

The Nashes: A New Decade

By Kate Simon

Frank Nash was enjoying a rare moment of quiet in his garden. He'd spent an hour deadheading his roses. Now he was sitting in the chaise with his feet up, reading the new Grisholm novel. He hoped he'd get through a few more chapters before the kids got home from school.

His twins, Anna and Jonas were twelve. His son Jacob was eleven. They attended the same private academy but Jonas was taking classes at Caltech one day a week. Today was his advanced chemistry class, so he wouldn't be home until five. Thank God for Sara. She would pick Jonas up after his class. Their nanny had been with them since the twins were infants and he didn't know what they'd do without her. She was one of the few people they trusted completely with their kids. She was expert at handling their children's diverse personalities as well as managing the security issues for the children of a celebrity.

His baby girl, Riley had just turned four. He loved all his children but Riley was special. She was a little blonde sprite. When she giggled and smiled at him he turned into a puddle. He could deny her nothing. Marina said he was a pushover for all the kids but his baby girl was different, at least he thought so. They'd been stunned when they found out Marina was pregnant with Riley. He'd thought his age would make him less able to be a good father. If anything, it had spurred him on to be the best father he could be. Riley was with Marina, having lunch with her friend, Kate Gallo. He closed his eyes and sighed, drinking in the quiet.

"Papa, where are you? Can I go to Charlie's?" called Jake.

Frank looked at his watch. Three forty five, later than he thought. "I'm on the deck."

Jake ran out to the deck and began a rapid fire monologue in Russian. They'd been raised bilingual and used Russian when they wanted to emphasize the importance of their conversation. "Papa, Charlie just got a new model rocket and we're going to shoot it off."

Frank drilled his son with a look that he'd fine tuned over the years. The look said 'You will tell me the absolute truth or suffer the consequences'. "Is Charlie's mother or father home?"

“Yeah. His Mom is the one who helped him build it. She said I could come watch them set it off.”

“Okay. You can go. Be back in time for dinner.”

“Thanks, Papa,” he yelled as he ran out of the house and down the street to Charlie’s house.

Frank looked past the deck door and saw Anna staring at him. “Hi, princess. How was school?” She came out on the deck but was continuing to study him.

“It was okay.”

He patted the seat next to him and she sat down. “What’s wrong, baby?” Usually Anna protested being called baby. When she didn’t he knew something was wrong.

“I found out why Jenny wasn’t in school. Her grandpa died.”

“That’s sad. How is she doing?”

“She said she was okay. She said her grandpa was really old.” Anna looked at him with tears in her eyes. “She said he was sixty four.”

Frank’s heart broke as he pulled his daughter close. He’d do anything for his children, but this he couldn’t fix. “You’re upset because I’m older too.”

“You’re older than Jenny’s grandpa.”

“Yes, Anna. I’m sixty seven.”

“I don’t want you to die,” she cried and buried her head in his chest.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered in Russian. “I want you to listen to me.” She pulled back and he struggled to keep his composure. “Anna, I wish I could tell you that it’s never going to happen, but I can’t. What I can tell you is I take very good care of myself. I eat right and I work out. My doctor says I’m in excellent health.”

“Really?”

“Really. I do everything in my power to stay healthy so I can keep up with you lot,” he smiled.

Anna smiled and gave him a tight hug. “You promise, Papa?”

“I swear, and you know Mama and I always tell you the truth.” They cuddled on the chaise as Frank kissed the top of her head.

“Papa, why did you wait so long?”

“For what?”

“To have kids?”

“Because I didn’t meet your mother until I was fifty five.”

“Did you want kids?”

“I never knew I did until you and your brother came along.”

Anna pulled back and looked stunned. “Didn’t you want us?” she gasped.

“Of course we wanted you. You know when you were still in Mama’s tummy I would talk to you and Jonas. You two were always tussling.”

“Hah. Sounds familiar.”

“Well, you two would be tussling and making Mama uncomfortable. That’s when I would talk to you. I would tell you to hush and give Mama a break, and you would. Then when you were born you were a very demanding baby. When you were unhappy you let the whole world know. For a while there I was the only one who could calm you down.” He looked at his daughter and smiled. “If I tell you something do you promise not to tell Mama? It has to be our secret.”

Her eyes got bright and she smiled. “Okay.”

“I secretly liked that I was the only one who could calm you down and make you smile. It made me feel special, like I was supposed to be your Papa.”

Anna smiled and put her arms around his neck. “You are special, Papa. You’re the best. I love you.”

“I love you too, princess.”

Then she kissed his cheek and he held her tight like he’d done when she was a baby. She was still Papa’s girl.

“Papa, Papa,” he heard from behind him. Marina walked on to the deck with Riley. She was holding a large pink flower with a yellow center. “Roza,” she said in her sweet Russian accent.

“Yes, Riley. That’s a rose,” he replied in Russian. He glanced up at Marina who looked concerned for at the sight of Anna on his lap. “Give us a second,” he said quietly. “Anna, sweetheart, are we good?”

Anna looked at her sister and then back at him. “Yes, Papa. We’re good.” She tried to get off his lap but he pulled her back.

He whispered in her ear in Russian. “Anna, sweetheart, my first born. I love you more than I can say. He cupped his hand to her cheek. “No matter what happens, I’ll be a part of you forever.” He kissed her cheek and she smiled through her watery eyes.

Anna climbed off the chair as Riley pushed towards him. “Papa, roza. For you.” He stood and picked her up as she gave him a kiss.

“Thank you, peanut. It’s beautiful.”

“Put it in your garden, Papa. It’s pretty.”

“Okay, let’s pick a spot.” He walked toward the garden.

“I tried to explain to her that it wouldn’t bloom more flowers but she wouldn’t hear it,” said Marina.

“Actually, it might. It’s a Rugosa Rose, a real hardy flower. The pollen in the center will drop off. She’s got a bit of root on the stem. It could take and bloom.”

“See Mama, I told you.”

Marina laughed. “Great. Proven wrong by my four year old.”

They picked a spot in corner of the garden and dug a small hole. Riley got dirt on her dress and her hands as they planted her flower. She noticed the dirt and looked up at Marina. “Mama, messy.”

“Come on, peanut,” said Marina. “Let’s get washed up.”

Frank watched as they walked into the house. He turned and looked at his garden. He cultivated it for nearly twenty years. He had roses for each of the women in his life, the Marina rose was a bold red. The Anna rose was a climbing rose and the Riley Jane was a pretty pink with white edges. They were popular roses among enthusiasts. They would be planted and replanted for generations. He closed his eyes and tried to fight the tears. There was only one thing that would ever make him leave his family. Time.

“Tell me what happened with Anna.”

He hadn’t heard Marina come up from behind him. “Where’s Riley?”

“Anna volunteered to get her cleaned up so what ever it was it was huge. Talk to me, Frank. What’s wrong with our daughter?”

“Nothing’s wrong with her. She found out why her friend Jenny was out of school. It was because her grandfather died. The grandfather was younger than me. She had a bit of a panic.”

Marina slipped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. “Oh,” she said. “What did you tell her?”

“What could I say? I told her the truth. I told her that I do my best to stay fit, but I can’t promise what the future brings.”

“That was good,” she whispered.

“What?” he asked as he tilted her face to his. He was surprised to see tears in her eyes. “Marina?”

She tried to pull away. “ I should get dinner started.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s my biggest fear too. I know it’s irrational. I know what great shape you’re in.” She smiled. “Believe me I know.” She paused and looked into his eyes. “We’ve always known our age difference was a risk. But I remember what Mama told us before we got married. A love like ours was a blessing and we should enjoy every minute of it. I have. We’ve made a wonderful life together.”

“Yes, we have,” he smiled and gave her a soft kiss.

“Mama,” called Anna. “Riley wants new ribbons in her hair and she says only you do it right.”

Marina smiled at him. “See what I mean?” She turned toward the deck door. “I’ll be right there.”

Frank watched as one of the biggest movie stars in the world went back into their home to tie ribbons in their daughter’s hair. He smiled, looked to the sky and prayed. “Please let me stay with them.”

Anna watched her family as they ate their dinner. Jake was talking about Charlie and rockets. Jonas was trying to explain the stuff he learned at college. Mama was trying to get Riley to eat her carrots but she was smiling at Papa. And Papa was smiling at Mama. They did that a lot. It was like they had told each other a joke. But she knew it wasn't that. She may be twelve but she wasn't a baby. She knew stuff.

She didn't understand adults. They always made such a big deal about her mother's looks. She just looked like Mama to her. Most days she wore jeans and t-shirts and her hair was stuck up in a ponytail. Sometimes she got dressed up for work. She admitted Mama looked pretty when she did that but it looked like so much trouble. People came to the house and fixed her hair and her face. Papa would get dressed up too. She did think he looked handsome when he did that, especially when he put on his uniform. She liked Mama's movies, the ones they'd let her see. But she just didn't get it. People made such a fuss over her just because of her face. To her, she just looked like her Mama. And everyone always said they she looked just like her.

"Okay, you lot, homework time," said Papa. "I'll get Riley settled and be back for dish duty."

"I'll do the dishes," said Anna. "My homework's done."

