

## **The Beautiful Years**

### **Part I**

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Cover design & Formatting by:

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## Chapter 1

1995 ~ Brando

The ballerina twirled on one foot like a girl inside of a beautiful music box.

She went up in a fluid movement onto her toes, just on the tips, and spun around with a grace that belied the strength she hid. She was strong. Stronger than anyone I had ever seen. Somehow her elegance and her strength coexisted in the same space, one working in favor of the other.

It was almost impossible to look away from her. She drew the eye and captured the mind.

Snow danced around me, circling me in wisps and flurries, mirroring her movements. If I had to compare them, the girl and the ice, she was the more graceful of the two in her movements than the wisps of frozen rain floating here and there. She was by far the greater of the two miracles.

Framed by the window of the dance studio, her body was outlined by a painted forest around the rim. Fog blurred the glass from the chill of the weather and the toasty atmosphere inside. The frosted, plum-colored trees painted on reflected the Christmas lights of downtown Natchitoches, Louisiana in a way that made them seem alive with a pulse. Thin ribbons unraveling from each tree met another, creating another, interweaving in a way that connected them all.

The window scene could've been a nod to *The Nutcracker*. I'm not sure. In fact, I've never even seen *The Nutcracker*, only heard about it. Maybe saw a few pictures of it in a book.

Standing in the snow, I felt like I had been dropped into a strange universe, knowing nothing about anything. I didn't even know the song she danced to. It was older,

but I liked it.

I made a mental note to ask Maggie Beautiful about it later.

Watching her, I felt like time stood still and my world stopped spinning. There was no other way for me to describe the sensation—the experience. I ran a hand through my hair, thinking that over. I noted that the other girls were watching her too, even the teacher. The entire room had decided to study the main attraction instead of socializing at the party. She had transfixed them with the power she held in her grasp; she was a force of nature with purely ethereal movements.

The truth hit me in that moment and I took back my first impression. There was a way to describe the experience: I was ice stuck where I had fallen. She was the solid ground to my water.

Out of the blue, she kept me grounded, as though the rest of the world failed to exist. She was a girl I had known my entire life, but she didn't know me. I had no idea who she had become as I watched a new version of the little girl I used to know. She might have grown—she had to be around fifteen now—but her scent was still familiar enough that I remembered it from a walk through her life.

Scarlett Rose Poésy.

I stuck my hands further into the depths of my black leather jacket, head down against the chill of the night, eyes stuck on her graceful form. She was in all blue, but she might as well have been covered in the color of her name.

She completed a perfect spin before she paused, doing a double take. Her brother Elliott had just walked into the dance studio. She smiled, her porcelain skin lighting within when her mind registered his presence. He smiled back and lifted the gift in his palm, offering it to her. She had forgotten someone's present at home, and their mother had insisted we stop before our party to drop it off.

Scarlett brought her right hand flush to her lips and then offered it to him in a gesture that meant thank you in sign language. His skin, redder than hers, lit with the same blush. Brother and sister conversed back and forth for a moment in his language, the language of hands. He explained our plans—he told her that he had a date with Lisette and not to worry, he had gone with the earrings she had suggested.

This was true, he had bought the earrings, but he had also bought her an engagement ring. He didn't want anyone to know yet. Not even his sister.

Scarlett went up on her toes, the perfect ballerina, and did some kind of dance for him, maybe showing him how happy she was that he had taken her advice. He clapped for her performance before he told her goodbye. He was in a rush; time with Lisette had become an urgent thing, and the ring was all he could think of lately. Like money, it was burning a hole in his pocket. I told him he was a fool in love. But what the hell did I know? He was certain they were meant to be because their names ended the same, which made me laugh soundlessly, the heat from my breath producing a cloud of smoke in the sharp night air.

Elliott turned and left, eager to get back to his car. He was the designated driver for the night. Scarlett went up on her toes, about to pick up her dance again, but as soon as she did, she came down abruptly, in a way that seemed almost painful. The gift fell from her hand, bouncing away from her for such a solid package. Her face went pale.

I took a step closer to the window just as Elliott came out of the dance studio. He knocked me on the shoulder, motioning to his car. Nick, another one of our friends, had been waiting in the passenger seat, the music steadily bumping while he howled out the window. Elliott smiled, motioning for me to get in the car again. So fucking eager. There was no rush. He had all night. He had the rest of his life.

I looked in at Scarlett again. She stood solid, not moving. The girls around her had started to clump together, whispering. Her dance teacher had moved to the opposite side of the room, talking to another woman, who I assumed to be another teacher.

There were times when I would forget the signs to communicate with Elliott. In those times, I usually pointed and spoke to make my point. Elliott understood me because we had been at it since we were kids, and he was an excellent lip reader, so we had a good relationship despite my lack. I never forgot the meaning of the signs, though, only how to use my fingers.

I pointed to my feet and mouthed, "Go on without me, Maestro." I called him Maestro because of his obsessive love of music. He enjoyed the beat of it.

He narrowed his eyes as a puff of breath came out of his mouth. He lifted his

fingers and moved them quickly. *You're not coming?*

I shook my head, "Nah." The words came despite the fact that he couldn't hear them. He was excellent with nuances of the face and body.

"Come on, Fausti!" Nick called. "It's freezing out."

"Nah, dude, ya'll go ahead." I turned just before Scarlett came flying out of the dance studio.

"Elliott!" Scarlett gasped, propelling herself at him. She hit him with such an intensity that he rocketed backward, almost bringing them both to the cement. She clawed at his jacket, sobbing.

He motioned as fast as his fingers would allow, begging her to tell him what had happened. "Is it mom?" he managed to get out. "Dad?"

"No, no, no!" she sobbed, close to screaming. "It's you!" She shook his jacket, pulling him forward. "Don't leave! Stay here with me! Please!"

Nick stuck his head out again, went to say something else, but stopped when he took notice of the scene. "Shit." He blew out a puff of cold air and rolled up the window.

Elliott patted his little sister on the head, bringer her closer. She kept a death grip on his jacket, her knuckles turning white, while the rest of her trembled. She had rushed out without a coat, without anything but her dance clothes: a thin, long-sleeve top, a frilly bottom, stockings, and ballet slippers.

One thing in her favor, though—she was damn good at holding on, despite the chill.

Snow came down in earnest now, sticking to grass and cement. The wind picked up speed, and for a moment, they seemed lost in the embrace. I didn't realize Elliott had turned his gaze on me until I felt the weight of his stare. His eyes were wide, and his hands came up behind her back in a "help me" gesture.

I shrugged, settling my hands deeper into my jacket. I doubted Scarlett had even noticed me. Hidden deep in the shadows, I had become just another part of the night.

Scarlett pushed back from his chest, keeping a tight grip on his collar. "Listen to me, Elliott." She shook him a bit. "You have to listen to me! You have to stay here with me until mom picks me up." She spoke the words, but then to drive them home, she reluctantly removed her hand from him and signed the words over again. Then she stuck

to him again, afraid to let go. Her fear was palpable.

*You have to tell me why*, he signed. This time Elliott took his sister by the shoulder and moved her so he could look her in the eye.

She sniffled, looking away from him. “I...can’t.” Fat tears streamed down her face. An insane urge to wipe them before they could freeze to her skin took over. She almost seemed too delicate for the weather. I tamed the urge down, keeping my hands solid in the pockets of the leather jacket.

Elliott pulled Scarlett in and hugged her hard. He kissed the top of her head. He said something in her ear. Then he released her before rushing into his car and locking the doors.

Scarlett seemed dazed, a bit confused as she stood there, eyes fixed on his car. The music bumped even harder. The tailpipe sent out streams of smoke.

