



DRESSED TO
Kill

Solema

MAY DAWSON

SELENA

DRESSED TO KILL



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Epilogue

A Note From May

Also by May Dawson

CHAPTER 1



S elena

I'D SPENT the last twenty-two hours awake and tracking a killer through the internet.

The evidence collected about my parents' murderers had been 'lost' forever, and all that was left was one bit of DNA from the crime scene, entered into the national DNA database.

Now someone had gone in and erased every electronic file on my parents. The DNA trace had been deleted.

But my heart pounded as I worked on my code, and it wasn't just from my excessive caffeine consumption. They'd left a digital trail, picking up the bug I'd set up long ago in case anyone ever came after this evidence. After all these years, the killer had finally popped back into existence. I was following the trail of whoever erased my parents.

And that meant I really needed another Diet Mountain Dew. The perfect soda, pure caffeine in lemon-lime form, the nectar of the gods.

I got up from the desk and stretched before I headed to the vending machine I'd installed in one corner of my room. It made a constant noisy hum and was far less energy efficient than a fridge, but I wasn't paying the power bill. There was just something fun about having my own vending machine. But as I fed quarters into it, I realized it was out of Dew.

It had been a long quest, after all.

I groaned and raked my fingers through my hair, feeling it snag on a few knots. I'd have to face *people*. Admittedly, they were people I'd lived with for twenty years, since Man took me in, but my tolerance for people swung from *not at all, nope to we can talk but please don't touch me*.

As I made my way into the kitchen, Karma said, "I see the world's best hacker is once again wearing sweatpants."

She was stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce.

"I'm number six, at best," I said. "Think of what you could accomplish if you didn't spend hours a day on your hair and makeup."

"I'm not taking life advice from number six."

"Strong words coming from a girl who once locked herself out of her own cell phone." I said. Then I added, "Anyway. If I'm number six, Darcy is fighting to push me down to number seven."

Darcy sauntered in then and hopped up onto the countertop. She looked up at me wide-eyed. "I'm not trying to push you down anywhere!"

"Too fucking sweet for an assassin," I told her, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

She glanced at the pot, and Karma said, "All I need is gratitude that I'm cooking. I don't want to hear about how you'd rather have pizza."

"I didn't say a word!" Darcy protested.

Karma aimed a spatula at her. Darcy widened her eyes and took a bite of garlic bread, then held one out to me.

"I just came in here for Mountain Dew," I said.

"You need to eat actual food, crazy," Karma said to me.

I rolled my eyes, but I took the garlic bread. The warmth of the kitchen—and of the other girls' banter—surrounded me, and it made me feel itchy.

"Sit and eat with us before you go back to your cave," Darcy suggested.

I just swiped my Mountain Dew from the fridge and didn't answer.

Assassins have a short lifespan. Sooner or later, everyone who lives by the sword—or switchblade or poison or rifle—dies by it. We might've grown up together, but it was a bad idea to get attached.

Just then, the door banged open, and Royal walked in. She looked exhausted from her last mission, but she perked right up—in a bad way—once she saw the state of the kitchen. “How can you cook with all those dishes in the sink?”

“They're not on the stove,” Darcy pointed out helpfully.

“Welcome back, glad you aren't dead,” I told Royal, already backing away toward the door. Sometimes the girls trapped me.

Karma looked at me in exasperation. “Take a bowl of food with you if you must live solely in your room.”

“Which smells bad,” Royal said. “Like Ramen.”

“You haven't been here in weeks!” And I only ate Ramen every other day, at most.

“We've lived together for a while, my friend. I know how it smells.” Royal looked thoughtful. “What you need is a plant.”

If I took care of a living green thing, it would quickly be followed by a browning... and Royal's ire. I would have to pass.

I needed to escape, but Karma convinced me to take a bowl of spaghetti—and a piece of garlic bread clutched between my teeth—as I fled back into my room.

There was something about the way they had family dinners that just reminded me a little too much of how different this life was from the life I was supposed to have, before my parents were murdered.

Back in my room, it felt as if I were too lost in my thoughts about my parents. I had the faintest wisps of memory about them. My father, picking me up when he came home

from work; the silver badges on his dark blue uniform. He'd always put his hat on top of my head because it made him laugh.

I tried to focus on the code instead.

That was all that mattered. The past was foggy and dark. Revenge was a clear, bright path into the future.

So I had spaghetti sauce on my sweatshirt—which paired well with the sweatpants and gnarled hair—when Royal stuck her head in the door. She'd just had her debrief, and Man had summoned me.

I walked into his office. He looked as immaculate as ever, with his well-trimmed gray beard and his perfect black suit. I thought it was a bit much as daily wear for someone who never left the mansion, but then, I was never going to be anyone's style icon.

He raised his eyebrows at my appearance but luckily he hardly ever talked, so he wasn't criticizing. As I sat down, he simply slid an envelope across his desk to me.

I opened up the envelope to find a file on Gavin Crude. Gun runner, mob kingpin, stone-cold silver fox; the man in the black-and-white 8x10 photo staring up at me was ridiculously handsome except for the intense, serial killer gaze.

"I'm on it," I said. I loved killing people who had hurt other people. Maybe someone else wouldn't have to live through the pain I had. I turned more pages in the file, then groaned.

Man had identified more than one location where I'd find Gavin Crude.

But one option was the annual gala he held, fundraising for charity. Quite the cover for a mob kingpin.

"You know I hate wearing dresses," I told Man.

He didn't look particularly sympathetic.

"I'll get it done," I promised him, and he nodded.

"I know," he said.

“Love you too, Daddy,” I muttered.

But only once I’d left the room and closed the door softly behind me.

He wasn’t my father, of course. But he’d raised me—and forged me into a near-perfect killer—since I was five years old, so... close enough.

The girls might’ve made a big deal of it if they’d known I was getting ready to leave on a job. Instead, I reluctantly left my new code running, working on tracking down my parents’ killer even while I was busy, and took a long, hot shower. It took a while to comb the knots out of my hair, blow it out into smooth, shiny brunette tresses, and do my makeup.

I cleaned up well enough. I just hated to waste the time.

The girls would’ve wanted to see me off, but I packed my bags quietly, listening to the sounds of them rattling around the mansion, retiring to their rooms. I ducked out after midnight.

Man knew my ways, and he was waiting by the garage to raise a hand in goodbye as I left. I hopped into the car with Pierce, who I knew would be blessedly quiet as he drove me to the airport.

The girls were nice, and so was Man, in his own way.

But there was no reason to get attached to assassins.

Sooner or later, we all find ourselves receiving instead of giving.

CHAPTER 2



The gala was held at Gavin Crude's mansion, which was the kind of idiotic security maneuver I didn't understand. Who would want hundreds of strangers in their house? I had mixed feelings about living with eight of my best friends.

Wearing a sleek black dress that would allow me to blend in with the catering staff—until I needed to blend in with the guests—I carried yet another tray of champagne flutes toward the party.

I turned back to make sure no one else was in the hallway that led from the commercial kitchen to the ballroom, then I leaned my back against the locked door that led to a closet. I pressed my 'Apple' watch—I'd ripped its guts out and retooled it—against the digital lockpad, and a second later, the door's latch released. I leaned my butt into it just as a flicker of movement down the hallway caught my attention; another of the servers was turning from the kitchen down the hallway.

But the door was already clicking shut between us. I turned to face the closet, which contained miscellaneous stuff for parties, and dumped my tray of champagne on top of a stack of bins.

This would be home base while I scoped out a good place to take Gavin out. I wasn't sure if an opportunity to place the hit would come while I was here at the gala tonight, but I would be ready.

So I pulled off my dress and flipped it inside out, revealing the golden satin lining. The skirt fell out with a quick pull of my fingers, and suddenly the skirt brushed the floor. I slipped the dress back on, then carefully pulled out my hairpins. As my hair fell heavily across my shoulders, I shook it back.

We'd all been wanded by the security thugs as part of the check-in for this catering job. I'd been hired thanks to my connections; how Man had so many friends when the man barely spoke amazed me. He wasn't exactly the life of the party. But security didn't matter, since I'd gotten someone who was legitimately on the guest list to bring my rifle in, hidden in his trunk.

Everything was digital these days. Cars unlocked remotely. Doors opened by keypad.

Which meant everything was *mine*.

I plugged my device into the router and started my code running.

And away we went.

But it would take time to do its work, and in the meantime, I needed to circulate.

I picked up a glass of champagne and swept out of the closet.

By the time I reached the music rising from the ballroom, I faked the walk: the smooth sashay of a rich girl who was already a little drunk, but used to being drunk in stilettos. As I swayed into the bubbling noise of the party, I fixed a smile on my face.

I knew what I looked like, because that was part of my job. Along with learning how to assemble and disassemble weapons, how to fight hand-to-hand, how to hack into virtually any system, I'd also learned how to do my makeup. Practiced my faces in the mirror. Taken improv classes.

I could fit in anywhere, even though I felt like I fit in nowhere.

So I knew that I looked conventionally pretty, with long, shiny brown hair that fell in a thick wave across my dress.

Gavin Crude circulated his party. He was even more handsome in person, with dark hair touched with silver at the temples and a magnetic smile. He seemed to talk easily to everyone, laughing and smiling.

It was almost hard to believe the man was responsible for hundreds of deaths when he was so very jovial. But I'd seen enough murderers to know people could do terrible things and still smile like a saint.

Plus, I was a killer, and I was fixing a smile on my face right now. I inserted myself into the corner of a conversation, nodding and listening but not quite inside the conversation. No one spoke to me, but the person speaking included me as she looked around the circle. Most people don't mind more of an audience.

Gavin stopped to talk to another man, and as the crowd cleared around them, I got a good look at the second man. Tall, twenty-something, dark-haired, green-eyed, handsome in a tux.

His oldest son. Aiden. I was prepared for Aiden.

Then Aiden looked up, still smiling from his father's joke, and his gaze happened to catch mine. That smile was white and charming and he looked at me as if he knew me, just for a second. I wasn't prepared for the way my stomach flip-flopped.

Then his gaze was gone, back to his father.

It had left me feeling strangely exposed. I gave myself a pep talk as I moved toward the appetizer table, soothing my unsettled feelings with canapes while I blended into the crowd. Aiden didn't know who I was. He hadn't really been looking at me. It was time to consider whether to abort or stay. Man always encouraged us to follow our instincts.

But there wasn't any real warning sign here. I simply wasn't used to finding men attractive. There was something unexpected about Aiden Crude.

I was turning away from the table when one of the catering staff offered me a canape. As I politely passed, another man stopped across from me and did a double take. “Didn’t I see you passing champagne earlier tonight?”

“Mm? I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else.” I groaned internally even as I turned my smile up to a thousand kilowatts. Usually the changes to my hair, dress, posture and how I carried myself was enough that I could go from staff to guest without anyone noticing in the slightest.

But the guy facing me had been paying too much attention to me earlier, trying to flirt with me even though I was obviously working. The attention was annoying to begin with, but also it had clearly caused me to lodge in his brain.

Fucking hell.

“Come with me,” he said commandingly. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Do you?”

“You snuck in here pretending to be one of the catering staff,” he accused, and even though I just laughed in disbelief, inside my stomach flipped. What the fuck? He went on, sounding even more confident than before. “You want the attention of one of those guys... Aiden, Dominic, or Xander depending on how ambitious you are.”

Well, at least he hadn’t realized I was here for a hit. He just thought I was a gold digger.

The Crudes should be so lucky.

“You’ve got me mistaken for someone else.” I gave another disbelieving chuckle, shaking my head.

Could I get away with murdering him? No, it would alert Gavin Crude he was in danger. I needed to find a way to get rid of this fool.

He laughed right back at me. “If you don’t want to get kicked out of here, you’re going to come with me.”

“What do you want?” I demanded, even though I already had an idea what he wanted.

He was average height, reasonably good looking, but the fact he was hassling me suggested his personality was a huge cock-block.

“You and I can go talk privately.” His eyes looked slightly glazed. He wasn’t just high on rich hubris; he was high on something special that made him so audacious. “Aiden would never go for a plain bitch like you, but if he sees you with me, he might want what I have...”

“No.” This wasn’t a Shakespearian comedy.

Maybe I could get away with killing him if I was really careful about disposing of the body. I contemplated leaving with him... and finding the nearest bridge.

“I know what you’re doing,” he repeated.

“And yet, I don’t think *you* know what you’re doing, Anthony.” A smooth, but irritated, voice spoke over my shoulder. The scent of expensive aftershave washed over me accompanied with the touch of a hand at the small of my back. More warmly, the speaker murmured into my ear, “There you are.”

The voice was deep and rich, and I looked up into the sparkling eyes of... Aiden Crude.

He smiled, that wide, slow smile that was like the sun coming out, that had drawn my eye from across the room. How could a man involved in such an evil gun-running business smile in a way that made me want to smile back?

“Here I am,” I said lightly, with no idea what was going on, but I’d do my best to roll with it. I handed my now-empty champagne glass to the asshole who had been hassling me and turned to face Aiden.

“I’ve been looking for you all night.” He touched my chin with one knuckle, raising my gaze to his.

The other guy, Anthony, glanced behind Aiden. I caught a glimpse of a tall, blond haired man who was built and huge standing away from the wall, his gaze fixed on Anthony.

Anthony hurried away, his cheeks blazing. He must think now this was a case of mistaken identity, that the staff he'd met looked similar to a girl who belonged here.

I *knew* this was a case of mistaken identity.

“Why’s that?” I arched my eyebrows innocently.

“Well, if Dominic is going to go through the trouble of setting up a blind date for me, of course I’m at least going to meet her,” he said. “I’ll admit, I get tired of these affairs. Of... meeting new people.”

Two beautiful women walked toward Aiden, smiling at him, but he didn’t seem to see them. His gaze was fixed on me. After a moment where they hovered, drinking champagne and laughing at jokes the other hadn’t really made, they moved away.

“I’m so sorry,” I deadpanned. “It seems like a terrible life.”

“I’m not so out of touch that I would say it’s terrible. But it’s... dull, in its own ways, at times.”

I wondered what the hell my name was supposed to be.

“Dominic told me that he’d set up a date, but not what your name was,” he said. “Just a description.”

Great, I wondered where his real date was. She’d have to show up soon and then he’d wonder why he had two blind dates.

“Selena,” I told him, taking the hand he offered. His tux was immaculate and expensive, his sleeves crisp and white. But his hand felt rough against mine, and as I slid my thumb over his knuckles in a quick caress, I brushed callouses. Interesting. It seemed likely he got his hands dirty...but I already knew that from the dossier. Aiden was the heir apparent in the family business.

“Aiden,” he said, as if there was anyone in this room who didn’t know who he was. He offered me his arm. “Did Dominic tell you all about me?”

“Yes,” I said as I slid my hand over the crook of his arm. His muscles felt hard and solid beneath the expensive material.

I expected him to lead me onto the dance floor, but instead he steered me to a doorway that led up from the ballroom. “Let’s take a moment away from the party. Are you all right?”

My heart raced, concerned about where he was taking me. Maybe he knew I didn’t belong here and he’d just been quietly removing me from the crowd. Maybe he didn’t want to ruin daddy’s party with a murder. “I’m fine.”

Then we emerged onto the catwalk overlooking the ballroom below. Beneath us, the party glittered, music rising.

“Judging from the look on your face... I’m sorry that Anthony was so badly behaved,” he said. “He’s a business associate of my father’s, but he’s hardly a friend.”

“I understand,” I said.

He led me down the hall past several rooms with ornate closed wooden doors to a small alcove at the end, which overlooked the dance floor but was recessed back, hidden in shadows. An enormous gilt mirror hung from the floor to the ceiling, framed by velvet curtains, and beautifully-lit art hung to either side.

It was a great place to set up to take down a target, if I could find a clean way to exit once the place erupted into chaos.

But for now, Aiden had stopped, one hand on the railing overlooking the dance floor. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Selena.”

Downstairs, I caught a glimpse of Anthony and the big blond exiting the dance floor, and I tilted my head to one side. Blondie was part of Aiden’s security team, I was sure of it. Was Aiden so obsessed with his honor that Anthony was going to get his ass kicked for hassling Aiden’s ‘date’?

How fucking delightful. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well.”

“I suppose Dominic told you about how I don’t like to waste time on first dates,” he said, his voice gravelly in my ear as he pressed me against the marble railing. His lips pressed the side of my throat, just below my neck.

“I thought you said Anthony was badly behaved,” I said swiftly. Aiden was sex personified and I felt a stirring of heat when I felt his cock press behind me, but this was just too much, too quickly. “Yet here you are.”

His hand swept up the nape of my neck, moving my hair to the side. Despite myself, my back arched subtly, inviting his lips to find that particular electric spot again. His soft voice stirred my hair as he murmured, “I’m an entirely different story, and you know it.”

Maybe he could read how attracted I was to him. But he was still an arrogant prick.

“I don’t think I’m the right blind date for you,” I said, turning in his arms.

He braced his hands to either side of me, leaning in with that big, powerful body. The noise of the crowd felt far below; all I could see was his all-consuming green eyes.

“Oh?” His breath was against my ear as he leaned in, and my back arched slightly over the railing in my nervousness. I shouldn’t have turned, because now I was pressed against his cock, which rubbed against me even through his trousers and the sleek material of my dress. “Let’s see if you are the right date for me.”

He leaned forward and his lips swept over mine. He smelled intoxicating and his lips were soft and sure as they pressed mine in a tentative kiss. For a second, I was stunned, and I couldn’t quite get my brain to work the way it was supposed to. I should be moving a step ahead to seduce him.

I should kiss him back. But even as I was thinking that, even as part of me *wanted* to kiss him back, I set my hands on his broad chest and pushed him back.

He straightened, though he still had me pressed against the marble railing. I couldn’t help but think how easy it would be for him to scoop and grab my legs, to force me over the railing to fall into the canapes below as the dancers scattered and screamed.

“I think you are,” he said quietly. “Most women will let me do whatever I want to them. They just want to get close to my power. I like someone with a little more spirit.”

The moment between us felt tense and charged.

Then he took a step back, and for the first time, I felt like I could draw a strangled breath.

“I have some official duties to attend to,” he said, sounding regretful. “But I’ll find you later.”

“Promise?” I asked with an arch smile, though I would make sure he didn’t find me later.

I was going to murder his daddy and get the hell out of here before I could get myself into any more trouble.

CHAPTER 2



Dominic

IF HE WEREN'T PERPETUALLY on my side, the speed at which Aiden came up with a new plot would have been terrifying.

He'd led the girl right into the little alcove at the top of the stairs. The Crude family had found a lot of use for watching over the ballroom while hiding in the shadows. Now he had invited her to do the same.

I watched as she circled the ballroom. She seemed awfully vapid for an assassin. She smiled at everyone, and she seemed a little wobbly in her stilettos. She was pretty in an everyday kind of way, with long glossy brown hair and perfect features. I preferred my girls a little rough around the edges, tattooed and dirty. I liked to know I wasn't going to break them. She looked fragile, like I might break her in bed. Physically, or maybe mentally.

She slipped out of the party and went down to the garage. I didn't bother to follow her. She must have found a way to stash her weapons and bring them up.

Xander was keeping an eye on her through the security cameras. So, while she was otherwise engaged, I hid myself in the alcove behind the alcove. The wall slid into place so that no one would know there was someone in here. It would be a fun surprise for her when she was ready to blow Gavin Crude's head off.

Concealed in the dark, I watched the grainy footage on the camera feeds.

I watched her through the one way mirror.

She set up with a sniper rifle in the alcove, assembling it with impressive speed. Well, that might make me like her a little more. There was just something about watching a competent woman at work.

Then she pulled up her cell phone and pressed a few keys.

I looked curiously for Gavin's face. I saw his face the moment all of his communications disappeared, replaced with a flirty little text.

He was in the middle of a crowd, but he was suddenly alone in the world. He had to know that the Belladonnas had come for him.

She settled the rifle stock into her shoulder and made a small adjustment to her scope.

I emerged from the mirrored hiding place behind her. She didn't feel my presence until I was right behind her, and then she started to whirl. I wasn't giving her a chance to get a shot off.

I caught the rifle barrel and with my other hand, slapped the drug-soaked rag over her mouth. I pinched her nose through the cloth, forcing her to draw a breath through her mouth.

But even as the drug was starting to work, she fought like a wildcat. The rifle clattered to the floor, but no one heard the noise amid the happy chaos of the ballroom far below. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her in close to my body. She kept trying to fight, elbowing me hard. I grunted. Such a little thing shouldn't be able to hit so hard. Her bones seemed light as a bird's, her frame thin, so the power in her blows was unexpected.

I lifted her easily off the ground, the rag still held over her mouth and nose. She wriggled and fought, her ass swaying back and forth across my cock, her fingernails scratching at

my arms as the drug drained the strength from her limbs. Finally, she slumped and was still.

Xander sauntered in, looking awfully relaxed.

“I didn’t expect you to get sweaty bringing her down,” he said, looking vaguely disapproving. Xander was allergic to sweat.

“A little help.” I let her fall to the ground in a lump of beautiful brown hair and golden satin. I was on a timeline, after all.

We stashed the girl in the closet, quickly binding her hands. I jabbed a syringe into her shoulder, making sure she would stay asleep with something a little more reliable than chloroform. She made a small sound of protest, even in her sleep. She raised one hand and tried to push me away. What a little fighter.

“Sleep well, little bird. I’ll see you soon.”

I closed the closet cabinet after stowing the weapon with her and picked up my own weapon. Then I returned to the railing.

Aiden twisted to look for us just as I raised my own gun.

Aiden dove between me and his father, then shouted abruptly, “Lookout!”

He pushed his father out of the way, just as I pulled the trigger.

Aiden’s level of trust was unreal. Sure, we’d grown up going to the range together. But I still wouldn’t want to trust someone to put a round through my shoulder when one slip up could mean it went through my chest instead.

Aiden fell into Gavin Crude’s arms.

Even as Gavin gripped him, I knew he would be looking for whoever had just tried to shoot him, before his son gallantly jumped in the path of the bullet.

Xander and I were already sinking into the shadows. Before anyone could reach us, I hastily wiped my hands with a

wipe that would remove any traces of residue and make it as if I had never fired a gun, then tossed that on top of her limp body. I closed the cabinet door. We'd retrieve her later.

As security came running, Xander and I pretended that we had just run up here first. At least I looked like I'd been rushing given the fight she'd put me through.

Down below, I caught a glimpse of Aiden. He was all pale faced and stoic, as if he hadn't wanted to take that bullet.

CHAPTER 3



S elena

I WOKE UP SLOWLY, with the sense that things had gone very, very wrong even before I opened my eyes.

I was lying on a bed. It was soft and comfortable. The blankets had been stripped off, allowing me to see the leather straps that bound my wrists and ankles to either side. I wanted desperately to pull and see if I could get free. The sense of being trapped pressed in at my chest, reminding me of all the times I'd panicked before.

Instead, I stayed still and waited, listening. I let my eyes drift shut again so that it would seem as if I were still asleep if there was someone else in the room.

The air felt still.

And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was someone in the room with me, someone watching.

Then I heard them rise from a chair, from the sounds of it. As they moved toward me, a deep male voice asked, "Do you really want to play that you're still asleep?"

His hand found my calf. His skin was warm to the touch, and he carried his own scent, not the expensive scent that Aiden had but something that was muskier with a hint of leather.

“It was very naughty to try to kill Gavin Crude.” He sounded amused. Those warm fingers kept stroking up my calf, up my knee, sending electric tingles across my skin. He reached the place on my thigh where my gown had tangled around my legs and slowly edged it higher. “Shall I wake you, Sleeping Beauty? Perhaps with a little more than a kiss?”

As his hand swept up my thigh, there was no hiding the way my body clenched at his touch. My eyes flew open to take in the tall, blonde haired man who grinned down at me. He was built like a linebacker. His shirt sleeves were rolled up over corded forearms even though he’d obviously been wearing a tux earlier, the dark ends of his tie still dangling around his powerful chest.

It took me a second to process him, and then I remembered the flash I’d seen of the face as I was fighting for my life. I’d seen his face in a blur. He was the one who had taken me.

Despite being a criminal scumbag, he had the face of an angel, all hard angles and soft pink lips.

“I can’t stop you from touching me now,” I admitted, yanking at the restraints to test them. “But I can kill you later.”

His lips curled up in a smile that softened the harsh, beautiful angles of his face. “I wasn’t trying to offend you. I was trying to be your Prince Charming.”

“Prince Charming was an asshole, kissing her without her consent,” I said. “But still probably more of a gentleman than you.”

“Perhaps he and Sleeping Beauty had an arrangement. After all, he was saving her.” He tilted his head to one side. “You can add all the feminist retconning that you want, but in the end, she only woke up because he helped her.”

“Well, I don’t want your help.” I squeezed my thighs together.

He chuckled darkly as his fingers drifted down my leg, and I gritted my teeth against the electric rise of sensation, the way it pooled in my gut. He reached my ankle and caressed the skin just above the cuff. “You are a little less powerful than

you usually are, at the moment, aren't you? You look as if you need some help."

Man would expect me to check in. We often went days without talking, but we always texted a check in every day to update him about our progress.

Sooner or later, I knew the girls would come for me.

The only question was if *later* would be too late to matter.

I had to stall my captors as much as I could. I had a pretty good idea of what would come next. If they took their time, as terrible as that would be, at least there was a chance that rescue would reach me.

I just hoped they wouldn't fuck up my face. It was such an important part of my career.

"What do you want?" I demanded. My legs were parted as if I were waiting for them, with each ankle tethered to opposite sides of the bed. I tried to clench my thighs, but I couldn't bring my legs together. My arms were staked out similarly, although I had a little play in the bonds. If I could entice him a little closer, I might be able to hook my hand around his throat and drag him down. But after that, it was questionable how successful I would be, so I set that tentative plan aside. For now.

I'd choke this bastard sooner or later.

I needed to convince them to free me. Maybe I could appeal to his baser instincts. After all, he hadn't been caressing my thigh because he was a Boy Scout.

He looked down at me curiously. "What naughty thoughts are running through your head?"

"Thoughts of your murder," I smiled up at him sweetly.

He traced his fingers up my calf, then my thigh again. A throb of want rushed through me, surprised me. I'd never been particularly susceptible to men's attention, but something felt different since I'd entered this house. Aiden had lit a fire inside me that I had never felt before.

It was really too bad that I was about to die. It would be nice to have an orgasm that I didn't bring about with the help of my own hands and a vibrating dildo, or have to force out of some loser I met while getting close to my target.

Another man entered then, tall but slender, elegant, with wild dark hair.

The big guy turned toward him. "Our little bird is awake."

Everyone probably looked *little* with this guy. He was huge.

The newcomer's dark eyes met mine. "Good morning. I'm Xander."

"Good morning?" I wanted to keep them talking anyway, but most of all, I wanted to ground myself in place and time. Where were they taking me? And how would I have stayed unconscious all through the night until morning?

"You gave her your name," the blond noted.

That was a poor sign for me, though I was pretty sure they intended to kill me sooner or later anyway.

"She's going to figure it out anyway," Xander said. "Won't you, Selena? Dominic and I did our homework about you Belladonnas, and I'm sure you did your homework about us. You wouldn't be able to kill so effectively without extensive research."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. The Belladonnas moved in the shadows. How did these guys know anything about us?

Dominic knelt at the edge of the bed, his arms propped in front of him and his chin resting on his arms. He looked so casual and relaxed, as if we were having a nice post coital chat instead of me being bound to the bed.

"What do you want?" I asked icily, my cool tone a cover for the panic I felt.

Being tied to the bed was one thing. The possible exposure of the Belladonnas was entirely another.

“Oh, I don’t want anything from you, little bird.” He touched a bruise on his cheek. “Unlike Aiden, who is dying to punish you, I’m not even angry you marked my beautiful face.”

Aiden entered the room, and the air changed as he stepped inside. Aiden carried an electricity with him, and everyone turned when he entered. He was tall, shirtless—a white bandage adorned one shoulder—but despite the wound, his hands were in his pockets and he looked quite comfortable.

He scoffed. “I didn’t ask you to torture her.”

Dominic quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Well, the two of you ‘bantering’ with her...” Aiden settled on the edge of the bed. “We meet again, Selena. This is quite the long first date.”

“I’m afraid I was unconscious for most of it. But that probably made it a better time for me.”

It almost certainly had, since I would’ve panicked being locked in this room by myself.

What was wrong with me? Why did I have to be a smart ass to the man who had me tied up to his bed?

He tsk’ed. “You tried to kill my father today. What do you think I should do to you?”

“You should let me go.” I locked eyes with him. “Hear me out. You have massive gaps in your security. Let me loose, and I can tell you how to fix them. Because even if you kill me, someone just like me will come, and if you haven’t closed those gaps... this time they won’t fail.”

He studied my face for a few long seconds, then said, “Oh, I don’t believe there’s anyone else *just like you*.”

He looked amused by the entire situation. I tried to figure him out, but his face was hard to read. He was amused, sure. There was a bright mind ticking away behind those green eyes and he wanted something from me. What was it? If he just wanted information about the Belladonnas, I imagined I’d

already be having an intimate experience with pliers or a blowtorch instead of Dominic's teasing touch.

"An interesting offer," he said finally. "but I'm not convinced I need you for that. And, if I've done my homework correctly..."

Unfortunately, Aiden Crude gave me the impression of a man who always did his homework correctly.

He continued, "You're one of the Belladonnas. A very particular Belladonna who plays with the electronics of the ones she kills. My father knows who tried to kill him, because you are rather world renowned, aren't you? At least the criminal underworld knows you and fears you." He chuckled my chin, the expression in his eyes certainly amused with himself. Smug bastard.

"My father has us hunting for you. You won't like it very much if he finds you."

My mind swam trying to make sense of this man. What did he want from me? He hadn't killed me yet, and that was for a reason. I would like to keep him feeling those reasons.

He studied me curiously, then drew his gun. My heart froze in my chest.

"But perhaps you're not the girl I'm looking for. Our meeting tonight seemed suspicious. But you've already done me a great service. Perhaps this is where our association should end."

"What do you want?" I'd asked that question a lot so far tonight, but I hadn't got an answer. I had a feeling that he liked his cat and mouse game. Maybe now he would finally tell me.

But instead, he raised the barrel so that it was the only thing in my vision. It took up almost all my attention. Somehow, those merciless, gorgeous green eyes behind it still grew my gaze.

His finger tightened almost imperceptibly on the trigger, releasing the safety on his Glock.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I couldn't help it.

The thought that I was going to die without avenging my parents swept through me, accompanied not with sorrow for my own death but with guilt and regret.

I waited for the gun to go off, but it never came.

I opened my eyes to find him kneeling on the side of the bed as he handed the gun off to Dominic. A wise man, it wouldn't be a good idea to put a gun where I could get my hands on it.

“Selena. Would you marry me?”

CHAPTER 4



S elena

I STARED up into Aiden Crude's bright green eyes. He looked pleased with himself, as if he realized just how much he'd thrown me for a loop. I wasn't usually surprised, but a marriage proposal from a target's son was new.

"What?" Xander asked, speaking for us both.

Aiden straightened. A spot of red appeared on the bandage, as if blood were seeping through, but he didn't seem to notice. "My father and some of his friends are determined to hunt down the Belladonnas. They know you're coming for them. But I'm the one who's learned all about you, and I'm happy to keep those secrets to myself."

I was happy to help him take those secrets to the grave.

"What exactly do you think you know?"

"We've pinpointed your origins to San Francisco. Now we've just got to narrow it down and find the nest." Aiden smiled down at me. "Rest assured, we will. You aren't the only one who can find people."

I kept my face impassive, giving nothing away. But fuck. San Francisco.

"You're not the only little bird, are you?" Dominic asked, appearing just as smug as Aiden.

Fuck. I'd do anything to protect the other girls, but that meant I had to verify what they knew...and keep it from going any further.

"And why haven't you already shared that information?" I asked crisply.

"I'd like to take over from my father," Aiden said.

"Then you should've let me kill him," I said.

"It's not that simple," Aiden said. "For one thing, unlike you, I'm not a psychopath. I care about my family."

I'd never been lectured on morality by a gun-running mafia heir, so we could add that to my list of new experiences for today.

"And for another?" I demanded, because I doubted that was the whole story.

"My father and the other two criminal patriarchs in this city have a deal: either *they* transfer power to their heir or the other mobsters absorb their criminal enterprise. For some reason, they don't trust us." Aiden didn't manage to sound offended. "One of many failsafes."

Xander's gaze flickered toward him and I knew there was more that Aiden wasn't telling me, but I let it pass for now.

"So let's be friends," Aiden told me. "He's willing to retire. But thanks to some bullshit family traditions I will never understand, my father needs to see me married before he'll let me take the throne."

"And what do I get out of this deal?"

"Your freedom. And a second crack at killing Gavin Crude, if you can find him." Aiden flashed a smile down at me. "I don't want to stop you and the other Belladonnas from murdering criminals. You're thinning out the playing field, and as long as you never come for me... we'll never come for you."

The arrogant bastard would never see us coming.

Or at least, that was what I wanted to tell myself, but here we were. I was the one strapped to the bed and he was the one who had the gun. I needed to know what he knew and how to keep anyone else from finding out that information.

Aiden leaned down and brushed the hair from my face. His fingers sent little tingles across my skin, and I gritted my teeth, annoyed by the way I felt undone. “So, Selena. Will you make me the luckiest man alive? Marry me?”

“I’d be delighted.” I lied.

Or was I lying to myself?

* * *

Dominic

NOW THAT THE girl was playing along—though I was pretty sure she’d stab us the second she had the chance—the three of us stepped out of Selena’s cell into the dimly lit basement.

“I want you to try to be the nice one,” Aiden said to me.

I regarded him skeptically, then glanced at Xander. “That seems like a better assignment for Xander.”

While women flocked to all three of us, I couldn’t deny that Xander held a special gravitational pull for the feminist psyche. Apparently women love an insane artist.

Aiden gave me a look. “My father is going to want me to come deal with this for him. And I need Xander.”

“You always do,” Xander said.

Aiden ignored him. “Gavin’s convinced that perhaps it’s a Belladonna, or perhaps it’s Aster, using the Belladonnas to hide his murder attempt. What a surprise, Aster might not be thrilled to have my father muscling in on his territory.”

The bandage on Aiden’s shoulder looked like blood was beginning to seep through.

I gestured for him to sit down, and he reluctantly did just that. “While we’re busy, you take care of her.”

I raised my eyebrows meaningfully as I pulled my chair up beside him, then peeled back the bandage over the wound. It looked nasty, but he was too deep in his new plan to give a damn about pain. When Aiden had a mission, he was focused—disturbingly so—and he didn’t care about any little details like a gunshot wound.

He said, “Not like that. She’s going to be my wife.”

I shrugged as I began to re-dress the wound. The two of us had a long standing history of fucking with each other. “I don’t think she said yes.”

“Explain to her what her duties are going to be.”

“This is the worst idea you’ve had,” Xander said. “And we’ve been with you for a lot of bad ideas. That girl is going to kill you in your sleep. And then, more importantly, she’s going to kill *us*.”

Aiden shook his head. “I can manage her.”

Xander frowned down at him, crossing his arms. “You like her.”

“I see an opportunity. Gavin can’t get to Selena.”

Xander’s gaze met mine over Aiden’s head. Neither of us would say Lolly’s name, but Gavin’s games had clearly made Aiden lose his mind.

“Anyway, she won’t get the chance to kill us in our sleep. Dom, let Rocky loose. She’ll stay in her room or she’ll regret it.” Aiden tossed me his keys as he stood.

“Fantastic plan,” Xander said as he and Aiden left the room. He turned to call over his shoulder, “Yell for help if she kicks your ass!”

None of us had cell phones. Aiden had always been a luddite, but Selena’s arrival had pushed him over the edge into straight-up technophobe.

I shook my head, tossed the bloodied bandages into the garbage, then headed in to face the little dark-haired spitfire.

She stared up at the ceiling, as if she wanted to ignore me.

“If I cut you loose, are you going to try to kill me?” I asked her. “Because I assure you, there is no way out of this house without Aiden’s permission.”

When her gaze turned to mine, her dark eyes were alluring. Until she bared her teeth at me in what might have been an approximation of a smile. “So you’re trapped too?”

“Yep. Difference between the two of us is, I don’t mind it. I’ll do anything for Aiden.” And he would do anything for me.

Well, anything except resist fucking each other’s girl.

Something about Selena opened up an unexpected pool of desire low in my gut. Most women would have freaked out to finding themselves in the position she was. She was so cool and calculating.

Aiden could pretend he’d chosen her because she was so immediately available, because Gavin would find her incorruptible, but deep down, he wanted someone who would stand on her own two feet in our dark, gritty world.

“I know you don’t want to play fiancée, but that will keep you alive for a little while.”

Her eyes shifted around the room, then back to mine. She gave me the feeling she was trying to look right through me, into my soul.

Too bad she probably wasn’t going to find much.

“So what exactly does he need accomplished before he kills me?” she asked.

Smart girl. She knew that she’d be a loose end needing to be taken care of.

“Just make him fall in love with you, and you might find yourself with a permanent position.”

Her lips twisted ruefully. “Not really my style.”

“Aren’t you Belladonnas good at making men love you?”

She looked me dead in the eyes and lied, “Artifice has never been my strength. I’m a naturally honest person.”

Sure. And I was a naturally patient one. “Well, artifice is required now. Aiden needs someone to pretend to be his fiancée. And lucky you, you’re the lady for the job.”

“Lucky me,” she said dryly. “It’s better than being shot in the head.”

“That’s my girl. I love the optimism.” I patted her leg, where a little too much of her thigh was still exposed. I liked this girl underneath the bubbly vapid exterior that I’d seen at the party so much better. A girl who left a mark. I ran my thumb absently over the bruise on my cheek as I studied her.

She immediately tried to push herself up, try and take control of her body, only for her arms to go back out from underneath her.

“They’ll be weak at first from the drug,” I said. “Feeling numb through your limbs?”

She nodded, her eyes flashing. She didn’t like being helpless at all.

“I can help that go away,” I told her. “But you’ll have to give me permission to touch you, sleeping beauty. You and I are going to be working together and I don’t want to be murdered when I’m trying to enjoy my waffles.”

“You’re the one who did this to me in the first place!”

“Who says the cure can’t also be the curse?”

She closed her eyes. “Fine.”

Her breath seemed to go still as she waited for me to touch her. I took the time to study her. There was something delicate and fragile about the lines of her collarbones and the swell of her small breasts in that golden gown. But she didn’t seem like she was fragile at all.

“Oh, you’re going to have to ask me nicely.” I ran my hand over her calf again, before taking her foot into my lap.

I began to massage her in long strokes, and a soft moan escaped her pillowy pink lips. Her eyes snapped open, as if she hated herself for showing any desire, but she couldn't help it when she was drugged.

I enjoyed that helpless pleasure more than I would if I were a good man.

“Ask me nicely,” I said, with my hands stilling on her calf. She looked at me as if she wanted to kill me, and then I slid my hand down her calf again, and her body stiffened, her hips rising subtly.

I had watched people come out of these drugs before, but I've never seen anyone come so close to having an orgasm.

I wanted to watch her weaken to pleasure. I waited until finally, she gave in.

“Please...”

“You are not very good at begging.”

Her eyes flashed again. “You just said I had to ask nicely.”

“You took too long.” I skimmed my hand up her leg again, intrigued, and her fingers twisted awkwardly in the sheets. She didn't quite have full motor control yet.

“Please,” she managed again, her voice etched with longing. My cock stiffened.

I went on, running my hands over her muscles. Her body felt good underneath my hands, as I caressed her back to life. I moved from one leg, when her toes twitched again, to her arm, massaging her fingers, her joints, her palm. I pressed a kiss to her palm and watched a shudder go through her.

She was so sensitive. Either she was inexperienced, or she was horny as fuck.

Or she wanted me.

Or all three.

I did the same with the other arm, that moved down her other leg. She moaned as I went higher and higher up her

thigh, and when my fingers brushed between her legs as I reached at the top of her thigh, her entire body shuddered.

“How close are you to coming?” I ran a finger over the curve of her through her panties, and her body jerked.

But she closed her eyes, clearly trying to fight back her orgasm, to avoid showing me any weakness...or desire. She couldn't hide the desire in her dark eyes, though. Her panties were damp and the scent of her arousal was alluring. It would be so easy to nudge them aside and curl my fingers inside her and watch her come.

I kept my eyes on her, my hand skimming over her thigh. “Do you want to learn how to please him, how to win him over so that he's more likely to leave you alive at the end of it?”

She licked her lips, and I couldn't stop staring as the tip of her pink tongue traced her red mouth.

“He's not going to leave me alive at the end,” she said. “So I guess I might as well enjoy life while I can.”

That was obviously bullshit. She was trying to feed me a line of defeatism. But I had a feeling that she was biding her time until she had the chance to kill us all and escape the castle.

She might find that harder than she realized.

But for now, my fingers drifted once again over her soft mound through her panties. She couldn't hide the way her hips bucked.

“I like my girls a little rough around the edges,” I told her. “But Aiden needs someone who can fit into his world. You're going to have to fake being a certain kind of woman. Demure, submissive...or at least someone who can be made to behave.”

But I had the feeling she would never be made to behave. She might submit to Aiden if he could convince her to like it...but it would only be in the bedroom. Anything else would be *artifice*, as she had said.

There was one thing I was sure she wasn't faking, though.

I pushed aside her panties and rubbed two fingers against her sensitive nub. Her head fell back, and the chains jerked as her body strove to push toward me, push toward more of the pleasure. I slid two fingers inside her and teased her as she arched for me, making the sweetest little sounds. “Come for me,” I told her, working my fingers against her g-spot.

And then she exploded, clenching around my hand. Her breasts heaved, her teeth bit into her lip, her hips jerked. She arched wildly, the chains rattling hard, and she let out a little gasp of a moan. The moan was all the better because she was trying so hard to stifle it, and my cock was so hard it could be a weapon.

The sound of her orgasm was even sweeter mixed with the rattle of her chains.

“Now you should be in better shape,” I told her, reaching to undo the first bond around her wrist. I half-expected her to fight, but instead she lay there, collapsed against the pillow, watching me with careful, dark eyes.

I slid one finger, soaked in her juices, along the curve of her beautiful mouth. She eyed me, as if this was new for her. She was an interesting mixture of intimidating and inexperienced. Most of all, the feeling that there was the brightest, most dangerous mind whirring along underneath all that uncertainty was intoxicating.

I pressed the finger between her lips, until she parted her lips, and they engulfed my finger. Then she began to suck her juices off my fingers. Her lips worked across my skin tentatively at first. Then she seemed to forget me as she sucked on my fingers hungrily.

Her gaze met mine, her teeth on my finger, pressing hard but not quite biting yet, and I grinned down at her. “Watch it, little bird. You could take my finger, but I’d take quite a bit more from you.”

I’d only just begun to know her, but I already had the feeling she would be so perfect for us.

I had no intention of letting her waste her life by trying to run away from us, or for Aiden to waste her life by tying up loose ends.

She was going to be mine.

CHAPTER 5



S elena

DOMINIC DANGLED a blindfold in front of me. “What’s that for?”

“Because I need to move you, and you aren’t going to learn anything about the interior of the house.” He gave me a wolfish smile. “I don’t trust you.”

“And yet, you just gave me a pretty decent orgasm.”

That smile widened. “Just because I don’t trust you, doesn’t mean I don’t like you.”

God, he was handsome and wicked. I’d never felt particularly stirred by guys like this before.

I let my hands fall to my sides. I still felt wobbly, and I’d only get one chance to run. If I were going to pretend to be Aiden’s fiancéé, I’d no doubt appear in public places which would give me the chance I needed to get away from them. Once I found—and destroyed—whatever or *whoever* endangered my Belladonnas.

“Good girl,” he murmured, slipping the blindfold over my eyes. His fingers were gentle as he knotted it against my hair. “I’m going to pick you up now.”

I stiffened, but it didn’t matter. He scooped me up in his arms, holding me against his warm, hard chest. My muscles

were weak and that must be why I found myself melting into his warmth.