Marina looked at Frank and shrugged. "Okay. I never turn down help in the kitchen." Anna scraped the dishes and loaded the dishwasher while Marina washed the pots. "Thank you, sweetheart. That was a big help."

"Mama I want to ask you a favor."

"Ask."

"I'll be right back." She ran out of the kitchen and pulled a magazine out of her backpack. She set it on the kitchen table. It was the latest People magazine with Marina's picture on the cover. It once again declared her mother the most beautiful woman. "My friend Jenny is sad because her grandpa died. She says she's okay but I don't think she is."

"Papa told me. I'm so sorry. What does the magazine mean?"

“Jenny is a big Time Travelers fan. She’s got the backpack and her notebooks have stickers. I thought if you autographed it for her she’d be happy, at least for a little while.” Anna didn’t understand why her mother’s eyes got teary.

“Of course. I have some pens in the sideboard that won’t smear.”

Anna got the pen and Marina sat at the kitchen table. She autographed the cover and closed the cap on the pen. “Does Jenny know I’m your Mama?”

“Well…”

“What?”

“I never told her. I don’t tell people. When people know your my Mama they can be weird. Are you mad?” She was surprised when Mama smiled.

“Of course I’m not. I understand. You want people to be themselves.”

Anna sighed with relief.

“I have an idea but it’s okay if you say no. If you want, I could pick you up from school a little early and maybe give this to her in person.”

“Would you? She’d flip out. Jenny’s always talking Carrie this and Carrie that.”

“Sure.”

Anna gave her mother a tight hug. “Thanks, Mama.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Mama, can I ask you something?”

“Why stop now?”

“It’s about you and Papa.”

“What about us?”

“Why did you marry him?”

“What? Because I love him and couldn’t imagine the rest of my life without him.”

“He’s so much older than you.”

“Yes he is, seventeen years.”

“I don’t understand.” Anna held up the magazine. “Everyone says you’re the most beautiful woman in the world and you’re this great actress. Nobody understands why you married him because he’s so old and ordinary.”

“Anna Marina! Your father is not old and ordinary.”

“I didn’t say that, they do,” she said pointing to the magazine.

“Well they’re wrong. Papa is older than I am but he is,” Marina smiled. “He’s no old man.”

“Eww, yeah I know why you’re always locking your bedroom door.”

Anna was surprised when Marina blushed. “Some things are private between Papa and I.”

“They say you could have had anyone you wanted. Like Ryan Ford, he’s really handsome. Did you really go out with him?”

“Yes, I went out with Ryan a couple of times. He is a very nice man but I the truth is I never gave him a second thought.”

“I don’t understand. He’s so handsome.”

“Anna, I don’t know where this is coming from? We’ve always told you real beauty is what’s in your heart, not on you face.”

“But Ryan Ford! He’s well, he’s gorgeous. Papa is so ordinary.”

“I guess it’s time I tell you about the day I met your father. It was when that awful stalking thing happened and Uncle Jake called his friend to help me. Your father walked into the kitchen at Uncle Jake’s and my heart started to race.” Marina closed her eyes a bit and smiled. “He has this energy that made everything in me that’s female jump up and say ‘Hello.’”

“Energy?”

“Yes. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. He’s so handsome.” Marina grinned. “And so...fit.”

Anna cringed a bit. “Again, Mama, Ewww.”

“It wasn’t just his looks that drew me to him. It was who he was as a man. He put his life on hold to protect me and defend me. He lives by a code of honor. He does things because they are the right things to do. He is a man worthy of respect. He’s smart and kind and funny. The fact that he’s also smokin hot is a delightful perk.”

“Mama! Come on, this is my Papa were talking about.”

“This is also my husband, angel. I love him more today than I did that first day at Uncle Jake’s.”

“You loved him the first time you saw him?”

“I didn’t realize it at the time, but yes I did. I had been looking for him for thirty eight years. My heart knew when I’d found him. The one for me.”

“Will I know?”

“Yes, angel, you will. It’s the way of Sokolovs. It may take us a while to find them, but when we do, we know it’s right.” She took Anna’s hand in hers. “Don’t give these magazines so much power over what you think.”

Frank walked into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. “Kitchen’s clean,” he smiled. “It looks like my timing’s perfect.”

“Where’s Riley?”

“Torturing Jake to teach her the Russian names of her stuffed animals.”

“I better go rescue her,” said Anna. “If he gets annoyed he teaches her the wrong names. She was calling her teddy a door knob for days.”

Frank shook his head as he watched Anna walk out of the kitchen. “She’s really growing up.”

“Yeah, she is.” Marina pulled out the electric teapot. “I was going to make a cup, you want some?” She reached for the container of tea. Frank pulled her hand away and drew her into a deep kiss.

“Energy?” he asked with a smile.

“How long were you listening?”

“Long enough.” He pulled her close and ran his hands down her back and cupped her ass. “I have to admit there are times I wonder too why you’d pick me.”

“Franklin Josiah! How you could you wonder? You know I married you for your spectacular ass.”

Frank laughed and gave her a kiss. “I love you, so much, diva.”

“Good. Tonight, after we get the crew in bed, you’ll have the opportunity to show me. But for now I’m making tea and I hid some Death by Chocolate in the back of the fridge behind the leftovers. Make yourself useful, Marine.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he smiled.

Marina drove to Anna's school and parked. She had a gift bag of Time Traveler action figures along with the autographed magazine. She hoped Jenny's parents wouldn't mind her showing up. She glanced in the window of the Anna's class and saw the students gathering their things. She knew she had about fifteen minutes before the hallway became a mad house and she didn't want to add to the confusion. She went to the principal's office and knocked.

"Hello Mrs. Hansen."

"Mrs. Nash. It's good to see you again. I'll call Jenny and Anna to my office."

Marina had called ahead of time to explain what she wanted to do. Mrs. Hanson was more than happy to cooperate. Meeting Anna and Jenny in the middle of school dismissal would have been bedlam.

She picked up the phone and called Anna's teacher. "Send Jenny Schwartz and Anna Nash to my office. Please wait for Jenny's mother and bring her here. No, there's no problem. I just need to see them both." She hung off the phone and smiled. "They should be right along."

Anna walked down the hall to Mrs. Hanson's office. She knew they weren't in trouble but Jenny was still nervous.

"Are you sure we're not in trouble. You don't get called to the principal's office for no reason."

"We didn't do anything wrong." She knocked on Mrs. Hanson's door.

"Come in."

Anna opened the door and saw Mama sitting in one of the big sofas with a gift bag. Mama probably brought Jenny a present. She was always doing stuff like that.

"Hi Mama," Anna said in Russian.

"Hi, sweetheart."

Jenny looked at Mama but it took a minute for it to sink in. She was looking at the real Carrie Reynolds. She looked funny because her mouth was hanging open. Anna took her hand and led her over to the sofa. “Jenny, this is my Mama.”

“Hello, Jenny.”

“You’re Carrie Reynolds,” she gasped.

“I play Carrie in the movies but in real life I’m Marina Sokolov Nash, Anna’s Mama.”

Jenny looked at Anna and she thought she was mad at her. “You never said anything. How could you not say anything?”

“Jenny, I can explain,” said Mama. “First, why don’t you come here and sit by me.” Jenny sat down never taking her eyes off Mama.

“You’re so pretty,” she whispered.

“Thank you, dear. That’s very nice of you. There is a reason Anna and Jonah and Jacob don’t really tell people about me. They want people to like them for who they are, not for who their Mama is. Do you understand?”

“I guess so.” She looked at Anna and smiled. “Anna’s always nice to me. And she’s a good friend to have when there are bullies around.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mrs. Hanson in a tone that said she wanted names and asses to kick.

“Everyone know Anna’s a badass.”

“Excuse me?” said Mrs. Hanson. Anna could see Mama as trying not to smile.

“She escaped from that guy who grabbed her and she has all those trophies from fighting.”

“Krav Maga,” Anna corrected her.

Jenny shrugged. “Whatever. Everyone knows not to mess with her.”

“Jenny, do you only like me because I can fight?”

“No. You’re real nice. You were real nice to me when my grandpa died.” She looked at Mama. “She sat with me on the playground and held my hand while I cried.” Jenny wiped her cheek. “I really miss him.”

Mama grabbed a tissue from Ms. Hanson’s desk and wiped Jenny’s cheek. “I know about your grandpa and how sad you were. Anna told me. She also told me that you were a fan of Time Travelers and that meeting me might make you happy.”

“Oh it does!” she smiled.

“I brought you a little something.” Mama handed Jenny the bag and she started looking at what was in the bag. She pulled out a Barbie size doll of her mother. It always creeped Anna out but everyone else liked them. “Oh my gosh, this is from the new movie. It’s not even out yet.” She threw herself at Mama. “Thank you, Carrie...I’m sorry, thank you, Mrs. Nash.”

“You’re very welcome, Jenny.” Mama gave Jenny a hug but she didn’t understand why Mama was crying.

“What’s going on?”

Jenny turned around at the sound of her mother’s voice. “Look Mom, it’s Carrie Reynolds and she came here just to see me! Can you believe it?!”

Mama stood up and shook Mrs. Schwartz hand. “Hello. Marina Sokolov.”

“Mama!” Anna hated it when she said it that way but Mama smiled.

