



## Midnight Action: A Killer Instincts Novel

By *Elle Kennedy*



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and a fully loaded arsenal....**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Dangerous suspense to quicken your pulse.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Vivian Arend

“Off the charts hot...The twists, turns, and surprises kept me glued to the pages.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christy Reece

#### About the Author

**Elle Kennedy**, RITA Award-nominated author of the *Killer Instincts* novels, 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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#### Prologue

##### *Nineteen years ago*

The overcast sky and turbulent gray clouds rolling in from the east made for a miserable afternoon. Rain was imminent, and the chill in the air had already sent all of the café’s patrons inside. Only Noelle remained on the cobblestone patio, her gloved hands wrapped around a cup of hot English breakfast tea. She wished she’d brought a scarf, but she’d forgotten it back at the elegant town house in the heart of Saint Germain-des-Pres, the prestigious neighborhood she’d been calling home for the past ten years. Except the nineteenth-century property where she lived, with its soaring ceilings and sweeping gardens, was not a real home.

It was a prison.

She’d come to the Marais district today to escape, but deep down she knew there was no such thing. The numbing pain in her left hand confirmed it—she was trapped. Forced to endure René’s torment, at least for another two months. But once she turned eighteen? She’d be out of that house like a bat out of hell. For good. Forever.

She wasn’t foolish enough to think she could convince her mother to join her. No, Colette had made her choice. She would never leave René, but Noelle was past caring. Past begging her mother to see the light.

Pushing away her bitterness, she took a long sip of her tea. The hot liquid instantly warmed her insides, but it didn’t ease the relentless throb in her fingers. At least two were broken—the index and middle—but her thumb ached too, so perhaps it hadn’t been spared in René’s vicious attack either.

*I’m going to kill you.*

She silently transmitted the message to her stepfather, willing his subconscious to hear it. And it was no longer wishful thinking—she *would* kill him. She didn’t know when, couldn’t even begin to figure out how, but René Laurent was going to die at her hands. She would make sure of it.

“Is this seat taken?”

The deep, gravelly voice jolted Noelle from her bloodthirsty thoughts. When she laid eyes on the man it belonged to, her breath caught in her throat.

She blinked, wondering if maybe she’d dreamed him, but then he flashed her a captivating grin and she realized that he *must* be real—her mind wasn’t capable of conjuring up a smile this heart-stoppingly gorgeous.

A pair of vivid blue eyes watched her expectantly as she searched for her voice.

“There are lots of other seats available,” she finally replied, gesturing to the deserted tables all around them.

He shrugged. “I don’t want to sit anywhere but here.”

She moistened her suddenly dry lips. “Why?”

“Because none of those other seats are across from you,” he said simply.

Her heart skipped a beat, and her gaze...Well, her gaze couldn’t seem to leave his face. He was the most handsome man she’d ever seen in her life. His features were perfectly chiseled, his jaw strong and clean-shaven, his mouth far too sensual. And those eyes...midnight blue and utterly endless. A girl could lose herself in his eyes.

And this girl nearly did, until the beautiful stranger chuckled softly, alerting her to the embarrassing fact that she’d fallen into a trance.

Noelle cleared her throat, feeling her cheeks heat up. “I guess you can join me.” She put on an indifferent voice, but she could tell he saw right through it.

He was studying her intently as he lowered his tall, lean body into the chair opposite hers. As he set his coffee cup in front of him, her gaze landed on his hands. Big and strong, with long fingers and short, blunt fingernails.

“You’re shivering,” he said gruffly.

“It’s cold out.”

“Yes, it is.”

Noelle took a hasty sip of tea, shifting awkwardly in her chair. She watched as he ran one large hand through his dark brown hair. So short it was nearly shaved off. She wondered if he was a soldier. His bulky hunter green sweater and faded blue jeans weren’t exactly military-issue, but something about the way he carried himself, something in his shrewd blue eyes, told her he was much more than a tourist or local college student.

He was also a foreigner—she definitely hadn’t missed the distinct American accent lining his flawless French words.

“You’re from the States,” she remarked in perfect English.

He nodded in confirmation. “Virginia, born and raised. And from the sound of it, you’re American yourself.”

“My father is.”

“Did you ever live in the States?”

“Yes. We were in D.C. for eight years.”

“But now you live in Paris?”

She offered a quick nod. “My mother is French. She and I moved here after my parents got divorced.”

“I see.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

The hiss of a lighter cut through the air as he lit up, bringing a frown to Noelle’s lips.

“Smoking is very bad for you,” she said frankly.

“What can I say? I like to live on the edge.”

He grinned again, and her heart began to pound.

As she tried to control the butterflies in her stomach, his mesmerizing eyes swept over her once more and a thoughtful expression flitted across his face. “You’re beautiful. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Her cheeks scorched again. There was nothing lewd or creepy about the compliment, but the intensity with which he said it made her pulse race. Something about this man affected her in a strange, confusing way she’d never experienced before. She found herself wanting to reach across the table and touch him. Hold his hand, stroke his jaw, place her palm on his broad, muscular chest. The urge only confused her further, and so she avoided his gaze by peering down at her teacup.

“What’s your name?”

Swallowing, she lifted her head to meet his eyes.

And was stunned by the odd combination of heat and desperation she saw in them.

“Noelle,” she murmured.

“Noelle.” His voice came out hoarse. “I’m James Morgan, but everyone calls me Jim, or Morgan.”

Jim. What an ordinary name for a man who was anything but.

“What brings you to Paris?” She was incredibly proud of herself for managing to speak in a steady voice when her entire body was consumed with erratic jolts of heat.

“I’m here on vacation. I have three weeks’ leave so I thought I’d travel until I had to report back to the base.”

“The base...Are you in the army?”

“Yeah. Doing my second tour now.”

“That’s nice. Do you enjoy it?”

His blue eyes flickered with...a glimmer she couldn’t quite decipher. “I do. I enjoy it a lot, actually.”

“Good. It’s important to love what you do.”

“It is,” he agreed, before slanting his head pensively. “What about you? What keeps you busy?”

“School.” Noelle shrugged. “I graduate from *high school* in the spring.”

She’d purposely emphasized the words so he would be aware of her age, but he didn’t seem distressed by it. She knew he was older—she would pin him down at twenty-one, maybe twenty-two—but the age difference didn’t bother her either.

Waves of tension moved between them. Or maybe it was awareness. She couldn’t be sure, couldn’t quite understand it, but she knew she wasn’t the only one feeling it. Jim’s pulse visibly throbbed in his throat, as if his heartbeat was as irregular as hers. And his eyes...they never left hers, not even once.

“And afterward?” he prompted. “What will you do then?”

*Run.*

*Run and never come back.*

“I don’t know,” she said.

Before she could blink, his hand breached the space between them and found hers. The burst of excitement that went off inside her was immediately replaced by the ripples of pain that seized her injured fingers.

Jim must have noticed her agitation, because his eyes narrowed. “You’re hurt,” he said flatly.

