

## Tempted By An Angel

Selena Robins

Published by Selena Robins, 2024.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Copyright Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Author's Note

More Books by Selena Robins

Sneak Peek: Chapter One of DECOY IN STILETTOS

## © 2022 Selena Robins. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real people, living or dead, events, or places is purely coincidental.

Thank you for respecting my work. Please do not copy, share, or adapt it without permission. Sharing this story without authorization not only infringes on copyright law but also takes away the heart and effort poured into creating it.

## Dedication

To every reader who's ever lost sleep for "just one more chapter," to the bloggers who spread the book love, and to reviewers who tell us the truth (gently, please).

You keep authors motivated, slightly unhinged and marginally less neurotic.

You're the real love story here.

Thank you for reading, loving, and occasionally forgiving our typos. *Selena* 

ana, it's all fun and games until I look like a hooker." Angelina Marino stared at her image from the bedroom mirror. She swung around and faced her Nona. "It's too much." She grabbed a cotton ball and rubbed some fluorescent green eyeshadow off her lids.

"No, no, bella mia, it's not too much." Nana Clara picked up the small brush and dipped it into the eyeshadow. "And you don't look like *Pretty Julia.*"

"You mean Pretty Woman?"

"Yes, that one." She smeared more shadow over Angel's eyelids. "Just a bit more."

Angel blew out a breath and closed her eyes so Nana wouldn't gouge them.

"Now for the good stuff. This will help you pull it off." Nana patted multi-colored sparkles over Angel's cheekbones and forehead. "Stop fidgeting, Bella." She ignored her granddaughter's impatience and sprinkled silver stars in Angel's hair.

"Oh, wait. I almost forgot." Nana went to the adjoining bathroom and came back holding a perfume bottle.

"Nana, you're not coming near me with patchouli oil."

"It's not patchouli. Now, hold still." Nana sprayed perfume on Angel's neck and shoulders then sniffed the air. "Smells good, but you need more."

"Whoa." Angel took the bottle away from her and put it on the dresser. "I don't need to marinate in the stuff." The lavender scent assaulted Angel's nostrils—she smelled like an explosion at an Avon factory. "Forget hooker. I'm a Madame."

"You could never look like a *poutana*. And thirty-three is too young to be a Madame." Nana laughed. "Now, if you were fifty-something like one of those tigress ladies, maybe."

"You mean cougars?"

"Well, them too." Nana handed Angel a tube of shocking pink lipstick. "Aren't you glad my papa sent me to beauty school? My skills came in handy today."

Angel dotted her lips with the lipstick. "Sure."

Seeing the enjoyment on her nana's face, Angel bit her tongue, stopped fidgeting, and shoved her apprehension aside.

"Bellisima." Nana pinched Angel's cheek. "Don't forget to shake and wiggle like that actress Donna Moore in the movie that Sophia and I watched the other day."

"It's Demi Moore." Silver stars floated in front of Angel's eyes as she shook her head. "And I'm not performing a striptease."

Angel grabbed the contract off the dresser, held the paper up, and read it over. "I've never taken this type of order before. You're sure you wrote all the details down accurately?"

"I did." Nana ran a short, purple-tinted fingernail across the contract in Angel's hand. "It says right there—bachelor party." Nana swiveled her seventy-five-year-old hips. "Just do some bumping and grinding like Demi. I must call Sophia. We need to watch that movie again."

"Focus, Nana. Did you explain that I'm not a stripper?" She'd have shredded the contract into confetti if food and shelter weren't necessities. But the client had forked over a hefty wad of cash for this stint. "I'm just delivering the party favors and singing one congratulatory song, right?"

"Yes, that's all you have to do." Nana continued gyrating, and Angel couldn't help but giggle. "While you're there, pick yourself up a nice bachelor."

"It's only been a few months since your hip replacement," Angel said. "Be careful with the expensive hardware, which reminds me. You have a doctor's appointment Monday afternoon, and I'm busy. Do you mind if I ask Mr. Rossini to take you?"

"I don't mind." Nana stopped dancing and winked. "Does that mean you have a date on Monday?"

"No, I have an interview for a contract position, and it could run late into the afternoon."

Nana handed Angel the card with the bachelor party address. "But Monday's Valentine's Day. You should be spending the day getting all dolled up to be wined and dined, not stuck in a stuffy office with an old coot."

"Not to worry. I'll leave the old coots for you."

"Smarty-pants," Nana said. "No old geezers for me. I like them young, wearing chaps that show off their cute buns, like that fireman guy with the suspenders and no shirt on?"

Angel slipped on her heels, using the bedpost for support. "I should never have taken you to see *Magic Mike*."

"You're right." Nana pulled out a few singles from her apron's pocket. "When we get some extra money, we should hit one of those shows and see the Chippy dancers." She waved the bills in the air, grinning as if she'd won the lottery. "It'll be fun to slip a few of these down their pants."

Maybe I should have let her gouge my eyes. "Nana, please, not a good visual."

"Oh, you," Nana said, putting the bills back in her pocket. "You're too serious. You need to go out and enjoy yourself more." She touched the ends of Angel's hair. "I have an idea." She opened the top drawer and pulled out a curling iron. "Sit down so I can curl and tease your hair."

"Hair is fine."

"Your hair is pretty, but you need to be more adventurous," Nana said. "It needs more height. You know, like those girls on the *Jersey Lake Show*."

"Jersey Shore, Nana." I seriously need to cancel cable TV. Her movie addiction is bad enough.

"I could style your bangs something like this." Nana raked her fingers through her salt and pepper short hair, loaded with gel, making the ends stand up straight. The last time Nana had experimented with a curling iron, she'd singed Angel's left eyebrow. Angel adored Nana, but not enough to let her wield that weapon near her head again.

Angel had moved in with her widowed Nana six months ago to help her out financially and upkeep the house her grandparents had lived in most of their lives. But, more importantly, Angel wanted to live with her to nurse Nana back to health after her hip replacement surgery and assist her caregiving because of Nana's minor health issues.

Nana had been quite the hairdresser slash cosmetician in her day when white eyeliner and bouffant hair were all the rage. Angel had managed to dodge Nana's fondness for reliving her beauty parlor days, using Angel as her guinea pig to make her over. Until today.

Today she gave in and indulged her Nana—all for the sake of increasing revenue for Angelina's small business.

Angel stared in the mirror again. She hardly recognized herself.

I look like a pole dancer. This guy's check better not bounce.

Nana plugged in the curling iron.

Angel unplugged it and glanced at her watch. "We don't have time for a new hairstyle."

"Right." Nana took the curling iron and put it on the dresser. "You don't want to be late." She waved toward the doorway. "Now get going. The handsome young man suggested you arrive after lunch." Nana's cheeks took on a rosy hue when she smiled. "You look better than any dolce. You'll be dessert."

"Oh, yeah." Angel patted her behind as she picked up her coat. "There's always room for Jell-O."

att, thanks for helping me out today," Tracy Dixon said to her twin brother as she placed her son's birthday cake on the dining room table.

Matt flipped another Spiderman paper plate across the table and grinned with satisfaction as it settled perfectly between the plastic fork and spoon. "Anything for my favorite nephew."

"Not for long." Tracy smiled and rubbed her pregnant belly. "In about four months, you'll have another favorite nephew."

"Congrats." Matt high-fived his sister. "I was going to ask if you found out yet."

"We just had the ultrasound yesterday, and I want to tell Mom and Dad in person, so act surprised when I tell them."

"Will do."

She placed a package of Spiderman paper napkins on the table. "While we're on the subject, when are you going to think about getting married so you can make *me* an aunt?"

"Marriage would take all the spontaneity out of dating." Matt picked up three paper cups and juggled them, whistling the Spiderman theme song.

Tracy rolled her eyes. "So, you had one bad experience."

Time to pull out his switch-the-subject gun. Matt would even risk listening to her gush about her husband. "Tell me about Aaron's new job. It sucks he had to leave so early this morning. When is he coming back from Texas?"

"We celebrated with birthday muffins at breakfast. He loves his new job, and he's coming back in three days." She flicked her black hair away from her shoulders. "And quit changing the subject. Not every woman is after your fortune." "Did I say they were?" The truth was, he hadn't found someone who challenged him enough to alleviate the boredom he felt after a few dates and someone who enjoyed spontaneity as much as he did.

"Well, what's your issue then?"

"Not having this conversation."

Tracy planted her hands on her hips. "Nora Bates has plenty of her own money. She's still single and—"

"I'm not interested."

"Did you hire an assistant yet? Because my friend Heidi would be perfect—"

"Again." He stacked the paper cups on the table. "I'm not interested in any fix-ups."

"Paranoid much?" Tracy said. "Heidi's looking for some office work, and if you two *happen* to hit it off then—"

"I already have three candidates lined up."

"You could still interview my friend."

