



HE'LL DO ANYTHING TO KEEP HER

DELICATE

THE ADAIR LEGACY: BOOK 4

DAME

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K. L. DONN

Delicate Dame

Adair Legacy

Book 4

KL Donn

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Models: Justin & Mackenzie

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Dedication

For all the Dominic and Carver fans, this ones for you!

Adair Empire/Legacy

Family Tree

- King & Lilith Adair ([King: Adair Empire Book 1](#))
- **Holden** (Noelle) Adair – [Killer Prince: Adair Legacy Book 3](#)
- **Aria** (Seven & Severo) Adair – [Broken Princess: Adair Legacy Book 1](#)

- Luther & Ariel Sutton ([Luther: Adair Empire Book 2](#))
- **Nolan** (Bea) Sutton – [Dark Knight: Adair Legacy Book 5](#)
- **Lake** (Saint) Sutton – [Vicious Saint: Adair Legacy Book 8](#)
- **Damien** (Whitney & Santo) Sutton – [Forbidden Temptress: Adair Legacy Book 9](#)

- Castiel & Talia Adair ([Castiel: Adair Empire Book 3](#))
- **Hadley** (Ashton) Adair – [Tortured Duchess: Adair Legacy Book 2](#)
- **Hendrix** (Miabella) Adair – [Vengeful Pawn: Adair Legacy Book 6](#)

- Atticus & Catalina Kincaid ([Atticus: Adair Empire Book 4](#))
- **Bishop** (Cordelia) Kincaid – [Damaged Bishop: Adair Legacy Book 7](#)
- **Easton** (Stella) Kincaid – [Beautiful Devil: Adair Legacy Book 10](#)

- Carver & Meadow Rivers ([Carver: Adair Empire Book 5](#))
- **Scotlyn** (Jaxson) Rivers – [Delicate Dame: Adair Legacy Book 4](#)
- **Saint** (Lake) Rivers – [Vicious Saint: Adair Legacy Book 8](#)

- Dimitri, Danika, & Daniel Petrov-Corelli ([Trinity: Adair Empire Book 6](#))
- **Seven** (Aria) Petrov-Corelli – [Broken Princess: Adair Legacy Book 1](#)
- **Severo** (Aria) Petrov-Corelli – [Broken Princess: Adair Legacy Book 1](#)
- **Santo** (Damien & Whitney) Petrov-Corelli – [Forbidden Temptress Adair Legacy Book 9](#)

Authors note: *While the **Adair Legacy** books can all be read as complete standalones and, in any order, I do suggest reading the **Adair Empire** series in order of books 1-6.*

Blurb

From *USA Today* Bestselling Author KL Donn comes an all-new obsessive, single dad meets prima ballerina, dark contemporary romance.

My parents fell madly in love when I was a kid. Now they have it in their heads that I need the same thing.

Convinced to try a blind date, I didn't expect to find the girl of my dreams.

A shy ballerina burned by love in the past.

We got through one date and multiple phone calls before life came barging in.

Just when I think I've got a handle on things, she goes missing. The trouble is, I didn't even know it until she showed up, soaked to the bone, beaten black and blue, and scared out of her mind.

Scotlyn Rivers is the epitome of strength, so I'm not shocked when she immediately loves my twin girls.

What's shocking is how easily she's willing to walk away to keep them safe from danger.

I never expected to love so easily, but a life without Scotlyn isn't one I'm willing to accept.

I'll keep her safe. I'll prove my love.

I'll do anything to keep her.

No matter who must die.

Reader beware, some themes may be triggering.

Chapter 1

Scotlyn

Jaxson: We still on for tonight?

Staring down at the message on my phone, I wonder if it's too late to cancel. I don't know why I agreed to use this dating app. I'm not even sure if I'm ready yet. My last relationship was a disaster and wound up with me in the hospital for a week with a broken arm, two fractured ribs, more stitches than I care to remember, and him in jail.

"Answer him, Scotty." My roommate, best friend, and fellow principal dancer at the Tumarov Theatre of Ballet stares at me like I've got the last slice of pineapple pizza we definitely are not allowed to have.

It's been a year since Nick beat me for the last time, and she insists I need to get back out there and meet someone, even if I only get a free meal or drink out of it.

"I don't know if I can do this, Libby." The entire idea has me vibrating with anxiety.