Surprise filtered through her. “I—”

He was peeling off her brown leather glove before she could protest, and when her hand was exposed, a deep frown puckered his mouth.

She saw exactly what he did—two black-and-blue fingers swollen to twice their size, and unpolished fingernails that had broken and bled beneath René’s heavy boot.

“Who did this to you?”

His low growl startled her, as did his astute assumption that her injury was no accident. When he gently ran one callused fingertip over her thumb, tears pricked her eyes, but she desperately fought them off. She refused to cry. Crying was a show of weakness, and Noelle was not weak. She would never be weak.

“You need to see a doctor,” Jim said hoarsely.

“No! No doctors,” she blurted out. “I’m fine, honestly. It was a clean break. I’ll just tape them up when I get home.”

His eyes flickered with surprise, and she could have sworn she glimpsed a gleam of admiration.

But he didn’t capitulate, just spoke again, sternly this time. “Your hand needs to be X-rayed at the hospital. There might be damage you’re not aware of.”

“No doctors,” she repeated.

“Noelle—”

She set her jaw. “*No.*”

The lump of panic jamming her throat doubled in size. He couldn’t force her to see a doctor, could he? Hospitals and doctors left paper trails, and she couldn’t risk leaving a trail that her father might find. Douglas Phillips had raised her to be strong. He’d passed his warrior genes on to her, made sure she could take care of herself.

What would he think if he knew she’d allowed René to have power over her? How ashamed would he be?

Jim released a heavy breath. “Fine. If you won’t go to the hospital, at least let me take you to see a friend of mine.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “What friend?”

“An old army buddy. He runs a small medical practice in Seine-Saint-Denis,” Jim explained, naming one of the more run-down neighborhoods of the city. “He’ll keep the visit off the books if I ask him to.”

Uneasiness swam in her gut, making her hesitate.

“Nobody will ever know you saw him. I promise.”

The total assurance in his tone was impossible to ignore. God, she believed him. She believed that when this man made a promise, he kept it.

“All right,” she whispered. “I’ll go.”

“Thank you.”

Their gazes collided and locked, and that unsettling and thrilling sizzle of connection traveled between them again.

Noelle couldn’t tear her eyes away from his. Her surroundings faded. The wind died into utter silence. She’d never felt this way before. Ever. And she couldn’t even begin to put into words why she was so drawn to this man.

All she knew, right here, right now, on this cold and cloudy autumn afternoon, was that her entire life was about to change.

## Chapter 1

### *Present day*

Noelle raised her cigarette to her lips and took a deep drag, sucking the smoke and chemicals into her lungs before exhaling a plume of gray into the night air. The apartment across the street was dark, save for the one light shining in the study where Gilles Girard was currently sipping on a cup of espresso. She’d been watching the Parisian barrister for three days, and she knew that after he indulged his caffeine fix, he’d move on to the bottle of Rémy Martin on the mahogany bar. The guy had expensive taste in cognac. That was for sure.

The lawyer's west end private residence was located in the 16th District, one of the most prestigious areas in the city. That told her he had the required cash to procure the services of someone like her, or, at the very least, represented clients who could afford her. But she didn't trust the man. Granted, she didn't trust anyone, but Girard's out-of-the-blue request was definitely fishier than most.

He'd contacted her via several middlemen, though that alone wasn't unusual, considering her number wasn't exactly listed in any phone books. No, what made her uneasy was the urgency she'd detected in his voice. *The job must be done as soon as possible. There's no room for delay.* The harried plea had rung with desperation, and in Noelle's experience, desperate men spelled nothing but trouble.

Which was why she now lay on the dark roof opposite Girard's, flat on her stomach with a rifle at her side and binoculars zoomed in on her prey. Watching, waiting.

Girard lived alone. No wife or kids, no household staff. He was in his late fifties, and his choice of attire told her he was an old-school, aristocratic kind of guy. Anyone who wore perfectly pressed slacks, a cashmere Burberry sweater, and a Gucci scarf around his neck, in the privacy of his own home, was someone who valued luxurious items.

Noelle adjusted the zoom on the binoculars and studied Girard's handsome features and groomed salt-and-pepper hair. There was something very...jaunty about him. And honorable—he seemed like a man with a moral code.

So why was he trying to hire a contract killer?

Frowning, she snuffed out her cigarette on the pavement and extracted her cell phone from the pocket of her tight-fitting leather coat. A moment later, her field glasses revealed Girard reaching for his own phone.

"Bonjour?" came his baritone voice in her ear.

"It's me," she answered in French. "It's time to continue our little discussion."

She clearly saw the man's face stiffen through her zoom lens. "You ended our last call very abruptly," he said in annoyance. "It was quite rude."

"I told you, I had to check out a few details."

"You had to dig into my background, you mean."

"Yes."

"And are you satisfied with what you found?"

"For the most part." She lazily ran her free hand over the barrel of her rifle. "Who is your client?"

"I already told you, I can't reveal that. But I can assure you, my client has no shortage of funds. He is more than capable of paying your fee."

"Good to know," she said lightly. "But I don't like working for shadows, Mr. Girard."

"Then I'm afraid we've got nothing more to discuss. The identity of my client will not be disclosed, mademoiselle. This is nonnegotiable."



Irritation flared inside her. Christ, sometimes she wished she'd gone into a different line of work. Secretive men were so goddamn infuriating. And yet she didn't disconnect the call—her curiosity had been piqued the moment Gilles Girard had contacted her, and she wasn't the kind of woman who walked away from a puzzle. Or a challenge.

"All right," she conceded. "I can live with that."

"Good. Shall we discuss the details, then?"

"Not over the phone."

"Fine. We will meet tomorrow?"

"Tonight," she said briskly. "We'll meet tonight."

"I'm afraid I've already retired for the night."

"No, you haven't." Chuckling, she zoomed in closer and saw the flicker of alarm in his dark eyes.

"What makes you say that?" he asked carefully.

"Well, I'm looking at you as we speak, Gilles, and your fancy-pants clothes don't look like pajamas to me."

Noelle got great satisfaction from seeing his gaze dart around wildly, as if he expected her to pop out of a closet and ambush him.

She laughed again. "Don't worry, *monsieur*. I'm not inside your house. Yet."

She tossed the binoculars into the sleek black duffel by her side. As she gracefully rose to her feet, the warm August breeze lifted her blond ponytail and heated the back of her neck.

"I'll see you shortly, Gilles," she told the panicked man. She paused in afterthought. "Oh, and I suggest you don't reach for that pricey cognac of yours."

Suspicion floated over the line. "Why not?"

"Because I poisoned it."

His startled curse brought a smile to her lips. "Y-you...h-how..."

"Don't you worry about that, honey," she answered as she quickly disassembled her rifle, while balancing the cell on her shoulder. "It was just a precaution, in case I didn't like the outcome of this phone call."

When he made an outraged noise, she fought a laugh and said, "Out of curiosity, who's the target?"

There was a pause. "I thought you didn't want details over the phone."

"Not about money or method. Names are fine."

