



Midnight Revenge: A Killer Instincts Novel

By Elle Kennedy

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From the *USA Today* bestselling author of *Midnight Captive*, the latest Killer Instincts novel is “off-the-charts-hot”* romantic suspense that takes readers into the heart of an enigmatic mercenary...

Out of all the stone-cold mercenaries in Jim Morgan's black ops organization, Derek “D” Pratt is the most intimidating. He is tight-lipped and covered in tattoos, and even the other guys on his team are afraid to ask him about his past. D's been off the grid for years, but after his teammate Sullivan is mistakenly captured in his place, D is forced to come out of hiding and face his demons.

When D lands in Mexico, he's ready to risk everything to save his friend. To complicate matters, Sofia Amaro, a feisty doctor whom D had a one-night stand with months ago, has tracked him down. And in an instant she's unintentionally caught up in his life-threatening rescue mission.

Now D must extract not one but *two* people from the most violent world he's ever encountered. And one of them is carrying his child...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Killer Instincts Novels

“Elle Kennedy...leaves you breathless.” —*New York Times* bestselling author Vivian Arend

“Heart-stopping, riveting suspense.” —**New York Times* bestselling author Christy Reece

“Hard-core romantic suspense loaded with sensuality.”—*USA Today*

About the Author

RITA-nominated author **Elle Kennedy** is the author of the Killer Instincts Novels, including *Midnight Captive*, *Midnight Actions*, *Midnight Pursuits*, and *Midnight Games*. She grew up in the suburbs of Toronto, Ontario, and holds a BA in English from York University. From an early age, she knew she wanted to be a writer and actively began pursuing that dream when she was a teenager. She loves strong heroines, alpha heroes, and just enough heat and danger to keep things interesting!

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Praise

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Chapter 1

Two months ago

Oaxaca, Mexico

“You need to pull him out.”

Just as Derek “D” Pratt had anticipated, his blunt command caused silence to fall over the line. But making this call had been unavoidable. He’d held his tongue for months—fuck, almost four months now—and it was time to make sure the boss knew that one of their men had become a liability.

Still, it felt like he was ratting out Macgregor, and although D was many things, a rat was not one of them.

He knew when to keep his mouth shut. Most days he preferred it. But if the choice came down to snitching on a teammate or staying quiet and watching that teammate get himself killed, then he'd sing like a fucking canary.

And people accused him of having no honor.

"Is it that bad?" Jim Morgan's gruff voice slid into D's ear, and he could picture the other man back at their compound in Costa Rica, sucking on a cigarette and pacing the stone terrace as he worked over the implications of this latest hiccup.

D took a drag of his own smoke, then blew a gray cloud into the night and watched it dissipate slowly. No breeze tonight. Not much humidity either. In fact, the temperature had taken a dramatic dip from afternoon to evening. Earlier it'd been so hot that he'd stripped off his shirt while waiting for the doc to treat Macgregor, and now he was in a threadbare hooded sweatshirt, wishing he hadn't forgotten his jacket in the chopper.

The small brick building that housed the clinic was three hours from Oaxaca and nestled at the base of the mountain, its isolated location making it the ideal place for an in-and-out patch job. D and the other men on Morgan's team of operatives had paid many visits to this clinic over the years. Sofia Amaro, the sole physician in charge, didn't bat an eye anymore when one of the mercenaries showed up bloody and broken and requiring a quick fix.

"It's bad," D confirmed. "He almost got both of us killed this morning, not to mention Ruiz, the fucking person we were supposed to be protecting."

"You told me Delgado's men engaged."

"They did. With the *ceiling*. One of them fired a warning shot after Ruiz said something that pissed off Delgado. The motherfuckers were trying to make a point." Aggravation bubbled in his throat as the morning's clusterfuck buzzed through his mind. "Macgregor shot and killed that guard, Jim. He lost his cool and snapped."

Christ, they'd been lucky to get out of there alive, which probably wouldn't have been the case if the meeting had taken place in cartel territory rather than at the neutral site chosen by the DEA. Morgan's team had been tasked with protecting Agent Joseph Ruiz while he negotiated with Delgado, a major cog in the cartel machine who'd been willing to cooperate with the DEA in exchange for . . . for who the fuck knew what, because they hadn't even reached the demands portion of the meeting. Because of Liam fucking Macgregor.

Thanks to pure, blind luck and their armory of skill, D and Liam had managed to keep Ruiz alive during the gunfight and shove him into the armored truck outside, and then D had floored it all the way back to Guadalajara.

Now the DEA was foaming at the mouth because of the botched meeting, and Liam was sedated in a hospital room because he'd taken a bullet to the shoulder and refused to swallow his pain meds. It was like dealing with a goddamn child.

"He's done," D told his boss, taking another deep pull on his cigarette. "This Sullivan thing has screwed with his head, and if you don't bench him—*indefinitely*—then he's going to get himself killed. He'll get us all killed."

Morgan sighed. "I was hoping sending him out on jobs might distract him."

“Bad call. Now he’s just distracted in the field. Pull him out, or I’ll drag him back to the compound myself and lock him in the tunnels.”

A tired chuckle sounded in his ear. “And you wonder why everyone’s terrified of you. You need to learn some diplomacy instead of forcing people to bend to your will.”

“I don’t force shit. I do what needs to be done.”

There was a beat. “How’s he doing? Did Sofia get the bullet out?”