She blinked a few times and I felt the air around us shift.

“No!” she screeched, torn from the shock. She looked from left to right, searching for what seemed like salvation, and took off after the car, pounding on the windows, screaming her brother’s name.

Elliott’s taillights glowed crimson before he took off, ignoring the frantic pleas of his sister. She scooped up a mound of dirt and rocks and snow and hurled it at his retreating vehicle, hitting the back windows in a cracking spray of debris.

For such a graceful being, she had a hell of a good aim.

She stood close to the street for a moment before she shook her head and came to stand on the sidewalk, staring down the street, probably hoping he’d come back. She kept whispering “no,” over and over.

I removed my jacket, holding it out to her. “Scarlett.”

She didn’t jump or flinch or even acknowledge me.

I took a step closer but kept in the shadows. For some reason, I didn’t want her to see me, only to know I was there.

“Scarlett,” I said a bit louder.

This time her eyes flew in my direction. She put her right hand over her heart, her entire body shaking with cold and what I assumed to be adrenaline. “He’s gone,” she

whispered.

“Here.” I pushed the jacket closer to her. “Your lips are almost the same color as your—” I motioned to her outfit, not knowing what to call it. Somehow “frilly clothes” seemed fucking stupid to say aloud.

“Who are you?” she asked in a small voice.

“A friend of Elliott’s.”

“A good friend?”

“Yeah, since we were kids. He’s like my brother.”

Her eyes narrowed, making her fragile stature seem fierce. Her eyebrows, those eyes, were more intense than I was prepared for. “Then you should’ve stopped him!”

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to stop him from, but judging by the way her body shook, and the color of her skin, she seemed to be experiencing hypothermia. “Take my jacket and then I’ll tell you why I didn’t stop him.”

She snatched my jacket, angrily shoving her arms through the holes, zipping it up to her neck with frustration. The black leather swallowed her fluff. “There.” She stuck her chin up. The blue piece of silk tied around her bun fluttered in the wind, almost coming loose and taking flight.

A smile almost came to my lips, but given the circumstances, I kept my features hard.

“Lisette.” I lifted my hands, even though I knew she couldn’t see me. It didn’t seem to make a difference to her. “Tonight’s important to him.”

“Can Lisette save him?”

It was my turn to narrow my eyes. “Tell me.”

The tone of my voice made her pause. As subtle as she could, she shook her head. It took her a moment to answer. “Never mind,” she said, resigned. The fire in her voice seemed to cool with the dropping temperature. “It doesn’t m-matter.” She began to sob even harder than she had before. She looked away and put both of her hands up, covering her face with the sleeves of my jacket.

“Tell me what’s going on, Scarlett.” My voice came out hoarse from the impossibly tough situation I found myself in, or from exposure to the cold air. I wasn’t sure which.

“God!” She sobbed and then started to laugh.

Accustomed to the emotional rollercoaster a woman could bring me on, I decided to wait her out.

“You must think I’m insane!” She used my sleeves to wipe her eyes, her cheeks, even her nose. She laughed again. “Perhaps I am. When...” She took a breath or two to calm the quiver in her voice. “When Elliott walked in, I felt fine. Then...he went to leave and I panicked. I’ve never experienced that before. I mean, I’ve heard stories from my grandmother. My dad’s mother, I’m referring to. How someone in his family saved the love of her life from a terrible storm in Scotland. She panicked when he told her he was leaving. She couldn’t let him go. So she tied him to the bed while he took a nap. An intense connection, my grandmother had called it. Something close to a sixth sense, in a way. But now that I’m out here with you, I feel fine.” She shrugged, laughing softly in that crazed way again. “Perhaps I was wrong...” She bit her lip. “Why would I feel that toward Elliott? I’ve never felt that before—such a rush to be close...to stop him. That’s not how the story goes.” She hesitated before continuing. “My mom said that there’s no truth to Grandma Poésy’s stories, that my dad’s side is certifiable anyway because they’re a mixed bunch of nuts. French and Scottish...”

She had used the word “perhaps” instead of “maybe” twice in the span of a few minutes. I almost smiled. That was twice she almost had me doing something I rarely did.

I studied her for a moment. Sometime during her rambling she had turned toward me, and the light from inside the studio fell on her and brightened her features. Shorter than average, thin, but with some curve that promised to deepen later in life. Above all else, though, “graceful” came to mind; she was built for the ballet stage. Compared to me she was slight, though something about her seemed larger than life.

The beauty of her face seemed to fill her out. Thick, chestnut hair was pulled into a tight bun, giving me a clear sketch of her face, the light from inside working with the darkness outside. Her eyes were shocking in their beauty—a deep emerald green that almost glowed in the night. I wondered if the color would hold specks of gold if she were in the sun. Her brows were dark, thick, arched in a way that gave her a bolder look.

Scarlett had mentioned her father’s heritage, but I remembered Elliott had



mentioned their mother's—Slovenian. All but their father spoke the language. Scarlett's features reflected that heritage: feline eyes, shaped like they belonged to a mischievous cat, while the straight, sleek cut of her nose and sharp, broad cheeks seemed sculpted out of hard stone, almost cold until she smiled and her face warmed. She had the most beautiful bones, angular, and the skin over them was taut. In contrast, her lips were soft, a delicate pink, and the perfect shape. I couldn't look away from her.

She smiled then, her eyes glistening, face red and puffy. "Did you hear me?"

"Repeat that once more."

She laughed, the breath flowing out of her mouth in a stream of white. "You could be a serial killer and I'm out here telling you about my family." She took a breath. "Though even a serial killer might be hesitant to deal with them. Charlotte would be on the first bus back home. She's not worth the hassle."

Charlotte was her older sister. And I had to agree.

"What's more concerning is that you're still out here talking to me—after having the thought."

"That too." She sighed. "But now that I think about it, you mentioned Lisette. My brother runs in a small circle. You knew my name. I'm going to take you for your word. Besides—" she shrugged "—I feel safe enough."

A howling wind came tearing down the street, throwing the snow around in mad flurries. I stuck my hands in the pockets of my jeans, resisting the urge to pat down a thin strand of hair that had come loose from her slicked bun. The situation with Elliott had unnerved her.

"Here—" She went to take off the jacket, but I stopped her.

"You keep it. It's damn near freezing out here."

She nodded and looked around briefly before turning her face to the sky. A quiet settled between us until she sniffed, then released a deep breath. "This is something, huh? Snow in Natchitoches." She pronounced the name perfectly: Nac-Au-Tish.

"Whenever it snows here, it's always a thing."

"Do you think snow where it rarely ever snows means something miraculous is about to happen?" She closed her eyes against the oncoming flakes. White diamond

flecks touched her skin, clinging without melting, and in that moment she seemed almost unreal to me—an ice princess.

I started to say that Maggie Beautiful believes snow is an omen in Louisiana, that nature tends to send in a mild nonoccurrence before she releases a natural disaster. But I stopped myself. Instead I said, “We’ll see.”

“We’ll see is better than no, I guess.” She grinned, the reaction warming her face, melting the ice. My heart started to beat faster. “That’s what my mom says when I ask for something farfetched.”

We’ll see. My go-to response after Maggie Beautiful asked me for something, which was usually farfetched, but I kept silent. She was smart enough to know that it usually meant no.

“You’re not much of a talker, are you?”

I blinked the snow from my lashes. “Not by nature, no.”

She nodded. “Why did you stay? Instead of going to the party? I assume you came here with Elliott and Nick.”