"Thanks for the offer." He tore the plastic wrap off the napkin package. "But I've contracted a temp agency to do the headhunting."

"How about I invite you and Heidi over for lunch next week?"

He plopped the pile of napkins on the table. "I don't take lunch breaks."

"Make an exception."

"No can do, sis." He bunched up the plastic wrap and tossed it in the garbage bin. "Look at that. Great shot."

"You're impossible." Tracy blew out an audible breath. "Let me set you up just this once—"

The doorbell chimed.

"I'll get that," he said, heading toward the hallway. "That's probably the clown I hired. Can you take the kids outside and keep them there for a few minutes? I want the clown to be a surprise."

"Okay, boys, let's get some fresh air," Tracy called out to the kids sitting around the big screen TV, watching cartoons after their pizza feast.

"And Matt, we're not finished talking about this." She lined the kids up and followed them outside.

Matt reached the front door and swung it open to greet the...clown?

For a couple of stunned beats, he took in the woman's tall figure wrapped in a short black trench coat, holding a bunch of balloons. He raked his gaze from the crown of her long blonde hair to her bare legs and the tips of her red, four-inch stilettos.

A clown who wears do-me heels?

Once he rolled his tongue back into his mouth and regained the skill to string a coherent sentence, he asked, "Angel's Party Solutions?"

"Hi. Yes. I'm... I'm Angelina Marino...but everyone calls me Angel," she said with a subtle nervous hitch. She held up an index card to her face, and he noticed her long, bright pink colored nails with gold stars painted on them.

Didn't clowns wear big white gloves?

"And it's Caleb's big day?" she said. "Do I have the guest of honor's name right?"

"Yup. You do." He reasoned that the balloon bouquet she clutched with a death grip was a sure sign she was indeed a clown. "I'm Matt. Please, come in."

He stepped aside as she entered the living room and wondered about the absent red nose and baggy clown pants. Not that he minded. He hadn't missed the perky nose below her round bedroom brown eyes and her firm, enticing-looking calves above those fantasy-inducing heels.

Time for a mental head slap as he remembered the reason for her visit. "Caleb's outside with ten of his buddies." He mustered up a welcoming grin and tossed it her way. "Can't wait to see his face when he sees your magic tricks."

"Tricks?" Panic colored her voice. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"You know." He shrugged. "The usual stuff."

"I'll sing." She appeared unsteady on her heels. "I agreed to *one* song." Wincing, she wobbled to the right. "I don't have the contract with me, but that's what was written."

Matt offered his arm for support, looking like she was about to fall over.

She clung to him for a few seconds, and his forearms' hair bristled.

"Sorry," she said. "I borrowed these shoes, and I'm not used to them yet." She let go of his arm, straightened, and took a few steps around the room. "Okay, that's better. I'm good now. Thanks for your help."

"No problem," he said. "Did you want to change into another pair of shoes?" *Like appropriate clown shoes?* 

Her brows knitted together; confusion written on her face. "No, I won't be here long enough for a costume change." With one hand, she unbuckled the belt on her coat.

"Okay, then." He walked away to call for Tracy and the kids to come inside. "You can go ahead and set up. I'll be right back—"

"Wait," she said, halting his steps. "I was told six guests in total. Did you say ten of his friends?"

Matt nodded. "Yup, most of his football team is here."

"A football team?" There was that panic in her tone again.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is this your first time?"

"I've been nervous before." Her full lips formed the letter 'O' as she exhaled a loud sigh. She shoved the index card she'd been holding into her coat pocket. "What's your sign?"

"My sign?"

"What month were you born in?"

"Excuse me?"

"The month you were born in," she repeated, speaking slower as if he were a two-year-old.

"In May, why?"

"End or beginning of May?"

"The tenth. Again, why?"

"Taurus. The earth in spring. Sounds safe enough."

Great, he'd hired a 1-900 astrological kook. "So, is this hocus-pocus astrology stuff part of your act? Because this bunch won't get it. I hope you have something more age appropriate to get them excited."

"Excited?" Her eyes widened. "And just how *excited* do you expect them to get?"

"As long as they're having fun and nobody gets hurt, we'll let them get as riled up as they want."

"Ohhhh. Sweet baby goats. I don't like the sound of that," she said between bouts of short breaths as if she'd just finished running a marathon. "Is that the best you can come up with? As long as they're having fun?"

He was confused as hell, but he wasn't sure how to continue the conversation given her obvious anxiety. Finally, he held his hands up in mock surrender. "I'll stay out of it and let you do your thing, your way. Okay?"

She looked up at the ceiling. Tiny beads of sweat glistened on her forehead. "Why did I agree to this?"

"Because I contracted your services for an hour of entertainment."

He took a step back as her icy glare hit him like a slap.

"Okay, it's too late to change my mind," she said. "Listen carefully. I have strict rules. I don't want any of them touching me. Have them all sitting down back there against the wall." She pointed to the far side of the room. "I'll stay by the door." She shook a finger at him. "And they'd better behave."

"They're boys. You know how rowdy and naughty they can be."

"Exactly my point." Scowling, she took a few unsteady steps toward him. Serious, bitch-slapping kind of steps. "Just keep them far away from me." *Perfect.* A neurotic clown who smelled like she swam in a sensual pool of perfume, disliked little boys, and was prone to panic attacks. "Not a problem," he said. "I'll keep them under control."

Why did he sense that his week should have started a lot later, like *after* his idea of hiring a clown? "Any other requests?"

"Yes. I'd appreciate it if you could please shut all the drapes." She wiped a trembling hand down the side of her coat. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not usually this snippy or tense, but it's my first time performing like...well, in this sort of environment."

"I get it," he lied.

He didn't get it, but he wasn't about to drill her about her apparent anxiety, especially since she looked like she was on the brink of a melt-down. Which baffled him.

How hard could it be to hand out balloons and make knock-knock jokes to a bunch of kids for an hour?

Maybe she was an introvert?

An introverted clown for hire. Yeah, that makes sense.

"Hey, Ms. Angel," he said. "Don't worry about this crowd." He walked around the house, shutting the drapes. "If it will make you more comfortable, go ahead and throw in the horoscope gig." He injected a don't-sweat-it tone into his voice, hoping it would help her relax. "Trust me. This gang is undiscriminating. They'll enjoy whatever you have planned for them."

"Okay." She placed the balloon bouquet by the sofa and unbuttoned the top button of her coat. "I'm ready. Let's get this over with."

He went to the patio door and opened it to let Tracy and the kids inside.

In neck-snapping speed, Matt witnessed his sister drop a bowl of potato chips and watched eleven pint-sized squealing, running linebackers rush the room.

He was speechless as he noticed the clown had peeled off her coat and stood in the middle of the commotion wearing a neon pink bikini.

Staring at the dazed clown-turned-stripper, he found his voice. "What the hell?"

"This is so *not* funny." Tracy punched his shoulder. "What were you thinking?" She pulled back the curtain and glanced out the window. "Great. Mom and Dad just drove up."

Four of the kids dived into the balloon bouquet, untying the string. Balloons were now scattered around the room.

Tracy picked up a stray balloon and thumped him across his back. "I'll get you for this."

Balloons? Those weren't balloons. Upon closer inspection, Matt realized what those babies were. He'd used enough of them.

He rushed to Angel. "Who the hell are you?"

"Matt," Tracy warned, "don't swear in front of the kids."

"Where's the clown I ordered?" Matt asked.

"Nana did it again." Angel slapped her forehead and paced the length of the living room and then back to him. "This is a kid's party?"

"What did you think?" he asked. "That I'd hire a stripper for my fiveyear-old nephew?"

"Of course not. What do you think I am, stupid?"

He snatched the quilt from the sofa and flung it over Angel's shoulders. "Are you asking me if I think you're stupid, or did you just call me stupid?"

She pulled the quilt closer to her admirable chest. "You seriously want to have this Q and A right now?"

The kids hit each other over the head with the so-called *balloons*.

Tracy stuck two fingers inside her mouth and whistled, just like Matt had taught her years ago. "Hey, everyone, listen up." She clapped her hands. "All of you. Go to the dining room and take a seat around the table. Now. Please."

Two little troopers ignored Tracy's pleas as one wolfed down the fallen potato chips while the other crushed chip crumbs into his nephew's hair.

"Oh, brother," Tracy yelled. "Matt, look at this mess you created."

Matt clutched Angel's wrist to hustle her out the back door.

Angel tripped and fell onto the sofa.

His leg caught under the quilt, causing him to land on top of the startled clown-stripper.

He struggled to break free while Angel thrashed her arms and legs.

The strap on one of her stilettos hooked into his shoelaces, and the clasp on her bracelet tangled in his shirt button.

The front door opened. "Surprise," Isabel and David Lockwood bellowed in unison.

