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**VERITY'S  
GAME**



# CHAPTER 1

## SUA SPONTE

VERITY UNDERSTOOD THE NECESSITY TO conduct private business conversations in the general vicinity of a roaring cement mixer, but that didn't mean she had to enjoy it.

"So, this is the guy," Montresor yelled over the rumble of a loader passing them with a full bucket of rubble. He held up his phone. On the screen was a picture of a high-profile Senator, Emilio Guzmán. Verity didn't follow Mexico's politics on purpose, but even she recognized his face: a handsome, bearded silver fox—telegenic. It was hard to avoid knowing who he was.

A lot of senators scrambled after the limelight, but Guzmán got it. He took big, ambitious swings all the time. He was pushing all sorts of foreign policy legislation. He was gunning to leave the Senate for a post with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and there was already hype around him for a presidential run.

Verity brushed at the shoulder of her linen suit. The sun that baked her bronze skin leached every drop of moisture out of the dirt, and it lingered in the clouds. She could *feel* those particles being magnetically drawn to her suit.

She shouted over the construction site noise. "So a guy like that isn't gonna have security?"

"He's a closet case, so no."

Verity sucked her teeth. One of her short, amber curls lolled down onto her forehead as she tilted her head to throw him some

side-eye. “You know, if I had scruples, I’d be offended at you sending me to hit a closeted man at a gay club.”

Montresor stuffed his phone back in his pocket and gave her a knowing look. “You know, it’s almost like you’re getting tired of this job.”

Montresor was a world-weary guy in his fifties. He had moved on to black ops after serving with her father in the US Rangers. Now he was a handler on a private payroll, dispatching professional killers on pharmaceutical company business. He was also the owner of a construction company busily erecting yet another office park in a fast-growing business district of Mexico City.

The cement mixer spun down enough to allow conversation at normal volume. Verity’s shoulders instantly unbunched. Her days of hollering shit at people were behind her as far as she could help it.

“You’re gonna burn out on this work if you don’t have a *why*,” he said.

Verity didn’t know a lot about his personal life, which was wise for both of them. But she did sometimes wonder whether his occasional nuggets of “wisdom” came from experience or if he was spouting nonsense he thought she wanted to hear. You never could tell with an ex-spy. “Oh yeah?” She squinted at him through the dust. “What’s your why?”

“None of your goddamn business.” He looked her over for a brief, tense moment.

Verity stiffened. He was inspecting her, but why?

“Nice suit,” he said eventually. “You went to my guy?”

“Yeah.” Of course, he was checking out her suit to see if he recognized his tailor’s work. Her shoulders relaxed. She tugged at the jacket, which hit just below the hip, where she liked it. “You weren’t kidding. He really knows his shit.”

“Okay. Let me know when the job is done. Contact me if you run into problems. Better yet, don’t run into problems.” That last part was something he always said whenever he sent her on a job.

In three years, she had not run into any problems.

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The sun was slipping by, and she had prep work to do. She gave a little head toss in his general direction. “Yeah, yeah, I got you. *Sua sponte*, baby.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She walked off across the rutted dirt, past his van emblazoned with *MONTRESOR CONSTRUCCIÓN*, already planning to drop this suit off for cleaning as soon as possible. Ten minutes on the site and she already could feel grit between the fibers.



Verity had been initially skeptical about taking on private wet work. She'd expected to be dealing with two-bit thugs with prison tats. Drug cartels, that sort of thing. But the cartel Montresor was working for was based in a big white building in Mexico City's business district, and instead of heroin or fentanyl, they produced and distributed antibiotics, mood stabilizers, and diabetes drugs. And like any other cartel, sometimes had problems that needed fixing. And they could afford the best.

Montresor was the same age her father would have been if his unit had not been bombed in Fallujah. He'd approached her at the right time—at her father's funeral in rainy, sad Brooklyn, when everything around her reminded her of who she no longer was, with no suggestions of who she should become. The fact that he was old boded well in her mind. Verity was thirty-five and looked ageless, but she vaguely hoped she'd eventually make it to something like “old.”

When she came here three years ago, he told her that he hadn't mentioned to his people at Mexilógico that she was Black.

She'd been unfazed. “Yeah, people are racist, film at eleven.”

“Yes, but also, Mexico City is not exactly crawling with Black people. It means you will stand out. At a glance, you could maybe pass for a dark-skinned Mexican, but you will be *negrita* to anyone who gets eyes on you longer than that. So you'll have to be much more careful about not being seen on the job.”

Fine, she'd thought. She had done her share of stealth in the Rangers. Her sniping skills had earned commendations. She could

snap a man's neck without breaking a sweat and was an expert at not calling attention to herself. "Yeah, whatever," she'd said.

"They'll figure it out eventually, but it will be after you do a bunch of perfect contracts, and it won't be worth their trouble to make an issue of it." After a long, pointed stare, he added, "And they *will* be perfect contracts."

So, although white was her best color, she went with the black suit for the Guzmán job because it was less dazzling. Left to their own devices, her curls might sit up and sway in all directions, but she slicked them back and donned her cufflinks. With that, plus her height and broad-shouldered soldier's build, she could, in a dim nightclub, be briefly mistaken for a man. A dapper one, if she did say so herself.

Outside the window of her one-bedroom apartment, the city was sinking beneath the weight of a hazy sunset, a jigsaw puzzle of old-style Spanish architecture smashed up against business districts with hard, slanting geometry and modern faces of mirrored glass. The neighborhood teemed with executives and fashion models, bus drivers and dog fighters, artists and intellectuals, and knife-wielding *cholos*. And she would be going out into it.

A last dollop of coconut hand lotion, plus a spritz of cologne with notes of rosemary and sea salt, and she was ready to go.

"Moisturized and unbothered," she muttered to her reflection.



Most of the promo materials she'd seen for this club suggested its clientele was all male, which made Verity skeptical that she was the best person for the job. Fortunately, this particular evening was advertised as a "mixed" night.

"Shouldn't you send in that dude of yours for this?" she'd asked Montresor.

"He's been too much drama lately. You're no-fuss."

He'd instructed her it was to look like "gay sex gone wrong," as it would make the authorities more disposed to sweep it under the rug. Mexico was still a Catholic country, after all, and the police would not want to deal with a big queer spectacle around the death of a

respected lawmaker. They'd be tripping over themselves to find a fall guy and declare the case solved.

"And how am I supposed to make it look like that?"

"Fucking figure it out."

The sun had set on the city by the time Verity was rolling up to the club. The stars, to the extent you could see them, were out. The neighborhood's iconic Angel of Independence statue spread her golden wings at the top of her pillar, bathed in lights from below, a heavenly beacon to the gays of Mexico City.

The club was in the Zona Rosa district, a patchy mix of friendly and colorful and sketchy and seedy, sometimes within the same block. Verity's Spanish was good enough to understand the obscene, rainbow-laden graffiti on the brick walls of the building next door to the club. The place wasn't anything special from the outside, at least not to Verity, who had grown up in New York. She'd spent her teen years sneaking into clubs occupying remodeled churches, old boathouses, and Turkish baths.

The big brick building with impenetrable, mirrored windows stood across the street from a used car lot and a warehouse for canned goods. No neon, no signage. The only real giveaway that it was a nightclub was the muffled thud of dance floor bass: *thump, thump, thump*.

Inside the club, it was another matter.

Verity paid her money to a drag queen who batted her eyelashes—as big as bat wings—and addressed her as *papi* before Verity could enter the cavernous interior. It was on the early side by nightclub standards, but the dance floor was already pretty full. Even on a "mixed" evening like this one, the demographic still tilted male, maybe 60/40. Go-go boys in sparkly Speedos gyrated atop a few lit-up pedestals around the perimeter of the dance floor. Each was attended by a handful of straight girls drinking rainbow-colored cocktails and giggling while stuffing money into the dancers' drawers. The dancers preened for them as if posing for the cover of *Safely Objectifiable Male Monthly*. Harmless enough.

Verity wove through the crowd, barely touching anyone she brushed past. The music that had been a muffled thumping from

outside was now a massive, booming monolith of reggaeton bass throbbing in her feet and chest. She recognized this one from hearing it blare out the windows of lowriders lately.

She sidled up to the bar and ordered a scotch—the best one they had, which wasn't saying much. They had Fortaleza Reposado and a few passable tequilas, but she preferred a middling scotch most days of the week. She leaned her tall, solid frame back against the bar and surveyed the dance floor.

