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BEAUTIFUL VENOM

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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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 a pure Cat-Lady fashion.

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To those who run in the dark, where beauty and danger
are two sides of the same coin.

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Author Note

Hello reader friend,

Beautiful Venom marks the start of an exciting new side of the #Rinaverse and can be enjoyed as a complete standalone.

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.

Beautiful Venom contains themes of consensual non-con, dub-con, and primal play. It also includes on-page depictions of road accident-related trauma and violence. Please be mindful of your triggers before diving in.

For more things Rina Kent, visit rinakent.com

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Playlist

The Girl Who Stole My Heart—Blue October
Little Girl Gone—CHINCHILLA
Rip Me Apart—Unlike Pluto
Black Dahlia—Hollywood Undead
Shadow—Livingston
Cake—Melanie Martinez
Sick Thoughts—Lou Bliss
Hell of a good time—Haiden Henderson
Bad Timing—Blindlove
Backbone—KALEO
I Can't Go on Without You—KALEO
Lilith—Halsey & SUGA
Vicious—Bohnes
Neon Gravestones—Twenty One Pilots
Game Of Survival—Ruelle
All That Pretty Love—Atom & Breathe
SINS—Red Leather
Feeling You—Harrison Storm
Fickle Game—Amber Run

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You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

CHAPTER 1

Dahlia

LIFE AS I KNOW IT HAS BEEN SHATTERED INTO TINY, unrecognizable pieces.

The silver lining? I have nothing to lose.

No one to go back to.

Nowhere to call home.

So nothing stops me from pursuing the bloody path I've carefully traced.

My fingers tremble against the smooth plastic of the stadium seat as I remain hidden. My muscles burn and my knees shake, creaking from the crouched position I've forced myself into for twenty minutes or more.

A blast of icy air envelops me, frosting the beads of sweat coating my temples and upper lip.

The thing is, I'm not supposed to be here.

And I don't mean in this position per se, but in the whole place.

I certainly wasn't supposed to set foot in Graystone Ridge or on the campus of Graystone University—also known as GU. Most importantly, I'm not supposed to be sneaking around in the notorious Vipers Arena, home to the school's prestigious Vipers hockey team that just won a spectacular game.

‘Just’ is metaphorical, because that game ended hours ago and everyone has evacuated the premises.

Except for me.

And the three players below.

Loud thuds fill my ears as the puck checks the boards. The swish of blades on the ice adds a symphony of undiluted violence.

I peek from between the dark blue chairs, holding my breath despite the magnitude of sounds echoing in the arena.

The seating inside Vipers Arena, which has a capacity of over ten thousand, rises steeply, giving a dizzying, vertigo-inducing view of the ice below. I can still hear the roar of the crowd from earlier as if it’s a physical force, reverberating in my chest in a persistent thrum. The clapping and chanting that ricocheted off the walls, rising to a deafening crescendo, was dull compared to the sound of the three players’ fast-paced late-night practice.

Or should I say meeting?

I catch a glimpse of ‘VIPERS’ printed on the boards across from me as the ice gleams under the harsh, blindingly bright lights, casting a bluish tint over the rink. The crisp, biting sound of skates slicing across the ice sends chills through me as I follow the players’ cutthroat maneuvers.

I’ve watched the Vipers dominate the arena countless times during my research, so I can recognize who has the puck without even checking their number.

Some might call this an obsession, and maybe it is, but if it can get me closer to the team, I’ll be a simp. Or a stan. Or whatever condescending term an expert on this bunch of snakes.

I lower my baseball cap over my face, switch my weight

from one foot to the other, then rest my clammy forehead on a tiny spot between the two chairs.

The three of them are so fast, so vicious, and so ruthless in their play, they nearly blur together in a sea of sharp glides.

My eyes cross as I attempt to keep up. They're alternating and playing two against one, probably to improve their flawless attack synergy everyone was singing praises about earlier tonight.

The reason those three play well together is probably because, even after everyone went home, they took to the rink again.

I've heard rumors that they often have these late-night 'meetings' and had to confirm it myself. Which is why I went to the restroom, stayed there until the place was nearly deserted, then snuck back into the arena and hid behind the chairs in the corner close to the ice but out of the players' field of vision.

However, I had to be dead silent because this place echoes even the slightest noise.

The three of them come to a halt in the middle of the rink, clacking their sticks together before tossing them onto the ice.

"That was lousy defense." Number 71, Jude Callahan, is the first to remove his helmet and shakes his soaking-wet black hair before he tosses it back like a dog.

He's the tallest and bulkiest of the three, standing at a whopping 6'5", and is the definition of fucked up. Jude is the most feared right wing in the college league. The rival teams' offense thinks twice before getting into his zone, and the defensemen can't handle his sheer size and unhinged energy.

Jude has anger issues and those hockey beat people the hell up. Everyone knows it, and anyone who has any dreams of a hockey career has learned to stay out of his way.

Number 13, Preston Armstrong, throws his helmet at the back of Jude's head, his deep voice carrying in the empty arena with a note of sarcasm. "Chest slamming is not an offense strategy. You would've been penalized for that. As always. Don't be a liability."

Preston is often labeled as the league's prince, probably because of his gorgeously attractive face, always styled sandy-blond hair, and Caribbean-green eyes. Despite his sleek appearance and refined mannerisms, he's known to be the most vicious snake on and off the ice.

His appearance is just another tool he uses to achieve his goals. Whatever those are.

In spite of my extensive research on Preston, I'm still in the dark about his true personality, and I doubt his teammates have a clue what he's truly capable of.

Unlike Jude, a notorious mass of muscles who acts with no regard for anyone, Preston is calmer and more calculated yet exudes a somber undertone.

Still, if I had to choose, I'd go with the latter. I can handle mind games, but Jude's brand of unhinged violence is hard to stomach.

As if on cue, Jude slams his body against Preston's with so much power, they both crash into the boards with a loud thud.

I hold in a gasp when Jude sits on top of Preston as if he's a chair. "What was that, dick?"

Preston's head bumps against the boards, and despite his lack of a helmet, I hear the echoing thump in my chest.

