

# Murder by Design

Alexa Silben  
Returns



**SAMPLE**

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# Chapter One

There is a fine line between retribution and revenge, but both can exact the same results. Contemplations of which he could pursue, and still stay in the service of the FBI, first crept into Truman's consciousness as he followed Alexa's gurney into the ambulance and watched as the doors swung shut. He settled next to Alexa, imposingly radiant but comatose nonetheless, and he shivered as the total dynamics of regret turned to indignation, causing him to gravely consider crossing that fine line. Losing his job would be insignificant compared to the achievement of putting Legano six feet under, right alongside the assassin he'd hired to kill Alexa Silven. Now, here she lay, critically wounded and severely vulnerable, and as long as Legano lived, the assassin would not stop his cutthroat pursuit until he completed that mortal commission.

As the rescue squad pulled away, sirens screaming into the bleakness of the night, the paramedics and Mark Truman reached a tenuous arrangement that they would do their job and he would be permitted to do his, as long as he stayed out of their way. He squeezed into the corner of the speeding ambulance, but this FBI agent kept vigilant; this wasn't just any prisoner. This was the woman he undeniably didn't want to live without. The assassin was at large and though these paramedics were medically in charge, Agent Truman's vigilance and protection could benefit them, as well. And they couldn't deny these were points emphatically made.

Truman could feel a wall growing between his emotions and his sense of duty. He was expecting this lawless, no, make that misguided, but stunningly attractive lady assassin to revive momentarily if the bulletproof vest was able to prevent any irrevocable damage.

Mark Truman leaned in and whispered in Alexa's ear, "That was an amazing performance! Must be just another hidden talent!" This etched

out no response, so he spoke louder, “Alexa, it’s time to wake up. You’re safe now. Can you hear me? It’s over. Wake up, Alexa. Please, God, help me out here.”

The paramedics reached to undo the bulletproof vest. Suddenly, a stream of crimson blood surprised them all. They moved remarkably fast.

“Here! Hold this on the wound!” Marcia, the veteran paramedic and her partner-in-training, Mike, crowded him out. As her pulse rapidly faded, Alexa’s coat was torn open and a bullet was found buried in the vest, but this was not the source of the bleeding and their patient was quickly losing ground.

“Cardiac arrest! Sir, get out of the way! Clear!” the veteran paramedic snapped orders to her trainee.

Alexa’s body rose off the gurney with each jolt, and this procedure was repeatedly attempted as Marcia injected intracardiac epinephrine directly into her heart, but to no avail. Alexa showed no response, remaining oblivious to the drama and tragedy unfolding around her. But Truman was anything but detached. His love for this female murderer was now painfully undeniable, and his commitment to the FBI was becoming ever so increasingly compromised.

Flatline. Time stood still as a numbing voice uttered his worst fears. “I’m gonna call it. We’ve done all we can do. Time of death?”

“Oh, heck no!” Truman pointed to the paddles. “Hit it! Again!”

“It’s too late. You’ve got to let her go, agent.”

“There’s always hope!” Mark placed the paddles back into Marcia’s hands. “Is your shift ending? What have you got to lose?”

With a slight air of resentment, Marcia yelled, “Clear!” and hit her one more time as Mark Truman yelled passionately from his corner.

“Alexa, don’t even think about it! Don’t you leave me now!” he yelled. Then he whispered an earnest prayer and watched anxiously.

A second jolt and a bleep came faintly on the monitor, then stronger, until a continuous rhythm developed.

“Thank God!” Truman shouted.

Mark moved to her side and kissed her forehead. He took Alexa’s hands and rubbed them vigorously, bringing warmth to them. His gratitude to God overflowed but he seethed with indignation for the paramedics. He turned to them; they were busy stabilizing her IV and vitals. As calmly as possible, he called to them, “If you ever need anything, here’s my card. Like if you’re ever considering giving up on someone prematurely and need a second opinion, please call me, preferably before it’s too late.”

Marcia and Mike’s final service was to escort their patient to the emergency room where an entire team wasted no time prepping her for surgery.

In the O.R. waiting room, Truman continued pacing and praying while trying to establish how she got shot in the side. Exhausted, he sat in a chair and buried his face into his hands. As time dragged slowly on, Truman began fighting intense concerns about Alexa’s status, almost slipping into a state of panic, when he detected a strong grip resting on his shoulder. At the end of it was a courageous but somber face.

“Any word yet?” the preacher inquired.

