SMOKE AND SHADOWS

By Victoria Paige

Copyright © 2014 Victoria Paige

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission.

ISBN-13: 978-0-9891337-6-0

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, names, places, events, organizations either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any similarity to any persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, places or locale is entire coincidental. The publisher is not responsible for any opinion regarding this work on any third-party website that is not affiliated with the publisher or author.

Cover Design by Robin Ludwig Design Inc., http://www.gobookcoverdesign.com
Edited by: Hot Tree Editing

The Guardians Glossary

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

Principal owner: Viktor Baran, ex-Special Forces

Guardians in this book:

Maia Pierce
Nathan Stark
Steve Manning
John Edmunds
Rebecca Olsen
Braden Connelly, ex-Army Ranger

Data Analysts:

Tim Burns
Holly Nolan

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

Principal owner: Jack McCord, ex-Navy SEAL (part owner of AGS)

VP of Operations and Design: Derek Lockwood, ex-Special Forces, also a contractor of AGS

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

Director of Clandestine Service (black ops): Kyle Yeager

Black ops team lead: Marissa Cole

Analyst: Allison Guthrie

Other Agencies frequently mentioned in this book

FBI - Federal Bureau of Investigation, also known as feds

DHS - Department of Homeland Security

MPD - Metropolitan Police Department, Washington DC police

NSA - National Security Agency

Other Acronyms

RPG - Rocket-propelled grenade

NOC database- Non-Official cover. The undercover aliases of agents on the field. Agents frequently on NOC assignments are disavowed by the people or agencies hiring them if they are discovered.

HUMINT **-** Human intelligence. Information gathered from human assets/informants.

SIGINT- Signal intelligence. Information gathered between people like cell phone signals.
OSINT – Open-source intelligence like digital information available on cyberspace, newspapers etc.
NKUF - National Korean Unification Front

CHAPTER ONE

Snow blanketed the mountains of West Virginia. A blizzard had swept through the east coast three days ago and dropped sixteen inches of powder, but the warming trend had turned the once pristine cover into a slushy mess. The whiteness reflected brightly, not only from the ground, but also from the snow-laden limbs of skeletal trees and evergreens. For Viktor Baran, these conditions were not ideal for extraction because the concealment of a night incursion was decreased, but their target, “Black Wolf,” was running out of time.

It was by sheer luck that the human intel (HUMINT) provided by the CIA became their best lead because the Guardians’ digital network turned up shit. Who would have thought that the perpetrators would hole up in an abandoned coal mine? It certainly didn’t look abandoned now with a generator cranking loudly and disrupting the stillness of the January evening.

“We’re in position,” Derek Lockwood’s voice crackled through comms.

Viktor raised his binoculars to do final recon on the entrance of the mine and spied Derek and two other Guardians blending with their surroundings in their white camouflage gear and light-colored assault rifles.

“Go in hot,” Viktor ordered. “In three, two…” He pressed the trigger to disable the generator, causing the equipment to falter and cut off. The mine was plunged into darkness.

Derek threw a stun grenade into the mouth of the tunnel and barrelled in after the explosion. It wasn’t long before an exchange of gunfire broke through their communications channel.

Viktor loped down the hill and slammed against the side of the open mine shaft

with his assault rifle at the ready. The barrage of gunfire was intermittent now. He did a quick check before following the other men in. Using his night-vision goggles, he navigated down the ancient cavernous railroad path.

"Talk to me, Lockwood," Viktor muttered when the shooting stopped.

"We're clear," Lockwood replied. "Hostiles are down. No twenty on Black Wolf."

Viktor reached the intersection of three tunnels. At the junction was an open space where boxes of supplies were stacked against a craggy wall. An inverted wooden crate served as a table where electric shock instruments were laid out.

His mouth tightened.

A broken bottle of whiskey was on the floor along with two men bearing kill shots to the head. Blood was fast pooling around them. Viktor glanced to his right in time to see Manning nudge another body to its back and check for signs of life. The Guardian looked at Viktor and shook his head.

Damn, Lockwood went on a rampage.

"I think I found him." Derek's tone held a grim excitement. "I'm breaking the locks."

"Where are you?"

"East tunnel, about thirty yards in."

Viktor jogged down the right tunnel, leaving Manning and Nathan Stark to stand guard as well as pack up any information they could gather from the scene. He heard Derek snap a round to get into the cell where the hostiles had kept their man for three weeks.

An unusual dread gripped his consciousness with what they might find.

As he rounded the bend into the small makeshift prison, the stench hit his nostrils, and Viktor's gut clenched, hoping that they were not too late, and if their man were alive, he was not beyond saving—physically or mentally.

Derek lit an LED lamp and set it on the ground, illuminating the lone occupant of the cell who was sitting stoically on the hard stone floor. Viktor lifted his night-vision goggles and exhaled heavily. The person they were rescuing was almost unrecognizable because he had lost close to fifteen pounds if Viktor were to guess.

His trousers were torn and filthy, and he was barefoot. Viktor suspected that the ridiculously stretched-out knit sweater their man was wearing hid evidence of torture. With his grimy, dark hair, and full beard, the man looked like a typical vagrant, but his slate blue eyes, though vacant at the moment, unmistakably belonged to one person.

Jack McCord.

"Are they all dead?" Jack's raspy voice was so chillingly calm that Viktor raised a brow.

"I think we got them all, buddy," Derek replied quietly as he helped his friend stand up.

"You're not sure?"

"Jack—"

"Because I want to fucking gut every last one of them involved in killing my wife."

*****

Three weeks earlier

Viktor paced his office, phone to his ear, as he waited for Maia to answer her phone. Tension stiffened his spine. Something about this mission had spooked him, and that was a rare occurrence. Besides, it was just bodyguard detail for *Christ's sake*, not an assault on a terrorist camp.

"Pierce."

"Why weren't you answering your phone?" Viktor asked.

"Jeez, Viktor," Maia Pierce McCord chided him. "I was on the phone with Jack. My man misses me and wouldn't let me hang up."

Viktor grunted.