They clutch each other by the collar and Jude attempts to pick Preston up, probably to flatter him across the rink, Neanderthal style. Preston, while not as bulky or as tall as Jude, is still 6'3" and manages to maneuver Jude's brute force

by flipping him and then smashing him against the ice before jamming an elbow to his throat.

13 wears a smile as he speaks close to 71's face. "I said you're a liability, *dick*. Learn to control your animal strength. It's okay to look like one, but acting the part is too much, don't you think?"

I take it back.

There's no way I can handle Preston. I can't tell if he'll release the huge guy underneath him or choke him to death while smiling.

I nearly lose my footing and give away my position as Jude's face goes from red to blue in a matter of seconds.

In a blur of motions, Jude kicks Preston and then they're rolling on the ice like a couple of polar bears.

Without head protection.

The third player, Number 19, removes his helmet with a sigh, revealing damp tousled dark-brown hair and a soft frown between his thick brows.

Jude and Preston's fight filters to the background as the view of the Vipers' captain and center grips my throat with invisible hands.

And the worst part? This isn't the first time he's stolen my attention.

For some reason, I've often found my eyes unconsciously flitting to Kane Davenport, and I can't figure out why.

Yes, he's handsome, probably the most beautiful out of the three of them. While Jude has angular features and Preston is more of the princely type, Kane's beauty is unnerving.

His sharp, chiseled jawline affords him a naturally commanding look. His usually neatly styled hair is now haphazard, and he runs his fingers through it, making his thick strands look casually polished.

At 6'4", he's also tall, but not as threatening as Jude. Kane's lean yet muscular build complements his role as a dominant player on the ice. His body is sculpted for both power and agility, and his controlled movements reflect his innate leadership. He carries himself with confidence, his posture always straight and composed, giving off an aura of quiet authority.

And yet...his blue eyes are so pale, so blank, they're akin to those of an arctic wolf instead of a human. They're piercing, cold, and unreadable. Despite his outward calm, there's a flicker of danger lurking just beneath the surface.

And yet he's the only safe option on the team.

Kane is a responsible captain, a powerful leader, and the one who calms his teammates when they slip out of control. He's also the only senior player with a normal-ish personality.

Well, as normal as these assholes can get.

He's still part of that fucked-up organization no normal person would choose of their own volition. I glance at the black obsidian ring on his right index finger that doesn't shine under the light. I can't see it clearly, but I know there's a compass rose branded on the top of it, a depiction of his family's symbol.

The ring is proof of his monstrous ties.

He skates to the other two and forcibly breaks up the fight by shoving his body between theirs. Preston instantly jumps up and skates in circles, his rhythm and provocative facial expression taunting without his having to say a word.

Jude fights against Kane's hold, and his strength and thirst for violence form an invisible halo around him, eliciting goosebumps on my skin.

"Enough." Kane pushes him away, and while the movement looks relaxed, it actually isn't. There's no way he'd be able to shove away a bear-like man if that were the case.

That's the thing about Kane. He somehow manages to make things look effortless when they're far from it.

"Is that all you got, big man?" Preston tilts his head to the side and pouts at Jude, mimicking an innocent kid. "I'm disappointed."

Jude dashes toward him. "You fucking—"

Kane extends his hands, punching them both simultaneously in the stomach. "I said enough. Save the energy for the rink."

Jude snarls. "I'll pummel his pretty face to pieces so he stops talking shit."

"Ruining my face won't stop me from dragging your ass." Preston grins wide. "It'll just show your inferiority complex. That jealous of my looks, peasant?"

"Your looks?" It's Jude's turn to mock laugh. "Which looks? Sickly and disturbing?"

"Said no one ever. But hey, I can find you a good plastic surgeon. Also a neurosurgeon so he can fix your messed-up personality."

"Only if your personality will undergo the same surgery."

"Blasphemy. I have a wonderful personality. Yours, however, revolves around mommy issues." Preston pouts.

"I'm going to fucking bury you." Jude charges, and Kane uses his body to absorb the shock and still gets pushed back.

"Pres." Kane stares at him. The energy shifts without his having to say anything else.

Preston lifts his shoulder. "What? It's fun to mess with him. Besides, he needs to be drained so he can sleep. Like a kid."

"The fuck you just said?" Jude asks in a dark tone.

"See?" Preston lifts his hands as if he's proving a point.

"Save the trash talk for the game," Kane tells him.

“Hmm...let me consider it.” Preston taps his chin. “I refuse.”

Kane sighs as if he was expecting the reply. “Did you use that same antagonistic energy to get that player penalized?”

“I suppose. Told him that his mom is letting his coach fuck her in all her loose holes so that a mediocre player like him can be kept on the team.”

Sick bastard.

“No wonder he nearly killed you and was penalized for five minutes. Twice,” Kane says in an unnervingly calm tone. “You’re effortlessly annoying.”

Preston grins. “I know, right?”

“That’s not a compliment.”

“Did she?” Jude asks, seeming to have forgotten about his vow to kill Preston.

“Did she what?”

“Let the coach fuck her in all her holes for her son?” Jude asks in a cryptic tone, and Kane watches him closely as if looking for something, though I can’t pinpoint what.

“Dunno. Probably? Who cares as long as the story served its purpose.” Preston releases a sigh. “People are so easy to mess with, it’s getting boring.”

Jude removes his gloves and throws them at Preston’s face.

The latter scrunches his nose. “Uncultured as always, Callahan.”

My gaze zeroes in on the black ring on Jude’s index finger. Similar to that of Kane’s, though his is branded with his family’s symbol—a caduceus wrapped in thorny vines. Preston has one as well. He has the symbol of a sun and a crescent moon.

They weren’t wearing them during the game, probably

due to regulations. They must have them on now because they're practicing on their own.

Maybe they don't want to be seen without proof of their allegiance.

Or proof of their power in this place.

People think Graystone Ridge is a sprawling, affluent town nestled in the US's Northeast, where history and wealth blend seamlessly with modern ambition. The heart of the town's center offers a mix of upscale cafés, designer shops, and historical landmarks lining cobblestone streets.

People also believe Graystone University, which is perched on the edge of the town, is a prestigious institution known for producing both academic and athletic powerhouses. Its historical architecture has aged well, harmonizing with its surroundings. While it offers renowned programs in business, law, sciences, and sports medicine, its true pride lies in its hockey program, which has become a breeding ground for future NHL stars.