Standing only two inches taller than me, Libby grasps my shoulders in her hands, leans her forehead to mine, and says, "If you don't get dressed, I'm dragging you there just as you are." Ripping the phone from my hand, she replies to Jaxson's text, and I feel sick. "Come on. You have that gorgeous black and gold off-the-shoulder that will make him eat his tongue."

"I think you mean swallow." I groan as Libby pulls me behind her to my room. She opens the closet doors and grabs the dress in question, and I fall in love with it all over again.

“Fine.” I grab the hanger from her and slip out of the robe I’ve been wearing while trying to decide if I’m going. His text came through three hours ago; I hope he doesn’t stand me up now.

Slipping the garment over my head, it falls to just above my knees and hugs my curves without being too tight. The fabric of one shoulder drapes down while the other remains close to my neck. The bodice has tiny gold flecks that give it a classier look but is comfortable enough to be a go-anywhere dress.

“These ones.” Libby hands me a pair of black peep-toe heels with a small bow on the back. Slipping my feet into them, she forces me down onto the bed while she fishtails my hair into a braid. I wear it up too often and too high while with the theatre that I want a change when I’m home or going out. “Just a little shadow and mascara.” Her tongue pops out of the corner of her mouth as she applies my makeup, and within minutes, I’m ready to go.

My self-doubt kicks in again, and our eyes meet when she hands me the shiny gold clutch. “I’m not sure about this.”

“A free meal, Scotty. Take it. Enjoy it. If he sucks as company, leave and forget it all. But give yourself this. One night to just forget and enjoy. He is kinda a hottie.” *I remember.* We’ve been messaging for almost a week now, and he’s shared some photos of himself with me, but I haven’t been brave enough to reciprocate.

Jaxson is big like my brother Saint, but he’s got light hair and these chestnut brown eyes that bare his soul. It’s why I originally answered his request to chat.

“Okay, here I go,” I murmur, walking out of our cottage to my car—a white BMW 5 series my parents bought for me when I was offered the position at Tumarov almost two years ago. I’ve traveled the country because of the theatre and have loved every show. While the competition is fierce between dancers, we also have a healthy respect for each other and our art.

After Nick, I lost my confidence. I lost my love of dance and the creative outlet it's always provided me.

Six months ago, I was offered the lead in a timeless classic meant for royalty: *The Awakening of Flora*. I will dance the role of Flora, the Goddess of Spring. This will be the first time it's been performed in the USA, and while my excitement is indeed skyrocketing, so have my nerves. Which all led to Libby setting me up on this dating app. She wanted me to relax and concentrate on something other than dancing. I've been so obsessed with this play over the past few months that I finally gave in.

Parking in front of the restaurant in downtown Baltimore, I take a few deep breaths before exiting and handing the valet my keys. A door is opened for me, and the bustling atmosphere nearly has me turning around. Standing at the host's station, the woman gives me an apologetic smile as she deals with a demanding customer. I smile back and shake my head. She has nothing to worry about with me.

It gives me a moment to gaze around. The atmosphere feels fancy here but not quite black-tie. People range from relaxed in dress shirts and jeans or slacks to glitzy dresses. The kitchen is completely blocked off by a wall and swinging doors. The lights over the tables are dim but not so low that you can't read a menu or see your companion while conversing.

As my eyes roam over the customers, a man in a booth halts my perusal. Close-cropped light brown hair, a day or two worth of scruff on his face—but neat—and bulky shoulders make him stand out.

Jaxson is here, staring down at his phone so I can't see his eyes, but I know the intensity in them will grip me in their hold when I do.

“Can I help you, miss?” The hostess is finally free.

“Oh, uhm,” I stutter out before shaking my head. “I'm here with Jaxson.” I don't know his last name, so I hope he used his first on the reservation.

Her smile widens. “Of course, right this way.” She leads me to his table, but his head doesn’t lift from his phone until the woman clears her throat. Turning to me, she winks and walks away.

I can’t read his face as he stands; he’s much taller than my five-foot-three frame and *holy intimidating*. I’ve grown up with sizeable men, but this one is huge. Larger than his picture, I think. I feel like a pixie in his presence.

We stand in front of the table for a few seconds, which feels like minutes, while his eyes roam across my body, and I would swear I can feel his touch on my flesh. Shivering, my legs begin to shake, and without thought, I drop into the booth across from where he had been sitting. He frowns before taking a seat, and I just hope that when the floor opens up to swallow me, it doesn’t take him too.

