covered her with his body and kissed her. She nipped at his lower lip.

"Touch me," she whispered in Russian. This would be their way, speaking in Russian to each other. It would define their passion.

He slipped his hand under her blouse, feeling her warm skin. He sat back and smiled as he unbuttoned her blouse.

"The rest, take the rest," she said as she unzipped her jeans.

He stood and slipped the jeans down her long legs. Marina reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. He smiled and pulled it off her. He looked at her as he slid her panties down and off. He gasped. She was perfection. Full breasts, beautifully toned torso, magnificent legs. "My God, Marina. I don't have words for what I see, in Russian or English. I don't think they exist."

She pointed at his shorts. "They need to go." He smiled and removed his shorts and boxers in one move. "Sweet Jesus," she muttered as she held out her hand.

Frank kissed her as he got back into bed. He needed her, need to taste her. He kissed her neck, nipped at her ear, then her shoulder. He traveled down, taking her breast in his mouth. His hand caressed her, his mouth teased her. Marina writhed under him, moaning his name. He stroked her legs, kissing and licking. He took her in his mouth and she cried out. He coaxed and kissed. He couldn't wait any longer. He raised himself over her, kissing her as he slid inside her. When Marina wrapped her legs tight around his waist, he lost himself.

They found their pace together, hard driving, urgent, nearly desperate. When he reached between them, rubbing her with his hand she shattered under him, screaming his name. He cried out for her as he lost what little control he had left.

Marina had to wait for a minute for her head to clear and her body to stop quaking. "My God," she whispered. "That was amazing."

Frank rolled to his side and smiled. "Yes it was."

She stroked her hands over his shoulders and arms. "Speaking of amazing. When I saw you in the hall, you took my breath away." She placed a kiss on his chest and

followed it up with her tongue. "Perfect," she whispered.

He smiled and gave her a kiss. "You're so sweet."

Marina shook her head. "This has nothing to do with sweet. This is about a being overwhelmed by you." She smiled. "I'm not just talking physically. It's everything about you. You are an amazing man. Good, kind, decent."

Frank fell on his back and looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know how decent. I just slept with my good friend's sister, someone I'm supposed to be protecting."

She made him look at her. "You listen to me. The moment you walked into Jake's kitchen I wanted you. It was as if you were all I could see. You have a presence."

He laughed. "A presence?"

"You walk into a room and every woman looks at you. They can't help it. They know they're seeing a real man. Mike saw it too."

He rolled back on his shoulder and smiled. "That's just ridiculous. She's crazy about your brother."

"She absolutely is but when you left the kitchen this is what she did." She mouthed "Wow." Frank smirked. "Hey, I'm just stating the facts. I told her I thought it was just me. She said 'I'm in love with your brother but I'm not blind.'"

"Well, that should make tomorrow night awkward," he said.

"Nah, I trust her. Besides it was just abstract admiration, that's all. Like admiring beautiful art." She ran her hands over his tattoos. I admit these surprised me. I saw the one on your arm under your sleeve, but the rest of them, ummm. very interesting." She got a mischievous grin. "Any more?" She rolled him on his back and saw an eagle tattoo, wings spread, reaching from shoulder to shoulder. "Wow," she whispered as she traced the wings with her hands. "It's beautiful." She placed a kiss on his back. "When did you get this?" He flipped her on her back and smiled a grin that felt like it was melting her bones.

"Later," he whispered just before he kissed her.

"How can you be hungry after that lunch we had?" Frank was sitting at the kitchen table flipping through the mentions of the two of them. It had been less than six hours and the picture of him kissing her was all over the net.

"I told you. Metabolism of a hummingbird. You better get used to it. If I'm not fed on a regular basis, I get very cranky." She walked over to the table and gave him a quick kiss before nipping at his lower lip. "I may even bite."

Frank smiled. "Umm, promise?"

"It's a guarantee," she said, then the smile dropped from her face. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"Frank, once you find the guy, are you going to disappear?"

He pushed his chair out and pulled her into his lap. "Marina, my sweet, beautiful girl." He gave her a soft kiss. "I will catch this guy. That has to be our first priority. But after, do you still want me around?"

She gave him a cautious smile. "Yes. Very much."

"Then I will stay around as long as you want," he said.

Marina let out a breath she'd been holding and smiled. "That long, huh?"

"That long." He patted her bottom. He wondered just how long 'that long' would be. "Now go get yourself something to eat. I can hear your stomach growling."

She gave him a deep kiss, letting their tongues dance together. "Somebody burned off all my reserves." She pulled out a large casserole out of the fridge and dished out some of the contents on a plate.

"Is that plov?" he asked.

"Yeah. It was my favorite growing up. It's my grandmother's recipe. Want some?"

He patted his stomach. "I shouldn't."

"Don't worry. I'll burn it off you later."

"Then by all means. I haven't had any since Moscow." He watched as she grabbed another plate. She stuck one in the microwave while she dished out a second helping.

"You must get a lot of grief from others in the business for your ability to eat like a linebacker."

The microwave beeped and she pulled out the plate and set it in front of him. She

handed him a fork and put the second plate into the microwave.

"What is it? Did I say something wrong?"

She smiled and walked to his side. She ran her fingers through his hair. "No, you didn't. It's just a sore subject for me. The eating thing is just one more strike against me for most people I work with."

"What do you mean?"

"People have been making assumptions about me my whole life because of the way I look. Just because I hit some gene pool jackpot I have to be a bitch. Add to it that I can eat what ever I want and some just down right hate me."

He stood and slipped his arms around her waist. "I'm sorry, baby."

"It's one of the reasons I became an actress. Everyone always tried to put me in a box, one that makes them comfortable. The parts I've like the best were I played against type."

"Like 'The Last Stand'. You were pretty badass in that."

Marina gave his a surprised smile. "You saw that?"

"Yeah" he smiled. Your moves in the fight scenes were really good. Accurate. I was impressed."

"Again, a compliment. Will wonders never cease?"

He smacked her bottom. "Smart ass."

"You love my smart ass."

He turned her around and gave it a close inspection. "It is pretty spectacular."

"Go eat your plov."

He sat down and wondered if that was all he loved. He took a bite of the plov and smiled. "Oh, this is great. Better than what I got at the Embassy."

"I'm glad you like it."

He nodded and smiled. He'd have to be careful. Even with his exercise routine, he'd never be able to eat the way Marina did. He caught her smiling at him. "What? Do I have rice on my chin? What?"

"I love I can speak Russian with you. It's quite good, by the way."

"You can thank your brother for that. He's an excellent teacher."

"I miss it sometimes, speaking it. We never spoke English at home. The boys didn't

learn English until they went to school. They had a hard time at first because of it so they taught me. Sometimes though, it feels like a piece of me is missing. Unless you're in a Russian restaurant in LA you almost never hear it. If you speak it outside of a Russian community people look at you with suspicion. That's when I call my brothers." Marina heard her phone ring and grabbed it off the counter. "Speaking of brothers."

"Jake?"

"Yes."

"Hello Jake." She held the phone away from her ear and Frank could hear Jake yelling. She covered the microphone and looked at him. "If I have to listen to him so do you."

"Jake, I'm putting you on speaker. Frank is right here. By the way big brother, why didn't you tell me he was fluent in Russian?"

"You never asked."

Frank held up his hands and smiled. Marina swatted at him.

"What the hell is this, Frank? I send you there to look after my sister and this is what you do?"

"Jake, Jake, calm down," said Marina. "Now listen to me. We put that out there on purpose. The idea was to goad the stalker into making a mistake."

"Are you kidding me? What the hell were you thinking?"

"Jake, what I was thinking was if we didn't do this we might never find him. I'm right here, Jake. Marina and I are trying to narrow down a field of suspects. I've also inspected her alarms and security cameras and I'm armed. I will protect her, Jake. It's what I do."

Frank heard Jake take a breath. "Fine. Marina you better not do anything stupid."

"I promise, Jake."

There was a pause and then Mike's voice came over the speaker so they switched to English. "Hey Marina, is your brother done making an ass of himself?"

"I think so."

"Hi Frank. Are you taking good care of her?"

"I'm doing my best, Mike."

Marina winked and mouthed, "Hell yes."

