

# FIRE AND ICE

by Victoria Paige

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Maia Pierce, a top agent for Artemis Guardian Services (AGS) and a widely known rule breaker, was good at her job. In her last mission, her risk-taking had finally caught up with her and she had now incurred the wrath of a Russian drug lord bent on destroying her. With assassins after her, one man had offered her his protection. But Jack McCord may be an other kind of danger, a danger to her heart.

Jack McCord had everything: a thriving defense company, sinful good looks and no shortage of beautiful women. But what he coveted the most didn't want anything to do with him. Maia Pierce, his brother's bodyguard, was the most exquisite creature he had ever laid eyes on and he wanted her. And when Maia got into trouble he saw an opportunity to finally seduce her and he is not taking no for an answer.

As they face-off with Russian mercenaries from the North Carolina coast to the depths of the Russian wilderness, they also finally face what may be in their hearts. But the danger that Maia finds herself in and the secrets she keeps from Jack threaten to derail their happily ever after.

## CHAPTER ONE

Maia Pierce exited her Audi convertible in the underground parking garage of the Trident building. Located in the central business district of New Park City, Virginia, the building housed the corporate offices of McCord Defense Industries (MDI) on its eighteenth floor. MDI was the premiere advanced weapons contractor for the Department of Defense.

Protective custody detail was the most boring job in her opinion and one she barely tolerated. But after her last assignment, Viktor felt she needed a break... and a lesson.

Damn Viktor. What happened wasn't entirely her fault. Wait, yes, it was entirely her fault—her screw-up. But she'd be damned before she left those young girls behind. The RULES were to remain detached, get the mission done and get out. Hopefully, the Russians had not uncovered her identity. This was the reason why Viktor had recalled her from AGS foreign missions, so she could fly under the radar that blanketed the planet like a spider's web.

Artemis Guardian Services (AGS) or simply "The Guardians" as they were known by most of their clients specialized in small team surgical incursions: K and R (kidnap and ransom), DoD covert ops that were 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.

Brett McCord was the assignment. Computer hacker extraordinaire, entangled with the local tri-city drug lord Raul Vergara, McCord had become the star witness for

the prosecution. The evidence was hush-hush but had something to do with access to emails, bank accounts and an encrypted list of transactions such as payoffs and names. A conviction would cause a major ripple through the East Coast drug trade taking down major players—including dirty cops within the NPPD and spreading to cities outside New Park like Washington DC. District Attorney Mike Callahan had recently been keeping AGS busy with his crusade to clean up the streets of New Park.

Mike. Maia sighed. She had not seen him in almost two years.

MDI was owned by Jack McCord, Brett's older brother. He was an ex-Navy SEAL and now his company was one of DoD's top small weapons suppliers/innovators. Talk about a career military. The brothers couldn't be more different. Brett was an environmental activist and preferred using computer worms and denial-of-service attacks in making a statement against companies that had rubbed him the wrong way. Heck, his FBI rap sheet included hacking into his own brother's company just for being a contractor for the DoD.

The elevator doors slid open on the 18<sup>th</sup> level revealing a sleek modern reception area in all white and silver. Comfortable leather chairs were arranged in an impersonal huddle around an industrial-style coffee table. A gorgeous brunette, who would look more appropriate on the cover of Vogue than as a receptionist to a defense company, leaned past her IMac to scrutinize the newcomer.

Maia's lips curved imperceptibly. She was used to catty appraisals. Though her beautiful red hair was pulled back and hidden in a chic bun, she was 5'7 with legs that seemed to go on forever and curves in all the right places. Her tailored cream silk suit hid well-muscled arms and thighs, the skirt skimming her toned butt like a glove. She was endowed with a delicate bone structure that flattered her unusual clear blue eyes and her lush sensual lips had come in handy in situations involving lecherous dictators.

"Maia Pierce for Brett McCord."

The receptionist inclined her head briefly and pressed the intercom button.

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"Miss Pierce is here," a husky voice relayed over the intercom.

"Send her right in," Jack McCord responded. He glanced at Derek Lockwood, his business partner and best friend. "She better be worth our time."

Though Jack was no sexist, he was disturbed by this development in Brett's protective custody. A hit had been uncovered in time that involved his brother's former security detail. Local law enforcement was so deeply wrapped up in Vergara's web that it had become necessary to bring in outside players. This AGS team came highly vetted by Derek Lockwood and Mike Callahan, but sending a woman to head the protective custody of a witness who could take down a violent drug kingpin brought their judgment to question. Okay, maybe he was a tad sexist.

The door to the conference room swung open and the stunning vision of Maia Pierce swept through. It took all of Jack's discipline to keep his jaw from dropping but he couldn't help the uncomfortable stirring that shot straight to his groin. The picture of her on the advanced dossier of the Guardians had not prepared him for this.

Jack was rich and extremely attractive and he had no shortage of beautiful women on his arm and in his bed. But he had never, in his entire life, seen a woman this exquisite.

Derek moved quickly to hug the visitor and Jack felt an odd twinge of possessive jealousy.

"Hey, gorgeous!"

"Derek." Maia flashed a dazzling smile up to his friend before nodding to Mike Callahan with a more reserved, "Counselor."

Jack's brow shot up, noticing the way Mike Callahan's face turned instantly stony and although Miss Pierce's face revealed nothing, he knew in his gut there was a story there. Interesting.

"I gotta ask, how do you stop the bad guys? By flashing your boobs?" Brett piped in obnoxiously.

"Jesus, Brett," Derek muttered.

"Actually, you'd be surprised how effective that play is," Maia drawled, not flustered in the least.

Jack swallowed a chuckle as Bret visibly stilled, then his idiotic brother gave a shit-eating grin, stood up and shook hands with Maia while his eyes drifted to her ample bosom. "I guess you know I'm Brett—your assigned pain in the ass."

"And I'm Jack McCord, welcome Miss Pierce," Jack rose up to his full 6'3" and grasped Maia's hand firmly. "You'll have to excuse my brother: he's been under a lot of stress from the recent attempts on his life."

"No apologies. I get that all the time, although not often quite as direct."

Facing the four men in the room, she opened her briefcase and switched to all business. "Shall we get started?"

Jack nodded his go-ahead.

"You've already received the dossier of my team. Six people will be guarding Castle—codename for the safe house—two outside for perimeter surveillance and four inside. There will be position rotations between the six. It shouldn't be too hard since we only have to keep Mr. McCord safe for 60 hours and every single member on the team can stay sharp for extended time periods. Here's the layout of the structure and the schematics of the security installed. Alarms and cameras of the interior and exterior are connected to AGS headquarters with 24-hour monitoring. There is an onsite panic room. We have our own emergency response team. Everything we do is kept below the police radar. We also have our own paramedics for the odd gunshot wound."

"Uh...what about life-threatening injuries?" Brett interjected. "Like getting shot through the chest?"