She zipped up the rifle case, then tucked it next to the duffel—she'd leave both on the roof and collect them after her little tête-à-tête with the good lawyer.

"Ah. All right, then." Girard hesitated. "The target is a soldier. Well, a former soldier. He now works as a

private military contractor.”

“A mercenary.”

“Yes.”

Shifting the phone to her other shoulder, she patted her jacket to make sure the weapons beneath it were secure, and then she walked across the gravel-littered rooftop toward the wrought-iron ladder at its edge.

“He’s used various aliases over the years,” Girard continued, “but he’s currently operating under the name James Morgan.”

Noelle froze. “What did you say?”

“Morgan,” Girard repeated. “The target’s name is James Morgan.”

• • •

“I met someone else.”

The slender brunette kept her back to him as she snapped the clasp of her bra into place. Her long, straight hair fell down to her panty-clad ass, shimmering in the pale glow of the bedside lamp.

Morgan zipped up his cargo pants and waited for Maya to continue, which she did, with great regret in her throaty voice.

“I should have ended it sooner, but I was...waiting...hoping, I guess.” She turned to face him, her bottomless brown eyes flickering with unhappiness. “I suppose I was silly to think that we might have a future.”

When he didn’t argue, her expression grew even more pained. “I know. You made yourself clear from the start.”

Morgan cleared his throat. “Maya—”

She held up her hand to silence him. “No. Don’t apologize. Like I said, it was silly of me. But Cruz...he’s willing to give me everything you can’t. And he adores Diego...”

*Whom you have never even met*, was the unspoken implication.

And damned if it didn’t make him feel like a total dick. In the two months they’d been sleeping together, he’d gone out of his way to avoid Maya’s seven-year-old son. Not out of malice or dislike, but, well, he knew how attached kids could get, especially young boys without a father figure in their lives, and he hadn’t wanted to take any risks. He’d known from the onset that his affair with Maya would be a temporary one.

She was a wonderful woman—he couldn’t deny that. Smart, beautiful, hardworking. But relationships didn’t interest him. Sex was all he’d ever wanted out of the arrangement, and Maya had always been more than happy to provide it.

“I want to give my son a good life, Morgan.”

“I know,” he said gruffly, his Spanish coming out stilted even though he normally spoke it impeccably.

Maya slipped into a pale blue tank top and a pair of denim shorts, then walked over and kissed him. She was a tall woman, didn't even have to stand on her tiptoes to bring her mouth to his, and he kissed her back with more tenderness than he'd ever shown her before.

She blinked in surprise as she pulled back, but the resolve in her eyes didn't falter. "I had a lot of fun."

"Me too." He dragged his thumb over her soft jaw before taking a step back. "But it was bound to end, sweetheart."

She nodded sadly. "I'll walk you out."

They moved through the dark bungalow in silence, with Maya ahead of him, her expression shielded from his view. Although she'd known the score from the get-go, Morgan knew she was disappointed he hadn't put up a fight about ending it. He could see that disappointment in the slight slump of her shoulders and the weariness in her long strides.

But he wasn't going to give her false hope or make empty promises. He wasn't the man she wanted him to be. Husband, daddy—that wasn't him, and never would be.

"Will you at least tell me about her?"

Maya's quiet plea made him frown. As they paused in the shadow-ridden front hall, he searched her gaze, trying to make sense of the request.

"Tell you about who?"

"The woman who broke your heart."

A harsh laugh slipped out. "Oh, sweetheart, I've never had my heart broken."

"I see." Maya hesitated. "She died, then?"

A thread of discomfort knotted around his insides. Christ. Why did women always assume he belonged to the *loved and lost* camp? Why did they always feel the need to analyze him, to discover what his demons were?

"I know I'm right," she murmured. "And I'm never going to see you again after tonight, so what's the harm? Tell me about her, Morgan. What was she like?"

Morgan stifled a sigh. He didn't have time for this. Didn't *want* this.

But when he opened his mouth, the words that popped out surprised them both.

"She was sweet."

Maya's eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "Sweet," she echoed. "What else?"

"Strong." He swallowed. "She was very, very strong. And innocent. And when she laughed..." The lump in his throat made it difficult to go on. "Her laughter was...Fuck, I can't even describe it. And she always knew what I was thinking. She could read my mind, and it was damn infuriating."

Maya bit her lower lip. "She's dead, isn't she?"

An ache tightened his chest. “Yes. She’s dead.”

“I’m sorry, Morgan.”

He managed a shrug. “Yeah, so am I.” Before she could question him again, he dipped his head and brushed his lips over hers. “Take care of yourself, Maya. Maybe I’ll see you around in town sometime.”

“Maybe.” She sounded noncommittal, and he could feel her retreating from him as she flicked the dead bolt and opened the front door to let him out.

He stepped into the night air without another word, and headed for his SUV without looking back. The soft click that met his ears told him she’d closed and relocked the door.

The moment he slid into the driver’s seat, he popped open the glove compartment to retrieve the nine-millimeter Sig Sauer stashed there. He never brought a weapon into Maya’s little bungalow—he didn’t want to scare her—but he felt naked without his trusty Sig. Even now, just sitting in his car, he didn’t feel fully comfortable until he placed the gun next to his thigh, within reach of his right hand.

Letting out a breath, he started the engine and reversed out the dirt driveway. He didn’t glance in the rearview mirror to get a final glimpse of the house. Their time together was over, which meant it was time to move forward.

And if there was one thing Jim Morgan excelled at, it was never looking back.

Still, his heart felt heavy as he drove down the darkened street toward the intersection that would lead him into town. He hadn’t wanted to hurt Maya, but he suspected that he had. He just hoped this new man of hers could give her everything she needed. Everything she deserved.

He reached the heart of town a few minutes later, found himself easing his foot off the gas pedal. The sleepy village of Turtle Cove didn’t offer many options in terms of nightlife, but it did boast a tiny dive bar that Morgan and his team of mercenaries often frequented. He headed toward it, and then parked in front of the narrow strip of dusty, crumbling storefronts.

It was just past eleven, but he wasn’t in the mood to go back to the compound yet. Nearly every member of his team was a night owl, and Morgan didn’t feel like seeing anyone right now. He’d been restless lately, itching to continue the search he’d embarked on so many years ago, but he couldn’t skip town on a whim anymore, not after his last spontaneous trip.

In his absence, his compound had been ambushed by a private hit squad, two of his employees had lost their lives, and one of his men, Holden McCall, had suffered a crushing loss. Morgan knew the attack couldn’t have been foreseen, but he still felt responsible for Beth McCall’s death. He wondered whether Holden blamed him for it too. Probably. Fuck, it’d be rightfully so.

Sighing, he hopped out of the SUV and strode into the deserted bar. Ernesto, the owner and sole bartender, stood behind the counter chatting on a cell phone, but he nodded in greeting when he spotted Morgan.

“Tequila?” the bald man said briskly.

Morgan nodded back and slid onto one of the rickety wooden stools. He chose a seat that provided him with a perfect view of the door and corridor leading to the restrooms, and his gun was tucked in his waistband, a reassuring bulge beneath his shirt that allowed him to relax.