The student body is a blend of wealthy legacy people—like Kane, Jude, and Preston—and ambitious scholarship students, drawn to Graystone for its connections and prestige—like me.

What people don't know, however, is that beneath this shining exterior, the university hides a shadowy influence: Vencor. The secret society tied to its and the town's founding families. Power here is not just earned but manipulated and handed down through generations.

Every corner of this place whispers power for the elite families who shaped the town.

The Davenport, Callahans, Armstrongs, and Osborns live in a gated enclave called Ravenswood Hill on the outskirts, in the mist-filled forest that looms above the town.

Behind heavy iron gates, their secluded mansions reflect a legacy of influence and control over the town. The roads leading to Ravenswood Hill are lined with towering oaks and hidden security systems, creating an air of exclusivity and mystery.

The Hill has always been off-limits to outsiders, which is why I have to approach these three at college instead.

Or more like one.

Kane is my best bet. I don't think he's an idiot I can fool easily, but he's at least a pacifist. Over the past few weeks, I watched many of his games online and in person—call the stalking police—and have never seen him indulge in violence.

Not *once*.

That's kind of a miracle in a physical sport like hockey.

If anything, he's an expert at breaking up fights. His cool is never ruffled and his authoritativeness can be felt through the screen. Probably why he effortlessly snatched the captain's position.

I'd rather not get close to any of them, but I have to, so it has to be Kane.

"Anyone you'll invite this time?" Kane asks Jude as he skates to the bench area.

"No," the latter says without turning around.

"Sure about that?"

"Yes. Fuck off." And with that, Jude leaves the ice and heads to the tunnel, disappearing out of view.

A faint mechanical hum from the ice machines overpowers the silence as Kane looks at Preston for a few heavy seconds. "You?"

"Contemplating it."

"You're expected to vet and bring someone to the initiation, Pres."

“You didn’t tell Jude that.”

“It’s better he doesn’t. He’ll just force someone off the street to accompany him, and we don’t want to deal with that mess. You’re different. Use your conviction skills. I mean manipulation skills.”

“Last time I did that, she didn’t want to drink my blood. Nearly killed her before she was kicked out.” He frowns. “How could anyone refuse *my* blood?”

“Normal people?” Kane asks what I’m thinking. Seriously, maybe that guy is only in Vencor because he was born into a founding family.

He obviously doesn’t belong there.

“How about you?” Preston asks with a raised brow.

“I’m all set. Worry about yourself.”

All set? Does that mean he already has someone in mind?

I was supposed to worm my way into his life so that I’d be that someone.

Not too long ago, I applied to be an intern for the team’s physician, which is still on hold. My classmate said it was impossible that they’d accept a girl for the position while gloating that he’d be the best person for the job.

If he’s right, then my chances of getting closer to the team are slimmer than ever before. I could apply as an assistant to the administrative manager or even volunteer. However, those aren’t guaranteed with a popular team like the Vipers.

“All set, huh?” Preston repeats with a knowing tone.

“Go home, Armstrong.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Preston mock salutes, a sadistic smile painting his lips before he skates away. “Time to drown Callahan in the showers.”

As silence befalls the arena, Kane stands in the middle of the rink for a few seconds, then picks up the pucks

they left lying around and stores them in the appropriate compartment.

My legs hurt from the strain, and I know if I don't leave soon, I'll fall over and give my position away.

I bite my lip and remain motionless.

I'll leave after Kane does.

There's no way I'd be able to sneak off while he's there.

Stop being a Goody Two-shoes and go already.

The sound of skates blends with the ice machines and I get distracted with massaging my legs, so I don't notice that Kane has skated to my side of the stands.

As I lift my gaze, he stops right opposite my hiding spot.

Cold seeps into my bones, and the air becomes so crisp that it hurts to breathe.

In the oppressive stillness, Kane's calm voice carries through the empty arena. "You can come out now."

I hide further, hoping—no, praying—that he's speaking to someone else who was brave—or foolish—enough to sneak into Vipers Arena late at night.

"I know you're there. I suggest you show yourself while it's only me. I can't promise the others will be as understanding."

CHAPTER 2

Dahlia

MY HEART BEATS SO HARD, IT NEARLY SPILLS THROUGH MY rib cage.

Sweat is now covering my hands as I tighten my grip on the chair. No amount of icy air could extinguish the fire that erupts at the bottom of my belly.

Kane's words echo in my chest instead of my head, and I stop breathing altogether.

Yes, I intended to 'meet' him officially. But not like this. I was working on multiple plans to make it natural and believable.

Catching me in one of my snooping sessions is neither of the above.

Maybe if I make a run for it, I'll be able to get out of here—

"Am I that scary? I promise I don't bite." The note of amusement in his tone breaks the flow of my thoughts.

God, why the hell does this man's deep, gravelly voice sound like it's out of my darkest, most delicious dreams?

He sounds relaxed. Inviting, even.

Maybe it's because of that, or the fact that my legs are done carrying me, but I choose to seize the opportunity. The probability of having another one-on-one encounter with

the Kane Davenport is slim to none. He's always surrounded by people.

All the time.

Everywhere.

Anywhere.

He's the magnetic field people find themselves pulled toward.

I'm the people. People are me.

With a sharp exhale, I slowly stand. My knees burn and my legs feel numb. In a swift movement, I remove my baseball cap and pat my hair into submission until the long, wavy brown strands smoothly settle beneath my breasts.

My sister Violet told me first impressions matter the most, and I hate that I'm not dolled up for the meeting I've been planning for weeks. But I did put some makeup on earlier tonight and I'm wearing flattering jeans that mold to my curves and a beige top that contrasts nicely against my deep olive-toned skin.

Sure, I could look better, but I can also work with this.

This will either make or break my plan.

After sucking in a deep breath, I look down, and I'd almost forgotten how effortlessly gorgeous Kane is.

Almost.

He leans against the boards, arms crossed, stick hanging from his hand, looking both unsettling and nonchalant. The opposing impressions he gives off are jarring and force goosebumps to surface on my skin.

The dark-blue hockey gear adds a sense of foreboding to his already intimidating physique. Despite a few rows of seats separating us and my average height of 5'6", he still looks intimidatingly tall.