He carried me out and up some stairs. Cool air brushed against my skin and it felt as if we were going in circles. So we'd been beneath the house? And now we were ascending a spiral staircase? I did my best to commit everything I could to memory.

Blindfolds didn't matter that much. Not with all my training.

Then we moved into warmth. His shoes echoed across the floor, and if it were possible for floors to sound expensive, these did.

"Can you put me down now?" I asked, sure that we were going up regular stairs, that he might be past the point where he intended to hide things from me. I understood why they wouldn't want me to know the layout of doors and windows.

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

His breath stirred my hair. "Because I like to hold you."

He pushed a door open with his foot, then carried me in and set me down on the edge of the bed.

"If tonight goes well," he told me, "Perhaps you'll have the run of the place. But for now, this is your world."

"Tonight?" I didn't really expect him to answer, and he didn't. They were so intent on keeping me off balance.

He gently pulled the blindfold from my eyes.

I was sitting on a bed in a luxurious room, but there were still cuffs dangling from each poster of the canopy bed.

"Are you going to tie me up at night?"

"We'll see." He rose and walked toward the windows, which looked out over an expansive green garden. He tapped his fingers on the glass. "Best security system in the world. Aiden is more careful than his father, and you're in his house now."

We'd see about that.

“What's tonight?”

“Aiden wants to introduce his fiancée to some of his closest friends.” He turned and crossed his arms.

“It's a test.”

“Very much so.”

I debated whether or not to ask him to tell me all about the friends... and how to make Aiden happy.

“What do you need?” he asked me. “I assume you know how to put on a good show. I saw what you did last night.... Though I'd suggest you pretend to be a little brighter tonight. They all know Aiden's never been attracted to Stupid.”

“Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“I didn't say he wouldn't let Stupid suck his cock.” He pointed out a pad of notebook on the desk. “You can write out a list of requests.”

“It'd be easier if I shopped for myself—”

“Online?” he raised his eyebrows. “I don't think so. You won't see anything with a keypad for a month, little bird.”

“Don't call me that.”

“But you are little. And fierce.” He picked up the pen from the table and tossed it to me. I caught it out of the air, and his lips curled up on one side. “Write your list. And call me if you need me.”

“How am I going to call you?” I looked around the room. There was no phone line. I didn't have my cell anymore. I had nothing.

He stepped toward me and ran one knuckle up my throat. The rough touch dragging up my skin was accompanied by a pulse of fire. “Use your big girl voice.”

Even though he turned me on, I was biding my time until I kicked his ass. *Big girl voice*. What an arrogant bastard who needed to be taken down a notch.

“I don’t need much,” I told him, turning my back on him. “It’s never the dress. It’s the woman wearing the dress.”

I quickly scrawled my shopping list on the notepad. I’d been through the big makeover montage more times than I could count, as the other Belladonnas helped me get ready for various events. By now, I knew what I was doing. My eyebrows were already groomed, my skin impeccable, my hair thick and shiny thanks to both products and a regimen of vitamins that I washed down with Mountain Dew. My beauty was not effortless, but it meant I didn’t need to dress things up much.

I handed it to Dominic. “Are you going to be my personal shopper?”

“No.” He folded it once and tucked it into his jacket pocket. I was curious about this man who looked so well-dressed and elegant despite his massive size, but who had scars across his knuckles.

“I’m going to be bored,” I said. “Can I look around the house?”

“Your freedom will be a reward for good behavior.” He tilted his head to one side. “And I promise you, little Belladonna. From what I’ve seen, Aiden’s punishments can be fun... but they don’t have to be. I would be on my best behavior if I were you.”

“I’m quite clear on the stakes, thank you. I don’t need any more threats.”

He nodded and left the room. It clicked quietly shut behind him. I walked a circuit around the room, studying it carefully.

There were no ties to the outside world. No phone line. Not even a hookup for an internet connection. That wasn’t exactly uncommon in a wifi world, but a nagging sense that these men were prepared for me raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

My phone, my apple watch, and everything else I owned had been removed except for my gown and underwear. I

touched my earlobes only to find my earrings were missing, as was my bracelet.

Both pieces of jewelry were more than met the eye.

And so were these men.

Then I went to the door and tried the knob. It didn't move. If there was a keypad on the other side, I didn't have any way to disable it at the moment.

I hated being bored.

It made me miss Dominic. I was curious to get another glimpse of Aiden as well. He was hard for me to read.

These men were dangerous for me, and I needed to escape.

But they were also like a puzzle, and I loved puzzles.

While I was stuck here...I might as well make the most of it.

* * *

IT WASN'T Dominic who delivered the clothes to my room.

There was no knock on the door. It just opened, and it was Aiden who stepped into the room. He carried a garment bag slung over one shoulder. He sauntered into the room looking commanding, which I guess made sense in the moment, given that he had the keys. I was trapped until he decided to let me out, which made me a little more polite than my usual MO.

"Hello, lover," he said as he laid the garment bag on the bed. He sat two shopping bags beside it.

I watched him, and he turned to me raising both eyebrows. "You are not doing a very convincing imitation of a woman in love. I hope that you will put on a better show tonight."

"It's just the two of us."

"Practice makes perfect."

If he expected a hug and a kiss after kidnapping me, he wasn't as smart as I thought. "When are we going out?"

“In an hour.”

“What time is that?” I glanced around the room. There was no clock in it. The sun was settling toward the distant edge of the sky, so I knew night was coming. But that was the closest I came to knowing the time.

He shrugged. “It’s an hour until I need you. The only time that matters for you now is my commands. It doesn’t matter what day or hour.”

It was a strange little bit of vulnerability, keeping me from knowing the time. But at least I had windows to get enough of a gauge. If it was good enough for the cave people, it was good enough for me.

“You don’t even trust me with a digital clock?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

“I need to know some things about you to make for a convincing fiancé.” Even as the words were coming out of my mouth, it all sounded insane. I’d never pretended to be someone’s fake fiancé, but I would if Man asked. But I would have done it with a dossier that told me everything I needed to know about them and the situation. I didn’t like going in blind and unbalanced.

Of course, that seemed to be what Aiden enjoyed about this most. Which I didn’t entirely understand, given that the stakes were high for him.

His father probably wouldn’t appreciate that he was fake dating his intended assassin.

He raised his eyebrows. “Dominic didn’t tell you everything you need to know?”

I should have called Dominic for help. Regret pushed in on me. But he had just as much reason to want this to succeed as I did if he cared about Aiden as he’d said. I wondered if there were fault lines between them, and if so, I needed to understand them so I could exploit them.

“How would Dominic tell me everything I need to know when you’re supposed to be my fiancé?” I headed for the

bathroom.

I didn't like having just an hour to do my makeup and my homework.

"He happens to know me very well."

"Tell me what I would know as your future fiancé." I leaned over the counter to begin to line my eyes. In the mirror, I caught him watching me, his gaze on the curve of my ass as I leaned. His heated gaze sent a matching flush of heat through my body, but I had work to do. In work mode, it was easier for me to push away the flutter of desire. "How do you feel about your father?"

He whistled. "I wouldn't tell my fiancé about that."

"You wouldn't tell your fiancé about your feelings," I repeated. "So are your friends supposed to believe that I am just the stupid ditz who wandered through your party last night?"

"You'll have to earn my trust for me to talk about my parents. I assume you don't want to talk about yours?"

I shook my head. "Orphan."

It was easiest to keep cover stories close to real life.

He nodded. "Probably easiest that way."

I wasn't sure if he was talking about the story, or if he just wished his parents dead. Clearly, he didn't want to talk about it yet.

"What's my nickname for you?" I asked him.

"Sir."

"Seriously." I kept my lips parted as I began to apply my mascara. I didn't know why that helped.

He had moved closer to me, and now he ran his thumb over my lower lip before it slipped between my teeth. I set the mascara wand down on the counter, feeling something inside me wobble.

“Seriously,” he said. “But we’ll come to that later. My friends will know—as will my father, and he is the one you’ll have to worry most about convincing—that while I might play with stupid girls, they’re not actually to my taste.”

” And what is your taste?” I asked.

“Sophisticated. Smart. Submissive.”

“While alliterative, those are three traits you don’t usually hear combined.”

“That’s because most people are stupid. They don’t realize the power a submissive holds over the dominant.” He tilted his head to one side. “I really don’t think you’re like most people. But I hope you won’t disappoint me.”

“You don’t have to remind me on a daily basis that you could kill me. Though I notice that you aren’t wearing your gun right now so you must assume that I have a chance of doing the same if we met in a fair fight.”

“How observant of you. I’m fascinated that you studied my body so closely. But don’t worry about me. I never fight fair.”

“I assumed not, knowing your father.”

His hand skimmed up my back, raising goosebumps with his slow soft touch. When he reached the nape of my neck, my back arched faintly despite myself.

Then his hand fisted the hair at the nape of my neck. I let out a soft gasp as he pulled me close, forcing my head back to meet his gaze as he drew me against his hard body. The scent of his expensive cologne enveloped me again.

“I am nothing like my father,” he said. “and you should be very thankful for that.”

He released me. My knees felt weak. He spun and headed for the door.

“Be ready in forty-five minutes.”

“I have more questions.”

“Then you shouldn’t have pissed me off.”

I followed him out of the bathroom as he headed for the door. “What do your friends know about me?”

“Absolutely nothing.” He said. “Which won’t be too surprising to them. Women are generally irrelevant in our world until they make themselves relevant.”

There was a distinct challenge in that line.

Aiden would find I was quite *relevant* when I was the last thing he saw before I killed him.

CHAPTER 6



S elena

IT WAS Dominic who came to get me later. He leaned in the doorway once he opened the door and quirked an eyebrow at me as I lounged on the bed. I'd been ready for a while and I was once again bored. I was lost without the internet.

He asked, "You don't seem wild to leave this room?"

"Where's Aiden?" I rose from the bed, running a hand over my hair to make sure it was still smooth.

"Waiting in the car." His gaze swept over me, feeling weighted. Then his gaze met mine. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you."

"It's not a compliment. It's a simple statement of fact. It's your job to look beautiful tonight."

"And here I thought you were the gallant one. Sweeping me off my feet."

He offered me his arm, and since I doubted I had any option in taking it when I was biding my time with these men, I hooked my fingers over the crook of his arm. The corded muscle of his forearm flexed through the fine material of his suit.

"Why are you always wearing a suit?" I asked.

"Why are you always a smart ass? We all have our things."

Just then, a clatter rose from the room across from us, followed by a man cursing. I couldn't help my alarm, which made me squeeze slightly closer to Dominic. He looked down at me as if he enjoyed my reaction.

"It's just Xander. Something must not be going well in his studio."

As we were walking through the house, I tried to catalog the layout. He looked amused, and then swept me off my feet and began to carry me.

"I can walk."

"Even in those shoes. It's impressive. I couldn't do it."

"I'd like to see you try." I didn't think I could entirely hide how my heart rate sped up when he carried me. Even though I was technically offended by being manhandled.

His lips dipped close to my ear as he paused. "Close your eyes."

It was hilarious if he expected me to actually obey. I closed my eyes while he watched me, and after a second, he returned to carrying me through the house. I let my lashes drift open just slightly. I needed to know where the exits and entrances were.

He must have been keenly focused on me though, because then he showed me some real manhandling, throwing me over his shoulder. The world spun upside down and I kned him in the chest, on the verge of throwing myself over his shoulder in a somersault before I stopped myself. I had to remember to pretend to be compliant...for now.

He slapped my ass and I made a sound of protest.

"I told you to keep your eyes closed. I didn't want to have to blindfold you again."

"How am I going to pretend to be Aiden's fiancée when you don't even trust me to see the interior of his house?"

"I have faith in your professionalism."

It was hard for me to take note of anything while I was dangling upside down. All I could really see was the tapered small of his back and the muscular curve of his ass.

We crossed out of the house into a green lawn, heading toward the circular drive.

I was pink cheeked and breathless from being dangled upside down when Dominic righted me and turned me toward the back of the car. A sleek black Lamborghini Urus waited in front of me, with Aiden in the driver's seat. He looked immaculate as always.

He cast a quick eye over me. "That look suits you. Far better than last night."

I wore a simple black dress, with my hair pulled back in a polished chignon at the nape of my neck. My makeup was minimal and tasteful except for a bold red lip.

I slid into the passenger side of the car. Dominic shut the door for me.

"So is he like your servant?"

"More like a brother. So you can set aside any thoughts of using him against me." Aiden gave me a thin smile. "I don't care if he fucks you."

The crass words disgusted me. Normally they wouldn't have bothered me—a significant part of my career success depended on men being misogynistic pigs—and I wasn't sure I wanted to examine why I was annoyed. Either way, all I said was, "Good."

"Just don't forget who you belong to."

I didn't belong to anyone, but I wasn't going to get into a back-and-forth with him. "What's my background?"

"Whatever you want. Just follow my lead."

I sighed under my breath. I liked a controlled, careful plan of attack and a well-prepared dossier. Aiden seemed to favor a surprisingly laissez-faire approach for a man who seemed generally quite controlling.

“What kind of restaurant are we going to for dinner?”

“We’re not going to a restaurant.”

“Where are we going then?”

“My favorite club.”

Of course. There was nothing I hated like the club scene. I hated to dance. Clubs were always so loud. My idea of a good night was curling up in my own house with a book. The men in books were almost always more appealing than any man you can find at a club.

He either didn’t notice my disgust or didn’t care, because he went on, “Luckily, you won’t have to do very much talking.”

“You all seem like the kind of men that don’t need women to talk very much.”

“I hope you’re going to check this attitude before we walk into the club.” A faint smile came over his lips. “Or not. That could be fun too.”

“I’ll do my job of seeming like your girl,” I said. “Smart. Sophisticated. Submissive. I can keep my mouth shut for a few hours.”

“We will see.”

We pulled past lush green trees and into the circle before an expansive hotel. I knew that the Crude family owned a series of dance clubs. And I knew there was a dirty underbelly to those dance clubs.

As much as I hated to dance, I hoped all Aiden planned for us tonight was a dance club.

A smiling valet came and took Aiden’s keys. A second car pulled up behind us, with dark tinted windows. Aiden might’ve driven us, but his security was always lurking close by.

Interesting, then, that when we were in the house, it was just the four of us. Aiden was cocky.

I loved arrogance in a man. It made him so easy to manage.

“Ready?” He held out his hand.

“Absolutely.” I smiled back at him, pleased to have the chance to steal a cell phone tonight and get to work verifying just what he knew...and to make sure my Belladonnas were safe.

We crossed the lobby to the elevators, where he had to swipe his key card for the top floor.

He took me up to a lush, over the top dance club. It was like nowhere I had ever been in before. Everything was captivating, and while there was a dance floor where one could not hear oneself think—because that was some people’s happy place—the rest of the club was soundproofed well enough that you could actually carry on a conversation. Which I appreciated.

Not that he wanted me to converse much.

“If you can convince them that you belong with me,” he murmured into my ear as we took seats in a wide booth in the private VIP area. “Then you can level up and we can go to the tenth floor.”

“What’s on the tenth floor?”

“You’ll find out when you’re ready.”

Hard pass. I’d never be ready to be dominated. Aiden was sexy, but I thought he’d look sexier if I was pegging *him*.

“For someone who needs this to work, you seem to really enjoy keeping me in the dark.”

“If you’re good enough to do the job, darling, you’ll be able to follow my lead.”

His friends joined us. There were several good looking men, and beautiful women who hung on their arms. Unlike Dominic who looked clean-cut enough to be secretly an FBI agent, all these men clearly weren’t trying to blend in at church on Sunday. Ink peeked above the collars of their expensive suits, and no matter how well-hidden, I was trained

to spot the tell-tale signs of discreetly-carried guns. These men were all ready for a fight.

I wasn't going to grab one of their guns, though I could feel Aiden's intensity as he watched to make sure I didn't lunge for a weapon. Why the hell did he want me by his side when he thought I might murder him at any moment?

He wasn't wrong. He shouldn't trust me. But I didn't understand the mobster heir, and that bothered me.

"Henry, Fox, it's good to see you." Aiden shook hands with a couple of guys, then settled his hand on the small of my back as he escorted me forward. His eyes lit with pride—what a good actor—as he said, "I'd like you to meet Selena."

"Pleasure," Fox said as he shook my hand.

A waiter was already at Aiden's shoulder, handing him a glass of bourbon and asking him what I would like to drink.

"I like bourbon," I said with a smile, taking the drink out of Aiden's hand.

Aiden paused, just for a second, but Henry's eyes swiveled between us. Then Aiden said, "Yes, bring another glass, please."

The waiter headed off, and Henry asked me, "So, Selena, are you new in the city?"

"Yes," I said. "I met Aiden at a party in New York and he convinced me to follow him here."

Aiden nodded, and somehow I didn't doubt his ability to pick up every detail I created and spin out the lies. "I didn't care for her friends in New York."

Really? He could make up any story he wanted, and he was going to present himself as a controlling bastard?

"Luckily, I gave up my friends in exchange for an offer I couldn't refuse." I twined my hand over Aiden's corded forearm, tucking myself into his side.

Aiden's gaze flickered across the room—at nothing—and then he said, "Excuse me, gentlemen. I have a few other

people who need to meet Selena.”

“Of course. Pleasure meeting you, Selena.”

As he steered me away from them, he murmured in my ear, “You’re making yourself sound like a gold-digger.”

“The offer I can’t refuse could be the chance to peg you,” I disagreed. “I might be willing to relocate for that.”

“I wouldn’t be with a gold-digger.” Aiden removed my hand from his arm. He looked genuinely annoyed.

So I’d found a sore spot to use against him. Fantastic.

He took the glass of bourbon back from me. “I think you already forgot what I told you.”

“Smart. Sophisticated. Submissive. Yes, I know. But I also just appeared out of nowhere as your future fiancée. People need to know we met in New York. Why I fell head over heels in love with you.” I smiled up at him as I added the last, but it was for the benefit of a couple moving near us that might be able to hear over the music.

Aiden sighed under his breath, as if perhaps he had just realized this was a bad idea. Xander, Dominic and I had all told him just that.

Then I overheard the woman in the couple behind us say quietly, “She’s no Lolly.”

“Might be for the best,” he responded.

I raised my eyebrows at Aiden, but he either hadn’t heard them or had decided not to.

“Go talk to the girls,” he said. “Redeem yourself.”

I was tempted to correct him—they were women, after all—but I refrained.

Instead, I found Henry and Fox’s ‘girls’. A tall redhead named Amanda and a petite, curvy brunette named Tessie. As we made small talk about nothing, I surveyed the club, constructing a mental map. Gavin Crude occasionally came to this club, although I had the feeling this was primarily Aiden’s

territory. My best chance at Gavin Crude would probably come as he was leaving this club.

Tessie drained the last of her champagne and set it down on the table, her enormous emerald engagement ring flashing under the strobing lights. “Does anyone want to visit the ladies’ room with me?”

“Absolutely,” I said. Amanda came with us, so she wouldn’t be left out—sometimes I didn’t understand other women—and I took the opportunity as we were talking at the long black marble sinks to liberate a cell phone from Tessie’s purse.

On our way out, I concealed it just in time, since Dominic was waiting outside the bathroom door. I hadn’t seen him earlier, but apparently he was Aiden’s favorite bodyguard. I breezed past him as if he was nothing; I had the feeling he would want to prove to me that he was *something*.

I could feel his gaze on my back, and an electric prickle ran up my spine. Dominic could be useful to me if I seduced him.

Besides being useful, I thought he’d be *fun*.

“So, let me see this ring,” I said, holding out my hand to Tessie.

She lit up and prattled on, just as I’d hoped, and I smiled and nodded as she went on about her engagement ring.

“How did he propose to you?” I asked, when she was winding down, and she started all over again.

“So,” Amanda asked me, clearly looking for an opening to hear something she hadn’t heard six times before, “Do you have any dreams for how you hope Aiden will ask *you*?”

“Hopefully he’ll get my father’s permission. I’ve always been old fashioned, and so is he.” I had no idea why anyone wanted daddy’s permission for *their* big life choices, but I had a feeling these two might.

“Oh,” Tessie looked slightly uncomfortable, and she reached for her purse, pulling it across the booth toward her.

Fox wrapped his arm around her shoulders, though he didn't look at her; he and Henry and Aiden were deep in conversation. I had a feeling jewelry and Parisian hot air balloon rides never came up.

Tessie dug through her purse and then said, "Where's my phone?"

"Take a night off from Instagram and Tiktok," Fox told her impatiently, glancing away from his conversation just to chide her. I might find her a little annoying, but he was insufferable.

She ignored him. "Oh no, I must have lost my phone."

"Didn't you have it before we went to the bathroom?" Amanda asked her. "Did you leave it there?"

The girls rushed back to look.

Aiden leaned over to give me a sharp look as Fox and Henry were joking about Tessie losing everything. He leaned over to me and whispered in my ear, "There will be consequences."

I looked back innocently.

Aiden didn't look convinced. "Take the phone out of wherever you have it stashed on your body. And drop it on the seat. We'll pretend she must have dropped it from her purse."

He finished his words by kissing my throat just beneath my ear. I tilted my head to one side.

Reluctantly, I did what he told me. I would have liked to have pried the phone apart and taken a piece or two, but I knew that it was too late for that. He was watching me too carefully.

The only thing worse than a gangster is a *smart* gangster.

CHAPTER 7



Xander

MY NEWEST PROJECT was rapidly turning into a flop. I'd been up all night, and so I heard in the small hours in the morning when Aiden came back in with the girl.

I had felt the stirring in the house since she arrived. I'd only spent a few moments with her. But seeing was the least important thing. I could *feel* her. Her energy floated through the house, charging the air.

Something had changed when she came in.

But she didn't return to the room across from mine. They went somewhere else. For a moment, my fantasies spun, but as I headed downstairs to the bar, I could feel how quiet the entire floor was.

They hadn't gone to Aiden's room.

As I poured myself a Scotch, curiosity got the better of me. Would Aiden really have sent her back to the dungeon? He needed her. More than he admitted.

Rocky padded past me, his claws clicking on the polished floors. Aiden didn't like having Dominic's rottweiler roam the house, so he must be at least a little afraid of Selena...even if he had locked her away.

The basement was thoroughly soundproofed. It wasn't until I had descended the staircase that I heard the first faint

sound of her. She wasn't in the same room where Aiden had first stashed her. She was in the room with the cage.

I had to swing open the door to hear her screaming.

Then her gaze met mine, wild eyed, through gilt bars. The gilt was scratched away in places, revealing the dull steel beneath. There was blood around her fingernails.

"What did you do?" I was full of curiosity. She seemed to have lost her mind.

She looked up at me, but didn't manage to answer. Had Aiden put her in here knowing how much she would freak out? I didn't think so. This wasn't a normal level of terror about being stuck in a cage in a gangster's basement, and there certainly would have been a fair amount of fear that was legitimate in that case. But she seemed lost in her panic.

That didn't fit with the kind of girl I'd expected Aiden to bring home. It didn't fit with the spark of the girl that I had seen when I first helped Dominic bundle her into a closet. And it didn't fit with the wild energy I'd felt enter the house when she did, like a strong, salt-tinged breeze coming off the ocean.

So I tried again. "What are you afraid of?"

She shook her head. She was clearly not interested in giving me any more material.

But I wasn't the one who would hurt her. "Talk to me."

"Let me out." Her voice came out on a whisper.

"Not a chance. I don't have the keys." I touched the lock, which was an old school, simple lock and key. Well, five of them. It hadn't looked like this before. Aiden had changed things once we captured her in the dungeon.

"What if you did?" She tried to sound unruffled, but her voice was still raspy from the screaming, so it didn't really work. She sounded cute though, with the huskiness.

"I'd still choose Aiden over you," I said bluntly. "But... I'm willing to do something to help the time pass for you until he lets you out."

“He’s going let me out?”

“He’s not going to leave you to starve down here. Sooner or later, he’ll have another tenant and that would make a big mess.”

She was clearly trying to master her feelings.

“Aiden thinks you’re quite impressive. Why are you screaming?”

She looked as if she were debating which was the better option, to tell me or to keep her secrets. In the end, she must have realized that if Aiden thought that she wasn’t impressive, her life would be over.

“I’m claustrophobic.”

“So you don’t like the cage.”

She looked at me as if I were stupid. “Who would like the cage?”

“You might be surprised.” Aiden had another one like it, although it wasn’t down here in the dungeon. Plenty of girls had happily climbed inside.

I asked her curiously, “How much does your claustrophobia impact your daily life? Can you go caving?”

She scoffed. “Caving is idiotic.”

“Elevators?”

“Elevators are fine. They’re only for a minute, I haven’t been locked in them by a madman, and I’m often not...”

She bit it off her words like she was hiding a secret.

“Often not what?” I asked her. She looked at me as if she weren’t going to tell me, but that was okay. I could guess. “Often not alone?”

She nodded reluctantly. “Ironic, because I generally far prefer being alone.”

I flashed her a grin. “You must not have had the right company.”

She didn’t look convinced I’d change her mind.

“I’ll stay here for a while,” I told her. “Until Aiden comes to let you out.”

“Are you sure he will?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m sure. He has plans for you.”

“I didn’t do a very good job pretending to be a fake girlfriend tonight,” she said.

“I’m sure you can learn.” I tilted my head to one side. “While his tastes are not mine, I can certainly teach you what Aiden likes.”

“Dominic said the same thing.”

Hearing Dominic’s name on her lips sent an unexpected spurt of jealousy through me. I wanted to hear her say my name.

But most of all, I wanted to spend more time with her.

“And are you ready to learn?”

She nodded. But who wouldn’t, when they were in the cage?

“I’ll stay here with you tonight.” I sank cross-legged to sit beside her.

She eyed me, as if she were considering whether she should grab me through the bars. I had no doubt she could kill me if she wished.

But then she’d be down here alone with my corpse for company. She’d be back to screaming, and Aiden would make sure she never stopped screaming before she was quiet forever. He was an asshole, but when he cared about people, he cared deeply.

And with homicidal impulses.

“Tell me about yourself,” I said.

She lay back, smoothing her black dress over her creamy thighs. She seemed exhausted as she turned to look at me, though her chest still fluttered with too-rapid breaths she was

obviously trying to master. “Why don’t you tell me about yourself?”

“You don’t like to talk about yourself.”

“Not with my enemies.”

“Oh, we aren’t enemies. You’re marrying my best friend.”

She ignored that. “How did you come to be roommates?”

I had the feeling she needed a distraction, and I didn’t see how that information could harm Aiden. “We’ve been friends since we were kids. Gavin took Dominic and me in when we were teenagers.”

“What was it like growing up with Aiden?”

“He’s always been the way he is now. Inhumanly polished,” I said, and she smiled faintly as if she knew what I meant. “I don’t think he ever went through an awkward phase. I’ve never heard him sing karaoke. I’ve never seen him get a zit. But I had enough for both of us when we were fifteen.”

“Sounds like a stuck-up prick.”

“Well, yes. But he’s *our* stuck-up prick.”

I stayed there until the night had passed, and dawn had come and gone. I should have been done with her by the time the door rattled and Aiden came in, but she had fallen asleep, quiet with her hand reaching through the cage for me. In her sleep, she was less guarded. And I had taken her hand and was still holding it.

Aiden took us in with a sweep of his eyes. “I think you don’t understand how a punishment is supposed to work.”

“I think it was more than you intended,” I told him.

She hadn’t wanted to tell me why it was that she was claustrophobic, but I was sure there was a reason.

Aiden threw me the keys. He wouldn’t admit he was wrong, but his jaw tightened the way it did when he knew he’d fucked up. “I have to spend my day pretending that I’m tracking her down. Take care of her.”

As if that weren't already my intention.

CHAPTER 8



S elena

I WOKE to the feeling of being lifted into the air.

My first impulse was to strike out. I slammed my fist into something hard and solid before my eyes even opened, and then a strong hand wrapped around my wrist.

My eyes flew open, my body already tense.

Xander's beautiful face gazed down at me. "If you've been having a bad dream, I've come to wake you from it."

He was still holding my fist, and he pressed a kiss to the knuckles I had just used to hit him.

I looked around and realized he had just lifted me out of the cage. If Aiden had come in with the keys, I hadn't woken. Had I been drugged again?

Or had I just been sleeping the deepest sleep of my life, holding hands with a mobster?

I wasn't sure which possibility was more horrifying. I slept poorly almost everywhere. The best sleep I got was with the hum of my vending machine in the corner of my room. I'd been at the house long enough to believe I was really safe there. But when I left its walls, I was always on a mission. I was always in danger.

And the nightmares always came back.

“Aiden came and unlocked the door,” he confirmed. “and I made some plans for our day.”

“What are those?” I hoped one of them was breakfast and I hoped another was a long, hot shower. I didn’t enjoy sleeping in my clothes as I’d done yet again last night.

He raised his hand to show me what he had palmed in it. A keyring with five keys on it. The keys to the cage.

Panic choked my throat, and the expression on his face shifted from triumphant to worried. “No, no. No one’s going to put you back in the cage. Here... I’ll show you.”

Having set me back on my feet, he twined his arm around my neck and pressed a kiss my forehead. The soothing motion surprised me.

So did the fact that I felt...soothed.

Instead of blindfolding me as Dominic had done, he kept his arm around me as he led me out of the room into an enormous basement. A black wrought iron spiral staircase led up, nearly lost in the darkness.

“Dominic told me he had to blindfold me to bring me upstairs.” I leaned into the warmth of his side; he smelled like clay and ink, and it was strangely comforting. “I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

Showing concern for someone is the quickest way to get them to care for you in return. After all, I knew how well that worked from the other side; I’d felt cared for when he stayed with me the night before. But I had to keep my guard up. This was not my home, and these men were not my friends.

“I’m pretty sure Dominic just said that because he wanted to carry you,” Xander said.

Indignation swept through me, remembering how Dominic had made me feel helpless. I was going to make him suffer for those feelings of helplessness, sooner or later.

The two of us made our way upstairs and emerged through a door that had been left unlocked. It bothered me to think that

there had been all those unlocked doors between me and safety. It had just been that damn cage that held me.

The delicious smells of breakfast cooking filled the air. “What do you want?” he asked me. “I’ll get it sent up to my studio.”

“Your studio? What kind of art do you make?”

His lips ticked up on either side. “You’ll see.” Then he added, “I recommend the caramel apple French toast. Aiden’s private chef is very talented.”

“I assume he’s also very well compensated to ignore people screaming in the cellar?”

“You really can’t hear anything up here. It’s completely soundproofed. But yes, he is well paid for his discretion.” Xander gave me an unapologetic smile. “I wouldn’t look for anyone to help you on the staff. They’re very loyal.”

“I only count on myself,” I promised him.

His hand drifted to the small of my back as we climbed the stairs. My legs felt exhausted, as if my body were rung out from all the trauma of last night. “Dominic and I are loyal to Aiden, but... we’re not staff.”

I wanted to untangle the implications of that statement, but he was stopping in front of a door and pushing it open. An expectant look crossed his face, as if he was excited to see my reaction.

The door yawned open partially. I pushed it the rest of the way open and stepped in.

It was hard to decide where to look in the crowded studio. Enormous windows on the far side let in golden light, and dust seemed to hang in the air, turned sparkling by the sun. There were statues everywhere: busts of men and women—some of them tangled up together amorously—in various states of development. Their lines were precise. I wandered between them, realizing that some of them were carved of marble or formed by clay over wire. Paintings on canvases were scattered on easels, and those reflected the same deft hand.

Xander was both skilled and obsessed with sex.

In the corner of the studio stood a large wooden desk, strewn with sketchbooks and pencils, and beside it were stacks of canvases. Near a potter's wheel, tucked into one corner of the room, was a large bed with the sheets in disarray, as if Xander's sleeping area was an afterthought to his art.

The walls of the studio were lined with sketches and large black-and-white photos of works in progress and finished masterpieces. The newer work was stapled haphazardly over the old ones.

The studio was madness, and it was beautiful.

Xander still stood at the door. He was watching me, as if he wanted to know how I felt about his art.

I was supposed to lie easily—I always did—and yet there was something about how he had just laid his passions bare by letting me wander the studio that made me reluctant to use this opportunity to manipulate our connection. “What are your plans for us today? Besides teaching me everything I need to know about Aiden Crude?”

“I thought we could start with a simple art class,” he said. “You should make a little project of your own.”

“I'm not particularly artistic.”

He raised his hand with the keyring in it. “Let's sculpt a homage to your freedom.”

He brought me back to the corner of the room with the potter's wheel.

He told me to sit down, and then started the wheel. He drew up a seat close behind, so we were intimately close. He pressed the key into the bottom of the lump of clay, then put it down on the wheel with a splat.

“I thought we could make a flower vase,” he said. “Something to decorate your room for as long as you're here.”

When I smiled, his answering smile lit his face. We would be partners in crime, making sure I couldn't be locked away

again. And most of all, he was on my side—at least in this one small thing. I could work with that.

He placed his hands over mine, his warm hard body enveloping mine as he leaned over and rested his chin on my shoulder. He seemed so comfortable with me that it both shocked me and lulled me into my own sense of comfort.

I found myself feeling an easy comradery with him too as the two of us worked in the quiet of the room, the only sound the whir of the potter's wheel besides his occasional murmured directions. I relaxed into the feelings of the wet clay slipping under my palms as it took shape, and his body against mine.

I lost myself to the satisfying feeling of the clay shaping under my palms until a vase had taken shape between our hands. Then he turned off the wheel, and I became slowly cognizant of how close we were, of how his hard, lean muscles enveloped me. His breath stirred my hair as he exhaled in satisfaction.

“It's beautiful,” he said.

“It's a little bit lopsided.”

He laughed, and the rise and fall of his chest shook my body. A warm glow fluttered in my own chest.

“Are you always so pessimistic?” he asked as he stood.

Cool air brushed against my back where his warmth had been, and I shivered at the withdrawal. “This is pretty much the sunniest my personality gets.”

He offered me his clay-slick fingers, and I took his hand since I was just as big a mess. Together, the two of us padded across the room toward his big en-suite bathroom. It was all black and stone, with a lot of lush green plants. I'd never seen such a lavish bathroom before.

He stepped on a button in the warm tile floor, and water began to pour out in the sink. He was already heading into the enormous shower, and I turned my face away as he began to discard clothing. I caught a glimpse of his tattooed shoulders

and the lean taper of his back before he disappeared into the water. An unfamiliar need pulsed between my thighs.

“It’s easiest just to shower off the clay,” he said. “You’re welcome to join me or to wash up out there.”

“I’ll just wash my hands.” My voice came out remarkably level, given the invitation.

“Lesson one about making things work with Aiden,” he began. “You were stiff last night. You were acting.”

“I’m a good actress.” So I’d felt until last night.

“And Aiden and his friends are good at seeing through people. Otherwise, they’d end up dead.” His voice was rich and warm.

“Aren’t you his friend?”

“I’m... more than a friend,” he said. “More like a brother.”

I was deeply curious about their relationship. “That makes sense, since you live in his house.”

“I know you want to scrape away all my secrets.” He sounded amused. “But listen. I’m trying to give you the key to that asshole’s heart.”

“Does he have one?” I dared a glance at the shower. Water streamed over his leanly muscled, perfect body.

But I’d seen plenty of good-looking men in my life. I wasn’t sure why this one made me feel slightly unwound.

I forced myself to study him, taking in every muscle. Behind him was a rainfall shower over a long marble slab, big enough to lie down on, and it made me imagine pushing him into the shower while he was still dressed, pulling his sodden clothes off, and climbing on top of him as the water fell around us...

“Oh yes. Buried under a lot of...” His shoulders rose in a shrug. “Perhaps the key to his heart is too much right now. Let’s start with how not to embarrass yourself.”

“You don’t know what the key is either, do you?”

He flashed me a cheeky grin, swinging his body around enough for me to catch a glimpse of the hard ridges of his abs and the hard cock that rose beneath them—and a glint of metal. I glanced away, biting the inside of my cheek.

He turned the shower off and stepped out, wrapping a towel around his waist. “Right now, you come across as confident in some ways. But only some. You’re pretty sure of yourself when it comes to murder, aren’t you?”

“Assassination,” I corrected. “It’s only the worst scum of the earth that attracts the attention of the Belladonnas.”

He tilted his head to one side. His dark hair was soaked and looked like he had pushed it back with his fingers, and it was sexy in a careless way. “So you’re the one who chose Gavin Crude as a target?”

“I’m not talking to you about that.” I wouldn’t give away any of the Belladonnas’ secrets.

“Fair enough,” he said, but there was a sudden sharp look in his eyes as if that had told him too much. I had the unsettling sense that as much as he might be the light-hearted artist of the group, he was also quite keen.

And dangerous in his own way.

That should’ve made me shy away, but instead an electric tingle ran across my skin. He was the nice one—but that didn’t mean there wasn’t an edge of danger with him that made me intrigued instead of scared. I wanted to know what made him tick.

“You need to loosen up,” he told me. “To be as confident in yourself as a woman as you are confident in yourself as an assassin.”

“I’m confident in both,” I shot back. I knew how to do my makeup, how to flirt, how to walk in stilettos, how to conceal a knife in a dress that barely concealed my nipples. I knew how to seduce a man—except, apparently, for Aiden Crude.

I didn’t know why I felt so clumsy around him. Maybe it was the way he seemed to see right through me that left me feeling undone.

“Mm.” His lips ticked up, and there was a challenge in his gaze. “Would you let me paint you?”

“Sure,” I said, quickly and recklessly, because I didn’t back down from a challenge. The thought of being under his scrutiny as he painted my portrait was uncomfortable, but the thought of seeing him use his gifts was alluring. From what I’d seen in his studio, he was obviously very talented.

And part of me was curious what he saw when he looked at me.

“Come here,” he said, holding out his hand and drawing me toward him. An electric tingle seemed to pass from his body through mine when he took my hand. I let him pull me toward him into the studio.

He turned his back to me, beads of water trickling down his shoulders to the lean taper of his waist. I glanced away, annoyed by the way he affected me, the clutch of need between my thighs.

He was uncapping paints as he turned to me. “May I?”

“Sure.” I crossed my arms, ready for the strange experience of being caught in someone’s painting. No one had ever looked at me so closely as it felt he looked at me now.

He reached out his fingers, dotted in red paint, and drew stripes across my cheek. A flutter rose in my stomach being touched like that, and I took a step back. “What are you doing?”

“Painting you.”

“I thought you meant on a canvas!”

“Do you want to do it to me first?” He held out the colors.

There was a clear challenge in his gaze, and I could never resist a challenge.

“Fine.” I began to paint his face the way he had mine. This close to him, I couldn’t help studying the intense eyes, the sharp angles of his face, the little scar at the edge of one dark eyebrow. We were intimately close, and he studied me with a slight smile on his lips until I smeared red paint across them.

His lips parted under my thumb, and he leaned forward. I paused, then gripped his broad shoulders with my paint smeared hands, leaving my prints on his skin. His slow, tentative movement toward me was a question, and I answered by swaying toward him.

His lips met mine, marking me with paint—and marking me as his, for the moment. His hands gripped my hips, and his hard cock pressed against my lower abs as he dipped to deepen the kiss.

I finally pulled away, breathless. “You got me back,” I said, touching my lips, which were smeared with paint. Both of our mouths were a mess now.

“Not everything is a game of revenge, Selena,” he said. “Have you considered that perhaps I just find you irresistible?”

“Of course I am,” I said.

“Glib,” he chided, dipping his fingers in the paint and using it to mark my other cheek. “You are quite the warrior, aren’t you? But you can’t just use sex and seduction as a weapon with Aiden.”

I was still throbbing with need, my lips swollen after those kisses. I didn’t particularly want to discuss Aiden at the moment, but he was my current mission; I needed to win him over to my role to position myself for my next move. “And if it isn’t a weapon, it’s...?”

“The emotional connection both of you desperately need?” he asked. “Aiden loves to dominate—it’s his nature. He loves to give pleasure and require obedience. But he needs something more.”

I rolled my eyes. “I can give myself pleasure and I suppose I can fake obedience.”

His brows quirked. “Did faking obedience work particularly well for you last night?”

“Don’t remind me.”

“The keys are gone,” he reminded me. “Aiden has his own lessons to learn, apparently.”

“I’m sure he could get new keys.”

“I promise you, he will not.” A sudden steely look had come into Xander’s eyes. “You’ll be safe here, with us.”

A sudden chill swept through my body. It was a strange thought, imagining being safe with someone outside of our house. The fact that I’d slept so well far from my usual comforts—in a cage no less—with Xander close to me, felt unsettling. Maybe I’d just been dead tired.

“Now, let me finish painting you.” It was half command, half question.

I nodded and he reached out, drawing my dress over my head. I raised my arms and saw the way his eyes sharpened on my body, the flare of lust in his eyes. I’d seen lust in so many men’s eyes before, but it was the first time I felt an answering heat.

He touched his fingers just below my ear, then slowly traced a line down to my collarbone. His touch lit fire in its path, and I bit my lower lip, unaccustomed to being touched this way. I’d had sex before, but it was always for the mission—or it had been in preparation for the mission, becoming comfortable with my sexuality—and so it had always felt more abrupt and transactional than the slow, worshipful way he was touching my body, the way he looked at me.

And with every slow touch, he set new fire blazing through my body.

When he painted my stomach, I found myself swaying toward him, wanting for him to keep going lower. But he straightened and said, “Look at yourself in the mirror.”

Resting my hands on his hips, the two of us faced the mirror in the bathroom. I looked strange all covered in paint, and yet it felt like I was seeing myself in a new way—as if the bold swipes of color portrayed something inside me that I’d never seen before.

“You are so beautiful,” he told me quietly.

“It’s your own handiwork,” I teased.

“It’s not,” he answered, as serious as I’d been glib. “I’m just showing you what I see. It’s just a different reflection of you.”

His hand swept my hair, lingering on the back of my neck in a way that made my back arch just slightly, longing singing through my body. “I just drew you in color when you pretend to be black and white.”

“I don’t know what to make of that,” I said lightly, my heart beating too quickly. “And how exactly does this help me deal with Aiden?”

“He needs to see you in color,” he said. “You need to be yourself.”

“But... with a fake cover story? Fake relationship? Fake everything?”

“Yes,” he said swiftly. “Sometimes it’s easier to be ourselves when we don’t have to be exactly who we’re expected to be. Especially after we’ve molded ourselves to be a certain kind of person.”

I twisted to face him. His broad pecs, marked with paint, were large in my vision but when I looked up, those intense eyes were too much for me too.

“So who did you have to mold yourself to be?” I asked lightly.

“I’m the bomb expert. The genius that supports Aiden’s criminal enterprises. But in here...” he shrugged. “I’m just the artist.”

“Which one is the real you?”

He leaned in and his lips touched mine in a soft, teasing kiss. It was just the barest graze of a kiss, and I captured his lips with mine, kissing him back intensely. I felt his lips curve up against mine as if he were pleased, but before I could pull away, his hand cupped my cheek. He angled my face to his as he deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping along the seam between my lips. My lips parted for him, but he was already back to those quick, teasing kisses, then he straightened away.

I raised my chin, feeling how my lips were puffy and soft from the heat between us.

His gaze met mine evenly. “This one.”

CHAPTER 9



S elena

THE KNOCK on my door was demanding. When I pulled it open, Dominic stood there, his shirt clinging to his ripped body—it took me a second to realize it was damp not just with water, but with blood—and his face livid. Fear tightened my muscles when I was faced with his anger, and I immediately began calculating the quickest way to take him down.

“Are you all right?” he demanded.

The look on his face was *concern*.

I stared at him, stunned, then quickly tried to cover the confusing feelings. “Better than you. Is that your blood?”

“No. Xander said you were screaming last night.” His big hands wrapped my shoulders, and he looked down into my face as if he were searching for answers. “He said he had to sit with you, since I was gone all night. Aiden sent me—it’s not important. What happened?”

My heart hammered at the thought of revealing my past to a man I barely knew.

“I don’t think anyone feels upbeat about life when they’re locked in a cage,” I said lightly.

