

# FIRE AND ICE (AN EXTENDED EPILOGUE)

by Victoria Paige

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ISBN: 978-0-9891337-3-9

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## The Guardians Series

**Artemis Guardian Services (AGS)** - “The Guardians”, as they are known by most of their clients, specialize in small team surgical incursions: Organized crime takedowns, K and R (kidnap and ransom), DoD covert ops that are too politically high-risk, corporate security enforcement (usually involving questionable and deadly force), and recently (and seemingly with increasing frequency) protective custody detail outsourced by the US Marshals Service. Work frequently with CIA, DoD, NSA, FBI, DEA, ATF and Interpol.

Principal owner: Viktor Baran, ex-Special Forces

Guardians:

Maia Pierce

Nathan Stark

Manning

Edmunds

Braden Connelly, ex Army Ranger

Data Analyst: Tim Burns

**McCord Defense Industries (MDI)** - company that designs and manufactures advanced small arms weapons that are efficient in urban warfare. Specializes in advanced carbine weapons, explosives and untraceable tracking devices. Well known for its MD-Bandit drones—a small reconnaissance aircraft capable of firing air-to-surface missiles. Top military contractor for the DoD.

Principal owner: Jack McCord, ex-Navy SEAL

VP of Operations and Design: Derek Lockwood, ex-Special Forces

## CHAPTER ONE

Jack had gone too far this time. His overprotectiveness was out of control. This last stunt of his undermined her position at AGS, which she had spent years to build. Her Mercedes screeched to a halt in front of the Trident Building, and she bolted out of the car.

The guard ran down the steps. “Miss Pierce, you can’t park there.”

“Have it towed; I don’t care!” Maia snapped as she shouldered past the guard. The car was an engagement gift from Jack. After their whirlwind trip to Paris, where he had proposed, the first order of business when they got back was setting her up in all the luxury his money could buy. She was overwhelmed if not a bit uneasy. And she knew now where that unease came from. Showering her with expensive gifts did not give him the right to control her life.

The elevator couldn’t reach the eighteenth floor fast enough: every second that passed was another second that fueled her fury.

When the doors finally slid open, she nodded briefly to Ally, the beautiful receptionist at McCord Defense Industries (MDI). The brunette was surprised to see her, and she quickly ducked her head to look at her computer.

“Maia!” Laurie greeted her. “Jack...wasn’t expecting you.”

Maia stared at her fiancé’s personal assistant. “Do I need an appointment to see Jack? Is he in?”

“He’s in a conference call right now.” Laurie hurried beside her and tried to discreetly block the door to Jack’s office. “I’m not sure it’s a good time.”

“You know why I am here, Laurie,” Maia said coldly. She hated intimidating Jack’s

employees, but she had hit the end of her patience with him. She speared Laurie with an unbending stare, and the petite personal assistant stepped aside.

Maia gripped the knob, inhaling deeply before opening the door. Jack paused midsentence, his brows drawn together. Derek Lockwood, who was sitting in front of Jack's desk, twisted his body around and mouthed: *Oh fuck*.

"Gentlemen, I have an emergency I have to attend to—we'll pick this up this afternoon," Jack said, hanging up the phone.

"I'm sorry, Jack, I tried ..." Laurie began.

"Not your fault, Laurie," Maia told her firmly before Jack could say anything. Maia walked forward, holding her fiancé's wary gaze. "No one can stop me from confronting my deceitful fiancé."

Laurie mumbled something unintelligible while Derek made a move to rise, but Maia momentarily turned her wrathful glare at her friend. "Stay, Derek. I don't think this AGS fiasco would have been pushed through without your knowledge."

"Maia, babe..." Jack began as he stood up.

"Don't you babe, me, Jack," Maia said, firing her opening salvo. "How dare you keep something this big from me?"

"The same way you sneak off to parts unknown without my knowledge," Jack shot back. "Did you think your little excursion to Mexico would have no fallout?"

"How will investing in AGS mitigate that? Huh, tell me?" Maia challenged. "Not even the AGS knew that Nathan and I were gone. If I wanted to take off on my own, I will. And not a single dime from your billions is going to make any difference. What you've succeeded at with this little power play of yours is to show me how little you trust me."

"And whose fault is that?" Jack asked as he rounded the desk to stand in front of her. He towered over her and lowered his head to get in her face. "Sweetheart, I'll spend every last penny to keep you from doing stupid shit. Get that through your damned head and accept it. I'll know every single deployment, location, and target. Even what you've had for dinner. I—Will— Know."

*Why this unrepentant bastard!* Maia fumed inwardly and then redirected her

anger at Derek. “How could you let him do this?”

“Maia—”

“Don’t look at Derek, Maia—look at me,” Jack growled as her eyes snapped back to his. “Personal reasons aside, AGS is a good investment for MDI. They’re the perfect testing ground for implementing advanced small arms weapons—”

“Quit feeding me that bullshit!” Maia yelled. She stepped back a little, so she could regain some physical advantage. Standing so close to her annoyingly attractive fiancé played havoc with her resolve. “Can you imagine how embarrassing it is to sit there and have Viktor tell us that you own part of the company and I have no fucking clue?”

“Babe, I’m sorry—” Jack’s eyes softened as he stepped closer and raised his hand to touch her face. Maia flinched and took another step back, ignoring the scowl darkening Jack’s face.

“Don’t. Don’t try to sweet talk me,” Maia warned. “God, I’ll be marrying you in two months, you sneaky bastard, and you keep a secret from me that directly affects my job—a job I happen to love, which I know now you can never understand.”

“That’s not true,” Jack argued roughly. “I just need to have some semblance of control.”

Maia gave a short, derisive laugh. “Control? I was right. You want to control me.”

“Stop twisting my words.”

“You just said it yourself; you want to control me.”

“Not you, the situation.”

“Tell me, Jack? Does this new investment of yours give you the right to veto any of my deployments?”

Jack’s face grew darker, but he did not respond.

Maia snorted in disgust. “I thought as much.”

“Maia—”

“Don’t,” Maia said quietly. She took a deep breath and repeated. “Don’t. Jack, I am this close to throwing your ring back at you—”

Jack blanched. “You fucking throw my ring back at me and that’s it. I will not go

through—”

“I know,” Maia cut in gently. She backed away from Jack and Derek. How she hated to put that stricken look on Jack’s face, but she was furious at him. “That’s why I’m walking away to clear my head. To calm down. Because Jack, once this ring leaves my finger, I’m never putting it back on.” She exhaled deeply. “I’ll be gone for a few days. If you want to save our relationship, I’m asking you to give me space. Please.”

Maia’s eyes burned as she turned away and headed for the door. She ignored the hoarse whisper of her name that followed her and the pain in her heart screaming at her to swallow her pride and forget her anger. She opened the door and shut it quietly behind her.

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“Goddamn it!” Jack raked his fingers through his thick black hair and paced the length of the office. He glared at Derek. “Much help you were.”

His friend raised a brow. “I was about to say something, but you cut me off.”

“She’s overreacting,” Jack declared.

“Are you telling me, or are you telling yourself,” Derek asked.

“This is not funny, Lockwood,” Jack snapped. “You heard her. She was going to break up with me.”

“But she didn’t,” Derek reminded him. “Maia is levelheaded in the face of anger; haven’t you figured that out yet? She wouldn’t throw a ring back at her fiancé as some kind of manipulation to get her way. If she gives you back that ring, Jack, it’s over.”

Hearing his friend say the words made Jack’s chest spasm painfully. What had he done? Had he broken their relationship? Keeping the AGS negotiations from her seemed like a good idea at that time. Derek and Viktor were dubious about it, and he should have listened to them. He had made a power play and Maia had called him on it. When Maia took off with Nathan Stark to Mexico, Jack was beyond furious. During the flight to Texas, Jack went through several tracks on how to keep Maia from harming herself. Scenario 1: Sell everything, buy an island, tranquilize her, whisk her off to said island, and keep her hostage for the rest of her life. Scenario 2: Build a compound where he could still maintain control of MDI, tranquilize her, whisk her off to the

compound, and keep her hostage for the rest of her life. Scenario 3: The old adage that if you can't lick them, join them, came to mind. Invest in AGS and keep tabs on her for the rest of her life.