A slight smile touches his full lips. "There you are. That wasn't so hard, now, was it?"

“Hi.”

Shit.

I don’t sound weak. Ever. What on earth is wrong with me? *Calm down, for God’s sake.*

“Hello.” His smile remains the same, exuding politeness. It’s even welcoming. “May I ask what you’re doing here at this hour?”

“I stayed behind after the game.”

“I could tell. Why?”

“I...I’m a fan!” I blurt the first thing that jumps into my head.

Why the hell didn’t I think of that before? Actually, I did. Fleeting. But I figured the Vipers already had too many fans throwing themselves at the team members at every opportunity. So that wouldn’t have made me stand out from the crowd.

But now that we’re alone, it might.

“I see.” The two words are followed by intense eye contact that’s strangely devoid of warmth. I’m being scrutinized, but there’s no sense of connection.

The glacial pale color of his eyes is similar to sinking into the Arctic Ocean as layers of ice form on the surface at an alarming speed.

This must be what it feels like to be iced alive.

I shake the image from my head. This is Kane, not Preston, or God forbid, the wild card Jude. He’s my best—and *only*—option.

“Yeah,” I continue in a more confident tone. “I’m a new fan. I didn’t know much about hockey before, but I’m learning more because of the team.”

“I’m happy we could lure you into the game.” His words sound calm. Like an undisturbed ocean.

Right.

That's the vibe Kane has always given. Deep, controlled, and reliable. An ocean in all its glory.

"You did me the greatest favor." I smile wide. I've always heard I have a beautiful smile and I don't mind using it to my advantage. Beggars can't be choosers, and I'm definitely a beggar in this situation.

"Who's your favorite player on the team?"

"You," I say with no hesitation.

"Are you sure you're not saying that just because I'm here? If Callahan shows up, you'll switch, won't you?"

"Callahan is too aggressive and violent in his play. I don't find that entertaining."

"Most hockey fans do."

"Not me. I prefer your tactical prowess and your seamless ability to lead both in offense and defense."

"I'm flattered. Thank you." His voice remains the same. Unaffected, cool. He certainly doesn't sound flattered, or maybe he's been praised so many times before that his responses have become mechanical.

"No, thank you for taking the time to talk to me. It's hard to run into you on campus, so this means so much to me."

Gag. I'm not used to praising strangers this extensively. I'm starting to cringe.

"Anything for a fan. If you want an autograph, all you have to do is come closer. I *truly* don't bite."

That's when I realize I'm still nestled behind the row of plastic seats, gripping one of them so tightly that my fingers hurt. I release it and slowly take the steps down.

The entire way, his gaze is pinned on me.

It's not threatening per se, but it's intense, like when he's reading his opponents on the ice. That should feel like

a compliment, but I've watched this man crush so many of his rivals, the attention shoots a wave of unease through me.

I stop in front of him, and he stands to his full height. I'm not sure whether the gesture is meant to intimidate me, but I might have underestimated how tall he actually is. Add the skates and he's downright towering over me.

Up close, his jaw is sharper, his skin smooth except for some stubble. And his eyes are paler, much colder. Slightly disturbing, even.

He carries himself effortlessly with complete and utter ease.

I'm actually envious. How can someone be so...self-confident? So self-sufficient?

"Can I take a rain check on the autograph?" I say to murder the invisible tension. "I don't have a pen or paper."

"How about a picture, then?"

"That would be amazing." I fumble in my back pocket and retrieve my phone, then click on the camera.

Due to the height difference, I can't get a good angle.

"May I?" he asks after watching me struggle for a few seconds.

I hand him the phone with an apologetic smile and lean closer so he can take the picture. A whiff of woodsmoke and the faintest trace of musk flood my senses.

The scent is so masculine, my head turns and heat creeps up my neck. I've always found men who smell nice attractive.

I forget to smile a few times as he snaps some successive pictures.

As he hands me the phone, I stare at his black ring for a beat too long and hope my inner disgust doesn't make an appearance on my face.

"Now, why don't you tell me the real reason you're here, Dahlia Thorne?"

My fingers pause on the phone as he clutches the other end. He doesn't release it when his eyes meet mine. His expression hasn't changed, but a dark undercurrent has overshadowed his polite manners.

"How do you know my name?" I whisper.

"You applied for an intern position on the medical team, no? The résumé had your picture and name on it."

"And you go through every application?"

"As the team captain, yes, I do. No one gets close to the Vipers without my knowledge." He pauses and lets my phone go. "Or approval."

I knew that. I *knew* it, which is why getting close to the others would have been fruitless, not to mention dangerous. No matter who I targeted, I would've gotten Kane's attention anyway, which is why I went for him from the beginning.

"How do you know I want to get close?" I ask, not bothering to deny his words. Kane is smart and trying to deflect would only backfire.

"Aside from applying to be part of the medical team, you've been asking around about administrative positions and trying to befriend those close to the team members."

He found out about all that? *How?*

I stare at his ring. Vencor. Of course, as a member, he knows this place inside out.

Maybe I underestimated just how intricately they're woven into the university's and the team's fabric.

"Have I made you suspicious of me?" I smile, deliberately making it appear awkward. Sheepish, even.

"I wouldn't call it suspicion. Curiosity is more accurate."

I swallow the saliva stuck in my throat. "What are you curious about?"

"Your motive."

"I can't be a fan?"

"You can. But your actions don't reflect your claim."

"How so?"

"First, you're not wearing any of our jerseys, and while that's normal for an occasional viewer, it's bizarre for a *fan*. Second, you said you only got into hockey recently, and yet you seem to know about my and Callahan's play style as if you've been studying it instead of watching the game for fun. Lastly, if you were a fan, you would've jumped at the opportunity of getting a picture with me, Armstrong, and Callahan, but you were dead set on hiding and eavesdropping, so that tells me you have an agenda. That agenda is less related to the team and has more to do with my ring, because you've stolen at least three peeks at it since the start of this conversation."

Damn, he's good.

He's so good, I'm speechless.

The way he delivered his analysis in tranquil, precise words is both impressive and nerve-racking. Just how far has he read into me?

And is it even safe to get entangled with him?