His eyes went steely. “Aiden did *what?*”

The thought that Dominic hadn’t known was comforting. I wouldn’t have liked the idea of him sleeping comfortably in

his bed while I was miserable below in the cage.

But I wasn't sure what to make with the flare of protective rage.

"Where were you?" I asked, trying to distract him—and also very curious about the blood.

He seemed to take the question completely differently than I meant it, because his eyes smoldered down at me. "I was tracking down someone who stole from Gavin and... dismantling the problem. But I promise, I'll never leave you alone again."

That was a terrible promise. I liked being left alone. I'd spent most of my life trying to be left alone.

"I'm going to tear Aiden apart—" he started.

I didn't understand what the hell was going on here.

"Take it easy," Xander said quietly from behind him. "You're scaring her."

"I don't scare easily," I promised.

"You do when someone's trying to take care of you." Xander shoved Dominic gently into my room, then eased the door shut behind us. "After all, you can take care of yourself, right, Selena? So his protective, possessive impulses make you feel squirrely?"

I frowned at Xander. The feeling of having someone else spill my deepest secrets over the plush white carpet was deeply uncomfortable. "No."

Neither of them looked convinced.

"You're going to drip on the carpet," Xander said. "Go into the bathroom. Jesus. You couldn't take a shower?"

To my surprise, Dominic headed for the nearest bathroom, *my* bathroom. "I took a dip in the river."

"The same river where you dumped him? Gross."

"Yeah well," he said. "All of it was gross."

“So, really not your blood.” I wasn’t sure why that seemed so important. But I would’ve asked one of the other Belladonnas anyway, to make sure they didn’t need medical attention.

“No.” In the doorway to the bathroom, he stripped off his t-shirt, his muscles rippling with the movement.

“You need to get cleaned up for dinner with Aiden.” Xander leaned against the door, crossing his arms over his leanly muscled chest; he looked relaxed. “It’s time for another little test before you meet Gavin Crude.”

My heartrate sped, but I covered it with a smile as I reminded myself that he couldn’t easily lock me back in that cage. He could get another set of locks in a heartbeat, I was sure—but Dominic and Xander seemed likely to stop him. I didn’t entirely understand why, but I could feel it in my bones.

Xander pulled himself up and crossed to me before I could say whatever glib words first came to mind. “You don’t have to hide with me,” he said quietly. “I don’t need that fake smile.”

He rubbed his thumb across my lips as if he wanted to rub it away. I frowned, looking up at him.

“That’s my girl,” he said. “The real one.”

His electric gaze held mine.

“Can you get me some clothes? And take these to be burned?” Dominic called.

“Why are you in my shower?” I called back, feeling slightly exasperated. I wouldn’t normally feel flustered by much of anything, but there was something about these men invading my space—in every way possible—that made me feel off kilter.

I needed to master my feelings about them, or I was forever going to be off balance around them.

What was I so afraid of?

I should fuck them until I didn’t care anymore.

“I’m going to get his clothes,” Xander told me.

“Great,” I said. “It’s going to be an awkward dinner without them.”

Xander grinned at me and left. I faced the bathroom, where the sound of the tub running was loud.

And I steeled myself.

Then I walked into my bathroom, only to see him with his head tilted back, his arms spread to either side as he sank into the deep tub. The hard planes of his chest, covered in colorful, intricate tattoos, were on full display. He looked like a different man without the suit, with his blond hair darkened with water and slicked back from the cruelly beautiful angles of his face. It was as if the mask he wore had been stripped away with his clothes, and I could see him as he truly was.

Beautiful. Dangerous. Alluring.

“Are you joining me or are you just going to stare?” He didn’t open his eyes, as if he could feel my presence. As if he was just as attuned to me as I was to him.

“Neither.” I’d dressed in a short black dress, so I sat on the edge of the tub and let my feet dangle into the water. He was using the bubble bath that had been provided in my bathroom, so the scent of lilies hung in the air. It was going to be quite different from his normal musky, leathery aftershave. “So, you do Aiden’s dirty work?”

“He doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty, if that’s what you’re implying,” he said. “And I’m not his servant, if that’s *also* what you’re implying.”

“I’m not questioning your loyalty to Aiden.”

“You’re not probing for weaknesses?” His lips tilted up slightly, but he still didn’t open his eyes. “I’d expect no less, Selena.”

“Tell me something about yourself.”

I expected a quick, pat answer.

“Let’s see. I went into foster care when I was three, so I don’t remember anything before that but I assume it was not great.” His tone was light. “With my sister. She’s my only real family.”

“What’s her name?”

“Bianca.”

“Older or younger?”

“Older.”

“You seem like a younger child.”

“And you’re an only?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I admitted. When my parents were killed, there was no one else for me. “You can tell?”

“You’ve got that vibe. The intense independence.”

I shrugged. I assumed my independence was due to having everyone I loved ripped away before I reached kindergarten, and listening to them die. But I wasn’t going to tell Dominic. I didn’t talk about them with anyone. “Tell me about Bianca.”

“She started running away from foster care when she was twelve. When she was fifteen, she tried to sneak out of the house, and I insisted I was going to go with her.” Dominic shook his head. “I was such a dumbass, I thought I was going to protect her.”

I could picture Dominic as an earnest kid, trying to take care of his sister.

“Anyway,” he said, clearing his throat. “I just made things worse for her. It was hard for her, having someone else to look after. But I tried. Gavin hired me when I was fifteen, and he paid for her rehab.”

“He did?”

“He’s not always a monster, Selena.”

Everyone I killed was a monster.

“I lost my family when I was four,” I told him, surprised to hear the words come out of my mouth. I usually didn’t talk

about them. All the Belladonnas knew the basics of my story, and I wasn't going to tell any of my targets or the people I encountered on my way toward those deaths. "I think I'm lucky, I have more early childhood memories than most people, so I remember a little bit about them. But I also remember... losing them."

I regretted the words as I finished saying them. I didn't want him to press me for more information.

"I think even if you didn't remember, your body would," he said. "I've been reading about how we hold all our trauma even if we don't remember it. So maybe it's better to know and to work through it."

"Have you done that with your trauma?"

"Not a chance," he answered, which surprised a laugh from me. "But I can give good advice to other people."

His eyes finally opened and met mine. His deep blue eyes were so intense that they surprised me. "Ready to face Aiden again?"

"Not particularly."

"I'll make sure he's on his best behavior." There was a dangerous flash in his gaze that made me believe it.

He dressed, and a few minutes later Xander, Dominic and I headed through the house to the dining room.

"I'd like to see the house," I said abruptly. I'd like to find where I could connect to the outside world and make contact with Man, but I also wanted to know the layout.

Dominic and Xander shared a look. I had the feeling they wanted to get to Aiden—especially Dominic—but he quickly relented.

"Let's do the tour," Dominic said.

They led me through room after lavish room. There was a library filled with books, a big gym with the boxing ring, even a bowling alley and an indoor gun range. I was eager to explore the gun range, and Dominic noticed my interests. "Do you want to come back here later? With me?"

“I don’t think Aiden is going to let you play with me,” I said lightly. Maybe I should have taken any opportunity to get a gun in my hands, no matter how unlikely, but the opportunity to sow a little more discord between Aiden and Dominic seemed more promising.

Dominic grinned and said, “I see what you’re up to, little bird.”

I walked on. Dominic and Xander shared a grin as if they were amused, not offended, by my manipulation. The rooms were cozy despite the size of the house, many of them warmed by lit fireplaces and hung with beautiful art warming the colorful walls. I was curious how much of the house reflected their actual style. I would have expected Aiden’s home to be all dark and brooding like he was. Seeing original art prints hanging on brick red or bright blue walls was unexpected.

In the back of the house, enormous windows looked out over the lush green lawn and a shimmering blue pool. The house seemed to have everything. Everything except for any kind of tech. There wasn’t even a printer on a LAN or a cord to charge a cell phone; I didn’t see a trace of tech in this house.

“Has Aiden always hated technology?” I asked.

“Pretty much,” Dominic confirmed. “He’s a technophobe. But he definitely went through the house and stripped everything out to welcome you home.” He flashed me a grin.

“I’m touched that he thinks I’m so dangerous,” I said lightly.

“And that’s why he needs you,” Xander said.

No matter how pissed Dominic was at Aiden, he still gave Xander a cautioning look. “That’s Aiden’s conversation to have with her.”

“And my conversation?” I interjected. “To convince him that he shouldn’t lock me up again?”

“No, that’s *my* conversation to have with him.” Dominic looked grim. There was something about his protectiveness that sent an unexpected flare through my chest. I wasn’t used

to having someone try to look after me, in any way, and I cautioned myself that this might be Dominic's manipulation.

I wasn't excited to see Aiden again after last night's failure. But I steeled myself to face him anyway.

As we headed toward the dining room, Dominic said, "I'll just go ahead."

Xander flashed me a smile and caught my hand before he drew me to a halt. I glanced at Dominic, who carried tension in his massive shoulders, as he stalked ahead of us. Xander gently took my chin in his hand and turned my face to his. "Do you want me to come to your room tonight?"

"Why?" I caught his wrist, pulling his fingers away from my face. His corded muscles worked against my fingers as he dropped his hand, and our touch fell apart.

"To sleep."

I scoffed. I'd slept so well last night, but I also wasn't in the business of being needy and vulnerable. "No thanks. You probably hog the bed."

"I'm good at sharing," he returned.

The way he'd said it left me wondering what he meant.

But we were at the entrance to the dining room, so I had to let it drop.

Dominic's voice was loud coming from the dining room. Aiden's was softer but sharp.

"You're a real asshole," Dominic said.

"And?" Aiden returned.

"And you can't treat her like that. You can't fucking scare her."

"I need her to follow the plan. Stealing a cell phone was not following the plan, and she had to be punished."

"*I need her.*" Dominic shot back. "You could've ended that sentence after those three words instead of being a sanctimonious prick."

Xander cleared his throat as the two of us stepped into the room, and I shot him a disappointed look. I could've listened to that conversation all day.

Aiden stepped away from the wall, as Dominic turned. For a second, the two of them had been so close together, and Aiden smoothed his lapels, straightening himself out from a disarrayed state. A pleased glow lit my chest—Dominic had pushed Aiden around on my behalf—and I made sure it didn't show on my face.

“The chef has the evening off, so we'll have to make do.” Aiden swept his arm toward the table. He looked handsome and unruffled, no matter what violence may have been involved in the earlier conversation. “I cooked.”

“This is how he apologizes,” Dominic said from behind Aiden. “Don't hold your breath expecting an actual acknowledgment of wrongdoing.”

Aiden scoffed, then turned that dark green gaze on me. “Feel free to apologize to me for responding to my *saving your life* by immediately stealing from one of my friends.”

“I don't apologize either,” I said. “I might kill someone for a person, though. If I really feel badly.”

“I don't want anyone dead that I'm not willing to kill myself,” Aiden promised. He moved to a chair and pulled it back, then looked at me with a cocked eyebrow. “You do know basic manners?”

“It's your manners that I doubt, Aiden Crude,” I returned, sliding into the chair with grace. I knew how to turn on that subtle polish. Decorum had been one of the things Belladonnas had to learn so we could position ourselves to fit into any environment. “You haven't been a very good host.”

“You haven't been a very good guest,” Aiden returned. “And you're all late to dinner.”

Dominic and Xander were taking the silver lids off several dishes. The scent of rich tomato sauce hung in the air, and my stomach grumbled in response.

Aiden had made lasagna, which was so mouthwatering that I could almost considered forgiving him.

“Since Aiden isn’t going to admit how much he needs you to be a *good guest*,” Dominic said abruptly, “I think we need to have an honest discussion of the stakes here. For Selena, too.”

“The stakes for Selena are that if she doesn’t suit her role, she knows too much, and I’ll have to slit her throat and dump her in the river.” Aiden offered me a smile that I definitely wasn’t going to return.

“Knock it off,” Dominic warned. “We need to be able to trust her, and you threatening to murder her isn’t helping.”

“We can’t trust her,” Aiden said bluntly. “She’ll kill all three of us and run at the first opportunity.”

Xander shook his head. “No, she won’t.”

“And you’re judging this on what?” Aiden asking wearily.

The interplay between the three of them was fascinating. They weren’t brothers, but they were so close.

“I painted her,” Xander said.

“Ah,” Aiden said, as if he was not surprised by this answer but would have loved a different one.

I wasn’t eager to get into a discussion of just how Xander had painted me—or to recall the sexual desire that it had sparked—so I asked, “Explain to me why I *want* to be your fake fiancée. Besides the whole *delaying my murder* part.”

Xander gave Aiden an encouraging look. Dominic gave Aiden a threatening look.

Aiden held out an arm to me. “Come sit in my lap and I’ll tell you everything.”

“I doubt that very much.” But I understood he wanted me to be comfortable faking a relationship with him—as I hadn’t been last night—so I tossed my napkin onto my seat as I rose.

I walked over to Aiden then hesitated, but he was already slipping an arm around my waist and drawing me onto his lap.

I straddled one of his muscular legs, feeling ready to bolt at any moment, as he drew me against his hard chest.

“Before you can say anything else that makes me contemplate killing you,” he murmured, then picked up a clean fork and speared a piece of his cheesecake that he held toward my lips.

“I’m capable of using a fork on my own,” I said.

“I know,” he said pleasantly.

I sighed and parted my lips. The smooth, sweet flavor of the cheesecake melted on my tongue.

He was the world’s biggest asshole—after his father—but he was a damned good cook.

“Now,” he said. “My father’s been contemplating retirement. However, he thinks my mother—and the births of my brother and me—were integral motivators in his rise to power. There’s an old family tradition of having sons take over the family business after they marry.”

It was hard to imagine Gavin Crude having family dinners and kicking a soccer ball around the yard with his sons. He seemed sexy and dangerous and untouchable.

Like Aiden.

“He wants to see you settled down,” I filled in the gaps.

Aiden nodded. “My father also is chronically suspicious, so he doubts my loyalty at times. He’s sent more than one woman to cross my path who was loyal to him and reporting back to him.”

“Some of them didn’t just cross your path,” Xander said. “Lolly was a childhood friend.”

Aiden’s jaw tightened, and Xander fell silent.

“I assume any woman who was ready to pull the trigger on my father has an independent mind,” Aiden said. “That’s your value to me.”

If I agree to help. “So tell me why I care about mob maneuverings?”

“Because if my father doesn’t retire—soon—he’s going to open a new branch of the family business. I think perhaps you’ll share my interest in stopping that activity.”

“Because there’s something more unsavory than providing arms to all the world’s baddies?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitating. “They can all blow each other to pieces. It doesn’t matter.”

“The collateral damage would beg to disagree, if they could.”

Aiden seemed not to hear me. “However, my father now wants to branch into the skin trade. I’m not interested in seeing that happen.”

“The skin trade?” I repeated, even though I knew damned well what they were talking about.

“My father’s always owned a series of sex clubs, hotels, and resorts,” Aiden said. “Now he intends to expand those services to include unwilling labor.”

“Forced prostitution.”

Aiden nodded grimly. “He’d like to bring in women from other countries who won’t have the resources to regain their freedom. I’m not going to allow that.”

“But you don’t want to go to war with your father.”

Aiden shook his head. “I’d like a peaceful transfer of power without any bloodshed.”

“That doesn’t seem like you.”

He gave me a dour smile. “There’s more at stake than just getting my hands dirty, I promise you.”

“And you’re not going to tell me what?”

“Prove to me I can trust you first.”

I nodded slowly. I wouldn’t have been willing to play all my cards yet either.

But as much as I didn’t want to tell them anything too personal, there was one thing we needed to discuss...now.

I couldn't stand the thought of letting my parents' killers' trail go cold. It had been years since anyone had accessed that account.

"I need a favor too," I said, my voice sounding distant to my own ears. I hated to ask for anything from anyone.

But if I were going to play their game... I couldn't give up my own.

"What's that?" Aiden looked smug, his eyes dark and knowing as if he had me on the hook.

"I'll stay here and help you with your mission, as long as once you get the keys to the kingdom, I can take my crack at killing Gavin Crude. But I have one mission that matters more than Gavin or any other target."

Dominic leaned forward, his eyes curious. His desire to help was written across his hard features, and it was strange to reconcile this man who was so dangerous with the one who sought to protect and care for me.

Before I could chicken out on asking for help, I blurted out the words. "I need help tracking down the people who killed my parents."

CHAPTER 10



*A*iden

RAGE FILLED my chest as I thought that someone had hurt Selena. But I could tell from the look on Dominic and Xander's faces that they needed me to be the cool voice of reason. As usual.

"Tell me what you need," I said, leaning back in my chair. I pulled a pad of paper and a pen from inside my jacket and clicked my pen open.

"Hold on," Dominic began, but I could tell from the stubborn look that had come over Selena's face that she was not ready to talk about her loss. It was hard to get her to open up. "I want to know the rest of the story."

"The rest of the story doesn't matter now." I'd be the bad guy and take the heat off Selena, because these two idiots would keep pushing her to talk about her feelings. I could tell Selena was a kindred spirit in some ways. She was not going to just open up. "I need her to be convincing when we meet my father in a few days. So whatever she needs to get her head in the game... I'm listening."

I turned my gaze to her, indicating that it was her turn to speak.

"I need internet access," she said. "I was working on a code to follow a lead about my parents. The trail's been cold

for quite a while until recently. I don't want to lose it again. I need to check my code."

"And what else are you going to get up to with internet access?"

Her gaze met mine evenly. "If I don't get in touch with home, the Belladonnas are going to come looking for me. And I don't think you're going to like that very much."

I nodded slowly. "How long do you need with internet access?"

"A couple of hours."

I clicked my pen shot. "Sounds like a date. But I'm not bringing any technology into the house. I'll take you to one of my offices."

Dominic's eyebrows had arched at the mention of the word *date*, and they arched further at the mention of taking her away from the house. But I wasn't interested in discussing it with him.

"And you can contact home," I said. "As long as you're going to tell them that you've taken on an additional contract."

I'd run into professional assassins before whose livelihood was based on their adherence to contracts. I wasn't sure how it worked for someone like Selena.

"I see," she said. My arm was still wrapped around her waist, and I could see the suspicion flare in her eyes.

It felt like a constant cat and mouse game between us, and I loved it.

I slid the contract out of my notebook and unfolded it. Dominic put his head down into his hand, clasping the bridge of his nose with two fingers. Dramatic bastard.

I smoothed the paper on the mahogany table. "This outlines my responsibilities and yours."

She picked it up and read it, then snorted. "I see that you decided to write that you wouldn't interfere with my career."

That's bland wording given I get your blessing to try again to kill your father."

"Just in case."

"Just in case? If Gavin Crude was to find it, surely your dad would wonder why you signed a contract with someone for a fake marriage." She tapped the paper with her fingernails. "I do like that you included a minimum cost of the ring, which is mine to keep. I don't really care about money, Aiden."

"How admirable."

"And what's going to be the rush for this wedding?" It was clear from the look on her face she had a limited tolerance for playing fiancée.

"Well, an unexpected pregnancy often results in a hasty wedding."

"So you want me to fake a pregnancy too," she said, sounding exasperated... and intrigued. I had the feeling she was the type of woman who never backed down from a challenge. "I'm not exactly the maternal type."

"I don't intend to actually knock you up. At the end of our contractual obligations to each other you'll go your way and I'll go mine." I tapped the paper. "I will assist you in tracking down your parents' killers and getting revenge."

I could tell her natural instinct was to tell me that she didn't need my help, and she struggled to contain herself. But in the end, she inclined her head in a quick nod. Then she took the pen out of my hand and signed the contract.

I still didn't entirely trust her, of course. Trusting an assassin would be as foolish as trusting a gangster. But I did know that the belladonnas valued their fearsome reputation.

I took the pen from her, and an electric charge seemed to pass from her fingertips to mine. Ignored it, quickly scrolling my signature across the paper. "Alright, love. Let's go on our date."

"I prefer you didn't call it that," she said.

I wrapped my hands around her hips to help her off my lap. She stepped away as if I had burned her.

I rose to my feet, straightened my lapels, and gave her a smile. “I know.”

Dominic and Xander looked jealous as hell, which I was not going to even pretend that I didn’t enjoy. I unclipped my holster from the small of my back and handed it to Dominic. “Lock that in the safe for me, please.”

I preferred being armed, but I didn’t trust Selena not to try to disarm me and turn the tables.

And I thought there was a decent chance she might succeed. There was a reason I liked the girl, after all.

I took her down to the garage, picked out a car for the night, and swung open the car door for her.

“A Bugati Chiron,” she noted as she stared at the sleek silver car. “You like to keep a low profile, don’t you?”

“You don’t have to hide if you’re quick enough,” I told her.

She slid into the passenger seat and ran her hand over the dashboard. She seemed to openly covet the car, which I enjoyed.

She grinned as I accelerated out of the garage and the force pressed her into the black leather seats. “Are you going to let me drive it?”

“Yes,” I said, and her face brightened in surprise. But I’d never been one of those weird dickheads who always has to be the driver. Not even with my own precious cars. I surrounded myself with competent people that I trusted, and then I acted on that faith. “Once we trust each other.”

She scoffed lightly, as if she doubted that would ever happen. “Where are we going?”

“My office at one of my luxury resorts, Sanctuary.” I cast a glance at her. “I think you’d prefer some of the branches outside the U.S.—Sanctuary Turks & Caicos is a favorite of mine—

but we do our best here.”

“You’ve really mastered the humble brag.”

I knew she wouldn’t show any sign she was impressed or intrigued when we pulled out front and the valet took my car. “Good evening, Mr. Crude.” he said as I handed him the keys and a tip.

“Good evening,” I said.

We entered the lobby, and I knew she would look as if she’d been there a thousand times before. But I still felt a sense of pride when I looked at the lush environment around us and the laughing, laidback adults clearly enjoying themselves as they wandered past us, with no idea they were passing the owner.

“You run a series of sex clubs?” she asked. “I thought that was your father’s business.”

“He originally owned the resorts and the clubs. But neither is his passion, and they are mine, so he gave them to me.”

“That seems unexpectedly generous.”

“I know you think he’s a bad man, but he’s been a good father.” I tilted my head, studying her. “And I did pay for them.”

“You did chores in exchange for a steady allowance of resorts?” Her lips tilted up as she mocked me. Even though her smirk made me want to spank her ass, that smile was still magnetic.

“Exactly.” An endless series of unsavory chores.

As we walked across the expansive marble lobby, I caught sight of a familiar champagne-blond bob and curvy figure. Lolly was waiting at the elevators too, and she was already turning. Not that I would have run away from my ex-girlfriend.

“Hi, Lolly.” My voice was cool but relaxed.

Selena’s eyes still lifted to mine. She clearly remembered the name.

“Aiden!” Lolly flashed me a bright white smile. She didn’t seem to even see Selena, despite how close Selena and I were standing. “How have you been?”

“I’m well. You?” I encouraged more small talk with the valet, but Lolly didn’t seem to notice.

She’d been one of my best friends growing up. The daughter of one of my father’s closest friends, we’d known the same world of luxury and brutality. We’d gone to the same stupidly expensive prep school where kids snorted cocaine in the bathroom between English and Trig. Lolly had cheered for me at football games and held my hand at my mother’s funeral.

And now I could barely fucking stand the sight of her.

“So, London was lovely, but I just had to come back home,” she was saying. I’d lost track of the conversation, thinking about our past and what she’d done to ruin it.

“It’s good you’re back,” I said. “This is my girlfriend, Selena.”

Selena leaned into me, her arm sliding around my waist. It was the first time she’d pressed herself close to me voluntarily, her breast pressing against my side, and the warm, softness of her body made some of my tension melt away. She smiled at Lolly. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“You as well,” Lolly said, but she barely glanced at Selena. “I’ve missed you, Aiden. I’ve missed our friendship.”

“Mm.” I had nothing to say about our *friendship*.

I’d like to get out of this conversation.

Actually, I’d kind of like to dump *her* in the river. That would definitely end the conversation. “Well, we have to be going.”

“It’s been so nice meeting you,” Selena said to Lolly. Then she beamed up at me, looking at me as if she adored me. It turned out the girl could act. “But Aiden and I have an appointment on the tenth floor.”

“Ah,” Lolly said, still speaking to me. “So you found a girl who has your same interests?”

Selena looked up at me through her lashes, and all my tension fled away as she purred, “My only interest is Aiden.”

She was so over the top it made me want to laugh, and it made it hard to even care about Lolly’s betrayal.

“Excuse me,” I said to Lolly as the elevator doors opened.

I escorted Selena inside. Lolly could have taken the same elevator, and she took a step toward us, but Selena was already pressing herself against me, looking as if she were hanging on my every word, my every breath. “Sir...” she murmured, leaning into my ear, and Lolly gave us a little wave goodbye as she stepped back from the elevator.

“Thank you,” I told Selena as we rode up.

She gave me that wide-eyed, innocent look that didn’t do much to hide the clever brain purring along like a race car behind the pretty face.

CHAPTER 11



A iden

I LED Selena into my office, which was beautifully lit by sunlight through the floor-to-ceiling windows and French doors during the day. Right now, the rooftop pool lapped just outside the windows, shimmering under the moonlight. The other set of doors to access the pool led out from the club. No one else was up here at the moment, and if Selena decided she wanted to swim, no one else would be.

She joined me at the window, looking out at the lush green plants that surrounded the pool. For a second, she looked as if she noticed how beautiful it all was. Then she asked, “Can I use your computer?”

“Of course.” I led her to the desk and keyed in my credentials. The screen lit as the computer woke. Then I pulled up a chair to sit beside her.

She eyed me. “Are you going to sit there the entire time?”

“I might enjoy watching you work.”

She rolled her eyes, but it was true. Selena’s quick competence drew me to her.

We sat for the next hour and what I would have considered companionable silence. She typed quickly, with occasional pauses with a faraway look in her eyes as if she was thinking, so I simply sat and watched her and made sure she didn’t make any treacherous plans. Although I wasn’t entirely sure I

could keep up with her, I was good with technology but I was certainly no Selena.

I leafed through some files as I watched over her. She glanced over at me and quirked an eyebrow. “What’s that, Aiden?”

“It’s what I’ve collected on the Belladonnas. And you in particular... you are my favorite.” The other Belladonnas had dramatic ways of killing their targets, though we hadn’t identified all the different Belladonnas at this point. But Selena simply shot her opponents. She didn’t play around.

And she was a very good shot. Which was hot.

“Lucky you that I showed up at your door, then.”

“Lucky indeed.” I meant it at the moment.

Then with a few final last taps, she pressed the enter key and leaned back. There was a glint of satisfaction in her gaze.

“Tell me about your code,” I asked when it seemed like she had reached a lull.

“I’ve tried to figure out what my parents were involved in that someone would have wanted to kill them,” she said. “All the evidence the police collected was lost.”

Her jaw tightened at the thought. “Their laptops, their cell phones, everything’s gone. There was some DNA collected at the scene, and there was *finally* a match in the police records—but now that’s gone too. Someone wiped it out.”

I was surprised she was telling me this much, but it seemed like her coding had relaxed her. And she looked at me as if she realized she’d begun to open up, her brows arching slightly in surprise. Her face was beautiful in a regal, old-fashioned way, with a long nose and rounded cheekbones, full, pillowy lips. She looked elegant.

“This is all I’ve wanted for years. The chance to find their killers.” Her lips pursed. “What I do is valuable to the Belladonnas, but I didn’t gain these skills for them. I learned them for my parents.”

“And what happened? What’s your lead now?”

“I hit a dead end,” she admitted. “It didn’t lead me anywhere. Whoever did it covered their tracks successfully... but something else happened.”

“What?”

“Someone accessed my parents’ email. They were going through their banking records. And I need to know why.” Her big, brown eyes met mine. “I need to hack into my parents’ bank.”

“You’ll get them,” I promised.

She didn’t look entirely hopeful. “Now tell me something personal about yourself so I don’t feel like a complete loser for telling you my life story.”

She hadn’t exactly gotten into the depths of personal things, but I understood how she felt. I nodded. “Were you wondering why I care so much about making my father happy enough to hand over the reins to me without bloodshed?”

“Very much so.”

“He’s a bad man but a good father,” I said. “I have a little brother, Gabe. He’s been through enough... he escaped the family business, but I don’t want him to be orphaned. And our mom... As terrible as Gavin can be, he really loved my mom. It just seems like a betrayal of her memory.”

“But you’ll let me kill him,” she said flatly.

“Well, I don’t like it,” I admitted. “But if you do get to him, it won’t be my fault. And anyway, perhaps he does deserve to pay for what he’s done.”

“Do you deserve to pay for what you’ve done?” she asked smartly.

“Are you seriously getting self-righteous with me? You’re an assassin.”

She acquiesced with a faint smirk coming to her lips. “Fair enough.”

The two of us were sitting so close together, with the gorgeous pool spread out in front of us. I’d opened the patio

doors, so the cool night air floated over us. She looked at me with curiosity and those bright, beautiful eyes, and as much as I wanted to kiss her, I had the feeling she wanted to kiss me too.

I knew better than to try to pursue a real relationship wrapped within my fake one.

But she had to learn to pretend to be my girl, to look at me with the kind of affection that would convince my father. He saw through people as well as I did. She wasn't going to fool him with a display like the one with my friends last night.

He would kill her without a second thought if he believed she was duplicitous, pursuing me for her own reasons.

So really, kissing her was just a sound business decision.

I leaned in and kissed the corner of her mouth. She paused for just a second, her eyes dark and serious as she looked up at me. She might have been having the same debate I was.

Then her lips parted. Abruptly, she turned and slid closer to me, resting her hands on my shoulders. The two of us took small, testing kisses, tasting each other's mouths. Her lips were soft and warm, just like the girl I was pretty sure lived under the jaded affect. She'd leapt to my rescue with Lolly.

Then abruptly, she straddled me. I wrapped my arm around her waist and held her close to me, admiring the beautiful angles of her face, the curve of her breasts. I kissed her slowly and deeply, and her lips parted, welcoming me in. The feel of her thighs parted around my lap made my cock stiffen to attention. I wanted all of her.

When she lifted her head from mine, her lips red and puffier than ever, I said, "If your work is done, do you want to go for a dip in the pool?"

"I don't have a swimsuit," she said, which was not a no.

"You don't need one. I've closed the floor. No one else will come up here."

She gave me a teasing look. "*You're up here.*"

"I'm your fiancé."

She considered it. “True.”

I appreciated that anywhere outside of our house—which I was confident was free of any bugs—she was dedicated to keeping up the ruse between us. Practice meant it was less likely either of us would make a misstep that could cause our deaths.

She slid off my lap and walked toward the open patio doors, letting her dress fall as she went. It pooled around her feet, and the moonlight shone on her skin and her glossy brown hair. She was beautiful.

She rolled her panties down her hips and looked over her shoulder at me to watch me watching her. A mischievous smile came to her red lips as if she enjoyed the heat in my gaze. I didn't try to hide how much I desired her, how attractive I found her. There was no point in playing those kinds of games. Perhaps when it came to purely photos being judged without any context, Selena wasn't the woman I would have picked out as the most beautiful. But combined with her quick wit and dangerous competence and the unexpected sweetness that lay just underneath the hard surface, I thought there was no one like her in the world.

I waited until she had reached the edge of the pool, and then I rose and followed her. She took a few steps down into the rippling water then turned back and watched me. I took my time taking off my jacket, unbuttoning my shirt, removing my tie. I liked the feeling of her watching me, drinking me in.

Then when I had stripped, I followed her down into the cool water. Not that anything could have cooled me off now.

As I stepped into the water, I felt her eyes on me, tracing every curve and dip of my body. I liked the feeling of her watching me.

I submerged myself, letting the cool water envelop me completely. When I resurfaced, she was still staring at me, her eyes dark with desire.

I moved towards her, feeling the water slosh around me as I walked. She stepped back, and I followed. We circled each

other, like predators sizing up their prey.

Finally, she stopped, her back pressed against the edge of the pool. I moved closer until our bodies were almost touching. The water between us shimmered and danced, reflecting the light of the twinkling fairy lights that hung over the pool.

Without a word, I kissed her. When our lips met, electricity surged through my body. Her hands moved to my chest, tracing the contours of my muscles through the water.

I deepened the kiss, my tongue darting into her mouth. She responded eagerly, our tongues dancing together in a hot frenzy.

I slid my hands down her smooth, slick skin, pulling her closer to me. With a sudden surge of desire, I lifted her up. Her legs wrapped around my waist. She clung to me as I held her, our bodies entwined, still trading kisses.

I lifted her over the edge of the pool, laying her down on the soft grass. She looked up at me with heavy-lidded eyes. Seeing the desire on that typically beautiful, impassive face lit unexpected warmth in my chest.

The moon reflected off the dark windows of the club, casting a pale glow on her milky skin. I kissed her again, my tongue tracing the curve of her neck. Her fingers dug into my shoulders.

I slid my hand down her body, pausing to tease her nipples before moving lower. She gasped as I parted her thighs, my fingers exploring the wet, slick folds between her legs.

She was hot and wet, and I wanted to bury myself in her so badly that I could barely think straight. My fingers traced her slit. She bit her lip, trying to stifle a moan that still escaped.

I loved the way she sounded, the way she looked at me, her eyes glazed with lust.

I kissed her again, my fingers lightly running up and down her slit. As she arched her hips towards me, her soft warmth pressed harder into my hand. She wanted more.

I was happy to give her more. I slid a finger up inside her, moving slowly as she adjusted to me. Her head fell to the side as her eyes drifted shut. I moved my finger in and out, slowly at first, as I brushed my thumb against the little nub of her clit. After a moment, her body met my rhythm. Her hips rocked up and down against the movement of my hand.

I moved my lips down her neck, opening my mouth and sucking on the sensitive skin just above her collarbone. She gasped again, her breath coming in quick, sharp bursts.

I took my finger out and slid two more inside her. She moved her hips against me, her fingernails running over my shoulders, my neck, with a faint bite of pain that I relished as she lost control. Her hips pumped, meeting my pace, as I worked my fingers inside her.

Her walls tensed around me, over and over, as if she was getting close. I slid out of her and waited until she opened those beautiful brown eyes. There was a question in them.

“I’m not going to let you come yet,” I told her, and those dark brows drew together slightly in response. But I ran my fingers over her slit again and the angry expression eased.

Then I lowered my head, kissing her chest. I bit and teased her nipples, finally closing my mouth around one and sucking it. Her body responding to the sensation, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

I moved my mouth down her body, tracing a path with my tongue. She shuddered as I reached her belly button, my tongue tracing it.

And then I was at her pussy, my tongue running over her delicate folds. She tasted sweet and musky, and I couldn’t get enough of her. As her hips bucked against me, I slid my tongue inside, and her hands found my shoulders and squeezed hard as if she were struggling for control.

But she wasn’t in control with me.

I slid my tongue in and out, each time delving deeper inside her. She cried out, her body writhing.

As she arched towards me, her body shaking uncontrollably, her walls pulsed around my tongue.

I increased the speed of my tongue, lapping up every inch of her.

Her back arched, her breasts pointing up toward the moon, and her voice rose. “My god!”

That cry echoed through my body, my cock tense as if I was on the verge myself just from pleasuring her. Her walls quivered as wave after wave of pleasure rippled through her.

Finally, she fell still, laying splayed across the grass as if she were sated and boneless. I kissed the inside of her thigh gently before lying next to her on the grass.

My cock throbbed to be buried deep in that tight pussy. The taste of her was still on my lips as I leaned over and kissed her, and her lips parted against mine.

When I reached between her thighs again, she caught my wrist. “Aiden,” she said softly.

I liked the way she said my name.

“Mm?”

“Thank you.” The whispered words sounded genuine but also had a sense of finality, as if she didn’t want to go any further tonight.

I ached to thrust inside her body and fill her up, to make her scream this time.

But all I said was, “All right.”

There were towels piled beside the pool, and I got her one. When I wrapped it around her shoulders, she seemed surprised by the small, caring act. It annoyed me, thinking no one had taken care of her before in such little ways. At least I’d had a loving mother until I was a teenager. Every year we get with loving parents was a gift. What had her life been like as a Belladonna? From the time she was a child?

What kind of monster raises children to be assassins?

“We’d better get in touch with your people.” Whatever they were worth. “And then let’s get back home.”

Her lips arched slightly at the use of the word *home*, but she didn’t say anything. The two of us toweled off and dressed again—god, I needed another dip in the cool pool, or maybe an ice bath would be better—and then she checked her code one last time. It wasn’t as if she would find anything different this time, but I let her, and she sat in my two thousand dollar leather chair with her wet hair dripping across the seat. I went and got her another towel.

“I can trace some of the digital activity from the target, but I’m losing them. There’s activity at this bank, though...” She went silent, thoughtful.

“What do you need?” I asked.

She looked startled by the question. “Well... I need to access the bank’s network.”

“I’m sure we can find a way to do that.”

Her gaze brightened. When she looked at me like that—as if she actually needed me—it made me want to kiss her again. But I didn’t want to push her boundaries tonight.

Instead, I brought her back to the house, and escorted her up the stairs to her room.

It had been a nice night, and my feelings about her were more intense than I wanted to admit... but I still wouldn’t sleep well if she were free to roam.

I told her, “I’m going to need to search you to make sure you didn’t take anything from my office.”

“Oh?” Her brows arched as if she found this amusing. She held out her arms.

I chuckled, shaking my head at her eagerness to comply. “Not like that,” I said, grinning. “I need to do a thorough search. Strip down. Now.”

She didn’t hesitate, quickly removing her dress and standing before me in nothing but the lacy black thong. I loved her confidence.

I took my time inspecting her, running my hands over every inch of her body, feeling the smoothness of her skin and the curves of her hips. My cock throbbed with desire.

But I couldn't let myself get distracted. I had a job to do. I checked every pocket, every seam, and every fold of her clothing. When I was satisfied that she hadn't taken anything, I turned my attention to her body.

I ran my hands over her breasts, feeling the weight of them in my palms. She gasped as I pinched her nipples, a flush spreading across her chest. I moved my hands down to her waist, pulling her closer to me, as she bit her lower lip. My hands trailed down to her hips, then I gripped them tightly.

Her need for me was evident when her body pressed against mine, her breath coming in hot, ragged gasps. I leaned in, brushing my lips against her ear. "For what it's worth... I'm sorry about the cage. I'll choose a different punishment next time."

Usually when I used the word *punishment*, she rolled her eyes and made it clear that she thought I was ridiculous.

But now, her lips met mine in another soft, hesitant kiss. She was obviously wild for me too, but she wasn't ready tonight.

I stepped back, picking up her dress and helping her slip back into it.

"Good night."

"Good night." She bobbed up onto her toes and pressed a quick kiss to my cheek. The affectionate motion surprised me more than the wild teasing in the pool or just now; there was something about it that felt like it was a reflection of how she felt, instead of her taking what she wanted.

I could still feel her lips against my cheek when she went into her room. A few seconds later, Xander's door opened, and I stepped back into the shadows.

He knocked, gripping his own keys, and when she called back to him through the door, he let himself in. He dropped the keys on the ground before he shut them both inside.

Jealousy engulfed me, but I blew out a slow breath. I didn't own her. She couldn't truly be mine anyway.

This was all just a game.

CHAPTER 12



S elena

XANDER HAD COME into my room the night before and then just...fallen asleep.

As I woke up, I stared at him. He'd fallen asleep so effortlessly last night, as if he didn't have a care in the world, as if there was zero chance someone would invade the house and murder us all.

And my breathing had slowly come to match his, and my eyes had drifted closed, and I'd only just woken now to study the hard angles of his face in the soft morning light.

No nightmares. I felt better rested than I had in the morning for as long as I could remember, and I stretched, enjoying the lazy, relaxed sensation in my limbs and the clarity in my mind.

A knock on the door had me out of bed and moving.

Dominic filled up the door when he swung it open. He saw Xander sleeping in my bed and his decision not to say a word was written across his face as his gaze swung back to mine.

"He just slept here," I said.

"Whatever you want, little bird," Dominic said. "Aiden told me to take you wherever you wanted today. He's got to help Daddy with some errands. But I'm all yours."

Whatever you want. I'm all yours.

The words echoed in my brain and I shook them away. “I need you to get me access to a bank’s network. I need to plug that USB stick into a computer on their network and my code will do the rest of the work.”

Aiden had confiscated the USB stick he’d let me use last night, but I’d bet Aiden had filled Dominic in. At least Aiden seemed willing to help me as long as I helped him.

“We can do that,” he said.

Xander yawned and sat up in bed. His hair was wild around his handsome face, and it gave him a rakish, sleepy appearance that I found unexpectedly charming. “I can come.”

“Aiden needs your help,” Dominic said.

Xander clearly thought he was full of bullshit, and then he groaned and raked his fingers through his hair. “Oh, shit. Gavin’s project.”

“That’s the one,” Dominic said. “And you’re late, as usual.”

“I’m trying to make it perfect.”

“Some of us would prefer a ninety percent solution in ten percent of the time, instead of your endless finessing.”

“A ninety percent solution when there are explosives involved is a good way to end up with a body count on your own side.” Xander shook his head as he rolled out of bed, squinting as if the morning light hurt his eyes. “It’s too early to argue with you. Don’t forget to feed Selena.”

Dominic looked affronted. “Of course not.”

Xander paused as he neared me, looking down and smiling. “You tell me if Aiden or Dominic are mean to you today.”

“What are you going to do, blow us up?” Dominic demanded.

“It’s always on the table,” Xander said. Then he leaned in and gave me a quick peck on the lips.

I barely had time to respond before his soft lips left mine and he headed into the hall. I felt a little confused about what had just happened.

Dominic was regarding Xander's back with his own curious expression, but then he turned to me and shrugged. "They're weirdos, but I love them. Get dressed, let's get going."

A bit later, the two of us headed out to the car. True to his word, he stopped to pick up acai bowls and iced coffee—I was stunned such a tough guy even knew what an acai bowl was—and we headed the two hours' drive to the nearest branch of the bank my parents had used.

The time passed quickly. Dominic and I didn't talk of anything of great importance, but he was easy to talk to. The conversation flew along as we discussed bands we liked, favorite places we'd traveled, and food we thought was weird. We both agreed that boba tea was a strange obsession—we did not want to unexpectedly encounter something chewy in our drinks—and that Taylor Swift was overrated.

"So, how do you want to play it, boss?" Dominic drawled as we took the exit toward the bank. He held up the USB stick between his fingers. "Aiden wanted me to hold onto this for you until it was needed."

"He's very distrusting." I plucked it from his fingers.

He gave me a sidelong look. "He's very impressed."

I shouldn't have felt as pleased by that as I did.

Then he added, "We could ask about a mortgage. I can use my fake identity, which has pretty good cover. Pretty good credit."

"Sure," I said. "That should take a while and as long as we can get them out of the room..."

The two of us headed into the bank. He opened the door for me, and when we stepped into the lobby, every woman looked at him as if he'd stepped straight out of Hollywood. It was true he was movie-star good-looking, but more than that, it was the way he moved. He projected power, a ripple of

energy through the air, and both men and women responded. Men sized him up and looked away, and women's gazes lingered.

"I feel like I should lick you so they know you aren't up for grabs," I murmured.

He grinned in response and put his hand in the small of my back, ushering me up to the counter at the front of the bank.

When the banker asked how he could help us, Dominic said loudly, "My wife and I came to see about a mortgage."

The room had gone silent. Jealous stares crawled down my back.

I reached out and took his big hand. We were committed now.

Dominic squeezed my hand in his as we were directed to one of the small offices alongside the main lobby of the bank.

The bank teller was a middle-aged man with a balding head and a potbelly. He looked us up and down, his eyes lingering on my curves before finally settling on Dominic's hand that still held mine.

"Let's get started then," he said, turning to his computer and typing away.

Dominic stood behind me, his chest pressed against my back as he rested his chin on my shoulder. I could feel his erection pressing against my ass. Banking had never been so interesting.

I leaned back into him, enjoying the feeling of his hard body against mine. He ran his hands over my hips, gripping them tightly as the banker collected his information.

