

Dimitri's Moon

Aliyah Burke

Dimitri's Moon

Copyright © 2009 by Aliyah Burke

Samara Grossman, Luz Melonakos, and Spyros Melonakos are copyrighted by and used courtesy of Savannah J. Frierson. Excerpt from *AJ's Serendipity* copyrighted and used courtesy of Savannah J. Frierson.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is coincidental. All trademarks, service marks, registered trademarks, and registered service marks are the property of their respective owners and are used herein for identification purposes only.

Editor and Formatter: Savannah Frierson

Cover Artist: MMJ Designs

ISBN: 978-0-557-07619-2

To my husband, for putting up with my one-sided conversations as I work out a scene, for not being mad when dinner isn't served on time, and for everything else you do.

And of course, Clarke and Valan, not a day goes by that I don't wish you both were with me.

## Acknowledgments

Any and all mistakes in this story are mine and not to be blamed on the ones who do this for a living. To my cover artist and editor, thank you!

Athens, Greece

"Damn this crazy shit going on in the world!" the petite woman cussed as she was jostled again. This most recent attack was mind-boggling. Someone or *someones* had attacked the American Embassy in Greece. She was heading away from the scene, just trying to make it out in one piece, when another explosion rocked the streets.

This time she was knocked to her knees. Palms scraped against rugged pavement while attempting to break her fall. The screams grew louder as the force of people moving near her turned to almost moving *over* her.

Fighting to regain leverage and her feet in the swarming crowd, she jumped when she felt a hand on her arm. "This isn't a time to be on the ground, ma'am," a deep voice said to her as she was lifted completely off the ground and placed back on her feet.

Ilanderae "Landi" Nycks looked over her shoulder at the man who had assisted her. He was dressed in a nice dark suit; his skin had the natural olive complexion that seemed to be common for the men of this area. He had black hair and a very tightly clipped goatee on his face. His eyes were dark green. *Damn!* "Thank you," she mumbled.

"We should get moving," he said as his hand secured a place on her arm, leading her through the throng of people to an open area.

Landi didn't argue, just let him tug her along. Her palms were stinging and her knees were beginning to ache as well. She stumbled along after him, her short, five-two frame no match for the strides his over six-foot body took. "Can we slow down a bit?" she panted.

He glanced down at her sweat-covered face. "Sorry. Right in here. We can get you cleaned up." The man pulled her into a restaurant, never even noticing its name as he ushered her in. If she had, she would not have entered.

The people inside were looking around full of suspicion and mistrust, as if anyone there could have a bomb strapped on as well. But all their eyes fell to her as she staggered in after the man towing her.

Momentarily stunned, Landi froze, her chest rising and falling with each breath she took. What the hell is up with the glares I'm getting?

Tugging on her wrist, she got the man who had brought her in here to let her go.

"Anatole, get some warm water and soft rags. We need to get her cleaned up." Turning to look at the woman beside him, he gestured to an empty booth. "Here, sit here and we will clean you up."

"Thank you," Landi said with a smile and did as he instructed.

The other people continued to watch her, but their expressions softened incredibly. When the young man approached her with the bowl and the rag, she sat up and reached for it.

Brushing her off, her savior took the cloth and dipped it in the water. Ringing it out, he applied it gently to her bloody knees, wiping them clean. "Better?" he asked in a low voice.

Swallowing, she nodded. "Much. I can do it," Landi insisted, taking the rag from him and cleaning the other knee before moving onto her hands.

The man allowed her to do just that. He stood back, crossed his arms and watched Landi tend to her injuries. His dark-emerald eyes moved over her body as she finished with the rag. As she placed it back in the bowl of water, he waved forward a woman who was carrying a platter of food.

As the young lady set down the plate, Landi said, "Oh, I really need to get back to my hotel. But thank you for everything."

"No. It's not safe for you or any American out there right now. The streets are too dangerous. You will stay here."

Shaking her head, Ilanderae protested, "No. No. I can't do that. I have to get going to my hotel."

The man stared at her for a moment as if testing her resolve. Finally, he nodded and spoke. "Okay, but only if you allow me to have an escort for you. My cousin will take you back to your place. I would do it, but I can't be sure I wouldn't take advantage of you. He is a gentleman." That statement was delivered with a hearty wink.

Ilanderae shivered as his stare roved her body. This man was nothing short of handsome wrapped in a gorgeous package. "I can do that. Thank you so much for stopping to help me. I don't know what's going on here right now. I totally believe I would have just been run over by the hordes of people if you hadn't stopped to help me out."

Taking her dark hand in his sun-kissed one, the man bowed low over it, placing his lips tenderly on the back of the smooth, flawless skin. "My dear, it would have been a sin for me to leave a delicate woman such as yourself lying there." He rolled his green eyes. "Not to mention very ungentlemanly of me."

She couldn't help it, she had to laugh. "Well, I, for one, am very grateful you decided you couldn't be ungentlemanly." Reluctantly, she took her hand away from his firm lips.

"If only I were to take you to the hotel, the pleasures I could show you," he murmured in her ear, sending delightful shivers across her body. The clearing of a throat made him groan in dismay. "That would be my cousin," he muttered, standing up to his full seventy-four-inch height, "who's come to take this lovely vixen away from me."

Landi shook her head at his dramatic antics. It had been a long time since a man had made her laugh this much or feel this special. "Well, thank you for your kindness and your hospitality. I won't ever forget it."

He winked roguishly at her and asked, "Will I be able to see you again, or are you leaving our fair country soon?"

Unable to get out of the booth because of where he was standing, Landi remained seated. "I am here for a few more days. Then I have to get back to the States."

"Perfect. Then we can go out on a date before you leave." She rolled her eyes. "I don't even know your name."

Before he could respond, a deep voice interrupted them. "AJ, I don't want to stand here while you flirt with another woman. I was asked to escort her back to the hotel, and I don't have time to waste."

If the feelings her rescuer had caused had rocked and shocked her, the ones that rocketed through her at the sound of the new masculine voice were like the finale at a huge fireworks show. Only one man had the power to deliver that feeling to her body; and the last time she had seen him...was over a year ago.

It can't be!

The man blocking her view stepped back and allowed their eyes to meet. Standing before her was none other than the one who had shown her an incredible weekend of pleasure and then walked out of her life, leaving her heartbroken. Dimitri Androcles Melonakos.

Golden eyes met rich brown and both people's breaths hitched.

**D**((

Dimitri froze. When he had been called down to the restaurant to do an "escorting" job of a tourist, he'd felt a growl of anger. He was

supposed to be on vacation and he didn't want to baby-sit some lost person who couldn't find her way back to the hotel where she had been staying. Hell, he didn't even *want* to be on vacation! He was *so* bored. But the cousin who'd called had said AJ was fighting his attraction for her and didn't think it would be wise to allow him to escort the cute American.

*Cute American.* Well, that was one hell of an understatement. The woman who sat on the blue leather booth seat was way more than just cute. He knew every inch of her body; each curve was committed to memory. The taste of her skin was imprinted in his brain.

Three days, two nights of incredible and exquisite pleasure was what they had shared with one another. The emotions he had begun to feel for this woman had been off the charts, and they had frightened him. Since that weekend, Dimitri had seen her from a distance, but had not ever spoken to her again. Not even at the wedding of their mutual friends.

Now, he was across the world from where he had left her only to find they were, once again, face to face. His every wet dream sat dressed in pink, her wavy hair pulled up off her thin neck into a high ponytail.

Ilanderae Nycks.

Staring at her took him back to the time they had last spent together, the weekend they had rented a cabin along the beach and used their time together to make love and play. Away from anyone who might know them, away from prying eyes. Time for just the two of them. Then, he had left, leaving her with more unanswered questions than answers.

The look in her light-chestnut eyes holding his own was anything but loving. It was stark animosity. But then she blinked and a small smile crossed her face. Sliding out of the booth, Landi stood beside AJ.

"This, my dear," AJ said as his hand settled on the small of her back, "is my cousin, Dimitri. He will see you safely back to the hotel where you are staying. I will be by this evening to take you to dinner." His fingers danced along the smoothness of her pink shirt.

"Thank you, AJ," she purred softly. "I can't wait to see you again. My name is Ilanderae Nycks, but everyone calls me Landi. Pick me up at seven." Light-brown eyes tipped up to meet the sparkling green ones of the man beside her who nodded his agreement.

Dimitri gritted his teeth. Stepping forward, he nodded brusquely. "Are you ready, ma'am?"

"Of course." Her response had as much warmth in it as a polar ice cap. That fact wasn't lost on anyone there.

Reaching out his hand, Dimitri waited for her to take it. Instead, she smiled up again at his cousin and walked right past him to the door, where she paused, tossed her ponytail, and looked over her shoulder at him. Impatience was all over her expression.

With a sigh, Dimitri followed and held the door for her. "Where are you staying?" he asked as she waved to his cousin *again* before they finally left the restaurant.

The moment they were out of sight of the establishment, Landi stopped walking and glared at the man beside her. "I don't need or want you to take me anywhere. I'll be fine." Tossing her head once more, she began to walk off without another word.

Two steps were as far as she got. A firm hand jerked her back around to face him. An involuntary groan left both of them as they touched. Licking his firm lips, Dimitri shook his head. "I don't think so, sweetheart. My cousin wants you to have an escort and I will do just that. It's too damn dangerous for you to be alone here."

"I think I am in more danger from you, Dimitri Melonakos. Just tell your cousin you escorted me. I don't really care what you say. I just want you away from me!" She jerked back from his touch as if it burned.

Golden flames burned in his leonine gaze. "Don't challenge me, sweetheart. We both know how we react to one another. How much you want to bet you are wet right now?"

Her fawn-colored eyes narrowed as her nostrils flared. "You know, you're probably right. I am wet, but then that cousin of yours *is* something else." Landi spun around so fast her ponytail almost smacked him in the face.

A furious snarl erupted from his chest and he was on her heels in seconds. Grabbing her again, this time when he spun her around his mouth was waiting to land on hers. The kiss lasted maybe five seconds before her palm connected with the side of his face.

Smack!

"What the hell do you think you are doing?!" she demanded even as her chest heaved with the exertion it took to find her lost breath.

"Has it been that long since you've been kissed?" he taunted. She'd practically melted in his arms before remembering she was angry at him.

"By an ass? Yes!" For the second time in mere moments, she yanked away from him. "Leave me alone!" Ilanderae whirled around and began storming off.

Dimitri followed, but this time he stayed behind her. What the hell was wrong with him? He was the one who had broken things off with her, not the other way around. Believing he was over her went up like smoke the second his eyes had landed on her pink-clothed body.

Ilanderae Nycks was stunning. She was a very small, petite woman who loved the color pink. Every time he had seen her there was some form of the hue on her somewhere. She could work the color, and work it she did.

A wry smile crossed his face as he followed his stomping woman through the streets of Athens. His cousin had no reason to worry; Landi knew her way and was traveling like a pro. Of course she was; he knew she had been here many times, coming for both business and pleasure. Which is she here for this time?

He felt the trouble before he actually saw it. The tension in the crowd was escalating faster than he would have believed possible. Immediately his body went into protect mode, and his gaze zeroed in on Landi.

"Landi," he shouted over the increasing noise. When she looked back at him with an irritated look, he commanded, "Get back here to me."

Her eyes flashed dangerously. She hated being told what to do. As she opened her mouth to dispute him, someone shoved her from behind. Dimitri was there to keep her from kissing the pavement.

"God damn it!" she swore. "I am so sick of this!" Her hands curved about his muscular forearms as he led them to the doorway of an old building.

The crowd began chanting; it was obvious a riot was about to ensue. This time when her eyes met his, they weren't full of anything but concern. "What the hell is going on here, Dimitri?"

"Civil unrest." His sharp eyes scanned for the safest route to get her out of danger. "Hold on to my hand. Whatever you do, don't let me go."

His tone must have told Landi just how serious he was. Normally she would have taken exception to the command, but knowing what

he did for a living, she kept quiet. He wouldn't tell her that unless it was imperative for her wellbeing. "I won't."

"Good girl, *agapi*." His endearment rolled so naturally off his tongue that it took a moment for either of them to realize what he said.

Landi felt so right near him. Later he could hash out what had—or hadn't—happened between them. Right now, he had to get them out of this in one piece...even though he'd smashed her heart into millions of them.

Dimitri saw the war waging in her eyes. Tipping her face up more toward his, he asked, "Ready?"

"I think so," she murmured even as she noticed how much row-dier the crowd was becoming.

"I won't let anything happen to you, Landi. I'll keep you safe."

"Okay," she uttered as her grip on his hand tightened.

He smiled at her, revealing the dimple in his right cheek. "You'll be fine."

"I know," she said immediately. "You're with me."

At that second, Dimitri felt invincible. His head lowered and he placed his mouth over hers one more time. Gently. Tenderly.

The rush of emotions that swarmed them took them both back to the beach. To the time they had spent with one another.

Thirteen months earlier...

The knock at the door was shocking. Only one person knew Landi was staying here, and that person was busy with a handsome man in her bed. Ilanderae slowly walked to the door and opened it, leaving the security chain intact.

"Yes?" her soft voice asked as she peered out.

Standing on the other side of the door was a man who had invaded her dreams. He was the only thing she saw when her eyes closed at night. He wasn't that tall; but since she stood five-two, his five-nine frame seemed to dwarf her — then add to that the proud way he carried himself.

He had thick black hair, olive-tanned skin, and eyes that were golden like a lion's. His nose was crooked, as if it had been broken in a fight a long time ago; but on him, it only added sexual charm. He wasn't in short supply of that; oh, no, this man dripped it.

The way he looked at her made her feel like he had taken all of her clothes off with his teeth and was preparing to enjoy a feast in which she *was all* the courses. His clothes were very tasteful and molded to his chiseled body like they had been tailored for him specifically.

"Open the door and let me in, Landi," his smooth voice said.

Unhurriedly, she did as told. She knew exactly what was going to happen once she did—they both knew. The passion had been building between them since they'd met a few nights ago at her friend's house.

Somehow, she'd managed to run into him a few more times; and each look, touch, and shared space just made the tension between them increase in intensity. Now that the initial shock had worn off, she wasn't really surprised to see him outside her door. He was a Navy SEAL, and she didn't doubt his ability to find a person he was after.

And for the time being, it was Ilanderae Nycks he was after. Not that she minded; it had been a while since she'd had a good session of mind-blowing sex. "Should've known you'd find me," she murmured as she waved him in with one hand.

Dimitri "Merlin" Melonakos allowed his golden gaze to peruse the woman before him. She was very petite. A few inches over five feet, he bet he could lift her with one arm.

She had dark, thick, wavy hair that currently was up in a ponytail held in place with a bright pink ribbon. There was a matching pink spaghetti-strapped tank top covering the smooth dark skin of her torso and she wore a pair of white cotton shorts. She was barefoot and he could see the bright pink polish on her toenails.

"I'm a man who goes after what he wants," he said in a low voice.

"And that would be me?"

He nodded. "That would be you."

She closed the door behind him and leaned against it, assessing him with her eyes. He stood there wearing a pair of faded blue jeans with a hole in the left knee that fit him snugly. Stretched across his torso was a white tee shirt that contrasted alluringly with his tanned skin. Covering that was a black three-quarter length leather jacket. On his feet were white tennis shoes.

"Well, now that you're here, what exactly are you planning on doing to me?" Landi asked as her tongue snuck out to lick her lips.

"Oh, you have no idea what treasures I have in store for you." His eyes moved in a languid motion across the distance that separated them. It wasn't more than four steps, and he would be right back into her personal space.

Her feet spread apart as she settled more comfortably against the smooth wood of her door. Thick lashes blinked over her exoticshaped eyes before she held his gaze. There was no fear in hers, only the sultry assurance a woman had when she knew the man in question belonged, even if just for the moment, to her and her alone.

"And just what treasures are you holding for me?" Her eyes never backed down from the intense passion flaring in his.

"A night that neither one of us will ever forget." Dimitri spoke with the calm confidence that was bred into every pore of his body. He knew whatever he and this vixen shared would be nothing short of explosive. With ease, he removed his jacket and laid it over the stool by the door.

Landi swallowed as her body reacted to his words, presence, and poise. From the first second she'd seen him standing in front of her friend, Koali, she'd felt a sexual reaction to him. That entire night had

been spent exchanging glances, mere brushes of skin, and blatant promises of things yet to come.

Well, now those things had arrived and it was time for this man to make good, a time she'd been waiting for since she'd looked into his golden eyes.

"Take your shirt off." Her command filled the room.

His hands gripped the hem of his white shirt and he slowly pulled it up over his head. He met her gaze as he dropped the cotton garment to the floor. A totally arrogant smile crossed his face as he witnessed her reaction to seeing his bared chest.

Landi inhaled sharply, her eyes skimming his golden chest. So far there were no tan lines on his body. The sight before her had her body clenching with desire and her panties flooding with more moisture.

He had a decent covering of chest hair, black like the hair on his head. It tapered as it neared the top of his jeans, creating a v that tempted her to follow it and see what lay below the snug material.

Licking her lips, Landi stepped closer to him and reached out her hand. She walked all the way around him, her fingers lightly touching his exposed skin. On his left shoulder was a tattoo of a crescent moon surrounded by five stars. "What does this mean?" she asked as she traced the five pointed star the five individual ones made up.

"It is a symbol of magic. My nickname is Merlin," he said gruffly.

"Merlin, huh?" she purred while continuing her perusal of his toned body. Her hand caressed over his tight buttocks as she moved to the right side of his body.

"Yep."

There was another inking on the inside of his right forearm that grabbed her attention. Holding his arm in both her hands, she turned it so she could get a perfect view. Short strokes made up a circle, almost like the sun's rays in a child's drawing. "And this one?"

"Explosion." His body was trembling.

Completing her circle, Landi stopped before him, her fingers dancing lightly against his hairy chest. The coarse tendrils sent volts through her. "Are you a dangerous man, Mr. Melonakos?" She spoke his name like a native Greek.

Dimitri felt his cock swell in anticipation of being inside this little vibrant woman who stood before him in pink. Hot pink, as if that didn't give him ideas of how scorching she would be.

His eyes burned with a feral golden fire as they met her sultry and teasing gaze. One strong shoulder lifted with a graceful motion. "Sometimes," he intoned seconds before he reached for her and pulled her body against his.

Landi squeaked in surprise. Then, his mouth covered hers. His thick fingers grabbed her ponytail and pulled her head back so he had easy access to her mouth. She tasted like crème de menthe.

This kiss had enough energy to light up the Eiffel Tower. Dimitri swept through her mouth with his tongue, determined to learn what secrets she possessed. His thick tongue dove deep, retreated, laved all corners, and then repeated itself.

Soon he was just making love to her mouth. Dimitri felt his body shiver as his imagination replaced his tongue with the ramrod erection he pressed against her belly. His cock began leaking at the image his mind painted for him.

One of his powerful hands dropped to her shoulder and slid the skinny strap down over the ball of it. The feel of each callused fingertip against her satin-like skin made them both shudder with anticipation. His other hand began to mimic the motion on the other side.

Dimitri shook with the strength it took for him not to lose control like a youth on his first time. Who knew this woman would test his resolve like this? It was slowly that he drew away from her mouth, holding her lower lip in his teeth, adding more pleasure to her experience. And his.

Moving his hands down her arms, he caught and held her gaze with his own. The blatant desire he witnessed in her eyes, was nearly his undoing. "Your skin is so smooth," he complimented her as he tantalized her senses by bringing his hands back up her arms.

Landi felt her nipples tighten even more and she knew he could see them; she was only wearing the tank top. "Take off your shirt," Dimitri ordered her, just as she had to him.

With one small step back, Ilanderae gathered the hem of her pink top in her hands and pulled it off her body in one motion. She felt his sharp intake of breath deep in her soul. A heated flush filled her as his eyes grew to a dark burnished color while raking over her breasts.

"Perfect," he groaned, and his hands cupped her globes. Dimitri allowed his thumbs to torment the already puckered nipples. "They fit so flawlessly in my hands."

A small moan escaped her mouth as Landi fought not to lose control of her legs. Her knees were shaking like a leaf in a hurricane. She clenched her hands into fists; she wasn't sure what else to do with them.

He his touch flowed over her flat stomach, dipped into the tiny swell of her waist, and slipped around to the small of her back. Then he removed his hands totally and walked around her, again like she had done to him.

Dimitri used one finger to trail over the expanse of her back while he moved slowly, not rushing the opportunity to look his fill of her beautiful body.

Standing behind her, Dimitri placed his hands on her hips and leaned in to bury his face into the ponytail she wore. The silken strands smelled like a mix of lavender, peppermint, and lemon. In fact, her whole body did. It was one hell of an aphrodisiac to his waning control.

Slipping his hands around to the front of her body, he sighed with contentment as the weight of her breasts was once again in his palms. Maneuvering his head, Dimitri swiped his tongue along the back of her exposed neck. She tasted delicious. Her small body shuddered beneath him.

Relying on the support his body behind hers offered, Landi allowed herself to relax against him. Not that she had much choice once he cupped her breasts again and began licking her neck.

Dimitri knew Landi could feel and discern what the hard ridge pressed into her buttocks was. His body clenched at the knowledge that soon, it would be hers. Landi brought her hands back to rest on the sides of his strong thighs, a move that arched her back and pressed her breasts further into his eager hands.

Nipping her slightly on the neck, Dimitri's hands traveled south with his hands. The smell of her desire was beginning to fill the room. Every inhalation and touch of her body on his chipped away at the hold he had on his control.

Halting at the top of her shorts, he let his fingers tease beneath the elastic. He felt the band of her panties and his cock jerked painfully as a result. "These need to go," he whispered as he began to tug them down.

Once they were past her hips, the material slipped unimpeded to the floor. Dimitri stepped around to the front of her and looked over her. She stood before him in nothing but a white thong.

His eyes easily picked up on the fact it was soaked. "Damn," he hissed. Like a hungry wolf, he circled her again. This time his sharp eyes picked up on a tattoo she had. It was on her left hip, a ladder that was deep pink in color. Beneath the ladder was the outline of a moon.

Dimitri traced one rung with a finger as he asked, "What possessed you to get a pink ladder on this marvelous skin?"

Ilanderae had to take several deep breaths before she could respond. "It is the Adinkra symbol of fate."

One thick black eyebrow rose as he began to shake his head. He moved his fingers over it one more time before sliding them under the edge of her skimpy thong. "Fate?" *Nimue is Merlin's one true love. And another word for Nimue is Fate.* 

"Yes," she stuttered. "I got it in college; my friends said I always tempted fate."  $\!\!\!$ 

"Well, you sure as hell are tempting me." He lifted her into his arms and walked over to the bed in the hotel room, lowering her gently to rest on the mattress. Dimitri eyed the fashion magazine that lay there and shoved it to the side.

Landi tugged his body down over hers, loving how the rough feel of his denim jeans felt against her bare legs. His thick chest hair teased and tormented her sensitive breasts. Her hands ran over the muscles in his back and settled on the firm ass he was blessed with.

Her hips bucked, pressing her soaking core against him, telling him what she wanted. What she craved.

Dimitri seemed to have had enough of playing around. Rolling her over so she was on top of him, he latched his lips onto one of the breasts that hung enticingly over his mouth. His tongue rolled her turgid nipple around as he alternated sucking and nipping on it. He kicked off his shoes so they were out of the way.

Landi had begun to mewl in the back of her throat as she ground down against the stiff erection in his denims. Her back arched, allowing him to pull even more of her breast into his mouth.

The feel of him between her thighs and the tugging his mouth was doing to her breast sent her body into an orgasm that blindsided her. It sent her spiraling into a beautiful world. But she wanted more. She wanted to feel Dimitri deep within her body.

She moved her breast from his mouth and slid down his form, placing little kisses along the hairy chest. Her nose inhaled the light smell of a musky cologne that he wore and wore well.

At the button of his jeans, she stopped. Her legs straddled his and she could see the wet spot that her most recent orgasm had put on his clothing. Landi undid the button and pulled down the zipper.

She tugged the material down over his lean hips and couldn't stop the groan of appreciation at the sight of his cock straining against his boxers.

"Landi," Dimitri uttered, his naturally deep voice sounding about an octave lower. His hips lifted so she could pull the jeans off.

She sucked her bottom lip in her mouth as she stood over him and looked. His thick lashes were lowered and she knew they were full of passion. The dark green of his boxers was a good color against his skin. But she didn't want his boxers; well, she did, but Landi wanted them off his body.

Kneeling back on the bed, Landi crawled up to where she could touch the waist of his boxers. Passion glazed her eyes as she finished undressing him. Her eyes became transfixed on the thick erection that jutted out from the dark hair.

*Damn, I want that in my mouth.* Before Dimitri could respond to the emotion he no doubt saw in her eyes, she leaned over and swiped her tongue across the top of his penis. His whole body jerked as he let loose an expletive.

"Landi!" He tried to grab her shoulders.

She was determined when she wanted something, and she wanted his dick deep within her mouth. So she had it. Rolling off his touch, she ran her tongue around the swollen head before lowering her mouth over it.

Dimitri had just about blown his load at the first touch of her lips sliding up and down his thick shaft. Her ponytail had fallen over her shoulder and the ends tickled the sensitive skin of his pelvic region.

More and more of his cock she took in her mouth. By the time her nose had reached the hair from where her treat originated, his hands were on the side of her head as hips began bucking, allowing him to drive home deep in her throat.

"Oh, Jesus, Landi. I'm about to—!"

His incomplete warning came seconds before he did. Spurt after spurt left his body and shot down her throat. And she took it all.

"Landi? Landi!" Dimitri's deep voice jolted Landi back from a memory best left in the past. "Stay with me, here; we have to make a run for it. Are you ready?"

Swallowing hard, she fought to focus on his words. She could still taste him as if they had just finished sharing their bodies with one another. "I think so," she rasped.

Dimitri narrowed his gaze as he took in the rapidness of her breathing combined with the lingering desire in her eyes. She could tell it had hit him; he knew exactly what she was thinking about. Their time together. Visibly forcing his lust back under control, he tightened his grip on her hand and stepped out into the chaos.

They moved swiftly through the crowd. The chants were increasing as was the shoving all people were doing. Things were being yelled in Greek and Landi had no idea what was said, although it wasn't hard to tell they were pissed off about something.

Dimitri kept them moving at a constant speed but had automatically adjusted for the length of Landi's stride. "You okay?" he asked as they dodged a large man who was hefting part of a table over his head.

"Peachy! You know I do this all the time." Her answer smacked of sarcasm and Dimitri grinned despite the seriousness of the situation. "How the hell do you know where I'm staying?"

"I am guessing you stay in the same place when you come to Athens," he responded as they dashed across another street.

"Assumptions...an ass...yeah that fits," Landi bit off as her hotel came into view.

"I didn't say I assumed, I guessed." Dimitri continued to pull her along even after they were inside the building.

"Stop. Stop! Damn it, Dimitri, knock it off." Landi jerked her hand out of his hold. "I'm fine now. Go back to...whatever." Her palms moved over the seat of her pants as if wiping off the mere touch he had given her.

The golden eyes of his handsome face raked up her body and they burned her with their intensity. "Landi, about what happened—"

"Oh, my God! Landi, you're okay! I was so worried!" A masculine voice interrupted Dimitri and both people looked toward the person jogging through the hotel lobby to her side.

Dimitri snarled quietly as he watched this man pick up Landi and kiss her cheek. The man was, Dimitri guessed, five-nine, and a striking black man. Good body, nice smile, tasteful clothes, the man had Landi in his arms. Dimitri hated him.

"I'm okay; I think it's time to readjust our plans, however." Landi kissed him back and didn't rush him in setting her down.

"I agree," the man said. "I've made arrangements. Let's get going before it's too late." His dark-brown eyes swung over to rest upon Dimitri. "And you are?"

"Dimitri Melonakos." The Greek paused for a moment. "You?"

Before answering, his gaze flicked over to Ilanderae, who was standing there staring with a blank expression on her face. "Jason Erickson." He reached out a hand and as it was taken, both men sizing up one another.

Landi took a step backwards and immediately Dimitri's gaze had zeroed in on her. "We aren't done, Landi."

Her brown eyes narrowed to slits; and this time, unlike back at the restaurant, she did nothing to disguise her anger. "I have *nothing* to say to you!" She turned from him, took one step, and froze when his hand circled her arm.

"We aren't done," Dimitri bit out.

Realizing they were getting odd looks from the people in the lobby of the hotel, Landi swallowed her response to his forward behavior. Her fingers itched to slap him for his boldness and her mouth longed to feel his firm lips upon it.

Narrowing her eyes, she commanded in an icy and haughty tone, "Remove your hand."

His golden eyes swirled with emotion and her belly quivered. She read the warning in his gaze before he dropped her arm.

"We will finish discussing this."

"Thank you for the escort, Mr. Melonakos." She tugged the hem of her shirt down and smiled at Jason before walking away without another word. With each step she took, she fought the urge to look over her shoulder at him.

Damn him! Damn him for being so damn good looking after all this time! Damn him for wreaking the same havoc in my body as he had before!

Blinking back tears, Landi headed straight for her room and locked herself in. After leaving a message to have her room rung when AJ arrived, she crawled into her bed and curled up to the big pillows and drifted off to the past.

## **D**((

The further away from Landi Dimitri walked brought the image of her on a date with AJ closer. He moved swiftly through the streets, avoiding the crowds of irate people and the police. Understanding his mood as being one that was less than decent, he entered the restaurant through the back to avoid any customers.

"Alejandro Kyriakos Melonakos!" Dimitri bellowed as he entered the restaurant.

"Why are you yelling?" AJ questioned as he nimbly avoided another person.

"You aren't going."

His cousin stared at him with those guileless green eyes. "Excuse me?" He set the down plate he had in his hands. "Not going where?"

"Out." Dimitri fought to get his rage in check.

"Of course not! Don't be stupid. This is a busy time. I'm not going until tonight with my date with..." he trailed off, eyes growing wide with understanding. "You don't want me to go out with that little cutie in pink?"

A low rumble rolled from his chest. "Don't call her that."

"You have a problem with me taking Landi out?" AJ crossed his arms and a mocking smile filled his face.

"Leave her alone, cousin," he growled.

"Why? She agreed to go out with me. In fact...she seemed downright pleased about it."

White-hot rage poured through his veins. Dimitri smiled ferally as he stepped up flush to his cousin. It didn't matter that AJ was inches taller than he. "Don't push me, AJ," he warned. "Change your plans."

AJ stared at him for a moment before deeper comprehension filled his eyes and a grin crossed his face. "You aren't in my plans at all. She is." Devilish humor filled his countenance before he strode away. He said over his shoulder, "You can always be here to watch our date if you like. Maybe you'll learn how a real man treats a woman."

Dimitri muttered something unkind in Greek as his cousin walked off. He wanted to beat him until he was in no shape to go anywhere near Landi. His vacation had just taken a turn for the worse.

Landi is mine, AJ. Mine!

Shoving a hand through his hair, he glared at Spyros, another cousin, who had been watching the entire exchange but wisely kept his mouth shut. Spinning around, he left the kitchens and headed back outside, sitting down on a crate.

Why did she have to be here? What was her power that made him lose all sense of self around her? Why did he want to go to her room and hold her? Make love to her?

Putting his head in his hands, he closed his eyes against the onslaught of his memories. It felt like it was just yesterday they'd taken that small trip to the beach.

"Are you okay, Dimitri?" a soft voice questioned in Greek.

Looking up, he smiled as he looked upon his Aunt Luz. "Yes, ma'am."

She raised a dark brow in disbelief and waited him out. "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

Dimitri met his aunt's kind eyes. He knew better than to lie to her. "It's my fault she hates me, I left her."

"And this is the young woman my son seems content to torment you about his upcoming date?"

Dimitri bit back a growl of anger. "She doesn't need to be going on a date with him."

"The young woman in all the pink? The American?"

He nodded silently. The image of Landi was so fresh before him, he felt like could reach out and touch her.

"She is the other half of your soul. And she knows it. I would have to have been blind not to see the passion in her eyes as she looked at you. Don't give up on her, Dima."

He smiled wanly. Only here in Greece was he called Dima. "I hurt her. I haven't spoken to her in over a year, until today."

His aunt knelt beside him, her hand rested on his leg. "You must give her time. She will see what is meant to be."

Touching one wrinkle-free cheek, Dimitri kissed the other one. "If only you weren't married or family. You are a woman like no other."

She blushed. "You Melonakos men, always with the smooth tongues."

"Love you, Auntie Luz."

"And I you, Dima. Don't worry about AJ; he will soon realize she is not the one for him."

Dimitri nodded. He planned on being there to make sure it didn't happen. "I should get back to helping out." Standing, he reached out a hand to assist her up as well.

"Such a wonderful boy, Dima. You are such a wonderful boy."

With another kiss, he held the door open for his aunt to precede him back into the busy kitchen. He watched her head for the office and disappear inside of it before he joined in the organized chaos that reigned.

AJ didn't say another word as they continued to work through the rest of the afternoon. At least not about Landi. And Dimitri did his best not to picture the date they would be sharing.

He cried off early and went to his hotel. Dimitri knew he always had a room at AJ's or his Aunt and Uncle's, but he felt like having his own space. He was antsy and had been so for a long time now.

Closing the door behind him, he headed to his bed. Flopping down with a grunt, Dimitri pulled out his wallet and took out a photo strip. It was snapshots of him and Landi. They had taken it one afternoon while walking along the boardwalk.

Most were of them laughing and smiling for the camera, but in the final one she was watching him. Her big brown eyes were full of tenderness as they stared at him. One finger touched her image gently before he roughly shoved it back in his wallet and lay there while looking up at the ceiling.

His skin still burned from where he'd touched her earlier. His lips wanted hers pressed against them.

"Damn it, Landi!" he swore. "Why'd you come to Greece?"

He knew the answer. Landi was a fashion designer and traveled all over the world. But what he didn't know was the relationship of the man to her. At least if she had agreed to go on a date with AJ, then she was most likely not in a romantic one with that Mr. Erickson.

Dimitri had one more night in Greece before he flew back to the States. He was going to California to see his parents and then it was back to work. And yet, all of that was second to the need to be near Landi.

Pushing up from the bed, Dimitri took a shower. Perhaps a cold dousing would cure him of his ails.

Landi stepped out of the elevator and headed for the front desk where her dinner date waited for her. As she walked around the corner, her breath caught in her throat. AJ stood leaning against a pillar, a bouquet of vibrantly colored flowers in one tanned hand. He wore a dark gray suit that accented the green of his eyes.

"Good evening, Landi Nycks," he said in a low tone. "These are for you."

"They are absolutely beautiful," she breathed, accepting the bunch and inhaling the fragrant smell they gave. "Thank you."

"They pale beside your beauty," he told her. His eyes moved over her and she waited for him to be done with his perusal. "You look incredible."

Landi wore a crinkled, pale-gray chiffon cocktail dress. It was strapless with a pink Empire waist tie that wrapped around her back before ending in a soft front bow. Her wavy hair was gathered in a sophisticated upstyle, showing off her elegant neck, and some extra curls cascaded down in the back. A few wisps framed her face, softening her appearance even more. Three-inch heels finished off her look.

"Thank you, AJ."

He offered his arm, smiling down at her when she took it without hesitation. She tucked the flowers in her other arm and looked up at him as they walked into the warm night. A breeze had picked up and gently caressed her skin. "Where are we going?"

"My restaurant. I'm a bit partial to the food there."

Her heart began beating hard in her chest. Would Dimitri be there? With a mental reprimand, she reminded herself of the hurt he had caused her by disappearing without a word. The tears she had cried over him. She refused to focus on what it had been like to be in his arms.

Determined not to let Dimitri's memory ruin her evening, she said, "Sounds wonderful."

AJ held open the door of a black car for her and closed it gently after she was inside it. She watched him as he slid in behind the wheel and started the engine.

The man had many similarities to his cousin, Dimitri, but there were also differences. The main one was that although extremely handsome, he didn't seem to set her heart to a breakneck pace. He wasn't quite as powerful looking as Dimitri and there was definitely a softer look to him, as opposed to the hardness she had seen in Dimitri.

Whoever snagged this one was going to be one lucky woman. She knew she would have gone after him herself if not for the untimely arrival of Dimitri Melonakos. That man had ruined her for all others and all it had taken was just to see him again for her to have no desire for anyone else. Even the taste of him still lingered on her mouth after that explosive kiss he'd planted on her this afternoon. She bit back a whimper as longing shot through her.

"You okay, Landi?" AJ asked.

"Fine. So you own this restaurant we're going to?"

"It is the family business, yes." AJ pulled off the street and parked the car before walking around to her side and opening her door. "Ready to eat?"

Putting her hand in his, she smiled. He really was devilishly charming. "Yes. Yes, I am."

He flashed a grin she was sure melted the hearts of many women. "Wonderful." His deep voice caressed her skin, heating it up even despite the cool breeze.