A moment later, Ernesto deposited a shot glass of Jose Cuervo in front of him, then wandered back to the other end of the counter, his phone glued to his ear. From the sound of it, Ernesto was trying to convince his wife that he had indeed cleaned the rain gutters like she'd requested, but clearly the woman wasn't buying it.

Tuning out the other man's conversation, Morgan thought about all the shit he needed to take care of tomorrow. The CIA was on his ass about a potential extraction of an agent who'd gotten himself captured in Angola, but government jobs were always such a pain in the ass. Too much red tape and peanuts for pay. But he supposed he could send Castle and a few members of his B-Team to get the job done.

He'd also just accepted a security gig, which he'd probably assign to Luke and Trevor, since the client had requested trained snipers. That meant he and the rest of his A-Team would have to handle the Ecuador job also in the pipeline. The government officials down there wanted a particularly delicate rebel situation handled, and were trying to avoid military involvement.

Man, so many jobs on the go, which gave new meaning to the words *soldier of fortune*. But even though the team would make a killing this month, Morgan had never been in it for the money. It was the action he craved, the rush of adrenaline and the surge of triumph he received after a successfully executed mission.

"Another one?" Ernesto's voice drew him out of his thoughts.

Morgan glanced down to see that he'd slugged back his shot without even realizing it, but he shook his head at the bartender's inquiry. Instead, he dropped a few US bills on the counter and rose from his stool. "Have a good night, Ernesto."

"You too, Mr. Morgan."

He left the bar feeling as unsettled as he'd entered it. What the fuck was up with him tonight? Yeah, he and Maya were done, but he knew that wasn't the reason for the persistent edginess he was feeling. Inexplicable unease continued to crawl up his spine like a colony of ants, and it stuck with him during the entire drive home.

The new compound was about twenty miles outside of town, bordered by dense jungle on one side and rolling hills on the other. And it was isolated and hidden, just the way he liked it.

It had belonged to a drug kingpin whose empire had recently been crushed by the DEA, and Morgan had bought the place for a song at a government auction. Surrounded by a twelve-foot electric fence, the hundred-acre property consisted of an enormous main house, several outbuildings, and a Playboy Mansion-esque backyard with a swimming pool, grotto, and ten-person hot tub that his men were fucking gaga over.

He found it ironic—for a group of hardened soldiers, the men in his employ sure enjoyed their luxuries. Sullivan couldn't go a day without talking about his prized sailboat. Liam owned more designer clothes than a male celebrity. And as no-nonsense as Kane and Abby were, they sure spent a helluva lot of time in the sixteen-seat movie theater down in the basement. Yup, the house had an honest-to-God movie theater. Not to mention a game room, gym, indoor and outdoor target range, and a dozen other decadent goodies.

But Morgan didn't give a shit about the frills. He cared about the tunnels running beneath the house. The armory. The top-notch security system and each strategically placed block of C4 in every corner of the house. After last year's attack, he was taking security even more seriously than before, especially since this latest place seemed to pick up new residents like a damn boardinghouse.

Ethan had moved his girlfriend, Juliet, into the compound a few months ago, and even though Luke and Trevor were living off-site these days, Sullivan and Liam had swiftly moved in to take their place. Plus, the recent addition of Ash, their newest rookie, meant there was yet another person to bump into every other second.

Sometimes he felt like a goddamn babysitter, with all these younger, sexed-up soldiers running amok. For a man who'd been on his own since the age of eighteen, living with so many people was kind of unnerving, but Morgan ran a tight ship. And truth be told, he preferred having his team close by where he could keep an eye on them.

It took him five minutes to drive through the three enormous gates that blocked off the compound from the road. Each one required a different access code for the security panel, and a glance at the cameras mounted on the chain-link fences. One of the two security men who worked around the clock buzzed him in each time, and when he finally reached the large courtyard in front of the main house, he was starting to wonder whether this new security protocol of his might be overkill.

The thought died the second he spotted the out-of-place Mercedes parked next to Kane's silver Escalade.

His eyes narrowed as he stared at the sleek black car. Almost instantly, wariness flooded his gut and stiffened his shoulders.

Son of a bitch. Either Sully and Liam had brought a late-night visitor onto the property, or...

His hands curled into fists over the steering wheel. Fuck. The alternative was grating as hell, and he suddenly found himself praying that his boys had broken the rules and invited a woman over. But he knew better.

And the ominous feeling that had been prickling his spine ever since he'd left Maya's made sense now.

Perfect fucking sense.

Squaring his jaw, he stalked into the three-story house, paused in the cavernous parlor to rearm the alarm, then strode purposefully toward the living room. Light spilled out from beneath the heavy oak doors, and the soft murmur of voices reached his ears.

He pushed open the doors, paying no attention to the three chocolate brown Labrador retrievers that scurried up to him.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

Abby Sinclair and Kane Woodland glanced up from their perch on the couch. The couple was snuggled together under a red afghan, looking too damn calm, considering the toxic presence they'd allowed into the house. The blanket hid Abby's growing baby bump, which, if he were being honest, was a relief not to see. Abby was almost five months pregnant, and each time Morgan noticed the rounded curve of her belly, he was unsettled as hell.

He couldn't imagine a baby living in this house amid a group of highly skilled operatives, but Abby and Kane hadn't discussed their plans with him yet. He wasn't sure if they planned to raise the kid here or find a place of their own. Though he was kinda hoping they'd choose the latter.

"You're home earlier than usual," Kane remarked.

He repeated himself. "Where is she?"

Abby ran a hand through her long red hair, her voice quiet and composed. “Out back.”

Without another word, Morgan ignored the excited dogs still nipping at his heels and marched off. The massive screened-in porch at the back of the house offered access to the backyard, and when he emerged onto the endless stone terrace and approached the railing, he instantly spotted their unwelcome visitor.

She wasn't alone. Derek “D” Pratt was with her, the two of them standing side by side near the kidney-shaped swimming pool. Although a foot of distance separated them and neither one was talking, their body language didn't reveal an ounce of aggression. If anything, they seemed utterly relaxed standing there together.

The anger that flooded Morgan's insides was both expected and infuriating.

Had she come here to see D?

It hadn't even occurred to him that she might be here for someone other than him, and the strange vise of possessiveness that squeezed his throat only pissed him off even more.

“Evening, Jim. Are you going to join us, or just lurk there in the shadows?”

Her mocking voice wafted toward him in the balmy night air. She hadn't even glanced his way, yet she'd known he was up at the railing, and the evidence of her razor-sharp senses was a reminder that he couldn't let his guard down around this woman. Ever. She was a threat. Had been for years, and probably always would be.

As he descended the stone steps, he steeled himself for this latest reunion. Each time they crossed paths, he went through the same old routine. Stayed on the alert, masked his emotions, armed himself for the inevitable showdown. He never knew what to expect with Noelle, except for one constant—her unceasing attempts to unnerve him.

If he were being honest, she succeeded more often than not.

Damned if he'd ever admit it to her, though.