I could feel the heat between us building, and I had to focus on the task at hand. If the banker thought we were going to fuck on his desk, he was never going to leave us alone for a moment.

"Come sit down, sweetheart," I told Dominic, patting the chair beside me.

Dominic did as I asked, but he took my hand in his and held it on his lap. I was near enough to the big, hard swell of his cock to find that distracting too.

Dominic made up an excuse to need something faxed in from another bank, and he used the banker's phone to place a call. The banker seemed perplexed about why Dominic didn't have a cell phone—that would be my fault—but agreed to it. Apparently Dominic's alter ego had a lot of money.

I was pretty sure *Dominic* had a lot of money, despite the decision to live in Aiden's house. I was curious about *why*.

"I'll be right back," the banker promised once Dominic hung up and said it had been faxed.

As soon as he left, Dominic leaned in the doorway, blocking me from the outside world. I quickly went around the desk and plugged the USB stick into the computer.

It uploaded automatically. I only needed to plant my virus, and the information I needed would be sent to me when the code had done its work.

I pulled out the USB stick—the computer let out a ding of protest at the disconnection—and resumed my seat.

Dominic leaned in close to me, his lips brushing against my ear. "You're so fucking sexy when you show off your criminal side."

The heat between my legs flared at the low, husky sound of his voice.

But I couldn't get distracted. We had a job to do, and we needed to stay focused.

The banker returned, and we finished up the paperwork. Dominic was approved for a hefty mortgage and he kept up a steady patter with me about what kind of house we would like. It was impossible for me to imagine a life beyond the Belladonnas and a house beyond the one where we all lived together. Dominic's teasing patter about a house with enough bedrooms for our kids, a big deck for sitting out with drinks and watching the sunset, and a pool to cool off during the summer was... unsettling.

I already had my place in the world. In the shadows.

But Dominic's hand on my leg sparked sensation shooting up my thigh and straight to my aching clit. For the moment, I was happy to indulge in this fantasy we were spinning for the sake of the...bored banker?

Was he really the one we were talking for?

As soon as we left the bank, I pulled Dominic into a nearby alleyway. His lips crashed into mine in a heated kiss. He pressed me up against the wall, his hands running over my body as he kissed me deeply.

I moaned into his mouth, feeling his hard cock against me.

I pulled away just long enough to ask, "Why did you pretend we were husband and wife?"

I was pretty sure it was a response to my obvious jealousy—which I hadn't expected to feel—but Dominic was too kind to mention it. "Why should Aiden get all the fun of such a delightfully murderous, criminal wife?"

Dominic grinned wickedly, his eyes glittering with mischief. "Besides, it turns me on to think of you as my wife. Seeing the looks on those bankers' faces was priceless. You look so damn hot."

I pursed my lips at the compliments, but a thrill pulsed through me at the thought of us as partners in crime. I was used to working alone. This was a dangerous game, but it was exhilarating to play with someone else.

Without another word, Dominic lifted me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist, pressing his body against me as we kissed fiercely. His hands roamed over my body, cupping my breasts and squeezing them roughly, kneading my nipples between his fingers. Hot need pulsed between my thighs.

I could feel his cock straining against his pants, and I knew he wanted me as badly as I wanted him. But we couldn't risk getting caught. We had work to do.

Reluctantly, I pulled away from him, drawing a deep, strained breath as I tried to regain my composure.

How was I supposed to work with this man?

I was always so controlled, but when I was near him all I could think about was fucking.

After a good, long look at each other, we pulled apart. He slid his arm around me as we headed for the car. He looked relaxed, but his eyes were constantly roving, and I knew he was checking for anyone following us. Just like me.

But we were alone on the street.

As we reached the car, I debated my next move. Should I kiss him again? Should I let things unfold however they might?

I didn't want to risk ruining things with Aiden. Ruining my mission.

But having Dominic on my side could be useful too.

Most of all, no matter how much I told myself I was making logical decisions, a raw ache had opened in my soul. Being so close to my parents' killers for the first time in twenty years felt like it had shattered the walls I'd built for myself, and I felt messy and vulnerable... I wanted a distraction from all the feelings pounding in at me like a driving rain.

When he got into the driver's side, we quickly drove away and he took a winding path through the city, making sure we weren't being tailed. His big hands were quick on the steering wheel as he made abrupt changes and land shifts, and his eyes were bright in the rearview mirror. Dominic was quick-witted and fun, and I was surprised by how much I liked being near him. That wasn't how I usually felt about other humans.

When I was sure we weren't being followed, I told him quietly, "Pull over."

Dominic glanced at me with a questioning look, but he didn't hesitate to pull over to the side of the road. I quickly

unbuckled my seatbelt and climbed over the center console, straddling him in the driver's seat.

Dominic looked up at me without a trace of surprise, and his hand cupped my cheek.

Our lips crashed together in a frenzied kiss, our hands exploring each other's bodies with abandon. Tension built between us until I thought I was going to go out of my mind with want.

Dominic's fingers found their way to my core, stroking me through my clothes. I ground my hips against his hand, desperate for more.

His hands slowly stroked up the back of my thighs, hiking up my skirt, until his fingers brushed against my panties. I jerked at the feel of his fingers against my already-throbbing clit.

"Fuck, you're so wet," he groaned, his voice a rough whisper in my ear.

I shuddered at his words, my body trembling with desire. "We can't go too far. Aiden..."

"I understand," he said, his voice rough and thick, as if it were hard for him.

"But I need a distraction," I confessed.

"I can distract you," he promised. "But let me get us somewhere... better."

I nodded. Dominic was off like a shot, speeding down the road at a speed that bordered on criminally dangerous. But that was how I liked it anyway.

"I want to do something for you too." It bothered me that Aiden had given me an amazing orgasm last night but I hadn't finished him. It made me feel like the two of us had business we still needed to complete. Like I owed him.

I didn't want to owe these men. I didn't ever want to owe anyone, and the strange feeling that things were growing complicated between us haunted me.

He shot me a wicked smile. “Like what?”

“Road head.” Wasn’t it the ultimate male fantasy? And I could give it to him. I reached over and unzipped his pants.

His eyes widened, then turned to smoldering fire as he felt my hot breath on his now-exposed cock. My lips closed around him, taking him deep in my throat and working him until he let out a low, guttural moan. It echoed in my body, inspiring me to work him harder, my tongue teasing around the head of his cock each time I rose to the top.

His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, and we kept accelerating, as I bobbed up and down on his shaft. I could feel every already-generous inch of him expand inside me.

It wasn’t long before Dominic’s hips started thrusting into me harder and faster. Finally, with one powerful stroke, he pushed himself into me one last time before releasing himself inside my mouth with a low growl.

I swallowed everything he had to offer, then sat back in my seat, breathing heavily.

I had never seen a man look so satisfied.

His eyes were still smoldering. We were taking turns awfully quickly on route to our destination.

When we came to a stoplight, he ripped the top of my dress down and yanked down one bra cup. The feeling of his hands, rough against my skin when he was usually so controlled, made heat throb between my thighs. He bent over to lick my nipple, before sucking on it.

I let out a moan as his hot mouth enveloped my breast, his tongue lashing at my nipple.

He pulled the top of my bra down, freeing the other breast, and went for the pleasure of both of my nipples in turn.

I was already incredibly turned on, but the way his mouth made my body ache for more made my mind go blank with lust. I reached down to touch him, but he stopped me, grabbing my hand and pulling it back up to my own breast.

“I want to taste you,” he growled, his voice low and rough.

I shuddered at his words, desperate for his touch. I lifted my hips, silently begging him to touch me.

He slid his hand down between my legs, his fingers finding my wet center. He teased me with light touches, driving me wild with need. Then he popped his fingers into his mouth and his eyes closed as if he was delighted by the taste. His now-damp fingers slid back between my thighs, and my hips bucked forward.

But just as I was about to come undone beneath his touch, the sound of someone knocking on the window shattered the moment. We both froze, our eyes meeting in silent understanding.

Without a word, Dominic drove us away from the spotlight, his eyes flicking to me every few seconds with a devilish grin. I reached to adjust my bra top, and his hand lashed out and grabbed my wrist. “Leave it. Those are the most beautiful tits I’ve ever seen and I like having them on display.”

He reached for me and began to touch me again. I writhed against the seat, folding my arms behind my head.

I felt his gaze on me, filled with heat and desire. I yanked my own further down, letting him see my breasts as my back arched. He let out a low moan of his own as his hand worked between my thighs. His fingers rubbed my clit intensely until my muscles stiffened, my body bucking against the seatbelt. Pleasure coursed through me. I let out a loud moan as I came, my fingers tangling in my hair.

Dominic pulled away, grinning wickedly. “You’re so fucking hot when you come. I could watch you all day.”

I wasn’t used to those kinds of compliments. Men found me attractive, and they liked what I could do for them... but Dominic seemed enraptured by my pleasure. It made me feel vulnerable, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but feel incredibly turned on.

As we drove, I worried about Aiden’s jealousy and about my own wayward intense desire. Aiden claimed he didn’t care

if Dominic and I fucked, but the way he looked at me made me wonder if he knew his own mind. And yet... I couldn't help but crave more of Dominic's touch.

When we finally arrived at our destination, an old, abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of town, I ached too much to pull back.

Dominic led me inside, his hand firmly on the small of my back as he scanned the dark space, making sure we were alone. There was always the possibility Dominic had brought me here for some nefarious purpose, but I could read people well, and I thought he just wanted *me*. Excitement tinged with a hint of fear tingled through my body.

And I fucking loved it. I felt alive like I hadn't in as long as I could remember.

He turned to me, his eyes flaring with desire as they met mine, and he touched my cheek gently.

"I'm going to make you mine." His voice was low and intense. "Not today. Today I'm just going to give you the distraction you wanted. But eventually, Selena, you *are* going to be mine."

He spoke with absolute confidence. Even though I knew how impractical it was to think we'd ever see each other again once I completed my mission, for a moment, I could believe he was right.

He pulled me into a searing kiss, our bodies pressing together in pure, unadulterated lust. His hands roamed over my body, exploring every inch of my curves, sending jolts of electricity through me.

I moaned into his mouth, my hands tangling in his hair as I surrendered control to him completely. He pushed me up against the brick wall, his lips trailing down my neck. My knees buckled underneath me as his mouth covered my nipple, his tongue curling around them until they formed needy peaks.

"I have to have you," he growled. I nodded, reaching for his cock, drawing him out of his pants. I had to have him too.

He slowly slid down my underwear, his mouth following his hands as he ran his tongue along my hipbones. I bit my lip, the anticipation of his mouth working me to my breaking point making me nearly vibrate with need.

“Fuck,” he groaned as he tasted me, before he returned to licking between my lips, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body. His mouth was hot between my thighs, his tongue working me wildly.

Dominic’s fingers dug into my hips as he continued to devour me. I couldn’t hold back any longer, and with a cry I came hard against his mouth, my body quivering with pleasure.

He stood up slowly, his warm, calloused hands trailing up my skin. “You taste so fucking good, Selena,” he said, his voice low and rough.

I was breathless, my body still shaking from the intensity of my orgasm.

Dominic pressed me back against the wall again, his mouth covering mine in a desperate kiss. His hands roamed over my body.

“I want you,” he growled, his voice low and rough. “Right here, right now.”

All my good intentions to stop at a *distraction* were rapidly fading. I didn’t think I could ever get enough of Dominic.

But he stepped back, looking slightly wild-eyed. “It’s time to get home. Before we go too far.”

“I guess we should,” I said, trying to catch my breath. Damn it, I’d been trying to keep things even, and now he’d given me three orgasms to his one.

In the car, things were quiet, but comfortable between us. My clit still throbbed.

“I meant what I said,” he told me, only when we’d passed the gate and pulled into the parking garage. “I want you. And eventually, Selena, you’ll be mine.”

He spoke with that perfect confidence still.

“I’m Aiden’s fake fiancée,” I reminded him.

“I don’t care,” he said, and the reckless words worried me. I didn’t want to ruin anything for these men. It was obvious how much they cared about each other.

“I can’t think about any kind of relationship right now,” I said carefully. “Not until things with my parents’ death are resolved.”

“That’s a funny way to say, not until I’ve murdered some very deserving people.” He flashed me a grin that was charming. “And that’s fine, Selena. But I hope you’ll let me be by your side every step of the way. I can be very useful when it comes to revenge.”

“I don’t doubt that,” I said.

It was touching how he’d thrown himself onto my side. My feelings were too much for me, too uncomfortable. I told him goodbye and fled to my room. As I hurried toward the stairs, I could feel his gaze watching me. It felt as if Dominic could see right through me.

And even though I had a million other things that should be on my mind...

I couldn’t stop thinking about how different each of these men had been when they kissed me. Aiden was dominating and controlling but god, he gave me so much pleasure. Dominic was wild, not trying to hide how much he admired me, and it was strange and comforting and wonderful. Xander was playful, mysterious, hard to read, but his hands had felt so good against my body.

I’d had sex with plenty of men without it meaning anything before. We’d both just been taking our pleasure. Using each other. But these men touched me as if they needed *me*, not just the release. Why did this feel so different?

Some crazy part of me didn’t want to leave them behind.

But I told myself that at least I could have fun while I was here. That would have to be enough.

CHAPTER 13



S elena

I KNOCKED on Xander's door when Dominic and I got back to the house. I just wanted to see him.

"Come in!" Xander called, and I pushed open the door.

He was shirtless, his jeans low on his hips, exposing the hard angles of his lower abs and the beginning of a dark happy trail. His focus was on the project on the table, but scattered around the wire cage of his sculpture's base were explosive charges.

"What's this?" I asked, forgetting the desire to check in with the sexy artist that had driven me here.

"Project for Gavin," he said absent-mindedly. "He thinks Jacob Aster—he's one of those asshole crime patriarchs—is trying to block his forays into the skin trade. So he's asked me to construct something that allows him to take out the other patriarchs if something goes wrong."

"Sounds like someone who would react well to his son's fake engagement."

"Oh, he loves Aiden, but we're all dead if he finds out." Xander drummed his fingernails on the tabletop as he studied his work.

"You can't actually go through with this," I said, and Xander's gaze rose to mine. He looked perplexed. "This isn't

who you are, Xander.”

Xander’s eyes were dark and intense as they met mine. “We barely know each other.”

The need to respond pressed like a stone against my chest. That was true, but it didn’t feel true. The pull between Xander and I felt magnetic.

“I guess you’re right,” I said. I turned and headed for the door.

When I looked back, he was watching me as if he were lost in thought. I pulled the door shut between us, feeling an ache.

The other Belladonnas and I would’ve happily killed the patriarchs. Why did it feel wrong for Xander to wire a bomb that did just that?

Gavin Crude didn’t care about collateral damage. It was different for Xander to put that power of killing into his hands.

That was what I told myself as I made my way downstairs.

“What’s wrong, little bird?” Dominic called to me from one of the living rooms.

I stepped inside. There was a fire burning merrily in the fireplace, and Dominic tucked a bookmark into his book. He looked larger than life and slightly unreal, sprawled back on the big couch. In the house, he wore a t-shirt that hugged his broad biceps and rode up enough to expose the little bit of ink that Dominic wore. I wanted to get another look at his tattoos, now that I could focus on something besides the pounding need between us.

I went to sit on the couch, but he grabbed me and pulled me into his lap. I let him, finding myself comfortable on his muscular thighs, and as his arm circled my waist, I reached for his book.

“I’m surprised you use a bookmark,” I said, looking at the cover to see what he was reading.

“I’m a thug, not a monster.”

“I don’t think any of you are just thugs,” I said, still bothered by Xander’s activities and more bothered that I didn’t know why I cared.

Dominic scoffed. “I don’t want you to be disappointed.”

I slipped off his lap to look around the many bookcases that spanned the deep blue walls. Dominic was sprawled on the couch, but behind him were enormous windows that let in soft, golden light, and a wide window seat. Aiden’s home looked like something out of the books I read when I was a kid. Like the kind of home I’d fantasized about.

I pulled out a book and joined him. Dominic held his arm out to me as he sprawled back on the couch, and I curled into his side. The two of us read silently, but the scent of his cologne and the warmth of his muscular body against mine lulled me into a sense of tranquility.

That lasted until Aiden arrived home.

Aiden stepped into the room, his dark hair tousled and a tired look written across his face.

As soon as he saw Dominic and I curled up together, his eyes widened as if he’d just had a shot of pure caffeine.

“You two look comfortable,” he said.

“This is Selena’s home,” Dominic reminded him. “She’s your fiancée.”

“She is indeed,” Aiden said. “And we should be seen together, given the... surprisingly abrupt nature of our relationship.” To me, he said curtly, “Get dressed.”

I pulled lazily away from Dominic. I should’ve been delighted to see the seeds of jealousy and discord growing between them, making them easier to manipulate. But instead, it ignited a burn in my stomach, a sense of something wrong.

I still leaned over and kissed Dominic’s cheek before I rose. I handed my book to Aiden on my way out of the room. “Here. It’s a romance. You seem to need to learn just what a woman wants.”

“I promise you, Selena, I know just what you need.” Aiden turned and nestled the book back into the shelf. “And I already read every book in this house.”

I walked up the stairs instead of answering.

A while later, showered and dressed in another of the beautiful dresses that now hung in my closet—though I hadn’t asked for any of them—I knocked on the door to Aiden’s room to tell him I was ready.

He swung the door open, dressed only in a towel around his waist, his dark hair damp. The colorful tattoos that wound across his leanly muscled chest and powerful arms drew my gaze, and I didn’t try to hide the effect he had on me.

Aiden Crude might’ve been a controlling dickhead and a criminal, but he was beautiful to look at.

“I’m ready,” I said.

He nodded, clearly not interested in discussing whatever had kept him busy from the time he issued me orders until I showed up at his room. I glanced around his room, which was pristine, filled with antique furniture with elegantly carved lines and dark, beautiful wood. A framed photo of him and a woman I assumed was his mother was on his nightstand; she beamed out of the photo, her dark hair flying in the breeze, her arms tight around her son as if she would protect him from the world.

“Your mom was pretty.”

He nodded as he emerged from his walk-in closet, carrying a gray suit along with a crisp black button-down shirt. I thought he wasn’t going to say a word about his mother, that topic too sensitive, but then he said, “I think she would’ve liked you.”

“Oh?”

“She never liked my father’s business. I think she just loved him so much, she tolerated it no matter how much it disgusted her.” He shook his head as he let the towel drop and began to dress. “If she were alive, he never would have started trying to take over Aster’s business.”

“I see.” Now I understood why the criminal had a heart—and why he was so intent on stopping Gavin Crude’s expansion into another, more brutal business.

He knotted his tie with quick fingers. “It’s a stupid business move. Now he’s going to run into conflict with Aster when we could simply stay in our lanes.”

Of course Aiden would have to pretend his impulses were entirely logical. “Where are we going tonight?”

“Another of my clubs.”

“Could a girl get dinner first?”

Aiden’s lips curled up. “You’re demanding.”

“I thought our cover story could be that you take very good care of your future fiancée.”

“I intend to do just that,” he promised, his dark eyes smoldering.

True to Aiden’s form, he never admitted that seeing me with Dominic had bothered him, despite his words earlier promising that he didn’t care if Dominic fucked me.

But he let me drive the Bugati to dinner, looking relaxed and careless in the passenger seat. I glanced over at him as I accelerated through the dark, rain-slicked streets, enjoying the way the car took corners.

“If you’re trying to scare me,” he said, a smile curving his lips, “I have complete faith in you.”

I shot him a look and he amended, “For some things, Selena.”

“Oh?”

“When it comes to cars, computers, murder and general mayhem, I’m sure you know what you’re doing,” he said. “You’re only an idiot when it comes to romance.”

I let out a laugh. “All right. You seem to be more of an expert when it comes to sex and depravity than when it comes to the human heart.”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

Maybe we could learn together, I thought, but swallowed those words. I’d never admit something so cheesy out loud. Besides, I knew Aiden and I had no future beyond our ruse.

He took me to another of his resorts. It was on the coast, and we sat by the windows, watching the surf pound in as the sun faded. The two of us had a pleasant conversation about nothing in particular as the waiters brought course after course so Aiden could sample all the food being prepared in the kitchen. He clearly cared a lot about his legitimate businesses, and I enjoyed sampling a dozen small plates of beautifully prepared seafood and desserts.

And one glass of sangria. I was not going to get drunk around Aiden Crude. The man required every bit of my attention and focus.

On our way out, I slipped off to the women’s room. When I returned to the lobby, Aiden drew my gaze right away. He was tall, elegant, and talking to another woman. *Laughing* with another woman.

His shoulders were slightly stiff, tension in his frame. He wasn’t enjoying the conversation, no matter how much he was laughing, and the sense of relief that washed over me was a surprise.

When Aiden saw me, his gaze brightened genuinely. I didn’t quite know what to do with that or with the way it made my heart flipflop before he told her, “This is my girlfriend, Selena. Selena, this is Clarissa.”

“An old friend of Aiden’s.” Clarissa added with a smile.

Aiden and I escaped the conversation and headed for the doors as soon as was polite. When we stepped outside the hotel doors, Aiden’s car was waiting, as was the armored car behind us. Rain beat down on the roof of the overhang, but we were dry. Aiden opened the passenger door for me, and I slipped inside.

Someone sprinted toward us, dressed in the gray jacket of the resort staff, and flagged down Aiden. He spoke quietly to

him, and Aiden swore as he got back into the car. He glanced over at me. “My father wants to see me. I’m going to make a stop on our way home.”

I nodded. I welcomed any chance to get close to Gavin and scope out his routines. But I was still curious about what was going on with that woman Aiden despised. As soon as we’d driven away, I asked, “Who was that?”

“Clarissa.”

“So I gathered. Why do you hate her?”

His gaze flickered over to me. “You don’t miss a thing, do you?”

“She looked like she wanted to eat you up.”

“Mm. I met her through Xander, when he tried to get close to Aster’s business.”

“What does she do for Aster?”

“She runs a business placing nannies and domestic staff,” he said. “Or rather, that’s the cover.”

“And those nannies really are...?”

“Sex slaves. Generally underage ones.”

I suppressed a shudder.

“Is your list growing longer? Do you think daddy would let you kill anyone else?” he asked me, and despite his mocking tone, there was a hard, serious edge beneath it.

I didn’t like the thought that he knew anything about Man. “I have broad discretion, Aiden. I’ll kill anyone I choose.”

“Delightful.”

“Not if you piss me off.” I smiled at him sweetly.

“Put away your murderous impulses for tonight,” Aiden said. “I need you to be on your best behavior when you’re around my father.”

He glanced at me as if he was debating whether it was a good idea to bring me into striking distance.

But I was increasingly convinced that Aiden was serious about why he wanted that peaceful transfer of power, and that as bad as he might be, he would do something good about the local skin trade.

“I’ll be on my very best behavior,” I promised.

The thought only made him look worried.

CHAPTER 14



Aiden

MY FATHER WAS ALWAYS WORKING. He had an office in a building where he ran his import/export business, pretending he shipped out olives and not weapons for terrorists.

I didn't like bringing Selena with me into his office because I knew she'd take the opportunity to memorize the interior, but I left her in the lobby with a warning to behave. She looked up at me innocently, which was as convincing as ever.

If she'd been a normal woman, I might've worried about leaving her here with my father's thugs coming and going. I wished I had a cell phone to text Dominic to come watch over her. Cory and my other guys who had followed behind us would keep an eye on her, from a distance. But it wasn't the same as having Dominic or Xander stand in my place.

Still, Selena was capable of taking care of herself.

"I'll be good, Aiden," she promised with a smile, misinterpreting my reluctance to leave her.

She bobbed up onto her toes and pressed a quick kiss to my cheek. The soft whisper of her lips across my skin had the same impact it had when she kissed me goodnight, a jolt that went straight to my heart instead of my dick for once. As I turned away, the two ladies at the reception desk were watching us with undisguised curiosity.

My reaction bothered me as I rode up the elevator. Selena had an unexpected impact on me, and she had since I first caught sight of her.

I walked past my father's secretary, who just smiled at me, and stepped into his luxurious office. Enormous windows wrapped around the two walls since he had the corner, and the lights of the city shone bright below. The city looked so sparkling from a distance.

"What's going on?" I asked him. "I was on a date with Selena."

"Ah, yes." My father cocked his head to one side. "That relationship has moved quickly."

"You should meet her. You'll like her." That might or might not be true. More thoughtfully, I added, "Mom would've liked her."

That was true, I was sure of it.

"I will," he said. "Have you found our would-be assassin yet?"

He nodded at my shoulder, and the wound throbbed as if I'd forgotten it when I was with Selena.

"I'm close," I promised.

"I have a lead for you." He picked up a file from his desk and handed it to me. "I would've emailed it if you weren't such a technophobe."

"I don't want to find my phone bricked and a Belladonna looming over me." I opened the file. A dark haired woman stared up at me. She was clumsily drawn and bore only the faintest resemblance to Selena, in the same way a stick figure with the right hair and eye color would. "You got a picture of the assassin?"

"Perhaps. Anthony Tallo said he encountered a woman who wasn't on the guest list."

Anthony Tallo was a dead man.

“Interesting,” I said. “This will certainly help. I’ll have the guys re-check the CCTV footage near the mansion to see if they can find any evidence of her.”

Selena had taken care of my father’s security system. She was so helpful.

Gavin nodded curtly. “How’s Xander doing with my project?”

“Fine. If you really want to start a war, he can certainly help.”

“I don’t want to start a war, Aiden. But if there must be a war, I intend to finish it.” He regarded me thoughtfully. “After all, you seem intent on marrying and taking over the family business.”

Fuck. “You’ve talked a lot about how you want to retire.”

“Mm. Always looking out for me, son?”

I shrugged. “I’ve never tried to hide my ambition. But I want to be ambitious with your blessing—for my marriage and my business.”

“I’ll stop by and meet Selena soon,” he told me. He clapped my shoulder. “I want to see you happy, my boy. But bring me a body first.”

“You want to see the assassin?” Fuck, that was inconvenient. Once I’d constructed a solid story, I’d planned to tell my father the Belladonna was at the bottom of the ocean.

“Very much so.”

One body, coming up, then.

And I knew just who to kill.

* * *

I EMERGED into the lobby just in time to see Selena talking to one of my father’s low-level thugs. Selena looked charming, pushing her long, dark hair back behind her ears as she smiled

up at him, and my heart sped up. She didn't need to look at any other man like that. Just me.

Though she looked at Dominic and Xander in a particular way, and it didn't make me want to murder *them*.

Then he set her hand on his shoulder. She took a step back, and he stepped in even closer. For a second, I lost sight of her behind his big body, so I couldn't read the look on her face.

The next second, he was doubled over, and she was gripping his hand as it stuck up awkwardly, standing over him. He grit out a "bitch" just as I reached the two of them, and when he looked up at me, his eyes went wide with fear.

"I was trying to tell you my boyfriend wouldn't be any more impressed with your lines than I was," Selena told him impatiently.

"Don't break his arm, sweetheart," I told her.

She released him, suddenly, and he let out a gasp of pain as he grabbed his forearm.

He immediately turned to me and started to babble. "She came on to me, I didn't know who she was..."

He kept talking, but I turned to Selena, raising an eyebrow.

"No," she said.

"Good." I grabbed him, and he tried to buck away, but he was unsuccessful. The building was all ours, fortunately.

And so was the alleyway behind it.

He stumbled out the back door when I shoved him. One of my men, Cory, was at my side in a second, handing me his gun.

I put two bullets in the back of his head before he could run very far down the alley.

Cory regarded the dead body skeptically.

"You can clean up," I said.

"You want us to keep anyone from approaching her next time?" Cory asked.

“No. I trust her.” I preferred to have Dom watching over her, but if he wasn’t available, I didn’t need my men to do anything but keep her from being kidnapped or hurt when I couldn’t be by her side. Otherwise, I just needed to let Selena be Selena.

I told Cory to give me his cell phone, and opened an app to use a fake number to call Clarissa. She sounded suspicious when she answered, but once she recognized my voice, she lit up. I made plans to meet with her before I handed the phone back to Cory.

I kept his gun, which meant I would have to be extra careful with Selena. She’d been quick to look out for me with Lolly, but I still thought there was the distinct possibility she’d blow my brains out if she thought she could and still protect her Belladonnas.

Selena was waiting in the lobby. She looked impatient, tapping one stiletto against the marble floor.

“I can’t leave you alone for a minute, can I?” I asked, slinging my arm around her shoulders. “That means you’re going to have to help me with a rather unpleasant errand.”

As we were driving, Selena was quiet.

“What is it?” I demanded.

“Did you kill that guy because he insulted you by coming on to me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“No other reason?”

“No,” I lied, because I’d felt a hot pulse of rage watching someone lay a hand on Selena’s body.

She could take care of herself.

But she didn’t need to, when she was mine.

Pretending to be mine, that was.

“Good,” she said, and that lone word was as weighted when she said it as it was when I did.

We drove past Clarissa's house—a six thousand square foot sprawling mansion where I didn't dare meet her because there were, most likely, half-a-dozen teenagers living on the premises who would be witnesses—to the park she favored. She lived in a pristine, expensive neighborhood where no one noticed the misery next door.

“If you could stay out of sight,” I told Selena, who rolled her eyes as I got out of the car.

“This car is too expensive to risk getting DNA in the trunk,” she told me, before sinking down out of sight.

Clarissa was already waiting by the lake, looking out at the tranquil water. It rippled in the wake of two swans who glided by.

“I do love Selena,” I told her quietly, and she jumped, not having seen me come up beside her.

She pressed her hand to her chest. “You surprised me, Aiden.”

“It's a knack of mine.”

“From what I've heard, you've only been with the girl a few months,” she said lightly, and I was pleased that the rumors and doctored photographs I'd set into motion had done their work, making it seem as if my secret relationship with Selena stretched back further than it did. “Do you trust her?”

“Yes.”

“That doesn't sound like you at all.” She rose from the bench, her voice husky. “Anyway, it's not as if any of the men of your...caliber...are faithful to their wives.”

The accusation that Gavin might've cheated on my mother made me furious. He'd been by her side every moment as she fought cancer, handing his business over to me temporarily. There was no chance he'd ever cheated on her.

“What do you want from me, Clarissa?”

“You could acknowledge the heat between us since you were a boy,” she pointed out.

“I thought that was what you preferred. Boys.”

She didn't deny it. “I like you at every age, Aiden.”

I leaned in toward her as if I were going to kiss her. She raised her face to mine, her lips parting.

Instead, I wrapped my hands around her throat and squeezed.

She jerked and writhed, trying to fight me. Her eyes bulged out of her narrow face.

Then she managed to get her fingers into the wound in my shoulder. She slammed into the wound hard enough that my grip loosened as pain spiked through the nerves.

She managed to escape my grip. I reached for my gun, and Clarissa clawed it out of my hands, fighting like a wild woman. I hadn't known she had it in her.

She dove for my gun.

Selena slammed into her, coming from nowhere. Selena's dark gaze was totally focused on the gun. In one last, desperate move, Clarissa tried to turn the gun toward me and squeezed the trigger.

The shot went off loudly, right over my head, as Selena forced the gun up. She controlled Clarissa's arm, prying it away from her in a quick, well-practiced move.

Then Selena had the gun, and Clarissa was sprinting away through the darkness.

“Kill her,” I said.

I wasn't sure if Selena had waited to take the shot until I said so or not.

But Clarissa stumbled forward as a second shot rent the night. Her body collapsed, her arms and legs splayed awkwardly. Blood soaked her hair.

Then Selena turned to me. She was the one holding a gun now.

I raised my hands.

“I know you told me to stay in the car,” she said. “But I thought you might need some help.”

“You’re a good girlfriend.” Blood was flowing freely down my shoulder now. The stitches had been wrenched loose in the struggle.

Selena hesitated, looking as if she wasn’t entirely decided about how many people she was going to murder tonight.

“I’ll help you stop people like Clarissa and Aster,” she said. “But we have to be an actual team.”

Relief flooded my chest.

“Selena, I think we already are.”

CHAPTER 15



S elena

AIDEN DUMPED Clarissa's body on Xander, who was going to make sure her tattoos were covered with new ones, her face altered, and her appearance generally obscured. Xander did a lot of cursing about it before Aiden pointed out it was for my sake.

So, for the first night since I'd come to the house, I slept without Xander. Worse, Dominic and Aiden went off on separate missions the next day. Aiden had to deliver the now-unrecognizable body to Gavin, and I hated waiting by myself, pacing the house and hoping Gavin bought the story.

That night, Dominic sent the chef off once dinner was on the table so we could have the house to ourselves. Then we went to drag Xander from his room, but when Xander didn't answer and Dominic let us in, we found him asleep on the bed.

He'd been busy on Gavin's project and he'd been up all night fixing the body to take suspicion off me. But that wasn't all he'd been up to. I stopped at his desk, stunned to find myself looking up from a dozen sketches. He'd drawn me obsessively.

Dominic looked down at me with an uncertain expression, clearly trying to gauge my reaction.

"I'm not going to think about how I feel about this right now," I told him in a whisper. "Let him sleep."

“Good,” Dominic said. “I get you to myself for dinner. Aiden shouldn’t get to spend all the time with you.”

He’d seemed offended by the thought I’d murdered someone and he’d missed it. Psychos.

But when we went downstairs, Aiden was just coming in, looking haggard.

We followed Aiden into the living room. Aiden went to the bar at the corner of the room and poured himself a drink. Dominic looked at him curiously as Aiden drained that one, then poured a round for all of us.

“What did Gavin want from you yesterday?” Dominic asked. He frowned at Aiden’s shoulder, which was still bleeding. “It doesn’t look like it went well.”

Aiden shrugged his good shoulder. “How did the bank visit go?”

“I won’t know until I get to a computer,” I reminded him, hoping he meant what he’d said earlier about us being a true team. I was increasingly reluctant to murder him in his sleep. “Your rules are driving me crazy, Aiden.”

His lips curled up on one side, and it looked as if he was coming back to life. “Show me you can be obedient, Selena, and I’ll consider it.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Do that again and see what happens,” he said, and there was no doubt there was a bright spark in his gaze now.

I crossed my arms. “I feel like you keep implying you’ll punish me, but what I hear implied is that *I’ll* have to murder you in your sleep.”

“I promise you,” Aiden’s gaze were fixed on mine intensely in a way that made my nipples tight with need, “you’ll learn to love being punished.”

I considered rolling my eyes at that too, no matter what flickers of heat licked up my core, but there was a chocolate cake in the kitchen and I really wanted to eat my dessert in peace. “Did your father buy it?”

“So it seems.” Aiden said. “Now you just need to convince him when you meet him.”

“Where will that be?”

“He said he’d stop by the house. But you might meet him at the club, which...” Aiden shook his head. “I have my doubts you can be convincingly submissive to any degree.”

“Why do I have to be submissive? We can make up any story we want.”

Aiden scoffed. “My father does know my type.”

“Fine. I’ll need to be *obedient* when we go to this club. I can do anything for a job.” I promised as we took up seats around the kitchen table. I had some familiarity with BDSM, of course, but it wasn’t something I’d ever played with. As extensive as our Belladonna training was, *that* had never come up.

“And everywhere else,” he said. “But the club would be a fine place to start.”

Before I could respond to that—and I had a lot of thoughts—he leaned back in the chair opposite mine. “Tell me about yesterday,” he said to Dominic and me.

We filled him in—on the bank, not the heated scenes between us—and then Dominic said, “That evidence that disappeared... I’d like to find it.”

“I’m sure it was destroyed,” I said bitterly. Whoever killed my parents had been well-connected.

“It’s likely,” Dominic agreed. “But we could break into Evidence. Maybe it was lost...or hidden.”

“You want to go into police territory?” I asked skeptically.

“Anything for you,” Dominic said, so lightly it could’ve been a joke.

“I’ll go as well,” Aiden said.

I was surprised they were so willing to help me.

“And then,” Aiden turned his gaze on me, “we need to get you ready to face Gavin. You need to see the club.”

“Absolutely,” I said, as if the thought of going into a sex club didn’t make my heart pound—in good ways and bad.

“Tomorrow, then. Be ready at ten.” Aiden said. “Enjoy your cake and your cuddles with Xander.”

He kissed the top of my head and left the room.

Dominic gave me a look that suggested he was as confused as I was, but then he shrugged.

“Aiden,” he said, as if that one word was all the explanation either of us needed to explain his crazy.

* * *

AIDEN, Dominic and I needed to talk our way past the police to get to the evidence locker. I could see why Dominic had his angelic appearance, with his nearly trimmed blond hair, because with his tattoos hidden by a well-tailored suit, he totally looked like a federal agent.

I told him as much, and Dominic’s eyes held mine, a faint smile curling up his lips, as if he liked knowing I was looking at him.

Aiden scoffed. “If he really wanted to look like a fed, he’d need to wear an ill-fitting suit.”

We pulled into the parking lot outside the building where cold cases files were kept. The thought of getting the files about my parents’ murder sent a buzz of nervous anticipation through my blood, no matter how much I told myself we probably would find nothing.

And first, we had to get past the police.

As we entered, Aiden flashed his badge, and the guard at the door nodded.

My heart was pounding as we walked up to the door with the big gold seal.

As we walked toward the metal detector, Dominic leaned into me. “You’ve got this, Selena. You’d make your parents proud.”

No one had ever said anything like that to me before, and it made my eyes unexpectedly hot.

I nodded, acting professional, even though I was tempted to reach out and touch him. I knew I shouldn’t, but I couldn’t help the way my body responded to him.

The elevator was small, just room for the three of us. I pressed myself against the back wall and tried not to look at either of the men, but their magnetism was overwhelming. The air was charged with electricity.

When the doors opened, we were on the cold case evidence floor.

“I’m Agent Gabriel,” Dominic told the man, flashing his credentials and flashing me a wink that sent my heart racing. “We’re here to access the cold case lock-up for an investigation. We have an appointment with Detective Morgan.”

The other cop checked his phone and said, “He’s just finishing up with another appointment.”

Aiden and Dominic had done their research. I was impressed.

He led us back through the evidence locker, down to a room behind the cold storage area.

“This is it,” he said. “Detective Morgan is waiting for you in the office.”

Dominic rested his hand on the small of my back. I glanced up at him, meeting those startlingly bright eyes. It seemed like he was almost...protective. But I didn’t need to be protected.

“I’ve got it,” Dominic said then, leaning in so his lips almost brushed my ear. “You go with Aiden.”

The way I felt when his hand rested on the small of my back, right above the curve of my ass, was not professional.

Dominic stepped into the office that was right outside the evidence locker and I could hear his deep, resonant voice already going through his act as he closed the door between us.

Aiden handed me my watch. “You dropped this.”

I flashed a grin at him, thrilled to be able to use my skills again. Within a few seconds, I had the video feed looping so no one would be able to see what we were up to.

“We’ve got some peace and quiet now,” I said, glancing at the door to the office.

Aiden pulled out a lockpicking kit.

“I can take that,” I said, reaching for it.

“I’m not useless, Selena,” he told me, as if I could ever think that about the tall, imposing man who now began to tinker with the locks. “You take care of the digital security. I’ll take care of the analog security.”

He worked with a steady hand, pulling the tumblers of the lock back and sliding the picks into the right place.

“Got it,” he said, and he swung open the door for me. Always polite, he ushered me in ahead of him.

We searched for the case file, but there was no file with our last name, Hart.

Aiden must’ve read the disappointment on my face, because he said, “If it were filed correctly, it wouldn’t have disappeared. We need to keep looking.”

“We don’t have much time,” I reminded myself, because I didn’t want to get my hopes up.

“We’ll find it if it’s here,” he promised me, sounding so sure of himself he almost convinced me too.

We continued to search through the files, pulling out boxes and scanning through them frantically. Aiden worked methodically, pulling out one box at a time and searching through them in a way that suggested he had done this before.

I couldn't help but admire the way his muscles flexed in his tight shirt as he worked. He was focused and intense, and familiar heat built between my thighs. It was a welcome distraction from my feelings, being so close but so far from the evidence of my parents' murder, and I searched the shelves with a return to my usual dispassionate efficiency.

As we searched, Aiden's hand brushed against mine, sending shivers down my spine. I tried to push the feeling away, but it was impossible to ignore the chemistry between us.

Suddenly, I heard a noise outside the door. Aiden and I both froze. We had to hide.

I'd spotted a small closet between rows of metal shelving. Without a word, I grabbed Aiden's hand, and electric sparks seemed to fly between us at the touch. I led him toward the small closet at the back of the room. As soon as I opened the door, he pushed me inside and then followed, closing the door behind us.

The closet was cramped and dark. Panic spiked through me, just for a second.

But I wasn't a child hidden among the coats. Aiden's warm, hard body pressed against mine. His heart beat quickly in his chest, matching the pace of mine.

We were so close that I could feel his breath on my neck. I tried to keep my breathing steady, but it was difficult with his body pressed so closely to mine. Slowly, the panic that I'd felt for a moment faded into another heated emotion.

Aiden leaned his head down to speak in my ear, so close that I could feel his breath on my cheek. "We're going to be okay," he whispered. "We'll get out of here, and we'll find—and kill—whoever hurt your parents. It's going to be okay, Selena."

He must have misinterpreted my breathing as fear, not desire.

I'd been in danger of being caught before. That was familiar. I always escaped.

I'd never felt like this before. It was unsettling, and I wasn't sure I wanted to escape.

He put his hands on my hips and pulled me closer, pressing his body into mine as if he would envelop me with his warmth. And I leaned into him, wanting more of that heat.

He pulled me harder against his body and kissed my neck, sending shivers through my body. I put my hands on his rippling biceps and kissed him back, exploring the soft tenderness of his lips that was so unexpected from this hard man.

"We should save this for a better place," Aiden whispered between kisses, his hand sliding down my body and between my thighs. But my legs parted, and his fingers nudged my underwear aside, curling against my lips.

I gasped as his fingers found their way to my hot, wet center, and I bit my lip to stifle any sound as he teased them inside me. He knew exactly how to touch me, his expert fingers stroking need with every touch.

In the dim light of the closet, Aiden's eyes were filled with desire as he looked at me. He was just as turned on as I was, and that only made me want him more.

Then I heard Dominic's voice outside. "Thanks so much, Detective Morgan. I can take it from here."

Aiden's lips tightened as his hands slid from my skin. Disappointment covered his face, and it was unexpected.

A few minutes passed while we waited, wanting to make sure Dominic was truly alone. I used the time to adjust my clothes though nothing could change the throbbing heat I felt.

Finally, Dominic swung the closet door open and looked at us with amusement written across his handsome features.

"Not a word," Aiden warned him as he stepped out, looking as dignified as ever.

Dominic raised his hands. "I don't even want to know."

We continued to search the long metal shelves full of case file boxes. Aiden paused, then said slowly, "August."

“September comes next,” Dominic said helpfully.

“I think this might be a Caesar cypher,” Aiden mused. “Your last name is Hart.”

I nodded, though the name seemed strange. I’d been just *Selena* for so long.

“This name is Kduw August,” he said. “The surname could be a clue that it’s a Caesar cypher, and it’s only four letters like Hart. If you shift each letter over...” He thought it over rapidly, already pulling the box off the shelf. “Then it would be Hart.”

He opened the box, and I stared down into it.

My head swam. I’d wanted this so badly, and I could barely think for a second as I stared down at the hard drives and cell phones in the box.

But Aiden and Dominic were already going to work, hiding the evidence on their body, and I did the same. Woodenly, hearing my voice as if it came from a long way away, I asked, “How did you know that?”

“My father has a lot of police in his pocket in this city. But if one of them wanted to have something on us, he wouldn’t even need to take the box out of evidence. Just mislabel it.”

“It was smart,” I admitted, feeling impressed by these men and reluctant to admit it to myself.

Aiden slid the box back onto the shelf. “Let’s be self-congratulatory when we’re back at the house.”

And yet... the fact that Aiden had known about the Caesar cypher made me wonder if it had been someone close to him who had named it in the first place.

CHAPTER 16



S elena

AS WE LEFT, Aiden and Dominic paced ahead of me into the parking lot. Dominic said quietly to Aiden, “You have to let her have the hard drives and the cell phones.”

