
THE PICONE CRIME
FAMILY

SELENA MICHAELS

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Selena Michaels
The Picone Crime Family

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v1

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.

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The Sicilian's Obsession

THE PICONE CRIME FAMILY -
BOOK ONE

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Chapter 1

Katima

Cold. Dark. Tight. My breaths came in pants as I woke in a small, enclosed space, folded over myself. Where was I? I cried out, "Daddy?" He would never let me stay in this tiny prison. I was his princess and he protected me from the fire-breathing dragons. At least that was the story he told me every night before bed.

A deep voice growled, "Shut up."

The box shook and I shivered in fear. Muted voices trickled in from afar. I couldn't catch my breath. The tears falling from my face threatened to strangle me as they dripped onto my thighs. I sobbed, harder and harder, until a small light infiltrated in from above me. I tried to lift my tiny frame, but something kept me pushed down. I kicked out, my tiny muscles no match for the contraption I was stuck in

I panicked and started to scream, "Daddy!"

I woke with a jolt. The familiar glow of my nightlight gleamed in the distance of my bedroom. I glanced at the clock on my nightstand—5:00 am. Every night for as long as I could remember, I had the same recurring nightmare. I

tried to ask my dad about it, but he just said I had an overactive imagination. Here I was, twenty-eight years old and still having nightmares, no friends to speak to, no family, except my dad. I grabbed my Avengers shorts and slipped them on. Then I padded barefoot downstairs. I got started on coffee. Dad was on another business trip, so it was just me, alone in this big house. Always alone. I grabbed my steaming cup of joe and headed out to the porch. The swing was my favorite place to sit and watch the sun rise in the distance. Pennsylvania had the most beautiful sunrises. I relaxed and let my mind wander, loneliness setting in. If I was a more outgoing person, maybe I would have friends, a tribe, people I could lean on—something. Not that my dad wasn't enough, he was just gone all the time. Of course, that was because he was CEO at Sweets Incorporated and trying to expand his empire. Dad wanted to leave something tangible for me when he died. Me? I didn't want the company. I just wanted my dad. I stayed on the porch, watching the sun rise high above the horizon. Then it was time to get to work. I went inside and hopped into the shower, washing away the sweat from a fitful night's sleep. I dampened my curls and squeezed conditioner through them then washed the rest of my body, leaving the conditioner in. My curls were dry, so I was going to throw them into a messy bun to keep them out of the way. I went through the rest of my routine, putting on a bare minimum of makeup. No one was going to see me anyway. I grabbed my Captain America shirt, a pair of old dark wash jeans, and my Chucks. I had nothing planned on my agenda for today, so there was no reason to dress to impress. The greatest blessing of being top scientist in your family's company was you could dress the way you wanted.

I rushed out to my Mercedes Benz with fifteen minutes to spare. I hit the Starbucks' drive thru, still surprised this small, sleepy town even had one. I scanned my badge at the

lobby with only five minutes to spare. My PA, Rebecca, was already there, her foot tapping impatiently on the tiled floor.

She griped, "You were supposed to be here earlier." I nodded my head in answer. She was always acting like she was my boss instead of the other way around. I still wasn't comfortable speaking in public. The only person I could hold an intellectual conversation with was my father.

Rebecca went on, "Your dad needs you to call him ASAP." She threw her golden locks in my face, causing me to sputter, waving my hand to get away from the strands. I headed into my office connected to the back end of my lab and dialed Dad.

He answered on the second ring, "Hey, pumpkin."

I murmured into the phone, "Hi, Daddy. What's up?" He sighed, which meant he was going to ask me to do something I was uncomfortable with.

"I've been traveling a lot lately, and you know I don't like leaving you alone. So, I came up with a solution." While he paused to gather his thoughts, I sat quietly, my mind racing over a mile a minute. Please, not another *friendship* lined by my father's money. Those are the worst.

"I hired a personal bodyguard to be with you 24/7. I'll be out of the country for a while and it would give me peace of mind if you were safe."

I whimpered into the phone. My anxiety was creeping up on me like a lost lover, stroking down my back. "I don't need a bodyguard, Daddy." My voice was small to my ears, weak, feeble. Damsel in distress at her finest.

