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PROLOGUE

*Venesa (Veh-neh-sah)**Twenty-One Years Old*

"DO YOU EVER THINK ABOUT DEATH?"

It's a simple question, but the man sitting underneath me—tied to the hotel suite's wooden chair—doesn't answer. Instead, he shifts, the bulge in his pants jabbing between my thighs. I slip my fingers down his dress shirt collar and behind his skinny black tie, and my chest skims across his as I lean in, my breath ghosting against the shell of his ear.

His body shivers.

Mine tries to recoil in disgust.

My lips are almost touching him, but I don't bridge that last millimeter of space. After all, my lipstick is red, and I can't stain his skin with the proof I was here.

"What?"

"You heard me," I whisper. My grip tightens around his

tie until I'm making a fist, my other hand now resting on his shoulder.

"Do I think about...*death*?" His brown eyes drop, locking on to my tits. My dress is low-cut, my breasts are large, and I'm using both to distract him.

Men are so easy.

My hips shift, sinking the full weight of my body into his lap, and he groans, his head falling back in either torture or pleasure—I'm not sure which. I imagine if he hadn't asked for me to secure his hands behind him, he'd be gripping my waist so tightly, I'd bruise.

Luckily for me, Joey here has a thing for being tied up.

I glance around his presidential hotel suite.

We're in the center of the living room. I moved the chair as soon as I arrived, smiling as he asked me to take the black rope he brought and restrain him. Joey thinks I'm bought and paid for, but the reality is I'm so much more.

There's a large brown leather couch in front of us facing the flat-screen TV, and behind his back are french doors leading to the primary bedroom. They're open, showcasing a king bed with small foiled squares of mint chocolate on fluffy white pillows, the Marino hotel's logo emblazoned smack-dab in the middle.

Joey isn't *actually* spending the night here, and it shows in the pristine condition of the room we're in. This hotel is just a nice place to hide some of his darker desires.

Like me.

Although I doubt I'm an escapade he ever saw coming.

Smirking, I yank him forward as much as the rope allows.

"That's right," I drawl. "Death."

"Not particularly." He hesitates. "Do you?"

"All the time."

It's the most honest thing I'll say to him tonight.

He frowns. "I didn't bring you here to talk about weird shit like this. Now put those lips to good use."

"Mmm," I murmur, loosening my grip on his tie so he drops against the chair. "And here I thought we'd be having an enjoyable time."

His body jerks so sharply beneath me, it makes me bounce.

A slow smile spreads across my face. "You all right? You seem a little agitated, sugar."

He turns his face to the side, his ruddy cheeks growing even more splotchy. "I'm fine."

"If you say so."

He's *not* fine, but I'll give him a few more minutes to come to that conclusion himself.

My fingers trace along my exposed collarbone and dip into my cleavage. There's a pocketknife stashed in my bra, and its presence is so heavy, the metal feels like it's vibrating against my pale skin. Normally, I'm a poison girl all the way to the end—it's more artistic, more *fun*—but the guidelines for this venture were straightforward.

"What are you doing?" He jerks again, his neck arching in a spasm this time. "*Fuck*."

Turning his cheek back toward me, I tap it with my fingertips. "Shh. Don't speak, darlin'."

"Enough with the pet names," he snaps.

I smile.

He's really quite pitiful when he's agitated.

Trepidation flashes across his face, and his leg twitches, jostling me forward until my breasts press against his chest.

"Un-untie me," he stutters.

I drag out the knife and flip it open before running my bloodred nails across the sharp edge. "Joey, *honey*, you're hardly in the position to be making demands."

"Untie me, bitch," he repeats. "*Now*. Do you know who the fuck I a—"

His words drop off as another tremor hits, and I take the opportunity, brushing the metal blade down the side of his face and over his Adam's apple until it's resting at the base of his throat.

"Careful with that filthy mouth," I coo, putting pressure on the handle of the knife. "You're turning me on."

He pulls against his restraints, no doubt trying to escape, but he won't be able to. My uncle taught me how to tie those knots when I was fifteen, and I've had a lot of practice since then. Still, the movement changes the angle of the blade, and a deep red stream of blood drips down his neck.