"Since you'll be wearing a vest, you'll be fine—unless they aim for your head or use armor-piercing bullets. In any case, they'll have to get through me and my men to get to you," Maia assured confidently. "But if it is a life-threatening injury, we'll have to take you to the hospital and unfortunately it'll be on everyone's radar by then. We really don't want that." Maia laid both palms on the table and leaned in towards Brett. "So Brett, it is very important that you do exactly as you are told. If we tell you to stay put, you stay put. If we tell you to haul ass, you ... haul ... ass."

At that point, Jack understood what it meant to underestimate the female Guardian. Her beautiful blue eyes turned frosty with cold determination, managing to

hold his brother's gaze despite offering an eyeful of cleavage when she leaned forward. Jack had no doubt Miss Pierce was skilled in the use of guns and knives, but her biggest asset was psychological misdirection. An unsuspecting enemy would certainly underestimate her. Always. And before he had realized his mistake, he would have taken a bullet through his head. Maia Pierce was a beautiful stealth weapon.

"Delivery as usual?" Mike Callahan broke in.

"Yes. Under the courthouse. I will personally do the handover, my men will follow through to the courtroom," Maia confirmed.

Jack frowned. Leafing through his file-copy of the playbook, he said, "You're not hanging around for the trial?"

"No. My assignment ends when I deliver McCord to the DA. The prosecution's protective detail will be expanded to include him. They will take him to your designated estate after the trial to lay low until everyone involved is apprehended. No use having two leads on this."

"Some other place you need to be?"

"No."

Jack smiled. One word answers of the evasive kind. They stared at each other for a beat; her eyes flashed challengingly into his, almost daring him to ask another question. Then she shifted her gaze back to his brother.

"Brett, we will need to scan your laptop for bugs and tracking devices. I'm sure Derek had already done that but I'd like to do it again. No offense, Derek."

"None taken," Derek replied.

"I also hope you have no cell phone on you. We have a secure SAT phone at the safe house. After the scan is done, we're all set to go. I'll have my men bring the transport over to the underground garage, load you up and we'll rendezvous at Castle."

Shifting her attention to address everyone in the room, she said, "Any questions or concerns, voice them now. After we leave here, I prefer to limit communications."

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Maia frowned at the recent report from the AGS data center. They had been at

Castle for 48 hours without incident. Striding with her tablet to the kitchen where Brett and three of her men—Manning, Danner and Edmunds—were having dinner, she clicked on the communications device to the rest of her team patrolling outside.

"Chavez, Lucas, you guys on?"

"Affirmative, boss."

"An update from base. It's not good. Been confirmed that Vergara has brought in some PMCs from Eastern Europe."

A flurry of expletives erupted around the room and on comms.

Brett quirked an eyebrow. "PMCs?"

"Private military contractor. Mercenaries."

"How come we're hearing of this only now? We're screwed aren't we?" Brett's agitation started spiraling out of control.

Maia shook her head. How could two brothers be more different? Jack McCord exuded badass calm, contained in that delicious lean compacted-muscular physique of his, while Brett—though equally handsome—was lanky and rife with nervous energy.

"Oh ye of little faith," Maia muttered. "Brett, calm down. We deal with their kind on a regular basis."

Brett pushed back from the table and started pacing. Maia sighed and continued the briefing. "Guys, it seems we won't be dealing with amateur gun slingers plucked from the streets of Mexico after all. There was enough chatter to warrant a cross-check with Immigration arrivals compared to what we have in our database. Our intel suggests the PMCs got in 36 hours ago via Dulles airport. Two guys have been identified, but we think there are eight. Viktor has alerted the emergency response team (ERT) just in case we get hit."

"The road leading to Castle is mostly deserted, it shouldn't be too hard to identify hostile transport," Danner added.

"Manning, do we have satellite uplink?" Maia asked.

"Yes. Cycles every 3 minutes covering the exit to Castle."

"Castle is about 30 clicks from the main highway, that should give us roughly 20 minutes heads up."



"That's not a lot of time," Brett, ever the devil's advocate, spoke up.

"How long would it take you to get into your vest and dive into the panic room?"

Maia shot back.

"I'm not going in there—claustrophobic," Brett declared.

Before Brett knew what was happening, his ass hit the chair, Maia's palm squarely on his chest.

"Is this some kind of damn joke? You're telling me this now?" Maia snapped furiously. "Listen McCord, it doesn't matter. I'm bundling you into that room whether you like it or not."

"Your manhandling is kinda hot." Brett grinned, wiping the tension momentarily from his face before his shoulders slumped in resignation. "I'm not too claustrophobic."

Maia looked up to the ceiling as if praying for divine intervention.

The SAT phone rang. Viktor.

"Pierce."

"Maia, there are eight hostiles. We've connected three of them to Reznikov."

"What? Reznikov is linked to Vergara?"

"It would appear so. Reznikov may be using Vergara to move the new recreational drug they have developed and isn't too happy with Vergara's impending incarceration." He paused before adding. "Maia, I need to pull you out. It's too dangerous for you."

"No. We're in the home stretch."

"If Reznikov identifies you as the one who burned him in Russia, he'll come for you with all he's got."

Small world.

"I'll ... be ... fine."

"I never should've ..."

"Viktor, damn it, I'll be fine."

"I'll monitor chatter. Keep you posted."

Viktor disconnected.

Well, this bodyguard detail wasn't turning out to be too boring after all.

*Four hours later.*

"They're 20 clicks out," Lucas crackled through the radio. Ten minutes earlier, two black SUVs had taken the exit to Castle from the main highway.

"Copy that," Maia returned and handed a Kevlar vest to Brett. "Put this on."

Danner skidded into the room, assault rifle cocked nonchalantly on his arm.

"Panic room checked. Response team is on its the way."

Maia nodded. "Take McCord into the panic room."

Gunfire erupted and illuminated the courtyard. Lucas and Chavez were in elevated positions on external tower structures, camouflaged by trees, giving them sniper advantage. Manning and Edmunds were providing distracting fire behind the front windows and Danner was guarding the back.

Castle was a ranch-style house sparsely built on five acres of heavily wooded land. It had minimal furnishings and architecture because it kept getting blown up and rebuilt. All the windows were retrofitted with bars so that, even if the glass was broken, people couldn't get in. Unfortunately, unless you had a key, you couldn't get out either. The bars were configured like a gate and were on titanium hinges with a depressed locking mechanism located discreetly at the bottom right. There were two exits, front reinforced double doors and a steel back door located in the kitchen.

"Talk to me guys," Maia spoke over the radio. She was crouched behind a sofa crafted with a bulletproof frame near the entrance leading to the panic room. "How many?"

"Two are down—I think Vergara's foot soldiers. There are eight mercs plus two more foot soldiers. They're hiding behind the SUVs, bulletproof."

"Copy that," Maia replied. Figures. So it was going to be a waiting game.

"Danner, ETA on response team?"

"Ten minutes."