“So sorry, Anna,” she said in Russian. “Marina Sokolov Nash. Anna doesn’t like it when I don’t say my whole name.”

“Rachael Schwartz.” Jenny’s mom looked at her funny. “Anna?”

“Anna is my daughter. She knew your daughter was very upset when her grandfather died and she thought meeting me might make her happy.”

Now Jenny’s mom was crying. Everyone was crying. This was not supposed to happen. “Oh Anna, that was so nice of you,” said Mrs. Schwartz. Then she gave her a

tight hug. So she wasn't upset. Grown ups are so confusing. Anna watched Jenny look at the rest of her toys but she watched Mama and Jenny's mom too.

"It was my husband's father, Ben. He lived with us since his wife passed. He and Jenny were very close."

"I'm so sorry. Was it sudden?"

"Yes and no. He'd had a rare form of leukemia. He survived many years with it, much longer than doctors anticipated. But the older he got, well...we have a ranch house so it was easier for him to get around. And he loved being around Jenny."

"I can see why. She's a lovely girl."

"Jenny has spoken very highly of Anna. She told me Anna is the only one who's nice to everyone, even the new kids."

Mama smiled at her. "That's very nice to hear."

"We should let you go. I'm sure you have a lot of things to do."

Mama smiled at Jenny's mom. "Chauffer duty. You know how it is. I have to grab Jacob and then pick up Jonas."

"I hear he goes to college?"

"He takes a few classes. Before we all go, why don't we take a picture. Mrs. Hanson?"

"Of course."

Mama sat back down on the couch and Jenny sat next to her. Anna sat next to Mama and Jenny's mom squeezed in on the end. Mrs. Hanson took a couple of shots with Mrs. Schwartz phone and then gave it back. Jenny stood up and hugged Mama.

"Thank you for coming."

"You're very welcome."

Then she hugged Anna. "You're the best friend ever."

“Thank you for letting us use your office, Mrs. Hanson,” said Mama.

“My pleasure, Mrs. Nash. See you tomorrow, Anna.”

Anna got her things from her locker and picked up Jacob at his room. They followed Mama to the car. Anna got in the front seat and buckled up. She was oldest. She called dibs. “Thanks for coming, Mama.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

Anna looked out the window as Mama drove to the college to get Jonas. He would argue that he should have the front seat but he would lose, again. It was easy with her brothers. She understood them. Even her sister Riley was okay. She was still a baby but she knew what she would do, how she would react to things. The rest of the world was awfully confusing.

Marina sent Jacob and Jonas to their rooms to wash up for dinner. Anna tried to follow but Marina held her back. "Come talk to me," she said quietly. She led Anna into the kitchen where Frank was getting dinner started. Riley was coloring at the kitchen table.

"Look Mama, pretty," Riley said in Russian.

"Yes, peanut, it's very pretty."

"How'd it go at school today?" asked Frank.

"Fine," said Anna but she didn't sound convincing. She may have inherited her mother's looks but she didn't inherit her mother's acting ability. Frank looked at Anna, then Marina.

"Riley, sweetheart. Why don't you take your coloring upstairs. Maybe Jonas and Jacob will join you." Frank scooped her up in his arms and Marina handed him the crayons and coloring book.

"When they're done have them wash her hands and face for dinner," Marina said. She looked at Anna and pointed to the table. "Sit, please."

"Am I in trouble?"

"Of course not. I was just going to make some tea. Would you like some?"

"Yes please." The kids knew if Mama offered tea she wasn't mad but she did want to talk.

Frank came back to the kitchen without his youngest. "Jonas is teaching Riley the Russian names for the colors in her crayon box." He looked back and forth between Marina and Anna. "Tea?"

"Would you like some?"

"Yes, please." As the kettle boiled Frank set out mugs and fit each with a tea bag.

Marina poured the water in the mugs. "The tea will be ready in a minute." Frank sat down next to Anna and Marina took up the chair opposite. "Can you tell me what's bothering you?"

"I'm not really sure."

Marina smiled. "Okay, that's a start. Let's talk about what happened at school. You were right when you said it would make Jenny happy."

"Was she surprised?" asked Frank.

"Yeah, she was. Mama brought her toys from Time Travelers."

"Then what's bothering you?"

"I guess it's nothing."

"Anna Marina, I am your mother. I know all and see all."

Frank laughed. "She does. I can't get anything past her."

"And you never will," she grinned. "Anna, sweetheart, something is still bothering you. Please tell us what it is."

"When we were leaving Jenny hugged me and said I was the best friend ever. Now I'm not sure if she means because of me or because of you."

Marina shook her head. "I understand. Frank, would you get the tea. I don't want it to get too strong." Frank knew to pour extra milk in Anna's tea. No need to dose her with caffeine so close to bed time. He set them on the table and everyone took a sip. "Frank do you know that our Anna is considered a badass in school?"

"She is?" he asked smiling, then it quickly faded. "For a good reason or a bad reason."

"Jenny told me that Anna protects the other students from bullies."

"Anna, have you gotten into fights?" asked Frank.

“No, Papa. They just know that I can whoop them if I need to so they don’t bother me or people I like. My instructor always says the only person I have to prove anything to is myself.”

Frank nodded. “That’s right.”

“Apparently our daughter likes everyone. Jenny says she looks out for them, especially the new kids,” said Marina

“You do?”

“Well, yeah. You said I should be nice to people especially to people who need it the most, like the new kids. You said not everyone is as lucky as we are, although I’m not really sure what that means. Papa, it’s a private school. Everyone who goes there lives in nice houses, like we do.”

“Not everyone,” said Frank. “Some kids are there on scholarships. They’re good kids who want to study hard but their parents can’t afford the tuition.”

“Oh. But that’s not everyone. Michael Pierce is always bragging about his father’s car collection.”

“You’re right, there are a lot of children of wealthy families at your school. But true wealth isn’t cars or homes. You know that,” said Frank. Anna blushed and took a sip of her tea. “Tell me,” he said in the direct “I’m your father you will tell me the truth” tone he’d perfected.

“Sometimes I brag about your bikes.”

“What?”

“They’re so cool, Papa. Could you pick me up on one of them one day?”

“Hold on,” said Marina. “You know the rule.”

“Not until my feet touch the ground. But they do!”

“What?”

“I’ve been going out to the garage and sitting on them,” she quickly looked at her father. “I didn’t touch anything. I just sat on them. My feet touch the ground.”

Marina took a sip to hide her curse. Anna was as tall as she was at twelve but she’d forgotten about anything but she was her baby. And there wouldn’t be a damn thing she could do to prevent her from riding a motorcycle. “Here we go,” she thought. “Okay, let’s table that discussion for now. Sweetheart, I honestly think Jenny likes you for you. You asked me to sign something for her to make her happy and that’s what you did.”

Frank took Anna’s hand. “Tomorrow, when you see her at school, talk to her. Be honest. She’ll probably think it’s pretty cool your Mama is a movie star but I’m willing to bet she likes you more.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I willing to bet a ride on my bike.”

“Excuse me!” demanded Marina.

“In a location approved and supervised by your mother.”

“That’s better, not much, but better.”

“Thank you, Papa!” she threw her arms around her father’s neck and kissed his cheek.

“I’m very proud of you, princess. You are growing up to be a very honorable person.”

“Honorable?” asked Anna.

Marina tried to hold back her tears. “I agree with Papa. You have become a wonderful young woman, with good instincts. You are good to people and you look out for them. That is very honorable. That makes Papa and I very proud.”

Frank kissed the top of Anna’s head. “It sure does, princess.”

“There is something else I want to talk to you about. Jenny’s mother told me about her father in law. It turns out he had a rare form of leukemia. Do you know what that is?”

Anna nodded. "It messes with your blood."

"Yes. Well Jenny's grandfather had it for a long time. He lived much longer than the doctor's expected he would. So you see, it didn't really have anything to do with how old he was."

"Really?" she asked.

"Anna Marina, Papa and I always tell you the truth."

Marina was rewarded with a bright smile. Anna finished the last of her tea and took her mug to the dishwasher. Marina watched her. Frank was adamant they wouldn't raise what he called 'entitled little snots' and apparently they'd been successful. "Come here, angel," she called in Russian. Anna came to her and she pulled her into a tight hug. "I love you, my angel. Never forget that."

"I won't, Mama. I love you too."

"Can I get some of that?" asked Frank. Anna came over and he held his first born tight to his chest. "I'm so proud of you, princess," he whispered in Russian. "Now go tell your brothers to get ready for dinner and help you sister."

Anna left the room and Marina and Frank stared at each other. "Wow," said Marina.

"I thought this would get easier as they got older."

"Hah! Whoever told you that lied! Now about that bike ride."

Frank had talked Marina in allowing Anna's first ride by promising to have her kitted up with the best safety clothes and equipment. Cabe was stopping by to pick them up. He was taking them to where he goes for all things Harley.

"Anna, Uncle Cabe will be here any minute," he called. Anna burst out of her bedroom and ran down the stairs.

"I'm ready, Papa."

"Both of you, hold up." Frank turned around to see Marina had come out of the kitchen. "Anna, you know my rules."

"Yes, Mama. Don't touch anything without asking and no sitting on any bikes without Papa."