I took a deep breath in and let it out. I could smell her in the chilliness of the air: popcorn from the party, leather from my jacket, and something mild but recognizable on her skin and clothes. Rose perfume. Not the kind older women wore. Something subtle, closer to the real thing. Sweet. Doused in snow, the cold made the scent stronger.

“Nick.” I repeated his name, harder than I had intended. For some reason the way she had said his name made my fingers curl into fists. I had to take a deep breath and then release it slowly. The air felt like cold, blue fire in my lungs.

Something I had never known reared its head for the first time.

In under a second, I had to erect iron bars to keep it in check. To restrain it from springing loose and causing havoc. The *something* that came to life had a mean and ugly temper.

She studied me in the darkness for a moment. I got the feeling whatever she felt from me had spoken to her, louder than the name I had spoken out loud. Her next response seemed to come from reading the unspoken thoughts in my mind.

“Nothing,” she whispered, turning her face away for a moment, giving me her

profile. “He’s my brother’s friend.” Her cheeks flushed with blood, making her blush spread like fire.

I cleared my throat. “I lost interest in going,” I said, answering her question. Choosing to ignore the insane rattling of bars.

She moved her ballet shoe across the cement, creating a line in the snow. “Does that happen to you often?”

This time, I allowed the grin. For the first time, she really made an attempt to see me in the darkness. Struggling to make out my features, she took a small step forward, her eyes scrunched to almost slits. She was more afraid of me than she let on—I could almost hear the pulse thrumming in her neck—but something possessed her to stay out in the snow and talk.

*Un piccolo gattino curioso: A curious little kitten.*

“Depends on what it is,” I said.

“I’ll need more than that.” She pinched her fingers. “Just a little?”

Enough about me. I’d find out more about her. “Does that—” I motioned around the area with a hand, thinking of her crying fit, or whatever it’s called when girls cry that hard “—happen often?”

“That—” she took a deep breath and let it out slowly “—never happens. I can’t explain it.” She took her voice down to a whisper. “It’s the worst feeling I’ve ever felt. The panic. The helplessness. My palms are sweaty just thinking of it.” She rubbed them together to prove her point.

“You seem to be okay now.”

She nodded, her stare lost in the shadows, with me. “I’m going to be. My heart is better.” She smiled, almost shyly, and I couldn’t stop myself from returning it.

“Scarlett!” An older woman in ballet clothes rushed out of the studio. She stopped short when she noticed Scarlett wasn’t alone in the darkness. Placing two elegant hands on Scarlett’s shoulders, the woman spoke to her in rapid French.

“All right.” Scarlett’s demeanor changed, became more professional. Even the tone of her voice became more mature, more commanding, as if she were in the position of power. “But give me a moment. I was just having a word with one of Elliott’s friends. *Je*

*vous remercie.*”

The woman studied me for a moment and then spoke in French again. Quieter this time. Scarlett answered her in the same language, as though French were her first language. The teacher motioned to the entrance/exit with her chin before she left us. She didn't go far, though. She stopped closer to Scarlett than to the door.

Scarlett glanced at the woman, another smile creeping onto her lips, perfect white teeth a flash in the darkness, before she turned back toward me. I was right about those eyes. Mischievous. Lifting her shoulders, she brought the collar of my jacket up to her ears. She turned her face, putting her nose closer to the leather.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For this. And for...everything.” She hesitated before she went to remove the jacket.

“Keep it.”

“No, you'll—”

The woman cleared her throat.

“I have a coat inside, you'll freeze,” Scarlett rushed out.

“It looks better on you,” I said, my tone clear enough. The leather jacket belonged to her now.

She huffed out a laugh. “Do you always give your clothes away?”

“Never.”

“Hmm.” She stuck her nose further into the jacket. I could see from the outline of her face that her smile had grown. “I'll have Elliott give it back to you the next time he sees you.”

I shrugged. The black thermal shirt felt tight across my shoulders all of a sudden. “We'll see.”

Scarlett stared in my direction for a moment before she rushed inside, into the warmth of the studio and the comfort of familiar people. Those weren't her people though.

*She's mine.*

The thought came unbidden, almost ferocious, from the beast that had reared its head out of the depths of inner darkness. In response, a low growl emanated from my

throat, aimed at myself.

Still, I had lost the war. I couldn't move or tear my eyes from where she was supposed to be. She might have been the most perfect ballerina, but there was something else about her that called to me, something that went even deeper. Something that might get me killed one day, but in her honor, I'd give up my life without a second's hesitation.

*She's mine*, the voice came again, and this time I accepted it without issue.

*Yeah, she is.*

Elliott had been insane to ever leave her, to leave this—light.

Once she was safely inside, I stood outside watching from the shadows. She stood in the center of the window again, leather jacket still on, looking out into the depths of the night. She felt me, judging by the grin on her face.

Her dance picked up where it had left off.

This time, my ballerina girl danced just for me.

## Chapter 2

1996 ~ Brando, The arrangement

I dressed in honor of the occasion. White button-down shirt rolled to the elbows, black slacks, and boots. I slicked my hair back and used pomade to keep it in place.

I slipped on a thick watch and checked the time. *Enough*. The tattoo on my lower left arm snaked from wrist to elbow, a reminder of that night out in the snow, a piece of her to carry with me until there wasn't a breath left in me. December was bitter with cold, so I added a thick jacket. It completed the look more than it was necessary to keep me comfortable.

My cologne hung in the air when I stepped outside. The breath from my mouth came out in a frosted white cloud. The leather seats of the Chevy held the cold, but the heater evened out the temperature. Not that it mattered. My body ran hot. The cold rarely touched me.

The drive only took a short time. Small town.

The southern plantation loomed in the distance. If a house could be considered a Civil War relic, this one took the title. White columns stretched the height of the structure and balconies stretched the width, standing out against the brick.

It had a long driveway that seemed to meander, surrounded by ancient live oaks, their leaves intertwined with fluttering moss. Not far behind, the Cane River carved out a path.

The closer the car moved toward the structure, the bigger and richer it became.

“This place is straight out of *Gone with the Wind*,” Maggie Beautiful had once remarked when we had come for a party.

“Yeah,” I said to myself over the humming of the motor. “Can’t argue with that.”

The entire place, even the trees that lined the driveway, had been covered in twinkling lights and decorations that signified Christmas was close. It made the house seem even more lavish. Though it would be some time before night fell, the lights were on, haloed in the haze.

Parking in front of the house, I turned the car off, breathing in a lung full of fresh air not polluted by fumes from the exhaust pipe. The scents of burning wood, cold water, and fresh pine lingered; an undercurrent of leather from the seats and my cologne drifted below them.

The smells lingered but I didn’t. Lifting my arm, I checked the time.

*Right on schedule.*

Before I could knock, Eunice, the woman who had worked for the Poésy family for as far back as I could remember, stood there, a cheery apron covering her dress. She smelled of fresh baked goods and the spice of firewood.

“Brando!” She embraced me, holding me tight. “It’s been too long! Too long!” She stood back but kept her hands on my arms. “You’re too thin!” She slapped at one cheek.

I smiled at her, despite the feeling of unease that rushed over me when I came here now. It wasn’t the same as it used to be.

“Oh,” she breathed out. “But you’re still as charming as ever! Too beautiful for your own good. Come in.” She stepped aside and shut the door behind me. “Let me take

your coat.”

I slipped out of it and she hung it in the closet, turning to face me once more. Her eyes roved over me for a long minute, before stopping on the tattoo on my arm.

“My, my,” she said, shaking her head. “I am so glad you’re here. It almost feels like old times. It does my heart good to see you.”

I nodded but couldn’t lie. “It feels different.”

