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VENOM
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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SWEET 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 a pure Cat-Lady fashion.

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For the survivors with scars no one sees,
and the ones who choose the light
even while standing in the dark.

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Author Note

Hello reader friend,

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

Sweet Venom contains references to mental illness, depression, suicidal ideation, and emotional abuse, including parental neglect and child abuse. It includes graphic violence, murder, torture, stalking, attempted child sexual abuse, the death of a family member, and mentions of multiple abortions and drug use/overdose involving non-main characters. Specific kinks in this book include consensual non-consent (CNC) and somnophilia. Reader discretion is advised.

For more things Rina Kent, visit rinakent.com

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Playlist

Chokehold—Sleep Token
Granite—Sleep Token
Panoramic View—AWOLNATION
Right Here—Chase Atlantic
Cry Baby—The Neighbourhood
Rain—Sleep Token
Bad Omens—5 Seconds of Summer
Keeping You Around—Nothing But Thieves
It's Not Living (If It's Not With You)—The 1975
Tongue Tied—Grouplove
FUNERAL—Neoni
My Oh My (feat. DaBaby)—Camila Cabello, DaBaby
Landmines—BELLSAINT
Can't Pretend—Tom Odell
I don't wanna lose again—Munn
Poison or Patience—Friday Pilots Club & OSTON
Is it Love—Loreen

You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

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CHAPTER 1

Violet

SOMEONE'S WATCHING ME.

Constantly.

Overtly.

The attention prickles the back of my neck like a thin, tiny needle delving deep beneath my skin.

In the beginning, I thought it was one of the bar's patrons who had a tendency to make me feel uncomfortable with their lingering gazes and 'accidental' touches.

Or maybe it was one of the desolate souls from our sketchy neighborhood who looked at me as if I were a piece of meat.

For as long as I can remember, I've always been that.

A piece of meat.

An object.

A toy.

One that bounces and ping-pongs, no matter how hard it's kicked.

So this time shouldn't feel any different. Once again, I'm just another something to someone.

A fixation.

A twisted fascination.

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As long as they don't come any closer, I'm safe.

I ignore the feel of those disturbing, creepy eyes like I do everything uncomfortable in my life.

Shove it in the closet. Close the door on it. Pretend it doesn't exist.

I wipe the bar counter after the last patron is escorted out by the manager, who laughs along with his drunken mumbling.

HAVEN is the main sports bar in Stantonville, a small run-down town in the Northeast whose entire personality revolves around an overt obsession with ice hockey.

Tonight, there was a replay of a game where the local college team—the Stanton Wolves—crushed it, according to all the happy faces I served.

If it had been a live game, I would've been nervous. Considering the men we get here, I don't know which is worse—when the Wolves win or when they lose.

In both cases, there are drunks who slur, shout, and don't keep their hands to themselves, but I guess maybe it's better when they win. Otherwise, we have to deal with ugly violence.

Hockey—and sports in general—doesn't really appeal to me. I was always bad at physical activities and was the class bookworm from a young age. However, since I go to Stanton River College, or SRC, where the Wolves are worshiped like gods, I have to keep up the pretense to care so I don't stand out in a bad light.

While others might be fine with saying they truly don't care for hockey and can take the malicious commentary that will most definitely follow, I'd rather remain in my own bubble and avoid confrontation.

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The smell of alcohol saturates my senses, and I try to block it out as I wipe faster, my lower back aching, my arms

screaming, and my head swimming in a fuzzy mess. I'm so sleep-deprived and tired, I can barely keep my eyes open.

Laura slides up to my side and helps put the glasses on the tray, her face worn out, her movements lethargic, and her gaze lost. She's in her thirties and had to take a second job to afford to raise her adorable daughter, Karly.

I have extreme respect for Laura for being able to juggle being a single mom and working multiple jobs. I can barely survive work, volunteering, and college.

And even though it's mid-July and vacation season is in full swing, I'm taking summer classes to improve my GPA.

As Laura starts to carry the tray of glasses, I pull it from her hands and smile. "You can go home. I'll finish up."

"Really?" Her expression lights up, but she bites her lower lip. "You always do this. I feel bad taking advantage of your kindness."

"You're good. I know you miss little Karly and you're worried since she hasn't been feeling well."

"Ahh, you're honestly the best, Violet." She side-hugs me, her face still tired, but a soft smile lights it up.

And that makes me feel better. The tension in my shoulders eases a little, and I take on her tasks with renewed energy.

I like lessening the burden on others, especially if it's someone like Laura who needs to work twice as hard to put food on the table for her little girl.

Maybe that's because I was also brought up by a single mom.

"Oh." Laura turns on her heel, then comes closer, casting a discreet glance at the security guys and the bartender, who are talking to the manager. "Did you see the huge motorcycle parked across the street when you came in?"

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All the ease vanishes, and my body tenses up in that frozen response I have for everything. "There's…a motorcycle?"

"Yeah. It looked expensive. Kinda hot. Here, I took a picture."

She fishes her phone out of her back pocket and scrolls through her gallery.

My breath catches.

It's him.

The tall man cloaked in black—jacket, gloves, and helmet—leaning against the monstrous gleaming black bike, his legs crossed at the ankles. No part of his face is visible.

But I know that bike.

I've seen it near my neighborhood.

Why would he park it across from HAVEN? Why not hide like he always does?

My stomach twists.

This…this is an escalation.

He's done hiding.

He wants me to know.

I try to remain calm, but my insides war with anxiety and the need to throw up. My fingers instinctively find the small tattoo on my left wrist, and I trace it back and forth, back and forth, willing it to quiet the chaos.

But there's no calming my thoughts.

Am I…in danger?

"Can you send me the picture?" I ask Laura with a forced smile that she doesn't see, because she's zooming in on the man.