Rainbow lights flashed, interspersed with shuddering strobes that cast the dance floor into a freeze-frame from moment to moment. Verity didn't take out her phone. She knew her target's face. She scanned the bobbing throng, sipping her scotch, hunting for her man.

Someone's gaze weighed on her. She glanced left. A woman a few seats away at the bar was checking her out. Zero interest in the go-go boys. Well, it was mixed night, after all.

On a night when she wasn't there for business, Verity might have talked to her a minute. She appeared close to Verity's age, maybe younger, and she had an interesting face—all smooth, tan skin and angular cheekbones and a strong chin that came to a sharp point below her delicate lips. She smiled at Verity, and Verity responded with a polite half smile and turned her attention back to the dance floor.

It didn't take long to find Guzmán. He was in a loud, neon-pink shirt, dancing with a much younger shirtless man in the middle of the floor. He was uncoordinated, holding a near-empty cocktail glass, and doing a little too much hip-thrusting and pawing at his dance partner's ass, as if trying to squeeze it for either juice or money. Verity made it her business not to know much about the guy's politics, but it still felt fucked-up to come into a closeted man's safe space and kill him.

She needed to get closer to him and figure out what the deal was between him and the boy toy. It would make her life easier if he wasn't a lover he was planning to leave with. The boy toy wasn't part of the contract, and she preferred not to kill people that nobody had paid her to.

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The weight of that woman's gaze still lingered. Verity turned to face her again. The woman's sleeveless cocktail dress, with a lot of splashy fringe, displayed her impressive muscled arms. Verity had a hard time pulling away from her intense, intelligent gaze—a woman with things going on in her head was always attractive.

"Nice suit," the woman said.

Verity tensed. "How'd you know I speak English?"

The woman looked her over with an amused expression that said, *Oh, just everything about you?*

Verity chuckled. "All right. Fair enough."

The woman shifted closer. "Also, your ring."

Verity's right middle finger bore a ring with the Army Rangers insignia: the four-quadrant shield with the sun, star and a lightning bolt.

"*Sua Sponte.*" The woman was reading the text underneath the insignia. "*Of one's own accord*, isn't it? Sounds like you do whatever you want. Very American."

Verity took in the tilt of her head, the sharpness of her gaze, the naughty pout that played around her mouth; needling Verity was her idea of a good time. "It means in any situation, in changing circumstances, I understand what needs to be done, and I do it."

"Hmm. Military, no?" She had an accent Verity couldn't place. It wasn't the usual accent of a Mexican speaking English. Could it be British? No, that wasn't quite it either.

"Army Rangers, yeah. But not anymore." Maybe this clever creature was going to be her way out onto the dance floor, to get closer to Guzmán. Not that it was by any means a chore.

"Good. I don't go to bed with American soldiers."

Verity was picking out notes of Mexican Spanish in her accent but also cadences of posh London. Interesting.

Verity wasn't used to a woman being this forward. Seemed like no matter where she was, women-loving women tended to be useless at courtship. Verity normally had a rule about mixing business and pleasure, but under the circumstances—an absolute snack presenting herself on a platter, something that almost never happened—



she supposed it was more of a guideline than a hard-and-fast rule. “Why’s that?”

Mischief danced around this woman’s entire being. “Because God created war so Americans would learn geography.”

Verity scoffed. She was spicy, this one. And quoting Mark Twain? Was there anything sexier than a woman who read books? “Oh, it’s like that?”

“It is.” Her dark eyes danced; her challenge unmistakable. *Come and get me.*

Verity’s English-teacher mother had shoved classic novels into her hands from the time she could read. She had spent a lot of her time in the Army devouring literature. It helped her stay grounded, gave her a space that wasn’t war and smoke and death or mind-numbing paperwork and babysitting. It connected her to home.

Verity shifted into a James Dean slouch, leaning on the bar. “Well, it is forbidden to kill; therefore, all murderers are punished... *unless* they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.”

It was the right response. The woman moved closer, those waving, silvery layers of fringe enticing. Verity’s chances of getting this honey onto the floor and maneuvering them inconspicuously toward where Guzmán was dancing were good.

“Are you going to stand like a professor quoting Voltaire at me all night, or are you going to ask me to dance?”

Verity pursed her lips, playing like she had to think it over. “Can’t it be both?”

The woman laughed, inaudible above the music. But she had a wide, movie-star smile, complete with perfect teeth, and it was all Verity could do to keep her mind on business.

Attachments weren’t safe in her line of work, but she wouldn’t mind an evening with this one if she could manage to be efficient about her assignment.

*Serendipity.* Verity held out a hand. The woman took it and followed her underneath the colored lights.

While a few drunk or high people bobbed and flailed on their own, most of the population of this dance floor consisted of people

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wanting to fuck who were trying to work out whether they would fuck the person in front of them.

If Verity had any doubts she'd be leaving with this woman, they disappeared in their first thirty seconds together on the floor. She was not the least bit shy about pressing her lean, athletic body against Verity's, inviting her to share the rhythm. Nor did Verity have trouble falling into it with her, their hips pushing against each other in perfect time to the bass.

Verity glanced over her partner's shoulder to gauge how far away Guzmán was and how fast she could move them without it seeming unnatural. She hated dividing her attention.

They revolved around each other on the floor, their bodies still pressed together, drifting as one in the general direction Verity wanted. One of her partner's hands slipped into her jacket and settled at the small of her back. Verity grabbed hold of her slim hips and guided their movement into a deep, slow grind. She gazed into her obsidian eyes with a look that said, *I'm setting the rhythm.*

The woman pushed back against Verity's gaze with her own. *Yes, you are...for now.*

They tangled, warmth against warmth, heat blooming into heat. The clothing between their bodies barely mattered, as if it could burn away in the friction of their movement. Sweat prickled in places it had no business doing so. For half a second, Verity considered pulling this woman off to a shadowed corner and having her right there in the dark, with reggaeton pumping in their blood.

Internally, she smacked her libido on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper—*Hey, knock it off!*—and focused herself back onto the job at hand.

Verity continued to move them deeper into the crowd, closer to where Guzmán kept pawing at the shirtless boy. She was pleased to find her partner cooperating with their overall trajectory. As they drew nearer, the woman put a hand on her chest and pushed back, then turned into Verity, her back flush against Verity's front.

A surprise turn. Convenient. She now had a clear line of sight to Guzmán and didn't need to worry about whether her partner noticed her split attention.

Verity twined her arm around the woman's waist, and they fell into a rhythm again. She forced herself to pay attention to Guzmán's movements rather than the flawless, rock-hard ass pushing up against her.

Guzmán knocked back a shot that a waiter handed him. Did these debauched queens have any idea who he was and what kind of power he had over their lives? Was the hunk he was dancing with someone he'd just picked up? A lover? A paid escort? The poor bastard was having a good time. Verity could smell weeks of repression burning away. Or maybe it was the Axe body spray.

She needed to get closer and eavesdrop. Verity dipped her head down and purred into her partner's ear. "What do I call you, baby?"

The woman turned around, pressed herself into Verity's chest, and put her mouth close to Verity's ear. "You can call me Sirena."

Verity's body throbbed at the way she said it. *Siren? That can't be her actual name; it's too on the nose.* But she supposed it didn't matter.

They inched closer to Guzmán. He turned around to wave to someone behind Verity. Face-to-face with Sirena, it was harder to keep an eye on him, but she had gotten close enough to get a glimpse over Sirena's shoulder and see that his pupils were blown to hell. Molly, probably—or blow.

Sirena continued to move with their shared rhythm but bent at the knees so that she skimmed down the front of Verity's body. She kept a smoldering eye contact that had its own center of gravity. Verity's mind stayed on the mission, but not without difficulty. A lady could only play it cool for so long, and the fact was, Verity was hot, all the way to her core.

And who wouldn't be? This Sirena was something Verity couldn't remember encountering before. She was feminine—the long, glossy black hair, the artful makeup, the silky mouth, the dress—but her body was sculpted, like a gymnast's or a dancer's. Her strength was obvious, written in the cut of the muscles in her arms and back.

Verity usually found she could take or leave most women; for any one she met, there were usually a hundred more like her. But this one? The sinuous grace, the aggressive sensuality were such that even when standing still, she was prowling.

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Sirena slipped around behind her and snaked her arm around Verity's waist, her chin resting on her shoulder, hand resting just above the trouser band. "What do you think of that, soldier?"

