



SYDNEY CROFT

# TEMPTING THE FIRE

‘Sydney Croft writes the kind of books I love to read!’

*Lara Adrian*

R UGE  
SUSPENSE



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## About the Book

Extreme heat. Extreme hunger. A jungle Eden ablaze with temptation.

Deep in the Brazilian rain forest, a sinister and superhuman creature has nearly wiped out a team of Navy SEALs, leaving sole survivor Chance McCormack and sending shockwaves through the Agency for Covert Rare Operatives (ACRO). Now agents Sela Kahne and Marlena West must head into the unforgiving jungle in pursuit of the mythical monstrosity with a taste for human blood.

Sela, an expert in cryptozoology, and Marlena make contact with Chance in the hope of tracing the creature. Meanwhile, Logan Mills, the man who rescued Chance, is already leading his private company of men on a hunt that has nothing to do with saving lives. However Sela, determined to extract information about the monster they are seeking, has a supernatural talent that she will put to work on Logan; when she makes love to a man, she engulfs his innermost thoughts.

But in this sweat-drenched realm of danger and deception, Logan is more than just a passive target. He has the power to lead a highly-trained seducer into a jungle without any rules, without any limits - and no end to the heat.

## About the Author

Sydney Croft is the alter-ego of Larissa Ione and Stephanie Tyler, who came together to blend their very different writing interests into adventurous tales of erotic paranormal fiction. Though they love to write together as Sydney Croft, they also write individually.

As Sydney Croft, they are the authors of *Riding the Storm*, *Unleashing the Storm*, *Seduced by the Storm*, *Taming the Fire*, *Tempting the Fire* and *Taken by Fire*, which are all available from *Rouge*.

Other books by Sydney Croft:

*Riding the Storm*  
*Unleashing the Storm*  
*Seduced by the Storm*

*Taming the Fire*  
*Taken by Fire*

# TEMPTING THE FIRE

**Sydney Croft**



## PROLOGUE

Chance McCormack had been given his name about three minutes after being born on the floor of a Las Vegas casino, his mom too busy playing craps to care about something as unimportant as labor pains.

“We’re from strong stock—farm stock,” she used to tell Chance, who wouldn’t bring up the fact that she’d never lived remotely close to a farm in her life and that her entire family had been born in Manhattan. But she seemed to enjoy having that make-believe become a part of her life and Chance never had the heart to break her out of fairy-tale mode.

She had a pretty shitty life and if telling stories like that made her happy, he was all for it.

And so Chance had grown up on the edge, skating the thin line between right and wrong and counting on luck of the draw to carry him through.

Today, though, he had a sickening feeling that his luck might’ve run out, had known something was wrong the second he stepped into the goddamned jungle, and it had nothing to do with the tangos waiting in ambush. His SEAL team had taken care of most of them, cleanly, efficiently and, most important, silently.

So yeah, a typical mission with the typical shit going down, and still, unease sat in his gut like a fucking boulder.



Sweat trickled down his back, when suddenly, inexplicably, he shivered.

He heard breathing and it wasn't his, wasn't Billy's or Campbell's or Joe's. No, it was a harsh sound. Inhuman.

He gripped the butt of the rifle so hard his fingers were nearly blue, kept his eyes level to the horizon and tripped before he took three steps.

Billy. The only way he could identify the SEAL was the patch on the uniform.

All that was left of the man beyond the bones was the skin on his face, his mouth stretched into a mask of horror. His eyes were wide open, as if looking over Chance's shoulder.

As if warning him.

Chance stiffened, held tight to his M14 and turned to face a wall of fetid breath. He readied for the fight of his life, knowing that, for as long as he lived, he would remember the red eyes of the beast staring back at him.

He knew there wasn't time to scream if he was going to make it out of this alive.

## CHAPTER *One*

SELA KAHNE SAT AT her desk, staring at the computer screen and wondering why she hadn't taken one more day of vacation time. An extra day would have meant another layer of tan on her normally pale skin, another couple of chapters of the latest James Patterson novel read and a few more hours' reprieve from typing up reports that all said the same thing in conclusion: *HOAX*.

