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Murder and Silk (A Fire and Ice prequel)

by Victoria Paige

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Murder and Silk

Sex.Drugs.Murder. In this fast-paced prequel to Fire and Ice, one-night stands can be a deadly affair. What Derek Lockwood thought would be a night of every red-blooded male's fantasy unravels into a nightmare of unexpected violence. Now a woman's life hangs in the balance and she is quickly running out of time.

Warning: Mature Content

His phone was ringing

Damn it, it was her. After all the voice messages he had left her, she chose to return his call now?

Derek tore his lips away from Tatiana—he doubted it was the sexy brunette's real name—and glanced down at the blonde head enthusiastically bobbing up and down his crotch. He was spreadeagled across the bed, his trousers unzipped and his shirt unbuttoned, and he was currently living up every red-blooded male's sexual fantasy. And he was about to fucking cut it short.

Groaning in frustration, he gently stilled the blonde's head so as not to startle her and cause himself unwanted bodily injury. He met the two women at a \$10,000 a plate fundraiser which was held this evening in Washington DC. They were part of a modeling contingent from Paris whose presence had sent the peacock strutting, high-powered male elite into overdrive. He and his friend Jack were used to this game, playing it cool and suave and ending up with the cream of the crop. His friend had left with a statuesque blonde and was probably having better luck than he was at the moment.

"Sorry, love," Derek croaked. "I gotta take this call."

The blonde woman, Monique, reluctantly relinquished his rock-hard erection, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and gave him a petulant pout. Derek quickly rolled to his side and grabbed his phone before it went to voicemail.

"You have the lousiest timing," Derek growled into his phone.

"Yeah? Well, you're on my shit list right now," a terse female voice replied venomously.

"Where are you?"

"DC."

"Can you be at Rooster bar in fifteen?" Derek winced as a pillow hit his head and heard colorful language erupted behind him. The two European models were understandably pissed, after all, he did promise them a good time.

"Oh my God, Derek! You man whore!" Laughter tinkled over his phone.

"Shut it, Maia," he warned. "Well?"

"I'll be there."

Derek sighed and reluctantly got up to face the two irate women. As he zipped up his pants, Monique crawled across the bed and pushed up on her knees, splaying her hands across his chest.

"How can you leave us?" she asked in a lilting voice as she tried to seduce him to stay.

Meanwhile, Tatiana attacked him from behind and pressed her naked breasts to his back while her hands felt for his arousal. "I want this inside me. You have a big beautiful cock."

"Um, thanks," Derek muttered while summoning all his willpower to untangle himself from two pairs of female limbs determined to wind around him like a vine. He purposefully made his way to the ottoman to put on his shoes and said, "I'm sorry ladies, but this is business. The room is paid for. Go ahead and order food or drinks." Just his luck, they would probably trash the room in a fit of rage.

Tucking his black bow-tie in his trouser pocket and grabbing his tuxedo jacket, he looked back wistfully at the wet dream tableau that should have been his for the taking and left.

###

Derek entered Rooster bar and immediately spotted Maia Pierce who was presently being surrounded by three men. That redhead could turn heads wherever she went, and it always surprised him that he never ever attempted to sleep with her. That thought had crossed his mind more often than he cared for, but they were very comfortable as friends and that was a place where Derek wanted to keep her. Maia's friendship was too valuable to complicate with sex.

He shouldered off the first man that was hovering unsteadily over her. The drunk glared at him, but Derek ignored him.

"What's your problem?" the man slurred, his eyes barely focusing.

"You guys are crowding my date," Derek said, loud enough for the rest to hear.

"You want us to get rid of this guy?" Another man, probably of college age, asked Maia.

She smiled in amusement, her clear blue-eyes twinkling. "No, you heard the man. Beat it."

The trio appeared ready to protest but thought better when they sized up the newcomer. Derek Lockwood, at 6'2", towered over them but more than his height, he had the relaxed predatory stealth of a lion ready to pounce. They backed off collectively and moved over to another group of women that had just walked into the bar.

"Hey, sweetie." Derek leaned over to give Maia a peck on the cheek.

"I'm kinda hurt they gave up so easily," she quipped.

"Your ego can handle it," Derek retorted. "Why were you ignoring my calls?"

"I called you now, didn't I?"

"After two days and six voice messages. I'll have you know that I had to leave two very irate European models back in my hotel room."

"I know ... I heard. Really, you're like a walking STD."

Derek's eyes widened in mock outrage. "I use protection," he said defensively.

"And you're one to talk... Miss 3-week anonymous affairs."

Maia burst out laughing. "We have quite the interesting sexual proclivities."

"We're pretty tame compared to Viktor." Derek grinned widely as she shot him a warning stare. "Do you know he has a new sub?"