His legs twitch with another convulsion, and I shake slightly on his lap.

"I'm afraid those little...muscle spasms of yours are only gonna get worse, honey."

"Wh-*what*?" Joey stammers.

I give him a pitying look. "On account of the strychnine

I laced your drink with when you were busy putting your face in my tits."

His breathing grows rapid until he's gasping for air.

Right on cue.

You can't ever count on a man, but you can always count on the poison that will kill him...or whatever that saying is.

"I don't know if you've ever studied the beauty of poison." My eyes peruse him. "Doubtful. Honestly, it's a lost art. One people don't take the time to truly appreciate. There's a beauty in my potions." I pause and give a self-satisfied grin. "That's what my best friend back home calls my little concoctions—*potions*, like I'm some witch here to steal your soul."

"Fuck... fu—"

"Technically, I guess he's not wrong," I say to myself and then look back at Joey, tilting my head. "The night goddess Nyx *has* been antsy for a sacrifice, and while she prefers animals burned and buried, I can never bring myself to harm them, so people have to do."

Now I'm just fucking with him. While I *do* practice baneful magic, I don't actually sacrifice living things to gods. Most witches don't.

"You're a fuck—fucking...psy...cho."

Sighing, I pull the knife back. "I told you, honey, don't waste your breath. If *I'm* here, it's because you made a deal with the devil, and there's nothing you can do to save yourself."

"I didn't d-do anything."

"Oh, sugar, I believe you, I do, but you know how it is in

this business.” I wave my hand in the air. “It’s better if I don’t really know the specifics.”

His entire body is shaking now, jerking uncontrollably while he struggles to take in air.

Honestly, this whole thing is getting a little tiresome for my taste, and I’m growing bored.

“Does it help to know that I wish I could? Save you, I mean. I’m trying to be better these days, you know? To help people instead of hurt them.”

It’s not the truth, not really. It’s just something I say sometimes because it makes me more palatable.

“You’re...hurt—hurting *me*...cunt.”

My grin drops. “True. About the hurting you part anyway. The cunt part is debatable.”

I reach out and grip his chin in my hand, digging my nails into his flesh and leaving crescent-shaped moons behind. “Unfortunately, you made a bargain with someone *besides* me. And a deal’s a deal, darlin’, no matter who you make it with.” My face screws up as I look at how sallow his skin is turning, and I pat his cheek before shoving it away. “You understand.”

His neck jerks back, and his mouth opens on a wide, pained gasp.

I lunge, plunging the metal deep into his carotid artery.

Joey’s scream is loud but short, and he gurgles something through the liquid collecting in his throat. Truthfully, I can’t understand a thing.

In my experience, it’s better when men can’t talk anyway.

Adrenaline is pumping so hard in my veins, my eardrums pulse in time with my heart.

Joey’s twitches are strong enough that the chair wobbles, so I glide forward, hoping my added weight keeps it from toppling over. Blood continues to seep around the edges of the blade and down the crisp collar of his cream shirt, and I tighten my grip, blanching my knuckles a ghostly white.

I yank the knife out, jumping from his lap and backing away as red spurts from the wound like a fountain, not wanting to get any on my clothes. I wore black just in case—because I know myself—but it’s a new dress, one I couldn’t afford but *had* to have, and I’m really hoping to wear it again.

The chair *does* topple over now, thumping against the floor, and I watch with sick fascination as Joey’s groans fade and he slumps lifelessly on the stained carpet.

Blowing out a steadying breath, I crouch until I can see his face. I cringe when I look at the mess.

Yeah, poison is *much* cleaner.

Joey’s eyes are open and glossy, unblinking and empty.

The silence is so thick, it makes my ears ring.

He never screamed, save for that one short burst at the start. Probably too proud to appear weak, even in his last moments. So many men of his stature are.

“Thanks for the warm welcome, Joey,” I say to his dead body, wiping off my blade with the corner of his shirt. “The Kingston family sends its regards.”