They walked into the establishment arm in arm. This time the place was much more packed, the lights were lower, and gentle music played throughout. Landi noticed that although she was again under scrutiny of the patrons, this time it was friendlier and it more curious as opposed to distrustful. The streets had quieted down much since the earlier ruckus.

AJ spoke to people as he led her to a table in a secluded corner. He held her chair for her and whispered in her ear as he slid her in, "They are all envious of me because of the lovely woman with me."

Landi chuckled as she set her flowers on the table beside her. "Is that so?"

"Oh, yes." He sat opposite her. "You think I'm jesting?"

"I think you are a smooth talker. I haven't forgotten what you said this afternoon."

He flashed a brilliant smile. "Good. I was hoping you hadn't."

Landi wasn't quite sure what to make of him. He was so charming and flirtatious. "Trust me; I don't get offers like that a lot. It stuck out."

"Men must be blind then."

Landi took a drink of water and listened in silence as he ordered for them. "So," she said once they were alone again, "am I going to like what you ordered for me?"

His eyes darkened. "Most definitely." He gestured to the wine bottle. "Would you care for some?"

"No, thank you. I don't drink."

"Then I shall not as well." With a wave of his hand the bottle was removed. He handed her the basket of bread and she took a roll.

AJ scooted closer to the table, reached across it and took Landi's hand. His thumb skimmed across the back of it. "Tell me about you."

## **D**((

Dimitri rolled his shoulders to alleviate the tension in his body. He sat across the restaurant in a dark corner, all alone. His back was to the wall and his eyes were glued to the couple on the other side. AJ and Landi.

He shifted his butt on the seat as he stared at Landi. No, that wasn't right; he ogled her. Courtesy of AJ, Dimitri had known they were going to be here for their date and had arrived early to find a place to sit.

His breath had left his body in a rush when she'd entered. All his primitive and primal instincts had blasted to the surface. She looked scrumptious. He knew her hair was like silk and she smelled like lavender, peppermint, and lemon.

Dimitri narrowed his eyes when AJ touched her. She carried a bouquet of flowers and a growl of displeasure rose from within him, his fingers tightened around the glass.

He watched AJ order for her; and when he picked up her hand, Dimitri swore. "She isn't yours, cousin. Make no mistake about that."

Anatole sat down at his table. "What's wrong? You've been surly all afternoon."

"Go away, Anatole," Dimitri grumbled.

His cousin didn't heed his warning. "Are you upset because he's dating that sexy American?"

He looked at his cousin. "Go. Away."

"No. I want to watch her as well. I know you haven't taken your eyes off her since she walked in. She looks good with AJ, don't you think?"

"No!" he snapped. Swallowing back his rage at those words, he just shook his head. "Leave me alone, Anatole!"

There must have been something in his tone, for his cousin left without saying another word. Drinking the rest of his beer, Dimitri continued to watch AJ's date.

His gut clenched each time she smiled. It dropped when she laughed. She was so beautiful, it hurt.

What had he done? Would he ever get another chance?

When AJ reached across the table and stroked her cheek, Dimitri jumped up from the table, rattling it as he hit it. Many eyes swept to him, but he didn't notice. His gaze was on the light-brown one of Landi as she met his stare.

She held it and then looked back to AJ as if dismissing him. He knew her impersonal glance—he'd gotten it from her at Kacy and Ernst's wedding. Then, he'd told himself it was for the best; now he wasn't so sure.

Especially when his cousin made her smile like she was.

Dimitri turned away and strode out of the restaurant, knowing full well if he stayed, he *would* do bodily harm to AJ. He had to force himself not to go to Landi and drag her off.

Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, Dimitri began walking, the scowl on his face more than enough to keep people out of his way. With no place in particular in mind, he wandered along the streets.

€.

Landi stood with AJ in the lobby of her hotel. "Thank you for such a wonderful evening."

"It was entirely my pleasure, my dear. Thank you, for being such a lovely companion."

She smiled. "Thank you again for saving me."

He wrapped his arms around her. "No need to thank me for that. I just wish I truly was the one who you longed for."

She pulled back and looked up at him. "What are you talking about?"

A kind expression crossed his handsome face. "I'm talking about how your eyes filled with an emotion I hadn't seen in them the whole evening until my cousin made an ass of himself."

"He does that very well," she said. "And I have no emotion for him."

AJ chuckled and pressed a kiss to her forehead. One hand tipped up her chin and his eyes met hers. "You have plenty of fire for

him. And if I didn't see it, I would be after you myself. Unfortunately, it is not I you desire."

Landi sighed and rested her head against his chest. "Walk me to my door?"

"Of course."

They moved toward the elevator close together. AJ walked her to her door and took her keycard from her to open it.

"Here you are," he murmured in a low voice.

"Thank you again, for everything."

AJ lowered his head to her ear and whispered, "Let's make him jealous, shall we?"

Delightful shivers skated along her spine. She didn't need to know who he talked about. "That's sweet AJ, but Dimitri isn't jealous with anything that has to do with me."

Using his large body, AJ covered her smaller frame and made it look like they were sharing an intimate moment. "My dear," he said, "that man is so jealous he can't see straight." He placed his hand at her waist.

"You must be crazy, AJ," she muttered lightly. "And even if you weren't, what good is doing this now? He's not here."

AJ chuckled a deep throaty sound and nuzzled her behind the ear. "I know he is. Wanna invite me in?"

Landi was quiet for a moment. "I don't think I should. I don't want to be part of whatever game you are playing with your cousin." Her hand drifted along his cheek. "But thank you for a lovely evening. It was greatly appreciated."

Placing his nose opposite hers, he nodded. "I haven't had more fun in a long time. Thank you for spending the evening with me, Ms. Nycks. Especially given your earlier scare."

"Well, you protected me so well the first time, how could I not go with you a second time?" She wrinkled her nose. "But, I have a busy day tomorrow, so I should go."

He sighed and brushed his lips over hers. Swinging open her door, he nodded his head at her. "It's been a privilege and an honor to meet you."

She blushed and nodded once before slipping into her hotel room and closing the door on AJ's handsome face. Landi sagged against the door and released a heavy sigh. The day had taken a toll on her emotions and she needed a second to regain her control.

Heading to the bathroom, she got into something a bit more comfortable before sitting down at the desk in the room and opening her portfolio. She groaned as her pencil made some marks on the dress she was working on.

Was this really what she needed right now?

Leaning back in the chair, Landi tucked a pencil behind her ear and put another one in her mouth, worrying it as she stared at the image before her. There was just something off about the design.

A knock sounded and absently she pushed back from the desk and took the paper with her. "Hang on." She opened it, figuring it was Jason stopping by to work on tomorrow's presentation.

She was wrong.

Dimitri Melonakos stood there, hands in the pockets of his darkgray slacks, watching her. A black shirt was stretched tautly across his torso. His thick hair was almost shaggy; but on him, it looked so damn good.

"What the fuck do you want?" she snapped.

"We need to talk." He held her gaze and her breath hitched as his golden orbs seemed to peer into her soul.

"No. We don't." Landi began closing the door when one of his hands landed on it.

"Yes. We do." Dimitri stepped closer and swamped her with the fresh, crisp smell of the ocean that surrounded him.

She arched a brow. "No, we do *not*! You made sure of that, Mr. Melonakos, the day you walked off without a word to me! You have no claim over any second of my time!" Landi pushed against the door.

"Let me explain..." he tried.

"I don't care to hear anything you have to say! Our time is over. Now leave me alone before I call security!"

"Landi-"

"No!" she yelled. "You are nothing to me now!" With a hard shove, she shut her door and locked it immediately.

Damn you, Dimitri! Damn you!

Landi stomped back over to her desk and flopped down. Her pencil made fast, angry strokes as she worked on the dress design.

A few moments later, another knock came on the door. Slapping the pencil down, she stood and headed back to the door, yanking it open snarling, "Get lost, D-!"

Jason. One black brow rose as he stared at her. "Everything okay, Landi?"

She sagged against the doorframe. "Fine," she muttered. "Just peachy. Get in here."

She pulled Jason in her room and her eyes darted to the sides, but she could see no sign of Dimitri. Closing the door, she could still feel the air hum with the energy that came when Dimitri was around. Dimitri stood around the corner in the hall and watched Landi pull that Jason person into her room. He'd seen her and AJ together and it had taken every last ounce of his training and control to keep out of sight. This was harder. He would have bet every last penny he owned that flames were coming from his eyes. Dimitri longed to beat his cousin and this man for daring to touch his woman.

Unsure of how to proceed now, Dimitri remained in hiding. He had gone to her door to try and explain what had happened, but all he could do was blab incoherently.

He wanted to pull her into his arms, kiss her, and make love to her like he had done during that wonderful weekend they shared before...

Before I went and fucked it all up.

He had to explain, but he honestly didn't know how. He couldn't bust in her room right now, not with that other man there.

He hadn't realized how much he would have missed her. Despite the fact he had been the idiot who had left her, he had cared deeply for her. He had loved her, still did.

Dimitri's impromptu decision to withhold his reason for leaving her had sealed his fate, at least in her eyes. Even his teammates had told him he was a fool for not telling her.

Part of him was sure Landi's friend Koali Zimmerman, nee Travis, knew what had happened between them. Her attitude toward him had cooled considerably. She was unfailingly polite to him, but he knew that was out of respect for her husband, another one of his teammates.

Muttering in Greek, Dimitri went to the front desk. He was getting a room here and would wait in it until he could go back to Landi's room and talk to her. As he walked across the lobby, his phone rang.

It was AJ.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"I want you to leave her alone. She's exhausted, and seeing you is only stressing her out."

"You are in no position to tell me what I should and shouldn't do," he growled.

"Grow up, Dimitri. We both know I could have persuaded her to let me share her bed. Out of respect for you, I didn't. But you need to think about this, carefully. She isn't ready to hear you out."

Dimitri bit back his response. AJ was right. He was very smooth with the ladies and would have had no issue getting anyone he wished in bed. "I'm not losing her again," he vowed. "I'll do whatever I have to to get her back."

AJ chuckled. "I've no doubt of that, cousin. But give her a break tonight."

"Point taken, AJ."

"You know I love you, Dimitri Androcles. You are a brother to me."

"I know. And I appreciate it immensely. Just stop flirting with my woman.

AJ's laughter reached him easily. "I like her. She's good for you."

Dimitri sighed. AJ was right. Landi *was* good for him. All he had to do was convince her that he had made a colossal mistake and remind her of how good they were together. "Good night, cousin."

"'Night."

Dimitri hung up the phone and left Landi's hotel for his own. Sleep, shower, and come sunrise, he would be ready for whatever Ms. Landi Nycks dished out.

A smile played up the corner of his lips as he walked. Ilanderae Nycks was one hell of a woman — explosive content in a small package.

Landi and Jason worked late into the night. They had one final presentation to deliver before catching a flight back home. Jason had mulled over the idea of leaving early, given the unrest that had erupted in the streets, but Landi had convinced him otherwise.

She hated leaving before completing the job. Part of her also wanted to make sure she wasn't just running away from running into Dimitri Melonakos again. She shivered. Just the thought of that man, created havoc in her body.

Her throat grew dry and her skin grew clammy. Her mind was on his golden eyes, darkly tanned olive skin, and that thick black hair he had as she'd said goodnight to Jason.

She set the designs on the desk in her room and went to the bathroom to get ready for a few hours of sleep.

"Even after all this time, just seeing him turns me into mush. It's like my body forgot how he left us. Alone. At the goddamn altar!" She slammed her brush down on the tile countertop. "Damn him!" she swore. "Damn him for still making me feel something!" It didn't matter theirs had been a whirlwind two-week relationship heading for the altar. All that had mattered was how right it had felt on that weekend he'd asked her to marry him. There was so little known about him, except how he made her feel.

Furiously wiping away the traitorous tears that had snuck out from behind her eyes, Landi quickly brushed her teeth before climbing into bed. Squeezing her eyes shut, she did her best to shove Dimitri's mental image out of her mind.

Sleep eluded her for a long time. The smell of his cologne, the sound of his voice, the gentleness in which he touched her, all seemed to take pleasure in torturing her. The seductive whisper of his voice tantalized her skin and she ached with want.

When her wake-up call came, Landi knew the day was going to be long. She didn't feel the slightest bit rested.

"Morning, doll," Jason said as he met her outside her room to go to breakfast.

"Hey, Jason," she responded.

"Oh, boy, I know that tone. You didn't get any sleep, did you?" "I'm fine," Landi snapped.

"Don't take it out on me, Ilanderae," he admonished. "I'm not the enemy here."

She flushed. Jason was right; he wasn't to blame. "I'm sorry, Jason. I'm just..."

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "It's okay. Let's eat; we've got to go over the presentation again before we show it."

"Okay," she agreed. "I am sorry, you know."

 $^{\prime\prime} I$  know. God help that man; I hope he has thick skin. Your tongue is wicked."

"I don't like people thinking they can push me around just because I'm short. Add to that, I'm in a cutthroat business. I've had to learn to speak up or get run over."

He slipped her arm through his. "I know. Just don't forget some of us are good."

She sighed. "I know, I know. And I am sorry."

Jason said nothing further and Landi knew he understood. They were each other's confidants. Never lovers, just extremely close. Many

thought Jason was gay, given he worked in the fashion industry and was always very well dressed. They were wrong. He had style and taste. She considered him a metrosexual, but he was definitely not gay. Landi had walked in on him in bed with a woman before.

She squeezed his hand and continued on toward the place they were eating breakfast. They chatted about the presentation while they ate and continued to do so during the ride to the office where the meeting was being held. As they climbed out of the taxi, Landi swallowed and smoothed her hands down the side of her skirt.

No matter how many she'd done, her nerves got tight before a pitch. This wasn't just a job for her. This was her passion, her calling. She had worked hard getting her name out there.

Desires of the Moon had begun as a lingerie line, but she had quickly expanded it to all aspects of clothing wear. The men's line, Lunarwear, had begun shortly after Jason had joined the company.

Now they were acquiring more retailers to carry her clothing. Landi was extremely picky about who sold her lines. She was proud of her clothing and took great pains to make sure there were few knock-offs.

She had begun taking her company globally in stores now, branching from Internet-only sales. It had taken many trips and many samples of her work, but now she was *hopefully* going to find a place for her line in one of the top boutiques in Athens.

Personally, it was hard for Landi to buy clothes over the Internet; she wanted to be able to try them on, and she knew customers wanted that ability as well.

Gripping her attaché, she waited for Jason and the garment bags he had. Together they entered the glass building.

**D**C

Dimitri swore. Landi hadn't returned. He had been waiting for her so he could explain why he'd left her. Powerful strides took him across the lobby floor as he paced.

"Mr. Melonakos," the manager said as he approached.

Dimitri stopped. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry you've been waiting for so long. Ms. Nycks is no longer a guest at our hotel. She checked out this morning."

Dimitri clenched his jaw and fisted his hands. *Gone? Damn it, Landi, where are you?* Forcing a smile, he nodded his thanks. "I appreciate you telling me."

"No problem." The manager walked off.

Dimitri was furious. He berated himself as he left the hotel. *Shoulda gone to her room. Shoulda made her listen to me!* 

He was still in a foul mood hours later as he waited for the boarding call at the airport. He finally relaxed as the plane settled into its cruising altitude. His eyes closed as exhaustion took over his body.

Soon, Ms. Nycks. Soon.

The flight home gave him time to remember their wonderful time together. Chasing her on the beach. Frolicking in the waves. Making love...

Dimitri stared at the vibrant woman sleeping beside him in the late afternoon, bathed by the warm rays of the sun. She was exhausted. They had spent most of the day swimming, making love, and just goofing off.

At the moment, she lay boneless on the bed totally naked. The light blue sheet barely covered her. Tendrils of her wavy hair were plastered against her skull.

With a smile, he reached out and ran one finger down her beautiful and serene face.

Her light eyes opened and she blinked once before she said, "Hey, hand-some."

"Hey, beautiful."

She stretched, showing him the tops of her breasts. He groaned as his cock began to swell.

"Why do you keep starting at me?" she asked.

"Does it bother you?"

"No." She blinked. "You just look so intense."

He gave her a gentle smile and leaned over her to brush his lips over hers. "I could stare at you all day."

Landi lowered her lashes slowly before she glanced at him again. "Just stare?"

"No, not just." He tugged the sheet from her body. His gaze ran over her naked form hungrily. "Never just."

Dimitri maneuvered himself over her and nudged her legs apart before lowering his body on hers. Hands on either side of her, he inhaled the delectable aroma that always emanated from her skin. "What do you want to do this evening?" he asked, rubbing against her lower body.

Spreading her legs wider, she grinned. "Take me out to dinner?"

Her feminine moisture coated one side of his rigid erection and he knew whatever else they planned to do would wait until after he made love to her again.

Getting hold of a condom, he moaned as she reached up, took it from him, and sheathed his cock. "Fill me, Dimitri," she ordered, her hand guiding him into her.

Dimitri released a hiss of pleasure as her heat surrounded him. She was so tight and wet around him; the experience was mind blowing.

"You feel so good, baby."

Her legs gripped high around his torso, angling her hips more to allow him deeper penetration. She took her lower lip between her teeth as she undulated against him.

He nipped her chin when her nails sank into his shoulders. His hips moved faster and he thrust home deep into her wet, willing pussy.

Her moans and mewls filled the air. "More...more...harder! Oh, God, yes!"

Dimitri could feel his balls tighten as her internal muscles squeezed and clamped around him. Her heels dug into his back and her scream rent the room.

## In. Out. In. Out.

Dimitri pumped a few more times before he echoed her cry with a roar of his own. Limbs shaking, heart pounding, he covered her mouth with his and rolled them over so she was on top.

Oh, yeah, dinner can definitely wait...

"...We are beginning our final descent into Los Angeles International Airport. Please make sure all seats are in their upright position and all tray tables are properly stowed."

Dimitri jolted awake. He had slept for a good portion of the flight. Looking out the window, Dimitri took in the sight of LAX. It was six o'clock at night and he knew there'd be a big meal waiting at his mama's once he got there.

Checking his belt, he ran a hand through his hair. It was getting long. He knew there would be no stopping his mama from commenting on it.

Dimitri moved steadily through the throng at the airport toward the baggage claim. A grin crossed his face, nothing like LA to boast of women wearing next to nothing. It always amazed him.

"Dimitri," a female voice said as he approached the group at the carousel.

He glanced over the crowd and swallowed. It was Austin Stroud. A beautiful woman, blonde hair, blue eyes, and tanned skin courtesy of the California sun.

"Austin," he said with a smile. "Good to see you."

"And you." She stuck out her hand and he shook it. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm on my way to visit my parents." The light on the carousel began to flash.

She sent him a tight smile. "Tell them hi for me."

"Of course. Are you doing okay, Austin?" He stared into her big blue eyes.

More strain appeared at the corners of her mouth. "I'm okay. How about you?"

He touched her arm. "I'm good. You know, some days are better than others."

"I know. Look, I'm sorry to keep you. Take care of yourself."

"Austin, wait!" He reached for a pen and paper, scribbling on it. "Here's my number. Call me if you need anything. I mean it, Austin. Anything."

"You're a good man, Dimitri Melonakos." Austin leaned in to hug him and kissed him lightly on the lips. Then she slipped away vanishing into the crowd.

An hour later, his parents welcomed Dimitri home. He smiled as his mother's arms closed around him.

"Gios," his mother said, pulling him tight against her. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too, mana." He kissed her cheek gently.

His mother stepped back and looked up at him. There were tears in her eyes.

"Good to see you, Dimitri," she said in Greek.

"Hello, son," a male voice greeted.

"Pateras." In another second, he was in his father's arms.

"Glad you made it safely, son."

"Me too."

His father let him go and grabbed his bag. "Let's get you settled. I know your mother has a big meal ready and we can catch up then." "Yes, sir."

They spoke in Greek over dinner and Dimitri filled them in on how the family over in Greece fared.

"What's with the hair, *gios*? Don't you get paid enough to have it cut?" his mother asked as she placed more food on his plate. She had made Minorcan-Style Duck with Green Olives.

"It's not bad, mana. I keep it longer now."

She harrumphed.

Dimitri smiled. Airlia Kolette Sophronia Melonakos was one hell of a woman. Still very beautiful and full of fire, she turned many a head. His father, Feodras Cenon Melonakos, was tall and in as good a shape to this day as he had been in his younger years.

"So," Dimitri decided to tread down a safer route. "What can I do for you while I'm here?"

## **D**((

Landi sat in her loft overlooking Central Park. For the moment she wasn't working, wasn't doing anything, except staring over the green landscape. Her easel sat behind her, ignored.

It was like she had hit a wall in wanting to create. She figured taking a few moments to herself couldn't hurt. Leaning against the open glass door to her balcony, she wrapped her fingers around her glass of lemonade and gazed out over the vast park.

Her attention had been lacking ever since she'd run into Dimitri in Greece. Numerous times a day, his image would shimmer before her; and each time, she drank it in like she were dying of thirst.

It was as if he had pulled back the protective barrier she had put there and exposed not just her feelings for him, but also her soul. Dimitri was the only man she had let into her heart, and the mark he left on her was intense.

Anger was her only defense against him now and she used it liberally. She knew he still owned her heart. This was why she was in New York instead of Virginia.

Somewhere deep down she knew he would be looking for her, especially since she'd never talked to him after he'd come to her hotel room. Landi knew Kacy had been disappointed she wasn't coming for a visit as planned, but she'd allowed Landi this rain-check.

The sounds of the city distracted her and finally managed to push the thoughts of Dimitri out of her mind. With a sigh, Landi drank her lemonade and headed back to her work area.

She was in the process of designing a man's semiformal outfit. As her fingers flew over the sketches, she lost track of time.

Her doorbell chimed lightly through her dwelling and she went to answer it. Jason.

"Hey," she said, stepping back to let him in. "Come on in."

"Hey, doll." He entered, carrying a folder filled with more sketches. "Let's see what you got."

"Sure. It's over there. I'll grab you a drink." She completed the task quickly. "Whaddya think?"

Jason took the tall glass and stared down at her, his dark-brown eyes twinkled. "I think that suit will be great on Dimitri."

She frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Well, you did design it with him in mind. I think that's a suit only he can pull off. No model will properly show it. Not in your eyes."

Narrowing them, she demanded, "What makes you think I had him in mind?"

"Doll, have you looked at the picture? I mean *really looked* at it?" *I did the work on it!* "Of course. I created it!" Landi scoffed and took another glance at it.

Oh, shit!

Jason was right. Somewhere during her work, she'd made the male model into an exact replica of Dimitri. Golden eyes, darkly tanned skin, and long, shaggy black hair. There was such intricate detail to his face it was more like a portrait than a sketch.

The greens and golds of the suit only highlighted the power that leapt from his two-dimensional eyes. The fabric appeared to hang perfectly from his body. Even though it was a casual pose, it screamed danger and virility.

Landi knew at that second, Jason got to see Dimitri Melonakos as she saw him.

She licked her lips. One hand reached for the picture, but she didn't touch it. "Let's see your pictures," Landi said.

"For what it's worth, I think it's a great likeness of him."

Cocking her head to the side, Landi sighed as she reached out again with two fingers, this time touching the likeness of Dimitri. "Yes, it is."

Shoving her desire for that Greek man to the back of her mind, Landi sent Jason a small smile, doing her best to effectively hide her pain. Dimitri laughed along with the rest of his teammates as they recounted a previous mishap. They were on the plane heading toward their latest mission and reliving funny episodes.

As the men settled back for the flight, Dimitri glanced up when Ernst sat beside him.

"Chief," Dimitri said.

"Merlin. How are you holding up?"

He raised a brow. "Sir?" *Holding up?* Had something happened he didn't know about? "What are you talking about?"

Ernst "Ghost" Zimmermann stared at him with his pale-blue eyes. "Kacy told me you and Landi ran into each other in Greece."

Of course she would. Dimitri watched his friend's expression. No censure, no sympathy. Nothing but straight-faced open curiosity.

"I'm okay. It was a shock seeing her. Man, I thought I was over her." He sighed. "Boy, was I wrong."

"Did you explain what happened?"

A dry chuckle burst from him. "Are you kidding? She barely said anything and didn't seem inclined to listen to me in the least. I was more yelled at than anything."

"And the date she went on? How'd you handle that?"

Man, Kacy didn't leave anything out, did she? "Wanted to kill him. But I refrained myself...barely. I figured my mother wouldn't be happy if I killed her nephew."

Ernst smiled. "We heard about the explosions over there. Was she hurt?"

Dimitri clenched his jaw as the memory of Landi being in danger resurfaced. "A few scrapes but nothing more. She was lucky."

"I'm glad she wasn't hurt." A solemn expression filled Ernst's lean features. "How are you doing, really?"

"I've had better days, Ghost." Dimitri closed his eyes briefly. "I want her back, but she won't give me the time of day."

"Hang tough, Merlin. If she won't come to you, go to her." He nodded. "I love her."

Ernst laughed. "Don't tell me, tell her." He patted Dimitri's arm. "Keep your head in the game."

Dimitri smiled his thanks and his friend and chief went to a different seat. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and let the comfortable seats of the *Sovereign* aircraft cradle him as he drifted off to sleep.

"Dimitri," Landi's voice moved over him like a powerful drug. "Yes, baby?"

He looked at her over his shoulder and grinned at the picture she presented. She wore a hot pink halter top and tight white shorts that offset her toned, brown body. His cock stirred.

"Are we going to eat soon?" She stretched out on the lounge seat. "I'm hungry."

"So am I," he muttered under his breath. "Yes, just as soon as I grab my wallet." Dimitri put down the wood he had been moving for their bonfire tonight and went inside the cabin.

He looked out the window of the beach home he had rented for them for the weekend. Being in a smaller, out-of-the-way town meant they were pretty much secluded from other people. With a smile, Dimitri shoved his wallet in the back pocket of his chinos and tugged a clean shirt on over his head.

Landi waited for him by the door and her eyes raked over him with appreciation as he put on his sandals. Her stare darkened with desire and she licked her full lips once. That single lick went straight from her mouth to his groin.

"Ready?" she asked, approaching him.

He looked at her and grinned. "Yes, ma'am. I most definitely am."

As his hand closed around her smooth one, Dimitri realized this was more than a weekend fling to him.

Dinner was fun and full of teasing, sexual innuendos, and tons of fun. He loved how quick-witted she was, how sassy, how humorous. It had been a very long time since a woman had engaged him so completely.

On their way back, they stopped at a small photo booth and took some pictures. Two sets of four. One for each of them.

Dimitri stirred as the plane banked left. Opening his eyes, he took in movement as Scott walked past him. Sitting up fully, he smelled food and looked behind him to see Ernst handing out meals.

"Good to see you awake, Merlin. Was about to kick you. Grab some chow," Ernst said, holding a dish in his direction.

As the eight members of the Megalodon Team ate dinner, they went over the mission one last time to make sure it was imprinted into their heads. No mistakes.

## **D**((

The cold air cut through the numerous layers Landi wore as she hurried through the snowy slush to her apartment building. It was late, it was cold, and she was in one hell of a foul mood.

New Year's Eve and she was bitter. She could admit that. Business was great—not a single complaint in that department. It was her personal life that lacked. Having no one to kiss as the year turned over sucked brass balls. Big shiny ones.

She snorted as she walked in her building. "Like I have a damn personal life!" Shrugging, she forced a smile as another tenant walked by. Instead of continuing on, he stopped and touched her arm.

"Evening, Ilanderae," he said. "Glad to see you back in town. And just in time for New Year's Eve."

"Hello, Hanson. How are you doing? How are your kids?"

He smiled. "We're all doing great."

Shifting her weight slightly, Landi nodded. "Wonderful." *All I want is to get to my apartment and close out the outside world for a few hours.* 

"So what about you? Any special plans for the big night?"

Landi ground her teeth. She wasn't in the mood for this. If she were a drinking woman, a large bottle would be in her future. As it was, she just wanted to relax and wallow in her pity.

"No, Hanson, no plans."

"Humph, you need a man, Ilanderae." He patted her arm. "Don't worry, one day you'll realize it's not all about work."

Her smile was more of a grimace. "Give my best to your family. Goodnight, Hanson."

She walked toward the elevator, grateful when the doors closed behind her. Pressing the button for her floor, she thought about Hanson's words as she took off her wool coat and leather gloves.

It wasn't like she didn't *want* a man. It was more that no man could measure up. Dimitri's ghost had resurfaced and didn't seem inclined to give her any peace.

Dimitri's face reared up in any man who remotely interested her. Those damn golden eyes of his appeared to stare into her soul. Perhaps they dared her to forget him. Or maybe they were searching for something...something she wasn't quite ready to give to him. Even Kacy had told her to let him explain.

Stepping out the elevator onto her floor, Landi shivered as a chill ran up her back. Not from the cold, from something else. With a strong shake of her head, she walked toward her loft. Putting the key into the lock, she hesitated. *I'm freaking losing it*. Landi turned the knob and pushed open her door. Then she froze.

The lights were on and there were flowers everywhere. All of them were different shades of pink. And in the middle of it all stood a man she had met in Greece. AJ Melonakos. Dimitri's cousin.

Kicking the door shut with the heel of her shoe, Landi demanded, "What the hell are you doing here?!"

An enchanting grin crossed his face. "Dima," he said, ignoring her question. "I think you should come out here."

"I asked you a question!" Landi snapped, dropping her bag and coat. Her eyes refused to let him go.

"Hello, Landi," AJ spoke in that deep voice he had. "Lovely to see you again."

She glared. "Are you gonna tell me what the fuck you're doing in my apartment?"

A shadow moved behind AJ; and to Landi's shock, it materialized into Dimitri Melonakos. "Hello, Landi," he said. The words surrounded her like a warm, velvet blanket.

Her legs began to tremble, her mouth went dry, and her palms became sweaty. Her heart rate went off the charts. He looked so damn handsome. Black hair, deliciously shaggy and perfect. He wore a darkgold shirt tucked into black slacks. Black leather shoes poked out from the cuffs of his pants. A black belt with a gold buckle united shirt and pants perfectly.

She ran her gaze over his upper body that was impressive in the gold that matched his eyes. The sleeves were rolled up, exposing muscular forearms. In one hand he held a single pink flower. The burning intensity in his stare made her feel he only wanted to be with her. And that memory made her remember the pain and betrayal she had felt that day.

"You!" she seethed. "Get the fuck out of my apartment!"

"Hear me out, Landi," Dimitri said.

Hear him out? Was he serious?

Her lip curled as she honed in on AJ who stood there with a half grin on his face. "You can leave and take that...that...that one with you!"

"Don't you think you should give him a chance to explain? He came all this way to see you," AJ reasoned.

Landi scoffed. Hands on hips, she shot daggers at the taller of the two. "Well, he can take his ass right back the way he came. And you can go with him! I owe him nothing. I don't owe either of you anything! Breaking into people's apartment—is this common in Greece?" Her voice kept rising. AJ opened his mouth and she slashed a hand through the air. "Don't even! You're family. You'd say anything to protect him!"

"Landi —" Dimitri began.

"Get him out of here," Landi bit off, refusing to take her gaze from AJ.

A smile crossed his handsome face and his green eyes sparkled. AJ shook his head. "No. I think I should be going now. I'll leave you two to work this out. Goodnight. It was wonderful to see you again."

"Where are you going?!" Landi didn't want to be alone with Dimitri. "If you go, so does he."

AJ approached her, cast a glance back toward Dimitri, and kissed her on the cheek. "Go easy on my cousin." At the door he said something in Greek and left.

The door shut with such finality. Landi looked everywhere but toward the dark-haired, golden-eyed man moving closer to her.

"Talk to me, Landi. Yell, scream, whatever, just talk to me, please."  $\,$ 

Crossing her arms, she arched a brow tapped out a cadence on her hardwood floor with her foot.

"I'm not going anywhere."

She bit the inside of her lip. He looked even better than he had in Greece. Landi wanted to touch him, feel his hard body against hers, and indulge in what his touch would bring.

"Look at me, Landi," he ordered in a sensual tone.

Smoothing a bland expression on her face, she did. From his shoes up to his head. Her eyes lingered on the stem he held full of moth orchid blooms. Pink moth orchid blooms.

If she weren't so damn furious at him, this would be on hell of a gesture. It still was regardless of the extent of her anger. Gritting her teeth, Landi forced back her tender feelings. He had to understand what pain his actions had brought her. She didn't want him to think she could be treated like that.

And yet, what harm could come from letting him talk? For many months she'd wanted to know why he'd not shown up. Landi had never thought she'd be jilted at the altar.

"So talk," she bit off. She stopped her foot and sent him one of her chilliest stares.

Dimitri couldn't believe it. She was willing to listen. Well, maybe not totally listen, but he had a shot. Tightening his hold on the orchid, he gazed at her.

She wore a fitted medium-gray pantsuit with light-pink accents. Pink and gold dangle earrings hung from her ears, and its matching pendant settled below the column of her throat.

Her thick, wavy hair was back in a tight chignon, emphasizing her high cheekbones and amazing eyes. Those eyes, which were currently angry and full of mistrust, were no less powerful than they'd ever been.

How did one begin to explain?

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Newsflash, you did. But hey, how the hell should I feel when you leave me at the altar? No message. No *nothing!*" she yelled.

"I know and I'm sorry."

One perfect brow arched. "You're sorry? You're sorry?! You never struck me as a stupid man, Dimitri. I know you weren't thinking those two words would make everything okay!"

"Can we sit down?"

He watched her eyes narrow before she huffed and strode to her kitchen. Despite his desire to get her to hear him out, a smile crossed his face as he watched her walk away.

Landi could bring a room to a halt just by walking in. To top it off, she never seemed to care. He shoved back his lust and followed her into the kitchen. He groaned as he watched her bending over in the fridge. Clenching his fists so he didn't touch her, he stood behind one of the chairs. Her expression hadn't changed when she faced him again. She held a container of yogurt and reached for a spoon. Nothing was offered to him.

"I'm still waiting," her snide comment rang and she took a spoonful of her key lime pie yogurt.

"I wanted to be there. Jesus, Landi, I wanted to marry you that day so badly."

"Oh, it showed. Truly." There was no warmth in her gaze or tone.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Regardless of how it looked, I'm not lying."

Landi placed her spoon in the yogurt container. "How it looked. Well, let me tell you, it looked like I was jilted." She licked her lips, an action that sent a volt of desire through him. "And, apparently, I was."

She got up from the table and rinsed out the empty container before putting it in a recycling bin.

Dimitri took a deep breath. Everyone had told him he should have told her what had happened, but he hadn't.

"My brother, Khristos, his helicopter went down, and he along with his whole crew died."

Landi turned slowly, some of the anger in her stare replaced with shock. "What did you say?" she questioned quietly.

"I said, my brother lost his life that day and I flew home to be with my parents."

Dimitri watched her face. Disbelief, uncertainty, and a myriad of other emotions swam in the depths of her beautiful eyes. She walked back to the table with two bottles of water and slid him one as she sat down.

"I'm truly sorry for your loss."

"I know I should have told you instead of just disappearing without a word, but when I got the call..." He shrugged. "I didn't want to put all of my grief and loss on you like that."

Her tongue ran over her lips. "We'll get to why you didn't want to put it on me later. Tell me what happened."

The pain of losing his brother roared to the surface. "My brother is...was a helicopter pilot for the Air Force." He took a drink of cold water. "They were out doing maneuvers on a training operation. Apparently there was some kind of mechanical malfunction."

Dimitri scanned the kitchen before continuing, "Because it went down on a training mission, the details given to my parents were sketchy. I tried to help them get more. The day we buried him, our team was sent off on another mission."

He sought her gaze and held it. "When we got back from that, it'd been so long, I had no idea what to say to you."

Her gaze grew shuttered as she took a sip of water. And yet, she remained silent.

"Ilanderae?"

"What?"

"Do you have anything to say?"

She held his stare unflinchingly. When she shook her head, his heart sank. "I don't have anything to say. There really isn't anything for me to say. You made a decision on how to act and that was that." Landi stood. "However, again, I truly am sorry for your loss."

"So, that's it?" Dimitri asked, standing as well.

One brow arched as her gaze hardened once again. "I really don't think we have anything else to discuss, do we?"

"What about us?"

"Us?" A short, humorless bark of laughter erupted from her. "There is no 'us,' Dimitri. You made sure of that the day you decided not to include me in your life."

"I made a mistake, Landi." He walked around the table toward her. "What we had was something rare and special. Do you really want to throw it all away?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You tossed it away, not me. I was ready to be your wife. Your wife! Share my life with you!" One finger reached out and poked him in the chest. "You broke my heart, Dimitri Androcles Melonakos, or 'Merlin', whatever you are going by right now. You broke my heart!"

"Landi," he said, grabbing her finger and wrapping his hand around her smaller one. "Give me another chance. Give *us* another chance!"

Her small nose flared before she tugged her hand. He refused to let go, using his strength instead to bring her in closer. The scent of lemon, lavender, and peppermint swamped his senses.

He groaned low in his throat. The desire to claim her as his own waged war with the need to go slow and secure her forgiveness.

She lifted her chin stubbornly. "I think we've said enough for one day. You know the way out."