He was seriously psycho. And he didn't give a fuck.

"What do you propose I do?" Jack asked quietly.

"She asked for space—"

"No way," Jack growled. "I give her space, she'll take three weeks again to figure out what the hell it is she wants."

"Then give her three weeks—"

"No fucking way," Jack repeated. "We're getting married in two months, Derek. She doesn't need three weeks to make up her mind if I'm her ever-fucking after. That time has passed. She's got two days to sort her shit, and then I'm going after her."

"Jack—"

"She can't do this every time she's pissed at me," Jack said.

"What you did was underhanded," Derek pointed out. "She had every right to be pissed at you."

"I'm not saying she can't be pissed at me," Jack replied. "We can rationally discuss the situation like mature adults."

Derek rolled his eyes. "Maybe the discussion should have taken place before the MDI-AGS negotiations."

Jack glared at Derek. "I screwed up—OK? I know I should have consulted her first. Pfft. Told her." He paused. "Shit. I'm doing this all wrong, aren't I?"

Derek nodded slowly.

"Fuck. I'm going to have to grovel, aren't I?"

Derek nodded slowly again.

Jack sighed. *What a mess you've made McCord.* What gave him the idea that Maia would meekly submit to his latest interference? He had been looking forward to the showdown. It was almost foreplay for them. They'd fight, and then they'd make up in a big way. At first, he had been bothered by this cycle, but his Mom, of all people, pointed out that it was inevitable at least for the short term. She warned that two strong-

willed people in a relationship usually resulted in serious sparks, and in this case his possessive, overprotective streak would be vying with her independent nature. His mom cautioned not to let the sparks catch fire and leave their relationship in ashes. Did Maia burn out? Had he pushed her too far? It would take an ungodly amount of patience to keep him from going after her. Two days. That was all he was giving her.

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The datacenter was in an uproar after Maia had walked in. When she left MDI, she headed back to their apartment, mulling over the circumstances. She knew in her heart that she wasn't breaking up with Jack. The mere thought of it inflicted physical pain because that overbearing man was the love of her life. He also infuriated her more than any man, and she feared her own temper. So she packed a bag, intending to hole up at a hotel somewhere, order room service, and just avoid Jack for the next few days. On the bright side, she wasn't feeling a betrayal. But she hated having the rug pulled from under her.

At around 7:30 p.m. though, she received a 911 text from Tim, summoning her to AGS stat.

"What's going on?" Maia asked, as the data analyst flitted from screen to screen, fiddling with multiple keyboards.

"Lucy Cortez got hit," Tim said grimly. "Nathan said she's critical, and we have another problem."

Maia was confused.

Tim continued, "I'll backfill you later on the Cortez case. A call just came in from Manning. We need to assemble a strike team against the German arms dealer. Something is going down tonight. Stark was working with Manning on that case."

"What do you need me to do?" Maia asked quickly. In the back of her mind, she was worried for Lucy. The poor girl. And Nathan. Just when they were moving on from a rocky start, their worst nightmare happened.

"Manning suspects there'll be a pickup at Port of Baltimore at 11:00 p.m. tonight. The intel I've gathered confirms a specific crate, so there is a high probability we could close this deal," Tim said.

“Sounds good. Where do I rendezvous with Manning?”

“Coffee shop, right outside Helen Delich Bentley Port. Edmunds is already with him along with an ATF agent. He’ll text you the address.”

“Good.” Maia started to walk away when Tim called out.

“Maia.”

“What?”

“You OK, girl?”

“About what?”

“Jack.”

“Tim that’s hardly relevant—”

“If your mind’s not on the game—”

“Tim, I’ve been doing this gig for ten years.”

Tim folded his arms and rocked on his feet. “You’ve also never been engaged before.”

“Stop,” Maia warned. “I’m more concerned with Lucy right now than my personal issues. And don’t you have work to do?”

*Jeez, she’s turning into a bitch.* She didn’t wait for Tim to reply and huffed off to the locker rooms. Fortunately, only one other Guardian was there—Braden Connelly. He was a new recruit. Maybe he was not up with AGS gossip yet. She worked the combination on her locker, yanked open the door, and started changing into gear.

“There’s a betting pool going on about your wedding pushing through or not,” Connelly drawled.

*Oh for Christ sakes.* Maia mentally rolled her eyes.

“Is that so?” she replied coolly as she pulled on a black t-shirt over her head. She toed off her shoes, unbuttoned her jeans, and tugged them off.

“Yes. So are you going to help me out and tell me the odds?”

“What are the parameters?”

“What day you’re going to break up or make up?”

“What’s the pot up to?”

“A thousand bucks.”

Maia shook her head and realized she was standing in front of Braden in her underwear, and the poor man was trying so hard to keep his eyes on hers. “You guys are nuts.”

“Well?”

“Do you honestly believe I’m helping you cheat?”

“Nothing like insider information.” Braden grinned.

Maia pulled on her cargo pants and sat on the bench to lace up her boots. She looked up at the incredibly tall, sandy-haired Guardian, all 6’5” of him. “Sorry, I can’t help you.”

Braden shrugged. “Didn’t think you would. You’re on the German assignment?”

“Yep, it’s going down tonight—at least the initial phase.”

“I wish Viktor would clear me for assignments.”

“You’re not ready yet.”

Connelly leaned on the locker, his blue eyes staring at Maia intently. “You’ve seen my evaluations, Maia. Are you seriously telling me I can’t handle a mission. I’m an ex-Army Ranger.”

“Doesn’t make you ready,” Maia replied shortly as she got up and started strapping on her shoulder holsters. She reached in to grab her 9mm pistols and slid them into place. The last piece was her utility belt that had all the other gizmos and extra magazines. “If you haven’t figured out the difference between an Army Ranger and a Guardian, you’re not ready.”

Braden flinched, and Maia felt guilty. Edmunds was Connelly’s trainer, but Maia had seen the training sheets, and she was up to take over from Edmunds. Might as well get started.

“Look, meet me at the sparring room tomorrow at 4:00 p.m.,” Maia said.

Braden’s eyes lit up, making her feel better about her earlier words.

“What are we going to do?”

“For starters, either you kick my ass, or I kick yours,” Maia quipped as she picked up a small duffle bag and shut her locker door. She smiled at Braden, jerked her chin, and left to meet Manning.



## CHAPTER TWO

Maia crouched down beside Manning. A stack of shipment containers loomed behind them. Manning was a formidable Guardian, almost six and a half feet of bulky muscle. He reminded her of Dwayne Johnson—the professional wrestler turned movie actor. He sported a bald head and goatee. Despite his size, Manning moved like a cat.

Manning looked over to where Edmunds and the ATF agent were in position behind another column of crates. Edmunds was the opposite of Manning. He was leanly built and was only a couple of inches taller than Maia. His physical attributes were deceiving, and it would be fatal to underestimate him for he was a killing machine with or without weapons. She worked frequently with Manning and Edmunds, and they were last together on a mission that went south when they were ambushed and held captive by the Russian mafia.

A commercial truck and a panel van drove up to the container flagged by Tim Burns as the item of interest. Manning had installed cameras to record their mission and monitor the activities without blowing their cover.

Two men stepped down from the commercial truck, another two exited the panel van, and they all converged in front of the shipping crate. They started speaking in German. One of the men unlocked the crate and lifted the gate, revealing several wooden boxes. A man took a crowbar and pried open one of the boxes and reached in to inspect its contents. It was too dark to discern what the man had lifted in his hand.

“Damn it,” Manning cursed silently. He panned the camera closer and glanced at Maia. She couldn’t tell for sure either what the man was holding. Edmunds, who was fluent in German, listened to the men’s conversation. They were speaking rapidly as

though they were arguing until one of them finally broke away from the group and walked over to a fork lift. Another man went behind the truck to lift the back gate and lower the ramps.

Their targets started loading up the boxes into their truck, and everyone on Maia's team was getting frustrated because they couldn't move in without verbal or visual confirmation. She started working up alternative strategies. They didn't call her a rule breaker for nothing.

"I'm going in," Maia whispered as she unstrapped her shoulder holster and stuffed her 9mm pistol behind her waistband.

"No way," Manning rasped.

Maia ignored him and rose from her crouch; Manning grabbed her arm. "The hell. I'm in charge here, Pierce."

