

SILVER FIRE EXTENDED EPILOGUE

by Victoria Paige

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CHAPTER ONE

Sophie emerged from the steaming shower. She had just gotten home from a spa day with Maia and wanted to remove the last vestiges of that mudpack the aesthetician had applied on her. Her normally pale skin was flushed pink as she peered down her body—well, that part of her was unusually red.

Toweling herself dry, she threw on a fluffy robe, grabbed her cellphone, and punched Beth's number.

"Well, how did it go?" her friend asked without as much as a hello.

"Um, it looks like some weird creature," Sophie said.

Beth laughed uproariously over the phone. "You'll get used to it, baby girl."

"I'm not sure Derek will like his surprise."

"I'm sure he will."

Sophie rolled her eyes even though her friend couldn't see her. "I don't think you have the expertise to say so."

Still laughing, Beth replied. "You're right. What did Maia say?"

"She said Jack went nuts when she finally did it."

What *it* was was a Brazilian wax. Sophie had never had one before, preferring to use trimming scissors to *tame the bush*, so to speak. But after one crazy girls' night out and one too many martinis, Maia challenged her to get a Brazilian wax.

"Nuts as in good nuts?"

"Yep."

"Well, you'll be having some wild honeymoon then," Beth teased.

Sophie flushed with anticipation.

"How's Derek handling all the brouhaha over his exes' tell-all?"

“He’s not in town. Have there been any more?”

“I think it tapered off after your wedding. Hey, gotta go, Sophie. Call me before you leave for Hawaii.”

Sophie couldn’t believe she’d gotten married two weeks ago, a month after Derek had proposed. He didn’t want to wait because he was scheduled to be gone for a week with Jack. They had a series of meetings at the DoD’s military testing site in Nevada, near Nellis AFB north of Las Vegas. Sophie had suggested to have the wedding after Derek returned from Nevada, but he was adamant that they be married before he left.

“I am not leaving you here for a week and having those damned tabloids change your mind,” Derek had argued.

Sophie had tried to reassure him, but the local media’s interest in their relationship, especially after they had announced their engagement, had been relentless. There was no shortage of women willing to sell their story about their week as Derek Lockwood’s ladylove. Some were flattering, some were scathing. However, almost each one of them advised Sophie to run as far away from Derek as she could and save herself the heartache. It didn’t help, Sophie supposed, that she was twelve years younger than Derek, and he’d been painted as the big bad wolf. Tabloid after tabloid had gotten on Derek’s nerves and he’d even gotten into a row with her best friend, Beth, because she’d been the one to bring papers over to their condo. What her friend found amusing was definitely *not amusing* to her new husband.

They also had a problem finding a place for the wedding because venues were already booked for holiday parties in December. Short of eloping to Las Vegas, they’d decided to have the reception in her newly renovated Mediterranean-style house. Derek gave her a blank check for everything, refusing to let her spend even a single dime. But she managed to sneak in her own contributions, like the flowers, wine, and her man’s wedding ring.

And now, after a two-week delay, they were going on their honeymoon. Sophie was apprehensive because she’d never really been on a vacation. Sure, she’d gone to Myrtle beach with Beth for a couple of days, but otherwise whenever she had flown out of the country, it was always for a conference.

Derek had booked a villa in Maui. And he was keeping the details a surprise. She wanted to be as bikini ready as possible, so when Maia had challenged her to get the Brazilian wax, she didn’t resist the idea too much.

She inspected the area with a hint of dismay. It was ugly, with all the bumps that reminded her of chicken skin. *Ugh, what will Derek say?* Thankfully, he wouldn't be back until tomorrow evening and the antiseptic that she had been sent home with would make it look better.

Her phone buzzed. Speak of the devil.

“Angel?”

“Hey Derek, how's Nevada?”

“Weather's been cooperating with the drone tests. How's my lovely wife?”

Sophie's heart skipped a beat. She was still getting used to being called his wife.

“Missing you.”

“Miss you too, baby,” Derek said softly. “Can't wait to take you away. Two uninterrupted weeks of just you and me.”

“I have a surprise for you when you get back,” Sophie said, a bit shyly.

“Oh yeah? Did you get more sexy lingerie for the honeymoon? Telling you, Angel. Nothing's gonna last long on your body with what I have in mind for you. I'm going to rip them off from your skin and sink inside you.” Derek paused and cursed. “Shit. I'm still at the site and I'm getting hard.”

“Serves you right. I'm all hot and wet. Not sure if it's from the shower or from your dirty mouth.”

A marked silence and then, “Fuck. Are you naked?”

“I'm in a robe.” Sophie giggled. She was thirsty, so she made her way to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water.

“Talk about something else,” Derek grunted. “Jack said Maia went to the spa with you today.”

“Yes, we had—” Sophie was reaching for a glass in one of the cabinets when she caught movement in the living room. A large shadow of a man rose from the couch and approached her. The glass slipped from her fingers and the phone clattered to the floor.

She screamed.

Sophie scrambled to the knife block, grabbed the Shun 9-inch chef knife and held it out against the approaching shadow. Her heart hammered wildly in her chest.

“Sophie, calm down,” a familiar voice said.

When the light from the kitchen finally illuminated the intruder, the surge of relief made her knees weak.

“God Viktor, you nearly gave me a heart attack!” Sophie screeched. “Ever heard of calling? How did you get in here anyway?”

“You might want to reassure your man before *he* has a heart attack,” Viktor advised.

Grabbing the phone off the floor, Sophie flinched at the colorful language coming from the phone.

“Derek—”

“SOPHIE! What the fuck? Are you all right? Who’s there?”

“Viktor—”

“That motherfucking son of a bitch! Put him on—”

“Derek—”

“Now, Sophie!”

Sophie handed the phone to Viktor. He took the phone from her with a heavy sigh.

“Yeah? . . . I’ve business to discuss with your wife . . . doesn’t concern you . . . why do you think I waited until you’d left?”

Viktor didn’t say anything for a while. Sophie was guessing that Derek was cursing up a storm at the other end of the line.

“Look it’s between me and your wife . . . calm the fuck down, Lockwood, I have no plans on getting her killed . . .” Viktor’s eyes flicked to her. “She’s got nothing I haven’t—”

Viktor shook his head and handed the phone back to her.

“Sophie?”

