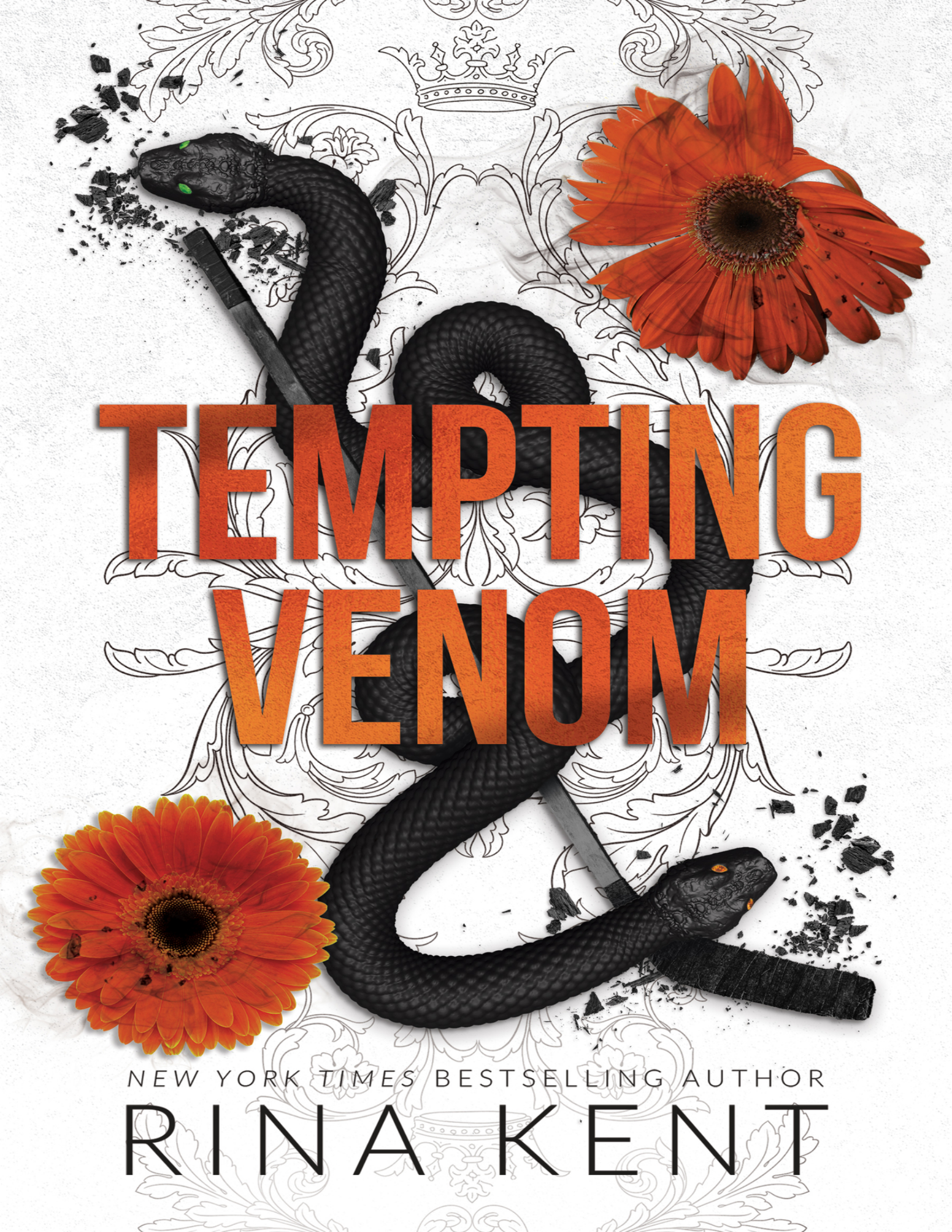




TEMPTING VENOM

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RINA KENT

TEMPTING VENOM

VIPERS

BOOK 3

RINA KENT

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ALSO BY RINA KENT

[Rina Kent's Books](#)

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*For all the Prestons of this world
Thank you for choosing to stay*

AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

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

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

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

For more things Rina Kent, visit www.rinakent.com.