Verity inched them forward in as natural a way as possible. "I think you should keep going."

She was close enough to Guzmán and his boy toy now to catch a glimpse of Guzmán's shoes, a pair of white loafers with fur on the uppers. And she could hear the two of them talking. Not well, given the din, but enough that having a line of sight and being able to sort of lip-read, she was able to get the gist of the conversation.

"You want another bump, baby?" the young hunk was asking in Spanish. He had bleached blonde hair that stuck up in spikes with enough gel that a small animal could hurt itself on them.

"Only if I can snort it off your dick."

"*Dale, papi, dale!*" *Go ahead!* The younger man jammed a hand into his pants like he was going to whip it out. Verity couldn't help rolling her eyes. The two men laughed.

"You can do that when we get to your place," the young man said.

Whether or not they had arrived together, they were planning on leaving together. That meant separating them long enough to do the job was going to be an issue. Much to her good fortune, another waiter was weaving through the crowd to hand a frosty glass of something fruity-looking to Guzmán's youthful dance partner.

Verity turned to face Sirena again. She wanted the girl's attention on her, not on anything else going on around them, so she pulled their bodies together nice and tight. She touched her forehead to Sirena's. "So. Do you go to bed with ex-soldiers?"

She had Sirena's attention now. She wound her arms back around Verity's waist as the two of them drifted closer to Guzmán. She was going to have to work out getting Guzmán's little twink to spill his fruity beverage.

"Not if they quote Voltaire," Sirena said. But anyone could see she wanted a good reason to let that slide.

"Not even if they do this?"

Verity bent her knees and got both her hands around the backs of Sirena's thighs and lifted.

Sirena understood what was happening and gave a hop upward, letting Verity lift her and wrapping her legs around Verity's waist. "Impressive."

It was a risk. Verity had to stumble backward into Guzmán and his boyfriend without her and Sirena getting hurt. And she had to calculate how things were going to go, depending on who got doused with the boyfriend's fruity drink. It was always good to be a few moves ahead.

Sirena was staring hotly into her eyes now, seeming as impressed as she damn well should. It was a shame to have to break the moment by plowing into the two gay boys behind them, but there was no way around it. That was, after all, what Verity was here for—not for getting laid.

She took a moment to judge the distance by hearing and that other more ineffable sense of space (her old captain in Afghanistan had called it her "Jedi thing"). She lurched backward—two well-calculated steps—and backed into a solid mass of human muscle.

"Fuck!" Verity yelled. She let go of Sirena, who landed on her feet like a cat, and turned around. "Watch where you're going, man!"

The boyfriend was apologetic and fussed over Guzmán. But Guzmán looked strangely out of sorts. Maybe it was the drugs catching up with him. He looked around, blinking in confusion. Verity spotted a large damp spot on his loud shirt. Jackpot. Separate him from the boy toy; take care of it in the john.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," he announced, sounding rattled.

"Are you okay, baby?" the younger man called after him.

But Guzmán didn't answer. He pushed through the crowd as fast as he could.

Verity had accomplished the objective of separating them. But now she had to follow him. She addressed the boy toy. "Did you get tagged?"

He quickly checked himself out. "I'm fine. You?"

She grasped the hem of her jacket and told a bald-faced lie. "I'm okay, but my jacket took a hit." She turned to Sirena. "Listen, I

gotta go rinse the drink out of this jacket before it's ruined. But once that's done"—she leaned in—"you want to get out of here?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

"I'll be right back." Verity gave her a wink and headed off through the crowd in Guzmán's direction.

There were cameras in this club. She had scoped out all of them and their lines of sight. While Guzmán's path to the men's room was a straight line, hers had to take a path around the edges of the room. It was important to stay off-camera for this part. She walked through one little knot of revelers after another, wove behind a couple of large potted plants. At least there were no cameras on the entrance to the men's room. For obvious reasons.

A trail of men, short and tall, young and old, twinkles and daddies and *cholos*, spilled out and around the near wall. Guzmán was nowhere to be seen. If he was feeling sick, he'd have cut the line.

Verity was thankful for the dark in the hallway outside the john. She lowered her head and breezed past the gaggle of nattering boys that meandered along the mirrored wall. She drew one or two outraged cries of "*¡Ey!*" But she moved fast enough that she was already long past them before it left their mouths.

The bathroom interior was also, thank God, dimly lit. The cacophony of queens bickering and singing—and, in one stall near the end, screwing—was the best she could have hoped for. That was how it was with these things. This kind of hit only worked if it was dead empty or else total chaos. Tonight, it was the latter. No one noticed her.

She moved down the line of stalls, in search of Guzmán. She spotted his distinctive loafers with the white fur, facing inward, in a stall a few doors from the one where people were having sex. Back to the door. Good. He was making this easy.

The door was open a crack so she moved through it, fast and quiet, pulled it shut behind her and flipped the lock. She was wearing good-quality men's dress shoes. Nobody would think twice about what was going on in that dimly lit stall.

He was hunched over in front of the toilet, shaking and groaning so bad, he didn't seem to even register her entrance. Even better. He

had maybe snorted or drank too much. He had not vomited, but it appeared he was about to any moment. Rough way to go out, she thought as she slipped on some latex gloves.

She kicked the back of one of his knees, hard, forcing him to the tile floor, then grabbed the back of his head and slammed it face-first into the toilet seat. He grunted in pain. It was indistinguishable from the sex going on a few stalls away. She was fast, surgical.

He tried to turn around to look at her, but she grabbed his little shock of silver hair and smacked his head against the bowl again, drawing another pained grunt. “Why are you—?” he began and placed his hands against the rim of the bowl, struggling to push himself upward.

She kicked the back of his other knee, and he dropped, but he managed to finally turn around and look at her for a split-second with wide, bloodshot eyes. His forehead was bleeding, and Verity could tell from the look of him that he was disoriented, frightened, and not quite seeing things properly.

Looking them in the eye was always the worst. “It’s nothing personal,” she muttered.

She crouched down and elbowed him in the face, sending his head whipping back around, then planted a knee in his back, wrapped her hands around his throat, and pulled.

He wasn’t a big guy and didn’t seem to be in any way trained to handle himself in a situation like this. His elbows flailed backward in a sort of macabre reverse image of the way he had been flailing them on the dance floor. But it wasn’t like he was going to hit anything. He was on his knees. The loud sex going on a couple of stalls over provided cover for all the grunting and scrambling and gagging going on in this one.

Her fingers tightened. She could feel the veins in his neck throbbing. She could snap it, but that would look less like a sex accident than being choked out. So she held on while he struggled, until he didn’t. She waited, silent, till the pulse stopped.

Satisfied, she took off the belt he was wearing, then wrapped it around his neck, looping it through but not buckling it. She pulled it tight.

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She checked his pulse again to make sure the job was done, then gave him the silent respect she gave all her targets upon completing her mission. Not a prayer, but a moment of stillness. This was a luxury she had not had in Afghanistan, but it was part of her practice now.

She was good at this shit, real good. She was trained to be ice-cold about the job. But this time, something nagged at her: why *did* he have to be killed?

That was not something you wondered if you wanted to stay in this line of work. But the strangeness of what she'd just done, the inhumanity of it, skittered under her skin.

She pushed it aside. If Verity was lucky—and she was feeling lucky—there was a girl out in that club who was still waiting for her. She wasn't about to miss out on this one.

*Sua sponte*, baby.



# CHAPTER 2

## THE TRUE ART OF WAR

VERITY STOOD IN THE STALL long enough for the crowd in the bathroom to turn over, which was a few minutes. She emerged from the stall, rinsed the hem of her jacket, and made her circuitous way back to the dance floor. She stopped at one point to grab a cocktail napkin and dab the fine mist of sweat from her forehead and wipe her palms.

Sirena was waiting for her back by the bar where they'd met, her wiry frame spilling off a bar stool, looking like a well-earned reward for a solid evening's work.

Verity drew close and put a hand on her waist. "So, no Voltaire, huh?"

Sirena tilted her head back. "No. Why don't you hit me with your best shot?"

Verity still couldn't believe the luck of running into a girl who knew her literature and philosophy in a place like this. Feeling good about her chances, she leaned in, taking in the delicate scent of Sirena's perfume—something green and woody—and murmured into her ear, "In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard."

Sirena cocked an eyebrow. "Toni Morrison. Bold choice." She gestured toward the exit. "Let's go."