“Yes, Derek?”

“Put some fucking clothes on.”

Sophie hurried to the room and put Derek on speaker while she dressed.

“What does Viktor want?” Sophie asked.

“He wouldn’t tell me. Shit. They’re calling me back to the meeting. I’m going to let Jack —”

“Derek, go to your meeting. I can handle Viktor”

“The fuck you can! I’m not letting him talk to you alone.”

“Derek, don’t you trust your friend?”

Derek sighed. “I do. But when it comes to you, I don’t trust anyone.”

“Look, I’ll hear him out—”

“Don’t promise him anything until you talk to me.”

Sophie’s temper flared. “I’ll—talk—to—him. And I’ll decide whether I have to consult with you.”

“We’re married now, Sophie. You don’t make decisions—”

“Do I interfere with MDI business?”

“Sophie—”

“Do I?”

“No, but—”

“If this has anything to do with Silver Fire Research, it’s my decision and I don’t have to confer with you.”

“Fuck,” Derek whispered. “OK. I see your point. It’s just that . . . fuck. I’ll call you as soon as I’m out of the meeting.”

“Everything all right?” Jack asked when Derek ended the call with Sophie.

“Did you call off the building’s security?”

“Yes, I did. Was it Viktor at your condo?”

Derek nodded. He was seething with irritation and anger. He’d almost lost it in the corridors of a military base and he didn’t give a shit. When he heard Sophie scream, his gut fell from under him. All he could think of was that his wife was in danger and he was 2,500 miles away, helpless to do a damned thing. He immediately told Jack to call his building’s security while he kept the line open. And when he heard a muffled, obviously male voice over the receiver, he wanted to crawl into his phone to protect his wife. And it wasn’t fucking possible.

“How the fuck did he get into your condo?”

“He has a key,” Derek growled. “And you can be sure that I’ll be correcting the oversight as soon as I get back.” Derek narrowed his eyes at his friend. “Do you know anything about this? You’re a partner at AGS.”

Jack scratched the stubble on his chin. “Nothing comes to mind.” Just then, his eyes widened. “Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“He did mention something about starting an R&D department for high-tech weapons.”

“Doesn’t MDI provide enough of those?”

“Viktor wanted something more specific—more targeted.”

“Sophie doesn’t have time for anything else,” Derek said, annoyed that his wife might end up having less time for him if what Jack was saying were true. He didn’t want her to be working two jobs. Hell, he didn’t want her to be working at all, but he knew Silver Fire Research fulfilled another need in her life. She was a brilliant scientist. He never thought he would fall in love with a woman who could do math faster in her head than he could.

They stopped in front of the conference room. The DoD had just finished another successful run of their newly upgraded MD-Bandit drones and were conducting a final assessment before the contracts were signed.

Jack looked at him. “You got it together, man?”

Derek rubbed his face. “Yeah. Sorry for causing a spectacle back there.”

His friend grinned. “No harm done. I’d be freaking out too if my wife was screaming bloody murder.”

Derek chuckled, tension slowly ebbing from his body. He couldn’t really imagine Maia screaming bloody murder.

CHAPTER TWO

Sophie followed Viktor into the AGS elevator. His business proposition had surprised her. Viktor wanted her to develop state-of-the-art weapons like the spherical blasting cap that she had already invented, and other specialized high-tech devices customized for each mission.

She'd refused at first, explaining that she was busy at Silver Fire and had been cutting back her work hours to spend more time with Derek.

"The reason I hired more assistants was so I'd be working less," Sophie grouched as they got out of the elevator. "And now, you're asking me to devote any time I've freed up to your new R&D division?"

"You could hire more people," Viktor said. "I'll make it worth your time."

"I like the distribution of work right now," Sophie replied. "Good balance of my input and fresh ideas from my assistants."

Viktor led her to the last room on the right that opened up to an empty space.

Sophie looked at him quizzically.

"This area will be yours to do as you please. Any equipment you need, just write it down and we'll procure it for you. Tear this room up, I don't care," Viktor said. "We could reinforce the concrete walls to guard against any accidental explosions."

"You don't seem too confident in my ability to work with caution," Sophie said.

Viktor's lips tipped up in a semblance of a smile, but Sophie wasn't too sure. The man's face was always stoic, it was hard to figure him out.

"Not at all, Dr. Leroux—"

"Lockwood—"

"Ah, yes. How could I forget?"

“Yes, Viktor. You were there at the wedding, remember?” Sophie said saucily, as she shot him a smile and walked into the room.

She thought she heard him snicker behind her, but she ignored him.

“What do you want me to do first?”

“I want more of those spherical blasting caps,” Viktor said. “But, I want them smaller. Can you make them just as lethal though?”

“I could melt more zefinium to amplify the C-4 or whatever plastics are molded into them. But that will cost more.” She turned to look at Viktor.

He shrugged. “Don’t care. We could always pass on the cost to the client. What’s important to me are my agents. They lay their life on the job every single time. They damn well deserve the best weapons we could give them.”

Sophie thought of Derek, who contracted with AGS on some jobs. She certainly wanted him to have the best. He hadn’t gone on any mission since South Africa, but they hadn’t talked about whether he wanted to continue.

“I can have Legal draw up our agreement,” Viktor said.

“Whoa! You’re moving too fast,” Sophie said. “You just sprung this on me.”

“Don’t want you to overthink things.”

“You guys have the same excuses.”

Viktor’s brows drew together. “What do you mean?”

“What you just said is something that Ms. Cole had told me,” she said. “Derek told me that you two were getting tight.”

“Lockwood doesn’t know shit,” Viktor said coolly.

Sophie bristled. “Hey, don’t talk about my husband that way. He’s been nothing but loyal to you.”

Viktor’s jaw clenched. “I apologize.”

Sophie nodded. “I have to discuss this with Derek. Though businesswise, I make my own decisions, this is something outside Silver Fire.”

She had a feeling their honeymoon wasn’t going to be as sweet as honey after all.

Sophie stood beside Maia in front of the Silver Escalade by the private hangar at Dulles International Airport. The Gulfstream 550 taxied down the runway and slowly made its way toward the outbuilding. It was a military-chartered flight carrying Jack, Derek and other high-ranking military officials. Sophie had met one of them before—Colonel Hugo Dalton who headed the DoD’s advanced weapons program.