“She did, and he’s fine—physically anyway. Mentally, he’s fucked. He’s one bad decision away from hopping a plane to Dublin and shooting answers out of people.”

“Shit. All right. The moment Sofia clears him for travel, bring him home. I’ll call Ruiz and placate him, but the DEA is pretty fucking pissed. Might be the last time they contract us out.”

“Who cares? Government jobs are a bitch anyway.”

“Yeah, but government allies are an asset,” Morgan countered. “We could’ve used Ruiz if the Sullivan thing ends up being connected to the cartels.”

The Sullivan thing. Even though he was guilty of using the phrase himself, he hated that they were referring to their teammate’s disappearance like that. Like it was no big deal. But it *was* a big deal, so big that Liam Macgregor was lying on a gurney right now with a bullet wound in his arm.

“Is that what you think?” D asked in a low voice. “That Sully might’ve gotten mixed up with a cartel? Because now you’re reaching.”

“I know I’m fucking reaching, but what the hell else am I supposed to do? It’s been *four* months. Sully’s gone off the grid before, but he’s never stayed away this long without making contact.” Morgan sounded as frustrated and confused as he’d been when D had called him from Dublin in October to tell him that Sullivan Port had gone AWOL.

“We’ll find him, Jim.”

After a split-second pause, Morgan said, “I know.”

That nanosecond of silence, unnoticeable unless you knew Jim Morgan as well as D did, was enough to stiffen every muscle in his body.

Son of a bitch. The boss had given up.

After months of tapping every contact available to the team, months of following every lead and leaving no stone unturned, Morgan had given up on Sullivan. He didn’t expect to find him. Or, rather, he didn’t expect to find him *alive*.

The knowledge triggered a burst of anger in D’s gut, along with a sickening rush of guilt that caught him completely off guard. He didn’t experience that emotion often.

His past choices, the mistakes he’d made . . . He didn’t dwell on them, because regret was a waste of time. When he made a decision, he was fully prepared for the consequences. If he took a life, he made peace with the action before he even pulled the trigger. And once the deed was done, it was fucking *done*. No looking

back. No moaning and griping and feeling bad about it. Guilt and regrets were for weak men who couldn't stomach the choices they'd made in their lives.

But that was the problem with "this Sullivan thing." Because it *wasn't* the result of a choice D had made or an action he had taken.

And yet it was entirely his fault that Sullivan was missing.

Sucking hard on his smoke, he filled his lungs with nicotine, hoping to ease the sudden tightening of his chest. "I'll call you once we head out," he muttered.

He disconnected the call before Morgan could respond, and the ensuing silence was a relief. Although being part of a team meant he had no choice but to engage in conversations, undergo briefings, and sit through strategy sessions, he really hated it sometimes. Hated talking, hated the sound of his own voice.

He took one last drag, then stomped the cigarette out beneath his boot and stalked inside.

The fluorescent lighting in the clinic intensified the throbbing of his temples. He hadn't eaten all day, but that wasn't the reason for the headache. He'd spent three years in Delta, followed by three more with the Smith Group, the hush-hush black-ops agency he'd sold his soul to. Both gigs had ensured he could go for days without sleep or sustenance. What he *couldn't* handle were loose ends. They gnawed at him like hungry scavengers, evoked a powerless sensation that made him want to pull out his HK and unload a clip into the wall.

Sullivan was a loose end, damn it.

"He's asleep." The stern voice drifted toward him as he rounded the corner toward Macgregor's room.

Sofia Amaro stood outside the door, arms crossed over perky tits that were barely contained by her tight white tank. He instantly tensed—something about this woman always elicited that response.

Her I'm-ready-to-go-to-battle pose was one he'd seen dozens of times before. Sofia was a pit bull when it came to her patients, snarling at anyone who tried to ignore her orders. D had always held grudging respect for her headstrong nature, but it also triggered an unwelcome rush of lust each time he encountered her.

He put on an indifferent look as their eyes met, pretending that her perfect tits and insolent scowl didn't get his blood going. "Is he cleared for travel?"

D peered past her slender shoulders into Liam's room, studying the prone man on the bed. Good. Liam's face had some color again—it had been dangerously pale during the chopper ride from Guadalajara.

"No," Sofia said firmly.

He'd worked black ops long enough to know when someone was lying to him. Arching an eyebrow, he met her green eyes.

"Yes," she amended, a flush coloring her olive-toned cheeks. "But he needs rest. He was damn near exhausted when you brought him in."

D was already pulling his cell phone from his back pocket, ready to call their pilot.

"For fuck's sake, Derek," Sofia burst out. "Can't you give him a few hours? The bullet was a through-and-

through. It'll heal. But he needs some fucking rest."

D's other brow joined its twin up near his hairline. Sofia was bossy as hell, but she rarely ever cursed, which told him she was genuinely upset about Liam's condition. His finger hesitated over the TALK button as he studied her worried gaze. After a beat, he tucked the phone in his pocket.

"Three hours," he said gruffly. "That's all I can spare."

"Can, or are willing to?" A note of challenge entered her voice.

"Can. Morgan needs him back at the compound."

"Morgan can wait. The health of his men should come before his need to work them ragged."

D's lips twitched. "Is that any way to talk about your benefactor?"

Sofia froze. Then, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear, she slowly met his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

The chuckle slipped out. "Don't play games, Sofia. You're better than that."