"Fuck! RPG!" Lucas yelled through comms.

Suddenly an explosion rocked the outside wall. They were taking out their

snipers.

"Breach!" Manning yelled.

"Lucas! Chavez! Report!"

Nothing.

Shit.

"Manning, Edmunds, fall back from the windows!"

Maia had barely gotten the words out when another explosion shattered the front door and blew out the windows and bars. Plaster rained down and a few deadly iron bars pierced the hardwood floors. Manning and Danner were unfazed and took up defensive positions further into the house. Maia scrambled towards the panic room and punched in the code. Opening the vault-like portal and without saying a word, she yanked Brett out and dragged him behind the sofa.

"Stay down!" she ordered.

"They're moving in. Brace!" Chavez yelled through comms.

"Are you okay?" Maia asked.

"Lucas is unconscious. I'm okay but I think my leg is broken."

Two canisters were thrown into the room amidst a hail of gunfire. Tear gas. *Well, we're ready for that*, Maia smiled grimly.

"What do we do now? Why did you take me from the panic room?" Brett whispered.

Maia spun Brett around and fitted him with a respirator before putting one on herself.

Another explosion shook the house taking out the panic room.

"That's why," Maia said, matter-of-factly, as if panic rooms blown up by RPGs were an everyday occurrence.

Brett curled up, hugging his knees with his elbows and burying his head in his hands. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," he repeated over and over.

A dark shadow fell across them as a merc dressed in all-black commando fatigues came running through the hole torn open by the blast in the panic room. Maia fired her weapon, the figure staggered back but did not go down. Damn robots! Maia

launched herself and wrapped her legs around the merc's neck and twisted, immediately hearing the killing snap before landing in a lunge position. Another hostile appeared, this time it was one of Vergara's foot soldiers. Maia spun a roundhouse sweep to the back of the man's shins taking him down. Immediately kneeling on her left leg, right leg cocked in front, she plugged him a double-tap with her automatic pistol.

Maia spied Brett darting towards the kitchen.

*Damn it, Brett.*

She tore after him at the same time noticing movement coming from the panic room again. She instinctively ducked and dodged right but was stopped short by a burning sensation in her leg. She'd been shot.

Spinning and landing on her back, Maia saw her shooter and took steady aim at the area between her enemy's neckline and squeezed the trigger. He went down on his knees before tilting forward, dead.

Meanwhile, Brett was backing out of the kitchen, arms raised, a red laser dot of an assault rifle trained on his chest. Maia quickly assessed the situation. Danner was engaged in hand-to-hand combat with another merc, and Manning and Edmunds were still shooting it out in front.

Maia tackled Brett sideways and felt a jarring jolt to her shoulder caused by the impact of a bullet.

Before landing on Brett, she was able to draw her throwing knife. The laser was trained on her head and she sprang to her haunches and threw the knife aiming for the merc's jugular.

The rifle fired again.

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"Castle was hit."

Jack tensed at Derek's words. Phone calls at 1am were always bad news. Holding his breath, Jack asked, "Brett?"

"Brett is fine, not a scratch on him."

He frowned. Derek sounded pissed-off.

"Any casualties from the Guardians?" *Was Maia okay?* was what Jack really wanted to know.

"Nothing major: broken leg, concussion, GSW. We better get there soon before Maia throttles that brother of yours."

"What happened?"

"I don't have all the details. Brett bolted, got himself in trouble. Maia took two bullets trying to shield him."

*Christ! I'd strangle that brother of mine, myself,* Jack thought angrily.

"I should be on the helipad of your building in ten," Derek said and disconnected.

There wasn't much left of Castle. The front was blown out and so was the side and back of the house. No cops were present. The place was crawling with AGS agents. Under the radar! Twelve bodies were lined up in front of the house.

"Jesus Christ," Jack muttered. "Brett's lucky."

Derek grunted in agreement.

A woman with glorious wild red hair was railing at Brett whose head was hung, face red with embarrassment.

"Seriously, I would shoot you myself, you pull a stunt like that again! I told you to stay down, not go tearing into the kitchen. You could have distracted Danner and gotten him killed!" Maia yelled.

"Maia we need to look at your leg and any injuries under the vest," an AGS paramedic said.

"I'm okay!"

She whirled around her, blue eyes blazing, her hair a flaming mass gleaming against the residual fires around the house. *She looked magnificent,* Jack thought. She caught his eye and stalked towards him and Derek.

"Agent Pierce, you've had quite a night," Jack said lightly.

"You need to knock some sense into that brother of yours," Maia told him, still pissed before giving a chin lift to Derek. "Derek."

"Sweetie, go get yourself checked out," Derek said quietly.

Maia huffed and followed the paramedic to the medical van.

Brett walked up to them. Before Jack could lay in to him, his brother said. "I think I'm in love. Man, you should have seen her move. She took down four hostiles in a span of minutes ... seconds even. She's got quite a temper though. All that red hair."

"Maia is all that," Derek said knowingly.

"I dunno what to say, Brett, except ... What. The. Fuck?" Jack growled furiously.

"Hey, not everyone can be like you. I panicked. Gunfire and explosions everywhere ... couldn't see a damn thing. At all. The clearest path was to the kitchen, so I took it."

Jack counted to ten. The desire to drop his brother off in the middle of the Amazon so he would learn a few survival skills was proving a powerful temptation. And to have a woman, who was probably half his weight, repeatedly saving his ass was an affront to the McCord pride.

"I'm surprised none of the Guardians went down, outnumbered as they are. Not to mention facing a hellfire of RPGs," Jack told Derek. "AGS sure knows their shit."

"The emergency response team arrived before it got really dire," Brett added. "When Maia took that second shot to the chest, I thought it was game over, but she threw a knife at the shooter and took him down."

"How did she get shot at the leg?" Derek asked

"Uh, she went after me and got distracted."

Jack and Derek looked murderous. Brett ignored them, looking pasts their shoulders. "Looks like I'm not the only one in love with Agent Pierce."

Jack turned and saw Mike Callahan walking briskly towards the medical van Maia was leaning into. Her vest and shirt had been removed and she was wearing only a tank top. A bandage was wrapped around her right thigh.

Mike curled his hand around Maia's head to draw her against his chest and then he buried his face in her hair. His other hand went to her back gently pulling her closer to him.

Jack bristled. "What the hell is the story there?"

"They were together for a few months two years ago. Obviously our DA hasn't gotten over her," Derek said.

"Have you ever..."

"No."

"Why not?"

Derek sighed. "Maia doesn't do relationships well. I mean, look at her job. You think any man will let her disappear for weeks on end with no assurances that when she returns, if she ever does, she wouldn't be riddled with bullets? Do I love her? Yes. As a friend. And I'd rather not rock that boat."

"Good."

"What do you mean? Where are you going?" Derek called as Jack walked away.

"Staking a claim."

Maia tried to pull away from Mike. This was awkward.