Maia grinned. "I know, big guy. So cite me for insubordination when we get back."

She looked over to Edmunds who was shaking his head in resignation. Guess the guys knew her very well.

Squaring her shoulders, she moseyed up to the group of men loading the crates. Four guns were immediately pointed at her.

"Who the fuck are you?" one of the men shouted as the others started looking nervously around.

"I've come to do business with you, Mr. Kappel or should I say Herr Kappel," Maia purred.

"I don't know who you're talking about," the man replied. His eyes wavered, his gun shook, and his voice was strangled. *Terrible liar.* He was definitely Milo Kappel.

"I've no time for games," Maia said in a bored voice. "My boss wants the guns, Milo. He'll pay you good money for it. Do we have a deal?"

"That's not how it works, woman," Kappel sneered. "You don't just walk up and ask for a deal. Huh! Your boss is stupid. Why would he send a woman to do a man's job?"

*Male chauvinistic pig.*

"I was an incentive," Maia said huskily. "Were we wrong? Do you prefer...men?"

The atmosphere in the shipyard changed. All four men looked at Maia with lust in their eyes—Kappel’s desire was obvious as he surveyed her in a new light. He stroked the front of his crotch as he licked his lips and smiled. “Now we’re talking. How do you fancy getting fucked in a shipping container?”

“Never tried it before, but there’s always a first time,” Maia returned nonchalantly.

“Put your hands up,” Kappel ordered. “Danny, search her for weapons.”

“With pleasure boss,” Danny replied as he approached Maia with a leer on his face; he also displayed the beginnings of an erection.

“You two,” Kappel addressed his remaining men. “Stop looking at her and be on the lookout for her accomplices. And maybe I might just share her with you.”

Maia sighed inwardly. This was getting too easy. Men were such predictable creatures.

“I can do threesomes, and I’d loved to get fucked in the ass,” Maia added when Danny reached out to feel her up. That did the trick. Too distracted by carnal thoughts, Danny did not see her coming. Before he knew it, Maia had one of his arms twisted around, his back flushed to her front, and his own weapon pointed at his temple.

“You, bitch!” Kappel shouted, as all three guns shifted back to her and Danny.

“Open the crate. I want to see what’s inside before I let you stick your cock inside me,” Maia said.

“You don’t give me orders,” Kappel said. “You can forget about doing business. Your boss can forget his guns. Ooooh, but you can be sure I’ll fuck you before I put a bullet in your head.”

“Don’t step any closer or Danny boy here gets it,” Maia warned. *Wait, was that a confession?*

Kappel fired; Danny became deadweight.

*Oh hell.*

“You were saying?” Kappel mocked.

“Freeze. Federal agents!” Manning shouted behind her.

Maia immediately ran and flew into Kappel. Her shoulder hit the man in his gut, and they went crashing to the ground. Kappel lost his gun. The man was still reeling

from her running tackle, and Maia had no problem flipping him around and keeping him subdued with his face to the ground. Surprisingly enough, there were no gunshots behind her. Looked like a clean take down.

The guns better be in those crates.

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The datacenter erupted in cheers and high fives when Manning transmitted the images of the firearms hidden in the wooden boxes. It had been a risky takedown, supported only by a vague verbal confirmation from Milo Kappel.

Overwhelmed by relief, Jack sunk into a chair and rested his elbows on his thighs, steeping his fingers and bending slightly. Tim had set him up to receive notification when Maia went out on assignments. He cussed a blue streak all the way to AGS, angry at Maia and more so at himself for once again being a distraction in her work. But watching her in action, Jack could only admire her calmness despite having four guns pointed at her. She was a professional capable of compartmentalizing her emotions and for that, Jack was extremely thankful.

“Had enough yet?” Tim ribbed him.

“Is she always this kickass?” Jack asked, grinning crookedly.

“Always, man.”

It had been tense at the datacenter. There were several signs pointing to a mission abort. The backup plan was to follow the men to where they would take their shipment and plan another stake-out if the contents couldn't be identified. Everyone had held their breath and Tim had muttered “*Here we go again*” when Maia had walked up to the four armed men. Jack felt all the blood drain from his face, and he wanted to grab the transceiver from Tim to yell at Manning to stop Maia. *What if those men got startled and just shot her?* He had controlled himself of course, after all everyone seemed to have been quietly waiting for Maia's play. He clenched his jaw when he heard Kappel declare how he was going to fuck Maia in a shipping container. Even if he knew Manning and the rest of the team would prevent anything from getting that far, Jack still felt all sorts of crazy. He was completely unprepared to be on the sidelines. How could

Viktor take it? Jack knew damn well how the other man cared for Maia just as deeply as he did.

“Now you know why we call her a rule breaker,” Viktor told Jack after finalizing operational details with Manning.

“I don’t know Viktor, I think it’s her uncanny way of adapting to a situation,” Tim corrected.

Viktor snorted.

“You all need to rein her in,” Jack pointed out. “This could have ended very badly and you know it.”

“Agreed, but there is no reining in Maia,” Viktor replied.

Jack stiffened; The double-meaning was not lost on him. Viktor was giving him some advice.

“This is not the military, Jack. We operate off the grid, we break laws but we get results,” Viktor continued. “We do have certain protocols we adhere to. But since the government would disavow our existence if we were to get into trouble anyway, we’re really not restricted by any rules.”

“They’re on their way back to HQ,” Tim broke in. “Viktor, are you doing the interrogation on Kappel?”

“Yes, we need the names of the people running the firearms ring in Germany. The FBI and Interpol are on standby pending results of our investigation.”

“Is this mission going international?” Jack asked.

Viktor nodded. Looking at Jack, he said, “I’ll have Tim set you up with secure access to our database. I’ll have to cut out to prepare for the interrogation. You best be on your way. I don’t think Maia would appreciate your presence at our datacenter right now.”

Unable to speak through the knot in his throat, Jack jerked his chin to acknowledge what the other man said and rose to leave. Instead of welcoming Maia back from a successful mission, he had to make himself scarce. How screwed up was that? Sensing that he was being watched, Jack turned and saw a Guardian staring at him with undisguised contempt. What the hell? Who was that guy?



## CHAPTER THREE

*Late afternoon, the next day*

*Oh this was going to hurt*, Maia thought belatedly as she saw the grappling mat rushing up to meet her. Braden had just thrown her over his shoulder after neutralizing her offensive. The air was knocked out of her lungs as she landed hard on her back. Maia squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. She felt Braden immediately straddle her, his sweat trickling onto her.

“And that’s how you neutralize a threat,” Braden said smugly. “Are you OK, Maia? I didn’t dump you too hard, did I?” His voice lowered huskily in concern.

*As if she was admitting to such a thing*. She felt his hot breath near her mouth, and she blinked her eyes open. “Of course not,” she fibbed. “Show me the move again.”

“I think you’ve had enough, lady,” Braden said.

“Hey, whose the instructor here?” Maia retorted.

“I seem to recall being asked to teach a certain redhead some Krav Maga moves. So I guess, I’m the instructor right now.”

“Seriously—show me that take down again.”

“Ah...I don’t think so. But I’ll show you one I think you will need to master to handle a big guy,” Braden said as he knifed off her and gave her a hand up.

“You make effective use of your legs, but when it’s someone three times your size, that could be a problem,” Braden told her. “You need to modify your move.”

“Oh, I know, the one where I straddle the assailant’s neck and pitch forward,” Maia replied.

“Yep. You’re used to side take downs with your legs. That’s excellent. But a behemoth might present more of a challenge,” Braden said. “With the side take down, he can simply grab you and slam you over his thigh, and you’ll end up in serious shit or a broken back. You could use me for practice and maybe Manning might be up for guinea pig duty.”

Maia laughed. “I’m game.”

Braden looked at her intently. For a moment, Maia was confused by the expression in his eyes, but he averted his gaze and smiled briefly. “OK—you ready?”

He glanced back at her. Maia nodded.

“You need to use my arm for leverage and use my thigh to give you a leg up. Quickly jump behind my shoulder, squeeze tightly, and then pitch side ways. Make sure you land on your side and not under me. That would defeat the purpose. Do not pause too long in between moves because you need your momentum to take me down—you got me?”