She sighed heavily and reached for the bag of Skittles she kept on her desk. She popped two into her mouth and cringed. She'd lost a filling during her vacation and desperately needed to see a dentist.

"ACRO's dentists are the best in the area," Torrence Olivia, the only other psychic besides Sela who worked in the agency's Covert Rare Operatives' Cryptozoology department, said as she walked by.

"I hate it when you do that," Sela grumbled, mainly because her own psychic ability was restricted to reading people only during orgasm.

"Hon, I didn't do anything. You have *dentist* written on your to-do list." Torr tapped the notepad next to the computer with a crimson-painted nail.

"Oh."

"What's wrong?" Torrence crossed her arms over her chest, her dark skin contrasting beautifully with her cream

blouse. “You just got back from vacation. You should be vibrant. Unless ... was Puerto Rico not as relaxing as it should have been?”

Sela stiffened. “How did you know I was in Puerto Rico?”

“Hello?” Torr tapped her temple. “Psychic.”

She never knew whether or not Torr was kidding when she said things like that, but given that Sela had told everyone, including her immediate boss, Mitch, she was going to the Bahamas, she could only assume that Torrence had gone psychic on her.

“You didn’t tell anyone, did you?” Not that her change of plans had been a huge secret, but she was supposed to have been drinking fruity cocktails on a beach instead of investigating the origins of el chupacabra.

She couldn’t wait to debunk the myth of the “goat sucker” once and for all. Confirming that the crazy things people believed in were false was a passion of hers, and it made her one of the few cryptozoologists in the field who was in it to *disprove* mythical creatures’ existence.

And the cryptid she wanted the most to prove didn’t exist was the one highlighted in the book in front of her, *Chupacabra: Myth No More*. The author, an eccentric, egomaniac billionaire she’d met half a dozen times at cryptozoological society gatherings, claimed to have spent years in the jungles of Central America observing chupacabra behavior like one of those nuts who infiltrated a pack of wolves.

*The chupacabra is a solitary creature that will kill others of its kind, though they do appear to mate for life. They give birth to a single offspring, which is capable of living on its own within six months. Males are larger than females, and they mark their territory by spraying scent and clawing trees and fences. Their ability to heal from wounds is nothing short of*

*amazing, something I witnessed after a young female was attacked and nearly killed by a jaguar ...*

What a freaking blowhard con artist. The book had made Parker Grady a celebrity in the cryptozoological circles, but Sela thought it only made him look like an idiot.

“Earth to Sela ...” Torr waved her hand in front of Sela’s face. “I just said I won’t tell anyone about Puerto Rico. It’s not my place.” She shoved her glasses up on her nose. “I’m going down to the lab. Oh, I almost forgot—a messenger delivered that package on your desk. He said after you watch it, you’re supposed to call Dev.”

Dev. The big boss. Head of ACRO, whom she rarely saw... and she preferred it that way. He hadn’t exactly hired her under normal circumstances five years ago, and while she didn’t regret how she’d come to ACRO, she did feel a little sleazy about it.

Twenty-one, cocky and just sure she was smarter than ninety-five percent of the planet’s population, she’d pretty much forced her way into the agency. Only later had she realized that Dev could have taken her apart and made her disappear so completely there wouldn’t have been a trace that she’d ever existed.

For some reason, he hadn’t. He’d played her game, let her believe she had the upper hand ... and even after she figured out Dev had been one move ahead of her from the beginning, he never rubbed it in. But he knew she knew. It was in his gorgeous brown eyes every time he saw her.

*Stop thinking about it.*

She shook out of her past, out of the things she’d done before she’d come to the Crypto department, and opened the padded envelope. Inside was a DVD. She slipped the disk into her computer, entered her individual access code and palmed a handful of Skittles.

The screen filled with trees. Thick brush, vines ... a jungle. The camera shooting the scene was in motion—a

helmet-cam? Yes, definitely. The person wearing the camera turned to the side, and she made out two men in camouflage, their faces painted, their rifles aimed and braced against their shoulders.

She popped a piece of candy into her mouth, remembering too late to chew on the left side. Pain shot from her molar into her skull.