It was supposed to be too quiet for me to overhear, but I did. Even after that moment when I’d held a gun and hadn’t shot him, Aiden still didn’t entirely trust me.

And I didn’t entirely trust him.

Maybe I should take the files and run.

Once we got to the car and we had pulled down the street, Aiden pulled over, and he and Dominic pulled the various files and hardware they’d hidden on their bodies out and deposited them onto the box in my lap. We’d made it through the scans thanks to my special watch, making it look as if we didn’t have any evidence.

Now I was staring down once again into a box that contained everything that remained about my parents’ untimely death.

Our drive home was quiet. I dreaded looking at the evidence at the same time as I felt desperate to know. What if it didn’t contain any info that led me to my parents’ killers?

Aiden must have sensed my unease because he reached over to take my hand. His touch was comforting, and I

couldn't help but feel a spark of desire at the same time.

I couldn't stop thinking about the way he'd kissed me in the evidence storage room. I couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like to forget about my past for a few hours with Aiden.

But I'd finally found a part of my fractured past, and I'd been waiting for the chance at revenge all my life. I wasn't sure I could afford a distraction like Aiden and Dominic and Xander.

We reached the house. Aiden and Dominic were both strapped, given that FBI agents always carried. Aiden pulled off his suit jacket impatiently once we reached the kitchen, then pulled off his harness and laid it on the long marble countertop.

“Are you ready to look through everything?” he asked.

I nodded, and we moved to the big, eat-in table on the other side of the kitchen. We began to go through the files. I didn't want to look at any of it with company, because I was afraid I'd see something that would make me cry.

To the best of my knowledge, nobody had ever seen me cry.

I'd shed my last tear in that closet, huddled in a corner, silent with fear.

Aiden and Dominic were silent as they worked through the files, occasionally sharing a look or murmuring something to each other. I couldn't concentrate, my mind was too full of thoughts about my parents and the unknown killers.

My hands shook with anger as I flipped through the pages of the file on their deaths.

My memories were fractured moments that I wasn't entirely sure were even really true.

My mother rushing me toward the back of the house, trying to protect me, as my father headed past her with his gun toward the men breaking down our door.

The coats hanging around me. More gunshots. My mother's scream.

The door swinging open.

The way I'd jolted out and run wildly. The open door that led out of the kitchen. A blurry glimpse of my swing set. My tunnel vision. The men near me, not quite as fast as a desperate four-year-old.

The man who had reached for me with his golden ring winking in the light, just before I slid through the storm drain.

I forced myself to keep reading, searching for any clues that could lead us to the killers. I studied the photographs of the crime scene, of my mother looking far smaller than I remembered her with half a dozen bullet wounds through her chest.

I'd been missing, presumed dead. My real name stared up at me from the papers like a talisman, something I'd left behind a long time ago. That little girl had a family. I was just Selena.

Dominic's hand found mine under the table, his touch grounding me in the moment. I looked up at him, and he gave me a small encouraging look before returning his attention to the files.

But I couldn't hold back my emotions any longer. As we sifted through the files, I sorted through pictures of my father's battered body and a record of warm, cozy rooms I barely remembered, splattered with blood. My heart ached with pain and anger.

Dominic put a comforting arm around my shoulders. I leaned into him, feeling his warmth and strength.

"Let it out," he murmured. "You don't have to be strong all the time."

"That's not who I am," I said, my voice low and fierce. "I *am* always strong."

"All right," he said gently. "I know what it's like to be so full of anger, to have lost someone... I just want you to be

free.”

“I’ll be free when the people who killed my parents are dead.”

Dominic’s face held a look of disappointment as if he knew that wasn’t true, but he nodded. “Together, we’ll make sure they end up dead, then. You don’t have to do this alone.”

I didn’t trust myself to respond to those kind words. Instead, I focused on the devices plugged into the wall, charging. My parents’ cell phones had finally charged enough to power on.

I turned one of them on, and I opened it up. A photo of my four-year-old self grinned out at me from the lock screen. My stomach dropped into a pit.

I was smiling at the camera. I had those strange tiny white teeth that little children have and two scraggly pigtails tied with yellow bows. I hadn’t thought of myself as truly being that little girl in so many years. The sight of her made me want to cry and it made me want to throw things, and my skin felt too tight.

I dropped the phone back into the box. “I can’t do this around you guys.”

“I understand,” Aiden said. “I’ll give you a minute.”

He nodded to Dominic, who looked reluctant, but Aiden gave him a meaningful look and the two of them left the room.

I stood there alone in the kitchen, my chest heaving. My breathing had accelerated like I was running a race just looking at that damned photo. It reminded me that deep down, I was still that girl. I still carried the trauma of being locked in a tight space while my parents screamed on the other side of the door.

I looked at the island and realized Aiden’s keys and his gun were still right there. I looked back at the box, sitting at the end of the table. I could easily sweep everything into the box and disappear into the night. I’d be free. I wouldn’t be at risk of getting attached to yet more people who could be ripped away as easily as a band-aid leaves a wound.

But if Aiden didn't take over the family business, I had no doubt it would mean more pain and suffering for a lot of innocent people.

People who were just as important to someone as my parents were to me.

I closed my eyes and let out a groan. I would stay. I would fight and help Aiden, and I'd take his help in tracking down these killers even though I could do it on my own.

Though I'd have to hide my kidnapping forever or the Belladonnas would have these men disassembled in twenty minutes. The thought of my men's dead bodies unexpectedly made my heart hurt.

Aiden entered the room, looking cautious, his green eyes taking in everything in a sweep.

As if he expected me to be armed.

Understanding swept through me, and I was all the more annoyed because I'd just been so fucking tender, deciding to stay with him. "You absolute ass. That was a test, wasn't it?"

I crossed the room to his gun. "This probably wasn't even loaded."

"Selena." His tone was warning.

"You know I'm just as dangerous with or without a gun," I warned him.

I pulled the gun free of the holster and dropped the clip, expecting to see an empty clip. But the brass tips of the rounds shone dimly out.

He held out his hand for the gun. There was a look in his gaze that I couldn't read.

I placed the gun, and the clip, in his hand.

"I'll hold onto this for you until later," he said. "Until you're ready to use it on the people who hurt your family."

"What about the files?" I asked. "Are you going to hold onto those too?"

“You can take them to your room if you wish,” he said. “I’ll get a laptop for you to use under supervision to review what’s on the hard drives.”

I tilted my head to one side, studying him. “So I passed. *Again*. Is this your kink, Aiden? You like giving me the opportunity to shoot you?”

“I told him not to test you,” Dominic grumbled as he walked into the room behind him.

Aiden ignored him, fixed on me. “You can keep them in your room if you wish. But I suggest you share the burden of what’s in those files with us.”

“That’s not my nature,” I said for the second time.

He slid his gun back into his holster. “Neither was staying here instead of running out that door.”

His intense green gaze held mine. “Maybe you’re something besides *just* a Belladonna, Selena.”

“Terrifying thought,” I said lightly. Then I collected my box of grisly evidence and carried it past these two men, with their watchful eyes, to go upstairs alone.

CHAPTER 17



Dominic

I DIDN'T LIKE the idea of Selena sleeping by herself that night with all that evidence weighing on her mind. I wasn't as worried as Aiden that she would betray us and use the technology against us; I was worried that she didn't seem able to let us in, to let us share the burden with her. I worried she would be haunted by nightmares or that she would stay up all night looking at terrible photos of her parents' bodies that no one should ever have to see once, let alone study.

"Are you going to sleep in her room?" I asked Xander.

"Are you?" he asked back. He looked like he'd been working all day, and there was ink on his fingers and smeared on his cheek.

"She hasn't asked me."

"She didn't ask me either, but she wants me there," Xander said. He thought he could read people so well. "I'll take a shower and go to her."

"Let me tell you about today," I warned him. I filled him in on what we'd seen today. "Our girl's pretty fragile right now."

"Our girl," Xander repeated, and I couldn't quite read his tone. "You know that girl is fragile like a bomb, though."

"You'd be the expert."

I left Xander's room. But I couldn't stop thinking about Selena and worrying about her, so finally, I knocked on her door.

She opened the door looking tired. "I don't need a distraction," she told me quietly. "I need to focus, even if it's painful."

"I understand that. But you also need some sleep." I tilted my head to one side. "Do you sleep better with Xander because you trust him?" *In a way you don't trust me?*

"I don't know," she admitted, and her voice sounded raw. "I can't think about it tonight."

"Then don't think about me either," I said quietly.

Her gaze met mine, her eyes widening. Then she stepped back from the door, allowing me in.

I got into bed with Selena. Even though we'd had so many hot, tense moments lately, I knew all she needed tonight was comfort.

I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close. She curled into my embrace, her body trembling slightly. The tension in her muscles slowly started to ease.

"You're safe," I whispered into her ear. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She let out a shaky breath of laughter, her fingers gripping the fabric of my shirt tightly. "I won't let anything happen to *myself*," she murmured. "It's just...sometimes I feel like I'm drowning in all of this."

I kissed the top of her head, running my hand through her hair soothingly. "You don't have to do it alone," I said softly. "We're all here for you."

She pulled back slightly, looking up at me with those beautiful, dark eyes. "I don't want to burden you with my problems," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

But I suspected it wasn't her problems that were an issue. She might allow me by her side to kill some people who needed killing. It was her emotions she didn't want to share.

“You could never be a burden to me,” I said firmly. “I want to be here for you, Selena.”

“You don’t understand,” she said. “I don’t want to owe you.”

A stubborn look crossed her face. “It’s bad enough you gave me more orgasms than I gave you.”

I quirked an eyebrow. Even in the dark, I could tell she was wincing as if she hadn’t meant to confess that thought.

“You’re afraid to owe me because you don’t want to be tied to me in any way,” I filled in.

She sighed. “Yes. But you’re going to try to make me stay, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Nuzzling her cheek with my nose, I whispered, “I want to help you. I want to be with you.”

I kissed her again, gently. She let go of my shirt, her arms sliding around my neck. She kissed me back, her lips warm and soft and tender. “I don’t know how to keep doing this.”

“Let me take care of you,” I murmured. “You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

She pulled back from the kiss, looking at me with those dark eyes that often seemed to see far too much, as if she could look right through me.

“You are in an occupation with a high mortality rate,” she whispered. “And so am I. We should probably just enjoy the fun while it lasts because nothing is guaranteed for us.”

“I want more than fun with you,” I said, feeling as if nothing I said broke through her walls. She was so stubborn. “I want to be here for the hard parts too. The sad parts.”

I could feel her scoff; it made her body shudder against mine.

“Let’s not talk any more tonight,” she said softly.

There was a long silence, and then she said, into the dark, “But thank you.”

I responded by just kissing her on top of her head.
And then, wrapped in my arms, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 18



Xander

SELENA'S BED BECKONED ME, and yet I couldn't bring myself to leave the studio. At least I knew Dominic was in her bed, comforting her in her dreams even though she'd never admit she needed us by daylight.

I couldn't shake the need to make something for her.

Something that would make her life better.

Maybe I should've made her art.

Instead, I made her a bomb.

It was the most compact one I'd ever made—a personal bomb, just for the person who had killed her parents. I could make more if she liked them.

I fussed with it all night, trying to make it perfect for her.

But by the time dawn was breaking and I had moved on to producing more, since Selena was sure there were many people behind her parents' death, I wondered if... well. I wondered if I had gone full psycho.

Would it be weird to give it to her?

Yes.

I should've given her a painting.

Right when I was berating myself for being an idiot—what a romantic thing, murder presents—there was a soft knock at

the door.

I opened it to find Selena.

She looked hesitant. “I just wanted to check on you.”

“Oh,” I said. “Because I never came in last night.”

She nodded. “Wanted to make sure you weren’t dead.”

But then I realized what she really meant was, *wanted to make sure you weren’t mad*.

It amazed me that such a badass girl as Selena cared what I thought.

“Still here,” I said. “You want to come in?”

“Always. I love it in here.” She gave me a smile that lit my heart.

“You do?”

“It’s so... alive,” she said, wrapping her arms around her chest as if she were cold.

I grabbed one of my sweatshirts from the dresser and carried it over to her. She accepted it with a small smile, then pulled it over her head. She drowned in the thing, pushing it up on her narrow wrists, but the voluminous clothing was sexy in its own way. I liked seeing her wear my clothes.

“So, is this the project Gavin has you working on?” she asked as she examined my work table, which had two small bombs and the beginning of a third.

“No,” I said, then admitted, “They’re for you.”

Her gaze rose to mine quickly. “Explain, heathen.”

I let out a laugh, surprised by her quick words. Feeling more vulnerable than I ever did—and an artist’s heart is always mercilessly on display—I showed her the bombs, explaining that they were for the people who had killed her parents.

“What will this do to them?”

“Turn them into a red cloud. So don’t use them until you’re sure they don’t have any information you need, that

you're done with them."

She nodded. "That was... thoughtful."

"That was insane," I corrected.

"Maybe a little bit of both," she said with a smile. "But I really appreciate it."

Relief swept through me. Women always wanted Aiden, Domnic and me, but that was different from being with someone who understood you and wanted you anyway.

The big windows sent soft morning slanted light falling across her face, making her skin look golden and igniting the red strands in her brown hair so it looked like fire. All I wanted to do was kiss her.

"Stay there for a second," I said. "I want to paint you. To capture you like that."

She smiled self-consciously but she paused.

I got a pad of paper from the other room and my paints. I would capture that moment, but I'd paint it as I would wish it to be. I started with her hair, accentuating the streaks of fire red. I added her curves, the pert, pointed peaks of her breasts, the gentle swell of her belly. As I finished her hair, I painted her face, bringing out the delicate beauty of her features, the amber in her brown eyes.

I paused, paintbrush in hand. I stared at her face, painting it in my mind. She had been through horrible things. But despite her jaded affect, there was still a warm, bright, exuberant light glowing in her eyes. It was the light of someone who could laugh and make you laugh too, even when there was a storm outside and the world was dark.

It was her smile that made me want to be next to her. It would be hard to be with somebody like her, a trained assassin who tended to be so cold and distant, who would be in constant danger. And yet... the warm heart beating under that hard, pretty shell was worth the pain.

I pressed my lips together. I was falling for her. This woman had stolen into my heart, but it wouldn't be easy for

her to love me back.

I stared at my portrait of Selena. It looked like her, and yet I didn't feel like I could quite capture her elusive presence. There was something about her that was magical.

She came to my elbow. "Oh," she said softly. "It's beautiful."

"So are you."

"I'm not sure I look like that," she said with a smile. "I think you flatter me."

I left the painting to dry and turned to her. "The painting is nowhere near as beautiful as you are. I can't capture your spark."

"My spark?" She raised her eyebrows.

"There has to be something special about you, Selena. Because all three of us are falling in love with you."

Selena's eyes widened at my statement, before a hint of a smirk tugged at the corner of her lips. She'd been surprised by the admission, but of course she quickly covered that with her usual glib mask.

"Is that so?" she said, her voice teasing. "Well, you boys might have to fight it out to see who gets me then."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "I don't think it's a competition, Selena. We all care about you in our own way."

She leaned in closer to me, her breath hot against my ear. "And how do you care about me, hmm?" she whispered, her fingers trailing along my cheek.

A shiver rushed down my spine at her touch. "I think you're my muse," I replied, my voice low. "You make me feel alive. Free. and I want to do the same for you."

She pressed her lips to mine, her tongue sliding past them and into my mouth. Our bodies pressed together, the heat between us almost suffocating. Her hands slid across my body, delving up under my shirt to caress my abs, my chest. I ran my hands across the curve of her ass, sliding under the waistband

of her pants to cup her perfect ass in my hands. Her hips swayed against mine, her tongue still hungrily teasing between my lips.

When we finally pulled apart for air, she looked at me with those gorgeous brown eyes. They were soft, warm, but there was something else there, something a little bit broken.

“I don’t know what to do,” she whispered. “I don’t know how to be with you.”

“Just let go,” I murmured, kissing her again. “Let me take care of you.”

I kissed down her jawline, making my way to her neck. She shuddered in my arms. My hand slipped underneath her shirt, moving up to cup her breast. Her nipple was already hard, straining against the fabric of her bra. I thumbed it through the material before moving to her back, rubbing her gently.

She moaned softly in my ear, pressing her lips to the side of my neck. She slid one hand down to my jeans, turning away from me. She kissed the side of my neck again, her fingers working the button on my jeans.

She slid her hand into my boxers, wrapping her fingers around my already hard cock. I groaned, my hips bucking into her touch.

When she looked at me, her eyes were dark with desire. “Xander,” she said softly, the word half a plea, half a demand, and my body responded before my mind.

I pushed her against the wall, pressing greedily against her as if I couldn’t get close enough. She moaned as our lips met again, tongues sliding together. I reached between us, pulling down her pants and underwear. She was already wet, and I slipped a finger inside her, feeling her tighten around me.

She let out a breathy moan, her head falling back against the wall. I added another finger, pumping them in and out, and her eyes closed. She bit her lower lip, trying to hold back, but I didn’t want her to hold back with me.

“Come for me,” I whispered in her ear, biting down on her earlobe.

She let out a low moan, her whole body tensing up. She tightened around my fingers, her orgasm hitting her hard. I kept my fingers inside her, drawing out her pleasure. Her moans were still soft until she sagged against me. For once, she let me hold her weight for a second as her legs trembled with the power of that orgasm.

I pulled her shirt up and yanked her bra down so I could take her breast into my mouth. I suckled her nipple, my hand sliding under her shirt to cup her other breast. She shuddered against me, her lips parting.

I pushed her knees apart and slipped my tongue inside her. Her fingers buried themselves in my hair, tugging on it as I tasted her. I moved my tongue in and out of her, my thumb massaging her clit.

She was moaning louder now, gasping for breath. Her hand fisted in my hair as her hips bucked, her pussy clenching around my tongue. I rode with her as her hips rocked, my mouth still working eagerly against that perfect clit, as her thighs trembled to either side of my face.

Finally, she loosened her fingers in my hair, her hands falling to her sides. I moved back up to my knees, kissing her. She tasted sweet and salty, like herself. I pushed her against the wall again, kissing her softly and pulling away.

“What about you?” she said, her voice breathy.

I grinned at her. “You can do whatever you want to do to me.”

A slow, sexy smile spread across Selena’s face. Her hand slid into my boxers and wrapped around my cock again. I let out a savage, needy growl.

She kissed me deeply, her other hand drifting down to my ass and squeezing, pulling me into her. I felt her fingers slowly pull the fabric of my boxers down, exposing my cock. It was already aching for her, throbbing, and she wrapped her fingers around it. She teased her fingertips around the piercing,

exploring it, and her touch sent shivers of tension through my body.

She pumped me a few times before leaning in and kissing the tip, her tongue slipping out and licking me. I groaned, my head falling back, my eyes closing for a second. It didn't take long for Selena to catch me off guard. She wrapped her lips around my cock and took me deep into her throat.

Her fingers dug into my ass as she sucked my cock, pumping me quickly with her other hand. I was getting close, but I didn't want this to be over so soon.

I pulled her off of my cock, her lips sliding wetly off of me. She pulled me closer to her, kissing me. I kissed her back, my hands sliding up and down her curves, feeling the smoothness of her skin against my hands.

She broke the kiss and slid down my body, her hands wandering down to my ass. She gripped my cock like it belonged to her and then fell swiftly to her knees. Those dark eyes held mine as she wrapped her mouth around me.

Dominic had told me that Selena felt like she couldn't owe anyone for anything. Even orgasms.

I wanted to tell her that she didn't ever have to pay me back, but then she was gripping my balls, rubbing them with the palm of her hand, and my breath started to come short.

"I'm close," I warned.

She squeezed my balls, pushing them into my body. It was all I needed.

I came right then. She drank me down, swallowing every drop. I was shaking by the end, gasping for breath. She pulled away, looking up at me. Her eyes were soft now, warm, and I gripped her arms and pulled her up.

"I'm glad you're here," I said, pulling her to me.

She kissed my jaw. "Best kidnapping I've ever experienced."

I wasn't sure we would ever find our way to a fairy tale ending. But I was confident in one thing.

I was ready for the next chapter with her.

CHAPTER 19



S elena

IT WAS GOING to take time to comb through all the files on the phones and computers, and as Xander and I headed downstairs to breakfast, I grudgingly contemplated letting the guys help me. The thought made me uncomfortable.

The chef had made ricotta pancakes with fresh strawberries, and Xander couldn't hide his smile. "I'm pretty sure Aiden ordered this for you. He's not really into pancakes."

"Well. He may be a dangerous mob kingpin, but he's growing on me," I said.

The doorbell rang, and Aiden strode through the room. How the hell did he look so impeccable so early in the morning? I was still wearing Xander's sweatshirt and my hair was up in the messy bun I wore for bed. But Aiden looked crisp in his suit, his thick, dark hair perfectly styled.

"There's only one person that could be," Aiden said. "My security only lets one person through."

He sounded a bit sour about it, as if he had to make allowances even with his own security for Gavin. Then he glanced over at me and said, "Make yourself presentable."

My lips parted. What an ass.

But I headed for the stairs anyway. Family doesn't bring out the best in a lot of people, and I did need to be ready for Gavin.

Plus I did look freshly-fucked and dressed in Xander's shirt. And Aiden was deliciously jealous, which boosted my mood almost as much as the orgasms.

Xander followed me up the stairs.

"Tell me what I should know about Gavin Crude," I said as I went into the bathroom, rushing to get ready.

Xander leaned in the doorway eating pancakes, since he'd brought his plate with him. Apparently Xander was not worried about making himself presentable.

"I don't doubt he loves his son, but he's kind of an asshole. Besides the business... He took Dominic and I out of shitty situations. Sounds nice right? But it turned out he had jobs for all of us since we were kids. We were like his little army of enforcers no one saw coming. And of course he would take in two kids who were expendable because he wanted to keep his own heirs alive."

"He had a couple of teenagers working as enforcers?" Maybe I shouldn't have asked, because now, I wanted to slap Gavin Crude into next week. I ran my fingers through my hair. It looked pretty decent thanks to the bun. I hastily began to put on a little makeup.

"We can discuss his sins later."

I finished applying my lipstick and turned to him. "What if I blow it? What if I don't convince Gavin I'm madly in love with Aiden? What if he realizes it's all fake?"

"Well," Xander considered. "We'll figure something else out."

"Something else like what?"

"A bloody coup," Xander said.

"You're not making me feel better."

“Sorry. But you look beautiful.” He rested his hands on my shoulders. “I don’t doubt that you’re smarter than Gavin Crude. Do you really doubt that?”

I considered. “Good point.”

“But Aiden needs you,” Xander said. “Even if he’d never admit it. *I* need you. I love him and Dominic like brothers, and I can’t protect them... not without you.”

Xander was almost always playful, but right now, he looked serious. His dark, intense eyes looked into mine as if he was searching for a promise.

“I will,” I said, and the tension in his body relaxed. As if he trusted me completely, even though Aiden still doubted me. Something about that was touching.

I headed for the door. “Don’t eat all the pancakes while I’m dealing with Gavin. I’m going to need sugar afterward to reset my mood.”

When I swept downstairs to the foyer, Aiden looked pained. Gavin Crude was as well dressed, handsome and arrogant as when I had briefly seen him at the party.

“Dad, I’d like to introduce you to my girlfriend.” There was a subtle edge to the word *girlfriend*. I wondered if Aiden had told his father he intended to make me his fiancée soon. “Selena.”

“Selena, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Gavin’s warm tone almost disguised what seemed like a hint of sarcasm.

I looked at Aiden, then at Gavin, before I spoke. I could be nice and polite to Gavin Crude even if it hurt...as long as I got to kill him eventually. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Crude.”

“Selena.” Aiden turned to me. “Would you get us some coffee and meet us in the blue living room?”

I was playing a role, and so I smiled. “My pleasure.”

Sometimes assassins have to do a little serving and smiling to get close to their victims. But it always annoyed me. I’d served drinks and had my breasts groped since I was a

teenager, blending into the crowd for a chance to slip a knife into a man's guts.

The three of us were soon seated in one of Aiden's lavish living rooms. I poured coffee for both men and fixed Aiden's cup with a splash of milk, the way he liked it, before I handed it over to him.

Gavin Crude took his cup and didn't bother to say thank you. Another reason to shoot him later, the misogynist prick.

"Tell me about yourself, Selena," Gavin said. "How did you and Aiden meet?"

Aiden had told me how he wanted me to appear. Intelligent and sophisticated, but submissive and adoring. Of course he'd tell me I had to adore him... professionally speaking.

"Well, Mr. Crude," I started, looking straight into his eyes. "Aiden and I met at a mutual friend's party. We were immediately drawn to each other's passion for... exploration." I gave him a coy smile, knowing exactly what I was implying. "I was drawn to Aiden's confidence."

Confidence was code, in this case, for dominance.

I had mixed feelings about Aiden's dominance, but I'd pretend I loved it now.

Gavin raised an eyebrow, clearly taken aback by my bold statement. Aiden, on the other hand, looked amused with my response. I was sure he'd point out that I'd have to back that statement up at the club.

"I see," Gavin said. "And what do you do for a living, Selena?"

"I'm a writer," I replied. It was an easy cover, since I could claim I wrote under a pen name. "I enjoy exploring the depths of the human psyche, delving into the darkest corners of the human mind."

Gavin nodded, but I could tell he wasn't impressed.

"And what about your family?" he asked.

“My parents are...deceased,” I said. “I was raised by my uncle. He’s very religious.”

About assassination.

Killing the deserving was Man’s true religion.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, but there wasn’t a flicker of real emotion in his eyes. He was probably thinking it would be easier to schedule his holiday parties then, since I wouldn’t have family of my own that I might pull Aiden away to visit.

Aiden wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and I leaned into his warmth.

We were having the most dull conversation—I despised small talk—but it felt charged with danger under the surface.

As the conversation dragged on, I could feel Gavin’s eyes on me, assessing me. I had to appear sweet and submissive, like a good enough future wife for him to transfer power to Aiden.

Submissive was fine, but I refused to let him see me as weak.

“So, Selena,” Gavin said, his voice dripping with condescension. “What are your intentions with my son?”

I looked at Aiden, his arm still around me, and smiled. “My intentions with Aiden are quite personal, Mr. Crude,” I said, my voice low and seductive. “But I can assure you that I am fully committed to him.”

Gavin snorted. “Committed to him? For how long?”

Aiden tensed beside me, and I knew he was just as irritated with his father’s questioning as I was. But I refused to let Gavin see me ruffled.

“For as long as he’ll have me,” I said, my voice firm. “I love him, Mr. Crude. I plan to submit to him in every way possible.”

Gavin’s eyes widened. But I held his gaze, refusing to back down.

“I’ll be curious to see if you can indeed keep up with my son,” Gavin said. “He’s quite demanding.”

“I think he’ll find he’s met his match with me.”

Aiden squeezed my shoulder, and I knew he was pleased. Gavin looked like he wanted to argue more, but he stood instead.

“Well, I suppose we’ll see,” he said, his tone dismissive. “Goodbye, Selena.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Crude,” I replied, standing up as well.

As he left, Xander lingered in the hall. Aiden went ahead to the door with his father while Xander and I spoke quietly. Xander was just checking on me, but I’d decided to let the way Gavin’s speech bothered me show in my face and posture. I didn’t want to seem too perfectly composed, because that wasn’t normal.

Gavin’s gaze flashed at us from down the hallway. “She seems quite close to Xander.”

Fuck. He should’ve stayed upstairs until Gavin was gone.

“We do all live together,” Aiden said lightly.

“And are you going to continue to live together?” Gavin asked him. “Did you find a slut like your brother did, someone who needs more than one cock to satisfy her?”

Aiden winced. “Dad, if you’re wondering why Gabe never talks to you, I have some thoughts.”

“Don’t be a smartass,” Gavin said.

“Don’t be mad at me because I’m the one who’s here and Gabe is gone,” Aiden said. “I do everything you ask.”

Gavin rubbed his hand across his face. To my surprise, the tension seemed to dissipate as he dropped his hand. “I do appreciate you, Aiden. I appreciate you bringing me that Belladonna.”

“I’ll find the rest of them before they can take another try,” Aiden promised.

Anxiety twisted my gut. Maybe Aiden wouldn't betray them, but if he had information about them, they were still in danger.

"Don't kill the rest," Gavin cautioned. "There are quite a few people in the underworld who would pay well for them."

"Whatever you want, Dad," Aiden said, his tone mildly annoyed, as if selling assassins for torture and revenge was an everyday occurrence.

Once his father was finally gone, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Aiden pulled me into a tight embrace. "You were amazing," he said, kissing my forehead.

"Thanks," I said, feeling a wave of relief wash over me. "I didn't do a good job of pretending to be submissive."

"I don't want you to be submissive to anyone else," Aiden said. His hands on my hips squeezed gently, his fingers sinking into my ass, and my hips swayed forward against his. "I love your fire. I just want to earn your submission *to me*."

"I didn't realize that was how it worked," I said.

"That's how it works with me," he promised.

"I don't think your father liked me very much."

"He doesn't like that you're real, instead of someone he chose for me, someone he planted in my path and he can control," he said bitterly.

"What did he mean? About your brother?"

"Despite how Dad talked about her, Gabe met an awesome girl that he just adores. And he is happy to share her."

The thought that maybe I wouldn't have to choose between any of these guys—in some magical alternate universe where we wouldn't all have to give up our identities to be together, because they were clearly not going to give up their life of crime and neither was I—was a new, fascinating one.

"She sounds like a lucky girl," I said, and Aiden's gaze sharpened on me. He hadn't missed the implication.

“I’d like to think so. My little brother’s pretty great.”

“He probably takes after his big brother. Definitely not Gavin Crude.” I licked at my lips, struggling a bit to say when I needed to. “I talked a pretty big game with your father.”

“You did,” Aiden’s eyes crinkled at the corners with his smile. “This is why I told you I wanted to ad lib. The stuff you come up with is fun.”

“Adrenaline junkie,” I accused him, and then realized it was true. Aiden was careful and controlled in some ways, but he loved an interesting game.

I didn’t know what to make of his love of games when it came to the two of us.

“What is it you want to ask?” Aiden said, startling me with the way he always saw through me.

“Can you take me to the club? Or teach me here? I want to be ready.”

His eyes gleamed with light that was both predatorial and strangely alluring. “I’m happy to teach you, Selena. The club is empty right now. We could get a look at it.”

“Right now?” I let the faintest note of alarm bleed into my voice. I was curious about the club, but it was still overwhelming to think of allowing anyone to tie me up or make me vulnerable.

He seemed to catch himself. “I have this timeline with my father, and I am concerned about it. But of course, you want to spend the day going through the files on your parents. You’re finally so close. I understand that. I didn’t mean to be insensitive.”

His thoughtfulness surprised me.

“I can work on it this afternoon,” I said. “My parents’ killers have gone free this long.”

His jaw tightened and I realized he was genuinely upset for me. But he merely nodded. “Then let’s go now.”

“I think I need to finish my pancakes before I face the sex club,” I said, which was not a sentence that I had ever thought I’d say.

But even though I was nervous, I was excited to spend some time one-on-one with Aiden. The guys all seem so close. They seemed like...they might be able to share.

It was crazy. But a girl could dream.

As long as she didn’t get too attached to those dreams.

CHAPTER 20



S elena

WE RETURNED to the resort where Aiden had taken me the first time. I was surprised to be greeted cheerfully by the valet, as if he already knew me.

I'd expected the sex club to be dingier, but of course, everything Aiden did was marked with perfection and beauty, and his sex club was no different. He led me through the red door with his eyes alight.

The walls of the club were covered in deep red velvet and silver wallpaper, the velvet showcasing a variety of intricate patterns and shapes. The walls shimmered in the light that came in through the large stained glass windows, which illuminated the intricate designs inlaid in the smooth marble floors.

In the center of the club, there was a large dance floor. On one side of the dance floor were two long leather benches. On the other side was a long polished wooden bar, with a variety of liquors.

The remainder of the club was filled with booths and chairs, some of which were upholstered in a deep red velvet, others with intricate wooden carvings. On the walls hung a variety of art pieces that included framed photographs, paintings, and sculptures, all of it erotic and strikingly beautiful. Some of it must be Xander's work; it just felt like him, the blend of passion and wild intensity.

Aiden noticed me looking and said, “I’m glad Xander furnished a lot of the art for the club. His work has the right energy.”

At the back of the club were entrances to other rooms. One large room had various benches, a bed, a swing, and a large X-shaped wooden frame. Another room had a large sunken hot tub surrounded by lush green plants and doors that led out to the pool. Beyond the BDSM room were a few smaller, private rooms, each richly furnished and cozy and obviously for private play.

The atmosphere of the club was one of luxury and decadence. The air was thick with the sweet scent of incense that was burned at night. Aiden’s pride in his club was evident as he surveyed the room.

“What do you think?” he asked me, tucking his hands behind his back. His tone and posture said he didn’t particularly care what I thought, but his eyes were intense.

“It’s the classiest BDSM club I can imagine,” I said.

Aiden laughed. “Thin compliment, but I’ll take it. What do you think about some hands-on learning?”

He swept his arm to encompass the room behind him. The BDSM room.

There was a gorgeous engraved wooden cabinet, and I went to it and opened it to see the rows of sex toys, plugs, floggers and paddles, chains and cuffs that hung there. I closed it again softly.

“I think, to be honest, letting someone tie me up is the most terrifying thing I can imagine,” I said. “I’ve been in handcuffs before for training scenarios, but never...”

“I’ll be with you,” Aiden promised. “I won’t ever leave you and I’ll get you out of the restraints the second you say your safe word or someone else enters the club. Which they won’t, because my security would kill them. All right?”

I nodded hesitantly. I didn’t doubt Aiden would be careful of me, but I hated being vulnerable with anyone.

“Safe word?” Aiden prompted me.

“Something I can work into a conversation in front of someone...”

Aiden frowned. “You and I will play in private rooms. My future wife is not going to be on display.”

I raised my eyebrows. “So I’m special.”

Aiden refused to answer. “Safe word?”

“Daddy.” I could guarantee I’d never say *that* unless I was mocking someone.

“Is there anything you want to explore?” Aiden asked me.

I blew out a slow breath. “I want you to teach me how to be...what you want.”

“That’s not how this works,” he told me gently. “I’ll be the one who leads and dominates, but it’s always while thinking about your safety and your pleasure.”

“I thought we were just trying to trick your father and your friends.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“This isn’t real,” I reminded him.

His hand cupped my chin, raising my gaze to his. “Just because we’re playing a game doesn’t mean it can’t be real.”

I shook my head. But those intense green eyes held mine, and I swallowed. His thumb brushed down the curve of my throat as if he were chasing my emotions.

“Fine. I trust you.” Those words were hard for me to say. But still, he was looking at me as if he wanted more, and I let out a deep breath. “I trust you to show me how this all works. Maybe... I want to explore this side of myself.”

He nodded. But there was something I wasn’t saying, and he still looked unsatisfied.

“And maybe...” I admitted slowly. “I want you to be the one to show me how.”

Aiden's eyes flickered with a deep intensity, and a hint of a smile played at the corner of his lips.

"Very well," he said, his voice low and smooth. "I'm curious to see if you can surrender control, Selena. Even if it's just...fake."

I always met any challenge. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

Aiden took my hand and led me into one of the private rooms. Inside, the walls were draped in red velvet and the lighting was dim, casting a soft glow over the room. In the center of the room was a large bed with a canopy of black silk hanging from the top. Aiden stepped behind me, unzipping my dress, the feeling of his hand along my back erotic even through a layer of fabric. The dress pooled at my feet, and he helped me step out of it.

He motioned for me to lie down on the bed, and I did so, feeling a thrill of excitement mixed with apprehension.

Aiden climbed onto the bed beside me, his hands sliding up my sides before he cupped my face. He leaned down and kissed me deeply, his tongue exploring my mouth in a way that made my head spin.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured against my lips. "I can't wait to show you how much fun you can have with submission."

He reached over to the bedside table and pulled out a length of silk rope. I watched as he expertly bound my wrists together, then tied them to the top of the bed frame. I was completely at his mercy now, and the thought sent a shiver through me.

Aiden stood up and began to undress, his body a sculpted masterpiece of muscle and sinew. He climbed back onto the bed and began to explore my body with his hands and his mouth, his lips soft on my skin. I shivered at his touch, feeling my heart pound in my chest. Being at his mercy was terrifying for me in a way few things were...and yet it made me feel alive in a new way.

He moved down my body, kissing and licking his way across my skin. He slid lower down the bed, and his warm breath washed over my inner thighs. I held my breath and trembled as his tongue dipped into my pussy.

His tongue swirled between my lips as he lapped at me.

I moaned softly, my body growing hot and trembling with desire. He gripped my thigh tightly as his other hand slid up my stomach. His fingers teased, then tweaked my nipple. When his lips closed around my clit and he began to suck, I cried out with pleasure, my body shuddering with need.

I wanted to touch him, to move us along faster, and I yanked at the restraints holding my arms in place.

Aiden pulled away, and I felt cool and exposed when the warmth of his mouth left me, before he began kissing his way up my body. Then he kissed me deeply, his tongue sliding into my mouth. His tongue explored my mouth the same way he had delved between my thighs and I kissed him back hungrily until he pulled away.

He kissed his way down my body, teasing my nipples before moving down to my inner thighs. He spread my legs apart and moved in between them, his lips returning to my pussy. He ran circles around my pussy with his tongue. When he slid his finger inside me, he caressed my g-spot, and I moaned softly, my head falling back with pleasure.

“You taste so good,” he murmured, his voice deep and sexy. “I might have to let you come soon.”

As his lips and tongue teased my clit, my hips began to move involuntarily—as much as they could when I was tied up. I was completely at his mercy, and I loved every moment of it.

Aiden added another finger, and I gasped as he began to thrust them inside me. He was hitting all the right spots, bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

“Please, Aiden,” I moaned, my breath coming in short gasps.

But he continued to tease me, bringing me right to the brink before pulling back again. I writhed beneath him, my body aching with desire.

Finally, he relented and began to suck my clit in earnest. I cried out as I came, my body shaking with the force of my orgasm. Aiden continued to lick and suck me until I was spent, then crawled up beside me and held me close.

“That was just the beginning,” he whispered in my ear.

And maybe he was right. I could feel the spark of something deep and primal inside of me. Something that only Aiden could ignite.

He stroked his hand low over my stomach, the contact of his palm skimming over my skin igniting fresh fire, his eyes flickering with a deep intensity. “Do you want more?”

I nodded, feeling a surge of excitement and anticipation coursing through my body. I was ready for whatever Aiden had in store for me.

“I’m going to blindfold you,” he told me.

The restraints were already uncomfortable, but that took it to another level. “I don’t think so.”

“I wasn’t asking, Selena.” His voice was amused and sexy and firm all at once.

I bit my lip, feeling a tingle of fear and excitement run down my spine. I had agreed to submit to Aiden, to allow him to guide me into a world of pleasure and pain. But the thought of being blindfolded made me feel vulnerable, exposed.

“Aiden,” I said hesitantly. “I don’t know if I can—”

“You can,” he said softly, cutting me off. “Trust me, Selena. Trust me to take care of you.”

He leaned down and kissed me, his lips soft and warm against mine. Desire jolted through me, and I knew that I could trust him. I nodded, and he reached over to the bedside table and took out a satin blindfold.

He tied it around my head, covering my eyes completely. I felt a sense of disorientation, as though I had been cut off from the world. But then Aiden's hands were on me, stroking my arms, my stomach, my legs. He slid his hands over my skin so lightly and so sensually, I relaxed, allowing myself to become his plaything.

"Now spread your legs for me," he said, his voice warm and comforting. I did as he asked and spread my legs, feeling vulnerable, yet safe in his arms.

Aiden leaned down and began to kiss me, and I closed my eyes and let my body melt. The blindfold sharpened all my other senses to the way his lips felt against mine, to the scent of his aftershave, the smooth skin of his jaw when it pressed against me.

I let my mind fall into a state of pure pleasure and desire, concentrating only on the feel of his lips on mine, his hands on my skin.

Then Aiden moved lower, his lips trailing kisses down my body. He paused at my breasts, his tongue flicking over my nipples, making them harden. I moaned, my body arching up towards him, begging for more.

He slid a hand down to my pussy, his fingers slipping inside me effortlessly. He began to move them in and out of me, his palm grinding against my clit, sending waves of pleasure through me.

"Fuck," I gasped, my body shaking with desire.

Aiden's fingers moved faster, harder, and I felt the tension building in my body. I was getting close, so damn close, and I writhed beneath him, my hips bucking.

"Please, Aiden," I begged, my voice hoarse with need.

And then he stopped.

I felt him move away from me, and I was suddenly alone in the dark. Panic began to set in, and I tugged at the restraints holding me in place.

"Don't," Aiden's voice was firm, but gentle. "Trust me."

I took a deep breath and tried to relax. My body was trembling, as if I was losing control of the situation.

I didn't trust Aiden Crude completely but I trusted him in this moment, and I let myself sink into the bed.

"Good girl," he said quietly. I heard movement, and then I felt Aiden close to me once more, his lips on mine. He kissed me softly, tenderly, and he felt like a tether when the world had gone dark.

"What do you want, Selena?" His voice was firm and commanding, and a sudden rush of desire shot through me.

"I want you," I managed. Admitting it was difficult for me, but I would do anything to get his hands between my thighs once again, to get his cock buried deep inside me.

"What do you want me to do to you?"

"Anything," I gasped, feeling the arousal building inside me once more.

Aiden chuckled softly, his breath warm on my neck. "That's right. I'm going to do whatever I want to you, and you're going to take it."

Aiden continued to kiss my neck, his hands roaming over my body.

Then I felt him lift my legs up. There was a quiet ratcheting sound, as if he had hooked my leg restraints to something, and then my legs were suddenly suspended in the air. The leather straps bit into my skin, holding me in place. My pussy was wide open to him and my core clenched at how exposed I was. But that vulnerability was laced with desire.

Not being able to see him was making me crazy, but it also heightened every sensation.

"Your pussy is so beautiful," he said, pressing a kiss to my thigh. His hands slid across the curve of my ass, which was lifted from the bed now. The feeling of his hard jaw against my thigh made my pussy clench again, wanting his mouth against me once more.

The first slap was unexpected, resounding through the quiet room, and I cried out in surprise at the sudden sharp feeling of his hand against my ass.

Aiden spanked me again and again, each one harder and more intense than the last. I could feel the heat building in my ass, but I was lost in the sensation, overcome by the pleasure and the pain.

“Aiden,” I moaned, my voice breathless.

He continued to spank me, his hand landing on my ass with a loud smack. I could feel my muscles clenching, tightening, and I knew that I was on the brink of release.

And then he stopped, and I was left panting and gasping for air.

“Please, Aiden,” I begged, my voice hoarse with need. “Don’t stop.”

He leaned down and kissed me, his lips warm and soft against mine.

“I’m not finished with you yet,” he whispered in my ear. “And this isn’t where *you* give the orders.”

He slapped my ass once more, and my body rocked with the motion.

Then he began to move once more, his fingers sliding inside me once more.

And then it happened. The pleasure was overwhelming, and I cried out as I came, my body shaking with the force of it. Aiden’s fingers were still moving inside me, prolonging my orgasm until I was spent and gasping for breath.

Then he pulled his fingers out of me and I heard him move away from me once more. I was left hanging there, suspended in the dark, my body still pulsing with pleasure.

“Aiden,” I whispered, my voice shaky. “Where are you?”

“I’m right here,” he said, his voice coming from somewhere in front of me. “I told you, Selena. I’m always going to be right here.”

I felt him move closer, and heard a quiet jangling of chains. He laid my legs down on the bed, then gently unbound my wrists. I wanted to tear off the blindfold, but I knew he wouldn't want that, so I waited.

Then he lifted me, holding me in his arms, and I felt myself being carried across the room. I had no idea where we were going, but I trusted Aiden. He knew what I needed.

Cool air caressed my skin, and my nipples beaded instantly.