"Sure. He looks so hot, right? I've got a thing for biker guys in leather." She chuckles and I laugh along with her even as my fingers tremble when I retrieve my phone.

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Laura leaves after she sends me the picture, and I add it

to the folder with some other discreet pictures I took from my apartment. Maybe this will be enough for the police to provide me with protection?

Though that's highly unlikely. Last week, when I showed them some of the ones I'd taken, they dismissed me and said I was being paranoid. Admittedly, the man is hard to make out since he was always in the shadows and never really in full frame like in the one Laura sent me.

This is the first time he's been standing there in person, and I can't help but think his actions are becoming dangerous. I can't get away with ignoring him, but I also know the police won't help me.

I zoom in on the picture Laura sent me, my wet fingers slipping on the screen.

Is that even him?

He looks…intimidating. All wrapped in black and danger.

I'll have to try harder with the police because this guy's presence is starting to mess with my head.

He's everywhere.

Like air.

And I've lived among enough creeps to know he probably won't be satisfied with just watching. He'll eventually take action and it'll end badly for me.

My head is full of macabre thoughts as I quietly finish my shift. It's around one thirty in the morning by the time I finally leave HAVEN, my back pain killing me and my thoughts swirling in a black pool.

I relax a little when I don't see the motorcycle or the guy.

The only silver lining is that he's not there all the time. He probably has a job or something, because his presence has been sporadic over the past few weeks or so.

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With a sigh, I pull my hoodie tighter over my head, feeling more at ease now that I'm not dressed in the tight shirt and jeans we have to wear at work. But at least we're not forced to wear short skirts—I've quit many jobs because of that.

In my everyday life, jeans are fine as long as I get to wear baggy hoodies or sweatshirts that don't outline my body. I even wear light hoodies during the summer.

Thankfully, the apartment I share with my sister is only a twenty-five-minute walk from HAVEN, so I don't have to spend money on transportation. I pass by a twenty-four-hour fast-food place and go in to buy a few sandwiches, then walk out in the middle of a drunken brawl without even being noticed.

It's easy for me to be invisible as long as I have my hoodie on, my hair is hidden, and my eyes are covered by the thick-framed nonprescription glasses I'm currently wearing.

"Don't let me hear you breathing, Violet. If you lay low and shut your trap, you won't get into trouble."

Mama's words have been my mantra since I was a little girl. At twenty-two, I've mastered the art of moving around in an invisible cloak.

As long as no one notices me, I'll be fine.

The neighborhood where Dahlia and I have been living for the past couple of years reeks of desperation, a place where dreams come to die and vices fester like an open wound.

It's not far from Stantonville's town center, but it feels like another world entirely—a forgotten pocket where streetlights flicker on their last breath and shadows move with intentions best left undiscovered.

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Small-time gangs linger on the corners, dealing drugs for quick cash, their hooded figures blending into the peeling

painted brick walls. The sidewalks are littered with cigarette butts, discarded needles, and the occasional broken bottle.

As I walk, the air is thick with the acrid stench of stale beer and burnt rubber, mixing with the faint scent of rotting food from an overflowing dumpster. A couple fights down the street, their voices raw and venomous, laced with anger that comes from years of resentment. The man's growl is slurred, the woman's shriek sharp enough to slice through the humid night.

"You worthless piece of shit! You call yourself a man?" she spits, followed by a crash—a glass or a bottle meeting a wall or the ground.

"You're the fucking whore!" he roars, and more curses ensue.

The neighbors, who, like me, are accustomed to this nightly ritual, shout back from open windows, "Shut up already, for fuck's sake!"

Another voice, hoarse with exhaustion, yells something about calling the cops, but no one actually will. Not here. The cops don't come unless they have a reason, and even then, they look the other way for the right price.

It's why I don't trust them to keep whoever is stalking me at bay. I suppose they're just an imaginary safety net I hold on to so I won't go mad.

A gust of wind carries the scent of cheap perfume and sweat from a nearby alley where a woman leans against a car, her thigh peeking out from a torn fishnet stocking as she laughs at what a man is whispering in her ear.

I step over a fresh puddle of something dark—could be coffee, could be blood—and pull my hoodie tighter around me. This place is a landfill of humanity, a breeding ground for ghosts who are still alive, but just barely.

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And I'm one of them.

My feet halt by Johnny and Bo, who are sleeping by a corner. They're covered with scraps that barely protect them from the night chill. I gave them my blanket when my sister Dahlia bought me a new one, but I think they sold it. It's summer anyway, so they probably don't need it.

"Night, guys," I whisper as I drop the sandwiches I usually buy them, then, because we got decent tips tonight, I slip a few bills under each of the wrappers.

Dahlia always tells me not to give them money, because they'll buy alcohol with it, and maybe they do, but the other day, Bo was grinning wide after he showed me the shoes he bought from the thrift shop with the money I gave him.

I walk through the alley that leads me straight to our street. The lone streetlight that's still working flickers with a buzz, highlighting the waste rotting on either side. I breathe through my mouth to avoid inhaling the stench of piss reeking alongside the walls.

Heavy steps echo behind me, slashing through the silence. My heart lunges and I grab my backpack tighter, my nails sinking into the straps as I quicken my pace.

The footsteps follow, bouncing off the alley's walls with a threatening caress.

My hoodie sticks to my back and sweat beads on my temples. Could it be…?

No. He's never approached me.

But then again, he's also never shown up in front of HAVEN before.

Is he escalating twice on the same day?

I just need to get home and hide—

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A strong hand latches onto my elbow and pulls me back. I go into shock mode.

It's… I don't know what it is, but whenever I'm in danger, I just freeze completely, catatonically, almost. My limbs go numb and refuse to follow my brain's commands to move.

Run.

Do something.

Anything.

People have fight or flight, but I have freeze.