Jax

I’ve never been on a blind date before. Never had the desire to date, period. Not for many years. But my younger sister, Gracin, thought it’d be a great idea for me to be less of a caveman and more of a human. I disagree. But here I am anyways. Waiting on a girl named Scotlyn, who was too shy to send me pictures but I’d been talking to for a week. When I didn’t get her text until about an hour before our dinner reservation, I wondered if it would even happen tonight.

My mother has been texting me nonstop because she, too, has been dying to know what this girl with such a different name looks like. A throat being cleared has me placing my phone on the table and staring up at a goddess.

Godfuckingdamn.

Scotlyn is ten times more beautiful than I imagined.

I stand up, intending to introduce myself, but my eyes won’t stray from her. She’s tiny, not even five and a half feet. She has this gorgeous mane of red hair with hints of blonde and brown in it, but I don’t think that’s anything but natural.

And her eyes, sweet fucking Jesus, I could get lost in the pools of spring green staring up at me.

I watch, perplexed, as she drops into the opposite side of the booth before re-taking my seat. Time passes as we stare at each other, but I don't care; I just want to feast my eyes on her. Learn everything I can before it's time to go.

"Hi, I'm Claudia; I'll be your server tonight. Can I start you both with some drinks?" I don't look away from Scotlyn, but her gaze flits up to the new woman, and I hear a gasp. "Oh, my goodness, you're her. You're Scotlyn Rivers." I hear the admiration in the woman's voice as Scotlyn's cheeks turn a shade lighter than her red hair.

"I am." Scotlyn nods, and when I see panic creep into her eyes, I become curious.

"I'm a huge fan. I loved you in *The Swan Princess*. I've watched the show at least once a month over the last year. You're just phenomenal. The emotion you portray is captivating." She sighs at the end, and I'm even more confused.

"Thank you." Scotlyn gives her a nervous smile, and I step in because I'm clearly missing something here.

"A bottle of Chardonnay," I tell Claudia.

"Of course, and I'm sorry for gushing. I'll be right back." She leaves, and Scotlyn's discomfort is apparent.

"You're an actress?" I hazard a guess.

She shakes her head. "Ballerina. She saw me in my last show." Shame haunts her tone.

"A year ago? That's either an impressive memory or you're one hell of a dancer." And I'm betting it's the latter because if I ever saw Scotlyn in a show, I'd for damn sure remember her.

She shrugs her shoulder, and I let the topic drop, sensing her unease. Reaching across the table, I lift her chin, needing to see her eyes again. "When you didn't send me a picture, I

wondered what you looked like.” Her gaze drops. “Can’t say I’m disappointed one bit.” She still doesn’t look up at me.

We’re interrupted by the server, who pours us each a glass of wine before taking her leave. It gives me a moment to study Scotlyn, the way she sits with the lower half of her body towards the restaurant, ready to bolt at a moment’s notice. Her hair is twisted to the side of the dress that drops off her shoulder, keeping her covered, when I imagine the designer’s point was to make it sexy and alluring. Which it is, but it helps camouflage her. Whether she wants to remain hidden because of her fame or something else is what puzzles me.

Taking a sip of my wine, I ease back in my seat and try to steer the conversation away from the silence we’re locked in. “You mentioned you aren’t from here?”

Her shoulders relax slightly, and her delicate hand reaches up to grab her glass. “I moved here from Florida two years ago.”

“Really?” Leaning closer, I watch the way she swallows as she takes a sip. Images of more erotic things enter my mind. “What part?”

Our eyes meet, and I’m right, I could get lost in her stare. “The Panhandle. Close to Pensacola.” She takes another drink, and there’s nothing I wish for more than to be able to taste her right now. “What about you? Are you from Baltimore?”

I nod. “I live about forty-five minutes out of the city on an acreage.”

Scotlyn perks up a little bit. “Do you have horses?”

“We do. Half a dozen. Some sheep, chickens, two cows, and a pig.” Her eyes widen with each animal I mention.

“We?” Her head tilts in curiosity.

“Yes. It’s my parents’ home, but my aunt and uncle live in another house that used to be a small cabin. And I live in the barn loft.”

“You live in a barn?” A smile threatens to break free on her face, and I’d kill to see it evolve.