“No, she may be in surgery a while,” Truman confided.

“This is all my fault,” the preacher quietly mumbled.

Standing, with his hands buried deep in his pockets, Truman resembled more of a little boy rather than an FBI agent, but his words were poignant.

“No, sir, it’s not. She’s a big girl; she knew what she was doing.” Truman intended to impart comfort, but the harshness of reality bit deeply into her father’s heart.

He buried his face in his hands but couldn’t hold back the eruption of tears and emotions. Truman handed him a cup of water from the cooler and allowed him time to recompose.

“Yes, she did, but I encouraged her down this path. It goes all the way back to her childhood and my domineering and selfish obsessions! They were all my dreams, my ambitions...not hers!”

In humiliating anger and self-debasement, he paced the hallway and softly prayed.

Suddenly one of the doors swung open and an attractive doctor emerged, pulling the mask from her face. “I’m Doctor Marshall. The Silven family?”

The preacher stepped forward. “I’m her father. Please tell me she’s alive!”

“I’m her surgeon. Though she survived the surgery, she’s still in a coma; we suspect it could be from the cardiac arrest. However, we were able to remove a bullet lodged near her kidney. We found minimal damage but there’s a complication. If she makes it through the night, that’ll be a good sign. We’ll keep a close eye on her tonight. Hopefully, she’ll be out of danger soon. You’ve had a long night; you should go home and get some rest. She’s in excellent care; we’ll call you if there’s any change.”

“Doctor, I’ve spent too many years trying to find her. I’m staying right here. I’ll sleep on the floor, but I’ll be there when she wakes up,” the preacher insisted.

“We’ll let you know when you can come in,” she nodded politely and shook his hand.

“Thank you, Doctor Marshall. Thank you for everything and may God bless you for saving my little girl.”

“You know it was a team effort. I’m on his team; he does the saving!” Dr. Marshall smiled.

“It’s quite a virtue to remain humble in your occupation, doctor,” Alexa’s father spoke most appreciatively. The doctor again nodded and left the room.

The preacher turned to Truman and offered him his hand. “Why don’t you join me? I could use some company to help me stay alert, just in case she wakes up.”

“You sure? I mean, don’t you want some private time?” Truman shook his hand rather vigorously.

“Son, I know you two are in love. I don’t know how she might react if she wakes up and finds me there. But you could help keep her calm and reassured. Please, consider staying, for her sake and mine.”

“Say no more. I was hoping I could hang around,” Truman smiled, “but how did you know? I mean, about us?”

“It’s in your eyes and it’s in her voice. I hope it works out for you both. Somehow, we have to hope beyond hope that God provides a way out of this mess. And what a mess it is!”

Truman and the preacher settled into chairs outside Recovery, but waited for hours before Dr. Marshall called in her dad to speak words of encouragement to Alexa. And though his track record left him insecure, and he was totally certain she couldn’t hear him, the doctor convinced him that his words were registering in her unconscious mind, and that every word would be essential to her recovery.

“I know it’s not normal procedure, but please, may Agent Truman come with me? His words could go a long way,” her dad entreated.

Mark stood at the foot of her bed, patiently observing and waiting his opportunity to speak to her. Her father pulled up a chair and sat by her side, leaning over the edge of her bed and softly taking her hand in his. The reformed preacher unraveled his changed life since she left their home. He revealed how her mother had regained consciousness in the hospital and her dying wish was for him to know she had forgiven him. He continued asking her forgiveness throughout the entire story and occasionally stopped for water to clear the choking in his throat. A more penitent man, Truman had never seen. He knew more about Alexa Silven now than he ever hoped to know and the bond that he felt forming with her father would be something he would cherish long into the remainder of his life. If he knew Alexa at all, there was no chance she would not forgive her father and mend the burned bridges of their estranged relationship.

After Alexa's father was emotionally exhausted, he motioned for Truman to take over. He needed some rest.

"I think I'll just go get some coffee, but I'll be right back. Just need a little boost. Do you want anything?" the preacher inquired.

Truman took his elbow and escorted him outside the recovery room door. He didn't want Alexa to even possibly hear the ensuing conversation.

Mark turned to Alexa's father with a quizzical expression, "Just need to know one thing, Pastor John. What's your complete name, John O'Siloven?"

"You can't hide anything these days!" the minister dropped his head. "I don't blame Alexa for not wanting to associate with that name. It doesn't bear many happy memories."