Maia covered her ears and exclaimed, "Lalalala! Oh my god! TMI, Derek." Viktor Baran was her boss and she looked up to him as her mentor and older brother. Discussion of his sexual activities definitely fell on the 'ick' side for her.

"Speaking of Viktor, I guess you have talked to him and that's why you're pissed?" Derek asked, getting down to business.

"I'm more than pissed," Maia retorted. "You know how I hate bodyguard detail."

"I'm so sorry, Maia, but Viktor told me he had to keep you local. What mess did you get yourself into this time?"

She looked down at her drink and shrugged. "I can't tell you."

Derek nodded. He was no longer an employee of Artemis Guardian Services (AGS) and was not privy to its company business. AGS specialized in small team surgical incursions and had recently branched out into the protective custody business.

"We need an answer," Derek pressed. "Mike's on board with it. We've finally convinced Jack McCord that you can keep his brother safe."

"I read the brief," Maia said. "Brett McCord is nuts. What was he thinking going up against the biggest drug lord in the tri-cities?"

"It was an unfortunate hacking accident. By the time he realized what he had gotten himself into, he was in too deep," Derek said grimly. "Felt like swallowing tacks for him to ask for his brother's help. We put him in contact with your DA and now we have a star witness that could put Vergara away."

Maia appeared distracted as her eyes shuttered. "Shh... not so loud. Guy at three o' clock is giving off bad vibes," she murmured.

"I noticed," he replied steadily. "I mentioned the name on purpose, and yes there's a reaction."

"I'm all in," Maia said suddenly, catching Derek off-guard.

"What?"

"I'm all in. But I'm picking my team," Maia said. "You'll have our dossier in 48 hours." She paused. "And he's not my DA."

###

This was the last time he was doing a one-night stand, Jack thought as the blonde Swedish model Viveka encircled his neck with her arms to bring his head closer for a kiss. She giggled as she suddenly hopped and wrapped her skinny legs around him, poking him in his ribs uncomfortably. They had been making-out for over thirty minutes, but he just couldn't get into it. He could blame the alcohol for his cock's refusal to fly the flag, but his libido had taken a nosedive in the weeks leading up to his breakup

with Isabella. He had already started cooling off towards her which was probably why she started acting psycho in the last two months. His girlfriend had demanded a proposal ... a marriage proposal ... Jack shuddered now at the thought. No wonder his libido went into hibernation, the idea itself was enough to encase his dick in ice.

His instincts were telling him to avoid women right now, not get it on with the first beautiful face that wandered into his line of vision. What was he thinking letting Derek talk him into a night of *tomcatting*. He should have been at his apartment ... asleep and alone in bed.

"Is something, wrong, Jack?" Viveka purred, emphasizing the 'J' in his name.

"Let's take a shower, sweetheart," he replied. Concentrating on her flawless countenance, he added wickedly, "I want to fuck you against the wall."

When they entered the bathroom, Jack lowered Viveka to her feet. He started the shower and got it to a steaming temperature. Looking down pointedly, he stated bluntly, "You'll have to suck me."

Viveka nodded eagerly as she dropped to her knees and took him into her mouth completely. Dragging her tongue over his length and grazing her teeth lightly over the tip, he began to grow out of her mouth and harden. *Finally*, Jack thought in relief when he felt the excited stirrings in his groin as his elusive erection manifested itself completely. The Swede was good at giving head and that got him into the mood quickly, hauling her up to kiss her deeply, he tore the foil packet to slip on a condom. They continued kissing—Jack desperately seeking a connection to sustain his arousal—as they made their way under the spray of the shower. The slickness caused by the water spurred Jack's urgency as he pushed Viveka against the tiled wall, slipping his finger

into her sex and finger-fucking her into an orgasm. She trashed wildly, begging for him to take her hard. He obliged as he lifted her, gripping the outside of her thighs around him and plunging his shaft into her heat. She screamed his name as she hit another high. Viveka continued moaning as Jack grunted and thrust into her forcefully. After a few minutes of methodical pumping, he came—it was the most unsatisfying release he could remember. He felt empty.

Just as he shifted to lower her, a plinking sound shot through the glass of the shower enclosure and he felt something graze the back of his neck. *What the hell?*

"Get down!" Jack shouted as he realized it was a tranquilizer dart. He shoved Viveka to the bottom of the bathtub as he grabbed a towel from the shelf across the shower head. The sound of another tranquilizer dart exploded through the glass door, but he was able to block it with the towel. He saw the attacker reloading the tranquilizer gun in front of the bathroom entryway. Jack slid the shower door open and charged at the man, taking him down and immediately taking hold of his head and slamming it hard against the floor. Too late, he noticed a movement at the corner of his eye just as pain exploded on the side of his head.