Using his arms as leverage, Matt heaved himself up, causing him and Angel to tumble to the floor, reversing their missionary position to woman-on-top.

"Matthew Joseph David Lockwood." It was never a good sign when his mother shouted all his given names. "Why is there a half-naked woman on top of you?"

His father chuckled. "I could've used a party like this for my sixtieth."

"David, stop that," his mother rebuked. "Let's help Tracy with the kids."

Matt sighed. "I thought this only happened in movies."

"Welcome to my world." Angel wriggled her bottom. "We're really stuck here."

In an effort to stifle her gyrations, he rested his hands on her oh-socurvy hips.

"Can you please watch where you put your hands?" Angel said.

"That's rich, a bashful stripper." A heel dug into his ankle. "Was that on purpose?"

"You're the smartass," Angel said. "You figure it out."

The pain in his ankle wasn't half as bad as the scene unfolding around him.

Turning his head to the side, he took in his sister, cursing the day she shared a uterus with him while his parents bickered. Little boys behaving like a herd of baby elephants let loose in a china shop, tipping every bowl filled with goodies upside down.

He glanced up and saw two miniature comedians pulling each other's fingers and giggling at the outcome.

Straightening his neck, he found himself head on with Angel. His mouth was a mere inch away from her lips. He noticed a white scar on her eyebrow and thought it was sexy, in a kick-ass chick way.

Any hot-blooded guy with a pulse would be tempted to plant a kiss on her full lips. However, this hot-blooded guy—emphasis on his blood heading south and in danger of heating to a full boil—was positive that if he attempted something that stupid, she'd probably rip his arm off and use it to beat him to a pulp.

Instead, he tried to charm her. "I told you boys could be naughty and rowdy."

She didn't respond, so he cranked it up and tried for a lopsided grin that usually worked with the sexier gender. "Look at the bright side, Angel-face. At least the kids are too busy turning the house upside down to pay any attention to us." He nodded to the side. "Come on. You have to admit, this is a little funny?"

"Anyone ever tell you that your timing sucks?" she said with her lips pressed together. "You. Need. Help."

"Can't argue with you there," he said. "You can help by not wiggling around so much."

"Matthew," his mother shouted. "Get off the floor and help us with the kids." She covered her grandson's eyes and shooed him from the room. "Your father is no help at all. He's too busy laughing at all of this. Whatever this is."

Angel's silky hair brushed against his jaw as her lower body pressed against his, up close and personal.

His brain was in danger of shutting down as the pressure in his jeans mounted. Not quite to an uncomfortable level. Yet.

"Hold still," he pleaded. "Please."

"I can't. We're all tangled up in here."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," he said.

"You're welcome, Private Sarcasm."

At least the dirty looks she shot him, and the cynicism in her tone helped relieve the pressure on his zipper.

"Oh, my stars," Angel yelled in his ear, and as if on cue, silver stars literally floated into the air as she swung her head toward the children grabbing the balloons. "Don't let them do that," she yelled. "They're busting them. Mamma, mia, this is bad."

Exasperated, Matt ground his molars. "You turned this party into an X-rated affair, and you're worried about busted condoms?"

She jerked up and down on him as she yanked her wrist and ripped the button off his shirt with her bracelet. "There's adult prizes in them, you idiot."

"Stop squirming, or you'll get a big adult prize."

"I have to stop them."

She managed to kick her shoes off and jumped up.

During her escape, her knee connected with his boys. Hard.

Not only did he see stars but dots and zigzags as well. Son-of-a-bitch.

She succeeded in busting his jewels as the pain zinged directly through his groin.

Now they're black and blue. Thanks, Angel-from-Hell.

"Was. That. Necessary?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"Sorry," she said over her shoulder as she retrieved two floating condoms. "You should've laid still while I untangled myself."

He inhaled deeply, resisting the urge to rub the pain away. Not a great idea to ask for a bag of ice for his sore-as-hell sack in front of his family and a bunch of kids.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Cowboy up. Shake it off.

After a few minutes, he managed to sit up and absorb the chaos.

A clown-turned-stripper chasing condoms. His father playing pied piper with seven little guys following him out the patio door, and his mother and sister's frustrated expressions clearly expressed revenge against him.

The pain in his groin had now dulled to non-swearing status. He grabbed a stray balloon, stood, and walked over to Angel. "Nice touch." He flicked it back and forth. "Ribbed and glow-in-the-dark. Part of your strip act?"

"Look, Chuckles." Angel bopped him over the head with a condom. "I'm not a stripper. I was hired to sing a song at a bachelor party and—"

"No, Caleb," Tracy shouted from the other side of the room. "Don't eat that. Matt, what did your girlfriend put in those balloons?"

Angel darted toward Caleb. "Yikes, the edible underwear."

Matt caught up with his nephew first, tugged the candy panties out of his small hands, and discreetly handed them over to Angel.

He hoisted Caleb on top of his shoulders. "Hey, buddy, great party, huh?" He looked up and winked at his nephew's wide grin. "Am I still the coolest uncle or what?"

"Yeah, cool." Caleb rewarded him with a squeal of laughter, pumping his little fist in the air the way Matt had taught him. "You're the funnest and bestest uncle."

Once the coast had been semi-cleared of kids, Matt flipped Caleb over and set him down.

"Uncle Matt." Caleb pointed to Angel. "Is the balloon lady my birth-day present?"

"Not this year, buddy." He ruffled his nephew's dark hair, dislodging some chip crumbs. "Maybe when you're twenty-one."

Caleb scampered toward Tracy. "Uncle Matt's gonna buy me a balloon girl when I'm old."

"You have a twisted sense of humor." Angel pinched Matt's upper arm. "And you're not the *bestest* or *funnest*."

"So, you're into pain?" he said. "Where's the whips and chains?"

Angel clicked her tongue loud enough for him to hear it. "Why I never—"

"Really?"

"Keep your frat boy comments to yourself. Do you have to embarrass me like that?"

"My mistake. I'll go back to letting you do it yourself."

He couldn't catch what Angel said under her breath as she stomped away and cleared up pieces of the busted condoms from the floor.

Tracy bounded past Matt, giving him a dirty look while Caleb and three over-stimulated party guests crunched potato chips, jellybeans, and cookies beneath their feet tracking their way outside.

Matt contemplated reminding Tracy that he let her out into the world first after they'd shared a womb thirty years ago. But a guy could only tap into his sister's sentiment for so long. Diamond earrings. That should restore some lost brotherly points.

Angel placed a small pile of busted rubbers on one of the end tables. She walked over to him, waved her hand around the room, and said, "Why don't you help out with this mess instead of annoying me?"

He nodded toward the cluttered room. "I'm annoying you?"

"Are you always this aggravating when there's a mix-up?"

"It's a gift." He pointed to Tracy. "Ask my sister. She'll back me up."

Angel picked up a stiletto lying on the floor beside her and held the shoe like a loaded Smith and Wesson. "Keep it up."

He looked past Angel's cranky attitude and instead enjoyed her smokin' body and *her* nicely shaped balloons.

Under different circumstances, I'd have no problem keeping it up for a long time.

Tracy picked up the other stiletto and held it out. "Here, pound him one for me."

Angel walked over to his sister, took the shoe from Tracy, shoved her feet into both then grabbed her coat off the sofa.

Matt folded his arms across his chest as he witnessed his traitorous twin bonding with the stripper.

"My deepest apologies." Angel's tone softened as she spoke to his sister. "My...nana...grandmother, who helps me out at the shop from time, to time made a mistake." Her voice may have sounded angelic and soft, but there was nothing heavenly when she looked his way. "She confused this party with another one." She rubbed her forehead. "This is so embarrassing."

Tracy held her hand up, turned, and shot Matt her patented you-are-so-dead expression. "I'm sure it's not your fault."

"I'll deliver your refund in the morning." Angel slipped her coat on. "Somewhere in Long Island, my friend Christine is at a bachelor party with my alter ego, Giggles the Clown."

Tracy gave her a warm smile. "You're a professional clown?"

"It pays the bills. I'm also a freelance graphic artist and photographer."

Tracy removed a piece of busted condom out of Angel's hair. "I'd love to see your work sometime."

Any minute now, Matt expected his sister to invite the stripper to dinner.

Tracy pointed to her belly. "I'd like to discuss a photo-shoot. A surprise for my husband. You know, like those nude pregnancy photographs that seem to be so popular."

Matt bent his head and covered his eyes, determined to get *that* image out of his head, or he'd never have sex again.

To cleanse his mental pallet, he filled his mind with a visual of a nude Jessica Rabbit shaped Angel.

Now, that's a good image. A real good image.

"I haven't done a photo-shoot like that, but I'll keep it in mind," Angel said to Tracy, interrupting his momentary fantasy. "Thanks."