I stare back, expecting to see the black helmet of my grim reaper, but all that comes into view is balding shaggy blond hair and a stained sleeveless white shirt.

"D-Dave…" I exhale, my heart still beating loudly, but at least my muscles unlock.

It's the local alcoholic, Dave, who's been drinking himself to an early grave ever since his wife took the children and left.

"Heeey, beautiful…" He sways on his feet, his meaty fingers digging into my arm as he takes a swig from his bottle of whiskey.

I pull my arm, but he latches onto it tighter, so I feign a smile. "Let me go, please."

It's not the first time he's done this, and he lets go when I ask. Usually, that is. Right now, however, he looks terribly drunk. Flushed cheeks, beady eyes with bags underneath them, and he reeks so badly, I have to breathe through my mouth.

"Maria won the court case, and I can't see my kids." He slurs his words.

"I'm sorry to hear that." I speak softly, subtly pulling my arm.

"Stupid judge says I'm a bad influence. Why the fuck is that?" He growls, tightening his grip on my elbow, and I wince.

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"I'm sure if you show you're improving, the judge will let you see them—"

"Shut your trap." He's in my face now, his alcohol-laced rotten breath skimming over my face. "All you women do is yap and fucking complain. You never appreciate a good man."

He's anything but a good man. Maria is the good woman who took a lot of abuse from him before she finally left, but I can't say that, because he looks irritated and I'd bear the brunt of his anger.

If anything, I'm instinctively cowering, withdrawing into the broken shell Mama built for me one lash at a time. I'm back to being the little girl she screamed at, kicked for being a nuisance, and locked in the closet.

My mere existence used to vex her.

Just my trying to help used to annoy her.

"Don't touch me!" she shouted and shoved me against the wall when I tried to rub ointment on her bruised face after a 'client' left. "You're the reason I'm like this, you goddamn leech. I wish I'd killed you! Stop fucking looking at me with those disgusting eyes!"

Dave didn't tell me not to look at him, but I lower my gaze anyway as I whisper, "Please let me go."

"Why?" he slurs, stepping closer. "I can show you a good time."

"No." I try to speak loudly, but my voice comes out small. I'm incapable of screaming, because my mom stripped that away from me—among other things.

"All you women want is money, fucking sluts. I said I'll show you a good time, so stop whining and thank me for it." He pushes me, his large, heavy body that reeks of alcohol and sweat trapping me against the wall.

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A low buzz starts in my ears, but I shove at his chest with unsteady hands.

"Dave…please don't do this. Think of your little girl. You wouldn't want her to be hurt like this, right?"

He wavers a bit, and I try to slowly disengage, my heart hammering in my ears. As I'm about to slip away, he grabs my breast over my hoodie, and bile fills my throat.

"Where ya think you're going?" He fondles me as I push at his hand. "I wanna see your tits."

I should knee him. He's drunk, so he'd probably fall over—

Before I can do that, a gloved hand wraps around Dave's head and pulls him back so powerfully, he stumbles before he falls against the opposite wall.

I watch with complete horror as the tall, large man who's dressed entirely in black slams his fist into Dave's nose.

He flashes me a look over his shoulder, and I can finally see the face of the man who's been stalking me for weeks as he says in a deep, gruff voice, "How annoying."

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CHAPTER 2

Violet

CONFRONTATION HAS NEVER BEEN MY STRONG SUIT.

If anything, I avoid it like the plague, but the thing I avoid most?

Violence.

I've been in too many bad situations where I was overpowered by people so much bigger than me that I couldn't have possibly taken them.

My mom. The men who visited her. My foster parents.

Dave just now.

All of them used their size to intimidate me, and I'm easily intimidated—a scaredy-cat through and through.

My favorite activities include reading, embroidering, and scribbling in my journal. Hell, even working is fine.

Anything is fine compared to being overpowered by another person.

Right now, however, I'm not the one being intimidated or thrown around.

It's Dave.

He's being held by the collar of his stained sleeveless shirt as a man drives his gloved fist into his face.

And it's not just *any* man.

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It's the man who's been following me sporadically for over a month.

My stalker.

And this guy just called *me* annoying before he went back to pummeling Dave against the wall.

I'm the annoying one.

Me.

The crunching of bones tightens my stomach, raising the bile in my throat. Dave's blood splashes on his shirt and the wall, and the dots of red look black under the flickering light. Like an ancient curse.

My drunkard neighbor groans and tries to resist, but his uncoordinated movements do nothing to halt or even slow down the stranger's assault.

I'm transfixed by the view, trembling as I push further into the wall, the solid surface digging into my back as the air assaults my tightened throat.

Violence isn't anything new to me. I've witnessed it in spades and have been on the receiving end of it more times than I can count. But this is the first time I've seen anyone being so…*calm* while they're beating the shit out of someone.

Laser focused, even.

As if his sole purpose is to dismantle Dave limb from limb.

I can only see the stranger's back, but even that feels like a disturbance. He's tall, at least 6'4" or 6'5". I'm 5'6" and still feel like an ant behind him.

But it's not only the height.

He's broad and muscular, as if he's carved from stone, and his fists strike powerful punches.

I don't like overly tall or extravagantly big men.

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Actually, I stay away from all men by using my invisibility tactic.

It's simple in my mind—dress shabbily, lower my gaze, don't speak too much or draw attention.

The formula Mama gave me has worked most of the time.

Not with this man, though.

Because not only has this one been following me, but he's also beating Dave because of me.

The ridges of his big muscles strain against the leather as he lifts his fist.

Thwack.

He lifts it again.

Thwack.

Blood drips from his glove, forming small pools on the dirty concrete as Dave squeals like a pig being slaughtered.

His fight and his voice wane, but the stranger is still punching and punching and *punching.*

A rush of apprehension ripples through me with each of his hits. The horrendous sound fills the turbulence in my head with red.