"So what's up?" Maia continued when he didn't answer.

"Just checking up on you. Are you guys ready to leave for the airport?"

"Just about. Stark's escorting Ibrahim Nasir to the limo now."

"Summit went okay?"

"I think an agreement has been reached regarding the chemical weapons," Maia

replied. “Hey—gotta go, Manning’s signaling me that the convoy’s heading out.”

Viktor struggled to tell her to be careful. “Katerina—”

But Maia already hung up.

Cursing himself for his moment of sentimentality, Viktor strode out of his office and headed to the datacenter where Tim Burns was busy setting up the feeds for the convoy’s route. His lead analyst didn’t look happy and was relieved when Viktor showed up.

“Thank Christ,” Tim said. “Viktor, would you please call someone at DCRI and tell them we need access to their street surveillance? They’ve been stonewalling us.”

“Fucking French Intelligence,” Viktor muttered, whipping out his phone to call his contact. “It’s Baran. What the fuck is going on? Your people are denying us access to your security feeds . . . well, fix the screw up.”

“Try it again after a few minutes,” Viktor told Tim. “Same code.” Switching his attention to Tim’s assistant, Holly Nolan, he said, “Are you keeping communications open with the team?”

“Yes, they’re heading out from the 8th arrondissement,” the 22-year-old analyst replied. Holly was as nerdy as they came, sporting a pixie-style haircut and wearing horn-rimmed glasses. She was too easily frazzled to work at the datacenter during high-risk missions, but Viktor believed, after another year with AGS, he could instill some nerves of steel in her. “They’re turning right on Rue de Courcelles.”

“Put them up on speaker,” Viktor instructed. “Tim, what the hell is taking so long?”

Tim shot him an annoyed look. “Feeds are coming up now.”

A limousine was shown between two black SUVs. There were two motorcycle escorts guiding the convoy of Ibrahim Nasir—the whistleblower of Syria’s use of chemical weapons against civilians, and a possible contender to unite the opposition that could challenge the ruling Ba’ath Party in Syria. Nathan Stark and Rebecca Olsen were the Guardians in the lead car. Maia was with Nasir and his wife in the limo while Steve Manning and John Edmunds brought up the rear. Five Guardians were protecting the man that could bring peace to Syria.

“Maia, do you copy?” Viktor asked.

"I'm here, Viktor."

Viktor turned away from the screen momentarily to fiddle with some communications settings. "Stark, how are the roads from your POV—"

"What . . . Fuck!" Tim shouted.

Viktor's eyes swung back to the widescreen in time to watch an RPG hit the front of the limo, lifting the vehicle's front a couple of feet before it slammed back on the ground.

"Under fire! Under fire!" Manning shouted through comms. "Maia, do you copy?"

"Shit, masked hostiles incoming at three o' clock," Stark warned.

The lead SUV backed into the limo. Stark and Olsen scrambled out of their vehicle to defend their convoy against the advancing gunmen.

"RPG!"

Stark and Olsen sprinted to the sidewalk and hit the deck as their SUV blew up from a direct hit.

"Take that RPG out!" Viktor shouted. "Maia, do you copy?"

"On it," Edmunds said. The Guardian took aim from within the remaining SUV and squeezed out several shots. "Got him." Edmunds was always as cool as a cucumber.

"Stark, are you guys okay? Maia, damn it, report!" Manning yelled again.

Viktor stood back as he watched the mayhem unfold on screen. Tim was busy panning the cameras closer. The exchange of assault rifle fire was deafening and drowned out some of the communication.

"We're okay."

Viktor closed his eyes briefly when he heard Maia's voice come over comms.

"We're sustaining heavy gunfire," Maia added. "Don't know how long the bullet-proof shields will hold. Nasir's wife is having a breakdown. Could you guys maybe hurry up?"

"We got this," Stark broke in.

Viktor watched the rest of the Guardians methodically take down the six gunmen who concentrated their efforts on shooting up the limo. Something was not adding up.

This was too easy. After a few more minutes, the last of the gunmen went down, but Viktor's uneasiness only escalated.

Sirens wailed at a distance as the Paris Police were alerted of the attack. Maia stepped out of the limo and signaled for Manning to take Nasir and his wife to the remaining functional vehicle. Stark and Olsen provided a protective circle around the Syrian couple while Maia and Edmunds had their assault rifles shouldered as they scanned the area.

They were sitting ducks.

"Talk to us, HQ," Maia said. "Who are these people?"

She looked down, nudged one of the bodies, and bent over to pull off the mask, revealing a man with olive skin and dark hair. Just then, a muffled pop sounded audibly on the comm channel as something struck the pavement behind her.

"What the fuck?" Maia muttered, quickly straightening up in alarm. However, another pop echoed ominously and more than a few gasps were heard as everyone watched Maia jerk back and hit the ground.

"Sniper!"

"Shit. Sniper!"

Edmunds quickly pulled Maia behind the limo. Manning pushed Nasir and his wife into the SUV and took position behind it.

"Stay with me, Maia," Edmunds said urgently.

Viktor was breathing hard. "How bad is it?"

"Gut shot. Armor piercing round. Damn it, Maia, you fucking stay with me!" Edmunds was screaming now.

"Goddamn it!" Viktor cursed. He hustled back to his office to grab his CIA-issued secure phone known as the Sec-phone.

He punched a number on his speed dial. A female voice answered immediately.

"Shit's going down right now," Viktor said.

"I'm watching it on live feed."

"You need to mobilize Grave Digger."

"Already did."

“I . . . thank you, Marissa.”

Viktor ended the call and ran back to the datacenter.

“What’s happening? Were there more shots fired?” he demanded.

“We’re losing her!” Stark roared over comms. “Damn it, Tim, where’s that ambulance?”

Two police vehicles screeched to a halt just short of the attack site and officers disembarked to initiate crowd control. A few minutes later, an ambulance squeezed between the limo and the line of dead bodies littering the streets.

Two EMTs exited the vehicle, one heading straight for Maia while the other went to the back of the ambulance to retrieve a gurney.