The plane slowed and revved down its engine. Soon, the internal stairs lowered and some men dressed in BDUs disembarked, carrying modified assault rifles and forming a protective line around the aircraft.

“Excited to see your man?” Maia whispered.

Sophie grinned. “Just as much as you are.”

“You be right,” Maia said, tongue between her teeth. The redhead was in a cheery mood, which only got cheerier when she spied the dark-haired man descending the steps—Jack.

Sophie’s own breath caught when she saw Derek following Jack down the steps. His dark blond hair was mussed, as if he’d been raking his fingers through it. She never could get over how handsome he was. He had the chiseled face of a Greek god and the lines of his jaw usually hinted of an arrogance, but right now, because his gaze was focused on her, his features were softened with tenderness, and yet the smolder from his eyes were making her nipples pebble. Even at forty-two, he had that boyish charm whenever he smiled. And currently, she was the recipient of that smile that quickened her pulse.

She waved timidly.

“Not like that. Like this,” Maia teased and raised her arm and waved crazily. Sophie was certain that if there were no guards stationed in front of the aircraft, the redhead would have ran and jumped into Jack’s arms.

Both men struck quite a presence in their suits, which were surprisingly unwrinkled after the long flight, and in Sophie’s opinion, they were the most attractive men in this testosterone-laden lot.

Once Jack and Derek had passed the line of assault-rifle toting guards, Maia tugged her on the arm to briskly walk up to the pair.

Derek dropped his briefcase and garment bag and immediately scooped Sophie into his arms. Bringing her eye-level with him, his lips covered hers in a brief but possessive kiss.

“God, I missed you, Angel,” his voice was deep with emotion, his eyes searching. “You don’t know how damned much.”

“Missed you more,” Sophie replied.

His mouth quirked into a wry grin. “I doubt it.”

“Gentlemen.” A voice boomed behind them. A man clothed in a dress uniform with a distinctive patch of stars on the shoulders approached their group. He was distinguished in his carriage. His black hair was streaked with silver and his deep-set eyes were piercing under the bushiest brows.

“General,” Jack and Derek replied in unison.

“That was a thrilling show MDI put on,” the general said. “Thanks for coming out to Nellis Air Force Base.”

“Our pleasure, General,” Jack said.

“Maia, you’re always a sight for sore eyes.” The general grinned at her.

“Good to see you, General Hayes.” Maia held out her hand to exchange handshakes.

“You’ve got a good man here,” the general said, thumping Jack on his back as his gaze swiveled curiously to Sophie.

“Is this the woman who’s finally reeled in our man Lockwood?” General Hayes teased, with a twinkle in his eye.

“General Hayes—my wife, Sophie,” Derek stated proudly. “Sophie, this is General Lyndon Hayes, current commander of United States Central Command.”

“You’ve caused us some trouble a few months back, young lady,” the General said, holding on to her proffered hand. Sophie gulped and looked at Derek, whose brows drew into a frown. The general glanced at Derek. “Oh calm down, Lockwood, I’m not bullying your wife.” He released her hand and added, “Just promise to keep her in line.” Sophie had no idea whether the general was teasing, but she was sure there was a warning in there.

Derek tugged Sophie protectively to his side. “I will, General, but I’d rather not have you intimidating *my* wife.” Derek’s voice was sharp, and the tension vibrated to an uncomfortable pitch. Sophie held back a gasp, her cheeks flushing for being the reason for the sudden chill in the air.

The general stiffened and then he grinned. “Point taken, Lockwood. My apologies to the lovely Sophie.”

Derek relaxed beside her. The general nodded to the rest of the group. “See you around, boys. Ladies.”

Colonel Dalton, who had been standing behind the general stepped up to Derek, shook his head in amusement, and gave Derek a squeeze on the shoulder before following his boss.

Sophie exhaled on a shudder. “I shouldn’t have come.”

“Don’t be silly,” Maia quipped as she handed the keys to Jack. “Hayes should have kept his mouth shut.”

“Maia’s right, baby,” Derek kissed her temple. “Don’t worry about it.”

The men retrieved the rest of their luggage and loaded up the SUV. Maia got into the front passenger seat with Jack. Sophie cuddled up to Derek in the backseat.

“But I could have messed up the MDI deal,” Sophie said, still worried. “Derek, you should’ve just let it go.”

Derek grabbed her chin, tilted it up so that she was looking at him. “You get I’m your husband, right?”

“Yes—”

“You’re mine?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts. You’re mine to protect, Sophie. End of story.”

“But a general, Derek?”

“General Hayes is a reasonable man, a family man. He understands what it means to protect his woman and that’s why he backed off immediately.”

“Derek’s right, Sophie.” Jack’s eyes met hers over the rearview mirror. “I’d have done the same if he’d made a similar remark to Maia.”

“You would?” Maia purred.

“You bet your sweet ass, babe,” Jack said and the two knocked lips. “So where are we going for dinner?”

“I don’t like the idea,” Derek said as he took a sip of his scotch. The four of them had just finished dinner at a casual Italian restaurant along a posh neighborhood in New Park City.

Lingering over drinks, he had brought up the subject of Viktor's unexpected visit. Sophie had yet to make a decision regarding running the fledgling AGS R&D.

"I think it's an exciting opportunity." Maia turned to Sophie. "I get to help you test stuff."

"God help us," Jack muttered into his drink.

"You won't have the time," Derek repeated an earlier argument. "We just got married. Now is not the time to get into something new."

"It's not like it's new. My first project is modifying the blasting cap," Sophie replied. "I told Viktor the most I could do is two afternoons a week, and he was OK with it. It's not going to cut into our time together."

"You say that now, but you don't know what a tyrant Viktor is," Derek grumbled.

There was an uncomfortable silence at the table.

"I really want to do this, Derek," Sophie said finally. She reached out to hold his hand that was clenched tightly beside his drink. He loosened his fingers and clasped her delicate palm. He reluctantly met her silver-gray eyes and that was it. He couldn't deny her a damned thing. He was fucked. Still, he hedged. "Do it on a trial basis."

"There is equipment to be purchased," Sophie said. "AGS cannot invest in this equipment on a trial basis. I have to go all in."

Fuck.

"How long is the contract?"

"Two years."