“I do. It’s not as bad as it sounds. The horses occupy the bottom level, while I reside on the insulated and ventilated second level. Can’t smell the horseshit unless I leave the doors open, which doesn’t happen. Unless my sister comes over and starts some shit.” There’s been a time or two that Gracin has been a little vindictive about it, too.

“You have a sister?” I get a smile this time. A real one. It’s crooked, and a dimple pops out on both cheeks, making me want to lick them.

“Gracin, she’s twenty-four, a preschool teacher, and she lives here in the city. A thorn in my side, but I’m pretty fond of her.” Her tinkly laugh is like a shock to my system. It’s highly addicting. “What about you? Any siblings?”

Scotlyn nods before taking a drink of water. Her face tightens as she speaks, like she’s stressed. “Saint, he’s thirty-two, still down in the Panhandle. He, uhm, he works for my uncle.”

Scotlyn

Saint is a replica of our father, only I think he’s deadlier. I’ve heard the stories of Daddy when he first met Mom and after. The psychopath with a heart. I’m not sure Saint has one, though, except for Lake. She’s his salvation. If only they could get together.

“And what is it your uncle does?”

Talking about what my family is into isn’t something I’ve ever had to do before. I know that as soon as he hears the name, he’ll recognize who I am. Who I *truly* am, and he’ll likely run. I thought I wanted that at first, but I’m starting to like Jaxson. He’s sweet, funny, and without saying the words, I can tell he’s a family man.

Maybe it would be better if he did know because I don’t consider myself any of those things, and I don’t want to ruin him.

“Something with imports and exports,” I respond, playing clueless. My family used to run guns, sell drugs, and I believe they even had a brothel once, but I’m not certain. What they do now is so much more important, however. Nobody has any idea how many women they’ve saved from domestic abuse with their underground operations.

“Sounds like fun.” Jaxson’s tone is droll.

“I think boring is the word you’re looking for.” I try to laugh. After a minute of silence, the server reappears to take our order. Jaxson orders a steak and all the fixings while I get a chef’s salad and soup.

With our opening next week, I need to watch my weight. Any deviance in it, and I could throw the entire performance off-balance.

“What do you like to do for fun, Scotlyn?” The way he says my name, rolling off his tongue with a hint of arousal, nearly makes me shiver.

“It’s going to sound silly.”

“Try me.” He leans forward.

“Fishing.” Chewing on my bottom lip, I watch, fascinated, as his eyes follow and remain steady until his hand lifts. Cupping my jaw, his thumb slowly rolls my lip out of my mouth, rubbing along the flesh. Without thinking, my tongue dips out to moisten the path he just took. A low growl emanates from Jaxson, and when he stands abruptly and slides in beside me—boxing me into the booth—my heart pounds heavily in my chest.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with fishing,” he replies, but his eyes are still focused on my lips, and I lick them again. Before I know it, his mouth captures mine. One hand touches my thigh, with his fingers playing at the hem of my dress, while the other cups the back of my head.

I’ve never been kissed with such raw passion before. My body lights up for this man I barely know and breathing becomes difficult. He pulls me closer, holds me tighter, and when I feel like I have a handle on him, he stuns me by gliding

his hand along my thigh, his fingers gripping my upper leg with such possession.

“Jaxson,” I gasp his name, forcing myself to pull away so I can draw in a full breath. “Jaxson, wait, please.” His lips continue moving along my jaw, down my neck. But he stops, resting his head on my shoulder and breathing heavily.

“I’m sorry,” he groans, drawing back but not letting me go. “Fucking hell.” I stare at his face, seeing lust in his gaze. “I should have had better control.” I hear the regret in his tone.

“I liked it, Jaxson. A lot. But I’m not that kind of girl. I don’t do sex on the first date. Heck, I don’t normally *kiss* on the first date. You bring something out in me, however. I want to push my boundaries with you, but I don’t want to lose myself, either. Not again.” Blowing out a breath, I wait for him to say something.

He nods but doesn’t release me. “I’ll be honest. From the second I saw you, I knew you were different. Kissing you only confirms it. It’s been a long-ass time since I’ve been anywhere near a woman I’ve cared about.” The server interrupts, placing our food on the table. Without a word, she’s gone, sensing the tense moment. “I want us to go further than one night, Scotlyn. Tell me you do too.” I nod definitively.