"I'm not giving up on you, or us."

She looked up at him, her eyes overflowing with anger. "I hate you!" she snarled lowly.

Hurt encompassed his body at her words. His other hand wrapped around the back of her neck, the silken strands of her hair brushing against his knuckles. Dimitri lowered his mouth until it was a hairsbreadth from hers, holding her gaze. "And I never stopped loving you."

He kissed her.



Landi whimpered as his lips covered her own. He held one of her hands between them, pressing it against the fabric of his shirt, and she could feel his strong heartbeat.

*I never stopped loving you.* Those words melted her heart. She felt the tears prick the backs of her eyes.

Landi gave herself over to the kiss. She had missed him so much. His touch, his scent. The smell of the ocean filled her senses.

She whimpered as the hand on her neck moved up and began unpinning her hair. At that moment, she didn't care one bit about anything aside from the fact she was in his arms again. That she might hate herself in the morning also didn't matter.

She needed this man, Dimitri Melonakos. He was the one who could take her ache away. No man had been able to give her the experience she'd found in Dimitri's arms. And regardless of ramifications, she just wanted to feel it again. Landi leaned into him even more, letting his strong body hold her up.

One by one, the pins that had held up her hair clattered to the tile floor of her kitchen. She followed when Dimitri tried to back away from her mouth, she didn't want the kiss to end, afraid logic would return. His hands fell to rest on her buttocks and he lifted her up so she sat on the countertop, then he wedged himself in-between her thighs, their mouths staying connected the whole time. She loved how he tasted.

Masculine and addicting.

She took her hands and slid them around his neck, allowing her fingers to trail through the thick hair he had. A moan slipped from her lips at the feel of the tendrils brushing over her skin.

Nothing else mattered. Only his touch did.

Dimitri's fingers moved to the buttons on her shirt. She sighed as the warm air in her apartment found her bared belly. A whimper escaped when his hands splayed across her waist.

Landi hooked her legs around his hips and held him close. Her fingers continued to massage the back of his scalp. He intensified the kiss, teasing her tongue and making love to her mouth. His thumbs stroked the underside of her breasts. The heat from his touch burned through the silk of her bra and seared her skin. Back and forth across her nipples he moved his thumbs. She shuddered and sucked hard on his tongue.

"Landi," he mumbled into her mouth.

"It's been so long, Dimitri. Please, make the ache go away."

He pulled back, looked into her eyes, kissed her gently on the lips, and laved a path down her neck and sternum. He ended at a breast and began sucking its nipple.

"Oh, God!" she wailed, bowing her back and pressing his head tightly against her.

His teeth grazed across the pebbled tip through the bra. She squirmed as moisture began pooling between her thighs. With one hand, he dipped beneath the waistband of both her pants and panties. Landi shook with need. A frustrated moan left her when he stopped and stepped away from her. She stared at him his golden eyes were dark with desire. Their heat singed her.

He pushed her shirt from her shoulders and unhooked her bra. She shuddered as he kissed each breast. His mouth was extremely gentle and he brushed it across her sensitive nipples.

Dimitri slid her forward, his teeth nipping on taut peak before his tongue licked away the sting. She remained silent as he lifted her in his arms and carried her to her leather couch, where he laid her down gently on a soft blanket.

He removed her shoes, pants, and panties before standing straight and looking down upon her. There was such burning passion in his stare that she swallowed and fought to get moisture back in her throat.

Lying there naked on her couch, Landi watched him unbutton his gold shirt, untucking it and letting it slide off his powerful shoulders to rest upon the rug at his feet. His chest was as magnificent as she remembered. His dark chest hair hid the muscles she knew were present; and as it had the first time she'd looked upon him, her eyes were drawn down below the waistband where his hair disappeared.

Landi licked her lips as another wave of moisture flooded her pussy. She whimpered and shifted her hips, the soft blanket beneath her doing nothing to help control her desire.

His hands moved to his belt and she waited impatiently as he undid it before releasing the hook on his pants and lowering the zipper. Her eyes never left his waist when he stepped out of his pants and

stood before her in his boxers. Landi allowed her gaze to move over the familiar ridge pressing up against the cotton material he wore. She wanted his large cock buried deep inside her. Her pussy throbbed and demanded attention.

"Dimitri," she whispered.

He dropped to his knees beside her and kissed her. His tongue was gentle as it moved through her mouth, gentle but also thorough. She whimpered as one of his callused hands palmed her breast and began kneading it, tugging on the peak, and rolling it between his thumb and forefinger.

She closed her eyes against the pleasure that washed over her. Dimitri slid a hand behind her head, wrapping his fingers in her hair as his other one moved down over her torso, belly, and across her smooth, hairless pussy where two fingers teased the wet slit.

Her legs opened wider of their own accord. She wanted to feel him inside her. Instead of complying, his fingers only teased her. "Dimitri," she begged, "please!" Landi grabbed his hair, wrapping her hands around the strands, and latched her mouth back to his, increasing the intensity of the kiss.

A mind-blowing orgasm swept her as he slipped two fingers deep within her. His mouth swallowed her scream of pleasure. Her hips bucked to allow him the deepest penetration possible. His wrist drove his fingers in and out of her as she rode out her release.

She opened her eyes when he withdrew his fingers. He ended the kiss and rose over her totally naked. She didn't know when he'd removed his boxers and she didn't care. She whimpered as he settled between her legs and guided his rigid erection into her wet, willing body. As he pushed further into her, another spine-tingling climax spread throughout her.

"So perfect," he murmured into her ear.

His breath skated across her skin and she arched against his steady thrusts. Dimitri's lips moved along her jaw line and throat as he whispered to her in Greek. Landi hadn't any clue what he said, but the emotions she felt from them made their meaning clear.

Dimitri grabbed one of her hands from his hair and laced their fingers together as his hips pumped in and out of her. There was no rushing, no frantic need to find that peak. He was creating a slow, hot fire within her and it spread throughout her entire body. All of her synapses blazed; each cell in her body felt his passion.

Slow, deep, endless strokes.

She undulated beneath him, matching him thrust for thrust. The air filled with moans, mewls, and ragged breathing. The soft blanket below her combined with his coarse chest hair and hard muscles created a wonderful sensation against her skin.

Dimitri would die a happy man if this were the last thing he did in his lifetime. Her internal muscles held him tightly, begged him not to withdraw from her wet heat. He'd almost erupted within her the moment he'd slid between her thighs. Nothing had ever felt so perfect.

Her body moved with him like they'd never been apart. He pushed, she arched. She purred with each stroke he delivered. Over and over, he murmured how much he loved her, how much he'd missed her and how eternally sorry he was for how he'd treated her. Every last word he spoke came from his heart and reached her ear in Greek.

Her breathing increased and her whimpers grew faster and faster. Dimitri knew she was close. He pumped a little faster within her and grunted with satisfaction when her body matched his pace. He knew he was close as well.

Landi's heels dug into his lower back. The hand he held tightened around his and he knew it wouldn't be long before he came. Her feminine channel milked him as she climaxed and her scream filled the air.

Dimitri kissed her while he stroked deep in her body. It didn't take long and he exploded as well. He moaned his release into her mouth and continued pumping until his exhausted body could take no more. He lowered himself onto her, arms shaking like a leaf in a windstorm. His heart pounded uncontrollably and as her hands trailed up and down his back. He sighed with contentment.

Carefully, Dimitri rolled to his side, keeping Landi pressed close to him. His lips brushed over her forehead. Her rapid heartbeat hammered against his chest. Tightening his arms around her, he stared across the dimly lit living room. The rich smell of all the flowers still filled the air. They remained silent, just allowing their breathing to slow along with their heartbeats.

Landi's hand began stroking up and down his side. Dimitri felt himself growing harder within her. Her warm breath drifted across his chest; but when her tongue snuck out and laved across his nipple, his body jerked with want.

"Landi," he rumbled deep in his throat.

"Shut up, Dimitri," she ordered before her teeth grazed his tight nipple.

A primitive roar built up from the depths of his chest. Rolling more, he lay on his back and watched Landi, in all her beauty, rise above him and begin to ride his rapidly hardening erection.

For the rest of the night, Dimitri made love to Landi all throughout her apartment. He thrust into her against the cold sliding glass door that led to her balcony as the sun came up over Central Park and welcomed the start of a brand new year. Her scream of pleasure resonated through him and he came with a low roar. Her body sank into him. With care, Dimitri carried her back to her bedroom and placed her exhausted body in her bed.

After covering her up with the comforter, he walked back through her apartment to shut off lights and double-check the locks on her door. Padding silently back to her bedroom, Dimitri stopped in the doorway and stared at her sleeping body. He was beat, but part of him was scared of going to sleep for fear he might miss something.

There was one light on in the room and it bathed her with a gentle glow. Her thick lashes lay against her smooth cheeks. She was on her back, one arm on top of the white-and-pink comforter, and the other beneath it. She looked totally at peace.

He shut off the light and walked to the bed. The early-morning light filtering in through her sheer curtains guided his way. Pulling back the comforter, he slid in beside her.

Rising up on his elbow, he trailed his fingers through her silken hair. With one thumb he traced her eyebrows, moved down the bridge of her nose, and skimmed over her full lips, which were still a bit swollen from his earlier kisses.

She never awakened. Her breathing remained deep and even. Dimitri couldn't stop touching her. It was almost like a dream; and if he stopped, he just knew he would wake up and find himself alone again.

"I never should have let you go, Ilanderae Rogue Nycks. Never," he whispered as he brushed his lips over one closed eye.

For a while he lay there, head propped up on his hand and watched Landi sleep. Occasionally, he touched her softly or brushed kisses across her smooth skin.

Eventually, Dimitri got up and took a shower. As he dried himself off, he snuck another glance at Landi. She still lay in the same position sound asleep. He pulled on his boxers and pants before towe-

ling off his hair a little more. Barefoot, he padded into the kitchen and began making breakfast.

Landi rolled over and stretched as she yawned. Sated was the only word to describe how she felt at that moment. Utterly sated.

Opening her eyes, she looked around her room. The memory of Dimitri's touch flooded over her and she shuddered as her body responded.

Was it all a dream? If it was, what a way to ring in the New Year. "No way," she muttered.

Slowly, she got out of bed and headed for her closet. Her outfit from the previous day wasn't anywhere in the room. She picked a black, full-length silk robe with pink trim and slid it on over her naked body. Raking a hand through her tangled hair, Landi shoved her feet into her house slippers and left her bedroom.

Landi stopped and stared at her living area. It was still full of flowers. *It hadn't been a dream*. Worrying her lower lip between her teeth, she paused before continuing on toward the man she knew was in the kitchen. Where did they stand now?

At the kitchen's threshold, Landi froze as her heart leapt into her mouth. Dimitri stood there, giving her a side profile, as he mixed something in a bowl. He wore nothing but his pants and they hung low on his lean hips. She could see his hair was a bit damp and she realized he'd used her shower.

"Morning, Landi," he said, turning his head and gazing at her through the hair that hung between them.

"Dimitri," she responded softly.

She remained immobile as he set the bowl down on the counter and walked to her. His steps were sure and never faltered. Dark stubble covered his strong jaw and his golden eyes were sharp and clear as he watched her face. One hand rose to cup her cheek as he leaned down and kissed her.

She whimpered and her knees weakened with the power of his kiss. Dimitri's tongue surged into her mouth, searching each and every corner he could reach. Landi felt his other hand settling on the small of her back, holding her tight against his bare chest. His cock pressed into her belly, making her shudder with longing.

Too soon his mouth left hers. When he met her gaze, his eyes swirled with desire. Two of his fingers tucked some of her hair behind her ear before tracing her lower lip. "You are so beautiful," he whis-

pered before bushing a tender kiss across her lips. Dimitri let her go and moved back to what he was doing.

She wasn't sure what to do. Anger at him had always been her defense this past year; but for the life of her, all she wanted to do was jump him and spend all day making love. Shoving that thought to the back of her mind, Landi asked, "How long are you in town for?"

"A few days," he paused and shrugged, "unless I get a call."

Landi nodded. She understood he could be called away at a moment's notice. Kacy and she had talked about that very thing many, many times.

"I do have to call and check on my cousin, though. See how he's doing."

"What exactly is AJ doing here?" Landi questioned as she moved to the fridge and pulled out some orange juice.

"Same thing as I am. Getting his woman."

She trembled at the conviction in his tone. Reaching for two glasses, she poured juice into each of them and put the jug back in the refrigerator. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

A charming smile filled his features. Landi bit back a snort. She knew his good looks got many people to lower their guard around him. According to Kacy, that was part of what made him so damn good at his job.

Resting her hip against the counter, she queried, "Who's his woman?" It's safer to talk about something else.

The gleam in his eyes as he looked at her told her he knew exactly what she was doing. "Her name is Samara." He set the bowl down for a second time and walked toward her. "She's beautiful, kind, and I know you'll like her. Stop avoiding what we need to talk about."

She gulped in some air. He moved with such fluidity, such grace, such danger. His arms settled on either side of her, trapping her between his hard body and the unforgiving countertop behind her.

"And what is it we need to discuss?"

He lowered his head to hers, his thick hair sliding down around his face. "The fact, Ms. Nycks, that I don't want this to be a one-night-stand kind of thing. The fact," he paused and kissed her nose, "I want you to know how much you mean to me and how sorry I am for the way I behaved." Another kiss.

Landi ducked below his arm and skated around him. She dragged sweaty palms down her robe. Facing the door to her pantry, she bit back a whimper as his sun-kissed arms trapped her again.

She kept her eyes lowered as he turned her toward him. He used one lean finger to bring her chin up. His golden gaze waited for her. The inky blackness of his hair contrasted beautifully with his tanned skin and amazing eyes. Long lashes lowered as he blinked once, slowly, before he cupped her cheek and kissed her.

It wasn't gentle. It demanded, and she gave him everything he asked for. As his tongue swept through her mouth, he took one hand, trailed it down her arm, and laced their fingers before placing their joined hands over her head. His mouth was hungry as he feasted on her. Landi could feel her nipples harden for attention, her pussy flood with moisture, and her skin prickled with anticipation. Dimitri abraded her skin with his stubble as he nibbled down the side of her throat, but she didn't care. She just wanted more of him.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, his damp hair teasing her skin. A satisfied groan left her as her silk robe opened. Closing her eyes, Landi just enjoyed his touch. Breakfast was forgotten as Dimitri made love to her against the pantry door.

**D**((

Landi moved through her apartment, alone for the moment. Dimitri had left to go meet AJ who was flying back to Greece. He promised her he'd be back just as soon as he could.

Landi had taken a long shower and put on some comfortable sweats and tee shirt from her own line. Then she began organizing the multitudes of flowers he'd brought her. He must have spent a fortune on these arrangements. She smiled and shook her head. Wiping the cleaning cloth over the now empty counter, she sighed.

"What am I doing?" she asked the air.

Just last night she had told him she hated him. But did she really? He had explained what had taken him away from her on that day. Would she be able to let this go and give them another shot?

Kacy always told her she had a vicious tongue and even Jason had mentioned it recently. Would Dimitri prefer her if she were meek and quiet? Landi snorted. "Moot point, it ain't gonna happen."

She rested her elbows on the sparkling countertop and sighed again. Here she was, New Year's Day, and she was wondering if the

man who'd made love to her all night and this morning would prefer her a different way.

"I'm going insane. I just have to find a way to trust him again."

Washing her hands, Landi plucked a moth orchid bloom and put it in her hair, then sat down at her workstation. There was a new line she was working on, a maternity line. Kacy had revealed she and Ernst were talking about having children. Landi wanted to make sure her friend could have something comfortable to wear.

Time flew by as she sketched. She took a short break, calling Jason to wish him a Happy New Year, and then got back to work. When her doorbell rang, Landi ignored it for a moment as she stared at her paper. With a few quick strokes, she got the image she wanted. Then she got up to answer the door.

A devilishly charming man stood on the other side. Dimitri leaned against the wall, his golden eyes heating her up from the soles of her feet to the top of her head. There was a black duffle bag over one shoulder and his gaze never wavered from hers. A sexy half smile was on his face.

"Hello, beautiful," he said in a silvery tone.

Landi couldn't stop her smile. "You are the devil in disguise, Dimitri Melonakos. Handsome, smooth talking, and very, very charming." Her body responded to him, just as it always did.

Straightening, he took his free hand and touched the tip of her nose. "Working hard?"

"Why?"

He shrugged. "You have pencils behind both ears, and one in your hand. Just curious."

Landi flushed as she removed them. "I tend to do that when I get into a project. Coming in?"

"Yes, ma'am." Dimitri flowed past her, flooding her senses with the amazing smell of the ocean he always seemed to have.

Closing the door behind her, Landi stared at the man in her apartment. She could watch him for hours. He placed his bag down by the beginning of the hall that led to her bedroom and then turned and looked at her. His eyes traveled over her lazily as if he had all the time in the world to stare.

"What are you working on?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Maternity clothes."

Dimitri's eyes grew wide as he tipped his head to the side. "Can I see?" Landi smiled. Leading the way to her desk, she stood by her

work as he looked at it. "She seems familiar in some way," he commented.

"I'm basing it on Kacy. She told me she and Ernst have been talking more and more about starting their family. I don't live next door to her and can't help out that way if she does get pregnant, but I *can* make sure the clothes she wears will be comfortable and functional."

"Ernst a father?" Dimitri nodded. "He'll make a great one."

Landi stole a sideways glance at the man beside her. *I bet you'd make one hell of a father yourself, Dimitri Melonakos*. Images of him with a boy and a girl flashed through her mind, startling her. He looked at her and smiled another heart-melting grin.

"She's lucky to have you as a friend, Landi." His deep voice wound around her like velvet. Tearing her gaze from his, she focused back on the sketches before her. Her heart pounded loudly and her palms sweat. "Look at me, Landi," he ordered.

Landi did as he commanded. His eyes were darker than normal as they held her gaze. "I have work to do, Dimitri. What do you want?"

"It's New Year's Day, Landi. You can take some time off."

The allure in his voice poured over her like a heavy syrup. She longed to do what he suggested. Putting the pencils down, she nodded and licked her lips. "Okay, then, Dimitri Melonakos. What did you have in mind?"

The sparkle in his eyes should have told her exactly what he had planned for her.

Los Angeles, California

"Looking great, Landi!" Jason hollered across the room to her. She waved back at him. They had just gotten a new buyer contract and were wrapping up the presentation. It had been a long week, although, southern California in winter wasn't a bad place to be. Honestly, Landi had expected this presentation to take a bit longer, so now she had some free time on her hands.

Nodding to herself, Landi scanned over some documents in her hands. This was excellent; her line was exploding. A new year and a fresh start. She smiled as she thought of Dimitri. They'd spent an amazing two days together in New York City. Dimitri had done what she'd sworn he would never have the chance to do again: get under her skin and make her love him even more. He wanted to try again. Landi longed for this to work, but she was leery. At the moment, they were giving the dating thing a go. She was determined to move slowly.

Dimitri seemed to have other ideas. He called her daily, sent her numerous e-mails, and never let her head hit the pillow at night without telling her how much he loved her.

As the last rack of her clothing rolled out to the truck, her phone rang. "Nycks."

"Empros, gorgeous." Dimitri's voice rolled over her.

"Hey, stranger. What are you doing?" She sent a small nod to one of the workers as they handed her a clipboard for her to sign. She read quickly through it before signing the paper with a flourish and handing it back. She walked to the doorway and stared at the vehicle taking the items back to her hotel room. She'd pack them for the trip back to New York. Landi was very picky about how her clothing was secured.

"I miss you," he said.

"Right. That doesn't answer my question."

"Where are you?"

"LA. Just got done with a sales pitch. Packing up the stuff to get back to the hotel. What about you? Out in some exotic locale? Skimpily dressed women and unlimited Mai Tai's?" He chuckled. "Not really. Well, not unless you call warm bottled water, a gym, and sweaty men an exotic locale."

Landi smiled. "I would." His grumble of displeasure crossed the line and she couldn't help laughing.

"Not funny, Landi."

"I thought it was. Seriously, where are you?"

"Looking out over the Pacific. How long are you remaining in LA?"

"We're here for another two days. The pitch went a lot smoother than we thought, so Jason and I have some extra time."

"Jason's with you?"

"Of course he is. He always comes with me. Besides, he loves it out here in California." A low muttered sentence reached her and she laughed again. "I don't want him to stay out here permanently, Dimitri."

"Wouldn't bother me a bit," he mumbled. "I want to see you."

She frowned as she climbed in the back of the black town car that waited for her. "You said you were overlooking the Pacific. Where are you?"

"Coronado."

Taking the drink Jason offered her; she took a sip and said, "What are you doing there?"

"Training. But I can get away."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to get in any trouble."

"Baby, don't worry about that. I want to see you. In fact I want to take you to dinner."

Landi looked at Jason and placed her hand over her phone. "Jason, will you be okay if I go down to Coronado for the next two days?" He gave her a thumbs up sign. "How about I come down to you?" she suggested to Dimitri.

"You'd do that?"

"Sure. I can get a hotel down there and that way you won't get into trouble. Unless you can't leave wherever you are."

"I can leave. I'll get you a hotel room."

"No. I'll have it set up. I'll call you just as soon as my plans are finalized and I'm on my way." Landi had very specific tastes about her accommodations.

"I love you, Landi," he said before she disconnected the call.

Jason stared at her with amusement in his gaze. "So," he drew out, "going on a rendezvous with the old man, are we?"

"Shut up, Jason. I'm just meeting him down in Coronado." A shiver of anticipation washed over her.

"Well, start making your plans. I'll get a rental car for you," he told her as he flipped out his phone and dialed a number.

She sent him a smile. Jason honestly was the best friend in the world. He may tease her unmercifully; but when push came to shove, he always had her back.

In less than two hours, she was driving south toward Coronado. The top of her Mustang was down and she thoroughly enjoyed the warm air flowing over her. A smile was on her face as she drove, listening to Mary J. Blige. Shifting on the leather seat, she thought about Dimitri. She hadn't seen him since the New Year. She missed him.

She downshifted as she entered San Diego. Following the directions she'd been given, Landi stayed alert and was soon pulling into her hotel. She grinned with joy as her gaze landed not only on Dimitri, but also Ernst and Osten. The three of them were leaning casually against a black Dodge Charger parked near the rear of the lot, talking and laughing amongst themselves.

Damn, damn, and double damn! That is one hell of a good-looking group of men!

Landi scanned over them as she drove toward them. Ernst, the tallest, wore khaki shorts and a white shirt with sunglasses. His light-blond hair looked almost white in the sun. He stood between the other two. Osten wore a baseball cap backward, a sleeveless gray shirt, and black shorts. She swallowed as her eyes traveled over the muscles in his arms. Osten also wore sunglasses, as was Dimitri. Her gaze settled on him and she groaned. He had on a tight black shirt and loose blue shorts with flip-flops.

She parked next to them, loving the grin that filled Dimitri's face as she did. He moved toward her, the others remaining against the car. "Hey, beautiful," he said as he leaned over the door and kissed her.

"Wow, three men to meet and greet me." She shut off the engine and climbed out when he opened the door. "Hi, guys," she said with a wave.

"Hey, Landi," Osten greeted.

Ernst walked over and hugged her, kissing her cheek. "Hey, yourself, stranger. You know Kacy is going to kill me for being able to see you while she can't."

"Well, I'll tell her I didn't expect to get to see you. It was just a bonus." She walked to the trunk and pulled out two bags. "I have to get checked in. Are you two joining us for something to eat?"

"We'd love to," Osten said. "We'll be here waiting."

"Come, Landi," Dimitri told her, grabbing her bags and heading for the entrance.

She smiled at his back. She could tell he didn't want to share her. It warmed her. Dimitri didn't say anything else as she got checked in; but when the door of her room closed behind them, he dropped her bags, pulled her in close, and kissed her.

It was powerful, intense. Her knees were weak when he released her mouth. "I've missed you," he said.

Landi tasted as delicious as she always did, crème de menthe. Then there was the scent of lemon, lavender, and peppermint that surrounded her, putting Dimitri's senses on overdrive. A purr vibrated up from her throat as she leaned into him and kissed him back before she ended it.

"We have to go, they're waiting on us."

"Who cares," he rumbled, pulling her tighter against him.

"Come on, Dimitri. Let's go eat."

He looked at her. She wore a white and pink shirt with tight, white capris. One her feet were cute little sandals that showed off her pink toenails. "You look good enough to eat." His skin prickled as he scanned her again. "Are you sure we have to go with them?"

"Yes, now, come on."

*Damn, I hate it when she's right.* Dimitri sighed and walked to the door, knowing full well if he touched her again, dinner would not be happening. They headed outside in a companionable silence to find Ernst and Osten waiting.

"Where to?" Landi asked.

"I'm up for anything," Ernst replied.

"Your choice, Landi," Osten insisted.

"You two follow; we'll pick somewhere." Dimitri opened her car door and fought down the urge to toss her over his shoulder and disappear back into the hotel.

A bit later the four of them were sitting at an outdoor table over-looking the Pacific. A large plate of appetizers sat between them and Dimitri listened as Landi chatted with Ernst, getting caught up on Kacy.

His gaze moved over her smooth, dark skin. Her beauty made him ache.

Dinner was lighthearted and fun; yet as she waved goodbye to Ernst and Osten, he was more than ready to have her to himself. Settling against the side of her rental, he draped an arm around her and pulled her to him.

"Up for a walk?"

"I think that would be a great idea." Landi leaned against him briefly before pushing away from the Mustang and his touch.

Taking her hand in his, Dimitri intertwined their fingers as they began to walk. Two blocks went by in silence and finally he asked, "What's the problem, Landi?"

"I'm just confused." Her tone was hollow.

"What about?"

She stopped and looked at him. "What are we doing?" Landi shook her head and his heart sank. "What game is being played here?"

"I'm not playing a game, Ilanderae."

"I can't pretend I'm not still pissed and hurt over what happened between us. And a part of me is waiting for the other shoe to drop and for you to vanish without a word again." She removed her hand from his. "I was so devastated when that happened. I can't go through that again."

I'm the worst person in the world for having caused you so much pain, Ilanderae Rouge Nycks. His heart clenched and he reached out to touch her arm. "I know words can't ever make up for what I put you through, Landi. I wish I could change how that day played out, but I can't. All I can do is give you my word it won't happen again. Should you get to the point of trusting me again and are willing to marry me, I swear, I'll be waiting. I tried to forget you, Landi, but I could never outrun your memory." He kissed the palm of her hand. "I'm not running from you ever again. Or from the way you make me feel."

Her eyes watched him, the setting sun making them glow. In them he could see her indecision, her uncertainty, and her internal struggle. Landi was such a strong person that she didn't always remember it was okay to accept help from others.

Not that my past behavior has solidified her desire to trust me.

"Are you trying to charm me?" she demanded without a hint of coyness in her voice.

"No. Every word is from my heart. I love you, Ilanderae. I want another chance t to spend the rest of my life making you happy."

Dimitri knew better than to make light of her question, she wasn't playing.

"You're a slick talker, Dimitri Melonakos. You know what to say at the right moment."

"Everything I say to you, Landi, I mean."

"Slowly, Dimitri. We have to take this slow. It's not that I don't trust you. I'm just protecting myself."

Dimitri knew what she meant; she trusted him to keep her safe, but not her heart. As painful as it was to realize that, he understood. He drew her into his embrace and kissed the top of her head. "So long as you're willing to give me a chance."

"I want to go to SeaWorld tomorrow."

A wry grin crossed his face. Landi was good, very good at doing a complete one-eighty during conversations. It was her way of letting someone know she was done discussing the topic. Keeping his arm around her shoulder he began walking again. "I don't know when we'll be done tomorrow."

"Well, I'll be there. You can join me whenever you are done if you want."

"I'll give you a call when we are."

"Okay." Landi paused in front of an old-time candy shop. "Oh, wait, I have to go in here." She darted in and pulled him with her.

Holding the basket she'd slapped in his arms, Dimitri followed Landi through the aisles watching her choose and put items inside.

"Hungry?" he teased, the fuller the basket became.

She sneered at him over her shoulder before returning her attention to the task at hand. "These are gifts. For my sisters."

She'd never talked about her family before and he was intrigued. "Tell me about them."

Landi looked over her shoulder at him again. Her eyes shuttered briefly. "I have two. Both older...twins. And since they *love* chocolate, I do my best to bring them a variety from the places I go." She sifted through some lollipops.

"Names?" He looked at the chocolate lollipops she'd dumped in the basket. Dark, milk, white, mint, and more.

"Shandra and Chandra."

He could tell she didn't want to talk about them anymore. Why, he wasn't sure. But he would let it go for the moment. Dimitri watched as she crouched down. The fabric of her capris tightened around her delectable rear end. He felt his cock respond. He placed the basket in

front of his hardening erection. A groan escaped as she stood and smiled at him.

"You okay?"

Swallowing, he nodded. "Fine. Why?"

"You looked in pain for a second there."

He stepped closer and lowered his head so no one could overhear him. "I am. I'm as horny as a teenager around you."

Her light-brown eyes sparkled. "You don't look like a teen." Landi brushed her hand along his hard cock and muttered, "Don't feel like one, either."

"Landi," he growled.

Her gaze was sultry as it met his. "Something wrong, sailor?"

"If you don't want me taking you in this store, stop."

"I thought you were trained to have patience." Her fingers grazed along his length. "Besides, I'm ready to go." She turned and walked away from him, an extra swing to her hips.

Several deep breaths later and Dimitri was ready to proceed onward. Damn, she knew just how to work him. He followed her sexy, sashaying ass up to the counter and placed the basket there. Dimitri half listened to her lighthearted conversation with the woman ringing up her purchases. He was counting down until the time he'd be alone with Landi.

"Ready?" Landi asked.

"Absolutely." Dimitri took the two bags and followed Landi to the door, opening it for her. He smiled when she was placed her hand in his. He squeezed hers gently as they walked to where her car was parked. After helping her into the passenger seat, he drove them to her hotel where they made love until they both fell asleep from exhaustion.

 $\mathfrak{D}\mathfrak{C}$ 

The console shot up sparks, followed by flames. He pulled back from the heat. Smoke billowed across the landing window as well as the windshield. The control stick wouldn't respond. The ground rushed up to meet them as they plummeted, unable to do anything to stop it. Death was imminent. The crew's screams surrounded him as he realized he'd failed them. He was in charge of their safety and it had gone terribly wrong.

Goodbye was his last thought as his world erupted into a ball of fire.

"Khristos!"

Landi bolted upright as the single name ripped through the air. It was laced with enough pain and torment for her to feel it. Reaching for the lamp, she turned it on and saw Dimitri sitting up in bed, hands over his face, with his dark-olive skin covered in a sheen of sweat. He trembled.

"Dimitri?" she asked, touching his muscled arm. His entire body shuddered. "Dimitri, talk to me. What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry for waking you," he said in a low tone. "Go back to sleep." He wouldn't look at her. Instead, he got out of bed they shared and sat down on the other double bed, facing away from her.

For a moment, Landi stared, her eyes skimming over some scars on his nude back. His body posture screamed "leave me alone!"; but this time, Landi wouldn't to listen. Her own heart still beat erratically from the shout he'd released to the room.

Without a sound, she got out of bed, pulled his shirt on over her naked body, and padded over to stand before him. When he looked up at her, the devastation in his eyes nearly brought her to her knees. Landi pushed his hands to the side and straddled his lap. Wrapping her arms around him, she pressed his head close to her breast and just held him.

For a while, powerful shudders racked his body and his heart beat fitfully against her before it slowed. His strong arms held her tight, his fingers digging into her flesh. Landi never said a word. One hand teased the hair at the back of his neck while the other kept him against her.

"I can't stop the dream." Dimitri's voice was unlike any she could recall hearing from him; the strength, confidence, even arrogance in his tone were gone. Even when he'd told her about his brother's death, the pain had been somewhat contained. Now it was raw and explosively real.

"Over and over I see it."

"Tell me," Landi whispered against his head.

"I told you what happened."

"Tell me your dream." His virile body tensed and she wondered if she had truly overstepped her bounds. *No backing down now, Ilanderae*. "Tell me the dream," she reiterated.

"It's like I am right there with Khristos when the chopper goes down. I can feel the heat, smell the acrid smoke, feel his panic and fear when he realizes they're going to crash. I can feel his shame at being unable to save his crew."

Her hand rubbed against the bare skin of his back. *Oh, Dimitri, how can I make you feel better?* 

"He's always saying goodbye to someone. I can't tell to whom, but the desperation to get his farewell to that person..." He fell silent.

"Dimitri, tell me what to do. Tell me how I can help you to get through this."

"You're doing it, Landi. Just by being here with me. That's more than I could ever ask for."

Landi closed her eyes and pressed her nose deep into his hair, inhaling the gentle clean scent of his shampoo. "I would have liked to meet your brother," she murmured. "Was he older or younger?" Not that it mattered; losing a sibling could never be easy.

"Older. You would have liked him. There wasn't anything he loved more than flying. I never got to tell him goodbye or that I was proud of him. If only I could have..."

"I'm sure he's proud of you as well. And he knows you're trying to find a way to say goodbye. His death wasn't your fault, Dimitri, so stop blaming yourself."

"But-"

"No," she interrupted. "No buts." Landi leaned back and made him look at her. "You couldn't have done anything. It was a horrible accident and a terrible loss. What it *wasn't* was your fault. Cut yourself some slack."

Dimitri felt the weight of his guilt flow away. Landi's words set him free from the prison in which he'd incarcerated himself. Watching her face, he was struck by the amount of compassion and love he saw there. Yet there was also a hint of determination in her beautiful eyes. This woman sitting on his lap was a solace to his soul. He loved her more than anything. There was no censure, no pity, just love and understanding flowing from her aura to his.

"I'm sorry I left without telling you, Landi." He caressed the side of her face. "It was the stupidest thing I've ever done. I'm so, so sorry."

She leaned forward, brushing her lips over his. "I know you are and I forgive you. We've both done things we regret. That's not important right now. Forgive yourself, Dimitri. You had no control over his own destiny."

She forgave me. She forgave me for my stupidity. Dimitri closed the small distance and kissed her once more. His tongue swept through her mouth as his hands moved up beneath his shirt that she wore, loving how soft her skin was. "S'agapo, Landi. S'agapo."

She kissed him again, her hips moving slightly against him. His cock hardened as her slick pussy moved over him.

"Landi," he muttered into her mouth.

"What, Dimitri?" She shifted against him again.

His erection was rock hard and sought entrance. He couldn't find the words. A low groan slipped out as she rose up and sank down up on his shaft.

"Uhhh!" she sighed.

Dimitri bit his lip as she began to ride him. Up and down she moved. Her tight, wet, velvet heat encased him perfectly. Her muscles flexed and tried to keep him deep within her as she lifted up. The pace was slow, erotic, and drove him crazy.

"Landi," he grunted.

Her hands rested on his shoulders, her head dropping back to expose her graceful neck to him. The faint glow from the light gleamed off her rich, dark skin. His eyes lingered over the rapid pulse in her neck.

Landi brought her head up, eyes smoldering with passion. "Love me, Dimitri. Make love to me."

He removed his shirt from her body before standing and repositioning them on the bed. Then he did as she asked and made love to her. She screamed her release to the hotel room; Dimitri's own cry echoed hers loudly as he released his load deep within her.

Dimitri held her in his arms until she fell asleep; then, he got out of bed and turned off the lights. He kissed her forehead as she snuggled up against him when he settled in next to her. Her deep even breath lulled him to slumber.

The soft chime of her travel alarm clock awakened her. Landi sat up and rubbed her eyes. She cast her gaze around the room and realized two things. One, she was still in the other bed; and two, she was alone.

"Dimitri," she said into the empty room as she climbed out of bed and walked to where her alarm still sounded.

Shutting it off, Landi headed for the bathroom and got cleaned up. She stood by the window while waiting for her coffee to percolate, her towel wrapped around her midsection, and watched the sun's rays touch the Pacific. Diamonds sparkled across the water as the sun inched higher. The gentle golden glow faded the higher the sun rose.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee hit her nose and Landi prepared herself a mug. Walking back to the window, she leaned against it and stared back out over the water. Her eyes narrowed from the glare and she sipped the strong brew. As the hot liquid ran through her, she felt more energized. Coffee *truly* was a necessity.

Placing the ceramic mug on the bedside table, Landi hefted her bag onto the bed and pulled out her lotion. She massaged it into her skin, let it dry, and then got dressed. Landi walked to where her cell sat on the desk and smiled as her eyes landed on a small sheet of paper lodged securely beneath her pink phone. Removing the paper, she read it.

Kalimera, Landi,
Thank you for everything. I'll call you when
we're done with training.
See you at SeaWorld.
S'agapo,
D

Closing her eyes, Landi sighed before she shoved the note in the back pocket of her black capris. *Dimitri*, her heart cried. Stopping before the mirror she double-checked her appearance. Her hair fell in waves about her face. She skimmed over the moss green halter top that was tucked into her capris. Pulling her hair up into a ponytail, she shrugged. *Guess this will do*.