CHAPTER 1

Venesa

Two Years Later

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE?” MY cousin’s shrill voice pierces the air as I stand across from her on a secluded part of the Hudson River.

It’s dark tonight, the clouds masking even the glow of the moon, so it took her a long time to notice me. She’s lucky it’s *just* me. Anyone could have found her, and she’s so obtuse to her surroundings, she’d be dead before she could even scream.

“Hi, Aria. Nice to see you too.” I grin sarcastically and scan her attire.

An emerald-green evening gown, her scarlet hair in a messy updo that’s definitely seen better days, and two red-bottom shoes dangling from her fingers, one of them with a broken heel.

Always the pampered princess, even when she looks like a dumpster fire.

“Out for a midnight run?” I ask.

She pushes a strand of hair off her smooth forehead before leveling me with a glare. “What I’m doing is *none* of your business. How did you even know where to find me? And why are you in New York?”

“You’re asking a lot of questions for a girl with broken shoes and a clear death wish.” I gesture to our surroundings.

I found her the same way I always find her: the tracking device my uncle installed in not only her phone but also the bracelet she got for her sweet sixteenth.

Truthfully, the tracking tech is probably in everything he’s ever given her, which is the whole caboodle. Aria doesn’t exactly make her own money, and he’s beyond overprotective of his only daughter, even after she up and skipped town years ago. Sometimes I wonder if she realizes that allowing him to bankroll her entire life means the whole “running away” thing doesn’t hold any weight, but she seems happy enough, and she’s always loved to live in the lap of luxury, so I’m not really surprised.

Aria crosses her arms. “Did Daddy send you again?”

I smirk.

She already knows the answer to that.

“I’m not a fucking kid! I can do things on my own. Make sure you remind him of that when you go back home.” She stomps her foot and then winces before bringing it up to look at the sole. There’s a thin stream of red, and she groans. “Great.”

I quirk a brow, looking pointedly at the broken heel of the shoe she's carrying in her hand and then to the deserted area we're in. "Seriously, what are you doing traversing damp rocks and murky waters in a thousand-dollar gown?"

She doesn't answer right away. Instead, she gives me a curious look, like I should already *know* why she's out here being reckless.

"I was on a date," she finally says. "It didn't go well, and it's...peaceful on the water."

She moves then, stumbling along the rocky shoreline, her dainty fingers reaching for purchase on some of the larger boulders as she slips between them.

"Where the hell are you going, Aria? Don't you wanna know what dear ol' Daddy has to say?" Begrudgingly, I follow her.

She trips and lets out a sharp hiss.

"You're gonna cut up your feet and get them infected." I try again just to get her to slow down.

She looks back at me and stops moving. "You're so dramatic."

"Seems like high praise coming from you," I muse. "Maybe I should take my chances in New York, try out the whole singing thing, and *you* can go home and work for your daddy."

"Be serious."

"You don't think I'd have better luck getting auditions for Broadway?"

She snorts. "Please."

I'm not being serious. I enjoy working for my uncle, even more so now that Aria's been gone for years and I get his full attention. Besides, I'm confident Aria has no clue who her father actually is beyond being the wealthiest businessman in the South.

What *I* do for him is so much more than that. I help prop up that hollow legacy, making sure the truth of his power remains out of sight.

Corruption sings with shiny buildings and fancy suits, and the *truth* is that my uncle is not only a respected businessman but he's also the most powerful gangster in the South.

In any case, I don't blame Aria for leaving South Carolina. New York is something special. Across the Hudson, broken up by the thick cables of a bridge, is the city skyline, and when I see it, something warm expands in the center of my chest.

I love it here, although admitting that out loud would mean also admitting I have something in common with Aria.

She's been obsessed with Manhattan since we were kids. She would find pictures in magazines to cut out and hang on her wall like window dressing, and I guess her obsession rubbed off on me.

It's all farcical, though. Dreams are that for a reason. Just dreams.

Maybe one day she'll learn...or maybe she won't. What do I care?

"Well." She throws her hands out to her sides. "What is it, then? Spit it out, Urch. What's Daddy want now? Did he send you out here to try and help me?"