"Mike ..."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just a flesh wound."

"God, Maia you need to stop this..."

"Seriously, we're having this conversation now?" Maia lashed out. She was coming down from an adrenaline rush and couldn't deal with emotional bullshit.

"Counselor, I'm surprised to see you here," a sardonic voice interrupted from behind them. Mike reluctantly released Maia to face an unhappy-looking Jack McCord.

Why did McCord look so furious?

"Mr. McCord," Mike said tightly. Their gazes leveled, clearly sizing up one another. Realization finally dawned on Maia: Jack was interested in her! When had this happened?

Hell, she didn't need alpha-male posturing at that moment and started to move away.

Before she could take two steps, Jack gripped her elbow halting her escape and told Mike, "You might want to check on your star witness. Make sure Vergara has not

spooked him with this ... spectacular ... ah ... assault."

The DA paled, glared at Jack and strode towards Brett.

"That was not nice," Maia said reprovngly and before Jack could reply, added, "What is your game, McCord?"

Jack smirked. Maia wanted to punch him.

"I like that. You're perceptive and direct," he drawled, his eyes turning heated as he took in the rise and fall of her breasts beneath her flimsy, ribbed tank top. The chilly night air had enhanced the outline of her nipples straining against the top. "Fuck. I shouldn't be lusting after a woman who nearly got her leg blown off."

"Uh...."

"I want you."

"I'm your brother's bodyguard."

"So, after ..."

"I can't believe this!" Maia hissed. "Really, Mr. McCord this is highly inappropriate conversation. Besides, I don't date or do relationships."

"Did I say anything about a relationship?"

"So you just want to fuck?"

Jack smirked again. *Really this guy is impossible*, Maia thought, her temper rising just as she felt a gush of warmth between her legs. Oh God, hell no, she was not attracted to Jack McCord.

"You want me too."

"You. Are. So full of yourself."

Jack cupped her other elbow, drew her closer, and lowered his head to the side of her ear and whispered, "Don't you want to be full of me?"

Maia's eyes widened. Men didn't usually talk dirty to her. Most would be too intimidated. She looked up into Jack's slate-blue eyes, which were almost black in the flickering light. She could either dig her hands into his hair, drag his head down and shove her tongue into his mouth or she could pull away. *Two can play this game*, she thought. Summoning years of practice, Maia's eyes fluttered to half-mast, she licked her lips and stared at Jack's firm lips dreamily. She was pleased to hear his breath hitch



before she smiled sweetly and said, "No."

Maia tugged her arms free and strode off to where Brett, Mike and Derek stood in a huddle. They had all had their eyes on her and Jack. Derek looked disapproving, Mike was thunderous and Brett was well, Brett. She needed to brief them on the new safe house, a bunker type structure not too far from Castle. Thank God there were less than seven hours before the whole mess was over. She was going to take up Viktor's offer of a break and head to Bora Bora.

"You can run, Miss Pierce," Jack called after her, and she could swear he murmured, "but you can't hide."

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Raul Vergara was convicted on all counts of money laundering, narcotics trafficking and police bribery. He was sentenced to 30 years in prison. The list of transactions and names was released to respective agencies such as the DEA, FBI, Internal Affairs and the Department of Justice. The NPPD had taken a direct hit and sadly it would take time for the local police force to regain the trust of the public. The US Marshal's East Coast division was also getting an overhaul. A few politicians in DC had resigned their posts as investigations uncovered their involvement in the drug trade.

Mike Callahan, New Park City DA had become the city's local hero. AGS was working its butt off to make sure he stayed alive. He sure had made a lot of enemies.

Brett McCord had been whisked off to a family estate, parts unknown.

Numerous arrest warrants had been issued. Vergara's men had scattered and started moving into smaller towns to hide the merchandise waiting until the heat cooled down. Millions of dollars in drugs had been confiscated, but there's still a sizable amount floating around.

And there's the matter of the Russians.

Jack and Derek emerged from a meeting with the DoD representatives. Needless to say their clients were pleased with the next stage of weapons testing.

Colonel Hugo Dalton was head of Advanced Weapons Acquisition and their main liaison at the DoD. His group worked closely with specialized units within the military to assess the changing landscape of covert operations.

A new lightweight carbine and an untraceable tracking device were on the fast-track to testing and production.

"New toys for the big boys," Colonel Dalton declared jovially before stepping into the elevator with his colleagues to report back to the Pentagon.

Jack smiled wryly at Derek. "Now that was an easy sell."

"Yeah."

"Drinks back at my office? We can head out to dinner later to celebrate."

"Man, we need to stop dating each other. No hope of getting back with Isabella?"

Isabella had been Jack's girlfriend for eight months. Lasting longer than most of his other arrangements, she was gorgeous, sophisticated, good in bed and most of importantly, had not demanded much attention until two months ago, that is. Jack hated getting played. Apparently, Isabella had made it her life's mission to become Mrs. Jack McCord and studied Jack's past relationships to this end. Jack liked his independence so she had played it cool in the beginning. But when she realized Jack was not getting any nearer to committing to any future with her, she had started delivering ultimatums. Jack had not wasted any time in dispatching her ass a few weeks before.

"I never go back, you know that. When I'm done, I'm done."

"Jack, you can't go on like this. You need to move on from Claire."

A flash of pain jagged through Jack's indigo eyes. Claire had been Jack's fiancée, and had been killed twelve years before in an accident that also took the life of his sister, Anna. It was a hellish time for everyone. The accident was in fact a revenge hit ordered by enemies Jack acquired during his time as a Navy SEAL. His missions were top-secret, but there were rumored to be leaks in the CIA and names involved in some covert ops were released. There was an inquiry initiated by the McCord family, but it was dropped due to lack of evidence.

Jack couldn't find it in himself to go through the heartbreak of losing someone he loved again. He did care for his girlfriends and was a generous lover both financially and

physically, but his emotional involvement was minimal. "I'm over that."

"No, you're not."

"What about you Derek? You're older than I am. Why don't you have a wife and three kids?" Jack shot back, getting irritated.

Derek was 41 years old, two years older than Jack. Dark blonde with brown eyes, he was physically built exactly like Jack - lean muscle and ruggedly handsome and was not lacking female company either.

"Point taken. But it's not because I can't commit. I just love women, different women."

"I can't keep track of your women. At least I'm monogamous."

Derek sighed. "We're hopeless. Maybe that's why we're such good friends."

Jack grinned and thumped Derek on the back as they entered his office.

"Let's stop commiserating like a couple of old women. Scotch?"

Derek's cell phone started buzzing.

"Lockwood."

Jack watched his friend listening intently to whoever was on the other end, and tensed when Derek's face lost all color. Not good.

"Fuck! What's her location?" Derek exploded. "No... no... I don't remember the fourth encryption protocol. My cell is secure. Damn it, Viktor, just give me the damn coordinates!"

Jack was already handing Derek a pen and paper.

