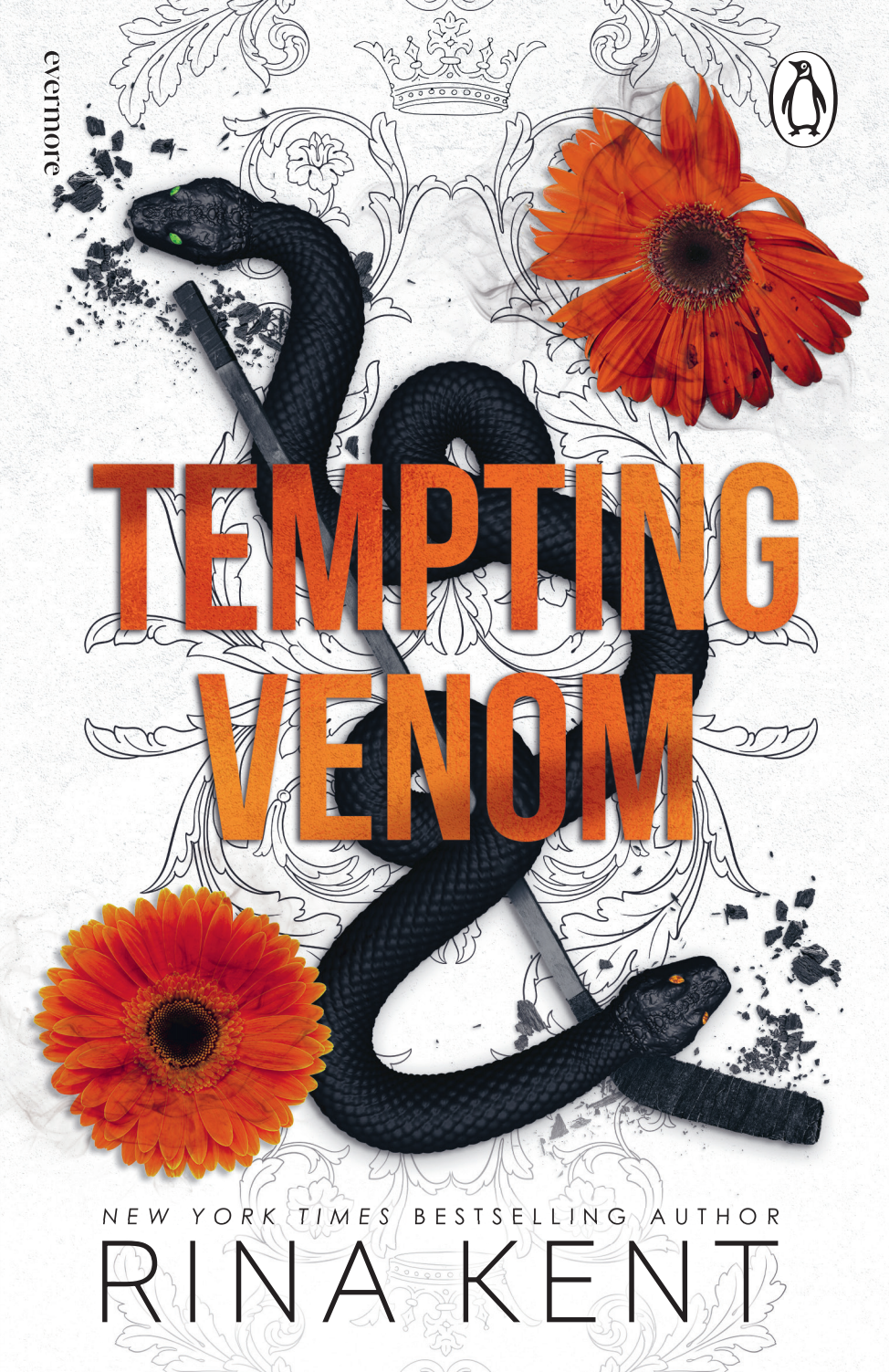
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TEMPTING VENOM

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RINA KENT

PENGUIN BOOKS

TEMPTING VENOM

Rina Kent is a *New York Times, USA Today*, international and No. 1 Amazon bestselling author of everything enemies-to-lovers romance.

She's known to write unapologetic anti-heroes and villains because she often fell in love with men no one roots for herself. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of darkness, a pinch of angst and an unhealthy dose of intensity.

She spends her private days in London laughing like an evil mastermind about adding mayhem to her expanding universe. When she's not writing, Rina travels, hikes and spoils cats in pure Cat-Lady fashion.

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Also by Rina Kent

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Cruel King
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Steel Princess
Twisted Kingdom
Black Knight
Vicious Prince
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Royal Elite Epilogue

Legacy of Gods series
God of Malice
God of Pain
God of Wrath
God of Wrath
God of Ruin
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Author Note

Hello reader friend,

Tempting Venom can be enjoyed as a complete standalone, but for a better understanding of the world, it's recommended to read *Beautiful Venom* and *Sweet Venom* first.

If you're new to my books, you might not know that I write darker stories that can be intense, unsettling, and even disturbing. My characters and their journeys defy societal norms and aren't meant for everyone.

Tempting Venom contains depictions of mental illness such as bipolar disorder and manic episodes, as well as mentions and on-page descriptions of child sexual abuse. The story also features graphic violence, homophobia (both external and internalized), the death of a parent by suicide, and suicidal ideation. Kink elements involving consensual masochistic tendencies are present. Reader discretion is advised.

For more things Rina Kent, visit rinakent.com.

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Playlist

Snap Back—Twenty One Pilots
One More Night—Maroon 5
Obsessed—Kami Kehoe
Popular Monster—Falling in Reverse
So Far So Fake—DarkLux & Xizt
Fuck Me Like You Hate Me—Jutes
Red Line—5 Seconds of Summer
Girl With One Eye—Florence + The Machine
Over Me—Camylio
I Can Fix You—Jutes
It Takes Two—Jutes
Specter—Bad Omens
Better—Villain of the Story
Ache in My Heart—Palaye Royale
Start Over—5 Seconds of Summer
Secrets—Christian Gates
Letdown—Letdown
A Lonely Night—The Weeknd
Give—Sleep Token

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You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

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PROLOGUE

Marcus

Age Seven

I HATE MY BIRTHDAYS.

They always begin with the same bleak reminder that the one thing I want the most is the one thing I can't have.

Maybe I should change the wish. Try to see if I can make a better one.

One that doesn't revolve around wanting something I can never have.

Too late now.

Mom's slightly trembling fingers tighten around my clammy hand—or maybe it's hers that's all sweaty. Her usually affectionate touch is jaded, smothered by the consequences of my stupid wish.

I peek up at her, sinking my teeth into my lower lip.

Mom is still in her pale-pink nurse's uniform, her white sneakers smudged from the walk in the rain and a worn leather bag slung over her shoulder. Her jet-black hair is pulled into a ponytail, a few strands slipping loose around her face.

I love Mom's face. It's round and welcoming, accented by huge dark eyes that I see myself in and warm skin kissed by the sun.

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She carries that faint trace of disinfectant, the scent I've loved for as long as I can remember because it means she's home. My classmates say the smell of the hospital stinks, but for me, it means Mom's hugs as soon as she walks in.

Doesn't matter how worn out she is, Mom always smiles the widest when she sees me, falling to her knees to hug me and shower me with kisses.

"How was your day?" I'll ask because that's what she always asks me.

"Much better now." She'll sigh in my hair, hugging me again.

Mom works in the emergency room at the local hospital in our town, Stantonville. And because she works night shifts and overtime, she usually has panda eyes.

Like now.

Normally, she leaves me with Mrs. Rodriguez next door, but yesterday, Mom asked Dad to spend time with me.

Because it was my stupid birthday wish.

I waited by the window, peeking through the curtains all night long, holding the puck he gifted me last year, but I fell asleep, and Dad never came.

This morning, Mom found me sleeping slumped on the windowsill, grabbed my hand, and drove us here.

To Dad's mansion.

I've never been here before.

The house looks as big as Dad. Too big. Like a castle. And…just far away, though it's right in front of me.

It rises from the ground like it swallowed the whole street, with so many floors stacked on top of each other and countless windows and doors. Even the garden is wider and neater than the park back home. It looks as magical as the gardens in fairy-tale stories Mom loves reading to me.

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I wonder if there are roses I can get for Mom.