"Stop it," I say in a small voice, tracing my wrist tattoo. "You'll kill him."

The stranger doesn't pay me any attention. I doubt he even hears me.

I take a hesitant step forward, physically pushing off the wall with my palm because, all this time, I've been trying to become one with it.

Logically, I should go home. Leave both monsters to battle it out in the darkness, but I don't want to be the reason behind someone's murder.

I tap the stranger's arm that's still grabbing Dave by the collar. Blood trickles down, staining the white shirt crimson and coating the black glove in a dark, sticky mess.

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"Stop," I whisper, unable to tear my eyes from Dave's shattered face. It's unrecognizable—blood, saliva, and snot distorting his features.

"Stop?" the stranger repeats in a low growl that crawls across my skin. His voice is so deep and startling, it makes me flinch.

He speaks like it's a chore to utter words. As if I'm wasting his time.

"Yeah…you'll kill him."

"Why would you care?"

I stare up at him.

Big mistake.

I've done everything in my might to avoid eye contact since that usually helps me go unnoticed, but here I am.

Looking at the most soulless eyes I've ever seen.

They're dark brown or black—I'm not sure which—but they're so utterly lifeless, I feel as if I'm in the presence of death.

But death has never scared me. If anything, the thought of it has comforted me. Whenever I'm kicked or thrown around and so damn tired, I think of death and how it'll free me from all of this.

This stranger, however, is a gruesome version of death, a dark, ruthless entity who I'm sure would snap my and Dave's necks without any form of remorse.

And it'll definitely not be the peaceful type of death I've always envisioned in my darkest hours.

It'll be merciless and bloody.

Staring at his face is akin to looking into a deep lake. Pretty from far away but frightening up close.

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He's the kind of beautiful that feels like a trap—razor-sharp, calculated, and entirely lethal. His features are carved

with cruel precision, from the defined cheekbones that cast harsh shadows under the dim light, to the precise cut of his jaw, as if sculpted from ice and tempered by fire.

His straight nose adds an aristocratic edge that speaks of lineage and old money, but there's nothing refined about the way he looks at me.

Almost as if…I *disgust* him.

"Answer me," he repeats when I say nothing. "Why would you care?"

"Why would I care if you kill someone?"

"Yes." He speaks the lone word with a gruff tone, as if he didn't want to say anything and was forced to.

"Maybe because that's wrong?"

"Wrong," he repeats with an edge.

His dark hair is styled back, slick and perfect, and my gaze is drawn to a few rebellious strands that have slipped free, curling over the thick line of his forehead. They don't soften him. If anything, they make him look more untamed, like a beast barely contained beneath a shell of restraint.

It's like I'm in the presence of a brewing storm or a pending disaster. My body is tight due to the awareness that he could erupt or blow up in my face at any second.

Like Mama.

"So, you know what's fucking wrong?" His lips press into a firm line, betraying no emotion, but his nostrils flare just enough to suggest irritation—almost as if my mere existence offends him.

"What?"

He says nothing, just continues to stare at me.

No. *Glare.*

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There's a danger in his stillness, a quiet violence

simmering beneath the surface. His gaze is dark, unreadable, but it sinks into my skin, a slow, deliberate scrape that peels back layers that I want to remain hidden.

The stranger isn't just looking—he's dissecting, calculating, as if deciding whether I'm worth his attention or if he should simply erase me from the world.

I can't look away, even when every instinct screams at me to run.

And for a moment, he seems familiar. Like a face I've previously encountered.

Impossible.

There's no way I wouldn't remember someone as striking as he is if I'd met him before.

"If I let him go, will you take his place and be my punching bag?" he asks out of the blue, his eyes tapering to an uncomfortable calm.

"No…of course not."

He throws Dave aside and he falls against the wall, then stands and stumbles out of the alleyway, muttering something about how the stranger will pay for this.

I can't focus on him, though, because the stranger is now stepping into my space. His broad frame blocks my vision until he's all I can see or pay attention to.

The scent of something masculine and heady floods my senses as he towers over me, trapping me in his disturbing presence.

I have to crane my head to look up at him, once again making the eye contact I should avoid at all costs.

"Too late. I already let him go." He takes a step forward, and I instinctively step back, my beat-up sneakers scraping against the concrete.

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"I didn't agree to that." I discreetly reach into my back

pocket. If I can call 911, if they could hear what's happening, maybe they'll send help—

A large hand latches onto my wrist, pulls my arm, then twists. My stomach coils at the view of the bloodstains at the palm of his glove.

"What do you think you're doing, hmm?" The rumble of his voice seeps into my skin.

I try to pull my hand, but he tightens his grip. It doesn't hurt, but it's firm enough to suggest that he'd make it painful if I struggle any further.

Someone like him who seems to escalate frequently in a short period of time is unpredictable and, therefore, dangerous, and in order to survive, I can't risk provoking him.

So I remain still. "Please let me go."

He shakes his head once, tsking as he pushes into me. "Don't beg yet. We'll get there…eventually."

My back hits the wall and I jump, my fingers clammy, my teeth grinding together with the force of the fear that slithers down my spine.

I've been cornered twice tonight, but what Dave did feels like child's play compared to this mountain of muscles and rage.

Because I can feel the anger in his touch and the way he looks at me—like a ticking time bomb, ready to explode.

I'm caught right in the eye of a turbulent storm.

"Now." He tilts his head to the side. "Shouldn't you thank me?"

"Thank you?"

"Yes."

"For…stalking me?"

"For saving your life." I hear a tinge of annoyance, and that shimmering anger grow in intensity, spilling into his words.

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I swallow, and the gulp that gets caught in my throat can be heard in the oppressive silence. "I didn't ask you to."