"Gotcha." Derek ended the call, scribbling some numbers quickly.

"I need to go. I'm taking one of our fully-equipped SUVs"

"Need backup?" Jack offered quietly.

The two friends frequently "helped" each other out in situations outside the office.

Derek looked at Jack carefully as if contemplating what he was about to reveal.

"What's going on?" Jack pressed, an odd nagging fear crawling over his skin.

"Come on. I'll tell you on the way. Can't waste any more time."

## CHAPTER TWO

Jack was furious. He and Derek sped through New Park City heading towards the warehouse district. Maia had called Viktor for backup because the Russian nut job she had burned in her last assignment had found her. AGS had known of this danger since the attack on the safe house which was five days ago. Jack wanted to know why her people had not tried harder to contain the situation. None of the ERTs were on alert right then and it would take an hour to mobilize them and by which time it would be too late. Viktor called Derek: the MDI offices were twenty minutes away from the warehouse where Maia was holed-up in.

Jack shouldn't have waited to make his move on her. He'd been trying to get her contact information from Derek but his friend had been evading his subtle inquiries. He had also tried the Private Investigator route but that had turned out to be all false information. She was a ghost. This intrigued Jack. He had other resources of course, but he did not want to tap into those markers unless he had to, as it might have raised unnecessary questions. Besides, he would have bet most information on her would be covered under black marker anyway. Heck, he should have just sat on Derek's head until he gave him Maia's number.

Now Maia was in trouble.

"I don't know Viktor Baran personally, but I'm really, really pissed at him right now," Jack said through his teeth.

"I thought she'd already gone to ground. I know she took on Brett's protective detail because Viktor was keeping her off of international radar. Instead it exposed her to the very people she was trying to avoid. I don't know the whole story. I try not to get

into AGS business and Maia doesn't share, but from what I've gathered these people are bad news and now they're Stateside."

Derek had worked for Viktor before, and that was how he had met Maia, so he generally knew how the company operated. His former boss also called him occasionally for favors.

Their black Escalade pulled up a block from the target location. Heading straight for the trunk, they armed themselves with semi-automatic weapons, ammunition and other essential assault gear. They then snuck up the remaining block, keeping close to the shadows.

There was a black panel van parked up ahead blocking Maia's convertible.

Jack pointed an MDI heat-signature device at the vehicle and noted that there were no warm bodies in the car.

"Van is clear, let's move in."

Derek hoofed it quietly towards the entrance of the warehouse, Jack kept his eyes open for snipers and followed when his friend gave the all clear.

Taking a peek up the open stairwell, they identified three flights of stairs. Blood was trickling from the second landing.

Jack and Derek exchanged grim glances. The warehouse was eerily quiet. Whatever had happened here was over. They stuck to one side of the stairs and sidled up, guns and elbows cocked and ready to go. There was a dead man on the stairs, head partially blown off. Another was on the last flight of steps, a recipient of the same fatal shot. Jack smiled humorlessly as he thought, *Kill shots*.

Derek held a finger over his lips to warn Jack to keep quiet and then waved his hand palm down, signaling for him to stop. There were distinctive sounds of slow typing coming from the top loft when to their relief, Maia's voice was heard speaking quietly on the phone, apparently talking to Viktor.

"I'm transferring the files now. Yes, I'll rig the devices with TX-3 so there'll be no traces left .... Ha! Thanks a lot .... I don't know, I need to pick up some of my gear at the locker at the train station .... I hate to stand down, Viktor, I do not like running ... I'll contact you when I'm secure .... OK .... Later."

The typing resumed.

"Maia, its Derek!" Derek shouted before showing himself, probably to prevent her from shooting first and asking questions later.

"I see the cavalry is late," Maia drawled, then her eyes registered shock when she saw Jack. "What is he doing here?"

"Glad to see you too, sweetheart," Jack shot back. His relief was so great he wanted to grab her and squeeze her. A simmering fury persisted though, as he surveyed the other two men lying dead on the floor. One appeared to have had his neck broken, the other bore no external indication of what had happened to him.

"They're dead," Maia stated flatly as she stood up from behind her computer. Jack and Derek reacted almost identically.

"What the fuck?"

"Hell, what happened to you?"

Maia stood before them, blood streaking down her right arm, the left hanging limply at an odd angle beside her.

"Can one of you pop my shoulder back in?" Maia asked as though she was asking for a glass of water.

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"You ready?" Jack asked Maia. He had her left arm bent at the elbow at 90 degrees. He was standing so close, she could smell his after-shave. She hung onto his clean scent to prepare for the unpleasant business of popping her dislocated joint back into place.

Maia nodded. Then Jack without further warning rotated the shoulder and arm outward coaxing the joint back into place.

"Ah! Damn!" Maia hissed through her teeth, her eyes watered as her badly-abused shoulder slid back into its socket. "I hate when that happens." Her whisper was strangled.

"I know, babe." Maia felt Jack's lips on her hair. Did he just kiss her hair? His arms came around her in a gentle hug. God, she hated to move away from the circle of

his warmth, feeling so secure in a strange way. But she remembered who and what she was and squirmed out of his arms.

"Er ... thanks, Jack."

"No problem. You may want to put that in a sling for a while."

Derek was working on the files on Maia's laptop. "Almost done! Shoulder back to normal?"

"Yup"

"I see you've been working surveillance on the Russians. Is that why you hung around town?"

"Yup."

"Um, hate to say this Maia, but was that a good idea?"

"That's an idiotic idea. That's a dumb fuck idea," Jack interjected, a bit too forcefully.

"I was careful," she replied defensively.

Jack raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, maybe I wasn't too discreet," Maia admitted grudgingly.

Derek frowned. "It's unlike you to be sloppy, sweetie. You need a break and regroup."

Maia chewed her bottom lip as if pondering what her friend had just said. "I'm going to pack up and come back to set the charges," Maia replied, not wanting the men to know she was doubting herself. They were so perceptive, damn them. Jack had been stirring something unfamiliar within her too because he rattled her defenses like no man ever had. She was fully aware of his virile masculinity - sucking the oxygen out of the room such that she had trouble breathing smoothly in his presence. She did not need this complication right now with Reznikov at large.

She moved to her dressing area and pulled out two oversized duffel bags. To her consternation, Jack followed her, observing her like a hawk. She ignored him and started shoving clothes into her bag.

"Where are you heading?" Jack asked casually.

"It's really none of your business," Maia replied, a little more harsher than she

had intended to. She wanted to keep her tone neutral, not act like he had gotten under her skin.

"I can offer you protection. I have some properties in a couple of small towns that are well-equipped to keep you hidden."

"And what's in it for you?"

"Damn it, Maia, I'm trying to keep you safe."

"I don't need you to keep me safe. You barely know me. I can take care of myself."

"I can see that. But you think this Russian whatever-he-is won't finally figure out how to get to you with the attempts he's made? Yeah, I know those mercs who stormed Castle were connected to him. I've got the resources, probably more than even the AGS."