"Damn it." He tossed back his drink and glanced at Jack. His friend looked sympathetic, but he wasn't getting any back up from him.

"Derek, why don't you tell Sophie the real reason you don't want her to get involved?" Maia said.

Maia had been his friend for years and saw through much of his bullshit.

"Working at AGS also puts you closer to their enemies," Derek said carefully.

Sophie's eyes narrowed. "Are you going to stop contracting with them?"

Derek scowled. "Fuck, no."

"So how would me working for them make any difference?"

"You know," Derek muttered.

"No, Derek. I don't know. Why aren't you telling me?"

“I can’t fucking watch you the whole time!” Derek raised his voice.

Several diners turned their heads toward their table.

“You’re saying I’m an easy target because I’m not as kick-ass as the rest of you guys,” Sophie said calmly. “Is that it?”

“Put that way—yes. *Fuck!*” Derek winced when Maia kicked him under the table.

“OK, both of you. Stop,” Maia said. “Marriage 101: No fighting in front of other people. Keep it private.”

“We know how that usually ends.” Jack snickered and winced when his wife apparently kicked him as well.

Sophie’s chin jutted out stubbornly. They were newlyweds for Christ’s sake, Derek thought almost in panic. They were going on their honeymoon tomorrow, he hadn’t seen her in a week, and now they were fighting.

“We probably need to go,” Sophie said. “Sorry for ruining your evening Jack, Maia.”

“Not a problem. Quite entertaining to have Lockwood dig a hole for himself for a change.” Jack smirked, ignoring Derek’s glare.

As for Derek, he was glad to call it an evening. He was so fucking tired.

CHAPTER THREE

Derek was ready to pull out his hair. He was on the receiving end of the silent treatment. Their short walk from the restaurant to the condo was done in silence, but he was relieved that Sophie let him hold her hand and didn't pull away when he locked his fingers with hers. He had to let her go when they reached the reception area to pick up his luggage and briefcase from the concierge. The ride up the elevator seemed to take forever.

Sophie unlocked their condo and held the door open for him.

"I got it," Derek said as he wheeled in his suitcase.

"I already, um, got some of your stuff ready for our trip tomorrow," Sophie said before disappearing into the bedroom.

He rubbed his eyes in frustration. The long flight from Nevada, having to unpack and pack again, and the idea of leaving early tomorrow morning for a long-haul flight to Hawaii suddenly weighed down on him. He had missed his wife and at the first sign of a fight, she'd erected a wall between them. Anger coursed through his veins. They'd agreed to avoid miscommunication by talking about their problems, not by ignoring each other. He lugged his suitcase into the bedroom and found Sophie packing for the trip.

"Sophie, we need to talk."

"I know."

"Then why are you avoiding me, Angel?"

"It's just that—" Sophie's breath caught. "You ruined it!"

Derek's heart thudded and he felt the blood leave his face. He had ruined what? Their marriage? Over one stupid fight?

"Now that's not fucking fair!" Derek roared. He was beyond furious now, and he ignored the alarm that crossed Sophie's face. He wanted her to see how angry he really was. He couldn't

tiptoe around her forever. “It was one damned fight. How could you say I ruined it? Don’t you think it’s your fault too?”

“What—”

“You knew I was an overprotective ass. You knew I didn’t want you putting yourself in danger. You knew all the shit I do for AGS. And now, to get what you want, you twist everything out of proportion and throw it at my face. Well, sorry to inform you sweetheart, you knew this coming into the marriage. You fucking signed up for it, so don’t say I ruined it!”

Derek shouted.

“What in the freaking hell are you talking about?” Sophie shouted back.

“You said I ruined our marriage! We had one stupid fight. How does that ruin it?”

“I didn’t mean you ruined our marriage.” Her face took on a weird expression. Like she wanted to laugh, but she was too pissed to do so.

“Well, what the fuck did you mean?” He had no time for riddles. Couldn’t she just spit it out? He was tired. And horny. And he wanted to fuck her, but she was too angry, and he didn’t think she was gonna go for it anyway.

“You ruined my surprise because you’re such an asshole.”

“Asshole? I’m an asshole? Well, you’re a b—” Derek caught himself, before *yeah*—he’d only be digging himself a deeper hole.

Sophie came around the bed and stood defiantly on her toes so that she was nose-to-nose with him. “What Derek? Say it. You were going to call me a bitch, weren’t you?”

“Stop putting words in my mouth,” Derek muttered. “Wait. What surprise?”

“I don’t feel like telling you now.” Sophie sniffed and walked away to resume packing.

“You don’t deserve it.”

Derek could sense that his wife wasn’t angry at him anymore, so he tentatively walked up behind her and circled his arms around her, hugging her close. He lowered his mouth to her ear.

“I’m sorry, Angel. Tell me what surprise you have for me. Please?”

She pushed her ass against him to break free. Then, she backed away slowly and reaching under her skirt, she lowered her underwear.

“Uh, a striptease?” His voice had gotten hoarse and all the blood seemed to have flushed to his groin. “I think you need to start with your top, baby.”

Sophie shook her head as she stepped out from her panties. She slowly raised her skirt. Derek's eyes tracked the slow exposure of her silky thighs until his mind registered her bare pussy.

Jesus.

Fucking.

Christ.

She's gone Brazilian!

"Angel—" he croaked.

"You like it?"

He loved it, and his wife didn't know it yet, but he was about to fuck the shit out of her.

There was no mistaking the feral gleam in his eyes that transformed the urbane-looking gentleman in a suit into a wild animal stalking his prey. Sophie squirmed at the warmth that gushed between her legs, reeling from how Derek could arouse her just from a look, a simple movement.

"Derek, wait!" Sophie breathed.

"No fucking way." The growl came from deep within his chest. Her first instinct was to run and she did. She scooted out of Derek's reach and tried to run out the bedroom, her skirt still bunched around her hips.

"Oh no, you don't." His arms caught her around the waist.

"Derek, stop it!" Sophie gasped with laughter. He dragged her across the room and sat her on the vanity table. Then, he switched on the lights on the mirror.

"Let me see," he whispered. Suddenly, Sophie felt self-conscious as Derek spread her thighs apart. "You did this yesterday?"

"Yes."

His eyes were hooded, inspecting the naked core of her femininity in wonder. He reached out and trailed his finger down the seam of her pussy. Then, he spread the labia and stroked her lightly before inserting one finger into her entrance.