Maia nodded eagerly. Braden gave her the signal to attack. She drew his arm and locked it under his armpit and floated up, barely touching his thigh with her feet before straddling his neck with her thighs. Still locking his arm under him, she jerked sideways to take him down.

“Flawless!” Braden said when they landed. His voice sounded strangled.

“You were taking it easy on me,” Maia replied dryly as she released him. Before she could untangle herself, she found herself flat on her back, her wrists gripped firmly on either side of her. Braden had wedged his hips between her thighs.

“I wasn’t,” Braden whispered. He leaned in closer. Maia raised an eyebrow, scissoring her legs around Braden’s torso, she watched his eyes bug out as he gasped for air. She freed her wrists and positioned a couple of fingers on his throat.

“You’ve gotten me in a position I’ve mastered in escaping,” Maia said, laughing when she released her death grip on Braden’s middle. “Haven’t you watched James Bond?”

She rested a palm on his chest and pushed him away, untangled her legs, and rolled up.

“I’m starving, wanna go eat?” Maia asked.

Braden rested on one knee, mildly surprised by her question.

“No plans with your fiancé? It’s Saturday.”

Maia scrunched her nose. “We’re giving each other space. That’s in no way insider information. Jack and I are not broken up.”

Braden chuckled. “I understand.”

“Let’s see if Manning and Edmunds wanna go with us,” Maia said as she picked up a towel to wipe off her sweat as she walked out of the sparring room.

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“You’re getting too painful to watch,” Viktor said behind him. Jack decided to occupy his time with the AGS CCTV when Viktor had left briefly to address a situation. Jack knew Maia was in the sparring room and clicked around to find it. At first he felt guilty about spying on her and was ready to turn away from the screen when he saw him—the Guardian who was staring at him yesterday with such hostility. And right now, watching the whole sparring exercise, Jack understood why—the man wanted Maia and wanted her badly. And that dick move where he positioned himself between her legs—Jack felt his hackles rise.

“Who’s that guy?” Jack asked tersely.

Viktor raised a brow. “Connelly? He’s a new recruit.”

“I don’t want him around Maia.”

“Back up a little McCord. You don’t run this ship,” Viktor said.

Jack sighed. No he didn’t. This rift between him and Maia was unsettling, and he was slowly losing his patience. He had decided to come in this afternoon to familiarize himself with AGS operations. He was more of a silent partner, but Viktor seemed interested in his business and tactical insights regarding the company. But the man made it clear—he still had autonomy on making final decisions and nothing was by committee or by vote. Viktor was a damned dictator.

“I understand. But are you ignoring how Connelly is around Maia?” Jack challenged. “It takes one second to see him in a room with her to know exactly where

his thoughts are.”

“Maia can handle herself,” Viktor assured him. The blond man leveled his gaze at him. “Jack. Advice? Maia is a rare find. A ring on her finger will not deter men from lusting after her. And it’s not only for her looks. Her fighting skills could give a man a hard on—”

“Jesus, Viktor.” Jack scowled.

“I’m not speaking about myself, asshole,” Viktor replied without changing his tone. “I’ve been around this company long enough to know half my agents are in love with her. That’s a fact. Deal with it.”

Jack remained silent. He seemed to be clenching his jaw a lot these days.

“She’s had men richer and more powerful than you falling at her feet,” Viktor shared. “And yet she chose you.”

“That’s generous of you to say,” Jack muttered.

Viktor gave a bark of laughter. “Truthfully, I didn’t care for any of those pansies except Callahan. I admire the guy and I think he would have been good for Maia.”

Jack felt his temper flaring. Viktor grinned at him. *Asshole.*

“But she took the chance with you,” Viktor continued. “Not to feed your ego, but I was relieved. Fucking can’t stand a man who will need his wife to protect him when shit hits the fan.”

Jack laughed. Maybe he and Viktor would get along after all.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jack had been watching old movie reruns all evening when he heard his intercom beep. It was almost midnight. Was it Maia? She had a keycard, but maybe she didn't feel right just coming up. Silly woman. Jack leaped over the couch, taking the shortest route to the kitchen. He pressed the call button.

"Yeah."

"Jack?" It was Derek. Jack tried to shake off his disappointment, but was baffled why his friend was here. It was a Saturday night—well Sunday morning—Derek should be at a hotel or his condo by now, fucking the last woman he'd picked up.

"Come on up."

Derek appeared a few minutes later. He was still in his suit minus the jacket, his tie loosened haphazardly and he looked like shit. What happened?

"Are you all right, man?" Jack asked.

Derek blew out a breath and collapsed on the couch.

"I've had it," he declared.

"Had it with what?"

"Meaningless sex."

Jack carefully lowered himself beside his friend, unsure if he heard him right. Derek didn't seem drunk. But tired of meaningless sex? Derek thrived on meaningless sex.

"What happened?"

"Took home brunette twins tonight," Derek said. "They were all tits and ass. I was the envy of every man at Rooster bar. Checked into a hotel on M street. Jack, I had the

enthusiasm of a man about to be executed. What the fuck is wrong with me? I've got one woman rubbing her tits all over my back, another one on her knees about to give me a blow job, and I feel nothing."

"You couldn't get it up?"

Derek snorted. "I have no problem there. But my mind was disconnected with my dick. There was this void. The last time I had sex, I came, but it was the weirdest feeling. As if I was a disinterested bystander watching myself having sex."

"Maybe you need to abstain for a while."

"You could be right," Derek agreed. "But it scares the shit out of me. What if I couldn't enjoy sex ever again. I love sex. This is a disaster."

"You need to find someone you care about," Jack continued. "Trust me, Derek. Sex with strangers may scratch an itch. But sex with someone you love? Mind blowing."

"So you keep telling me," Derek replied dryly. "By the way, are you going to straighten things out with Maia?"

Jack sighed. "I'm hoping she'll miss me enough to come back on her own."

"Pathetic," Derek scoffed. "You're sitting here mooning over her, while she's enjoying the company of other men."

Jack felt like he'd been sucker punched. "What do you mean?"

"She was at Rooster bar tonight with Manning, Edmunds and some new guy. Looked like she was having fun and not missing you at all."

*Damn Derek, he knew how to push his buttons.*

"What time was this?"

"I left Rooster at 11:00 p.m., I think they just got there."

"Are you up for more drinks at the bar?"

"Hell no. I've got a rep to protect," Derek said. "Everyone saw me leave with the brunettes, they might think I've crashed and burned."

Jack was already disappearing into the bedroom to throw on some clothes.

"Get over it. You're my wingman tonight," Jack called out from the bedroom. He knew he wasn't playing fair. But damned if he wasn't claiming his woman back and he needed someone to have his back just in case Maia's colleagues decided to go all

protective over her. Manning was a big guy, Jack could probably take him on, but Edmunds was a wily one and the third guy, who he suspected was Connelly, he had no idea.

He heard Derek groan. "Fuck you, McCord."

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Maia saw him the minute he entered the bar. Jack was hard to ignore. Every woman in the immediate vicinity had their eyes trained on the two gorgeous men making their way across the room. Jack was dressed casually in well-worn jeans and a faded tee; his tousled hair hinted that he might have just crawled out of bed. His face was unshaven, and two days worth of stubble only enhanced the chiseled contours of his strong jaw.

Sentiments of possessiveness suddenly consumed her. She was used to short term hook ups and never claimed any man as her own. But at this moment, she had a primal urge to walk up to Jack, press her body against his, and feel his hardness. Maia's pulse quickened.

Derek was with Jack, which made the ripple of feminine sighs double in intensity as they approached their table. Derek was every bit as attractive as Jack, but whereas Jack had a standoffish aura, Derek had the easy charm women found extremely appealing. Which was a shame because for all his charm, no man avoided commitment as much as Derek.

"Lockwood's back," Manning broke into Maia's thoughts. "Didn't he just leave with those twins."

"He's back for more? Or did those twins abandon him?" Edmunds laughed.

"Looks like Lockwood ratted you out, Maia," Manning said. "Your fiancé doesn't seem pleased we're around you."

"Maia isn't leaving with anyone unless she wants to." Braden put in his two cents.

The new recruit was sweet, Maia thought. But he had no idea how intimidating Jack could be.