She nodded, a serious look on her otherwise friendly face. “It is. That’s why it feels right to have you here. There was a time when we couldn’t keep you two apart.”

“Yeah, those were good times.” I cleared my throat. “Scarlett. How is she?”

Eunice narrowed her eyes at me and they flickered down to the tattoo before meeting my stare again. “Her mother sent her to Russia.” She sighed. “Something to do with the ballet.”

I knew this, of course. I knew everything when it came to her. Eunice lived with the family; she was privy to information no one else was. It was good to hear my information was correct, but that’s not what I wanted.

Eunice seemed to sense this. “She’s hurting. So much has changed since—”

A throat cleared in the background. Eunice and I both turned to find Pnina Poésy standing at the top of the winding staircase, looking down on us.

*That’s about right.*

Scarlett’s mother was a stunning woman. Her blonde hair was swept back, showcasing the angular shape of her face. She was dressed in all red, the color of blood.

*Huh. A warning.*

“Eunice,” she said, her eyes on me. “We’ll take refreshments in the office. Preferably something hot. Brando.” She nodded. “You’re welcome to join us. We’re ready.”

I nodded in return and thanked Eunice for taking my coat.

As I began to take the many steps to the office, Pnina hadn’t moved from her spot. Her eyes were fixed on the tattoo on my arm. Four steps before I reached her, she swallowed hard. Her eyes had turned into daggers.

She released the banister and turned from me, reaching the office before I did.

Her perfume swallowed up the space, but Everett's expensive cigars and cognac were a subtle undercurrent. The tall man stood in the corner, a crystal glass in his hand, staring out the window.

When he heard us enter, he turned, his normally cordial features settling into friendliness. He met me halfway in, taking my hand and pulling me in for a one-arm man hug.

"Brando," he said, his breath full of spirit fumes. "It's good to see you, son."

I agreed and took the seat he offered me on the leather sofa. He took a chair across from me. Pnina took the one next to her husband.

A picture of Scarlett in a girlie blue ballet outfit was framed in silver on the table that separated me from her parents. The queen of some country stood next to her.

The sight of my ballerina girl made my will harden even further.

Eunice came in then with a tray of coffee and cookies. To be polite, I accepted the coffee and took a bite of the cookie. Rarely did I do things to please other people, but I had a soft spot for the woman.

She knew this too. She smiled and winked at me as she made her way out, closing the door behind her.

Pnina sipped on her coffee. Everett added cognac to his. Setting the cup on the table, I cleared my throat.

"Thank you for seeing me today."

"You never have to call to see us—"

Pnina cleared her throat, cutting Everett off. "This is not a friendly visit."

Everett looked between us.

"Correct," I said. "In one way. Though I still consider this a friendly visit."

Pnina nodded, urging me to go on. I didn't need her permission nor did I seek it. There was something else at stake.

"I love your daughter," I said. "I'd trade my life to see her safe. I'd sacrifice my life for the honor of hers. I'm not here to ask your permission, but to get your blessing."

"Charlotte?" Everett asked. He looked almost eager.

Charlotte was Scarlett's sister. And *hell no*. The rest of my life would consist of



*fuck me*, the equivalent of *why me*, if she were the one I called *mine*.

“No,” I said, meeting his eye. “Scarlett.”

Her father said nothing. He stared at me for some time until he stood, going to the bar in the corner and pouring more cognac into his glass. He kept his back turned to us, staring out of the window again.

Of course, where his children were considered, Pnina ran that ship.

Pnina stared at the tattoo on my arm again. Her mind worked, though she kept her face intentionally blank. I had seen the woman do it too many times to count. Though she tried her damndest not to, she was easy to read, yet almost impossible to understand.

She took another drink of her coffee, her finger tapping against the glass after she had brought it down. “Scarlett is only sixteen. She is just a girl.”

“I’m well aware,” I said. “I’ve taken her age into consideration.”

She nodded. “What do you expect us to do? Give you her hand in marriage?”

My lip quirked up. No one would give Scarlett to me. She had been mine ever since that night out in the snow. Maybe even longer.

I was here for one reason. To make sure this woman didn’t send my heart to another country because she refused to do what the world insisted was her destiny. Dance.

“She’s not performing as she once was. She’s hurting.” I paused. “And she’s rebelling.”

Pnina narrowed her eyes at me. I had hit a nerve.

If there was one way to get the woman to see clearly, it was to discuss Scarlett in terms of business. What good was a ballerina who refused to dance? And not just any ballerina. One that was destined to do great things.

I was told that making arrangements such as this one ran in my blood. I had no doubt that it did. However, I never expected to make one in the name of love.

One way or another, Scarlett would stay put and I’d have her. This woman sent her away much too often and for extended stretches of time. Scarlett needed to be home. For now.

“I see you have been well informed,” Pnina said, the words “go on” on the tip of her tongue. Though she refused to say them.

I grinned at that. “Allow her to go to school,” I said. “Give her something to concentrate on. Give her some normalcy for a change. Offer her the chance to feel like a normal kid. She’s already graduated from high school. I get that.”

Scarlett was not only talented beyond what the law should allow, but she was extremely smart. She had teachers from all over the world, and not just for dance. She had completed high school at sixteen.

Little wonder. Apart from dance, all she did was read and study. Nothing else felt safe enough for Pnina. The girl had danced for royalty but probably had never gone to the movies.

I went on, sensing that Pnina’s interest had been piqued. “The public school will be accommodating enough to let her have a normal year or two, even if it’s all for show. Her best friend Violet will be with her. Scarlett has asked to go before. I doubt she will turn down the opportunity now. And relatively speaking, keeping her contained on the school grounds will keep her safe enough while allowing her the freedom that she needs. It’s not even college. High school. Safe enough.”

*Safe enough.* I said the phrase twice. Pnina knew what I had intended with that comment. *Keep her legs safe enough.*

“You have no idea how talented she is, do you? What is in store for her?”

“Ah,” I said. “I do. Or I wouldn’t be sitting here today. That’s why I’ve come to you. She’s been through a lot. I want what’s best for Scarlett. I’ll do whatever it takes to see her happy and thriving.”

“What is in this for you?”

“Her.” *Mine.*

“Her career comes first.”

*Ah, here we go.* We were down to the specifics of this arrangement. Pnina knew me well enough to know that my word was as good as my blood. I said what I meant and meant what I said.

“I agree.”

“She goes to Paris after this ruse is over. She has had a standing offer with the ballet there since she was a young girl, as well as a few others.”

I opened and closed my hands. “Where she goes is up to her.”

“As long as she goes,” Pnina said. “I know my daughter. If she is committed, she will see it through. I know she is infatuated with the thought of you. She has asked Eunice questions—almost eagerly. I found your picture in her room. I am her mother and also a woman. I know these things.

“Dance is something she does because she can. It comes natural to her, as natural as breathing. I will not allow her to commit to you fully and give up all that she has worked for. Scarlett is destined to reach the stars. Men such as yourself take the light for themselves.”

*Yeah, they do.* I had claimed her that night in the snow. She was mine. End of story. This woman was smart to be wary of me. I never doubted that about her.

She continued. “You will set her free when it is time. Or I will have no choice but to keep her abroad now. She has already lost so much focus. I cannot allow her to lose anymore.”

She took another drink of coffee, set it down, and then smoothed out her dress.

“However, I do believe giving her an incentive will work. Giving her some normalcy as you pointed out.”

Of course. There was more to this than she let on. When Scarlett turned eighteen, she had the power to crush Pnina’s dreams by not dancing at all. Pnina could hold their wealth over her, but that’s about all.

