

Consuming Fire

An
Alexa Silben Novel



SAMPLE

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Chapter One

She was accustomed to coming here; she was an assassin embroiled in a sultry web of blackmail and deceit. The risks were burgeoning, jeopardizing her life, her career, her very soul, if she still had one. Desperate to find connections in the blackmailer's binding and lethal contracts, she strained to concentrate on linked details and to shut down every extraneous thought. And though her intent purpose was to eliminate the controlling influence behind these hits, the truth remained that acquiescing to the foreboding demands of an anonymous extortionist was making her not only an accomplice but was threatening the core of her very being. And ultimately, Alexa Silven had to concede that this was not the normal career of a fashion designer, nor was it the reason she'd spent an eternity in training to become an Olympic sharpshooter. She became tenacious that she would not continue to be this ogre's hired gun; her career and wellbeing depended on it! And her career ambitions should not have attracted dangerous liaisons; she needed to discern the root and identity of this evil entity that was pervading her life.

Nonetheless, there she was, hiding outside the familiar payoff site following her recent hit, as she waited impatiently for the commotion and panic to subside in the city. Where did this nightmare begin? Unfortunately, with the horrendous and fatal clash with her parents on the night she ran away to Paris, which was exactly what he threatened to expose. How he became privy to her involvement, information even the police couldn't prove, totally perplexed her. And when he revealed he was even aware of everything that happened in Paris, he became a predatory power to reckon with.

Ah, Paris. Alexa pragmatically acknowledged that shooting Ambassador Waters in Paris was not her finest moment. But extraordinary anger and distress had induced her actions, though she was totally unaware of the man's position and connections before she confronted him. But

sensibility had little influence; Silven knew incontestably that his heartless crime of assassinating her fiancée demanded immediate retribution, compelling her to revert back to her sharpshooting skills. And she wasn't impulsive in this decision; she was resolute and calculated, though her lack of compunction became a menacing complication that, if revealed, could derail her growing recognition in the fashion industry.

She'd escaped that traumatic nightmare in Paris and had fled back to America, but there would be no escape from her past. This creature, this ethereal blackmailer operating under the alias of Angelo, definitely knew her sullied history at home and abroad. Incriminating facts had arrived in old newspaper clippings and encrypted emails that she could not trace. Angelo had unique access to her in every venue of her life, affording him a callous margin of power and creating the only reason she was in this present predicament.

She was reluctant to enter the cold, dark and unsettling cathedral that seemed to accuse her, causing her guilt to overwhelm her. But the bleating sirens grew closer; only a few moments remained. She leaned against the coarse exterior wall and nervously drew a deep breath. She watched it wax white in the frosted air and gradually diminish from sight. She was deeply fatigued and weary of this villainous game into which Angelo had coerced her. Regret sent tears coursing down her cheeks. Each aspiration, every hard-earned dream was rapidly dissolving from her grasp. But then, she had learned from early childhood that dreams were elusive and hers, in particular, didn't matter. She swallowed hard and angrily wiped away the tears with the back of her gloved hand.

The sirens shrieked with closing proximity; Alexa proceeded to the door. As previously arranged, she found it unlocked. She slipped inside, muffling the piercing blasts as cops sped down the block. Immediately, Alexa steadied her back against the door and drew her Glock. Fixing her sights over the barrel, she scanned the length of the room. When she

could sense only shadows, she holstered the gun inside her jacket and focused her attention on the front of the room, where a dull light faintly glowed from a large brass cross, suspended above the platform. Alexa moved into the light and checked her watch.

As if on cue, the sidewalk streetlamps flared, casting fragmented lights through many split segments of stained glass. As the dark shadows within faintly lifted, the rows of pews came into manageable view and allowed her to move down the center aisle until she reached the seventh row, where she moved in and sat at the juncture of two benches. Carefully, her gloved fingertips explored the underside of the juncture and ripped the tape loose, freeing a sizeable manila envelope stuffed with large bills. Payoff cash. And, unfortunately, runways and fashion designing did have operating costs, elaborate and extensive expenses beyond even her greatest estimations.

But Alexa was not naïve; her blackmailer's intentions were not to support her legitimate career, but to buy her services, to buy her loyalty hit-by-hit, payoff-by-payoff. Every encrypted instruction, every dynamic of every fateful demand and ugly reminder was calculated by a hostile and spineless creature, operating from behind a cover, and leaving nothing to chance. Since his first message, Alexa was inextricably bound to him; she realized she could never escape her past; there was too much chalk on her blackboard and there would be eternal retributions. But she would make certain Angelo got his share of damnation.