We stopped suddenly, and I could hear the sound of water moving around his body. Aiden set me down gently, and I realized that we were in the shallow end of the pool.

“Get on your knees,” he commanded, his voice low and rough.

I did as he asked, feeling a rush of arousal. Cool water lapped around my heated body, and I knew that this was going to be intense.

His fingers swept through my hair, teasing against my scalp, until he finally took the blindfold off with gentle fingers.

Seeing him towering above me, his body chiseled like a Greek god's, just made me hotter. The bandage across his shoulder was bright white and clean, the wound beginning to heal. He was quite the unstoppable psycho, choosing a bullet wound to put his plan into motion.

Aiden stepped closer, his cock hard and ready between his legs. He pressed it against my lips, and I opened my mouth, taking him in.

He moaned softly, and I could feel his fingers tangled in my hair as he thrust into my mouth, his cock sliding in and out of me easily.

I reached for him, and he stopped me, wrapping one hand around my wrists. “I'm going to fuck your mouth. I'm in control, not you.”

I nodded, my mouth still full of his hard cock. Aiden began to thrust harder, driving himself deeper into my mouth with each movement. I could feel my own arousal building once again, my pussy pulsing with need.

“Good girl.” His fingers tightened in my hair. “You take me so well.”

I moaned, the sound muffled by his cock in my mouth. I could feel myself getting wetter and wetter, my pussy clenching with every thrust.

I could feel the warmth spreading through me, the desire to please him growing with each passing moment. I let him take control, allowing him to use my mouth for his pleasure.

He started to move faster, his hips slamming forward as he fucked my mouth. I could feel his cock getting harder, his breathing growing more ragged.

“Stop,” he commanded, his voice hoarse with need. I felt his hand in my hair, guiding me up to stand.

“Turn around,” he whispered in my ear.

I obeyed, and he pushed me forward. His cock brushed against me, and I pushed back, eager for him.

He entered me slowly, his cock stretching me in a way that left me gasping for more. I could feel the water from the pool surging against my body, heightening the sensations as Aiden began to move inside me.

He started slowly, savoring each moment as he pushed into me deeper and deeper. I moaned softly, the feeling of him filling me completely sending waves of pleasure through my body.

“God, you feel so good,” he groaned, his hands gripping my hips as he began to move faster.

I pushed back against him, my own need growing with each thrust. I wanted him to take me harder, to push me to the brink of pleasure once more.

And he did. He started to pound into me, his hips slamming against my ass as he filled me again and again.

I cried out, unable to hold back any longer, and my body convulsed with pleasure as I came once. Aiden didn't stop, though. He kept pounding into me, his cock driving me wild with pleasure. I felt his fingers dig into my hips, holding me steady as he fucked me harder and harder.

I let out a cry that felt ripped from some primal part of me. I would never be so exposed, so vulnerable, if I was in control.

Aiden didn't stop, his thrusts becoming rougher and more aggressive. He gripped my hair and pulled it back, exposing my neck.

"Who do you belong to?" he growled, his teeth sinking into my flesh.

"You," I whimpered, my body on fire.

"That's right," he said, his hand coming down on my ass with a loud smack. "You're mine, and I'm going to fuck you until you can't walk straight."

I moaned, the pain mixing with pleasure as he continued to pound into me. I could feel his cock throbbing inside me, and I knew that he was close.

I was lost in the moment, my body completely consumed by the sensations. Nothing else existed except for Aiden and the pleasure he was giving me.

He reached around and started to play with my clit, rubbing it in circles as he continued to fuck me. I cried out as I came again, my body shaking with the force of it.

He didn't stop, though. He kept going, his cock pushing me over the edge again and again until I was completely spent, my body limp in his arms.

Finally, he pulled out of me and helped me to lay down by the side of the pool. The sunlight was warm against our skin. He leaned down and kissed me softly, his lips gentle and tender against mine.

"Was that so terrible, Selena?"

"No," I murmured, feeling boneless and spent.

He lifted me into his arms, and I felt his chuckle through his chest. His wet skin felt so good against mine.

He carried me back inside, back through the red door.

CHAPTER 21



*A*iden

WHEN I'D TAKEN Selena back to the house, I wanted to sleep in bed with her like Xander and Dominic. The thought of holding her in her sleep was magnetic.

But my father had called me for help. So I'd watched her walk away, and then I'd gone to meet him.

The pier was shrouded in darkness, the air thick with shadows. The old wooden boards creaked beneath my feet as I made my way towards my father.

He was standing in the middle of the pier, his face illuminated by the faint light of the moon. His gaze was fixed on me. We hadn't had the most pleasant conversation when he met Selena, and I was prepared for him to castigate me for my choice of lover.

Instead, he said, "Son. I've got to apologize."

I stopped a few feet away from him, curiosity igniting. "Why?"

"I don't think I made a very good impression on Selena."

That was for sure. "I thought you were trying to scare her off."

"Did it work?" He sounded curious, but I was sure there was a hopeful note beneath it.

“You met her.” I bled pride into my voice, and it didn’t take much. “She can’t be scared off easily.”

I knew why he had called me. Hidden with the merchandise for my resort chain were women for his new enterprise, smuggled into this country illegally so they would be helpless and docile.

I hardened myself for the night’s business. If I went against my father now, he would still follow through on his ‘expansion’ plans, but I might lose my chance to inherit the family business. My father loved me, and he was also ruthless in dealing with any opposition. I didn’t want to see how he would respond to conflict.

I was comfortable with our violent line of work. But selling women was an entirely different business.

When I was growing up, I adored my father. I’d changed as I’d grown, but I’d stayed loyal to him.

But now that time was coming to an end.

The ship sailing into the pier docked. It was a dusty looking container ship, and we watched as they began to offload.

He turned to me and spoke in a low voice. “It’s time. Let’s go.”

I nodded and followed him down the pier. We walked in silence, our footsteps echoing through the night. Soon, my father stopped in front of a large warehouse. The door was slightly ajar, faint light coming from inside.

My father pushed open the door, and I followed him in. The room was full of crates, and in the middle of the room, I could see a group of young women huddled together, their eyes wide with fear. I could smell their terror in the air, and my stomach tightened.

My father walked over to the dozen women and spoke to them in a gruff voice. “Don’t worry. You’re safe. Before you know it, you’ll be free.”

He spoke the words in English, then began again in Spanish.

The women's faces brightened with relief, and some of them rushed to thank my father. I closed my eyes, filled with regret and horror.

I'd stop this once I took over the business. But would I be able to get these women back and safe?

The wail of sirens rose in the distance.

My father scoffed and we went out to meet the police. My father had them all in his pocket anyway. There might be some goodie-two-shoes or someone who didn't know my father out there, but his buddies or captain would soon set him straight.

My father raised his arm to greet the police. The police officers approached us with caution, their hands resting on their holsters. My father stood there with an air of confidence, the kind that only comes from being a powerful man in a corrupt world.

"What's going on here?" one of the officers asked.

My father gave him a charming smile. "Our business just received a shipment. For our hotel chain."

One of the officers obviously recognized my father and his gun arm dipped.

The other officer's face hardened. "We received a tip that there was illegal activity happening in this warehouse."

My father's expression didn't change. "Really? And what makes you think that?"

The officer hesitated for a moment before replying, "We have reason to believe that there are human trafficking victims."

My father's façade slipped for a moment, and anger flickered in his eyes. He had never been caught before, and this was a major threat to his business. Someone had betrayed him.

But just as quickly as it had come, the anger disappeared, replaced by a calm and collected demeanor. “That’s a shame. If there’s any such activity, I hope you’re able to take care of it. But there are no victims in my shipment, I assure you.”

He turned to me and said, “Son, why don’t you run along while I take care of this?”

The second officer barked, “You can both stay right there.”

“Hold on, let’s get Commissioner Fielding on the line,” my father said pleasantly. “We’ll get this straightened out in a moment.”

The officers glanced at each other, abashed. My father was going to win another round.

There were two nondescript vans on the street, and suddenly their doors burst open. Men and women in blue jackets with yellow letters across the back leapt out.

The Feds.

My father cursed and grabbed my arm. “Run.”

He ran one way, and I leapt into the water.

I hit the surface of the water with a loud splash, and the coldness of the sea enveloped me. I swam as fast as I could, desperate to put some distance between me and the warehouse. My wounded shoulder burned with every stroke.

As I swam, chaos unfolded behind me. Gunshots echoed through the night, and I could hear my father shouting orders to his men. But I didn’t look back.

Hopefully, my father’s reign would end not just with me taking his place, but with my father in a prison cell.

I finally reached the shore and stumbled onto the sand, gasping for air. Back on the pier, the flashing lights of the police cars strobed the night. There were a lot of police and Fed vehicles over there.

But I doubted anyone would be a match for my father.

Anyone but me and Selena.

CHAPTER 22



S elena

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke still feeling sated, a slight soreness between my legs from the many orgasms and from Aiden's size. It was a pleasant feeling that turned me on all over again.

I felt surprised by how much I had enjoyed the night.

Xander rolled over, drawing me in his arms. I rested my cheek on the warm, hard plane of his shoulder. I wondered if Aiden would ever hold me like this, or if these three men would always fulfill such different parts of me.

I felt so safe with Xander. I threw my leg over his, wanting as much contact as possible between his long, hard-muscled frame and my own.

Xander's eyes blinked open slowly, and he pressed a kiss to my temple. "Good morning, beautiful. How were your adventures with Aiden last night?"

"I liked it," I admitted.

Xander's lips parted in a smile. "Well, that will make things easier. I'm glad he didn't scare you off."

"If Aiden likes to control," I said, running one fingernail over the complicated designs across his chest. "What is it that you like?"

“You.” He kissed my temple again. Then he admitted, “I also like rope work and knots.”

“Because you used to be a Boy Scout?” I asked innocently.

He laughed and kissed me, and the two of us barely managed to make it out of bed, though he finally pulled himself away because he had work to do for Gavin.

He saw the way my face fell when he mentioned Gavin, and he pulled me close again to plant a kiss on my cheek. “Don’t worry, beautiful,” he murmured into my ear. “I’m going to make sure only Aiden actually has the switch. Or maybe I’ll give it to you. But I’m not going to help Gavin hurt anyone, even if he thinks he can.”

I pulled back to look up at him, wide-eyed and worried. “What if Gavin finds out?”

He scoffed. “We’re all playing a dangerous game of *if Gavin finds out*. But you’re keeping us alive, as long as you play fiancée.”

“I’ll look out for you,” I promised.

He cupped my face to give me one last kiss. “And we’ll look out for you.”

Then he was off to deliver his bombs to Gavin Crude.

Dominic’s face came into my mind, and I decided to seek him out. He’d come into our bed the night before, but he hadn’t stayed to the morning. I slept the best curled between him and Xander, their broad shoulders like walls between me and the world, the weight and warmth of their arms like a nest.

I found him just outside the gym on the lawn, wearing a leather tunic and gloves as he worked with a dog. On command, the dog attacked, the cute rottweiler suddenly becoming terrifying

I stopped dead, and he told me, “It’s all right. Rocky won’t hurt you.”

He took off the tunic, and the dog panted happily as he rubbed her black fur. “Did you have any pets as a kid?”

“No,” I held out my hand for Rocky to examine, and once she licked me, I began to pet her too. “Not really an option for a Belladonna.”

“I’ve always had dogs,” he said, then grinned. “When it comes down to it, I like dogs and... you and Aiden and Xander. That’s pretty much it.”

“So you’re telling me I’m... as good as a dog?”

“That’s a high compliment.”

“I wondered if we could spend some time together today,” I said, the words feeling uncomfortably raw and bold for me.

But the way Dominic’s face brightened in response lit a glow in my chest. “I’d like that.”

I didn’t exactly have any brilliant date ideas. When I’d seduced men professionally, it had been emotionless on my end, and sex had been a quick means to an end.

I did want sex with Dominic, but it felt different... and I wasn’t quite sure how to go about it when what I desired wasn’t empty.

“Do you want to take Rocky for a run with me?” he asked. “And then maybe... we could go a few rounds in the gym?”

I glanced through the house’s floor-to-ceiling basement windows, where I could catch a glimpse of the boxing ring and mats, then nodded. “For you, Dominic, I’ll even run.”

He let out a bark of laughter.

I quickly changed into a pair of leggings, a sports bra and a light hoodie. My closet had been populated as if by magic, and I had a lot of questions for Aiden, like how anyone had guessed my bra size, but it wasn’t my primary concern at the moment.

As I pulled my hair back into a sleek ponytail, I was surprised to see my cheeks were pink, my eyes glowing. I looked...brighter... than I had in years, maybe ever.

When I walked back outside, I watched Dominic run across the green lawn, his golden hair shining under the sun.

As he raced away from me, his t-shirt clung to his broad shoulders; his long, athletic stride ate up the ground quickly.

Then he turned back, a grin across his face. Rocky's tongue lolled out of her mouth in her sheer joy as she raced back toward us, and I felt myself smile in response.

When I rejoined Dominic, he explained that rottweilers aren't built for long-distance running, but they were incredibly fast over short distances and needed the cardio exercise. "And also, Rocky just likes to race."

The three of us did a series of sprints together across the lawn, and while I always hated running, it was a lot better with a cute dog.

At the end, Dominic and I collapsed in the grass. Rocky nosed us, trying to get us up to keep running.

"You run twenty-five miles an hour!" Dominic told her, rubbing her ears. "I need a break."

She went on nosing him until he tackled her and the two of them briefly wrestled. When Rocky was on top, Dominic stretched his muscular arms over his head. "Okay, I give."

Rocky let out an excited bark and I reached over to pet her. "Good doggie. You show him who's boss."

Dominic side-eyed me. "I let her win."

"Sure."

"Rocky, time to play in the yard," he told her, before leading her to an expansive fenced-in area. He handed me a chew toy, and I played tug-of-war with her for a few minutes before she finally broke away and scampered off with it, looking so proud of herself that I burst into laughter.

He locked her in, then turned to me. "Ready to go a few rounds with me?"

"After seeing you get dominated by the dog? Very much so," I teased him.

"Oh, we'll see," he warned me.

Dominic and I entered the ring and bumped knuckles.

“Anything goes?” I asked. “Except actual bodily harm?”

He gave me a suspicious look. “Why do I feel like I’m being set up?”

I gave him a wide-eyed look. “I’m just a little slip of a girl, right? You’re the one who was calling me *little bird*.”

Dominic chuckled and shook his head. “Oh, I see you, little bird. I know you’re tough as nails.”

I smirked, feeling a rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. I always loved a challenge, and Dominic promised a good one. As adrenaline pumped through my veins, I bounced on the tips of my toes, trying to loosen up.

We circled each other, sizing up our opponent. Dominic was faster than I expected, and he landed a solid punch to my stomach, knocking the wind out of me.

“Oh, so we’re going to play it like that,” I said, pressing my arm over my abs.

Dominic started forward with sympathy written across his face—and a wary look in his eyes because he was a smart man—and I let out another jab that almost contacted his hard side. He just grinned as he danced back.

I feinted to the left and landed a quick jab to his jaw, making him stumble for a second.

He recovered with lightning speed and launched a furious volley of blows that had me stepping back, giving up ground across the mat.

I dodged his next punch and landed a quick jab to his stomach. It was like hitting a brick wall. He didn’t react at all, and since we were fighting without gloves, my knuckles stung from the contact with his rock-hard abs.

We circled each other, each waiting for the other to make a move. Dominic was bigger and stronger than me, but I was faster and more agile. I knew I had to use my advantages to my benefit.

He threw a punch, but I ducked under it and landed a solid uppercut to his chin. He staggered back, but I didn’t give him

a chance to recover.

It was all the opening I needed. I launched myself at him, grabbing him by the shoulders and slamming him into the mat.

We grappled on the ground, rolling and twisting, each of us trying to gain the upper hand. And then, suddenly, Dominic came out on top and he pinned my arms above my head. I could've kept fighting and tried to roll us over, but instead I found myself studying his blue eyes and the hard angle of his jaw.

He looked down at me, breathing hard. "You're a real firecracker, aren't you?" he murmured, pressing my wrists down into the mat.

I smiled up at him. "And you're not as big of a wimp as I'd thought."

Slowly, he lowered his face towards mine. I could feel his warm breath against my lips, and I found myself parting them slightly.

Just before our mouths met, he pulled back.

"I need a shower," he said, getting to his feet. I stared at him in confusion.

My breathing was still hard and wild, and my skin was flushed red—as much from my desire to kiss him as from the exercise. I didn't reply, just got up and walked back over to the mats.

"Not bad for a little bird, by the way," Dominic said, smacking my ass as I walked past him.

It was a weird reaction when he'd just leapt away from me as if I were dangerous. "Are we going to do that again?"

"Maybe."

I tilted my head to one side. "Maybe?"

"We can't make a lot of promises to each other," he reminded me.

I frowned at him, finding it hard to reconcile the suddenly cool and collected Dominic with the way his face had

brightened when he first saw me this morning. Which was the real Dominic?

Part of me didn't want to even try. I didn't need anyone.

I spun on my heel to leave the gym. But the memory of Dominic's smile, of how much fun we'd had with Rocky, of how protective he'd been since I came to the house, all flooded me.

I spun back around. I wanted to understand him. No matter how hard it was for me to talk about feelings at all.

"What the hell's going on?" I demanded.

"What?" he asked, arching his eyebrow.

"You're being so weird!"

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice husky. "I don't know what you want me to say. I'm attracted to you. You're an amazing fighter. You're brilliant and beautiful."

"Why are you saying all that like it's a bad thing?"

"It's not." He shook his head. "But then I thought about what it would mean to be with you. To have you in my bed every night. And I realized that I couldn't do that to you."

I took a step towards him. "Why?"

Dominic shrugged. "I'm dangerous for you, little bird."

I took another step towards him, my eyes locked onto his. "I can handle danger, Dominic," I said, my voice low and husky. "I crave it. I crave *you*."

Dominic's eyes flickered with desire and hesitation, his body tense as he tried to resist my advances. But I could see the lust in his eyes, the way his body was responding to mine, and I knew he wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

I closed the distance between us and pressed my body against his, feeling the hard muscle of his chest against my breasts. He groaned and his hands went to my hips, pulling me closer to him.

Our lips met in a heated, passionate kiss, our tongues tangling as we explored each other. I felt his hands sliding down to my ass, squeezing it roughly as he pulled me tighter against him.

It felt good to have Dominic touch me roughly instead of always being so careful with me. I liked how he had treated me like an equal in the ring except for that one moment when his chivalry took over.

Then even as he was kissing me, I realized he was looking over my shoulder out onto the lawn.

I yanked away. “What’s going on, Dom? For real? Are we in some kind of danger?”

He licked his lips, looking concerned, as his walls finally fell. “Maybe. Probably not... but it makes me realize I don’t want to put you in danger.”

“I’ve been putting *you* in danger since we got here,” I said. “Because if Gavin realizes what Aiden is up to, I don’t think that crown is going to pass peacefully from one head to another.”

“True,” he said roughly. “But I... did something last night. Without clearing it with Aiden, and...”

He chewed his lower lip.

“Tell me,” I said gently.

“I don’t want to put you in the middle. Make you keep secrets from him when I know you care for him—”

“I’m an assassin,” I said. “I can compartmentalize. Go ahead and tell me, Dominic. And I’ll help you face whatever danger comes for us. We’ll be a team.”

He seemed to melt at those words. “You’re too good for us, you know that, little bird?”

“I’m aware,” I teased. “But I’m throwing my lot in with you all anyway.”

His lips met mine in another kiss, but this one was slow and gentle, as if he was savoring me. “Let’s talk about this in

the shower,” he suggested.

I wasn't sure if he was suggesting the shower to add another layer of sound-proofing or because he wanted us clean for sex, but I was down either way. I nodded, and he led the way to his room.

It was odd to realize I hadn't yet been in this particular mobster's room. His room was decorated in shades of dark gray and glossy black. The low lighting set a moody ambience even though it was so sunny out, and even though Dominic seemed so sunny himself in his own way.

Black sheets draped the large platform bed. The curtains at the window matched the towel hanging over a modern chair. A large, square, metal shelving unit in black rested against the soaring wall opposite the bed and held his books. It was cool, quiet, and a bit unsettling, as if he had never felt comfortable in his own bed.

He led me into the sumptuous bathroom, which was also dark, with an expansive shower with a pebbled bottom. Like Xander's, there was a slab of black marble like a bench running along one side of the shower, and over it was a series of brushed metal rainfall showerheads.

Dominic pulled off his shirt, revealing his chiseled abs and muscular chest. I loved seeing his colorful tattoos across his chest and arms; they made his body feel like a secret only I knew.

My eyes raked over his body hungrily, and he grinned at me as he noticed.

He stepped into the shower and I followed him, my body pressed up against his as we stood under the steaming water.

“What is it you need to tell me?” I asked before I could get distracted. “What kind of trouble are we in?”

His lips tugged, as if he appreciated the way I implied we were a team. “You know how Gavin's branching into bringing in enslaved women from other countries?”

His words were blunt. He didn't try to muffle the horror by calling it *the skin trade* as Aiden had.

“Yes.”

“Aiden thinks we need to let it play out until he can take over, and then we’ll fix things... while losing as little face as possible,” Dominic said. “I’m sure that makes the most sense. Aiden’s always logical. But I...”

“Your sister,” I said, filling in the blanks. “You can’t let anything happen to girls like her.”

He nodded. “Gavin’s first shipment was supposed to come in last night.”

“Supposed to.”

“I made sure the Feds got the forged manifest and the details of what was going on,” he said. “The FBI raided the pier last night and took custody of all those women.”

“You didn’t *just* do that,” I said slowly, carefully. “You’ve developed a federal contact.”

“You’re too smart, little bird.” His lips quirked ruefully. “I love Aiden like a brother, but he’s...pragmatic. There are lines I don’t want to see him cross.”

“Oh, Dominic,” I said quietly. He was playing a dangerous game. I worried Aiden would see him as disloyal if he learned and would kill him. Aiden loved him like a brother, but we couldn’t forget Aiden was a dangerous man.

“I know,” he answered quietly. He cupped my face in his hands. “We should stop this. You can be Aiden’s... he can keep you safe.”

“I will be Aiden’s,” I said softly, and watched his face fall before I added, “But I can’t help being yours, too. You have my heart, Dominic.”

He leaned down and captured my lips in a searing kiss, his hands roaming over my body as he explored every inch of me. I moaned against his lips as he pressed me back against the tiled wall, his fingers finding all the right places.

I reached down and wrapped my fingers around his hard cock, stroking him slowly as I watched the lust in his eyes grow even more intense.

Dominic groaned and thrust his hips forward, wanting more. I continued to stroke him, feeling him grow even harder in my hand. He pulled back slightly, his eyes locked onto mine as he whispered, “I want to fuck you with my tongue until you lose your mind.”

I nodded, feeling my own desire grow with every passing second. He knelt in front of me and parted my thighs, his tongue flicking out to trace circles around my clit. I gasped at the sensation, my fingers tangling in his damp hair as he pleased me.

I writhed against the wall as Dominic brought me to the brink over and over again. But just as I was about to come, he stood back up and pulled me into a passionate kiss.

He pressed me back so that I was up against the cool tile wall, and then he gripped his cock firmly, teasing the tip against my opening. He rubbed it in increasingly frenzied circles through my slick, and I reached for him hungrily.

He thrust into me, filling me up completely, as his lips met mine. Any worries about the past or the future fled under his wild motion. I moaned into his mouth, pleasure building inside me with every thrust. He moved with ferocious intensity, his body slamming into mine as we moved together in perfect rhythm.

I clawed at his back, my nails digging into his skin as he pounded into me harder and harder. The sound of our bodies slapping together mixed with the steamy water and our moans of pleasure.

Dominic’s hands were everywhere, grabbing onto my hips, pulling me closer to him as he fucked me harder and harder. My body trembled as my orgasm built.

Then as he hit that spot inside of me, over and over, he sent me over the edge. I screamed his name as I came.

He followed soon after, his hot come flooding into me as he groaned out my name. The sound of his murmured *Selena* as he was gripped with pleasure made me throb around him, wanting more of him already.

We stayed in the shower for a while, our bodies tangled together as we rode out the aftershocks of our orgasms.

Then he sat down on the marble slab, already pulling me between his legs. He looked up at me as his hands cupped my breasts, and his eyes were dark with heat and desire.

“I want to look at you,” he said, his voice raw. “To see what’s mine now.”

I straddled him and reached down to take his thick, hard cock. I felt stretched and slightly sore and yet that didn’t stop me from slowly taking him inch by inch. He groaned and watched me closely as I rode him, my hands resting on his shoulders.

“I love watching you ride me like this,” he said, his voice low. “The way you look when you come. The way you look when you want me. I can’t get enough of it.”

He gripped my hips and pulled me down harder onto him, his hands trailing up my sides and coming to rest on my breasts. I threw my head back, the sound of his heavy breathing and the feel of his hot hands on my breasts driving me towards my own second orgasm.

When we’d both come again, I slid off of him and sat in the warm water running over the pebble floor. He watched me intently as I leaned in until his cock rested against my lips, and a tremor ran through him at that contact.

I ran my tongue over him, tasting the juices that ran down his cock. I positioned the tip at my lips and took him in my mouth, swirling my tongue around him.

As he groaned, his hands tangled in my thick hair and I took more of him in my mouth, my tongue working against the tip. He groaned louder, his hips thrusting forward to push his cock deeper into my mouth. I sucked harder, eager to have all of him.

My lips slid over his shaft, my tongue swirling around him. I slid my hand down to cup his balls and tugged gently. He grunted deep in his throat and pushed his hips forward

again, and I took more of him, one hand stroking him while the other held his balls.

I slid off of him again, and he pulled me up against his lips, his hands gripping my ass. His lips captured mine in a long, slow kiss, and I relaxed against him, my body sinking into the warmth.

As dangerous as Dominic was, even he needed to be taken care of. I stood up and reached for the soap and started to wash him all over. He watched me, his expression slightly dazed as I washed his chest, then knelt to wash his legs, the muscular curve of his ass. Slowly, he relaxed into my touch, and so I started over again now that he could enjoy it.

“Sit,” I ordered him. Then I climbed behind him, washing his hair. He tilted his head back and I could see satisfaction written across his face as my fingers massaged his scalp.

Then I pressed him beneath the water and helped him rinse off. I pressed a kiss to his cheek at the end. “There. All clean.”

“But you’re still dirty,” he teased, picking up a washcloth himself.

“You like me dirty,” I chided, but I still stood still and let him wash me, savoring the feeling of his hand and the rough cloth tracing over every inch of my skin.

Eventually, we got out and dried off, both of us feeling more at ease with each other than we ever had before.

As we dressed, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of contentment wash over me. It was as if all of my worries and doubts had been washed away along with the steamy water. I knew they would find me later, but for now, I was...happy.

“I meant what I said earlier,” I told him as we sat on his bed, our bodies still buzzing with pleasure. “I want you, Dominic. And I can handle the danger.”

He looked at me, his eyes full of both desire and hesitation. “I know you can, little bird,” he said. “But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” I told him firmly. “I know what I’m getting into, and I’m willing to take the risk. Not everyone would want an assassin in their bed... but there’s no one better equipped to stand by your side.”

Dominic’s eyes softened as he pulled me close, his lips soft against mine. I could feel his body relax against mine, his tension melting away with every passing second.

“I can’t promise that everything will be easy,” he said, his voice low. “But I can promise that I’ll do my best to protect you.”

“I know,” I replied, my fingers tangling in his hair. “And I’ll do my best to have your back.”

We kissed again, our bodies pressing close as we lost ourselves in each other.

With Dominic by my side, I was willing to face anything that this dark world could throw at us.

CHAPTER 23



*D*ominic

AFTER THE MORNING, it was a let-down to return to earth. Selena needed to return to working through the evidence she'd found about her parents.

"Can I help?" I asked her, expecting to be rejected.

I could tell how badly she wanted to say no. She hesitated.

"I want to help you end these guys," I told her. "I know you don't want anyone to see you have a human side instead of being a complete badass all the time, but..."

She smiled. "I'm not a complete badass all the time. *You* managed to capture me, after all."

"Hey!" I tackled her against the wall, and she laughed and squirmed as I put my face down into her throat and began to tickle her with my mouth. She pushed me away, and then she pulled me close, her lips meeting mine.

The two of us traded kisses, and then she looked up with a soft expression in her eyes.

"All right," she said. "It's weird for me, but... we can give it a try. But I may kick you out at any time."

Her tone was light, but I knew she was serious.

"Works for me," I said.

Her shoulders relaxed slightly. She went into her room for the box, and the two of us carried it downstairs.

Selena and I sat down at the kitchen island. I brought out the two laptops that Aiden had agreed she could use, although they had the wifi cards removed. Selena just smirked at that, shaking her head.

Together, the two of us began to connect the various hard drives that had been confiscated from her childhood home as part of the investigation of her parents' murder.

She dove into her work with an intensity that made me worry about her.

But I had to admit that it was impressive to watch her go, her fingers flying over the keyboard to break the encryption on her parents' files, the way her beautiful, thickly-lashed dark eyes swept quickly back and forth. Her pretty, heart-shaped face was reflected in the computer screen. There really was no one quite like Selena.

For hours, we worked together. We set up the external hard drives and connected them to the laptops. Then we began to arduously go through the files, looking for anything hidden, or anything that might indicate a motive for their murder.

“The police never identified a motive?” I asked.

“No,” she said. Then, bitterly, she added, “Not that I think they really tried.”

I thought of how Gavin had bought off the local police force. Whoever had murdered Selena's parents must have that kind of pull as well.

Then I found a file labeled ‘doors’. I began to go through it and found it was full of security from a camera that Selena's parents must have rigged to watch their backyard and their front porch. Most of the videos just showed cars cruising past or parked outside, which made me search harder for a reason why they would've kept them.

“Selena,” I said quietly, and she leaned into me to watch. Her shoulder brushed mine and her soft, glossy hair swayed against me.

As we watched the videos, something caught my eye. Sometimes, a man was visible briefly in the car across from their house, either in the driver's side or the passenger side. Someone had been watching the house.

"Do you have any idea who that is?" I asked Selena, who was watching the video with me.

"I've never seen him... that I remember." she replied, her voice tense. "But we need to find out."

We continued to watch the videos, looking for any clues that might lead us to the identity of the man. As we watched, I couldn't help but notice Selena's body tense up each time a car pulled up to the house, or someone walked by.

"Are you okay?" I asked, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged and turned to me, her eyes dark with emotion. "I'm fine."

I nodded.

"It won't show the night those men came into our home," she said quietly, sounding defeated. "These are the videos my parents found suspicious enough to save."

"Then what happened to the original footage? Surely the police would have saved it."

Her lips twisted bitterly. "Maybe. Maybe not."

As we watched, I caught another glimpse of one of the men as he shifted in the seat. For a second, he was silhouetted, his beaked nose and domed forehead in sharp relief against the night.

He looked familiar, and I leaned forward, squinting to get a better look at him.

I couldn't place the man at first, but it hit me like a freight train when he turned his head. It was Carl Quincy, a low life gun for hire who Gavin employed occasionally. But Quincy definitely wasn't loyal to Gavin. He wasn't loyal to anyone.

“What the fuck?” I muttered, rewinding the video and pausing on Quincy’s face. I turned to Selena. “Do you know him?”

I knew it was a long shot, given how young she’d been for the murders.

She shook her head. “No, I’ve never seen him before. That I know of.”

“I’m going to track him down,” I promised. “See what he knows.”

“Not without me!”

“I can’t put you in danger,” I said. “Aiden would kill me. But don’t worry. I’m good at finding out what people don’t want me to know.”

I smiled at her, but she still looked worried.

“Speaking of the devil. You should talk to Aiden,” she said carefully. “I worry about you two, keeping secrets from each other.”

“Aiden and I are like brothers,” I assured her. Aiden would be pissed if he knew what I did to Gavin’s shipment, but he’d have my back. “It’s going to be all right.”

She looked so worried, chewing her lower lip. I loved when she gave in and didn’t try to hide her emotions. She was always so cool and controlled that it was nice to see the real her.

And it made it impossible to resist her.

I gave in and kissed her. As my lips left hers, I promised, “I will.”

I took her upstairs so she could sit with Xander in his studio. Xander and I shared a look. I wanted him to be sure to protect her.

With one last kiss, I left her and went to find Aiden. He was working with his father Gavin, and although I didn’t want to talk to Gavin, I needed to know what Aiden knew about Quincy. When I arrived at the warehouse, Aiden was already

on the loading dock, counting boxes of supplies. I knew foreign guns were hidden amongst the supplies for the resorts.

“What are you doing here?” he asked when he saw me. “I thought you were watching Selena.”

“I need your help,” I said urgently, pulling him aside so that we could talk in private. “Carl Quincy was watching Selena’s parents’ house.”

Aiden’s eyes widened in surprise. “You’re sure it was him?”

“Yeah,” I said grimly. “I’ve seen the footage. I’d know that ugly motherfucker’s nose anywhere.”

Aiden grimly glanced at his father, knowing that this might incriminate him or not. “I’ve got to go, Dad,” he called over.

Gavin grunted. He could turn on the charm when he needed to, but he wasn’t trying now. He was still pissed about the loss at the pier. I was amazed the slimy bastard had escaped.

“Let’s go find him,” Aiden said shortly. There was so much implication of violence contained with those four words.

We drove out of the warehouse and headed towards the rougher side of town. Quincy was known to frequent a bar on the outskirts of the city, and it was our best bet to find him.

Aiden kept his eyes on the road, his grip on the steering wheel white-knuckled. I knew he was just as angry as I was about what had happened to Selena’s parents.

We pulled up to the bar and got out of the car. The music was loud, and the smell of cigarette smoke hung in the air. A few folks at the bar turned and gave us menacing looks before they recognized Aiden and went back to their drinks.

It was a rough crowd. In other words, it felt like home.

We scanned the bar, looking for Quincy. He sat in a dark corner, nursing a whiskey. He hadn’t gotten any cuter in the years since I last saw him.

Aiden moved across the floor toward him, like a tiger stalking his prey. The tension in the room ratcheted up as we got closer.

It was clear that Quincy wasn't expecting to see us when he turned. A look of pure fear flashed across his face before he recovered himself and forced a smile. "Aiden, what can I do for you?"

"I just have a question for you about an old job," Aiden said with a smile that was so predatorial that Quincy flinched. "Do you remember going out for a hit against the Harts?"

"With a name like that, I think I'd remember," he lied.

"The mom might've been collateral damage. The dad was a cop. Joseph Hart."

"Doesn't ring any bells."

"Well, if you hear anything, let us know," Aiden said.

"Of course," Quincy said. "Too bad about the kid."

He was such a dumbass, he didn't even realize what he'd just said, and Aiden didn't react in the slightest.

I followed Aiden out of the bar before my hands started to shake with anger.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now we wait for him." Aiden's voice was cold, and he glanced over at me before saying, "Pull yourself together. It's not like he murdered *your* mom."

"Don't be a dick," I warned him. "Your pragmatism makes you a real asshole sometimes."

He shrugged. "It's a strength."

"Not always."

We brought the car around and waited for Quincy to leave.

As soon as he stepped out of the bar, we burst into motion.

He didn't manage to reach his car before we jumped him. Aiden clocked him in the jaw, and I grabbed his arms to keep him from swinging back. With some effort, we managed to

drag him into the car and drive off before anyone noticed what was happening.

We drove a few miles away from the bar to an abandoned warehouse that we sometimes used for other business dealings. It held good memories for me after distracting Selena from her worries, and I was a little disappointed that Quincy and some bloodshed might override those memories.

But I was pretty excited about the *bloodshed* part.

As soon as we pulled Quincy out of the car, he started begging us not to hurt him. Quincy was clearly terrified. He knew what was going to happen next, but he had no way to escape it.

We threw him down onto a chair in the middle of the room, and Aiden stood over him like a silent executioner. I watched as Aiden began questioning Quincy about Selena's parents' murder, his voice low and menacing.

Quincy tried to deny any knowledge or involvement until Aiden leaned forward with a knife in his hand, ready to make good on his threats.

"Aiden please," he begged. "You've known me since you were a kid—"

"That means I've had twenty-odd years of not liking you," Aiden said coolly. "Tell me who hired you to kill the Harts, and why."

"I didn't do anything, I swear."

Aiden clocked him across the jaw.

I watched as Quincy's head rocked back. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth as he straightened, gasping, begging for mercy.

Then I said to Aiden, "I can tell you don't go to the gym much anymore."

Aiden threw me a look. "Fine, you ask him."

The two of us took turns working him over.

I didn't think I could be any angrier.

“I still don’t remember,” Quincy said.

I snapped. In the blink of an eye, I was on him, and my hands were around his neck.

“Who killed them?” I asked, my voice low and calm.

“I don’t—”

I slammed him against the ground, not caring if I hurt him.

“Who?”

“It was Patrick Foss!” he wailed in terror. “He hired me! I never met the guy who assigned the original job, I didn’t ask questions!”

Another lowlife with shifting loyalties. Fuck. We’d gotten nowhere. Foss had worked for both Gavin and Aster at different points over the last few years before finally throwing his lot in completely with Aster.

I slammed him against the ground again, and this time, something cracked. I heard Quincy’s howl of pain and maybe I should’ve felt like a monster. Instead, it felt like I’d been relieved of a weight. I’d kill my way through everyone who had made Selena suffer. “What else? What happened that night?”

“Please,” he begged. “I don’t remember. I’m telling the truth! It’s been a long time. I thought the kid was dead too. They never told me that she—”

He stopped speaking and went still, his eyes glazing over, but I didn’t care. I let him fall to the ground, my hands trembling with anger and adrenaline. Aiden was watching me with a look I couldn’t quite read. Concern? Judgment? Affection? Aiden was hard to read at the best of times and I could barely see through the red haze.

“Let’s go,” he said quietly. “We’re not getting anything else out of him.”

I nodded and followed him out of the warehouse. We got back in the car and drove in silence for a few minutes.

“What now?” I asked finally.

“We find Patrick Foss,” Aiden said. “We find out what he knows, and then once he’s no more use to us, we make him pay.”

I nodded, happy with his answer for once.

Maybe Selena was only ours for a little while. But she was still ours. We looked out for our own.

Aiden sighed. “We’re going to have to clean this up ourselves. Just in case when we unravel this all... it was Gavin who ordered the hit.”

So he knew there was a possibility Gavin was guilty. The fact he admitted it was a relief.

“And if that’s the case,” I said. “Then what?”

“Then we let Selena kill him, of course,” he said. “so it’s all the same to me. If not, we kill Aster or Michael or whoever it was who did order the hit. Or rather, we have Selena pull the trigger, so she can leave it in her past.”

No matter what he said, I didn’t think it was all the same to Aiden. A look of pain came over his face when he discussed killing Gavin.

But he would do whatever it took.

It was time for the end of his father’s empire.

CHAPTER 24



S elena

AIDEN CAME into the blue living room as I bent over the coffee table. The air seemed to crackle with his energy, and I looked up as he circled the couch and leaned on the back, looking over my shoulder.

“You look stressed,” he said, resting his hands on my shoulders.

“It’s stressful being an orphan with a need for revenge. Also, a mobster’s fake girlfriend.”

“You’re about to get an upgrade to fake fiancée,” he said, which didn’t do anything for my stress levels. “We’re going ring shopping today.”

Right, the ridiculously overpriced ring he wanted to buy me.

“I have all this to do...” I gestured at the table. There had been no more major breakthroughs.

“We have our engagement party coming up at the club,” he told me. “I need a ring to give you.”

“Right. I’ll keep up my end of the bargain. But I don’t care...” I trailed off under his stern gaze. “Why does it matter?”

“I want it to be something you love,” he said. “If you leave us at the end of this, then I want you to have something that

reminds you of our time together.”

“That’s... unexpectedly sweet, you psycho.”

“If you think that’s sweet, you should see what’s in the trunk.”

He took me down to the garage and raised the hatch on his car to show me the body in the trunk. He pulled back the blanket on the face. “Do you remember him?”

I shook my head. “No.”

My heart was racing, though.

“Quincy’s the man we know was at your house the night your parents were killed,” he said. “We’re tracking down the others.”

“I don’t want to be left out, Aiden.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” he promised. “Now come on. Let’s leave this mess to Dominic to fix, he owes me. And you and I will go ring shopping.”

Relief flooded me at the realization the two of them must have finally talked about how Dominic had sabotaged Gavin’s shipment. But I just nodded.

“I’d rather go shopping than grave-digging,” I said, though it was a fine line for me.

* * *

Aiden

SOMETHING I’D SAID HAD MADE Selena’s pretty face soften into a smile, and she beamed at me over the corpse. That smile made me want to do anything for her.

“I’m glad you guys are still friends,” she said.

“I’m not that jealous of any man,” I said, even though I felt a distinct twinge of jealousy. I flashed her a smile as I made a joke that I meant: “As long as you choose me first.”

She let out a laugh. “Well, you are about to become my fiancé.”

I drove her to Tiffany’s. As we parked outside, she said, “It’s a bit cliché, isn’t it?”

I started the car back up, and she put her hand over mine to stop me. “Stop. I love a good cliché.”

“Oh?”

“Like fake dating the guy you’re actually falling for? Yeah. This place seems like a fit for our story.”

She got out of the car then, leaving me behind slightly shocked. I hadn’t expected her to admit what was going on between us. I thought Selena was too guarded for that.

But she was also tougher than I had realized.

I held the door open for her as we entered Tiffany’s.

The sound of our footsteps echoed through the upscale store as we made our way to the engagement ring section. Selena’s eyes widened at the displays of sparkling diamonds and gemstones. I could tell she was enjoying herself, despite the circumstances that brought us here.

A sales associate approached us, introducing herself, then offering assistance.

As I looked at the rows of cases, all I could think of was how much I’d love to see her *really* wear my ring.

“Let’s start with a solitaire diamond, preferably round cut,” I said. “Something classic and timeless. Then she can tell me if she hates it and we can go from there.”

The associate brought out several options for us to look at, and as Selena tried them on, I couldn’t help but imagine her wearing one of these rings for the rest of her life.

As she tried on the last ring, I noticed her hand was shaking slightly.

“Are you okay?” I asked her quietly.

She looked up at me, and for a moment, her eyes looked shiny with tears before she blinked them away and was back to her usual unflappable self.

“I’m fine,” she said quickly, pulling her hand away. “It’s just... it’s a lot to take in. Even though it’s not real.”

“Go on,” I prompted her.

She stuck her tongue out at me for being bossy, then went on. “After losing my parents, I always thought I’d be alone.”

Then she added drily, “And I didn’t hate the idea.”

I laughed. She was so blunt and honest, and I liked that.

“I didn’t mean to put too much pressure on you by trying to buy you something beautiful to keep forever,” I tapped another glass case with earrings. “You could get earrings instead. Those can be forever.”

“You have to stop trying to buy me everything.”

As I wrapped her in my arms, I caught a glimpse of the salesgirl beaming at us from across the room. I knew what they saw: a handsome, well-dressed man, who adored the woman with the curves and long glossy curls. We seemed picture perfect.

And also, we probably seemed like a big commission.

“Oh. Shut up and like it, slut,” I murmured into her ear, because I couldn’t stand for anyone to think I was completely whipped by this beautiful girl.

She froze for a second, then let out a laugh as she untangled from me. “I’m going to have to take the lead at the club to civilize you.”

“We’ll see how that works out for you.”

The lighthearted banter seemed to have eased her mind. Typical Selena; too much real emotion made her panicky. She picked out a ring that looked beautiful on her thin hand, and she didn’t protest—much—as I added several sets of earrings and necklaces to the purchase.

Maybe I couldn't hang onto her. But even so, I wanted her to be reminded of me often.

CHAPTER 25



S elena

DOMINIC, Aiden and I sat around the breakfast table. I was eating a hot, fresh buttered blueberry muffin, which was one of life's greatest pleasures.

"Do you remember that guy who hassled you at the party?" Aiden asked me. He was eating a spinach omelet. I wasn't interested in a steady diet of health food when I was pretty sure I'd be dead by thirty.