I might have been dreading this date, but I’m glad I came. I needed this. I needed to reconnect passion with romance, sweetness, and intensity, without being violent. Jaxson is the precise type of man to remind me that the world isn’t as screwed up as I sometimes believe.

“Good. We can eat and talk at length because the more I learn about you now will make it easier to convince you to go on another date with me.” He winks with a cocky grin before returning to his side of the table.

The rest of dinner goes on without a hitch. We control our attraction as we share dessert and coffee while laughing at some of the stories he shares with me from his childhood. I’m not quite as ready to get that personal about my family yet. So many individuals have heard the name and automatically believe they’re terrible people. They aren’t. My dad and uncles

can be scary, have done things they'll never speak of to us girls, but, at their core, they're good men. They raised the boys to be good men, too.

My dad and Saint are whom I measure all guys up to. Jaxson is the only one who's ever stood a chance with them. So far, anyways.

After taking care of the bill, Jax escorts me outside with a hand on my back. Handing the valet our tickets, we stand off to the side and wait.

"I had a lovely evening with you, Jaxson." I gaze up at him, realizing now how much taller he is than me. My neck will kink if I have to look up at him all the time.

Brushing the hair back from my face, he leans down, kissing me again. Slower this time but no less intense. The desire bubbles beneath the surface as we pull apart. My car is swiftly parked in front of us, and he walks me to the driver's door before opening it for me. Settled in the seat, he buckles my belt, and my belly quivers from the chivalrous act.

"Call me when you get home." It's not a question but a command.

"Okay." I don't know what else to say. He takes my mouth again. Harder this time, as if to imprint his touch on me. I sigh when he pulls away, stands, and closes the door. With one last look at him, I pull away.

Driving home in a fog of pure joy, I notice the living room light on and know that Libby is waiting up for me. I park, grab my clutch, and rush inside, quietly closing the door, but she still hears me.

"I have coffee or wine at the ready. You need to tell me everything!" she gushes from the couch where she's wrapped up in a blanket, a book in her lap.

"In a minute." Pulling out my phone on my way to my room, I do as I promised and call Jaxson. Dropping back on my bed, we talk until he arrives home, only saying goodnight because Libby is standing in my doorway waiting to hear all about our night.

After hanging up, I change into a pair of shorts, thick socks, and an oversized sweater. We spend all night talking about the incredible man I met, and when I finally crawl into bed to get some sleep, I realize he just might be the one to change my life.

Chapter 2

Jax

“Daddy!” The high-pitched squeal is followed by my twin girls jumping into bed with me just as the sun is beginning to rise. “Was she a princess?” Bellamy asks. She’s minutes younger than Bethany and filled with every question possible.

“Better.” I grin as they lay their chins on my chest to listen. “She’s a ballerina.” Their matching brown eyes widen with delight.

“Wow.” Bethy glows with excitement. She loves to dance and sing but especially loves ballet. “Could she teach me?” Her unassuming voice whispers, making me grin.

Bethy is the shy one of my girls. They’re polar opposites and best friends. Where Bellamy is outgoing and draws the attention of a crowd in no time, Bethany is more likely to hide behind me, away from prying eyes. Having her ask for something from someone is huge, but I don’t make a big deal about it.

“I bet we could ask her one day.” I purposely didn’t tell Scotlyn about my girls. I had no idea the date would go so well. That I would feel like I had met the other half of my soul. But it did, and I’m confident that when the time is right, learning about my girls won’t scare her off.

“Do you think she’ll like us?” Belly asks, curiosity and a touch of worry in her gaze.

“Of course I do.” I have no doubt Scotlyn will love them, and they, her.

Growing up without a mother has been difficult for the girls. They have my mom and my aunt Ev, and my sister, but it's not quite the same. It's something I understand very well too. My birth mother was a terrible person who nearly had me and Deidre killed when I was my girls' age. I still remember the day Dad brought her home. The way she smiled at me, promised to make me pancakes and sang me an old Irish lullaby at bedtime until the nightmares faded.

Deidre is the mother I was meant to have. She's the woman my father swears was born to belong to him. They're as in love now as the day they met.

"Alright, up, get dressed, then we'll head to the house for breakfast." The girls were six months old when I realized their mother, Mila, wasn't up for the task. She tried damn hard, but it wasn't for her. We were never meant to be, but we stayed together and tried to be a family for the girls. The day after their first birthday, I gave her the freedom she desperately tried to squash. I have no doubt she loved our girls, which was why she went away. She knew that staying would only force her to resent them.