"The least you could've done is tell me you weren't coming so I could've come up with alternate plans for Marcus." Mom's voice is bitingly low—the tone she always uses when she's fighting with Dad. "A child his age shouldn't be left alone."

"He's eight and grown enough," Dad says in that dismissive way of his, the sound cutting through the air, although his voice stays controlled.

"Seven. Marcus is seven, Andrew."

"Seven. Eight. What's the difference? You're being dramatic."

I peek at Dad, not really daring to look at him fully. I don't think he likes it—or me—that much.

Dad is tall and broad—so tall both Mom and I have to look up at him.

We share the same cloud-colored eyes, except his are narrower, meaner, and barely shift. His light-brown hair catches the light from the thin sunbeam leaking through the clouds, nearly turning blond.

He hardly smiles or hugs me like Mom. He just looks.

Like now.

His gaze strays toward me, and I stare down at my blue-and-white sneakers Mom got me for my birthday last year.

Mom always tells me Dad is busy and doesn't have time and that I should understand, but I think he just doesn't like me.

"*Dramatic*?" Mom's hand squeezes mine even tighter. "I'm dramatic for asking you to be a decent human being and treat your child right?"

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"I give you money for whatever he needs, June. What else do you want from me?"

Mom releases my hand, reaches into her bag, and pulls out a few dollar bills, then throws them at his chest. "Fuck your money! Your son needs his father, not money."

"Well, that's all I have to offer him. I told you it would've been better to abort him; it's not my fault you chose to keep the kid."

Mom covers my ears with both her hands as if that will magically erase what I just heard.

Then she forces a smile on her trembling lips as she removes them, probably figuring out I can still hear—and see.

Mom crouches down so that she's at my level and strokes my hair—it's the exact shade of hers, so black it's almost blue—away from my face.

And she smiles, like every time she sees me, but her panda eyes make her look exhausted. When we go home, I'll cut her the cucumber slices that Mrs. Rodriguez uses at night.

"Marcus, darling, do you mind waiting for Mommy near the car? I'll be right there, okay? I just need to talk to your father for a bit."

"Okay."

"Love you, sweetie."

"Love you, too, Mommy." I glance at Dad, and he's scrolling through his phone. "Bye, Daddy."

"Mm." He releases the noise, but he doesn't look at me.

Mom glares at him, then gives me one last smile before she ushers me down the couple of stairs. That's where we've been talking to Dad the whole time—in front of his house. He was waiting for us there as soon as we arrived, and he never invited us in.

I guess he doesn't want his wife and his other children to see us. Mom said I have two brothers and a sister, but they have a different mom, and it's better if I don't get to know them.

Copyrighted Material

Dad said I'll never meet them.

"You come from different worlds, and it'll remain like that. For your sake," he told me once while we sat in our living room.

He was helping me put together a puzzle as Mom prepared dinner. It was one of my favorite times we spent together.

Dad had a strange look in his eyes as he stared in Mom's direction. "And your mother's."

Now, I round the corner and spot Mom's car, tiny compared to the huge, shiny ones lined up on either side of it.

Instead of heading to the car, I hide by the bushes and peek at Mom and Dad.

I know I don't have parents who live together like most people in my class. The other day, Chad called Mom a whore and a gold digger, and I pushed him to the ground and punched him so hard he started bleeding.

And it felt good—hearing him crying and begging me to stop.

He shouldn't have said that in the first place.

But then the school called Mom, and it was so annoying.

When I told her what Chad said, she told his parents to educate their kid so he won't get beaten up like that in the future.

Then Mom told me people will say whatever they want and I shouldn't let it get to me.

She's wrong.

I won't allow anyone to insult my mom.

Even if it's Dad.

"Listen here, you son of a bitch," Mom points a finger at his chest. "Whether or not I chose to have Marcus was my decision, not yours."

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Dad is still staring at his phone. "Then don't come here yelling the house down because he spent a night on his own."

"It's his birthday!"

"I don't give a fuck." He lifts his gaze to her. "His birthdays mean nothing to me. You're the one who had him. Take responsibility for him."

"Wow." She steps back. "Not only did you lie to me back then, pretending to be single when you had a whole wife and three kids—"

"You were being dramatic, ending a relationship just because of a wife."

Mom takes another step back, visibly vibrating with anger. "Dramatic for not wanting to be a mistress?"

"You would've had a better life than now." He stares her down. "You look terrible, by the way. Gone are the days when you were attractive. Even your biting tongue is no longer amusing."

"Well, I'm glad, because the last thing I want is to amuse you, asshole. I'm here to ask you to be a decent father to your son."

"A decent father provides money."

"That's a bank, not a father!"

"Call it whatever you want."

"I don't know why I bother talking to you." A worn, brittle sound slips from her, her head bowing for a heartbeat before she lifts it again. "You know, I really didn't want to cut you out of his life, since you donated the sperm and all, but if you're going to keep hurting him by not showing up or by being so emotionally paralyzed, you're no longer allowed near him."

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He smiles, but it looks evil, like in the cartoons. "You can't keep me out of his life."

"I can try. And keep your allowance. I don't spend your blood-soaked money on my child anyway."

"Don't be ridiculous, June. You'd rather struggle than take the hand I'm offering?"

"You finally get it."

Dad purses his lips, frowning like he always does around Mom. "You're making a grave mistake."

"The only mistake I made was meeting you, asshole. Actually, no. Marcus came out of it, and he's the best thing that's ever happened in my life, so I'll consider the couple of years I spent with you fucking charity."

My lips twitch in a smile. Mom always says that—that I'm the best thing that's happened in her life and that she doesn't know how she'd lived without me.

If only Dad cared like she does.

It doesn't have to be a lot.

Just a tiny bit is enough.

I don't need to see him all the time. Just sometimes.

He grabs her by the elbow. "You don't have the foggiest clue what type of family you're up against, June. Quit with your spitfire attitude and listen to reason. Come here, let's talk inside."

Mom is saying something, but I don't hear them as he pulls her through the huge door.

I drag my foot over a pebble and walk to the car, my head dropping to my chest. But I stop when, through the gaps between the perfectly cut square trees, I catch a glimpse of the garden.

The grass is so green, it feels alive, dotted with so many colorful flowers that look painted on.

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I bite my lower lip. Dad won't mind if I pluck a few and give them to Mom, right?

She loves flowers, and I always take her some from the side of the road. These are so much prettier and brighter, maybe they'll make her feel better.

I take a look at my surroundings, then carefully step between the bushes but pause because, wow, there are so many of them!

Flowers of all shapes, colors, and sizes are perfectly arranged in round and square patterns around the trees and bushes.

I hop from one bed to the other, changing my mind about which one is the prettiest the moment I see the next. Maybe I can take a few to Mom. There are countless flowers, so Dad won't notice if some are gone.

My feet carry me between the trees as I follow the trail of flowers. I crouch by every bed and pluck a few colorful ones, mostly roses. Mom loves roses.

A thorn pricks me, and I wince, standing up and sucking on my pointer finger. The copper taste of blood explodes on my tongue, slowly easing the pain.

As I'm about to carry on with flower picking, I hear movement from above. I look up and pause, my grip on the bouquet loosening.

Wow. Dad has a fairy in his garden.

A small, beautiful fairy.

It sits on the branch above me, its feet dangling and swinging, its white sneakers all smudged. The wind lifts its white-blond hair, brushing it against the rustling leaves. Beams of sun slip through the gaps and wash its face in a soft glow. Its eyes are so green, they blend into the garden, turning almost yellow where the light hits them.

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But wait, hold on. Where are the fairy's wings?

I tilt my head to the side, but I don't see them. Wings, I

mean. There's no glitter on its face either. This fairy is wearing pastel-green shorts and a white shirt as it sucks on a lollipop while looking up.

Do fairies like lollipops?

A squirrel scurries up the tree's trunk, and the fairy grins and jumps up, then grabs onto a branch and climbs after the squirrel.

"Why don't you use your wings?" I ask, almost blurting.

The fairy looks down at me, its green eyes going wide as it slips on the branch.

My own eyes widen when it drops, and then we're both crashing into the grass. My head hits the ground, and the flowers I was gathering scatter all around us.

"Ow." The fairy shuffles on top of me, then lands beside me.

I sit up as well and pick up the flowers one by one, dusting them off. One of them, the most beautiful red rose, is a bit crushed.