He frowned and whispered "Behave."

"What?" asked Mike.

"Nothing." answered Marina. "What time are you getting in tomorrow?"

"Early afternoon. How about we meet at the hotel for dinner. How's seven?"

Frank nodded.

"Sounds great. You got the pictures?"

"Yes, the gown is gorgeous and I have the perfect set for you."

Marina gave a little squeal. "I can't wait. Frank, Mike's work is amazing."

"Mike, how valuable is are these pieces?" asked Frank.

"Will she need extra security? No. The entire set doesn't retail for more than ten thousand. There will be women there wearing ten times that."

"Okay," said Marina. "We'll see you at the hotel at seven tomorrow." She disconnected the call.

"Women too?" he asked. He was trying to get ideas of who could be after her.

Marina smiled. "Happens more than you would think. And from a few you'd never believe."

Frank smiled. "Okay, let's just focus on the time frame of the movie since this is when it started. Was anyone too persistent?"

"A few of the crew guys tried but I shut them down and they were good about it. Took no for an answer. Except for that PA."

"Who?"

"There was a personal assistant to the director. Always hanging around, overly complimentary. I stopped seeing her around the set about the seventh or eighth week."

"Her?"

"Yeah. I think her name was Mary. Like I said. Happens more than you'd think."

"Anyone else?"

Marina frowned. "Well, there's Peter."

"Peter Kane?"

"Yeah, but he's a notorious hound dog. I think he hits on every female as a matter of course. He's very handsome so most say yes."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because he's an arrogant, entitled asshole."

Frank smiled. "Don't sugar coat it."

"He thinks because People magazine said he was the sexiest man alive, everyone else should too."

"How did he react?"

"At first he thought I was playing hard to get. When he realized I really wasn't interested he ignored me. The toughest part after that were the love scenes."

"What do you mean?"

"He'd eat onions before filming, be a little too passionate in them. He was just being an ass."

"Okay, well this gives us a place to start. I'm going to run some checks and see if anything pops. It may take my people sometime before I get any results."

"You have people?"

"One admin for the paperwork and another investigator. Jerry takes the low priority cases."

Marina smiled. "So am I a high priority case?"

He reached for her hand. "Of course you are."

She stood and smiled. "We have some time. Let's go swimming."

"What?"

"Swimming? Jump in the pool. You can swim, can't you?"

"Of course, but I didn't pack a suit and I should focus on this."

"Frank, after you assign the work all you can do is wait, correct?"

"Yeah."

"So go put on your shorts and let's go swimming. I'm going to change." Marina smiled as she left the kitchen.

Frank sent messages to Jerry and Susan. They would do the leg work Frank couldn't. He had to stay with Marina. Finding a stalker was always difficult, like looking for a particular grain of sand on the beach. With so many possible suspects, he felt like he's trying to find that grain of sand in the dark.

"Well, are you going to join me?"

Frank turned and his mouth dropped open. Marina was wearing a small blue bikini that fit her like a glove. He stood and walked toward her. He slipped his finger under the small strap and traced a line down her chest. "Very nice," he whispered. "I guess we're going swimming."

Frank put on his shorts and came back downstairs. The pool lights were on and Marina was already doing laps. She looked up after a laps and smiled.

"Hey big fella. Care to join me?"

He dove in the deep end and swam toward her. He came up from underneath and scooped her up in his arms. He loved it when she squealed like a high school girl. The truth was he made him feel like a kid himself. Who was he kidding? His teenage years were never this good. No ones were.

"Hello, beautiful," he whispered.

"Hi," she said as she kissed him. "Mmm." She pushed herself off him and shouted, "Let's see whatcha' got, Marine." She shot the length of the pool with a speed that surprised him. He swam after her and caught her around the waist.

"That's what I've got."

She ran her hands over his shoulders. "Impressive."

Frank laughed and pulled her into a hug. "If you say so." They chased each other up and down the pool, each let the other win a lap. He watched Marina as she stepped out of the water and stepped into the hot tub. She turned on the jets and closed her eyes, enjoying the pulsing water. He joined her in the tub and sat next to her. "Oh, this is great," he said as he pressed his back against one of the jets. Marina smiled and floated into his lap.

"It sure is," she whispered before she gave him a deep kiss.

"Sweetheart, I should go check my email, see if there are any results."

"Not now," she said as she kissed him again.

"Marina, it's important."

"Not now," she repeated.

"Marina, I told you this has to be our focus. Ignoring it won't solve anything."

"You're damn right, I'm ignoring it. I have some psycho fixated on me. Believe me

I know. But I also know there's nothing I can do about it right now. So do I want to focus completely on the hot guy I've got my legs wrapped around? Hell yes I do."

"Marina,"

"Frank, if I think about it twenty four seven I'll go insane. Or I'll buy a ticket for Bora Bora and disappear. None of those things will help."

Frank gave her a quick kiss. "Tell you what. We'll compromise. I'll get my cell and bring it out here. If I get anything it will beep."

"Fine," she said, obviously not pleased. "Bring mine too. I'll check to see if Jake called. Frank returned with both phones, neither of which had any messages.

He got back in the tub and pulled her into his arms. "Now where were we?" Marina rewarded him with a big smile before she gave him bone melting kiss. They laughed and made out like kids until the timer shut off the jets. Marina got out and grabbed some towels from a cabinet. She held up a towel for him and he started drying himself off. He stopped and stared. Marina's dark, wet hair hugged her face and down her back. The deck lights shown off her skin. And that bikini. Good God.

She caught him staring. "What?"

"Sometimes I have to stop and appreciate just how beautiful you are."

She walked toward him and gave him a soft kiss. "Thank you, Josiah." She got a mischief gleam. She handed him his phone after she activated the camera. "How about an exclusive Marina Sokolov photo."

He watched as she laid on the deck chair. She stretch her arms over her head and curved her legs, arched her back. It was the hottest image he'd ever seen. He held up the camera and hit the button. He flipped open the gallery and pulled up the picture.

"How does it look?" she asked as she got up. She looked at the picture and smiled. "Oh that's a good one."

"Yeah, it is," he murmured. "Are you sure you want me to have this?"

"Of course," she said. "It's natural you'd have my picture."

Frank was still frozen, looking at the amazing picture. "It may be natural for me to have it but most men's girlfriends aren't the hottest woman on the planet." He glanced up at Marina who was smiling. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. She reached for her phone. "My turn."

Frank smirked. "Marina, really?"

"Oh yeah," she said as she walked around him looking for the perfect light. "Smile, Josiah."

"This is ridiculous."

"You have to put yourself in the right frame of mind with photography. Think of something."

"Like what?"

She looked away from the camera and smiled. "Think about the first time you saw me naked."

He couldn't help but smile.

"Perfect," she said. The camera clicked and she pulled up his picture. "Hell yeah," she murmured. "Perfect."

They were in the middle of doing dishes the next morning when Frank's phone rang. "Susan, tell me you have something." He listened for a few minutes and shook his head. "Thanks. Let me know if you get anything." He disconnected the call and set down the phone.

"Anything?" she asked.

"Yes and no. Mary, was Mary Freed. The reason she disappeared eight weeks in to the shoot is because she was killed in a car wreck."

"That's terrible. No one said anything on set. Did she have any family?"

"Just a mother in Modesto. No siblings."

Marina leaned back against the counter. "That's so sad."

Frank was amazed by her. No one would believe what this woman was really like. He kissed her forehead.

"What was that for?"

He smiled. "No reason. This also means Mary isn't the stalker. I'm still running checks on a few of the crew who have sketchy pasts. They're still checking on Kane."

"Okay. I'm going to get ready for my meeting. We need to be in town by ten. If we run late my management team will stretch the meeting into lunch and I just want to get

this over with."

"Get what over with?"

"I'm going to tell them I'm taking time off. At least a year. They won't be happy."

"Sweetheart, I promised you I'd catch this guy and I will."

She slipped her hands around his waist. "I know you will. I've been thinking about this for a while. I even brought it up before 'Countdown'. I haven't had more than a week off in more than two years."

They pulled into the parking lot at her management office. Frank pulled into a parking space and turned off the car. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"I'll be fine. I'm really glad you're with me."