On the screen, one of the men made a hand signal, and the camera panned to the right. Slowly, it moved forward. The camera jolted and then focused on the ground.

Sela slapped a hand over her mouth to hold in a gasp of horror. What was left of a man lay strewn about on the forest floor, his bloody mouth frozen in a terrified grimace.

And all hell broke loose. The sound of guns firing, men shouting and *something* screeching had Sela reaching for the volume.

The camera jerked around wildly, giving her only glimpses of the action, but what she saw sent chills up her spine. The men seemed to be fighting off some sort of creature. It moved fast, and if the film could be trusted, it had red eyes and huge fangs.

What the *hell* was it?

Suddenly, the camera stopped moving, its angle skewed, apparently lying on the ground. Sela saw clawed, scaly feet approaching. Her heart shot into her throat, blocking the candy as she tried to swallow. Between the thing's legs she could see the men. Well, parts of them, lying in a growing pool of blood.

A snarl vibrated the camera, and then there was a gaping mouth, a splatter of blood on the lens ... and all went black.

Sela choked on her own breath. Dear God, those men had been ... slaughtered. Dismembered, disemboweled.

Her phone rang, and she nearly bit her tongue. She'd seen some gruesome things during her career as a

cryptozoologist, but nothing could have prepared her for seeing humans torn apart before her eyes.

She picked up the phone with a shaky hand. "Sela."

"It's Dev. You watched the video?"

"Yes."

"Meet me at my office in ten minutes." He hung up, and she slumped back in her chair. Something told her it was a good thing she hadn't unpacked yet.

ANNIKA SVENSON WASN'T READY FOR ANOTHER ROUND OF your-lover-is-an-ass with Dev, but Gabe was fucking impossible to deal with. The guy had learned to go invisible with more control, which was great, but he was relying on his invisibility to get him out of trouble. Which meant that he was slacking off on learning the basics of self-defense, combat and intelligence work. He had yet to figure out that no matter how great your gift was, something could always circumvent it.

Everyone had a kryptonite.

Creed was hers, and speak of the sexy devil, he was just leaving Dev's office, so things were looking up. Grinning, she waved as he started down the old military building's steps, but he didn't see her because he'd been accosted by Sela Kahne.

Sela's black hair fell in a severe angle, shorter in the back to longer in front, coming down just below her jawline, but as she looked up at Creed, she tucked one side behind her ear, which was pierced all the way around. Creed, being pierced *everywhere*, probably loved that.

Not that Annika was jealous. Creed wasn't going anywhere, and if he tried, Annika would kill him.

Simple as that.

Still, she really wanted to slap the smile off Sela's face. Annika had never been overly fond of the woman, whom she mostly saw only in passing, but the way she was looking at Creed, with a little too much familiarity, made

Annika's electrical battery charge up. Lightning tingled on the surface of her skin, and she had to take a deep breath to calm herself. Anyone who touched her right now—anyone but Creed—would get a nasty shock.

"Hey, baby," Creed said, when he saw her approach.

She mounted the steps until she reached him, smiling when he hooked an arm around her neck and tucked her next to his big body. He always knew how to handle her, knew when she needed a little extra attention or needed to be left alone.

Sela nodded in greeting. "Annika." She looked at Creed again, all smiles and exotic green eyes. "Nice seeing you."

"You too."

Sela headed up the steps, and once she'd disappeared into the two-story building, Annika peeled away from Creed. "I don't like how she looks at you."

Creed cocked a dark eyebrow, making the piercing there climb up. "How does she look at me?"

"Like she wants to lick your tattoos." Which weren't truly tattoos, since he had been born with every single one of the Native American symbols that covered his entire right side from head to toe.

Creed just laughed. "She didn't lick them."

"I know that." Annika rolled her eyes. "I don't think she'd just walk up to you in public and—" Wait. Something about the way he'd said Sela *didn't* lick them ... and the familiarity in her eyes ...

"Oh, my God," Annika breathed, which was difficult, because a band of jealousy had just wrapped around her chest. "You slept with her."

Creed's big brown eyes got a whole lot bigger. "Ah ... I thought you knew."

"Why the hell would I know?"

"Because that's how she came to ACRO."