My lips pull downward. I wanted to give Mom this one, then put it in a glass of water, and place it by her bedside table.

"Ahh, my lollipop is ruined!" the fairy says.

No, he's actually a boy—or a girl. I can't tell for sure, but I think he's a boy. Up close, he looks as pretty as a girl, with chubby cheeks and the biggest, most gorgeous green eyes I've ever seen.

They're greener than the grass and every tree in the garden.

Greener than Mom's spoiled houseplants.

Greener and livelier than life itself.

His eyes cut sideways to me, irritation simmering beneath the surface. "Why did you talk to me all of a sudden? I fell over because of you."

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I can't tell him I thought he was a fairy, because that's so stupid now that I think about it, so I clear my throat. "You ruined my flowers, so let's call it even."

He shuffles toward me on his knees, throwing down his lollipop that's covered in grass. His eyes catch a spark of something unearthly, his lips parting as if the words rip free before he can stop them. "Who are the flowers for?"

"My mother."

The slightest spark flares in his eyes as they widen. "Your mother likes flowers?"

"Yeah."

"Mine loves diamonds."

"Can you get her diamonds?"

"No, silly." A soft laugh escapes him, light as a breeze shifting through the leaves overhead.

Something fascinating happens then. His cheeks crease, and two dimples appear, framing his face like a magic spell.

They turn shallow when he speaks. "I'm still too young."

"Then how about your dad?"

He pouts, his laugh instantly disappearing.

No. Why are the dimples gone? I like it when he laughs and stirs a beautiful sound in the air.

The boy shifts closer to me, grass staining his knees so that they're as green as his eyes. No, they're not as bright or sparkly.

His mouth trembles into a small, reluctant downturn, like he's trying not to show how much it stings. "My parents are getting divorced."

"Why?"

He shifts forward further. "Mom said Daddy gets rid of anyone he doesn't like anymore, and he just doesn't like the two of us now, so we have to leave for a new home. Mom said he wants to have a new family."

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"I'm sorry," I say, even though I don't really know what that word means. I hear Mom say it all the time to people in our neighborhood, and it seems to make them feel better.

"It's okay. At least I'll always have Mom." He jumps up, a grin curving his lips, and he extends both arms above his head. "When I grow up this big, I'm gonna make lots of money and buy her all the diamonds in the world."

I stare up at him as the sky and wandering clouds frame his face and the dimples, making him look so pretty.

Like a prince.

A *fairy* prince.

"You can do that?" I ask. "Buy all the diamonds for your mom?"

"Sure can. I'll be richer than Daddy, and I'll never kick her out of my house."

"Me too." I push myself up, my body angling toward his. "I'll be richer and bigger than Dad and make Mom proud."

"Yay! We can be rich together." He slings an arm over my shoulders, a broad grin breaking across his face.

He smells like the woods and roses, like something sweet and soft.

A small smile tugs at my lips before I can stop it.

I don't really smile much. My teachers have told Mom I'm a withdrawn child. Bright but quiet. Intelligent but not social.

It's not that I don't want to smile, I just don't like smiling for no reason like other kids do.

But this fairy-like boy is different. His hyper energy is contagious, and I want to be friends.

See what he does aside from climbing trees.

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Maybe I'll be able to smile more if he's my friend.

"Wow. You look so pretty when you smile." He places

his pointer and middle fingers at the corners of my mouth and pulls. "You should smile all the time—Oh, found you!"

He releases me and chases a squirrel, who climbs a tree before he can reach it.

"Do you live here?" I ask in a low tone.

Maybe he's my brother.

Dad said I can't meet them, but this boy was right here in the tree. I couldn't ignore him.

The boy shakes his head, his gaze drifting up to the branches above. "I came to play with Leo, but he's sick, so I'm just having fun on my own."

I follow him as he slowly circles the tree. "Who's Leo?"

"Uncle Andrew's son."

Dad's son? One of my brothers?

"Are you Leo's cousin?"

"No."

"Then how do you know him?"

"Dad and Uncle Andrew are friends, so Leo and I are friends, I guess. But Leo's always so sick lately, and I don't think he'll be able to go to school anymore." He stops abruptly, spinning back toward me, and I catch myself before I collide with him. "Why are *you* here?"

I lift a shoulder, not wanting to seem too uncool by talking about my parents fighting.

"Come on." He straightens. "Why can't you tell me?"

My gaze flits to the flowers in my hand.

The boy looks to either side of him, then leans in to whisper, "Is it a secret? Is it? I can *totally* keep a secret. I swear."

"It's not a secret."

His shoulders hunch. "Then you can tell me."

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"Well, it's my birthday, and Mom brought me here to see my dad. That's all."

His eyes widen, excitement bursting through them like a rush. "Your dad lives here? Are you going to live here, too? Will I see you when I come over?"

"I don't…think so. My mom and dad don't live together."

"Aw." He pats my shoulder softly. "They divorced, too?"

"I guess."

"That's okay. We can still be friends, right?"

I nod once.

"Yay!" He hugs me close, squeezing me so tight it hurts a bit, then he pulls away. "Not many people want to be my friend."

"No way. You're so pretty." I bite my lip after I say that, and I feel my ears heating.

"Pretty like a girl." His lips push forward in an exaggerated little sulk, his eyes flicking up to check if I'm watching. "I hate it when people say that."

"You're not pretty like a girl. You're just pretty."

His smile stretches wide, warming the edges of his face. "Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm."

"That makes me so happy!"

I shuffle on my feet, rocking back and forth, and sneak a look at him, because he really is pretty—maybe the prettiest thing I've ever seen. Prettier than the anime girls, and I always thought nothing could beat them.

"As your friend…" He rummages in the pocket of his shorts, his tongue peeking out at the corner of his mouth with concentration before he produces two pieces of candy. "Ta-da! Here, I'm giving you these. Happy birthday!"

When I don't attempt to take them, too stunned to act, he shoves them in my hand.

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"This is all I have, and they're my favorite flavor.

Mango. If you continue to be my friend, I'll give you more. I promise."

I can't stop looking at the candy balls in my palm, a lightness blooming quietly in my chest.

An hour ago, I hated my birthday because Mom had been mad since early morning, and she and Dad were fighting. They fought last year, too, and the year before that, I believe. They always fight because Mom doesn't like it when Dad comes late or doesn't bring something she asked for.

Little by little, I've started to hate my birthdays. I've wished my birth date never existed. Maybe if it didn't, Mom and Dad wouldn't fight so much.

But for the first time, I'm happy to get a gift on my birthday.

This candy is the only gift I've gotten without fights before or after it.

"I know it's not much, but the lollipop was ruined, or I would've shared. The candies are clean. I swear." He tilts his head to look at me. "Do you not like them?"

"I do. Thanks."

"Yay!"

"Here." I pick the prettiest orange daisy from the bouquet in my hand and place it behind his ear, tucking it between the silky blond strands. "I'm giving you this, too."

"Whoa…this is so pretty!" He trails a fingertip over the daisy, his smile spreading wide. "From now on, we're friends, okay?"

"Okay."

Yeah. Right.

Friends.

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CHAPTER 1

Preston

Present
Age Twenty-Two

WE'RE GATHERED HERE TONIGHT TO WITNESS ME hurting someone.

Or a few *someones*.

Or a whole fucking team of them.

Here's the thing. We're playing against our biggest rival tonight. You know, the Wolves—aka the slimy sons of bitches who keep eyeing *my* championship.

Some would argue—*some* being our captain, Kane—that it's *our* championship. The Vipers', to be exact. Since I'm just one of twenty-six players on the team. But hear me out. They wouldn't get anywhere without me, so technically speaking, it's *my* championship, bitches.

Back to the topic at hand, or the actual Wolves' shitty arena we're playing at tonight.

Light floods the ice as our guys skate into position. That pregame buzz hits early, a hum of adrenaline sliding under my skin and making me extra fucking hyper. Can't wait to crush some egos tonight and send them home crying.

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The place is packed full of people who came to watch my highness humble some peasants.

Okay, fine, they might have come to watch Kane and Jude. Especially Jude. He gets so much attention without even trying, and it makes me salty with extra sodium at times, but hey, he gets a pass for being my best bro.

Said big man—yup, that's Jude, the resident hulk of the Vipers—skates beside me on the rink amid the crowd's deafening cheers.

For the Wolves, not us, since it's an away game, but I take a dramatic bow to our side of the audience anyway.