He's frighteningly perceptive and a master at recognizing and linking patterns. It's fascinating on the rink but lethal in real life.

Kane raises his hand, showcasing his index finger. "Do you know the meaning behind this ring?"

"Everyone in town does," I say in a small voice.

"Correct, but probably not as well as you do. In reality, only a few have deciphered the actual meaning."

"I don't know what you're talking about—"

"No. Don't play dumb. It insults both of our intelligence."

"What do you want me to say?" I whisper, feeling trapped between his claws without his even having to touch me.

“What does this ring mean, Dahlia?”

“I don’t...know.”

“We’re done here.” He spins around and starts skating away.

I panic, my breathing coming in a chopped rhythm, and I draw endless circles on my thumb with my index finger.

I know, I just know that if he leaves, he’ll never give me the time of day again. He seemed disappointed by my reply. He was fully aware I was lying, and instead of calling me out, he just chose to put an end to the conversation.

“Wait! It means you’re a Senior Vencor member.”

He comes to a halt a small distance away and slowly turns around. His expression is its usual brand of calm and distant. “What other ranks exist?”

“Trial, Member, Senior, and Founder,” I say slowly, revealing I’m more entrenched than anyone should be.

I’ve completely put my cards on the table now, and it’s his decision whether to flip them over or let me play. I could’ve lied and denied it, but Kane proved he has zero tolerance for bullshit.

The low timbre of his voice fills the air. “And how did a college student such as myself get a very high Senior position?”

“Because you are...”

“I am?”

“Biologically related to a founding family.”

“True and false. I went through the ranks like everyone else. I just started early.”

Oh, I didn’t know that. I thought he, Jude, and Preston had gotten access solely because of familial ties.

“How...early?” I ask.

“Early.” He speaks the single word with enough command

to ward off any further questions. “Now, why don’t you tell me the reason you’re so well-versed in Vencor when you were born in Maine and grew up in New Jersey, Dahlia?”

I swallow hard. Even though that information is public and mentioned on my résumé, the fact that he remembers it so clearly is unsettling.

“You know I’m on a scholarship, right?” I start in a composed tone.

“Yes, and?”

“If you’ve done your research, then you must know I receive grants. I was born to a poor fisherman and seamstress in a little coastal town in Maine, but I don’t remember much of that life, because my parents died when I was six. But I do recall that Mom fixed the same dress at least five or six times instead of getting me a new one. I remember never having enough food to quiet the hunger in my stomach. The situation didn’t change when I was thrown into the system and moved from one abusive home to another. Kids like us don’t get nice things. Some of us become druggies, others sell their bodies, and many die in freak accidents. Nobody cares about the nameless corpse by the side of the road. We’re just statistics that feed the machine. The few who make it, like me, are still treated like outsiders and discriminated against, no matter how book-smart or street-smart we learn to become.”

I pause, largely because of the lump that’s obstructing my throat. I didn’t mean to get personal, but I have a feeling anything less than the truth will not move Kane in the slightest. For that matter, he might look down on me if I lie—he was certainly ready to end the conversation when I attempted it.

Although I’ve just laid my unglamorous life out in front

of him, he doesn't react. There's not even a tic in his monk-like expression. He doesn't appear to be calculating whether or not I'm telling the truth.

"And?" is all he says, prompting me for more, sliding ghostly hands through my brain as if he wants to pick it apart piece by piece.

"And I'm tired of being on the outside. For once, I want to be on the inside. I want to wake up in the morning and not worry about how to survive for one more day. I heard Vencor can help with that. That if I become a member, my future will be guaranteed, like it has been for countless politicians, businessmen, and even ex-presidents. I want to be part of the powerful instead of the weak."

"And you thought the best way to do that would be to get close to the hockey team, where three players are Seniors and a few others are Members, and have one of the Seniors invite you to the upcoming initiation."

Not a question, but I still say, "Yeah."

"You thought right. I'll make your wish come true."

My lips part.

Did Kane just agree to help me without my having to resort to all the diabolical plans I had prepared?

What?

Why?

Does he perhaps pity me?

Honestly, I don't care. I'll be the most pitiful puppy if that gets me in. I have no time to focus on my pride in situations like this.

"Really?" I ask, still not believing my ears.

"Yes. I already had someone else in mind for the initiation, but I'll take you instead."

A shiver goes through me when he says, 'I'll take you

instead.' Even though his tone doesn't change, there's a strange shift in his expression.

A smile curves his lips, and I stop and stare. Am I supposed to find him this gorgeous?

It soon disappears as his mechanical tone fills the air. "Fair warning. This is not your run-of-the-mill initiation or some hazing ceremony where you'll be asked to take silly dares. You will be tested. You'll be pushed to your limits. And you'll be asked to offer your body and soul at the altar of demented people. If you refuse, you're out and banished for life. If you don't prove to be willing to be used for Vencor, you'll be sabotaged until you escape the country or shoot yourself. And if you betray Vencor, no one will find your bones. Are you sure you still want to participate? Sometimes, being an outsider is much safer than being a blood-bound insider."

Another chill runs through me and I tighten my hands on my phone. I've heard a lot of rumors and I'm part of dark web forums that discuss theories and stories about what these people are capable of.

Kane's words said in a neutral newscaster voice shouldn't shake me, but they do.

If I'd heard this a year ago, I would've turned around and left, but now?

Now, I have nothing to lose. And if I must use my life to avenge my sister, so be it.

So I say in a resolved, dead voice, "I'm sure."

Kane watches me, neither surprised nor approving. "If you change your mind before you're accepted, say a word only the two of us know and I'll make it stop. No matter what it is. Let's go with...red."

I nod. "Why are you helping me?"

He taps my cheek with his index finger on which he's wearing the ring. The cold metal sends a chill through me, but that's nothing compared to the electrifying fire that spreads down my belly as his skin touches mine.

"I'm curious if you'll last and how far you'll go, my fake fan." His smile drops as he pats my cheek one final time. "Don't disappoint me."

CHAPTER 3

Dahlia

DON'T DISAPPOINT ME.

Don't disappoint me.

Don't. Disappoint. Me.

It's been a week since Kane spoke those words to me. He's said nothing since then, and for some reason, I can't get them out of my mind.