This time when her body flooded with electricity, she didn't bother tamping it down. Maybe Sela would come

back out and “accidentally” touch her. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I just figured Dev would have told you back when it happened.” Creed tugged on his jacket a little uncomfortably, and yeah, Annika would just bet he was sweating despite the cool spring breeze. “Sela and I, uh ... we got together for a night. Years ago. She didn’t know about ACRO, but she’s—”

“Sexually psychic,” Annika ground out. “I know. She was assigned as a Seducer when she first came here.”

“Yeah. She read me during sex. Found out about ACRO.”

“So ... what? She blackmailed you? Said she’d spill the beans about ACRO if she didn’t get a job?” Actually, Annika didn’t see that happening; Dev would’ve had Sela shut up if he’d believed she was a true danger to the agency.

Creed sighed. “After she left my place—”

“She was *at your place*? In the bed *we* share now?” Annika’s voice had gone shrill enough to make Creed wince, but she didn’t care. Didn’t care that she was acting like some sort of jealous fishwife either. She’d never really gotten too worked up over the scores of skanky women she’d run into who had bedded Creed, because they had been disposables who didn’t work at ACRO.

But Sela ... she wasn’t one of the bar whores Creed had fucked before he’d gotten together with Annika. She was beautiful, intelligent and ... right here in the same organization.

Now Annika knew how Creed had felt when he discovered her lessons with one of the male Seducers years earlier.

“Annika, it was a long time ago. And it was just the once.” Of course it was. His ghostly guardian, Kat, had never let him sleep with any woman besides Annika more than once or twice. He ran his hand through his shoulder-length hair. “She spent a couple of days afterward investigating ACRO. I think she must have seduced a gate



guard or something. She came back to my house and laid out what she knew ... and insisted on meeting Dev. I arranged it, and Dev hired her. Simple as that. I hardly ever see her anymore."

"I hate her." It was a childish, stupid thing to say, but whatever. Annika had never been in a relationship before, thanks to her tendency to shock men to death during orgasm, and even though she'd come a long way, maturity-wise, she still had relapses. Like now.

Creed smiled, the one that made her stomach flutter, and then he cupped the back of her head and brought her in for a gentle kiss. "You have nothing to worry about, you know."

That fast, she calmed down. "I know," she sighed. "I don't doubt you at all."

"Something's wrong, isn't it? You've been restless lately."

She had. She'd been a mix of extra-clingy and extra-distant. Their relationship had been going well, though Creed had been increasingly anxious when she went off on missions.

"No idea. I've just been tired, I think."

Creed frowned. "You're never tired."

"I know. It's weird. Maybe I'm getting old."

His hand came down on her shoulder, and he bent to look her straight in the eyes. "You got your birth control shot, right? *Right?*"

Well, if that didn't just chill her blood. And piss her off at the same time. No way in hell did she want a kid, but for some reason, the way he said it, like having one with her would be a horrible tragedy, set her the fuck off.

"Well, duh," she snapped. "How stupid do you think I am?"

The immunization ACRO had developed to prevent pregnancy in females, and disease in both sexes, was required for all operatives who worked the kinds of

missions that might require them to screw someone. Annika had never needed it, but now that she was with Creed and sleeping with him, she'd been anal about getting the quarterly boosters.

"Whoa." He held up his hands and took a step back. "Just checking. You've been moody and tired."

"Moody?"

"Ah ... well ..."

"*Moody?*" Oh, she'd show him moody. She spun around and took the steps two at a time. The thud of heavy boots followed her, and she wheeled back to him with a snarl. Creed drew up like he'd hit a wall. "Don't. You wouldn't want to touch me and get me pregnant or something."

He blinked. "Are you upset because you *want* kids?"

"Hell, no, I don't want any little drooling rug rats!" A couple of guys dressed in the standard ACRO uniform—black BDUs—stared as they walked past, and she flipped them off. But she also lowered her voice. "But you know, you could at least pretend that it wouldn't be the end of the world if I did get pregnant."

Except, it would be, because she'd been raised by CIA monsters to be a robotic killing machine with no morals or feelings, and she wouldn't even know where to start raising a kid. She wasn't mother material and never would be. Apparently, Creed agreed, because his face markings stood out starkly as his tan skin paled.