Sitting down on a chair, she shoved her feet into her canvas slipons. She grabbed her purse, made sure she had both car and room keys, and then left to begin her day. Breakfast was first and after that...SeaWorld. She'd been at the park for a few hours enjoying the attractions. Her cell rang as she dodged a small child and his rapidly melting ice cream cone. "Hello?"

"Afternoon, gorgeous."

Landi stepped to the side and smiled at Dimitri's voice. "Hey, yourself. How're you doing?"

"I'm better now. Where are you?"

"I'm by the Coconut Bay Café. How about you?"

"On my way to you."

Sensual shivers spread throughout her despite the warmth of the day. Dimitri had this way of sounding so damn sexy when he talked. "I'll be waiting," she said softly before disconnecting the call. Landi sat down on the edge of a bench and watched the steady flow of people before her.

As if the entire park shifted from normal to slow-motion, her gaze landed upon Dimitri Melonakos advancing toward her. Her breath caught in her throat, her heart skipped a few beats, and the juncture between her legs grew damp with longing. The man strode with an inherent confidence that drew many appreciative stares.

His black hair caught the breeze and bounced with each powerful step he took. A dark-blue shirt conformed to his impressive torso; his biceps strained against the sleeves. He had on light blue jeans that hugged powerful thighs. Though he exuded power, Dimitri had a lazy smile on his face when he stopped before her.

Landi stood to meet him and enjoyed the envious looks some women sent her as his arms closed around her. He smelled fresh and crisp.

"Kalispera, Landi," he whispered as he kissed her lightly.

The amount of passion that rocketed through her weakened her knees. Her arms wrapped around his waist as she kissed him back. A frustrated moan slipped from her lips when he put some space between them.

"How are you, baby?"

"I'm fine," she said, dropping her arms from around his trim waist. Her eyes dropped to his chest and she smiled. "Nice shirt."

"Thanks. One of my faves."

The shirt had a marbled look to it with the head of a Great White Shark across it. The animal looked like it was breaking through the fabric.

"Very fitting," she commented as he took her hand. Landi recalled his Team had taken its nickname from that of a prehistoric shark, the *Carcharodon megalodon*, one thought to be the largest and deadliest carnivorous creature of the oceans. It tripled the size of today's Great White; in fact, experts thought it to be the Great White's ancestor.

He smiled down at her. "You look beautiful, Landi. And so hot!"

She ducked her head to hide her reddening cheeks. Only Dimitri could make her blush like a schoolgirl. "Thank you," she muttered, glad he thought so. In the back of her mind, she knew she'd wanted to impress him.

As if he sensed she was uncomfortable, he questioned, "Where'd you want to go?"

Tucking a wayward curl behind her ear, Landi tipped her head up. "Have you eaten?"

"Not since 0530."

Her brows furrowed. "When'd you leave this morning?"

His lips brushed hers. "Much sooner than I wanted to."

That damn blush and tingly feeling swept her body. "Do you want to eat here?" she asked, pointing toward the Coconut Bay Café.

"Here's just fine."

Hand in hand, they walked to the restaurant and had a nice lunch. Afterward, they went next door into the Shark Encounter. As the sharks swam overtop of them, Landi looked on in awe and wonder.

"They truly are so graceful," she said as Dimitri stepped away from her a bit to allow a little boy to run between them.

"They are. Almost enough so that you forget what amazing predators they are. There's an eerie ghost-like quality to them."

Leaning against the railing, Landi nodded. "Still, they are beautiful."

"No argument."

Dimitri wrapped his arm around her waist and they continued on. Her gaze traveled over multitudes of sand tiger, blacktip, whitetip, and bonnethead sharks. Even though they'd been safe, Landi still felt better once the warm California sun touched her skin. The sharks had this power about them that made her nervous.

The couple attended the Dolphin Interaction Program; and as her fingers moved across a dolphin's back, Landi felt totally at peace. Being with Dimitri gave her that. They watched the dolphin show while holding hands. As they left their seats, Dimitri gazed down at her and queried, "Where to now?"

"Polar bears."

"As milady commands."

Everything about Landi shone as she watched the animals in the Base Station Wild Arctic exhibit. She was so happy here at SeaWorld. Relaxed, perhaps, was a better word.

When Dimitri had first spotted Landi sitting on the bench, he'd fought back a primitive roar of anger at all the men staring at her. She wore a tight green halter top with straps that crisscrossed the top part of her chest. The color beautifully offset her skin's rich- brown hue. Desire had swamped Dimitri's body when she'd smiled at him and stood. She had on tight black capris and adorable pink camouflage-print shoes. Her thick wavy hair was pulled up in a high ponytail, leaving a glossy black lock to hang down from each temple.

Her fingers trailed gently over the tank separating them from millions of gallons of water and the creatures in it. A Beluga swam in front of them and a collection of "*Ahhhs*" rose from the crowd. He smiled as Landi leaned back against his chest and watched the whales.

He held her close while they went through the ice tunnel, the foggers, misters, and simulated snow helping them experience the arctic chill. Then, there was the twenty-five foot long ice wall they passed. As they stepped back into the sun, Dimitri was sorry for losing a reason to hold her tight.

The rest of the day progressed with surprising quickness. They rode rides and got soaked, then took a trip on the Bayside Skyride and Sky Tower. In between hitting all three aquariums, they grabbed some smoothies from Pineapple Pete's Island Eats. In the aquariums, Dimitri managed to sneak in some kisses in the dimly lit areas. They visited the Anheuser-Busch Hospitality Center and walked through the stables before heading to the Label Stable Gift Shop. He was intrigued when she purchased not one, but two plush Clydesdales.

"Who're those for?" He took the bag from her, determined to carry it for her, even though she'd waved away his offer to pay for the items.

"My sisters."

His brow scrunched. Her sisters? They were older than she, weren't they? "Okay. Wanna grab something to eat?"

"Yes. What are you hungry for?"

"You," he whispered in her ear, grinning at her slight shudder. "I'm not on the menu."

"Damn." His hand drifted across her ass before resting on her hip. "How about the Calypso Bay Smokehouse? That smelled great earlier."

"That sounds divine."

They had a thoroughly enjoyable dinner. Dimitri had never found eating ribs to be so damn erotic, but watching Landi tear the meat from the bone had him rock hard. Afterward, he shepherded them toward the Plaza Bakery where they had a nice dessert. Once they finished dessert, they walked through the night to Shamu's show .

Both had bags in their hand when they left the park for the parking lot. Dimitri couldn't stop the smile on his face and he didn't want to. It had been a wonderful day.

"Did you drive?" Landi asked.

"No, I had a duty driver drop me off."

"Do you need to get back tonight?"

"Not unless you want to be alone." His breath caught as he waited for her answer.

She reached up and kissed him lightly. "No, I don't want to be alone."

Shifting all the bags he carried to one hand, Dimitri wrapped his free arm around her and lifted her up toward his mouth. "*S'agapo*, Ilanderae, *s'agapo*." For a brief moment, she locked her legs around his waist and kissed him again. A very brief moment.

"Put me down, Dimitri."

He complied before taking the bags from her. "Can't blame me for wantin' to hold you in my arms, can you?"

"Could do a lot more than just hold me when we get back to the hotel," she quipped.

His body responded immediately and he picked up the pace. Her soft chuckle fell over him like a cloud, caressing and tantalizing at the same time. He put the bags in the trunk she'd opened and slammed the door shut. Dimitri held the driver's door open for her and closed it gently after she climbed in. As he walked around to the passenger side, she lowered the top. He vaulted easily into the car.

"Show off."

He chuckled as he fastened his seatbelt. "Were you impressed?"

"Oh, very much so," she muttered as she drove out of the emptying parking lot.

"Liar," he teased.

Her laugh filled the car. "Not at all. Your strength is amazing, but what blows me more is the vast extent of your gentleness."

The awe in her voice amazed him. He'd never thought of it that way. Being physically strong was required for his job, but to see himself through Landi's eyes was humbling.

Light banter filled the ride back to her hotel. He was right behind her as she unlocked her hotel room and entered. Immediately his gaze landed on two tall gift bags on the room's second bed. Landi gestured for him to place the items he was carrying on that same bed.

"Who're the bags for?" he questioned again.

Landi walked behind him, her fingers trailing lightly across his lower back. The touch sent shockwaves through him. She stood on the other side of the bed and sorted her purchases, remaining silent.

"Landi?" He reached across the corner of the bed and touched her arm.

She glanced at him, her fingers wrapped around a soft replica of Shamu. "My sisters."

Dimitri looked at the glossy bags. Same size, one was silver with kittens and the other was silver with puppies. "Landi, forgive me, but I thought your sisters were older." The chocolate they'd gotten the previous day was beside the bags as well.

She sat items by each bag. "They are."

"And they both like stuffed animals?"

Her eyes were sad when she looked at him. "My sisters are mentally retarded, Dimitri. They were born at twenty-four weeks and have stayed in a childlike state. They're small, very small." A humorless laugh escaped. "Smaller than I am. They're mentally the equivalent of eight-year olds, and they both really enjoy stuffed animals. I always try to bring them a nice gift basket when I visit. I'm on my way home so my parents can take a vacation."

What did one say to that? "I'm sorry about your sisters, Landi." He pointed to the bags. "What can I do to help?"

Landi watched Dimitri carefully pack Shandra's bag. She didn't know what she'd expected him to say about her revelation, but she was so pleased he didn't ply her with sympathy. He'd said sorry and moved on. She appreciated that.

"Put a bow on Hamlet the Clydesdale as well?" he asked.

She smiled. "Yes, a purple one, please." He'd tied a blue one around Shamu's neck. In fact, Dimitri had attached bows around most everything. He sat at the head of the bed and worked diligently on the task at hand. His hair hung around his face, giving him an almost angelic appearance. And yet, beneath that, lingered a definite hint of bad boy.

He raked his hand through his hair and tipped his head up to meet her gaze, the warmth in his eyes heating her from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. A smile flitted across his face.

"Enjoying the view?"

"More than you'll ever know," she admitted.

Dimitri pushed up from the bed and moved toward her. His golden eyes burned with passion. "Tell me," he purred.

She opened her mouth just as a Bon Jovi tune filled the air. Dimitri answered his phone with a short, "Melonakos." Landi watched his brow furrow as he listened to the person on the other end of the line.

"I'm sorry; I'm not in Virginia at the moment. I'm not sure when we'll be back. You'd have to check with Commander Leighton on that. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He snapped his phone shut.

"Everything okay?" Landi asked, closing the remaining distance between them.

Dimitri tossed his phone on the bed and pulled her flush against him. "Landi, everything is perfect when you're in my arms." His lips tantalized hers.

"There's more of that Melonakos charm," she teased.

"It's all for you." He kissed her again, his tongue surging through her mouth, setting her on fire.

Landi arched against him, her breasts craving his touch, her pussy demanding release. "Dimitri," she moaned, running her hands over the worn material of his jeans covering his ass.

"Undress for me, Landi," he commanded. "I want to watch you get naked."

His words sent a spike of heat through her. Her pussy throbbed. Stepping out of his arms, she showed him her back. "Undo me," she said softly. His fingertips caressed the skin of her nape as he undid the bow securing her top. The room was silent except for the whisper of cloth against skin.

"There." Dimitri spoke with tender reverence.

Facing him again, Landi slowly removed the crisscross from her chest, dropped the tie, and pulled her shirt off to let it fall to the floor. She smiled as his eyes darkened with pleasure.

"You didn't wear a bra?" he asked.

"No." Her fingers reached for the first of five buttons on her capris and toed off her shoes. Button two, then three, then four. His eyes roved over her and in them she could read his growing impatience in them.

"Landi," he growled, his hands fisting at his sides.

"Take off your shirt, Dimitri. I want to see you."

The shark shirt hit the floor before her words faded. And as she always had when looking at him, her mouth grew dry. That same amazing chest she could never forget was right before her. So hard. So perfect.

"Landi," he rumbled dangerously. "I want you naked."

She undid the final button and pushed down her pants. His groan filled the room.

"Look at you," he uttered on a long drawn out breath. "So fuckin' hot and wearing nothing but a green thong."

Dimitri stepped closer. Her eyes roamed over his body. She could see the rapid pulse in his throat, the hard ridge of his cock along his right leg. Blue jeans and shoes were all he wore, and her heart tripled in speed at his sexy, dangerous look.

"Love me, Dimitri," she mumbled as she captured his gaze.

His strong arms closed around her, pressing their bodies tight against one another. Callused palms moved across her bare back and seconds before his mouth covered hers, he whispered, "Gia panta, Landi. Gia panta."

Landi rang the doorbell and smiled as her father opened it.

"Ilanderae," he said with a mix of pleasure and relief.

"Hello, Papa." She stepped into his waiting arms, the familiar comfort surrounding her. "How are you?"

"Fine. We're all fine. Come on in, baby girl. Let me get your bags."

She followed him in, carrying the gift bags for her sisters. Soon she was in her mother's arms and shortly thereafter hugging her sisters.

"Chandra," she said. "It's so good to see you."

Her sister flashed a huge smile. "I'm not Chandra, I'm Shandra. You always get us mixed up!"

Throwing her hands in the air, Landi sighed dramatically. "Man, I thought I had it right this time." She winked at her parents and said to the other sister, "Chandra, you like kitties, right?"

"No, silly!" Shandra laughed. "I like kitties. Chandra likes puppies."

Landi pretended to be blown away by that bit of information. "Okay, let me get this straight." She pointed at Shandra. "You're not Chandra and you like kitties." Her sister nodded happily.

"Alrighty, then, that means this bag is for you and this other one is for you, Chandra." Her sisters squealed as they ran to the living room with their bags after giving her a kiss on each cheek. She stood in the doorway to the living room and watched her sisters eagerly go through their gift bags.

"They miss you so much when you're gone," her mother said. "I miss them too. I've just been very busy."

"I know, Landi. It wasn't a criticism. Are you sure you'll be okay with them for ten days?"

"We'll be fine, Mama. You two go and have a vacation. Have a wonderful time."

Five days later as Landi lay in bed, she rolled to her side and glanced at the clock. 2:00 a.m. She was exhausted. The fact her parents did this day in and day out blew her mind. Very attractive and very innocent, her sisters had endless energy.

Reaching out, she picked up her phone and flipped through her address book until she found the number she sought. She shifted against the cotton sheets as it rang and rang. Disappointment swarmed

her as she heard a recorded voice apologizing for missing the call. She hung up without leaving a message.

Landi pulled the comforter up to her ears and prayed for sleep. Slumber remained elusive. Still, she started when her phone vibrated and then played the C Major scale with piano keys.

"Hello?" she said without checking the display.

"Is everything okay, baby?" Dimitri's deep soothing voice immediately calmed her nerves.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" she asked.

"Not at all. I was in the shower when you called. Why didn't you leave a message? Is everything okay?"

"I just..."

"I miss you, too, baby," he crooned in her ear.

The first tear leaked out and ran down over the bridge of her nose. "I wish you were with me, Dimitri."

"What's going on?" His concern was obvious.

"Nothing." She wiped away the tears and closed her eyes. "I didn't mean to—"  $\,$ 

"If you say bother me, the next time we meet, I'm gonna turn you over my knee and spank that perfect ass of yours."

A tremor of longing shot through her. Imagining his work-roughened hands caressing her skin gave her goose bumps. Without conscious thought, her free hand dipped between her spread thighs. Landi wasn't aware she'd made any noise until Dimitri spoke again, his voice thick with passion.

"Are you touching yourself, Landi? I heard your sexy moan." "Yes." she admitted.

"Pretend I'm there, baby. Play with that clit of mine. Make small circles over it."

Her body burned and she opened her legs further. "Dimitri," she moaned.

"Do as I say, Landi. Move faster. Slid two fingers deep inside that hot pussy and use the heel of your palm to keep my clit happy."

The flames rose within her and began to spread throughout her entire body. Her mind conjured Dimitri's masculine scent. Her nipples tightened.

"I'm suckling on your breasts, rolling those exquisite nipples around in my mouth. Tugging. Nipping."

Her pulse skyrocketed. She was so close. Her wrist plunged her fingers in and out of her pussy. "Dimitri," she begged.

"Cum for me, Landi. Cum all over my cock as I fuck you," he growled.

That did it. She bit her lip to keep her scream muffled, hips arching as she exploded in to a million tiny pieces. Her body quaked as she melted back into the mattress.

"D-"she panted.

"Sleep now, *selini*. I'm on my way to work. I'll call you when I'm done."

Even as his words reached her, she felt the presence of the sandman. "Okay," she muttered.

"S'agapo, Landi." He disconnected the call.

With a deep sigh, Landi burrowed into the bed, ready, finally for sleep.

## **D**C

Landi pushed the cart out of the store. She was grocery shopping so her mom wouldn't have to immediately after returning home. She'd given her sisters a short list of items for which they were responsible. Her sisters grabbed them as they passed by the shelves. Landi was very proud of them; they'd done very well, staying close and listening to her.

"Mom and Dad are coming home tonight, right, Landi?"

"Sure are, Chandra. We'll make that cake to welcome them back and eat it after dinner."

Chandra clapped with glee and danced around her and Shandra. "Mommy's coming home! Mommy's coming home!" she chanted as she spun.

After shopping, Landi stopped at her father's Expedition and opened the back. Her sisters helped her load the vehicle.

"Well, well, I see the retards have a new sitter today." A nasally voice came from behind. "And a lot better-looking one."

Aghast, Landi whirled to see two men leering at her as well as her sisters. Her eyes narrowed. "Get in the vehicle and buckle up," she said without taking her eyes off the men. The fading light gave them an ominous appearance. Landi was so relieved when her sisters did as she told them.

"Now, now. Why'd you do that? We'd love to have some fun with all of ya."

Bile rose in her throat. "Leave us alone." Landi closed up the Expedition and locked it.

"I bet those tardos are virgins. I'mma enjoy poppin' them cherries."

Her anger rushed to the surface and Landi had to bite back her response. It was *her* job to protect her sisters. Egging on the men before her wouldn't help with that. Swallowing back her rage and fear, Landi stood tall and shot an icy look at them.

"Don't even think about it. Leave us alone."

A menacing chuckle came from one man as he fondled himself. "Who's gonna stop us, darlin'? You?"

Landi bit back a sob of relief and disbelief as a deep voice said, "Me."

Dimitri stepped out of the night's increasing shadows and put himself between the men and Landi. "Get in your car and go," he ordered without taking his eyes off the two before him."

Anger rolled off him in waves. He longed to break both of these men for even allowing those thoughts to enter their minds. His body only slightly relaxed as he felt Landi move away. One of the men took a step forward, only to stop when Dimitri speared him with his gaze.

A vehicle started; Dimitri rolled his shoulders and said, "You two *ever* bother her or her family again, I swear they'll never be able to find, much less reassemble, all the pieces I'll blow your bastard asses into."

The taller of the two stepped closer. "Back off, man."

Eyes narrowing, Dimitri diminished more of the distance between him and the others. "You're so tough when facing women. Let's find out how good you are when faced with a man who is *so* looking to kick your ass."

The guy visibly blanched but he didn't back down, an ugly sneer crossing his face. "There's two of us. I know karate and I'll beat the shit out of you. Or, *now* do you want to back off?"

Dimitri could hear the thread of hope in the man's voice. "Nope. I'm not going anywhere."

"Two to one," the other guy jeered, "not very good odds."

Lifting his shoulder, Dimitri commented, "I know. Have any more guys you can ask to come help you two out?"

Their expressions were comical, but he wasn't in the mood to laugh. Before they knew it was coming, Dimitri grabbed their hands

and hit a pressure point with each thumb, rendering each man immobile.

"Why don't we try this again," he growled. "I know you can't speak but you can listen. That woman you were harassing will *never* be approached again, nor her family. If she tells me she's caught the slightest glimpse of you, I *will* find you. And trust me, I'm very good at that. But I'm even better at making bombs. You'll never know it's there until it blows up in your face." He released them and watched their knees crumble. "Pray you don't see any of them again."

Dimitri headed for his rental and drove off toward Landi's house. He parked in the driveway and went to the steps. Halfway there, a taxi pulled up to stop at the end of the driveway. He stopped halted and watched an attractive couple get out. The cabbie placed luggage on the walk before driving off. The man and woman looked at him strangely. Dimitri knew they were Landi's parents; he could see the resemblance.

The front door opened and he looked up at the house to see Landi burst through. She hurdled the three steps and launched herself into his arms.

"Oh, my God," she babbled. "I was so scared, Dimitri. I thought they were going to hurt my sisters. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

Dimitri wrapped his arms around her and squeezed lightly. "Baby? Landi, hon," he said between the kisses she placed on his lips. "Your parents."

She stopped kissing him and looked over his shoulder. At that moment, twin cries of "Mama! Papa!" filled the night air. Dimitri sent Landi an encouraging grin before placing her on her feet.

Dimitri turned and faced the couple behind him. The man walked toward them and Dimitri took a deep breath, preparing to meet his, hopefully, future father-in-law.

"Welcome back, Papa." Landi hugged her father and kissed his cheek.

"And who is this?" he asked, pointing at Dimitri.

"This is my," Dimitri caught her brief hesitation before she continued, "good friend, Dimitri Melonakos. Dimitri, this is my father, Calvin Nycks."

Immediately offering his hand, Dimitri said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Brown eyes were shrewd. "Nice firm handshake. I like that in a man."

"And who is this?" Landi's mom stepped up while the twins took the luggage inside.

"My name is Dimitri Melonakos, ma'am," he said, bowing over her extended hand and brushing a light kiss over it. "It's an honor to meet you." He wasn't positive, but Dimitri was pretty sure he saw a blush creep over her oval face.

"Sheba Nycks." One finely plucked brow arched and she asked, "Aren't you going to say how much like sisters my daughter and I appear?"

"I suspect you hear that all of the time, ma'am."

"So, you don't think so?"

His mouth curved up on one side before he said, "I think you're both very beautiful and one day Landi will carry herself with the same assurance and confidence you do."

A grin crossed Sheba's face. "I like you, young man."

"Thank you, ma'am." Landi narrowed her eyes at him and he winked in return.

"Staying for dinner?" Calvin asked.

Dimitri hesitated with his answer as he deferred to Landi.

"Yes," Landi said, sliding her arm through his. "I have to take it out of the oven."

"Let's go, then," Sheba said and headed to where her other daughters were poking their head out of the house.

Inside, Dimitri leaned against the beige countertop and watched Landi finish preparing dinner. Cooking wasn't something he normally equated with Landi, but he loved it. He'd met her two sisters and found them to be utterly charming.

"What are you doing here, Dimitri?" She wiped her hands on the towel over her shoulder and came to stand in front of him.

"I felt you needed me, so I put in a leave chit, hopped a flight, and here I am. Are you sure you're okay from earlier?" Her hands shook and he pulled her into his chest. "I wanted to kill them."

"I was so scared. I wanted to fight but I had to protect my sisters."

His hands caressed her back. "You did just fine, baby." Her slight body trembled. Dimitri glanced at the entry to the kitchen as her father entered, his face drawn tight in anger.

"Ilanderae Rogue Nycks," he said in a low but forceful tone.

Dimitri allowed Landi to pull away a bit but she did not step out of his hold. "Yes, Papa?"

"Chandra said that man was there again with a friend. Is that true?"

"Yes, Papa."

Her father stepped closer and halted. "Are you...are you okay?" She nodded. "I'm fine. Dimitri was there to intervene."

Brown eyes flashed toward him. "You were there?"

"I was in the store getting some things before I came here. Luckily, I was in the right place at the right time." His heart soared as Landi's arms tightened around him.

"Thank you. My daughters mean the world to me."

Dimitri understood. "I don't think they'll bother your family again," he announced.

"Why do you say that? Even the cops said they couldn't do anything without proof."

His eyes narrowed as he remembered the panic on Landi's face. "I had my proof when I saw the fear that filled Landi's face." Dimitri kissed the top of her head. "So I talked to them, man to man." Calvin Nycks was silent for a moment, assessing.

"Come with me, Dimitri. I'd like a word with you."

Immediately, Dimitri did so. He released Landi and moved toward the tall, thin man who was the father of the woman he loved. "Yes, sir."

Landi listened as her mother asked Dimitri questions. She was positive they were similar to the ones her father had asked before dinner. If they were, Dimitri didn't appear to mind. She sat beside him, her sisters across the table, and her parents at each end.

"What about you, Dimitri? Do you have any siblings?" Her mom asked him.

"I used to, ma'am. I lost my brother in a helicopter crash about a year ago."

Landi looked at Dimitri and saw the sadness in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry," Sheba said.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Do you see your parents a lot?"

"As often as I can. Family ties are very important to my family, as I see they are in yours. I don't see them as often as I'd like since we live on opposite coasts."

"And church?"

Landi wanted to sink beneath the floorboards. Her mom had no sense of boundaries.

"Greek Orthodox, ma'am."

"And you have family in Greece?"

"Yes, ma'am. I visit them often as I can as well."

"Do you speak a different language?" Chandra piped up.

"Yes I do. I speak a few." Dimitri placed his golden eyes on her sister and smiled.

Chandra grinned at him and Landi saw the admiration her sister just developed for Dimitri. Not that she blamed her. "I want to learn." Chandra pursed her lips. "Spanish, Italian, Russian, Chinese, everything. Greek also."

"That's wonderful, Chandra," Dimitri said. "Are you working on one now?"

She stuck out her lower lip. "No. I don't know which one to start with." Chandra took a drink. "What did you learn first?"

Landi snuck a glance back at Dimitri to see if she needed to interrupt. He didn't seem at all uncomfortable. There was a relaxed smile on his face. So she got up for dessert.

Dimitri's deep soothing voice followed her. "I grew up speaking both Greek and English. I learned Latin first in school and then Italian."

"Wow!" Chandra breathed.

Landi fought the urge to ruffle her sister's hair; instead, she took away the dinner dishes and placed the dessert before her.

"Whichever you feel the strongest about is the one you should start with," Dimitri told her.

"Thank you," Chandra said with a huge smile.

"My pleasure, glikiá adelphí." He winked at Chandra. "That means 'sweet sister'."

Landi smiled as a blush covered Chandra's face. As Landi placed a piece of triple-layered chocolate cake before Dimitri, she whispered, "Thank you."

He winked at her, so quickly she almost believed it was naught but a figment of her imagination. "This looks wonderful," he praised.

"Thank you, but I can't take credit for it. Shandra and Chandra made it special for tonight." Landi served herself last and sat down to eat. As they enjoyed the cake, her mom still plied Dimitri with questions. When they'd had their fill, he answered them all. He surprised Landi by insisting on helping clean up. They were finishing up when her parents walked in. Landi could hear a Disney movie playing in the

living room. As she wiped down the middle counter station, she caught a glimpse of her sisters on the sofa. Each holding a stuffed animal, they laughed along with the film.

Sheba patted Dimitri on the back. "I commend your mother for raising such a helpful young man."

"Thank you, ma'am." His deep voice flowed over Landi and melted away the lingering tension.

Landi looked at her father who poured himself some more coffee and leaned against the counter she'd just cleaned.

"I like him, Landi."

"Do you really, Papa?"

"Yes. I really do. I like the light he puts in your eyes." He reached out and touched her arm. "We'll finish up out here. You take your young man to the sunroom. We'll be there in a bit."

Holding his gaze, Landi waited until her father gave her another nod. Placing the towel down, she touched Dimitri's arm and led him to the sunroom.

"Beautiful home your parents have, Landi."

She nodded. "Sit in the hammock with me?" She wanted nothing more than to crawl inside his skin and just let him totally surround her.

"Thought you'd never ask." He walked beside her toward the Hatteras hammock where it sat on a cypress stand.

"Normally, it's outside; but in winter, they bring it in." She was babbling and she knew it. Landi climbed on and sighed contentedly when Dimitri snuggled up against her. He slipped his arm under her neck and allowed his fingers to caress her shoulder. Her head rested against him as she looked out the skylight above them. Stars broke through the black velvet sky. Dimitri's lips brushed her temple, sending electrical impulses through her body. Her eyes drifted shut.

When she woke, Dimitri was gone. She was alone in the sunroom with a pillow and a blanket over her.

Dimitri ducked as floodlights swept the area. The wet grass soaked through his shirt. Rain fell in torrents around him. Squinting through the downpour, he made out the almost invisible man next to him. Osten, known better as Baby Boy. As one, they moved quickly to the next cover and waited for the next imminent sweep of the floodlights.

Sitting low against the rock, Dimitri adjusted his hold on his weapon. In his ear he heard one click before Harrier's voice sounded in an almost non-existent whisper. "Next sweep of the lights and we move on the compound."

Dimitri swiped his hand over his forehead, smearing the black paint there. His body was ready for the go command. The familiar thrum of adrenaline surged through him. He loved the rush. At this round of lights, the men ran toward the crumbling compound. They were silent as they checked the first room.

Shaking his head, Dimitri rid himself of the excess water in his hair. Wiping his hand off on his pant leg, he looked at Harrier and waited for his signal on when to proceed onward.

Weapons ready, the men moved out, quickly, silently, and efficiently progressing down the corridor. Dimitri had taken point and he froze at the sound of scuffling feet. Giving the "hold" sign, he immediately put his hand back on the underside of his gun. He identified three different sets of steps. Signaling the number he heard, he pressed his back against the wall briefly before spinning so he faced down the hall. With three quick pulls of his trigger, three bodies collapsed on the floor.

"Nice and quiet. Well done, Merlin," Harrier said as he moved past and took point. They only paused to capture the image of each man on the camera.

"Not him," Dimitri whispered as he flipped the third man back over.

Deeper and deeper the team drove into the twists and turns of the old fortress. "Holy shit!" Jeb's southern drawl exclaimed. He was up ahead a few doors. "I think I just found these bastards' ammo storage. They've got a shitload of weapons."

The men converged on the room. Dimitri shook his head. Where the hell did people get the money to buy such huge amounts of artillery?

"Rig it," Harrier uttered as he opened a crate and lifted out an automatic machine gun.

Without a word, Dimitri got to work setting claymores and bricks of C-4. Swiftly, he rigged each corner and placed more charges through the room, arming them all. "Ready. This shit is gonna blow hard when it goes. We're gonna want to be on the other side of the compound."

"Always did like to make a big boom, didn't ya, Merlin?" Ghost teased.

Dimitri flashed him a grin, knowing full well Ghost could see him courtesy of the dim light inside this musty smelling place. "You know it. Bigger the better. Although in some cases, that's not so."

"Just get it done, Merlin." Harrier's voice was low and businesslike but not tense. "We have to find Al Riyad."

"Done." Dimitri stood and picked up his gun after shoving the now empty bag into a side pocket of his pants.

Silence descended as they progressed onward. The powerful smell of lye and lime hit his nose. Dimitri shook his head. There was an open doorway leading into a dark room. He met Baby Boy's gaze and together they entered. One high and one low, they both using night vision.

Bodies littered the floor. Dimitri had been expecting that. The overwhelming lime smell had prepared him. Still, the sight churned his stomach. All ages of both men and women were in various stages of decomposition, a process the lye had sped up as the lime kept the stench down.

Leaving the room, they continued on their way. As they moved toward a staircase, Dimitri pressed the button on the side of his eyewear and the night vision vanished, allowing the genuine faded amber glow to light his way.

"Three in the room on the left. One looks too small to be an adult," May's low voice intoned.

Dimitri hesitated by the door. They preferred not to eliminate children, so he waited for Harrier's decision on how they'd proceed.

"Position of the smallest?" Harrier questioned.

Waiting for the response, Dimitri admired how unruffled Harrier remained. Only his wife Lex, or something concerning her, could his team leader riled. Otherwise, he always maintained a cool head.

"Ten o'clock," Maverick's whisper came.

"Small one is yours, Merlin. We secure everyone. Quietly."

Maverick continued to fill them in. "The other two are at twelve and two."

"On my mark," Harrier said and Dimitri knew whoever was on the other two had been identified with eye contact or hand signals.

Dimitri waited, his hand curling around the handle of his Gerber Mark II. At Harrier's command they burst into the room and immobilized everyone in there in seconds. He looked down at the boy in his arms. The child's eyes were wide with fear as they stared up at him. The boy's face was nearly buried beneath his large hand. Dimitri saw Hondo and Jeb holding two badly beaten women.

"Tie'em up," Harrier muttered. "It's not my goddamn job to kill women and children who are already getting the shit kicked out of them."

"Mmm mmmph," the child muttered into his glove.

"Quiet," Dimitri hissed. The boy did it again. "Kid's trying to talk."

Hondo quietly rendered the woman in his arms unconscious and laid her on the ground for Baby Boy to tie up.

Hondo walked toward him and Dimitri heard and felt the boy's deep trembling breath. Dimitri had to admit, Hondo approaching did tend to strike fear into a person. Stopping before them, he said something to the boy. Dimitri felt him nod.

"Take your hand away, Merlin. I told him if he screamed you'd slice his throat."

Dimitri did and stood ready to do just that if necessary. Hondo was the only one who spoke any Farsi; they were lucky the child at least understood it. The room was tense as Hondo spoke to the boy.

Hondo met Dimitri's gaze and said lowly, yet audible to everyone, "He says they are slaves of Al Riyad. They stay here in this room until he sends for them. He says he can take us to the room where Al Riyad receives them."

Dimitri looked down at met the boy's big, brown gaze. "Do you trust him?" he asked Hondo.

"Nope, not totally. But it doesn't look like Al Riyad treats them well. If this boy can give us a direct route, I say we take it. We should just expect a trap."

Harrier spat on the ground and nodded. "Tell him we'll take him with us. He can show us the way, but he has to be tied and gagged. He can gesture the way." As Hondo translated, Harrier looked at Dimitri. "Kid's yours, Hondo. Merlin, tie him up."

He nodded and sheathed his knife, tying and gagging the boy before handing him off to Hondo. Then, he secured his MP5 submachine gun. Dimitri nodded to his teammates and headed for the door, waiting for the rest of them to regroup.

Dimitri was shoulder to shoulder with Baby Boy as they moved through the corridors, Hondo's voice telling them which way to go.

"Wait." Hondo's voice came to him. "Around this corner. First door on the right, his bedroom."

"Stay with the kid, Hondo. Make sure he stays quiet...and safe," Harrier commanded.

"Roger that."

Dimitri shifted and balanced himself. His hands curled familiarly around the MP5.

"Two jeeps entering the compound," Maverick announced. "Whores."

Maverick was holed up in a high-vantage spot with infrared and his sniper rifle, keeping an eye on their surroundings. Cade also sat in a high position, covering their exit point with an M-60.

Dimitri cast a glance to Harrier who'd moved up beside him. The cornflower-blue eyes of the team leader met his as he did a silent countdown.

Three. Two. One.

BAM!

They burst in through the door. The room was filled with muzzle flashed. A siren began to wail.

"Get your asses outta there! They're swarming!" Maverick growled.

"Is he here?" Harrier demanded.

"I don't see him. This man is a close second but it's not him," Dimitri said, dropping the dead man back to the floor. Gunfire from the hall spurred them into action. Dimitri entered the hall in time to see Hondo toss the boy over one shoulder and shoot two approaching men.

"Down the corridor and go left," Maverick ordered. "It's clear."

They moved quickly.

"Blow the ammo," Harrier said.

Dimitri reached into his pocket and grabbed the detonator. Flipping up the cover, he pressed the button. Large tremors rocked the entire area.

"Haul ass, guys! That brought in everyone," Cade reported.

"We're coming out," Dimitri hollered over the continuing explosions as he saw their exit in sight. The unmistakable sound of an M-60 filled the air. Cade. As Dimitri crested the small trench, he squeezed the trigger. Two men fell and more took their place. The smell of gun smoke and gasoline clogged his nose. Harrier jumped up beside him and together they fought their way through. A noise over his shoulder made Dimitri turn to see a man jerk to the ground, a single hole in his forehead. Dimitri knew Maverick had done it. Before he turned again, Dimitri saw Hondo put the boy down and cut him loose.

*Good luck, kid,* he thought as the boy crawled into a tiny hiding spot. They pressed on toward their extraction point.

"I'll be damned," Maverick muttered. "Al Riyad is getting into that jeep."

"Confirm, Al Riyad," Harrier commanded.

"Confirm target, Al Riyad." Maverick's deep voice flowed effortlessly through the ear pieces they wore.

"Do what you do, Maverick."

"Roger that." A moment later, Maverick said, "It's done. Let's go home. I'll meet you at the extraction point."

As flames engulfed the compound in the Pamir Mountain range, the eight members of Seal Team Seventeen rejoined forces and slipped away into the night. Three witnesses were left alive who'd actually seen them but they would never speak of it.

Dimitri was silent as they evacuated. He knew while the mission technically had been a success; overall, it wasn't. Though they preferred to execute missions with as little fanfare as possible, that huge stockpile of Russian and Chinese weapons had needed to be destroyed.

**D**((

Landi laughed as sweet tea spewed out of Kacy's nose. The look of exasperation on her friend's face only increased the laughter that slipped out.