"Sweetheart," Jack said when he reached their table. Maia ignored him and took

a sip of her drink. He leaned in and whispered, “Still not talking to me?”

Maia glared at him, but her fiancé only grinned. So he’s not taking her gripe with him seriously? Did he think he could get away with what he did without any consequences?

A waiter came by to take their drink orders. Jack pulled Maia off the bar stool and took her seat and lifted her up on his lap. Her short skirt rode up her legs. His left arm curled around her waist firmly while his right hand clasped her thigh. Maia would have protested, but she sensed a raw energy emanating from Jack that was definitely possessive. He was also shooting off sparks of warning to her male colleagues, silently intimidating them. Maia leaned in and twisted her neck to see what her man was up to. Jack and Braden were having a silent but hostile conversation. Jeez. She should just drag Jack home and get everyone out of the line of fire.

“Traitor,” Maia told Derek. “What happened to your women?”

“Sent them away,” Derek admitted.

“Can’t get it up, Lockwood?” Edmunds teased.

“That would be the day,” Derek shot back. “According to some experts, I just need to find my one true love if I want fantastic sex.”

Derek said it loudly enough that some women glanced his way. He smiled at them, and the women giggled. Manning and Edmunds snickered. Maia rolled her eyes.

“That my friend—” Manning informed Connelly. “—is the master at work.”

Their drinks arrived. Two fingers of scotch, neat.

Jack raised his glass to the group. “Great ops yesterday, guys. Saw the entire thing.”

“Maia is fucking nuts,” Manning muttered into his drink.

Maia stiffened. Jack watched the ops? *When? Where?*

“Yes, sweetheart, you were fucking hot,” Jack mumbled into her ear, his scotch-moistened lips sending tingles straight between her legs. “I’m getting a hard on just thinking about it.”

“Damn, Jack,” Derek said. “Get a room.”

Her man started getting an erection and Maia couldn’t help grounding herself into

his lap. She could feel the rumble of a groan behind her. Good. Served him right for playing this game. But he retaliated. His hand slipped further up her leg and insinuated itself between her thighs.

Her hand gripped the stem of her martini glass.

Maia concentrated on the conversation going around her, hoping no one would notice how her man was slowly driving her insane. The men were still ribbing Derek about the two brunettes.

“I told Derek he should abstain for a while,” Jack joined in the conversation as his fingers pushed the crotch of her panties aside, parting her slick folds, and spreading her juices up and down her cleft.

Maia squirmed and took another sip of her drink. “That’s true, Derek. You might be having too much sex. Maybe your penis has been desensitized.”

Jack pinched her clit and she gasped, startled.

Derek narrowed his eyes at Jack before looking at Maia. “I assure you sweetie, I have every nerve ending alive and well.”

“If you say so,” Maia said. Her voice strangled. Jack had now slipped a finger inside her, sliding in and out while his thumb worked her swollen nub. He added another finger and increased the tempo. Oh god, he was going to make her come in a bar and she felt powerless to stop him. Feeling him so hard and ready beneath her, she was so—turned—on.

Edmunds was saying something, but all her attention was focused on Jack whispering in her ear, “Wanna leave this place?”

Not trusting herself to speak, Maia nodded helplessly.

Jack tossed back his drink and eased Maia off his lap. Fortunately for her man, his tee was untucked and covered the bulge beneath his jeans.

“Where are you guys going?” Manning demanded.

“We’re leaving,” Jack declared with a smirk as he threw a couple of bills on the table.

Derek glared at Jack. “You drag me out here and now you’re abandoning your wingman?”

“Catch a cab or ask one of the guys to take you home,” Jack said.

“Thanks,” Derek grumbled before grinning at Maia. “You are so screwed.”

Everyone, except Braden, laughed.

Maia felt her cheeks flush and was thankful when Jack dragged her away.

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Maia’s three-inch heels were having trouble keeping up with Jack’s long strides. Jack had not said a word since they left the bar and simply held her hand tightly as he pulled her along on the sidewalk. He turned onto an upscale boutique hotel.

She dug in her heels and pulled on her arm.

“Jack,” she hissed. “What are you doing?”

He yanked her into his chest. “Takes five minutes to get to the car, fifteen minutes to get out of Georgetown and twenty minutes to get home. I’m not waiting to put my cock inside you, Maia.” Jack’s eyes glittered with determination and heated intensity that caused her sex to spasm. When she just gaped at him, he growled, “Good, we’re on the same page.”

He resumed dragging her up the hotel steps and through the lobby. They stopped at posh check-in counter.

“Do you have a Deluxe suite available?”

“Let me check,” the receptionist said slowly. The suite was probably five thousand dollars a night and from the receptionist’s scrutiny of their attire, she didn’t think they could afford it.

“We have one available, um, how many nights, sir?”

“Two,” Jack said shortly as he handed over his American Express ‘black’ card.

Soon they were in the elevator. No luggage. No overnight bag. Just the two of them, like a typical one night stand.

“Jack we can’t hole up in a hotel for two days with no clothes and—”

“Maia, for what I have in mind, clothes are useless.” He was staring straight ahead, not looking at her.

“We can’t fuck our way out of our issues, Jack.”

“Can’t we?” Jack asked softly. “I thought we were doing just fine.”

“Jack—”

“Don’t,” Jack cut her off. “Not another fucking word, Maia.”

*What is up his ass?* Maia could feel the tension rolling off him, and she couldn’t put a finger on his mood. Was he the one pissed? She was the wronged party as far as she was concerned.

When the elevator doors slid open, Maia tingled with anticipation. Her instincts were telling her to run because she had finally deciphered the vibes coming off of Jack. Predatory. He was hunting, and she was his prey.

Jack gripped her upper arm and guided her down to the end of the hallway where double doors opened to a luxurious suite. Without another word, he pushed her inside, and slammed the door shut.

“Strip,” Jack ordered as he pulled off his shirt. “Leave your shoes on.”

Maia just stood there, a part of her still defiant.

“Maia, in under sixty seconds, I intend to bury myself deep inside you, and I want you naked,” Jack grit through his teeth, nostrils flaring. “Every second you delay increases the intensity of how hard I fuck you. You can take some hard fucking, babe, but I don’t want to hurt you, and I’m slowly losing control. So—Please—Strip.”

Maia felt excitement thrumming through her veins as she shoved off the straps of her dress, and let it fall. She stood before Jack in her panties and high heels.

“Are your panties soaking?” Jack whispered thickly.

She nodded.

He stalked toward her and pulled her to him, his lips crashing down on hers, his hand diving under her lace panties, and cupping her molten core. Jack groaned into her mouth and backed her against the round dining table.

Without further warning, he turned her around and bent her over, ripped her panties off and drove into her. Maia gasped at the sudden intrusion. She was primed and wet for him, but his size stretched her uncomfortably. She hadn’t fully recovered when he withdrew slowly and rammed inside her again, her breasts rubbing against the table.

“Oh god, Jack—”

“Fuck you fast and hard, Maia,” he growled behind her. The third time he pulled out, the pacing increased. He pumped into her hard, grunting with the effort of each thrust. New sensations overwhelmed her body as she gripped the edge of the table, her breasts flattened on the hard surface, his cock moving inside her as his hips pounded her ass.

The throbbing inside her spiraled like a vortex until Maia was caught in the whirlwind of her orgasm and she screamed. It was consuming, the pleasure so intense she thought she couldn't take it.

“No...stop...Jack...I can't—” Maia cried.

“Yes you can. You will—”, thrust, “—take all of me,” Jack snarled as he rotated his hips to increase the pressure against her core. Maia felt another wave crash into her.

“Oh, god...oh..god, stop!” Maia sobbed as pulses wracked her body endlessly. He was driving her mindless.

“Fuck...fuck...” Jack groaned above her as she clamped down greedily on his rigid shaft. He withdrew one final time before thrusting into her balls deep; his cum filling her channel with warm gushing liquid. She felt him shake, the tremors vibrating through his body as he absorbed his climax. Afterwards, Jack nuzzled the damp skin of her shoulder. He gently pulled her away from the table, swung her up in his arms and walked into the bedroom to lay her down on the bed. Maia stretched languidly as she always did after sex with Jack. He returned shortly with a warm wet towel and started cleaning her up.