"It wouldn't be the end of the world, but—"

"But what?" Fuck. She had no idea what she was upset about. At all. But she kept getting angrier and more irrational by the second.

"It's just ... it's something we should talk about," he said quietly.

A weight settled in her gut, which had started churning. She knew he wanted kids. He knew she didn't. It was a reality they'd have to face eventually, but she didn't want it to be now.

“I have to go.”

“Annika—”

“Later.”

She took off as if she had a fire lapping at her combat boots' heels. God, how long had it been since she'd walked away from Creed in a moment of anger? A year, at least. And here she was, reverting back to her old self, and why?

Because he'd asked her if she was current on her birth control?

Of course she was ... wasn't she?

As she jogged through the little park in the middle of the base, she recalled her last visit to medical. She'd had a question for Kira, ACRO's most talented animal whisperer, but the woman hadn't been at the kennels or stables where she usually was. Annika had had to track her down at ACRO's day care facility, where Kira's triplets stayed while she and Ender were working.

Annika hadn't been breathing in the scent of baby powder and diapers for even two minutes before she'd practically run out of there and had gone straight to the medical facility, where she'd demanded a shot—four weeks early.

That had been three months ago. Three months and three and a half weeks ago, actually.

Oh, God.

Annika clutched her belly as a wave of nausea rolled through her. She was overdue.

Over. Due.

Fuck.

She glanced at her watch. She had to teach a class in half an hour. That gave her enough time to jump in the Jeep and head to a drugstore.

Five minutes after that, she should know if her world was still safe and sound.

Or if it had just ended.

SELA COULD STILL FEEL THE BURN OF ANNIKA'S EYES IN THE middle of her back as she entered Dev's office. He was sitting at his desk, grumbling at a PDA, which he put aside when Sela sank into a chair.

"Things were so much easier when I was blind," he sighed, and she had to admit, he'd been scary-efficient as a blind man. Now he seemed more harried. He didn't miss a beat, though, and pushed a file at her. "You're going to South America. Brazil, near the Colombia border."

"To investigate what I saw on the video?"

He nodded and ran his fingers through his spiky brown hair. "Any idea what might have attacked those men?"

"I can't say. It looked like some sort of animal, but I'd rather not speculate until I learn more." And animal, her ass. It looked like a monster.

His smile was slow and all-knowing in that freaky way of his. "How was Puerto Rico?"

Christ, did everyone know about her trip? "It was as enlightening as I expected it to be," she said. "Which means I found no new evidence that suggests chupacabras are real." She tapped the folder. "And if you're thinking that a chupacabra attacked those men, well, that's not likely."

"Because they don't exist?"

"That, and even if they did—which I don't believe they do—the Amazon isn't a hotbed of reported chupacabra activity." Except, she'd checked the logs before she left her office, and recently there *had* been a number of sightings in the region, as well as an increase in bizarre livestock deaths.

"This is why you're perfect for the job. You're a skeptic, so you'll be going in without any preconceived ideas."

Sela grumbled. She hated the jungle. "I do have a preconceived idea. I think it's probably a jaguar or gorilla." A deformed, superfast, superstrong jaguar or gorilla. Which was almost as unlikely as the chupacabra. "Who were the men?"

Dev sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Well, this is where it gets interesting," he said, as if the mysterious cryptid wasn't the most fascinating part. "They were SEALs on a mission. Obviously, not easy to kill, but whatever attacked them took out the entire team. One is MIA, presumed dead."

"Maybe the MIA is responsible."

"Could be. Can't rule out anything yet."

"And the Navy wanted our help on this?" Seemed a little extreme for them to call in ACRO, but then, as a secret paramilitary organization, ACRO had covertly worked side by side with all of the branches of the military for years.

"The Navy didn't contact us." He gestured to the thick file. "It's all in there. You can catch up on the plane. Can you leave in an hour?"

"I'm already packed." She flipped through the folder's contents but didn't stop on any particular page or photo. "Am I going alone?" Usually she went with another cryptozoologist and a small contingent of specialists to assist in photography, research, electronics, etc., if the mission wasn't deemed to be dangerous. If it was, ACRO sent her with all of that plus a security team.