"Derek—" Her hips almost came off the table at the spike of pleasure threatening to explode within her.

“Shh . . . you like this, don’t you Sophie?” His gaze lifted to hers and she was pinned by the smoldering need in his eyes. “You’re so tight, Angel, so wet.” His nostrils flared as he added a second finger. His other hand cupped the back of her head to draw her in for a passionate kiss. His tongue mimicked the exploration of his fingers—thrusting, possessing, fucking her mouth with his tongue.

She moaned into his mouth. Sensations pulsed low in her belly and a pressure built where his fingers were ruthlessly pounding into her.

She tore her mouth away. “Please—”

A gleam of triumph, of male satisfaction, flickered through his eyes. Derek bit her lip gently before lowering his head. He pushed her knees up to her shoulders, baring her wide for his tongue and plunged inside her. The release was immediate. The moment he sucked on her clit, she fractured into a million pieces of pulsating sensations. The keening cry that echoed in the room was hers. An answering rumble vibrated deep within Derek’s chest, his sounds becoming more animalistic by the second, the feasting becoming more wild—uncontrolled.

He devoured her, and she succumbed to the pleasures of his mouth.

The heat below her navel intensified once more. His tongue and lips enjoyed the unencumbered access to her core. And as her climax built, she grabbed his hair to hold his head in place, not caring if she was smashing his face into her pussy.

She screamed, “Ahhh . . . Derek! There! Harder . . . flatten your . . . Yes. Harder . . .” She was coming, moisture flooded her channel, and his tongue laved up every drop of her essence.

“Oh, Angel, I missed your taste. I fucking missed it.”

He pulled her off the vanity and carried her to the bed. Sophie was a boneless mass in his arms. She didn’t think she could be any more satiated until she felt the head of his cock pushing into her, and her nerve-endings started firing once more.

“Derek—”

“Feel that, Sophie, I’m fucking hard for you,” Derek grunted into her neck. His girth stretched her channel, his shaft bottoming out and touching her womb. “Fuck . . . fuck . . . you’re sucking me in. God . . . you feel so good.” He stilled to let her get used to him, cupping her face as his eyes blazed into hers. “I won’t last. I just can’t. So, I’m going to take you hard and fast. OK, Angel?”

She nodded. His hips started to flex—first thrust, second thrust, and then the movements blurred as he sped up and pounded into her. He fucked her with the single-mindedness of a man possessed with unrelenting hunger. She reached another peak, mellower than the first one but longer. He kept his eyes on her as she came, until his own release hit him and his eyes slid shut. His face contorted in a mixture of pain and pleasure and a harsh grunt escaped him as he collapsed on top of her.

He continued to rock into her, raining kisses on her face in a gesture of near worship.

“Love you, Angel. You know that right? No matter what,” Derek whispered.

“I know, Derek.” Sophie raised her head to kiss him lightly. “I know.”

Sophie waited for Derek at one of the cocktail tables while he went to the bar to get them some drinks. They had arrived in Maui after an almost sixteen-hour journey, and she wanted to strangle her new husband for no apparent reason. OK, there was a reason—envy. Derek slept through almost the entire journey, while she had a hard time catching any shut-eye at all; all this lack of sleep had made her grumpy. To add to it all, she was starving by the time they had arrived at the Kahului Maui Airport.

Unlike Derek, she wasn't used to traveling, and it irked her that despite coming off the Nevada trip, he seemed refreshed, looking as dapper as ever, while she looked haggard and pasty, with her blonde hair all over the place. This had her believing that the only things that men needed were food and sex. She grew warm as she remembered how he'd reached for her repeatedly the night before.

He'd made love to her almost till the time that they had to wake up to go to the airport, which was partially why she wanted to strangle him. She hadn't slept well last night and couldn't sleep on the plane either, and it was all Derek's fault that she was tired and irritable.

She did catch her second wind when they arrived at their rented villa. As always, Derek outdid himself. It was a breathtaking Balinese-style structure, made of native wood, and had an open-air floor plan and a lanai that went around the house, offering a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean. It had four bedrooms and a state-of-the-art kitchen, which Sophie highly doubted they would ever use. Outdoor and indoor showers. An infinity pool. It was perfect.

So, she sheathed her grumpiness a bit, but warded off Derek's advances when he wanted to have sex with her out on the lanai.

"Feed me," she demanded. Derek's face fell, and she almost relented, but then she remembered—not without a trace of vindictiveness—how peacefully he had slumbered, while she squirmed in her seat on the plane.

So here they were at Wayfarer's Grill—a highly rated restaurant known for serving fresh seafood. The temperature in Hawaii was almost constantly between 70°F to 80°F year round, which made it an ideal vacation spot for people from the mainland who wanted to escape the bitter chills of winter. Initially, Derek suggested Fiji for their honeymoon, but Sophie said that she wanted to take the idea of vacations one step at a time and preferred to remain within the United States.

She glanced at the bar to see what was keeping Derek. The bar was packed and three-person deep. Their hostess did say that their table wouldn't be ready for another 45 minutes. Sophie was just hoping that she wouldn't pass out from hunger and wanted to ask Derek to order some snacks.

"Sophie? Sophie Leroux? I'll be damned!" A vaguely familiar, deep, modulated voice spoke from her side. She turned and stared straight into bespectacled brilliant blue eyes and her heart skipped a beat.

"Professor Blake?" Sophie jumped off the bar stool and greeted her college mentor, kissing him on both cheeks.

"Are you here for the energy summit?" Lawrence Blake asked. His dark hair contrasted starkly with his pale skin. But his strong patrician features and tall, rangy build made him the heartthrob of the Harvard nuclear physics department. It was also weird to see him out of his usual bow tie and sports jacket attire, and considering his skin color, he did look a tad out of place in a Hawaiian shirt.

"Ah, no." Sophie smiled, raising her ring finger. "Honeymoon."

A strange expression came over Lawrence's features, but he quickly masked it. "Anyone I know? Which nerdy scientist did you end up with?"

"Actually—"

"I'd be surprised you'd find anyone more brilliant than yourself."

“Except you,” Sophie said without thinking. *Damn*. She hoped that was not flirting. Despite the initial thrill of seeing an old crush, Sophie hardly felt anything else. Her admiration for the professor was mainly intellectual.