Jack crashed into a chair, dazed but not out. The second attacker hauled him up, preparing to hit him again, but Jack blocked it and delivered a sharp jab to the man's face. The assailant staggered back and started to draw his gun, but Jack was already on him, kneeling him in the gut causing the man to lose his weapon. The man growled furiously and took a swing at him which Jack deftly sidestepped. Fired by angry frustration now, the man drew a knife, wielding it wildly.

Jack managed to dodge a couple of stabs before one sliced him right above his

hip bone. He was suddenly made aware of the vulnerability posed by his nudity and its danger to his private parts.

He grabbed the chair that was behind him and swung it at the goon, knocking the knife over, and then bringing it back around, he caught the man hard on the side of his face sending him crashing into the dresser. The attacker's head smacked the edge of the dresser with a sickening thud before he landed on the floor unconscious.

Jack moved to pick up the weapons. Shoving the knife and the tranquilizer gun into the nightstand drawer, he kept the gun and checked the magazine and chamber. He called the front desk.

"This is Jack McCord in room 205. Send hotel security and call MPPD."

"Jack ..." a frightened voice whispered from the bathroom door.

Jack grabbed his boxer shorts and pulled it on. Never taking his eyes off of the unconscious men before him, he headed to the bathroom and hugged Viveka tightly as she started crying.

"Shh ... it's okay. It's over," Jack murmured into her hair and then in a gentle but firm tone, he said, "Get dressed, Viveka, we're going to have company soon." The Swedish model nodded and quietly gathered her clothes amidst the fallen goons and locked herself in the bathroom to dress. *Poor girl, she must be in shock*, Jack thought as guilt washed all over him. This had something to do with Brett and Vergara, he was sure of it.

A rapid knock sounded at the door. "Security."

Jack took a peek through the peephole to make sure that whoever was on the other side was who they said they were before letting them in.

###

Derek's phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked the number and frowned.

"Jack?"

"You good?"

"What happened?" Derek's troubled eyes met Maia's alert ones. They were still at Rooster bar, taking shots of tequila at the same time deciding what to do with the suspicious man sitting at the other end of the nickel-plated bar.

"Are you at a bar?" Jack asked in a shocked voice.

"Yes, why are you calling?"

"Viveka and I got attacked in our hotel room, they used tranq darts. We're OK."

"Fuck!" Derek hissed. "They want to use you to keep Brett from talking."

Derek heard his friend's muffled argument with someone else before hearing, "Derek..."

"I'm here, man ..."

"The paramedics are insisting I go get stitches on my abdomen, but I want you to swing by my apartment later. We need to finalize Brett's protective custody immediately."

"Ah ... working on that."

"Why are you at the bar? What happened to Tanya and Mona?"

"You mean Tatiana and Monique? I abandoned them for a fucking sexy redhead," Derek replied and chuckled as Maia stuck her tongue at him.

"What?"

"I'm here at the bar with Maia Pierce."

"You gave up a threesome to be with an AGS Guardian?" Jack's voice was now incredulous.

"A fucking sexy AGS Guardian."

"Derek, stop with the flattery. I'm all in, OK?" Maia hissed.

"Is that her?" Jack asked.

"Uh-huh"

"She's got a sexy voice," Jack drawled.

Derek winked at Maia as she rolled her eyes. Turning away from the bar, he spoked lower into the phone. "We might have a slight problem. Maia and I have picked up on a suspicious character that seems to be interested in one of us. We'll be leaving in a few minutes."

"Damn it, you guys be careful."

"Don't worry, he doesn't stand a chance."

Derek hurried into the hotel he was checked-in earlier and headed straight for the front desk. It was 2am and he was thankful that there was no one in line for him to skip over. The last thing he needed was another confrontation.

The suspicious character at the bar had been after him. For a time, Maia and he wondered who the man was watching between them, after all, his red-haired friend admitted to being on someone's hit list.

Maia left Rooster bar ahead of him. They had agreed to meet at the bar's back alley where she would wait in the shadows if the man did not follow her. Derek left after five minutes, noticing the man getting up immediately to tail him. He was halfway down

the dark narrow lane when he heard a scuffle behind him. Maia had already taken down the man and knocked him unconscious.

"Hell, Pierce, you don't leave much fun for anyone else, do you?" Derek said dryly.

"He had a knife," Maia said, nodding to the weapon lying on the ground.

"Hmmn, he meant to whack me?" Derek wondered. "What purpose will that serve? For that matter, why would anyone be after me?"

Something suddenly dawned on him. "Shit. If they were after me they might have gone to the hotel I was ... Fuck!"

"You think your girls are still there?"