“She’s not breathing. There’s no pulse,” Stark’s ragged voice informed the first responder.

The EMT took out a syringe and injected Maia with an unknown substance.

“What the hell is he doing?” Tim asked.

Viktor kept his arms crossed to remain calm, but his mind was echoing Tim’s words.

“Shouldn’t you be giving her fucking CPR?” Stark demanded.

The EMT started a couple of chest compressions and checked for breathing.

“Fuck!” Stark shoved the EMT. “Do you even know what you’re doing?”

A police officer came by and warned Stark in accented English to stand down, or he’d be removed from the scene.

“Damn it,” Viktor muttered, raking his fingers through his hair.

“This is not happening.” Tim stood up, gripping his head with both hands and staring helplessly at the screen. “Viktor, do something.”

The EMT shook his head at Stark. His face paled in disbelief.

“You didn’t do a goddamned thing!” This time it was Edmunds shouting. A few more police officers surrounded the tense scene.

Stark tried to stop the EMT from covering Maia’s body with a white sheet and was tackled by two police officers in the process. Manning had to intervene, grabbing the younger Guardian back while Edmunds was up in the face of another French officer.

Maia's body was loaded on a gurney, covered by a white sheet with her blood slowly seeping through.

"Shit. Viktor, do something," Tim choked as he turned his anguished eyes on him.

"What do you want me to do? She's gone," Viktor said tonelessly. "Manning, get the team back into gear. You're in charge now."

"What the hell, Viktor?" Stark said. "Maia—is—dead. How can you be so cold about this shit?"

"Listen up, Stark. We're responsible for a man who could end the clusterfuck in Syria," Viktor said. "Do your fucking job. Because if you fail to bring Nasir back safely to his country, Maia's death will be in vain. Am I making myself clear?"

"Copy that, Viktor," Manning replied gruffly. There was no response from the rest of the Guardians, but Viktor watched them make their way back to the remaining SUV.

"Jack's on hold," Holly piped in.

Viktor sighed in resignation. A pain inside him was threatening to split his chest wide open. "Tell him that the convoy was attacked and we have no updates. Have him come in. I'll tell him personally that his wife is dead."

Tim took in a ragged breath, trying to hold back a sob, but failing to stop his tears from falling.

"Tim, are you going to keep it together?" Viktor asked sharply. "The team needs you on top of this. We have no idea who's behind the attack. A sniper's still at large. No way is this over."

His analyst nodded, not looking at him.

Viktor returned to his office and sank into his chair feeling as if he'd aged fifty years. Everyone thought he was an unfeeling son of a bitch. But there was one person who knew how deeply he felt, and was the same person who could see through all his bullshit.

He punched her number on the Sec-phone.

"We have her," Marissa said.

He asked the one question that mattered. "Will she live?"

*****

Present day

"Maia's alive."

Jack struggled to understand Viktor's words, thinking that he was hallucinating the entire rescue, that he was still locked away in this shithole after a grueling electroshock session that damned near cracked his ribs.

He reached out and grabbed Viktor by his throat, backing him against the wall.

"Don't lie to me," Jack snarled, bringing his face close to Viktor's. His vocal chords were strained—three weeks of torture did a number on them. "I saw the footage…they covered her body with a fucking sheet." For the first time in days, the back of his eyes stung. Four days after his abduction, his captors showed him the video of his wife's death. The sick bastards taped everything; from the assault on the limo to Maia taking a gut shot, and to the one image that he couldn't wipe out of his head—a white sheet being lowered on her beautiful, lifeless face. The thought of never seeing her again managed to accomplish what days of torture couldn't do—break him down enough to lose it. Then numbness replaced the crazed grief he was feeling, angering his captors enough to beat the shit out of him when he had shown no empathy. How could he when it felt like his soul had detached from his body?

"That was operation Grave Digger," Viktor told him. "I'll explain later what it is and why it was done. But for now, it's enough for you to know Maia's been in a medically-induced coma for the past three weeks. They're about to bring her out of it. Figured it's best if I rescued your ass before she woke up. If she knew you were taken, nothing would stop her from going after you and busting her stitches."

Jack let Viktor go and resumed walking up the tunnel. *She's alive*. Elation hit him, and it was a struggle not to buckle to his knees and weep in relief. He could feel their eyes on him, watching him cautiously and gauging how broken he was. His body was stiff, and his ribs hurt like hell, but they were not cracked or broken. His tormentors were careful to aim their blows on his torso, giving him just enough pain, but stopping short of breaking his ribs. The electric shock was worse, not because of the burn marks it left,

but the seizing and spasming were the worst sensations and pain no one could bear. But bore them he did. Because he swore to himself, he would survive this and avenge Maia.

"We were waiting for some ransom note or demand, but it never came," Derek said. "We immediately increased security around your parents and Brett, just in case this was against the McCords. Especially since they had nabbed you the same day Maia was shot. What did they want?"

"Codes to the AGS database."

The only people who had the codes were Viktor and him.

"Fuck." Viktor stopped walking. Jack suspected if he wasn't as weak as a newborn kitten, the blond man would have slammed him against the wall. "Did you break?"

"Fuck no," Jack bit out. "I thought they'd killed my wife, Viktor. You think I'd give them the satisfaction of getting what they wanted from me?"

They continued walking until they reached the junction. Nathan's eyes widened in shock. "Fuck man, you look like shit. Did they feed you at all?"

The minimum to keep me alive for torture, Jack thought grimly.

"Here. We got you some clothes." Derek handed Jack a change of clothing.

"Are we heading straight to the hospital?" Jack took off the ratty sweater his captors gave him. It was scratchy as hell, but along with the wool blanket they had mercifully given him, it had kept him warm enough. He ignored the cursing from everyone when they saw the marks on his body.

"Uh, sorry, man, but you stink," Derek informed him. "You don't want to knock Maia back to sleep with the scent of *eau de piss*."

Jack grinned for the first time in weeks. "You have a point. Although, I'm pretty sure I didn't piss on myself; at least I didn't think I did."