At this point, I wasn’t so sure that Scarlett wouldn’t rather live on the street and work at the local diner.

Neither of us wanted that for her. Nor would I ever allow her to live on the street or work at the diner. However, I understood Pnina’s unspoken thoughts all too clearly. When I entered Scarlett’s life, if I encouraged her, she would dance.

Call it premonition, but we had both surrendered to each other that night out in the snow. She could move me just as well as I could move her.

I was well aware that she was mine in all regards. I had no doubt that she didn’t recognize the same loss of power in me. There was no escape for either of us. All it took was one night and for our eyes to connect. Those emerald eyes haunted me even when I

was with other women.

Pnina went no further, waiting to hear the words from my mouth—*you have my word*.

I looked her in the eye. “I also have conditions.”

Her eyebrow lifted at that.

I held a finger up. “I’ll enter her life when she’s eighteen. You’ll allow me to give her the opportunities that were available to your other children. Meaning, she gets to do normal things with me.”

“When she’s eighteen. When’s she legal?”

I nodded. Less chance of this woman sending her off if she was of age. I had to give her as little wiggle room as possible.

I waited for her to agree this time.

“You have my word.”

I lifted another finger. She narrowed her eyes. “Once she’s decided where to go. France. Italy. New York. Wherever.” I waved a hand. “You hire someone to follow her around—all that she does and sees comes back to me. I want to know who she’s with down to what she eats for lunch. After her first performance as a principal dancer, I come back into her life. At that point, she’ll be established in that world.”

Pnina shifted in her seat but she didn’t get comfortable. “Brando, you have to give her a chance to live her life. You have to give her a chance to experience what it means to be on her own without you. She is young. If she is not allowed to have other experiences apart from you—because make no mistake, you are a man who becomes the experience—you might find yourself living with regret one day. Your mother, for instance, was fifteen as well when she fell in love with your father.”

Yeah, this woman knew how to split the chest open, no doubt about it. But I was here to put my heart on the table as collateral anyway. “What makes you so certain that Scarlett’s going to fall hard for me? She might want to leave *me* when it’s time.”

Rarely did I ask a question. This time, I felt it was necessary. If she didn’t think Scarlett was going to do all of this, she wouldn’t be entertaining me now. Still, she had a reason, and I wanted her to admit it aloud.

The woman smiled. She spoke in Slovenian and then, realizing that I had none, turned to English. She did that from time to time. “I know my daughter. She is already in love with you. Your absence in her life is one of the reasons she refuses to dance.”

There it was. The reason why she had agreed—we both knew it. Whatever swayed Scarlett to cooperate, she would do. Even if it meant breaking her daughter’s heart in the long run.

Though she was right. Scarlett had too much potential to waste it. Not many people had the level of talent she had, nor the opportunities.

I stood. Pnina stood. Everett still had his back to us.

“You have my word,” she said, offering me her hand.

“You have mine,” I said, offering her mine. “*La mia parola è buona quanto il mio sangue.*”

Her shoulders stiffened at those words, that vow, before we shook. She knew what it meant and how serious it was. *La mia parola è buona quanto il mio sangue*—“*My word is as good as my blood.*”

Pnina might have cracked open my chest, but I had ripped my own heart out and placed it in an hourglass filled with rushing blood.

## Chapter 3

1998 ~ Scarlett

*Falling in love just happens. When you least expect it.  
When you are not looking for it. There is no rhyme or  
reason, and if there is, it is hidden away where all the  
mysteries of this life go. I can only hope it's the same place  
my brother went. It feels like heaven.*

I should’ve known that it would all begin on the most benign day of the week.

Wednesday. Even Monday, with all its cursed glory, was a more talked about day than the third day of the week. The middle child, so to speak. Or my sister Charlotte, if Wednesday were evil.

To give this Wednesday a bit of flair, it started with a dare. I had never given in to peer pressure before, but Violet Castellanos could push all the right buttons. It was hard to tell if that was a good or bad thing, but despite the undecided outcome of the thought, I had accepted her dares as somewhat of a personal challenge. I wasn't all that offended by actually losing. I just wanted an excuse to get out and feel the world.

Violet's dares offered me that luxury. She was a seasoned veteran at reverse psychology, and me at pretending I didn't know what she was up to.

Violet knew the truth. Her egging gave me an excuse to go out and experience the world. Therefore, our status always floated around *best* on the friend meter. I don't think it was particularly anything Violet did or didn't do. She recognized that too. It was me. Some days I didn't care one way or another.

"It'll be fun!" she practically yelled. "Look at you. You're depressing. You're pale and you have purple circles under your eyes. You're beauty trapped in a tragic cage." I shot her a look, and she swung both of her hands up. "Take a chill pill, *Sandy*," she said in a goofy voice. "If fun doesn't float your boat, what about a dare?" She wiggled her dark eyebrows at me. Her hair was blonde, her eyes blue, and her shimmering tan skin came straight off a beach in Greece. The combination was no less than gorgeous. "I *dare* you to go with me so I don't get grounded. And what can be more rebellious than going to a party on Wednesday? Give me one example and you're off the hook."

I thought about it for a moment. "Grounded" was the least of her worries. Some of the guys she found attractive were jailbait, and not in the common use of the term. They were bait to the fishing officers.

"All right. I'll go."

Violet stopped walking next to me for a moment. People were switching classes, hustling to make it on time before their next lesson, weaving between and around us. A freshman bumped her on accident, and she scowled at him before looking at me again.

"You used to be so chatty," she said with an accusing tone to her voice. "Now a

perpetually sad melody follows you around.”

Without giving me a chance to respond, she turned and disappeared into the throng of pushing and shoving students.

The day turned into night, and once again I found myself jostled and bumped, not by throngs of students shoving through school halls, but by those same kids, now drunk, pushing through a packed party surrounding a bonfire.

“I used to be a lot of things,” I muttered to myself. I sighed, releasing the pressure weighing heavily on my chest.

Two talkative girls standing next to me, with plastic red cups in both of their hands, glanced my way, but not finding me all that interesting, looked back at each other. I put my hands out, feeling the heat of the bonfire touch my skin. The temperature was crisp, October rolling in with the promise of a cold winter, and the contrast between the warmth from the fire and the chill was comfortable.

I grinned at a familiar face; Juliette and her friend, Kari, made their way through, bringing me a farewell book to sign. Juliette was leaving, her family moving, and she had decided earlier in the day to attend this party as one last goodbye. Though I wasn't close to anyone but Violet, there were a few people I'd never forget. Juliette was one of them. After I signed her book and hugged her, they both disappeared, leaving me alone amongst the crowd once again.

Even with all of these people surrounding me, I still felt alone. *Pathetic.*

I settled my back against the rust-colored Ford Taurus behind me. The metal didn't feel as chilled as it had been. The owner of said vehicle sold some type of gelatinous lime shots out of his window for fifty cents each. He said he didn't mind that I loitered outside of his business.

*Thank God for small favors.*

This small favor was almost dismissed in light of his next comment: “Stay as long as you want. You'll bring the boys in, like bees to sweet honey.”

Violet danced up to me, a guy trailing right behind her. Her wild blonde hair made her seem more lioness than human in the glow of the fire. The light but abundant hairs on

her arms were silhouetted when she threw them up in excitement.

“I can’t believe we’re here!” she shouted over the music, which wasn’t really that loud.

“Yes,” I said into my cup of Coke, feeling like a rebel, “me either.”

I gave the party another once over. A bunch of underage (and perhaps some actually legal) pedestrians were hanging out by the train tracks, music drifting with cigarette smoke and ashes from the non-permitted bonfire burning rebelliously in the center of the party.