"I told them they can stay the night, it's a five star hotel ... I need to go back"

"Let's load this guy up into my car, I'll see what I can get out of him back at HQ," Maia suggested.

Lugging an unconscious person to one's car at 2am behind a bar did not seem out of the ordinary. After loading the thug into the trunk (this time they did check around for witnesses) of Maia's car, Derek hightailed it back to the hotel to check on Tatiana and Monique.

"Room 422, have they checked out?" he asked the front desk clerk tersely.

"Sorry, sir, I'm not allowed to reveal..."

"It's under my name, Derek Lockwood."

"They haven't returned any keycard, but sometimes people forget ..."

Derek didn't wait for the clerk to finish talking and sprinted into an open elevator. When he got to their room, his chest tightened with dread as he sunk his keycard into

the slot. He pushed the door open and his gaze took in the trail of discarded clothes, red stilettos, silk lingerie and finally, a sight that had him clenching his jaw and bowing his head in regret.

Monique was sprawled naked at the foot of the bed; her eyes were open and lifeless.

###

Crime scene investigators, Metropolitan police officers and detectives were combing every inch of the hotel room. Tatiana was missing. Either she had gotten away or she had been taken. There were distinct signs of a struggle: overturned chairs, broken lamps and some blood spatters. Monique had a red welt on her throat which would indicate strangulation as a possible cause of death. Derek was sprawled on a couch answering questions from Lieutenant Frank Moore, a detective from the Metropolitan police department.

"Why weren't you with the victim?" the detective asked him.

"I received an important call from a business associate of mine," Derek replied.

"Look, you can check Rooster bar, I know the bartender there and he can confirm I was with someone."

"So in the two hours you disappear, someone comes in and murders your ..."

Moore paused, his mouth twisting derisively "... entertainment for the night. Convenient don't you think? And you claim there was a second woman?"

Derek was seething. "She has a name—Monique and yes, there was a second woman, Tatiana."

"Are you even sure those are their real names?"

He wanted to smack the smirk off of the detective's face. "No."

"So you decided to come back and continue where you had left off?"

"Look, Detective, before I answer any more questions, you have to be aware that my friend Jack McCord had been attacked in his hotel room this evening about the same time this might have happened."

"I am aware of that incident," Moore replied curtly. "There appears to be a motive in that one and suspects are under arrest." The detective's eyes bored into Derek, making him stiffen.

"If there is something you want to say, Detective, say it," Derek snapped, nostrils flaring.

"Would you say your sexual activities are beyond those considered normal?" the detective asked snidely.

Derek's gaze turned red, the fucker was trying to paint him as a perverted sex fiend who got off by strangling their partners during sex. He knew some people who played that dangerous game, but that wasn't his scene. Before he could tell the detective to fuck off, Mike Callahan walked in. He was the DA of New Park City and had no jurisdiction in DC, but he was a legal force to be reckoned with anywhere.

"I sincerely hope you're not planning to answer that without your attorney present, Lockwood," Mike said in a weary voice. To Moore he said, "Back off, Lieutenant. This interrogation is over."

"I was just interviewing a witness."

"Looked like an interrogation to me. You can ask for his statement later. You have

a problem with that, I'm calling your Captain right now," Mike Callahan shot back.

Pulling Derek over to the corner, Callahan spoke in an angry whisper, "You and McCord need to learn how to keep your dick in your pants until this whole mess with Vergara is over."

"Does this make sense to you?" Derek asked. "Why would Vergara come after me?"

"I would conclude it's because you're helping McCord keep his brother safe. It's no secret you two are best friends and business partners," Mike said. "Where were you anyway? I got the gist of what had happened. You said you left after an urgent call and when you came back, one of the models were dead, the other missing. A two hour-window doesn't exactly give you a solid alibi."

Derek gestured towards the door and Mike followed him out of the room. Taking a turn towards the fire exit, he pushed the crash bar of the stairwell portal and waited for the DA to past through. The door swung shut behind them.

"There's more," Derek said shortly as Mike scowled.

"Damn it, Lockwood!"

"Wait, it's not like that," Derek said quickly, realizing Mike had jumped to the wrong conclusion. "I was attacked at Rooster bar."

"What? I don't recall hearing any of that," Mike said, his eyes narrowing. "What did you do, Derek?"

"I was with Maia, tonight ..." Derek began but broke off when Mike Callahan's face contorted with disbelief, pain and then fury. Mike and Maia had been a couple two years ago and the relationship had not ended well. The DA has not, apparently, gotten

over her.

"You sonofabitch ..." Mike snarled.

"Wait! Jesus, will you calm down?" Derek said irritably. "We talked about Brett's protective custody, OK? She's onboard with it."

Mike's face was unreadable. "She is? That's great."