Irritation flickered in her expression.

"I know my boss funds this place," he said with a shrug. "So the way I see it, you work for him just like the rest of us."

"I work for myself," she snapped. "And for the patients who come here. Morgan's money might keep this clinic open, but I'm not at his beck and call. He knows that."

D released another laugh, low and harsh. "Is that so?" He gestured around the deserted corridor. "Look around, baby. Listen. No staff. No voices. I called you from Guadalajara and told you I was bringing Macgregor, and you sprinted over here like the good soldier you are and opened up the clinic for us." D smirked. "You work for Morgan. Deal with it."

Those green eyes flashed, and something about her defiant expression stirred his cock.

Fuck.

Now was not the time to think about sex. And Sofia Amaro was not the woman to think about having sex *with*. She was on Morgan's payroll, and her services were invaluable to the team. No way would D risk losing their private physician for a chance to get off.

"You win, Derek. I'm another one of Jim Morgan's minions. Just like you." Then she spun on the heels of her hiking boots and disappeared into Macgregor's room.

D followed her, propping his shoulder against the doorframe as he watched her check the IV drip at Liam's side.

"You went to a lot of trouble for a bullet wound that'll heal," he said suspiciously.

Sofia spared him a dark look. "I told you—the bullet wasn't the issue. He's suffering from exhaustion and dehydration." She scoffed under her breath. "What, you couldn't be bothered to toss a canteen his way every

couple hours? Not everyone is a robot like you are.”

A robot? He thought it over, and decided that probably *was* the best way to describe him. He was a cold bastard. Ruthless. Violent. He’d been that way since he was eight years old, and if he’d ever had the ability to feel compassion or tenderness, then it had been beaten out of him a long time ago.

But he’d never made apologies for who he was, and he wasn’t about to start now.

As Sofia tucked the thin blanket tighter around Liam’s waist, D caught a glimpse of leather and metal around the man’s wrists. “Did you restrain him?” he demanded.

Her eyes didn’t convey even an ounce of remorse. “Damn right I did. He struggled like crazy when I tried giving him the sedative. Kept insisting he didn’t need it and that he had to go find Sully.”

D’s stomach clenched.

Sofia sighed. “I take it you guys aren’t any closer to finding him?”

“You fucking think? He disappeared without a goddamn trace, Sofia.” D gritted his teeth. Even though his frustration was directed at himself rather than her, he didn’t apologize for snapping at her.

Fortunately, she was unfazed by his sharp tone. “Do you think someone took him?”

“Yes.”

Her brow furrowed. “Why?”

Because of me.

He swallowed the confession, same way he’d been doing for months. Because what was the point in telling people about his suspicion? There was no concrete evidence to support it. Nothing except the offhand remark of an Irish bartender.

But D knew, deep in his bones, that he was responsible. That Sullivan had been abducted because of *him*.

Something must have gone down at the end of that Dublin job, but even four months later, D was no closer to finding out what. When Sean Reilly had gotten tangled up with some very dangerous Irish gangsters, the team had flown to Dublin to help him out. The job had gone smoother than most and Reilly had come out on top, but somewhere between the end of the mission and the morning the team was scheduled to leave, Sullivan had fallen off the face of the fucking earth.

Security footage showed Sully in the hotel bar at two in the morning, talking to a dark-haired man whose face had been shielded from the camera. A few minutes later, he left the bar, and that was the last anyone had seen or heard from him.

Foul play was definitely involved. The security footage in the lobby and outside the hotel had been wiped clean, which meant someone had gone to great lengths to cover up whatever had happened in front of those cameras.

The team had run the stranger’s profile—what little of it they had—through every facial-recognition program out there, but there’d been no hits. And nobody, not a damn person on their extensive list of contacts, had been able to identify the man. The bartender’s account had been useless for the most part—he insisted he

hadn't heard a word of Sully's conversation with the stranger, that it'd looked friendly enough, and that Sully had been sober and calm when he'd walked out of the bar alone.

The only red flag? The bartender hadn't referred to Sullivan as *Sullivan*—he'd called him *Mr. Pratt*.

As in Derek Pratt.

D didn't know why his teammate would have been using his name, but it stood to reason that if the bartender had believed himself to be in the company of Derek Pratt, then so had the stranger.

The intended target that night hadn't been Sullivan.

It had been D.

“Derek?”

Sofia's voice jerked him back to the present.

“I don't know why he was taken,” D muttered in response. *But I intend to find out.*

His gaze drifted to the bed. Even injured and sedated, Liam Macgregor looked like a fucking movie star. Sometimes D found himself staring at the guy and wondering how Liam had ever worked for the DEA. A face like his was too damn memorable, which wasn't a characteristic you wanted in an undercover agent. Deep-cover operatives were supposed to blend. Liam Macgregor didn't blend—he stood out.

“He and Sullivan were close, huh?” Sofia asked.

Were. Her use of the past tense didn't surprise him. He was starting to suspect that most of his teammates believed that Sullivan was dead. Not Liam, though. The man refused to stop searching for his best friend.

Christ, D should've told Morgan to sideline the guy months ago. He'd seen Liam spiraling, and he'd done nothing to try to stop it.

“Joined at the hip,” he told her.

She glanced at her patient, her expression softening. “Sullivan's a great guy. I really hope you find him.”

“You don't sound hopeful.”

“Are you? Because in your line of work, four months is a long time for someone to go off the map. Usually that means they're no longer *on* the map.”