Dev's long pause sent a chill up her spine. "You're going with Marlana."

"Marlana?" Sela frowned. "Your secretary?"

"She's no longer my assistant. She's a Seducer now. She's fully trained, but this will be her first real mission."

"Ah ... forgive me, sir, but why in the world would I be taking a Seducer on a crypto assignment?"

"Because this is more than a mission to find a mysterious species. Two weeks before the attack, a company called Global Weapons Corporation set up camp near where the SEALs were killed. Satellite photos showed that the camp was still there as of three days ago, but now it's gone and can't be located. However, I have intel that indicates they're in the area. It's possible that GWC was

either hired to take out those SEALs, or they used the team as a test for their creation.”

“The creation being the creature.”

“Yes.”

“This sounds very Itor.”

“We know that GWC has supplied Itor with weapons in the past. It’s likely that Itor contracted GWC after they failed to turn Rik into their ultimate animal weapon.”

Ulrika was a recent acquisition, a powerful shape-shifter who now worked in the Cryptozoology department. As the first truly mythological creature proven to exist, Ulrika had been a shock to Sela’s system. Then again, Ulrika had been, in part, an Itor lab creation, and since her entire family had been destroyed, there was still no proof that shape-shifters existed as natural creatures in the wild.

“So why not send a combat agent into this? Why me?”

“Once you get the intel, proof that GWC is working with Itor, or proof that the creature exists, I’ll send in combat agents. But to start, we need you. The guy GWC sent to join the camp at around the time of the attacks, the owner’s son, Logan Mills, isn’t stupid. He’s not going to fall for a story that some lone person just happened to stumble onto his camp in the jungle. We need to be convincing. I need a cryptozoologist and her assistant to be investigating reports of a ... what’s it called, a goat fucker?”

“Goat sucker. Chupacabra.”

“Fine. Chupacabra. You’ll need to get captured, and when you do, they’ll realize you’re the real thing. A cryptozoologist investigating sightings by the locals.”

“And then?”

“You find out the truth.”

A feeling of dread crept up from the depths of her bowels, and she slowly placed the folder on her lap, open to a photo of Logan, apparently taken at some sort of backyard party. He had a beer in one hand, and his other was slung around some chick who resembled Marlina. Tall,

dark-haired and muscular, he was hotter than hot, which, combined with Dev's "truth" statement, set off all kinds of warning klaxons.

"Since we're talking about the truth," she said, "maybe you could be straight with me. The reason you picked me for this assignment has nothing to do with my outstanding record in my field, does it?"

"You *are* our best cryptozoologist," he hedged.

"No shit." Probably not the best way to talk to the boss, but she had a bad feeling about this. "And?"

"And ... in addition to your cryptozoology experience, you may need to employ your ... other skills."

Fuck. Just ... fuck.

"Exactly," Dev said, and she knew he'd read her mind. "If Marlena can't seduce information out of someone, you'll have to."

"Dev—"

"I know I'm asking a lot," he said gently. "But you really are the only person we can send in with Marlena. No one else in your office has undercover training."

No, they didn't. Everyone at ACRO was sent through exhaustive physical instruction so they could defend themselves in pretty much any situation, but as an undercover field operative, her training had gone well beyond that. She'd been trained in covert operations, weapons handling, combat techniques—and as a Seducer, she'd been given specialized instruction in sex. And, like all operatives, she was immunized against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, thanks to ACRO's advanced science.

But none of that had protected her on her final mission as a Seducer, and her bones began to ache in all the places where they'd been broken three years ago.

"Marlena is good," he said. "Really good. And she fits the profile for the type of woman Logan likes. You shouldn't

have to do anything beyond nose around and look for whatever it is GWC is playing with.”

God, she hoped so. Because Sela hadn't touched a man since the day one had nearly beaten her to death.

She was glad her hand didn't shake as she closed the file, shutting out Logan's face. Because she wasn't afraid as much as she was angry. There was a reason that Seducer mission was her last, and it had nothing to do with nearly being killed.