"Smile, Callahan," I tell Jude, wearing my charming smile, complete with the most gorgeous dimples—not my description; it belongs to one of the beautiful ladies I fuck on the regular. But since she said it about me, I have the right to plagiarize.

Jude stops beside me, running a quick gaze over me as if assessing something.

What, I don't know.

Actually, I do, but let's pretend I don't. Works like a fucking charm every time.

Jude's a few inches taller than me and much broader, almost like he's on a mission to tower over the world. He pulls on his gloves, still doing that not-so-discreet watching he's obsessed with. "Focus, Pres."

"I am focused—on doing public service."

"Don't be too antagonistic tonight."

I search around, then place a hand on my heart. "Antagonistic? *Moi*?"

"He's right, Pres." Kane skates to Jude's side.

The captain of being a pain in the ass, ladies and gents.

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Fine, okay. He's not bad. Just a nagging little bitch sometimes—actually, most of the time.

Kane's build is somewhere between Jude's wrestler-like muscles and my lithe, perfect physique. He also has seriously creepy light-blue eyes that look especially muted now, almost reflecting the ice.

"The Wolves' defense is aggressive," he says, giving me a solemn look that fits a grandpa. "You goading them will only end badly for you. Play clean."

"Nah, don't worry. They'll all fall into my trap." I whistle, motioning toward their side. "Will be sending those peasants to the box one at a time."

"Just tone it down," he says.

"So, I won't be doing that."

"Pres…"

"*But* I'll turn them into minced lasagna."

Jude sighs. "It's 'make mincemeat out of them.'"

"I meant my version. Sounds tastier."

Kane shakes his head at me, then skates away. Jude pats my shoulder as he follows. "I got your back."

"That's what I like to hear, big man." I make a "pew pew" motion, then resume greeting the fans.

The crowd seems more distracted by Jude's massive body and *je ne sais quoi* attitude, which are stealing the limelight.

Boo to Jude.

But then again, it doesn't matter, because the crowd loves me more than him, and anyone who says otherwise is spreading false allegations and fake news.

I continue smiling, delaying strapping my helmet on so I can wink at anyone I make eye contact with.

The fangirls go *wild*.

Not even kidding, they're fainting and shitting themselves upon seeing my angelic face. Figuratively, of course. Though it might lead to literally one day—who knows, am I right?

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The Stanton Wolves' arena, located near Stanton River College (or SRC), is so shitty and barely fits three thousand spectators, all packed together like sardines.

If this were Vipers Arena, which is one of the largest and best-equipped college complexes in the country, it could house at least ten thousand of our diehard fans. Many of them go with us to Graystone University (or GU)—the elite college tucked within the affluent town of Graystone Ridge, where I was born to rule.

And be an absolute menace.

But that's beside the point.

The point being me.

Preston Armstrong.

The most handsome devil you'll ever meet. And no, that's not arrogance. Ask anyone, specifically the beautiful ladies who grace my bed every night, and they'll sing my praises.

I don't pay them, I swear. It's natural. I was just born to attract attention.

Not always the *best* kind of attention.

But I'll just skip past that part because I'm on a mission. I'm going to bring my A game tonight so the papers and articles will call me the Vipers' ace left wing and hockey god.

It's one of the few reasons I play this game—one, the idol worshipping. Two, because Jude was somehow into this shit when we were young, and I was desperate to be his friend, so I followed him. Three, because the popularity of the Vipers in our hockey-crazed town allows me, Kane, and Jude to supervise shit.

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Well, not supervise. We sort of keep an eye on campus, using our spots on the team as built-in lookout towers. Perks of being born into the founding families of Graystone

Ridge—and Vencor. The secret society that runs our town and whatever shadows spill past it.

Armstrong—that's me. Callahan—Jude. Davenport—Kane. Osborn—blank.

I mean, there was my friend Leo Osborn and his brother Lance, but they died. Leo was one of many friends who left me, even though he didn't mean to. He always looked like he was in so much pain, poor dude, so I guess it's good that he's not hurting anymore.

Wasn't that close to Lance, but he died a couple of months ago as well, so no male heirs for the Osborns. Good news for Dad and Kane's and Jude's dads, because this was supposed to give them more edge.

Wrong.

See, the Osborns still have a female heiress, and she's kicking ass, literally and figuratively.

Anyway, as a representative of the Armstrongs, I'd like to say this whole secret society thing sucks. But like *secretly*, because Dad would have my left nut if I announced these thoughts.

My mouth holds its curve, but it feels frozen there.

Here comes the nuisance.

The Wolves swarm the rink in those amber-gold jerseys that are basically orange with commitment issues. Black and white stripes, snarling wolf logo—all of it trying way too hard to square up against the viper on ours.

Theirs is ugly, just saying.

I skate to number forty-eight, their best defenseman, and grin. "Hey, Dicky, ready to go home crying to your mama tonight?"

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He fixes me with a hard, burning stare and snarls. "My name is Richardson."

"Dickson, Dicky, who cares?" I circle him, scraping my blades on the ice every now and then just to mess with him. "Heard your girlfriend broke up with you. Must be because of the tiny Dickson allegations circling around. She found a better Dicky?"

I can always feel it.

That split second before they snap.

The way their eyes bulge like they're about to claw their way out of their sockets, the way their whole body coils into that *fight, fight, fight* response.

It sends a tingle down my spine—straight to my god-damn dick—seeing them get that worked up over the stupid shit I say.

This is pure talent, you know. I did my homework before the game.

I always prep for whoever we're up against. Learn the two or three defensemen I'll be dealing with and dig up as much dirt on them as humanly possible.

Then I hit them where it hurts the most.

Drag out their ugliest, darkest vulnerabilities or secrets.

It's what allows me free access to their heads. I don't need to put my all into the game; I just have to mess with them, and they'll make mistakes on the ice.

They *all* do.

Play harder, not smarter.

I'm a master provocateur and the reigning champion of pissing people off and poking them exactly where it's paralyzing.

You'd better not have any issues and be perfect when facing me, because I'll go there—I'll go *everywhere*—while wearing a smile.

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It's impossible to be perfect, though, so I've always, and I

mean *always*, gotten into my opponents' heads and dragged them on the ice for the world to see.

Dicky is just the latest addition.

He faces me, his eyes injected with tiny red veins, his fists clenched as he raises his hand holding the stick.

Now, if he hits me hard enough and we get rid of him before we even start, the Wolves will be so cooked.

Let me give him one more push.

"Aw, you're mad?" I tilt my head. "Hit a nerve, Dicky? You must've given such a lackluster performance for her to find another dick—"

He lunges at me, and I smile, closing my eyes. Referees better be watching, because I'll be the most dramatic drama queen to have ever existed when I take the punch.

My blood roars in my veins at the prospect. The pain. The crunch of bones. The possibility of spilling blood.

It makes me feel alive.

Though this was so easy, I'm slightly offended.

I wait for the hit.

And wait.

But it doesn't come.

I open my eyes, and fuck it all straight to hell. Someone has shoved Dicky away from me right before he could hit me.

Who the fuck—

My eyes narrow as a wall of muscle who's built a bit like Kane but with Jude's height shoves Dicky out of the way. "Position. Now."

"But—" Dicky tries to argue.

"*Now*, Richardson."

The order is nonnegotiable. I don't even catch his face when he says it, but I hear that low, rumbling voice that hits like a commandment. Whatever it is, it's enough to make

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Dicky—who's twice his size and built like a fridge—mutter a curse and skate the hell away.

Osborn. Eleven.

That's what his jersey says.

So I lied, there actually is a male Osborn heir. It's this clown.

Marcus Osborn.

Pathetically a nobody.

Certified bastard child.

And comes from the peasant rank.

You know, Stantonville, the shithole town that neighbors our town and I'd rather never visit, because I heard it's full of rats? Yeah, this particular Osborn happens to live here and definitely not on Ravenswood Hill where the founding families' mansion sprawls above Graystone Ridge.

Because he's a *nobody*.

He's not recognized by his paternal family, except for the last name, which is weird—they should've removed that, too.

A nobody spawned by Uncle Andrew because he couldn't keep it in his pants once upon a time. Not that I'm judging, but come on, protection. *Condoms*. They exist for a reason, and you can find them in a grocery store near you.

Yes, this is an unpaid ad as I'm a firm believer in those plastic balloons. Diseases? Hell no. Spawning a child? Even more of abso-fucking-lutely *not*.