He couldn't disagree. But fuck, he hoped they were wrong. Hoped like hell that Sully was alive and well out there, and not the unfortunate victim of a case of mistaken identity.

Sofia moved away from Liam's bed and strode back to the door, gesturing for D to follow her. His gaze unwittingly rested on her ass, round and firm beneath her faded jeans. She didn't dress like any doctor he'd ever met. No scrubs or white coat for her, but jeans, skimpy tops, and the occasional flannel shirt she threw on when it got cold.

The sight of her ass brought another ache to his groin, which only pissed him off again. Men like him weren't allowed to feel sexual desire for women like Sofia. Men like him didn't feel sexual desire, period.

For D, sex was nothing more than a pent-up need that required an outlet every once in a while and in no way involved bullshit like intimacy or lust. Tension and release—that's all it was to him. To normal people, to women like Sofia, it was far more than that.

Usually, he avoided those women like the plague. But the awareness that hummed in his blood whenever he saw Sofia Amaro was impossible to control. She was so fucking spirited. And bossy. He'd always wondered what it would be like to fuck her.

But he wouldn't allow himself to find out.

Times like these—and it pained him to even think it—he missed Noelle. Morgan would rip D's throat out with his bare hands if he knew D was thinking about his wife in a carnal way, but he couldn't help it. His arrangement with Noelle had been exactly what he'd needed: hardcore fucking and nothing more.

“You’re quiet tonight,” Sofia remarked. Then she laughed. “Quieter than usual, that is. I swear, you’re the most tight-lipped person I’ve ever met.”

Shrugging, he glanced over at her. Well, glanced over and then down, because at six-one, he towered over her five-foot-two frame. And because of his height, he could also see right down her tank top, getting an eyeful of the creamy swells of her tits. She had great tits. He'd admired them on more than one occasion. It pissed him off how often he found himself staring at this woman.

This was the first time she'd ever caught him, though, and she rolled her eyes when she noticed where his gaze had traveled. “And instead of answering, he stares at my boobs. Classy, Derek.”

He smirked at her. “On what planet could I ever be considered *classy*? ”

“True.” She tilted her head. “But I’ve never seen you check anyone out before.”

Because normally he didn’t. Or at least, he was usually more discreet. Sofia didn’t seem put off by his behavior, though. If anything, she looked . . . intrigued. Fucking hell. She really needed to wipe that interested look off her face. After this morning’s adrenaline rush, he was too damn primed for sex, and if she offered him an opening, he wasn’t sure he could stop himself from taking it.

As they walked toward the back of the small building, he gave her a wary look. “Where are we going?”

“Outside.” She frowned at him. “The last time you were here, you ignored my clear-cut instructions and took off while you had a concussion. I don’t trust you not to whisk Liam away if I turn my back, and I don’t trust you in the clinic.”

He didn’t bother trying to defend himself. Hell, part of him was still entertaining the idea of calling in their chopper and getting Liam out of here when Sofia wasn’t looking.

They stepped outside through the rear doors. She seemed unruffled by the cool breeze on her bare arms, continuing forward at a brisk pace.

He walked alongside her, cursing himself the whole time. He needed to get *away* from her, damn it, not stay glued to her side. Usually he kept to himself when he was at the clinic. Found a room to crash in, or smoked out front. But he suspected that even if he’d wanted to do either of those things, Sofia wouldn’t let him.

They followed the dirt path behind the clinic until the terrain grew hilly. It was the dry season, but the mountain elevation allowed most of the plants to remain green. A carpet of purple bougainvillea stretched

out on both sides of the path, blooming wildly across the landscape.

A few more yards, and a single-story house with a white exterior and sloped roof appeared in the distance. Sofia's house.

D experienced a prick of discomfort. Sofia had never invited him or any of his male teammates to her home before. Abby Sinclair, the sole female mercenary on the team, was the only one Sofia had welcomed into her private space, and that was during a dangerous storm. Which was damn ironic, because Abby was a terrifying motherfucker and not someone most people wanted to be alone with. D used to worry she might slit Kane's throat in his sleep, but since she'd given birth to their son, he considered the prospect less likely.

As they neared the house, a light flicked on over the rickety wooden porch. Motion sensor. He approved.

But then Sofia opened the front door without unlocking it, and his approval faded. Yes, she was isolated up here and hadn't encountered any trouble from the cartels since she'd opened the clinic, but safety was nothing more than an illusion.

"Your door should be locked," he said curtly.

"Wouldn't make a difference. That door is so old I could break it down just by tapping on it, even if it's locked."

He made a mental note to send in a contracting crew to rectify that. Sofia was a valuable asset to the team. Morgan wouldn't like having to replace her if she died during a home-robbery attempt.

"Want a beer?" She glanced over her shoulder as she strode into the house.

D hesitated in the doorway. He didn't do this kind of shit. Nope, hanging out with women was definitely not a regular experience for him. Well, except with the ones he'd been ordered to kill. During his agency days, he'd had no choice but to lay some groundwork with his female targets, and unfortunately, that had involved drinks and dinners and conversation he'd hated making.

"You can come in. I won't bite."

The mocking note in her voice made him sigh. Other than Noelle's operatives, Sofia was the only woman he'd ever met who wasn't afraid of him. Everyone else, men and women alike, shit their pants when he walked into a room. And that was the way he liked it.