Strict instructions had been given upon arrival: *If anything should go down, run like hell. And if you’re caught, blame it on the homeless. Now have fun.*

I had to give it to the organizers of the shindig. They were proactive.

The air was laced with alcohol, almost enough to blow up the fire if enough fumes made contact with the robust heat. Laughter and freedom were just as rampant as the illegal substances; apparently there’s nothing quite like the freedom of being parent-free.

Violet squished up her eyes and nose. “Always the life of the party, huh, *Sandy?*” She turned to her companion, a guy who I was willing to bet met or had surpassed the legal drinking age. “Want to dance some more, Ben?”

Ben bumped his head to the sound of the music in answer to her question.

I guess this was my problem. I always lost the dare. Once I was out and about in the real world, suddenly I wanted to run home. Once home, it never really felt like home. And once home doesn’t feel like home anymore, where do you go?

Back to the dare. Then the circle continued in much the same way. It was exhausting, and I found myself needing a nap.

Setting my red cup on the roof of lime-shot’s car, I turned my face up to heaven and closed my eyes. An image of my brother floated past, his smiling face like clouds rolling across the moon. I couldn’t bring myself to open my eyes. There were times when his memory seemed to come to me sharp like a knife in my heart, almost dragging me with him; other times, he came to me like a soft blanket over my cold body—gentle, comforting, making me smile through the pain.

Then there was the humming in my veins. That unexplainable sensation that had



become such a part of me that most times I didn't notice its existence unless I thought of it. But I refused to go there, even if the humming seemed to be getting louder in my ears.

The soft music playing in the background turned deafening. House Of Pain's "Jump Around" blasted through the empty spaces, echoing for what seemed like miles around. The crowd started to howl and clap. Whatever was going on around me involved bodies crashing into one another. Guys were "oohing" in low tones when one body slammed hard into another.

My hands balled into fists at my sides. They were all disrespecting him, his memory. Just like they had done at his funeral, with all their excessive chatter and laughter at times.

How could they laugh?

Aunt Primrose had said they were keeping his memory alive, telling stories of how funny he was, how he was always the first to pull a prank.

I laughed bitterly at the thought.

How did they even find the energy to stand, to sing and dance? Didn't they know he was gone? My brother, my best friend, was gone. He meant something to someone, *to me*.

I would never see him again. The realization of this fact overtook me, as it had uncountable times before, and constricted around my heart like a noose around a neck.

*God, the music was too loud!*

*"Oooooof!"*

I had no idea what had hit me until I was on the ground, looking up at the sky once more. One of the violent dancers must have gone for someone else and accidentally got me. Well, I hoped it was accidental. You'd have to be pretty low to hit a girl trapped in a tragic cage.

The energy it took to pick myself up eluded me, and it seemed like the party was still going strong, even with girl down. Mocking laughter floated above me.

The wind must have been knocked out of my lungs too, because I found it hard to catch air. I wheezed a bit, trying to gain a steady stream of oxygen. After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only about two seconds, my body settled, taking in

what it needed and had lacked.

I blinked. It took me a moment to notice two new faces standing over me. A man swooped me up like a rag doll, limp in his strong arms. The other guy took a step back, looking between the man—there was no other way to describe him, he had the most intense eyes I had ever seen—who had picked me up and the rest of the party. The *guy* seemed to have a nervous twitch.

“You seem to be okay now.” The man who held me in his arms looked down at me, dark eyes full of concern and reflections of the fire. Flickering strokes of the surging bonfire lit up his features with a surreal vengeance. He was intimidating, almost overwhelming.

I looked up at him with eyes that felt too heavy for my face. I knew that voice, I knew those words, and that night came rushing back to me, knocking the breath out of me just as violently as the unexpected slam had.

Brando Fausti.

All I could do was nod.

He gently put me down on my feet, keeping one hand around my waist, and the other he used to dust some of the dirt off my blue velvet minidress. The long sleeves flared at the wrists, and they were caked with fresh-turned mud from the stampede of feet in the undeveloped area. My black stockings had gaping holes, exposing wide areas of skin to the biting cold. The black velvet lace-up witchy boots on my feet might as well have been dipped in a coating of grime, sprinkled with dead grass.

A hush settled over the crowd. The music was turned low. Dancing ceased, and every head turned in our direction.

I hadn't even noticed that Brando's fingers had made their way to my face, his thumb trailing over the lines of dirt. My hand trembled as I reached to meet his touch. His fingers smelled sweet, but with something added—his cologne. *Him*. The scent of him had been branded into memory just as painfully as the actual night.

The smell brought me back to my senses, and I returned to my skin to push his care away. But I couldn't seem to tame the tremble that shook my bones, tightened my muscles, and made my teeth clatter.

Somehow I didn't think the knock to the ground was what had caused it.

Brando removed his fingers, crossing his arms over his wide chest, turning to the guy standing next to us. He looked at him with expectation. What he expected of him, I wasn't too sure. I felt bad for the guy. His cheeks were fiery red, his body stiff with tension. Sweat ran down his face in fast moving streams despite the chill.

"I'm sorry," the guy whispered, not meeting my gaze, looking everywhere but at us. Clearly it wasn't me who he studiously avoided. "I knocked you over."

"It's—"

Brando swung his left fist, making contact with the guy's face. I didn't have enough time to see where Brando's fists had done damage because the guy fell to the ground with a resounding thud, face first. The noise seemed to echo around the circle of rubberneckers watching. I stared in horror at the guy, not knowing how to react.

"Show's over! Show's over!" a voice from the crowd yelled. "Well, is this a party, or what? Where's the music?"

On that note, the music restarted, people began to talk in slow waves, and then the party ramped up into full swing again. Guy down was not a big deal anymore. *Tough crowd.*

I narrowed my eyes at Brando. "You didn't have to do that."

"He knocked you over. He saw you go down and then laughed. Him and his boys." He said "boys" as though the word was an insult. "His boys left him."

"That guy's a punk." A voice from the crowd became a solid shape and now stood next to Brando. "I know his older brother. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." He grinned at me. "Hello, Scarlett. Long time no see. And if you don't mind me saying, *my*, how you've grown."

I couldn't place him.

"Mitchell Lewis." He turned his face from left to right, giving me a clear view of his features. "I was a friend of..."

"Elliott's." My jaw clenched.

He nodded and then looked to the ground for a moment before meeting my gaze.

"Give us a second, Mitch," Brando said.

I realized that not much had changed. When Brando Fausti spoke, he never really asked. He ordered. People seemed to listen, no questions asked in return, no hesitation. Mitch took off for the many ice chests filled with beer without a backward glance, probably thankful for an excuse to leave an awkward situation.

“You were standing with your eyes closed. Before—” he looked down at the guy “—I mean.”

Instinctively, a hand went to my eye. In light of his gallant appearance, I had forgotten that I had been standing closed-eyed before. “You were watching me?”

“That’s not what I asked you.” He grinned. I wanted to add that he hadn’t asked a question, he had demanded a reason for my eyes being closed, but I decided to keep my mouth shut. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a sucker, the kind with a soft chocolate candy in the middle.

He offered it to me first, and when I refused, stuck it in his mouth. The same sweet smell that had been on his hands drifted to my nose. When he pulled the candy out, it glowed red like a ruby in the light of the fire.

I shied away from him, from his question. The situation was headed to where it had once been, picking up as though time seamlessly weaved the span into nothing but seconds. I had been on that route before Guy Down came crashing into my world.