"You know, she probably shortened her name because she didn't want anyone to find her after she left America," Truman offered.

“No doubt, Mark. And of course, she didn’t know I was alive; she probably was hoping I was dead,” Pastor John concluded.

“Well, now she’s fighting for her life and she needs you just as much as she did when she was a child and called you ‘daddy.’ She’s forgiven you; you’ve got to put the past behind you and focus. And I’ve got to convince the Bureau that she will turn Federal witness, or when she leaves here, neither of us may see her again. Chief Meredith will be posting guards outside her door soon; I’ve asked him to wait at least until she regains consciousness. I’m watching her for now.”

Truman started near the door and turned back to her father, “Pastor John, I think you’d better know that the man who did this to her is a professional and he’s still out there,” Truman paused. “We’re looking for him, but I think she’s going to have to enter our witness protection program if she’s to survive.”

“Alexa won’t agree to that. She’d never leave her design business.”

“Then you’re going to have to help me convince her!” Truman was adamant.

“Of course you’re right, but she’s headstrong. She’s learned from a master, you know, not that I’m proud of it.”

“I wish I knew some other way out of this, sir. I’ve been all over this in my head and I can’t see another solution that would be as safe as this. I put my best plan into effect and yet, here she is,” Truman’s stinging self-condemnation was palpable.

“I know you must have provided that bulletproof vest and I’m amazed you talked her into it. Don’t blame yourself,” her father drew a deep breath. “You must have taken every precaution necessary. She must have known danger was increasing around her.”

“Right, so don’t you see how important it was to her to run to you, anyway?”



Her father wiped his eyes and muttered, "I think I'll go for that coffee now. I'm praying and trusting she'll be fine, no infections and no lasting coma. I'm believing her healing will be complete, in all respects."

He left for the lounge vending machines and Truman could barely hear him quietly muttering, "From my lips to your ears, Lord."

Truman silently entered Recovery and assumed the seat next to her bed. He wasted no time trying to convince her that they could be together if she'd agree to the witness protection program. When her blood pressure fluctuated, the nurse stepped in and told him to change the topic. Alexa began to relax as Mark described the moment he realized he'd fallen in love with her. He found it easier to express with her in her current state of unconsciousness, so he continued bravely with all his hopes and dreams for their future.

"It's good," Dr. Marshall entered the room. She noted her vitals and restated her diagnosis, simply and succinctly. "Yes! I don't know what you've said to her, but she's coming out of it!"

"Right now?" Truman inquired.

"Yes," her physician responded, with a dental poster smile.

"Do you think she heard everything I said?" Truman's warming complexion heated the atmosphere.

"Apparently, she must have! But what's wrong with that?"

"Doc, I can't begin to explain everything that's wrong with it. But please, what's the prognosis?"

"Well, her temperature is only slightly elevated. Her color's coming back. I think the chances are good she'll have a full recovery; no major organs were affected. We'll keep a close eye on her. But ...OK! Here she comes!"

Alexa's head rolled slowly in Truman's direction. She opened her eyes but it took a few moments for her to focus. And when she did, a weak but stunning smile crossed her lips.

"Mark, it is you. I heard your voice...thought I was dreaming." Alexa spoke with muddled words. "Could I have some water?"

"Welcome back, Alexa! Thank God!" Mark Truman gushed. "Sure, I'll get the waiter." Truman stuck his head out the door and caught an orderly's attention, "Hey, you! Water! STAT!"

The doctor laughed and motioned Truman to join her outside the door.

"Looks like you've got this under control," she winked, "so she'll need to get some rest tonight. We'll be taking her to her room soon."

With a gently reassuring pat on his shoulder, the doctor left Recovery before Truman could respond. Taking a moment to calm down his excitement, Truman went to the bathroom down the hall to freshen up and consider his future options. It was either to protect Alexa, his way, or stay loyal to the FBI. Somehow, he intended to do both, but working covertly within the ranks of the FBI was something he knew nothing about...and never thought he would. As he returned to the hallway, busily convincing himself that he would never betray the Bureau, he noticed an unusually masculine nurse with long, dark, curly hair enter the hallway from the supply closet and proceed to Alexa's room.

His agent's intuition went haywire and he followed her at a respectable distance, breaking into a slow jog while focusing on her every move.

The nurse quietly opened the door to Alexa's room and cautiously checked for visitors, then stealthily walked over to check her IV, drawing out a hypodermic and removing the protective cap. Truman watched from the doorway and immediately took note of the shaggy-haired nurse's scrub booties stretched over a size ten pair of men's wing tips. He couldn't help but notice the five o'clock shadow, as well.