She'd hated seducing men for information, hated getting a head full of their deepest, darkest secrets, which often left her feeling ill for days. The men she'd been assigned to seduce weren't pillars of the community, and the things they'd done still sat in her memory like cyanide pills, leaking poison into her system and making her sick at the most inconvenient times.

One more horrible memory might put her over the edge, and that Logan guy looked like just the kind of man to do it.

EVEN THOUGH THE ANSWERS WERE ALWAYS THE SAME, MARLENA West had woken early and headed to ACRO's science labs anyway for her monthly check-in with the team that had been following her case for ten years.

Dr. Petra James was in charge of the case very few people knew about. A small woman with serious brown eyes, she had taken up the charge to find answers for Marlena at Devlin O'Malley's request. Although, knowing Devlin, it most likely was more of a demand.

And even though Marlena never got her hopes up, the small shake of Dr. James's head still hurt. *Unable to find a cure. We'll keep looking. Don't ever give up.*

Now, back at the Seducers' housing where she lived, she stared between the orders placed on her bed, indicating her next mission, and the picture of her sister that had fallen from the book she'd pulled off the shelf.



Stepsister, to be accurate. Kelly had been killed in a car accident years ago, taking with her any chance of true happiness Marlena could hope for.

Kelly had been strangled by hatred and jealousy toward Marlena from the day Marlena was born. A practicing witch, Kelly came up with a curse that wouldn't allow Marlena to find love or happiness with any man. The curse doomed Marlena to fall insanely in love with any man she slept with—and ensured that no man would ever love her back once that happened. And the curse was so complete and malicious, it promised that Marlena couldn't fall in love with a man *until* she slept with him. Indeed, couldn't have any feelings at all in that regard, would never feel that excitement of falling for someone, the way she did when she was a teenager, before the curse was cast.

Thus, for Marlena, sex had always been something completely out of her control—the thing that would cause her emotions to plummet wildly. She'd been lucky enough to find ACRO years earlier—or, more accurately, they'd found her after some of her modeling photos caught their attention. She'd immediately felt at ease with Dev, and after she'd confessed the truth about her curse, he'd assured her that they wouldn't stop searching for a way to break it.

And he'd promised that no matter what, she would always be safe at ACRO.

She'd agreed to join then, because she'd been scared and alone and because she'd instantly trusted Devlin.

In all the years since, he'd never let her down. He'd been a safe man for her—he'd given her a job as his executive assistant and he also let her satisfy him, and him her. Falling in love with him had been inevitable and painful, but Devlin had been gentle with her heart.

But now, with her new job as an ACRO Seducer, she defined sex on her terms. No intercourse, if possible. Controlling the man's orgasms. She was the one who made

all the rules, and thus she was able to keep men at a distance.

Though she hadn't been at it long, becoming an ACRO Seducer could've been akin to a form of self-torture. Forced to use her sexuality in a way that could actually help people, Marlana took a chance on becoming a victim of the curse every time she went on a mission.

Of course, she made every effort to ensure that did not happen. Unlike most Seducers, whose specialized psychic talents required them to have sex with their targets in order to gather intel, Marlana could rely on her beauty and flirting skills to pry the information out of her mark, so sexual relations were unnecessary. She knew how to make a man go ga-ga over her, and for some ops, it was—and would be—enough. On other missions, she'd use her other talents, because a lot of men would give up their mothers for an amazing blow job.

Up until this point, she'd been on four small jobs—training missions that required sexual skills but had put her in no real physical danger. The goal had been to see if she could finally resist falling in love with any man she slept with. She'd been hypnotized by ACRO's best, prodded by their scientists and sent out with high hopes for all her missions.

She'd gotten through the first three without having to resort to intercourse—each of those missions a complete success.

The fourth required sex. She'd fallen in love and the man had been repulsed by her as soon as the deed was done. But then, she'd already gotten the information she needed, and she accomplished what she'd wanted—she'd fallen out of love with Devlin O'Malley.

That had been a relief in and of itself. Now she was in love with some horrid ACRO enemy she might never see again, certainly not on a daily basis.