She worked quickly and stuffed the bundle of bills into her coat pocket. As she surveyed his selection of surroundings, chosen to pain her conscience, she decided that her torment and manipulation were no longer in the approximated range of tolerance. Time was up for Angelo. Ridding the world of his presence would be ample payoff, perhaps even, redemption for her soul.

Alexa began formulating a plan in the secluded darkness and reviewed the clues to his identity. So far, her three contracts were men of local notoriety, with political connections. It was imperative to her survival to investigate their most recent activities, searching for any common threads that might unravel Angelo's identity. She leaned back on the pew, mulling over the missing pieces in this enigma, like Angelo's motivation in selecting her as his personal assassin, though obviously, as a former sharpshooter she was vulnerable. Though his ulterior motive was obscure, Alexa suspected it reached far beyond her.

She closed her eyes and memories of her fated quarrel with her father flooded her mind. She was fresh out of college, with an offer for an internship to train in Paris's top design house, but her father was immovable. Years of their rigorous training for her berth in the Olympics as a world-class sharpshooter had left him with tunnel vision, his, not hers. Even his congregation no longer mattered, not to mention her mother or her own dreams and goals. His every effort became selfishly centered on regaining an opportunity at Olympic sharp-shooting gold. That it would be a vicarious accomplishment didn't bother him because he planned to be there when she cashed the inevitable endorsement checks. But then he discovered her packed bags only a few nights after they'd triumphed in the qualifying finals, and it all came down and ended in one inevitable burst of his temper and reprehensible lack of self-control. That night, her mother sacrificed her life as she sustained the brunt of his angry blow, though no one would ever believe her respected father was capable of such a crime. Alexa stared at the stained glass windows, oddly shaped disjointed pieces of glass fighting to create a lucid image, just like her life.

She wiped her forehead and slipped out of the pew. She reached for the side door when flashing blue lights diverted her attention back to the stained glass windows. She dropped and crawled to the nearest window, impatiently leaning in for a closer look. A spotlight blazed through the

window, momentarily blinding her as footsteps crept around the building. In one continuous flow, the auburn-haired beauty pulled and cocked her weapon. She crept beneath a pew as the footsteps stopped at the side door. The grip on her gun tightened and she listened attentively to the door as it jarred open, allowing an abrupt shaft of light to explosively intrude. The cop stepped inside, gun drawn. He scanned the altar with the beam of his flashlight, then swept silently but deliberately across the pews. As the door slammed shut, Alexa edged out and stood to stretch. Immediately, the door opened and the light made a final sweep. She ducked behind the solid end of the pew, focusing the Glock's sights, but he exited and closed the door behind him.

Gun still drawn, Alexa watched until the car pulled away from the curb, flashing lights off, creeping like a cat prowling for a rat. She stayed well behind their search lights, sneaking into the shadows of the back alleys and creeping through narrow passages while avoiding streetlights and passing cars.

Within minutes, Alexa spotted the garage entrance to Oscarton's famously luxurious hotel where she held the coveted penthouse suite. She stuffed her blonde wig into her oversized bag and fluffed her hair before proceeding into the parking garage. Confidently, she approached the garage elevator but her attention was suspiciously diverted to several circular puffs of smoke floating lazily in the air, and noticed some cowboy boots crossed on the back of a chair.

"Wow! You're working late. Want me to send up a snack?"

She recognized Ray Talbert's voice as he emerged from behind a post, out for his evening break.

"Ray, you're really the best. Let me check the fridge and I'll call if I need something."

"Good enough! Let me know," Talbert smiled beneath his broad mustache.

“Ray, you’re actually willing to give up your break to make me a sandwich? That’s either admirable or crazy! Either way, it’s definitely appreciated. Thank you.”

Ray nodded and watched her disappear behind the elevator doors. He checked his watch and spoke to someone concealed in the shadows.

“That was close. Maybe we should consider meeting some place else?” he whispered.

Within moments Alexa stepped into her lavish apartment and laid her bag and gloves on the tiled foyer table, where she pressed a piece of tile beneath the overhanging counter top and a drawer shot out, revealing a hidden compartment large enough to cradle her gun and holster.

She found the refrigerator pitifully bare, just like her stomach. Sorting out Angelo’s identity and schemes would wait until morning, but she was still unnerved and desperately needed peace and quiet. If she could only get a little rest, be at the top of her game. Just a little rest was all she needed.

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Consuming Fire: An Alexa Silven Novel is a novel over 63,000 words and first in a series, that presents constant suspense, mystery, and intrigue fused with an underlying message of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

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1. Fiction—Suspense

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This book is dedicated to my family, with special acknowledgment to God for the inspiration, and to my son, Dan, my editor and motivator, and my son Mark, for technical assistance.