Anyway, because a condom didn't prevent his existence, Osborn stopped my genius plan concerning Dicky before it started.

He turns to face me, a lazy curve stealing over his mouth as if he's been expecting me.

What a nuisance.

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He blocks my view like a damn wall in motion, his orange jersey glaring under the rink lights with that stupid snarling wolf in the middle. It's not even subtle. We get it—you're the big, bad predator. Congratulations, want a cookie?

I've played Osborn before—against him, I mean—but annoyingly, my provocations didn't get me inside his head. And it wasn't for lack of trying.

He's the Wolves' wild card who's always moving everywhere, so I had to cripple him. In the games I played against him in previous seasons, he was always slippery.

If anything, I'd say he's the one who targets me on the ice instead of the other way around. Asshole seems to love checking me into the nearest surface.

There's been this strange rivalry going on between us since high school. A type of intensity that's tucked close to the surface, looming there without spilling over.

But ever since our first college game three years ago, I've been feeling a sort of…*threat* whenever we face off. As if he intends to fucking devour me. No, just kidding. I can't be threatened. I do the threatening myself.

During our last game in Vipers Arena, I attempted to get a rise out of him by saying, "Did the rats let you out to play, or did you bribe them?"

What? Not my best line, but it was a good one, come on.

He just smiled and skated away.

He *smiled*.

The audacity.

So I tried again with "Your mama rode the right dick but didn't finish the job. That's why you're with the rats instead of being here. So sad."

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Yes, told you I'd go there. I go every-fucking-where.

He still *smiled*.

But then he checked me so violently yet cleanly, I almost lost my fucking teeth.

I focused on another teammate, going so deep inside his head, I sent him to the box enough times to have him removed from the rink.

And we won. Of course. All thanks to my genius.

After that game, however, he stole my girlfriend. Okay, so she wasn't my girlfriend, since I don't do those, but she was the girl I fucked at the time, and he had no business having her wrapped all around him in her fucking stories.

Not that we were exclusive or anything, and I've totally forgotten the girl's name, but it's the *audacity* for me.

Tonight, however, Osborn is…hmm. How do I put this not so nicely? He has too much arrogance. It's everywhere. From the way he carries himself, to how he speaks, to how he looks.

His helmet is tilted back just enough to reveal sharp angles, a mouth that looks like it's permanently smirking, and dark-gray eyes that don't blink like normal people's do. They just watch. Assess. Like he's collecting data for the best way to piss me off.

I'm so annoyed that he stopped me from wrecking his teammate's fragile ego. No one ever steps between me and chaos. Especially not some Stantonville rat who crawled out of the gutter and decided to grow cheekbones sharp enough to commit crimes with.

The only break in all the sharp lines is a scar that slashes over the edge of his thick eyebrow.

He's taller than I remember, built like he crushes bones and doesn't lose sleep over it. Taller than me—*the motherfucker*—and I'm 6'3". He's like, what? 6'4"? 6'5"? Who the fuck needs that much height? Giants?

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He runs a hand through his messy black hair, then pulls the helmet down on his face, his mouth tipped in that same lingering, taunting curve. "Hi, fairy prince."

I release a sound that's similar to a "tsk." I have no fucking clue why he calls me that. I mean, yeah, sure, I *am* a prince, thank you very much. It's what they say in the papers, too. *Armstrong, the league's prince* this *and Armstrong, the league's prince* that.

But this degenerate makes it sound like he's mocking me in that annoying deep voice of his.

"We meet again." The way he speaks drowns out the noise, demanding attention.

But you know, two can play that game.

"Who are you again…? The name's on the tip of my tongue, but I can't quite remember. Hmm."

"Forgetfulness at your age is a real issue, Armstrong. May I suggest seeing a doctor?"

This motherfucker.

I truly don't like him and the way he's always waving and smirking and nodding at me as if we're old friends.

"Right, Osborn!" I ease a smile into place, then start to circle him; it's how I disorient them. "You'd better have dealt with those mommy issues of yours, because I'm going there again tonight."

"What about your own issues, Armstrong? Ready to hold my hand and talk about it? Because I'll also go there."

I falter, and his hand fists my collar, hauling me to a stop as he yanks me toward him. The pull is so sudden and forceful, it knocks the breath from my lungs, leaving me stunned.

Because what the actual fuck?

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My face is practically pressed to his helmet, only a breath between us, and Jesus fucking Christ—are those blue flecks

in his eyes? Like shards of sky caught in storm clouds. They flicker, almost alive, almost extinguished.

That's when I realize something.

I've always found Osborn's face annoying, and now I know it's because I can't read his eyes. Zilch. Nada.

As someone who's extremely good at reading others, gauging their reactions, getting a figurative—and sometimes literal—hard-on at the rage and anger in their eyes, I currently can't find *anything* to feed on.

Just a sea of gray asphyxiating the blue with no spark.

No life.

No story to tell.

It's destabilizing.

"Leave my players alone, Armstrong. This is my first and final warning."

I tilt my head, a small, satisfied curl forming at my mouth as I whisper, "Or what?"

He pauses, staring at me, and for a heartbeat, something shifts—flickers—before he murmurs, "Or you'll regret it."

"Are you threatening me with a good time, rat?"

"Careful, princeling." His voice comes out rough-edged, the kind of rasp that could strip skin if I listened too long. "Don't want to chip your manicure."

"Aw, thanks for the concern, but don't worry. I keep them sharp for cutting throats."

He laughs, the sound low and throaty, but it carries condescension instead of anything resembling amusement.

"Will you be coming after *my* throat?"

I don't like his tone. There's something dark and strange there I can't quite pinpoint.

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"If you get in the way, maybe." I lift a shoulder, subtly disengaging from him.

Because fuck this shit, being near him is intense.

Not "I'm gonna get beat up to feel pain" intense or "I'm gonna fuck until I pass out" intense, but something more uncomfortable.

It's because I don't like people touching me out of the blue, or at all, really. That's why I always tie the girls up during sex. If they don't like that, we're not compatible. *Get home safe, beautiful.*

But here's the thing that's slightly—or *majorly,* depending on how you look at it—disturbing. I seemed to have momentarily forgotten about that tiny, pesky inconvenience just now.

If anything, I didn't notice he was touching me for a while.

Fuck me sideways.

"What should we do?" He feigns concern, his voice grating on my last damn nerve. Or maybe it's the way he speaks, so nonchalant and blasé and entirely fucking irritating.

I'm the only one who gets to speak that way.

"I plan to get in the way," he says, circling me once, before he stops in front of me again, standing so close, I have to look up.

Okay, being circled is actually a no-no—almost there with waking up and finding myself in a place I don't remember sleeping in.

It's so grating, I want to bash his head on the ice and watch his blood paint the white red. It would be an impressive painting to collect, in my humble opinion.

"Good luck with that." I start to bypass him, because he's so not fucking fun. I prefer Dicky and his friends, who get red at the merest shit I say.

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Osborn is an anomaly I'd rather not deal with.

He subtly shifts in front of me, blocking my path, and just when I'm about to shove him away, he lifts my chin with his gloved index finger, tilting my head back so I'm staring up at him.

For the first time, the look in his eyes changes, light slipping through.

No, it's not light.

It's sadism.

A deep sense of wanting to hurt someone.

Something.

Anything.

I recognize it because I experience that need in spades. But to see it directed at me raises goose bumps all over my fucking skin.

My throat closes and a hum of static floods my brain.

His head dips, and instinct urges me to pull back, but I can't—not when he whispers so close to my mouth.

"You're all mine tonight, prince."

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CHAPTER 2

Preston

THERE'S SOMETHING ENTIRELY LUDICROUS ABOUT THIS fucking game.

You know, the one I'm trying to win, but as much as I hate to fucking admit it, we're struggling.

Being the reigning champions of the college league means no one fucks with us.

Much.

No one but the asshole Wolves who seem to have set their eyes on our throne.

But fear not, I am about to save the game. The first two periods were rough, but I'm here for the rescue.

I have Dicky by the dick—figuratively, of course. Ever since I planted the seed in his head before the game, I've already gained easy access. To his head, I mean.

We're on the attack, and we have to get this one in to keep our marginal advantage, but their defense is no fucking joke this game. Someone has been working on their shortcomings since the last one.

You won't catch me saying this out loud, but they've become a better version of themselves.