He reluctantly stepped inside, watching as she wandered across the open-concept main room toward the kitchen. She grabbed two longneck bottles from an old refrigerator that was humming so loudly, D suspected it sucked up way too much power.

"Here." She walked over and handed him a bottle of cheap Mexican beer, then leaned against the work island separating the kitchen from the living area.

He knew from experience that this particular brand of beer tasted like piss and was weaker than water, but fuck, he had a few hours to kill, so he twisted off the cap and took a sip. Since it was hot inside the house, he set the bottle on the table next to the couch and stripped off his hoodie. That left him in a wifebeater, and he didn't miss the way Sofia immediately zeroed in on his bare arms.

She eyed his tats, her gaze traveling up his forearms to his biceps, then to the snake coiled around his neck. She'd never asked him about his tattoos in all the time he'd known her. Luckily, she didn't ask now.

As she sipped her beer, he stared at her long, graceful throat. Then their eyes locked, and his cock twitched again.

“I can’t figure you out,” she said thoughtfully.

He shrugged. “There’s nothing to figure out.”

“Your men say you’re a coldhearted bastard. And honestly, I think they’re secretly terrified of you.” She slanted her head. “But I also think that’s exactly what you want. For them to be afraid.”

“If you brought me back here to psychoanalyze me, you’re wasting your time.” He took a menacing step forward, just because he was in the mood to see her flinch.

But she didn’t. Instead she smiled. “See? You’re doing it right now. Trying to scare me.”

He took another step, and this time received a response. A hitch in her breath, almost inaudible, and he heard it only because he’d been watching her throat and seen the slight dip to it.

She wanted him.

He might not be good with all that romance bullshit, but he knew sexual arousal when he saw it. The reddish tint to her cheeks. The interest flickering in her eyes. The fluttering of her pulse at the center of her throat.

Screw it. He felt his body take over, his mind forgetting all about professional courtesy and ordering him to take her already. She wanted him. All he had to do was lay down some ground rules first, make sure she knew what this was—and what it wasn’t.

“Don’t worry. I get it,” she said, her tone mocking him again. “If people fear you, then they won’t try to get close to you. Right, Derek?”

She was one of the few people who called him that. To everyone else, he was D. D, vague and unmemorable—just the way he liked it.

As she offered a look of challenge, he stepped closer and bared his teeth in a hard smile. “As much as I’m enjoying this verbal foreplay,” he said abruptly, “what do you say we just skip to the part where you ride my dick?”

Chapter 2

Heat.

Sofia hadn’t expected it, but holy hell, there it was. Flooding her body and pulsing between her legs as flames of arousal licked at her skin.

And Derek Pratt, of all people, was responsible for it.

Morgan’s mercenaries flew in and out of her life every few months. They showed up bloody and hurt and in need of treatment, and she gave it immediately, because as much as she hated to admit it, D was right. Morgan *was* her boss. Yes, he understood that the patients she treated in the neighboring villages came first, but *she* understood that it was her duty to fix up his men.

She wasn't sure she could fix D, though. At least not in the psychological sense, because Derek Pratt might actually be unfixable. She'd seen him stand by and watch while she pried bullets out of his teammate's bodies, without even flinching, without showing an iota of concern. On the surface, he looked like he didn't give a shit if his men lived or died, but every so often Sofia caught glimpses of emotion behind his cold mask. He did care, but only sometimes and only about certain people.

Still, those infrequent slivers of compassion weren't enough to convince her that he was a good man. He might not scare her when it came to her physical safety, but he sure as hell frightened her in other ways. His hard exterior and complete lack of humanity were deeply unnerving.

So why were her breasts suddenly tingling in his presence? Why was her core throbbing with need? In the six years they'd known each other, her body had never shown any sexual desire for the man.

So where was this unexpected attraction coming from?

She stared at his chiseled features, his gleaming dark eyes. God, a man as dangerous as this one, as *cold* as this one, wasn't allowed to be so handsome. His appearance had always unnerved her too. That incredibly attractive face, those defined cheekbones, sensual mouth.

Her gaze lowered, and she became preoccupied with his body. Tall and muscular, his chest massive beneath his wifebeater, his long, powerful legs encased in snug cargo pants.

And the tattoos . . . they'd always fascinated her. The deadly samurai and diamondback snake engaged in a fighting pose on his left forearm. The gorgeous dragon on his right biceps, about to take flight off his shoulder. And the snake around the base of his neck . . . that one didn't fascinate her so much as terrify her.

"What's the matter?" he said mockingly. "You've got nothing to say to that? You're always so quick with the snappy comebacks, Sofia."

He was right. She usually was. But he'd caught her off guard with his crude suggestion, and now she couldn't stop picturing what it would be like to . . . to ride his dick. She couldn't get the phrase out of her mind because, *God*, she wanted it.

"You know what? Maybe I'll ride *you*. I'll ride you hard," he drawled when she didn't respond. "I think I'd rather do that anyway."

She finally found her voice. "Who says I'm open to either option?"

He laughed. Except it wasn't *really* a laugh. His laughter, rare as it was, never seemed to be triggered by humor, only derision. "Are we playing games now? Because we both know you brought me here to fuck me."

Had she? No, she couldn't have. But . . . well, if that *was* the reason she'd invited him into her home, then it certainly hadn't been a conscious decision.

He raised one dark eyebrow. "Am I wrong?"