By this hour, the club was getting wall-to-wall packed, making it feel oppressive. Bodies clogged every corridor and doorway, and

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the air was damp and hot from shoving a lot of sweaty people into one place. Verity was dying to get the hell out of here, even without the bonus of going home with a woman who looked absolutely delicious. They had to elbow their way down a stairwell jammed with people in shimmering clothes and squeeze around a woman who was out of her gourd, hugging the wall and groaning in a way that suggested a ketamine trip.

When they broke out onto the street, the warm, muggy evening felt like freedom. Horns honked, motors rumbled, and party people streamed along the sidewalk, laughing, squawking, and shouting. Verity and Sirena both took a deep breath.

Verity glanced in both directions. "Which way?"

Sirena pointed. "That way. We can get a taxi, if you want to."

"Is it far?"

"Not too far. Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty if we walk slowly."

"I don't mind the walk if you don't." Verity couldn't afford getting entangled in a relationship, but this encounter was too interesting to rush through. The rare opportunity of intellectual foreplay had presented itself, and she'd be damned if she'd pass on it.

Sirena's eyes flicked once over Verity's whole self. "Let's go."

Verity offered her arm. Sirena took it and led them deeper into the neighborhood, away from the Angel of Independence. "Your English is great," Verity said. "And it sounds like you have an accent but not a Spanish one? Maybe British?"

Sirena gazed down the street, seeming to mull over her answer.

Verity reflected on the many awkward, stupid questions she used to get about whether her hair was her real hair or why she didn't have a "blaccent" or how she had acquired her encyclopedic knowledge of books, as if Black folks couldn't love reading. Then there were the ones she got in Mexico, about whether she was Afro-Latina or why she was living here or why she dressed "like that." People didn't know what to do when you didn't fit the stereotype in their head and often ended up asking something vulgar like *What are you?* "Sorry. You're probably tired of that question."

Sirena seemed to shift her focus back to the conversation. "No, it's not that. Anyway, your ear is correct. I went to prep school and

then uni in London from the time I was fourteen. People are always surprised when my English sounds this way. But it's how I learned."

The more she spoke, the more Verity could hear the blend, the Spanish coming through more on certain words, but the British flavor clear on others. It delighted her for reasons she couldn't articulate. "You must have missed home, right? Probably stood out a little in London, no?"

"Well, there aren't many Mexicans, if that's what you mean. But London is quite Black, of course, and has a lot of Indians. India Indian, not the American kind. So, to answer your question, yes, I stood out a bit, but it could have been worse."

Verity squeezed playfully at Reina's firm hip. "*Quite Black*, huh? Does that mean I'm not your first?"

Sirena squeezed her arm in response. "A lady doesn't kiss and tell."

Verity felt the way anyone would on a warm, hazy night in Mexico City with a beautiful woman on their arm and near-future plans to visit her bed: more fortunate than she deserved, probably. "So is it just English and Spanish?"

Sirena guided them around a corner onto a quieter block. "No. I also speak French, Russian, and Mandarin."

"Oh, so a real cunning linguist, then, huh?"

"Very." Sirena's dark eyelashes fluttered and her mouth took on a little pout, as though she were looking forward to demonstrating her talents.

Verity hooked her arm around Sirena's waist and curled her fingers at Sirena's hip. Not only did she have a gymnast's body, she had the posture too—shoulders back, spine straight. And her stride had an effortless grace, as if the world were her tightrope that she walked with perfect balance.

"So," Verity said, "Spanish, English, Russian, and Mandarin... you're the human embodiment of the United Nations."

Sirena leaned her head against Verity's shoulder. "Well, I do work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I'm a translator."

## Verity's Game

Her hair smelled like something herbal with traces of coconut. Add a few more points for that. "Oh? So you could mistranslate something and start a whole war if you wanted, couldn't you?"

Sirena scoffed. "In theory, I suppose so. In reality, most of what I do is help diplomats argue about their parking spots. What about you? What do you do?"

And this was why Verity didn't go home with women often: she didn't want to answer questions, and she wasn't fond of lying. "I'm the ice cream man."

"Hm, I see. I imagine that must be demanding."

"You have no idea." Verity had momentarily forgotten about the dead man lying in the nightclub bathroom. She whipped out her phone and fired off a text to Montresor. One character, an *X*, to indicate that the job had been done.

Verity had wanted to drive an ice cream truck when she was a child, before she understood that coming from a family of Rangers meant she was Army-bound and destined to be a Ranger if they opened it up to women in time (they had).

In Brooklyn, the universal sound of happiness for a child was the Mister Softee truck playing his tinkly little tune over the loudspeaker on top. Children clamoring with excitement would surround the truck by the curb, waving their sweaty dollar bills or little, round potato fists full of change. When Verity was five years old, she was convinced that ice cream man was the best job anyone could ever have.

It wasn't till a bit later that she found out that ice cream man wasn't considered a respectable job. A part of her never stopped being dismayed at that, and at the class bullshit people heaped on one another in such a routine, cruel way.

Now, as an adult with more blood on her hands than she could hope to ever quantify, it was the first job that sprang to mind when a woman asked her what she did.

Sirena had an intelligent gaze that Verity guessed could spot bullshit a mile away. She watched the calculus happening behind the woman's eyes. She must have decided she didn't begin to buy Verity's ice cream truck response but also didn't care.

A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Sirena's neck. Verity's eye caught on it, and she watched it slide till it stopped at her collarbone. With a gentle finger, Verity dabbed it away. "Hot?"

The smoldering eye contact was enough to make a weaker woman go soft in the knees. "You'll see what hot is soon enough."

They had slowed to a stop in front of a small apartment building across from the hulk of an empty warehouse. Verity couldn't help noting her surroundings, the decent condition of the apartment building in front of them, its white, plaster facing. All the windows had curtains, candles. It was a civilized spot.

Verity was dying to find out what this striking, athletic, perfumed body could do in bed, but she held back, played it cool. She cupped Sirena's face with her free hand, ran a thumb over her cheekbone, and leaned in for what she intended to be a brief kiss.

But the moment Verity closed her eyes and their lips met, it was like an electrical current had yanked them together, and the flow of energy between them was not about to let her pull away so quickly.

Sirena's lips were silky and sweet, and they parted immediately to invite deeper exploration. The wet sliding of their tongues against each other sent a jolt down to Verity's guts. She kept her hand cupping Sirena's face and let the other drift up her waist to rest on her rib cage, a thumb pressing in with purpose just below one of her small breasts. Verity was being patient, but the question wasn't whether they would fuck but how long they'd be able to wait.

Verity pulled back and glanced around. "Where are we?"

"My place." It was a challenge.

Verity had every intention of meeting it. "I was hoping you'd say that."

The building was well-maintained, but it was an older one with four floors and probably no elevator. Sirena opened the painted front door and guided Verity inside. Heavy, wooden stairs spiraled upward through the center of a column of white stucco walls. "It's a walk-up, and I'm at the top," Sirena said. "Hope you don't mind."

"After you," Verity said, gesturing for Sirena to go ahead.

"What a gentleman."

"Nah, baby. I just want the view."

## Verity's Game

Sirena pursed her mouth and started up the steps, tossing a glance over her shoulder. Verity trailed a step behind. The fringe on her dress blurred the contours of her ass, but the backs of her thighs were a delight by themselves—tan and muscled and giving every appearance of being strong enough to crush a cantaloupe between them.

“You do mixed martial arts or something?” Verity asked.

“No. I work out a lot, though.”

Their voices echoed softly off the stairwell walls. “I can see that.”

“Plus, the four-flight walk doesn’t hurt.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t.” There was no way a four-flight walk-up could explain those arms of hers, but the legs? Maybe.

When they reached the fourth floor, Sirena produced keys and opened three locks in the heavy steel door of her place. Verity listened to the scraping of them, the clicking of the pins, as Sirena undid each one, then nudged the door open. Nothing but a sliver of black showed from inside.

Sirena turned to Verity with that same invitation, really more of a challenge—*come and get me*—and said, “Last chance to change your mind.”

Verity eased into Sirena’s personal space. “Now, why would I do that?” She put her hands on Sirena’s hips and looked deep into those dark eyes, tilting her head in close enough to kiss her. *I do, in fact, intend to come and get you.*

“I could be a psycho killer, you know.” Sirena flicked the tip of her tongue over Verity’s lower lip.

Verity responded with a bite. “So could I.”

