



SWEET VENOM

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RINA KENT

SWEET VENOM

VIPERS

BOOK 2

RINA KENT

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ALSO BY RINA KENT

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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.*

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.

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BLURB

Can I outrun his merciless obsession?

I accidentally witnessed a brutal murder.

I froze, pretended I saw nothing, hoping I could leave it behind.

But my plan backfired, and my life spiraled downward.

Now, I'm the target of cold-blooded revenge.

Jude Callahan isn't just a hockey god—he's a devil no one dares to cross.

My existence disrupts his stardom, prestige, and possible serial killer career choice.

And he's set out to make me pay for that moment of silence.

No matter how much I run or hide, he finds me, watching from the shadows.

Like a predator.

I thought he'd stop at the stalking.

Or even better, he'd kill me and finally end my misery.

But Jude has other plans.

He says I can't die. I have to pay for my sins.

And just like that, he drags me into his depraved world, kicking and screaming.

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 – 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](#).

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.

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.

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?"

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.

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.

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.

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.

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—

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.

"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.

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."

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.

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.

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.