Sofia swallowed, thinking it over.

Oh God. He *wasn't* wrong.

When he'd stepped off that chopper earlier, with one muscular arm supporting Liam, her first thought had

been—Okay, her first thought had been to take care of his barely conscious teammate. But her *second* thought? She'd wondered, just for a second, what it would be like to . . . well, fuck him.

She'd admired his looks before, but this afternoon had been the first time her appreciation had translated into actual awareness.

Into lust.

It's not him. It's because you haven't had sex in more than a year.

Yeah, she couldn't deny she was hard up. The mere thought of having a man inside her made her thighs clench. She liked sex. She liked it a hell of a lot, and ever since her affair with a doctor from the relief foundation had fizzled out, she'd been aching for it.

Now a sexy man was standing in front of her, and her libido had roared to life. And although she hadn't consciously planned to hit on him when she'd invited him inside, there was no point in denying the truth.

“No,” she said.

“No what?”

“You’re not wrong.” Sofia sighed. “I guess I wouldn’t mind getting laid.”

His eyes narrowed as he advanced on her. Like a predator. Because he *was* a predator. A ruthless soldier, lethal and impassive, and yet right now, she didn’t mind being the prey. If she were being honest, she preferred it. Day in and day out, she was the one in control, the one holding people’s lives in her hands. But in bed . . . she submitted.

She used to hate that word—*submission*—because submission was associated with weakness, but over the years she’d learned to differentiate between the two.

“Do you want to get laid, or do you want to get fucked?” he rasped as he bridged the distance between them.

She raised her eyebrows. “Aren’t those one and the same?”

“No.”

Mere inches separated them. His muscular body dwarfed hers, dominated her personal space, and she gulped when one large hand curled around her throat, roughly skimming the delicate tendons there before the pads of his fingers rested on her pulse point. She knew he could feel the wild hammering of her heart, sense the way her body reacted to his nearness.

Her breasts were heavy and achy. And she was wet. God, Derek Pratt was making her wet. She had never, ever expected this.

“*Getting laid* implies a lot of shit I’m not interested in doing.” His voice was harsh yet oddly seductive. “Lying down, for one—not gonna do that. Bringing each other pleasure . . . won’t do that, either.”

A strangled laugh popped out. “No pleasure, huh? Then what’s the point?”

“Release,” he said simply. “I’ll fuck you, Sofia, hard enough that you’ll feel it for days. I’ll make you come. You’ll make me come.” His fingers slid down her throat to her collarbone, then lower, toying with the swell

of her cleavage. “If you want seduction and drawn-out foreplay and someone telling you how fucking good it feels, you won’t get that from me, so feel free to ask somebody else.”

It was difficult to concentrate on what he was saying, because her brain had stopped working after the *I’ll fuck you, Sofia* line.

God, she wanted that. She wanted an orgasm that didn’t come from her own hand. She wanted to feel his powerful body tight to hers, his cock plunging inside her.

Her gaze lowered to the unmistakable bulge beneath the fly of his cargo pants. The sight sped up her pulse. Jesus, he was big. She wasn’t sure why that surprised her. Every other part of him was big, so why not the part she wanted now?

“What’ll it be?” His eyes remained shuttered as always. “Do you want me to fuck you, or do you want me to walk away? But you should know I’ll be walking away regardless, with or without the fucking.”

Of course he would be. He didn’t strike her as the type of man who stuck around. Who cuddled and kissed and enjoyed postcoital intimacy with his lover. This would be sex and nothing more, because that’s all a man like Derek Pratt was capable of giving a woman.

Was she insane for even considering this? For wanting it? She knew the difference between sex and love, but she required at least *some* intimacy from a lover. A hint of tenderness, a moment of connection. That wouldn’t happen with D, and it should bother her. It really should.

But holy hell, she wanted him. So much that her sex was throbbing painfully, clenching around emptiness, aching to clamp around *him*.

“Answer me, Sofia.” A command. A taunt.

She let out a wobbly breath. “I . . . want you to fuck me—”

Before the last word even left her mouth, she found herself being spun around. Her belly pressed up against the counter, and her hands instinctively flew down to brace against the hard surface.

She wanted to turn and look at him, but his solid body kept her in place. Her breathing grew labored as his big hands landed on her waist, then traveled upward, sneaking beneath the hem of her tank top. Even if she’d wanted to move, she was no longer capable of it, because his touch was distracting, hypnotic.

No gentleness in the way he tugged her shirt up and over her head. He tossed it on the hardwood floor, and then his long fingers undid the button of her jeans. There was something dangerously erotic about not being able to see him. She heard his even breathing behind her, felt the heat of his body. One callused hand splayed on her lower back while the other eased her jeans down her thighs. When the air met her bare skin, a full-body shiver rolled through her.

She heard the rustle of his clothing. He’d knelt down on the floor—his fingertips were now skimming down her legs to where the denim had snagged at her ankles. She hurriedly kicked off her boots, and when he rasped, “Lift,” she obeyed. Lifting one foot, then the other, so he could remove her jeans and panties.

Naked. She was fully naked now and he was still fully clothed, the material of his pants rubbing her bare buttocks as he stood up and ground his hips against her.

“Oh God,” she choked out.

“There’s no God, Sofia. Just the devil. Just me.”