Marina was greeted by hugs and air kisses from her agent and business manager. "Frank, this is Arlene Lasko and John McDermitt. Guys, this is Frank Nash."

Arlene looked him up and down. "So this is the mystery man. You really should have run this past us. What will Peter say?"

Marina swore in Russian. "For the record, once and for all, I don't give a fuck what Peter Kane thinks about anything." She turned to Frank and continued in Russian. "What do you think?"

"Do you think either of them could be responsible?"

"For the Inquisitor photo, absolutely. The rest, I don't know."

"I'll make a few calls." Frank opened his sport coat and his holster was evident. Marina heard Arlene gasp.

"I'll try and wrap this up quickly." She turned to Arlene and John, speaking in English. "Shall we?" She walked into the conference room and saw they'd laid out quite a spread. Arlene's assistant Stan was setting up coffee.

"Ms. Sokolov can I get you a cup?"

"Yes thank you, Stan. If you would be so good to pour one for Mr. Nash. He's in the lobby. Black, two sugars."

He smiled and nodded. "Of course."

Stan was always exceedingly polite to her, in part because everyone else he encountered never bothered with a please or thank you. He placed a mug in front of her

and then left with a mug for Frank.

"Okay, let's get to it," said Marina.

"Seriously, sweetie. He's just security, right? I saw the gun. You can tell me. We're friends."

Marina looked at Arlene and her overly blonde hair. She was pushing sixty but claimed to be fifty. She'd been her agent for the last ten years. She was a great agent, but friend? No. "My relationship with Frank is very real."

"You have to be kidding me?" said John "You're the most famous beauty on the planet and he's so...old." John had come to the team five years ago. He was a great manager, but she knew she was an asset to John, not a friend. She looked back and forth between the two of them. They were making what she was about to tell them much easier. She smiled and pulled out her phone. She flipped to the picture she took of him last night and showed it to them.

"Holy crap," said Arlene.

She turned the picture toward John. "Shit," he said.

"We stand corrected," said Arlene.

She gave them both a knowing smile. "Now can we move on?"

The meeting was loud and contentious. Both Arlene and John were at first unbelieving, trying to say they understood what she was going through and she should take a vacation for a couple of weeks. "When you come back," said Arlene "There's a script from Lawson Fuller that he wrote with you in mind. You'll love it."

"You really aren't hearing me, either of you. I'm taking at least a year off. I will fulfill my publicity obligations to 'Countdown' when it's released. Other than that I'm done for at least a year."

They got angry, especially Arlene. Marina understood. Her taking time off would mean millions in percentages they would never see. She was willing to listen to them until Arlene went off the rails.

"This is about the stalker isn't it? So you hire more security and get on with it. It's part of the job. When you look like that you have to expect it."

Marina stood, trying to remain calm. "So I deserve to have a psychopath torture

me because of what I look like. Arlene, our contract is up at the end of the month. I will not be re-signing with you."

"Marina, darling, please, let's be reasonable."

"I am being reasonable. I'm not telling Frank."

Frank stood as she entered the waiting area. "Is everything okay?"

"Get me out of here," she whispered. He took her by the arm and escorted her to the elevator.

"Tell me," he said.

"Later. Just get me home."

Frank pulled up to the driveway and stopped. "Are you going to tell me? I'm ready to go back there and drag it out of those two."

Marina sighed and put her head back against the seat. "They wouldn't believe I was going to take a year off. They weren't listening to me. Then Arlene said it was because of the stalker and I should expect it when I look like this. It was part of my job." Tears ran down her cheeks. "She said it was my job. I made her millions over the years."

Frank felt his blood pressure shoot through the roof. He forced an even tone in his voice. "No one deserves this, Marina. No one."

She gave him a sad smile and they got out of the car. He stopped their approach to the house when he saw something laying on the front step. It was a bouquet of dead roses.

"Oh God," she said.

"Stay put," he said. He grabbed a t-shirt from his gym bag and covered his hand. He looked at the bouquet and saw no booby traps. Only a card. He picked it up and set it a few feet from the door. "Okay, sweetheart."

He led her into the house when she fell into his chest and sobbed. Whoever was doing this Frank would end it, one way or another.

Frank had insisted Marina lay down after they found the dead flowers. She hadn't wanted to but he'd been right. She'd slept for over an hour. When she looked in her vanity mirror she was pissed. Not because her eyes were puffy from crying but that'd be crying at all. "This is bullshit," she said to her reflection. It was getting late, nearly five and they were supposed to meet Jake and Mike in two hours. She stripped off her clothes and turned on her shower full force. The powerful heads massaged her muscles and helped clear her head.

She blow dried her hair and decided on a dark blue sundress with a small sweater jacket. The shower had reduced her puffy eyes so she didn't need more than light makeup. The finishing touch were the stained glass earrings Mike had made. She looked in the full length mirror and gave herself an honest appraisal. "Not bad, Sokolov."

Downstairs she found Frank sitting at the kitchen table talking to a large man with

sandy blonde hair in his mid thirties. He wore a t-shirt and jeans and gave the appearance of an aging surfer boy. That is except for the large gun in his shoulder holster. They stood when she walked in the room. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize someone was here."

"Marina, this is my associate, Jerry Sterling."

She extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"A real pleasure, Ms. Sokolov," he smiled broadly.

"Yeah, definitely a surfer boy," she thought. "Please call me, Marina. I assume you're here about the delivery."

"I've bagged the flowers and card to see if we can pull a print," said Jerry.

Marina looked at Frank. "Any leads?" She caught a look exchanged between Frank and Jerry. "What?"

"It may be nothing," said Frank.

"Tell me."

"There have been several restraining orders filed against Kane in the last few years. Seems when the women try to break it off with him, he gets nasty. Threats to employment, placing false stories in the trades." Frank said.

"Stalking?"

"Never been accused of it, at least not in the public record, but he sounds pretty damn close," said Jerry. "I think he's the strongest lead."

Marina nodded. "Do what you have to do to get the proof. Don't worry about expenses. I'll cover whatever you need."

Jerry smiled and Marina it struck her as genuine, in a town of false smiles. "No need," said Jerry. "This isn't a job. We're just helping out a friend."

"Let me guess. You're ex-Marine."

"No such thing as an ex-Marine, ma'am."

She looked at both men and smiled. "I stand corrected."

Frank put his hand on her shoulder. "You seem to be feeling a lot better."

"You know what I am, Frank? I'm pissed. Me crying and being afraid is just what he wants." She looked at the men and smiled. "Well, fuck that."

Both men laughed. "Oh, I like her, boss," said Jerry.

"Me too."

Frank saw Jerry out and locked the door behind him. He walked toward her and smiled. He leaned in and gave her a kiss. "I'm so proud of you," he whispered.

Marina smiled. No compliment in a lifetime of compliments had ever meant more.

"Jerry will call me if he gets anything but it will probably be tomorrow at the earliest."

"It's fine, Frank. You'll get the bastard."

"You bet your ass I will." He gave her another quick kiss. "I'm going to grab a shower and change for dinner."

It was nearly six. Marina closed up her notes for the Marine ball and walked up to the bedroom. She smiled to herself, their bedroom. She'd moved Frank's things into her room after the first night. "Hey, Marine. You ready? It's getting...late." She stood still looking at Frank in a power suit, deep blue with a pale blue shirt and tie.

"What?" he said walking toward her. "I can't walk into the St. Regis in a t-shirt and jeans."

She looked him up and down. "Damn," she whispered. She pulled him into a blazing hot kiss. She reluctantly released him only to take a breath. "Damn, babe. You're so freaking hot."

He pulled her into a hug and chuckled. "If you say so, sweetheart."

"Why do you find it so hard to believe that you turn me on?" she whispered. She kissed his neck, his cologne filling her senses. "Look at me. Do I look like I'm serious?" She took his hand and slipped it under the loose hem of her skirt. "Do I feel serious?"

"Christ," he whispered.

"Believe me, Josiah. I said I would always tell you the truth."