"And Papa?" Marina asked with a 'don't mess with Mama' tone.

"I am to never let her out of my sight and if she gets so much as a scratch I'm in big trouble."

"Good! Just so we're clear."

"What are you going to do?" asked Frank.

"Jonas is on a field trip with his class from CalTech. Sara is with him. Jake is at Charlie's and Charlie's mom, Carol, volunteered to take Riley."

"Wow, that was nice of her."

"We took Charlie overnight last week so they could spend their anniversary alone so she said she owed me."

"So what are you going to do?"

Marina smiled. "I am going to take a nap, a really long nap."

The buzzer rang and they could see Cabe standing at the front door. "Uncle Cabe is here!" Anna shouted.

"We have to go. Are you good?" asked Frank.

“I’m fine. Go. I’ll enjoy a rare few hours of quiet.”

Frank opened the door and let Cabe in. “Hey buddy. Hey princess. Are you ready.”

“Yeah! Papa’s going to get me a leather jacket.”

Marina rolled her eyes. “Good Lord.”

Cabe gave Marina a kiss on her cheek. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on her,” he glanced at Frank. “And him too.”

Frank gave her a kiss. “Go have that nap.”

“Anna, come here.” She kissed her daughter’s cheek. “I know you’re excited but please behave yourself.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Frank smiled. “Okay, let’s roll.”

Frank glanced back at Anna who looked like she was going to jump out of her skin. She’d been pushing for this day since she was a toddler in her miniature Harley jacket. Cabe was taking them to a dealership that he always went to for his bikes and gear. He liked their selection and he said the staff was very knowledgeable.

They pulled into a dealership in Santa Clarita. Anna spotted the large Harley sign at the top of the building and squealed. “We’re here!”

“Calm down, Anna.”

“Yes, Papa.”

Frank took her by the hand and followed Cabe into the dealership. He had to admit he was excited as Anna. He’d been looking forward to Anna getting into bikes since she was small. But his mouth dropped open at all the new bikes lined up. There were some very sweet rides.

“Oh, Papa. Look at them all.”

“I know, princess. It’s pretty cool.” Frank glanced over and thought he recognized someone. “Hey Cabe, it that...?”

“Yeah, it is. He’s one of the owners.” Cabe waved at the man who smiled and walked toward him.

“Cabe, buddy. How’s it going?”

“Great, Robert. This is my friend Frank Nash and his daughter, Anna. We’ve come to get her gear fitted for her first ride.”

“Frank, Anna, this is Robert Patrick.”

Frank extended his hand and tried not to geek out over meeting the Terminator. “It’s very nice to meet you. You have a great place here.”

“Thanks. I’m real proud of it. We have a great group of people here.”

“You look familiar,” said Anna.

“Mr. Patrick makes movies,” said Frank.

“Oh, like Mama.”

“Mama?”

“I’m married to Marina Sokolov.”

Robert looked at Anna and smiled. “Oh, I should have known. You look so much like her.” He looked up at Frank. “I’ve never had the pleasure of working with her but I’d love to. She’s a great actress.”

Frank smiled. “I’ll relay the message.”

“I know Anna’s young but I thought she’d be tall enough for smaller women’s gear,” said Cabe.

“We’re going to need everything, boots and good helmet,” said Frank. “It was the only way I could get Marina to agree to let her go for a ride.”

“I’m going to ask Patricia to help you out. She’s in charge of all our clothing.” He waved over a woman with dark hair and a warm smile. “Patricia, Ms. Anna here needs a full kit. Can you help her out?”

“Papa’s going to take me on a ride.”

“That’s great,” said Patricia.

Robert extended his hand to Cabe. “It was great to see you. Be sure and come back soon.”

“Will do.”

“It was nice to meet you, Frank.” He looked at Anna. “Be sure and find me before you leave. I want to see how you make out.”

“Okay,” she smiled.

The next half hour was spent finding the right boots, pants and the promised Harley jacket. Patricia picked out gloves for Anna that weren’t so thick that she couldn’t hold on to his waist easily.

“What do you think, Papa?” Anna smiled.

“I think you look like a real biker.”

“Do I Uncle Cabe?”

“You sure do, princess.”

“Now for the helmet.” It didn’t take them long to find a helmet that fit and, according to Anna, looked sufficiently badass.

She was walking around the floor when she ran over to Robert. “How do I look? Do I look badass?”

He glanced up at Frank, who smiled and nodded. “You’re a total badass.”

“I really am, you know.”

“Are you now?” he chuckled.

“No, Robert, she is. She’s a third degree black belt in krav maga,” Cabe smiled.

“Holy...” he stopped himself. “Well I will be sure to be on my best behavior around you.”

“Do you think we could get the helmet detailed?” asked Frank.

“Yeah sure, whatever you want.” He handed Frank a post it and he wrote down some Cyrillic letters.

“Papa, you’re not going to put something sappy on it, are you?” Frank showed her the word. She took the pad and handed it to Robert.

“What does it say?”

“Printsessa. It’s Russian for princess,” Anna smiled.

“Mr. Patrick, I was wondering about a Street Glide Ultra I saw on the floor.”

“Sure, let’s take a look.” They walked to the bike and Anna reverently ran her hand over the leather seat.

“This is the bike I’ll have one day,” she said.

“Can you install a queen seat on this?”

“Yeah sure. My guys can do that no problem.”

“When would it be ready?” he asked.

“Papa?” she asked with a quaking voice.

“We could have the helmet and the bike ready tomorrow.”

“Great. Any longer and I think my daughter will jump out of her skin.”

“Oh Papa!” she screamed and threw herself in Frank’s arms.

Robert looked at Cabe, thoroughly confused. “Don’t worry. He’s not that crazy. She’ll only be a passenger until she gets her license. He’s also an excellent rider. He has a Road Glide Ultra and a Road King.”

“Okay then, let’s get you over to Denny. You can get the paperwork started.”

Frank set Anna down and she followed Robert toward the office, still wearing her helmet. Cobe leaned in toward Frank. “You do realize between all the gear and the bike you’ve just dropped thirty thousand on a twelve year old.”

“She has been drooling over that bike since she was seven. I know she’s only twelve but who knows what the next four years will bring? At least she’ll be able to say her Papa bought her the motorcycle of her dreams.”

“Frank, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just getting to the point where I’m considering the inevitable.”

“Well don’t make it too soon. I honestly don’t know what Marina would do without you.”

Frank smiled as he watched his daughter take a picture with a movie star.

“You bought her what?!” demanded Marina.

“It’s not hers, at least not until she gets her license.”

“Well, you better tell her that because right now she upstairs telling her brothers you bought her a real Harley.”

“Actually...I kind of did.” Frank cringed at the forthcoming explosion.

“You told her it was hers!”

“Yes, but only to ride on with me, in places approved by you.”

“Franklin Nash, you have always been a pushover for the kids but this is too much!” She started pacing back and forth railing at him in Russian. He grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to look at him.

“Sweetheart, please, sit down. Let me explain.”

“You better make it good, Marine.”

“When Anna came home that day, so upset about her friend’s grandfather, it started me thinking. Actually I’ve thought about it since the day they were born, but I’ve always pushed it to the back of my mind. Now, I can’t. There will be a time when I won’t be here for them. God willing, it won’t be for a very long time, but I can’t know that. So, for now, I want to be there for them the best I can. I want to help them realize their dreams.” He paused and took a breath, trying to calm himself. “I want them to remember I tried to be what they needed.”

Marina wiped a tear from her cheek. “Damn you, Frank. You did make it good. How am I supposed to stay angry now?” He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“How about if I do anything else this...bold, I consult with you first.”

“Better.”

“How do I make it best?”

She gave him a grudging smile. “Make me a cup of tea?”

Frank grabbed a mug and set about making tea and amends. “Cabe recommended a track for us. It’s a track that people go to learn. Very smooth, no speeding.”

“I’m going with you.”

He set the tea in front of her. “I assumed you would.”

Marina sat down with the boys on the bleachers while she held Riley on her lap. She had to admit that Anna looked like a real biker in her new riding leathers. She was ecstatic to show off her helmet that had been detailed with Russian name for princess. She watched carefully when Anna got on the bike and her feet, did in fact, touch the ground. Frank had explained the queen seat and she had to admit she felt better about her riding on it. It was a separate section of the seat for her that had a back to it. She could hold tight to her father and be secure. Anna waved to her before she held tight to her father. Marina held her breath as Frank started the bike and drove what she knew was slowly for him. He rode around the track speeding up only a bit as Anna got comfortable with the ride. He slowed down after thirty minutes and then stopped the bike. He helped his daughter off the bike and parked it in front of the bleachers.

“Did you see, Mama?! Did you see! It was so cool!”

“I saw sweetheart. We all did.”

“It was loud,” said Riley.

“It was pretty cool,” said Jacob.

“Did you have fun?” asked Jonas. As her twin, they were very close but they couldn’t have been more different in personality.

“It was like when Uncle Jake told you that your paper was so good you should publish it.”

“Oh,” Jonas smiled. That joy he understood.

The children got down off the bleachers and surrounded the bike. Anna began an explanation of each part. Marina was gratified when Anna pulled Riley's hand away from one of the chrome pipes.