“Babe?”

“Hmm?”

“Sorry I was too rough,” Jack said huskily as he gently cleaned the semen from between her legs. “I was too turned on at the bar, it took all my self control not to fuck you in the back alley. My mind simply short-circuited with the need to be inside you.”

His eyes met hers. There was tenderness mixed with passion. Gone was the pure feral gleam that flared in his eyes earlier.

“I'll make love to you now.” Jack stretched out above her, propping himself on his

forearms as he ducked his head to kiss her forehead, her nose, and her lips. He dropped feathery light sensual kisses all over her face, her neck, and her breasts. His tongue lazily circled the skin around her nipple as he sucked and alternately tongued it to a hard peak. He repeated the same on the other breast. Finally, he trailed kisses down her belly, slowly sliding down her body and pushing her knees up. His hands held her thighs apart and always when he did this, Maia whimpered in anticipation.

Nothing happened.

“Jack?” Maia propped up on her elbows to see what he was doing.

He was just staring at her sex.

His eyes flicked to hers for a second, and she saw him lick his lips.

“All mine,” he whispered before his mouth descended between her legs. Her toes curled, and she could feel the back of her legs cramping. *Oh shit.* She was still too sensitive, but Jack continued to lick her to another orgasm. His tongue tunneled her entrance before pulling her clit gently between his lips. She dissolved in his mouth. Again.

Her sex was still spasming when Jack gently pushed inside her. Just rocking into her slowly, his hard length—her man certainly had stamina—sliding into her slickness. When he withdrew, her body screamed from the void that was left, and when he thrust back inside her she felt satiated. With this man, it would always be an endless cycle of sate and need.

Her orgasm built slowly, but was no less explosive. She came twice more before Jack let himself go, shoving his face in her hair as he recovered from his climax. He lay down beside her, drew her into his arms, and spooned her as they both drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*3:30 a.m. Sunday morning*

Jack collapsed beside Maia. He had no idea how they got from the bed to the floor. OK, he did. His woman woke him up by sucking his cock, and when he couldn't take it anymore he dragged her up and impaled her on his erection. She rode him hard and wild, and when he was about to come, he rolled her on her back and continued to pump into her. But Maia wasn't having any of that and hooked one leg around his waist, while the other anchored one of his legs—he hated when she did that—and flipped him over and resumed to ride him. Well, he was determined to have the upper hand, so he rolled her on her back again. After two more flips, they landed on the floor. Jack cushioned their fall, but quickly hooked the back of her knees under his elbows, grasped her wrists on either side of her, pressed her thighs in, and continued thrusting furiously inside her.

“Jack, you're playing dirty,” Maia gasped.

“No other way with you, sweetheart,” Jack grunted. He could feel her inner muscles clenching around him. She was about to come and through his fog of lust, an opportunity came to mind. They used sex to deflect issues before, why not use mind-blowing sex as a reward for resolving them? “Speaking of playing dirty.” He slowed the pace and started teasing her inch by inch. *Fuck, it killed him.* “Are we in accord about the AGS negotiations?” He pulled out and rested the tip of his cock at her entrance.

Maia's eyes flew to his in disbelief. “We're having this conversation now?”

Jack pushed the head of his cock inside her. “Uh-hm.” He leaned in to nip her

lower lip that had set in a mulish line. He loved this position; he had her locked and at his mercy.

“I intend to spend the next 48-hours fucking and not talking about matters we could have settled a day ago,” he informed her.

“You were the one who went behind my back!”

“And you walked out on me,” Jack shot back. Maia shifted her hip so his erection would go deeper. He smirked and flexed his hip away from her.

Her eyes flared with a mixture of challenge and need.

*Don't give in, don't give in,* Jack chanted in his brain.

“I needed some space!”

“Well, see. Here's the thing. My wife—” Jack paused. “—Will not be sneaking off for space. If she needs to process her issues with me, she talks to me.”

“I'm not your wife,” Maia hissed. “Yet. And you continue this, I won't be—Oh god!”

Time to play dirtier. Jack released her wrists, slid down her body, and pushed her thighs further apart. He dipped his head and nuzzled her clitoris with his nose while using his tongue to spread her sensitive lips. His tongue circled and swirled, thrust and licked as her body writhed frantically. Her moans were getting choppy. He stopped—crawled up her body and kissed her thoroughly, giving her a taste of her own musky scent and devouring her lips the same way he did her swollen pussy.

She nipped him. Jack tore his lips away and grinned down at her.

“You were saying?”

“Fuck you, baby,” Maia got out and moaned when Jack teased her clit with the tip of his cock.

“Soon, babe,” Jack muttered. Fuck, he was about to blow. His plan was backfiring. They stared at each other. Maia's eyes were needy, and how Jack wanted to give her that release. He was about to slip inside her when she spoke.

“Don't do things behind my back again.”

“Will you promise to do the same?” Jack asked softly. “I hate what you did when you took off for Mexico.”

“Your retaliation was out of proportion.”

“It wasn’t a retaliation, Maia. I was telling you the truth when I said the investment made for a strategic business deal. I knew you would react negatively, which is why I kept it under wraps. I expected us to discuss it afterward, not have you run off. I hope it’s not a sign of a bigger problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not having second thoughts about marrying me, are you?” Jack asked, his voice hoarse.

“Of course not!” Maia’s swift response erased all doubts in his mind.

Jack ducked his head and leaned his forehead on hers. “I’m really sorry about the AGS deal, Maia. But it’s done. It mitigates some of the unknowns that plague me whenever you go on missions.” He raised his head and scowled at her. “Although it doesn’t do shit whenever you go off playbook, which I’m beginning to realize happens more often than not.”

Maia laughed. “I like to keep you on your toes.”

Jack sighed. “We’ve had this conversation before.”

“We did,” Maia admitted.

“Babe, we’re going to get there.”

“Get where?”

“A point where we’ll trust each other and not freak out when something out of the ordinary happens.”

“I’m not the one freaking out.”

“I’m trying to adjust to your level of ordinary,” Jack replied dryly.

Maia smiled up at him. “Jack, nothing about what we have is ordinary. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have chosen you.” She wiggled her hips, effectively getting his cock in her entrance.

Jack hissed.

“Wow. You. Are. Still. Hard,” Maia purred. “See what I mean. Not ordinary.”

“Maia,” Jack ground out as he thrust inside her to the hilt. “Prepare for some extraordinary, babe.” He began moving inside her, loving the friction of her moist heat around the girth of his cock as her orgasm hit her. She felt like home. Every time he slid

inside her, he felt bound to her more than ever. Their relationship was not perfect, but in its flaws it was also extraordinary. They clashed, they loved and made love with a passion unfettered by normal rules. And as he powered deeper inside her, he exploded, baring his soul to vulnerability. But she was there, enveloping him in her warmth and drawing him in. Home.

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*6:30 a.m. Sunday morning*

Every muscle in her body was screaming for relief. Maia glanced over to where Jack was sprawled on the bathroom floor. In their attempt to enjoy the suite's gigantic marble tub to soothe their overworked muscles, they ended up with more sex, sloshed water all over the tiles, and more achy muscles.

They were hopeless. The rift between them that had festered these past two days triggered a primal instinct of survival, which included mating until they were incapable of moving.

She groaned as she gripped the side of the tub to help her sit up. Muscles she didn't know existed felt sore— Jack had creative ways of twisting her like a pretzel.

“Babe?” Jack's eyes were half-open. “Can you order me a big breakfast. Lots of eggs. I think I've been sucked out of my protein reserves.”

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*9:00 a.m. Monday morning*

“Jack, no more!” Maia grumbled as she burrowed her face further into the pillow. Jack was impossible. She received temporary reprieve Sunday morning because amazingly, her man was as battered as she was. But oh, the fucking resumed in the afternoon, into the evening and into the damned following morning. Jack smugly informed her that wisely spacing out his protein and carb intake was the key to fucking her brains out. To which she retorted that he probably should start a “stud” farm with as

much research as he had put into it.

“Babe, Laurie will be here any minute. We might have time for another round.”

Maia sat up and vigorously puffed her hair out of her face. “Have you taken a look down there, Jack? My pussy is as red as a tomato. You’ve sucked the ever-living hell out of it and rammed it into the ground with that damned insatiable cock of yours. I—Am—Ruined. You hear me?”

