

RIVERDALE

THE POISON PEN



An original novel by Caleb Roehrig

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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CHAPTER ONE

Summers in Riverdale can be positively beastly—sticky as maple syrup, and not nearly as sweet. Lucky for me, the Five Seasons Hotel has particularly robust central air, and the suite that housed the Maple Club was as crisp as an October afternoon. I was also fortunate that the Maple Girls were willing to put in diligent labor right up to the last minute to prepare for that evening’s event. The room bustled with activity as we all bundled party favors, hand-lettered place cards, and decorated personalized flasks of rum.

“I have to hand it to you, Veronica,” Cheryl Blossom said graciously, tossing her red hair over her shoulder as she admired the embossed cream-and-silver card stock of the invitations I’d designed. “With only three weeks to plan it, you’ve managed to put together an event that looks like you had . . . well, let’s say at least four weeks.”

“Thank you so much.” My tone was dry—but the fact is, this backhanded praise was about as undiluted as compliments got when they came from Cheryl Blossom. “Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“Don’t listen to her.” This was Toni Topaz, Cheryl’s girlfriend. Her pink hair held back by a patterned headband, she was carefully filling out a sheet of blank labels with a calligraphy pen. “In three weeks, you wrangled together ice sculptures, celebrity guests, a chef flown in from actual France to prepare the hors d’oeuvres, got a mixologist from the 21 Club to design an original cocktail named after the bride-to-be . . . *and* you’re using it as an opportunity to promote Red Raven Rum? Not many people could pull this off.”

“Thank you,” I repeated, a bit more sincerely. This was the kind of appreciation I deserved for all the headaches I’d suffered over the past month. And I’d suffered plenty.

“Even if the marriage *is* totally doomed, and we all know it is, and I feel like some kind of vulture filling out these labels right now,” she added under her breath.

And there it was. I let out a defeated sigh and sank deeper into my seat, banging the keys of my laptop a little more aggressively, scrolling once more through a slideshow presentation that would be one of the evening’s pivotal moments. Wishing I could disappear into my computer for good.

“Listen, ladies, we’ve been over this”—*and over this, and over this*—“so let’s just drop it, okay?”

Cheryl reached out and gave her girlfriend’s hand an affectionate squeeze. “All TeeTee means, Veronica, is that because this young couple is heading for the kind of dramatic crash and

burn you see in Michael Bay disaster movies, capitalizing on their engagement feels a little bit . . . crass. That's all."

"Thank you for interpreting, Cheryl, but I picked up on that." Letting out a louder and more exasperated sigh, I gave up on the slideshow and massaged my temples. "Look. When Pernilla approached me about hosting her engagement party, I didn't ask questions before saying yes. The Pendergasts are a political dynasty, and I knew the guest list—*this* guest list," I noted emphatically, scooping up the roster of names from a pile beside me, "would be a who's who of influencers and tastemakers around the world. I didn't know the details until I'd already made a commitment. And by that time, I couldn't exactly back out without an explanation, could I?"

I fixed the both of them with a meaningful glare. They understood me. We all knew the Pendergast-Huxley marriage was doomed, and why, even if we could never say so aloud. It was knowledge we weren't supposed to have, for one thing, and those of us involved had even gone so far as to swear an oath never to speak of it again. For many reasons, I had no intention of violating our pact—but especially not with sensitive ears present. Glancing up, I caught Penelope Blossom watching me from a corner of the room, as if she could read my thoughts, and I shivered. We had wanted her where we could keep her in our sights, but her constant presence in the club was unnerving.

I *could* still call the event off, of course, with no explanation at all—but it would bring ruination down on our names, and

we'd worked too hard for that. I had volunteered to provide a hundred and fifty personalized flasks of Red Raven Rum, labeled and numbered by hand, as favors for all the guests of our grand soiree. No matter what disasters befell the couple of the evening, Cheryl and I would emerge from the debacle a great success as both event planners and mavens of the social scene. I would accept no other outcome.