“Why are you here?” he muttered when he reached the couple.

Couple. Goddamn it. The thought made him want to...Fuck, he didn't even know. Throw up? Shoot them down like rabid dogs? Laugh?

D seemed to be reading his mind as the two men locked eyes. The big, tattooed mercenary took a quick drag of his cigarette before breaking eye contact, then headed over to the poolside table to put out his smoke.

“Nice catching up with you, honey,” Noelle drawled to D's retreating back.

The other man didn't turn around, just kept walking, but Morgan noticed those broad shoulders stiffen for a beat. He watched as D went up to the terrace, noting the power and confidence in the man's stride. D was a warrior, a terrifying force to be reckoned with, and for a moment, the image of that muscular body tangled with Noelle's petite one between the sheets flashed in Morgan's head.

His hands involuntarily curled into fists, but he tamped down the anger and resentment that rose in his throat, and finally turned to face Noelle.

“Why are you here?” he asked again.

Her pale blue eyes gleamed in the light glowing from the pool. “Just stopped by to say hello to an old lover, but you seem to have scared him off.”

Morgan jerked his thumb in the direction D had gone. “He went thataway.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Aw, I’m just messing with you, Jim. You know exactly which ex-lover I came to see.”

Her laughter was like a razor blade scraping a chalkboard. Cold, humorless, deadly.

“What do you want, Noelle?”

“You look good, Jim.”

“What do you want, Noelle?”

She blinked innocently. “You’re not going to return the compliment?”

He kept his gaze locked with hers, despite the fact that looking at her took a major toll on him. She was too beautiful. Too fucking beautiful, with her exquisite face, those big blue eyes, the perfect rosy lips. Her long hair was the color of spun gold, and he knew firsthand that it was silky to the touch.

And her body...it was goddamn sin. Endless curves hugged by black leather pants and a bloodred tank top, a body designed to make a man think of pure, carnal fucking.

Noelle’s beauty was beyond compare, and that only stoked the hatred burning like lava in his gut. She looked like an angel, but she had a devil’s heart. She was poison, and he refused to utter a single complimentary word to her, even as his hard-on strained against his zipper in salute to all her splendor.

“Fine.” She gave a mock pout. “I guess pleasantries aren’t really our style, huh? Let’s get right to business.”

He shot her a pointed look. “What favor do you need this time?”

She was positively beaming now. “Oh, baby, this time the favor’s all yours.”

As a cloud of suspicion floated through him, he reached for the bottom of his shirt and yanked it right over his head.

Noelle’s gaze fastened on his bare chest, her head tilting to the side. “What are you doing?”

He unzipped his pants and let them drop to the concrete pool deck. “Going for a swim,” he answered in a bored tone.

His boxers came off next, and Noelle’s slight hitch of breath confirmed that she noticed his raging hard-on.

It was kind of hard to miss.

“You don’t want to know what I mean by that?” Those blue eyes remained glued to his cock, but she didn’t comment on his state of arousal.

Probably because she knew damn well the erection had nothing to do with lust. This was an anger-fueled



boner, pure and simple.

He arched a brow at her. “I’ll hear you out when I’m good and ready. Right now, I feel like a swim.”

Brushing past her, Morgan headed for the deep end, hopped on the diving board, and dove cleanly into the warm water. The moment he was fully submerged, his head began to clear. Soon the volatile emotions Noelle always managed to elicit in him had reduced to a manageable degree.

When he finally poked his head out, he saw that she’d sat down on one of the lounge chairs. Her annoyed expression brought a surge of satisfaction to his blood and a burst of energy that had him doing laps.

He’d do twenty-five, just to stir up her irritation. Make her wait, watch her stew. It was the same old game they always played. See who could piss off the other one more. Who could inflict more pain, cause more destruction.

Morgan sliced through the water in a clean crawl stroke, wishing he could see her face. But no biggie, because he could clearly envision her displeasure, picture the scowl twisting her lips.

Except...bad idea, thinking about her lips. That only triggered the unwelcome memory of what he’d done the last time they’d been alone together. Not two months ago, when she’d helped the team out in Cairo, but on the job in Belarus earlier that year, when he’d...

Kissed her.

Goddamn it, he’d *kissed* the bitch.

*You felt nothing.*

Right, he’d felt nothing. Nada. Zip. It had just been a test, a need to confirm that there was nothing between them.

Absolutely frickin’ nothing.

He forced the memory away and concentrated on counting out his laps. Six. Seven. Ten. Fourteen. His arms burned from the brisk pace he’d set, but he preferred the pain to the other burn he felt around Noelle.

Another glance at the deck revealed the bitter grimace on her face. Good. Let her sulk. He’d spent years thinking of ways to punish her and make her suffer, but the woman was a block of ice, totally impenetrable. Unless she was being ignored—that was when the wall of indifference crumbled, her desire for power and recognition trumping her need to conceal her emotions.

And so he kept swimming, knowing the longer he made her wait, the faster her carefully composed mask would unravel.

Times like these, when he was imagining new ways of hurting her, it was impossible to believe that he’d ever loved this woman with all his heart.

## Chapter 2

“Why is Morgan skinny-dipping in our pool?” was the first thing Sullivan Port demanded after he’d strolled

into the room without knocking.

Liam Macgregor glanced up from the computer screen. “That’s news to me. But please tell me he’s not in there alone, ’cause that’s just weird.”

Sullivan collapsed in the armchair across from the bed as if his long legs could no longer support his weight. “He’s in the pool alone, but he’s got an audience. She kinda looks like she wants to murder him, though.”

Closing the laptop, Liam leaned his head back on the mountain of decorative pillows their housekeeper liked to pile on his bed. No matter how many times he told Inna that he despised all those damn pillows, every night when he entered his bedroom, the Mount Everest of fluffiness was back on the king-size. Damn Russian females—they were a stubborn lot—that was for sure.

He placed the computer on the end table and raked a hand through his hair, all the while fighting a yawn. It was almost midnight, and he’d had a long day. Spent most of it in the gym working out with D, and then he, Ethan, and Juliet had gone for a hike in the mountains bordering the compound. Sullivan had been out all night, and even if he hadn’t sent Liam a text with a heads-up about his plans, it would’ve been easy to figure out how he’d passed the time.

Liam could always tell when his buddy had gotten good and laid, and at the moment, the guy was exhibiting some serious post-fucking symptoms. Rumpled blond hair, sated gray eyes, and a hundred and eighty pounds of sheer laziness. Sully’s six-foot-three frame had practically melted into the chair, as if he didn’t have the energy to move a single muscle.

It didn’t escape Liam that he could’ve been feeling the same sexual satisfaction right about now, if only he’d accepted Sully’s invitation to partake in the fun. In the year and a half since he’d joined Jim Morgan’s team, he and Sully had been joined at the hip, indulging in more threesomes than he could keep track of.

Not lately, though. They hadn’t shared a woman in more than a month. Not because Sully didn’t ask him anymore—he did, every damn time—but lately Liam found himself reluctant to join in on the sexual escapades.