It's subtle, but I see his free hand flex, sticky blood still dripping onto the concrete. "If I hadn't shown up, that pathetic waste of space would've violated you. And considering your meek, entirely washed-up, and boring personality, you would've let him."

I would've *never* let him. I was going to hit him.

But I don't need to explain myself to a literal stalker. Besides, explaining myself has never worked, and it's only gotten me into worse trouble.

So instead of slipping down that hopeless road, I tilt my head to the side. "What's it to you?"

He narrows his eyes, a hint of rage flashing through them. "The fuck you just say?"

"Nothing. Just…let me go."

"No, you said something. Repeat it. Now."

I let out a fractured exhale, causing my glasses to fog up.

Maybe it's the exhaustion or the throbbing pain in my back. Maybe I just want to go home, read my novel, then go to sleep so I can wake up early and study and then go to class.

Maybe I'm just suicidal.

Whatever the reason, I let the words I constantly police spill out in one go. "I said it has nothing to do with you. Whether I'm assaulted or killed or thrown into a dumpster is not your business. And honestly, if you believe me to be boring and washed-up, why not stalk someone else? Or maybe quit the whole despicable ordeal and do something better with your time?"

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He remains motionless, probably as surprised by the statement as I am. I didn't mean to talk back, but I guess I

now have no filter when I'm nervous. Add all the physical and mental pain, and I'm ready to just…go.

The stranger's face slips back into stark indifference, a blank, careful mask I can't read. "You think I want to follow you around? See your pathetic life in 3D?"

"I'm sure you don't. So why are you?"

"Why do you think?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

He steps farther into my space, his chest a breath away from mine, his fingers tightening around my wrist. He's so close, his boots rub against my sneakers, and I'm assaulted by the smell of wood and leather, a potent masculine combination that fills me with apprehension.

I can't help it.

Having lived in a world where most men use and abuse women, I can only feel dread at the scent.

"Have you done something bad, Violet?"

I gulp. Sure, I thought he'd know my name if he'd put so much effort into watching me, but still, hearing it uttered in his voice causes goosebumps to erupt on my skin.

"No." The lone word leaves me in a strangled breath.

"Liar." He has a distinctive way of speaking—precise, deep, but also frighteningly monotone, as if talking is a true hindrance.

"Why would I lie?"

"Because you're no different than the rest of them. All of you are rotten to the core."

Who are 'all of us'?

Before I can ask, he strokes my wrist with his bloodied glove, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It seems sensual, but, in reality, it's no different than a veiled threat.

Copyrighted Material

Both of us watch as he smears my tattoo with blood.

"Endure," he reads the word inked there. "Very fitting."

I try to pull my wrist free, but he tightens his grip. "You'll need to endure, Violet, for a long time."

He releases my wrist, and I think the nightmare is over, but then he traces a line on my cheek with the back of his bloodied hand, smearing the sticky mess from the edge of my glasses to the corner of my mouth. "When I'm done with you, there'll be nothing left."

My chin trembles, and I want to look away, to escape his black-hole-like orbit, but I don't.

"Why are you doing this?"

"You'll have to figure that out yourself." His lips hover near my cheek, and with every word he breathes against the blood, a chill spreads across my skin. "Reflect on your sins."

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 3

Violet

"MORNING, VI!"

I flinch when slim arms hug me from behind, nearly making me spill the soup in the saucepan.

Masking my nervousness, I turn to face my sister, who's grinning wide.

Dahlia is about a year younger than me, and even though we're not related by blood—we met in my last foster home—she's the only family I have.

She's curvier than me, with golden olive-toned skin, long, wavy brown hair, and the kind of bold presence that makes people stay away. But it's her eyes that always strike me the most. Big, expressive hazel, sharp and bold, like they've seen more than they should and somehow refused to shatter.

Her smile drops. "What's up with the dark circles? You worked too late and barely got any sleep again, didn't you?"

"It's nothing." I pour the soup into a container and put on my practiced smile. "You know how it is at the bar."

"Yeah, not sure the tips are worth it. They're obviously exploiting you. How many hours did you even sleep?"

Three.

Copyrighted Material

Despite the exhaustion, I couldn't fall asleep. I kept

tossing and turning in bed, my mind filled with that stalker and his threats.

"*Reflect on your sins*," he said.

What sins?

The only person I've committed a sin against is dead.

So why…?

I kept thinking about it all night, searching for the possible reasons he'd say something like that, but I still came up empty.

Since I couldn't fall asleep, I scribbled in my journal and sketched a few things, and then I was able to drift off, but my sleep was riddled with nightmares of dark eyes and a bloodied gloved hand squeezing my throat to death.

I woke up both terrorized and…disappointed.

It's not the first time I've dreamt of death, and I'm always left with this niggling sadness at the realization that it's not real.

That I didn't die like I should've.

"I slept enough," I answer Dahlia, who's still watching me with a slight frown. "Look, I made you soup and a few sandwiches so you won't eat junk food."

"It's not that I want to eat junk food. I don't have time and can't cook to save my life, remember?" She smiles sheepishly, opening the cabinet. "Cooking is overrated anyway."

I laugh and fix the collar of her jacket. It's leather.

My fingers twitch.

Why did it have to be leather?

I let her go, and she retrieves an instant coffee packet.

"Eat something. Don't just drink coffee first thing in the morning."

"Don't have time. I'll be late for work."

Copyrighted Material

"You're a med student, Dahl. You should be mindful of

what you eat." I place a wrapped sandwich in front of her. "Here. Eat it on your way."

She side-hugs me, squeezing me tightly. "You're truly the best ever."

I hug her back, her warmth and carefree energy offering me a much-needed reprieve. Dahlia is nothing like me.

She's a firecracker through and through.