"I thought you'd be more enthusiastic about it."

"Lockwood, Maia is the best at what she does," Mike said carefully. "My reasons for not wanting her to get involved are personal. I don't want her anywhere near Vergara."

"Too late for that now."

"You might as well tell me everything. Wait, let me guess. Maia has the guy in an interrogation room somewhere. You didn't tell this to the police because it's off the radar," Mike stated blandly.

Derek smirked, Mike sighed. "Can't say I won't sanction the same. We're still pouring over the files that Brett has turned over. Shitload of payoffs, it pisses me off. We have to maneuver carefully until we know which dirty cops are involved with Vergara. Anything else? "

"I don't get why they would take Tatiana," Derek mused.

"She probably got away."

Derek hoped so, but a nagging feeling told him that there was something else at play here.

###

The sun was just beginning to hit the horizon as its rays flared over Derek's closed eyes, rousing him from his nap. He had crashed in Jack's New Park apartment this morning and ended up sleeping on the couch. His friend was not too happy with him for landing them both into this mess. After all, it was through Derek's insistence that Jack acted as his wingman as they charmed three of the best looking women from last night's fundraiser. His friend shouldn't complain, he had not been the one who ended up with a dead body in his hotel room. Derek was drowning in guilt. A woman was dead and another was missing because of him.

The French modeling agency that the three women worked for had not heard from Tatiana either, and they were frantic. With two models down, their schedule was in jeopardy and blame was being heaped on Jack and Derek; it did not matter that the models were all consenting adults. Derek loathed the shallowness of the modeling world: amidst the gravity of what had happened, they were worried about a damned fashion shoot. Mike Callahan was in the process of issuing a gag order on everyone involved because of the sensitivity of the investigation. If the news were allowed to get out, the New Park-DC tabloids were going to have a field day—especially with Jack's reputation as a consummate womanizer.

At least Forensics had backed up Derek's story that there was indeed a second woman in the room. Monique Lunde was also a Swedish model like Viveka. Tatiana Petrovich was Ukranian. They had given their real names after all.

They had a conference call this morning at 5am with Mike Callahan and Agent Edmunds of AGS. Maia was unavailable because she was making headway in her interrogation of the man they had captured earlier this morning. Jose Alejandro was a

low level minion of 2nd tier drug lord Esteves Prado—a known crony of Raul Vergara.

Other than that, they had no new leads. The MPPD was not hot on sharing information about the two suspects who had attacked Jack and Viveka the night before.

Derek heard some shuffling in the kitchen and then the coffee grinder went off.

Thank God. Caffeine.

Derek pushed up from the couch and stretched his aching limbs. He was still dressed in his dress shirt and trousers and made a mental note to take a shower and borrow some clothes from Jack. He rose and made his way to the kitchen, flinching as he spied the angry bruise on Jack's temple where the goon had struck him. His friend had a Lorena Bobbit moment when the goon's knife cut very close to his private area and Derek wondered if that episode was giving Jack a lingering feeling of dread. Derek knew he would if his wang had nearly been hacked off. He shuddered at the thought.

"Any word?" Jack asked curtly.

Derek shook his head.

"What's taking Pierce so long? You guys keep harping about how brilliant she is. Maybe she should just turn over the guy to the MPPD."

"What's your problem, Jack?" Derek growled. "You're pissed at me, don't take it out on AGS. They're only trying to help."

"Help you, you mean," his friend replied sarcastically.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"In case, you've forgotten Lockwood, a girl is dead because of you," Jack bit out scathingly.

"That's low, man, even for you," Derek muttered, inwardly flinching at Jack's

words. "But I'm going to let that pass because you're feeling guilty yourself because protecting your brother has put other people's lives at risk."

Jack slapped the coffee filter into the basket and switched the coffee maker on. He stared broodingly at the stream of brew without saying another word. The harsh planes of Jack's face were more pronounced as a muscle ticked in his jaw and Derek knew his friend was struggling to get matters back into perspective.

A phone started buzzing.

"Lockwood."

"Hey." It was Maia.

"You better have good news for me, woman."

"I do, but you're gonna have to follow through on my lead. Viktor is locking me down. Well, the guy we caught yesterday—well early this morning— was a low-level goon..."

"We already know that!" Derek snapped. Lack of sleep and one dead model can wreak havoc on one's patience.

"Let me finish, damn it!" Maia fired back.

When Derek remained silent, she continued, "So I roped Manning into tracking down Alejandro's accomplice—Gio Lopez who was actually the guy who broke into your hotel room."

Derek tensed with the new information. "Hold on, Maia. Let me put you on speaker. Jack McCord is here with me."

"Oh, the guy who had pranced naked in front of two assailants." Maia was laughing over the phone.