"Don't worry, man, we won't tell," Manning added.

Derek clapped him on the back. "Let's get you cleaned up so you can see your wife."

*****

A keening cry shattered the usual quiet of the New Park Medical ICU.

Jack is going to kill him, Viktor thought. It had escaped his mind to inform Jack that his parents had kept a vigil by Maia's bedside for over two weeks now. They didn't blame Maia for their son's abduction, and instead, took care of her the way parents would take care of their daughter in such a situation. Though being shot in the gut wasn't a normal occurrence experienced by most daughters.

"Oh, my God, oh, my God—Jack!" Frances McCord threw herself into her son's arms, failing to notice the wince that crossed Jack's face. "What did they do to you?" Frances speared Viktor with an angry glare. "What did they do to him?"

Jack cupped his mom's face gently. "Mom, I'm okay. I'll tell you. But I really, really want to see Maia right now."

Frances nodded in understanding. Robert McCord gave his son a hug and gruffly welcomed him back. Jack kissed his mom on the forehead and took a deep breath before stepping into Maia's room. His parents followed, along with Dr. Lance Henderson, who worked on retainer at AGS's medical facility, but also had medical privileges at New Park Medical.

Dr. Henderson had explained Maia's condition to Viktor and Jack's parents, but there was something else the doctor felt he had to hold back at least until Maia was conscious or Jack came back. Viktor had a bad feeling about it. He was surprised how well Jack had survived three weeks of captivity but knew the effects could still manifest later.

Pain flashed through Jack's features as he raised a trembling hand to touch Maia's face.

"Babe." His whisper was low as he bent over to kiss his wife's forehead.

Viktor had known Maia since she was twelve, and because of her daredevil attitude, this wasn't the first time he had seen her laid up on a hospital bed. Still, it wasn't easy for Viktor to see her intubated and hooked up to a ventilator—so he could well imagine how McCord was feeling.

Dr. Henderson cleared his throat. "Jack, it's good to see you alive and . . . almost

well."

"Doc," Jack acknowledged.

"I want to run some tests and x-rays on you after this."

"That won't be necessary—"

"Son," Robert cut in. "Do this for us, please."

Jack nodded reluctantly. "Doc, I would like to hear about my wife's condition."

"The bullet went through and through and hit mostly muscle, but it grazed some of her intestinal walls and damaged some blood vessels. They had the best surgeons in Paris work on her, and I won't lie—they did lose her a couple of times, but she made it. Her brain function is normal, so we expect her to wake up with no problem."

"When could you bring her out of the coma?" Jack asked.

"We could do it as soon as tomorrow. Her test results are very promising, but with the extent of her injury, infection remains to be a possible complication."

"How long before she gets to move around?"

"She'll be ambulatory in another two weeks," Dr. Henderson replied. "Jack, there's something else you need to know."

Viktor watched all the McCords stiffen and realized he did the same.

"Maia was pregnant."

"Was?" Jack's voice was strangled. Frances McCord started sniffling.

"She miscarried," Dr. Henderson said. "It's hard to tell the age of the fetus without knowing when her last cycle was. I doubt if she was even aware that she was pregnant."

"She was pregnant?" Jack repeated the words in a gruff whisper.

"Jack—" Frances McCord was openly crying now as she laid a hand on her son's back.

Jack's shoulders slumped, his head dropping. "I'd like to be alone with Maia, please."

Frances held back a sob and quietly walked out. Viktor was the last one to leave the room. Jack McCord was one of the strongest men Viktor had ever known. But even the strongest of men had a breaking point. McCord just hit his.

Before Viktor closed the door, he saw Jack bend over his wife, and gingerly wrap his arms around her. His body shook as he allowed his grief to take over.

*****

"How is he?" Derek asked. They were hanging out at the ICU waiting room.

Viktor shrugged. "He's taking it hard. But that's expected after what he's been through. We need to debrief him."

"Can't you leave him alone for a few days?" Derek asked incredulously. "The man thought he'd lost his wife. He was tortured and starved for three weeks. Cut him some slack."

Viktor nearly lost his cool. Men like Derek just didn't get it. Friendships made you weak and clouded your judgment. Derek and Jack were partners in McCord Defense Industries and the two were the best of friends. Derek used to work for AGS and that was how he and Maia had become buddies as well. It was Derek who had recommended Maia to head up protective custody for Jack's brother. And now here they were.

Viktor had strong reservations about Maia getting involved with Jack, and he'd done his own share of meddling. But Jack had more than proven his worth to Viktor and married Maia despite knowing how crazy her job could get. McCord had even invested in AGS to become privy to mission details, and because he was part owner, Jack had access to the codes to the AGS database.

"This is bigger than Maia and Jack," Viktor said in a low voice. "A week after Maia was hit, an ex-Guardian who had worked as a Lacrosse coach in Georgetown University died of a heart attack. He had been as healthy as an ox."

"Are you saying someone is targeting Guardians?"

Viktor nodded. "I had my suspicions. After McCord told us what his abductors were after, I'm more convinced someone is acting on a vendetta. Maia was the target, not Nasir."

Derek's eyes widened. "And you're only telling me this now? Should I be worried about Sophie?"

Viktor didn't answer.

"Damn you, Viktor," Derek said. "If anything happens—"

"Calm down."

"How dare you withhold information from us—"

"We'll have an all-hands briefing tomorrow and figure this out."

Derek walked to the elevator. "I'm going home. Tell Jack I'll see him tomorrow."

"Lockwood—"

Just then, the elevator doors opened and Braden Connelly stepped out. The Guardian was in love with Maia and had no problems making his interest known. He had pissed off Jack McCord a couple of times.

Derek's face darkened, and his lips curled into a snarl.

Viktor rolled his eyes. *Great, now we're having a freaking hospital soap opera*.

Before Derek could confront Braden, Viktor stepped between them and said, "I thought I told you not to show your face around here, Connelly."

The tall, blond Guardian wasn't aware of Jack's rescue yet. The fool thought the field was wide-open now. Maia was in a fucking coma for Christ's sake.