Several weeks ago, she caught Dave trying to harass me, and she pointed a gun at him. No kidding. It wasn't hers or loaded, but she still used it to scare him off.

She's always been like this, not hesitating to speak up, shout, and destroy anyone who comes at her or me. I've always been in awe of how she couldn't care less about confrontation or how social anxiety is scared of her.

Dahlia and I met when she was twelve, at a foster home where the parents used us for cash flow and repeatedly hit us—Dahlia more than me because she talked back.

As for me…well, I had a different encounter with the 'dad,' another man who only ever wanted my shell of a body.

We ran away and have kind of survived together ever since, leaning on each other, being the home we both didn't have.

I've never told her this, because she'd freak out, but if Dahlia weren't in my life, if I didn't have a self-imposed purpose to take care of her and make sure she thrives and reaches her goals, I would've killed myself a long time ago.

I would've stopped *floating* with nothing but pain tethering me to life.

She's my lifeline. Literally.

"Vi, honest, I mean it. You need to ask the manager for fewer shifts. You look out of it lately." She takes a sip of her coffee as she grabs some books she left on the kitchen table, where she usually studies.

Copyrighted Material

We live in a run-down one-bedroom apartment that we moved into recently, after the guy who used to rent us his attic tried to drug us with his homemade wine. It's a couple of streets away from our previous place, and we were lucky to find it after the old man who lived here died and his son rented it out to us for a bargain. It's way better equipped than the attic and we pay almost the same rent.

Honestly, both Dahlia and I think we've hit the jackpot. It even has a balcony, can you believe it? I've never lived anywhere with a balcony, so these past few weeks have felt surreal.

I usually sleep in the living room, having insisted Dahlia take the other room so she can focus on her studies. She wanted us to share it, but it's small and I don't want to disturb her healthy sleeping schedule with my erratic, nightmare-filled one.

"I'm actually earning a bit more from my job now that I'm working extra shifts in the summer." She shoves the books into a tote bag. "I'll help out more."

"Spend that money on your studies or your expenses. I'm truly fine, Dahl."

She throws the bag over her shoulder and frowns. "No, you're not. You're just saying that so I won't worry. Your back pain is flaring up again. Don't think I didn't notice the heat patches you're using on the regular now."

"It's a chronic injury. It's bound to flare." I hand her the sandwich she left on the counter. "You'll be late."

She kisses my cheek. "I'm totally helping out more. See ya!"

And then she's off before I can reply.

Since she said she'll help out, I can't stop her. I guess I'll buy her some necessities in return. Starting with a new pair of her favorite white sneakers—her old ones are so beat up, they look gray.

Copyrighted Material

Maybe I'll design and embroider her a medical-themed patch for one of her bags.

My classes start late today, so I spend an hour or so sketching some ideas in my journal while making food for Dahlia for the rest of the week. I haven't eaten anything since last night, but I'm used to this constant sense of starvation. I consider it intermittent fasting—apparently, it's good for you.

I would definitely rather Dahlia eat than me. Seeing her well-fed, well-dressed, and crushing it at school brings me joy and a sense of accomplishment of sorts.

I'm apprehensive as I leave the apartment, even though I'm dressed in my signature hoodie and jeans. My strawberry-blonde hair that reaches just below my shoulder blades is gathered in a bun and hidden by the hood.

I'm also wearing my thick-framed glasses and carrying one of Dahlia's tote bags.

Although it's daytime, I can't help glancing around corners, expecting the stranger to appear out of nowhere.

He doesn't usually, not during the day, but I'm panicking a bit about his threat.

I contemplated telling Dahlia about the whole thing earlier but decided against it. I didn't in the past, because I refused to put her in danger, and I wouldn't now, because knowing her, she'd definitely confront him, and I'd never survive if he were to beat her to a pulp like he did Dave.

Or maybe even kill her.

No. Dahlia can't know about this.

Thankfully, the stalker isn't around, and I spend an uneventful day in class, going through the motions until I have to leave for work.

Copyrighted Material

My shift starts in the early afternoon today, and I still

release a breath when I don't see his motorcycle or large frame close to HAVEN.

The need to constantly be alert is starting to take a toll on me. I don't know how long I can survive looking over my shoulder, giving myself a pep talk every time I go to work or even step foot out of the apartment.

I'm organizing the bar when Laura comes over squealing.

I plaster a smile. "Good news?"

"The best!" She shows me two hockey tickets. "Boss gave us these for the Wolves' first game next season. He can be so sweet when he's not getting on my last nerve."

"Nice. Who are you taking?"

"Um, you! Boss said it's one ticket each."

I line up the glasses on the shelves. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Girl, spill."

I lean over and whisper, "I don't really like hockey."

"The blasphemy! We live in Wolves territory, where hockey is huge."

"I know, I know. How dare I?"

"Uh-huh. We need to have you checked and consult the priest for an exorcism and shit."

I laugh. "How about you take little Karly instead? She'd enjoy it much more than I would."

Her eyes round. "Oh my God, are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Don't waste a ticket on me."

"This will be her first live game. Oh my God, she'll love it!" She hugs me. "You don't know how much this means to me, truly, Vi. I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

Copyrighted Material

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it, really."

She hugs me again and scurries away, calling her daughter

to tell her the news. I love how she squeals, nearly jumping in place at hearing Karly's reactions.

A while later, patrons start filtering in and the manager puts on another replay of a hockey game. He sometimes rotates other sports, but, really, he and the owner are hockey fanatics, so they always play it on at least one TV, even during the offseason. During the season, however? That's pretty much all that's shown.

This one is apparently the Wolves' fiercest game from last season against their archnemesis, according to one of the regulars.

I'm working at the bar, helping out the bartender, as the two guys sitting on the stools whistle at something happening on TV. I don't even pay attention to the game, mostly thinking about whether the stalker will show up again tonight and what I can do if he does.