"No, no. You mustn't touch. After riding it gets very hot. It will burn you."

Frank sat down next to Marina. "Okay, let me have it."

"You were right."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You were right. I've seen her climbing trees, climbing walls, winning trophies for kicking the ass of some kid twice her size. I have never seen our daughter this happy. It also occurred to me that riding with you would be the best way for her to learn how to be safe."

"What are you saying?"

"You can bring her here to ride whenever you want." She added quickly. "But the same rules apply."

Frank kissed her cheek. "I love you, diva."

"Yeah, yeah, you're just enjoying your victory."

"That too," he smiled.

Marina sat in the examining room with Frank flipping through his phone. She didn't know why the doctor had to do another test after her yearly checkup but she'd asked that she bring Frank. Dr. Weston had delivered all four of their children. Frank had been with her for those exams but that was to see the babies.

"Did she say what other test she was going to do?"

"No. That test did anything to me that would require me to have a driver but she insisted."

"I am here to serve, my queen," he said with an exaggerated Russian accent.

"Shut up," she said as she tossed her magazine at him.

Dr. Weston came back into the examining room. "Marina, I'd like you to get dressed and then you and Frank can meet me in my office." She closed the door and Marina could feel herself trembling.

"Frank?"

Frank stood and she could see he'd lost the color in his face. "Let's just get you dressed and we'll find out what Jennifer has to say," He held her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Together. Like everything. We're in it together."

Marina barely remembered getting dressed. Frank held her hand as they walked into her doctor's office. They sat down when they noticed another doctor in the office. "This is Lauren Pryor."

The tall woman with long brown hair in a tight ponytail. "Hello Mrs. Nash, Mr. Nash."

"I know you," said Marina.

"We've met at the Gallo's fundraisers."

"Oh God, I remember." Marina sat back in her chair.

"Sweetheart, what is it?"

"She's an oncologist." She felt Frank's hand grip hers.

“Yes, I am an oncologist. Dr. Weston called me in to consult and I agree with her diagnosis. You have stage two uterine cancer. Jennifer called me after your regular exam last week. I’ve compared the results and I see growth. I want to schedule you for surgery right away. I can do it this Friday. I then want to follow up with chemotherapy.”

“Oh God,” she whispered.

Jennifer stood and sat on the edge of her desk. “Marina, you’ve known me for years and I’ve always been straight with you. This is stage two but it’s treatable. Honestly, at the rate it’s growing you came to me in the nick of time.”

Dr. Pryor moved forward. “You can survive this. I’m not arrogant enough to give you guarantees, but I am an excellent surgeon. Jennifer is right about the timing. A few weeks or months difference and we’d be looking at a very different outcome.”

“What exactly will you do, surgically,” asked Frank.

“The safest course of action is a complete hysterectomy.”

“Oh God,” Marina started to weep. Jennifer handed her a tissue and she wiped her eyes. She stood and started pacing. “How am I going to tell the children?” She looked at Dr. Pryor. “I have four children. The oldest are twelve, the youngest is only four. I have to be here for my children.”

“Mrs. Nash, this procedure is the best way to insure you will be.”

Frank took Marina in his arms and she dissolved into wracking tears. “Can you give us a few moments.” The doctors reached for the door and Frank interrupted. “One question. Dr. Pryor, you wouldn’t normally be here now, would you?”

“No. You would have had to make an appointment with my office. Jennifer advised me who her patient was and in consideration for who she is we thought this would be best.”

“Who I am?” Marina asked.

“Jennifer said, and I agreed, that the last thing you need right now is for anyone to know about this who doesn’t absolutely need to know.”

Marina managed a whispered, "Thank you" before she continued sobbing into Frank's chest. He moved them to a couch and held her tight, kissing the top of her head.

"We'll get through this," he whispered.

They sat in the kitchen drinking tea and waiting for Sara to come back from the playground with Riley. “What are we going to tell them?” Marina asked.

Frank took Marina’s hand. “What we always do, the truth. It will be much better coming from us.”

“They’re smart, especially Jonas. They’ll know more.”

“One step at a time, sweetheart. One step at a time.”

They heard Sara come in through the side door and the excited voice of their youngest. “Mama, Papa,” called Riley Jane as she ran to them and they both pulled her into a tight hug.

“Did you have a good time, peanut?” asked Frank.

“Yes, but Bobby is mean.”

“Bobby?”

“One of the boys from the neighborhood. He wouldn’t let Riley play with his truck.”

“He said girls don’t play with trucks.”

“Well, he was wrong,” Marina smiled. “Sara, will you get Riley settled upstairs? Then come back down. We need to talk,” she said quietly.

A few minutes later Sara returned to the kitchen and took a seat. “She’s coloring. I think she’s drawing a truck.”

Marina shook her head and Frank knew she didn’t want to talk. Frank explained what was going on and they would need her to stay over while she was in the hospital. “We’ve decided to tell the kids when they get home. Then we’ll tell Riley.”

Sara blinked back tears. “Whatever you need.” She took Marina’s hand “I mean it. Whatever you need, whenever you need it, I will be here for you and the kids.”

Marina stood and gave her a hug. “I know we can count on you. You’re family.”

They heard the children coming home from school and Sara looked at toward the sound. "I'll be upstairs with Riley."

The children came running into the kitchen but stopped when they saw their parents. "What's going on?" asked Anna.

"Kids please sit down. Mama and I need to talk to you." The kids took their seats at the table.

"It's bad isn't it?" asked Jonas. "Is it Grandpa George?"

Frank smiled and shook his head. "Grandpa George is fine." His eighty seven year old father in law was in excellent health for a man of his years.

"No babies, it's me," said Marina. Frank was surprised when she started to speak but he'd follow her lead. "I have to go in the hospital on Friday. I need surgery."

"For what?" asked Anna

"Kids, remember how Papa and I always tell you the truth?" They all nodded but they were pale and frightened. "My doctor told me today I have a tumor. They need to take it out."

"Do you have cancer, Mama?" asked Jonas. They should have known he would pick up on it right away.

"Yes, sweetheart. I do."

All the children started crying and Jacob threw himself on Marina's lap. "No, you can't. You can't be sick."

"I'm sorry sweetheart, but I am."

Jacob looked up at Marina with a look that broke both their hearts. "Mama, are you going to die?"

"Jacob, Anna, Jonas, look at me. I am going to tell you what the doctor told me. That I'd been checked at a good time. It's not as bad as it could have been, but they need to get it out right away. Then they're going to give me medicine afterward to make sure it

all gone. It's going to make me feel sick for a little while but I need to do it so I will get better."

"Chemotherapy?" asked Jonas.

Frank tried to hold back his tears. Sometimes it was hell having such a smart kid. "Yes, Jonas. Chemotherapy."

"Will all your hair fall out?" asked Anna

"Probably," Marina smiled. "But it's just hair. It will grow back."

Anna got off her chair and stood next to her mother. She pulled on her own ponytail. "My hair looks just like yours. You can have mine." Marina lost her composure and pulled her daughter to her. She looked up at Frank to take over.

"Kids, I wish we could promise that everything will be just fine. We've never lied to you before and we won't now. I can tell you that Mama has the best doctors. We will do everything we have to do to get Mama better."

Jonas walked over to Marina and took her hand. "Mama, are you scared?"

"A little," she said quietly.

He gave his mother a tight hug. "We'll pray for you, Mama."

"Thank you, baby. I would like that very much."

Jonas looked at Anna and Jacob. "Come on. My room. We have work to do."

"Work?" asked Frank.

"We have to make a plan. A schedule when we're going to pray."

Frank tried to hide his smile. "Okay, then. We'll call you for dinner." They watched as the children left the kitchen.

"A schedule? They really are the children of a Marine," Marina smiled for the first time.

“Maybe it gives them a little sense of control,” said Frank. “Are you okay?”

“You mean am I okay to tell Riley? Not really but we have to. She can’t find out from the others.”

They walked upstairs past Jonas room and heard him leading them in a Russian prayer they learned in Sunday school. “They really are good kids, aren’t they?” said Frank.

“The best.” They paused in front of Riley’s room. Marina opened the door and saw Riley and Sara coloring.

“I’m making a big truck,” said Riley.

“I see that, baby. It’s very cool.” Marina nodded at Sara.

“I’ll get dinner started,” she said as she left the room and closed the door. Riley Jane was still a baby, only four years old. They would have to step carefully. They wanted to be honest with her but how much truth can a four year old handle?

Marina sat in the rocker that she’d used to rock all her children to sleep. “Riley, baby. How about you sit in Mama’s lap?”

Riley climbed up in her lap holding her picture. “This is much better than Bobby’s truck.”

“Yes, it is. Peanut, Papa and I need to talk to you about something. Do you remember the hospital. We go there sometimes to visit Aunt Kate.”

“Are we going to see Aunt Kate?”

“No baby. Do you remember what a hospital is?”

“It’s where the sick people go to get better.”

“That’s right. I have to go there for a few days so I can get better.”

“Are you sick, Mama?”

“Yes, baby.”

“But you’ll get better,” she smiled.

“The doctors are going to help me do that, angel.”

“No, the picture lady said you’d get better.”

“Who?” asked Frank

Riley pointed to the picture of his grandmother, Jane. “The picture lady. She comes at night sometimes and we have tea parties. She’s very nice. She told me.”