I've been trying to sneak into the arena to watch the Vipers practice, maybe catch Kane's attention and ask him about what steps will be taking place going forward. However, their security is no joke. They have a zero-tolerance policy for outsiders. Even if they're the team's biggest fans. Doesn't matter if they go to Graystone University.

If it weren't for the very real pictures in my phone, I'd think the whole conversation I had with Kane and the promise he made about taking me to the initiation was a figment of my imagination.

Sure, no one knows when and where Vencor's initiations take place since, according to rumors, they change them up to keep the mysterious factor going.

But Kane is in the inner circle. The Senior level is the highest rank attainable for all members except for Founders. I have no clue what type of trials they must go through or how

many souls they have to sell to the Devil to get there, but I suspect their own soul isn't enough.

I frown at my picture with Kane on my phone. I posted it on social media the other day and tagged him, but all I got was a like. That's all. No DM or further acknowledgment of my existence.

Nothing.

I'm supposed to be studying, but I find myself staring at the selfie.

Again.

Kane's expression is calmer than a starless night and just as deep. I can't imagine him selling his soul, to be honest. He genuinely listens and lacks Preston's shadiness and Jude's brutality.

He can be relentless during a game if need be, but I've never seen Kane be aggressive. Whether on or off the ice.

I zoom in on his hand, where the ring shows. He's still a Vencor, a Senior Vencor. For some reason, I seem to gloss over that detail whenever I think about Kane.

Which I've done constantly since our last encounter.

Vencor or not, I don't believe he's the type who dishes out empty promises.

But why hasn't he gotten in contact since then? He's kind of untouchable on campus, so I can't exactly walk up to him like we're acquaintances. We study in completely different fields in buildings that are on opposite ends of campus anyway. Him, business. Me, pre-med. So it would be hard to pop in there and pretend it's a coincidence.

Besides, would that be a smart thing to do? Initiating a public meeting. The other time he made sure his teammates were out of earshot before he talked to me. I assume he doesn't want our deal to be exposed.

“Kane Davenport. You ain’t playing about your crush.”

My head whips up. I was so focused and lost in my thoughts, I didn’t notice Megan getting close to my desk.

I fumble to flip the phone over. “He’s not my crush.”

Megan is my roommate in GU’s dorms and is here on a scholarship like me, so at least there’s not much societal difference between us. But lucky for her, she comes from a happy family and I often see her at the local cafés with her parents or siblings.

I keep to myself and she keeps to herself. She did try to befriend me in the beginning since she’s a real extrovert, but after she witnessed me studying like a dog to earn the grades needed for my scholarship, she kind of retreated and decided to spend more time with her friends in the social sciences department.

Megan is a redhead with dark skin and a striking fashion style. She’s rocking a red, white, and green kimono-style dress with slits in the skirt and glimmering chains for straps for one of her nights out.

“Girl, you were staring at that man like he was a snack.” Megan checks herself in the full-length mirror near the entrance of our room.

“I was not.”

“Uh-huh.” She takes a few selfies in the mirror.

Her side of the room is full of colorful clothes piled on the bed from when she was picking her outfit. Some purses have fallen on the floor, but her desk is spotless, all her social science books neatly displayed like they’re actual treasures.

My side is minimalist at best with my med books and laptop. However, my bedside table is covered with haphazard college hockey magazines that I’ve been studying more seriously than my school projects.

My three pairs of white sneakers are lined up by my side of the closet, while Megan's are full of all types and colors of shoes.

"And here I was wondering about your recent obsession with hockey. Gotta say, you have expensive tastes. You couldn't go for a lower-grade peasant from the team?"

I spin in my chair to face her. The other difference between Megan and me is that she's been at GU since her freshman year. As for myself, I was studying in the neighboring town, Stantonville. I initially applied to GU and Stanton River College—or SRC—but my application was rejected for GU and I was accepted into SRC. Which was a bummer, but at least Violet was accepted into SRC, too, so we moved from New Jersey to Stantonville.

Imagine my surprise when I was offered a random scholarship to GU for my senior year this summer. To say I was over the moon would be an understatement. GU's medical program is one of a kind, which is why I wanted to enroll here in the first place. And to be offered that opportunity for my senior year felt unreal.

Violet seemed a bit apprehensive, but she still bought me a little cake and we had a blast celebrating that night.

I thought this would be my new beginning.

And it is, but now, I don't have Violet with me.

Megan is actually a local to Stantonville and could've gone to SRC, but she purposefully applied for a scholarship here because, in her words, "This place is the shit. Aside from their famous hockey program, SRC doesn't have much to offer."

The Stanton Wolves are the Viper's biggest rival. Both teams are known to produce the best NHL players, and their 'Cold War' games are easily the highlight of the college league.

Despite Megan not being massively interested in hockey, she was brought up surrounded by these two legends, so she knows more than the rumors I've heard and what my technical research can produce.

"I didn't go for anyone," I say to keep up the conversation. "He was generous enough to let me take a fan selfie after the game."

She shifts her attention from the mirror and hikes a hand on her hip. "You'll sit there and tell me with a straight face that you don't want to be anything more than a fan?"

I spin my fountain pen between my fingers but remain silent.

"That's what I thought," she says with a gloating facial expression, then looks at the mirror again to pat her red curls. "Better not get your hopes up. He's top of the food chain, as in royalty, in this college, town, and world. People like you and me don't mess with people like them and get out unscathed. So lower the standards...unless you only want to fuck him? In that case, get in line. I'd let that man throw me around like I'm his puck. I heard from an acquaintance of an acquaintance that he has a huge dick to match the energy."

"Megan!"

"What? Gotta do my research before opening my legs. And I just did yours, too. You're welcome."

I laugh despite myself. "What else do you know aside from rumors about his dick size?"

"That's all I need." She side-eyes me. "That's all you need as well if you want to stay out of trouble."

"I just want to know my chances."

"You have none. Those people who live up the Hill only get into relationships with each other, marry each other, and produce little minions like themselves who'll repeat the cycle

all over again. We're outsiders, D. Outsiders get no chances." She looks up. "Dear God, in the next life, I want to be reborn as a rich man. Amen. Hold on. With a huge dick also. Big amen to that. No pun intended."

"So outsiders get no chances, but fucking is okay?"