"Bitch," Kacy snapped playfully.

"I'm just sayin'..."

Kacy rolled her eyes and threw a handful of ice cubes at her. Landi glanced at Kacy and did her best to stop her mirth. It just wasn't happening.

Since the men were gone on a mission, Landi decided it was time for a visit; and when she'd knocked on Kacy's front door, her friend had answered, squealed with joy, and then promptly burst into tears. Koali Zimmermann was pregnant, very moody, and had a very powerful case of morning sickness.

Instead of getting a hotel room, Landi had decided to stay with Kacy for the week in the spare room and help out in any way she could. Today was Sunday and they were enjoying an early light lunch in the backyard.

Landi dodged more projectiles. "You shouldn't be wasting water. You know you've got a drought situation here."

Kacy flipped her off before throwing more ice at her, which Landi easily avoided, laughing again. "Good thing you're able to make your living as an electrician instead of a pitcher, because you suck!"

"Tell me again why I want you here?" Kacy griped.

Landi blew her a kiss. "Because I cook and clean for you. Rub your back, do your laundry, and so on."

Kacy smiled. "Ahh, that's right. But I want to know about you and Dimitri. You've avoided talking about him for the week you've been here, but now I want to know. Come on, girl, dish!"

A warm feeling settled over her at the mere mention of his name. Landi fought back a smile, knowing full well, Kacy was waiting for it. "What's to tell?" she hedged. "We're trying the dating thing, but I'm still a little bit leery."

"Hmm, guess I should be nice to him again, then."

"What do you mean?" Landi frowned. "You haven't been nice to him?" Protectiveness overcame her.

Kacy shrugged without the slightest bit of remorse. "You're my friend and he hurt you. Why the hell would I be nice to him?"

Landi stared at her in shock. "Because he works with your husband."

"I've been your friend much longer." Kacy shrugged again. "Besides, I was always *polite* to him; just now I can be nice."

Landi shook her head. "And people say I'm the bitch."

Kacy took a drink of her tea. "Well, you are. Taught me everything I know."

"Right," Landi scoffed. Inside she smiled, Kacy was a true friend. "I do love you, ya know."

"I know." She raised a brow. "Just like I know you're trying to avoid telling me all about that hot Greek man of yours."

"Kacy!" Landi gasped.

"Hey! Dimitri is hot! I'm not blind!" She winked. "Fill me in."

Dimitri appeared before Landi's mind's eye. His golden eyes caressed her body like his hands did when they were together. She shivered despite the warmth of the day. Snapping fingers brought her back to the present and she focused on Kacy who waited for her gaze with an expectant one of her own.

"Focus, Landi. I want to know about him, not have you go off down memory lane."

She blushed and ducked her head. "He's amazing, Kacy. I yell at myself for having ignored him after that day. If I hadn't let my pride get in the way..."

Kacy ate some of her Cobb salad. "What happened between y'all?" she asked as she stabbed another forkful.

"The day his brother Khristos died we were going to be married. But he never showed." Landi saw the shock on Kacy's face. "I understand why now; but at the time, I was just jilted."

"I can't believe it."

"I had a hard time—"

"No," Kacy interrupted. "I can't believe you never told me you had planned on marrying, much less you had planned on marrying Dimitri! Something that huge and you kept it from me?!"

The amount of pain in her friend's voice amazed Landi. "I didn't tell anyone, Kacy. And once it never happened, I was ashamed."

"Isn't that what friends are for, Ilanderae? To help you through the rough times?"

"Yes," she muttered. "I'm sorry I kept it from you."

Kacy stared at her before she winked and smiled. "So, how good is he in bed?"

"Kacy!"

"What? Come on, we can exchange stories." Kacy fluttered her lashes at her playfully.

"You're crazy! You do know that, right?"

"I know." Kacy glanced down at her watch and said, "We should get going."

"Right." Landi stood, taking the dishes in; and by the time she was ready, Kacy was waiting for her by the interior garage door. With a grin, Landi waggled her fingers. "Hand over them keys, woman!"

Kacy stared at her blankly. She blinked a few times but didn't move or say a word. Her gaze cut from Landi and back to her vintage Camaro.

With a snort, Landi grabbed them from her. "Yeesh, I'm not a bad driver! Come on! Besides, with you needing to puke all the time, you can just hang your head out the window this way."

"Fine, but if there is one scratch on it..." Kacy warned.

"Please, you'll just go to Dez and have her fix it." Landi climbed in behind the wheel and adjusted the seat. "You and your damn legs," she muttered in good humor.

Landi drove them up to Norfolk to the USS *Wisconsin*. The women enjoyed the day touring the battleship. Hours later, they walked back to the parking garage side by side. "So what now? Dinner? Or do you want to go home?"

"I'm hungry. Let's grab some food."

"Sounds good to me. Up here or back in Virginia Beach?" She unlocked the car and they both climbed inside. Starting the engine, they lowered the windows. Landi shoved her hair from her face and backed out of the parking spot to leave the garage, stopping to pay the ticket.

"Does The Fisher King work for you?" Kacy asked. "I'm so craving some of Darnell's wife's cooking."

"Hey, I'm not about to argue with a pregnant woman. You want The Fisher King, you'll get it." Landi merged onto 264 Eastbound and soon the interior had cooled off because of the breeze flowing through it.

After dinner, Landi and Kacy picked up some ice cream and made sundaes at the house. The women were out on the back porch, Kacy in the swing and Landi sitting against the railing enjoying their sundaes, when the screen door swung open.

"Ernst!" Kacy squealed, jumping up and launching herself into her husband's arms. Her sundae fell to the deck.

A smile filled Landi's face as she witnessed the joy and love between the two of them. Standing, Landi said softly, "Welcome back, Ernst. I'll just leave you two alone."

"Thank you, Landi, for taking care of my Kacy while I was gone," Ernst said in his smooth voice. Landi nodded and slipped past

the couple closing the door behind her. She sighed and headed for the sink.

"Why so glum, selini?" a deep voice asked.

Landi gasped and spun around. Leaning against the doorway between the kitchen and living room was Dimitri. He wore loose-fitting khakis that only gave her a hint of the muscles that lay beneath the material. Tucked into his slacks was a solid black shirt that hugged his chest and biceps. She licked her lips as a low moan escaped from her throat.

"Dimitri," she breathed.

He shoved a hand through his inky black hair and strode to her. His arms closed around her seconds before his lips covered hers. She purred as his tongue surged into her mouth. He swept through it like a raging river. Landi held him as close as she could. It felt so good having him back in her arms.

"I've missed you, Ilanderae Nycks," he announced after he ended the passionate kiss.

"I missed you, too, Dimitri."

"Come home with me," he said.

She didn't have to think on it. "Yes. Just let me get my stuff."

"I'll help," he muttered, his hand trailing over her butt.

Landi grabbed his hand and pulled him down to the spare room with her. Taking out her suitcase, she began to pack her clothes. She stared in shock as Dimitri haphazardly tossed clothes inside her luggage.

"What are you doing?!" she asked.

"You don't need to fold them. You can take them out at my place. Let's go."

She cut her eyes at him and felt her body tighten with longing. "In a rush?"

"Damn straight! I've been away from you far too long. And if you don't want me to throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of here, you'll pick up the pace."

A wicked grin crossed her face. "Well, now, that might be fun." Landi reached for him and pulled him closer. "I'm ready to go."

"You're gonna kill me, Landi," he groaned.

"But you'll go wearing a smile."

"Damn straight!"

She shoved the final things in the bag and grinned when he took the suitcase for her. They walked into the hall and headed for the front door. "Bye; Kacy; bye, Ernst," Landi hollered as they left the house.

He tossed her bag in the back of his green metallic jeep and grinned. "Ready, baby?"

"I don't know if I'll ever be ready enough for you, *Merlin*." She walked slowly toward him, inwardly grinning as his eyes darkened with passion and roved slowly up and down her body.

"Get in the jeep before I toss you in."

"More of those threats?" She clucked her tongue disapprovingly and jumped into the passenger seat.

He muttered something in Greek as he hurried around to climb in on his side. "That was a promise, baby. I want you. I've been thinking about all the ways I am going to enjoy your delectable body."

All kinds of electricity shot through her system. "All that sweet talk...you expecting something?"

He shifted gears and looked at her as he drove off. "Hell, yes!"

She trembled. Her nipples hardened and her pussy made its wants clear. "Good. So am I." Landi fell silent as he arrived at an apartment complex. She saw kids running, parents chatting, dogs barking, and ducks waddling around in the waning light.

Dimitri jumped out of his jeep. Landi watched, in awe of the way he moved. Raw power. He grabbed her suitcase and his sea bag before sending her a look that skyrocketed her body temperature.

"You comin' or staying here?" he asked with a half grin on his face.

Landi blushed. She'd been so busy examining him she'd forgotten to get out of the vehicle. "I'm coming." They walked toward the stairs, Dimitri responding to the hellos people gave him. "They seem to like you here.

"Nice people," he said easily. They went up to the third floor and she held him breath as he unlocked his door.

"Nervous?" he questioned softly.

She thought about it. Was she nervous? "No." Landi followed him in and sighed. What she saw was very nice and clean. It wasn't a huge place, but cozy.

Dimitri shut the door behind her and headed toward the small hall. "Make yourself at home; I'll put these in the bedroom."

Home. The bedroom. As if they were truly a married couple. Landi wondered what life would be like if they *had* gotten married. She walked around the living room. There was no way to mistake it for anything but a bachelor pad. No plants, flowers, or much of anything with color. On the coffee table were magazines about weapons and offroading. There was a fireplace in the corner and went over to look at the pictures on the mantle.

There was a very picture of an attractive older couple and she assumed was his parents. Dimitri looked a lot like his father. Even in the photo, there was assuredness in those eyes. His mother was extremely beautiful.

The one next to it was of two people. Actually, there were two photos in the frame. Dimitri and who she assumed to be his older brother Khristos. In one snapshot they were in jeans and tee shirts; in the other, they wore military uniforms. Khristos was a bit taller than Dimitri and just as handsome. *Damn, these are some good-looking brothers*! The third frame had a photo of all four, and the fourth looked like a family reunion. She only recognized AJ and Anatole but no one else. The final picture up there was of Dimitri's SEAL Team. Like usual, her breath caught at the sight of the good-looking group of men.

Still, her attention moved back to the one of just Dimitri and Khristos. Her hand reached out toward it. Her heart ached for his loss.

Dimitri stood behind Landi and watched her reach out to touch the picture of him and his brother. Her wavy hair cascaded down her back. She wore a pair of white shorts that cupped her ass in a way that should be outlawed, and the tight, ribbed pink tee shirt she wore made him a goner. From the second he'd laid his eye on her at Ernst and Kacy's house, the desire to lock her away from everyone else had taken root in his mind. He loved her so much.

"Handsome isn't he?" he asked, moving up beside her in bare feet.

"Very much so." She placed the photo back and glanced at him. "You have lots of relatives."

He smiled. "Yes. The Melonakos clan is a large one."

Landi turned to him and whispered, "Welcome home."

Dimitri wrapped her in his arms and held her against him. Her mouth was waiting for his as she lowered his head. For a moment, he allowed her to be the aggressor. Her tongue invaded his mouth and laid claim to it. He loved how she was so wanton with him. Usually appearing so rigid and in total control of everything, he took pride knowing she was so uninhibited with him. She pressed against him, rubbing her tempting body along his hard one. His cock was painfully hard; and when she nipped his lip, he lost control.

Jerking his mouth off hers, Dimitri ripped off his shirt and undid his pants, shoving them down his legs and kicking them away. He reached for his boxers only to stop with her single word.

"Wait."

Dimitri bit back a groan as Landi dropped to her knees before him. His body tensed upon her soft fingers trailing across his skin. She used one hand to skim over his straining erection. Carefully, she lowered his boxers and Dimitri clenched his teeth as her pink tongue snuck out to wet her lips.

She curled her fingers around his turgid flesh. His cock jerked at the contact. Her warm breath teased him before her wet mouth slid over the head of his erection. His eyes fluttered in pleasure as her tongue ran around the underside his cockhead before her mouth sucked in more. He stared down at her and watched his shaft disappear between her full, pouty lips. Her eyes were closed but enjoyment was written all over her beautiful face.

Dimitri began to pump his hips, slipping in and out of her perfect mouth. She applied the right amount of pressure on him. Her tongue swirled over his sensitive skin. He shuddered as her fingers cupped and caressed his balls.

"Landi," he grunted even as he widened his stance to allow her easier access.

"Hmmmm?" she mumbled. Her light-chestnut eyes opened to hold his gaze.

"Stop," he muttered even as his hips continued to power into her.

"Uh-uh," her response came as she took more of him in her mouth. Her other hand settled on the thigh, nails scoring the flesh.

He wrapped his hands in her silken hair and thrust faster as she sucked harder, sending shockwaves throughout his body. His balls tightened and he knew he was close.

"Landi," he rasped. "Baby, I'm about to come."

A smile teased the corners of her mouth but she never relented. Landi played with his balls, her nails lightly raking the sensitive skin while her other hand slid around to grip the back of his thigh. Her teeth lightly scraped over his erection as he pulled back. *Gamo!* Tightening his

hold in her hair, he stroked faster, the pressure building. Gritting his teeth, he thrust twice more and erupted in her mouth. She didn't release him until she'd milked every last drop out of him.

Sultry eyes looked up at him as Landi got off her knees. Dimitri's body shook with the aftermath of his explosion. He pulled her close, his fingers digging into the flesh of her ass. "Two seconds, Landi," he growled in her ear.

"And then what happens?" she breathed heavily as one hand closed around his cock and began stroking up and down its hard length again.

"I rip your clothes off you and fuck you right here."

Dimitri could feel the shudders racking her slender body. Landi released his cock and in a second the sound of her zipper lowering reached his ears. He glanced down to watch the skimpy shorts she wore fall down over her smooth legs. He dragged his gaze back up her body in time to see her drop her pink shirt on the floor. His mouth watered as he stared at her. Perky breasts barely contained by a white satin bra and a white thong were all that stood between him and his goal.

She looked at him and used both hands to undo her bra, dropping it carelessly on the floor once she had removed it. He licked his lips and his cock bobbed as if telling him to hurry up and get to it. He sheathed himself with a condom. His need for Landi filled him. It roared for release.

He reached out and slid his fingers under the band on the side of her thong and pulled once hard. With a snap, it fell in a tiny heap on the ground. Landi's gasped in surprise.

Without missing a beat, Dimitri grabbed her around the waist and lifted her. He settled her upon his rigid erection and her legs closed around him, keeping him in deep.

"Ohhh!" she moaned.

He echoed her as her velvet heat encased him and held him tight. "This is where I belong," he grunted. "You're mine, Landi." Her muscles gripped him tightly and he leaned close to kiss her as he moved within her.

Landi didn't respond. Instead, she used her tongue to match the tempo in which he thrust in and out of her.

The phone rang as they were sharing a relaxing breakfast in bed. Dimitri fed her another bit of waffle topped with strawberries and whipped cream before picking up the receiver by his bed. Landi winked at him as she slowly chewed her bite. She was content. For the past two days, she and Dimitri had made love and eaten, not much else.

She leaned against the headboard and listened to Dimitri speak in Greek to the caller. As she took a sip of coffee, she noticed how tense he'd become.

"Everything okay?" she whispered.

His gaze was worried when he looked at her. He tried for a smile but it failed. Landi cut another bite and sat in silence. Dimitri hung up the phone and got out of bed. Her eyes followed his boxer-clad body as it moved with his usual lethal grace toward his bathroom. She stayed in bed until she heard the shower start.

Shaking her head, Landi slipped on his tee shirt and took the remains of breakfast to the kitchen. She was just finishing up the loading of the dishwasher when a fully dressed, clad in all black, and dangerous-looking Dimitri strode into view. His face was an unreadable mask and his movements were robotic.

"Dimitri?" she asked as she put the towel over her shoulder and faced him completely. "What's going on?"

"I have to go. You need to get dressed so I can take you to Kacy's or a hotel."

Emotions raged in her. Surprise, sorrow, disbelief, and anger. "Just like that?"

"There's something I have to do."

Running her tongue over her top teeth, Landi whipped the towel off her shoulder and heaved it at him. It smacked him directly in the face; and when he pulled it away, his eyes found hers.

"What the hell was that for?"

She stalked toward him. "Let me tell you something, Dimitri Androcles Melonakos. If you *think* for one moment that I'm going to go through this again, you're crazy!"

"What are you talking about?" he asked as he tossed the towel to land on the cleaned counter.

Landi poked him in the chest. "You and this damn way you clam up!" She tossed her arms up in the air. "I won't go through this again, Dimitri. I can't! I won't! I refuse! You send me away now and it's over forever. No more chances, no nothing!"

"What - ?"

She jabbed him in the sternum again. "No! Hush! You came to me for a second chance because of your dumbass decision to keep me in the dark. It was your last one. So, you think about it very carefully. If we're," she made air quotes, 'together', then don't keep me in the dark. Think about it, Dimitri." Landi headed toward his bedroom, stripped off his shirt, and padded into the shower. Her body shook at the prospect of losing him a second time.

Dimitri was sitting on the edge of the sink when she slid back the shower curtain and reached for a towel. His legs were crossed at the ankles and his hands were braced behind him, but his eyes moved appreciatively up and down her body, garnering a response she forced herself to ignore. Silently, Landi held his gaze as she wrapped the towel around her body and stepped out onto the bathmat.

"What do you want?" she asked, sliding the curtain back over.

He reached out with one arm and pulled her to him, spreading his legs so she fit perfectly between his muscled thighs. He stroked one hand down the side of her face. "I want you, Ilanderae Rogue Nycks. Every feisty, sexy inch of you." She trembled as his thumb skimmed across her lips.

"I wasn't kidding, Dimitri."

"I know, *agapi*. And you were one hundred percent right. I was doing it again, trying to keep my problems mine. And I'm sorry. It's just a habit. I don't want to lose you because of how I handle personal stress. I'll try to do better."

She stared into his eyes. "So, what's going on?"

He sighed and ran his hands over her bare arms. "It's my father. He had a heart attack and now is going in for bypass surgery. My mother needs some help."

"Oh, my God! When are you leaving?" She caressed the side of his face.

"I have a flight out of Norfolk in four hours." He leaned forward and placed his head on her chest. "I'll be gone for a while."

"Let me help."

His head flew up and he met her eyes. "You are."

"I meant out there. Let me go with you and help."

Dimitri shook his head. "I can't ask you to do that."

"You don't have to." Placing her hands on the sides of his face, Landi gently brushed their lips together. "And you never will."

Dimitri touched her face also, but his kiss was intense and possessive. His tongue drove into her mouth, sliding against hers and

making her moan in pleasure. She sucked on his tongue, pressing herself closer to him. She craved more of his body against hers.

Landi whimpered when he set her away from him. "Baby, you know I'd love to pursue this further, but I have to get to base and grab my emergency leave chit."

"I'll be ready to go when you get back." She narrowed her eyes at him. "You'd better *not* leave without me."

He kissed her lightly. "Wouldn't dare; plan on joining the mile high club with you." Dimitri went to the door where he hesitated and looked back at her. "Sas efharisto poli, agapi." Then, he vanished through the doorway in silence.

Landi got dressed, packed, and waited for Dimitri's return. She could see the hint of strain around the corners of his mouth when he entered his home. Still, he smiled as his eyes landed upon hers.

"Ready, baby?" He kissed her and went to his bedroom. She followed.

"Yes. A taxi will be here soon to take us."

Dimitri set his black duffel bag on the floor and moved to stand before her. He brushed her hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ears. His gaze was more golden than she could ever recall as he stared at her. Without any words, he pulled her into his embrace and held her.

Landi wrapped her arms around him tight. Being in his arms was the best feeling. The honking of a horn drew them apart. "Let's get going," she whispered.

## **D**C

Dimitri leaned back in his seat and swirled his drink in his hand. Beside him, Landi worked on her PDA. Stretching out his legs, he smiled despite the tension flowing through him. Flying first class was nice like that. Without asking, Landi had marched up to the counter and upgraded his ticket. When he had begun to protest, she'd leveled one of her famous "you'll-keep-your-mouth-shut-if-you-know-what's-goodfor-you!" looks at him. So with a sigh, he'd kept quiet and let her do her thing.

An arrogant smirk crossed his face as he relived their stay in the airplane's lavatory. There was nothing like a mind-blowing orgasm, or two, at cruising altitude.

"Can I get you anything else, sir?" a petite redheaded flight attendant asked.

"Another tomato juice, please."

"Right away." She winked at him before turning her attention to Landi. "And you, ma'am?"

"No, thank you," Landi said, barely glancing away from her handheld device.

"What are you doing?" Dimitri queried after the woman left.

"Making sure my schedule is covered."

"If you need to go, Landi, I'd understand."

She took his hand and squeezed. "I know you would, but being here for you is something I want to do."

His heart swelled with the love he had for her. In the back of his mind, he realized how different things would have been had she been with him during his brother's funeral. *Live and learn, Dimitri,* he thought.

He smiled his thanks at the flight attendant when she returned with his drink and then looked at Landi again. She turned her head toward him and sent him a gentle smile.

"Doing okay?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you for this."

"Don't mention it. It didn't make sense for us not to ride together." She skimmed his profile with her gaze. "Although, I bet that *redhead* would love it if I were back in coach."

Dimitri bit back a grin. He heard her undertone of jealousy. With one hand, he reached for Landi's cheek and ran the back of his hand down it. "Perhaps she would; however, I wouldn't."

"Get some sleep; we'll be landing in about an hour," she said, pulling a book out of her bag.

Knowing she was right, he quickly drank his juice and got comfortable. Before sleep claimed him, he glanced at Landi through slit eyes. She was already reading again. She turned her head to him, blew him a kiss, and stuck her nose back into her PDA.

Landi stood by the rental car silently as Dimitri embraced his mother. She was even more stunning in person than she had been in the photo. Ageless beauty.

"Mana," Dimitri said, "I want you to meet Ilanderae Nycks."

The woman stepped toward Landi, her brown eyes seeing more than Landi might have expected them to. "Thank you for coming with my son."

"I am so sorry we had to meet under this situation, Mrs. Melonakos," Landi said, leaning in to kiss Mrs. Melonakos on the cheek.

"Please call me, Airlia, or mama, or *mana*. Let's get you two settled in. Then I have to get back to the hospital."

They followed her inside the large brick home. Landi smiled slightly at Dimitri's reaction to his mother putting them in separate rooms. She assumed he'd expected them to share one. He kept his mouth shut on the subject, but burned Landi with the heat of his gaze as he leaned his head in the doorway of her room and winked. Landi knew she'd have a visitor at night.

His mother muttered in Greek as she walked around on the lower floor, picking up things and setting them back down.

"Come on, Mana. I'll take you to the hospital."

"I have to make dinner, still, gios."

"Please, don't worry about that, Mrs. Melonakos," Landi broke in. "I can make dinner."

"You?" she gasped. "You're a guest!"

"Not right now. Consider me family. I'll cook and clean so you can spend more time with your husband."

Airlia opened her mouth and then shut it. With a nod, she looked at her son and said something in Greek before coming to Landi's side and giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you." She grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

Landi blushed under the intensity of Dimitri's gaze. He reached out with one hand and skimmed her lower lip. "I'll be back soon, agapi." His lips brushed hers lightly and then he left with his mother.

With a sigh, Landi sat down in a large overstuffed chair that smelled faintly of pipe tobacco. This was his father's chair. Running a hand through her hair, Landi chewed on her lower lip. Had she made the right decision? Would she only be in the way?

Reaching for her cell phone, she made a call. "Hey, Monique," she said when the caller answered. "I need you do something for me. Can you shoot the files we've been working on out to the office in LA?" She paused while Monique spoke. "I know, but I'm out here at the moment, and I can swing by and pick them up to go over." Getting out of the chair, Landi walked to the kitchen and looked around the open space. "Thanks, hon. Yes, I'm on my cell. Call if you need anything."

Shutting her phone, Landi placed her hands on the smooth countertop. "Well, now, all I have to do is figure out what to make for dinner." Landi shook her head. "Admit it, Ilanderae, you're worried. And why? Because they are from a family that owns a restaurant." She lowered her head to the countertop and groaned. A little bit later, the doorbell chimed and she opened it to find Tim standing there with the documents she'd requested.

"Thanks, Tim." She closed the door behind him and took them to her room. Landi preferred to see things out before her. Though her PDA could accept color photos, she liked the images in her hands to set up a layout.

A rumble of thunder reached her ears as she walked to her bag and grabbed her mp3 player. She turned her music on to shuffle. With a deep breath, Landi moved to the refrigerator and peered inside to see what she could prepare. She figured six o'clock was a good time to plan on eating. Then, she went to her bedroom.

Landi browsed the images of the outfits for her upcoming show. She needed to make sure they all were perfect. She'd placed a call to the LA office and her man there, Tim, had driven the pictures over to her.

"Landi?" Dimitri's voice broke into her focus.

Pulling a bud out of her ear, she looked over her shoulder at him. "Hey," she said, standing straight and meeting him halfway for a hug. As his arms slid around her, she asked, "Is everything okay?"

"They're prepping him for surgery. I just came back to check on you and then I'll head back."

"I'm fine, Dimitri. Don't worry about me; focus on your family." Landi pulled away. "Do you want me to fix you something to eat before you go?"

His smile was strained. "No, I'm fine. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. I'm finalizing my decisions for the show. Go be there for your mom and I'll see you for dinner."

"S'agapo, Landi." He kissed her thoroughly and vanished during the time it took her to recover.

It was raining when the front door opened for Airlia and Dimitri's entrance. Landi saw them as she wiped her hands off on the towel while Dimitri and his mom walked in the kitchen. Landi blushed as Dimitri brushed his lips over hers. "Smells wonderful, Landi," he praised.

"Yes, it does," Airlia agreed.

Landi blushed again. "Thank you. The lasagna will be ready in about five minutes."

She walked to the fridge, pulled out a large bowl of salad, and placed it on the round table in the dining room. She turned to see Dimitri carrying the plates, glasses, and silverware. He kept staring at her as he set the table and she fidgeted underneath his powerful gaze.

"Would you stop staring at me?" she asked quietly.

He glanced at her through the hair that fell over his eyes. "Why? I can't help it. It's either that or do what I *really* want to do to you."

Landi looked down at her outfit. Loose-fitting cargo pants and a black tee shirt, and yet still she flushed as his words flowed over her. She could be wearing a burlap sack and he'd manage to make her feel sexy and beautiful. Not to mention horny. "Behave, Dimitri," she begged. "This is your mother's house."

The wicked smile he sent her didn't set her at ease. "I'll be good for now."

Without a word, Landi went back into the kitchen, shut off the oven, and pulled out the piping-hot lasagna. A sniff caught her attention and she looked over her shoulder. Airlia was standing in the living room, trying to find her composure. Something told Landi Dimitri's mother didn't want anyone to know she was falling apart. Moving swiftly but carefully, Landi carried the pan over to the table and put it down.

"I'll go get my mom," Dimitri said.

Landi grabbed his arm and shook her head when he looked at her. "She'll be in; just give her a minute. I think she needs to be alone for the moment."

Dimitri held her gaze before he nodded. "Okay." He reached for the glass pitcher and poured each of them a glass of water. Then he walked to a wine rack and searched until he found a bottle of wine. He filled two wine glasses and set the bottle on the table.

"Sorry," Airlia said as she walked in. "Didn't mean to keep everyone waiting."

"No problem, Mana. We're just ready now."

Landi waited to see where they sat before she went to a chair. She smiled at how Dimitri held his mother's chair for her and then moved around to do the same with hers. As he slid her in close to the table, his warm breath caressed her neck and she swallowed in an effort to remain unresponsive, knowing full well his mother watched.

Dimitri found Landi curled up on one side of the blue loveseat out in the sitting room, her pink phone by her leg as she stared out at the night. He'd taken his mom back to the hospital to see Feodras one more time. Now she was in her room trying to get some sleep, so he'd come looking for Ms. Landi Nycks.

"Hey, beautiful," he said softly, shutting the sliding glass door behind him.

"Hi," Landi responded in the same low tone. "How's he doing?"

Dimitri sat next to her and smiled as she immediately snuggled up against him. She took one of his hands and laced their fingers.

"He is doing well, considering. He should be home in a few days at the most." Brushing his lips over her head, he idly ran one hand up her exposed arm. "He just looks so old and frail."

Her hand tightened around his. "I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

"Baby, you're doing it. Being here, making dinner, it was so much more than I could've ever hoped for. Thank you." Dimitri tucked her in closer, resting his chin on her head. "Are you tired?"

"Yes. I just wanted to wait up for you and find out how things went."

"Let's go to bed, then."

"I should." Uncurling from his embrace, Landi picked up her phone and leaned down to kiss him briefly. "Goodnight, Dimitri." She padded silently to the door, slid it open, and slipped through.

Chuckling softly, Dimitri watched her lithe figure disappear from view. "I don't think so, Landi," he whispered as he slowly got to his feet and followed. Before going upstairs, he double-checked all the locks and turned off the lights. As he stood in the bathroom brushing his teeth, Dimitri wondered what Landi would do if he asked her to marry him...again. Shaking his head at his reflection, he knew it wasn't the right time.

Moving silently through the dark hall, he approached Landi's room, swinging the door open and slipping inside. A single lamp lit the room as Landi sat at the desk and stared at the items before her, giving him a side profile.

"Thought you were going to bed," he whispered as he shut the door behind him.

She jumped. "What are you doing in here?" she questioned, turning her head to meet his gaze.

"I'm here for bed," he stated as if it were obvious.

"This is your parents' house!" she hissed.

"I know." Dimitri prowled closer. When she stood all the blood in his body rushed to his lower extremities. She wore a subdued pink satin gown with an empire waist and a sweetheart neckline. It had a high slit up the right leg, allowing him to catch glimpses of her beautiful skin. "Jesus," he groaned.

Landi tipped her head to the side, her hair covering the thin straps holding up her gown. "You okay?"

"You, Landi, are so fucking hot." He closed the distance between them. "Each time I look at you, my heart skips a beat."

"We can't do this, Dimitri," she muttered, one hand settling against his bared chest. His lower body jerked at the slight contact.

"We'll just have to be quiet," he corrected. Sliding his hand along her face, he used his thumb to skim her lips. They trembled and parted beneath his touch. Her heavy lashes fell forward to caress her cheeks before they lifted to leave him staring into her brown eyes full of burning passion.

"I shouldn't," she protested.

Slipping one hand into her wavy hair, he groaned as the silky strands cascaded over his fingers. His gaze traveled over her face, big amazing eyes, full lips parted and just begging to be kissed, high cheekbones, and cute little nose. Landi wrapped a hand around the one on her face. Against his hand, hers seemed delicate. His heart lurched as she blinked and looked at him again. He just wanted to dive in the deep pools of her eyes and never leave.

Dimitri saw himself with this woman and children. Their children. The feeling of love was so strong he inhaled sharply. Her wide eyes held his and she asked, "Are you okay?"

Lowering his mouth to hers, he whispered, "Yes." Then he kissed her. He traced her lips with his tongue before gaining entrance to her full mouth. Slowly and tenderly, Dimitri coaxed her tongue out to play with his. He caught her sigh in his mouth and swallowed it. His pants grew tight as her sensual taste filled his senses. Her cool, satin gown slid across his bare chest.

Landi let go of his hand upon her face and moved hers to join the other one on his chest. Her fingers trailed through his chest hair and over each nipple. Her nails raked him lightly and he fought down a sharp gasp.

"Get out of this, Landi," he ordered even as his hands began inching it up along her legs.

"Don't rip it; I like this one. It's one of my favorites." She stepped back from him and held up a hand when he stepped forward. "Stay."

Forcing himself to listen, Dimitri stared as she slowly pulled off the gown, leaving her clad in matching boy panties. A wave of longing shot through him when she hooked her thumbs in them, lowered them to the floor, and kicked them away. His eyes roved over her naked body and his throat grew tight. *Beautiful*.

He closed the distance between them and scooped her up. Laying her gently on the bed, he lowered himself over her prone body, one of his legs between hers. His lips skimmed over her soft skin as he moved along her jaw line. One hand traced the contours of her body and back up again to rest upon her breast. She gasped in his mouth as his thumb and finger began rolling her taut nipple between them.

"Dimitri," she panted, rubbing her bare pussy against his jeanclad thigh.

"Easy, baby, let me love you." His mouth moved down to replace his hand on her breast. She gasped as he used his tongue to lave the sensitive nipple. He alternated between the two loving how she tasted. His cock grew heavy against the confines of his jeans.

A need to slide into her filled him in a way he'd never felt before. While their attraction had always been intense and powerful, this was more. So much more.

"I need you inside me, Dimitri."

Grazing her nipple with his teeth, he released her breast. In seconds he stood before her naked. Landi lay on her back. A small, gold heart pendant necklace rested against her skin; otherwise, she was completely naked. Her eyes were heavy lidded with passion; her mouth was slightly open; and her bald pussy wept with desire.

Curling his fingers around his cock, Dimitri slowly fisted himself as he stared down at her. His belly clenched when her tongue snuck out to wet her full lips. He moved forward when her legs spread wider in invitation. Lowering himself over her, he settled between her open thighs, the head of his erection penetrating her.

"Please," she said.

"Protection," he ground out as he tried to hold on to his control. Her legs rose and wrapped around him, drawing him closer. A groan slipped past his lips as her internal wet heat gripped his length. "I'm on the Pill," she told him.

With a thrust of his hips, he sank fully into her. "Shit!" he hissed. Her muscles gripped him as he withdrew, telling him not to go. Landi purred and moved with him.

Feeling her wrapped around him without a latex barrier between them blew Dimitri's mind. He ground his teeth together so it wouldn't end too soon. Shutting his eyes, he fought for control, but her sexy mewls and pants kept grabbing his attention. He had to watch her beneath him.

Landi unhooked her legs from around his waist and placed her feet on the mattress. Undulating her hips, she offered him deeper penetration and more friction with her tight pussy. He picked up the speed and depth of his unrelenting thrusts.

Taking her hands in his, Dimitri laced their fingers and placed them above her head. Lowering his head to the curve of her neck and shoulder, he licked along her skin. She trembled beneath him as the faint tang of sweat permeated his senses. The scent of lemon, lavender, and peppermint filled him. Grazing the side of her throat with his teeth, Dimitri continued to power into her. His body burned for release, and he could feel her tightening around his shaft as her panting grew higher and faster.

"Shhh," he reminded her. "No noise."

She whimpered. Her mouth bit down on his shoulder blade as her internal muscles rippled along his length. She came hard. Gritting his teeth, Dimitri pistoned in and out her wet channel until he came with a powerful jerk. He barely choked back his own roar of pleasure as he unloaded deep within her.

Lowering his trembling body on hers, Dimitri rolled them to the side and held her close as their hearts began to slow. He rested his hand along the curve of her hip and closed his eyes, accepting the feeling of completion this woman brought him.

## D((

Landi leaned against the railing as Dimitri's dad Feodras walked out to join her on the wraparound porch. She and Dimitri had been at his parents' home for over a week, and she stared out over the beautiful Melonakos backyard. Dimitri's mother had an amazing garden.

Feodras's deep voice broke the silence. "My wife loves to garden; gives her a sense of peace."

"It's a wonderful one," Landi remarked, slanting a glace to the man beside her. He looked a little pale still but overall she could see improvement from when he first returned two days ago. His black hair was thick with a smattering of gray throughout it, giving him a distinguished look. And yet, she could still see the rakish man he must have been back in the day.

"My son is in love with you. He calls you his other half."

The comments were so matter of fact, Landi wasn't sure how to respond. Opting for a safe way out, she remarked, "He's an amazing man."

A light chuckle filled the air. "I agree." Feodras sat down on the porch swing at the corner, allowing the person to see both front and backyards, and pushed it gently with one foot, allowing it to flow in the warm afternoon. "Tell me, Landi."

She sat down on the railing. "What would you like to know, sir?"

"Do you plan on having children?"

For a moment, she took offense. *That's none of your business!* Staring into his eyes, she then understood he wasn't being presumptive and demanding, but just curious and straightforward like the rest of the Melonakos men she'd met. Then, she smiled. "I'm not sure. I have other obligations to keep in mind."

One graying brow rose. "A young thing like you? What could keep you from having kids of your own?"

Landi remained silent for a few seconds. This was something she hadn't told anyone, not even Kacy. Feodras beckoned to her and Landi joined him on the swing. He picked up her hand in his and squeezed. His look encouraged her.

"I have a responsibility to my family that takes precedence over my own personal wants." Landi smiled to counter his frown. "The man I marry will have to understand I will be my sisters' caregiver when my parents are no long capable. There aren't a lot of men out there who would be okay with that. They'd like their own children without having to care for my mentally challenged sisters."

"You will take care of your family over your own happiness?" "I love my family, Mr. Melonakos. Caring for them *is* my happiness."

"I meant no harm, just that you deserve to have children of your own."