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As we exchange the puck, I square up to Dicky and make a motion for Kane to pass it.

"Yo, Dicky. Wanna know who your girlfriend's new dick is?" I ask him, catching the puck. "Your homie number eighty-one might have an idea. Or a video."

Even if I don't score this one, I'll have this clown sent to the penalty box. With their right wing wide open, I'll score as much as I like.

Dicky's too stunned to react, and it's the fraction of a second I need. With a grin, I skate past him and flick my wrist, ready to score—

A shoulder slams into mine, as solid as steel, and the shock reverberates all the way down my spine. I shove back, my teeth bared, but I've already lost my footing, and I hit the ice with a thud.

"Ahhhh—" the crowd reacts collectively.

"Told you you're mine tonight." Osborn's voice carries like a low-spoken threat.

His eyes sweep down over me, a slow smirk settling in as though I'm exactly where he wants me. His orange jersey blazes under the cold light, the wolf baring its teeth between us. "Don't try to weasel your way out of facing me, Armstrong."

Then he skates away at supersonic speed as the crowd roars. Fuck this shit, they have the puck now.

I jump up and skate back to defense, ignoring Jude's watchful eyes.

The puck is nearly blurry as it moves between their offense, led by none other than the headache on skates.

Marcus fucking Osborn.

He messed with the wrong person tonight.

As he gets the puck, I square up to him. "Good evening, bitch. Your night ends here."

"Says who?"

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"The scoreboard when I'm done with your sorry ass."

"Bet?" He tries to skate around me, but I check him so violently, he groans but still passes the puck.

I stay on him because he's their leading scorer. Their ace, really. Freak plays defense and offense as if he cloned himself overnight, which is annoying—for us, not them. Centers aren't supposed to be good at both. I mean, they are, but they're usually better at one or the other. Hell, even Kane leans toward defense, and Kane's basically a hockey Terminator. But this jackass? He shows up at both sides of the rink, acting like he's trying to win Employee of the Month.

A dream two-way center, so to speak. He probably has all the hotshot NHL coaches and agents drooling to have him on board.

And I want to crush that.

Him.

I want to slice him open and see what lurks behind the facade carved by God's worst sense of humor.

We're dancing around each other as he tries to get past me.

Not going to happen.

I don't even like defense, but today, I've decided I'll humble this peasant so he can retreat to whatever hole he crawled out of with his tail tucked neatly between his legs.

"Tell me, Osborn." I skate in front of him, keeping up with his fluid movements. It comes naturally to me because I'm lithe, but how the hell can he move like that with a giant's frame?

"Anything, princeling."

"Is your mama still in the business of riding rich guys' dicks? Because I have a huge cock she can sit on all night. I'll pay her for the trouble, too, so that she can buy you a new stick."

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His smile falters. Mine widens.

That's it.

Break for me, Osborn.

Just like the rest of them.

He knocks his helmet against mine, and I hold him in place, pushing as hard as he does.

This is how it'll go. Osborn will hit me, and we'll have the best power play while he sits in the box like a sad kicked puppy.

His breath spills into mine, a rush of adrenaline and raw heat blending with the wild hum of the crowd around us. Their roars thrum beneath my skin like fuel.

"I have a better idea." He gets close, so close his knee is shoved between mine, and despite the protective gear, it's as if he's kneeing me in the fucking balls.

His voice dips closer to a murmur, low enough to raise the hairs at the back of my neck.

"*You* should sit on my huge cock, Armstrong. If you're good enough, I might pay you the rate of a low-rent whore."

This fucking—

I lunge at him, hitting him not so cleanly, and the whistle screams like it's personally offended. At that exact moment, Osborn checks me into the boards so hard, it rattles beneath our weight as the crowd loses its mind.

My ears start ringing, the whole arena sounding like it's buried somewhere underground, and my vision goes fuzzy as he lifts me.

All of me.

The motherfucker actually hauls me up by my collar and shakes me like I'm a snow globe, then cracks his helmet against mine. My sight is swimming in a blurry daze, but I still shove at him with everything I've got.

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"Is that a no to my offer?" His rough words push past the chaos, the crowd's noise, the screams of our coaches and teammates.

"Just so you know." I'm grinning before I even register the metallic flash on my tongue. "I'm going to kill you, Osborn. I'll chop you into tiny pieces, feed you to the sharks, and keep your skull on my nightstand as a candleholder."

"Will that be before or after you bounce on my cock like a good little slut?"

I growl deep in my throat as I'm about to punch him, but he's yanked back by none other than Jude.

Fuck this shit.

Soon enough, Jude and Osborn are at each other's throats as both teams try to separate them.

I stand up, and the ref waves me off toward the fucking box.

"Seriously? *Me*?" I yell, then force myself to calm the hell down, because what in the ever-loving fuck is going on right now?

If someone could explain, that would be perfect, thanks.

At the lack of a satisfying reply, I skate toward the box, remove my helmet, and try as hard as fuck to be cool.

Breathe.

Just breathe, me. No, we're not used to the box, but I need to chill the fuck out and not let that degenerate get into my head.

Isn't it too late, though?

Shut it, demon of reason. No one needs your useless commentary.

I remove my mouthguard and swallow the metallic taste that's flooding my senses. No, literally, I'm seeing fucking red.

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"Everything all right, Pres?"

Kane's the one who just spoke through the glass, although his attention is divided between me and Jude, who's still trying to fight Osborn as the crowd goes wild.

"Never been better." I lick my split lip, running my tongue across the cut over and over again.

Every sting of pain reminds me that I need to inflict it ten times worse.

Bring that bitch down.

Make him fucking *crawl*.

"Don't clash with Osborn," Kane says. "He doesn't fall for provocations."

"We'll see about that."

"Just leave him to me."

"No, he's mine. Stay out of it."

Kane's brows pinch together, but he's distracted. Jude is being Jude, and the other team members can't control him, so Kane skates to the middle of the brawl.

Letting out a grumble, I flop onto the bench in the box, chugging half a bottle of water.

Finally, the teams break Jude and Osborn apart, sending each toward his respective side.

It's a blur of commotion—blue, orange, sweat, and too much testosterone—and right in the middle of it stands Marcus Osborn. Wolves' captain. Stantonville's pride and joy. And the guy I've decided to crush until there's nothing left.

I'll skin him alive and eat his goddamn heart.

He doesn't seem to be aware of my macabre cannibalistic plans, because his full attention remains on me.

In the midst of the mess, as someone at his side talks to him and he straps his helmet back on, his creepy eyes never look away from me.

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He skates backward to the center of the rink, looking at me the entire time, then he does a beckoning motion with his index finger.

Water slides down my throat as I crush the bottle in my fingers.

The puck drops again, and I'm not out there, I'm here, trapped in a fucking box, my chest heaving, my blood hot enough to melt the ice.

Kane wins the face-off, and I stand up, cheering them on. "Go, go, go!"

Before Kane can manage to score, that motherfucker Osborn steals the puck and leads a flash counterattack and scores.

The goal is clean and brutal, and the buzzer echoes in the air as the orange section in the crowd goes wild.

"Motherfucker!" I slam my stick against the glass, losing my cool in epic proportions.

It's not like me.

At all.

I've perfected the art of being the league's prince. And the league's prince doesn't lose his cool over a nobody.

And this particular Osborn is a fucking *nobody*.

He's so far below nobody, he's not even on the goddamn map.

Osborn skates lazily to the center, pointing his stick at me as I leave the box.

The moment we have the puck, I ask Kane for a pass, and when it's in my possession, it's not Dicky who comes to intercept me, no.

It's the useless slab of muscle who's wearing that infuriating smirk that he crafted just to get under my skin. "We meet again, fairy prince."

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I say nothing, because, listen, I invented this game, and I will *not* be provoked into making another mistake.

With a deep breath, I speed past him, but the motherfucker blocks me again, lowering his head so we're eye to eye.

"Aw, you're ignoring me? I'm hurt."

"Drop dead."

"Not when I can see you so worked up. That look on your face is giving me a hard-on."

I'm momentarily stunned, but I recover fast enough to pass the puck to Kane, who scores.

"Boo." He starts to skate backward. "Stop using Davenport and Callahan as proxies and face me head-on. Unless…you're scared of me."

"You're the one who should be scared of me, rat."

"Oh no, Mommy, come pick me up. There's this big, bad prince who wants to do unspeakable things to me."