Ever since that last time, when...

*When nothing.*

He swiftly banished the thought, focusing instead on the curious look Sullivan shot him.

“You really didn’t know she was here?”

Liam frowned at his teammate. “Who?”

“Noelle. I ran into Abby in the hall and she said her former boss showed up about an hour ago.”

“I’ve been up here all night. I had no clue the Queen of Assassins was visiting.”

“Well, she is. And trust me, mate, Morgan’s not happy about it. He’s doing a real angry-looking crawl.”

Liam snickered. “Yeah, I’m sure you could tell his mood based on his swimming stroke.”

“Trust me,” Sully repeated.

“So what does she want?”

“Fuck if I know. Maybe one of her crazy operatives needs rescuing again.”

“Doubt it. Most of her chameleons live with us now,” Liam grumbled. “Or in Isabel’s case, with Trev in Vermont.”

“Good point.” Sully released an exaggerated sigh. “Why do those blokes get all the breaks? I’d kill to sleep with one of her girls.”

Liam couldn’t disagree. Sometimes he wondered if Noelle’s employment contracts contained a clause that said all her assassins had to be drop-dead gorgeous. Because so far, the ones Liam had met absolutely fit that bill. Abby, Isabel, and Juliet were so hot it was almost criminal, and from what Juliet had told him, the others were easy on the eyes too. Of course they were all deadly as hell too, so maybe it was a good thing he wasn’t getting jiggy with one of Noelle’s operatives.

Who wanted to sleep with a woman who was capable of murdering you in your sleep?

He’d much rather stick to the nonlethal chicks he met at the bars, thank you very much.

“You say that as if you’re not getting any,” Liam said mockingly. “And yet we both know you didn’t spend the night alone. Or the day. What—are you practicing for a marathon?”

Sullivan’s silver eyes twinkled. “Bloody right. Stella and I beat my record today—seven times.”

“Stella...Have I met her?”

His buddy snorted. “We hooked up with her sister a few months ago.”

“Shit. Right.” A laugh flew out. “You’re such a whore, bro. Just *had* to make a move on the sister, huh?”

“Uh-uh, *she* made the move,” Sully said smugly. “What was I s’posed to do, turn her down? That’d break her heart.”

Liam couldn’t help but laugh again. Truth was, he appreciated Sullivan’s open attitude toward sex. Until he’d become friends with the cocky Australian, he’d never known anyone with that reckless anything-goes mentality.

“Anyway, it’s a bloody shame you bailed today. You woulda had fun.”

Liam didn’t doubt it. He always had fun with Sullivan.

But...maybe it was *too* much fun.

Their sexual antics had begun to distract him lately, even confuse him, if he were being honest. And he valued their friendship way too much to watch it crash and burn because of some weird, complicated tension he couldn’t even explain.

Liam’s eight-year stint in the DEA had made it impossible to form any lasting friendships. He’d been in deep cover for most of his career, cozying up to slimebag drug dealers and kingpins in order to take them down. A damn lonely way to live, but the extent of his loneliness hadn’t truly sunk in until after he’d gone private and hooked up with Morgan. The easy camaraderie he’d witnessed among Morgan’s men had been a major

reason why he'd joined the crew full-time, and once he'd become ingrained in a team, he'd realized just how much it sucked to work alone.

To *be* alone.

His friendship with Sullivan Port, girly as it sounded, meant a lot to him. He'd never connected with another guy the way he connected with Sully. The two of them could read each other's minds, and with the rest of Morgan's men dropping like flies into commitment territory, Liam and Sully were among the few remaining hound dogs of the bunch.

"Yeah...sorry," he told Sullivan, keeping his tone vague. "I had a shit ton of e-mail to answer."

"Your family's on your case again, eh?"

He sighed. "Yup. But that's what happens when you come from an Irish Catholic clan. Eight kids, for fuck's sake. I don't know what my folks were thinking."

"Ah, mate, you're lucky. You'd hate being an only child, not to mention an orphan."

Liam gulped at the wistful note in Sullivan's voice, suddenly feeling like a total ass for complaining about his family. He'd been raised by parents who adored him, and surrounded by seven boisterous siblings who always had his back, while Sully had spent his entire childhood in foster homes. Sometimes he forgot that, especially since Sullivan didn't talk about his upbringing often.

"Anyhoo," his teammate hurried on before Liam could say another word, "wanna go downstairs and spy on the boss?"

"Nah. I don't feel like being murdered tonight."

That got him a loud laugh. "Another good point. Fine. Let's watch a movie, then. I don't feel like going to bed yet."

He hesitated, then said, "Pass. I'm frickin' exhausted."

"Jeez, Boston, you're such a bloody pansy." Rolling his eyes, Sullivan heaved himself out of the chair and rose to his full height. "If you change your mind, I'm down in the theater."

"I won't. I'm ready to collapse."

The blond man headed for the door, then paused to toss a quick taunt over his broad shoulder. "Night, Princess."

"Fuck off."

With a laugh, Sullivan left the room and closed the door behind him.

The moment he was alone again, Liam leaned back against the pillows and released an unsteady breath. Shit. Sooner or later, Sully would start noticing the distance Liam kept placing between them, which meant it was definitely time to try to get his head on straight.

Before he screwed up the one friendship that meant the most to him.

• • •

His body was magnificent.

Not an ounce of fat on it, just a solid mass of muscle and raw masculine power. Noelle eyed Jim's molded biceps and triceps as those strong arms propelled his body forward. Long legs kicking through the water, tight buttocks flexing with each commanding stroke.

She hadn't seen him naked in years, and she was intrigued by the scars—both old and new—that marred his sleek, tanned skin. She wondered how he'd gotten each one. A big part of her wished she had been the one who'd inflicted them on him, but alas, she hadn't laid a hand on the man since they'd parted ways in Paris all those years ago.

Her hands suddenly tingled with the urge to alter that. To pound into his flesh and administer pain, bruises, any kind of mark to serve as proof that she could cause him damage.

God, he deserved to die for what he'd done to her. So why did she continue to let him live? She used to tell herself it was because she wanted to torment him first, but lately she'd been questioning her motives. Wondering if maybe the reason she hadn't killed him was because she simply didn't want to see him dead.

But why not, damn it? All she'd ever dreamed of was wiping him out of existence, out of her life and her thoughts.

And clearly she wasn't the only one. Someone else wanted Jim terminated, someone who was willing to pay a small fortune to make it happen, and instead of acting like the professional she was and getting the job done, she'd come here to warn him.

To *warn* him, for fuck's sake.

A soft splash recaptured her attention, and she lifted her head in time to see Jim hop onto the deck. Water dripped from his warrior form, rivulets gathering between his heavy pecs, running down his rock-hard chest and clinging to his washboard abs. He was unconcerned with his nudity, unfazed by the erection jutting from his groin.

His arms rose in a lazy stretch, roped muscles bulging as his gaze found hers. His cobalt blue eyes gleamed mockingly.

“Say your piece and leave, Noelle.”