“Ah yes, but it appears I was too late to snatch you up.” He stared pointedly at her ring finger.

“Yes, Sophie is very much taken,” a cold voice said from behind her, and Sophie groaned inwardly. Of all Derek’s timings, it had to be at this point of the conversation.

Pasting on an all-too-chipper face, Sophie made the introductions.

“Hmm, so what branch of science do you specialize in?” Lawrence asked, and it was not lost on Sophie that he was trying to put Derek down.

“I’m not in any field of science,” Derek replied. “I’m more a doer than a thinker.”

Lawrence’s brow shot up. “Interesting.” The professor looked at Sophie. “I would figure you’d marry a man of your intellectual equal.” He smirked at Derek. “No offense.”

Sophie seethed. No one puts her husband down like that. Derek’s face darkened and Professor Blake had no idea that her man could make him disappear. Before Derek could reply, she said, “Derek is smarter than both of us combined, believe me. I have realized that common sense and street smarts are more important than solving any Callan-Symanzik equation.”

Derek’s scowl lessened as he pulled her in for a very wet kiss. “Why thanks, Angel.”

Turning to the professor, who was now suddenly looking uncomfortable, Derek said, “Though I’d like to meet Sophie’s colleagues in the future, you should know that this is our honeymoon and you’re blatantly intruding—”

“You’re very rude—”

“No. You are,” Derek growled. The gloves were off, and Sophie had to put a calming hand on Derek’s arm. “You look at my wife like you want to fuck her—don’t deny it—and it’s pissing me off. It’s my cock that’s fucking her tonight and every single night thereafter. And if you don’t step away from us right this instant, your face will be acquainted with my fist. Clear?”

Sophie was speechless at the fury dripping from Derek’s tone. This couldn’t be a simple manifestation of jealousy, could it?

Lawrence huffed and looked at Sophie, shaking his head. “I can’t believe—”

Derek stepped into Lawrence’s personal space. They were the same height, but Derek was clearly more lethal of the two.

“Get out of here,” Derek said in an ominous voice.

Sophie blanched when she noticed that some of the patrons in the restaurant were starting to notice the altercation.

Raising both his hand in surrender, Lawrence backed away, he turned around, and disappeared into the crowd.

“Derek, don’t you think you—”

“Not now, Sophie,” Derek snapped as he threw back his drink.

He was mad at her? She had defended him.

Unfortunately, the confrontation put a cloud on the rest of their evening. They ate in silence. Derek was brooding, and Sophie was too tired to argue with him.

Later, when they retired to the villa, Derek grabbed the scotch, walked out to the pool, stared into the ocean, and drank.

Sophie felt like crying. It was their honeymoon and they were fighting again. She showered, crawled into bed alone, and quickly fell asleep in exhaustion.

Later that night, the bed dipped as Derek got in beside her. He smelled of scotch, which was pleasant in a masculine way. He gathered her into his arms, held her, and kissed the top of her head.

Sophie snuggled close, feeling better because he had not shut her out. They both slept peacefully.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sophie watched the waves crash against the shores of the Kaanapali beach, unable to concentrate on the book she was reading. Derek was still unusually subdued, carrying over some of his behavior from last night. He woke her up with his mouth, and she thought that after her morning orgasm, all would be well, but instead of following through with sex, he scooped her up and took her to the shower where they simply made out.

So, no shower sex either.

She was getting annoyed. What was all this making out and no follow-through?

He had suggested that they checked out the beach not too far from their villa, so she put on her new two-piece bikini. But as soon as he saw her, he roared at her to cover up with a towel.

Now, Sophie expected such behavior from her caveman.

Fortunately, she had brought a sarong. She ignored his scowl when she took off the cover-up and lounged under the cabana.

They'd been sipping Mai Tais under the sun when Derek decided to rent a Jet Ski. He asked if she wanted to ride with him, but she waved him off, preferring to work on her elusive tan. He helped her pull back the shade from the cabana before taking off.

She must have dozed off for she jerked awake, realizing that her e-Reader had fallen into the sand. Sophie quickly checked her tan to make sure that she hadn't gotten the embarrassing imprint of her e-Reader on her chest and sighed in relief when all looked well. She must not have slept for too long. Where was Derek?

Checking the time, she figured that he'd been gone for 45 minutes. She was getting hungry. They had eaten an early breakfast and the sun was getting too scorching at noon anyway. Shading her eyes to look for Derek, she scanned the ocean and wondered which one of those

speeding Jet Skis was him. Well, they all seemed to be having fun, so she shrugged and went into the adjoining restaurant to see if she could get some food.

She sat at the verandah overlooking the beach, so that she could wave Derek over when he got in. The server came by and she ordered grilled fish and vegetables. She sat back and resumed reading her book, momentarily stopping to giggle at the little crab that was crawling over the verandah wall. Little sparrows flitted from table to table, waiting to snatch up unattended food. The sky was azure, while the ocean breeze carried in the essence of salt water. Just when Sophie was marveling at how beautiful the place was, Derek appeared at the entrance of the restaurant, breaking her tranquil thoughts. His face was stormy, and his hand was gripping her sarong. He marched right up to her table.

“Put this on,” he said brusquely.

In that moment, Sophie decided that she’d enough. It was her vacation too, and she wasn’t about to get trampled on by her husband. “No. Sit down if you want to eat. Otherwise, leave me alone.”

“Sophie,” he bent down and leaned in close, the muscle on his jaw ticking rapidly. “Don’t make me put this on you.”

“Derek, it’s a beach. I’m not the only one wearing a two-piece.”

“You get that every male eye in this restaurant is ogling you, right?” His voice had taken on the texture of steel scraping over gravel.

“Don’t be . . .” Sophie looked around and saw a portly red-faced tourist staring at the exposed curve of her hip. The man looked up and winked at her. Her gaze moved to another guy, who was openly leering at her legs. “Um, you’re right.”

She stood up, and tried to reach for the sarong, but Derek had lost patience and wrapped it around her himself. He wasn’t looking at her, but was glaring over her shoulder, and she figured he was warning the other men to look away or else.

“You shouldn’t have left the beach by yourself,” Derek said, gentleness returning to his voice.

“I got hungry.”

He reached over and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I shouldn’t have gone off on the Jet Ski.”