“I guess we’ll have to take our chances.”

“Mm.” Verity pushed herself against Sirena, and the two of them slipped through the doorway. Verity had her where she wanted her—pinned against a wall. Their mouths found each other again as the door groaned shut. They stayed there exchanging hot kisses in the dark of Sirena’s apartment for a few electric minutes.

Verity could read a woman’s body when it was pressed against hers. If she went for it right now, let her hand glide right up that cocktail dress, Sirena wouldn’t stop her. But, for once, she didn’t

want to rush it. She palmed Sirena's firm little tit and squeezed, matching the rhythm of it with the pressure of their wet, open kisses.

A light flicked on. Sirena had found the switch in the dark.

Verity didn't pull back, but she turned her head and checked out the place—small but tasteful, with a pleasant scent of sandalwood incense and ylang-ylang. The few pieces of furniture had the distinct vibe of having cost some money: a leather sofa, a modernist coffee table of dark wood, a few sturdy bookshelves full of books. *Oh, the bookshelves. Better than porn.*

"Nice place."

"Thanks."

Verity leaned in for another brief kiss, after which she strolled over to the bookcases.

"See something you like?" Sirena asked.

They were well-stocked and, as Verity drew nearer, she caught the scents of paper and leather. Delicious. If Sirena was the kind of girl she seemed to be, she'd understand this as a species of foreplay.

Many of the titles met her approval. There was modern stuff—Maya Angelou, Carlos Fuentes, Kurt Vonnegut—and an impressive trove of classics. Some of them showed age on their leather bindings, gold embossing worn away by time, that suggested they were first editions. "You've got a lot of Camus."

"I like Camus. It's better in the original French, you know."

"Of course it is." Verity sort of wished she'd bothered learning French. But two languages was enough to deal with. "Goethe, Kafka, Rousseau...and you lied about not liking Voltaire."

"No, I hate-read him."

"Ha." She found a row of Hermann Hesse titles. She pointed to it. "Important question: *Siddhartha* or *Steppenwolf*?"

"*Steppenwolf*, obviously."

That response satisfied Verity. *Siddhartha* was about the pursuit of inner peace. *Steppenwolf* was about the search for one's humanity; it was about loneliness.

Her eyes lit on a copy of *Valley of the Dolls*. "Jacqueline Susann—is that a joke?"

Sirena remained unruffled. "Don't you ever eat junk food?"

Verity turned to find Sirena standing closer to her. Sirena clearly liked that she'd found someone who could have this conversation, someone who gleaned meaning from the plethora of volumes lining the wall. Verity glanced around the room again.

Opposite the sofa, a surrealist painting hung on the wall. Its curious perspective and contrast of muted and vibrant shades struck a familiar chord. Since moving here, Verity had cultivated an interest in the work of Mexican artists, and Remedios Varo was one of the best. "Is that a real Varo?"

Sirena's expression telegraphed an innocence Verity didn't buy. "On a translator's salary? Surely you jest."

Verity moved closer to it. It wasn't a print. It wasn't one she recognized, but if it wasn't a Varo, it was someone mimicking her style. You could see the depth and dimension in the brush strokes, the faint variations of pigment. If there was a signature, it must be tucked beneath the frame. Whether or not it was an actual Varo, it was an impressive piece of work.

Beneath the painting, on a side table, sat a bottle of wine. An outrageously expensive bottle of hard-to-get Bordeaux. "Château Lafite, 2017?" She picked it up gingerly. "Feel like opening this?"

Sirena plucked the bottle from Verity's hands and set it back on the side table. "No. Trust me, you don't want that."

Verity gave her a sly smile. "Oh? I don't want a thousand-dollar bottle of wine?"

"Not that one. Here, make yourself comfortable. I'll open something nice."

Verity sank into what may have been the most inviting sofa she'd ever sat on. It was cushy, but not too much, and the leather was soft. She didn't feel the slightest bit sweaty, which was her usual gripe with leather sofas. This one felt like low-key money. Verity wondered if Sirena was a trust-fund baby or something more intriguing.

Sirena returned with another bottle of wine, dark green glass clad in a gold-embossed label. She sat on the sofa, leaving less than the width of another person between them. They stared at each other while Sirena deployed the corkscrew. The muscles in her forearms shifted with each twist of the shiny, metal key.



This girl was alert and hungry. Verity had no doubt she was watching for trouble and could take care of herself if it should arise.

Sirena's biceps flexed as she held the bottle between her knees and yanked out the cork with a satisfying pop. Her skirt crept up a few delightful inches.

The deep, rich burgundy wine gurgled into one glass, then the other. The oaky smell hit a moment later. Sirena offered Verity a glass. She had one leg crossed over the other and was eyeing Verity as if about to pounce.

"Looks good." Verity took the glass.

They touched their glasses together with a clink and took a sip.

Verity closed her eyes as she tasted the wine: beside the oak, she picked up notes of leather, vanilla, and something in the finish that she couldn't identify but that tasted like salt or sex or both.

Good taste in literature and wine too. Verity was going to get herself in trouble with this if she wasn't careful. "Just so we're clear... I'm a lone wolf."

Sirena sipped again, looking at Verity with amusement. "Like *Steppenwolf's* beast, eh?"

If Verity believed in a God, she'd be convinced he/she/it was testing her. "That's the one."

"Perfect."

They drank, gazing at each other over their glasses with something different, something more than simple lust. They shared a certain recognition here; Verity could see it in the way Sirena's gaze lingered on her face, rather than traveling around to mentally undress her the way it had been. They shared not a language spoken in the everyday but one that transcended the mundane rhythms of living.

This kind of attraction could get a lone wolf all tripped up.

Sirena set her glass on the table and closed the distance between them, coming in for another breath-stealing kiss: firm but not rough, and gentle but not timid. A warmth bloomed in Verity's crotch—a chemical reaction, a molecular response. Her brain couldn't scrape a thought together. She set her glass down before they became entangled any further.

## Verity's Game

In an instant, Sirena was mounting her lap, straddling her, moving against her as each kiss turned deeper and hotter. The sparkly dress rode up Sirena's thighs, and Verity followed it with her hands, sliding over her smooth skin, gripping the firm muscles as Sirena arched against her.

Sirena started laughing into their kiss. She pulled back. "Wait, wait."

"What's so funny?"

Sirena's eyes were dancing. "What's your name?"

Verity all but whooped out loud. She couldn't believe they'd gotten all this way without doing that. "You can call me V. Sirena, right?"

"Just Reina. Sirena is the fake name I give out at clubs before I know whether you're a weirdo."

Verity slid one hand underneath Sirena's—Reina's—dress, high enough to find the lacy hem of her skimpy underwear. "Glad I made the cut."

"And then some." Reina glanced to her left, thumbing toward a door which Verity presumed opened into a bedroom. "Shall we take this inside?"

Verity followed Reina into the darkened bedroom, doffing her jacket as she walked and laying it on a chair by the bed. The unexpected sound of a striking match made her twitch. She turned to find Reina lighting a few chunky candles that gave off the smell of vanilla and honey. The flickering golden light framed her lean body and angular face in a dramatic way that made Reina resemble a modern painting. *Like a Varo, maybe.*

Her dramatic silhouette made something in Verity's chest ache.

Reina kicked out of her shoes, and as they stood gazing at each other, she wriggled out of her sparkling dress and laid it on the dresser. Verity tried not to let her want show, tried to keep playing it cool, but it probably wasn't working. She cared about that less and less with each passing moment.

Verity could get laid a lot if she wanted to. Back in New York, a million years ago, before the Army, she'd gotten a lot of girls—fresh-out-of-the-closet baby dykes, older white girls who wanted to

piss off their racist boomer parents, and everything in between. She didn't do it often these days because it wasn't smart and it wasn't safe.

But if she was going to take the risk, she couldn't think of a more worthy gamble than this woman with a soft mouth and hard eyes, this beauty with a sharp mind and a body like a Roman statue.

And it *was* a risk; Verity could feel that much. Reina was a puzzle whose pieces didn't fit neatly. The intellect, the accent, the body that could damn near have been wrought from copper, all the muscles so defined, they seemed painted by a human hand. There was more to Reina than met the eye, which was saying something because, at the moment, there was a lot meeting the eye. If someone had sent Reina to seduce and murder Verity, they couldn't have chosen better, and Verity wouldn't even be mad at them.

Reina drew back the creamy sheets and slid into the bed. "You're taking too long. Get naked, won't you?"