He was right. He *was* the devil, doing sinful things to her body as he reached up and cupped one breast, squeezing hard enough to make her gasp. His palm brushed her nipple, which puckered in response, straining into his hand. When his fingers found that distended bud and pinched it, desire sizzled from her breast to her clit, summoning a moan from her lips.

She heard a zipper being dragged down, another rustling of fabric, then the unmistakable sound of a wrapper tearing.

He was putting on a condom.

God. She couldn’t breathe. How had things escalated so fast? They’d gone from barely exchanging ten sentences to her naked against the counter with him about to fuck her.

“You want it bad,” he remarked, and she moaned when his fingertip toyed with her opening. “Your pussy’s soaking wet.”

She was wetter than she’d ever been, in fact. She’d never felt this way before. Completely and totally dominated, and he wasn’t even inside her yet.

D’s finger slipped in an inch, then another, until it was lodged in deep. When her inner muscles squeezed around it, he made a guttural noise, and then his finger disappeared.

Sofia sagged forward in disappointment. Empty. She felt empty now. Frustration turned her hands into fists, tight to the counter. Why was he teasing her? Why—

The blunt head of his erection nudged her opening, and she realized he hadn’t been trying to tease her. He just didn’t want to waste time.

There was no tenderness, no foreplay other than that exploratory finger he’d used to test her readiness. Nothing but the sound of his breathing, her panting, and then his deep voice muttering, “Brace yourself.”

She’d barely uncurled her fists and planted her palms down when he drove inside her. So hard she gasped. So deep she saw stars.

But it didn’t hurt. Oh no, it felt . . . good. So fucking good. Her body stretched to accommodate his thick length, then clamped on tight as if to trap him inside her. Pleasure flooded her core, tingling in her fingers and buzzing in her toes. She’d never felt so *full* in her entire life.

He didn’t start off slow; he was merciless from the word *go*. Slamming into her from behind in frenzied thrusts, hitting a spot deep inside that made her pussy throb. His fingers dug into the flesh of her hips, but the tiny sting of pain only sent another jolt of pleasure up her spine. Holy hell, she was *definitely* going to feel him for days. His cock stretching her, his marks on her skin.

She’d never been fucked like this before. D didn’t let up his hard, relentless tempo. Didn’t give her time to adjust or breathe or move. Over and over again, deep thrusts that brought moan after moan to her lips.

It shouldn’t have felt this incredible, being manhandled this way. He was rough. He didn’t say a word. He didn’t even seem to care if she was enjoying—

Sofia moaned when he reached around her body and pressed his thumb on her clit. She was wrong. He *did*

care if she was enjoying it. Because now he was rubbing circles over that swollen bud, slowing down his thrusts as he teased pleasure from her nerve endings.

“Oh *God*. Keep doing that,” she begged, shocked by the throaty pitch of her voice, the wanton need ringing there.

“You gonna come for me, Sofia?” His breath fanned over the nape of her neck. “I’ll come harder if you’re squeezing my cock.”

His wicked fingers played with her clit until she could no longer think clearly. Her vision became a blur of white dots, her body tightening with tension, pulsating with arousal, until the pressure broke apart and a blinding rush of ecstasy swept through her body.

Her surroundings faded away, the orgasm robbing her of breath. Behind her, D’s thrusts got faster again. Faster, deeper, harder . . . And then he buried himself to the hilt and went still, and she felt his chest trembling against her back as he climaxed. He didn’t make a sound, but his fingers pinched into her waist, the prick of pain mingling with the pleasure still floating inside her.

Her heart was beating uncontrollably. Her breathing was equally out of control. When D slowly withdrew from her core, she almost wept from the loss. From the emptiness.

Drawing a shaky breath, she found the courage to turn around. Expressionless eyes peered back at her. She wondered if he’d looked like that during the actual sex. Probably. The man didn’t advertise what he was feeling, ever, and she suspected that extended to sexual desire as well.

“I . . .” She trailed off. For the first time in her life, she had no idea what to say. She’d just come harder than she’d thought possible. Derek Pratt had done that to her, and she couldn’t wrap her head around it.

D rolled off the condom, and she got her first view of his cock. Long and imposing, still hard as a rock. He tucked it back in his pants, then walked to the sink, opened the cabinet beneath it, and tossed the condom in the little plastic wastebasket.

Without a word, he strode to the couch, reached into the front pocket of his sweatshirt, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He tapped the small cardboard box until one cigarette popped out, then shoved the smoke in the corner of his mouth but didn’t light it. Instead, he watched her as intently as she was watching him.

A strange wave of tension rippled through the room. Not awkwardness. Not anger. Lingering awareness.

D narrowed his eyes. “You good?”

She nodded, surprised he’d even bothered to ask about her well-being.

Nodding back, he took a step toward the front door.

“You promised to give him three hours to rest,” she called after D.

“He’ll get his rest, Sofia. We’re not leaving yet.”

No, he was just leaving her house. Leaving *her*.

She was more dazed than upset as she watched him walk out the door. As she heard the creak of the porch steps and the soft thud of his footsteps moving away from the house.

Her body was still on fire. Still tingling and pulsing and *aching*. She hadn't expected this. Hadn't expected to enjoy having sex with D. Hadn't expected to want to do it *again*. But she did. God, she wanted to shout for him to come back and do it all over again.

But he'd gotten what he'd wanted and now he was gone, and she wasn't even angry about it, because she'd gotten what she'd wanted, too. Except the bastard had left her wanting more, damn it. She couldn't make sense of that. D was not a man you invited into your life *or* your bed, yet she'd done both tonight.