My spine jerks upright, and there's a long buzzing sound in my ears as the scent of peppery musk and burnt cigarettes clogs my throat and floods my mouth.

How the fuck does he…

No. No one knows. It's impossible.

And yet as Osborn glides across the ice, hyping up their crowd with his mere presence, my stomach heaves, bile pressing at the back of my throat.

I'm itching to run my thumb along my lip, bite down until blood pours out.

The rest of the game continues in a blur.

I don't even register half of it, and my head is so not in it, I don't remember what the fuck Coach Slater and Kane yap about.

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I can only focus on one thing.

Osborn.

He makes me his fucking target. Whether on defense or offense—he's there like a goddamn shadow I can't shake off.

As they're attacking, he says, "You sure you don't want to give my cock a go?"

And I lose it. There are no thoughts in my head as I slam him against the boards, which break into pieces.

He laughs as I'm sent to the box for the full five minutes.

For the first time in my hockey career.

I may have done the occasional two minutes, but never five.

And during those five fucking minutes, I have to watch the prick.

There's something I notice. Osborn moves like he's been skating since birth. Every glide is measured, economical, like he's figured out how to waste nothing—not breath, not energy, not attention.

And I'm wasting all three on him.

Because, you see, I wasn't kidding. I'll kill the bastard.

Torture him first, make his life hell, then skin him alive and drink his blood vampire style.

No one gets to know about *that*.

No one.

I'm practically useless for the rest of the game. When the buzzer cuts through, announcing the Wolves' win, I slam my stick against the boards as Jude wraps an arm around my shoulders.

"You okay?"

I hate that tone. The worry, the way he's watching me as if I'm made of glass.

Or I'll collapse any second.

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"Never been better," I grunt.

"Don't lie to me."

"Don't annoy me." I elbow him in the side, ignoring his furrowed brow and the fuck ton of questions he'll ask me once we're out of here.

As Jude slips ahead of me into the dim tunnel, I throw a glance behind me.

Osborn is being patted and hugged and praised all the way to Sunday by his teammates. Treated like a fucking god. And yes, sure, it makes sense. He stopped me, and that gave the Wolves their win. It's as easy as that—cripple the Vipers' left wing—my highness—and it all goes to shit.

In the midst of the celebratory fuck-fest, Osborn catches my eye, and there's that grin again—small, private, like we're sharing a joke no one else gets.

"My offer still stands," he mouths.

Something in my chest pulls tight. Not pain, exactly. More like the slow burn before realizing I'm bleeding.

What offer?

The…gay sex?

I could swear he's not gay. Right?

I've only ever seen, well, *heard* of him with girls. He's known to change girlfriends faster than his dad changes mistresses.

Not to mention that time he stole my fuck buddy.

Yes, I'm still salty about that.

He definitely made those distasteful remarks just to provoke me.

But how did he know it'd work? How could he have figured out that those exact fucking words would get so far beneath my skin, I'd need some real purging to expel them?

Because he seems to know more than he should.

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But how?

Why the fuck…?

I remove my helmet, narrowing my eyes at him as my teammates slide past me.

And even though every one of the Wolves seems to be vying for the rat's attention, Osborn's gaze rests on me, a subtle smile unfurling as if meant only for me.

It's not a smirk, but more of an intense appraisal and… *what?*

A promise? A threat?

Is that walking corpse *threatening* me right now?

My own lips curl in a wide grin as I make an "I'm watching you" gesture.

Oh, you're so fucked, Mr. Nobody.

You'll soon be cooked and served to my dogs.

Kane said that Osborn might be taken into the main family now that Lance died. He might be illegitimate, but he's the only male heir they have left. From what Kane mentioned, this is definitely something the Osborn elders want to make happen.

Our fathers don't—or at least Kane's dad doesn't, because he told him to get rid of the pest.

I'll take care of the nuisance myself.

Consider it a selfless humanitarian effort to rid the world of the vermin.

I'm basically a saint at this point.

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CHAPTER 3

Preston

SO I LIED. I'M NOWHERE NEAR A SAINT, BECAUSE WHAT the fuck is this?

Torture. That's what it is.

Listen, I'd rather be licking my wounds by playing games with Jude and watching *Tom and Jerry*—hey, don't judge, they're funny.

Better yet, I'd rather be pestering Jude and Kane like the goddamn parasite I am, but my father said, "Not today, bitch."

I mean, not in those words, since he's a robot and only speaks in monotonous sentences, but the intention is there, because I see his chauffeured car waiting for me at the arena's parking lot.

"Fuck," I say, making the smoothest U-turn known to man, but then I'm blocked by a literal giant who shakes his head at me.

Lenin.

Daddy dearest's muscle, so to speak.

"Double fuck," I whisper.

Lenin has no reaction, looking like he crawled out of a tax audit. Tall, stiff, permanently unimpressed—the human equivalent of a bruise you forgot you had. He doesn't talk

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much, just stands there with that "time for your punishment" stare, like I'm his full-time disappointment. Honestly, if people came with return policies, I'd send this one right back.

With a sigh, I trudge to the back seat of the car, and greet the driver, "Yo, Nelly."

She nods at me through the rearview mirror but doesn't remove her hands from the wheel, her white gloves as crisp as the night air. "Tough luck tonight."

"Don't talk about tonight. We don't talk about tonight." I stare at Lenin. "Unless I can go?"

He doesn't reply.

If a ghost, a prison warden, and a wet blanket had a baby, that's Lenin.

My very own personal nuisance.

"Your father really wants to see you," Nelly says with an apologetic look, smoothly pulling out of the parking lot.

"Can you drop me off at Jude's? Thanks. I'll buy you ice cream. Or maybe the latest drugs on the market. I know a guy."

Lenin and Nelly aren't amused, though Nelly smiles at me because she's cool like that. What's uncool is that, like Lenin, she can't be bribed, and unfortunately, my chirpy suggestions fall on deaf ears. So, what do I do?

What I do best, of course. Annoy the fuck out of them.

I spend the entire drive whining and talking nonstop about the most random shit.

What? You make my life difficult, and you can sure as hell expect that I'll reciprocate.

An eye for an eye and all that poetic bullshit.

Unfortunately, we arrive at the dreaded place, and that's how I find myself in hell on earth.

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Just kidding. It's only the Armstrong estate.

Sprawling at the top of Ravenswood Hill, this is where my ancestors decided to start the witch coven after immigrating from Europe.

Sorry, the family. They decided to start the *family*. Silly me for always thinking of it as a cool witch club.

I stare down at the black ring on my right index finger. The sun and crescent moon symbol engraved within looks ominous under the night lights.

Armstrong.

The ruling kings and pioneers in the energy sector—that's what this symbol I was shackled with since birth means.

Every male heir in my family has this ring—Grandpa, Dad, Uncle Atlas, and finally, me.

Kane and Jude have the same kind of ring, just with different family symbols. Kane's has a compass rose because the Davenports basically run the world's import-export cheat code. Jude's has a caduceus strangled by thorny vines, a very subtle wink at the Callahans owning the entire pharmaceutical scene.

The Osborns get a lion's head framed with gears, which fits since they've sunk their claws into every inch of urban development in this town and beyond.

This ring is the personification of a blood oath that befell me just because of some stupid birthright—very nonconsensual on my part, by the way. Now, I have to fall in line as the future heir of the empire. If I could care any less, I would. I would care so little, no caring would be found in my body.

I'd finally be free from this fiasco and this family.

But I can't.

Which is why I'm walking into the house with dear old Lenin by my side.

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"I can walk on my own, Lenino," I say with a grin. "I think I know the way since I live here."

Officially, at least. I mostly spend my time crashing at Jude's place. I thought about getting my own penthouse, but then I remembered that alone time and I are the most bitter enemies, so I voted against the idea.

In typical Lenin fashion, he says nothing. I've known this dude since I was young, considering he's Dad's right-hand man and all, but I don't think he likes me.

I prefer Hayes.

Dad's secretary of sorts and somewhat house manager. Not sure what his official title is, but he's been around to bail me out of Vencor shit.

Vencor is this powerful secret society founded by the four influential families in Graystone Ridge. It's been used to ensure our full control and influence over important sections of society.

And while the four families have collaborated their entire lives to maintain their bloodstained power, there's been some shakiness lately.

My dad's generation is barely holding it together, undermined at every turn by the following generation. Uncle Atlas, Julian, Jude's older brother, Kayden, Kane's uncle, and Serena Osborn.