He pushed her against the bedroom door while giving her a punishing kiss. Her moans were muffled by him as his hand explored her, rubbed and caressed her. She cried out as she came apart in his hand. His eyes had gone dark with passion and need. She reached under her skirt and pulled her panties down to her feet and kicked them away. She reached for his belt and undid his zipper. All she had to do was nod. He freed himself and lifted her as she wrapped her legs around him. He held her tight as he thrust deep inside her. Her moans and whispers drove him to the edge of reason. It didn't take long

to fall.

Frank set her down carefully and she smiled. "Do you believe me now?" They both broke into fits of laughter.

They sat in Frank's car at the St. Regis, waiting for the valet. Marina touched up her lip gloss and smiled. "You ready to face my brother?"

"We should tell him."

"We will," she smiled. She spotted a couple of photographers stationed on the other side of the street. "I have an idea," she said.

"Marina, I don't want you taking unnecessary risk."

"I won't be. You're armed, right? She slipped her hand under his jacket and felt his shoulder holster. She patted his chest. "So hot."

"Marina..."

"Frank, if I have to deal with this creep much longer I'll go crazy. Whether it's Peter or not we want to flush him out."

"What are you going to do?"

"You ready for your first public appearance?"

"Good Lord," he muttered as he stopped in front of the valet. They got out and he handed the boy his keys. The photographers immediately began shouting her name.

Marina pulled out her million watt smile. "Excuse me, before you park the car, could you do me a favor?"

The young man's eyes lit up. "Of course, Ms. Sokolov. Anything for you."

"Aren't you sweet? See that photographer over there with the red curly hair? Would you please bring him to me? Tell him he's not in trouble but I want to talk to him."

"Yes, ma'am," he said as he dashed across the street.

"Marina..." Frank growled as the cars behind them started beeping their horns.

"Trust me," she said. The valet came back with the photographer and Frank slipped him a large tip. Marina smiled at the obviously nervous photographer. "Come with us. Let's get out of the street." Marina led them into the lobby where their security tried to stop the young photographer. "It's okay. We'll only be a few minutes." The security guard immediately backed off. Another perk of being Marina. People did what you asked.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Jimmy. Jimmy Collins."

"Frank I want you to meet Jimmy Collins. I've seen him around town and at events

quite a lot. He's always very polite and respectful." The young man blushed as red as his hair. "Who do you work for, Jimmy?"

"Freelance."

"Well, you're about to make a lot of money. Your respectful attitude is very appreciated. It's a thing sorely lacking in this town. So, you are going to get the first official pictures and a short interview with Frank and myself."

"Holy crap! Oh God, I'm sorry."

"No problem, Jimmy." She reached her hand to Frank. "You don't mind, do you sweetheart?"

"Of course not." He wrapped his arm around Marina's shoulder and forced a grin.

She turned and whispered in his ear. "You can do better than that. Think of an hour ago in our bedroom." When Frank smiled at her this time she felt like everyone and everything else in the room disappeared. She gave him a quiet kiss. "Well done, Josiah," she whispered.

"Oh wow, these are going to be great." Jimmy started to fumble a bit.

"We're meeting my brother and his fiance for dinner so we don't have a lot of time. How about I hit the high points."

"That'd be great," he said, obviously relieved. He pulled out his notepad and pen.

"Frank is Marine Colonel Frank Nash."

"Retired," Frank added. Jimmy nodded.

"We met through my brother, who is a Major in the Marines."

"That's why you do that Marine ball, every year, isn't it?"

"It is. I've have had a very blessed life. If I can use some of my notoriety to bring light to such an important issue, like returning vets, I'm happy to do so. Will you be covering the ball?"

Jimmy blushed. "I didn't get clearance. I guess I haven't been around long enough."

"Do you have a card?"

"Ah, sure." He pulled a stack out of cards and she took two. She handed one to Frank, who put it in his pocket. The other she flipped over and took Jimmy's pen. She wrote a phone number down and handed it to him. Call this number tomorrow. I'll arrange for your credentials."

"Oh my God, that's so great of you!"

"Jimmy, we have to get going but we'll see you tomorrow."

"Ms. Sokolov, one question. When did you end things with Mr. Kane? Everyone thought you two were going strong."

Marina smiled. She knew he'd get there. "Jimmy, Peter Kane and I were never anything but fellow actors on a movie. There was never anything between us. Ever."

"Sweetheart, we need to go. Jake will be waiting."

Marina smiled. "Of course." She turned to Jimmy and smiled. "See you tomorrow."

Frank took hold of her hand and led her to the restaurant. "Well, that was interesting. You were sweet as candy and simultaneously stuck it to Peter Kane. Whether or not he's our guy, he's definitely going to be pissed."

The restaurant manager rushed to greet them. "Ms. Sokolov, welcome." He nodded toward Frank. "Sir. Ms. Sokolov, your brother is already seated. Please follow me."

As they walked through the restaurant, Marina heard the dull murmur that usually happened when she walked into a public area. He led them to a quiet corner where Jake and Mike barely noticed anything but each other.

"Hello?" said Marina.

Mike squealed with pleasure and jumped up from her seat. "Marina, it's so good to see you."

"You too, Mike."

"I'm really looking forward to tomorrow night."

Marina caught a strained look between Jake and Frank as they shook hands. Jake smiled and pulled her into a hug.

"Hello, baby sister. How are you doing?" he asked in Russian.

"I'm fine, Jake. Frank is taking good care of me." Jake shot him a suspicious look.

Mike cleared her throat. "English, please."

Jake smiled. "Sorry, sweetheart."

As they sat the manager returned with champagne in a silver bucket and a waiter with four champagne flutes. He nodded at Marina who smiled. He popped the cork and

began pouring.

"What's all this?" asked Mike.

"I called ahead," said Marina. "We didn't have a chance for a proper celebration so I thought we could do it now."

Jake smiled. "Thank you."

They all picked up their glasses as Marina began speaking. "Jake, I've never seen you this happy. Not ever. Mike, we haven't known each other that long but I can see how much you love my brother. Being totally selfish for a moment, you're the sister I always wanted. I am so happy you both." She continued in Russian. "Jake, you are my rock, my hero. You've always been there for me and I am so proud to be your sister." She switched back to English. "Congratulations." They touched glasses and took a sip.

Mike's eyes were welled with tears. "You're the sister I always wanted too." She leaned over and gave her a kiss. Jake stood and walked around to give his sister a kiss. "I love you too," he whispered in Russian.

Mike held up a leather portfolio. "I have your set for tomorrow. I usually work in color but that dress is color enough."

Marina opened the portfolio and pulled out a padded jewelry case. She opened the case and gasped. The necklace was a waterfall of yellow gold wire. At the end of each wire was a bezel set diamond, like raindrops. The earring were miniatures of the necklace. "Oh my God, Mike these are amazing. They're perfect. Frank look." She turned the box toward him. "I told you she did amazing work."

"They're beautiful, Mike."

"Thank you," she replied.

"But let's put them away for now," Frank said, looking around the room.

Marina nodded and tucked them away.

"Any developments?" asked Jake.

Marina shot Frank a look knowing Jake wasn't referring entirely to the stalker. "Frank has made some progress."

"We have a strong lead but we're trying to get the evidence. Knowing who it is won't help if we can't prove it to prosecute," said Frank. "I'm waiting for some results. Until then Marina goes no where without me."

Jake shot Marina a look and she took a sip of her champagne. "Here goes nothing," she muttered in Russian. She glanced at Frank who nodded and smiled. That was all the strength she needed. "Our relationship is real."

"What?!" Jake said just short of shouting.

Mike grabbed his hand. "Jake, hush. Let her talk."

"It started as a stunt to draw out the stalker." She looked at Frank and smiled. "It changed. And Jake, I was the one who pushed it, not Frank."

"Frank, she's my sister. You're supposed to be looking out for her."

Mike smacked his arm. "I'm somebody's sister. That didn't stop you."

"Jake, believe me I know. All I can tell you is what you already know." He looked at Marina and smiled. "I would die to protect her."

"Jake I know you only want what's best for me. If you didn't you wouldn't have called Frank in the first place. You've protected me my whole life and for that I can never tell you how grateful I am. But as much as you hate to admit it, I'm not a baby anymore. You have to trust my judgment as much as I trust yours."

Jake shot looks between Marina and Frank and then finished off his champagne. "Fine. I'll try."