Verity didn't hurry with unbuttoning her shirt. It wouldn't do to come off too eager, no matter how much she wanted to be in that bed with her, no matter how much lust her eyes probably telegraphed. She popped the buttons one by one, to the middle of her chest, undid one cufflink and then the other, dropped them into her jacket pocket, and inched the shirt off.

A few years out of the Rangers, Verity wasn't in the shape she'd been in when serving in Afghanistan, but she was still Army fit: defined shoulders, cut biceps, flat stomach. She looked good. Had she doubted that, Reina's focused stare as she finished undressing would have more than reassured her.

Since moving to Mexico City, Verity had been with a few women. A cute, mousy secretary who worked in an office. A sleepy-eyed singer-songwriter who had been playing in a café. A tough little bartender who talked a good game about wanting nothing more than one night but in the end had begged Verity for her number. She didn't give it.

None of them were like Reina.

## Verity's Game

Reina definitely wasn't being sincere about who she was. Verity's instincts were never wrong about that kind of thing. But there was no doubt that her desire was real. So Verity got into the bed anyway.

"Took you long enough." Reina pulled her lips into a playful smirk.

Verity kissed them. She leaned in, carried by the weight of their slow, smoldering kiss, until Reina fell back onto the mattress and Verity was on top of her.

The minute their naked bodies came into contact under the sheets, they started a slow, sweet grind. They had a real fit, a real match of rhythms. In the same way that they shared the secret language of literature when they talked, they spoke the same vernacular in bed: purposeful but not hurried or frenzied.

Verity hummed happily against Reina's ear. "You be real nice to me, and I'll be real nice to you."

"Hmm," was all Reina said.

By the time Verity caught what happened next, it was too late to do anything about it, and she wasn't sure she wanted to anyway.

Reina had wound her legs through Verity's in a specific, familiar way and flipped their positions. Verity's center of gravity changed faster than she could reorient herself. She was on her back with her wrists pinned to the mattress. Reina was way too pleased with herself about it.

That was a *move*. Reina had been taught the right way to flip someone. Oh, she was dangerous, but, God, that was hot. Reina's delicate lips and the playful way they curled when she was teasing were too sexy for their own good.

"And here I thought you were a nice girl."

With a roguish little rasp in her voice, Reina said: "And here I thought you were an Army Ranger."

Reina was strong, but she clearly wasn't using all her weight. Verity slipped one hand out from her grip and snuck it between the sheets as they lay together.

"Now you see how the true art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." Verity worked her freed hand between their

bodies, down to the spot she was looking for. When she reached it, Reina gasped, her eyes fluttering closed.

“See?” Verity let her fingers play, exploring Reina’s warmth and sensitivity. “Who’s your friend? It’s me, right?”

Laughing, Reina nodded and moved herself against Verity’s touch.

Reina might be on top of her, but clearly, Verity had the situation well in hand.

# CHAPTER 3

## A LOOSE END

VERITY COULDN'T TELL YOU THE name of where she and her unit were; it was nothing but a string of latitude and longitude coordinates. A lot of Afghanistan was like this once you got further into the mountains.

Crouched on a rooftop, rifle in hand, she watched the team in fatigues buzzing around in the street. A few gunshots sounded, distant, somewhere high in those craggy peaks. Didn't necessarily mean anything, since these mountains were crawling with folks with guns, and it could easily be one of her own team shooing off a wild goat or something.

The air still stank with artillery fire and smoke and gasoline from one of the Hummers that had taken damage and was leaking a huge puddle of fuel. Her eyes scanned the street. "The worst is over," her captain had told her. "Go hang out up top. Keep an eye on things while we clear the hell out of here."

So here she was, rifle at the ready. The weight of a pocket-sized copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* pressed against her thigh through one of her cargo pockets. Hemingway was too depressing to be reading while in a war zone, but she didn't like to not finish a book. Once they were on the road, she might open it again.

There were about a dozen guys on the street now—her guys. They'd been brought in to bring a quick end to some harassment from local warlords against an Army medical unit. In a place like

this, you fell right into us vs. them, into your unit being your family, no matter much you might piss each other off. Because all that mattered at the end of the day was getting out alive, and the only people you could trust for that were the guys wearing the same colors. Your guys.

After a long, shitty summer, the weather was starting to cool off. Verity squinted at the sky and caught sight of a couple of Army choppers clipping across the cloudless blue. They were headed in the direction of Kandahar. Kandahar was one step closer to home.

She turned her focus back onto the street, where four guys from the medical unit were loading their equipment into a truck. They'd rendered all the aid about to be rendered here.

Not one local was to be found on the streets. Not that Verity blamed them. With warlords coming at them from one direction and American soldiers from the other, the choices were hide or fight; and if they were going to fight, fight whom?

Earlier, she'd seen a few locals in their simple clothes that had been made exactly the same way for centuries. She'd enlisted the aid of one kid in finding a water supply, bribing him with blue jeans. But they were all waiting for Verity and her unit to leave.

Movement in her peripheral vision made her head snap left. A small, slender shape on the ground came rounding a corner at the other end of the block from the medical truck, where her people were loading up their own gear. The kid couldn't be more than fourteen or fifteen. Had to be a boy; girls wouldn't wear those blue jeans—obvious even from this distance and from atop the only two-story building in town.

"Shit," she muttered.

She picked up her rifle and peered through the scope. It was not the kid she'd given the jeans to, but maybe a younger brother or cousin. The closer view she got revealed a face that wasn't fourteen or fifteen. More like twelve.

"Shit, shit."

The kid was running toward her guys in the street with something weirdly bulky and clearly pieced together strapped to his chest.

## Verity's Game

The construction was shoddy but still menacing. No one needed to tell her what it was.

Everyone knew you could get blown up anywhere out here with an improvised explosive device. But Verity had not been adequately prepped for the possibility of the IED being strapped to a fucking child.

He was headed toward the truck.

Verity settled the crosshairs right in the middle of the boy's head and trailed him as he ran.

Time stopped. A loud report deafened her. Her scope filled with a flash of white.

The boy's vest had detonated. Had the sound of it swallowed up the sound of her rifle firing?

She had hesitated. She had not done her job quickly enough. Smoke drifted into her nose and eyes. Screams echoed in the pit of her chest—she could not tell if they were coming from below or from inside herself.

In the fog of war, she wasn't sure she remembered the butt of the rifle jolting her shoulder with its recoil. Had she fired? Had she even fired?



Verity sat up in bed, gasping, disoriented, unsure of where she was. She cast about wildly, her heart pounding. No, not Afghanistan. A soft, sweet-smelling bed in a too-warm apartment in Mexico City. A few candles remained burning, sputtering as they neared their end.

This was the other reason she didn't like to get entangled too often—the embarrassing possibility that she might doze off and wake up screaming.

Reina was still stretched out next to her, sleeping like a woman who'd been shown a real good time. A pang of regret jabbed Verity in the ribs. Not at having slept with her, but at the fact that she was going to have to sneak out and leave behind the most desirable woman she'd run into in a good long while.

She climbed out of bed and found where her pants lay folded over the edge of the chair—because you could take the girl out of the



Army, but you couldn't take the Army out of the girl. As she perched on the edge of the chair, preparing to don them, Reina shifted in the bed.

She yawned. "You don't have to hurry out."

Verity attempted to focus on putting one of her legs into the pants. "Nah, I don't want to overstay my welcome." This was more of a half-truth than a lie.

Reina made a scoffing sound and waved a lazy, dismissive hand. "Nonsense. I said I didn't want a relationship, but that doesn't mean I'm rude. I'm not going to toss you out the moment I'm done with you."

Verity chuckled and popped her foot through the end of the pants leg. "Oh? But what if I'm done with you?"

"Pffft. You most certainly are not. Come back to bed."

Verity hesitated. Staying the night was never a good idea. How would she pull herself out of this bed in the morning? But Reina, still lying on her side, looking sleepy and blissful, was telling her to stay. Not begging her, the way that little bartender had done. Telling her. Because she knew Verity wanted to.

After a moment, Verity took her pants off and lay them back over the chair. She got back into bed, facing Reina.