"I did not prance," Jack growled as he glared at Derek.

"Whatever," Maia replied airily. "Anyway, the guy who killed Monique was of higher rank than Alejandro and knew exactly what was going on."

"Wait, you have the guy in custody?" Derek asked incredulously.

Maia kept quiet, obviously annoyed with another interruption.

"Um, sorry Maia," Derek said. "Go ahead."

"Jack McCord was a primary target, his kidnapping could hinder Brett from testifying—this is irrefutable. But you see, you, my friend, were a decoy. The real target in your room was Tatiana Petrovich."

"What the fuck?" Jack bit out.

"Fuck!" Derek exclaimed.

"Tatiana Petrovich's sister is Ukrainian chemist Lizveta Petrovich," Maia spoke over their blistering curses. "Our sources tell us she had just gone missing in Russia this morning. Chemist ... drugs ... you get the drift. We're not sure who the players are, but it seems that they have gotten to Lizveta, they no longer have need for Tatiana. According to Lopez, your girl is now dispensable. The mob doesn't like loose ends. Viktor has shut me down and is royally pissed that I have two men in our bunker that were not sanctioned hits. He suggests you take over."

"You have her location?"

"What do you think?" There was a smile in Maia's voice.

###

They must have consumed a gallon of coffee by the time district attorney Mike

Callahan stepped through the elevator into Jack's apartment. Another man, Kane Taylor who was part of Brett's security detail, was also present. According to Maia, Tatiana was being held in a house owned by Esteves Prado in a subdivision off of Leesburg Turnpike. It was in a middle-income neighborhood, so they wouldn't have to worry about any checkpoints or gates. Jack brought up satellite images of the property; it had no fencing and had lush shrubbery. There were only three henchmen currently guarding the house, maybe even less. Most of Prado's minions were protecting his business interests.

"You boys have presented me with a dilemma," Mike said without preamble. The DA looked haggard, like he had not slept a wink all night. He was building the biggest case of his career and it had nearly crumbled this morning. "I'm not even sure Miss Petrovich is within my jurisdiction to make a decision for a couple of reasons. First of all, the kidnapping happened in DC, second, Esteves Prado does not do business in New Park—I can't touch him, and third we have nothing that links him to Raul Vergara. Everything is circumstantial."

"You're not sure about that," Jack replied. "Raul Vergara might just be calling in a marker from Prado."

"To what end?" Mike asked. "Vergara doesn't manufacture drugs. He deals them. Why would he need a chemist? Turn this over to the Feds, McCord. As far as the books go, your attack had nothing to do with the Lunde homicide."

"Bullshit."

"The men that attempted to take you are Vergara's thugs, we can add attempted kidnapping to his charges—his men are singing like canaries. But since the assault on

Lockwood is under the radar right now, my hands are tied. How's Maia going to handle the release of Prado's thugs?"

"Viktor is taking care of it," Derek replied uneasily.

Mike Callahan, ever the astute prosecutor, said, "You mean he's cleaning this up? Not too happy you lassoed Maia into this, is he?"

"We don't have the time to deliberate jurisdiction shit," Derek said through clenched teeth. "Tatiana's time is running out. It might even be too late."

"You guys are going in no matter what I say, am I right?" Mike said in resignation.

The other two men nodded.

"I don't even know why you guys called me into this except to make sure I have no deniability. If shit hits the fan, I might not be able to bail you guys out," Mike warned as he exhaled harshly. "As it is, you cowboys might even cost me my job."

A white panel van rolled to a stop in front of a nondescript two-story house in an old subdivision off of Leesburg Turnpike. Broad daylight was not the best time to carry out such operations, but time was not on Tatiana Petrovich's side. Since it was a Thursday, the neighborhood was mostly deserted—kids were in school, people were at work. Kane Taylor was driving the van and all of them were outfitted in work jumpsuits such as the type utility workers wore. A thermal-imaging scan identified four targets. Three were mobile throughout the house, another was barely moving and appeared to be sitting on a chair located in the back room on the first floor. Derek was already positioned in the backyard, crouching behind some thick shrubbery and waiting for Jack to make his move.

Jack nonchalantly got out of the van, carrying a tool box and walking purposefully towards a circuit junction box that was located within the easement of the property. The sound of the front door slamming heralded the appearance of two men who were rapidly closing in on Jack. They looked extremely pissed.

"Twelve o' clock, Jack, two men with sidearms," Kane Taylor warned. "Derek, make your move. Remaining hostile in the house is in the kitchen ... wait ... nope, he's moving to the backroom."

"Fuck," Derek muttered through comms.

The first man approached Jack, while the second guy stood back and observed Taylor who was pretending to be checking information off a clipboard. Taylor looked up and gave a chin lift to the second guy who nodded in response.