"What I do during my personal time is none of your business, Viktor," Braden replied. "And if you fire me over this, I will sue your ass."

"Say that to me again, Connelly." Viktor stepped into his space. "Tell me that you're going to sue my ass, and I'll make sure I rip you a new one."

Braden didn't answer and shouldered past Viktor to walk to Maia's room.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you," Viktor called out.

Braden stopped and turned around. "Or what? You're physically going to stop me?"

The door to Maia's room opened, and Jack walked out.

"No, I won't." Viktor jerked his chin up. "But he will."

Viktor crossed his arms as he watched Braden pivot on his feet and turn rock-solid. He couldn't see the idiot's face, but he was pretty sure his jaw was hanging open. Jack's expression was the scariest Viktor had ever seen it. The two men stood before each other like gunslingers at the O.K. Corral—without the guns.

Derek scowled at Viktor. "What the hell are you doing? Jack's far from one-

hundred percent."

"Never underestimate the power of raw anger."

"I don't fucking believe this," Jack said as he stalked the couple of steps toward Braden, ignoring the gasp coming from his mother.

"You're alive," Braden said quietly.

"Yes, I'm fucking alive," Jack growled. "And you're so fucking dead."

Jack faked a right hook, and instead, slugged Braden across his cheek with his left fist. But Braden was a six-foot-five solidly-built wall of muscle and only staggered back a few steps.

"I don't want to fight you, McCord," Braden said. "Not like this, man. You look like hell."

"I was in hell you asshole, and you tried to steal my wife? Fuck you!"

Jack launched himself and planted his shoulder into Braden's torso, crashing into a cart of medical instruments and taking him down. He let loose a series of punches, some connecting while some were deflected by Braden. The blond man managed to throw Jack off.

"This is an ICU, not a bar," the head nurse yelled. "Stop now! Security's on its way and I'm having all of you thrown out."

Derek and Robert restrained a furious Jack from going after Braden again.

Viktor sighed, walked up to Braden and shoved him toward the elevator. "Go home, you big idiot. You've caused enough trouble."

Just then, his Sec-phone buzzed.

"Baran."

"How's Jack?"

"Considering the circumstances, he's good. He's already gotten into a brawl."

"What?"

"It's like freaking General Hospital over here."

"Did you just crack a joke?"

"Yes, I did, sweetheart."

She laughed. He loved hearing her laugh.

“Listen, I think I have some intel for you.” Marissa changed the subject.

“What?”

“It’s a who. Remember Jiro Matsuda?”

“What’s the Japanese got to do with this?”

“You know he’s not really Japanese.”

“We can’t talk about this over the phone, Marissa.”

“Okay. Where do you want to meet?”

“Site three in twenty minutes?”

“Sounds good.”

“You know you don’t have to make up shit to see me, Marissa.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

The line went dead, but Viktor found himself grinning.

CHAPTER TWO

Site three was an old abandoned junkyard on the outskirts of the shady Cloverleaf District. It was also a CIA property used for clandestine meet-ups, dead drops, and object disposal. Dark puddles covered the asphalt from the melted snow. Marissa smiled as she watched a Dodge Charger pull up beside her BMW. Viktor always loved his muscle cars. Ever since the South Africa incident involving the zee bombs, they had developed a cautious business relationship punctuated with some flirting, mostly from Viktor's side. This was only their third rendezvous. The first one was when she put together some disturbing intel on a potential threat against the Guardians. The second meet-up was two weeks ago, soon after the attack on Nasir's convoy and the abduction of Jack McCord. McCord's kidnapping was baffling, but because what happened to Maia was kept under the radar, as far as New Park and DC society knew, the couple had taken a sabbatical together. Now, the pieces were falling into place, and the game board was looking more alarming. Viktor needed to be brought into the loop.

Viktor rapped on her car window. They'd done this routine the past two times; she would hand him the keys to the junkyard gates, he would open them to let her car through, and then he would follow, locking the gates behind him afterward. Then he would park beside her car and get into her vehicle.

Marissa felt warmth flood her body as Viktor Baran folded his imposing frame into the passenger side. His light blond hair hinted of his European ancestry, and he usually wore it in a buzz cut, but he had allowed it to grow recently. Now, with some locks falling over his chiseled countenance, he had become even more irresistible. Viktor was quite a specimen of a man, and she flushed every time she remembered the muscled hardness that lay beneath the civility of his leather jacket, cargo pants, and military

boots.

He leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. *Now this is new*.

“What was that for?” Marissa quirked a brow.

“Sheathe your claws, sweetheart.” Viktor turned on his seat to face her squarely.

“You know, Viktor, you’re becoming more and more unprofessional at our meetings.” She tried to keep her tone neutral. But her blood was pounding through her veins. She wanted nothing more than to straddle him. *Get a grip, Cole!*

“And you’re getting more and more defensive.”

Marissa shook her head. She knew better than to argue with him, so she launched straight into their agenda to take her mind off her lusty thoughts.

“I’ve gone over the background of the men who abducted Jack McCord.”

“That was fast.”

“I didn’t have to dig very deep.” She paused. “All of them looked Caucasian, but one of them is actually half-Korean.”

Viktor stiffened.

“He’s not very high up in the chain-of-command, but he belongs to the National Korean Unification Front.”

“What the hell does the NKUF want with the AGS database?”

“That’s a good question. I have no answers yet. But someone may.”

“Jiro Matsuda,” Viktor said in resignation. “He’s left that life, Marissa. We got him out and gave him a new identity.”

“I thought I’d throw that out there.” Marissa shrugged. “I know how much you hate going back on your promises and messing up the life of a retired asset.”

“He gave up so much to give us that intel.” Viktor pinched the bridge of his nose.

“And he saved lives.”

“We failed to protect his wife and daughter. I’d hate for him to put his new wife in jeopardy.”

Marissa weighed her next words carefully. Viktor’s eyes narrowed at her. There was no hiding anything from him. At all.

“What aren’t you telling me, Marissa?”