Maia zipped up her bag that held her clothes and started working on the second duffel to hold her weapons.

"I don't need to fuck someone for protection," Maia retorted and almost regretted the words when she saw Jack's eyes grow icy and a muscle begin to twitch his jaw.

Without saying another word, Jack took the first duffel bag, turned around and stalked out, informing Derek over his shoulder, "I'll wait in the car."

Maia finished packing her second duffel bag and rejoined Derek who had started wiring the charges around the computer and other devices that needed eradication.

"Jack is right you know: he's better able than anyone else to keep you safe. The Russian won't think to mess with him."

"I know he's your friend"

"So are you," Derek returned.

"He wants me to sleep with him."

"Jack is honest, blunt even with what he wants, but he will never force an unwilling woman."

"I can't drag him into my mess. A mess, I might say, I've created."

"You'll have to give me some details about that sometime."



"It's still an ongoing case, I can't talk about it."

"Gotcha."

They continued to work silently, rigging everything to be set off by one transmitter. Once wired, they moved behind the wall near the stairwell and hit the detonator. There was a loud bang and a flash, and then everything was incinerated into charcoal-like remains. TX-3 explosives are very efficient: they burn fast and controlled and are frequently utilized by the military. It was also one of the very first products designed and patented by MDI.

Derek picked up Maia's bag of arsenals and started down the stairs with her.

Upon reaching the ground floor, Maia looked at her car wistfully and said to Derek, "Viktor is sending Guardians out to take care of the Russians' ride and my Audi. I'm gonna miss driving it."

"Where do you want us to drop you off?"

"The Fulton Station. I've got a locker there with a new laptop, access card and some cash."

"Where're you heading?" Derek echoed Jack's earlier question.

"Not too far. Viktor wants to keep me close, they've got some leads on the Russian," Maia said.

"And you want to be the one to take him down," Derek said.

"That's the plan," Maia admitted.

"Why can't you go to Viktor? They've got bunkers down at headquarters."

"That's not how we operate, you know that."

"Yes, I know. Damn policies," Derek sighed. *You don't bring your mess home.*

They rounded the corner where the Escalade was waiting. Jack was leaning against it, arms crossed in front of him, expression inscrutable.

Maia ignored him and strode past him to open the back passenger door while Derek loaded her duffel into the trunk. She felt the back of her neck prickle, a spidey-sense she had developed in her line of work that warned of impending threats.

Before she could react, a strong arm wrapped around her body, slamming her against a hard chest and holding her arms immobile. Before she could kick out, a

needle pricked the right side of her neck and her consciousness started to fade.

A disembodied "What the hell, Jack?" echoed in the distance.

A familiar voice whispered in her ear, "Easy babe, I got you."

Blackness.

She felt like burying her face in the soft pillows as consciousness struggled with darkness. A bed. Maia was in a comfortable bed lined with luxurious and expensive sheets and her muscles refused to wake up preferring to lull blissfully in dreamless oblivion.

She was also half-naked, dressed only in lace panties and a camisole. Uh, what?

A moan escaped her lips as she lifted her lids. Jack McCord sat across from her in a wingback chair regarding her broodingly, a glass of amber liquid swirling in his hand. She closed her eyes again, trying to remember what had happened. The mattress sunk as Jack was suddenly beside her, his fingers stroking her cheeks.

"Hey, babe," he murmured. And somehow it sounded sexy.

Um, had she just done the nasty with Jack McCord? She searched the haziness of her muddled brain for confirmation. Her eyes popped open in dismay as she remembered what exactly had happened.

"You bastard." All she could manage was a raspy whisper. Her throat felt like sandpaper.

Jack didn't say anything, but pulled his hand away as she tried to sit up.

"You tranquilized me!" she said more forcefully.

"You were being stubborn."

"And, you...you...undressed me!"

Jack smirked this time. "That was fun."

"You perv!"

"Hey, all I did was get you more comfortable. I prefer my women willing and actively participating."

Maia's eyes turned a full glare on him.

"I also cleaned the wound on your right arm. A thank you would be nice."

"Can't believe you kidnapped me and I can't believe Derek let you get away with it."

"He didn't ... exactly."

It was then that Maia noticed the bruise on Jack's jaw. She smiled in satisfaction.

"I must say, sweetheart you have quite the collection of sexy underwear."

"Part of the job description," Maia replied bitchily, her implication clear.

Jack's smirk disappeared and his mouth tightened as he pushed up from the bed.

"Look, go get cleaned up. Your bags are in the closet. But before you shoot me, I hope you'd consider what I can offer you. I'll be in my study on the first floor." He nodded to the nightstand. "Take two Advils with that glass of water. I'll have Grace, my housekeeper, bring up a tray of food in thirty minutes and I'd really, really prefer if you not scare the shit out of her."

He grabbed his glass and strode out without looking back.

Maia huffed back against the pillows and then, after a beat, pulled the comforter out the way and padded off towards the bathroom.

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Maia showed up an hour later in Jack's study dressed in running gear: short-sleeved capped shirt, black draw-cord fitted pants and silver sneakers. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, face scrubbed free of makeup. She looked so innocent, nothing like the deadly Guardian that had taken out eight bad guys (that he knew of) in less than a week.

"Going for a run? How's the leg?" Jack asked, remembering her leg wound from the Castle siege.

"Just a scratch," she replied flippantly. "Your house has a great view of the beach. Your housekeeper told me we're in the Outer Banks near Nag's Head."

Jack's mouth twitched, controlling a grin. It appeared she had gotten over her resentment about her abduction. "I take it I've discovered a weakness."

Maia simply smiled at him, her clear blue eyes sparkling. Jack caught his breath. It was the first smile she had bestowed on him—unguarded, soft, beguiling.

Clearing his throat, Jack looked away. "Yes, the beach along the foot of the cliff is a popular running track around these parts. But I was thinking I should show you what facilities we have first."

"Facilities?"

He walked to some columns of bookshelves and drew on a lever of the last one. The shelves slid away to reveal an elevator. Keying in a code to call the car, the door slid open. Maia cocked an eyebrow showing guarded approval of what she was witnessing so far.

"Shall we?" Jack held out his arm, motioning for Maia to proceed.

She stepped into the elevator, Jack followed and the doors slid shut.

"I'm impressed." Maia looked around the high tech facility located in the basement beneath a supposedly normal-looking stonehouse.

One wall held a series of widescreen monitors and keyboards, the other held a bay of computer servers and a host of other devices.

"This is one of our control rooms. I have several of them scattered among my properties. These servers are part of my disaster-recovery protocol and hold an image of the data from MDI corporate headquarters," Jack explained, not without some pride. "I can create a user account for you so you can continue your intel-gathering on whoever is after you. Our communication network is very secure as we deal with the DoD frequently. I can open up a separate socket and network for you to AGS."