Marina smiled at her brother. "That's all I ask."

Mike leaned over and kissed Jake on the cheek. "Well done, Jacob."

"Can I at least get a real drink?" Jake waved to the waiter. "Stolichnaya on the rocks. Marina?"

"Hell yeah."

"Michaela?"

"I'll stick with the champagne."

"Frank?"

"None for me. Armed, driving and alcohol, not a good combination."

Jake held up two fingers to the waiter who dashed off. He finally looked at Frank and gave him his first genuine, albeit small, smile of the night.

They'd finished their meal and Jake and Marina were laughing at a childhood story of Marina's first acting job. "I was nine. Jake took me into the city for a commercial I'd gotten. I was very excited and had my lines down cold. It was a soup commercial. All we had to do was eat the soup and say our lines. The director was an ass and started yelling that I was overshadowing the boy. He said I was too much."

Jake shook his head and started laughing. "I bet that director still remembers you."

"What did she do?" asked Frank.

"She started yelling at him in Russian, telling him he was a no talent hack interspersed with some very colorful curses."

"Did he speak Russian?"

"No but apparently some of the crew did. They started laughing and it got around to the rest of them pretty fast."

"What did he do?" asked Mike.

Marina shrugged. "He fired me."

"That's terrible," she said.

"Well, last I heard he's still directing commercials and my last movie made over a billion dollars, so all in all, things worked out."

They all started laughing. Marina looked around at the table and thought only one thing. Family. All of them, family.

The manager approached their table. "Excuse me, Ms. Sokolov."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are we being too loud?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't never ask this but there is a little girl. Her parents brought her here for a special birthday dinner. She begged me to ask if she could meet you and I didn't have the heart to say no."

Marina smiled. "Of course, send her and her parents over." Frank gave her a cautious look. "It's fine, Frank. Just another Marcie."

A little girl cautiously approached followed by her two equally nervous parents. She had dark brown hair, beautiful brown eyes and was wearing a lovely party dress. "Hello, I'm Marina. What's your name?"

"Elena. Elena Torres."

Marina extended her hand. "It's very nice to meet you, Elena. This must be Mom and Dad." Marina shook both their hands.

"Thank you, so much for this Ms. Sokolov. It means so much to Elena," said her father with a heavy Central American accent.

"I understand it's your birthday. How old are you?"

"I'm eight. Mama and Papa brought me here for a special treat."

"Also because she got straight A's on her report card."

"You did! That's wonderful Elena. What's your favorite subject?"

"Science," said the girl but cast her eyes down.

"That's great, Elena. Science it very important."

"I like it a lot," she said "but the kids make fun of me for being smart. They say I'm teacher's pet. They say I talk funny. I didn't learn English until a couple of years ago so sometimes I mess up the words. I just wish I was beautiful, like you."

Marina's heart clenched. She looked up at her parents who both had tears in their eyes. "Come here, Elena," she said through a choked voice. "First of all, you are very beautiful. Don't ever let anyone tell you different. But this," she made a circle around her own face. "I had nothing to do with this. This is thanks to God and my parents. You know what I am really proud of? My hard work. I worked a long time, I went to school, I studied, I trained. I improved. My hard work paid off." Marina was rewarded with a smile. "Do you know that English isn't my birth language?"

The little girl gasped. "It's not?"

"No it's not. See that guy over there. That's my brother, Jacob. We were raised speaking Russian. I had to learn English too." Marina touched the little girl's cheek and spoke to her in Russian. "I am very happy to meet you, Elena Torres and I wish you a very happy birthday."

"I heard my name but what was the rest?"

"I said I was happy to meet you and I wished you a very happy birthday."

"Thank you," she whispered before she launched herself at Marina for a big hug.

Marina looked up at her parents. "Do you have a camera?" Her father nodded and pulled out his phone. "We have to have a picture. Frank, would you take one too?" He nodded and pulled out his phone. Elena beamed as her proud parents snapped pictures.

She glanced over at Frank and saw a look she might mistake for pride.

"Just a second, Elena." She leaned over to Mike. "Is it okay if..."

She smiled and nodded. "I'll make you another pair."

She pulled off her earrings and handed them to Elena. "These are my most favorite earrings." She nodded toward Mike. "My brother's fiance made them for me, but I want you to have them."

Elena gasped. "Thank you."

"One last thing. Remember," she circled her own face again. "This isn't real beauty. Real beauty is what's in here," she pointed to the little girl's head, then to her heart. "and what's in here."

Elena threw her arms around Marina's neck and kissed her cheek. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too," she whispered back. Marina watched as the little girl held the earrings tight in her hand as they went back to their table. She looked back at her family and saw smiles.

"That was well done, sister," Jacob said in Russian.

Marina smiled sadly. "Thank you, but I see just that sort of thing more than I like. Young girls who want to look like me so much they can't see their own gifts."

Mike touched Marina's hand. "I need a touch up, come with me."

Marina stood and Frank stood as well. "Oh for God's sake Frank, the ladies room is right there." She pointed to the back corner of the room.

"Fine," he muttered. He sat back down but angled his chair so he had a better view.

"Good Lord," she muttered in Russian before she joined Mike.

"You're sister is a remarkable woman," Frank said.

"Yes, she is. And if she gets hurt I will rain hell fire down on you. Russian hell fire."

Frank smiled, but never took his eyes off the ladies room door. "I wouldn't blame you."

Mike closed the door behind them and turned the lock. "Okay, spill. You and Frank."

Marina smiled. "Me and Frank. He's..." She searched for an English word but couldn't find it. "I don't know how to describe him or us."

"Okay how do I ask this without crossing any lines?" asked Mike. "Oh what the hell? Is he as hot as we thought?"

Marina grinned and pulled out her cell phone. She pulled up the picture at the pool and showed it to her.

"Holy shit. All that and tattoos. Damn."

"You should see the one on his back. It's an eagle that reaches from shoulder to shoulder."

"I'm repeating myself but...damn." She looked up at Marina and blushed. "Oh God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"No. It's fine. You should have seen my reaction. We'd had an argument and I was coming to apologize. I saw him standing in the hall wearing nothing but shorts. I couldn't breathe let alone speak."

"So have you told him you're in love with him?"

"What? No, it's only been a few days."

"Marina, I know the look. It's the look Jake has when he looks at me. You're in love, sister."

Marina put away her phone and reached for her lip gloss. Her heart pounded knowing Mike was right. The problem was, now what?

Marina pushed off her shoes as soon as they walked through the front door. "That was a nice evening but I'm beat."

Frank held up the portfolio with the jewelry. "I'll put this away and check the upstairs."

"Fine." she said as she flopped on the couch and put her feet up. "Oh, give me that kid's card. I want to text it to the coordinator before I forget." She took a picture of the card and forward it with instructions to see Jimmy got his credentials. She was endager of drifting off when Frank came back in the room.

"Everything's secure," he said as he grabbed his tablet and pulled reading glasses out of his inside pocket. They had a light silver frame and rimless bottoms.

"Glasses?" she smiled.

"Yeah," he said pointing to himself. "Old guys need glasses."

"They're hot, in a hot professor kind of way."

"Hot professor?"

"Yeah you're too old to be a hot teacher."

He laughed and pushed her back on the pillow. "Smart ass." He opened a few websites he'd been monitoring. In only took a minute to find it posted on The Inquisitor site. He turned the tablet toward Marina. "That didn't take long." There was a picture of Frank and Marina with the headline, The Look of Love, by Jimmy Collins.

Marina sat up and looked at the pictures. "Oh these are nice. I hope he got a lot of money for them." She looked at the picture taken just as he'd smiled at her. She had the thought that she'd never looked happier in her life. She took a quick look at the brief article and for once, everything in it was accurate. She pointed to where it said she'd never been involved with Peter Kane.

"Mission accomplished. Kane will be pissed and anyone looking at this would think you're in love. You're a great actress, Marina."