A sly grin crossed his face as he commented in Greek. Then he squeezed her hand and said in English, "You are wise beyond your years, Ilanderae. I understand why my son feels the way he does about you. You have the kindest of hearts."

Landi gave him a warm smile. Not too many said that about her. She was well-known for her cutting tongue. "You are very nice, Mr. Melonakos."

"Call me, *pateras*," Feodras ordered with a wink. "I've always wanted a daughter. And you, Landi, are perfect for the spot." He kissed the back of her hand.

"I see where your son gets his charm."

Feodras grinned and shrugged easily. "Yes, the Melonakos charm." Gesturing to the backyard, he sighed and changed the subject.

Dimitri moved silently away from the door and sat down in the living room. Idly he picked up a magazine and flipped through it, not really paying attention to the words before him. He and Landi had some things to discuss. Why hadn't she told him about caring for her sisters? Did she think he wouldn't agree to watch over them? He adored her sisters and loved how she planned to take care of them.

"Gios."

He looked up from the magazine and saw his mother standing before him. "Mana," he responded with affection. His mother, Airlia, looked much better now that his father had returned home. Tossing the publication on the coffee table, he rose and placed a kiss on her cheek.

She gave him a small smile before sinking gracefully to the couch and patting the cushion beside her. Following her unspoken directive, Dimitri sat down.

"Everything okay, mana?"

"This woman you brought here, Dimitri. You were with her when Khristos died?" she asked in Greek.

"Yes." Airlia arched a brow at him and he smiled. "We were going to be married that day," he responded also speaking in Greek. She narrowed her gaze at him and Dimitri knew she wanted more of an explanation. "I was a spur of the moment thing, Mom. We would have had a larger one with the families."

"And now?"

Dimitri stared at his hands. "Now I'm trying to earn her trust back. I never stopped loving her."

She tipped his face toward hers. "And this is why you and Alejandro did what you did?"

Damn! How'd she find out about that? I'm gonna kick AJ's ass when I see him next! Dimitri shrugged as nonchalantly as he could. "She was avoiding me."

Her brows rose again before her beautiful eyes turned sad. "Don't let her go then, Dimitri. I can see she is your saving grace. She is a wonderful woman." Airlia averted her gaze for a moment and commented almost to herself, "I learned my lesson with Khristos."

Dimitri furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?" When her eyes met his he could see even more sorrow and even some shame in them. He reached for her hands and held them.

"I wanted you and Khristos to marry nice Greek girls, and I think I only succeeded in pushing Khristos further away by always telling him that. He was so secretive toward the end. He introduced us to one girl, Austin, but I only saw her once until the funeral. She stood with some of his other friends. I think...I think he loved her." With one hand, she wiped her eyes. "Anyway, I wanted to make sure you *knew* how fond I am of your Landi. She makes you happy, which is all I could want for my son. I love you, Dimitri Androcles Melonakos." One hand touched his cheek before she stood.

"Love you, too, *mana*," he whispered in English as she exited the room.

Austin. He'd often wondered that as well, but Khristos had never divulged anything to him about her other than they were good friends. His phone's ringing snapped him away from memory lane.

"Melonakos."

"Hi, Dimitri," came the soft greeting.

He smiled. "Hey, Austin! I was just thinking about you. How are you?"

"I'm okay. How's your father?"

He'd called her with the news, thinking she ought to know about it for the simple reason his brother had thought so much of her. "Doing well, thanks. He's home now."

"Wonderful."

He could hear the tension in her voice. "Austin, what's going on?"

"Do you have time to meet me?"

"Of course. Where are you?" He listened as she told him. "I can be there in about thirty minutes. Is that okay?"

"Yes, I'll see you then. Thank you, Dimitri." She ended the call.

Pressing the button on his cell, he left the couch and went to his room to change. With a quick kiss for Landi, who still sat with his father on the swing, he climbed into the car. As he pulled into a parking spot at the park, his eyes immediately picked out Austin. She stood by a play area, wringing her hands, and looking entirely too nervous.

Landi's heart caught when Dimitri pulled back into the driveway. Her gaze narrowed as another vehicle followed. Sitting at the wheel of that car was a blonde woman. What the fuck is going on here? She remained seated on the porch swing as Dimitri got out and walked back to the other car to open the door for the female.

Long, feminine fingers curled familiarly around Dimitri's arm as they moved toward the back door of the Nissan Sentra. When the screen door beside her opened, Landi still kept her gaze on the two by the vehicle.

"Austin," Airlia gasped as she let the door shut behind her.

So the mom knows her. An ugly wave of jealousy rose up within Landi. The woman complemented Dimitri's darker coloring with her blonde hair and tan skin. Whoever she was, she stood about two inches shorter than Dimitri and was very beautiful.

A cold chill overcame Landi as the woman backed out of the car holding a young boy. Landi's stomach sank to her toes. The child was an exact replica of Dimitri. Rising, despite her shaking knees, Landi muttered, "Excuse me," as she cast one more disbelieving look at the trio before slipping inside the house.

"Landi!" Dimitri's shout followed behind her, but she didn't stop. In fact, she increased her steps toward her room.

Tears threatened as she closed the door and sagged against it. Taking care of her sisters was one thing, but could she really help him raise his son from another woman? It was hard to breathe and she stumbled to the bed, sinking down on the thick mattress.

Do I stay? Maybe it would be better if I left. Reaching for her cell, Landi scrolled through her address book for the number she wanted to call. With a groan, she snapped her phone shut.

"Get a grip and make up your mind, Landi." Tossing her phone beside her, Landi stood and reached for her bag. She could get some more work done at the LA office while she waited for the next flight out. It would probably be a redeye, but she didn't care. Before long, she'd packed her suitcase and zipped it shut. Suddenly, her door swung open. Her breath caught as her gaze landed upon the lean hard physique of Dimitri Melonakos.

"Landi," he said closed the door behind him. His expression hardened as his golden eyes shot flames when they landed on her packed suitcase. "What the hell is this? Are you leaving?"

"I think it for the best, don't you?"

"No!" He moved toward her. "Landi, don't do this. It's not what you are thinking."

She bristled. "How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"Baby, it's all over your face." He gripped her upper arm and she glanced down at his fingers then back to his face. The look in his eyes softened but was no less serious. "He's not mine, Landi. That's my nephew."

*Right.* Her expression must have portrayed her disbelief for he sighed heavily, letting go of her and shoving his hand through his hair.

"Landi. Why would I bring a woman here with a child who's supposedly mine without telling you first? I couldn't...I wouldn't do that to you." He cupped her face, allowing his thumb to stroke along her lower lip. "Her name is Austin and she was pregnant with Khristos's baby when he died. But she never told us because she didn't think our parents approved of her. When I'd told her about my father going into surgery, she wanted to make sure he at least got to meet his grandson."

Wrapping her fingers around his wrist, Landi sat down on the edge of the bed. "I...I'm so ashamed. I thought...I thought..."

"Don't, Landi. This is a shock to all of us. I didn't know until I met her at the park and she told me. Now, will you please forget about leaving and come down to meet my nephew?"

Landi licked her lips. "I think this is a time for family."

A small smile turned up one corner of his mouth. "Baby, you *are* family. Not yet as I'd like, but we'll get to that later. Please come with me." Dimitri stood and reached out for her hand.

Worrying her lower lip again, Landi's insides melted when Dimitri leaned down and covered her mouth with his. It was a gentle, coaxing kiss that eliminated her doubt revealed his feelings.

"Dimitri," she sighed when he ended the kiss.

"S'agapo, Ilanderae. For me...there's only you."

Blinking back tears, Landi allowed him to pull her to her feet. Holding hands, they went to the living room where everyone else had gathered.

A while later, Landi stood off to the side and observed Dimitri playing with his nephew. *He's going to be a wonderful father*. Just as the thought ran through her head, he looked in her direction and winked. The happiness he exuded made her heart wrench. This was a man who longed to have children of his own.

A cold blanket of awareness settled around her. She couldn't promise giving him them. Despite the sadness that settled over her, Landi returned Dimitri's smile. Should she let him continue to pursue her even though kids weren't a guarantee with her? Didn't he deserve a woman who could and would definitely give him that?

Like Austin?

Landi's fingers tightened around the mug of tea she held. The way Austin kept glancing at Dimitri bespoke of longing and familiarity. Landi shoved down the anger that threatened to rise up within her. But Dimitri held his nephew so lovingly in his arms, and the way the blonde stared at Dimitri made Landi almost feel like an outsider.

Bringing the mug to her lips, Landi allowed the warm brew to slide down her throat. A vibration at her side pulled her attention off the handsome Greek who played with a child that could be his clone. "Nycks," she said. It was Tim at the LA office. Landi entered the house, leaving her cup in the sink, and went to her room to take the call.

Dimitri folded up the blanket his nephew had been playing on in the sunroom. Khristos was off with his folks getting ice cream. A smile filled his face as he recalled his parents' reaction to Khristos. They were already doting on him.

"I think this went very well," Austin said from behind him.

Placing the blanket on the back of the overstuffed chair beside him, Dimitri looked at her. "Yes. It's obvious they love him. I'm glad you told us about him, Austin. Thank you."

She smiled slightly and cast a glance behind her before she shoved her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. She moved closer to him. "He looks a lot like you...and Khristos."

"I see some of you in him as well," Dimitri commented as he sat on the arm of the chair, sending her a kind smile. "He's a great boy, Austin. Khristos would be proud of the way you're raising him." Austin walked closer, her blonde hair swaying in time with each step. "Thank you. Every time I look at him, I miss his father even more. Some days," she paused and ran a hand through her hair, "I don't know how I'm going to make it. I feel so alone."

"You aren't alone, Austin. Don't forget that." Dimitri swallowed as tears began to stream down her face. He stood and placed a hand slightly on her shaking shoulder. "You aren't alone. Don't think like that."

With a loud sob, she threw herself at him. Instinctively, Dimitri used his arms to support her. She tightened her hold on him and continued to cry. Feeling a bit awkward, he patted her back lightly. Consoling people didn't rank high on the list of things he did well.

Licking his lower lip, he adjusted his stance as her face burrowed deeper into his neck. Her breathing slowed and eventually the racking sobs rocketing through her subsided. Austin's grip on his muscles changed. She inhaled sharply and he felt her breasts slide across the planes of his chest. She froze before drawing back and staring at him, showing him the red-rimmed gaze she retained.

"Sorry," she murmured, stepping back.

"It's okay."

Her eyes flashed back to his and then scanned up and down his body. "You look a lot like your brother." He smiled slightly and Austin moved forward, erasing the distance she'd put between them. "I bet you hear that a lot though."

"Not too much," he said. "I'm not around people who knew him." His heart clenched with pain as he recalled his brother with his easy-going personality and winning smile. *God, I miss him*.

"I did," Austin muttered, reaching toward his face only to stop at the last second. "I knew him and trust me, there are a lot of similarities." She placed herself right before him, barely leaving any space between them. "He was so proud of you."

Dimitri hadn't any clue Khristos had talked about him. "I didn't know that."

"All the time. He always told me to go to you if he couldn't be reached. That there was none other he trusted."

One eyebrow arched. Dimitri waited for her to continue. When she remained silent, he said, "You have my nephew; anything I can do to help, I will."

Austin reached for his face, touching his hair at the last moment. Her gaze grew shuttered. The second he wrapped his fingers around her wrist, she closed her baby blues. "I can't do this," she whispered.

"Austin," Dimitri said. "Austin, look at me." She did and he could see the need in her eyes.

Before he could continue, she cupped his face. "Please don't make me be alone. It's been so long," she told him as her arms wound around his neck. "So long since I've been held."

He swallowed as he gripped her upper arms, setting her away from him. "Austin, I'm not my brother. I can't be the man for you."

"I need you!" she wailed and lunged toward him. Her lips pressed hungrily against his, her tongue thrusting into his mouth.

Dimitri jerked away from her and stepped around the chair so it sat like a barrier between them. A flash of movement caught his eye and his heart sank when he realized who it could've been. Pinning his gaze on the blonde in the room, he said, "I'm not Khristos. *Don't* do that again."

She sank down to sit on the edge of the coffee table, but he didn't move closer. "I'm sorry. I forgot myself there. Your touch, accent, all of it...please, forgive me."

Forcing a smile past the dread welling up in his belly, Dimitri nodded once. "Excuse me, Austin. I have to go speak to Landi." Without waiting for an answer, he left the sunroom and jogged up the stairs toward Landi's room.

"Landi," he said as he entered the room without knocking. It was empty. A growl of anger rose up within him. Spinning around, he headed back down the stairs; he needed his phone and it was in the kitchen.

His mom was in there loading the dishwasher. "Mana." Under her watchful eye, he reached for his phone.

"Gios," she responded with affection. Her expression became worried as she continued to watch his face. "What's wrong, Dimitri?"

"Did you see Landi leave?" His heart clenched as he waited for the response.

"Of course. She said she went to tell you. Did she not?" His mother spoke in Greek.

He  $\mathit{knew}$  Landi had seen the kiss. "No," he answered, "I was talking to Austin."

"There is something you aren't telling me, son." She closed the dishwasher. "But I'll assume you and Landi will work it out when she returns."

*Returns? She's coming back?* In English, he replied, "Yes, mana. We're fine."

"Okay. Your dinner is in the oven. Take it out when the timer goes off." She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "We'll be back later." Before he could ask, his mother had left the room. In moments, he waved goodbye to his parents, Austin, and her son.

The instant he was alone, Dimitri pressed the call button for Landi's number.

"Nycks." Her voice soothed the angered beast within him.

"Where are you, baby?"

"Dimitri." Her response sounded flat. "What can I do for you?"

"Where are you?"

"The office. I'm a bit busy; can whatever's on your mind wait for a bit?"

No! "When are you returning to the house?"

"I'll be back in about two more hours." The sound of papers shuffling reached him.

His shoulders slumped. "Okay." *Really, what can I say?* The alpha within him wanted to demand she come to him, but Dimitri knew that wasn't the way to deal with Landi. Never one to back down, Landi had a tongue that could flay the hide off an armadillo without breaking a sweat if someone pushed her.

"Bye, Dimitri." Her words flowed over him.

"S'agapo, Landi," he muttered to the dial tone droning on in his ear.

Landi sighed as she closed her phone. For the first time in a long time, she longed to forget work and go back to Dimitri. She knew he wanted to discuss the kiss between him and Austin, but now wasn't the time. Yes, it had hurt to see; but if there were ever a time to trust him, it was now. Tim slid a folder before her dragging her attention from the lingering memory of Dimitri's voice to the work before her. Soon all her concentration was on the job at hand.

She relaxed in the back of the town car as it drove her back to the Melonakos home. She was tired. Meeting Dimitri's nephew and Austin had taken a lot more out of her than she'd realized. Heading to the LA office had truly been a blessing, giving her a moment to step back and get control of her emotions.

Especially her jealousy and anger at Austin kissing Dimitri. She'd longed to run in there and beat the shit out of her; but instead, Landi had left. Having a brawl in his parents' house was not high on her to-do list. Landi had told Jason what had happened, and bless him, he'd told her to take a step back and calm down.

Her gaze snapped to the door as the black vehicle gently came to a stop. With a deep breath, Landi grabbed her purse, left the comfortable interior, and, with a wave to the driver, went up the brick steps. The door opened before she got there and her heart lodged in her throat as her gaze ran over Dimitri standing there waiting for her.

He wore black, a color he made look *so* damn good. His shirt hung open on his lean muscular frame, allowing her to ogle the tanned skin of his chest. She could see the silver of his belt shinning in the early-evening sun. The sight before her made her mouth go dry and her pussy flood. As she moved toward him, his golden gaze pierced her. In its depths she read a gamut of emotions.

Licking her lips, she smiled and said, "Hey."

"Landi," he murmured as he closed the rest of the distance between them and wrapped his powerful arms around her. His scent gave her the feeling of coming home, being safe and protected. His deep, soothing voice continued on in Greek.

When he stopped talking, she asked, "You the only one here?" He released her enough to allow her to enter the house. "Yes. Landi, about earlier...the thing with Austin—"

"The *kiss* y'all shared?" she asked, cutting him off. Her eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"No!" His stare hardened. "We didn't *share* a kiss. She kissed me."

Landi could tell he was gearing up for a confrontation. At that moment, Landi realized she didn't want to argue. Whatever demon that had pushed that button no long had any power. Holding up a hand, she shook her head.

"Leave it, Dimitri. It bothered me, yes. I wanted to hurt you both, yes. But the bottom line is I trust you. There wasn't anything between you. Drop it."

Relief flooded his face. "Oh, Landi," he said, pulling her in close. "I thought I was going to lose you. I swear it didn't mean a thing. She wants my brother."

Figures. "I kinda thought so. I saw the way she watched you more and more." Landi's stomach roiled at the replaying image of Austin kissing Dimitri. Squeezing her eyes shut, she did her best to put it behind her. Harder than I thought it would be.

A squeal escaped as Dimitri swept her up in his arms and carried her up the staircase to her bedroom. Her heart sped up as he turned a warm, golden pair of eyes upon her.

"Love you, Landi," he announced as he lowered them both to the bed.

*I love you, too, Dimitri.* Landi wondered in the back of her mind if she'd ever be able to voice those words aloud to the man currently removing her clothing.

They made love until exhaustion overtook them. After a long shower together, they had dinner. When his parents returned home, they spent the remainder of the evening playing cards.

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The warm sun shone down upon Dimitri as he walked through streets and the numerous vendors lining them. A gentle breeze ruffled the fabric of his blue-and-white Hawaiian shirt. Before long, a beautiful brunette joined him. His gaze ran appreciatively over the blue microskirt she wore and the light-blue bikini top that nicely complemented her tanned skin.

As her arm slid through his, they entered a hotel lobby and headed straight to the pool. Dimitri smiled as his date prattled on about where she wanted to go tonight. As he lounged back in the chaise, the cell phone attached to his pocket began to ring.

He answered it with a groan. "Hello?"

"Landi's here and I don't just mean in Rio. I mean at the same fucking hotel," the voice on the other end said without preamble.

His heart skipped a few beats. Slicing his gaze to the woman beside him, Dimitri gave Mara a smile. "I understand, thank you." He ended the call and placed the phone back on the clip.

"Anything important?" Her syrupy voice slid along his skin.

She rotated in the double chaise to drape her body against his. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, Dimitri leaned forward and brushed a kiss along her cheek. "Not at all. I'm going to get a drink; be right back." Unwrapping her body from his, he got to his feet and walked to the bar.

"Your usual, sir?" A man with intense gray eyes asked.

"Yes, please," Dimitri said as he sat easily on a stool.

Ross whipped up a cocktail for him. Dimitri kept an eye on the woman he was with as she stood and shucked off the scrap of material passing as a skirt, removed her heels, and dove gracefully into the water. He glanced back when the drink settled beside him.

"Thank you," Dimitri mentioned as he slid a bill across the bar and walked off, drink in hand. There was no need to look back; the men had worked together long enough so mere actions portrayed what they wanted...or needed. And in this case, Dimitri needed to get to Ilanderae Nycks before everything was blown.

Giving himself a strong mental shake, Dimitri took a long drink of his mojito. As he sat down on the edge of the chaise, Mara lifted herself from the pool. Water ran off her toned body and she drew many appreciative stares. Her deep blue eyes met his and without hesitation, he rose and walked to her with towel in hand.

"Obrigada. Water's great," she cooed as she took the offered towel and patted her face and arms.

"You're welcome, and I'm glad to hear that," he agreed with a smile. "Let's grab a bite to eat." Together, they walked back to the chaise.

"Wonderful." She dried her legs and tugged her skirt back on, then bent over to fasten her shoes. Tossing the towel carelessly onto the empty chaise, Mara stared at him expectantly.

Dimitri offered his arm and together they headed for a vacant table. His mind was not on his companion, but rather on the news he'd received over the phone. He missed Landi. No matter how beautiful Rio was, he would much rather be with Landi. Holding her. Kissing her. Loving her.

But they were here to eliminate the threat on an American ambassador before he was assassinated. Dimitri had been in Rio for the past five days under the guise of taking a vacation. According to the intel, the woman beside him was linked to the supposed group who had planned the hit. Personally, he believed the assassin was Mara. Her cool and collected demeanor along with some mannerisms he'd seen hinted at it to him.

Holding her chair, Dimitri smiled again as Mara slipped into her seat. He sat beside her and didn't refuse her reach for his hand. Fingers intertwined, they waited for the waiter. His expression barely changed as their server approached—a tall black man he knew very well.

"Boa tarde," the waiter said. "What can I get you two today?"

Dimitri went first, knowing Mara always liked to look over the menu longer. When she finally got around to ordering, a shiver ran up his spine. Glancing around casually, Dimitri realized why. Ilanderae Nycks had arrived. Picking up his drink, he took a slow sip as he ate up the vision she presented like a hungry wolf feeding on meat.

Landi wore one of her own creations; he recognized it from a pre-show practice run he'd attended with her. It was simple dress, but she made stunning. The color was a frothy blue-green that complemented her skin with perfection. Her shoes matched, of course; and on her face were a pair of mirrored sunglasses. His heart had sped up at

the sight of her, then stuttered a bit when Jason pointed in his direction while he spoke to Landi. Because of her glasses, Dimitri couldn't read her expression. Her head turned his way and she shook her head before she sat in her seat. It left him staring at her bared back.

"Hey," Mara said, grabbing his attention.

"Yes?"

"Have you decided what we're doing this evening?"

Dimitri licked his lips and smiled as he stared into Mara's blue eyes, wishing with everything within him they were Landi's brown ones. "Whatever you wish."

Landi longed to throw a tantrum, puke, and fly into the rage threatening to consume her. When she'd followed Jason's finger, her gaze landed upon Dimitri holding hands with a very attractive brunette.

"Are you *sure* that's not him, Landi?" Jason asked, fury evident in his tone. "It looks just like him to me."

With a sigh, Landi opened her mouth to respond when a shadow fell over them. She looked up into the eyes of their waiter.

"Ms. Nycks, excuse the interruption. Can you come with me for a moment please? The manager would like a word with you."

Jason frowned even as Landi nodded. "Jase, will you order for me? I'll be right back." Without waiting for an answer, she followed the waiter.

"This way please, ma'am."

Landi trailed after her escort to the manager's room. He knocked before opening the door, indicating she should proceed through alone. The moment she entered, the door closed behind her. The manager had the back of the chair toward her and when he spun around, her heart leapt to her throat. *Holy shit! I know him!* Legs a bit weak, she perched upon the edge of the nearest chair.

Before her in the white leather chair sat Dimitri's commanding officer, Scott "Harrier" Leighton.

"Ms. Nycks," he began. "I need to know if you're going to be a problem or not." His tone was nothing but business and there was very little warmth in his stare. This was a man who'd seen too much. Despite the warm tropical air flowing through the open windows, Landi still shivered.

"Ms. Nycks?"

"A problem what? I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

Scott leaned forward and rested powerful forearms on the desk. "I don't have time for games. Will you blow Merlin's cover? Or can you accept seeing him with another woman?"

Landi narrowed her eyes. "So it *is* him! And what is he doing that calls for him to be with that leggy brunette?" *Are these guys covering for one another?* She stared at his hand and there was no wedding ring. There was no tan line from one, either. Her temper flared.

"Stopping an assassination," Scott stated bluntly. "If you can't pretend not to know  $\lim$ 

Landi jerked to her feet. "Trust me; I don't have a problem ignoring people I've no intention of speaking to." She glared at him. "Or the hired help."

Shoving her glasses on, she shouldered her bag and marched out the door, head held high. Her temper had calmed considerably by the time she reached Jason. He waited with their food and she smiled at him as she sat. Landi waved off his question and said, "It was nothing. Just a question about work. Let's eat." Jason's expression told her he didn't totally believe it; but thankfully, he turned the topic to something else entirely.

After lunch, Landi changed and went off on her own. This was her one afternoon to herself. No meetings, no conference calls, just time for her to be alone and gather her thoughts. She smiled slightly as she walked through the *Floresta da Tijuca*, or Tijuca Forest as it was known in English. A mountainous, man-cultivated rainforest in the middle of a thriving city, it was the largest urban forest in the world. This place was absolutely incredible and she loved everything it had to offer.

This was her absolute favorite place to visit while in Rio. Every time she came to this city, she made time for a visit. The beach was nice, yes, but this urban-locked rainforest took her breath away. She wandered without purpose or a specific destination in mind. Coming to a bench, Landi sat down for a brief rest while the sounds of nature filled her. She was a city girl, true, but this place...held some magical pull to her.

"Hello, Landi," a hushed voice said from behind her.

She jumped slightly with surprise before turning on the seat. Leaning against a thick tree trunk stood none other than Dimitri Androcles Melonakos. Her heart skipped a few beats as she took in his attire. His powerful body dressed in a silver-gray tee, his biceps strained the sleeves. A pair of faded blue jeans completed his look. Golden eyes stared at her from behind thick black lashes.

"Dimitri," she murmured as if she weren't sure he was real.

"Selini," he returned in the same low tone.

Everything within her longed to run to him and jump into his arms, but her mind couldn't forget the words Scott Leighton said to her. Ignoring the cries of her soul, Landi faced front and tried to control the rapid beating of her heart. It didn't work, especially when a warm, gentle touch skimmed along the back of her neck. Clenching her teeth, Landi bit back a whimper of longing as every synapse in her body responded to the simple contact.

"Lovely afternoon," he commented as he sat beside her. He put his foot on the bench and tied his shoe.

"Yes, it is." Landi kept her gaze on the trail before her. *I have to get out of here*. Rising abruptly, she barely glanced at him before saying, "Enjoy your day." Then she walked off without looking back. Tears stung her eyes. It was painful to be so close to him and walk away.

Closing her eyes briefly, Landi headed toward Cascatinha Waterfall. Playing her mp3 player, she maneuvered the trail closed to vehicles. She wasn't stupid or totally relaxed in her guard. Still, no matter how many times she'd been to this forest and enjoyed all it offered, as she came to the breathless view of the waterfall. It was so beautiful. As great as her love of Central Park was, it still paled in comparison to how standing before this made her feel.

Moving to the side, she relaxed on the soft ground and watched tourists and visitors snap picture after picture. Contentment sank into her bones.

Dimitri watched from a short distance as Landi enjoyed the majestic view before her. She wore white capris and a pink shirt. Her canvas shoes matched the hue of her top. Pushing away from the tree he currently leaned against, he moved through the shadows toward her. His gaze took in everything around them; and by the time he was behind her, Dimitri was content they were safe.

"Why'd you walk away, Landi?" he asked gently as he crouched beside her. Dimitri watched her slight flinch. She must have not believed he'd follow her here.

"What do you want?" she questioned as her hands tugged her earphones out of her ears. She stopped the music and waited, keeping her gaze on the children running around nearby.

"For starters, I'd like you to look at me." He sighed deeply when she turned her head, the mirrored rectangular sunglasses obscuring her eyes. Reaching out with one hand, he removed the frames and folded them gently. "I meant without glasses, Landi."

The amount of pain she tried unsuccessfully to hide struck him. With the hand holding her glasses, he tucked a wavy, silken strand of hair behind her ear. "Will you let me explain?" His body responded as her tongue snuck out to slide across her lower lip.

"There's nothing to explain," she said with a shrug. "You're here doing what's necessary to get the job done."

Her face turned away, but he captured her chin and brought their eyes back together. "You know I love you, Landi," he said with all honesty in his soul.

"I know your woman may not like the scent of another woman on you." Fire raged in her eyes for a brief second.

Taking her hand, Dimitri pulled her to her feet and led them to a secluded place. Before Landi could say anything, he kissed her. Dropping her sunglasses onto the grass, he wrapped his arms tightly around her as he devoured her. Her hesitation lasted for a mere second before she met his fire with her own. Her nails dug into the flesh of his triceps as her tongue dueled with his. His cock throbbed against his boxers and he thrust against her. Landi's low moan filled his ears, her hips mimicking his actions. Desire for her raced through him. In that moment, Dimitri didn't care about anything but the angel in his arms.

Lowering them to the soft ground, Dimitri lessened the intensity of the kiss. "Landi," he murmured in Greek. "I've missed you."

Her hands fumbled with the button on his jeans. Urgency moved over him as her small hand wrapped around him. He shuddered when Landi slowly began fisting him.

"Landi," he mumbled, "wait a sec."

"Now, Dimitri," she ordered. "Please, I need you!"

It took him mere seconds to remove her shorts, rip off her panties, and slide home in her wet hot core.

"Shit!" he said on a groan as she held him tightly. Her low moan of pleasure echoed his statement. It had been so long since he'd been with her. This was coming home. Being with Landi made the world right again.

Back and forth he moved. His mouth covered to muffle her noises. In the background the roar of the waterfall, faded conversations, and laughter reached them. He didn't care. Harder and deeper he thrust. Landi accepted everything he gave and more. As if they'd never been apart, they made love in perfect tandem. He pushed, she arched. Landi's small body began to tense beneath him and he knew she was close. Resting his hands beside her ears, he began to move faster, knowing just what Landi craved.

Her breaths came in short pants and he groaned when she dug her fingers into him. He loved the feel of her nails in his skin. Her tight pussy clamped hard around his cock as he pistoned in and out of her. When her muscles milked him, he erupted deep within her, his tongue matching the pace of his thrusts.

For a moment they lay there, breathing hard, hearts pounding erratically. Dimitri pushed back and looked at her, taking in the flushed skin, swollen lips, and contented smile. Brushing a kiss against her mouth, he pulled out of her. Not a sound was spoken as they put their clothes back in order. When Landi started to rise, he thwarted her action by grabbing her and rolling her beneath him.

"Where are you off to?" he mumbled as he stared into her eyes.

A small yet satisfied smile graced her features. "I was going to get the grass that is residing in places it really shouldn't be."

Dimitri waggled his eyebrows. "Lucky grass." Pressing a kiss on the end of her nose, he got to his feet and effortlessly lifted her to his. He watched with amusement as she shimmied and shook before she was happy nothing lingered under her clothes that had no business being there.

Landi sighed and slid her arm through his. "Are you sure it's okay to be here with me?"

"Mara is busy with something else." Dimitri observed the slight tensing of her body when he mentioned the name.

"I see." Her tone took on a harder tone.

"I haven't slept with her," Dimitri said. Landi shrugged and dropped his arm. Fast as a striking snake, his fingers were around her upper arm, turning her toward him. "Landi, don't brush me off like that."

She arched a brow and looked between his hold on her and his face. There was no mistaking her unspoken command. Dimitri dropped her arm but never glanced away.

"As was pointed out to me, you're here to do a job. Whatever it takes. So by all means, go back to it. I'm sure Mara will be waiting for you."

Dimitri struggled to control his temper. It wasn't easy for her to digest what his job could require him to do, but it wasn't like he *wanted* to be with Mara.

"Landi, don't get mad because of that. I have a job to do, yes, but I am here with you."

"Which is probably a mistake. We both have things to do." There was no inflection in her tone and he knew she was shutting down. With a sigh, he nodded and stepped back.

"You're right. And this is neither the time nor place to work through this. We will discuss this, Landi; don't make me hunt you down." He cupped her cheek, his fingers digging into her skin when she tried to pull away. "No matter what, Landi, there's one thing you need to remember."

Her brown eyes shot flames at him. "What? That you're a SEAL. A man who does things others won't?" Venom dripped from her tongue. "It's a *hardship* to kiss that leggy brunette? What is it I *need* to remember, Dimitri Melonakos?"

"Just this." Dimitri covered her mouth with his and kissed her with everything he had in him. When her body began to tremble beneath his touch, he backed off and waited for her eyes to open. Her hazy stare met his and he brushed his thumb along her lower lip. "S'agapo, Landi. Now and forever."

Then he spun around and walked off without looking back.

D((

S'agapo, Landi.

Those words ran through her head nonstop while her gaze followed Dimitri as he vanished from view. *Damn it! Damn him!* She fought the urge to stomp her foot like a child. Moving until she could see the waterfall, Landi sank to the ground, knees to her chin, and sat there in silence.

"Why do I keep pushing him away?" she hissed to herself.

"Because it's ne'er easy to see the man you love with another woman," a deep but gentle voice commented from beside her.

Trying not to scream, Landi jumped and turned toward the accented voice. Her surprise morphed into relief as recognition set in. Aidrian, the single black man on the Team. A smile touched her lips as he joined her on the ground. Landi couldn't believe how large he was

next to her. Being five-two, he towered over her by at least a foot. He was one of the quietest of the group from what she recalled.

"Am I allowed to speak to you?" she asked, still a bit upset at Dimitri.

"Did someone tell you not to speak to me?"

He stretched his legs out and leaned back on his elbows. Landi found herself staring at her own reflection in his tinted Hugo Boss glasses.

"No, but I thought..."

Aidrian looked ahead again. "You know he didn't want to do it. None of the married ones do."

Landi crossed her legs and began plucking some strands of grass. "But he still took it."

A rich chuckle rumbled from his chest. "Our job isn't a democracy. We do as we're told. I know that fact is hard for many non-military to grasp. We may not always agree, but we follow orders and save lives."

There was a slight reproach in his tone and Landi felt ashamed. She hadn't thought of it like that. Even talking with Kacy, Landi realized she didn't fully understand what it took to be in a relationship with not just a military man, but a Navy SEAL. Landi remained silent as she thought about the truth of his words.

I really can be such a bitch. She shook her head. It wasn't Dimitri who had been hesitant about things. He'd owned up to what had transpired between them in the past and had been there for her ever since. She was the one who didn't share feelings and kept a wall erected around her heart. I'm the one keeping him at a distance.

"I...I..."

"It really is beautiful here," Aidrian interrupted. "Would you care to walk a bit with me?"

Landi smiled as she got to her feet. "I'd love to."

She understood what he was doing. He might be quiet but he was very protective of his friend and teammate. But at the same time, he didn't want to be all in their business. He wasn't looking for an explanation for her actions. She admired that very much.

When he got to his feet, Landi swallowed in amazement. Aidrian was a very large, very handsome man. He wore a white button-down shirt and dark-green cargo pants. In her mind she automatically began designing clothes for him. *I wonder if I could get these men to model for me...* 

Together they continued to walk through the forest. Landi found herself completely relaxed. She felt very safe with this man beside her, as if a brother was walking with her. Chatter was minimal but comfortable.

After they grabbed some ice cream, Aidrian led her to an outside table. Landi ate a bite before she looked at the man with her. He appeared deceptively relaxed.

"Did he want you to keep an eye on me?"

Black eyes held her gaze as he ate more ice cream. "Nae, that was me. You remind me of my sister."

"Cute and charming?" she teased.

He flashed a grin of straight, white teeth. "I was thinking more along the lines of stubborn and hard-headed."

Landi shrugged. "Humph. Doesn't sound like me! You sure that's what your sister reminds you of?"

Aidrian laughed. "I like you, Ms. Nycks, and I can see why Merlin does as well."

That got a smile. "Likewise."

Aidrian O'Shea spent the rest of the day as her escort. The afternoon was lovely and carefree. When she returned to the hotel, things were right in her world again.

"Thank you," she said, reaching for Aidrian's hand, "for a wonderful day and helping me get my head on straight."

Aidrian took off his glasses and hooked them on the v of his shirt before placing his onyx gaze on her. "It was my honor to spend some time with you. Thank you."

"If you...if you get a chance, could you tell him I understand." Black eyebrows rose and she blushed. "Well...I...just...oh, never mind!"

A slight smile cracked the corners of his mouth. "I'll see he gets the message. Good day, Ms. Nycks." He nodded briefly and walked away without a single look back. Landi didn't take offense; in fact, there was a smile on her face as she headed up to her room.

It was late at night when Landi stood out on her balcony and stared down at the nightlife of Rio de Janeiro. A knock on her door turned her attention from the hustle and bustle of the city below.

"Yes?" she asked as she waited by the door.

"Room service, ma'am."

She narrowed her eyes. "I didn't order anything."

"I know. This is a delivery from the front desk."

Breathing deeply, she opened the door to a slender woman in a housekeeping uniform. In her hand was a small envelope. Landi reached for it, one eyebrow arched. The woman smiled.

"Boa noite."

"Same to you."

With a soft click she closed the door and walked to a chair to sit. Landi opened the envelope and removed the folded sheet of plain paper.

## ~S'agapo~

She bit her lower lip as the tiny prick of tears came. There was nothing else on the paper, but it didn't matter. Nothing else need be said.

"Love you, too, Dimitri." Pressing a kiss to the note, Landi slipped the letter inside her purse. With a sigh, she got ready for and went to bed. Golden eyes were the last thing she saw before sleep claimed her; and despite the fact she was alone when she woke up, that gaze was still there. They remained with her the rest of her trip, following her through her presentation and even after she boarded a plane for the United States.

Dimitri leaned against the wall as if he were totally into all of the dancing going on around him in street. His head moved in time to the seductive as the dancers' hips swayed around him. Even as he stood there, his gaze moved over the crowd as he kept his gaze on the man he was following.

This is going to be a long night.