Gulping, Sofia ignored the discarded clothes on the floor and went to her bedroom, where she found an oversized T-shirt and slipped it on. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and ran a hand through her hair. Okay. She'd had sex with D. No big deal. They'd both enjoyed it, and now it was done.

With a sigh, she fell onto her back and closed her eyes, willing her body to stop tingling and her mind to quit conjuring up images of a repeat performance. *It was just a onetime thing*, she told her oversexed brain.

A yawn overtook her. She should probably sit up before she fell asleep, but . . . it felt so nice to lie down. She hadn't slept last night because she'd been delivering a baby for one of the local women, and then she'd spent the entire day seeing patients and the entire night monitoring Liam Macgregor.

Crap, maybe she *should* sleep for a bit. Otherwise she'd be guilty of the same thing she'd accused Liam of doing: working herself to death.

She crawled up the bed and fiddled with the alarm, setting it to go off in an hour and a half. That would leave her time to check on Liam before D dragged him to that chopper.

A moment later, she was curled up on her side, fast asleep.

• • •

Sofia awoke to the deafening buzz of her alarm. Groaning, she reached over and slapped the snooze button, but the noise didn't go away. No longer buzzing, though. It was a different kind of noise, a rhythmic *rat-tat-tat* echoing beyond the open bedroom window.

She shot up, cursing loudly when she realized what she was hearing.

Helicopter rotors.

D was stealing her patient ahead of schedule.

Thoroughly outraged, she flew out of the bedroom and ran to the porch, where she anxiously peered through the trees in the direction of the helipad that Morgan had insisted on building behind the clinic. Blinking red and blue lights twinkled in the dark sky as a familiar military chopper made its ascent in the darkness.

"Fucking bastard," she muttered.

She didn't have to go to the clinic to know that they were gone, but she did anyway, just in case the helicopter had belonged to someone else. Which was a stretch, because the only aircraft that landed here belonged either to Morgan or the relief foundation, and the latter only showed up in the mornings.

She was right—that had been Morgan's chopper, all right. Because Liam's bed was empty when she stormed into his room.

Laughter bubbled in her throat as she stared at the sheets, which were still stained with Liam Macgregor's blood. Goddamn D. He'd only given her two hours instead of three.

He'd also given her the best sex of her life.

For some reason, that just made her laugh harder.

Chapter 3

Present Day

Turtle Creek, Costa Rica

“I, Ethan, take you, Juliet, to be my lawfully wedded wife . . .”

Weddings. D had no idea what the point of them was. Tax purposes, maybe? But nah, folks didn't need a wedding for that—a marriage license and a quick ceremony at the courthouse took care of all the paperwork required for taxes.

Symbolic, then? A way to declare undying love to each other in front of an audience?

Waste of fucking time, in his opinion.

This particular wedding was taking place at night, and the bluish water in the kidney-shaped pool cast an eerie glow over the manicured lawn. Morgan's housekeeper, Inna, had handled every detail herself—the neat rows of white wicker chairs on either side of the rose petal-strewn aisle. The tiny lights twinkling from the trees. The intricate altar she'd commissioned from one of the local carpenters.

But D was too busy pondering the reason for this circus to focus on his surroundings. He was the only person in attendance who wasn't sitting down, but rather standing in the back, his arms folded over the front of his muscle shirt. When Ethan had begged him to wear a suit, D had laughed in the man's face.

“I, Juliet, take you, Ethan, to be my lawfully wedded husband . . .”

The bride's throaty voice echoed clearly and earnestly in the clearing behind the compound. Ironically, this farce couldn't even be blamed on Juliet Mason, the thief-turned-assassin who worked for Morgan's wife, Noelle. According to Noelle, Juliet had resisted the marriage, but Ethan Hayes was the Boy Scout of the team, and just old school enough to insist on making things official.

D swept his gaze over the very small crowd. Morgan sat in the front row with Noelle on his right, and his daughter, Cate, on his left. Isabel and Trevor had flown in from Vermont. Luke and Olivia had made the trek from Aspen with their dog, Bear, who was sitting obediently at his master's side.

Kane and Abby's dogs were equally calm, which meant hell must have frozen over, because the three chocolate labs were fucking menaces. They were ridiculously protective of Abby, even more so now that she was carting around a baby all the time. And, yep, the damn baby was also present for the wedding, sleeping peacefully in his father's arms. The kid hadn't made a peep since the ceremony had started.

Christ. How was this his life? D wanted to strangle himself for allowing it to get to this point. His résumé was extensive—he'd been an assassin, a cleanup man, a soldier, and a criminal.

And now he was a goddamn wedding guest.

Sometimes he regretted joining up with supersoldier Jim Morgan after his self-imposed retirement from Smith Group. He could have disappeared, but he was built for action, and so he'd chosen to stay in the game. Except that meant going from a solo operative to a team player, and *that* meant he was now surrounded by people all the fucking time. Not just his teammates, but also Noelle's operatives, who'd not only joined professional forces with the team, but had become the wives and girlfriends of most of his men.

"You may now kiss the bride."

The minister was beaming like a fool as Ethan dipped his new wife and kissed the living shit out of her.

Juliet didn't seem to mind being mauled. The tall brunette looped her arms around Ethan's neck, her white dress fluttering around her ankles as she kissed him back.

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