“What do you mean she comes at night? Is someone in your room at night?”

Riley looked at him like he was purposely being silly. “No, Papa. At night when I close my eyes. Sometimes we play in the garden. Sometimes we have tea parties.”

“You mean when you’re dreaming?” asked Marina.

Riley shrugged. “I don’t know. I know we have fun. She told me that Mama would get sick but not to be scared. She said you’d get better.” Frank looked at Marina and shook his head. He didn’t know what to do next. Marina gave her a kiss and set her down.

“Well that’s very nice to know. Tell the picture lady I said thank you the next time you talk to her.”

“Okay, Mama,” she said as she went back to her drawing.

“Dinner will be ready soon.”

They went into their bedroom and closed the door. “What the hell just happened?” asked Frank.

“I’m not sure but apparently your grandmother is our child’s imaginary friend.”

“At least it’s some comfort to her.”

Marina took his hand. “Maybe for us too. Remember when Riley Jane was born. The nurse in the NICU and the smell of lavender?”

“I remember but I thought we were saying it was a coincidence.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. All I know is it won’t hurt to believe.”

Frank sat in Marina's room and watched as they prepped her for surgery. They'd been through some hard times but they always did it together. Last year when his parents died only four months apart, Marina and the kids had gotten him through it. They were both over ninety and had a wonderful life together. Marina had said she didn't think his mother wanted to be here without his father. Today, he understood how his mother must have felt.

Everything in his life he marked before and after Marina. Before Marina he was a squared away former Marine. He worked security jobs and took risks he would never take now. Before Marina he could have never imagined being married to a woman he adored and having a house full of children. Now he couldn't imagine life any different.

The nurse looked at him and smiled. "We'll be taking her to surgery in thirty minutes."

"Thank you," said Frank. He stood and forced a smile. "Do you want me to bring the kids in now?"

"Yes, please."

He went to the next room and found the children sitting with Sara. Only Riley looked calm. The others were unusually quiet and pale. "Hey kids, time to see Mama." Sara looked up at him.

"I'll stay here."

"Okay." They'd had a parade of family through the house yesterday. All the friends and family, including Marina's mother and stepfather had visited. Today would just be for them. He brought the kids into Marina's room and he could tell her smile was as forced as his.

"Hey babies. Come give Mama a kiss." They all lined up and got their kisses. Frank leaned Riley over and she gave her mother a kiss. "I love you all, so much," she said.

"We love you too, Mama," said Jonas said in Russian. He'd apparently been nominated by the others to be in charge. "We've been praying for you."

“Thank you, angels. I really appreciate that. You are all the best children a Mama could ever want.” Jake started to cry and she reached for his hand. “Climb up here, sweetheart.” Marina scooted over and Jake laid down next to her. She wrapped her arms around him and whispered in his ear in Russian. “My sweet baby boy, my angel. I love you, so much.”

“You can’t be sick. You’re a good person, Mama. You shouldn’t be sick. God shouldn’t let that happen,” Jake cried. She took a tissue from the night stand and dried his eyes.

“I want you all to listen to me. Remember what the doctors told me. They found this early so I can have a very good chance of getting better. Maybe that’s God’s way of helping me.”

“The picture lady said Mama was going to be fine,” said Riley.

“Who?” asked Anna.

Frank looked at his older children and shook his head, silently telling them to let it go. “It’s Riley’s friend.”

“I keep trying to talk to her in Russian but she doesn’t understand.”

Frank laughed and kissed her on the cheek. “Okay, let’s go find Sara.” Everyone gave Marina another kiss as she smiled, giving the best performance of her career.

“I’ll see you all soon.”

Frank took the kids back to the special waiting room Kate had arranged. There was a sofa, TV and a bed for the kids to nap. She’d also arranged for security to be doubled on the floor. There would be no stolen paparazzi pictures this time. He went back to Marina’s room and the orderlies were about to take her. “Give us a minute, please.” They nodded and closed the door. He looked at his wife and tried to smile. “God’s way of helping you?”

“That’s my story and I’m sticking with it.” Her smile turned to tears. He grabbed a tissue and wiped her eyes.

“I’m sorry. It’s the medicine. I don’t do weepy.”

He looked at her and spoke in Russian. “Don’t hide from me, diva. Not today. I know you’re scared.”

“Not for me, for you and for them. I want you to listen to me, Frank. No matter what happens now, I know you can handle it. I know you can. And I know our children are in the best possible hands with you.”

He leaned down and gave her a tender kiss. “I love you, diva.”

“I love you too, goon,” she smiled. “I think my chauffeur is waiting.”

Frank opened the door and let the orderly in the room. He gave her another kiss. “I’ll see you soon, diva.”

“Yes you will, you big goon.”

He closed the door, slid down to the floor and wept.

Marina was trying to keep down the light lunch Sara had made for her. The pain of the surgery was nothing compared to the cycles of chemo. She had her fourth cycle and would have a week off before testing and more possibly more cycles. She allowed herself a spell of self pity when the children weren't around. She looked in the mirror and saw how different she looked. She'd lost about thirty pounds and her hair was all but gone. She'd asked her hairdresser to come to the house. Casper had thought it was for an event but when he saw her he understood. He cut it pixie short for her all the while with tears in his eyes. Frank didn't understand why she wanted to cut it short.

"It may not fall out."

"It probably will, and you know that. I think this way it will be less of a shock for the children." She took Frank's hand. "For all of us." After it was done Casper told Frank he could go back in and see her. He walked in the bedroom and forced a smile. "It's cute. You look like a little pixie."

She walked to him and touched his cheek. "No I don't. I look like hell. But this is a temporary situation. The chemo will do it's thing and I'll be fine." He pulled her into as tight a hug as he dared.

"I've known soldiers going into battle and yet I've never known anyone more brave than you. You're certainly more brave than I am."

She looked at him and smiled. This man was the love of her life, strong and steadfast. He was also terrified. She could see it. "I'm not as brave as you think I am. I'm so scared sometimes I can barely breathe. But you know what scares me more? Being without you and the kids. I refuse to give up and give in. You are my world. I won't let go without a hell of a fight."

He forced a smile. "You're such a diva. Always getting what you want."

"Damn straight, you big goon."

"How about right now you get a nap. The children will be home in a couple of hours and napping may not be possible."

"That's an excellent idea. Will you join me?"

“Sure thing, diva. Who am I to deny you?”

They got into their bed that had been adjusted to an angle that helped minimize the nausea. She curl up against his chest and listened to the soothing sound of his heartbeat.

“You know, meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me, Marine.”

“Ditto,” he whispered as she fell asleep on his chest.

The storm woke him. It had only been an hour but Marina was still asleep. He managed to slip out of bed without waking her. He glance outside and saw some of the deck chairs were being blown into the backyard. He went downstairs and out the patio door. The sudden downpour immediately drenched him. He picked up a chair and put it up against the house. He spotted another chair blown toward the back of the garden. He walked back to pick it up when there was a crack of thunder. He picked up the chair and heaved it as far as he could.

He looked up into the clouds and screamed. "It wasn't supposed to be like this! You aren't supposed to take her. I'm old. They can do without me. Why are you doing this?! Take me! Don't take her from them. She's too good to suffer like this. Please help her." He fell to his knees and covered his head. "Please," he whispered. "Please."

Frank never noticed the curtain in the upper floor window fluttering closed.

Sara knocked on the bedroom door. "Mrs. Nash, can I come in?"

She looked over at Frank who just showered and changed into fresh clothes. He nodded. "Of course," said Marina.

"Oh, Mrs. Nash, your hair looks cute short."

"Thanks, Sara."

"The children are back from school and Riley insisted I tell you she was a big help with the groceries."

"And they're all anxious to see Mama with short hair."

Sara smiled. "Yeah."

"Bring them in." Sara came back with the children a few minutes later. They stopped short of her bed when they saw her. "It's still me, just with short hair. Remember how I looked in that funny movie where I was the mean Mama? I had short hair in that."

"Yeah, but that was a wig."

"It's only hair. It grows. Jonas, I know you know what it is. Give us a lesson"

Jonas took a breath. "Hair is keratin. It grows about a quarter of an inch a month. It will take about a year for your hair to be as long as it was."

"See, that's not very long. Now come here and give me my hugs." The children gave her hugs and kisses and Riley smiled.

"Mama, I helped with the groceries."

"Sara told me. How did you help?"

"I was very good and didn't try to get out of the cart."

Even Frank smiled at that. "Well done, peanut."

Anna looked at her and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Mama, are you going to lose the rest of your hair?"

Marina reached for her daughter's hand. "Probably. It's the medicine. If I have to give up my hair to get better it's a small price to pay."

"You're all better now," said Riley.

"Thank you, peanut," Marina said as she tried to smile.

Riley shook her head. "No, the picture lady told me. She said you're all better now."

"Well, that's good to know, sweetheart."

"I'll get her washed up for dinner," said Sara as she carried Riley out of the room.

"Who's the picture lady?" asked Jacob.

"It's the picture of your great grandmother Jane. Riley says she has tea parties with her."

"Like a pretend friend?" asked Anna.

"Yes, like that."

"That's silly," said Jonas.