"I better see what the kids are up to out there." Tracy opened the patio door. "Don't worry about a refund. My brother can afford this. He enjoyed it as much as the kids did." Tracy's grin was loaded with mischief.

"Matt, isn't her bikini the same color as the dress you once wore?" she said, heading outside.

He heard his father's throaty chuckle from the patio. "I forgot about that. Remember the time he wore your mother's pearls...."

Matt rushed to the door and slit it shut, smothering the rest of his father's trek down embarrassing memory lane and Tracy's high-pitch laughter.

"You have more nerve than a sore tooth." Angel folded her arms and tapped her foot. "You dared to criticize me?"

"I was six years old." Matt made a mental note to enlarge copies of Tracy's bloated-phase pictures. "And it was Tracy's idea, and...never mind."

"Matthew?" His mother tapped him on the shoulder. He swung around to see her quizzical expression. "What does one do with these?" She dangled a pair of red velvet handcuffs.

Angel bent her head, rubbing her temples. "Will this day never end?"

"Christmas tree ornaments, Mom." Matt took the handcuffs from his mother's grasp. "Go join Dad and Tracy. I'll call you all in after I've cleaned up."

"Matthew, look at the poor girl. She looks upset. I should talk to her and—"

He guided his mother to the patio door and nudged her out. "Mom, I'll handle it."

He went to the kitchen, opened a cupboard, and grabbed a large plastic bag. He walked around and loaded the bag with the remainder of the adult surprises; four black feathers, two small vials of cherry flavored massage oil, and another pair of edible panties.

"Thanks." Angel accepted the bag he handed her. "I'd like to stay and help you clean this mess, but I'd rather leave if you don't mind."

"No problem. You go on ahead. I'll take it from here."

She dug out a set of keys from her coat pocket and walked toward the door. "I will reimburse you and...I sincerely apologize for the mix-up." Her cheeks reddened under her make-up, making her look sunburned.

"Not necessary," he said. "You've earned it, and the kids had a good time."

He followed behind her and watched her leave with a strange surge of disappointment. He wanted to call her back and apologize for goading her, but she had already disappeared behind the thicket of bushes aligning the porch.

He grabbed the broom and dustpan from the closet and glanced out the kitchen window. He watched Angel drive away in a yellow vintage mustang. As her taillights disappeared from his view, he wondered who Angelina P. Marino really was under the heavy make-up and stripper facade.

He swept the floor and stopped as the broom snagged an object under the table. He crouched and retrieved a black and white blindfold with a business card twisted inside it.

He unfolded the card out and read the blue embossed lettering—Angel's Party Solutions. Angelina Marino.

Angelina Marino.

The name had sounded familiar when she first introduced herself, and now seeing it in writing, it made the familiarity even stronger.

Angelina Marino.

Where have I heard that name before?

He dug into his memory bank, and all the pieces clicked into place.

As he dangled the blindfold back and forth, he laughed out loud.

"Oh, man. This is priceless."

n Monday afternoon, Angel sat in the president's office of A&M's Ad Agency, smoothing her dark green skirt for the tenth time. Why did she wear this linen suit? The material wrinkled every time she sat or moved. Even a twitch caused a major crease.

She turned her chair toward the window, leaned over, and looked down at the people rushing across Madison Avenue.

This suit is the only good outfit I own. And if I don't nab this temp assignment, I'll be selling it to pay the electrical bill.

Lately, her life resembled a losing baseball team.

Strike one. Saturday afternoon when Nana mixed up the clown-stripper order. Unfortunately, the bachelor party client wasn't as understanding as the kid's birthday party client, and she had to empty her meager savings to pay back the bachelor party to make up for the losses.

Strike two. On her way to the job interview, Old Yeller, her untrustworthy 'stang, decided to shed a muffler as she rolled through a stop sign in front of one of New York's finest, who in turn ticketed her.

Well, at least she still had one more pitch left. Besides her artistic talents, she was confident in her office skills. The temp agency had assured her that she was a top candidate for this assignment, guaranteeing a regular paycheck for the next six weeks.

Home run time. Right out of the ballpark.

The sound of the office door opening caught her attention.

Angel swung her chair around and rose, ready to introduce herself to the interviewer.

Instead, she had to concentrate on keeping her jaw from dropping and stood motionless.

She stared into a pair of dark blue eyes.

At the moment, they were filled with recognition. She knew first hand—had felt first hand—his tall and lean, hard build.

This man's jet-black hair and rugged features would make a nun question her vow of celibacy.

Damn. Strike three.

She shuffled her feet as though she could magically dig a hole through the hardwood floor and sink beneath it. She let out a quiet breath and managed a tentative smile.

Ignoring her pounding heart, she took a step forward. "Good afternoon." She stretched her arm out with a lot of trepidation. "My name is Angelina Marino. And right now, I'm hoping that you hit your head over the weekend, causing a slight amnesia problem. Not too serious, of course. But say, wiping out the last seventy-two hours or so?"

"Matt Lockwood." He shook her hand. "Nice to meet you. Again." He walked around his desk and faced her.

The corners of his mouth quirked upward, and a dimple appeared on his cheek. She hadn't noticed the dimple before.

"Ms. Marino, knock me off my feet...." His grin reached the twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "I apologize. Wrong choice of words. Impress me with your office skills, and I'll come down with a case of selective memory."

If it weren't for the pile of bills the height of Mount Rushmore awaiting her, she would have made a quick exit.

"Mr. Lockwood."

"Call me Matt. This is a creative and informal environment."

"Okay... Mr... I mean, Matt." She was surprised at how comfortable it felt saying his name. "And please, call me Angel." He nodded and she concentrated on keeping her tone confident and professional. "I know we literally got off on the wrong foot on Saturday. But I assure you, I'm a hard worker, and I'm qualified for this position."

"Please. Have a seat." He sat in a black leather chair behind his desk. "I've read over your resume, and I'm already impressed."

Angel sat and smoothed her skirt, which now seemed way too short. Heat crept into her cheekbones as she noticed his gaze lingering on her legs. She waited to see if he'd stop staring—no it was more like gawking.

The nerve.

"Mr. Lockwood—"

"Matt, please."

Fidgeting, she tugged on her skirt, trying to pull it down further. *Damn, I think it shrunk. It seems shorter than I remember.* "Before we continue with this interview, I'd like to make something clear. If that's okay?"

He nodded. "Sure."

She wheeled her chair closer to his desk and leaned forward. "Just because a misunderstanding had me dress like the pet of the month, it doesn't mean you can...well, you know...pay so much attention to my legs."

"I apologize if I gave you that impression. But I wasn't staring at your legs. My partner, Adam Richards, who usually handles human resources, suggested I place a few business cards and magazines in disarray on the coffee table and a few files on the floor. Adam theorized that if the candidate tidied up the mess, it would indicate that we have ourselves someone who takes initiative." He pointed toward the area behind her. "I was staring at the table and the files on the floor. Your legs happen to be in my direct line of vision."

Angel swallowed hard and slowly turned her head.

Yup. He was right.

She had been so preoccupied dwelling over the botched-up weekend and her financial woes that she had walked right by and never noticed the disorder in his office.

To give herself time to get it together, she avoided looking at him and instead scanned the contents on his desk. Had she done so earlier, she would have noticed a framed picture of Matt holding his nephew, both

wearing baseball caps and making faces. After recognizing him in the picture she could have made a quick getaway.

Too late now.

She sat straighter and acted like she knew the files and mess were there all along.

"I don't think that shows initiative," she said with more confidence than she had. "It would have been presumptuous and rude of me to come in here and assume I could just start straightening up your office." Deep down, she felt she had probably blown her chances of being hired, so she decided she may as well spout her honest opinion. "Besides, do you want an assistant or maid service?"

"Fair enough." He steepled his hands on his desk and regarded her for a few moments. "You have a lot of fight inside you, don't you?"

Yeah, fighting for employment every single day.

She pushed her shoulders back and nodded in agreement. "Yes, I do, along with a bundle of nerves right now." And no contract, thanks to my big mouth. Not the first time, but I'm not a defeatist. Something else will open, somewhere. I come from humble and strong stock, just another bump in the road that I'll have to smooth out. Again.

"It's understandable. Most people are nervous during an interview." He leaned back in his chair. "My philosophy is that anyone we hire and who chooses to come on board works *with* us and not for us. I have an open-door policy. All opinions and suggestions are appreciated, whether I agree with them or not. We discuss them and figure out what works and what doesn't, then take it from there."

She was certain his answer was the employment equivalent of the classic; *you're a nice person. It's not you, it's me, kiss-off.* Letting her down with a backhanded compliment and a warm, friendly smile. Correction. Drool-worthy smile.

Oh, mercy. Now I'm channeling Nana.

On Saturday, I couldn't get myself off him fast enough and I wanted to feel his arms around me as he kissed me into a coma.