"Hell yeah. Fucking is harmless fun. Anything beyond that is not. If you want to be super realistic, you'll get a better chance fucking that manwhore Preston—who accepts all girls' advances—than Kane. Hell, Jude might be easier to fuck than Kane. It's hard to get that man excited about anything other than hockey. His hookups are few and far between. Either he's training to be a monk, or he has one hell of an NDA in place, because all the girls want a piece, but few have managed to get it, and those who did don't talk about it."

Fucking Kane is the last thing on my mind right now. Okay, not *really* the last. I'd be lying if I said I don't find him hot. Under different circumstances, I'd be open to some harmless fun like Megan, but with my situation, I need something deeper.

A lot deeper.

"Have you ever been to Ravenswood Hill?" I ask. "You know, to snoop and see how they live."

"Hell no. This pretty head." She motions at her face. "I want it kept on this pretty neck. Thank you very much."

"Is it that dangerous?"

"Fuck yeah. Listen. I know you're probably one of those students who loves the thrill of secret worlds, haunted houses, and enchanted forests, but this is not a horror movie. Those who've dared to go close to the Hill have disappeared without a trace. Don't become a statistic."

I already have. Copyrighted Material

But Megan is right. Going to the Hill just to snoop without any entry or escape plan in place is just asking for death.

That's why I thought the best way would be to achieve entry through the team.

Megan sprays a cloud of perfume before she leaves, attempting one final time to invite me to the latest 'sick' party. However, she gives up when I tell her I'm studying tonight.

At least, that's what I intend to do.

I find it hard to focus and barely finish reading a case study for ethics.

My phone lights up and I check it to look at the pictures Megan's sent of "what I missed."

The pen nestled between my fingers stills and drops on top of my textbook when I find a DM from @kane.davenport.

Kane: Are you free tonight?

My heart thunders so loudly, I can hear it in my ears as I type: *Hi! Yes.*

Then realize it sounds too desperate, so I delete it.

Dahlia: Why?

Kane: The initiation is tonight. In two hours.

Oh God.

That came sooner than I expected. I didn't think I'd get a save-the-date card or anything. But a two-hour notice?

I'm not even mentally prepared.

Kane: Will you be there?

Dahlia: Yes. Where?

Kane: I'll send you a location. Be there in an hour and a half.

Dahlia: Okay. Thank you.

I think the conversation has ended as he sees my text and doesn't reply, but then a single word appears on the screen and my heartbeat quickens.

Kane: Dahlia.

Me: Yes?

Kane: Red. Say that word now and this nightmare won't happen. If you don't, you won't have a chance afterward.

My eyes fly over what he's written again and again. Just like when he learned about my interest, he's offering me a way out.

But he doesn't know that when my mind is set on something, I won't stop until it's done.

Someone in Vencor was behind my sister's attack and subsequent coma. I lost my only family because of them, and I won't rest until they're six feet under. Hopefully, after they suffer.

So no. Even if I'm going to die, I won't take the out that Kane's offered.

I like that he's putting the option on the table, though.

Dahlia: I'll be there.

There's a long stretch of silence from his end before he sends one final text.

Kane: Dress comfortably. It's going to be the longest night of your life.

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CHAPTER 4

Kane

THIS ISN'T THE FIRST, THE SECOND, OR EVEN THE HUNDREDTH time I've faced such a scene.

It won't be the last either.

But it never manages to penetrate me. Not the screams, the gurgling of blood, the stench of fear mingled with the absolute realization that they've fucked up.

And that it's the final time they'll ever fuck up.

"Listen...listen...please hear me out..." the vice-chancellor, Fred, begs on his knees, his belly bulging from between his shirt's ripped buttons, his ugly purple tie tight, turning his face red.

Jude, Preston, and I asked Fred to join us for a ride after school.

He smiled with delight, thinking we were presenting him with an opportunity. It's not every day that a mere vice-chancellor gets a private meeting with three Senior Vencor members who'll become de facto Founder members as soon as they graduate.

And Fred, like any Vencor member, knows that only we who are born into the four founding families are granted the Founder position. So we've always held a monopoly on the power balance on campus, even if we're still just Senior members. A position Fred will never reach.

Because instead of the opportunity-filled meeting he expected, we drove him to a warehouse owned by my family, located so far out of town, no one would hear him scream.

My father's cronies are stationed outside, waiting for us to finish with our fun so they can clean up.

Though, truly, it's more fun for Jude and Preston than me. I'm only here to finish a 'decapitation' mission. Meaning, cut the head off a snake that's starting to consider biting its master.

Vencor's power, aside from strong business relations between the four founding families, is all about control. If there's an opportunity, not only do we seize it, but we also eliminate anyone who forms any type of obstacle.

It's a secret society that's highly dependent on its Founder members and their connections. But unlike any other society, it's not exactly a brotherhood, and internal fighting among the four founding families to snatch the upper hand is common.

Senior members, the highest position any outsider can reach, are more primed to take upper positions in society like senators, leaders of political parties, or controllers of military and financial complexes. Their job is to grow Vencor's connections and serve its goals. They usually have Members catering to them, doing their bidding, and keeping an eye on them in case they go awry.

It's not unheard of for a Member to become a Senior for disclosing the betrayal of a previous Senior he worked for.

Since it's impossible for anyone not born to a founding family to achieve a higher rank, Preston, Jude, and I are anomalies on campus. We hold power over the team, and everyone at Graystone University bows down to us.

Today's mission is one I handpicked for myself, so the

other two didn't need to join, but then again, Jude has developed a pesky addiction to killing, and Preston suffers from an incurable case of bloodlust.

As Senior members, we're actually the ones who assign those lower than us in rank with these types of missions, and our role is to supervise from the shadows, only intervening if things spiral.

But I've always liked being hands-on. I don't trust anyone else to finish the job as efficiently as I do.

"Hear what exactly?" I lean back in a metal chair across from Fred, leisurely wiping my gun with a cloth and making sure it's in his field of vision the whole time. "That you're dealing drugs on campus behind our backs?"

"It was only a one-time thing...please...I have a family," he begs, droplets of sweat gathering on his upper lip and oily nose.