Senator Pendergast, of course, had his own outcomes in mind. Hayes Huxley was a local—the same age as Polly Cooper—and he was a deputy with the Rockland County Sheriff's Office to boot. The senator's daughter saying yes to a small-town cop only a few months before the upcoming gubernatorial elections was the kind of publicity and outreach money couldn't buy.

And Patrick Pendergast had *scads* of money.

"Well. At least when their marriage collapses, it won't be our fault," Cheryl said cheerfully, reaching for a box of crystal champagne flutes etched with the engaged couple's initials. Each was to have a length of silver ribbon wound around its delicate stem.

No one, and I mean *no one*, would ever say that I throw an understated party.

There came a knock at the door of the suite, and I dispatched Laura—one of the Maple Girls—to answer it, turning back to the presentation I was reviewing on my laptop. After the speeches, but before the dancing started, I was going to introduce a slideshow celebrating the relationship of the soon-to-be-wed couple. I'd worked with the family to select the

perfect photographs, I'd worked with a professional editor to make sure the transitions were seamless and artful, and I'd even managed to convince Josie McCoy to record a song for the accompaniment. It was going to be flawless, I was certain . . . but it didn't hurt to double-check. Or triple-check, as the case may be.

When Laura returned to the room, she held a plain white envelope in her hand. "It was just a guy bringing up the mail. I guess someone left this for you at the front desk, Veronica."

It's funny how your life can change irrevocably, but the moment it happens is so mundane you never see it coming. Everyone fears the big catastrophes—your boyfriend's father dying in a tragic accident, for example, or your own father developing an unpredictable illness. When you've lived through all that, who's afraid of an envelope?

In retrospect, I'm embarrassed to admit that I wasn't.

It was a perfect square, my name printed across the front in meticulous block lettering. There was no return address on the missive—although I guess there wouldn't be, if someone had left it at the front desk—and the flap was sealed with a coin of scarlet wax. It was a charming touch, old-fashioned and debonair, and I smiled. The insignia pressed into the shiny red disc was a curlicue *PP*.

Assuming it was from one of the Pendergasts—some final instructions, or maybe (what a laugh) even a *thank-you* for all our hard work—I opened it without hesitation.

Dear Ronniekins,

I know you've got your hands full, making all the arrangements for Pernilla Pendergast's fabulous engagement party, so I'll be brief. (Wait! Being Veronica Lodge, no doubt you prefer a word that's far more pretentious and grandiose than party to describe a gaggle of wealthy drunkards coming together to congratulate one another on their acquaintanceship. Let me guess . . . fete? Soiree? Stop me if I get it!)

You love to play the part of the poor little rich girl, don't you? All that false humility, all that disclaiming of your father . . . except when his wrongdoings work in your favor. Veronica Lodge: Mafia Princess with a Heart of Gold.

What a crock.

How many of Daddy's crimes have you been complicit in, or silent about? How many people has he hurt, how many lives has he destroyed, while you looked the other way through your Cartier sunglasses?

How many crimes have you committed yourself? I know of at least one. On the night of July Fourth, while most of Riverdale was passing around snacks and sodas at the fireworks display in Pickens Park, you filed a false police report and defrauded your

insurance company. Daddykins would be so proud. You're a real chip off the old cell block.

Now, I know what you're thinking: Those transgressions are small potatoes compared to what else goes on in this town. Your name alone has gotten you out of worse trouble than what you'd face if somebody tattled on you to the sheriff. But here's what you should keep in mind: I know everything that happened that night. What you did. Why you did it. Who else was involved.

And, Ronnie? I have proof.

So start thinking about what it's worth to you to keep this little secret hushed up, because soon, there's a favor I'm going to need from you. Meanwhile, be a lamb and keep this note a secret? Don't tell anyone—not Daddy and not a single one of your friends—or I'll know, and there will be consequences. I'm watching you . . .

—Poison Pen