"What's going on here?" the first man demanded.

"Sir? I'm doing a signal test on the cable junction box, there were complaints around this area about slow response times," Jack replied courteously.

"How long are you going to take?"

"It depends," Jack answered, his brows squished together as he tried to figure out how to remove the box seal. The man continued to bombard him with annoying questions to which Jack mumbled inane responses to. Finally, the cover came off and exposed a network of wires. Jack reached for the probe that was hanging down his utility belt and pretended to measure the signal. He prayed that Derek would hurry up.

Derek snuck carefully towards the double-French doors of the back patio and tested the handle. Of course it was locked. He took out his lock picks and started

working on it. It was a simple pin/tumbler configuration and after a few jiggles and poking, Derek had the door open. A door chime alert sounded off which he and his team had anticipated.

"What was that all about?" the third goon asked from the back room, obviously thinking that his comrades have returned. After a few seconds, the man's alarmed voice asked, "Diego?"

Derek drew his suppressed 9mm and quickly flattened himself against the wall just outside the back room.

The silence was palpable, but he was able to discern a slight shuffling of feet that meant that the third guy was approaching. A muffled female whimper echoed in the room.

The muzzle of a gun slowly elongated behind the line of the wall.

Amateur, Derek thought as he deftly knocked the guy's gun up causing it to discharge into the air. He had the guy in a choke hold in no time, and after a few seconds of struggling, the man slithered to floor unconscious. Ignoring the sounds of a commotion outside, he patted the guy down for more weapons and found a knife sheathed by his ankle. Taking custody of the weapons, he headed to the backroom where he found Tatiana, crying silently, gagged and bound to a chair.

He tore the gag from her mouth and cut her restraints. Tatiana immediately launched herself into his arms, sobbing wildly and speaking rapid-fire Ukrainian.

"You'll be okay. I got you," he mumbled. He awkwardly disengaged himself from the distraught model's death-grip on his waist so he could take care of the thug on the floor. Dragging the man over to the staircase, he grabbed the handcuffs from his belt

and secured one of the man's wrist to the wrought iron railing.

A gunshot rang out. The two men out front whipped their heads in the direction of the house before realizing their mistake. Jack and Taylor had already drawn their weapons and had them pointed at them.

"Drop it!" Jack ordered.

"Hijo de puta!" the first man swore.

"Yeah, back at you man," Jack replied sarcastically. "Throw your weapons to the curb. Now!"

Prado's goons complied immediately. Jack picked up some handcuffs from his tool box and threw it at the men. "You. Cuff him behind his back," he told the first man. When the second man was bound, he continued. "Both of you lie face down on the ground."

Taylor exited the van via the passenger side. At Jack's nod, he tucked his gun behind him and took another pair of handcuffs to secure the other guy.

Derek emerged from the house with Tatiana who looked bewildered but physically unharmed. His gaze fell on the two men on the ground. "I've got a live one inside. We don't have a solid plan what to do with them, do we?"

Jack gave a lopsided grin. "What would the AGS do?"

"Beat them up until they can't move and leave them in a ditch for the police to find," Derek deadpanned.

"Somehow I think there's some truth to what you're saying," Jack muttered.

"Monique." Tatiana's voice broke as a sob tore up her throat. "They killed her."

"I'm sorry, Tatiana," Derek whispered. Jack realized his friend was feeling awkward offering comfort to a person who was, for all intents and purposes, a stranger.

"She ... she set us up," the model said.

"What?" Derek exploded. "How?"

"Monique let Gio into the room," Tatiana said and then nodded to the men on the ground and continued in halting English. "They mock me ... how my friend betrayed me. Monique wanted us to go with your friend, but he not want threesome. Don't know why, is every man's fantasy, no? So we went with you."

"Gee, thanks," Derek muttered.

"You are both attractive men," Tatiana said quickly. "They had to split their men because we did not go with your friend here."

"Wait. Are you telling me that this was supposed to be a single hit?" Jack said carefully, realizing the implication of what Tatiana was saying. "You're sure the men who attacked me and your friend Viveka were in cahoots with Gio?"

"That's what I overheard from these men ..."

Jack closed his eyes at the extremely close call. No way could he have fought off four attackers in the condition they had found him—naked in a shower. Derek was staring at him with renewed horror.

"Prado and Vergara ... there's our link ..." Jack stated grimly.

The sound of police sirens sounded in the distance.

"Fuck, I guess that's the Loudon County PD," Taylor said.

Jack took out his phone and punched a number. "Mike, we got Tatiana ... no we

didn't need to shoot anyone, thank fuck. Loudon County PD will be here any minute ... we would really appreciate it if ...yeah, thanks, Counselor."