Compared to the hell some ACRO agents went through because of their powers, Marlana felt, in comparison, she had no right to complain. And she didn't. But she knew she was getting colder, keeping everyone at arm's length.

And she knew that would only get worse if she continued in this job.

## CHAPTER *Two*

LOGAN MILLS SMELLED THE hot, fetid breath of the beast hanging heavily in the humid air of the Amazonian jungle. They were close but somehow no closer than they'd been since they'd begun this mission.

The animal was smart—and Logan had a sickening feeling that he and his team were actually the ones being hunted.

He took a swig of water from the canteen that hung from a line on his pack and then capped it and checked his weapons again— an M14, a Sig and two tranqs with enough juice to put down a hippo.

His body had finally adjusted to the heat after thirty-plus days in this place—he'd gotten used to sweating as his body tried to keep up with the constant water loss, and all of this reminded him of his days in Special Ops.

“Hey, Lo, we gonna call it a day soon?” Dax, one of his men, muttered. Logan glanced at his watch—1600. Thanks to the overlay, they'd find themselves in total darkness sooner than later.

They'd been on the move since 0600—nonstop except for water breaks—and while they'd found evidence of the escaped beast, they still hadn't been able to track it down.

His men were tired—of the jungle, of this mission, of Logan's nonstop barking and near obsession with

recovering the creature he didn't know anything about beyond the fact that it was lethal.

His men didn't understand the full consequences; and if he had his way, they never would. No one else would either, and that's why Logan planned on continuing his search for a few more hours.

"I'm not paying you to sleep," he answered Dax evenly.

The man shook his head and held up his arms in silent surrender, and Logan sighed. He got it—they were exhausted. It was a feeling he could barely remember, and so garnering sympathy for it was hard.

He wasn't tired, never got tired anymore. In fact, he often had to force himself to sleep so the still-human part of his mind could rest.

He was a product of his father's company, a company he now oversaw—one he had controlling shares in, due to his father's continually bad decision-making. Global Weapons Corporation had been his father's brainchild and was now Logan's baby, since he had turned the company from nearly complete financial ruin to a growing enterprise in a little over three years.

It had been severely mismanaged, thanks to his father's ego; the old man could never see past the get-rich-quick aspect of weapons development to realize that GWC could be a huge asset to the American government in the fight against terrorism.

Unfortunately, his father still insisted on making decisions behind Logan's back. Like this most recent one—the reacquisition of some kind of species, labeled Unclass 8, that killed an entire SEAL team last month, when GWC had accidentally released it after nearly three years of modifications.

Logan's gut twisted as he thought back to his own injury four years earlier—when he'd been shot to hell and left for dead at the bottom of a ravine for three days.

After he was found by the Marines, his father had him airlifted from the military hospital in Germany to a private facility in London, where a team of scientists and surgeons waited to save Logan's life.

He'd been rebuilt with special bioware—his right arm, his legs, part of his brain. He functioned with an efficiency that scared even him, and he wondered if maybe the company had taken things too far.

But how could he tell his father he'd done the wrong thing by not letting his son die?

"We'll work for another hour and then head back to camp," he told Dax, who nodded and let the other four men know there was an end in sight to today's mission.

Logan turned back toward the twisted path and studied the broken branches tipped with the blood of the animal's most recent kill—a deer they'd found fifty yards away. He'd told his men they were hunting something that looked like a Komodo dragon, when in all honesty he didn't know what the hell this thing was, never mind what it looked like.

He and his team had been in the jungle only two days searching for it when they'd stumbled on the massacre—what he now knew were four Navy SEALs, torn to pieces.

He'd just ordered his men to continue their search for more bodies or survivors when he tripped over something, then cursed and turned back to kick the branch out of the way.

But it hadn't been a branch. It was a human, or what was left of one. Immediately, he'd motioned to Dax, and the two of them brushed the leaves off the body and uncovered what Logan believed to be another dead SEAL.

Tentatively, he'd felt for a pulse and nearly jumped out of his skin when the man, later identified as Chance McCormack, grabbed his wrist and whispered, "Watch out ... it's coming for you."

They'd gotten him to their base camp, and because of that decision Logan was forced to leave the massacred