



Death Angel: A Novel

By Linda Howard

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In Linda Howard's gifted hands, second chances, unexpected romance, and unrelenting action combine into a riveting new novel of suspense. In *Death Angel*, bad girls can wake up and trust their hearts, bad guys can fight for what's right . . . and dying just might be the only way to change one's life.

A striking beauty with a taste for diamonds and dangerous men, Drea Rousseau is more than content to be arm candy for Rafael Salinas, a notorious crime lord who deals with betrayal through quick and treacherous means: a bullet to the back of the head, a blade across the neck, an incendiary device beneath a car. Eager to break with Rafael, Drea makes a fateful decision and a desperate move, stealing a mountain of cash from the malicious killer. After all, an escape needs to be financed.

Though Drea runs, Salinas knows she can't hide—and he dispatches a cold-blooded assassin in hot pursuit, resulting in a tragic turn of events. Or does it?

Left for dead, Drea miraculously returns to the realm of the living a changed woman. She's no longer shallow and selfish, no longer steals or cheats or sells herself short. Both humbled and thrilled with this unexpected second chance, Drea embraces her new life. But in order to feel safe and sound—and stop nervously looking over her shoulder—she will need to take down those who marked her for death.

Joining forces with the FBI, supplying vital inside information that only she can provide, Drea finds herself working with the most dangerous man she's ever known. Yet the closer they get to danger, the more intense their feelings for each other become, and the more Drea realizes that the cost of her new life may be her life itself—as well as her heart.

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Editorial Review

Review

“The Howard name is synonymous with amazing entertainment.”—*Romantic Times*

“A darkly romantic book of second chances and intrigue, as well as hot assassins.”—Parkersburg News and Sentinel

“Linda Howard is a superbly original writer.”—Iris Johansen

About the Author

Linda Howard is the award-winning author of many New York Times bestsellers, including **Up Close and Dangerous, Drop Dead Gorgeous, Cover of Night, Killing Time, To Die For, Kiss Me While I Sleep, Cry No More, and Dying to Please**. She lives in Alabama with her husband and two golden retrievers.

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Chapter One

New York City

“You did an excellent job,” Rafael Salinas purred to the assassin, who stood on the other side of the room, near the door. Either the man didn’t like getting too close to other human beings, or he didn’t trust Salinas and was giving himself an avenue of escape if the meeting turned sour—in which case he was smart. People who were wary of Salinas tended to live longer than those who trusted him. Drea Rousseau, curled close to Salinas’s side, didn’t care what the assassin’s reasoning was, so long as it kept him at a distance.

He gave her the creeps, the way he never seemed to blink. She had seen him once before, and at that meeting he’d made it obvious he disliked her presence. He’d leveled his flat, unblinking gaze on her for so long that she’d begun wondering if he made it a practice to eliminate people who could identify him—other than the people who paid him, of course, and maybe even them after the money was safely in his hand, or his account, or however assassins collected their fees. She had no idea what his name was, didn’t want to know, because while truth was supposed to set you free, in this case she thought it might possibly be deadly. She thought of him as Rafael’s assassin, but in fact he wasn’t one of Rafael’s regular crew; he was a free agent, hired by whoever could afford him. At least twice now, that she knew of, Rafael had met the price.

To keep from looking at him and maybe finding that unnerving stare locked on her again, she unhappily examined the magenta polish on her toenails. She had put it on just that morning, thinking it would look interesting against the creamy white of the silk lounge outfit she was currently wearing, but the purple undertones were too garish. She should have gone with a shell pink, something delicate and almost transparent to compliment the outfit instead of contrasting with it. Well, live and learn.

When the assassin didn’t reply, didn’t rush to assure Rafael that he was honored to work for him the way others had, Rafael’s fingers drummed impatiently on his thigh. It was a nervous habit he had when he wasn’t comfortable, a telling little gesture, at least as far as Drea was concerned. She’d intensely studied his every mood, his every habit. He wasn’t exactly afraid, but he, too, was being wary, which meant there were two smart men in the room.

“I’d like to offer you a bonus,” Rafael said. “An extra hundred thousand. How does that sound?”

Drea didn't look up, though she quickly processed the offer and what it meant. She went to a lot of trouble to never show any interest in Rafael's business dealings, and when he'd occasionally asked her some very casual but leading questions she'd pretended she didn't understand what he was getting at. As a result, Rafael wasn't as careful around her as he might otherwise have been. As far as he was concerned, she had no interest in anything that didn't directly affect her, and in a way that was true, just not in the way Rafael thought. He assumed she didn't care who the assassin had killed for him, that she cared only about what she was wearing, how her hair looked, about making Rafael look good by being as sexy and glamorous as she could make herself.

She was definitely interested in that last part; making Rafael look good in the eyes of others always put him in an expansive mood, a generous mood. Drea studied the platinum and diamond anklet that circled her right ankle, enjoying the way the dangling diamond glittered in the sunlight, the way the platinum glowed against her tanned skin. The anklet had been one of Rafael's gifts when he'd been very happy about something. She hoped his pleasure with the assassin's success put him in an equally generous mood; she wouldn't mind a matching bracelet—not that she ever hinted. She was always very careful not to ask Rafael for anything, and to ooh and aah over everything he gave her even if it was butt-ugly, because even butt-ugly crap could be sold.