Most of the room's sparse illumination was from the pale lights on the busy street outside. Reina had a softness to her now that she hadn't had however many hours ago before they'd gone to bed. She stroked Verity's bicep with a gentle fondness. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." That much, in this specific moment, was true. Whatever torment had come poking at her in her dreams had departed as soon as she'd climbed back into bed. Maybe she was weak, maybe just lonely, but Verity couldn't help the wanton thought that Reina would understand if Verity confessed right here, in this dimly lit bedroom, that she was feeling more and more like her life didn't fit anymore. "I don't make a habit of staying."

Reina continued stroking her arm. After a moment, she pulled Verity toward her into a kiss. "You don't have to run away because you had a nightmare."

Verity withdrew, her cheeks warming.

## Verity's Game

"It's normal, you know." Reina brushed her cool fingers along Verity's jaw. "You were a soldier; of course you have a bit of PTSD. I don't think I'd like you if you didn't."

Verity scrunched her nose, puzzled. "What, now?"

"It says you're still human. Not a psychopath." The softness in Reina's look was causing strange, fluttery things in Verity's chest.

*What kind of people has this woman been around that this is where her thinking goes?*

"Well, what about you? You a psychopath?" Verity teased.

Reina laughed. "No. Many things, but not that."

Verity leaned in and nudged Reina onto her back with a deep, slow kiss. "What things?"

Reina, eyes still closed, smirked. "Snob."

"You don't say."

"Occasionally a bitch."

"Oh, my word."

"Mm. And a demon in the sack."

"Someone has a high opinion of herself."

Reina nipped at Verity's bottom lip. "Well, you did enjoy that one thing I did."

They both laughed quietly at this—Verity, because she was usually the one to say cocky shit like that, Reina, probably because she knew she was right.

"I did. But that's not why I'm staying."

"Oh, no? Why, then?"

"Because. *I'm* not done with *you* yet."

Verity disappeared under the sheets, intending to show Reina how not done she was.



When Verity woke again, sun was streaming through the bedroom window. The sounds of cars and pedestrians filtered in from the street. She yawned and stretched her arm out to the side, but Reina was not in the bed. Last night's workout still had its little claws in her muscles.

Music came in from the kitchen, something with lyrics in Spanish, but not salsa. It was so smooth and funky, it made Verity want to strap on roller skates in a fit of nostalgia. The occasional banging of pots and pans and a steady sizzling punctuated the music. Reina was cooking something that involved garlic and jalapeños and a bunch of other aromas Verity could only identify as goddamn delicious.

A contented yawn emerged as moments from the previous evening surfaced in her consciousness like little floaty toys bobbing up from the bottom of a pool: the creative dirty talk Reina had whispered in her ear, the press of Reina's thighs wrapped around her head, the way Reina liked to goad and tease her into showing more of her strength than Verity did with most women. She couldn't remember how many times they'd gone at it last night, but the meeting of mind and muscle was still imprinted on her body. She still tasted Reina.

Verity stretched and grinned broadly to no one.

She sat up, shimmied into her underwear, and pulled her half-done button-down shirt on over her head. A few of her curls had escaped the prison of maximum-hold gel and now scratched against the inside of her shirt as she pulled it on.

Ambling into the kitchen, Verity found Reina in a green silk dressing gown (of *course* she wore a silk dressing gown), cooking chilaquiles. The smell of fresh coffee wafted from a French press beside the stove.

"Smells good." Verity came over and leaned against the counter, watching Reina work. She didn't push for any intimacy between them, but she wasn't ruling it out either.

"You slept hard. Breakfast is almost ready. You must be hungry." Reina accompanied her comment with a wink. The unspoken subtext: *because I fucked your brains out.*

"Yeah, yeah. I'll get the coffee." Verity turned to the coffee maker, regarding it with a kind of suspicion. "French press, huh?"

"Mm hmm. I like the ritual of it. French press, Colombian coffee."

Verity *tsked*. "What would your *abuela* say?"

## Verity's Game

Reina made a nonchalant *hm* sound. "I'll ask her next Día de Muertos. I like good things; I don't care where they come from."

"Valid." Verity gently pressed the plunger on the machine, pushing the coffee grounds to the bottom of the pot. Even with the top still closed, it smelled amazing.

She opened a cabinet and found two cups inside. After peering into the fridge, she pulled out the glass bottle of milk and poured three fingers' worth into each cup. She popped them into the small microwave. After a minute, the oven beeped, and she pulled them out.

Reina, busy cooking, only glanced over now and again. "What are you doing with that?"

"You'll see. Got vanilla?"

Reina pointed to a cabinet.

After a moment of hunting, Verity found cinnamon and the vanilla. She sprinkled some of each into the cups. As she was putting the bottles away, a small, hand-held immersion blender on the counter caught her eye. Even better.

She dipped the business end into one cup and summoned it to life with a push of the button. It took about twenty noisy seconds to froth the milk to her satisfaction.

"Are you joking?" Reina laughed when Verity finished the first. "This is excellent coffee. It doesn't need all that."

"Colombian is fine, but I grew up with Jamaica Blue. Now *that's* the best coffee in the world."

Reina feigned offense. "Are you starting this delightful morning-after by slagging my coffee?"

"Trust me. It's good this way. You want to talk about precision and technique, my dad made me practice these steps till I could do them in my sleep." She frothed the milk in the other cup.

"He sounds like a drill sergeant."

"He was." Verity waggled her finger with the Rangers insignia ring. "My family bleeds Army green." She rinsed the blender in the sink for a few seconds. "And if I made a mistake, he'd make me dump it and start over."

"That sounds traumatic."

Verity couldn't tell if she was being sardonic or not. "Yeah, well, it's probably why I'm not good at doing what I'm told these days."

Reina pulled two bowls from the cabinet next to the stove. She began serving the chilaquiles into them. They looked as good as they smelled. Corn tortilla chips simmered in a red tomato salsa, laced with onions, garlic, jalapeños. Little bright green chunks of avocado swam among the red.

Verity waited until Reina finished spooning a fried egg onto the top of each bowl before handing her host a cup of coffee.

Reina took a small, skeptical sip. Surprise crossed her face. "It's quite good."

"Told you."

As if not wanting to admit she'd been wrong, Reina added, "I still prefer my simple *cafecito*, but it's good."

Pleased with herself, Verity leaned back against the counter and sipped, watching Reina set their bowls on the small kitchen table next to the window. The fact that Reina could cook too was not doing good things for Verity's better judgment. Especially not when Reina turned around, pressed herself against Verity, and pulled her in for a kiss.

Verity adjusted her feet apart so Reina could be flush against her front. She ran her hands up the silky back of Reina's dressing gown, then down again over its belt, the small of her back, and finally her firm, magnificent ass. No underwear. They could go again right now.

A kiss was always the first tell when you were with someone new; the first indication of whether your energies were a match. Verity was used to having to come in strong and steer things or adjust herself to meet someone where they were. But with Reina, there was no adjustment. They kissed the same: confident because they knew what they wanted, but relaxed as if there were no rush.

Their bodies were already moving against each other, already responding. They could get a quickie in while the food cooled. Maybe.

"Forgive me," Reina mumbled against her mouth. "I'm trying to get my fill of you before you disappear into the noonday sun."

Verity squeezed her ass through the silk gown. "Yeah? How's that going for you?" After a few more minutes of kisses that grew warmer

by the moment, Verity reached around and tugged at the belt holding Reina's gown closed. Reina gasped and slid a hand into Verity's half-open shirt.

"Fine," Reina panted. "And you?"

"Good." A few moments of wet kissing sounds followed. "Gonna make you come again though, if that's okay."

"Mm, if you must."

This was too comfortable, too good. Verity slipped her hand into Reina's robe, but before she could get anything going, an annoying, familiar sound interrupted her from the bedroom. It was her phone. And it was Montresor's ringtone.

"Goddammit."

Reina responded with a mock pout. "I suppose you have to get that?"

"Yeah, much to my chagrin. To be continued."

Verity jogged into the bedroom and picked up the phone. "Yeah."

His gruff, three-cigars-a-day voice rumbled through the phone. "Consider this a professional courtesy call."

She scowled. "What's going on?"

"Our mutual friends are unhappy with the job you did last night."

"What? It was perfect!" How could Mexilógico be unhappy? Her execution had been flawless!

He huffed. "The Medical Examiner found ricin in his blood. They announced it this morning. Now the cops are all over it."

Poison? Verity struggled to get her mind around it. "What the fuck, Montresor? You know I don't work like that."

"I know. That's why I'm calling. I'm advising you to get out of town and lay low for a while."

Verity dropped her voice to ensure Reina didn't hear any of this. "They got a price on me?"