"Katima, after losing your mother, you know I need eyes on you at all times."

Ugh, it was always the same guilt trip. My mother died when I was a baby, and it's always been just Dad and me.

"You're just being overprotective again, Daddy." If I

could get him to see that there was no threat, then surely, he'd call off his hound.

"If I say you need it, then you need it, Katima. No more arguments."

I shut my mouth at his gruff bark. It wasn't like I even tried to really argue with him, but Daddy has always been a bulldog.

His tone softened. "Anyway, he'll be showing up at the lab to introduce himself. He'll have access to the company, and to make his job easier, he'll be staying at the house with you. Whatever he needs to make security better, give it to him."

I closed my eyes, letting out a deep, slow breath. I could already feel the migraine brewing. My hands were shaking. I hated meeting new people. Daddy knew this and chose to have me do it anyway. If I was normal, lived on my own, and didn't have these problems, I wouldn't have to deal with this.

"All right, Daddy." In the end, it's just easier to give him what he wants.

He tenderly said, "Love you, pumpkin."

"Love you too, Daddy." I really did. I just wished things were different, that I was different. A daughter he didn't need to watch out for, a daughter who was strong, resilient, a warrior, but I'm none of those things.

I gave myself some time to calm down after hanging up with my dad. No way did I want to face Rebecca in the middle of a panic attack. She would just make it worse. If she wasn't such a good personal assistant and sometimes research assistant, I would have replaced her years ago.

A short while later, I was back under control and in my element. Today, I was working on a few recipes with our crystallization method. I was my own taste tester, so I always used fudge as my base. If I was honest, I was addicted to our fudge. I couldn't get enough. Just as I was adding the first

drops of liquified cayenne pepper and Gochujang, a Korean pepper paste I used to heighten spiciness, a tap sounded on the door. It swung open before I could say anything.

I snapped at the intruder, "Did you not see the freaking testing light flashing?" What was standing in front of me made the rest of my rant dry up in my throat. A tall man, dressed from head to toe in black, darkened the doorway. His bulging arms were lined with tattoos and I could see a few peeking out the top of his shirt collar. His combat boots were muddy. I already knew I was going to have to decontaminate my laboratory just from his mere presence. His dark faux-hawk had tapered sides and the top looked wet like he'd just stepped out of the shower. His dark tattoos were illuminated by his tanned skin, but it was his piercing green gaze that stopped me in my tracks. His eyes were hauntingly cold. My body started to shiver from their penetration.

I stuttered, "Wh-who a-are y-you?" My face scrunched up in a grimace upon hearing my own voice. I waited for his condescending attitude, or worse, his laughter. I could feel my face growing hot, waiting for his answer.

His voice was deep, with hints of an accent as he said, "Excuse me?"

My belly fluttered in excitement. I'm sure my face showed my confusion. I choked out, "N-no one is s-supposed to enter the l-lab while I'm t-t-testing." My embarrassment was plain as day now. The more I stuttered, the harder I shook, anxiety riding my body hard. I was panting, and pieces of my curly bun had fallen around my face from being distracted by the new recipe. Now they stuck to my face with sweat as I spiraled downward inwardly. My humiliation complete, I wished the floor would open and swallow me whole.

Arturo

What fresh hell was this? A few days ago, a contract came through with an easy job. Security for the Sweets Incorporated princess of science. I haven't been out in the field in a while and figured a change of pace would be nice. If anything got too hot to handle, I could always call in reinforcements, but I doubted this was a serious mission at all. Besides, I investigated her father, and it really seemed like a simple job. Babysitting duty, really. I figured I'd get in, hang around and get out when the contract was up, but Katima Sweets was absolutely not what I had prepared for. I was expecting a young, bratty princess, not this nervous looking angel. She was beautiful, petite, her dark curly hair thrown in a haphazard bun. It sat on top of her head like a beacon. She had on a lab coat with a movie t-shirt, jeans, and comfortable shoes. A minimalist, I liked it. Her glasses were overly large on her tiny face and I made a note to ask her if they were on purpose or for show.

I prompted, "Testing?" I had no clue what she was talking about.

She said tersely, "Yes."

Confused, I said, "Your assistant said I could just walk in."