"What's over there?" Maia pointed to the darkened hallway just outside the control room. Jack smiled and walked ahead to illuminate the area.

"Several rooms, one is a gym, which you are free to use. There's a sparring mat in case you want to work out your frustrations against me."

"Very funny. Don't give me any ideas," Maia said.

Jack threw back his head and laughed. "You think you can take me on?"

"Don't be insulting. I can break your neck with my legs," Maia retorted.

Before Maia could move forward Jack had her pinned against the wall, pressing his hard body against hers, trapping her arms beside her.

"Try," Jack whispered, his mouth nearly touching hers.

Jack loomed over Maia, a surge of desire suddenly sweeping over him, the need to possess her consuming him. She did not pull away, but just stared straight up at him and wet her lips.

With a groan, his lips crushed hers in a searing kiss, and then his hands released her arms, one hand splaying across her back, the other hand skimming down her side to cup her ass to grip her closer to him, his growing arousal pushing, grinding into her softness. Maia gave a soft mewl and dug her fingers into his hair pulling his head closer. He lightened his kisses, teasing her lips with his tongue, before pushing in to resume plundering its sweetness. And she was sweet ...so sweet... like...

He felt her hands descend to his chest to push against him lightly. Jack withdrew reluctantly, leaning his forehead against hers and said, "Sorry, been wanting to do that since the first time we've met."

Maia scooted pass him and, to Jack's annoyance, acted like nothing had happened. "I believe you were giving me the tour?"

Jack nodded curtly and said, "This over here is a weapons testing room."

Maia looked at him dubiously. "Good God, who the heck are you? Bruce Wayne?"

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Maia pounded the sand as she ran along the rolling beach, trying to erase Jack's intoxicating kiss from her mind. In a moment of temporary insanity, she had let him kiss her—quite thoroughly. She had a feeling there would be more moments like that. It was difficult to resist him. The instant her body touched his, she melted. She was so screwed.

Jack's offer echoed in her head. "Like I said, you have free run of the place for as long as you need to lie low. Contrary to what you think, you do not have to sleep with me, which isn't to say I won't try to get you into my bed. I want to fuck you, but what I don't want is for you to sleep with me out of gratitude." He delivered the statement tersely and without the warmth she had seen in his eyes right before he kissed her.

Maia picked up her pace just as she felt some rumblings behind her. She saw a couple of beach walkers and other runners scrambling away. Just then an open-top Jeep Wrangler, with three very raucous occupants, sped by her, narrowly missing some folks a few feet in front of her.

One of them saw her and signaled for the driver to turn around.

From what Grace, Jack's housekeeper, had said, this was a very quiet town. Grace's sister ran a fine goods store. The town was probably just a one mile stretch of mom and pop shops.

Which made Maia think that these rough heads were outsiders like her.

The jeep skidded diagonally to a stop a few feet from her, the engine left running as all three riders jumped down and intercepted her.

Maia started calculating how she was going to play this: tough chick or damsel-in-distress?

"Hey darlin' ! Want some company?" The tallest of the three boomed by way of greeting.

"Oh look, she's nice and sweaty. I like sweaty," the bald one said with a leer.

"Aw Syd, stop scaring the girl," the third one, of average height with brown hair, said.

"Plea...Please....I don't want an...any trouble," Maia squeaked in a scared, shaky voice obviously going with option number two. "Leave me...me... alone."

Syd, the bald one, grabbed both her arms and pulled her back against his front. He leaned in and swiped his tongue along her neck to lick the sweat.

*Ugh ... gross!*

"Please...don't ..." Damn! She was this close to kicking his ass.

"Man, she's as sweet as honey. Bet her cunt is just as sweet."

Maia noticed a crowd forming behind the jeep. Spectators seemed to be fighting amongst themselves to take action against these bozos. Unfortunately, these three jerks looked scary as hell. One woman in the crowd yelled bravely, "Let her go, you assholes!"

The taller one moved forward, and let the back of his hand skim over her breast.

"No...no...no..." Shit, how much longer could she stand this, Maia wondered furiously. If she took these three down, her cover would be blown.

"What the fuck is going on here?" A loud voice thundered as the tires of a bike skidded to a halt, whipping up some sand.

The newcomer was tall, well over six feet. His thick corded muscles rippled beneath a tight white tee, his powerful-looking legs in khaki cargo shorts. He was wearing aviator shades and his thick brown hair was cut really short.

"Nothing, detective, just getting to know the locals," the tall guy said while backing away from her. Syd, released her too. In fact, all three men backed away.

*The hot guy is a cop?*

"Looks like harassment to me," Maia's rescuer snapped. "And you guys are stupid enough to do it in front of so many witnesses?" Then looking at her, he asked gently, "Are you all right, honey?"

Maia nodded, pretending to be too frightened to speak.

"You want to press charges?"

"No, no charges. It was nothing," she said quickly. *Seriously this damsel-in-distress mode sucks.* Maia did not want to press any charges because she was supposed to be off the grid. Just her luck: first day in town and she's a goon magnet.

"See Tanner, no harm. We were just having fun."

"You best be on your way, gentlemen," the detective said, his tone decisive and menacing.

The three jackasses didn't waste anytime jumping into their jeep to drive away.

"Later, Detective Tanner," they called out.

Tanner turned his attention fully on Maia.

"You new in town? I'm Detective Rick Tanner."

"Yes, I just got in yesterday."

"Got a name?"

"Uh, Maia."

"Well, Maia, I'm sorry about your intro into the town of Westcove. Syd, Tommy and Benny drove in three weeks ago and have been nothing but trouble. Funny thing is

no one wants to press charges. I'm keeping an eye on them. Now I know they are all scary and shit, but the offer still stands. You can come down to the station and press charges."

When Maia didn't answer, Rick continued. "I'm from another town myself. Got assigned here because of some trouble trickling down from the bigger cities."

Maia stiffened. "What kind of trouble?"

"Sorry, can't talk about an ongoing investigation. You might reconsider running anywhere by yourself if you're staying for a while. Given the way you look, there's bound to be trouble."

*Now what the hell did that mean? That I brought this on myself?* Maia thought angrily.

Rick read her mind and sighed. "Look, that didn't come out right. All I'm saying is you're a beautiful woman. Haven't seen someone as pretty as you. Ever."

Oh, now he's flirting. She could do flirty.

Maia smiled her sultry smile. It obviously had the desired effect on detective as his jaw slackened in response.

"I better head back. See you around... detective."

And with that, Maia turned around and headed back to the stonehouse on the cliff.

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"I can bake pies," Maia declared to Grace Banning. "I make my dough from scratch too, all butter."

She was hanging out in the kitchen having lunch. Grace whipped up a mustardy-mayo dressing from scratch. That meant starting from an egg-yolk and whisking in the oil slowly. Maia liked nothing better than homemade mayonnaise. A sandwich of prosciutto, provolone cheese, roasted Piquillo peppers and that special dressing between freshly baked focaccia bread was simply divine. Maia could get used to living here. She loved to eat.