Marina pulled Jonas to her and gave him a hug. "Never tell Riley that. To her the picture lady is real. It makes her happy."

Anna smiled. "That's what you do when you work, Mama, pretend. Maybe she'll grow up to be an actress like you."

Frank laughed. "You know, princess, I wouldn't be at all surprised."

"Okay, everyone go get washed up for dinner." When the children left Marina stood and closed their door. She was glad he'd actually laughed. "Feeling better?"

"What? I'm fine."

"No you're not. I don't just know all and see all with them. I know you, Marine. I also was looking out the window."

"Oh. I was... I don't know what I was. I guess I lost it. I'm sorry."

“You had a meltdown and don’t you dare apologize. You have held all of us together for five months. You were due.” She walked toward him and slipped her arms around his waist. “I’m here, now, because you give me strength. When I’m weak I know I can lean on you. I know when I can’t be there for the kids, you are. Without you, I would have never made it this far.” She looked up into his beautiful blue eyes and smiled. “Besides, the picture lady says I’m fine now.”

Frank smiled. A real, all the way up to his eyes, smile. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“You mean besides the whole, honorable, trustworthy, righteous goon thing?”

“Yeah, besides that,” he grinned.

She slid her hands down and grabbed tight. “Your spectacular ass!” This time he laughed out loud and it was the best sound she’d heard in ages. “How about you help me get changed? I feel like having dinner with the family.”

Anna sighed and looked out the window. It was almost time to go home. Sara would be there to pick up her and her brothers. Mama never came anymore. Papa liked to stay with Mama. Cancer sucked. Mama didn't look pretty anymore. All her hair was gone and she looked so skinny. She still acted like Mama, especially when she yelled at her for climbing the big tree in the backyard. It was so silly. She asked her if she remembered falling when one of the branches broke. Of course she remembered. It hurt a lot, but that was a long time ago. She was stronger now. Besides, she hadn't been to the climbing gym in like forever.

Everything stopped when Mama got sick. Papa got real quiet. He didn't like to leave Mama alone even when she said he could. Papa hadn't taken Anna on a ride in forever. She didn't ask. She knew he was really upset about Mama. They were trying to be good. Jonas had them praying together every night before they went to bed. Jacob would make Mama pictures and sings songs for her. He had a pretty voice and it always made Mama smile. Anna wasn't like that. She didn't know what to do. All she knew was cancer wasn't fair to anyone.

Anna and Jonas met Jake at his class and they walked together to the parking lot. They were always careful, especially since that time Anna got taken. Even though she wasn't who the bad guy really wanted, Anna fought her way loose and everyone knew who she was. Ever since then they were extra careful. Sometimes being the kids of a movie star was a pain.

They walked out to the lot together and were greeted with shouts of "There they are!" Anna spotted Sara and walked with the boys as fast as they could. She was surprised when a couple of them followed them to the car. They weren't supposed to do that. They weren't supposed to come on school grounds. Papa said so.

A tall skinny guy with black hair shouted at her. "Where's your mother? Where's Marina?" Anna helped Sara get the boys in the car. "Why has no one has seen her in months? Is she dead? Is Marina Sokolov dead?"

Something inside Anna broke. She threw her backpack in the car and turned on her heels. "You svin'ya!" She walked toward the guy. She didn't notice the camera guy or

hear Sara calling her. "My mother is not dead! She's fine. She doesn't have to show herself to you. If she doesn't go out a lot that's her business, not yours. You leave me and my brothers and my parents alone!" Then she let loose with a string of every bad word she knew in Russian. They didn't know what she was saying but Sara did. She felt Sara grabbed her by the shoulders and talk to her in Russian.

"That's enough, Anna. We need to go home."

Anna pulled on her seatbelt and sat quietly. Jonas was sitting next to her and took her hand in his. Jake turned around from the passenger seat. It was his turn to ride up front. "You said a lot of bad words."

"I know," she said quietly.

"Do you think you'll get punished?"

"I don't know."

"It's better if you tell Mama and Papa first," said Jonas. "You know what they always say."

"I know. 'We're honest with you. We expect you to be honest with us.'"

"I don't think you should get punished. They weren't supposed to be there," said Jake.

She looked at her little brother. Sometimes he was a pain, but he was mostly okay. "Thanks, Jake."

Marina looked in the mirror and couldn't help the tears that fell. What little hair she had left had fallen out over the last week. She now like she was wearing a special effects skull cap. She took a breath and tried to steady herself. "It's only hair," she whispered. It will grow back." She was glad everyone was out of the house because she was going to have a world class cry. She was wiping her eyes when she heard Frank coming up the stairs.

"Diva, where are you?"

"Bedroom."

He walked in and stopped. "Are you okay?"

She faked a smile. "I'm fine. Just indulging my vanity."

He pulled her to her feet and gave her a hug. "What do you always tell Anna, and all your fans?" He made a circle around her face. "This is not beauty." Her pointed to her heart and her head. "This is true beauty. And that still makes you the most beautiful woman in the world."

Marina laughed. "Now I remember why I married you."

He gave her a kiss that deepened. He pulled back and smiled. "As much as I'd like to continue this we may have a problem."

"What's going on?"

"I've had a couple of people forward this to me. It's a video that's hit the tabloids. It will probably hit the news." He pulled out his phone and hit play. Marina gasped at the sight of her daughter on the verbal offensive with paparazzi. She covered her mouth when she heard her daughter start to spew obscenities. She watched Sara pull Anna away and get her in the car.

"Oh my God," said Marina. Then she did something Frank never expected she started laughing. "She is a force of nature." She looked up at him. "And where did our daughter learn such colorful language?"

Frank put his hands up. “Hey, I’m not the only Russian speaker the girl knows.” They heard the door open and they heard Sara come in with the kids. “What do you want to do?”

“Let’s see what she does.”

“Mama?” Riley walked into their bedroom rubbing her eyes.

“Did you fall asleep, baby?”

“Uh huh.” She looked at Frank, smiled and held out her arms. “Papa.” Frank picked her up and gave her a kiss.

“Have you been a good girl for Mama, peanut?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Yes, Papa, she was a good girl. We colored and we had a tea party.”

There was a knock at the door and Anna was standing at their door. “Mama, Papa, I need to talk to you.”

“Okay, princess,” said Frank. He set Riley down. “Peanut, go find Sara.”

“No, I want you to play with me.”

“Riley Jane, go, now. I will play with you later.” Riley made a pouty face that usually worked on her father. She put her hands on her hips and walked out when Frank pointed to the door. “I swear she’s going to win an Oscar one day.”

“Probably,” said Marina. She sat down on the bed and patted next to her. “Come sit, princess. What’s going on?” Frank sat down next to Anna.

“You can talk to us.”

“I did something bad.”

“What did you do?” asked Marina.

“There was a rude reporter at the parking lot when Sara was picking us up. He asked where you were and I tried to ignore him but then he asked if you were dead! I got so mad, Mama. I yelled at him and then...”

“Then what?” asked Frank

“Then I said bad words. He just made me so mad.”

Marina looked at Frank and couldn't hold back her smile. “We know, angel.”

“You know?”

“It's already hit the internet. You'll probably make the news.”

Anna started crying. “I'm sorry, Mama. I tried to hold my temper, I really did. But when he asked if you were dead and I thought about how sick you've been.”

Marina pulled her close and put a kiss on the top of her head. “Sweetheart, you're not in trouble.”

“I'm not?”

“No, princess,” said Frank. “Although, I may have a chat with Mrs. Hanson about security.”

“You're better now, aren't you?” she asked.

“I'm feeling much better. It's just going to take time before I'll look better.”

“Is that why you're inside all the time?”

Marina looked at Frank and then back at her daughter. “You're right. I stay in the house too much. How about if I pick you up tomorrow?”

“Do you mean it? Is it okay?”

She held her tight. “Yes, baby, it's okay.”

“You're really not mad at me?”

“No baby, we're really not.” She stroked Anna's face. “You're so much like your Papa.” Frank gave Marina a shocked look.

“I am?”

“You will do anything to protect the ones you love. You’re a warrior, just like your Papa.”

Anna looked up at her father and smiled. He gave her a kiss on the cheek and stood. “I’m going to check on the boys.” He closed the door and left Marina alone with Anna.

Marina curled up on the bed. “Come here, angel.” Anna cuddled up against her and she held her tight. “I’m proud of who you are, of the woman you’re going to become.”

“Even though I said bad words at that man.”

Marina shrugged. “He had it coming.” She laughed and then her daughter laughed. At that moment she felt better than she had in months.

“You ready for this?” asked Frank.

“Yes, are you? You’re not going to go all Papa Bear on them, are you?” asked Marina.

“I talked to Mrs. Hanson. The police will be ready to arrest them for criminal trespass if they come on to school grounds.”

“The police are standing by? How did you arrange that? Wait, let me guess. Cabe.”

“It helps to have friends,” Frank smiled.

They pulled into the parking lot and waited. They could see paparazzi standing across the street. There was nothing they could do about that. It was public property. When the children started coming out they got out and stood by the car. Marina could hear them calling for her. “There she is. Marina, where have you been?” She ignored them and smiled as her children walked out together. They really were a tight little team. They walked toward their children and Marina was very happy to see a broad smile on Anna’s face. Her daughter was right. She’d been hiding in the house. Well, no more of that. They ignored the questions being shouted at them as they walked with their children back to the car. That is until someone came up from behind them.