“That’s OK, Derek, you weren’t gone for too long.”

Derek sighed. “I’m trying to act normal and not like a psychotic husband—trying to assure myself that you’d be OK without me for a few minutes.”

Sophie smiled sadly. Her husband was still working through her abduction a couple of months ago. One would think that since she’d been stalked and taken twice, she’d be more careful in public. But her brain wasn’t wired that way. She had a feeling her neurotransmitters avoided observing people because they were unpredictable and preferred to focus on surroundings that established patterns. This “zoning out” drove Beth crazy, and now, Derek as well. “Is it getting better?”

“I’m getting there, Sophie. Besides, vacationing is new for you and I’m afraid to leave you alone even for a second. But other things—”

Their server came back with her order, effectively stopping him from what he was about to say. Derek ordered a beer and fish tacos. The subject was dropped.

Derek had to rein in these feelings of dread and try to salvage the evening. This was the second dinner that had become a train wreck because he was consumed with unreasonable jealousy. Sophie was sitting sullenly, close to tears, shoveling food in her mouth because she was either hungry or plain upset.

His wife was beautiful and she was blossoming more each day. Derek should have been feeling proud because he was certain it was because of him, but he was too selfish to share her beauty and couldn’t stand it that other men were just as mesmerized with her as he was. Her hair had already lightened from the sun, and her skin was glowing like a bronze goddess. She was breathtaking, sultry, and so guileless.

Apparently, someone else had noticed her beauty. A photographer. Whether he was a professional or not, Derek didn’t know. Derek had come back from buying tickets for an after-dinner show to the sight of the asshole taking pictures of his wife, who was obliviously perched on a railing, sea breeze in her hair, watching the sunset.

He was gone for less than ten fucking minutes for god’s sakes!

She was wearing a white linen dress that left little to the imagination when light passed through it, and right now, every sensual line of her body was visible. The fucker.

He confronted the photographer and made him delete the pictures. Afterward, he dragged Sophie off to a corner, failing to filter the words that tumbled out of his mouth.

“I couldn’t leave you for five fucking minutes without some douchebag taking advantage of you,” Derek hissed at her. “Or were you enjoying the attention? Were you flirting with him?”

“I wasn’t flirting! I wasn’t even aware that someone was taking my picture!” Sophie tilted her chin up. “I was happy and simply having fun. But now you’ve messed up the evening again. If this is a pattern of how our honeymoon’s going to be for the next two weeks, I’d rather go home.”

“Is that what you want?” Derek shot back. “I’m sure that could be arranged.”

“You’re such a jerk,” Sophie cried and walked off. He caught up with her and was about to apologize when her next words stopped him cold. “I don’t know what the hell I was thinking when I agreed to marry you!”

Sophie slapped a hand over her mouth when she realized what she had said. His face reflected the sudden pain that splintered his heart. “Derek, I—”

“That’s fine. Forget it.” He managed to say, struggling to keep the sudden anguish from his voice. “We’re going to be late for dinner. We’ll talk later. OK, Angel?”

But his insides were screaming in panic. He had pushed her too far, pushed her to regret marrying him. What the fuck was wrong with him?

A knot had lodged in his throat, and he couldn’t say anything all throughout dinner beyond small talk. He was terrified to broach the subject of what she had blurted out, and his mind was trying to justify her words as ones spoken in anger because his scathing statements certainly were, and he was deeply contrite for letting such words leave his mouth.

After dinner, Sophie didn’t want to go to the show citing a headache, so they decided to return to the villa.

Sophie was done sulking. The minute she stepped inside, she turned around and glared at him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Sophie demanded.

Derek tried to answer her, but the words still would not come. He needed a drink, but that wasn’t going to erase the fears that had been plaguing him since their first night on Maui when he realized that other men would look at his wife and want her as their own.

“I don’t know,” he muttered and tried walking to the lanai because her scrutiny was pushing his fear further inside him. But Sophie wasn’t letting him retreat. She pulled on his arm.

“Bullshit, Derek. You’ve been acting irrational since you got back from Nevada. I understand your overprotectiveness. But these sudden rages of jealousy are getting out of hand, and they’re making you say and do hateful things, and *that* is not my husband. So tell me. What’s the problem?”

“Sophie, don’t push me,” Derek warned. He was in an agitated state. A state where he could hurt her. Which was why he had stayed away from her last night. He wanted to sink into her, mark her. Hard. Repeatedly. “Let me work through this, Angel. Please. I . . . I might hurt you if you push.”

“No. We sort this out right now!”

“I’m afraid of losing you, OK!” He whirled around, yelling at her. “I’ve fucked up in the past, thinking it wouldn’t catch up with me. But it will. You’re going to leave me. Because that’s what I did to all those women.” He gave a short, mirthless laugh. “Karma’s a bitch, isn’t that what they say?”

“Oh, Derek,” Sophie whispered. “Are you saying that you’ve been tormenting yourself with what you’ve done in the past?”

“I don’t fucking know. It appears that way. All those women suddenly speaking out in those tabloids, telling you to stay the fuck away from me. It hurts. Because I want to be everything for you, to do everything to make you happy, and it hurts when people say I don’t deserve you.”

“Beth shouldn’t have shoved those articles in your face. You know they sensationalize it somewhat, right? So it would sell?”

His sweet wife. How did he ever deserve his Angel? She was still trying to defend him. With the exception of the first few weeks of their relationship, she had never thrown his past at him. Even during the worst times of media scrutiny, she had never wavered—she stood by him all the way. And when she stood beside him as his bride? It was the happiest moment of his life.

“I never thought I’d love someone this much,” he continued. “I never thought . . . I never thought I’d find someone I’d want to hold on to forever.”

“But why are you feeling this fear now?”

“I don’t know, Sophie. Maybe because I’m realizing that the ring on your finger doesn’t mean shit to all those assholes without boundaries, and I’m terrified I’m going to fuck up and give them an opportunity to move in. You heard your fucking professor. And I kind of rushed you into marrying me. I’m afraid that if you’d get the chance to stop and think about it, you’re going to regret it.”

“Derek, I’m sorry about what I said earlier.”

He sighed. “I’m sorry too, baby. But you need to be more careful of men taking advantage of you. That motherfucker was lucky I didn’t smash his camera.”