The bar gets packed fast, the crowd smelling like beer, sweat, and cheap aftershave. The game plays on a few screens, the flicker of harsh arena lights casting a bluish tint over the faces of the regulars. Their voices rise and fall in drunken excitement, spouting curses and half-slurred commentary between gulps of beer.

I wipe the counter absentmindedly, my rag catching on a deep scratch in the wood, one of many scars from years of slamming glasses and flying fists. Their voices push their way in, seeping into the cracks of my mind like smoke.

A glass thuds against the counter, liquid sloshing over the rim, spilling beer where I just wiped. "Jesus Christ, Callahan's at it again."

"Cheap shot on the back-check?" another guy grunts.

Copyrighted Material

"Nah, worse. Laid that poor bastard out with a reverse hit. Kid never saw it coming."

"That's Callahan for you," another man mutters, shaking his head. "Most violent bastard in the league aside from our own Osborn."

My ears perk up at Marcus Osborn's name. He's one of Dahlia's useless exes, and I'm glad she only stayed with him for two weeks before realizing he's a can of worms she shouldn't go near.

I've always wished I could be as assertive as Dahlia in the way she treats men. She loves danger and having fun, but she also doesn't hesitate to throw them away the moment she gets bored. Which is what she did to Marcus.

He's still a hockey god in this town, and even someone like me knows he's the Wolves' captain and Stantonville's pride. So to hear one of the regulars compare someone else to him in the form of praise is rare.

I glance up just as the instant replay rolls. The Callahan everyone's talking about plays for the Vipers, the team from the neighboring affluent town, Graystone Ridge.

No way.

My fingers clench around the rag as he stands there, his large physique and the glare I've had nightmares about on full display.

The replay shows him skating at supersonic speed, but he doesn't chase the puck—he's tailing the other player like a predator timing his strike. The other team's forward barely turns his head before Callahan plants his skates, shifts his weight, and slams into him with the force of a car crash. The guy crumples, chest first, against the boards, his stick clattering to the ice.

A collective wince ripples through everyone watching the game.

Copyrighted Material

I can't stop staring at the screen, held captive by the scene as my heartbeat thuds against my rib cage.

Callahan—Jude, judging by the banner that appears on the screen—isn't celebrating or even looking back at the wreckage he left behind. He just skates away, his jaw tight, his eyes empty under the harsh lights of the rink.

The same dark eyes that peered into my soul last night and filled my nightmares.

My stalker has a name and it's Jude Callahan.

But that's not what sends bile up my throat, forcing me to rush to the toilet, my eyes watering, my knees shaking, and vomit filling my mouth.

He…couldn't have been related to Susie Callahan, right?

The woman who was killed right before my eyes, and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 4

Jude

THE END OF THE UNOFFICIAL SUMMER SKATE LEAVES ME with…nothing.

Just another flare of violence.

Another burst of light.

But then it's all done.

And I'm back to square one.

Violent-less. With these goddamn urges still coursing through my veins with the blood.

Slipping beneath every ridge of tense muscle, every scar, tattoo, and godforsaken memory.

The shower is scalding, but it does nothing to burn off the adrenaline still thrumming in my veins. My muscles ache in that raw way that should imply I left everything on the ice.

But I didn't.

This rage is uncontainable. Indestructible.

No amount of hockey violence can rip me from its clutches.

I shut the water off and rake a hand through my hair, pushing it back as I step into the locker room, the thick scent of sweat, tape, and victory hanging in the air. The place is alive with noise—guys shoving each other, laughing, and talking about the game.

Copyrighted Material

"Nice hit out there, Callahan." Ryder slaps me on the back as I pass, his grin sharp and his eyes still wild with post-game energy. "Thought you were gonna take Hunter's head clean off."

"Should've. Next time." I yank a towel off the bench, rolling my shoulders, not caring that everyone can see the map of scars on my back, partially concealed by tattoos.

Half of the guys here know the reason, and the other half wouldn't dare ask.

"Fucking savage," Drayton, our goalie, mutters, shaking his head as he laces up his dress shoes. "You play like you've got a personal vendetta against the ice itself."

"Ice started it." I reach into my locker.

A few guys chuckle. Others are chirping about a missed play. Even though it's summer, elite college hockey teams like the Vipers don't really take time off. We often do captain-led practices—whether they're skates, scrimmages, or drills.

The coaches are technically not involved—aside from conditioning and strength coaches during some sessions—but really, it's all due to a program created by our captain, Kane.

He's currently leaning against the lockers, already fully dressed, and going through his phone.

Unlike me, he doesn't like showcasing his scars. Not that I *love* it per se, but it's a fuck-you to the system, so everyone can see what type of monster my father truly is.

Not that I'm any better. Birds of a feather and all that.

"Davenport," I call Kane's last name, and he lifts his head, his expression calm, his face so welcoming, you'd think he was an angel. "I need a word."

"About your irresponsible play?" He lifts a brow. "Sure."

I pause after grabbing my deodorant. "I only got sent to the box twice."

Copyrighted Material

"One is overkill."

"I was still the best player."

"Nah, that's me." Preston lifts his hand in my peripheral vision. He's sitting on the bench, a towel hanging low on his hips, one ankle resting on his knee like he owns the damn room.

He pauses taping his wrist, his usual smirk firmly in place. "Hell of a game, Callahan, but we all know I'm the fan favorite. Even though it was a practice game, there's already an article." He slides his hands in the air as if unveiling the title. "Armstrong, the league's undefeated left wing strikes again, even during the offseason."

I lift a brow. "Pay the reporter?"

"Stay jealous, big man. Now, more importantly, how's my hair?"

"Like roadkill on a humid day."

"I see you're still jealous." He pats his styled blond strands. "Don't listen to Jude's nonsense, my premium genetics."