There were times I would forget that night, in light of the loss. Other times that night would console me, and sometimes it would haunt me. I had only a cherished few hours with the memory of the two of us standing out in the snow, and then the memory would shift into one tainted by a gaping hole in my life.

Soon after Elliott’s accident, before the fog of numbness had settled, I replayed that night over and over. I went over every second of it. Pulling it apart, finally ripping it to shreds, until I realized that there were times I would add things that didn’t belong or take away things that did.

Violet had bought me a journal as a way to express all that I couldn’t say, and one night, during a moment of true clarity, I decided to write down what had actually happened—a roadmap to the truth. Brando was the only soul who could confirm or deny all of the thoughts running rampant through my mind.

The memory of Brando and I, that conversation, was one of my best and also one of my worst. I could never figure out a way to love it without feeling guilty, or hate it and not feel guilty. As much as I wanted his clarity, his truth, I couldn't bring myself to ask him.

Something had changed in me that night, before the accident, out there in snow. That change should have had a name, but it probably never would, and it rested on my heart like an extra weight. As much as I shunned it, whatever it was, it never left me.

This unnamed thing surged in my veins as well.

You see, after I ran after my brother, I realized something that would irrevocably alter the course of my stars. It hadn't been my brother who pulled the unusual reaction from me. It was Brando. From that day forward, the humming became a part of me, and now that he was so close...it seemed to sing, to rejoice at his closeness.

*Time to walk, Scarlett, a hurt voice, probably coming from the sane part of my mind, seemed to echo inside of my head. Leave it all behind with all those unsettled feelings he left you with. So what if your blood is humming, feeling like champagne bubbles in your veins, and he's pulling you like a magnet to its home?*

"I can't say that I'm too pleased with you hitting this guy—" I nodded to Guy Down without looking—"but thanks for taking up for me. I should be getting back to my friend."

Brando nodded, his eyes dark and serious. I couldn't read his mind, but I could tell by the way he watched me that he wasn't buying what I sold. I stepped in front of him, truly realizing how imposing his figure was. I was 5'4, and he dwarfed me in both height and build. Clearly over six feet, he had strong arms, a wide chest, and broad shoulders. It didn't seem like he had worked hard to obtain his physique. He just seemed naturally inclined toward it.

I turned my face from his before he noticed how hard my stare had become. Looking away felt like a lost opportunity. I hadn't been able to study all of his curves and shapes like my eyes *really* wanted to. No doubt about it, I had never seen a man as gorgeous as him.

Before I could get too far from temptation, he reached out and grabbed my wrist. A

surge of heat seemed to strike up my arm, making the humming even stronger, which in turn made my heart race even faster. My breath felt shallow, hard to catch.

Not able to move, I stopped, my back to him. If I turned around, I would say something stupid, or ask a question that I might not want the answer to.

“Scarlett,” his voice drifted out soft, almost mesmerizing.

I swallowed the untamed emotions down, choking back the tears. “That night...the night it snowed, I didn’t remember you. God knows I tried. I mean, I didn’t remember you being around Elliott. But after I went home, before he...I looked in his room. You were there with him, in all of his memories, even though I couldn’t remember you being there. It was my mother, wasn’t it?”

It took him a moment to answer. “Long story.”

It was hard to understand my reasoning, why I had asked him that particular question when the list was so long. Perhaps it was the need for confirmation—that out of all Elliott’s friends, Brando was the one that I knew, like me, would never forget him. He would hurt, just as much as I perpetually would. I needed confirmation that the bond they shared had been real.

Perhaps a part of me wanted to believe that he had not sought me out because of circumstances neither of us had control over.

\* \* \*

One of the hardest things to do was turn and walk away from him. But I did. The reminder of his absence in my life gave me the strength to push forward and find a seat around the fire on a wooden crate. If I was being totally honest, standing was not an option at this point.

My skin tingled where he had touched me. I rubbed my wrist, staring into the distance, trying to keep my eyes from returning to where he stood. Violet had heard through the grapevine what had transpired, and she was bothering me for details, not wanting me to skip a second.

“Where were you, anyway?” I asked after I had given her the dirty details, throwing a glance her way. “What if I had been hurt?”

“Brando Fausti was here to save you.” She tapped her shoulder against mine. Her

smile grew wider. “I would give anything to be knocked to the ground by Carlos the Perv if I got to have *him* come to my rescue. The man has muscles in his stomach that you can touch and count at the same time. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. *And*. Six.”

“How do you know him?”

“The Perv or Brando?”

“Brando.” His name came out softer than I had intended.

I stole another peek at him from my seat on the wooden crate by the fire. He stood in the shadows, barely allowing the light from the fire to touch his face. Mitch was deep into conversation with another guy around their circle, and they were steadily pumping back the beer.

I could see Mitch and his buddies hanging around here. Not Brando. He seemed too worldly, too old, though he was around my brother’s age, I knew. Twenty- two.

As far as I could tell, Brando had traded one sucker for another, alternately listening to his friends and watching me. Our eyes would meet every so often. He would grin or nod and I would look in the opposite direction.

*Real subtle, Scarlett.*

He was impossibly gorgeous—dark eyes to match tan skin, glowing bronze in the light of the fire, an angular face with sharp features, but softened somehow by the dusting of dark hair above his mouth, on his chin, and along his jaw. His teeth were almost blinding, and perfect in their placement in his wide mouth. His lips were the only claim he had to softness, apart from his hair.

A beanie covered his head, but pictures of him in Elliott’s room had shown raven hair to complete the perfect picture. His was the kind of hair that begged to be touched, to run your fingers through over and over. Some powerful Roman god had bestowed that hair upon him on a good day. Not just his hair, but that body too. He was the kind of fine that made good Catholic girls feel guilt by just staring for too long. There was something undeniably wicked about him, yet he had swooped in like an angel of vengeance.

*A misguided angel.*

I grinned to myself, thinking back. I had tried so hard to see him that night in the snow, just a glance, but he had hidden deep in the shadows. I had been afraid of him

luring me, but not for the right reasons. I knew then that if he had held his hand out, touched me, I would have gone without a backward glance. Then, perhaps, he would've shattered my delicate heart with goodbye. The thought of his abandonment, even then, scared me into some semblance of sense.

Which was why I sat on the crate by the fire, attempting to steal glances at him instead of standing too close.

He removed his flannel jacket, setting it on a crate close to him. The fire brightened his thin black and white t-shirt, an old Led Zeppelin one that set off the color of his gorgeous skin. In the firelight, he seemed to shimmer bronze. The muscles in his arms flexed with his movements. When he lifted his arms to stretch, a glimpse of his stomach afforded me an even more impressive sight. He had muscles in all of the right places. Six-pack abs, as Violet had pointed out. And I could see the outline of a deep V carved into his skin. A true Adonis belt that was worthy of the name.

“Hello?” Violet snapped her fingers. “Earth to Scarlett.”

“Hmm?” I looked at her.

She laughed, a breathy sound. “Did you even hear me?”

I shook my head. *No*. How could I when an Italian god was standing just a few feet away from me, making intense eye contact? His dark eyes... *oh God*... they had the power to command me without speaking a word. I could feel them calling to me, but in a way that gave me the option to stay or to go to him. If he wanted it another way, his command was my will.

He was giving me this. The option.

“I don't think there's anyone in this town who doesn't know who Brando Fausti is,” she sighed. “The girls love him. Most of the guys hate him but respect him. He's...” She rested her chin on her hand, looking his way. “Brando Fausti. The ‘Italian Stallion’ but without the cliché attached to the name. The kind of Italian that you see in high-end magazines, all decked out in thousand-dollar clothes, cheekbones on prominent display. He has a reputation. Always in trouble, but sweet to the girls. Actually, he's sweeter to the *women*. That one is a recipe for disaster. A heartbreaker for sure. And he came to your rescue. Imagine *that*.”