She looked at him and her heart broke a little. She stroked his cheek and whispered, "I wasn't acting, Frank." The stunned look on his face made the crack in her heart a little bigger. "I'm in love with you. I know it's not what you wanted or expected." She gave a small laugh. "God knows you're not what I expected, but there it is. Apparently that's how

it works for Sokolovs. It takes us forever to find you, but when we do, we know." She gave him the softest of kisses and then stood. "I'm going to make some tea. Do you want some?" He was still staring at her, unmoving. She turned and walked toward the kitchen. She knew if she'd stayed there much longer she'd lose control and that was all she had left.

Frank stared at where Marina no longer was. She was in love with him? It couldn't be possible. It shouldn't be. He was supposed to be focused on the stalker, not her. His mind flashed with moments they shared over the last few days. The car ride, the pool, the first time they'd made love. He also thought about the Marcie's. The little girl tonight. Her work with the Marines. She was amazing. Of all the things her thought about her, strong, smart, kind, beautiful was always last. The images fled and all he could hear was Marina yelling at him in Russian to grow a pair.

He found her in the kitchen setting up a kettle for boil. She turned and saw him.
"Do you want some?"

"Russian Caravan?"

She smiled and shrugged. "Of course."

"Marina..."

She put up her hand to stop him. "Don't Frank. I don't need another litany of reasons while we'll never work. I've heard them all. I just need to know if you want some tea."

"Yes, thank you." She reached for a second mug but he could see she was trembling. He took the mug from her hand and set it down. "Marina, listen to me. You're right. You're not what I expected. I expected a pain in the ass diva. I never expected someone like you." He brushed held her face in his hand. "I never expected someone so strong and smart and kind. You are the most amazing woman I've ever met. I can't believe someone like you would say you love me."

"Are you going to make me prove it, Frank? Would you always doubt my love for you? As much as I love you, I couldn't live like that. I told you once I would always tell you the truth and I always have. That would have to be good enough. I would have to be good enough just the way I am."

He switched to Russian. Somehow it seemed it would be the only way he could explain himself. He gave her a soft kiss. "My sweet, sweet girl. You don't have to prove anything to me, ever. I'm the one who needs to prove himself. I am a stubborn old man who has trouble changing his ways, so you'll have to be patient with me." He kissed her again. "My sweet, beautiful girl. I'm in love with you." She gasped as her face lit up. "I think I've been in love with you since the first time you called me a goon. Or maybe it was when you stuck your tongue out at me." She smiled as the tears were running down her face. "Or maybe it was when I saw how kind you are to the Marcies and Jimmys and Elenas in this world." As he leaned in to kiss her, the electric kettle boiled. He turned off the switch and smiled. "The tea can wait." He looked into her amazing eyes and whispered, "I love you."

Marina fussed with her hair as she waited for Frank to lock up and check the alarms. She'd slipped on a negligee she had for ages but never wore. The pale peach satin flowed over her skin like water. She didn't know why she was so nervous. They'd been having enthusiastic sex for days. She glanced over at the door he'd had pressed against a few hours before. She closed her eyes and smiled. He loved her.

"I checked the.." Frank stopped in his tracks. "My God," he whispered. He tossed the jacket and tie he was carrying on the chaise. He walked toward her and placed his hands on her waist, running them up and down the cool fabric.

Marina slipped her hands around his neck and whisper to him in Russian. "I love you, my strong, wonderful, handsome man. My Josiah." She pulled him into a passionate kiss as he held her tight against him. She pulled back and he tried to unbutton his shirt. She took his hands and whispered "Let me." She opened his shirt and pulled it out of his pants. She undid his cuffs and slipped the shirt off his shoulders to the floor.

She rubbed her hands over his bare skin, tracing this chest, his arms. She ran her fingers over his tattoos, tracing the lines with her fingers. She replaced her fingers with her tongue, smiling when she heard him gasp. She walked slowly around him studying the eagle on his back. She touched it's wings, tracing the line of his shoulders. "Beautiful," she whispered. She circled back and put her hands on his chest, caressing him. "My Josiah," she whispered. "My man." She reached for his belt, undid his slacks. She knelt

down to remove his shoes and socks. She slipped off his slacks, his boxers . He was naked before her. His eyes had gone dark with passion. Marina slipped the straps of her gown off her shoulders and let the gown fall to the floor. She took his hands and placed them on her hips. She moved close and whispered, "Your woman."

He took her in his arms and she knew he'd never let go.

Jake sat at the small table in their suite drinking his coffee. He opened the morning newspaper and began to flip through the pages. "Ah, crap," he muttered in Russian.

"What is it?" asked Mike.

He turned the paper so Mike could see of the picture of Marina and Frank taken last night.

"Oh, that's a good picture. What's the problem?"

"Look at her face."

"Yes, I see her. What?"

"She's in love with him."

Mike smiled. "I thought so even though she wouldn't admit it."

"And you didn't tell me?"

She ran her hand over Jake's short hair. "I thought she should figure it out first."

She took another look at the picture and said, "Well how about that?"

"Now what?"

"He's in love with her too."

"Are you sure?"

Mike laughed. "Oh yeah."

"This is crazy. They barely know each other."

She pulled him to his feet. "Did you really just say that? We met, fell in love and got engaged in less than a week. Apparently that's what Sokolovs do."

Jake slipped his arms around her waist. "She's my sister and she and my friend are...I can't even say it."

Mike gave his a light kiss. "Doing the nasty?" she whispered with a grin.

"Knock it off."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I couldn't resist. I know you've been looking out for Marina her whole life. You need to trust her judgment the way she trusted yours about me."

"I know you're right, but if he hurts her..."

"I know. You'll come down on him like the hand of God."

"More like Satan, when Satan's having a really bad day."

Marina sat at her vanity while Rose did her makeup and Casper put the finishing touches on her hair.

"So where's your hunky new boyfriend. I saw that picture. Very nice," asked Rose. Marina laughed. Rose and Casper had been her prep team for events for years. They could get away with being a little nosey. Rose was a little Italy transplant in her late fifties with a super short grey hair and a personality as bold as her taste in clothes. Casper was tall and heavily muscled. He was the guy who got into hairdressing to meet women. Now, they flocked to his Beverly Hills salon.

"He's getting dressed across the hall. He said he'd leave me to all the girly stuff." She looked in the mirror and touched her hair. "Casper, it's perfect."

"Of course it is," he said with a smile then slapped her hand. "But it won't if you keep messing with it."

She had Casper pin her hair up with a few loose curls to soften the look. This way she could show off Mike's jewelry. She pointed to the case on the vanity. "Casper, would you be a dear and help me with my necklace."

"It's gorgeous," said Rose.

"Isn't it? Michaela Turner designed it."

"Oh, she's very good," said Casper.

Marina smiled. "Yes, she is." She put on the earrings and stood in front of the full length mirror. She was pleased with the overall look, elegant but not flashy. Rose and Casper were packing up when there was a knock at the door.

"Are you ready? The car's here." Frank walked in and all of them stopped moving. He was wearing a perfectly tailored Marine dress uniform. The jacket was snug across his broad shoulders. Pinned to his chest were rows of ribbons. His white slacks had a sharp crease and his white hat was tucked under his arm. He looked at everyone's stunned silence. "What?"

Marina walked toward him and whispered in Russian, "Just when I think you can't get any better." She slipped her hand around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss deeper than should happen in front of an audience.

Rose laughed as she approached them. "I'd yell at you for messing up my work but frankly, I don't blame you." She handed her a tube of lip gloss. "Take this for touch

ups." She looked up at Frank and smiled. "Try not to mess her up too much before the red carpet."

Casper stopped and extended hand. "Semper Fi, brother."

Frank smiled and shook his hand. "Semper Fi." He saw them to the door as Marina grabbed her purse. "Your hairdresser was a Marine?"

"Yeah. Said he joined right out of high school. Did four years before getting out and working at his mother's salon in Pomona. Discovered he had a real gift for it. That combined with the fact he was a handsome straight man, he became very popular. He opened a shop in Beverly Hills about ten years ago. Rose works for him. It's impossible to get an appointment with him."

"Except for you."

Marina smiled. "They make an exception for me." She walked toward him and put her hand on his chest. "You ready to roll, Colonel?"

Marina waited in the limo while Frank went in to the St. Regis for Jake and Mike. Dressed like this she'd be noticed and she couldn't be late. Tonight was too important. She smiled as she saw her brother walking to toward the car in his dress uniform. He looked so handsome. Not as handsome as Frank, of course, but pretty close. Mike looked sensational in an elegant black gown that plunged in the front.