Katima gasped, her hazel eyes wide with shock. She squeaked, "What?" I noticed she was very direct with her answers. Maybe her bumbling earlier was from nervousness.

I clarified for her, "I don't know if you know what I'm supposed to do here, but I am supposed to be in the lab."

She looked past me and asked, "Time?"

What happened to full sentences?

"It's about lunch." I checked my watch just to double check. My natural clock was never off. Katima started cleaning up her area, so I waited to see what she was going to

do. The lab looked clean to me, but she grabbed a ton of supplies out of a small closet and started cleaning. I stood stoically for an hour just watching her clean from top to bottom. I had a feeling if I wasn't watching her, she would grab a toothbrush and scrub the grout. Good thing I was here. She glanced up after hanging her lab coat up and looked surprised to see me standing in the same exact spot.

"L-let's g-go." She motioned me back and I, for one, didn't want to make a mess after watching her clean, which was exhausting to look at.

"Are you heading to lunch, Ms. Sweets?" Katima's PA was super friendly. I'm almost certain she was flirting with me when I entered the building. I looked at Katima, who held up one finger, whipped out her phone and then stared at her PA until the phone at her desk rang.

"Sweets Incorporated, Rebecca speaking." She paused. "No, Mr. Sweets. I didn't mean—" She was cut off and her whole face lit up like a tomato. She hung up and glared at Katima.

She said through gritted teeth, "I apologize, Ms. Sweets, for not checking to make sure you weren't currently experimenting." Her mouth was stretched into a thin line. Katima motioned for us to move forward.

I thought, *oh, there's the princess*. It's not her fault she's a disappointment to me. For some reason, I thought she would be different from the little, rich princesses I usually watched over.

I sighed, "Want to go to Greta's Diner downtown? I saw it when I was driving in." Best to get to know her, since we'll be spending all our time together. Katima nodded her head in agreement and I led her to my truck. We could have driven separately, but I wanted to dirty the princess up a little bit. She didn't object, just climbed in, and off we went.

Not that I spent time with many women, but are they

supposed to be this silent? I kept glancing at Katima when we got to Greta's. She hadn't spoken a word since we were in her lab. Our waitress was a friendly, older woman named Greta, and I knew that she was the owner from a glance. I really liked this small town, but there was something odd. I couldn't put my finger on it, so I just sat back and did what I do best—observed. Katima hadn't ordered anything. In fact, she never even touched her menu. But our waitress brought her an orange juice and side salad. She didn't seem offended at all by Katima's silence. Frankly, I was sick of her being rude.

I motioned to the waitress. "Shouldn't you say thank you, princess?"

Katima whipped out her phone and I scoffed. What was she going to do, call her father? Her face flushed and she looked at the owner embarrassed. Good.

She sputtered, "Th-thank y-you."

I turned to smile at the lady, but she was shooting daggers at me with her eyes. Me. I wasn't the one who was being rude and couldn't show gratitude for my every whim being satisfied without asking. We sat in awkward silence. I could see the wheels in her head turning. Meanwhile, I was studying her. She sipped her orange juice but hadn't touched her salad yet. I vaguely wondered why. Greta brought my burger and fries out, slamming the plate down so hard, I was afraid it would break. She flounced back into the kitchen. I could see her motioning to the cook with her hands, complaining about me. This was really a weird town. Where I'm from, waitresses would've torn Katima a new one or at least spit in her food. I took a bite out of my burger, noting Katima picked her fork up. Maybe she had been waiting for me. If so, why didn't she just say that? My charge had me more and more confused.

Greta came back out and handed Katima a receipt.

"I put it on your tab as usual, Katima, but only his meal. Earl and I agree that yours was on the house." I shot a startled look her way.

She leaned forward and whispered loudly, "Next time, don't bring the asshole, yeah?" She shot me another scorching look and stomped off.

I demanded, "What the hell was that?" Katima looked down at her plate and shrugged. "No, she acted like I did something to you." I was outraged, outrageously confused. Katima was a spoiled brat. I think. I mean that's how she acted. I watched her more as I finished off my burger, noting she never tried to strike up a conversation. Women loved to talk. My sisters would never just sit in silence. They were always regaling me with their stories. There was more to Katima Sweets than what meets the eye. And I was just the guy to find out.