Smiles came easily as he drank his bottled water on the warm night. He couldn't see them, but he knew Hondo, Jeb, and Harrier were nearby while the other four men on the Team pulled protection detail on the ambassador.

With a yawn, Dimitri pushed away from the wall and wove through the numerous gyrating couples. A wry smile crossed his face as he watched them. Even so, he never lost sight of his target. Dimitri stuck to the shadows when they hit a seedier, more desolate area. The person he followed seemed unconcerned with the goings on around him and strictly focused on his business. Dimitri knew better; this was a man who lived for his next drink. He planned on using this vice to his benefit.

Dimitri fell back even more when the streets grew narrower and hiding spots became limited. When the man, Pima, stopped and cast a glance behind him, Dimitri knew time was running out. He took the open beer in his hand and tossed some on his clothes as he ingested a mouthful, swishing it around and then spitting it out. He stumbled into view and wove drunkenly to the man he'd been following. Raising his bottle in salute, Dimitri tripped over his feet and into the man.

"Sorry," Dimitri babbled.

"You're drunk," the man replied sharply.

"No...no...I don't think so," he slurred. "Wanna...wanna have a drink?" He tipped the bottle on the man's shirt soaking it. "Oops...so...sorry 'bout that. Let say I buy you a drink."

The glimmer of an alcoholic flared to life, but it was tampered down by his knowledge he still had a job to do. *Just another push*.

"Get away from me man." He shoved Dimitri, who stumbled and fell to the ground, dropping his beer.

"Wow...see...now I need a drink." Dimitri held his arm up. "Come on, help me up. I'm on vacation and..." he trailed off before shrugging. "I don't know. I just need a drink. Help me up and it's on me."

*Hook, line, and sinker.* Dimitri knew he had him when the gaze flickered across the street to a bar and he nodded.

"Let me help you up. Name's Pima." He glanced at his watch. "I have a few minutes and you can buy me that drink."

"Wonderful." Dimitri allowed Pima to pull him up and they went into a small bar. He waved for a bottle and two glasses, and soon his partner was as drunk as Dimitri pretended to be. When Pima almost fell out of his chair, Dimitri caught him.

"I think you need some help. Where do you need to go?"

"A...across the street. I have a room there. Have to pick something up," he slurred.

Moving slow as if intoxicated himself, Dimitri pushed up, jostling the table and knocking over the bottle. "Okay, let's go."

Together, arms around each other's shoulders as if the best of friends, Dimitri and Pima left the bar and shuffled up the street a short pace. The building they entered was dark and rundown. There was a staircase in one corner and Pima stumbled in that direction. They climbed to the third floor to a weather-beaten door. Fumbling for his key, it took Pima a moment to fit it in the lock. Dimitri pushed open the door and turned on the single overhead light.

Not much to look at. There was a bed against a wall, a round table with a single chair, and a sink beside a door he presumed led to a bathroom of sorts. Just looking at this place made him itch for another tetanus shot.

"Here you go," Dimitri uttered as Pima reached for the bottle on the table, uncorked it, and took another swig. "What'd you need to pick up?"

"Wanna," he paused and frowned, "...it's in the mattress. I'll get it in a minute. Let's have another drink." The bottle was thrust in Dimitri's direction. "That bitch won't mind if it's a bit late," he said as he tried to whisper.

"In a minute," Dimitri said.

Moving behind the drunk with a sigh, Dimitri put a choke hold on him until he slumped forward, unconscious. The bottle fell to the floor, tipping over, the amber liquid pouring into the stained carpet.

"What a waste of good drink," Dimitri muttered.

Lowering Pima to floor as well, he cast a glance to the door. He locked it and moved to the mattress. He searched it carefully and methodically, yet quickly. Finding a small cut in the mattress, he grinned as he slipped his hand in and removed the folded stack of papers from the smelly, moldy bedding. Dimitri secured the papers in a deep pocket with a flap. Standing, he made short work of remaking the bed. He went to the door, stepping over the figure in the way, unlocked it, and peeked out. Voices from below floated up the stairwell. Sober ones.

"Figures," he swore.

Shutting the door, Dimitri locked it again and then rolled his drunk, unconscious friend in front of it before placing the near empty bottle beside him, tipped over. Then he moved to the window and wrenched it up enough to slip through. Once out on the shaky balcony, he slid the pane of glass back down. In the dark, he made out two figures below.

Guess I'm going up instead of down. With a sigh, he began to quietly make his way to the roof. Did I mention this was going to be a long night?

As he vaulted onto the roof, he crouched low, scanning for other people. The sound of breaking glass reached him. *Time to go!* The familiar rush of adrenaline poured through him. He stood and scooted along the edge between the buildings. Footsteps on metal spurred him into action. Backing up, Dimitri began to run. At the last second, he launched himself over to the next rooftop. As he hit the ground he rolled, coming up to run to the next edge and clear it. Shots rang out as he jumped from the second rooftop.

Dimitri swore in Greek as he regained his feet and headed for the next building. As he sailed through the air, he realized he'd misjudged. His fingers grabbed for the edge and his body slammed into the side of the structure.

"Umph!" I'm getting too old for this!

A sentiment which rang even truer as the mortar beneath his left hand crumbled like rotten wood. His right shoulder screamed in pain as it was the sole support for his body. He might be shorter than most on the team, but he was no lightweight by any means. With a deep breath, he grabbed up with his left and prayed the building would hold. It was not a short drop and there was no telling what littered the ground. Thankfully, the new spot held and Dimitri drew himself up over the edge.

"That's gonna leave a mark."

Making his way to the roof access door, he turned the handle and groaned in relief when it opened. Heading down the stairs, Dimitri found himself stepping around people sleeping or unconscious in the corners of the stairwell. Harsh, intense voices made him stop and search for another avenue. When the people talking made it around the corner, guns in hand, all they saw were people slumped over. This abandoned building was full of nothing but drunks and strung-out addicts.

Dimitri waited until he could hear their footsteps going up to the next floor before he crawled out from beneath the rank coat he's been under. Draping it over the still sleeping man he'd swiped it from, Dimitri patted him on the arm.

"Thanks, man," he whispered.

After casting a look around, Dimitri slipped down the rest of the stairs and carefully made his way out onto the street. Shoulders hunched, the right one still burning, he returned to where all the dancing was still going on. Once there, he flagged down a taxi and went to the hotel.

Eventually, he entered a room on the first floor and groaned when he saw the three faces of his friends. They looked all relaxed and pain free. There was no concern on their expressions, more like amusement.

Ross "Jeb" Connelly threw some clean clothes at him. Dimitri snagged them out of the air and dug in his pocket. Tossing the wad of folded papers to Harrier, he headed to the shower.

"Great job, Merlin," Harrier said once he'd emerged from the bathroom.

Toweling off his hair, Dimitri responded, "Thanks."

"You okay?" His CO, commanding officer, questioned.

"I'll be fine. Shoulder hurts a bit." He glared playfully at his teammates. "Couldn't stop 'em *before* they shot at me?" Dimitri teased.

"Oh, we just wanted to see your moves," Hondo commented lightly, flashing him a grin.

Tying his shoes, Dimitri stopped long enough to look at him and shake his head. "No need to be jealous, old man, you were young once. Surely you can remember back that far."

Hondo casually flipped him off. Finally ready, Dimitri got to his feet and rolled his shoulders. Pain shot through him and he did his best to not grimace.

"You okay, Merlin?" Harrier asked again, this time an underlying command in his tone. One that said not to brush him off.

Damn, forgot how flipping observant he really is. "I'll be fine. I should get back to my room."

"Right. Be safe," Harrier said.

Dimitri remained silent while going to the door. A glance over his shoulder accompanied by a nod was all he afforded them before he slipped away. As he walked toward his hotel room, Dimitri heard a familiar voice.

"Hey, there you are."

Mara. He turned with a smile in place as the leggy and scantily dressed brunette sashayed toward him.

"Hey, yourself," he said. "How'd your...thing go you had to deal with?" An odd look filled her features before it was smoothed away; and he knew if not for being so observant, he'd have missed it.

"Not bad. I had to track down someone afterward; otherwise, I would have been back sooner. You know how it is—you just keep missing one another." She shrugged. "Anyway, I finally got to see her."

"Wonderful," he said as they walked to his door and entered his room. Mara went straight for the small bar and fixed herself a drink.

"Yes, I thought so." Mara stared at him, the ice bucket beside her with one hand resting on the rim. "I really needed to speak to her, but she's always so busy."

Dimitri didn't give a damn but he could tell she wanted him to ask. "What does she do that keeps her so busy?"

Mara picked up three cubes and dropped them into the waiting glass. The sound was ominous and set the hairs on the back of his neck on end.

"She's not busy now; she's staying in Rio for a bit." Mara opened the whisky and poured herself two fingers. "She's a fashion designer," she stated, holding his gaze.

Landi!

Fear slammed into him so hard it nearly floored him. There was a sadistic gleam in Mara's blue eyes. It required all his training to not visibly react.

"That's nice," he commented easily. "I'm sure she'll relish the time off." Dimitri walked to a chair and sat down with a moan.

Mara headed toward him. "You okay?"

"I think I ate something that didn't agree with me. I'll be fine. Just a bit tired."

"It is late." She took a drink and placed the glass within reach of his hand. Pressing a kiss to his cheek, she asked, "Meet for breakfast?" "You got it."

Dimitri escorted her to the door and kissed her. When he was alone in the room he grabbed his phone. He dialed Landi's number, but never pressed send. With a low growl he threw it across the room to land on the cushion of the chair he'd vacated. No matter how much wished, he couldn't call her. Dimitri dumped out the drink Mara had made and stared at the door. Anger welled up within him.

"I will rip your head off if you've so much as breathed on her," he vowed as he headed for the bathroom.

Dimitri was cranky as he slipped into bed. He knew he would receive a call if anything developed with Mara. They had eyes and ears on her.

Saying a prayer for Landi's safety, he went to sleep. Tomorrow was the planned assassination and he needed to be at the top of his game. The ambassador's life depended on it.

He awoke to the phone by his bed ringing.

"Hello?"

"Bom dia," Mara's voice spoke.

"Good morning," he returned.

"I have to cancel breakfast. There are some errands I have to take care of. Rain check?"

Sitting up and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, Dimitri said, "Sorry you won't make breakfast, but yes. Rain check."

"Great."

She hung up the phone and Dimitri did the same. Rotating his shoulder, he shook his head as the pain was still there. His cell rang and he reached for it.

"I'm getting ready now," he said without preamble.

"Great. We'll have a taxi waiting for you," Harrier said.

"Understood."

He hung up and dressed in casual clothing, hiding his gun in the back of his waistband. There was a disarming smile on his face as he moved through the hotel and out the front door. The second he reached the street, a vehicle pulled up and stopped before him. Without a word, he opened the back door and slid in. Hondo drove away and didn't speak until they were in traffic.

"She's in the green car, four ahead of us."

"Got it." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "Will you do something for me?"

"Yes."

Dimitri sat up and met Hondo's shade-covered gaze in the rearview mirror. "If anything goes wrong today, there is a small red box in my locker. Can you make sure Landi gets it? And that the letter gets to my parents?"

Hondo was quiet for a few seconds. "Yes," he murmured. "I'll see she does."

"Thanks."

They turned onto another street. Hondo maintained his distance and followed the car with the ease of someone who'd done it many, many times before.

"Hang on a second; I think we have a tail," Hondo announced without slowing down. "I'll have to move over a street and see if I'm right or not. Keep eyes on the target; we're taking a detour."

Dimitri never looked back. He knew the routine. Still, he grimaced as they turned left while Mara's car took her straight. There was no need to worry, though; Harrier and Jeb were in a vehicle following her as well.

"Yes, it's on us," Hondo told him.

With ease, Dimitri withdrew his weapon from the back of his pants. "Let's find out what they want, shall we?"

Chambering a round, he placed the gun upon his thigh and turned slightly toward the window, allowing him to see out the back as well. At the last second, Hondo whipped into a narrow alley and headed towards the other end. The moment the other car turned in as well, Dimitri turned fully so he could know what they faced.

"I see two," he informed Hondo.

Hondo slowed the car and muttered, "It's a goddamn ambush. There's one in the front as well. Couldn't wait until later to do this, could they?"

The cocking of another gun filled the interior. Hondo sighed and Dimitri almost laughed at his attitude. So calm, so matter-of-fact. He was more put out by the delay than the ambush.

"That's the thing; people are rarely sensitive to our time tables!"

Dimitri leaned out the window and fired at the men getting out of the car behind them. The first fell while the second returned fire, causing him to duck and shield his face as the rear window shattered. Absently, he heard Hondo taking shots at the other opposing team. Without looking up, he fired through where the rear window used to be, then sat up and waited for the man to show his face. When he did, Dimitri put a bullet through his skull, dropping him fast.

Suddenly, Hondo gunned the motor and they lurched forward. Dimitri had barely turned when their car rammed into the one before them, sending it back until they could get down another side alley. Then Hondo floored the gas and they tore out of there, leaving the bodies and vehicles behind.

"Where are you?" Hondo spoke to the other team of men.

Dimitri brushed glass off the seat next to him as Hondo accelerated and drove toward the destination. The buildings blew by Dimitri didn't pay any attention. Instead, he caught the clip Hondo tossed over his shoulder to him. With quick and precise movements, he ejected the empty clip and replaced it with the full one. Gun reloaded, he threw the used magazine back over the seat to settle beside Hondo.

The taxi slowed and Dimitri jumped out quickly, making sure his shirt hung over the gun to keep it hidden from view. He moved into the building and saw Jeb, but never even acknowledged him, going straight to the elevators. Riding it up to the fourth floor, he exited the car toward the stairwell to get to the roof.

Dimitri cracked the door open and peeked out. Nothing. The noise from the crowd below grew, telling him time was running out. Parades were all well and good, but they were notoriously difficult to keep one hundred percent secure. Gun in hand and a bullet chambered, he slipped through and closed the door as silently as he'd opened it. He couldn't see Mara, but he knew she was here.

Pressed up against a HVAC unit, Dimitri peered cautiously around the corner. Nothing either way, so he moved to the next one. When he reached the third unit he saw her. Mara was by the far corner dressed in a tank top and capris with canvas shoes on her feet. She was looking through the scope on her sniper rifle.

Weapon aimed right at her head, he stepped out slowly. "Put it down, Mara." She tensed but didn't turn. "Get away from there, I won't tell you again."

"I knew you were too good to be true," she said. "This hit's worth a lot of money."

"Who hired you?" he asked, moving closer and not relaxing his guard. There was absolutely no trace of her earlier Portuguese accent, but Dimitri knew it wasn't American, either.

Mara looked at him over her shoulder and flashed a grin. "Someone who no longer wanted the ambassador alive."

"Take your finger off the trigger, Mara," he ordered.

She put her eye back up to the scope. "You wouldn't kill me. You like me."

"Not that much. I don't want to kill you. But I will." It was true; he really had no desire to kill her.

Mara backed away from the eyepiece and nodded. She got to her feet and moved back from where the rifle sat balanced on its bipod. She was using a South-African Truvelo .50, a large caliber sniper rifle. Governments looked upon it as a "heavy sniper" rifle. Now Dimitri knew what kind of accent she had.

"No closer, Mara. Tell me who hired you."

She rolled her eyes and tsked. "Now, what would that say to potential clients if I squealed? My client list is confidential. You should know better." Mara glanced over the edge of the roof. "You sure you don't want in on it? He's nearing the right spot."

Reaching into his pocket, Dimitri pulled out a large zip tie and tossed it at her. "Put it on."

She caught it with ease. "Two hundred fifty thousand is a lot of money. How much are you being paid to stop me?"

Shaking his head he said, "Not even close to that. It would take me a long time to make that amount of money. A very long time."

Mara put her hands in the loop she made. As she brought the end to her mouth to pull it tight, she stopped. "I'll split it with you. Fifty-fifty, right down the middle." With her teeth, she drew the black strap tight. He shook his head. "You sure?" she asked. "I could still make the shot."

"Afraid not, Mara. Walk over here to me, nice and easy." Dimitri saw her look longingly back to her gun and sigh.

"You win." Her legs brought her near. Mara looked up at him, her deep blue eyes soft and gentle.

Dimitri stepped back and gestured to the door. "Let's go."

A sliver of warning snaked up his spine. It seemed like slow motion as he turned his head to see another man running at him, weapon drawn. Mara screamed. Firing at him, Dimitri cursed as the dying man got off a bullet that lodged in his inner upper thigh. He crumpled to one leg and fired at another man who had come around a vent. Another shot hit him. As he turned to check on Mara, the world grew fuzzy.

Pain unlike any he'd ever experienced seared through him as he fell forward. Mara's face was close to his and she shook her finger at him. He could see blood on her hands.

"Should have taken me up on my offer. But that's okay. I'll get another shot at the ambassador, while you...well, let's just say I don't think you'll get off this rooftop alive. It's a shame, really; we could have been really good together." She pressed a kiss to her bloodied fingertips and touched his cheek. "Goodbye."

Dimitri tried to respond, but he couldn't. He could only lie there bleeding while Mara walked away without a look back. Breathing became increasingly difficult and his limbs felt heavier and heavier. He could barely keep his eyes open to register the concerned face leaning over him. All he could see were shadows.

"Hang in there, Merlin. We'll get you home. Stay with me!" The voice was familiar though he didn't recognize its owner. It calmed him as he fell into a deep abyss.

Landi!

She was his last thought before the darkness totally consumed him.

Landi groaned as she pulled into the gas station. A definite benefit to residing in New York City was she seldom had to do this. Getting out, she burst out laughing when she popped the gas-tank cover on Kacy's Camaro to find a small note tapped to the cap.

## Make sure you use the gas I said!

"Crazy ass woman," she muttered, pulling the paper off and wadding it up into a ball that she shoved in her pocket. Shoulda known Kacy would pull a stunt like that. As she filled the tank, her mind drifted back to Dimitri. Perhaps returned would be a better word, for he rarely seemed far from her thoughts.

She paid for the gas and went to the store to grab a few more things for the party Lex was having for the women. Being the one who wasn't married, Landi had volunteered to go out and get the requested items. As she arrived back at the house, her stomach fluttered and flipped. There parked amongst the others sat Dimitri's Jeep Wrangler.

"What the -?"

Her heart pounded erratically and her palms sweat. Parking, she shut off the powerful engine and got out, stopping at the trunk to grab her purchases. Landi hesitated a moment before entering the house full of feminine chatter.

"Hey, Landi, glad you're back," Lex said, approaching her. "Been craving some of that chocolate."

Without hesitation, Landi passed off the bag of chocolate and entered to the living room where the women sat. There were no men she could see. However, there was one woman she didn't recognize. She was very pretty, her hair in ringlets, with smooth brown skin and eyes. Her outfit was very casual—cargo pants and a ribbed tee-shirt.

"Landi, come meet, Affrica O'Shea, Aidrian's sister," Kacy said. With a smile on her face, Landi approached the woman and shook her outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you." Landi noticed a fire in Affrica's eyes and in that moment, she realized why Aidrian had said she was stubborn and hard-headed.

"It's verra nice ta meet ya," Affrica said, her voice tinged with the same lilt as her brother's.

"Affrica just got back from India," Kacy informed her.

"Really? That must have been amazing. What were you doing over there?" Landi asked.

Affrica smiled. "I'm a freelance photographer and was over there getting some shots. When I was done with that I stopped by to visit ma brother, but it turns out they're gone. So I took Dimitri's Jeep then came here."

"You know Dimitri?" Anger pooled in her belly.

"Yes. He lets me use his vehicle." She sent Landi another kind grin. "I recognize you now from the pictures of you he has up in his place."

The fact this woman had free access to Dimitri's vehicle and home didn't sit well. The news her photo was up in his house, however, pleased her. Her emotions must have been plain on her face for Affrica reached for her hand and squeezed it gently.

"I'm naught but a little sister to him. Always have been and always will be."

Landi blushed, a bit embarrassed she'd been so transparent. Affrica winked and leaned back in her seat. The remainder of the day was fun and relaxed. When Kacy dropped her off at Norfolk International, Landi pulled her in for a hug.

"What's that for?" Kacy asked when they separated.

"For being such an awesome person and military wife."

"Oh, sweetie. It's going to be okay. He'll be home soon. Both of them." Kacy smiled and asked, "Are you sure you have to go? I wish you could stay longer. It always seems like you're running off to different parts of the world."

"I wish I could. I have a meeting tomorrow. I'll be back soon, and definitely in time for the birth of little Landi." She winked and laughed at the comical expression on Kacy's face.

When the laughter had died, Kacy looked at her with tears in her eyes. "I'll miss you."

"Me, too, hon." Landi hugged her again and got out of the vehicle. Leaning in through the open window, she said, "Call me if you need anything." Standing up, she stuck her head back by the window. "Oh, yeah, left you a gift in the guest room. I gotta run. Give the other women my thanks for including me today. Love ya, Kacy!" She blew

her a kiss and entered the airport without looking back, her bags trailing behind.

Having boarded the plane, she sat in her first-class seat only half watching the rest of the people finding their seats. Landi thought about the clothes she'd left for Kacy. Hopefully, her friend would enjoy them. Sipping her pre-flight drink, she thought about what it would be like to settle down, to leave her life in New York City and be in Virginia Beach.

What would my life be like?

The fact she had almost married him before didn't matter. After being with the wives, the idea was even fresher in her mind. To be a part of that group of women, to be a part of Dimitri's life. The big *what if*?

She looked out the small window and reached for her mp3 player. They'd reached cruising altitude and so she put in her earphones and leaned back with her eyes closed. Dimitri sprung into her mind and she drifted off to sleep with him and strands of soulful R&B guiding her.

It was close to ten at night when she rode up the elevator to her loft. Landi stared down at her left hand. It seemed empty despite the rings she wore on her thumb and middle finger.

Landi got off on her floor and went to her door. "Damn them for getting me to think this way! I was perfectly fine with the way things were!" Even as she uttered those words, Landi knew it was a total fabrication. She longed for more.

Once inside, she took her luggage to her room and sank to her chaise, removing her shoes. Flopping back against the pale gold-and-pink, jacquard-pattern fabric, Landi closed her eyes and relaxed there until her stomach reminded her she hadn't eaten. She'd not been hungry on the plane. Changing into some comfortable loungewear, she went to the kitchen to find something to eat. She ate about half of her frozen dinner, comparing the quiet she had to the jovial activities with Kacy and the rest of the women. Even her solitude didn't seem as appealing as it once had.

Setting her fork down, Landi went to the bag she'd left sitting in the living room. With care, she withdrew the rolled photograph and spread it out on the leather cushions of her sofa. Affrica had given this to her from her portfolio. The square image was two feet long and done in a matte finish. It was of the tea fields of India and a large tiger was in one of the rows, a large regal head raised in silent challenge. There was immense power in his gaze and it made her shiver. The zoom on

Affrica's camera must be amazing for Landi could see the dew on some of the leaves. She hung the photo on her wall and then returned to the kitchen.

"I'm still not hungry." She tossed the remainder of her food.

Looking around her apartment, Landi wondered if she *could* leave it all behind. She grabbed her bottled water off the table and went to her work area. Music on, she sat down at her design table and gathered the images she needed for the meeting the following day. That ready, she reached for a clean pad of paper and began to sketch. Soon she was lost in creating a new design. She heard her cell ringing over the music more than once but ignored it, wanting to finish what she was doing.

As she shaded in the dress, her home phone began to ring. Landi have every intention of paying no attention to it until Kacy's voice broke through the music as she left her message on the answering machine.

"Landi, it's Kacy. Hon, you need to pick up the phone. I need to talk to you—something's happened! Call me as *soon* as you get this, no matter the hour! It's about Dimitri!"

The lead broke against the paper and the pencil dropped. Landi bolted for her cell phone. Her hands shook horribly as she brought up Kacy's number and pressed send.

"Landi," Kacy said immediately when she picked up. "Where've you been?"

"What happened?" she demanded, ignoring the pleasantries.

"He was injured. Badly."

Landi's legs gave out and she crumpled to the floor before a chair. "Tell me," she rasped.

"I don't know the details, Landi. Not other than he's stable for the moment."

"His parents?" she asked. "They can't lose their only remaining son! It would kill them! They've already lost one!"

"I don't know if they've been told. I had to have permission to tell you, so you can't say anything."

Landi closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Where is he?" Kacy's hesitation was blatant and she cried, "Kacy! Tell me!"

"I can't." Landi longed to hit her for those two words. "Landi, it's not that I don't want to, I can't tell you. I don't have that info yet." Kacy sighed and said in a gentle tone, "Just get down here. We should know more by the time you arrive."

"I'm hopping the first flight I can. I'll rent a car and be at your house as soon as possible."

"Landi...I'm sorry. Love you, hon."

Hanging up the phone, Landi shut her eyes and ran her hands over her face. For a moment, she remained on the floor and fought to regain her composure. With a deep breath, she got to her feet, grabbed the house phone, and headed for the bedroom. Yanking her still packed suitcase onto her bed, she dumped the contents from her last trip on the pink-and-blue floral comforter. As she stuffed it full of clean clothing, Landi called the airport for the first flight out to Virginia Beach.

Standing right inside the door to her apartment building, Landi placed another call as she waited for her taxi.

"Hello?" a feminine voice heavy with sleep asked. Samantha Huff, Jason's partner. They had yet to get married but acted as if they were.

"Hey, Samantha, it's Landi. Sorry for waking you. Can I talk to Jason?"

"Sure, hang on."

Landi heard her wake Jason as she went outside and got in her taxi, her lone bag beside her. Giving the cabbie her destination, Landi waited for Jason's voice.

"Landi?" Jason's sleep-laden voice came on the line. "What's up, hon? Everything okay?"

Tears pricked her eyes. "I'm on my way back to Virginia Beach. I'm so sorry to do this to you, but I'm going to need you to handle the meeting without me. Everything is ready; the portfolio is at my apartment by my workstation."

"Landi?" he asked, concern laced his tone.

"I don't have information at the moment. I'll tell you when I know," she responded even as she willed the taxi to go faster. "My cell will be on; call if you need me."

"I've got it covered up here. Take care, you," he murmured affectionately.

"Thanks, Jason." Landi ended the call. She knew Jason was worried, especially since she'd never missed a meeting. Ever. This very meeting was the reason she'd not been able to stay longer with Kacy and had had to return home.

At JFK airport, she paced impatiently as she had herself and her bag checked by security. Once she sat in her seat on the plane, she leaned back and closed her eyes.

Dimitri!

She shuddered at the thought of never seeing him again. Never holding him. In no way experiencing his touch, smelling his scent, or more unless in a dream. It made her sick to her stomach.

She faintly heard the captain speaking, but it didn't register. She barely paid attention to the flight attendants demonstrating the procedures in case of an emergency. Landi struggled to remain calm. This was a five hour flight including the connection in Washington D.C.

Landi wore her mask of composure when she arrived at Kacy's house. Paying the driver, Landi took her bag and went to the front door. It was six-thirty in the morning and the door opened before she had even made it completely up the steps.

"Landi," Kacy said, arms spread.

Kissing her friend on the cheek, Landi returned the hug. She remained silent as the women walked into the house. A frown crossed her features as she realized they were the only ones there.

"Where's Ernst."

"They're not back yet."

"Kacy, what the hell is going on?" Landi demanded, dropping her bag on the floor.

"I swear I know only what I told you." Kacy tugged on her shirt. "Look, you must be wiped. Get some rest; I promise I'll wake you the moment I hear anything else."

With a nudge, Kacy sent Landi in the direction of the guest room. She followed her directive. Her friend was right; exhaustion *was* nipping at her heels. Once in the room, Landi changed into sweats and a tank top. She'd just pulled back the blankets when a soft knock came through the door.

"Come on in, Kacy." Landi sat on the edge of the bed.

She entered holding a steaming mug. Kacy placed it on the bedside table. "Chamomile," she said with a shrug. "Wasn't sure if you'd want it or not."

"Thanks, Kacy." Landi noticed the drawn look on her friends face as her hands smoothed around the swell of her belly. "Are you okay?"

With a smile Landi knew to be forced, Kacy nodded. "Just tired. You get some sleep. I'll let you know if and when I hear anything."

So many questions swarmed within her, but Landi understood that this wasn't easy for Kacy, either. Dimitri was family for her as well, and this not knowing had to be eating away at her also. Before Kacy

could slip through the door, Landi slid off the bed and stopped her. Turning her friend toward her, she wrapped her arms around her, offering support.

"It'll be okay, Kacy."

Kacy Zimmermann sniffed as she pulled back, wiping the tears from her face. A small smile appeared. "I'm supposed to be reassuring you, Landi, not the other way around."

"You are, Kacy," Landi admitted. "Get some sleep yourself. We'll talk later."

A final squeeze on her hand was all she got before Kacy walked away. As Landi slid into bed and fell asleep her mind raced with what ifs.

The sand was warm beneath Landi's feet as she walked along the beach. Her gaze drifted to the man playing in the surf. There was such joy in his expression, and in that moment she knew there was no way she would ever believe what he did for a living. It just didn't fit his completely relaxed and boyish antics. Even though she did know he was a Navy SEAL, she didn't see it right then.

"You sure you don't want to come in?" a deep and smooth voice questioned.

Dimitri Androcles Melonakos stood before her.

Damn, I didn't even see him move. *Landi shook her head. "I'm fine here, thanks."* 

A devilish grin crossed the Greek's face. As water rolled down his darkened olive skin, a gleam grew in his golden eyes.

"No, Dimitri, I'm good here."

Before she could blink, he'd scooped her up in his arms, pressing her flush against his hard, wet chest. Her body tightened with desire. Dimitri headed back to the water and she wrapped her arms tight around his neck. She knew what was coming.

"Let me go!" she cried.

Dimitri laughed and walked deeper into the ocean. The cold water felt good against her heated skin, but Landi still had no plans on going all the way in.

"Take me back to shore, Dimitri."

"Hold your breath, selini, we're going in. This hot-ass pink and gray bikini needs to get wet." He winked at her and fell backward into the water, taking her with.

Ahh shit! Landi let go of him when he sank beneath the surface. She felt smug that she didn't go under for all of a second until an oncoming wall of water rolled her and drove her under as well. Pushing up from the bottom, she crested and sputtered, taking in air. Before she could yell for Dimitri, part of his head broke the surface. His eyes were slightly above the water as he moved toward her, his thick, black hair plastered to his head.

Landi narrowed her eyes and sent a spray of water in his direction that he evaded. One brow rose before he sank silently below the waterline. Tensing, she waited for him to do something to her or surface in a different spot. He never did. Moments ticked by; and even spinning in a circle, she couldn't see him.

"Dimitri?" she questioned.

She rolled her eyes when the ocean floor was no longer attainable for her. "Figures," she grumbled. There are days being short really, really suck! "Dimitri?" she asked again, starting to get worried. Nothing. Turning for shore, she sighed and kicked her legs.

"Ahhh!" she screamed as something grabbed her ankle and pulled her back under.

Landi struggled until her flailing limbs connected with something solid. Strong fingers settled about her waist and guided her back to the surface where she soon found herself face to face with Dimitri. His golden gaze sparkled with humor. Boyish impishness filled his expression. He leaned in and kissed her, his tongue sweeping through the recess of her mouth. Landi wrapped her legs around his waist and hugged him tightly.

"Was that really necessary?" she asked when the kiss ended.

"The kiss?" He nodded. "Absolutely!"

"Not what I meant, smart ass! I was talking about the impromptu bath I just received. And do you have any idea what is going to happen with my hair?"

He smiled as he tugged on soaked tendril. "Nope. Can't say I care, either. And before you get all bent out of shape, I know you don't either. Why come to the beach if you aren't going in the water?"

Landi harrumphed. I hate it that he's right! She didn't give a damn her was dripping wet. It would dry and she could always go to a salon later. Being in his arms was way more important.

"There are ways of keeping your hair dry you know. Or I could have just not put my head under."

He shook his head. "That's no fun and I don't see you running around with your hair up in some plastic thingy."

Rolling her eyes, she changed the subject. "Where'd you go when you dumped me?" she asked.

"Nowhere. I was right here."

"I didn't see you."

"I was under the water, selini."

Tilting her head to the side, she arched a brow. "Part fish now, are you?"

He winked and turned them to shore. "Nope, wouldn't go that far. Close though."

Landi sighed and put her face against the side of his neck, loving the way his touch made her feel so safe and secure. A smart swat on her butt caused her to jump and her eyes flew open.

"What was that for?"

Dimitri put her down and shrugged shamelessly. "Couldn't resist." He grabbed a towel hanging on the porch railing and stood before her.

"You know what, Ilanderae Nycks?" he asked as he dropped to his knees in the warm sand in front of her and began running the towel up her left leg.

"What?" she gasped as he pressed a feathery kiss to her upper thigh.

"You look so damn good with the sun sparkling off the water droplets moving down your body. It's like you're covered in diamonds."

His admission sounded like it had been ripped from his chest, deep and graveled. His words made any remaining anger at being dumped in the Atlantic Ocean vanish. She bit back a whimper as he moved to her right leg. Landi trembled when his fingers teased the edge of her bikini.

"Dimitri!" she gasped as he began placing small kisses along the top edge of her low-rise bikini bottom.

"It was so hard for me to keep my hands off you, especially with you wearing damn near nothing; and that sexy tattoo of yours visible every time you turned around."

Landi sank her hands into his wet locks and held him tight against her. Callused palms tormented her as he moved his hands along her outer thighs.

"Dimitri," she groaned.

"Landi," he whispered.

Two fingers slipped beneath her suit and skimmed along her bare pussy. "Please," she moaned, hips bucking into his tantalizing touch. Her eyelids fluttered as he thrust them deep within her. "Dimitri!" she screamed, an organ washing over her.

His fingers plunged within her and she rode out the intense wave of pleasure. She dragged her eyes open when he withdrew them. Dimitri stood before her and placed the towel over her shoulders. A light kiss was followed by a gentle caress down the side of her face.

"Dimitri?" she asked, confused when he stepped back from her. Landi reached out to him.

"I love you, Ilanderae Rogue Nycks."

He turned and walked down the beach. Landi tried to move and go after him. She couldn't. It was if she'd been cemented into the ground.

"Dimitri!"

He glanced over his shoulder, slowed, but didn't stop. "S'agapo, Landi. I love you, gia panta. Forever." Facing forward again, he seemed to just vanish from view.

"Dimitri!"

## Seventeen

"Landi? Landi! Come on, wake up!"

With a gasp, Landi bolted up to find Kacy perched on the edge of her bed, a worried expression on her face. It filled with sympathy as she touched Landi's shoulder.

"Come on, we're going over to Jayde's house. She said Scott or Lex would call her back in a few hours."

Landi felt tears sting her eyes and didn't even try to stop them as they streamed down her face. "I couldn't stop him," she cried. "I tried, but I couldn't move—and then he was just...gone."

As Kacy's arms closed around her, Landi fell apart and just sobbed in her friend's embrace. Landi had no clue how much time had passed before Kacy drew back and looked at her.

"We should get going if we're going to be there when they call." Squeezing her eyes shut, Landi nodded. "I'll be ready in a few."

"No problem. I'll be in the living room when you're ready." Kacy walked out and shut the door behind her.

Landi glanced at the clock. Ten in the morning. She took shower. Finishing and dressing quickly, she walked up the short hallway to where Kacy waited for her in the living room.

Tugging on her shirt, she said quietly, "I'm ready."

Kacy set down the book she was reading and looked at her. "Let's go, then."

Landi helped her up and grabbed the keys. The ride over was silent except for Kacy giving her directions to Jayde's house. With each mile that passed, the knot in the pit of Landi's stomach grew exponentially. At Jayde's house, she shut off the engine and gripped the steering wheel. She struggled to control her breathing and didn't pull away when Kacy grabbed her hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze. The women were silent as they headed for the door.

Jayde Kincade opened the door and gave them a strained smile. "Come on in." She hugged them both tightly.

Landi saw Dez Connelly, another Team member's wife in the kitchen pulling something from the oven.

"CJ is teaching and Lex is also working or else they'd be here," Jayde said.

Landi could only nod. In seconds, Dez had her in a tight embrace as well. When she stepped back, Dez said, "Come, let me get you something to eat."

With a glance to Kacy and Jayde, who both nodded, Landi went with her. Being surrounded by supportive friends brought another wave of tears to her eyes. Landi dutifully ate what Dezarae placed before her despite her lack of an appetite.

As time passed, the women kept her entertained with conversations and more. Landi jumped when the door opened unexpectedly. She watched CJ enter carrying even more food followed by Dez's adopted daughter Charmane holding more food. After placing her load down on the counter, CJ enveloped Landi in a hug. Charmane squeezed her hand and took Murdock, her younger brother, along with Jayde's children out to the backyard.

"Any news?" CJ asked as she hugged the other women.

"Nothing as of yet," Jayde said.

"Okay. Well, I brought more stuff, including sweets, so don't be shy. Dig in."

Afternoon turned into evening and evening merged with the night. Still no word. No one left except Lex who had to go to work; Jayde merely showed where beds were for those who needed rest. Landi didn't take her up on the offer, sitting awake instead, her eyes on the cordless phone on the end table. It was nearing six in the morning when the front door opened.