After signing away her rights and granting me full custody, she left, and we haven't seen her since. The girls don't ask about her, and I'm not sure if it's because they're afraid of the answers they'll receive or they just assume they don't have a mother. Mila left letters for them, knowing, one day, they would inquire as to why she wasn't there. I'm hoping it's not until they're much older that I need to give them to them.

"Nana says she's taking us shopping for new dresses today for the ballet next week!" For their fourth birthday two months ago, Mom got the girls tickets to a ballet performance. It's the first time this specific one is being performed in the country, and it's supposed to be a big deal. The girls are making a huge night of it: limo, dinner, show, everything.

"You don't leave Nana's sight." They've been known to hide from each other in the stores without thought as to who might be looking for them when they disappear.

“Yes, Daddy,” they say together with a snicker, and I shake my head. “Is Aunty Ev coming too?” I see them nod as they brush their teeth. *Good*, at least it’ll be a fair search.

Shutting my bedroom door, I slip into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt before grabbing my phone off the charger and sending Scotlyn a quick text.

Jax: Morning sunshine. I’ll call you this afternoon.

Taking a quick picture of the sun rising over the fields from my window, I hit send. We haven’t made plans for another date yet, but I plan to change that this afternoon, with the hope of seeing her again tomorrow.

“Ready?” I call to the girls as I scroll through the emails on my phone. The request for help at the bottom catches my attention.

“Papa!” Bethy shouts with excitement as she opens the door leading to the stairs in the barn. I laugh as both girls rush down to my dad, jumping into his arms.

“Whoa, there, little girl, what’d we say about running down them stairs like that?” Bethany casts her eyes down and apologizes while Bellamy looks ready to dispute him. “Not a bit of sass from you.” He points at Belly, and she scrunches up her nose.

“Sorry, Papa, we were just excited.” She doesn’t look the least bit sorry, but these girls have him wrapped around their fingers.

“Nana’s got breakfast cooking. Go on up to the house.” They both nod as he kisses their cheeks and run off to where Mom is standing on the back porch waiting for them.

Feeling my phone vibrating in my pocket, I pull it out to see a message from Scotlyn.

Sunshine: Beautiful view, here’s mine.

I burst out laughing when I see the picture of her friend behind her, flipping her off while guzzling a coffee.

“That her?” Dad asks, peering down at my phone.

“Yeah. She’s something else.” He eyes me strangely before walking to the horse stalls and opening Ranger’s. He’s a jet-black Mustang we rescued last year. Ranger is still timid around men, but he eats up the attention from my girls. Though, they aren’t allowed to ride him yet. Not until we’re certain he’s safe.

“Did you get an email this morning?” he finally asks as he finishes watering the horse.

“Yeah. I haven’t read it, though.” Pulling it up, I open it and see it’s an out-of-state request. My father was a mercenary for years before he found Deedee. After that, he and Uncle Casey started a private security firm. I followed them into the life after attending the police academy and spending four years on the streets and another two in a gang unit.

That all changed when Mila became pregnant with the girls.

“Sit down, Jaxson.” For the first time in my life, my father looks every bit his age.

I do as he requests, lowering myself onto one of the work benches. “What’s going on, Dad?”

Running a weathered hand down his face, he takes a seat next to me, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees before speaking. “I got a call last week. A young woman got into a bad marriage when she was guilt-ridden and feeling vulnerable.” He stares over at me, and I see something is eating at him.

“Okay, so we get her out,” I say. That’s nothing new. I’ve done it plenty of times before. New identities, new locations, new lives. Letting the past go sucks, but gaining freedom is worth every sacrifice.

“I know, son. I know.” He blows out a deep breath. “It’s Mila, Jaxson. Mila needs your help.”

Motherfucker.

I'm covered in sweat, can barely breathe, and I'm sure I've lost my weight in bodily fluids, but I feel alive. For the first time in a year, I'm inspired. Recreating the Goddess of Flowers with a modern twist is emotional and draining. But I'm wide awake and ready to continue.

"Take a break, Scotty. You're going to kill me." Libby pants across the stage as she tries to stay on her feet while drinking a bottle of water.