Not only have I screwed up this interview, I'm also being a big hypocrite.

She accused him of gawking at her legs when she had been checking him out like it was her career, parking her gaze on his dazzling smile and tanned forearms.

I must get out of here.

She was about to stand, thank him for his time and race out of his office when a knock on the door interrupted them, and the door swung open.

The woman, who had introduced herself as Liz when she showed Angel into the office, poked her head inside. "I'm sorry to have to interrupt you, Matt. Sheldon is on line two. He refuses to leave a message. He's been calling every five minutes and threatened to come down here and storm your office. I told him you were busy in a meeting, but he demanded to speak to you right away."

"It's okay, Liz, I'll take the call." He nodded toward Angel as Liz left. "Excuse me."

Angel got up to leave, but Matt motioned for her to stay. "This won't take long."

She welcomed the respite and decided not to bolt since she sensed he wanted to continue the interview. She crossed her fingers and hoped.

If by some miracle she was still in the running for the temp assignment, and she was hired, she would red light the *slight* attraction she seemed to have toward Matt—even though she still thought it was twisted, given their exchange on Saturday.

Perhaps Nana was right, she'd been too busy with worrying about money and work she'd shoved dating into the back of the closet. It was time to get out and put herself out there. That is, after she secured some work.

Now, back to the important things in life. Like this job I need. If not here, maybe he could recommend another company?

Right. I don't only need a paycheck. I need a reality check. If he thinks I'm not qualified for this position, then he probably wouldn't give me a recommendation.

That thought brought back her anxiety, so she stamped it out of her head and concentrated on mentally rhyming off all the office skills she possessed and the speech she had prepared regarding the strengths she would bring to the organization.

All this helped her to recuperate her confidence. Taking a silent deep breath, she was back in control. *That's better*.

She sat back and scrutinized Matthew Lockwood.

Gone was the playful banterer of Saturday afternoon as he had now morphed into full professional mode, and based on his conversation, he was attempting to calm an irate client.

She tried not to eavesdrop, but it was impossible. She gathered from Matt's side of the conversation that his client Harrison Cosmetics. Sheldon Harrison was well known in town to be obsessive about his newest venture, *Sinful Perfume*.

Obviously, Matt's firm had secured Harrison's account, but from the sounds of it there wasn't an ad campaign ready to appease the notorious crotchety Harrison.

"I realize today is Valentine's Day." Matthew furrowed his brow as he continued talking on the phone. "Your legal department had the contract and agreements delivered late Friday afternoon. Like I told your marketing VP, there's no way we'd be able to launch a campaign in time for today or have billboards designed and assembled this morning."

Matt picked up a pen and tapped it against his coffee mug. "Have you reconsidered my initial idea of using a She-Devil type of character for the ad campaign?"

Angel's creative juices flowed through her mind faster than the bus in the movie *Speed* as she picked up her briefcase and rifled through the papers.

She took out her *Angel's Party Solutions* flyer, which depicted an impish angel holding balloons in one hand. She unzipped the side of her briefcase and took out two markers.

Rapidly, she shaded out the image of the balloons with the black marker and drew a picture of a bottle of perfume in the angel's other hand. She scribbled *Sinful Perfume* on the bottle.

She then used the red marker and wrote a caption on top of the angel's head in big, bold letters.

Satisfied with her creation, she held up the paper in Matthew's view and was rewarded with a wide grin that produced pleasing tingles to zigzag their way down from the pit of her tummy to her happy valley.

Willing the euphoric sensation to disappear. Again. She momentarily visualized Nana gyrating next to Magic Mike.

That worked to eliminate all tingles.

She returned to paying attention to Matt's conversation with Mr. Harrison.

"Sheldon," Matt said, his tone filled with cool confidence. "I guarantee will love what my new assistant proposed for the campaign." He paused and gave Angel a thumb's up. "Correction. What my newly hired graphic artist created."

Matt picked up the paper and stared at it. "Forget the She-Devil idea. I've got an angel holding a bottle of Sinful Perfume with the caption, *Tempted by an Angel.*"

She was hired for the temp assistant job?

Wait. Matt said graphic artist.

Yes. A creative assignment. Finally, work that I'm passionate about.

Angel tamped down the inclination to jump up, dance, and sing, then decided that may eliminate his temporary amnesia. Instead, she relaxed as she waited for Matt to finish the phone call. And from the sounds of it, Matt Lockwood hit a home run with her fastball pitch.

Matt hung up, rose, walked around his desk and stood in front of her. "I apologize. I got ahead of myself regarding the graphic artist position."

Her elation busted as quickly as the condom bouquet she had delivered to his sister's party. "I understand," she said. "The temp agency told me the interview was for a short-term administrative assistant not—"

"That's not what I meant." Smiling, his dimple resurfaced, and so did her feel-good-tingles. "I should have offered you the position before assuming you'd want to work here full time."

"Your assumption this time is accurate." She jumped out of her chair. "Did you say full time?"

"With benefits," he said. "The other good news is that you won't be working directly with me, but I'm sure we'll work on certain projects together from time to time."

"Yes, that is good news."

He lifted his brows. "You're great for my ego."

"Oh, no, that's not..." She let out a nervous giggle and composed herself. "The good news is that it's a full-time job."

He held his hand out and she shook it with a lot of enthusiasm this time.

Pure employment joy massaged all her tension away.

"Welcome to the A&M team," he said.

"Thank you. I'd like to offer a suggestion if I may?"

"Like I said, I have an open-door policy."

"How about you develop some of that amnesia again and forget what I said about hiring a maid and other things I may have said all in the name of nervous energy?"

Matt nodded. "How about we discuss this amnesia problem I keep having over lunch next week?"

His aura was positive and bright. She felt his sincerity and warmth, right down to her toes.

"Yes, I'd like that." She truly meant it.

He held up the flyer she had designed. "This was genius."

"Thank you, I have a lot more where that came from."

"I have a feeling you're going to do well in this business."

"Nana always said that I have a mind for business and a body for sin." The minute the words were out she wanted to take them back and chew them hard. "I can't believe I just said that. You see, my grandmother is a movie buff, and she tends to take dialogue from movies and...well, never mind."

She knew she should feel more embarrassed, but she didn't. She wanted to burst out laughing at the stunned look on his face.

That worked to eliminate all tingles.

She returned to paying attention to Matt's conversation with Mr. Harrison.

"Sheldon," Matt said, his tone filled with cool confidence. "I guarantee will love what my new assistant proposed for the campaign." He paused and gave Angel a thumb's up. "Correction. What my newly hired graphic artist created."

Matt picked up the paper and stared at it. "Forget the She-Devil idea. I've got an angel holding a bottle of Sinful Perfume with the caption, *Tempted by an Angel*."

She was hired for the temp assistant job?

Wait. Matt said graphic artist.

Yes. A creative assignment. Finally, work that I'm passionate about.

Angel tamped down the inclination to jump up, dance, and sing, then decided that may eliminate his temporary amnesia. Instead, she relaxed as she waited for Matt to finish the phone call. And from the sounds of it, Matt Lockwood hit a home run with her fastball pitch.

Matt hung up, rose, walked around his desk and stood in front of her. "I apologize. I got ahead of myself regarding the graphic artist position."

Her elation busted as quickly as the condom bouquet she had delivered to his sister's party. "I understand," she said. "The temp agency told me the interview was for a short-term administrative assistant not—"

"That's not what I meant." Smiling, his dimple resurfaced, and so did her feel-good-tingles. "I should have offered you the position before assuming you'd want to work here full time." "Your assumption this time is accurate." She jumped out of her chair. "Did you say full time?"

"With benefits," he said. "The other good news is that you won't be working directly with me, but I'm sure we'll work on certain projects together from time to time."

"Yes, that is good news."

He lifted his brows. "You're great for my ego."

"Oh, no, that's not..." She let out a nervous giggle and composed herself. "The good news is that it's a full-time job."

He held his hand out and she shook it with a lot of enthusiasm this time.

Pure employment joy massaged all her tension away.

"Welcome to the A&M team," he said.

"Thank you. I'd like to offer a suggestion if I may?"

"Like I said, I have an open-door policy."

"How about you develop some of that amnesia again and forget what I said about hiring a maid and other things I may have said all in the name of nervous energy?"

Matt nodded. "How about we discuss this amnesia problem I keep having over lunch next week?"

His aura was positive and bright. She felt his sincerity and warmth, right down to her toes.

"Yes, I'd like that." She truly meant it.

He held up the flyer she had designed. "This is genius."

"Thank you, I have a lot more where that came from."

"I have a feeling you're going to do well in this business."

"Nana always said that I have a mind for business and a body for sin." The minute the words were out she wanted to take them back and chew them hard. "I can't believe I just said that. You see, my grandmother is a movie buff, and she tends to take dialogue from movies and...well, never mind."