BLURB

When two ruthless enemies collide.

My name is Preston Armstrong, and I'm the most depraved bastard you'll ever meet.

I take what I want, ruin what I don't, and live exactly how I please.

That is, until I crash into the force of nature that is Marcus Osborn.

Captain of our rival hockey team and the perpetual thorn in my side.

A migraine in human form and the one person who refuses to play by my rules.

He's my brand of heartless and just as deranged.

I set out to crush him, his career, and his infuriatingly gorgeous face.

But Marcus hits back with equal force, turning our rivalry into a violent, addictive dance neither of us can walk away from.

We were supposed to annihilate each other.

Instead, we spark a fire that threatens to devour everything in its path.

In this battle of two unhinged souls, our bodies become collateral damage.

But I never expected our stone-cold hearts to get involved.

PLAYLIST

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

You can find the complete playlist on [Spotify](#), [Apple Music](#), and [YouTube](#).

PROLOGUE — MARCUS

AGE SEVEN

I hate my birthdays.

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

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

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

Too late now.

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

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

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

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

She carries that faint trace of disinfectant, the scent I've loved for as long as I can remember because it means she's home. My classmates say the smell

of the hospital stinks, but for me, it means Mom's hugs as soon as she walks in.

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

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

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

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

Like now.

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

Because it was my stupid birthday wish.

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

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

To Dad's mansion.

I've never been here before.

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

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

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

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

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

“Seven. Marcus is seven, Andrew.”

“Seven. Eight. What’s the difference? You’re being dramatic.”

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

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

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

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

Like now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay."

"Love you, sweetie."

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

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

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

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

Dad said I'll never meet them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She's wrong.

I won't allow anyone to insult my mom.

Even if it's Dad.

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

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

"It's his birthday!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A decent father provides money."

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

"Call it whatever you want."

"I don't know why I bother talking to you." A worn, brittle sound slips from her, her head bowing for a heartbeat before she lifts it again. "You know, I really didn't want to cut you out of his life, since you donated the

sperm and all, but if you're going to keep hurting him by not showing up or by being so emotionally paralyzed, you're no longer allowed near him."

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

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

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

"You finally get it."

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

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

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

If only Dad cared like she does.

It doesn't have to be a lot.

Just a tiny bit is enough.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wow. Dad has a fairy in his garden.

A small, beautiful fairy.

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

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

I tilt my head to the side, but I don't see them. Wings, I mean. There's no glitter on its face either. This fairy is wearing pastel-green shorts and a white shirt as it sucks on a lollipop while looking up.

Do fairies like lollipops?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Greener than Mom's spoiled houseplants.

Greener and livelier than life itself.

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

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

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

"My mother."

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

“Yeah.”

“Mine loves diamonds.”

“Can you get her diamonds?”

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

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

They turn shallow when he speaks. “I’m still too young.”

“Then how about your dad?”

He pouts, his laugh instantly disappearing.

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

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

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

“Why?”

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

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

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

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

Like a prince.

A *fairy* prince.

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

“Sure can. I’ll be richer than Daddy, and I’ll never kick her out of my house.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

See what he does aside from climbing trees.

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

“Wow. You look so pretty when you smile.” He places his pointer and middle fingers at the corners of my mouth and pulls. “You should smile all the time—Oh, found you!”

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

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

Maybe he’s my brother.

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

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

I follow him as he slowly circles the tree. “Who’s Leo?”

“Uncle Andrew’s son.”

Dad’s son? One of my brothers?

“Are you Leo’s cousin?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know him?”

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

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

“Come on.” He straightens. “Why can’t you tell me?”

My gaze flits to the flowers in my hand.

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

“It’s not a secret.”

His shoulders hunch. “Then you can tell me.”

“Well, it’s my birthday, and Mom brought me here to see my dad. That’s all.”

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

“I don’t...think so. My mom and dad don’t live together.”

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

“I guess.”

“That’s okay. We can still be friends, right?”

I nod once.

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

“No way. You’re so pretty.” I bite my lip after I say that, and I feel my ears heating.

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

“You’re not pretty like a girl. You’re just pretty.”

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

“Mm-hmm.”

“That makes me so happy!”