"I do," I said. "The last I saw of him, he was going for a walk with Dominic."

Dominic snorted. "I should've just killed him. Came close. He didn't enjoy the little talk we had outside the house."

I tilted my head to one side, glancing between the two of them. "Why? Why'd you two go full psycho when you didn't even know me?"

"Aiden hadn't gone full psycho yet," Dominic said. "That came later."

Aiden glanced down at his omelet. "He had sketched your face. But he was a terrible artist. He gave it to my dad as a potential suspect."

"Ah," I said. "Well then, I do wish you'd just killed him."

"Wish granted," Dominic said.

Aiden waved it off as if it were nothing. “It had to be done to protect your cover. And it’s no great loss.”

“Do you think you could at least tell me when you kill people on my behalf?” Maybe I shouldn’t have felt as pleased as I did, but I scolded them on general principle anyway.

“You should eat something with some protein,” Aiden said instead of answering. He cut his omelet in half with his knife and pushed his plate between us.

“I’ll take the protectiveness and even the control,” I said, “and I’m fine with spankings, but I draw my boundaries on eating spinach.”

Dominic didn’t quite succeed in hiding his grin behind his coffee cup.

“I’ve barely seen Xander lately,” I complained.

“Well, he finally delivered his project,” Aiden said. “He’s got everything in place and Gavin’s happy.”

Dominic looked frustrated. “It was too bad he escaped. You can’t let him go through with that, Aiden.”

“It was for the best,” Aiden corrected. “No one would ever be convinced we had a peaceful transfer of power and I had the full backing of our family if he was sitting in prison. This way, we still have a chance at a peaceful transfer of loyalties... as long as Gavin’s convinced Selena really is my girl.”

He looked at me affectionately, and a warm glow rose in my chest.

“It’s rude that this plan doesn’t involve her being *my* girl too.” Dominic protested.

“Well, we’ve been so close and lived together so long... I think people would believe we’d share.”

I stared between them, surprised we were actually having this conversation out loud. Did they really want that kind of relationship with me?

Just then, Xander walked in. He looked between us all in exasperation. “So... you two decided to share her?”

Temporarily?”

His tone was acerbic.

“Why not?” Dominic crossed his arms over his chest.

“You’re all insane,” Xander said. “Convincing yourselves this is just temporary.”

“Let’s get to work,” Aiden cut him off.

I stared at Xander, stunned by his jealousy—and by the implication that we should all end up together for real.

Aiden said impatiently, “We have people to kill and then we all need to get cleaned up for the club tonight.”

“I’m coming,” Xander said.

“Fine, try to cockblock us,” Dominic said with a grin. “See how that works for you.”

The way Dominic looked at me, as if he could eat me up in the car, sent a rush of lust and adrenaline through my body.

“I hate for you to get your pretty hands dirty,” Aiden told me.

“You’re prettier than I am,” I told him, reaching up to muss his dark hair.

“Not the hair,” he warned me, catching my wrist. “I don’t have any plans to punish you tonight, but that could change.”

“Given where we’re going tonight, that seems inevitable,” I said lightly.

“There are many different things we could do at the club,” Aiden told me. “And I plan to introduce you to them all.”

“I probably won’t like them all.”

“I think you will when I do them to you,” he disagreed, slapping my ass as I headed for the car.

It stunned me that I wasn’t genuinely pissed off, even if I glared at him on general principle. “Turn about’s fair play.”

I’d always hated to be touched... until I met them. It was one thing to enjoy sex. It was entirely different to enjoy being

hugged, or having their shoulders brush mine when we were working, or the way they touched the small of my back.

The four of us drove together to find Patrick Foss.

In the car, the guys explained Foss had sometimes worked for Gavin Crude, but he had also worked for two other gangs that also worked the city. Calder Coolidge was a kingpin who controlled the drug trade and prostitution rings in the bad part of town. Meanwhile, Jacob Aster sold drugs and high end girls to the rich elite. Gavin Crude had stayed out of the constant turf war between them by focusing on selling guns to them both.

Though Gavin might never have come to Man's attention if that was all. He also coordinated selling guns outside the U.S. to a lot of bad actors, and he had killed innocent people who got in the way of his business.

We finally tracked down Foss to a shady motel in the bad part of town. The place was rife with drug addicts, prostitutes, and criminals. The smell of urine and garbage filled the air, making me gag. But we had a job to do. And it was easiest done in a place where no one would choose to see anything.

Aiden led the way, his gun drawn, while Dominic, Xander and I followed close behind. Aiden gave Xander a look that told him to stay close to me.

We found Foss sitting on a dirty mattress, surrounded by empty beer cans and cigarette butts. He looked up at us with bleary eyes, clearly under the influence. "Who the fuck are you?" he slurred.

"We're new friends. We're just going to ask you some questions." Aiden sounded as cool as ever, but somehow that just made him more frightening.

Foss tried to stand up, but he stumbled and fell back onto the mattress. "I ain't telling you shit," he muttered.

Dominic stepped forward, his gun pressed against Foss's temple. "You might want to watch how you talk to him."

Foss seemed to sober up, at least partially, immediately.

“This guy was definitely involved?” Xander asked.

I nodded. “I remember catching a glimpse of his face watching the footage my parents had collected.”

Foss’s gaze snapped to me, recognition lighting his eyes. The target he hadn’t managed to kill. But he was smarter than Quincy and didn’t say anything.

“Maybe it’s time to use your gift, Selena,” Xander said. “If you want to.”

When I heard Foss’s voice, it brought me right back to being inside that closet.

Hearing my parents scream.

Hearing his laugh.

“Yes,” I said.

“Let’s take him with us,” Xander said. “Move to a more private location.”

“No one here cares about him,” Dominic said.

“But still. We aren’t going to leave much evidence, but we don’t want to leave any.” Xander said.

We took Foss back to that warehouse, the one where Dominic had brought me that day. It had more pleasant memories than it did now.

The guys tortured Foss for information. His sobs echoed off the bare walls of the warehouse.

The cracking of their knuckles against his skin meant nothing to me. I watched his skin fracture under their onslaught, watched them break his arms and legs, and it didn’t bother me at all.

The girl who would have cared had been killed the night he murdered my parents.

“You would have killed me too, wouldn’t you? Just to leave no evidence?” I asked.

He looked up at me, startled. “I didn’t want to kill a kid.”

“But you took the money to do it just the same. Even if it wasn’t your favorite thing to do.”

“I wasn’t the only one.” Foss looked around at us frantically. “I can tell you who else was there. Just let me go.”

“You’re going to tell us that,” Aiden promised him.

Soon enough, Foss had sobbed out one more name.

“Where did the order come from?” Aiden asked, his voice dangerous. “I’m done playing.”

“It was a favor for Jacob Aster,” he sobbed. “But we couldn’t find any of the evidence in the house. They hid it somewhere. Hart was trying to take it to the Feds.”

Suddenly it all made sense. That was why I’d found someone trying to get into my parents’ accounts.

I wasn’t the only one trying to retrieve the evidence they’d hidden.

The tension in Aiden’s jaw suddenly relaxed. He was splattered with blood, and it soaked his usually crisp white shirt sleeves. “I see.”

“Good,” Dominic said. “I’ve got no qualms about killing Aster. It’s not like having to kill your dad.”

Aiden inclined his head in a nod, and I could see the relief written across his face. An ache opened in my chest. He didn’t want his father dead.

I had to talk to Man about this mission. Gavin Crude deserved to die. But if Aiden replaced him and Gavin truly left the business, then maybe we could leave Aiden’s father alive. For his sake. And Gabe’s. Their father might be a monster, but he was still the one who had been there for them all their lives. The one they had leaned on after their mother died.

Aiden inclined his head, listening. Then he turned to Xander and me. “You two hide.”

Although I liked to provoke Aiden when he was trying to get my *obedience*, this wasn’t the time. Without a word, Xander and I swiftly moved across the floor to hide behind a

couple of oversized crates. He wrapped his arms around me as we listened.

I'd recognize Gavin's smooth, arrogant voice anywhere. "What's going on, son?"

"Mr. Crude!" Foss called desperately. His voice was hoarse from screaming, and he could barely raise it to be audible. I dared a glance out to see Gavin frown at him. "Help me!"

"This scumbag's been feeding information to Aster," Aiden lied smoothly. "He's been working for Aster all these years."

"I see." Gavin cracked his knuckles. "I think Aster's been killing an awful lot of my people lately. Might as well return the favor."

Before Foss could babble the truth, Dominic punched him across the face. The chair rocked back on its rear legs, then slammed into the cement. Foss's head lolled to one side, unconscious.

"Why are you here, Dad?" Aiden asked. "You usually let me do my work without showing up yourself."

Gavin let out a laugh. "You mean to say, I let you do all the dirty work? Well, when I was your age, I did my own dirty work. Showed my men how it needed to be done."

"I don't mind," Aiden said.

"I know you don't, son. I came to give you this." Gavin handed him a gold ring. "It was the ring I wore when I was married to your mom. I wanted you to know I stand behind you and Selena, a hundred percent. And I hope she makes you as happy as your mother made me."

Aiden's gaze was bright when it met Gavin's. "Thank you, Dad. That means a lot."

My heart almost melted.

Then when Gavin and his men had left, Aiden came over to us and offered me his hand to help me up from hiding. I didn't need help, since I hadn't aged seventy years behind the

crates, and I almost told him that. Instead, I took his hand as I rose to my feet.

He rubbed his thumb over the engraving around the ring as if it mattered to him, and I held out my palm. “Can I see it?”

I was glad to think he’d have that connection to the best part of his father, the love he’d had for his wife and his family, and that we were so close to putting a far better man on the Crude family throne.

Then he dropped it into my palm, and a memory rose for me like bile.

I’d slammed into my side, scurrying into the storm drain that was only big enough for a child’s body.

He’d reached after me.

His face was a blur and always had been, as if he were in a dream.

But his ring had been engraved with an elaborate filigree pattern that had remained in my mind all these years. That one last grab before I slipped free.

I swallowed, the knowledge settling into me like a stone. Somehow Gavin Crude had been there when my parents were killed.

“Selena?” Xander’s voice seemed to come from a long way away, as if he were speaking to me down a tunnel.

I looked up to find Aiden staring down at me, a worried look across his face. Dominic was already bundling up Foss, who groaned, apparently still alive.

“I’m fine,” I lied, handing the ring back to Aiden.

My father must’ve had something on Aster. And Aster had gotten Crude to murder my parents so no one would tie him to the crime, since he was the one with the motive.

But none of it had mattered anyway in this corrupt town.

I’d handed the ring back to Aiden, but I could still feel it pressing against my palm as if it had burned me.

I weighed whether to tell them or not. Aiden would be happy to help me kill Aster. But he obviously wanted his father alive.

I debated it even as Xander went and got the boat and pulled it up to the marina dock behind the warehouse. Dominic easily carried Foss's unconscious body over one massive shoulder as we all stepped into the boat.

We rode over the choppy water, the engine growling as a sudden rainstorm whipped around our faces. Dominic came up from below carrying a rainslicker, and he stepped on Foss's outstretched hand in his focus to keep me dry and warm. I let him take care of me, but I was barely there with them.

"Selena," Aiden said quietly, and I looked up to realize the three of them were watching me carefully. "Is this what you want? Killing Foss?"

"Yes," I said without a second's hesitation.

"What's wrong, then?"

I shook my head. I couldn't say the words. That his father had killed mine.

"Wake up Foss," I said. "I've got one more question for him."

The guys exchanged a look. But they gamely tried to wake him up. It took a long while for Foss to come to, and he looked terrified, eyeing the edge of the boat as if he might plunge off into the stormy sea. Drowning might be a more merciful death.

I squatted so I could look Foss in his eyes. Or at least, the one eye that was still open, since the other was swollen completely shut.

"Killing my parents was a favor," I said, thinking of his exact words. "And who did that favor?"

Foss raised his terrified gaze to Aiden, then looked back at me, looking perplexed. "Gavin Crude."

Aiden stiffened.

The wind whipped around us mercilessly, and the boat rocked up and down against the waves.

“We’re here,” Xander called over the noise of the storm.

“Give it to me.” I held my hand out to Xander. I couldn’t bear to look at Aiden right now. But I could focus on the one thing I was going to do next.

Foss had *laughed* about what he did to my family.

“Get him up,” I said.

Dominic yanked him up. I stepped forward and fastened the collar around his neck. Foss kept begging me to stop, to save him.

“I couldn’t if I wanted to,” I told him, as the collar shut with a click. “They’d kill you anyway.”

I couldn’t make myself laugh, like he had, even though I tried. “And I don’t want to.”

The guys forced him off the boat onto an outcropping of rocks. He begged as we pulled away, leaving him stranded, slipping on the rocks.

Xander handed me the detonator, but once I gripped it, he didn’t release it. He gave me a long look. “You wanted me to keep my hands clean. Selena, is this really what you want?”

I nodded. “This is who I am.”

He nodded. “As long as it isn’t *all* you are. You’re not just a Belladonna, you know.”

“I know.”

The four of us turned to watch the man screaming on the rocks. The wind tore his last words away.

I pressed the button, and Foss exploded into red mist.

The wild waves would wash every bit of evidence away from those rocks. It would be as if he had never existed.

But I knew nothing would ever wash away the bitter pain that choked me.

CHAPTER 26



Xander

I WANTED to be pissed off that the guys had started a relationship with Selena and left me out. But she looked so sad and lost on the way home that I couldn't be angry. As soon as we got home, I told her, "You need to come make something with me."

"I want to tear something apart," she said flatly.

"Then let's start there."

I brought her into my art studio, I loved seeing her there, my favorite girl in my favorite place.

"I think you might like to explore auto-destructive art," I said. "It began after World War 2 as a way to come to terms with the pain and suffering."

"Tell me more," she said.

I took a deep breath, flipping open one of my art books to show her some examples. "It's basically the idea of creating art by destroying it. Like, using fire, explosives, or even just physically damaging it. It's a way of purging negative emotions through destruction."

Selena looked at me, her eyes curious. "That sounds... cathartic."

"It can be," I said. "I took something from Foss's room."

I brought out the guns that he had hidden in his room. I told her I'd already checked to make sure there were no rounds inside, but she still lifted each and checked herself. I hid my smile. She was a true professional.

"We're going to destroy them and make them into something new," I told her.

"What will we make?"

"You'll know when it's time."

I handed her a sledgehammer. "Here, take out your anger on this," I said, gesturing to the guns.

She looked at me skeptically. "How is this supposed to help? I just want to kill everyone involved."

"It's a way to release your emotions," I explained. "You can destroy this metal and turn it into something beautiful."

Selena raised the sledgehammer and brought it down with a loud clang. She hit it again and again, until it bent and twisted under her fury.

"I never thought I'd enjoy destroying something so much," she admitted, trying to catch her breath.

"That's the beauty of it. Destruction can lead to creation."

I grabbed a welding torch and guided her as she began piecing together the mangled metal, creating a sculpture that represented Selena's pain and anger, but also her strength and resilience. After a while, she relaxed into the experience of welding, and I was glad she loved it as much as I did; there was something magical about the process of using fire to fuse two things together.

As we worked, sweat dripped down our faces and the scent of melting metal filled the air.

It gave me time to think.

I knew I had to fight for her. I couldn't let her walk away from me when this time was over. There was a spark between us, something that had been building since the day we met.

Just like we were creating something beautiful here from something awful and ugly, we could make something good from this fucked-up situation.

Arousal rushed through me as I watched her work, her muscles flexing under her tank top. I knew it was wrong, that I shouldn't fantasize about someone whose old wounds had just been torn open so brutally. But my body didn't care about right or wrong.

It just wanted her.

As we finished the sculpture, I stepped back to admire our handiwork. It was a twisted and distorted figure. It represented Selena's pain, but also her strength to overcome it.

"It's beautiful," she said softly.

"Yes, it is," I agreed.

We stood there in silence for a moment, the only sound the hum of the welding torch as it cooled.

And then I told her, "I meant what I said earlier. I don't want you to go."

"Oh," she said. "Well, there's a long time to go. I'm not even properly engaged yet."

The party would be tonight, and I didn't think I could stand to watch her and Aiden get engaged when they were both lost in their delusions...and leaving me behind.

"I want you," I told her firmly. "Aiden and Dominic are starting a relationship with you, but where does that leave... us?"

"With Aiden..." She hesitated. "He knows it's temporary. I think you want something more than that, and I can't make any promises."

"Oh, bull shit," I told her. "You always find a way, Selena. I have faith in you."

Selena looked at me, her eyes shining with a mix of uncertainty and desire.

"I don't know if I'm ready for that," she said softly.

“I’m not asking you to be ready,” I said. “I just want you to know that I feel something for you. And maybe the rest of you can pretend you can be happy with *now*, but I want you to know I want more. I want forever.”

We stood there for a moment, the silence stretching between us. And then she stepped closer, her hand reaching up to touch my face.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

I leaned in, my lips meeting hers in a hungry kiss. It was rough and desperate, born out of the emotional turmoil we had both been through.

But it was also something more. It was a connection that had been building between us since the day we met. It was a spark that had grown into a flame, a flame that threatened to consume me.

The two of us kept trading kisses as we undressed each other. She pushed me back across the room toward the bed.

I turned her, still kissing her, as I took over and backed her against the bed. She let me push her onto the bed, smiling up at me as her legs spread. I took in the sight of her perfect pussy spread before me. My cock pressed against her as I kissed her neck and her breasts. She was slick and ready between her thighs, and her body rocked against me as I rubbed her clit.

I moved on top of her, my cock pressed against her as I kissed her. I could feel my cock sliding against her delicate skin, the warmth of her pussy.

I broke away from the kiss, and Selena looked up at me with heavy-lidded eyes as I began to explore her mouth and her neck with my lips. I moved my mouth lower, kissing her breasts and sucking in her nipples, teasing her with my tongue. She wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me closer to her.

“I want your cock,” she whispered against my lips.

I pushed my cock inside her, holding her tight as I began to move inside her. I could feel her tightness around me, her warmth enveloping me. She gasped as I thrust into her, her

hands gripping my hips tightly as if she might push me away or pull me in harder.

I moved faster and harder, my cock pounding into her as we both moaned in ecstasy. Her hips rocked in time with mine as she clenched tightly around my cock.

“Fuck,” I groaned, as she tightened around me.

She buried her face in my throat to muffle her cry.

I thrust into her one last time, my own orgasm crashing over me as I emptied myself inside her.

She was mine. I had claimed her. And I didn't give a fuck what anyone had to say about it.

“I want you to stay with me,” I said.

“Stay with you?” she asked, her voice breathless. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” I said, before I leaned in and kissed her again.

There was no point in talking about it endlessly, but I wanted to be sure she understood. Aiden and Dominic might be slow, but they would come around eventually.

If she chose us, this house would be her home.

CHAPTER 27



S elena

AIDEN LEANED in the doorway of my room. I knew he was there while my back was still to the door as I stared out at the swaying trees. A storm was rolling in, making the sky even darker than it already was as the sun set. I could feel Aiden's presence; there was something about him that changed the air in the room, charged it with electricity.

"Ready to pretend not to despise me for a few hours?" he asked.

"I think we've moved past *despise* at this point," I said. "Hopefully you don't send me back there again."

I flashed him a smile that I knew didn't reach my eyes.

Tonight was our engagement party.

I had to face the man who had led the murder on my parents and pretend I was wildly in love with his son.

I wasn't entirely sure I was pretending, but...

"Selena," he said. "You don't have to face him. I can say we broke up, we can find another way."

"And you'll still need your transfer of power."

He inclined his head. At least he didn't pretend. Protecting me would mean more damage to the innocent people his father would hurt and use.

“I’m going to kill your father,” I told him.

His lips tightened, and pain flashed across his face before he covered it with his usual blank expression. He dipped his head in a nod. “Of course. I would do the same.”

But I wasn’t sure it was really that easy. Aiden and Gavin obviously loved each other, despite the tension between them. I didn’t think that when Aiden first made that deal with me, he’d had any intention of ever letting me blow his father’s head off.

“Why did you choose me? Really?”

“I wanted a girl who could keep up with me.” He crossed the room toward me, his movements graceful and predatory, like always. “I knew when I saw you that I had met my match.”

“How did you know who I was?”

“Once I knew you weren’t on the guest list, I put two and two together. I didn’t know which Belladonna you were at first. But my father has richly earned a visit from the Belladonnas.”

“How did you know that before you kissed me?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then why did you rescue me from that hideous situation with that creep?”

His gaze found mine. “Because there was something about you from the first time I saw you. I can’t explain what it is. There’s something special about you, Selena.”

“Then you were the first to feel that way,” I said, feeling the same well of loneliness that I had all my life because my family had been ripped away.

If I thought he was going to say something sympathetic, I had forgotten I was dealing with Aiden Crude.

He slid his fingers under my chin and raised my gaze to his. “You don’t need anyone else to see you’re special. I’m enough.”

My lips parted to tell him that he was an arrogant jerk— as if he didn't know— and his lips met mine. His kiss was slow and tender, and I lost myself in it, leaning into his body and letting myself forget my pain for a few moments.

When I pulled back he was looking at me with this mix of emotions in his eyes. I knew Aiden chose who was allowed to see him at all with his walls down, and to see him look uncertain at all, to see his worry and his affection, was overwhelming.

He wouldn't want me after I killed his father. No matter how blasé he pretended to be. There was a reason we both understood there was a shelf life to this relationship, no matter what Dominic or Xander said.

But for tonight, I was supposed to be in love with him, and I wouldn't have to try hard to show that to the world.

“Let's go to our engagement party,” I said.

“You're wearing my earrings.” His fingers touched my earlobe lightly, but the feeling was still electric.

“Always,” I said, knowing he would understand.

We couldn't have long, but we'd make the most of it.

Hand in hand, we walked out of the room.

* * *

WE RETURNED to his sex club at his luxurious resort.

But this time, instead of it being just the two of us, Dominic and Xander flanked us as muscle. They looked imposing and cold tonight, the warm, sensuous men I'd come to know hidden deep within. We were all more complicated than we looked. I realized that about myself now too—I'd spent so long thinking I was nothing but the cold assassin.

I always would be that, of course.

But I was still a daughter, even though I'd lost my parents. And I had grown into a woman who could dream of a new

chance at happiness. No matter what happened with these men, they'd brought me back to life, and I'd never be the same.

The club was busy now, filled with music and laughter and the sounds of someone, off in the distance, getting thoroughly whipped. I couldn't quite tell from their screams if they were happy about it or not.

"Quite the soundtrack," Aiden said to me, taking two glasses of champagne from a waiter circling with a tray and handing one to me. "This is a pretty small affair. Just good friends and a few close business associates."

So, another chance to look like a fool in front of his friends. Delightful.

Henry, Fox and their girls came over then. They greeted me warmly, as if I hadn't seemed hopelessly out of place last time.

I made small talk with Tessie and Amanda. They oohed and aah'd over my ring. "Did he ask you in a romantic way?"

"Not exactly," I said breezily, and since I knew just how much the four of them were into Aiden's business, I said, "But he killed a man or two for me, so that was sweet."

Tessie laughed. "True love, then?"

"Definitely." I dared a glance at Aiden, only to find him watching me.

Those words would've rolled off my lips easily no matter if it were a lie.

But I wasn't entirely sure they were.

"I like her energy," Fox said to Aiden quietly. "What did you do to her?"

Aiden let out a laugh. "She just had to get in touch with her submissive side. And I helped her do just that."

He was an absolute ass. Maybe I should murder him after all.

The air seemed to go out of the room when Gavin Crude walked in.

He was as tall and immaculate as ever, and I could see traces of Aiden's face and mannerisms in his as he shook hands and greeted people. His smile was warm and magnetic.

Aiden rested his hand on my shoulder, and I turned to him, surprised. "You need to be distracted before we make our announcement."

"I'm fine," I promised him.

"It wasn't a request, Selena," he said, his voice amused. "I don't want you to strangle my father to death in front of a crowd, and the way you were looking at him—"

I didn't like the thought that any of my feelings had been publicly visible. Aiden must have picked up on that, because he said, "I don't think anyone else would notice. I'm just very familiar with the look you get when you're contemplating whether or not to murder someone."

He led me through the noise of the crowd and we greeted the many well-wishers as we walked, making brief small talk and smiling. The way he put his hand in the small of my back made me feel cared for, even in the midst of this mess.

Aiden led me over to the Saint Andrew's cross in the large back room dedicated to BDSM. Dominic and Xander just had to glance around the room, and the sounds of flogging faded. The two people fucking against a wall were suddenly adjusting their clothes, and the others all moved out too. Dominic smiled at them as they went, then closed the door behind them.

It was a relief to be shut away from Gavin Crude. Maybe Aiden was right that I needed a moment to collect my thoughts.

Aiden's warm, hard body pressed against me from behind, and he put his hands on my shoulders. "I'm going to spank your adorable ass until you feel submissive instead of just pretending, and then I'm going to fuck you until you remember who you belong to. Always. No matter who else is in the room."

“Until I feel submissive? We might be here a while and we have a timeline, Aiden.”

“Enough.” His voice was stern as he rubbed his hand across my lower back, and when he dipped lower, my back arched despite myself. “Don’t be glib with me. I’m right here...I know the situation sucks, but you don’t have to do a moment of this alone.”

“And you need to tie me up to remind me of that?”

“Apparently.” He flashed me a smile. “Also, I just enjoy it.”

I glanced over at Dominic and Xander, and he said, “They’re just muscle tonight. They’re not going to rescue you from me.”

I understood what he meant but wouldn’t say in a less secured environment than the house. We were trying to fool Gavin Crude; we didn’t need to add more tension by adding any possibility I might get pregnant with a child who wasn’t the Crude heir to the throne.

“Strip,” Aiden told me.

There was an edge in his voice that made my pussy clench. I slipped off my shoes, then took my dress off, one strap at a time, dropping it to the ground.

Then Aiden pressed against my back. He pulled my bra down, using the soft fabric to caress my nipples.

Aiden ran the metal clasps over my nipples, and I sucked in a breath. I arched my back and pressed myself against him, my breath catching.

Everything was too hot, too close. Too many feelings.

Aiden pulled my panties down, and I stepped out of them, my bare feet on the tile floor.

His hands on my shoulders, he turned me around. It was strange and vulnerable to be naked in front of him when he was dressed in that perfect suit with white cuffs. His sleek expensive shoes nudged my feet apart gently, guiding my

ankles to either side of the X-shaped wooden device. Dominic came over and knelt to secure my ankles to each side.

“This seems like a torture device,” I said.

He ran his hand up my spine, and electricity sprung to life everywhere he touched me. Then he reached the nape of my neck, and his hand fisted in my hair. “You’re done speaking unless I speak to you. Besides your safe word, of course.”

He sounded mean, and I frowned, but then he added, “You get stuck in your own head because you’re so mouthy. And tonight, you need to be in your body. Not in the past, not in the future. Here with me, feeling everything I do to you.”

His hands cupped and caressed my breasts, and I relaxed back against him slowly at the feeling.

Then he pulled away and gave me a smack across the ass. It might’ve been playful, but it still stung; Aiden’s hands were hard and calloused. “Lift your arms.”

I raised my hands to the top of the cross, and Aiden bound them with the leather straps. I shivered at the feeling of being at his mercy as he stepped back, looking at me.

“Fuck, you look so hot like this,” he said, his eyes dark with desire. “All tied up and ready for me to do whatever I want.”

I couldn’t help the breath that escaped my lips as he walked towards me, his hand sliding down to cup between my thighs.

“You’re already wet for me.” His breath stirred my hair. “Just the way you should be. Good girl.”

He began to tease me, his fingers circling my clit before dipping inside me. I cried out in pleasure as he pumped his fingers in and out, my hips bucking against the hard wooden beam.

“Please,” I begged, my body on the brink of release.

He pulled his fingers out of me, and I whimpered at the loss of contact.

“I told you I was going to spank your adorable ass,” he said. “And *you* told me we were going to be here a while. Remember that?”

I shook my head, not because I was inflicted with a sudden bout of amnesia but because I was currently regretting pushing him. I enjoyed driving Aiden slightly crazy, but right now, I wanted his hand back on my clit.

Aiden stepped forward, his hand trailing down my body as he looked at me with a fierce intensity. “You’re mine.” He said. His hand cupped the curve of my ass. “Say it.”

“I’m yours,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

“Again.”

“I’m yours,” I repeated, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks.

“Good.” Aiden’s hand landed on my ass again, harder this time. I gasped and wiggled, but the restraints held me in place.

He spanked me again and again. The sting spread across my ass. But mixed with the pain was a heady sense of pleasure, of being completely under his control. I could feel myself getting wetter with each strike of his hand.

“You like that, don’t you?” Aiden whispered in my ear, his breath hot against my skin. “You aren’t alone anymore... I’m going to keep you in line.”

“Good luck,” I said, but I couldn’t deny Aiden’s words made my aching thighs clench with need.

He let out a laugh and slapped my ass again, harder. “Keep testing me, Selena.”

He continued to spank me, alternately squeezing and caressing my ass between strikes. I could feel myself getting lost in the pleasure and pain, completely at his mercy.

Finally, he stopped and stepped back, admiring his handiwork. My ass was bright red and stinging, and I could feel the heat radiating off it. I could just see him out of the corner of my eye, looking pleased with himself and wild for me, his cock straining the front of his trousers. He’d removed

his suit jacket, and his sleeves were rolled up over his corded forearms.

He stepped back, and I saw him examining the paddles and other devices on the wall. My core squeezed needily.

“I want to prepare you to take us,” he said, then returned to me carrying a jeweled butt plug and a bottle of lube. The thought of taking not just Aiden, but Dominic and Xander too, was a wild turn on.

His hand caressed the curve of my ass, then delved between my curves, and I moaned at the sensation as he caressed my opening. “Who does this asshole belong to?”

“You,” I murmured.

“Say my name.”

“Every part of me belongs to Aiden Crude.”

“Don’t forget it,” he murmured into my ear. “I take good care of what’s mine.”

He kept playing with my opening until my hips were swaying back toward his greedily. My core clenched, wanting his hand on my pussy again. He finally did play with my clit as he slowly worked the plug into my ass. It felt cold and strange at first, then as it filled me, I relaxed into the sensation. It felt good to be filled up.

As he worked my clit, I moaned, rocking forward against his hand.

When I was about to come, he pulled away. “I believe you wanted to be here a while.”

“Aiden,” I murmured in protest as he returned to the wall of paddles. He returned with one of them.

He began to spank me, the paddle on my skin with a thwack that echoed through the room.

I cried out as the paddle connected with my ass. The sting was intense, but so was the pleasure. Again and again, he hit me with the paddle. The pain mixed with an overwhelming

sense of pleasure, and I was lost in it, moaning and writhing against the restraints.

“You’re doing so well,” he murmured, his voice thick with desire. “So obedient and responsive. Do you feel submissive yet, Selena?”

He ran his hand over my ass, the cool touch of his skin against my heated flesh sending shivers down my spine.

“Yes,” I murmured, desperate for his cock.

“Good.”

Then he began to spank me again. The rhythm was hypnotic, and I felt myself slipping deeper into subspace with every hit. It was a new sensation, feeling totally relaxed at the same time I was vulnerable.

I was lost in sensation, completely at his mercy,

“Are you ready for me to fuck you?” Aiden asked, his voice low and gravelly.

“Yes,” I breathed, aching for him.

Although I’d seen him before, I was struck all over again by his size as he drew himself out of his trousers. His dick was thick and pulsing with need.

Aiden stepped between my legs, grabbing my hips and pulling me toward him. When he pressed the tip of his cock against my entrance, I ground my hips back into him. He was teasing me, driving me crazy. I felt myself opening up to him, and I arched my hips back toward him wantonly.

I moaned at the feeling of his cock pressing against my opening before finally, he entered me. He continued to press forward, and I met his movements until he was finally buried deep inside me.

I cried out at the sensation of being filled relentlessly, both the butt plug and his cock making me feel as if I were filled so completely, in a way I never had before.

“I’m going to fuck you slow and hard,” he murmured in my ear. “I’m going to take you until you’re screaming my

name.”

Then he began to move, thrusting in and out of me, filling me completely. I felt myself losing myself in the rhythm of his movements, the feel of his cock filling me, stretching me, and as good as it was, I knew someday I needed all three of their cocks.

His hands gripped my hips as he thrust into me, each thrust driving the butt plug deeper into me. With every thrust of his hips, I moaned, my eyes closing in delight as my body rocked forward and backwards.

Each thrust drove me closer to orgasm, and when he started to toy with my nipples, I moaned and whimpered, my body tightening and releasing with need.

“Come for me,” he said, his voice thick with desire. “I want to feel you come on my cock.”

I moaned and wriggled my hips back toward him, pushing down on his cock as he thrust forward again.

He pinched my nipples just as I was about to come, and I moaned out loud, my body shaking with the power of the orgasm that swept through me.

It was the sensation of being filled, of the pleasure of the butt plug and his cock, that brought me to orgasm. I came hard, my body shuddering and shaking with ecstasy as the pleasure poured over me in waves.

As I collapsed against the restraints, I felt Aiden’s hand on my ass, soothing and caressing the red skin.

Then he reached up and undid the cuffs on my wrists. I felt the cuffs on my ankles being undone by another of the men, but I felt floaty and dreamy, as if the evil of the world had faded away for a while.

“That’s my girl,” Aiden murmured into my ear. “Keep the plug in under your clothes. You look well-spanked and properly fucked, and everyone is going to believe you’re mine.”

For now, I could believe it too.

CHAPTER 28



S elena

I FIXED my hair quickly in the bathroom, knowing Dominic was lurking right outside. The guys wouldn't leave me alone with Gavin Crude in the building.

I opened the door to see Dominic there, leaning against the wall opposite me, his arms crossed over his powerful chest. His gaze met mine, since he'd been fixed on the door, and I felt a jolt of warmth in my chest. I always worked alone. It was nice to have someone watch my back.

He didn't say a word to me, just held out his arm to escort me. After all, it wasn't a good idea for us to speak much now. But it didn't change the connection I felt between us or the comfort of his body close to mine as the two of us walked down the hallway.

Xander was waiting at the end. He turned, since he'd been looking out for any threat, and his eyes crinkled slightly at the corners when they met mine. Seeing the genuine warmth that lit their eyes when they looked at me sent a rush of warmth through me too.

But then, I was also in an exceptionally good mood at the moment. Later, I would kill Gavin Crude. Tonight, I needed to set that aside. I was good at compartmentalizing... and I had to admit, Aiden had helped. The throb between my thighs and the warmth of my ass, the feel of the butt plug inside me as I walked, all helped ground me in the moment too.

The guys escorted me to where Aiden was waiting. The faces of the crowd were a blur, and all I could see was him.

“Ready to announce that I made the best deal of my life?” he asked lightly as he held out his hand.

I put my hand into his. “Yes.”

He lifted my hand, studying the ring as it glittered under the lights. The diamond was obscenely large. It was still amazing to me that he had wanted to spend so much money, because he wanted to give me a parting gift that I wouldn't forget.

“Before you change your mind,” he said, giving me a smile that was so charming that my stomach dipped. He led me up onto the dais beside the DJ, and the music slowly faded out. The lights felt bright here, and the room went quiet with respect for Aiden as everyone faced us.

“I'm thrilled to announce my engagement to Selena,” he said. “If you've had the pleasure of meeting her, and I think you all have, you know she's as strong and sophisticated as she is beautiful.”

I smiled self-consciously. For the audience, since I wasn't often self-conscious at all. I knew that was all I had to do, since no one here expected me to speak.

Aiden's arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer to him. “I'm a lucky man,” he continued, looking down at me with a possessive glint in his eyes. “And I plan to make her my wife, because I can't imagine my life without her.”

The crowd erupted into cheers and applause, but all I could focus on was the feeling of his hand on my waist, the warmth of his body against mine.

It was just pretend. But I could so easily get lost in that game, in the warmth of his eyes.

Aiden leaned down and kissed me, his lips possessive and demanding.

As if he were lost in the game too.

The evening passed in a blur of champagne, dancing, and congratulations. Aiden never left my side, his arm always around me, possessive and protective. It was intoxicating, the feeling of being wanted so completely.

As the night drew to a close and the guests began to leave, Gavin Crude walked toward us.

“Selena,” he said. He didn’t seem as hostile as he had been when we first met, but I’d been aware of him watching me all night. I knew he’d been assessing and judging me. As I met his gaze, I wondered about his conclusions.

As Gavin’s gaze raked over me, a shiver ran down my spine. He was dangerous, and I wasn’t sure how to handle him.

“Aiden,” Gavin said, turning his attention to my fiancé. “I just wanted to congratulate you on your engagement. You’ve truly outdone yourself this time.”

Aiden’s arm tightened around my waist, and I could feel his tension. He didn’t trust Gavin, and neither did I.

“Thank you,” Aiden said stiffly.

“There’s something I never told you about my wedding to your mother,” Gavin said. “I think you two should get a drink and join me.”

“A drink?” Aiden repeated.

“You’re going to need it,” he said.

* * *

“WHAT DO you think is going on?” I asked Aiden as the two of us stood at the bar.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “My father always has some trick.”

Then he looked down at me, touching my hip. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out together. He’s no match for the two of us together.”

I smiled up at him. I knew we were being watched. Aiden took both our drinks and handed mine to me.

Together, we walked across the room to join Gavin, who had paused near one of the long couches. Gavin was saying goodbye to a group of departing guests as if he were the real host.

Aiden smoothly took over, wishing everyone a safe drive home. I took a seat demurely on the couch and sipped my drink.

Gavin stood across from me, then smoothed his jacket as he sat. As if he ever looked ruffled.

“So, Selena,” he said. “What are your plans?”

Your brain. A fine mist. The words floated through my mind even as I smiled and blushed—something I’d worked hard to perfect on cue—as if I was gathering my thoughts before I said, “Well, I’ll keep writing. Aiden and I have talked about children, and we both feel there’s no reason to wait.”

Gavin nodded as if he approved. “Absolutely. No reason.”

The voices behind us faded as the guests left.

Aiden came and sat beside me, stretching his arm protectively along the back of the couch. I shifted, nestling into his side.

“I owe you an apology, Selena,” Gavin said to me. “I was rude the other day. I’ve just been concerned for my son.”

“You trust me to run your business for you, but not to pick my own partner?”

“Well, killing people and dealing with criminals is easy compared to navigating matters of the heart,” Gavin answered. “Would you let me apologize?”

Aiden jerked his head in a nod, and Gavin turned to me. I was surprised, because I didn’t expect men like that to offer a true apology. “Selena, I should have been more open to meeting you. I know Aiden has a good head on his shoulders and would choose a good match. Most of all, I shouldn’t have taken my concerns out on you. I’m sorry. Can we start over?”

Not a chance. “Of course. I look forward to getting to know you better, Mr. Crude.”

“And I look forward to getting to know you better,” Gavin said.

I was going to be the last person he saw before the life faded from his body. That was a sort of intimacy.

Aiden tilted his glass, his whiskey tilting back and forth with the motion until it seemed it might slosh out of the glass. It wasn't like Aiden to fidget. “What did you want to tell me about your wedding?”

“You know that I took over the business from my father,” Gavin said. To me, he added, “Our family has been in the gun running business since 1901.”

“That's quite the long legacy.” Did he really expect me to be impressed?

“It's provided a good life for my family, which has always been my true motivation.” Gavin said. “Before I took the business over from my father, he wanted to see that I was ready to settle down and produce an heir. I've been an asshole to you, Selena, and I'm sorry, but I learned it from the best.”

I chuckled politely.

“However, my father was concerned that my wife could be a gold digger or working for another family. I knew it was ridiculous, since I had known Caroline since we were both children. I trusted her completely. But before we married, Caroline had to prove herself.”

Aiden sat forward. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Gavin raised a hand to placate him. “Hear me out.”

“I'm listening,” I injected a shake into my voice.

“There were two things that Caroline did for our family before we married. I believe she was well compensated by the life we had together and the joy we felt raising you two boys.” Gavin smiled.

Aiden did not return it.

Gavin raised two fingers. “Once we were engaged, she killed a police informer. I set everything up for her to pull the trigger and was there to comfort her and kiss her afterward. And it was videotaped, so that if she ever left me or harmed the family, she knew what the consequences would be.”

Aiden swore.

“I knew it would never be needed, son,” Gavin said. “Surely you feel the same about Selena. But that was one of my father’s requirements.”

“It’s a stupid idea. Implicating your wife in a murder of a cop wouldn’t exactly make your hands look clean.” Aiden pointed out.

“Perhaps. But it also showed that she was invested, that she would do whatever it took for the family. Loyalty is a good quality in a wife.” Gavin’s gaze turned to mine, his stare weighty. “Would you kill for Aiden?”

I would kill for a diet Doctor Pepper as long as I thought the target deserved it. I licked my lips before I answered shakily, “Yes.”

“Good,” Gavin said, with a condescending smile which made me want to stab him through the eye with a pencil even more. But I pushed down my murderous impulses. There would be plenty of time for that later.

“You said there were two things,” I said, then stopped and drew in a deep breath that rattled in my chest so that we could all hear it. I was glad Man had brought in that improv teacher. “What’s the other?”

“You are a quick witted girl,” Gavin said, giving Aiden an approving look.

I wasn’t a girl at all, but go off, you misogynistic bastard.

He went on, “The second test was just that. A test. I tied Caroline to a bench, I applied some light torture, and I questioned her under my father’s supervision. To make sure that she was totally loyal to me and only me.”

Aiden’s jaw was bunched. “You tortured my mother?”

“You know how much I loved your mother,” Gavin chided. “Only lightly. I’m pretty sure you already did worse to Selena tonight. It was the truth serum that did most of the work.”

I stared at him in horror. “That’s such a violation.”

“Is it?” Gavin disagreed. “If you truly have nothing to hide?”

Aiden exhaled. “We’ll consider it.”

“Consider it quickly,” Gavin said. He glanced at his men, who stood at the door, eyeing Aiden’s men. In theory, they were all on the same side. We all knew reality had become more complicated than that. “Troy is carrying the serum. It has a short shelf life and it is quite expensive. It will be used tonight.”

“You can’t just spring this on us,” I said.

Gavin shrugged his shoulders. “What can I say? Family tradition. If Selena had advance notice, she might be able to take an antidote that would render the serum useless.”

I looked up at Aiden, expecting him to find a way to get us out of this. I couldn’t go under truth serum. There was no way I’d be able to hold back the truth of why I was here, or of what I was waiting for. Then we would have to fight our way out of this situation. Aiden needed to find a way to delay.

Instead, he blew out a long breath. “She’ll do it.”

Gavin smiled triumphantly.

I rested my hand on Aiden’s thigh as I looked up into his eyes. “Aiden, I can’t.”

“Didn’t you hear me? You can and you will.” He caressed my cheek, his thumb drifting over my lower lip in a way that was sensual even in such a terrible situation. His gaze pounded mine meaningfully. “I’ll be right there with you. All you need to say is *yes sir*.”

I bit my lower lip, struggling to trust him. But I knew that he must have some plan.

Still, it felt like a wrench in my chest to lose so much control.

Aiden's gaze was intent on my face. His fingers skimmed against mine, reminding me of his promise earlier that we would find another way out if we needed one.

“Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER 29



*A*iden

SELENA WAS FREAKING out on the outside, but that was a decision on her part. She usually had perfect control over how she acted. It was only because I knew her that I was pretty sure she truly was also freaking out on the inside.

There was no bigger loss of control for my dangerous, self-possessed girl.

The thought that she actually trusted me pressed in my chest with a mixture of pride and protectiveness. I had to take care of her through this.

“I already had you on the cross tonight,” I said. “I’m going to put you on the bench.”

She turned wide, brown eyes up to mine.

I tucked her hair back behind her ear. “I trust you. Do you trust me?”

“Completely,” she said softly.

I was sure that was a lie, given Selena’s life experience, but she held her delicate wrists out to me and I felt a surge of wild pride.

I bent her over the bench and attached her wrists—lightly, trusting that she wouldn’t pull loose. She made eye contact with me as I did it and while I kept my face neutral since my

father could see, I knew she understood. Then I moved to secure each ankle.