“What’s that supposed to mean?” I shifted a bit, the wood uncomfortable. “You said he’s sweet to *women*. Carlos the Perv, as you call him, hit me and then laughed. If I were a guy, I would’ve socked him too.”

“See, that’s the thing. When I say sweet to the *ladies*, he’s sweet until he gets what he wants. Then they never hear from him again. *Capisci?* I mean, look at them.” She raised a hand in his direction. Girls hovered around, taking turns approaching him and his friends. “Look *at* him. He’s a prize to be won. Chasing him is an impossible game to be played. All that cool restraint? Just think about what he’s holding back. He lets it loose under the sheets. Or wherever.”

My cheeks stung from the sudden rush of blood. “That’s pathetic.” Who would want to change him? Why not let him want to change himself, if *she*, whoever she was, mattered that much.

“Ooh, someone’s mad.”

“I am not! But why make an ass of yourself? Look at the one standing next to him...she’s practically got her breasts shoved in his face.”

“It’s nice to see something—I mean *someone*—has you worked up again.”

I turned my body to face Violet, so I wouldn’t be so tempted to stare. I refused to watch the show that seemed to be just beginning. “I’m not worked up, Violet. Besides, your thoughts are headed in the wrong direction. He’s a friend of Elliott’s. He probably felt sorry for me. Stood up for me the way Elliott would have.”

I didn’t tell Violet about our night in the snow. I refused to. The memory belonged to us. So she had no idea we had ever spoken before the bonfire party, or that we had what my heart insisted on calling a short but intense history.

“Have you noticed anything peculiar about tonight?” Violet hummed, trying to make her question seem more like a juicy mystery.

“Violet.” I stood, stretching, running a hand down my stained dress. “I’ve been physically assaulted, laughed at, and I would’ve been mortified if my give-a-shit meter was still in working order. I’m tired. I’m bruised. I’m ready to *go*. So if you have something to say, just say it.”

“No need to get saucy.” She stood, taking me on, even though the only thing big

about her was her hair. “Guys never flirt with you. They *look* at you. Hoping you’ll catch them and then acknowledge their efforts. You are the epitome of beauty. No. *Daunting* beauty.” She shook her head. “English is really working for me this year.”

“Earlier you said I was beauty trapped in a tragic cage,” I reminded her.

“All great beauties are touched by the tragic. That’s what makes you so appealing. You are a classic, my friend. It’s hard to look *away* from you. And no one, not one soul, and there are a few here in need, has even so much as looked at you this evening.”

I tried to knock more mud off my clothes. “What does that even mean?”

“Hello.” She snapped her fingers. “Brando scared them away! What’s he even doing here? He’s too old for this scene. I’ve never seen him here before. Ben almost laughed at the idea of him stepping foot on this ground. He came here for the tragic beauty trapped in her cage, that’s why. The beast wants to rescue her and bring her to his lair.”

I laughed. Truly laughed. “Sure. Sure. And Carlos the Perv only knocked me to the ground to get my undivided attention. Like boys claim to do in Kindergarten when they have a crush.”

Violet gave me a square look. No humor. “It’s a known fact. When I was slow dancing with Ben I had wondered out loud why none of the guys at the party were even looking. Two words. Brando. Fausti. From what Ben claims, this is not the first time. Then one thing happened after another. And here we are. I saw with my own eyes what Ben had said was the truth.”

My eyes flew in Brando’s direction. He was watching me again. Mitch knocked him on the shoulder, motioning somewhere in the distance with his finger, while his mouth moved. Brando listened while his eyes stood intent on mine. After Mitch turned to the other guy, and a few girls, they started to move away.

Brando stood there for a moment, not following. His hand came up, a slow grin making its way across his face.

All of the air seemed to be sucked from my lungs. Something about him seemed too strong for this place, too overwhelming. The shape of his mouth alone made me go

weak in the knees. What was he even doing here, in this small town? He belonged in some place exotic, some place warm. He belonged in Italy.

He turned to leave and my heart exploded in my chest. I couldn't find it in myself to move, to even open my mouth. I must have been that way for a few seconds. When I could focus again, I realized Violet had been repeating my name over and over. Her hands were on my shoulders and she was shaking me.

“Did Carlos hurt you when he knocked you down? Scarlett? Scarlett!”

“I...” And then I was sprinting toward Brando, my legs carrying me with speed and agility. Close enough to touch him, I grabbed him by the wrist, yanking.

He turned so quickly that I almost fell backward. He caught me by the arms, pulling me toward him with enough strength that my face ended up against his chest. His heart pounded loud against my ear. It was as if my panic had somehow reached him and my own heart echoed from his body.

A terrible sensation rippled through me. The horrible feeling of my stomach dipping during an impossibly deep slope made my breath catch. I had him by the shirt, clinging with all my might. I pulled back, looking up at him.

That moment in the snow with my brother came back with an intense sharpness, piercing through the layers I had created to keep the hurt from surfacing.

“You...you can't go.” I couldn't get the words out fast enough. “You can't leave.”

I could see it in his eyes, a deluge of memories rushing forward. Something else was there too...reality.

“Oh God!” I cried out, prepared to admit the truth, anything to get him to stay and not leave me. “It's *you*. Can't you see? You...you were going with Elliott. After he left, I felt...”

Brando pulled me tighter against him, shielding me from prying eyes. “Don't say it. I'm not leaving. You'll stay with me.” He said something about light, but not loud enough that I could make out all of the words clearly—my heart felt as though it were lodged in my ears.

I pulled away a bit, looking down at his arms so I wouldn't have to meet his eyes. A tattoo of a ribbon wound from his left wrist, above the pulse point, all the way up to his

elbow. I traced the shape with my pointer finger, and goosebumps rose on his skin as though by magic. The smoke from the fire made my vision blurry.

“Stay with me,” he said. It wasn’t a question. It never seemed to be with him.  
“We’ll walk and talk.”

I nodded, not able to say anything else. The sensation had started to ebb, my heart starting to piece itself back together, one slow beat at a time. His decision to stay with me seemed to right my panic.

Intertwining our fingers together, I held on for dear life.

## **Also by Annie Rose Welch**

### **Saving Angels Series**

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### **The Ladies of Pistol Fanny's**

Pistol Fanny's Hank & Delilah

Hazel Darling: Sweetest Sister

### **The Beautiful Years**

Part I

Part II

## About the Author

Born and raised in New Orleans, Annie has a habit of shortening her words and telling long stories. She speaks with a southern flair and cooks with it too. At the tender age of twenty- one, she hitched up her wagons (took her first plane ride) and moved out west to the big shake (California).

Her passion for writing began one sleepless night when she imagined a gorgeous woman and a man with maniacal hair floating above her like lightning bugs falling from the sky. Curious about them, their story, and why they were floating around in her head, she sat down and penned (typed) her first novel, Marigny Street. A dream come true for her, she hasn't stopped writing since. She loves a damn good love story, always has, no matter what the genre. She is particularly moved by imperfect love that in its own unique way is perfect, the notion of love at first sight, soul mates, and things that are generally out of the norm.

When she's not writing she enjoys dabbling in photography and finding new, inspirational music to add to her collection. Deciding on a whim to hitch up those same wagons, Annie currently resides in Texas (where everything is bigger) with her husband, daughter, and their two peculiar dogs, Boudreaux and Tabasco (who, call her crazy, bark with an accent).

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