“I’ll try to be more aware of my surroundings.”

“Your cluelessness is endearing, sweetheart. That’s one of the things I love about you, but it’s also driving me crazy.” He hauled her up against her. “There are a lot of douchebags out there and not all men are like me.”

Sophie snorted. “Yeah, right, you’re—”

Derek silenced her with his mouth, driving his tongue between her lips as his hands grabbed her ass and lifted her. He’d warned her. But it was too late. His body was coiled with the need to possess her in every way. It didn’t help that she moaned into his mouth and buried her fingers into his hair, returning his kisses just as desperately.

He swiftly carried her out to the lanai, lowered her on the day bed and yanked off her dress. He unhooked her bra and tore off her panties. She was spread out naked before him, bathed in the glow of a full moon. She raised her hands to unbutton his shirt, but he caught her wrists and slammed them beside her.

“What do you want?” Sophie asked.

He quickly flipped her on her stomach, pulled her hips up, and bending over her, pressed her head down.

“Spread your legs.”

“Derek?”

“Now!” Derek ordered, his voice turning guttural. He had a primal urge to fuck her from behind. He wanted to ram his cock inside her and pound that ass over and over, while his fingers dug into her hips, holding her captive against him.

He reached under her to finger her clit, penetrating the seam and noting with satisfaction that she was ready for him.

“That’s it, baby. You’re wet for me.”

“Derek, please—”

“You want my cock now, Angel?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to give it to you hard.”

“OK.” She was breathless.

With his other hand, he unbuckled his belt, lowered his zip and shoved his shorts down, pulling his erection free from his boxers. He stroked his cock twice before guiding it to her entrance, sliding the head up and down her core and prepping it with her moisture. Without further warning, he reared back and slammed inside her hard. Sophie cried out, her hands gripping the covers tightly. His fingers dug into her hips as he pulled out and thrust back inside her again and again and again. Her ass bumped against his hips, increasing the intensity of his surging desire. He grunted and adjusted his hold on her, and without easing up on the pumping, he folded over her back and grabbed her wrists, pinning her down and fucking her harder. He continued thrusting inside her, not able to bottom out in their position, which he knew was driving her crazy, but it prolonged their release.

“Derek, please—”

“Please what, baby?”

“I need to come—”

He pulled out and flipped her over. He shoved her knees up and dove into her sweet honey, licking her pussy and grunting with pleasure when she squirmed and tried to buck him off as she screamed for him to suck her harder. Her orgasm lasted forever and he hungered for all the juices that her pussy gave up, laving every bit of the slick moisture to quench a primal thirst. After her tremors subsided, he slammed back inside her, manacled her wrists with his hands as he pounded deep, dipping his head once or twice to suck on her breasts.

It wasn’t long in coming, for he rode her hard and fast. Sweat trickled from his forehead and landed on her breasts. They were both breathing hard, and Sophie was looking at him with a challenge in her eyes for him to fuck the shit out of her. And he did. For his climax transcended every other fucking release he’d ever had.

His back arched and he tensed, and a visceral force radiated through every muscle in his body as he poured into her endlessly.

“Fuck!” he groaned raggedly. “What the fuck just happened?”

His outstretched arms buckled and he fell on top of her.

“Um, was that good?” Sophie asked, as her hands stroked his back lovingly.

“Un-fucking-believable, baby,” he panted. “I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.”

He rolled off her and pulled her on top of him, running his hands possessively over her sweat-dampened skin. “Are you OK? Did I hurt you?”

“I think I’m going to be sore later. But I like this wild side. I rarely see it.”

He grinned at her.

“It’s so claiming,” Sophie added. “I feel like you’ve possessed every inch of me. Love it.”

Derek hugged her close. She didn’t know how much her words meant to him.

“I love you so much, Sophie. I promise to get a hold of my shit. The last thing I want do is hurt you.”

She was no shrinking violet and he thanked whatever fuck had given him such a woman who knew when to push him, who loved him so much that she wouldn’t allow him to wallow in his bullshit and fuck up what they have. “My little fighter,” he whispered.

“Only for you, Derek. I love you. I know what it means to be self-destructive. I’ve been there. There’s two of us now. We took vows to be there for each other. Most problems can be solved if we communicate. Now I may sulk sometimes, but I give you permission to kick my butt when I get too stubborn.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think I have better ideas of what to do with your butt,” he said, lowering his hands and squeezing her ass, with his cock responding quickly.

Sophie’s eyes widened in shock. “You can’t be—Derek!”

“Fucking love you, Angel.”

CHAPTER FIVE

He groaned into her neck as he emptied inside her. Derek had made love to her slowly, worshipping every inch of her body before taking her up to unparalleled bliss and bringing her back down to warm reality. She stroked his hair and squeezed his sides, loving the feel of his lean hips cradled between her legs. He owned her. And she—owned—him.

It was their last day in Maui. It was such an idyllic paradise that she didn't want to leave. After the rocky start to their honeymoon and getting to the bottom of Derek's fears of losing her that second night, they had come out stronger and enjoyed the rest of their honeymoon without further drama.

Derek would always be jealous and overprotective of her; Sophie had accepted that it was an intrinsic part of who he was.

She always considered herself passably attractive until the third morning of their honeymoon when Derek stood behind her in front of the mirror and pointed to each part of her body that he loved and that other men coveted.

"Just remember that these are mine," Derek had said, touching her breasts. "And this." He cupped her between her legs. "And these lips," he had whispered as he kissed her until she was giddy with desire and the knowledge that she was this beautiful goddess in her husband's eyes. She didn't care what other men saw.

Her man's muffled grunt in her neck brought her back to the present. Derek rolled off her and pulled her into his arms.

"I guess that was the last honeymoon fuck," Derek said. He kissed the top of her head. "Wanna extend another week?"

"We need to work."

"Fuck work."

Sophie pulled away, flopped on her belly, and propping herself up on her elbows, gazed into Derek's eyes. "Thank you for a lovely time, Mr. Lockwood."

"You're welcome, Mrs. Lockwood."

"I love being your wife," Sophie whispered as she leaned in and planted a light kiss on his lips.

He grabbed her and flipped her over.

"Derek!"

His heated gaze raked her up and down, and Sophie felt herself getting branded again by the searing possessiveness in his eyes.

"And I love being your husband."