“Why have you been hiding, Marina? Take off your hat. You’re fans are waiting.”

Anna tugged on her sleeve and spoke to her in Russian. “Mama, that’s him. That’s the one who made me so mad.”

Marina turned on her heels. “So you’re the one who ambushed my daughter.” She could see two police officers walking their way.

“You’re daughter has quite the mouth on her. I had someone translate what she said.”

Marina jabbed her finger in the man’s chest. “You’re lucky that’s all she did. She could have kicked your ass.” She looked at Anna and smiled. “She’s a third degree black belt. And see that very angry looking man behind me. That’s my husband and Anna’s father. You really don’t want to make him any more angry than he already is.” Marina

whipped off her hat and pulled off her sunglasses. “Is this what you wanted? She heard cameras across the street and the one in front of her clicking. “Is this what was so important to you that you had to go after a child to get it? Yes, I’ve been sick. That’s obvious. I don’t look like a movie star any more. Well, that’s what cancer does to you. But you know what? I’m still me. I’m still Frank’s wife. I’m still the mother of Anna and Jonas and Jacob and Riley. Cancer won’t change that. Not ever. Don’t you count me out. I’m Marina Sokolov Nash and I never quit.” The police made their move and arrested the reporter and his cameraman for criminal trespass. Marina nodded to the officers in thanks and got the children in the car. Frank reached for her hand.

“Are you okay?”

She smiled and nodded. “Yes. Yes, I am” She tossed her hat and sunglasses on the dashboard. “I’m also done hiding.”

“Mama, that was awesome,” said Anna.

“Yeah. You really told him,” said Jonas.

“I bet you scared him,” said Jake.

Frank reached over and kissed Marina’s cheek, then looked back at Anna and smiled. “My woman are warriors.”

“Russian warriors!” yelled Anna.

Marina sat in Dr. Pryor's office. She tried to put on as brave face for Frank but she couldn't get anything past him. He took her hand and kissed it. He whispered to her in Russian.

"I'm here, diva. We're in this together."

She smiled but she was still scared. Waiting for the result of her tests was much worse than having to go through them.

"Good morning," said Dr. Pryor. "I won't keep you waiting. I ran your tests twice to be sure but the news is very good."

"What?" she gasped.

"There is no detectable level of cancer cells in your body. It hasn't spread to lymph nodes. It looks like you've beaten it in an impressively short amount of time."

"No more chemo?" asked Frank.

"No more chemo," she said with a smile. "Of course I want to see you again in six months but, and I don't say this lightly, you are officially cancer free."

Marina couldn't stop herself from bursting into tears. Frank stood and pulled Marina to him. "You did it, diva. You beat it."

She looked up at the man she adored. "We beat it." Dr. Pryor handed her some tissues and she wiped her eyes. Marina walked around the desk and pulled the doctor into a hug. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome. I love giving this kind of news almost as much as you love hearing it."

"Hey, I need to do that too." Frank gave Dr. Pryor a hug and whispered, "You saved us both."

They walked into the house a Frank tossed down his keys and pulled Marina into his arms. "What would you like to do?"

"Honestly, I'd like a big ass glass of wine."

He gave her a quick kiss. "One big ass glass of wine coming up. And I think I'll join you."

Sara came down the stairs following Riley. "Hi. How did it go?"

"It went great. No cancer, no more chemo."

Sara gave her a tight hug. "Oh, Mrs. Nash. That's wonderful news."

"Thank you." She smiled and picked up Riley. "Do you have a kiss for Mama?" Riley gave her soft kiss. "The doctor said Mama's all better."

Riley gave her a look that was a cross between confusion and indulgence. "Of course you're better. I told you the picture lady said so." Frank walked back into the living room carrying two big ass glasses of wine. "Papa, I already told Mama she was better."

"Yes, peanut. You did."

Sara grabbed her purse. "I was going to take Riley with me and get the groceries before I pick up the kids at school."

"Peanut, will you help Sara by being good?"

"I'm always good."

Marina and Frank sat on the couch, drinking their wine. "Ahh. A quiet house and a glass of wine and you. This is great."

Frank wrapped his arm around her. "Yes it is." She smiled and he leaned in and kissed her. He set his wine down and took hers from her hand. He was about to kiss her again when she suddenly looked nervous.

"Do you want to watch a movie?"

“What? No. You know what I’d like to do.”

“Well, I...” She reached for her glass and took another big sip.

“Marina, talk to me.”

“I...” she ran her hands where her hair should have been.

“Marina Valentina Nash! Do you think I’d stop being attracted to you because you’ve lost your hair?”

“You have to admit I bear a striking resemblance to Mr. Clean.”

Frank toned down his voice when he saw the tears in her eyes. He turned her head to face him and spoke quietly in Russian. “Marina, you are the love of my life. But I didn’t fall in love with a movie star. I fell in love with a strong, fearless, warrior of a woman. I have never known a more beautiful, loving, wonderful woman. Nothing in this world would ever make me stop loving you and wanting you.”

Marina smiled as a tear ran down her cheek. “You always were a pushy goon.” She stood, took his hand and led him upstairs.

Marina and Frank sat in the kitchen waiting for Sara and the children. “Do you think Riley would have said anything to the others?” she asked.

“I don’t think so. She seemed like, to her, it was a foregone conclusion so why were we making a big deal about it.”

They heard the garage door open and a minute after the sound of their children arguing. Each were carrying a bag of groceries while Sara tended Riley. Sara looked at them and smiled. “I’ll take Riley upstairs. She’s spilled her juice down her front.”

“How did you manage to spill a juice box, peanut?”

“Jake did it.”

“Okay, how did you do that, Jake?”

“She gave me a sip but when she took it back she squeezed it and it shot out of the straw.”

“You did it on purpose!” Riley replied with all the outrage she could muster.

“Alright, that’s enough. Sara if you would take her upstairs,” said Frank. The rest of the children set the bags on the counter and started to unpack. Their children were used to pitching in. It was part of his “I will not raise entitled little snots” decree. “Children, come here for a minute. We want to talk to you.” They turned from their chore and look frightened. “It’s okay. It’s nothing bad.” He looked at Marina and nodded. He wanted the news to come from her.

“I went to the doctor today and I got very good news. There’s no more cancer.” The children faces lit up. “I still have to go for checkups but the doctor said I’m cancer free.” Then they did something neither of them expected. Jake burst into tears, quickly followed by Anna and Jonas, although he was trying to hold it back. They threw themselves at their mother. She pulled them into a group hug and gave them kisses.

“Mama, we were so scared,” said Jonas.

“You didn’t say anything.”

“We didn’t want to worry you. We talked about it at night when we were praying.” Marina let the tears fall. Frank had to wipe a tear from his own cheek. “Our praying help, didn’t it?” he asked.

“It certainly did, sweetheart,” said Marina.

“Mama?” asked Riley.

“I just told the others about my good news from the doctor.”

“Oh. Can I have a cookie?”

“You’re going to have your dinner soon.”

“I have an idea,” said Frank “We need to have a celebration. What celebration dinner do you want?”

Marina and Anna said simultaneously “Montie’s Wings!”

Frank laughed. “Like mother, like daughter. Boy’s?”

“Yeah that’s good,” said Jonas. Jake nodded.

“Montie’s it is. I’ll call for take out.”

The last of the wings were done and Sara had gone home for the night. “Who wants to watch a movie?” asked Frank.

“Can we watch one of your movies?” asked Jonas.

“I think my movies will be a little much for Riley.”

They went into the living room and Frank turned on the screen. He scrolled through until he found an animated film he’d heard was pretty good. “How’s this?”

“Oh, that’s good,” said Marina.

Frank took his spot in his recliner and Marina got comfortable on the couch. Instead of taking up their normal spots with pillows on the floor they all piled on the couch next to their mother. Anna sat to Marina’s right and Jacob to her left. Jonas sat next to Jacob.

Not wanting to be left out Riley climbed into Marina's lap. Frank and Marina looked at each other and smiled. She put her arm over Jacob and put her hand on Jonas. He turned and gave his mother a broad smile.

To give it a theater feel Frank turned off the lights before he started the movie. Frank was surprised he actually enjoyed the movie. It was cute for the children but had some witty jokes for the adults. The credits rolled and he stood and turned on the lights. He looked over at the couch and there was most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. They'd all fallen asleep in the same position they'd been when he'd turned the lights out. There was his wife, bald and too thin, and still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. There were his children, each needing to have physical contact with their mother. He sat down and marveled at how lucky he was. He'd nearly lost her. He looked at his family and promised himself he'd stop worrying so much about future and be grateful for every day they had together. He would start by preserving this particular moment. He grabbed his phone and took a picture. He smiled at the result. This would always be his favorite family picture.

Frank walked to the couch and picked Riley off Marina's lap. The others stirred, but not Riley. She was down for the count. "Is it over?" asked Marina.

"Yeah, it's over," he smiled. "Let's get the crew to bed."

The children gave them sleepy smiles as their parents tucked them in. They would all remember this day as the best day ever.