Not that I care. They should all kill each other. Thanks.

"It's rude to ignore me, Lenino," I coo, my lips easing into a pout. "Shouldn't you at least try to console me for losing tonight? Or are you going to punish me?"

He releases a gruff noise.

"Is that a no? A yes? Instructions to clear."

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No reply this time. Not even a noise.

Guess we're back to pretending I don't exist. Dad's and Lenin's favorite hobby—on par with golf.

So I focus on my surroundings instead, sighing dramatically, just to give Lenin sensory irritation.

Petty, the pettiest of petty. That's me.

The Armstrong mansion isn't a house. It's a god complex with central heating.

Marble everywhere that screams *imported*, because my family believes locally sourced stone is for peasants. There's a chandelier big enough to trigger a mild earthquake if it falls, and the reception room is lined with portraits of dead people I'm supposed to pretend I know.

All of them stare down like they're waiting for me to turn out just as disappointing as Grandma says I will be. Spoiler alert—mission accomplished.

Every room smells like old money and newer guilt. The walls are beige because nothing says "emotional repression" quite like that color. The library's full of books no one's read, the piano hasn't been touched since my stepmother's last meltdown, and the dining table could seat up to fifty people we don't even like.

Then there are the mirrors. They're *everywhere*. Grandpa says they make the space look bigger. I say they just make the emptiness harder to miss and my face much more handsome.

As my reflection greets me, my lips tug into a smile on reflex, even as something tightens inside me.

"Pressie!" a small voice screams as my baby sister crashes into my legs from behind, hugging me tight.

"Mimi!" I turn around and pick her up, throwing her in the air as she giggles uncontrollably.

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Her golden pigtails fly with the motion, and when she lands in my arms, she holds on to me with all her might.

Miley is seven years old but hasn't grown that big yet. I'll keep tossing her around until she no longer wants it, because Dad sure as hell doesn't indulge in the innocent gesture.

She's wearing a soft-pink nightgown covered with pictures of Doraemon, her favorite show that she's made me learn by heart.

"Isn't it past your bedtime, Miles of Trouble?"

"Shh." She lowers her voice, looking around, and thank God Lenin disappeared. "I sneaked out. Don't tell Mommy."

"Never. But why did you sneak out?"

Her large blue eyes twinkle under the dim lights as she plays with the lapel of my Vipers jacket. "I heard Nanny say you lost the game tonight, and I wanted to make you feel better. Look." She reaches into her oversized pocket and produces a wrapped pastry, then removes the wrap and places it near my mouth. "I saved you this from dinner."

"Aw, you kept it on you all this time?"

"Yup! Hid it under my pillow. It's a bit crushed. Sorry, Pressie."

"Oh, that's okay." I take a bite. "It's so sweet."

"Right?" Her eyes widen as she watches me, gulping audibly, practically drooling all over the place. "Does it make you feel better?"

"Way better. But I'm so full, you have it, Mimi."

"Really?"

I push it toward her mouth, and she devours it in seconds. It's her favorite petit four pastry, and she was obviously on the fence about eating it, but my little sister kept it for me instead.

It's disturbing how different Miley is from her snake of a mother. You can bet I ordered a DNA test to make sure she was actually Lilith's daughter, but unfortunately, it came back with a match.

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Let's just say my angelic half-sister takes after me rather than either of her parents. She looks like me as well. Her blond hair is curly and a bit darker than mine when I was her age, and her eyes are different, but she's just as beautiful as I am.

No, not like me.

No one should ever be plagued with that. She's way better.

Different.

She'll definitely be *different*.

"You were awesome tonight!" she says after she finishes the pastry.

"I was?"

"Yup!"

"But I lost."

"That's okay. You were still so cool. I watched the game with Daddy for a bit before Mommy took me to bed, and you had awesome moves! Bang! Next time you take me skating, I'll bring my sparkly skates, and you can teach me moves."

Bias is showing, Miles. Forgiven, though. Can you blame her?

Then I focus on something she said and frown. "Dad watched the game?"

He doesn't usually—I don't *think*—and just shows up at the finals for image reasons.

Miley nods vigorously. "Yeah. Mommy, too."

Gag.

"Miley!"

Speak of the goddamn devil.

Satan's lover, aka Lilith Armstrong, rushes toward us in a flurry of silk and fluff, her hair gathered in a bun, her eyes shooting imaginary lasers at me.

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Lilith is Dad's second wife, but she wasn't his first girlfriend after Mom. No, she was probably the fifth that he introduced to me. I managed to drive all the others away, but this pest has been impossible to get rid of.

"You should be in bed, Miley!" Satan's lover yells, attempting to pull my sister from my arm, and I lower her to her feet, breathing harshly to keep calm and not bash the woman's head in.

Miley's mother. She's Miley's mother. Miley would be crushed.

Stay calm.

Zen down, motherfucker.

My sister stares at her feet. "I wanted to see Preston."

"You already have. Time for bed."

"Pressie." Miley's lower lip nudges forward in a pout as she looks at me.

"I'll see you tomorrow." I pat the top of her head. "I'll pick you up after school, and we can go downtown, okay?"

"Okay!" Miley's pout transforms to a wide grin in a fraction of a second.

Lilith grabs her hand and starts dragging her toward the stairs, but then she stops and stares at me, her lips curving in an evil smile. "That game was embarrassing to watch, dear son."

I flip her off discreetly, so Miley doesn't see, and she purses her lips as she takes my sister along.

One day, I'll see that hag burned at the stake.

Or maybe just kicked out so Miley doesn't suffer.

Listen, I indeed have issues. Yes, Mom taught me to hate whoever Dad brought along, because he was trying to replace us with them, but Lilith is just a bitch.

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I was probably nine when she first got to know Dad, and

unlike the others, she didn't seem like a liar. She said she'd be so happy if I could accept her, because she'd always wanted a son.

And I *believed* the bitch.

I know, very amateurish on my part. Already murdered young me for all his insolence.

Moving on.

Back then, Satan's lover made my favorite food and was still nice if Dad wasn't there. She was so caring and attentive, I thought about how lucky I'd be if I had her after Mom's death.

In class, I even painted her in a picture with Dad and Mom. I wanted to show it to her, but that's when I overheard her talking to her best friend on the phone, about three months after I met her.

"The kid? A piece of cake. He was trying to be an asshole at first, but I knew how to deal with him. The little fucker lacks motherly affection, so I just acted the part, and he latched on fast. Men, right? Act a little, and they fall into place. Age doesn't matter."

She sipped on her coffee, staring out at the garden. "I'm telling you, Gabby. I'm marrying Lawrence and winning the lottery. No messed-up son of his with mommy issues will stop me. I really hate it when he hugs me. Ugh. He holds on so tight, it's creepy, and I find it hard to stay in character."

There was a pause as she listened, then she nodded. "I know, right? He's really an oddball, this one. Sometimes, he keeps staring like a little psycho. Something's seriously wrong with his head for real. Anyway, I'll have him sent to a boarding school and get rid of the nuisance so I can have Lawrence all to myself."

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I just stood there as the mask fell to the floor and

shattered, and I saw Lilith for who she truly was—Satan's lover.

I burned that picture I drew and decided to make her life hell from then on, which I've been achieving with flying colors.

Anyway, I turn to leave. Now that Lenin has disappeared, I have no reason to subject myself to Dad's lecture—

"Oh, for fuck's sake. You don't sleep, man?" I mutter when I find Lenin close behind me. I swear the dude moves like a ghost sometimes.

Instead of answering, he motions at the hallway leading to Dad's study.

"Fine, fine, I'll go."

I head to the office, knock on the door, then wait for the grumbled "Come in."

My muscles are wound tight as I walk inside, which is always the case when I have to be one-on-one with dear old Dad.

My father's office looks like money and midlife crisis had a baby.

Leather chairs that squeak when you sit, books that no one's opened since the Cold War, and that mahogany desk—huge, shiny, and pretending to have a personality. It's positioned right in front of a window that probably cost more than my entire existence. Perfect view of Graystone Ridge from up the hill, because, of course, Dad likes to look down on people while he works.

He's standing behind it now, his posture military-grade straight, his tie strangling him in a shade of asshole—sorry, green-blue. The same shade of his eyes that we don't share, cold, probably because he patented emotional frostbite.

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His hair's gone more ash than blond, styled by a similarly