She remembered her foster parents. Viktor had been in her life since she was



twelve and placed her with a couple he knew personally. He began to train her as soon as she turned fifteen. The training could get brutal but she was lucky. Her foster parents were loving and warm, which was probably why Viktor chose them: so they could balance out the harshness and coldness that she had to endure under him. Her foster mom loved to cook and she baked everything from scratch.

"Jack loves pies," Grace informed her and smiled. Maia rolled her eyes. She liked Jack's housekeeper except for the way she believed Jack walked on water. Grace was fifty-years old, and was slender with long blond hair held up tightly in a French twist. She moved so gracefully in the kitchen she gave new meaning to domestic elegance. Her older sister Betty ran an upscale grocery store in town and all Grace had to do was email her the order and Betty's son, Kyle, would drop off the goods every few days. Such was life in a small town.

Grace shared that Betty was recently widowed and that her seventeen-year old son was helping his mom out as much as he could.

"That's hard. What about college?" Maia asked.

"Kyle may have to skip the first year of college until his mom can handle the grocery store by herself or afford to hire more help. He is such a bright kid, it would be a shame if he didn't get the opportunity," Grace said sadly.

"So what do you want for dinner tonight?" Grace asked her.

"No dinner for tonight, Grace," Jack said as he strode into the kitchen. "You can go home at 3pm since you had to come in early. I'm taking Maia out tonight to sample Westcove Tavern's famous burgers." A thought occurred to Jack and he asked Maia, "You do eat meat, right?"

"Heck, yeah. I love my meat," Maia replied without thinking and could have kicked herself when Jack raised an eyebrow and grinned wickedly at the double-meaning.

"There's hope yet," Jack drawled.

"Maia makes pies from scratch," Grace piped in as she turned around to prepare a sandwich for Jack.

"I love pies," Jack said. "Are you taking requests? My favorite is apple pie."

It looked like Jack had gotten over his snit this morning, Maia thought.

"This weekend."

Jack groaned. "I'm at New Park this Saturday but will be back that evening. Can I have it for Sunday breakfast?"

"Apple pie for breakfast?" Maia thought that weird.

"Did you miss the part where I said I love pie," Jack retorted.

"Pie for breakfast it is."

Grace's back was to the couple talking about pie, but she was smiling broadly at their exchange.

"Man, you are right. This is one of the best burgers I've ever had," Maia declared, licking her fingers clean.

They were late getting into Westcove Tavern because Jack's meeting ran too long. The place was packed on a Thursday night, so they opted to sit at the bar because customers occupied every available booth and table.

"Sorry for getting you here so late. You looked like you were ready to eat me for dinner when I got out of that meeting," Jack teased, but Maia didn't fall for his double-meaning again. He'd been making sexual innuendos the whole afternoon but she had successfully ignored them.

He was right though, by 8:30 pm she was starving, and probably looked murderous. She did not do hungry well.

"Girl, you did a good job with that burger. How do you stay so skinny?" Their bartender, Tina, came back to clear their plates.

"You don't wanna know," Maia replied.

Jack chuckled.

"Another beer?"

"No, I'm switching to tequila later. Give me a few minutes," Maia told Tina.

"So you're a tequila kind of girl, huh?" Jack said, his eyes twinkling. He was obviously in a good mood.

Maia didn't respond; she had been distracted by a group of rowdy guys having an

argument a few seats over. They needed to call it a night, since they had clearly had too much to drink. One of the results of her job was heightened vigilance of possible threats. It would take a few days for her to decompress and stop seeming paranoid. Which was why she loved the ocean: listening to waves rolling in brought her to her zen place.

"Maia?"

She stiffened and felt Jack freeze beside her too.

She turned around and faced Detective Rick Tanner.

*Oh, fuck.*

"I thought that was you. Never forget a pretty face. Now, what did I say about going around by yourself," Rick admonished. For a detective, he was certainly clueless not to have picked up that she was there with Jack, unless he thought that Jack had picked her up because they were sitting at the bar.

"Actually, she's here with me," Jack said biting, possessiveness and territoriality emanating from him forcefully. "What I wanna know is how you met Maia, Rick?"

Okay, no introductions necessary, they know each other.

Rick frowned. "Maia was accosted on the beach this morning by three fuckwads who rolled into town three weeks ago." He looked at Maia questioningly and a little bit smug, as if he knew something Jack didn't. "You didn't tell him? Honey, there's no shame ..."

"Detective..." Maia quickly tried to shush him. Jeez, for a detective he sure had a big mouth.

"It wasn't your fault ..."

"Detective ...."

"...they touched you..."

"They did what?" Jack roared, his eyes slicing through Maia, waves of fury rolling off him; she was pretty sure they were not directed at her. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

"Don't you dare yell at me, Jack McCord!"

"Now, Jack, she was pretty shaken when I got there. They really freaked her out

and maybe she wasn't ready to talk about the incident" Rick explained in a conciliatory tone.

Jack's expression shifted from anger to incredulity as if he could not decide how to process the detective's conclusion that she had been freaked out—she who had just taken out eight Russian mercs that past week. Jack's face turned red, and then he laid his elbow on the bar and lowered his head on it, his shoulders shaking.

The detective looked worried. "You okay, man?"

Jack's shoulder shook a little harder.

Maia thought that this would be an excellent time to use the ladies' room and started to hightail it out of there.

Rick started. "Maia..."

As Maia took a few steps forward, she felt her neck prickle as she observed the rowdy boys getting more agitated, just as she heard Rick shout, "Maia, look out!"

A massive drunk body started hurtling towards her. She instinctively bent at the torso and flipped the guy over her back, using his momentum to throw him over. She sank to a lunge to steady herself before straightening up to see everyone who had witnessed what had happened gaping at her.

"Motherfucker!"

"Holy shit!"

"Did you see that?"

"You go, girl!"

Maia wished the floor would swallow her up. She just couldn't do normal.

Rick Tanner was too stunned to say anything. Jack stood up quickly and threw a couple of bills on the bar. "Tina, we're outta here," he said urgently.

"What? I was going to give that girl free tequila for that show!" Tina protested.

Jack gripped Maia's arm and muttered, "Let's go." And proceeded to weave them both out of the crowded tavern.

When they got to Jack's vintage '65 Ford pick-up, he stopped and turned her around leaning her on the hood. "There's never a dull moment when you're around, is there?"

Just when Maia thought Jack was going to kiss her, they both heard footsteps approaching.

It was Rick.

"Maia, I never got your last name."

"Pierce," she replied instantly. Hesitating would only arouse suspicion.

"Well, Maia Pierce, I think there's more to you than meets the eye."

*Oh hell.*

"Have a good evening." Rick lifted his chin at Jack. "Jack." And then the good detective left.

She was so screwed.