She knew she should feel more embarrassed, but she didn't. She wanted to burst out laughing at the stunned look on his face.

And that's exactly what she did. She burst out laughing.

Matt threw his head back and joined her. "Now I'm tempted by an Angel."

The beginning of something special.

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

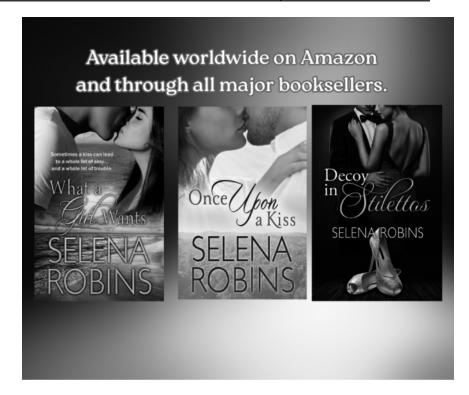
• • •

#### THANK YOU FOR READING TEMPTED BY AN ANGEL.

I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed creating this fun story.

Reviews help other readers find books. I appreciate all reviews, whether positive or negative. If one of my books spoke to you, please share.

### More Books by Selena Robins



# S neak Peek: Chapter One of DECOY IN STILETTOS

Copyright Decoy in Stilettos © 2025 Selena Robins

• • •

### Chapter One

## "Vodka, Blinis & a Body Bag."

There are moments in life that catch a woman off guard. Lying face down on a hospital gurney on her birthday after her lunch date dropped dead mid-sentence topped that list.

"I can't believe he collapsed." Ryan buried her face in the pillow. "What if I triggered it?"

"Triggered?" Brenda said. "What did you do? Whined your boyfriend to death?"

"He wasn't my boyfriend." Ryan swallowed the get-bent retort. She wasn't about to start a family war with her cousin in her vulnerable state. "I was on the job."

Ryan wrinkled her nose as the antiseptic tang clashed with vending machine food, leaving the ER perfumed in disinfected panic.

"Good afternoon," the doctor interrupted as he walked into the examining room. "I'm Doctor Hemsworth. Nurse Benetti and I will be taking care of you today." He not only shared the actor's name, but he could've been his body double.

Brenda handed him a chart, and he flipped through it. "Ryan O'Flanagan, thirty-three today. Happy birthday. Dog bite to the left gluteal region." He placed the chart on the counter. "Not the best way to celebrate."

"Thank you." Ryan turned on her side as Brenda lowered the sheet. "And I agree, having a vicious beast bite me is no way to ring in another tour around the sun."

"How did it happen?"

"While I was working."

The doctor slipped on a pair of surgical gloves and examined her butt, where the dog had claimed a chunk of skin. "What do you do?"

"I'm a private investigator." Ryan braced herself, tightening the grip on the bed's railing. "And owner of R.A.M.B.O. Decoy Agency."

"Agency?" He sprayed something cold and then dabbed the sore spot with a cloth. "What kind?"

"The kind that lures cheating husbands into hotel rooms." Brenda smirked, handing him a tube. "Or as Ryan likes to call it, honey trap investigations."

"Wrong," Ryan said, keeping her tone light. "We provide irrefutable evidence to prove a spouse's loyalty." Her decoys were trained to never make the first move. They simply offered temptation. If the mark took the bait, well, that was on him.

The doctor applied cold gel that stung like hell all over her left cheek. "Rambo?"

"It's an acronym of my full name." Ryan bit down on her lower lip as he pressed gauze against the wound. "Ryan Abigail Maria Benetti O'Flanagan."

He slipped off his gloves and tossed them into a bin. "Interesting."

The doctor was a hot visual aid and a nice distraction from the pain, but his monosyllabic responses grated on Ryan's already traumatized nerves.

Brenda tapped Ryan on the shoulder. "You can sit up now."

Ryan pushed herself up and leaned on her right side. "My family's eclectic."

"Eclectic?" Brenda snorted. "Singing Return to Sender at our greatuncle's funeral—"

Ryan turned toward the doctor. "He was one-hundred-years old and loved Elvis."

Brenda's eyes gleamed with mischief. "You named Nonna's pig and goat Bacon and Feta."

"At least I didn't eat them." Ryan tugged at the hospital gown. "Can I get dressed now?"

Doctor Dashing scribbled on a clipboard. "Yes. We'll be back shortly."

Thirty minutes later, fully dressed, they knocked and returned, leaving the door open.

"Thanks, Doctor." Ryan finished tucking in her blouse and straightened. "You too, Brenda."

"Not so fast." Brenda pulled on gloves and tapped on the gurney. "Hop back on."

"Why? I'm patched up, aren't I?"

"Ms. O'Flanagan," the doctor said, flipping through the paperwork on his clipboard, "your tetanus shot isn't up to date." He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "This won't take long."

Ryan took a deep breath and concentrated on staying upright as she watched Brenda twist a mean-looking syringe, drawing air into it. Ryan decided it was safer to sit.

Brenda swabbed Ryan's upper arm with alcohol.

Ryan had no problem with needles, but the look of wicked pleasure on Brenda's face made her queasy.

She grabbed her purse, dug into it, slid the unloaded Smith & Wesson out, and mustered a practiced menacing rasp. "You hurt me." She paused and narrowed her eyes. "I'll hurt you."

"I'll take that," a familiar deep voice said, yanking her 9mm out of her hand. For a six-foot-plus guy, Gabe was damn stealthy.

"Oh, look, it's the dick," Ryan said to Detective Gabe Marchetti, another nemesis from her past. And the man who made it clear that he disapproved of her agency with a vengeance, as if it were a personal insult to law enforcement.

She forced a breezy, confident tone, though her stomach knotted and her cheeks were in danger of catching on fire. "I didn't realize Bytown's finest investigated bites on—"

"Pains in the asses. You'd better have a carry permit for this." Gabe gave her his default cop glare. "And what the hell were you doing hanging out at Volkov's Point?"

"I vanted a shot of vodka vit blinis." She attempted an authentic Russian accent. "Iz good idea, nyet?" She tried batting her eyelashes, but the burning behind her eyes betrayed her. She waved toward the door. "Now, dasvidaniya, comrade."

"Smart ass." He shook his head, and for a fraction of a second, she thought she saw genuine worry flicker in his eyes. But it vanished before she could hold on to it. "Do you have any idea who you were playing decoy with?"

Not until the police arrived.

Ryan swallowed hard, trying to mask the tightness in her chest.

After Boris Petrov dove headfirst into his beef stroganoff, she learned that her client's husband was rumoured to be the Rideau Ripper, a member of the Siberian Wolves outlaw motorcycle gang.

Her comeback faltered for a moment as a ripple of anxiety coursed through her.

Rideau Ripper.

The name sent a shiver down her spine. This wasn't just another cheating husband.

"Well," Gabe said, "were you aware of his reputation?"

Prickling goosebumps raced across her skin as the thought of the Rideau Ripper still clung to her mind, with anxiety clawing at her. "Do I look clueless?"

"Not going to answer that."

She worked at masking the terror creeping in. "Bite me, Marchetti."

His mouth twitched a fraction. "From what I hear, another male beat me to it."

"Very funny." She mentally exhaled, the tension uncoiling a fraction. Strange how Gabe's wiseass remark could yank her back from the brink. "Of course, I knew about my client's husband."

Acting was part of her job, playing the role of the attentive listener, the sympathetic ear, the woman who just happened to be in the right place at the right time. But at the moment her acting skills weren't convincing given Gabe's skeptical expression.

If his dark eyebrows inched any higher, they'd disappear into his hairline.

"I do research all my clients."

Though not always, especially since her agency was now thriving beyond her expectations, and she hadn't had time to hire an office assistant.

"And we don't judge." She crossed her legs. Damn, that hurt. "We catch cheaters from all walks of life." She scooted to the edge of the bed. "I'm done with your questions."

"Hold still," Brenda said.

"In the name of The Sopranos, The Godfather, and all things Coppola, this better not leave a mark." She shot her best Nonna Maria death glare. "I know people."

Yeah, she probably stereotyped the Italian population and earned Gabe's here-goes-the-drama-queen look. It was her birthright to have one irrational outburst, two on a bad day. Plus, it was her coping mechanism, one of her quirks inherited and honed from surviving family chaos.

Brenda shrugged, unfazed. "Terrifying." She jabbed Ryan with the needle, then dropped it in the bin.

Gabe leaned against the sink across from her, and it was then she noticed he was either still off work since his shooting incident a few months ago, or he was assigned to an undercover operation.

He wasn't wearing his standard detective suit and tie. His hair, black as espresso, was longer than usual, curling around the collar of his brown, dog-eared leather jacket.

It hung open over a black T-shirt that stretched across his chest, flattened against his abs.

And damn him. Why did his low-riding Levi's have to be faded in all the right places and worn as if they were custom made for his thighs?