Intensely focused and exuding an air of confidence, the nurse attempted to insert the needle into the IV bag, thumb poised on the piston. But Truman rushed him, shouting, "FBI! Drop it!" while he jumped and landed a flying right cross to the imposter's jaw, violently knocking him off his feet and sending the syringe sailing out of his hand and his black wig to the floor. Truman again shouted, "FBI! You're under arrest!" But he was caught off guard by an elbow planted firmly in his gut. Truman doubled over, struggling to catch his breath and reached inside his jacket for his gun, when the man lunged at him, knocking the weapon from his hand. Truman surprised him with a high intensity fist to his chest. The man stumbled backwards and while gasping for air, he limped from the room, leaving his black wig on the floor near Alexa's bed.

Truman recovered his gun and took a moment to catch his breath. He was headed out the door, when the same assassin's face was pressed into the window of Alexa's room, with a Glock .22 to his head. While securing his hands behind his back, Sandy Fuller was mumbling barely coherent comments of a distinctively uncomplimentary nature.

Between deep but even breaths, Truman and his FBI undercover partner locked eyes and a silent pact occurred. Truman nodded and grinned at Sandy; she always had his back and she knew he'd be there for her.

"Well, fancy meeting you here. Good timing, partner. I've got to admit, I'm surprised to see you." Mark kept his distance, trying to control the urge to flatten the assassin on the spot.

"Glad to be of service. I requested Alexa's room security and I could hear the commotion halfway down the hall! Timing was strictly fortuitous." Tightening her captive's cuffs, she continued, "This ugly thing was leaving a blood trail into the stairwell that even a blind bloodhound could follow. Is she OK? Because if he did anything to Silven, I think this scumbag might just get shot while trying to escape."

Truman blew out one long breath, “He didn’t get a chance to carry out his plan. The needle’s on the floor. I think she’s OK.” Finally standing completely erect, he took another deep breath, “This guy and his wig do look quite familiar.”

“Is he the same jerk that shot her from the church balcony?” Sandy pressed the button on her shoulder mic and called for backup and Forensics. “Let’s find out.”

“Good idea; we’ll get some DNA and confirm whether it matches the evidence found in the balcony.”

While Fuller read him his rights, Truman turned his attention to a doctor as she arrived.

“Let’s get his side patched up before we haul him in. He’s bleeding everywhere. Save some for the lab, will ya?” Then he suggested to Fuller, “And bag that wig over there!”

The doctor opened his shirt, “Looks like he’s broken through a few stitches! Wow, did you do this yourself?” She spoke to Truman, “This looks like a stab wound!”

“I recovered this Taser and this snub nose .38 from one ankle and this nasty Buck blade from his other ankle,” Fuller laid the weapons out. Backup arrived and the two cops accompanied the suspect and Dr. to another room.

As they disappeared, Fuller turned to her partner, “Truman, you know that either way, this is Alexa’s assassin and he’s got to be turned over to the Bureau. We’ve got to be careful; watch every step,” she asserted.

“Yeah, save it for later, OK? I’ve got a few kinks to work out.”

“No, we’ve got a few kinks to work out and I’ve got a plan; or make that part of a plan.” Now, Fuller drew a deep breath as half of the hospital staff converged upon them, led by hospital security.

Dr. Marshall and three nurses moved directly to Alexa's bedside. Reassured, she turned with apologetic resolve, and spoke directly to Truman.

"She's got to have better protection, guys!"

As they cleared the room, Preacher John O'Siloven entered, inquiring about the commotion. Hearing Alexa groan, her father moved to her side and gently pulled the hair from her forehead, bending to give her a kiss.

"Was that man trying to hurt Alexa? Was that the assassin who shot her?" He stared at Truman in horror.

"In custody, sir; he will never hurt her again, I promise you."

"And I promise you, too, Preacher John!" Daniel Gother entered the room, determined and defiant. "If the Oscarton Police Force and the FBI can't protect Alexa, we can...and we will. Fuller briefed me. She's got a plan."

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# **Murder by Design: Alexa Silven Returns (Free Sample Chapter)**

by C.B. Hoffmann

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*Murder by Design: Alexa Silven Returns* is a novel over 44,000 words and second 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

Editor Dan Hoffmann

Cover Design and Photography Dan Hoffmann

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