"Viktor—"

"Let me guess," Viktor bit out. "If I refuse to help you, the CIA will pick up Jiro Matsuda anyway."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"One of our agents was assassinated last week." Marissa told him the agent's name, watching Viktor's face grow passive. She hated it when he did that, putting on a mask to hide his real emotions. "It was made to look like an accident. Gas explosion at his home."

"He was on that Syrian mission eight years ago," Viktor said reflectively.

Marissa nodded, unable to speak, because it was that Syrian assignment that broke them up.

"I'm not getting a good feeling about this," Viktor muttered. "If the Syrians and the North Koreans are in bed together on this, we have a big fucking problem."

"If they are, they're very careful because the NSA couldn't pick up a damn thing," Marissa said, letting her frustration show. "We're dependent on our human intel for information."

"Well, the NSA needs to keep their contractors on a damned leash." Viktor referred to the recent scandal of the NSA whistle-blower. "Our agencies have embraced the world of advanced technology, but our enemies have decided to throw back to the old cloak and dagger ways."

"CIA is still pretty cloak and dagger." Marissa noted with amusement the scowl breaking across Viktor's cold facade. "We value our HUMINT. They're still considered one of our most valued assets and the CIA has a good network in place."

"So, you're saying I need to play nice with you guys?" Viktor said. The air in the car changed drastically, supercharging with a raw sexual awareness that pinged crazily between them. Marissa stared straight into his eyes; the light blue had turned to ink in the darkness, but she could sense desire in them.

Viktor leaned in, his hand snaking out to grab the back of her neck, drawing her face close to his. "I don't mind playing nice with you."

"Viktor, don't—"

"Don't what, Marissa?" Viktor said softly against her lips. "I'm tired of playing this cat and mouse game with you. We want each other. We always did. You're too stubborn to act on it because you're scared."

"I don't want to do this again, Viktor—"

"Too bad. Because I do."

A click and her seatbelt was released. She found herself being dragged against Viktor's chest, his lips crushing hers. The hand on her nape moved to the back of her head and gripped her hair as his tongue forced its way into her mouth in a way she felt straight to her core. Viktor's hand that was gripping her ass shifted to cup the heated neediness between her legs. He groaned and kissed her harder as his fingers rubbed her through the soft fabric of her clothes.

Marissa's hands found their way to his crotch. Knowing she was the reason for the hard ridge bulging through his pants, excited her, yet when Viktor began to lower the zipper of her pant suit, sanity returned and she tore her lips away.

"We need to stop," she hissed.

"Fuck, you're right," Viktor muttered. "I don't have a condom with me."

"How does kissing lead straight to sex?" Marissa said indignantly. "Don't you think you're being a tad overconfident?"

Viktor chuckled. "I'll get my way eventually. I never liked using a condom with you and I'm not about to start."

"What?"

"Get yourself tested, sweetheart. I'm clean, by the way."

"What?"

"You like repeating yourself," Viktor chided, setting her back into place and fastening her seatbelt.

"There's a briefing tomorrow with McCord and some of the Guardians." Viktor switched back to all business. "I want you there to fill in the gaps on our intel. I'll let you know the time."

As usual, no requests—he dictated—expecting everyone to fall in line like

lemmings. He opened the door and exited the car, but he ducked his head back in.

"I mean it, Marissa. Get yourself tested. We're happening."

And with that, Viktor Baran shut her door and sauntered back to his Charger.

*****

Viktor eyed the group of people gathered in the AGS war room. Jack, Derek, and Marissa sat at the end of the conference table on the right. Manning, Edmunds, and Nathan were seated on the left. Tim and Holly were seated next to Viktor.

"I guess we're all here," Viktor said in opening. "We've got reason to believe that recent attacks on our agents are a part of a vendetta determined to bring down AGS." He looked at Marissa. "Ms. Cole and I have been piecing some intel together from weeks before the attack on Nasir's convoy. Six weeks ago, CIA agents in Syria broke into a chemical weapons warehouse which was also the last known location of Rafiq Shadid—a freelance assassin."

Viktor turned his eyes on Jack. "They found a slew of newspaper clippings. Most of them were from news coverage of past AGS ops. All of them have pictures of Guardians mixed in with the crowd of spectators in the aftermath of a mission. None of them were marked, but we don't believe in coincidences."

Almost everyone's face changed to anger, but Jack's features contorted with rage. He stood up from his chair, hands clenched into fists; he snarled, "You knew. You knew Maia was in danger."

"Sit down, Jack. We didn't know for sure." Viktor passed around a folder and jerked his chin. "Those are the clippings. The photos are grainy. But what we could discern from some of them are pictures of Manning, Edmunds and Maia. None of them were missions you were on, Derek."

He went on to tell them about the circumstances behind the deaths of the two agents. "They're after the CIA, too?" Nathan asked.

Viktor nodded. "Jack, can you tell us anything more about the people who abducted you? You said there were two unaccounted for."

"Yes. The other two wore masks and were rarely present. One of them has a

slight accent, almost British whenever he spoke English, but they've communicated in Arabic as well," Jack answered.

A mumble of speculations went around the room.

"What aren't you telling us, Viktor?" Derek asked.

"There was an op eight years ago involving the two agents, myself and Marissa," Viktor said slowly. "A chemical weapon was about to be deployed in a very populated area near Damascus. We had Mustafa Shadid in custody. He knew the location of the chemical weapon, but he was dedicated to his cause. He was willing to die rather than tell us where the VX nerve gas was going to be released."

Viktor fell silent. He had made many hard decisions in his life, but this remained to be one of the toughest, because only he knew all the facts and Marissa had been kept in the dark.

"So, what did you do, Viktor?" Jack asked, a hint of challenge in his voice.

Viktor looked at Marissa. Her head was bowed because she had vilified him for what he had done that day, and he had never told her the truth. He couldn't, not then.

"We lined up his wife and son," Viktor said. "Gave him a choice. We'd take out his family one by one if he continued to stonewall us with the location."

"And did it come to that?" Edmunds asked.

"I shot his wife in the head," Viktor stated flatly.

"Jesus Christ, Viktor," Manning whispered.