She shouldn't be noticing him at all, yet heat pooled in her chest, stubborn and unwelcome. The fact that it came from the dumbass who'd humiliated her on prom night, her sixteenth birthday, made it worse.

Some humiliations lingered. And, apparently against all logic, so did her brain's stupid habit of noticing how annoyingly hot he was.

They hadn't hung out since high school, unless she counted the annual Little Italy reunions or the occasional wedding or funeral of mutual acquaintances where they continued their tradition of trading subtle insults wrapped in fake smiles, like it was an Olympic sport.

Still, she'd recognize that default brooding expression anywhere.

What threw her every time were his eyes—deep, navy blue. They were steady, focused and at times even gentle, surprisingly.

Just her luck that she still noticed all that about him.

"What are you doing here?" Ryan asked him.

"They," he lifted his chin toward the door, "asked me to come down to check things out."

Ryan turned and saw her parents entering the room, bundled in their matching fall jackets. "Damn it. That's all I need."

"Ryan Abigail, don't swear," her mother said. "Brenda, nice to see you. You look so pretty in your nurse's outfit."

"Who called you?" Ryan asked her mother. "And why would you tell him of all people?" Her parents never liked Gabe.

Her mother unbuttoned her jacket. "Your sister called me because you never tell me anything."

"I'm going to kill her."

"Don't talk like that in front of a detective." Her mother glanced at Gabe. "Gabriel came into the store when we got the call."

"You don't shop in that neighbourhood," Ryan said.

He crossed his arms across his chest. "And you know where I shop because?"

"I have friends in high places." One friend who used to live in the apartment above Gabe had kept tabs on him for Ryan. She wasn't stalking him, just making sure he was okay after the shooting.

She hadn't pulled the trigger, but guilt stuck to her like glitter on a rug. She'd been a decoy, doing her job, yet somehow... her timing, that one client, had left Gabe exposed, and she guessed indirectly, people could say it was her fault, though she didn't want to believe it.

Her father approached, looking concerned. "How are you doing, kiddo?"

She managed a grin, despite of the situation. "I'm good, pops. Really. It's nothing."

Her mother bombarded the doctor with questions, then went into a spin. "My daughter is obsessed with movies, and I'm sure she got her idea about opening this agency of hers from those shows. Especially that Charlie's Angel movie."

"And the GI Jane flick," Brenda supplied. "She shaved her head one summer."

Her mother shook her head. "We don't need to be reminded, Brenda."

Gabe tipped his chin toward Ryan. "The infamous buzz cut. Classic." She narrowed her eyes and shot him what she hoped was a dirty look.

Her father's hand settled between her shoulder blades, not heavy, not awkward, just his usual quiet support in dad form. "At least she didn't get tattoos."

None you can see, Pop.

"Actually, Uncle Tom, Ryan has—"

"Had enough excitement for one day," Ryan interrupted, glaring at Brenda.

"Doctor, will she need surgery?" Her mother's words tumbled out faster than Ryan's racing heartbeat. "I'll stay the night and take care of her."

"Ma, it's not serious, and I'm fine." Ryan focused on the doctor's dimples and sweetened her voice. "You can go home. I'll call you later."

Her mother turned to Gabe. "Could you put in a good word for Ryan to get a job at the police station?" She swung around and pointed at Ryan. "You're wearing a vinyl skirt?"

Ryan gritted her teeth. "It's leather, Ma."

Her mother turned, facing Brenda. "You'll keep this between us? We're family, after all."

Brenda shrugged. "Sure."

"We ordered your favourite cupcakes." Her mother scowled at Gabe. "Ever since your sixteenth birthday was ruined, you've refused to celebrate." She softened her expression. "It's all in the past. It was all a misunderstanding."

Gabe's lips tightened. He looked away, and his stance stiffened for a heartbeat before he smoothed it out. Ryan sensed he knew what her mother meant, and, like her, he wasn't about to revisit their history either. Not here.

Ryan rushed to change the subject, even though she was reeling from the whiplash her mother gave her. Her mother looked ready to flog Gabe one minute, sweet as sugar the next. But she didn't have time to untangle that now. "Ma, I'm too busy with work to celebrate. That's all it is."

"Work? Honestly, Ryan Abigail." Her mother wagged a finger at her. "You need a new job."

"She's right." Looking a lot less tense, Gabe walked over to her and leaned in close. She caught the faintest whiff of a citrusy, soapy scent. The birthday ruiner dared to smell good. "Can you say, do you want fries with that?"

Ryan's grimace and comeback faltered. Her toes screamed from her tight stiletto boots.

"See, even Gabriel agrees." Her mother interrupted, tucking a strand of Ryan's hair behind her ears. "You could come back and manage the store. It would be more respectable."

"My agency is respectable." With a poise she wasn't feeling, Ryan lifted her chin with pride. "We handle delicate assignments."

"Assignments?" Gabe walked back to the counter and leaned against it. "More like entrapment."

"What the hell? Entrapment?" Ryan had now reverted to her outside voice. "That's a stretch."

"Stop cursing." Her mother sighed. "Call Charles and work things out. Have a baby. It'll keep you out of trouble. That home wrecker he drags around is too old to give him one."

"Ma." Ryan was sure her molars were now ground into enamel dust. "Please. Stop."

"She's right, Maria," her father said. "Not an appropriate discussion."

"And," her mother ignored her father and continued as if possessed by the mortifying your daughter devil, "don't forget to confirm your hair and make-up appointment for the wedding. No blue eyeshadow. It does not complement your green eyes."

Gabe smiled about as sweet as apple cider vinegar. "Right after your daughter comes down to the House for a statement."

"What house?" her mother said

"Police station."

"Dressed like that?" Her mother wiped her forehead with a lace handkerchief. She turned to her husband. "Tom, you go instead. Tell the police she's been unwell since the divorce."

"Pops can't go for me." Ryan sucked in a breath. "I'm not twelve."

Her mother turned to Brenda. "Is there a psychiatrist in the hospital?"

Brenda looked like she was enjoying a live taping of a dramedy. "Maybe two."

"Maria." Her dad laid a hand on his wife's arm. "Let Ryan take a breath."

"Mrs. O'Flanagan," Gabe said. "The police need Ryan's statement."

"Here. Have a biscotto." Her mother pulled a container out of her purse and handed one to Ryan. "You young people suffer from low blood sugar."

"Thanks, Ma." She tucked it in her purse. Her stomach wasn't on speaking terms with food. Even her favourite cookie couldn't fix a day this ridiculous.

Ryan could tell Gabe struggled to maintain his cop poker face while her mother doled out biscotti to them all.

The doctor took the cookie. "I have to check on another patient. I'll be right back." He escaped, and Ryan wished she could jump on his back and piggyback the hell out of the Twilight Zone.

"She's not under arrest," Gabe said.

Ryan exhaled in relief.

"At least not yet." Gabe took a bite out of his cookie. "Thanks. Tastes good, Mrs. O."

"What do you mean, yet?" Her mother's eyes widened. "Gabriel, fix this. You owe us. If it weren't for us, you'd be a convicted felon."

"Really?" Brenda said. "That story never made it to our side of the family."

"Because we made it go away," her mother said.

Her father lowered his head, rubbing his forehead. "Maria, not the time."

"Does this have anything to do with what happened in high school at the Winterfest prom?" Gloat coloured Brenda's voice.

Leave it to Brenda to mention that out loud.

Gabe shuffled his feet as his gaze hit the walls and then the floor, looking as uncomfortable as Ryan felt, and not meeting her gaze.

Ryan aimed for an unbothered look, but every muscle in her body ached in protest. "What are you talking about?" She rubbed her throbbing temples. "What does Gabe owe you? And felon?"

"Your mother is exaggerating again," her father said. "Main thing. You're fine. And not in trouble." He turned to Gabe. "Right?"

Gabe remained stoic. "The police need her statement."

"I knew this would happen one day." Her mother paced across the tiny room. "What will people think?" Her face reddened, and she removed her coat. "This is even worse than when you lived in sin with Maya."

"What? Sin?" Ryan's voice spiked. "You need therapy, Ma."

"Two girls living alone, no supervision. I remember calling and hearing men's voices." Her mother sounded out of breath. "Now this agency, the way you dress, a man is dead, and the police want to talk to you?"

Her mother rubbed her forehead. "With your attitude, a judge might send you straight to prison." She dabbed her neck with the hand-kerchief. "And your future could all fall apart."

And people wonder why I'm dramatic at times.

Ryan inhaled a deep breath to ward off the stinging pain. "You're making way too much of this."

"Let's call Charles. He hasn't sent in his RSVP for the wedding, and we can ask him about that, too," her mother said. "I'm sure he'll help. He still loves you, you know."

"Don't you dare call him."