Jack grinned devilishly at her. “You said the same thing earlier.” And his hand dipped between her thighs and of course her damned sex responded. “But I think, I can coax her to come and play again. She’s already wet.”

“She’s stupid is what she is,” Maia mumbled and flopped back on the bed. “I’m serious, Jack. Leave me alone.”

“Babe, we have another day,” Jack whispered into her ear.

The doorbell buzzed.

*Saved!* Maia thought thankfully.

Jack muttered a string of profanities and grabbed one of the hotel robes to make himself halfway descent. Maia reluctantly got up and headed to the bathroom until she realized she didn’t have a brush to tame her wild mane of hair. Splashing water on her face, she donned a robe and walked out to meet Jack’s personal assistant.

“Good morning, Maia!” Laurie chirped as she pulled out some vitamin water and eggs from a paper bag. “Your change of clothes and some toiletries including a brush...” She paused and stared at Maia’s hair. “...are in the suitcase.”

“What are the eggs for?” Maia asked warily. It’s not as if ordering eggs from the hotel menu was going to dent Jack’s wallet.

“Fertilized duck eggs,” Laurie explained, “are an aphrodisiac and are rumored to enhance sexual stamina.”

“Laurie, Jack doesn’t need them.”

“They’re for you, babe,” Jack said affectionately.

Laurie slapped a hand on her mouth; her eyes were crinkling.

Maia felt her temper flare. Was she a brood mare for his stud farm? Her hands flew to her hips.

“Jack McCord, I do not need an aphrodisiac,” Maia said. “And my stamina is just fine. I believe you need to have your head examined or maybe join a sex-addict help group.”

“I’ll leave you two lovebirds to settle it,” Laurie said with a big smile on her face. “Call me if you need anything else, Jack. I’ll inform Derek to hold the fort and handle all your meetings.”

“Shit,” Maia cursed. “I need to call AGS. I have a debrief with Viktor and Manning this morning.”

“Already took care of it.”

“What?”

“I informed them you were not coming in.”

Laurie quickly exited their hotel room.

“What?” Maia wasn’t sure she heard Jack right. Did he just say he called work for her and told them she was not coming in without consulting her?

Yes, he did.

*Count to ten*, Maia told herself. They just made headway working on their communication, surely a well-meaning phone call made by her fiancé was reasonable.

“I need to understand why you did not simply remind me to call AGS instead of calling in without my knowledge,” Maia said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I wanted you to rest.” Jack frowned. “Since I was awake anyway and taking care of MDI business, might as well get that out of the way. I’m part of AGS now, Maia and you’re going to be my wife. It’s perfectly OK for me to call in for you. Were you planning on going in?”

“Not really.”

“Babe, are you worried that I was trying to manage you?”

“Yes. Weren’t you?”

Jack sighed. “That was not my intention. I’m trying to find ways to take care of my woman.” He looked away from her. “There are so many aspects of your job I have no control over, have no way to protect you.” He smiled wryly and glanced back at her. “I’m coming to terms with the reality that you can damn well protect yourself more than

anyone else can and that includes me.”

Her heart ached knowing how such an admission was difficult for a proud man like Jack. Was she too selfish to allow him to do these little things for her? Suddenly, she knew deep inside how to give him the reassurance he needed.

She tucked her arm into his. “Jack, thanks for calling in for me.” She rose on tiptoes to brush his lips lightly. “I know it’s hard for you to stand by and watch me take all these risks. Just remember, baby, that no matter how desperate the situation looks, I will always find my way back to you.”

She was smothered in a tight embrace. “Promise me that, Maia,” Jack said fiercely. His eyes were raw with emotion, and she fell more deeply in love with him if that was possible.

“Promise, baby,” Maia whispered before Jack sealed her words with a kiss.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Two months later*

Nerves. That was all it was. Maia stared at her reflection in the big oval antique mirror. Her gown was an elegant sheath dress of embroidered silk by Monique Lhuillier. Maia couldn't believe she had to argue with Jack's mom and the wedding planner about her choice of gown. It was her wedding after all. They wanted her to wear a pompous affair of billowing white silk organza, but she told them it wasn't her.

"But you look like a princess in this!" Frances had wailed as she held out a heavy elaborate gown. Maia was not about to walk down the aisle with a skirt that bobbed ridiculously with each step. Over her dead body.

She pretty much let Frances McCord have her way with everything else. The Ritz Carlton, the flowers, the food, but anything that went on her body, Maia got to veto. The only thing she and Frances enthusiastically agreed on were her three-inch Christian Louboutin open-toed heels, which were dyed to match her ivory gown.

"You look beautiful, Maia," her foster mom, Lana Eaton, said. Maia had not seen her foster parents in years. Because of her work, Maia rarely communicated with them, but a wedding was definitely an exception. Lana and her foster dad, Carl, flew in three days ago. Viktor and Carl had grown up together and shared an enduring friendship. Maia also knew that Carl was the one person Viktor trusted the most, which was why he entrusted a twelve-year old Maia in their care. "I'm so happy you found someone. Jack is so handsome!" So her fiancé and soon-to-be-husband had charmed Lana over. "Now if we can only find someone for Viktor."

“Bite your tongue, Lana,” Viktor said as he walked into the room. Viktor was dressed in the requisite tux. Maia knew he hated formal affairs and was threatening to boycott the wedding if he was forced into a “monkey suit.” Somehow Derek had convinced Viktor to give in, and for that she was thankful.

Lana smiled affectionately and walked to the door. “I’ll give you a minute with your girl. The wedding starts in ten minutes. Do not make her cry and ruin her make-up!”

“You do look beautiful, Katerina,” Viktor said softly as he raised his hand to brush her cheek.

“You clean up nicely, yourself.” Maia grinned. And she was not kidding, Viktor would have a hard time blending into the background.

“It’s not too late to change your mind you know,” Viktor teased, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Maia laughed. “I have no doubts about marrying Jack. I just hate walking down the aisle and being the focus of three hundred people.”

“Are you afraid to blow your cover?”

“AGS has vetted the guest list, right?”

“Yes. No problem there. Relax, Katerina,” Viktor murmured.

“Thanks for everything, Viktor,” Maia whispered and damn it, she teared up.

“Shit. Don’t fucking cry,” Viktor muttered. “Lana’s gonna kill me.”

Maia hiccuped. “It’s just that...you saved me. And I wouldn’t be having this life now...” And then she bawled her eyes out while Viktor stood by helplessly.

“Maybe I should have had this talk with you earlier,” Viktor said in resignation.

“You should have,” Maia sobbed and laughed as she tried to wipe her tears with the heels of her hands.

Carl walked in. “Lana sent me to—oh shit!” His incredulous eyes swung to Viktor. “You made her cry? It’s two minutes before the ceremony!”

“I didn’t fucking do anything,” Viktor growled.

Maia looked at her face in the mirror. Oh god. The mascara was waterproof, but everything else was not, and her face was splotchy.

“What the hell happened?” Gillian shrieked when she walked in the room. Gillian

Fontaine was her wedding planner and at this moment a very frazzled wedding planner. She immediately barked into her radio. "We've got a 911 in the bridal room. Bring the makeup-artist, stat." Gillian glared at Viktor and Carl. "Both of you. Out!"

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Jack felt the first inkling of alarm when he saw a commotion at the back of the church. Gillian's team of wedding planners were in an uproar with the women skittering around in high-heels and running from one end of the corridor to the next. As part of tradition, he stayed away from Maia for one day. He absolutely hated the separation. Maybe her suggestion of marrying in City Hall and eliminating all these nerve-wracking preparations was a good idea after all. But he wanted this. He wanted to go through the process of marrying her: having her walk down the aisle toward him, claiming her from Carl, exchanging vows, kissing the bride, even cutting the fucking cake. He wanted the entire DC, hell, the entire world to know that she was fucking his.

He impatiently checked his watch. Ten minutes late. What was going on?

He turned to his best man. "Derek, can you find out what's keeping them?"

Derek frowned and nodded. "I was about to suggest the same thing. Hold on."

Five minutes later his friend returned, his eyes were filled with mirth and his lips were twitching.

"Well?" Jack asked impatiently.