She rose from the deck chair with a careless shrug. “Someone wants you dead. Offered me five million big ones to eliminate you.”

Jim slanted his head. “Who?”

“Not sure. The client is using a middleman.”

“Interesting.” He swiped a towel from the stack on one of the lounge chairs and wrapped it around his trim hips.

The second his erection was out of sight, Noelle was able to breathe again. It sickened her that her body was capable of responding to his aroused state; her heart had actually skipped a beat and her core had ached with need.

She wasn't allowed to get turned on by Jim Morgan. It was a weakness she refused to possess.

"He gave me five days to get the job done," she added. "After that, the contract hits the open market—two million bucks for your head on a silver platter. It'll be an assassin free-for-all."

"Thanks for the heads-up," he said gruffly. "Any idea who the client might be?"

"No, but I can give you his associate's information. Gilles Girard, a lawyer in Paris." She took a step toward the flagstone path that led to the terrace. "Happy hunting, Jim."

"Did you take the job?"

She kept her back to him. "Of course. Turning it down might have raised a red flag."

"You planning on following through on it?"

"Nope."

His husky laughter grated. "Why not?"

"Why do you think? I'll kill you on my own terms, not under orders from some anonymous asshole."

"Right. You've still deluded yourself into thinking you're actually gonna off me."

She slowly turned around. The amused glimmer in his eyes made her want to reach for the pistol at the small of her back and shoot him right in that mocking mouth of his.

"Right back atcha, baby," she said softly.

"Oh, I already explained why I haven't killed you. I'm not done making you suffer."

"Whatever you say, Jim."

She took off walking again, but he came up beside her, matching her hurried strides.

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"What do you care?"

He ignored the question. "Back to Paris?"

"Yes," she said grudgingly.

"Good. I'll catch a ride with you, then. Give me twenty minutes to gather my gear."

He was on the terrace and marching inside before she could protest, leaving her standing there in annoyance. Presumptuous ass. She'd rather slit her wrists than let him board her jet.

*So why are you still here?*

The snide voice raised a valid point. Jim couldn't force her to give him a ride. All she had to do was walk out of the house, get into her car, and drive to the airstrip. Without him.

Or she could put a bullet in his brain and finally be done with him.

But Noelle chose neither of those options.

Instead, she lit up a cigarette, took a deep drag, and waited for Jim.

• • •

“You really think it’s a good idea to handle this alone?” D’s gravelly voice sounded from the doorway, where the tattooed mercenary stood with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

Morgan tossed a couple pairs of pants into his large black duffel, followed by a few T-shirts and a handful of rolled-up socks.

“No other choice,” he muttered as he packed. “I need my A-Team in Ecuador, and the rest of the men on other gigs.”

“Sully, Liam, and Ash are all off rotation,” D pointed out. “Take them with you.”

“No.”

“Morgan—”

“No,” he repeated. “I have no idea what I’ll find in Paris, and I’m not dragging anyone else into this until I know for sure what I’m up against. I’d rather they stay at the compound—you can call them in for backup if the rebel job gets too hairy.”

D scowled. “They’d be of better use serving as backup for *you*.”

“They stay here.” He spoke in a firm voice, refusing to yield to D’s menacing expression. No way was he endangering any of his men in what could very likely be a dangerous wild-goose chase.

As if reading his mind, D stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. “She could be fucking with you.”

Although Morgan had been entertaining the same notion, his brain kept dismissing it. He knew Noelle better than he knew himself, and he believed with absolute certainty that she’d told him the truth.

But what were her motives for sharing the information? The cynic in him assumed she’d come to gloat, but that didn’t sit right with him. As crazy as it was, he suspected she might have actually come to warn him.

Figure that one out.

“Nah, she’s on the up-and-up.” He checked the clip of his semiautomatic, shoved the weapon in a smaller canvas case, then stowed the gun bag in the big duffel. “Question is—who was stupid enough to hire an assassin to take me out?”

“Speaking of stupid, don’t go teaming up with her,” D said curtly. “If you don’t want to bring the boys, fine—that idiocy is on you. But at least work it solo, then. You can’t trust that woman.”

“No kidding.” Stifling a rush of resentment, he straightened up and met D’s coal black eyes. “Though I’m surprised to hear *you* dispensing the advice. Weren’t you the one cozying up to her for the better part of a

year?”

As usual, D’s expression remained shuttered. “Doesn’t mean I trust her.” There was a pause. “It’s over now, in case you were wondering.”

“Already knew that—never cared either way.”

“If you say so.”

Morgan could have sworn he glimpsed a flicker of amusement in the other mercenary’s deadly eyes, but if he had, it was gone now. Still, the idea that D didn’t believe him—no, even worse, that D was *challenging* him—made his blood boil.

As far as he knew, out of all the men in his employment, D was the only one who’d made use of previous connections to dig into Morgan’s past with Noelle, and it pissed him off that the man might’ve gained even a smidgen of insight about their turbulent history. Fortunately, D had raised the subject only once, never to mention it again.

But it still fucking grated.

“Anyway, if you need backup, just say the word.” With a shrug, D opened the door and disappeared into the hall.

Morgan finished packing his gear and left the room a moment later. He strode down the long hardwood corridor toward the east wing of the house, where Kane and Abby’s suite of rooms was situated. He’d heard them come upstairs a few minutes ago, and sure enough, they were in their bedroom when he knocked on the door.

“I’m taking off,” he said once Kane appeared in the doorway. “D’s got the details about the rebel job. Call if you run into any trouble.”

“Yes, sir.” Kane’s green eyes took on an irritated light. “Would you please consider taking backup? Sully and Liam are—”

“Staying here,” he finished, swallowing his own irritation. “I just had this same argument with D, and I’m not in the mood for a repeat performance. If I need help, I’ll call ’em. Until then, they stay here.”

“Fine.” Kane sighed. “Keep in contact, all right? Don’t go AWOL on us again.”

“I’ll try not to.” He peered past the man’s shoulders and nodded at Abby, who was perched on the edge of the bed. “Don’t even think about joining them in Ecuador, Sinclair.” He shot a pointed look at her stomach. “You’re grounded for at least another six months.”

“Don’t remind me.” The redhead sighed, her hand absently lowering to rub the slight bulge. “Christ, what am I going to do with myself? I’ve never had this much time off in my life. Is there such a thing as knife withdrawal?”

Morgan had to grin. Abby was probably the most skilled operative he’d ever worked with, but she was definitely way too fond of her knives. He wouldn’t be surprised if her and Kane’s kid popped out with an immediate case of bloodlust.

“I’m sure you’ll find ways to occupy yourself.” He glanced at Kane. “And you, don’t screw up this job. The



pay is too good.”

“Like you need any more money,” Kane cracked.

Chuckling, Morgan carted his duffel down the hall again. His scuffed-up combat boots didn’t make a sound as he descended one of the twin spiral staircases and stepped into the parlor.

When he slid out the front door, he found Noelle waiting on the pillared porch, a cigarette in her hand and a frown on her face.

“Let’s go,” he muttered.