Derek cursed and rubbed his forehead. Jack continued to stare at him with no expression whatsoever.

"I turned the gun on his son," Viktor continued. "He gave up the target and we saved hundreds."

There was an unspoken question in everyone's eyes.

"I don't know if I would've taken out his son as well," he admitted. "But the point to all this is we may have found a link."

"But Maia was not on that mission," Nathan said.

"Whoever's behind this doesn't want to kill me, Stark," Viktor said. "What would be the pain in that? Didn't it ever occur to you how easy it was to take out the six

gunmen? The RPG could've easily destroyed the limo. No. They wanted me to watch someone I care about, die. There were two shots. I've studied the tapes. It was meant to be a head shot, but Maia bent to take off the mask of one of their attackers. And when she straightened up, the other bullet struck her in the gut."

Jack sprang out of his chair and started pacing and cursing. "Fuck you, Viktor."

"Yes, fuck me," Viktor shot back. "You don't get to make the difficult decisions, McCord, so shut the fuck up."

"Yes!" Jack roared and stabbed his finger at Viktor. "FUCK YOU! That bullet could have hit Maia in the head. She'd be dead now. So, yes, FUCK YOU!"

Jack turned and slammed out of the war room. Everyone was deathly quiet.

Viktor pinched the bridge of his nose. "Get him back here, Lockwood. We're not done."

Derek sighed heavily, pushed back from his chair, and went after Jack.

"Tim, can you tell us about the six gunmen, plus the RPG handler?" Viktor invited.

"They were all French citizens with ties to families in Syria," Tim said. "We believe their families were the ones who received the payoffs."

"We're trying to figure out the source of the payoff," Marissa spoke up for the first time. "It's not going to be easy, because, for starters, the families are in Syria. Our closest station is in Lebanon. The payouts were most likely made in cash. We need boots on the ground to follow this lead."

"And do you?" Edmunds asked. "Have boots on the ground?"

Marissa smiled mysteriously.

The door opened. Derek walked in followed by Jack, who sank into his chair but had his eyes averted, obviously still seething from their blowup earlier.

"Jack, I want you to take a look at the picture of Rafiq Shadid. He's Mustafa's son," Viktor said. "He's the only one I could see needing revenge for what happened to his parents. Mustafa died a few years ago."

Viktor did not want to add that the man died while in CIA custody, the circumstances he never wanted to know.

Still not looking at Viktor, Jack opened the folder that was pushed in front of him. At first he looked disinterested, but an expression of recognition dawned on his face before turning into disgust.

"I know those eyes," Jack said grimly. "Well, congrats, Viktor, you've manage to turn a—" McCord paused to look down on the information on Rafiq Shadid and added sarcastically, "—seventeen-year old boy into a twenty-five year old torturing prick. I hope you can live with your shit."

Jack stood up and glared at Viktor. "I'm done here. I've a wife who's coming out of a coma, no thanks to this bastard."

After McCord left for the second time, Derek spoke up, "Give him time, Viktor. He'll come around."

Viktor nodded. "I've been branded worse than a bastard, Lockwood. I don't give a fuck if he holds me responsible for the rest of my life. He keeps on forgetting what he signed up for when he married Maia."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Viktor," Manning muttered. "The man just withstood three weeks of torture, all the while thinking his wife was dead. Could you show some humanity here?"

"Agreed." Viktor clipped. There was no use defending his words or actions. He'd always accepted that he operated on a different level of empathy than most people. Turning his attention to Tim. "I want you to check the encryptions on all our databases. Our NOC database should receive top priority. If it falls into the wrong hands, every agent we have out there, active and retired, could become a target. Let's not have that happen. We protect it with everything we've got. Understood?"

"Roger that, Viktor," Tim said.

Viktor stood up. "I'll send out further briefings if we hear anything. Everyone be extra vigilant, especially you two—Manning, Edmunds. Ms. Cole, I'll see you in my office."

*****

Marissa lightly knocked on Viktor's office. She had stopped by Tim's station to

exchange some intel and get her security badge processed. Apparently, she was going to be a regular visitor here until they had the situation under control. But because she was with the CIA clandestine service, her visits needed to be logged in a separate database.

"Come on in, sweetheart."

Marissa froze. She wished he would stop calling her that. She had not agreed to any relationship with him, sexual or otherwise, and he needed to stop assuming she would do whatever he mandated.

"What do you want to see me about, Viktor?" Marissa asked. "Unless you're willing to use your connections to Jiro Matsuda, there's nothing new I can tell you."

"When will you move in with me?" Viktor asked. He wasn't looking at her, but rather seemed occupied with the stacks of reports in front of him.

"Excuse me? Did I miss something?" Marissa countered. "I don't seem to recall agreeing to your proposition. And I certainly wouldn't move in with you even if I did."

Viktor's eyes flickered briefly to her before turning his gaze back to his work. "Two of the agents involved in Operation Smokescreen were taken down not two weeks ago. What makes you think you wouldn't be a target?"

"I can damn well protect myself."

"I would feel better if you stayed with me."

"I don't believe it's my responsibility to make you feel better." The damned man wouldn't even look at her when he spoke to her, and that was when it dawned on Marissa that he was treating her like one of his submissives. The idea infuriated her as well as turned her on; however, her annoyance won out. "If that's all, Viktor, I don't want to waste any more of your time—or mine. I'll let you know when I've found anything else."

With that, she turned on her heel and strode to the door. Just then, the glass walls to the office immediately frosted for privacy, and before she could reach the exit, she felt herself yanked against a hard chest. She was spun around and pinned against a wall.

Viktor was staring down at her, and he looked pissed.

"I told you we're going to happen," he said almost in a snarl.

"Put a lid on it, Viktor," Marissa challenged. "I'm not one of your subs."

"No, you're not." His eyes flared heatedly. "Or I would've turned you over my knee and paddled your ass by now."