"This should be interesting," Jack murmured as he watched three police cruisers screeched to a halt.

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Thanks to the intervention of the New Park District Attorney's office, Jack McCord, Derek Lockwood and Kane Taylor had not been thrown into jail for instigating a civilian rescue of kidnapped model Tatiana Petrovich. Other charges, which included withholding information from an investigation, were also dropped.

The three men were sternly rebuked for undermining police authority which included taking matters into their own hands. Derek felt vindicated in more ways the one. He had not been responsible for Monique's death nor of Tatiana's kidnapping, but he regretted Monique's demise. Whatever the blonde model's reasons were for betraying her friend, whether it was for money or blackmail, she did not deserve to die. Maia's words echoed in his head: "The mob does not like loose ends."

"You think you men are above the law because you're rich and well-connected," Lieutenant Frank Moore's voice broke through his thoughts. The detective was glowering at Jack, who had turned solid at the Lieutenant's statement. They had both been debriefed earlier by Moore's boss. "Better watch your back whenever you're in DC, McCord."

"Are you threatening me, Lieutenant," Jack replied coldly.

"Threatening?" The detective's voice dripped with malice. "No. But I'll have eyes on you and your man here. I know you boys want to play covert ops thinking you're still

in the military, but you make one wrong move and I'll make sure the charges stick."

"Un-fucking-believable," Derek muttered. "Moore, you do realize that our actions today saved a life, right? Maybe if you'd take your head out of your ass sometimes and figure out we're on the same side, you could have been the one to solve the case."

Moore's lips curved in displeasure. "We're not on the same side." Before he turned away, he added, "And that's Lieutenant to you."

Jack watched the detective walk away and muttered, "What's his fucking problem?"

Derek shook his head and shrugged.

The two men exited the district office of the MPPD. Taylor had been released earlier since his involvement was just tactical. The masterminds were Jack and Derek and in some 'Godfatherly' way, Mike Callahan. Prado's men under AGS custody were dumped in front of the MPPD earlier that afternoon—they were hog-tied, drugged and lightly roughed-up. Though they did not sustain any severe physical injuries, their mental state was a different story. They had refused to reveal any description of who had had them. Viktor can be one intimidating sonofabitch. He didn't even have to touch you; he could give you nightmares just by describing what form of retribution he would take if you crossed him. Alejandro admitted to assaulting Derek but insisted he had ran away and got picked up by an unknown group. All suspects under MPPD custody were getting extradited to New Park City since they were all material witnesses in the trial of Raul Vergara. An arrest warrant had been issued for Esteves Prado. Documents found in his Leesburg home clearly linked him to Raul Vergara.

Derek's phone buzzed.

"All good?"

Maia.

"Yes. I owe you big time, sweetie. Jack and I owe you," Derek stated solemnly.

"You sound kinda off, something bothering you?"

"Well, we got our ass chewed out by the MPPD police chief, and we've probably made enemies of the whole Metropolitan police department because we encroached on their territory, particularly one Lieutenant Frank Moore."

"Pfft, we do it all the time," Maia quipped.

"Yeah, but you guys never get caught. And Viktor has dirt on everyone, no one dares mess with the AGS."

"Wait, did you say Frank Moore?"

Derek's interest piqued as he looked at Jack who was patiently listening to his side of the conversation. "You know him?"

"Yes. He tried to join the AGS two years ago, he didn't make the cut."

Derek laughed. "That explains a lot. What? He not good enough?"

"Skill-wise we could work on it, Viktor just didn't like his attitude."

"Why?"

"He's a self-righteous prick. You know we can't have that. Guardians do the dirty work other organizations can't handle."

"Not a rule breaker enough for you, Maia?" Derek teased, still chuckling.

Maia snickered but didn't say anything.

"Alright, sweetie, hate to change the subject, but when are you sending the file of your team over? I know we had you working this case, but Vergara goes to trial next

week. Brett's being brought back from hiding this Monday and we need his security solidly in place."

"I'm reviewing the file of one more guy. I'll have it to you by tomorrow, Friday. You'll have the weekend to look over it before we meet on Monday morning."

Derek put his phone away and filled Jack in on the progress in Brett's protective custody detail.

Jack nodded and sighed, "What a long ass day. Wanna go for a drink?" He glanced sharply at his friend before he added, "And no more women for a while."

Derek grunted in agreement. He wasn't arguing with that.

Hope you enjoyed this prequel to my full-length novel "Fire and Ice" available April 2013. The first two chapters are now available for free on my blog:

<http://victoriapaigebooks.com/2013/03/10/fire-and-ice-preview-chapters-4/>

Fire and Ice

Blurb:

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.

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 for a no-strings attached arrangement 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.