"Hi guys," said Marina as they got in to the limo. Jake and Mike each gave her a kiss. It gave Marina a chance to admire the long necklace and matching chandelier earrings. The pieces were a perfect example of why she was known for her colored stones. "Those are beautiful. What are they?"

"They're all sapphires in varying colors."

"Beautiful," she smiled. "So everyone ready for this?"

"It's different," said Jake.

"Jake is usually my date for this. He looks very handsome in his uniform."

Mike looked at him and smiled. "He certainly does."

"Any progress?" Jake asked Frank.

"I expect something soon."

"No talk of psychos tonight. Let's just relax and have a good time."

The red carpet was a typical madhouse. Frank had worked these events before, but never from this side. The men exited the car first. Jake held his hand out for Mike, then Frank helped Marina out of the car. As soon as she hit the pavement they were bathed in a flood of camera flashes. The Marine Ball had become a big event thanks to Marina. She made sure there were enough celebrities for the photographers to show up en masse. She held Frank's hand as she walked toward the wall covered with the Marine Corp symbol erected for posing for photos. Frank dropped her hand as she moved toward the center of the wall. Photographers yelled her name and she waved and smiled. They called out questions about what she was wearing and she made sure to mention Michaela Turner designed her jewelry. Frank could imagine Mike's phone ringing off the hook with orders by Monday. He was marveling at her poise when they started calling for him to join her. She waved him over and he reluctantly complied. She pulled him close and said in Russian, "Relax, Josiah. Just think about what I'm going to do later tonight to get you out your uniform."

Frank couldn't help but laugh out loud. He gave her a kiss that caused a lightning storm of flashes. He saw a head of curly red hair at the end of the line of photographers. At that angle he wasn't going to get a good shot. He pointed him out to Marina. She took his hand and they walked to where Jimmy was standing.

"Hi, Jimmy. So nice to see you again," Marina said.

"Hi, Ms. Sokolov." He gave her a huge grin. "You look amazing."

"Oh, thank you. Frank, how about one for Jimmy?"

"Sure thing." Frank posed with Marina as Jimmy took several rapid fire shots.

Marina waved to the crowd and walked toward the hotel entrance. "That wasn't too bad, was it?" she asked.

"No sweetheart. It wasn't too bad."

"I have to go talk to the coordinator and take care of some details."

He looked in the ballroom and saw a crush of people. He didn't like it. "I'll go with you."

"Frank, there's no need. I've known these people for years."

He pulled her aside to a quiet hallway. "Marina, our prime suspect is someone you

know. I need you to be safe." He slipped his arms around her waist and switched to Russian. "Keeping you safe used to be my job. Now it's my life."

She smiled and gave him a kiss. "I love you, Josiah." She took his hand and led him to a conference room. The event coordinator was Patrick Monahan, a retired Marine sergeant, who snapped to attention when Frank entered the room.

"At ease, sergeant. We're both retired."

"Sorry Colonel, force of habit."

Marina and Patrick reviewed the plans for the evening, dinner, dancing and a speech before announcing how much they'd raised.

Frank held on to Marina as they tried to make their way to the head table. They were stopped every few steps by another rich and famous someone who just wanted a moment of Marina's time. She was polite to everyone while quickly shutting them down. When they finally got to their table Jake and Mike were already seated with Monahan's wife, Mary. Marina greeted Mary with a kiss and introduced her to Frank. Monahan joined them just as dinner was served.

Dinner went quickly. Monahan and his wife were outgoing people who entertained the table with stories of navigating with multiple assignments while raising five boys including a set of triplets. Once dinner ended the music started. Monahan was the first to stand and lead his wife to the dance floor. Frank leaned over and whispered, "May I have this dance, Ms. Sokolov?"

"I would be delighted, Colonel Nash."

Frank took her in his arms and moved slowly around the floor. She smiled up at him and he forgot for a moment that there was a threat out there. He whispered in her ear, "I love you, angel."

She smiled and said, "I love you, too. I've never been happier, not in my entire life."

Frank was still holding her in his arms when Monahan approached. "Excuse me, Colonel. Marina we're ready for you."

"Ready for what?" Frank asked, suddenly on alert.

"I have to make a little speech and I announce how much we raised." She pointed

to the raised stage behind the head table. "I'll just be right there."

"Marina, I don't know."

"Is there a problem?" asked Monahan.

"Security issues."

"Colonel Nash worries," she said with a smile.

"Of course, sir. We have security on all the doors. And sir, if I may, there are over two hundred Marines in this room who would take a bullet for this woman."

"Oh, Patrick, hush," Marina said blushing.

Frank nodded and extended his hand. "Thank you, Sergeant."

Marina gave him a quick kiss. "I won't go far, promise."

Frank took his seat and watched as Marina, Monahan walked onto the stage. Music faded and the conversation roar subsided. Monahan approached the podium and tapped the mike.

"Good evening, everyone. Welcome to the tenth annual Marine Ball for the benefit of Welcome Home. Every year this event raises funds for veteran services provided by Welcome Home throughout the year. This our celebration of every year of the work that has been accomplished and a reminder of the work still to be done. Normally this is the part of the evening when I introduce our special guest, but tonight is a going to be a little different."

Frank saw the startled look on Marina's face. She didn't know what was happening.

"In the ten years of Welcome Home we have provided housing, made homes wheel chair accessible and job training. Sometimes all we do is listen when someone needs to talk. Tonight I am happy to announce that we have raised over two million dollars. These funds will be used to finish construction on our new outreach center. The generosity of our patrons will help us serve hundreds of vets over the next year." He paused for a round of applause. "Tonight also marks ten years the unfailing support of our guardian angel, Marina Sokolov." The crowd erupted in cheers as Marina blushed as glanced at Frank. "Marina has worked behind the scenes for ten years, providing aid, and convincing many of her industry friends to join us. Now if Marina was just any patron we would give her a plaque and name the new center after her. But I've worked with her for ten years and I know she would hate that." Marina rolled her eyes and smiled." Monahan glanced at

Marina and smiled. "Marina, if I were to list all the things you've done for us over the last ten years," he paused and smiled. "Well, you'd just tell me to hush. You have touched so many lives. You have no idea how much you mean to us. So, well, we have this."

The lights dimmed and music began playing. A screen behind the podium lit up with a picture of Marina, but not a glamour shot. She was in jeans and a t-shirt painting a wall. Then Monahan began to sing.

*I've got sunshine on a cloudy day
When it's cold outside, I've got the month of May
I guess you'd say
What can make me feel this way.*

Two Marines stood up.

Our girl, our girl, our girl,

Two more stood

Talkin' 'bout our girl

Two more stood

Our girl.

Pictures of Marina, laughing with vets, holding children on her lap, sitting behind a desk on the phone flashed on the screen as the singing continued. By the time the song finished twenty Marines were standing and singing to Marina. The music ended and the audience stood for thunderous applause. Monahan stepped aside for Marina to take the mic. Frank laughed when Marina looked at him and mouthed "Wow."

The crowd quieted and took their seats. She took a breath and smiled. "Thank you all. This is really wonderful. She looked down at them and smiled. "Both my brother and the love of my life are Marines. From them I've learned about duty, honor, respect and love. It has been my privilege to work with men and women who have given so much to serve our country. Thank you so much." She acknowledged the crowd as she returned to their table. Jake gave his sister a hug and whispered, "Well done, little sister." Mike gave her a big hug and kiss. Finally she walked toward Frank and smiled. He pulled her into a hug so he could be sure she would hear him. "You are the most amazing person I've ever known."

Marina took a sip of water but didn't sit down. "I need to do the dances."

"What dances?"

"Every year I dance with the youngest and oldest Marine. It's tradition."

"I'll come with you," said Frank. He began to stand but she pushed him back down.

"Frank, it's just dancing. I'm not leaving the dance floor."

"Fine, but don't leave the room, Marina. I mean it."

She smiled and gave him a kiss. "I love you too."

Frank sat down and listened to the music starting to play. Two dances and he'd go get her. He felt his phone vibrate. The text he read didn't make him feel any better.