His friend shook his head and chuckled. "Viktor made Maia cry."

"What?" Jack said furiously. "What did he say?"

"Apparently, nothing," Derek said. "But Maia got all emotional because of their past and just broke down."

"Fuck!"

"Gentlemen." The priest made his presence known behind them.

Fuck. Jack had forgotten that the priest was already waiting behind them.

Should he go to her? Jack was feeling helpless standing around and doing nothing when his woman was crying. Hell, Maia almost never cried.

"We should have kept Baran off the guest list," Jack grumbled.

Suddenly, the orchestra started playing signaling the beginning of the ceremony. His mom hired an entire symphony to play at their wedding. He watched the endless parade of the wedding entourage. How many flower girls and bridesmaids were there? And they were all from his side of the family. Jack's heart clenched. Maia had no one save for Viktor and her foster parents. Now she had his family, and they all loved her.

Finally, he heard the familiar bridal march and that was when he saw her.

Holy Fuck! She—Was—Stunning. Jack's throat constricted as he stood transfixed by the most beautiful woman in the world.

Derek leaned in. "Breathe, Jack."

He didn't realize he was holding his breath. Talk about taking his breath away, Maia did it every single time. As she drew closer with her foster father Carl, Jack resisted the urge to walk up, snatch her and run away with her.

Soon enough, she was before him, her lips curving in a serene smile. Her unusual clear blue eyes were luminous and he felt so humbled to be loved by such an amazing woman. His own eyes blurred as he carefully took her hand from Carl and tucked it in the crook of his arm. Finally, she was going to be his, and he intended to keep her forever.

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"Did I mention how dashing you look?" Maia smiled up at her husband. Jack always cut a fine figure in a suit, but in a tux he was devastatingly handsome. His Tom Ford tux hugged his broad shoulders and tapered trimly at his sides conveying a lean muscular physique that exuded power and—Maia wet her lips—unbridled sex appeal. She was hot for this man, and she was feeling a familiar ache between her legs.

Jack grinned down at her. "Yes, you've mentioned it a couple of times. I'm wondering if I should take the hint and whisk you off to our room."

"Am I that obvious?" Maia pouted.

Jack chuckled. "Yes. You are. But we're only on our first dance, and I'd hate to have Mom's efforts go to waste by having the bride and groom disappear so early."

Maia pressed her body intimately into Jack's and was gratified when she heard him hiss. She loved feeling the hardness of his chest scraping against her breasts, her

lower body teased the front of his trousers.

“Maia,” Jack groaned. “You’re not making it easy, babe.”

“Think of it as foreplay.” Maia pulled away, grinning mischievously.

“You know you’re asking for it,” Jack warned. His eyes were glittering with a promise of retribution later.

Jack swirled her around the exquisitely appointed ballroom of the Ritz Carlton. The mood lighting was expertly choreographed with each segment of the program. The theme was vintage Parisian chic. A string of Swarovski crystals accented the elaborate centerpieces of out-of-season flowers and must have cost a fortune, but Maia didn’t have the heart to say no to Frances. Their eight-tier wedding cake—hand painted in a stained glass design—was an architectural work of art; she told Gillian it would be a shame to cut it, to which her wedding planner simply shrugged. The menu was an eight-course French cuisine extravaganza supervised by a well-known chef. Their parting favors were French macarons flown in direct from Paris and matched their wedding colors of teal, ivory, and antique gold.

Yes, it would indeed be a shame for her and Jack to disappear too early.

*A few hours later...*

“Where did she go?” Jack asked Derek, returning to the ballroom after getting pulled away by a couple of his ex-Navy SEAL buddies. They were giving him a hard time about being such a lucky bastard to have landed a woman like Maia. His chest puffed with pride even as he felt a surge of overwhelming possessiveness.

“I think she’s with her AGS buds,” his friend replied, picking up a fresh drink from the bar.

Jack’s eyes continued searching the crowd until he finally spotted Nathan Stark who had his fiancée, Lucy Cortez, perched on his lap. Viktor and Edmunds were also at the table looking extremely bored. But where was Maia?

“Three o’ clock,” Derek murmured, taking a sip of his scotch. Jack’s eyes swung to the right and saw Maia stumble in from the open balcony doors with Connelly and

Manning. She was laughing and holding a flute of champagne.

“What the fuck?” Jack muttered as he made a move to walk over.

“Jack,” Derek cautioned. “It’s your wedding night. Do not overreact.”

Jack paused. His friend was right. Maia belonged to him now. He had a ring and piece of paper to prove it. He fingered his wedding band, and he suddenly felt better. He was smiling broadly by the time he reached his beautiful bride.

“Hey, handsome,” Maia called out as she fell into him and giggled. His beautiful, drunk bride. His cock twitched at the thought of drunk sex.

“Sweetheart,” Jack whispered in her ear. “Gillian gave me the OK to disappear. Are you with me?”

Maia’s eyes widened before her gaze dropped to his crotch, and she bit her lower lip. Fuck. He was semi-erect.

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“I want to fuck you in nothing but your heels,” Jack said thickly as he carefully undressed his wife. His wife. He wouldn’t get tired of saying those words. Jack was frustrated with the fastenings of her gown, and he couldn’t figure out how to take it off. Maia wouldn’t let him tear it off either, so he patiently worked the front hooks of the lace overcoat.

“Stop growling, Jack” Maia said with a slight slur to her words. “You’re getting there.” She giggled. Finally, he peeled the first layer off her body. He pushed her against the wall and caught her lips in an urgent kiss as his hands worked on the zipper on the back. The thing was stuck. He jerked it down and heard a rip. Oops.

Maia pulled her lips away and said, “Did you just ruin my gown, Jjjack?”

Jack grinned. She was such an adorable drunk. He tore the rest of the zipper away and let the gown drop to the floor. He stepped back and surveyed her. She was wearing a thin lace corset and panties. He could definitely work with that.

“Let me,” Maia said as she reached up and undid his bow tie and started unbuttoning his shirt. Jack caught her hands and shook his head. “That’s as far as I go, babe.”

“What? That’s unfair.”

“That’s for getting me all worked up at the dance floor.”

Jack filled his hands with her breasts. Plumping them up and having them escape the confines of the corset, he dipped his head to capture a nipple, swirling his tongue to taste her.

“Baby…” Maia breathed, trying to rub her crotch into his. “I want your cock.”

“Soon, sweetheart,” Jack murmured as he gave his attention to the other breast. His hands skimmed her sides as he went down on his knees. He could smell the musky scent of her arousal. His erection was straining against the confines of his trousers. He nosed her clit, inhaling her scent and fuck, it was driving him insane. He lightly bit through the silk. She bucked her hips into his face. “Easy, babe.” Pushing the crotch aside, he slip his tongue into her folds and ate her up, keeping the pressure until a warm gush flooded his mouth and he sucked up her juices greedily. He slowly slipped her underwear from her body and trailed his lips up her leg, paying attention to the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

By now Maia was squirming and moaning, begging him to fill her. Good, because he couldn’t wait any longer. He stood up, ripped the corset from her body and stared at her nakedness one more time.

“Mine,” Jack whispered.

Maia smiled and swayed toward him. Her fingers unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers and reached into his boxers and grasped his rock hard erection.

“Mine,” she purred in return.

Jack growled, gripping her legs just under her ass, lifting her against the wall and thrust up inside her. Maia cried out as Jack grunted, hammering inside her in hard steady strokes. Maia was grinding her hips over his, their frenzied coupling spiraling like a rocket seeking an explosive finish. Maia reached her peak first, screaming his name and clamping her tight inner muscles over his cock, urging him to join her in her release. But Jack wanted to savor the exquisite feel of having his wife’s limbs clinging to him, the pain of her heels digging into his ass was surprisingly erotic, and his cock buried

deep inside her was heaven—fucking heaven. In the end, his climax was brutal, draining yet immensely satiating.

He slowly lowered them to the floor, sitting and facing each other. Her legs straddling his, their bodies flushed together as they shared an intimate embrace.

“I love you, Jack,” Maia murmured, resting her sweat-dampened cheek against his chest.

Jack knew Maia was fighting to stay awake, so he quickly whispered, “Love you too.” He paused, his throat thick with emotion. “Wife.”

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