"Then you should've thought of that family before you crossed us." I stand up. "No one crosses Vencor. You're only a little tool to be used. It's bad form when you start believing you have agency. We do the thinking, not you."

"I promise I'll never do it again if you give me another chance."

"Don't be naïve. There are no second chances. One mistake and you're out."

"Especially when you thought you could get away with it." Jude slides behind Fred, grabs his tie, and tugs him so far back, I'm surprised his neck doesn't snap.

"The audacity is sending me." Preston kneels in front of Freddie, rolling the handle of his knife between his fingers. "News flash. Nothing escapes us. You can hide, but you can't run."

"It's you can run, but you can't hide," Jude tells him.

“Well, I meant it the other way around.” Preston presses the knife close to Fred’s neck, and the man holds his breath. Whether it’s due to Preston’s knife or the way Jude is strangling him, I can’t tell.

“That’s not how it works. Don’t be an idiot.”

“Ha. The pan calling the kettle black.”

“The pot calling the kettle black, not pan.”

“Same fucking meaning.” Preston throws his hands back, slashing Fred’s throat in the process. Blood gushes out like a fountain, spraying both of them with red. Their faces, hair, clothes.

Everywhere.

It even splashes my jeans and shoes.

What a drag.

Fred’s mouth is open, his eyes staring at nowhere as he bleeds out in seconds.

“Argh...look what the fuck you’ve done, Jude!” Preston rises to his full height. “I didn’t have the chance to watch him die.”

“Me? You’re the one who killed him, motherfucker. We didn’t even get to torture him.”

Preston squares up to him. “It was because you were being a smart-ass trying to correct me.”

“I wouldn’t have to correct you if you were right, now, would I?”

“I’m always right. Not my fault a peasant like you can’t recognize a superior being.”

“More like a superior pain in the ass.”

“The fuck you just call me?”

Jude steps close. “Painted on my shoulder. “In. The. Ass.” He hits him upside the head. “That clear enough for you?”

Preston grabs him by the collar. “I’m so gonna drown you in Freddie’s blood.”

They’re about to start wrestling while bickering as usual, so I sheath my gun in my belt and say, “Just so you know, if you start fighting, I’m not breaking it up. I’m not getting stained by that filthy blood any more than I already am.”

“Oh yeah?” Preston grins, and the motion looks manic with rivulets of crimson cascading down his face. Then he releases Jude’s collar, all aggression disappearing, and places a brotherly arm around his shoulders. “Big man, is it just me or does it seem like Kane is looking down on us?”

“No, you’re right. He has that holier-than-thou thing going on. It’s revolting.”

“That’s what I’m saying. I think we should do something about it.”

“Don’t you fucking dare—” Before I can manage to escape, they jump me.

Jude and especially Preston get the blood all over me. And while I try to throw them off, these two are actually the perfect fucking team and they overpower me.

They’ve always done this, since we were in boarding school. They’d be bickering and I try to break it up, so they gang up on me just because.

I only manage to shove them off of me after Fred’s blood is covering me from head to toe.

Preston laughs and Jude watches with a satisfied expression as I walk out of the warehouse to talk to my father’s men.

Fucking children.

Doesn’t matter how Fred died. It only matters that he died and won’t be betraying Vencor anymore.

The upper echelon, aka the Founders, will pick a

replacement for him soon enough. That is, if they haven't already.

My mission as the Vipers' captain is to make sure the campus is under control and fulfills its role as one of Vencor's multiple tentacles.

Since this town is obsessed with hockey to the point of considering it a religion, it makes sense to use the most popular team as our base, through which we keep an eye on Graystone University and even recruit those we deem worthy.

Though, the vetting process only allows us to invite high-ranking members of society.

Usually, that is.

Because as I slide into my car, I'm thinking about the exception to that rule.

The fake fan who claims she wanted to be offered a chance to be on the inside. A chance I'm granting not because I sympathize, but because I want to see her on her knees.

Literally.

Figuratively.

I hit the gas. Time to get to the highlight of my evening.

Here's to hoping she doesn't disappoint me. If she does, I might have to drive her to one of our warehouses.

And it'd be a shame to turn those bright hazel eyes red.

CHAPTER 5

Dahlia

MONTHS.

It's been months of constant, careful plotting, thorough calculating, and painstaking patience.

Months.

And today's finally the day.

I wipe my clammy hands on my jeans as I park my bike in a parking space and power walk through the dimly lit streets. I actually followed Kane's advice and came in my most relaxed outfit—a plain gray T-shirt and my comfiest sneakers that are slightly beat up.

If I said I wasn't scared, it'd be a flat-out lie.

I've only heard rumors about Vencor's initiations, and they all mention a grueling interrogation process, having to endure physical and mental tests, and being stripped bare of one's humanity.

But they all remain rumors.

No one but Vencor members know the truth.

Despite the slight tremor that invades my limbs and the heaviness in my steps, no amount of fear will deter me from bringing Violet justice.

Violet and I aren't blood-related, but we met in a foster home—one of the most abusive ones I lived in—and we

bonded. She protected me when the man who was supposed to take care of us got too drunk on liquor and hit us or when his wife tried to get me addicted to meth.

Then one night, Violet took my hand and suggested we escape. We were homeless for a while, and she refused to take us to a shelter or anywhere else in the care system. Neither of us trusted it. I was maybe twelve at the time and she was thirteen.

For some reason, our previous foster parents, Martha and Gerald, didn't report us as runaways or missing right away, and Violet said she 'took care of it.' I'm not sure how she convinced them, but something told me it was because of the black eye she was sporting, and I wanted to go back and kill them.

But the last thing we wanted was to be found and shoved into another abusive foster home.

Thankfully, Violet looked older than her age, so she got a job at some shady restaurant and begged the owner lady to let me study in the storage room while she worked the evening shift.

She fed me, made sure I was keeping my grades up, and took me for late-night walks. She's my mom, my dad, my sister, and my savior.

She shielded me when she was in the cold. She fed me and stayed hungry herself.

She was the warm shelter kids like me don't get.

Until she was snatched away from me.

Because of Vencor.

They cut off my lifeline, and now, I have nothing left except the need for cold-blooded revenge.

The light dims further until only a few lit bulbs remain. They're so far apart and barely there that I have to rely on my phone's flashlight to see the path ahead.