When I straightened, I told my father, "I'm not removing any of her clothes. Not with you here."

"I've seen you fuck plenty of women here," Gavin said, then glanced at Selena as if he was curious to see how those words landed. "But I understand. This one will be your wife."

He moved to the other end of the room and sprawled in a chair, crossing his legs casually and resting his hands on the sides as if he were about to watch a film. I was glad I had some space from him.

He'd already set the case with the serum down on the table. I opened it and looked at the needle inside, then made sure it was ready, checking there was no air until a drop of silvery-blue liquid glistened at the tip of the needle.

Selena made a small, scared whimper. Even though I knew it was fake, it still echoed in my chest. I didn't want her to feel a moment's fear and I hated she had to experience it because of my dickhead father.

"Shh," I said, kneeling behind her. I pushed up the hem of her dress, exposing her thigh. "You're a good girl, Selena. You're going to take this for me, and I'm going to count down. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

What happened next would be dependent on if I could keep a perfect poker face, since I couldn't entirely disappear from Gavin's view. "Three, two..." I said as I lined up the needle, then, "One."

I slid the needle into the underside of my wrist and injected it. Gavin stood to see, as Selena threw her head up and let out a cry. Her flying hair blocked Gavin from view, and I stood with the needle, giving her a slap on the thigh. "Don't be a brat. It didn't hurt more than anything else I'll do to you tonight."

Knowing Gavin was watching to see that the needle's cylinder was empty, I let him see it before I dropped the spent

needle into the case. I closed the case with a thud.

Then I turned to Gavin. “Well, what do you want me to ask her?”

“Why don’t you warm up while the serum takes effect?” he said. “It should be five minutes.”

I picked up the riding crop and hit her. It had no pleasure with my father’s eyes on us, but it wouldn’t hurt her in any real way. She cried out, twisted and pulled at her bonds, but it was all for show; she could’ve slipped them if she wanted to. Then she stilled, as if she were coming to peace with the position. She knew what I was up to now.

I just had to hope I didn’t accidentally reveal more truth than I intended, given the serum would affect me. I looked up at Gavin, who looked impatient when he said, “You have a strange idea of torture.”

“It’s not even necessary.”

“It’s *tradition*. It doesn’t have to be necessary.”

I scoffed. “The true torture will be joining this family.”

I smacked her one more time. “Tell me something I don’t know. Tell me if you want my friends as much as you want me.”

Gavin’s face tightened in interest. We had to give him something.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Who?”

“Dominic. Xander.”

“Do you want them to fuck you?”

I smacked her again, not that I cared.

Selena whimpered, her fingernails digging into the leather of the bench.

“Another question,” Gavin said, his eyes intense. “Did you truly meet Aiden at a party?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know who he was beforehand?”

“No.”

I caressed her ass with the crop, though it didn't have the same impact through her dress. “Do you love me?”

“Yes sir.”

Gavin scoffed, and I knew it annoyed him that she answered me with *sir* and not him. Knowing my Selena, that was a purposeful provocation, and it gave me a warm glow in my chest.

“Are you loyal to me? Not any other family, any other organization?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” she repeated.

I looked up at Gavin. “Anything else you wanted to know?”

“That covers the highlights.” He rose to his feet. But as he neared me, he paused. “Are you really happy to have a girl who loves your friends? Who wants them too?”

Fuck, a question.

“Yes,” I said. I tried to grind down on the truth, but it spilled out. “She's worth it. I've fallen in love with her.”

“So you'll watch your friends fuck her?”

“With pleasure.” I admitted.

Gavin shook his head, amusement written across his face. “I never thought you'd really fall in love. I hope it brings you joy just like your mother brought me.”

“It surprises me too. I didn't expect to fall for her, But I'll love her until the day I die.”

Gavin nodded. “Take good care of her, son.”

“I will.”

No matter what it cost him.

As soon as Gavin had left, Dominic and Xander came in. “They're really gone. We've got people watching the door. Is

Selena...”

Their gaze fell to her.

“Ours,” I said, clapping their shoulders. The serum made me feel loose, uncomfortably so. “There’s no one else I’d rather have by my side. Always.”

“Aiden,” she said, an urgent note in her voice. “Where did you hide the truth serum?”

“I took it myself.”

“Oh fuck,” Xander said.

“That could’ve gone really wrong,” Dominic said.

“But it didn’t,” I said. “And now it’s just Selena and us, and she wants us... all three of us. Don’t you?”

I trailed the riding crop over the curve of her ass, reminding her I had other ways of inviting her to tell the truth.

“I do,” she said, the word choked when she meant it, unlike when she played a role.

“Good girl,” I told her. “Then you can have just what you want.”

CHAPTER 30



S elena

AIDEN SMILED and brushed his lips against mine. His kiss was soft and gentle, and it sent a wave of pleasure through my body. I responded eagerly, my hands running over his broad shoulders and muscled back.

Dominic stepped forward and moved his hands over my waist, pulling me close and pressing his lips against my neck. His kiss was burning hot, and that heat rushed through me. His hands slid over my curves as his lips moved down, exploring every inch of my body.

For a moment, Aiden and Dominic trapped me between them, covering me with kisses. Their big, hard bodies penned me in, and I felt warm and safe as well as horny between them.

Xander moved in next, his hands tracing the curves of my body. His kisses were hungry and passionate, and I gasped in pleasure as his hands moved lower, until he pressed his fingers against my clit and began to rock them back and forth. My hips swayed with him, wanting more of him, as the three of them penned me in until I could barely move.

I felt myself melting into the sensations they were creating. I'd longed for this, and I could already tell it was going to be better than I could have imagined.

I moaned in pleasure as they continued their exploration, their hands and lips traveling over my body. I felt as if I was in

a trance, lost in the pleasure that they were creating.

The three of them lay me down gently on the bed, and my breath caught in my throat as I saw the desire in their eyes. I'd never had any man look at me like that before them, and now I had three men look at me as if they adored me.

Their hands and lips explored me, creating sensations I had never felt before.

I felt my breath catch as Xander brought his mouth down to my breast.

The three of them moved together, their hands and lips exploring me in perfect harmony. I felt my body arch in pleasure, and as my breast rose toward him, Dominic captured that nipple in his mouth. Meanwhile Aiden pressed between me, his fingers sometimes stumbling over Xander's relentless teasing of my clit, as he began to toy with my ass.

I reached hungrily for Xander's cock, rubbing my thumb over his piercing to watch the way his hips rocked in response. His dark eyes smoldered hungrily down at me as I pulled away from them, feeling the loss of their hands so I could kneel at the center of this group of three. I touched my tongue to his tip, then dragged my tongue down his cock until I met his balls.

Aiden moved behind me, and I felt his fingers dancing over my skin before he gripped my hips and yanked me to the foot of the bed. He moved his weight forward, gently pressing his cock against my opening. I moaned in pleasure as he pulled me back against him, thrusting his cock inside of me.

Dominic moved to the head of the bed and knelt beside me. I turned my face towards him, pulling Xander's cock back into my mouth and sucking hard. Xander growled, his hips bucking as I took him in deep.

I felt Aiden's hips moving back and forth, slowly and rhythmically as he slowly pulled his cock in and out of me. I moaned in pleasure, feeling a hot, delicious tingle spreading through my core. Dominic pulled my hair back, exposing my

neck to his lips. He trailed his lips across my skin, his hands cupping my breasts hungrily.

Then Dominic sprawled across the bed. He pulled me on top of him, and Aiden stayed inside me as they positioned themselves, until Dominic's mouth was against my clit. As Aiden resumed rocking inside me, Dominic's fingers spread my lips, looking up at me and watching Xander's cock enter over and over.

"You have the most beautiful pussy I've ever seen," Dominic said, "And I love watching my friends fuck you."

The three of them kept moving, each of them exploring me in his own way. Aiden moved his hands and mouth over my body, making my skin tingle with the sensation. My fingers and tongue continued to explore Xander and his shaft, eager to feel his cock pulse in my hand.

I felt the sensation building, and I moaned in pleasure as Xander pulsed inside my mouth. I looked up, and met his eyes as he gritted his teeth, trying to hold back a little longer so we could come together.

As the sensation built, Dominic's mouth moved to my opening, and I felt his tongue swirl around my lips, teasing around where Aiden's cock filled me. His tongue was hot and rough as he explored me, and sensation flooded my body.

The sensation was building faster. My hands explored Xander's leanly muscled thighs, feeling his muscles rippling as his hips thrust forward. I could feel my body building towards orgasm, and I moaned around Xander's cock as he erupted. I pulled his hot come into my mouth, swirling and sucking with desire and swallowing every drop.

With a primal cry, Aiden thrust deep inside me, and I felt an explosion of pleasure as he filled me with his seed. I moaned in pleasure, my body tingling all over as Aiden rocked against me, again and again, until he was finally spent.

He pulled out, and Dominic gazed up at the two of us, his eyes warm.

"What do you want?" I asked him, eager to please him.

He caressed the curve of my ass. “I want this perfect ass to be mine,” he said. “I want to be the first one to own your ass.”

We changed positions, so that Xander was lying on the bed now and Dominic lined up behind me. Aiden sank into the chair by the door, but he contributed by giving all of us orders while we tried to sort out our positions. He soon drew his heavy dick out of his pants to stroke it as he watched us.

Once Xander had slowly entered me as I sank down, inch by inch, onto his cock, Dominic began to rub his cock against my ass. He poured lube over his cock, and the warm liquid dripped down my ass crack while he continued to tease me with his tip.

“Enter her,” Aiden ordered.

Dominic hesitated, still rubbing slow circles against me, as if he were worried he’d hurt me.

“Please,” I moaned, eager for the pressure against my tight opening. “Please try.”

As the pressure increased, I felt myself growing more and more desperate. I was still aching to feel Dominic’s cock enter my ass.

I was so wet, I was sure he’d slide in easily, but as he pushed against my ass, I felt as if there was something stopping him.

I relaxed as much as possible, but he told me to hold still for a moment. Then I felt Xander’s fingers between my thighs. As I gasped and moaned, his fingers spread my folds apart, stroking me as Dominic slowly entered me, inch by inch, until I was filled.

I groaned as I felt the sensation of both Xander and Dominic inside me. It was as if they were taking me at both ends, joining me in a way I had never experienced before. I felt their cocks rubbing against each other, stimulating my core and building the heat within me.

The sensation built quickly, and I moaned in pleasure as I felt both of them pumping inside me. I could feel the tension

building, and the desire to come over me. I cried out, bucking back against them as they thrust into me.

I moaned in pleasure, crying out their names as they continued penetrating me. My body surrendered to the sensations, and I was lost in the blur of pleasure as the orgasm ripped through my body. I collapsed onto Xander, my hips grinding against him as he thrust into me.

Aiden rose and came closer, the look on his face intent, and I felt his hot come fall against my back as he came from watching the three of us.

Then, in a sticky, warm mess that I didn't mind one bit, the four of us tumbled side by side into the bed. Xander stroked my hair back, smiling up at me dreamily.

“You're ours,” he said quietly.

“I am.” I felt a mischievous smile curve my lips. “Aiden said as much, under the truth serum.”

“I do love you,” Aiden said, then frowned, as if he were still surprised to hear himself.

“I don't need truth serum to tell you I love you,” I said to Aiden, before kissing him softly. Then I turned to Xander and kissed the corner of his mouth. His hand fisted in my hair as he caught me and held me there, turning his mouth to kiss me fully, intensely, deeply. His tongue parted my lips as easily as the guys had parted my aching core.

I pulled away just long enough to say breathlessly, “and I love you, Xander.”

“You know I love you,” he said, then kissed me again as if he couldn't help it. “I love you, beautiful.”

Then I turned to find Dominic. He was looking at me even more hungrily than he had before we fucked.

Before I could even get the words out, he grabbed me, as if he knew what I was about to say and it affected him so much, and his lips crashed against mine. He kissed me breathless.

He didn't need to say the words. I knew he would, but I could feel his love in his lips as he kissed me like he would

never let me go.

CHAPTER 31



Selena

THE NEXT SEVERAL days passed in a pleasant blur with the guys. I knew time was ticking down in every way, including to when Gavin would want me to kill for him.

But Aiden had a plan, of course. He always did.

Foss had named a man who still worked for Gavin, Kenneth Kyle. So Aiden, Dominic and Xander were lining things up to frame Kyle. They wanted it to be Gavin's idea to order his death.

"You know," Xander pointed out between kisses, as the four of us were lying in bed, "We could take out all three patriarchs in one fell swoop." He mimed pushing a button, except he did it with my nipple, his thumb tweaking me then his palm caressing my breast.

"That would kick off an all out war," Aiden disagreed.

"Which we would win." Dominic's hand swept down my thigh, and I grabbed his wrist and guided him between my legs to just where I wanted him to be. "But Selena wants the chance to murder people herself."

Xander turned disappointed brown eyes toward me, as if he were personally insulted by my lack of interest in explosives. "You could press the button."

“It always distresses me to agree with Aiden, but it’s just not the same,” I said.

Aiden nipped my shoulder in revenge. The bite of his teeth against my skin made my back arch, and then his lips swept up my throat until he found the place below my ear that always made me moan.

And then even murder wasn’t that interesting to the four of us.

* * *

THE DAY CAME, about a week after the club. Gavin came to tell us what he wanted, since Aiden still didn’t carry a cell phone. I would’ve been surprised that he came himself, but then, we’d already established he did his own dirty work.

I was used to working harder for a kill. But Aiden drove me to the warehouse when Kenneth Kyle was being held. I glanced up at the video cameras watching us to record this moment.

Aiden handed me his gun.

I walked alone toward the man who was bound to a chair.

I looked into his eyes, but I didn’t remember him.

And I doubted he remembered me or my parents. We’d been nothing. A *favor*. How much had they been paid for tearing my parents away?

My hand trembled on the gun. It wasn’t like me, but hey, at least the tremors would be convincing for Gavin, who thought I barely knew how to fire a gun.

The thought of putting a bullet through Kyle’s head, then turning and aiming at Gavin, pulsed relentlessly through my brain. I could just imagine the stunned look on his face that split-second before I sent him off to Hell. I wished he’d remember me.

Kyle made desperate noises against the gag.

“Should’ve made better choices,” I told him as I raised the gun. “The dildo of consequences rarely comes lubed up.”

I squeezed the trigger. That was the longest my monologues ever got.

The sound split the air, and the man slumped in the chair, the bullet neatly pierced through his skull, leaving a round hole. The other side was much messier, brain and blood splattered across the cement.

I turned to face Aiden and Gavin.

The two of them looked pristine, tall and dark haired. Gavin smiled at me warmly. Aiden was the one who looked alarmed, taking a step toward me.

“Aiden,” I cried out, rushing toward him. I handed him the gun as if I were afraid of it. Gavin smiled at me as if I were adorable. He didn’t realize I was thrusting the gun away before I lost my mind and couldn’t resist drilling him with bullet holes.

For Aiden’s sake.

I would get my chance eventually to kill Gavin Crude, even though right now he was looking awfully pleased with himself.

“I’ve got to get her home.” Aiden wrapped a protective arm around my shoulders. “Do you need anything else?”

“Not at all,” Gavin said. “Welcome to the family, Selena.”

CHAPTER 32



*A*iden

THAT NIGHT, Gavin came over for dinner. I didn't like the idea, given how close Selena had come to killing him in the warehouse, and her promises she would be on her best behavior weren't particularly comforting.

I was still wrestling with the thought of her killing my father. I understood why she had to do it, but the thoughts and images that rushed through my mind rankled. My girl's slender finger tightening on the trigger, the look of fear and betrayal on my father's face, the thought of how my father used to kiss my mother with delight in his gaze.

But Selena was fine for now, drinking champagne and playing hostess with a smile that charmed my father. She served dessert as my father leaned back in his chair, looking pleased with us all.

Since my father was suddenly so big on tradition, I pointed out to him that he'd replaced his father on *his* wedding day. The sooner I took over, the less likely Selena was to stab him with a steak knife or drive a pen into his eye. I'd been quietly collecting sharp objects from her all night.

"It does seem like an auspicious time to mark such a big change," Gavin agreed. "I've been getting things ready for you to take over for a long time. Planning our expansion, setting things in motion. And I know you're ready."

I nodded.

“Have you thought about a date yet? In about a year—”

“We have,” Selena said, touching my arm. She smiled at me, as if she were holding back a secret. “Should we tell him?”

God, I never should have told her I loved it when she ad-libbed.

“Yes, we should,” I said, smiling back at her.

We’d talk about this later. She had to know that, and from the way she crossed her legs, I didn’t think she minded the thought of my disapproval and heavy hands. She smoothed her skirt over her legs as she flashed me a mischievous look.

“Aiden and I are expecting,” she said softly. “I’d like to bring the baby into this world as man and wife.”

Gavin sat back and raised his eyebrows, a stunned look across his face. “Wow.”

She nodded. “I know. I’m so excited but... it’s not quite the right timing. So since the baby’s due date is set... the wedding date will have to be soon.”

“Of course,” he said, recovering quickly. Then he looked at me. “Are you sure the child is yours?”

“Absolutely. Selena cares for Dominic and Xander, but she hasn’t been with them. This child is mine.”

“When do you want to get married?” he asked.

She’d spun that lovely, convenient lie about being raised by a very religious uncle. “Selena’s family is old fashioned and she doesn’t feel like she can announce the pregnancy to them before there’s a wedding ring on her finger.”

She ducked her head, an embarrassed flush crawling up her neck. I admired the complete control she had. “We’ll pretend the baby is... early.”

“So, soon.” Gavin’s voice had turned icy. He’d already agreed, and he must feel maneuvered into something he didn’t want.

I might have felt some pity if that hadn't maneuvered me that same way my entire life.

"Soon," I confirmed. "We can have a small gathering with family and friends next week... if you give your blessing."

Gavin sighed. "This is all moving so fast, Aiden."

"I know," I said, taking her hand and holding it in her lap. I gave it a squeeze. "But I have to take care of my wife and child. Just as you've always said."

"If anyone can pull off a hasty wedding, you can," my father stood. "And I'll prepare for the transfer. It wasn't what I planned, but I've been looking forward to retirement. You can do all the work from now on."

He gave me a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

I whistled once he had gone. "That's quite the story, Selena."

She met my gaze. "It's not a story, Aiden. My period's late, so I took a test this morning."

I stared at her in disbelief.

She nodded.

I grinned, wanting to grab her and kiss her, but it wasn't just my baby. "Dominic! Xander!"

Dominic sauntered in, Rocky at Dominic's heels. Xander followed, his fingers ink-smudged and his eyes intense.

"Tell them our news," I told her.

Dominic frowned expectantly. Xander touched his fingers to her lower back, always unable to resist touching her if they were in the same room.

Selena said, "I'm pregnant."

It took a few seconds for it to register. Then Dominic let out a delighted laugh. Xander grabbed Selena and kissed her. Selena kissed him back, but she was stiffer than usual and she pulled away after a few seconds.

Rocky ran around their legs excitedly, barking as if she understood the joyful emotions even if she didn't understand the words.

Selena stopped our celebration by raising her hand, though she also dropped to her knees to pet Rocky. "I'm not sure what to do... I'm still a Belladonna."

She twisted the hem of her shirt in her fingers as she looked up at us, and it was the first time I'd seen Selena genuinely nervous. "I don't want to bring up a baby while I'm an assassin, never knowing when I'm going to be on the receiving end of my own justice. But I also don't want to bring my baby up as a criminal... the heir to a criminal empire."

"But Selena," Dominic said. "We can use our power for good."

She nodded. "Like at the pier. But that's not enough."

I turned to Dominic. "Like the pier?"

My tone had turned to ice. Selena straightened, looking as if she was ready to jump in front of Dominic.

"I should have told you sooner," Dominic said. "I couldn't let you go through with it. I know you thought it was easier to let your father have his way, but there are some things you can't take back. All those women would have suffered."

"You can't just go behind my back!" I said.

"You're always the one who's right, Aiden," Dominic said crisply. "Doing whatever the *pragmatic* thing is. Your father wants Aster taken out as part of your expansion project. Were you going to talk to Selena before you let Xander blow him to pieces?"

"Selena wants him dead more than I do," I reminded him. "Aster's the real reason her parents are dead."

Selena had fallen silent.

"Aiden is right that Aster needs to go," she said. "If you can guarantee there's no innocent collateral damage...let's do it."

But not even killing one of the worst criminals in the city could fix the darkness that had fallen between us.

I wished we could reverse five minutes to when we were all happy.

When I thought she was going to stay.

CHAPTER 33



Selena

THE NEXT WEEK WENT BY, busy with preparations but also strangely quiet. All of us were being careful around each other now.

Aiden sat down beside me on the couch and handed me a USB stick.

“This doesn’t seem like you,” I said, covering my curiosity by being glib. “I thought you assumed I could kill someone with one of these.”

“I have faith in you to kill someone with a coffee mug,” he said. “But that’s all the info I’ve collected about the Belladonnas. I deleted it from everywhere else. It also has the information I used to track you guys to San Francisco, so you can tighten up the patterns in your airline travel. You girls shouldn’t always fly first class.”

“Ooh, if the Belladonnas find out you’re responsible for them flying coach, you really should expect a hit,” I told him lightly. Then I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“I want the best for you, Selena.” His jaw tightened so much that a tick leapt under his cheekbone. “And if you don’t see yet that *the best* is right here, with us... then I guess I’ve got to give you the space and time to figure that out.”

* * *

WE WENT to one of Aiden's resorts for the wedding. I dressed in a simple, but expensive—because Aiden loved for me to spend his money—white gown, edged in lace. I asked Xander to take some pictures of me, because I knew the girls would find this hilarious, and I wasn't sure if I'd be here long enough to receive the official wedding photographs.

But when I walked down the aisle toward Aiden, my heart still swelled.

Aiden's eyes were soft and adoring, and he whispered, "I love you."

I paused for a moment, and returned a soft, "I love you, too."

We finished the ceremony under a canopy on the lush green lawn of the resort, overlooking the shimmering lake.

But the most important moment came after the reception, when Aiden disappeared into a back room with the men who had come to witness the transfer of Gavin's business to Aiden.

When Aiden came out of the room, he looked tense, but he nodded to me.

It was done.

I could kill Gavin Crude and fade back out of their lives.

If that was what I chose to do.

I still didn't think Aiden could truly bear to be with me if I killed Gavin. He loved his father. Gavin was a monster, but he was a peculiar monster. He was good to his family and terrible to the world.

"Does it feel like a weight has been lifted?" I asked as I kissed Aiden's cheek.

Aiden shook his head. "But I'm ready."

Aiden's eyes were sad when he looked at me. He reached for my hand and pressed his lips to my knuckles. "Dance with

me?”

He led me onto the dance floor, where we moved to the slow, romantic song. His hands tightened around my waist and his lips pressed against mine. Aiden led intentionally, every move of his perfectly sculpted body sexy.

“I should’ve known you’d be dominant on the dance floor,” I teased him.

“And everywhere else.” His hand dipped just below the curve of my back, just for a second. After all, this was no time for his more debauched moves.

But I didn’t mind being reminded of them.

I loved these moments. I loved the way he kissed me, and the feel of his cock pressed against my hip. I loved the way he laughed when I teased him, and the way he pounded his cock into me, the way he growled when he took me hard enough for his balls to slap my pussy. I loved the way he ate me out like I was the most delicious feast and the salty taste of him on my tongue. I loved the way he dominated me and let me surrender control, falling into trust for the first time.

I loved the way his hands felt on my body.

But beyond that... I loved the quiet intensity he brought to every task. I loved the way he looked after the men he loved like brothers. I loved his generosity and the way he cooked for us, revealing a caring side that he didn’t show the outside world. I loved that, despite his checkered past, I was sure he’d be both a good father and a good man.

I loved everything about him.

And I had no idea what I was going to do about it.

CHAPTER 34



S elena

THE DAY AFTER MY WEDDING, I set off to murder Gavin Crude.

Aiden had replaced almost every electronic in his house with the intention of keeping me captive. That made it easy to steal his keys and let myself out of his house, going through lock after lock.

I didn't want to steal from him, though. Instead of taking his car, I went down the road, feeling a prickle along my skin because I figured Aiden might be watched by rival families and they would see me as an easy target.

Fools. But it would be an inconvenience.

There were no pay phones anymore, but as soon as I got out of the house and away from the wifi blockers, I could use my mother's old cell phone to call Man.

"I need help," I said.

"What?" he asked, not sounding concerned about how I'd vanished. I'd filled him in that I would be out of touch a while.

I gave him a shopping list, then hung up.

I walked to make sure I wasn't being tailed, then opened my mother's phone and began to scroll through the photos she'd taken of me—and the selfies she'd taken of us together—all from before I was five years old

I found the picture of my mother holding me as a baby, and I traced her face with my finger. She had been so beautiful, with her long black hair and almond brown eyes.

I wondered if she would be proud of me for what I was about to do to Gavin. Or if she would be sad. I wouldn't want my baby to grow up to be a Belladonna.

The realization of that shocked me. This was the only life I'd ever known. It was good enough... wasn't it?

I shoved the phone into my pocket and stepped into the shadows, waiting for Man's friend to arrive. He pulled up in a beat-up old car, and I got into the passenger seat.

"Got everything you asked for," he said, passing me a bag. Inside were a set of lock picks, a silenced pistol, a cell phone, and a knife.

"Thanks," I said, tucking the weapons into my waistband. "I need you to wait for me."

"Sure thing," he said, not asking any questions. Man's contacts were always there when I needed him.

I approached Gavin Crude's mansion, feeling a sense of dread building in my stomach. I knew what I had to do, and just like all other targets, he deserved to die.

But he was also Aiden's father.

I thought again of my mother smiling out of the photo, and sighed under my breath. I hated to risk my life—when it was the baby's life—and I hated to give up my happy ending with Aiden

But I had waited all my life for this.

I had to follow through. I had to get revenge for my parents.

I was going to take Gavin Crude out in his own home.

I rang the doorbell, feeling odd standing in plain sight, where he could see my face, without any disguise or pretense.

One of Gavin's men came to the door.

“Miss Selena,” he said, stepping back. “I’ll tell Mr. Crude you’re here.”

“Thank you.”

I waited for a few moments in the foyer, and when the man returned, he said, “Please follow me.”

I followed him down the hallway to the sitting room, where Gavin waited. He smiled when he saw me, and my fingers twitched.

Planting a fist in his smug face would be satisfying.

But I wasn’t here to please myself. Instead, I forced a smile and said, “Aiden sent me. He had urgent business.”

“What is it?”

He wasn’t surprised. After all, Aiden hadn’t carried a cell phone since he met me. He’d told his father he was a technophobe. After Gavin found his phone bricked right before the attempt on his life, Aiden didn’t want to give the assassin an easier entry into their lives.

“He knows who the assassin truly is,” I said.

Gavin stood. His hands trembled slightly. He was afraid, and that sent a jolt of power through me. How did it feel for him to be the one afraid when he had caused so much pain?

But he still sounded in control when he asked, “Does he want me to meet him somewhere to deal with this assassin?”

“No,” I rose too, already pulling the silenced pistol out from beneath my jacket. “Because I’m your killer.”

His lips parted in shock right before I squeezed the trigger, putting a bullet through his brain. I didn’t waste time.

He crumpled to the carpet, still looking offended.

I fired my pistol repeatedly as I ran out of the house, instinctively killing Gavin’s two guards that tried to stop me. The men fell like bowling pins, arms and legs splaying into unnatural positions.

It was over. I tucked the still-hot gun back under my jacket, its presence a hard, comforting weight even if it singed my skin slightly. After all, I'd learned over the past few weeks that I wasn't afraid of pain.

I slid into the passenger seat of the nondescript car, which I knew didn't even belong to Man's contact.

"Would you please drive me to the airport?" I asked. "Time for me to go home."

And so without any fanfare, I left behind the man who had murdered my parents.

And I left behind his son and the other men I'd come to love.

CHAPTER 35



S elena

WHEN I WALKED BACK into the Belladonna mansion, it felt a little smaller than it had before. I looked around the cozy space thinking about how I'd grown up here, how I'd slid in my socks across the hardwood floors in playful moments. But my childhood had been dominated by Man's training, for preparing to be a deadly assassin.

A sudden wash of sadness swept over me. I'd never had a dog like Rocky; I hadn't had the chance to paint or draw or discover any other interest besides shooting and martial arts. I genuinely loved those things, but...

There were noises in the kitchen, and I headed for my room, intent on not being dragged into a conversation.

But when I walked into my room, it felt a little claustrophobic, like a closet in its own way. The glow of the vending machine, the faint... odor of Ramen... which lingered even after my time away.

Royal was right. I needed plants.

I closed the door and paced around, then... to my shock... left the room and headed back toward the stairs. I wandered into the kitchen, not knowing what I really wanted.

"There you are!" Tabitha rushed over as if she wanted to hug me, then paused. She knew me better than that. "You've been gone a while!"

I didn't know what to say to that. I was always awkward when I wasn't playing a role.

"Yeah." I held out my arms to Tabitha, whose surprise only flashed across her face for a second before she leaned in and hugged me. "I missed you guys."

She hugged me tightly, and of course I was the one who finally broke away.

"What happened to you out there?" she said with a laugh.

"My target's dead," I said, my voice hollow. "And I found out who killed my parents."

"Oh." Tabitha's eyes went round. "Do you want some pizza? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," I said, automatically. I always said no. Tabitha had the worst taste in pizza and I didn't talk about my feelings.

"Okay," Tabitha said, cheerful in the face of all the rejections she faced. She was the nicest of any of us.

"But I would like to order Chinese food," I said, because I had a craving for lo mein and felt like I was going to die if I didn't eat it, "and I'd like to watch *Kill Bill* for the fiftieth time. If you want to hang out."

We soon had ordered and were sprawled on the couch. Soon, Darcy came in and flopped on the couch with us. Darcy mixed pineapple in with her lo mein when it came, and when Ivory came in, she made the usual noises about how weird Darcy was.

"It actually sounds pretty good," I admitted. "Savory plus sweet pineapple."

Darcy angled her can of pineapple back and forth at me as if she were trying to tempt me.

Suddenly I had an intense craving for just that. I poured pineapple into my lo mein and took a bite. Then I closed my eyes and moaned—not quite like I moaned for Aiden, Dominic, and Xander, but it was *good*.

“We should stop teasing Darcy about her culinary choices.”

Ivory asked me, “Are you okay?”

Tabitha, Darcy, Ivory and I hung out on the couch and watched the movie. Until a wave of nausea overwhelmed me. Fuck. It was called *morning* sickness. Why was it plaguing me now?

I ran to the bathroom and leaned over the sink, thinking positive, motivating thoughts to my esophagus. If I’d known I might barf, I wouldn’t have picked noodles.

“That’s what comes from mixing foods into unholy combinations,” Ivory said from the doorway. Despite her being... herself... she sounded sympathetic.

It was comforting being back with the girls. My closest friends, as much as I’d pushed them away.

But I missed Aiden, Dominic, and Xander. I could just imagine how they’d fuss over me. I went to get a Mountain Dew—surely the nectar of the gods would settle my stomach—but then I hesitated, wondering how caffeine impacted a baby. Would the tadpole in my stomach end up turning wild backflips?

I needed to see a doctor. And I needed to tell Man I wasn’t taking any more missions.

But I was reluctant to tell anyone about the baby, which felt like a secret all my own. It would be real if I told them about it, and I would have to decide what to do.

Later that night, I knocked on Man’s door. He looked surprised when he saw me standing there. His white-touched beard was as impeccable as ever and he waved me in.

“Gavin Crude is dead,” I told him, because I was as abrupt and succinct as he was. I tossed the USB drive onto his desk. “The Crude family was collecting information on the Belladonnas. Apparently we’re gaining notoriety among the criminal underworld. The Crudes tried to be ready for me. We need to be more careful.”

Man grunted and picked up the thumb drive. I wasn't sure he was going to truly *be more careful* with us. I'd like to understand his reasons for taking us in, for grooming us to be Belladonnas.

But maybe it didn't matter.

I knew this wasn't the right place for a kid to grow up

"Did you know you were sending me after the man who killed my parents?" My voice came out light. As if I didn't care. My usual M.O.

He raised his eyebrows. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm done taking orders," I said. "I need a break."

I turned and walked out of his office.

"Selena," he called after me. I turned to find he'd stood up from his desk. "You've done well. I'm proud of you."

I wasn't sure he'd be too proud when he found out I was knocked up by my target's son.

CHAPTER 36



S elena

TABITHA WENT with me to my ultrasound appointment. She held my hand and squealed when the ultrasound showed a healthy, alien-looking little figure. The girls were excited for me, as long as *I* was excited, but Tabitha had been acting like my big sister.

When she was by my side, I could almost pretend that I was fine on my own.

I could almost pretend I didn't think about Dominic, Xander and Aiden constantly.

* * *

IT FELT like the first time in weeks I left the house, and it was the first time I'd left alone. But I needed to be myself.

My parents had a safety deposit at the bank. That was where my trail had ultimately led.

My parents, a long time ago, had gone analog. Maybe they would have loved Aiden and his technophobe ways.

I pulled my mind away from the thought. It seemed like I was always thinking about Aiden. And Dominic. And Zander.

I'd even bought some canvases and started to paint. Everything I made was terrible. But that wasn't really the

point. The other girls kept asking if they could see, once they had noticed the paint on my fingers. I told them that I destroyed all the canvases afterward, which was true. It was the best part. Splashing them with bleach or setting them on fire to change what they were into something else entirely, something rougher but still beautiful. Something a little more my style.

When I opened the safety deposit box, I found the evidence my father had collected about Aster. It hardly mattered; my father had tried to bring Aster down with the law, and I'd done it my own way.

They had done what they could to keep it from falling into Aster's hands. They'd known their lives were in danger.

Had they known one day, I'd chase down their killers? Get justice for them?

I had a feeling they hadn't dreamt of my path. That all they'd wanted was for me to survive that terrible day. To have a life. To be happy.

I didn't exactly have any of those things yet, but I did have a powerful need for spaghetti at the moment, and that would have to be good enough.

With my hand on the strap in my bag, I headed down the street. The evidence they'd worked to protect didn't even matter, and that felt wrong and sad. I'd made my own justice.

As I headed down the sidewalk, the sense something was wrong crawled up my spine. I could feel myself being watched. I reached for my knife in my bag and used my thumb to push off the sheath. Then I drew it out, hiding the blade against my leg.

I'd drop the bag and pull my gun if I needed to, but a knife is usually more unobtrusive. I could stab whoever was following me if I needed to, then continue on my way through without anyone realizing.

A van rolled past me. The door was opening. It wasn't subtle, but they had the benefit of speed and I imagined they'd hoped for surprise.

But that didn't make them a match for a Belladonna.

Especially a hungry, angry Belladonna who was looking forward to lunch.

I didn't run away. Instead, I grabbed the door handle and used it to help propel me as I jumped into the van with the three thugs who were trying to kidnap me.

"What's up, gentleman?" I asked, already moving toward one of them to slash their throats open.

The next second, I registered the golden blonde hair of my target, and I paused, the blade a whisper away from his throat.

Dominic's bright blue eyes met mine. He grinned as if he'd missed me, even though I'd just come very close to severing an artery that he was probably quite attached to.

Rocky almost knocked me over, and I put my arm around her to pet her, realizing that the dog changed the game.

I might consider killing my exes. But I would never shoot the dog.

"What are you doing?" I asked harshly. "Did you really try to kidnap me?"

"For old time's sake, little bird," Dominic said defensively.

"You cannot kidnap someone in a nostalgic way!" I told him. "There's nothing romantic about kidnapping!"

"It can be a little bit romantic," Xander disagreed behind me, and the sound of his voice sent a surge of emotion rising through my chest.

These men were psychos.

I missed them.

I didn't put the knife away. A little stabby stab was still on the table depending on how they acted.

"You've been back with the Belladonnas for a month," Aiden said. When I turned to find him, I drew my gun. His dark eyes locked on mine, and he didn't even seem to notice the weapon. "Are you ready to come home?"

“Are you ready to kill me for murdering your father?”

Aiden frowned. “Your second chance at completing the mission was always the deal. What *wasn't* the deal was you sneaking out of my house to do it and not saying goodbye.”

“You loved your father.”

“Yes. And yes, I'm mourning him. In my own way. But... it doesn't change the kind of man he was.”

Xander stepped forward as if he couldn't resist touching me and took my hand. “And it doesn't change what you are to us.”

“I don't understand how we make this work,” I said. “We're certainly all criminals, we're all on the wrong side of the law, but I've been trying to make the world a better place. In my own way.”

“With our money and connections we could expand in a new direction,” Aiden said. “You don't have to just kill bad guys for the Belladonnas.”

I felt an unexpected smile to them cross my lips. I was pretty good at reading people, and Aiden meant what he was saying. “You want to kill some criminals with me?”

“I love you so much, I would want to watch *Little Women* with you. Forget killing some people.” Xander said, and I laughed.

Dominic caught me around the waist, and this time, I didn't take it as an attack. I let him pull me against his broad chest, and I relaxed into his warmth. I'd missed the way he touched me.

I beamed at them.

“All right, but you're going to have to meet the girls. They're the closest thing I have to a family.” I paused. “I mean, they are my family.”

“They're not your only family,” Dominic said, his hands cupping my stomach, as if he was trying to feel for the baby inside.

EPILOGUE



A few months later, we had another wedding. This time, we had it at Aiden's favorite resort, in the Turks and Caicos. I was sunburned on my wedding day, and I was what felt like eleven months pregnant.

Harlow came, with Gabe at her side. What were the odds that two Belladonnas would find true love with the sons of a man who deserved to die at our hands? The two of us didn't hug each other—that wasn't Harlow, and it wasn't me—but I grinned at her. She and I and the other Belladonnas swam during the morning before our wedding, floating in the crystal-clear blue water, talking about poisons and weapons like the totally normal girls we were.

Normal or not, we all deserved to find love.

Anyway, that was why I was sunburned on my wedding day, standing with my feet sinking in the sand and my burn prickling against the thin straps of my simple white sundress. Even Aiden, who seemed impervious to things that affected mortals, looked ruddy-cheeked and happy as he waited at the end of the aisle with Xander and Dominic. Dominic wore one of his suits, as ever, and Xander looked remarkably un-ink-stained on our wedding day. But he still sketched me obsessively, and I'd come not to mind one bit.

I caught a glimpse of Man standing at the back as we were married. He smiled at me, his eyes twinkling over the heads of the crowd. Then he was gone, melting away into the shadows.

I was glad he'd come.

The ceremony began, and we took turns saying our vows to each other. This time, I didn't have to pretend that I only loved Aiden. We promised to love and support one another, no matter what life brought our way. They promised to be the father my baby deserved, and I rested my hand on the swell of my belly.

They each slid a narrow, diamond-encrusted band onto my ring finger in turn. The bands fit together into one ring, with a large diamond on the center ring and clusters of emeralds and sapphires on the others, forming one perfect ring. It was a little gaudy, but what else would anyone expect from a mob kingpin's wife?

"I love you, little bird," Dominic whispered under his breath as I slid the ring onto his thick finger. I ran my thumb over the callouses across his knuckles. "I think I have since you gave me a black eye."

I laughed, but it felt like a wave of emotion crashed over me, just as powerful as the waves landing on the white sand beach. Until he made me laugh, I'd been on the verge of tears.

This was our beginning, our new life together as a family. I looked around the gathering, taking in all of the familiar faces—many of the Belladonnas among them—and I was filled with gratitude for the life I'd been given. I missed my parents, even today. Especially today. I'd walked myself down the aisle, and the Belladonnas clustering around me before my wedding couldn't replace having a mother at my side. But I'd found friendship and love and a new chance at family.

Afterward, we had a lavish reception even though our guest list was small. It was perfect, at the end of the evening, to head out to Aiden's private patch of beach, underneath the stars.

I'd confessed days before that I forever had an interest in having sex on the beach, and Dominic had crinkled his nose. "I don't know if you know this, but sand in your intimate places is the least sexy thing."

But there was a king size bed out on the beach, with a white canopy fluttering around it. Framed against the moonlit

sea, it was an incredibly beautiful sight.

“You did this for me?”

“I do intend to make all your dreams come true,” Aiden said.

“What’s next in your dreams?” Xander asked.

“There’s a drug cartel that I would love to take down,” I said.

“I’m pretty sure they’ll never see the four of us coming,” Dominic said. Then the four of us tumbled into bed.

Their eager hands stripped off my wedding gown, discarding it onto the sand. Just as eagerly, I pulled off suit jackets and ties so I could run my hands over their hard-angled bodies, my fingernails tracing over their tattoos.

Their mouths found mine in a jumble of kisses, their tongues exploring the depths of my mouth. Their hands moved over my body, lifting me up, turning me and positioning me as they all touched and tasted me. Everywhere I went their mouths followed, teasing, licking and nibbling. The three of them moved like one unit, pushing me toward my edge.

Dominic’s fingers found my heated core and teased it until I was panting with need. His mouth returned to mine as he brought his hand up to slip two fingers inside me. Aiden joined us, pushing himself deep into me from behind as he held onto my hips for leverage. Xander knelt below us, tasting every part of me before moving his way up between my thighs so that he could join in our coupling. I drew Xander into my mouth, eager to have more of him, the four of us moving together in perfect harmony as we shared a pleasure that felt like nothing else on earth. The original awkwardness of figuring out the positions for four had faded with practice; now our slick, warm skin pressed together and their hands stroked my body with perfect ease.

I wrapped my arms around Dominic and gripped his shoulders as the orgasm built up inside of me. Aiden’s mouth was on my neck and thighs, his body moving deep and firm, hitting me in all the right places. Xander’s mouth moved to my

breast and teased the nipple, his hand finding his way between my legs and stroking my clit. I cried out in pleasure as the orgasm poured over me, but the men didn't stop. Each of them was greedy for every bit of me, wanting more and more as I cried out and let them have it.

Then Xander slid inside me, gathering me on top of his body as the other two continued to touch me and tease me. I rode Xander slowly, enjoying the way he watched me, his eyes heavy lidded, one arm tucked behind his head. Slowly, his lips parted, his hips rocking as he couldn't resist joining me in the wild motions.

The sensations built to a crescendo. The world went away and all that was left were the four of us, our mouths and hands and bodies coming together, creating a feeling like no other in the world. The moans that filled the air could've been mine or theirs, it didn't matter anymore. The salty taste of the ocean was on my tongue, and the cool night air faded away in the warmth of their hands cupping my breasts, sliding between my thighs to tease my clit in time with the pace I kept with Xander.

And then I came, hard, gasping as my body exploded with pleasure. And the three of them followed me, their bodies tense, the pleasure they gave me evident in the sounds they made.

"I love you all so much," I breathed, my arms wrapped around all three of them.

"I love you, little bird," Dominic said. "I'm so happy to be your family."

"I love you too," I said. "All of you."

Aiden leaned over and kissed me deeply, and Xander's hand stroked gently over my bare skin.

Wrapped up in their arms with the salty scent of the sea and the sound of the ocean crashing in, I slept deeply.

A NOTE FROM MAY

I hope you enjoyed meeting Selena and her men!

Make sure you check out the rest of the girls in the [Dressed to Kill series](#).

Join my Facebook readers' group, [May Dawson's Wild Angels](#), for exclusive excerpts, giveaways and discussion!



ALSO BY MAY DAWSON



All I care about is saving my little sister from the mansion of horrors where we've been raised. Enter four alluring men, who seem to be determined to protect me... if I can trust them. But they're hiding secrets of their own.



Five years ago, I was found wandering in the woods with a sword, a note, and no memories. Now four Fae kings have come to find me... but these ex-lovers of mine are determined to punish me for sins I don't remember.



*Dragon shifters are always male. They're always royals.
They're always assholes. Until my first shift, when I
grow wings, breathe fire, and throw the world into chaos.
Now I'm partnered with five of those cocky royals for
military training... but I have to pretend to be a man.
Even as these forbidden royals fall in love with me when
I'm a girl...*