"What is it?" asked Jake.

"It's from my associate. He's identified the print on the last note. It's Peter Kane."

"Are you sure? How did you get his prints?" asked Mike.

"Jerry's resourceful. It's enough to get a restraining order but it's not actionable."

"What? He's terrified her for months. He should be arrested." demanded Jake.

"The messages he left are disgusting but he never made an overt threat." Frank tucked his phone back in his jacket and wondered how he was going to stop Kane just short of killing him. Although that option wasn't completely off the table.

Marina had finished her dance with an eighty five year old former gunnery sergeant. Now it was an eighteen year old private. They smiled for pictures and just the music was winding down the young man got tapped on the shoulder.

"May I cut in?"

The private's face lit up. "Sure thing, Mr. Kane," he said as he stepped aside.

Peter took her left hand in a crushing grip and pulled her tight against with his right.

"What are you doing here, Peter? You weren't on the guest list."

He leaned in close and whispered, "I'm Peter Kane. I can get in anywhere or anything I want, including you." He punctuated his point by grabbing her ass.

"You're disgusting," she said as she tried to pull away. He dropped his right hand for a moment and slipped it in his pocket. Then she felt the barrel of a gun pressed against her stomach.

"We could have done this the easy way, but have it your way." He nodded toward the side exit. "Move."

"Frank will come looking for me."

Peter laughed. "That old man? I'll take care of him when I'm done with you."

She put her hand on Peter's chest. "I don't want him hurt. Let me send word I'm going out for some air. Otherwise he'll be on your heels in a few seconds." She could see him pause and think about his options.

He nodded. "Don't try anything," he said as he pushed the gun hard against her stomach before standing back.

She tapped a young man on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Marine."

The Marine smiled broadly, "Yes, Ms. Sokolov."

"Would you do me a favor? Would you go to the head table and tell Lt. Colonel Nash I'm going out for some air?"

"Sure thing," he said before dashing off.

Peter grabbed her hand and led her out of the ballroom.

Frank was looking around at the dance floor and didn't see her. He was about to go up on stage and grab the mike when a young private came to their table.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Lt. Colonel Nash."

"It's Colonel Nash," said Jake.

"Oh, I'm sorry sir. I have a message from Ms. Sokolov for you. She said to tell you she's going out for some air."

"Going out for air?" asked Frank. "What the hell is she thinking?" Then it hit him. "Private, are you sure she said Lt. Colonel?"

"Yes sir, she did. Maybe she doesn't know the difference?"

Frank looked at Jake. They said it in unison. "She knows the difference." He turned back to the Marine. "Was she with anyone?"

"She didn't seem to be. There was a guy in a tux behind her but he wasn't looking at her."

"What did he look like?" asked Frank.

"Didn't get a real good look, blonde guy about six foot one."

Frank looked at Jake who'd gone pale. "He's got her." Frank put his foot on the chair and pulled a 22 out of his ankle holster. "Monahan, Marina's been taken. The suspect is Peter Kane."

"The actor?" he asked.

"Yeah. Get some men, cover every entrance, every room." The private pointed to the door Marina went through. Frank sprinted through the crowd, screaming "Move" at the top of his lungs. Jake was close behind.

Marina was terrified but she be damned if she'd let him know. She saw he was leading her down a hall that led to an exit. She stopped walking and turn to him laughing. "You know Peter, I have to give you credit. Snatching me out of a room full of Marines, that takes brass ones."

He pushed her up against the wall and gave her a brutal kiss. "That's because I'm a real man."

"I just don't know why you went to all the bother. The notes, the flowers, making sure you never get caught, why go to all that trouble?"

"Because you needed to be taught a lesson. You can't play hard to get with me."

"I wasn't playing."

"I know you wanted it. All those love scenes," he stroked her face. "You were so passionate."

"I was acting."

"I know you weren't. Everyone knew you were into me. Even the trades new it."

"You're wrong."

Peter turned beet red and slapped her face.

Marina could see him trying to collect himself. She was hoping she'd get an opportunity to get away.

"You start snubbing me on set. Me. No one treats me like that. I had to teach you a lesson. Then you replace me with that old man and tell the world I was nothing to you. You can't do that to me and get away with it." He got in close. "Well I'm going to show you what a real man is like."

"You know you'll have to kill me. How are you going to explain that, Peter?"

"I don't have to kill you. I'm going to take my time with you. Afterwards, if you make any noise about it, I'll say it was consensual. It'll be your word against mine."

"You won't get away with it."

"Oh yes I will."

Frank could barely hear the pounding of footsteps behind over the sound of his pounding pulse. He'd failed. Kane got to her. He had to find her. He became aware of men shouting behind him. They were the Marines, called out to help. Some flooded out to the hotel parking lot, others posted themselves at the exits. The rest started running up and down hallways.

"Why are there so many damn hallways," he thought. The first led to a dead end. They turned to the next one which led around the gym and out toward the parking lot. They had just turned the last corner when they saw them. Kane had her pinned up against the wall with a gun pressed to her stomach. Kane heard them coming and turned his face toward Frank and Jake.

"Come any closer and I'll kill her."

Marina took his moment of distraction to drive her knee into his crotch with incredible force. Kane let out a blood curdling scream and fell to the ground.

"You bitch!" he screamed.

He aimed the gun at her when Frank fired, hitting him in the shoulder. He screamed curses at everyone. Frank walked over and kicked the gun out of Kane's range. The Marines heard the shot and came running. They circled around the scene, ensuring Kane wouldn't move. Frank pulled Marina into his arms and said over and over, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

"I'm okay, Frank. Really I am."

One of the young private's spoke up. "You know sir, none of us would say anything if you want to take another shot at him." Kane's face blanched, assuming he was about to be executed. Jake walked forward.

"If you won't I will."

Frank put a hand on Jake's chest. "No. The rest of the world is finally going to know what a piece of shit this guy is. This guy made his name on his looks. Now he'll be the prom queen of his cellblock for the next twenty years."

Marina tighten her grip around his waist and said in Russian, "I'm proud of you, Josiah."

He felt like a complete fraud.

By the time they got back to Marina's it was nearly dawn. Marina look tired but still as beautiful as ever. "Why don't you get some rest. I have a few things to take care of."

"Bullshit," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"You're blaming yourself for what Peter did. You think you could have stopped him."

"I should have stopped him."

"I should have let you watch me on the dance floor, but I didn't. He would have found a way to get to me, he would have never given up."

"I pushed him to act."

"We did and I'm glad we did. I knew you'd find me."

Frank cracked a small smile. "That Lt. Colonel bit was clever."

She slipped her arms around his waist. "Thanks," she smiled.

"And remind me never to piss you off. That was an impressive move with your knee."

"I paid attention in fight training."

Frank's smile faded. "I don't know how you can be so casual about this. I don't know how you could forgive me. I won't ever forgive myself."

Marina backed up and started yelling at him in Russian. "Casual! You think I'm casual about this? As much as I wanted you to find me I was terrified you would."

"What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I was terrified of what he would do to you." The dam broke and the stress of the night poured out. "I've spent my whole life pretending to be other people so no one has ever knew who I really am, no one except you." She started pacing the floor . "You see the pain in the ass diva with the huge temper and you still love me." She stopped and pointed at him. "Don't pretend you don't. I'm not having it."

Frank tried not to smile. "I wouldn't dream of it."

"And what is all this 'I didn't save the damsel in distress' bullshit? I am not some helpless weakling. We figured this thing out together. Not just you, not just me, together." She pointed back and forth. "That's how these things are supposed to work. We figure things out together."

"I see," he said quietly.

"So are we good here?" she asked.

He smiled. "Yeah. We're good."

"Okay then." Marina grabbed his hand and started pulling him upstairs.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm doing what I promised. I'm going to do something exceedingly clever and hot to get you out of your uniform. At which point I am going to ravage every square inch of you."

Frank laughed. "Oh really?"

"Really. Then you will ravage every square inch of me."

"So that's how this together thing works?"

Marina stopped and gave him a soft kiss. "Exactly," she whispered. "Now move it, Marine. The ravaging is about to commence."

He laughed as he followed her up the stairs.