Landi sat upright and held her breath as Tyson Kincade strode through the door. The man screamed power and danger. Jayde ran into his arms in an instant and no one said a word until their powerful kiss ended. Landi watched his mouth as he whispered in his wife's ear. It took her a moment to realize Tyson hadn't been alone. Dez was in Ross's arms, CJ clung tightly to Osten, and Kacy was in Ernst's embrace.

Hazel eyes were tired and strained as they met hers. Almost like one the wives left their men and stood behind and beside her, their hands resting upon her in silent support.

"He is alive," Tyson said grabbing a chair and straddling it.

Landi's body shook with relief until she realized Tyson's expression hadn't changed. "Tell me," she demanded on a whisper, not even sure she really wanted to know.

"He's not out of the woods—not even close. Osten, fill her in a bit on what happened. Lex can do the rest once Landi gets to the hospital."

Landi ran a hand down her face and turned her head toward Osten Scoleri, the corpsman on the Team. His expression was just as serious as Tyson's had been. He stood, legs braced apart and hands hooked behind his back.

"Dimitri took two gunshot bullets and sustained a knife injury. The knife wound was the most severe. When medics got to him, the blade had to be left in his back for fear that removing it would paralyze him. We had to induce a coma so he wouldn't move by accident and risk further damage." He glanced behind her before focusing back on her face. "Lex can fill you in more." Osten looked back at Tyson who nodded and stood.

Bile rose up within Landi. "Can I see him?"

Tyson nodded. "I came to get you. Lex is with him now and his parents are on the way."

Landi honestly had no wish to take these men from their spouses, but she *did* want to be with Dimitri. Her expression must have given her thoughts away for Tyson smiled slightly.

"We're all going back. Don't feel like you're making me take a trip I don't have to."

"Thank you," she murmured.

Landi watched the couples embrace and the men look in on their children. Her belly was in knots as she sat in the front passenger seat of a white van. Behind the wheel was Aidrian. She rested her head back and closed her eyes.

A coma. Dimitri's in a coma. Two gunshot wounds and a stabbing injury that may have paralyzed him.

The drive contained muted snatches of conversation from the men in the back. She opened her eyes when they got on I-264 Westbound.

"Where is he?" she asked as they entered the Downtown Tunnel. A stream of brake lights met her eyes.

Hondo spoke without taking his gaze off the busy road. "NMCP. Navy Medical Center Portsmouth."

She shifted against the vinyl seat of the passenger van when they came to a halt. Impatience roared to the surface, but breathing came easier once they began moving again until they stopped at a guard gate. Landi remained silent as Hondo showed his ID and received a salute. He drove on and around to the main doors.

Landi got out and sent a trembling smile to Hondo before he drove away, leaving her with Ross, Osten, and Tyson. They were all quiet as they entered through the sliding doors into the hospital. She walked beside Tyson while Ross and Osten flanked them. In the elevator, her heart began to pound harder. She swallowed and shoved her hands in the front pockets of her jeans. She worried her lower lip with her teeth. Landi shut her eyes and called upon an image of Dimitri, his golden eyes twinkling and an amazing grin upon his face.

"Come on, Landi." Tyson's whispered voiced pulled her lids back up.

If the situation hadn't been so dire, she would have smiled. It was the first time he'd ever used her first name; he'd usually call her "Ms. Nycks" or "Ma'am". At Tyson's gentle guidance, they walked down a near empty hallway, the only noise that of their footwear as they walked.

A woman in minty green scrubs stepped from a room accompanied by a man dressed in military fatigues identical to what the men with her wore. Landi recognized both Alexis "Lex" Leighton and her husband Scott. Their expressions were so serious.

"Landi," Lex said as she stepped away from Scott and approached her, draping her stethoscope over her shoulders as she moved.

"Please tell me what's going on, Lex." Landi hugged her briefly.

"Do you want to see him first?" Lex questioned.

"Yes."

"Okay, this way."

Together they entered the Dimitri's room. Landi took a sharp breath as she gathered herself before moving toward the bed. Dimitri lay there, his skin pale and drawn.

"Can I touch him?" Landi asked in a whisper.

"Of course. And talk to him, Landi. We need him to wake up, but he hasn't yet. As strong as your connection is with one another, perhaps you can succeed where we failed."

Landi moved a small stool beside the bed to sit near Dimitri. She slipped her hand under his motionless one and brought it to her mouth, kissing it. "Come back, Dimitri. I'm not ready to let you go again." There was no response. Moving some hair off his forehead, Landi

blinked back tears. "Your parents need you. They can't afford to lose their son."

Sliding the seat as close as she could, Landi rested her head against his arm. With her free hand she traced aimless circles on his bandaged chest. "There is so much I want to tell you, Dimitri Androcles Melonakos, and I can't do that unless you wake up."

The beeping of the monitors combined with the faint yet familiar beating of his heart lulled her into a world of sleep. When a hand settled upon her shoulder, she jumped. Turning, Landi found herself staring at Feodras and Airlia Melonakos.

"Landi," Airlia murmured with tears in her eyes. "Thank you for being here so he wasn't alone."

Landi got to her feet and hugged her. Feodras drew her in for one as well and she struggled not to cry again. "I'll let you be alone with your son," she whispered as she stepped away from Dimitri's father.

Those words were hard for her to force out. *I don't want to leave him.* Landi knew and understood his parents needed some time alone with him. Slipping out the door, she closed it and leaned against the wall until her legs would no longer hold her. Landi sank to the cool tile floor and shook. This time when the tears threatened she didn't stop them.

"Here, lass, dry your eyes," Aidrian's lilting voice commanded gently.

Lifting her head slightly, Landi found Aidrian crouched before her, holding out a box of tissues to her. His black eyes were kind as he held her gaze. With a trembling hand, she reached for some tissues and dabbed her eyes. "Thank you," she murmured.

Looking around her, Landi noticed the rest of the Megalodon Team, stoic as they held a silent watch until there was more news about Dimitri. He was more than just their teammate; he was also brother and friend. They didn't look at her and Landi realized they, too, were in their own private hell.

"This is for you," Aidrian said softly.

Landi took the red box in one hand and glanced back to the man still before her. "What's this?"

"Merlin wanted you to have it...if anything happened to him." Aidrian touched her shoulder and walked back to where the rest of the men continued their unspoken vigil.

Part of her didn't want to open it. It would make everything seem so much more real. Dimitri had wanted her to have it if anything

happened to him. *If I open it, will I lose him forever?* Shaking off that thought, she took a deep breath and opened the lid.

Oh, my!

Sitting on the blue, satiny inset was a silver pendant of crescent moon surrounded by five stars that made a five-point star themselves. It was like his tattoo. Diagonally through the large star was a pink ladder that appeared to keep the moon in place. It was beautiful.

She bit back her gasp of surprise. Landi started to replace the lid when her thumb brushed across a piece of paper lodged in it. Her name was scrolled across it. Removing the folded parchment, Landi read the words in Dimitri's handwriting.

Landi,

First and foremost, I LOVE YOU. I always have and I always will.

The necklace is a way for you to have a part of me with you always. We were made for one another. Fate which is the Adinkra symbol you wear has another name. Nimue. Patience, Landi, I can see you cocking you head to the side silently encouraging me to get to the damn point. Very well. Nimue is the name of Merlin's one true love. Just as you are mine. I don't know what the future may hold for us but no matter what, never forget you are the last thing I think about before I sleep and each morning I wake with you in mind. You are my moon; I will always turn to you to find my way home.

S'agapo, dikos mou isyzygos, s'agapo, ~Dimitri

Landi's hands shook as she kissed the note. *Dimitri!* Her soul cried for him. Getting to her feet, she went to a restroom. Standing before a sink, she splashed some cold water on her face until she stopped shaking. Landi stared at her reflection and couldn't believe the size of the circles under her eyes. Taking the necklace from the box, she tried twice to put it on, but her hands wouldn't cooperate. Landi put it on the shelf below the mirror.

"Landi? Are you okay?"

Staring at eyes that were similar to the tiger's eye rock, Landi shook her head at Lex. "No," she admitted with a sharp exhalation. "I

don't know what I can do to help. I want to be with him but his parents desire to be there with him, as they should." With a sob, she tightened her grip on the sink and broke eye contact with Lex, staring down at her hands.

"You know he can hear you," Lex's voice was gentle and near her ear. "He loves his parents immensely, but that man would move a mountain if that's what you wanted him to do."

Landi opened her eyes when Lex moved her hair to the side and put the necklace on for her. Touching the pendant as it settled against her skin, Landi stared in the mirror and found Lex's gaze. What a very caring and wise woman she was.

"Then why won't he wake up?" Landi asked.

"I don't know. I'm hoping it's his body's way of healing him from the inside out and he'll wake up soon. What I do know is if you give up," Lex paused, released her hair, and stepped away, "so will he."

Lex left as silently as she'd appeared. Landi touched the pendant briefly before she headed back to Dimitri's room. Landi knocked softly before entering. His parents hovered over him, one on each side of the bed. Feodras waved her over. When she reached his side, he slid his arm around her shoulders.

"You belong here with us. You're family, *kori*." He placed a kiss on her cheek. "We'll leave you alone with him for a while." Feodras moved to his wife's side and led her from the room.

Stroking a hand along his forehead, Landi whispered, "Come back to me, Dimitri." Placing a kiss on his cheek, she sat in the chair beside him.

Dimitri had been in the hospital for two weeks, and Landi had been by his side every day she could. Today, she had her sketchpad and new cards to read to him.

Placing her things by the chair in the sun, she spoke to him as she put up his new cards. "Well, Dimitri, you have two cards today from my sisters and one here from Khristos. They're very beautiful. All you have to do is open your eyes to see them." Cards in their proper place, she kissed him before sitting in her chair.

For a while, the room was silent save for the strokes of her pencil on the paper and the beeps from the machines attached to Dimitri. Landi readjusted herself in the chair and talked while she sketched.

"I've got a show coming up in California. It'd be great if you could be there. Not to mention I'm sure your parents would love for

you to visit. So would Khristos. It could be like the time when you were in Coronado. Well, except for you having to go back to work." She angled her paper and shaded more of the outfit. "Or maybe something like we did that weekend along the beach on this coast. Hell, I'd travel wherever if you'd just wake up. I miss you, Dimitri. Each day I sit here and pray to hear your voice." Landi took a sip of her lemonade and began sketching again.

"I love you, Dimitri," she said softly, blinking back tears. "Lex says you can hear me and I've talked until I'm blue in the face every day. I don't know what else to say."

"'I love you' would be great to hear from you again," the raspy masculine voice floated across the air to her.

Landi squealed and dropped her pad. Dimitri had turned his head to look at her. She found herself staring into his golden eyes. "Dimitri," she gasped as she flew from her seat to stand beside him. Blinking away tears, she reached for his face. "Oh, my God, you woke up!" Landi placed kisses on his face. "I love you," she murmured in between each one.

"Landi," he husked out.

"Yes?"

"Can I have something to drink?"

Shame washed over her. "Of course. Let me go get Lex."

"Lex?" he croaked.

"I'll be right back, Dimitri." She ran from the room dead set on finding a doctor or a nurse. And his parents.

Dimitri closed his eyes and tried to figure out what exactly had happened. Last he could remember was pain, excruciating pain. But he had slogged out of a fog to hear Landi's sweet voice saying she loved him. Dimitri had turned his head and seen her sitting in the chair by the window, sketching as the sun shone upon her.

He'd longed to hold her to him, but his limbs were so weak. Dimitri had also wanted to shout at her to stay instead of leaving to find a doctor. All he wanted was her. To feel her soft skin against him, to smell her tantalizing lemon, peppermint, and lavender scent.

"Hey, there, Dimitri. Welcome back."

Slowly, he opened his eyes again. Lex stood beside him. "Lex," he whispered roughly. She smiled and offered him cool water he drank through a straw. "Where's Landi?"

"Waiting outside until we've checked you out."

Dimitri glanced at the door and then the male nurse in the room with Lex. "What happened?"

Lex shined a light in his eyes. "What do you remember?"

He watched her jot notes down on a chart. "I remember pain...and..." he trailed off as flashes of a brunette woman flickered before him, along with blood. Lots of blood. "Arrgh!" he hollered when he couldn't pull up any more of the memory.

"Easy there, sailor." Lex's calm, unruffled tone broke into his tenseness.

"I don't know. I should remember, but I can't!" His breathing accelerated and his heart rate increased.

"Take it easy, Dimitri," Lex said. The beeping grew faster.

He tried to do as she said. Dimitri wanted to get up, but he couldn't. "Lex," he spoke, "I can't move my legs." Alexis Leighton might be a great doctor, but even she couldn't hide the worry that statement put on her face. Dimitri's throat grew dry. "What's wrong with me?"

"Listen to me. We need to run some more tests. It may be nothing."  $% \label{eq:listen} % \label{eq:liste$ 

Dimitri shook his head at her. "Don't give me that medical crap. What aren't you telling me?"

She sat down on the stool beside him. "You sustained a serious injury due to a knife to your lower back. To do the best they could and not paralyze you, the medics put you into a coma, got you stable and then removed the knife and the two bullets. But you wouldn't come out of the coma, so we never knew if they had been successful or if there was actual nerve damage done."

Nerve damage. Paralyzed. I may never walk again.

"Don't think bad things, Dimitri. You've come back to us; that's a huge step in the right direction."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, shutting his eyes.

Dimitri heard whispers and then the door shut. All kinds of thoughts ran through his mind as he fell asleep. The following days didn't show any improvement.

When he awoke from resting a few days later, the first thing Dimitri saw was Landi sitting in her chair sketching quietly. Her headphones were in her ears as she worked. He stared at her from beneath lowered lashes.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked without looking up from her pad. "Water? Ice chips? Jell-O?"

Some real food would be nice. "Look at me, Landi," he said.

The scratching of her pencil stopped and she placed her fawn gaze on his. A frown marred her face. "You okay?" Landi put her feet on the floor and walked over to him.

Dimitri almost smiled at the pink football jersey she wore. *I should have known it'd be the only way she'd wear one.* He swallowed a few times before he asked, "Why are you still here, Landi?"

"I'm here because this is where I want to be." She brushed her lips over his lightly.

Silent, Dimitri nodded and Landi returned to her seat, picking up her sketch pad again. He wanted to hold her, carry her in his arms. Play with his...no...*their* children. Not be in a wheelchair.

"What does kori mean?"

Landi's question startled him. "Why?" he asked.

"Just curious."

"Who called you that?" Dimitri believed he had a very good idea.

"Your father."

I was right. Figures he would do that. Dimitri frowned as another thought entered his head. If I'm paralyzed, how would I ever be able to make love to Landi again? A chill settled around him. Even his parents loved her, proven by his father calling her daughter.

"You should go," he said.

She put her pencil down and looked at him. "I'm sorry, what?" Lex walked in, chart in hand, but he ignored her. Never tearing his gaze from Landi, he repeated himself.

"I said you should go. You have other things to do I'm sure."

Her eyes narrowed. "You want me to leave." Landi made it a statement, not a question.

"Yes," he returned even as his heart cried out *no!* "My parents are here. You can get on with your life."

"Get on with my life."

Dimitri turned his head away, unable to look at her. "That would be a good thing for you to do." His heart felt like it was being ripped from his chest.

"Don't you look away from me!" she snapped. "Damn you! Look at me!"

He did and she was at his side, her eyes angry as was her stance. "What?" he bit off.

"How are you going to sit there and tell me to go?"

Temper at his situation boiled over. "Well, I'd get up and tell you but..." he halted and slashed his hand toward his legs, "I can't seem to get up, now can I?"

One of her arched brows shot up and she put her hands on her hips. Dimitri knew she was ready for a fight. Well, that's fine. I'm spoiling for one as well.

"What happened to the man who believed he could do anything?"

His hands fisted in the blankets at his sides. "He's lying in a goddamn hospital bed! He's tired!" Dimitri stared straight ahead.

She snorted. "Of course you're tired. You've given up. The question is why?"

He snapped his head around to glare at her. "I've not given up!" "Oh, cut the shit, Dimitri!" Her voice had risen to match his.

"What? How am I the bad person here?"

"Answer me, damn it!" Landi's command reverberated through the room.

"Don't be mad at me, Landi. I'm the one who may never walk again. I'm tired. Leave me alone!"

"Shut up, Dimitri. Just shut up!" She lowered her face into his and he had to stop himself from grabbing her and kissing her. Landi narrowed her eyes at him and shook her head. "I thought you were a SEAL." Her small form stepped back. "Guess that was a mistake for the US Navy to have that same assumption of you."

Fire flowed through his blood. "Damn you! I *am* a SEAL!" he growled. Dimitri looked over to where Lex stood avidly watching their interaction. "I'm tired, Lex. Get her out of here."

Lex sighed and shook her head. "Nope, sorry. You're on your own here." With a brief glance to the nurse with her, they both left.

Dimitri glowered. "Go away, Landi."

"No."

"What?"

"No. It's a really simple word. Two letters, I'm sure you've heard it plenty." She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "You have just given up." She shook her head in disappointment.

"Given up? I've given up?"

"Did something happen to your hearing as well? Given up, that's what I said. Should I say it again? Dimitri 'Merlin' Melonakos has given up," she taunted.

Dimitri wanted to throw something. Hit something. Yell. More. "Don't go there, Landi," he warned.

"Why not? You seem to be throwing yourself this pity party. You don't know you can't walk. They say it may take time, but you...you expect to immediately be able to jump from a plane or whatever the hell you do. And since you can't, you're taking the coward's way out. Quitting."

"Get out!" he yelled. "What good am I if I can't walk?"

"Why? Why would you do this?" she seethed at him. Her anger was so palpable he could taste it. "After everything the two of us have gone through...why?" She reached in her pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper. Landi stomped over to him, grabbed his chin, and shook the note in his face. "Let me tell you something, Dimitri Androcles Melonakos. You don't get to say the things you did to me in this and then push me away."

He forced himself to ignore the anger and pain that coated her words.

"Landi, I may never walk again."

"Shame on you, Dimitri. I would love you even if you were in a wheelchair. That doesn't make you who you are. But I won't listen to this pity party anymore." She crumpled up the paper in her hand and hit him in the chest with it. "I won't be your excuse to quit."

Dimitri remained silent as she stared at him for a moment. Landi spun around and left the room. The slamming of the door was like someone shutting him into a dark room with no light. His heart tightened. Glancing to his right, he felt relieved when he saw her items still there. *She'll be back*. The room was without the warmth Landi brought him. *What did I do?* 

He tensed when the door swung open. An apology died on his lips when he saw it was Lex and another person.

"We're going to take you for an MRI." She reached for the balled up paper still resting in his lap. "Want me to throw this away?"

"No!" He grabbed it and said in a softer tone, "No. I want this."

"Okay," Lex replied. "I'll leave it here for when we get you return." He didn't want to let go of it. Lex spoke in a gentle yet firm tone when she held out her hand. "I need the paper, Petty Officer."

*She's going all protocol on me.* With a sigh, he relinquished it. Lex just put it with his other cards and turned back to him.

"Ready?" she asked softly.

Am I ready? Dimitri nodded and leaned back as they wheeled him from the room and down the hall. The procedure took a while and Dimitri was cranky as he was returned to his room. He wanted Landi and the calm he felt around her.

But Landi wasn't there. Osten Scoleri sat wearing civvies in the chair she normally accompanied. When the orderly left, Dimitri realized what else was wrong in the room. Landi's stuff wasn't there.

"Where's her stuff, Osten?" he asked.

"She's gone, Dimitri."

A harsh laugh exploded from his chest. *No!* "That can't be. She just left her stuff right there. Where you're sitting."

"I know. I packed it up; it's in my car as we speak."

"What?" Dimitri's heart pounded in his ears. "Why would you do that?"

"She left a note with Lex that she had to leave and if someone could send her stuff to Kacy's, saying she'd get it later." Osten uncrossed his legs and walked to the bed. "I have something I need to tell you."

"Wait a sec," Dimitri said, trying to wrap his head around the fact Landi was truly gone.

"No, you need to listen, Dimitri. I feel horrible that I wasn't with you when this went down, you know that. Of all the guys on this Team, you are my best friend. I feel like I failed you. Like, if I'd been there, maybe I could have done something immediately. I'm the medic for us and I wasn't there when you needed me. I'll never forgive myself for that."

"It wasn't your fault, Osten. I may not remember what happened that day, but I know it wasn't your fault."

"Fight this, Dimitri. Fight this and win. You need Landi and she needs you. Do you know she never even told our wives she saw some of us in Rio? She *is* one of us, and you need to bring her home where she belongs."

Dimitri remained silent as Osten patted him on the shoulder and walked to the door.

"Dimitri, bring her home," Osten said one more time in Italian before he slipped out the door.

When Lex arrived, he didn't say anything about Landi. "Can I have my phone, Lex?"

"I'll get it for you," she said with a smile. She returned in seconds with it.

"Thank you." He immediately dialed Landi's number.

Dimitri frowned when it went directly to voicemail. He tried a few more times, determined not to worry or be upset she didn't pick up. After all, he'd been the dumbass who'd told her to go. Throughout the rest of the day, his teammates stopped by to see him. None of them mentioned the lack of Landi in his hospital room. He knew they were well apprised of the situation.

Days passed and he still couldn't reach Landi. He spoke to many people, including his family over in Greece. Dimitri had talked to Austin and Khristos as well. He found himself calling Landi's number, even knowing he'd get her voicemail, just to be able to hear her voice. One day, a knock came to the door.

"Come on in," he said, "I'm just tryin' to eat what they claim to be food around here."

Affrica's head popped around the door edge. "Are you decent?" "Yes."

"Dang. I'll come back when you're not."

"Get in here," he said with a smile that grew bigger as she bounced in, even despite men's eyes following her. "You gonna make me get up from this bed and kick their asses for ogling you? Or tell your brother?"

She glanced over her shoulder and waved at them before closing the door on their snooping gazes. "Nae. They're harmless." Affrica walked up to him with a vase of vibrantly colored flowers. She put it on the table and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Aidrian would kill 'em," she paused, looking down at him, "not that any of the rest o' ya, wouldn't as well. I'm not a baby; I can take care o' myself."

Dimitri laughed. "That's not the point." He tugged her to sit on the bed beside him. "Now, what are you doing here? Thought you'd be out gallivanting around the world."

"I was. But when Aidrian let me know about you, I came to see you." She readjusted herself so they shared the bed. "Now, tell me, what is this bullshit about you not walking?"

Turning his head, Dimitri pressed his lips to her temple. "My legs don't move, Affrica. It's not bullshit."

"Pshaw. You dinna want to try."

"Why do you think that?" Dimitri asked even as he acknowledged if anyone else had said that, he would have flown off the handle.

"Because I know you and don't believe any of this blarney." She snuggled against him and Dimitri smiled as he put his chin on the top of her head.

"You know, Affrica, I don't know why you aren't taken. Are you hiding some man from us? We won't kill him."

"Speak for yourself, Merlin," Aidrian's deep voice filled the room. "I'd gladly slit him from—"

"Aidrian," Affrica admonished.

"Speaking of slitting men touching my sister, what *are* you two doing in bed together?" he demanded.

Dimitri laughed and looked at his friend. There was some humor in his gaze, but there was also suspicion and the desire to maim. *I feel for the man who tries to date Affrica*.

"She's telling me to get off my ass," Dimitri said.

"About time," Aidrian muttered.

"I'd say it's the perfect time." Affrica squeezed his midsection. "You get to walking and I'll take you with me to a fashion show I've been invited to."

Drawing back, Dimitri looked down into her sparkling brown eyes with their gold flecks. "A fashion show?" His heart rate sped up.

"Aye, I got this invite from a friend o' mine. She's has this design line called Desires of the Moon." Affrica carefully unfurled from around him and left the bed.

Landi.

Dimitri watched her tug on her drawstring cargo pants and pull down her tight white tee shirt. He chuckled as Aidrian's eyes narrowed at his sister. She shrugged and faced him.

"Don't take too long, Dimitri," she said in his ear. "I'll be back for you and we'll fly out together." She kissed his cheek again and walked to the door where she waved at him over her shoulder. Dimitri smiled back and then laughed as Aidrian growled low and went after her, his fierce glower sure to scare any men away from his only sister.

His skin burned from the thought of seeing Landi again. Holding her. Landi had been right all along; he'd been feeling sorry for himself. There was no excuse for self-pity.

"Time to change that," he muttered.

Grabbing his cell phone he tried Landi again but didn't despair when he couldn't get her. He hung up without leaving a message.

"Ready now?" Scott's voice came from the door.

Glancing up, Dimitri smiled as he saw the rest of his team standing in the entrance to his hospital room. They all wore civvies, but it didn't make them appear any less threatening, or him any less happy to see them.

D((

California

Landi sighed as she watched the final preparations for the show moved around her. It was busy and she needed a break. She stepped to the back of the building for a moment. Truth was, she didn't want to be here.

I want to be with Dimitri.

It had been so difficult ignoring all of his phone calls and she still felt bad for what she'd said to him in the hospital room. It didn't matter that Lex had taken her aside to tell her Dimitri didn't seem to want to fight or that he would get angry and yell. Lex had asked her to not coddle him but to fight back.

Landi looked up at the afternoon sky and then down to the Pacific Ocean that sparkled in the light. "I'm so sorry, Dimitri. I didn't mean those things I said."

With another tired sigh, she headed back inside the building. Jason was there with a mocha for her and she took it with a smile.

"Thanks, Jase. I needed this."

"You sure you're okay?" he asked.

"Fine."

Landi drank some of the hot liquid, loving the rich taste sliding down her throat. Together they went to the catwalk and Landi sat in a chair to watch her models strut their stuff. She didn't move until she'd finished the drink. Sliding off the chair, she said, "Nice job. Take a break and be ready for tonight."

From that moment until the time she got ready for the show, Landi worked on another sketch. Then she showered and put on her lotion. After fixing her hair in a partial updo, she slid on a silvery white dress with spaghetti straps and a handkerchief-style hem. Along the bodice of the slightly scooped neckline and at the hem was a floral design done with a pale pink beading. After she'd put in her earrings, Landi grabbed her jeweled T-Strap sandals with three quarter-inch heels.

"Let's go kick some ass tonight," she whispered to her reflection. Jason and Samantha waited for her and together they climbed into the limo. She smiled as they grew near the venue, her body beginning to thrum with the rush of adrenaline.

"Ready, doll?" Jason asked.

"I sure am. This is going to be a great night."

He smiled down at her before touching the side of her face. "I think so too."

Something about his tone struck her. "Maybe I should be asking if you're okay." She smiled at him. "What are you up to?"

"I've been with you almost the entire day. When have I had time to be *up* to something?"

He had a point. When he isn't with me, he's usually talking to Samantha. "Okay, I'll let it go for now."

He flashed a grin. "Good girl."

Crossing her legs, Landi shook her head in amusement. "Whatever." Jason just laughed.

As the evening progressed, Landi knew the show was a hit. Sitting by the end of the catwalk, she watched the men model the new

suits. Landi sat up as Jason walked out holding a microphone in one dark hand. She arched a brow waiting to see what unfolded.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. We have one final item to showcase. So please bear with us while we make the last few preps to it."

Landi worried her bottom lip as she listened to the music shift from something fast and flashy to a more smoothly romantic melody. What the hell is going on? She began to stand when a hand clamped down on her arm. Turning her head to the side, she saw Jason sitting back down.

"What is going on?" she hissed, not liking being kept in the dark about *her* fashion show!

"Nothing more than what I said. Just one more suit to show." He pressed her back into the chair. "Just watch. My goodness, do you think I'd do something to mess up this night?"

The expression on his face was one of pain and hurt. Immediately, Landi reached for his arm. "I'm sorry, Jase, I'm just a bit out of sorts I guess."

She stared at Samantha, who just shrugged and turned her attention to where the fog was beginning to billow around the stage. It rolled down the walkway and slid off the end like a cat stalking its prey. As she watched, a shadow emerged from backstage and a man came toward the end where she was.

Landi narrowed her eyes. Something about the swagger rang familiar. Her skin tingled with anticipation and her body reacted in a sexual way.

"Can't be," she breathed. Landi leaned forward and gripped the hands of her chair.

The closer the man bathed in the fog screen got, the more she was certain. He stopped at the end of the runway and she held her breath as the fog drifted away. The spotlight remained on him and Landi felt tears well up in her eyes.

Standing on the end of the platform was Dimitri Melonakos, and he wore the suit she'd drawn with him in mind after she'd run into him in Greece. It was green and gold and hung off his frame just as she had intended. The pride of seeing one of her works of art took second place to the feeling she got from seeing Dimitri up and walking, so different from him being bedridden only a month ago.

His hair was shaggy and just as sexy as she remembered. He looked good. Really, *really* good. *Oh, my God I want to run up to him and* 

*hold him!* Landi looked across the way to where Affrica stood with a smile on her face. Landi mouthed "thank you" to her.

"I love you, Landi," Dimitri said. "Thank you for what you did when I was in the hospital. I needed that. I needed to realize a lot of things." He reached out a hand. "Come up here."

The crowd cheered; and as she walked to the edge, she looked up at him. "I'm a bit short and there are no steps." The words had barely left her mouth when two of the male models showed up and lifted her up onto the catwalk with Dimitri.

"Problem solved, selini," he purred in her ear.

Her body shivered and her legs weakened. "What are you doing here?"  $\label{eq:weakened}$ 

"I came to get my woman." A loud whistle echoed through the crowd. Dimitri smiled and rubbed his thumb over her lip. "You look absolutely breathtaking, Ilanderae Nycks."

The fact she was standing on a platform with potential clients looking on didn't matter. The only thing that did was the man who stared down at her like she was the only woman in the world.

"What do we do now?" she asked, running her hands down the lapel of his suit coat.

"That note I wrote with the necklace was the truth. You are my moon. Everything I could want is with you. I want to correct my mistake from so long ago when I didn't make it to the altar." He reached in his pocket and withdrew a black velvet box. Dimitri sank to a knee and held up the open box. "Will you marry me, Landi?"

She held her fingers to her lips and stared at the ring resting upon the black satin. It was a cushion-cut diamond with rows of alternating round diamonds and pink sapphire baguettes in a channel-bar setting. There was also a matching band and all was in platinum.

"Dimitri," she said on a sigh. "This is a wedding set."

He looked at her and winked. "I know. What's the answer, Landi?" He rose to his feet and took her hand in his. Dimitri pulled the engagement band out of the box.

Landi swallowed. "You know I love you. And I know I've not made things easy, but I want you, Dimitri. The good, the bad, I just want you."

She reached for his face and stopped when he grabbed her wrist. "I need an answer, Landi."

"Yes, Dimitri. I'll marry you!" She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

He returned her passionate kiss as he slid the ring on her finger. Everyone cheered loudly around them as they broke apart.

"Is there a chaplain, minister, preacher, or someone who can conduct a marriage ceremony in the house?" Dimitri shouted.

"What are you doing? I can't do this now! What about my family? Your family?"

"I can marry you," a voice shouted.

Landi looked in the direction it came from and saw a man walking toward them. Her belly quivered. "Dimitri, now?"

"I'm not letting another second go by without you as my wife." He kissed her briefly again. "And you're already in white." Looking around, he said, "Can we have some witnesses?"

People began to stand up and answer. Landi felt tears gather in her eyes. She recognized her family and his, and Dimitri's teammates were also there in nice suits with their wives. Even Austin and Khristos were there.

"You did this?" she whispered in awe as friends and family they knew came forward.

"I love you, Landi." He kissed her so passionately, her toes curled in her shoes. "Let's get this show on the road," he said as some steps were rolled up to the end so they could walk down.

The crowd laughed and it didn't take long before they were standing in front of a man of the cloth reciting their vows. In her hands she held a bouquet of white and pale pink roses and calla lilies.

Landi shook when he slid the wedding band over her finger and set it against her new ring. It was a blur when she heard, "You may kiss the bride"; all she focused on was the feel of Dimitri's lips on hers.

His arms held her so securely and she wanted to flee the prying eyes and enjoy the man who was now her husband.

"I love you, Landi. S'agapo."

"I love you, too, Dimitri."

Later that night as she stood in her hotel room, she looked at the man who was pouring them champagne. He wore a bathrobe that matched hers. As she stared at him, he glanced at her, his hair falling over his eyes. In that second, as the light from the full moon over the water shone into their dimly lit room, she knew this man was her future. He was her everything and she was...

Dimitri's Moon.

## About the Author

Aliyah Burke loves to read and write. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached at <a href="mailto:aliyah@aliyah-burke.com">aliyah burke@hotmail.com</a>, and feel free to join her yahoo group at<a href="mailto:http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aliyah\_burke">http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aliyah\_burke</a> or friend her at <a href="mailto:http://www.myspace.com/aliyahburke">http://www.myspace.com/aliyahburke</a>. Please stop by her website, <a href="mailto:www.aliyah-burke.com">www.aliyah-burke.com</a> for more available titles —just don't forget to sign the guestbook!

Aliyah is married to a career military man. They have a German Shepherd, a Borzoi, and a DSH cat. Her days are spent splitting her time between work, writing, and dog training and showing.

Read further for an excerpt on Dimitri's cousin AJ from AJ's Serendipity by Savannah J. Frierson

## Excerpt from AJ's Serendipity

He'd never been so hard in his life, and it was all Samara's fault. The siren had no idea how alluring she was, and he thought that was probably part of the reason she didn't like clubs. She attracted attention, simply put, especially when she danced.

Hips shouldn't do things like that outside the bedroom...

Next to him, Spyros pressed the bottle of his beer to his forehead and fanned himself with his free hand. "Is it hot in here?"

"Scorching," AJ rasped, his eyes on the two sisters who were dancing up a storm in one of the clubs they had discovered. At first, Samara had been content on being a booth butterfly, and he'd been more than happy to let her be. Far be it for him to put her up where other men could see...try to take her away from him. She was his; damn all that. However, this latest club they'd stumbled upon played more R&B music (Samara and Frankie called it "old school") and the sisters had been on the floor nonstop ever since.

"This is my *jam*!" Samara had exclaimed when they'd first entered, and had pulled Frankie to the dance floor to prove just how much she enjoyed it.

AJ thought he would be content just watching and allowing the sisters to have a good time. He had fairly hijacked all of Samara's time from the moment he'd seen her at the market. He was a big boy; he knew how to function without her by his side...

It was the other men who were growing increasingly problematic.

At first, no one had dared approach Samara and Frankie, many completely awed by the two women on the dance floor. After three songs, however, some had become bolder and decided to ask them for dances. At first, both ladies would shake their heads; but the men would be persistent, and then the women would relent. AJ couldn't help but smirk when some more courageous men tried to move their hands into off-limits territory (which, for AJ, was Samara's entire body), but Samara and Frankie weren't having that. There was always space between the dancing bodies, and then there was the fact the partners simply couldn't keep up.

In the meantime, various ladies had approached AJ for a drink, a dance, or other "activities" in the numerous dark corners of the club, but AJ would politely (and sometimes not) reject all the advances. He never did well with substitutes, and the only woman who would get a dance with him was his dark-caramel American beauty.

"I'm going in," AJ muttered to Spyros in Greek after the fifth man approached Samara. He needed her in his arms before he got them thrown out and himself in jail.

Fifth Man and Samara were dancing to a song AJ didn't recognize, but it had a pulsing beat and a mean bass line that apparently compelled Samara to shimmy her hips in a most enticing manner. Every time Fifth Man tried to bring her closer, she would skip out of his reach so fluidly one would think it was part of the dance. AJ, however, knew otherwise, and was intent on showing all the other men just to whom she belonged.

Without a word, he slid one long, strong arm around Samara's waist and brought her back flush against his front, bending his legs as they dipped and swayed to the music. Fifth Man glared at him and started to say something, but the warning in AJ's eyes had him holding up his hands in surrender and leaving to find another dance partner.

Smart man.

Samara's shock wore off after Fifth Man left. "Who—?"

"I didn't know you could move like that, *khriso mou*," AJ purred in her ear, his eyes watching Spyros turn Frankie's attention on him. Frankie smirked and went at it, a challenge in her eyes. Spyros was definitely more than up for it.

As for Samara, she still hadn't moved since he'd rounded her up in his arms, so he bent his legs again and swayed once more. Her hands went to his forearms as if steadying herself.

"Come on, love," AJ whispered though the music blared. He was absolutely sure she had heard him given the shiver that went through her body. "Dance for me."

"AJ..."

"You dance for all the others but not for me?" he murmured, inhaling her scent with his nose in the crook of her neck. Despite the height difference, it was as natural as breathing for him to do. "You never struck me as a tease—"

"I am not-!"

"Then," he began, placing his hands on her hips. "Dance."

Samara was very inhibited at first, as if uncomfortable with how close they were. AJ kept his hands on her hips, guiding her movements to match his. When the second song started, her body became more fluid, and her hands roamed over the curves he'd been fascinated by from the moment he saw her.