"Well, you're a loose end now."

Mexilógico wanted her dead? After three years and a few dozen perfect contracts? This was some bullshit. "Man, I gotta go."

Verity dropped the phone onto the chair and paced in a circle a couple of times, heart pounding in her ears. None of this made any

sense. They thought she'd poisoned him? She did snipes, or up close and personal hits, like how she'd done Guzmán. Poison was for girly girls. Montresor knew that. So did Mexilógico. Didn't they?

Someone had to have dosed him at around the same time as she did her job. Jesus, what a fucking mess. Did Mexilógico have competition they were unaware of? Who else could have wanted Guzmán? Her jaw worked as she tried to settle her nerves.

She stopped moving, grabbed the windowsill, and pressed her forehead to the glass, cushioned by the white linen curtain. Verity was grappling with the unappetizing possibility that Reina was in danger by being with her.

She took a moment to collect herself. She had to get out of here with as little drama as possible. She'd walk back out into the kitchen, apologize for rushing out, say she had an emergency, and leave this whole situation in the rearview.

Verity arranged her face to something approximating casual and walked out into the living room. "Hey, listen, I'm sorry I have to rush out of here, but I just got—"

She stopped.

Reina was standing in the living room, still in her dressing gown, which was closed now, pointing a feminine little .38 Special at her. Her eyes were flinty as she glared at Verity down the small barrel of it. "The ice cream man, was it?"

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me." Verity had heard of another high-ticket female assassin in the city, one attached to a corporate interest. Was that Reina? Had she dosed Guzmán? It certainly fit.

If this was bad luck, it was the kind that happened to no one, ever.

"I said the same thing when I got the call." Reina's mouth was set in a determined line. "It's a shame. I liked you."

*The call.* She was a professional like Verity. Had to be the one she'd heard about.

Yet, somehow, Verity believed her when she said it was a shame. What they'd had last night had been a taste of what life could have been like if things had gone differently. As Verity flashed back over

the memories of their night, none of it felt false. She leveled her gaze back at Reina. "I don't like it when people talk about me in the past tense."

But the fact they were having this conversation, the fact Reina had not plugged her without a word, already betrayed that her heart wasn't in the assignment.

Everything about Reina made sense now. Of course she had expensive things. Of course she spoke five languages and was ripped like an MMA fighter or decathlon runner. The wine, the books, the art. Those things weren't for show. She loved them. That bookcase had to have several first editions in it. Her real profession paid for all of it.

The painting.

"So," Verity said, piecing it all together, "that painting *is* a Varo, and you're a professional."

"As are you. Which makes you the Black American pro I've heard about. It crossed my mind you might be the one when we were back at the club."

*Unbelievable.* "You've heard of me?"

"There aren't many women in our business. When you narrow it down to Black Americans, the list of possibilities becomes rather small."

Verity scoffed. "Well, I had my suspicions too, just so you know." A stretch maybe, but Verity had struggled from the moment she'd laid eyes on Reina with how someone like that could exist. "So you don't really work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?"

Reina tossed her hair as if the suggestion offended her. "Of course I do. A girl has to have a day job. Something a bit better than an ice cream man."

Some heat, some old anger, some class baggage Verity had carried around with her since her Brooklyn childhood on Eastern Parkway, bubbled up in her chest. Who the fuck did Reina think she was, with her posh accent and expensive furniture? What was she, some rich girl who killed people because she was bored? Verity pushed it down. No room for that. "But who do you *really* work for?"



This was a pointless question. Reina couldn't reveal who'd hired her for Mexilógico. The first rule of being a professional assassin was to keep your mouth shut on clients and bosses.

Reina looked pained. "Please don't make this harder. It's not personal."

"Now that I'm on the business end of that line, I'm finding it doesn't make me feel any better." *It's not personal. Jesus.* Verity had last said those words to Guzmán as she was busy choking the life out of him.

Reina's love for those books, that painting...that was genuine; it had to be. Verity could tell that much from the little time she'd spent with her. So, much as it pained her to do it, Verity had one choice. She grabbed the painting off the wall and rushed at Reina, holding it in front of her.

All she needed was that second of hesitation as Reina resisted damaging a precious painting she loved. That half-a-heartbeat pause got her close enough to get in one solid punch and knock Reina to the floor.

She tossed the painting aside and jumped on her, punching down at her wrist and sending the gun skidding across the wooden floor. Verity enjoyed Reina's dark, furious gaze maybe a little too much. "Everyone has a weakness, baby. Yours is art."

Reina had already demonstrated her talent when it came to flipping a power dynamic, and even with Verity being prepared for it, she didn't manage to stay on top for long. Reina found leverage with the coffee table and wrested them into a roll that was inelegant but had her sprawled on top of Verity. They wrestled against each other, grunting, muscles straining, each trying to overpower the other long enough to claim the upper hand.

"You know, this was a lot more fun last night," Verity said. This was not how she had wanted to find herself rolling around with Reina again this morning.

"I don't know," Reina panted, now pinned underneath Verity. "It has its"—she grabbed a vase off a nearby end table and smacked it against the side of Verity's head—"charms!"

Verity saw white. Her body went on autopilot when pain like that kicked in. Her hands, on instinct, closed around Reina's throat and squeezed.

Reina continued to struggle, to kick, to try and tilt her off, push her away, or anything, but Verity bore down—ignoring the scratching at her back, the fists pounding against her spine—and stayed that way until Reina stopped struggling.

It might as well have been an eternity.

Stars still pinged across Verity's vision as she let go. Reina was gasping for air. Frustrated, Verity blinked hard to clear her vision, spat out a curse, and hauled off with a punch that bloodied Reina's nose and knocked her out cold. Not hard to do, since she was more than halfway to out as it was.

She couldn't move, but she had to. Despite the hot throbbing in her skull and the weird sizzling specks on her vision, she had to make a choice in short order.

She stumbled into the bedroom and scrambled back into her clothing. As she was slipping her shoes back on, her gaze caught on Reina's purse, a svelte, black leather number tucked behind the lamp on the bedside table.

Verity started rifling through the purse. She pulled out a Mexican passport that read *Reina Valencias*, with a picture of her striking face staring straight into the camera, a large wad of cash, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs lanyard. All unremarkable so far.

She stopped. A plastic baggie. She pulled it out and held it up to the light. Inside was a syringe.

"Well, fuck me," she muttered.

She couldn't see anything on it or in it, but what were the odds it had contained ricin? Poisons weren't her thing, but Ricin was supposed to be next to impossible to see. This confirmed that Reina had wrecked her hit. It was just Shakespeare-level irony that she had also been assigned to kill Verity afterward.

Verity went striding back to where Reina lay unconscious on the living room floor. She picked up the little .38. It was so tiny, designed for concealed carry by someone who didn't have a lot of room to conceal things. She aimed it at Reina's head.

That would be the logical tactical move. Kill her. Get the hell out. But what a waste that would be.

*It figures. I finally meet a woman who makes me think twice about lone-wolfing it, and I have to kill her.*

To lose such a worthy opponent would be a crime. And maybe this whole thing could be salvaged after all? Whoever sent Reina after Guzmán had reasons for wanting him dead. Maybe if she could figure out why, could prove who had botched her hit, she could clear her name with Mexilógico and they would call off the hit on her.

She stared down the barrel of that silly little gun, at Reina's beautiful, bloody, unconscious face. Her hand shook as her grip tightened around the trigger. She pictured the *bang*, the shattering of Reina's forehead where the bullet would go through. Her stomach turned.

Her hand steadied, and she willed her blood to go cold. After a long moment, she huffed. She couldn't do it. Verity was a professional, but she had not been prepared for the possibility of having to kill someone she liked.

"Fuck it." Disgusted with herself, she stuffed the tiny pistol into her trouser band and stalked back to the bedroom.

She stuffed the wad of cash into her blazer's inside pocket and put the baggie with the syringe into an outside pocket. Not a pants pocket. No need to have that any closer to her body than necessary.

Verity grabbed Reina's phone from the nightstand and walked back into the living room. She knelt beside her, took her limp hand, and used her fingerprint to unlock the phone. She called her own number. The phone rang in her pocket.

Satisfied, she hung up.

She stood over Reina and watched her as seconds ticked by.

*You're gonna burn out on this business if you don't have a why.*

Verity hated to admit it, but Montresor—as was often the case—was right.

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# VERITY'S GAME

BY JENNIFER GIACALONE

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