"Like I told you more than once, all marriages have their ups and downs. This can be fixed."

Of course, every marriage has its peaks and valleys. Only Ryan's marital bliss had never hit the Himalayas. It had taken up permanent residency in Death Valley.

"You have to work at it, forgive and forget." Her mother turned to Gabe. "Right, Gabriel?"

"If you say so." He shrugged. "I'm not a marriage therapist."

Ryan caught the slight crease between his brows and the quick glare he shot her mother—silent but clear. Cops like Gabe had zero tolerance for men like her ex-husband—sleazy defence lawyers.

That's when it hit her. Charles? Invited?

"Wait. What?" Ryan held up her hand. "Did you say Charles has to RSVP to Colin's wedding?" She raised her voice. "Why was he invited?"

"Because Charles' firm represents Zoey's parents' company, and they want him there. I told you about it."

"No. You never mentioned it." Ryan's jaw clenched of its own volition any time she was in her mother's company. "Ma, I'm begging you. Please fix this. Tell Colin to disinvite him."

"That wouldn't be polite, and it's out of our hands." Her mother ran her thumb between Ryan's brows. "Don't glare. You'll end up with a deep wrinkle there. I hope this injury heals quickly. We can't have you limping down the aisle."

"I didn't break a leg," Ryan said, trying to control another outburst. "Never mind." She dropped her head in her hands and shook it side to side.

Can this day get any more chaotic?

Of course, it could.

Her sister Sophia burst in first, followed by her brothers Colin and Joseph.

Sophia rushed to Ryan's side, looking worried. "Are you okay?"

"I was. Until you called her."

"I had no choice." Sophia pulled Ryan in for a hug. "Last time you ended up in the emergency, and I didn't tell Ma, she threatened never to speak to me again."

"And that's a bad thing?" Ryan said.

After assuring her siblings she was fine, she crooked her finger. "Colin. We need to talk."

Colin raised his hands. "I know that look. I'm in deep crapola, right?"

"Correct. Why would you invite that man?"

"Zoey's dad insisted," Colin said. "We couldn't say no."

"Then, disinvite him."

"Can't." Colin shook his head. "Look, the Rosemont ballroom is massive. We'll stick him at the far end. He'll be a speck."

"We'll be too busy celebrating to even notice him." Sophia squeezed Ryan's arm. "He'll just fade into the background."

Ryan opened her mouth to respond, but her mother re-entered the chat. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." Colin put his arm around his mother's shoulder. "It's all good."

Ryan swallowed her frustration mixed with embarrassment when she noticed the doctor entering the room, manoeuvring his steps as if walking through a labyrinth.

The whole day crashed over her like a rogue wave, knocking her off her feet. Petrov's death, her aching butt, her family, Gabe... all of it.

She had to keep her sarcasm intact. It was her lifeboat as it kept the anxiety knotted in her chest from spilling out. Because if she cried in front of this bunch, or him, she'd have to leave town and change her name.

Straightening her shoulders, she waved her hand toward her family. "Doctor, would a blood transfusion release me from their bloodline?"

The doctor grinned and handed her a small tube. "This will last a few days. Fill the prescription and complete the antibiotic course."

Ryan put the tube in her purse. "Thank you, and I apologize for all the noise." She slid off the gurney and finger combed her hair. "I've had enough. I'm out of here."

Gabe turned to the doctor and extended his hand. "I'll make sure her prescription gets filled."

The doctor handed Gabe the paperwork. "I've included the instructions for caring for the infected area."

"My bite." Ryan took the paper from Gabe's fingers. "My instructions. Thank you all." She pinned Gabe with a stern glare. "And now I'm off like a prom dress."

Gabe hiked his eyebrows. "Pun intended?"

"Sure. Why not?" She waved and headed toward the door. "Ciao, everyone."

Gabe dangled steel handcuffs before her eyes. "Not leaving without me." He snapped them onto her wrists.

"Oh, dear," her mother said. "She'll be back by tomorrow, won't she? Zoey'll panic if she misses one more dress fitting."

"Ma, I'm handcuffed. And you're worried about a bridesmaid dress?"
"Gabriel's teasing you." Her mother waved. "It's a joke, right?"

"Nope." He guided Ryan toward the door with a hand on her lower back. The heat of his nearness shouldn't have mattered. Especially at a time like this, with everything going on. "Time to get serious." He lowered his voice. "You're in way over your head."

### I HOPE YOU ENJOYED this glimpse into *Decoy in Stilettos*.

If you'd like to see what happens next, the full novel is waiting for you on Amazon and at your favourite bookstore.

To keep up with my news and my own misadventures in life, please feel free to follow my blog at: www.SelenaRobins.com<sup>1</sup>

1.

### Don't miss out!

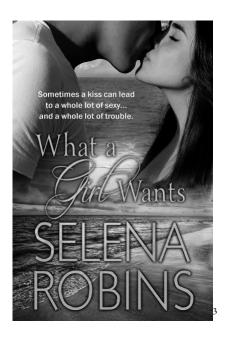
Visit the website below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Selena Robins publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

https://books2read.com/r/B-A-XRBI-AONHD

BOOKS 2 READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

# Did you love *Tempted By An Angel*? Then you should read *What A Girl Wants (Friends to Lovers, RomCom)*<sup>2</sup> by Selena Robins!



# FINALIST: IAN (Independent Author Network) Book of the Year Award

Maddie Saunders has a plan.

Her philosophy: "Life's a beach, and then you have sex on it."

Maddie lands a joint magazine assignment to Hawaii with the man whose kiss could singe the eyebrows of a mannequin, her friend, Alex Donovan. She's packing a new attitude to match her new erotic lingerie. She plans to turn her triple-X fantasies into reality for a no-strings-attached situationship.

The impossibly gorgeous Alex Donovan has secrets.

**His philosophy:** *To live by the four-date maximum rule.* 

<sup>2.</sup> https://books2read.com/u/3RVzpL

<sup>3.</sup> https://books2read.com/u/3RVzpL

Alex enjoys Maddie's playful wit and values their platonic relationship. He shipped her into the friend zone years ago. He knows firsthand how sex destroys friendships. But since arriving in Hawaii, her continuous flirting and guerilla seduction tactics make it hard—literally—to keep her in the platonic zone.

Spoiler Alert: He resists until an encounter of the steamiest kind drowns his resolve into the Pacific.

Complicated? Absolutely. Especially when his investigative reporter's sixth sense flares up. He discovers the truth about the Hawaiian assignment. He also uncovers deep secrets that take his and Maddie's lives down drastically different paths.

Will their newfound relationship and trust in each other shatter into irreparable damage once the secrets are revealed?

**Warning:** Side effects may include but are not limited to spontaneous, uncontrollable laughter, hot flashes and intense sex, and chocolate cravings. Read in bed with someone special or a B.O.B. Please note: Batteries not included.

#### **Editorial Reviews:**

"This was a funny, mysterious, and sexy friends-to-lovers story. It pretty much had everything you'd want for pure indulgence. This was my first book by this author, and I thought the characters were really well written, and I absolutely love this author's style of writing."

### **Totally Booked Blog**

"Selena Robins has an excellent voice that makes Maddie such a wonderfully hilarious woman. There are more twists and turns in What a Girl Wants to keep the reader on their toes. The emotions between Alex and Maddie are poetically conveyed while providing the extra spice to make it beautifully erotic. What A Girl Wants is one that should be near the top of any TBR list."

### Delane, Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance & More.

"Selena Robins' plots are deliciously fun. Full of antics and compromising situations. She does an excellent job blending humor into her romance with an undercurrent of mystery."

# New York Times & USA Today Best-Selling Author, Kimberley Troutte

"I love Selena's funny, sexy, and suspenseful characters, plots, and the way she writes the characters' emotions. It made me an insta-fan of Selena's work, and whatever she writes in the future, I'll be sure to buy."

### USA Today Best-Selling Author, Cari Quinn

"Selena Robins brings supreme wit, honesty, and amazing characterization to all her writing. If you love novels with laugh-out-loud humor and fully realized, in-depth characters, you can't go wrong with Selena Robins."

### Award-Winning, Novelist, Denise A. Agnew

Read more at https://selenarobinsmusings.com/.



### About the Author

After giving up her dream of becoming a movie star/dancer/singer, Selena decided that her second-in-line dream was to pursue her passion for writing.

She writes stories that she loves to read, which are eclectic. She's written short stories, children's books and romance novels with sassy heroines who always fly by the seat of their pants without a safety net, and heroes you want to gobble up with a spoon, taking your time to enjoy.

Her critically acclaimed work has been described as genre-defying, witty, humorous, suspenseful, romantic and sexy.

Her passions include; her love of God, family, friends, writing, hockey, reading, humour, and cooking which all come through in her writing and books.

Read more at https://selenarobinsmusings.com/.