She rolled her eyes disparagingly. “Yes, sir.”

They walked toward her Mercedes. The three feet of distance between them was nowhere near vast enough to reduce the tension surrounding them like a dark cloud. If anything, Morgan was even more on edge than before. They had a twelve-hour flight ahead of them, and he wasn’t looking forward to it in the slightest.

It suddenly occurred to him that for the first time in years, they were about to be alone together for more than five minutes.

Just the two of them. On a small jet. Tens of thousands of feet in the air.

Christ.

Maybe he should’ve packed a parachute, just in case.

## Chapter 3

*Nineteen years ago*

She was so beautiful, it hurt to look at her. The pictures in her file didn’t even come close to doing her justice, and Morgan was becoming far too distracted by her angelic looks.

*Remember the objective. Get the intel. Get out.*

Should’ve been easy as fuckin’ pie. As far as missions went, this one was considerably less bloody. No guns, no death—all he had to do was tap into his innate charm and seduce the information out of the girl. He’d done it a dozen times before.

So why couldn’t he seem to focus on the goal this time around?

“You really don’t act rich,” Noelle remarked.

“Tell me, baby, how does one *act* rich?”

The two of them were lying on the thick blanket he’d laid out in front of the fireplace. She’d joined him for dinner in his two-bedroom suite at the Lancaster Hotel, and after the room service staff had whisked their dishes away, Morgan had suggested they light a fire, one thing led to another, and now here they were. He on his back, Noelle stretched out beside him with her head nestled against his chest.

The sweet scent of her strawberry shampoo was driving him crazy. She smelled so damn good, felt so damn delicate in his arms. And he felt the need to kiss her so strongly that his lips were actually trembling.

Christ.

What the hell was wrong with him?

She was a tool and nothing more. A means to an end.

He had to remember that, for fuck's sake.

"All the rich people I know like to show off their wealth," Noelle murmured. "They dress wealthy, talk wealthy, go to wealthy places. But you don't seem at all interested in money."

"That's because I'm not," he said gruffly. "My parents left me a huge inheritance, but that doesn't mean I need to blow every dime, or wave my cash around so other people will think I'm important. At the end of the day, money is just paper. It means nothing."

"Maybe." She paused. "But power doesn't. Power means everything."

"Nah, power's overrated too."

His hand, of its own volition, began stroking her silky hair. He lazily twined one thick strand around his fingers, noting that in the light of the fire, the soft golden tresses almost seemed to be glowing.

"You only say that because you have it." Her voice grew strained. "I bet you've never let anyone have power over you, Jim. You'd never let anyone hurt you, would you?"

"I'd kill anyone who tried."

She fell silent, and her uneven breathing told him that she was troubled. The topic at hand didn't surprise him. Going into this mission, he'd already known everything about Noelle Phillips, including the abuse she endured at the hands of her stepfather. The information hadn't affected him before—simply another tool at his disposal—but when he'd seen her broken fingers the day they'd officially met...Christ, in that moment, his vision had turned into a red haze, and his rage had been so visceral he could feel it burning his throat even now.

The thought of anyone hurting her made him want to go on a shooting spree.

"I used to think that too. I was sure I'd never let anyone hurt me. I thought I was strong." Her voice wobbled. "But lately...I'm beginning to wonder."

He knew she was thinking about Laurent. The sadistic creep had been on Morgan's mind too. He didn't understand men like that. Men who beat up women, men who got off on victimizing what they perceived to be the weaker sex.

Needless to say, Morgan wouldn't mind it one bit if René Laurent accidentally took a fall down a flight of stairs one of these days.

But that was a different objective for a different day. Right now, there was only one man he needed to be concerned with: Douglas Phillips.

Noelle's biological father.

Unfortunately, she hadn't mentioned dear old Dad even once tonight, though Morgan had subtly coaxed her to talk. Then again, it was only their first date. He still had lots of time to gain the necessary intel.

*If* he could quit stroking her hair and actually concentrate on the damn job.

"You *are* strong," he said huskily. "Your strength was what drew me to you."

She laughed softly. "Bull. You just thought I was pretty."

Pretty. Ha. Biggest understatement of the year.

The girl was stunning.

For his own peace of mind, he found it necessary to keep referring to her as that—a *girl*. Otherwise he might do something stupid.

Like fuck her gorgeous brains out.

He couldn't sleep with her, though. She was seventeen years old, for Christ's sake. Too young and innocent for a man as jaded as him.

*She'll be eighteen in two months...*

He silenced the eager reminder. It didn't matter that she would be legal soon. He wasn't going to take advantage of Noelle Phillips any more than he had to.

"No," he corrected, "I thought you were *spectacular*."

"And what do you think now?"

She was teasing him, and damned if his heart didn't do a childish little somersault.

"I think you're perfect." His voice came out thick and gravelly.

"I'm not perfect, Jim. Nobody is." Her warm breath heated his neck as she sighed. "I try to be...I don't know...*good*, I guess. I try to be the person I know I should be. But sometimes, when I'm lying in bed, late at night...I think very bad thoughts."

His fingers tangled in her hair, tilting her head so he could see her eyes. The fierce look in those pale blue depths startled him.

"What kind of thoughts?"

"I fantasize about all the ways I would kill my stepfather." Guilt flashed on her face. "Isn't that sick?"

"No."

"No?"

"It's human nature to want to strike back against the people who've hurt you." Morgan hesitated. "He hurts you, doesn't he, baby?"

Her bottom lip quivered ever so slightly. “Yes.”

“What does he do to you?” Although he voiced the question, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Everything,” she whispered. “He does everything.”

Anger torpedoed into his chest, and if he hadn’t been lying down, the force of it would have knocked him right off his feet.

*Head in the game, man. You’re not here to protect her from Laurent. Focus.*

He choked down his rage, took a deep breath. Enough. He had to quit letting his emotions rule him. Otherwise he’d blow this entire mission.

“He’ll get what’s coming to him,” Morgan said quietly. “Evil men always do.”

Noelle’s loose red sweater rustled as she disentangled herself from his arms. “I don’t want to talk about René anymore. He’ll be out of my life soon enough.” She checked the expensive silver watch around her delicate wrist. “Actually, I should probably go. My mother doesn’t like it when I stay out late on school nights.”

“I’ll drive you home,” he said immediately, and the surprise that filled her gaze made him chuckle. “What?”

“You’ll drive me home, just like that?”

“Of course. Did you think I’d make you walk?”

“No, but...” She looked sweet and innocent as she nibbled on her lower lip. “I thought you’d be upset that I’m not...that we won’t...”

“Have sex?” he said knowingly.

She nodded.

“This is our first date.” He grinned at her. “I don’t put out on the first date, baby.”

Her melodic laughter wrapped around him like a warm blanket. “I didn’t expect you to be such a gentleman.”

“No?”

“You told me I was beautiful. And then you invited me to have dinner at your hotel.” A cynical note crept into her voice. “Other men would have tried to seduce me.”

Shrugging, he hopped to his feet and held out his hand. “I’m not other men,” he said lightly.

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