"How dare—" Marissa started angrily, but Viktor's lips sealed over hers, effectively shutting her up. She could feel a cool breeze on her lower body. That was when she realized he had shoved up her skirt. He hiked one of her legs over his hip and thrust against her, making her aware of the hard ridge that was only getting harder. He continued to grind against her, fiercely taking her lips in a plundering kiss, his tongue licking the insides of her cheeks, coaxing her to respond. She moaned into his mouth.

He tore his lips away and ordered, "Grab my neck."

Dazedly, she did as he commanded. He hooked her other leg around him and carried her across the room, laying her down on the couch, and stretching on top of her. Her legs were wrapped around him with his erection centered against her core.

She was throbbing with the need to be taken. If he intended to fuck her in his office, Marissa wasn't sure if she could deny him.

"Viktor, wait—" Marissa gasped as his tongue trailed down her neck. His fingers slipped between her legs and pushed her panties aside.

"Wait for what, Marissa? You're wet." His fingers slid inside her. Oh God. Marissa tightened all her limbs around him. He continued to pump his fingers in and out of the moist walls of her sex. "Move in with me, sweetheart."

It wasn't fair. He knew he could manipulate her easily with sex. That much had not changed for she was putty in his hands right now.

Still, she could offer some token resistance mainly on principle. "No."

He removed the hand between her legs, pushed away slightly and started unbuttoning the front of her blouse.

"Stop!" Marissa whispered desperately, gripping both his hands in her half-hearted attempt at protest.

He took both her wrists in one hand, and with the other, yanked the front of her top open, sending buttons flying everywhere. His eyes smoldered as he took in the rise

and fall of her breasts. An expert flick of his fingers later, her bra came undone, and his mouth immediately captured a breast, alternately sucking and swirling his tongue on her nipple. Balancing on his forearms with his back curved over her, his hips abraded hers in a rocking motion, sending her into a mad frenzy.

She was gasping. Moaning. She just didn't care anymore. This man made her feel things, want things. His hand returned to her moist heat. She knew she was soaked; she felt swollen and exposed. The throbbing screamed for him to enter her.

"Are you moving in with me?" Viktor asked huskily.

"Can I think about it?" Marissa gasped. "Please?" She wasn't sure what she was begging for.

"You're so fucking hot," Viktor muttered against her ear as his fingers continued to drive her crazy. She was close, so close.

"I need to taste you, Marissa, but you have to promise to stay quiet. I'm putting my hand over your mouth."

She could only nod as his head disappeared from her view, and her legs landed over his shoulders. Her hips were lifted by one hand while the other covered her mouth, her hips bucking at the first lash of his tongue. He licked and licked.

Slow.

Fast.

And then hard.

Already strung so tight, she exploded when he sucked her clit. He rung every last shudder from her body, not once relenting when she tried to push him away because the pleasure had become unbearable. Spasm after spasm hit her until she finally became aware of a coppery taste in her mouth.

Oh, my God, I bit him!

Viktor reappeared in her line of vision. There was a self-satisfied smile on his face. "You're a little wild cat," he murmured, taking his hand from her mouth and inspecting the little teeth marks.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry," Marissa chanted as she tried to get up, but seeing as Viktor was still on top of her, that was a problem.

"Hey—" Viktor said, grabbing her chin. "It's okay. So what's it gonna be?"

"Viktor, I need time," Marissa mumbled.

"You have until the weekend."

"That's three days away!"

"Three days should give you plenty of time to get tested."

Marissa bit back a retort about where to stick that blasted test. She was clean, but she had no intention of telling him. Yet.

"Let me up."

Surprisingly, Viktor didn't argue and even helped her adjust her clothes.

"You need to button up your blazer."

"You think?" Marissa snapped.

Viktor drew her into his arms and whispered in her ear. "Glad to have you back, sweetheart. Now get out of here so I can work."

He slapped her ass, surprising her enough to hiss.

She responded with a mutinous glare, but he only grinned maddeningly at her.

*****

Viktor stood by the railings near his office that overlooked the datacenter. He should be worried about the insidious threat that was determined to destroy everything he had worked for, but at that moment, his thoughts were preoccupied with a green-eyed spitfire determined to drive him insane.

He was tired of fighting his attraction to Marissa even when it seemed she could deny hers. During that crucial point in the South Africa mission when he thought he would lose Marissa forever, he just knew he wanted her in his life.

Eight years ago, he'd been surprised how quickly he had succumbed to the sassy young woman who had rocked his existence. Marissa was on her first mission when he had met her. He was brought in to fix the mess her handler had wrought. He extracted her from the underbelly of an Irish firearms dealer, and one look into those emerald green eyes and he knew he was in trouble. She had a body made for sin. A body that could bring a man to his knees. Viktor hardened as he remembered the feel of

her firm round ass; her breasts fit perfectly in his hands, and her toned, silky limbs that just minutes ago were wrapped around him. The CIA struck pure gold with her. Marissa's mother was half-Armenian; her father was pure American royalty, and she had inherited amazing genes from her mixed heritage. With her light olive skin, dark brown hair, and facial features that were hard to make out ethnicity, she was the ideal CIA operative, especially since she could pass as any other ethnicity except Asian and Scandinavian.

Viktor had bedded many beautiful women, but with Marissa, the connection went beyond lust. She understood him. Her mind challenged him, and even in her inexperience, she had not put up with his bullshit. She excited him . . . got under his skin.

They had often clashed, but their make-up sex was mind-blowing. They'd been together for three months before the Syrian mission derailed whatever burgeoning relationship they could have shared. She refused to see him after Operation Smokescreen, so he turned up at her house. She wouldn't even let him get past the front door, and instead, she lashed out at him with those damning words: *"I can't be with a cold-blooded killer. I don't think I could bear for you to touch me, Viktor."*

She had marked him deeply that day in a way that dictated how he chose his relationships going forward. And so he became a Dom, and only had relationships with women he could control—trained submissives.

He let go of his last sub a few months ago when Marissa had walked back into his life to lead the South Africa mission. He wasn't over her, not when he was having sex with someone else and imagining he was fucking Marissa.

Damn her. Only Marissa.

His body craved only her.

<<<<>>>>