"And yet those premium genetics still lost the puck battle against a guy built like a traffic cone," I remind him, just out of spite.

Pres, Kane, and I grew up together, but Pres is probably my best friend. Kane has always been self-contained in a way, never goes too high or too low, perfectly able to remain calm under duress, then shove himself back into a mold. He has the type of control Pres and I lack in spades.

So we inevitably grew closer. In a sense, Pres's sickness speaks to mine and his darkness mirrors my own.

We're the toxic duo everyone hates to see coming.

Preston tuts, unfazed. "That was strategy, Callahan. Gotta let the little guys think they have a chance before you yeet the whole damn carpet into next week."

Copyrighted Material

"It's 'pull the rug out from under them,' not whatever crime against language you just committed."

"I meant to add my special twist."

I chuck a roll of tape at him, hitting him square in the chest. "Nah, you just don't know your idioms."

"I do." He catches the tape before it rolls onto the floor, then stands, squaring up to me with a taunting dimpled grin. "You're the boring prick who has not one ounce of creativity in his thick head."

"I'll knock your teeth out."

"Oooh, is that a threat?"

"Fuck around and find out, Armstrong."

"Oh my." He lifts a hand to his chest in mock disbelief. "You have the heart to hurt my beautiful face?"

"Is beautiful in the room with us?"

"Pfft. You jealous, petty bitch? One day you'll appreciate my genius more."

"Doubt it."

"That's what they all say before they realize they can't live without me. Oh, the horror. Imagine not having me in your life?"

I pause, my index finger tapping my lip as I pretend to be thinking. "Pretty peaceful, actually."

"Why do you lie?" He's about to punch me, but Kane steps in with the usual sigh of exasperation he gives when Pres and I bicker or start hitting each other for no reason whatsoever.

Actually, that reason is aggression. Something Kane can rise above but we can't.

"If you're done fighting like chickens, get dressed, Jude. I don't have all night."

Copyrighted Material

Kane leaves first, and I throw on my sweatpants and shirt

in record time before following him to the coach's office down the hall of Vipers Arena—the pride and joy of Graystone University and, honestly, the entire town of Graystone Ridge.

We were born and bred here, raised in this pocket of wealth where centuries-old tradition collides with modern edge.

A place where old money doesn't fade—it evolves, sharpens, and makes sure everyone remembers who built this town.

I find Kane leaning against the desk, staring at his phone with a tilted head and a hooded expression.

Not sure who or what captured his attention, but it's bad news for the other party. While it's true that he's calm and collected, like all of us, he was born with a demon lurking inside him.

"Sorry I'm late!" Preston barges in behind me. "Not really sorry, but anyway. I'm here now. You're welcome, bitches."

"This has nothing to do with you," I grunt as I close the door he left wide open.

"Nonsense. Everything has to do with me." He grins, trudging to Kane's side and hitting his shoulder. "What's the plan? And don't be boring."

Kane doesn't acknowledge either of us for a while, still staring at his phone.

Even though Kane is the captain, he shouldn't have free access to the coach's office.

In theory, at least.

In practice, the three of us have unrestricted access—not just to Graystone University, or GU, but to the entire town of Graystone Ridge.

Our clearance comes in the form of the black ring on each of our index fingers.

Copyrighted Material

They're more than just symbols of status. They're proof

that we belong—not only to the founding families of this town, but to the secret society that shadows it.

Vencor.

Callahan. Davenport. Armstrong. Osborn.

The four pillars of Graystone Ridge. The originators of Vencor. The ones who've held this place together—and in their grip—for generations.

The black rings mean we're Senior members.

The highest rank attainable for anyone outside of direct bloodlines.

Trial, Member, Senior, and Founder.

That's the order.

And while we currently hold Senior status, we're in the final stretch. After graduation, we'll face our last trial and ascend to the position we were always meant to inherit.

Founder.

Kane taps his index finger against the back of his phone. His ring bears the Davenport family crest—a compass rose. It's a symbol of control, steering direction, and navigating dominance. Fitting, considering the Davenports have monopolized the import and export industry.

I twirl my own ring slowly.

It's etched with the Callahan crest—a caduceus twisted in thorny vines.

A corrupted version of the medical symbol.

It represents our family's unrelenting grip on the pharmaceutical sector. Hell, ever since my brother, Julian, took over the Callahan empire, we've become unrivaled.

Pres wears the Armstrong crest—a sun and a crescent moon. A nod to his family's hold on energy, in all its forms.

Copyrighted Material

Then there are the Osborns. They don't currently have a college-aged member—at least, not officially—but their

crest is a lion's head framed with gears, reflecting their control over real estate, construction, and every inch of urban development in this town.

Over the centuries, the four families learned to carefully and calculatedly share power.

That uneasy balance eventually gave birth to Vencor, the society we now oversee.

It's through Vencor that we've built our empire—recruiting, shaping, and eliminating as needed. Ensuring that Graystone Ridge stays exactly the way it was always meant to be and that our legacy never dies.

"What the hell are you watching?" Pres peers over Kane's shoulder. "Is it porn? If yes, why am I not invited?"

Kane slips his phone into his pocket and shoves Pres away. "Why are you even here?"

Pres releases an exasperated sigh. "You keep asking that, and yet you can't live without me."

"Highly debatable."

"You little ungrateful cretin—"

"Anyway." Kane slides his attention to me. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I need another name from the list," I speak in a calm tone I don't feel.

He raises a brow. "You already took care of Violet?"

My throat constricts, and I feel the veins popping in my neck, my muscles tightening and sporadic fire spreading across my skin.

At just the mention of her name.

All their names.

And she *is* just another fucking *name*.

Copyrighted Material

"It's time for the next name," I say, ignoring his question.

"What the fuck!" Preston jumps up. "Why haven't I been