She had no illusions about the permanency of her position in Rafael's life. Right now she was at the top of her game, mature enough to be womanly, young enough that she didn't have to worry about gray hair or wrinkles. But in another year or two, who knew?

Eventually Rafael would tire of her, and when he did she wanted to have built up a nice little nest egg for herself, mostly in the form of jewelry. Drea Rousseau knew what it was to be poor, and she intended never to be poor again. She'd severed all ties with the girl she'd been growing up, white-trash Andie Butts, the target of malicious jokes because of her name as much as anything else, and made herself over into Andrea (pronounced anDRAYuh, which sounded French to her) Rousseau (to go with the fancier pronunciation).

"Her," said the assassin. "I want her."

Her interest caught—who was her?—Drea looked up . . . and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. The assassin was staring at her with the same cold, unblinking gaze she remembered. Shock slammed into her like a tidal wave; she was the her he was talking about. There were no other women in the room, no one else he could possibly mean. Icy fingers of sheer panic laced around her spine, but then common sense reasserted itself and she relaxed. Thank God Rafael was a possessive man; he would never—

"Ask for something else," Rafael said lazily, looping his arm around her shoulders and snuggling her close to his side. "I couldn't give away my good-luck piece." He pressed a kiss to her forehead and Drea beamed up at him, almost limp with relief, though she tried not to reveal that for a moment she'd been scared almost senseless.

"I don't want to keep her," the assassin said dismissively, without looking away from Drea's face. "I just want to fuck her. One time."

Reassured by Rafael's immediate rejection of the request, confident once more, Drea laughed. She had a sweet laugh, as harmonious as the chiming of bells. Rafael had once told her she reminded him of an angel, with her long, curly blond hair, big blue eyes, and her bell-like laugh. She used the laugh as deliberately as if it were a weapon, reminding Rafael without words that she was indeed his angel, his good luck.

At the sound, the assassin's entire body seemed to tense, his attention so tightly focused on her she could almost feel the touch of it on her skin. Until then, if she'd thought about it much, Drea would have said he was already alert, but now he was somehow more so, as if all his senses were heightened, his focus so

intensi- fied she felt the burn of it on her skin and her laughter choked off as abruptly as if his hand had closed around her throat.

“I don’t share,” Rafael said, an irritated note underlying the ease of his tone. The top man never shared his woman; if he did, then he lost an edge, an important one, in the authority he had over his men. Surely the assassin knew that. But they were alone in the penthouse apartment, with no witnesses to what Rafael did or didn’t do, so maybe that was why he’d thought he could have what he wanted.

Again the assassin said nothing, merely watching, and though he didn’t move there was abruptly something lethal stewing in the atmosphere between them. Curled against him as she was, Drea felt Rafael’s almost imperceptible twitch, as if he, too, was aware of the change.

“Come now,” Rafael said, his tone cajoling, but Drea knew him well; she caught the uneasiness he was trying so hard to disguise, and because that wasn’t something she was accustomed to seeing in him she almost darted an alarmed glance at him, before catching herself and instead inspecting a fingernail as if she’d spotted a chip in the polish. “That’s a lot of money to throw away for something so brief. Sex is cheap; you can buy a lot of it with a hundred thousand dollars.”

Still the assassin waited, as silent as a tomb. He had made his request, and the only thing yet to be determined was if Rafael would grant it, or deny him. Without saying a word he made it plain that he wouldn’t take the money that had been offered; instead he would walk away, and at best Rafael would no longer be able to call on the assassin’s services when needed. At worst— Drea didn’t want to think about what the worst could be, would be. With a man like this, anything was possible.

Rafael suddenly looked at Drea, his dark gaze cool and assessing. She sucked in a breath, alarmed by that abrupt coolness, by the assessment. Was he actually considering the idea, weighing the cost if he continued to say no?

“On the other hand,” he mused, “perhaps I have convinced myself. Sex is cheap, and I, too, can do a lot with a hundred thousand dollars.” He removed his arm from around Drea’s shoulders and stood, straightening his pants with a practiced movement that made the hem break across his foot at precisely the right spot. “One time, you said. I have business across town that will keep me tied up for five hours, which is more than sufficient.” He paused, then added lightly, “Don’t damage her.” Without even glancing at her again, he walked across the living room toward the door.

What? Drea bolted upright, unable to think straight. What was he saying? What was he doing? This was a joke, right? Right?

Drea pinned her desperate, disbelieving gaze on Rafael’s back as he walked to the door. He didn’t mean it. He couldn’t mean it. Any moment now he would turn around and laugh, enjoying his joke at the assassin’s expense, never mind that he’d almost sent her into cardiac arrest. She didn’t care that he’d scared her half to death, she wouldn’t say a word to him about it, if he’d just stop, if he’d say, “Did you really think I was serious?”

There was no way he’d give her to the assassin, no way—

Rafael reached the door, opened it . . . and left.

Barely able to breathe, her lungs constricted by the tide of rising panic that threatened to strangle her, Drea stared blindly at that door. He’d open it now, and laugh. Any minute now, Rafael would come back in.

Users Review

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