My role is to bring Mother Nature back to life at the dawn of a new day with the help of Goddess Eos—or Aurora as she is often referred to in Roman mythology—which is Libby's part. Together, we are the stars of the show. No matter how long or short the performance, we always give it our absolute best.

"I know, but can't you see it, *Aurora*?" I dance without music. "The blossoming of flowers. The changing of colors. Winter to spring to summer. New life." I get lost in the movements as I twirl around the studio, music playing that only I can hear.

My passion for the art of ballet is unmatched by anything else in my life. The freedom I get from flowing effortlessly, absorbing the feelings of the characters I portray, living in their skin as the world has seen, makes my blood pump harder than anything else.

"Earth to Scotlyn!" I hear Libby's voice and realize she must have called me multiple times.

"What?" I'm even more out of breath now.

"You've got a call." She walks over to me with a smug smile on her face as she hands me my phone, and she has me on video.

"That was fucking beautiful." Jaxson's face is filled with an emotion I don't fully recognize.

"Thank you," I murmur, brushing my drenched hair away from my face. I know I'm red and look a mess, but this is how I am about eighty percent of my life. It's hard to hide. "I didn't

expect you to call yet.” My gaze flicks up to the clock on the wall, and I’m shocked at the time.

“I told you I would this afternoon. It’s almost three.” Noticing the background, I can tell he’s in his vehicle.

“What are you doing?” Placing the phone against my bag as I sit down to get a drink, I can feel his eyes caressing me as if he were here.

“Well, after just witnessing the way you danced, I’m fucking pissed to have to tell you this.”

“Tell me what?” He swears a lot.

“I’m headed out of town on a job.” He doesn’t sound pleased about it.

Neither am I if I’m honest. “Oh.”

“Awe, shit, don’t do that to me, sunshine. I wouldn’t leave if it weren’t important.”

I don’t know why I’m upset. It was one date. One. Date. Maybe if I keep repeating it, I’ll believe it. One evening with Jaxson was so much more than I ever imagined it could be. We connected in a way I’ve never experienced before.

“Do you know when you’ll be back?” I plaster a smile on my face.

“I wish I could give you a firm date. But I just don’t know yet.” I’m not even sure what it is he does for a living. “I was hoping we could have a virtual date tomorrow night, though.”

“A what?” Libby calls from across the room.

Jaxson frowns before he breaks into a smile. “Virtual date. I can’t be there, but I for damn sure want to see you, Scotlyn. Please don’t make me beg.”

His eyes dart from the phone to the road so much that I fear for him getting into an accident. “Yes, okay. A virtual date.”

“Good.” He nods, then licks his lips. “Christ, I wish I could kiss you again. This is going to be fucking torture.”

“You say fuck a lot!” Libby yells out as she finishes gathering her things and leaves before he can respond.

“She’s a firecracker, isn’t she?” He laughs, and I can’t help but agree. Libby says precisely what’s on her mind all the time. “You going to be up around nine tomorrow night?”

“For you, I could be.” I bite my lip. I wasn’t raised to be coy or shy, but with him, I am. I haven’t decided whether that’s a good thing yet or not.

“Great. You choose what we’re having for dinner, and I’ll make sure I’ve got it.” I acknowledge that, and his face turns serious. “I’m going to miss you, Scotlyn.”

“We hardly know each other.” I roll my eyes and play glib, but inside, I feel the same way. I’m just afraid of getting my heart broken again.

“One day, real damn soon, you’re going to tell me why you guard that pretty heart so closely.” I swallow at his astute observation.

“And one day, you’re going to tell me what you do that drags you out of town,” I throw back at him.

“Private security,” he replies. “I work for my dad, but this case is different. Normally, he’d send someone else, but it’s a little more personal this time.”

“Well, that doesn’t worry me at all.” It sounds so cryptic. Like something my brother or one of my cousins would say.

“I promise to explain when I get home, okay?” The sincerity has me acquiescing. “I’ve got to go for now, but I’ll call you tonight once I’ve gotten settled.”

Nodding, I blow him a kiss. “Bye, Jaxson, be safe.” He looks crushed that it’s not a real one.

“I’ll talk to you later, Scotlyn.”

After hanging up, I feel confused. I’m not sure how long I sit on the floor staring at my phone, but when I get up, my ass is numb.

Jaxson brings up so many emotions in me. All of them good. But I'm not sure how I feel about that. Just yesterday, I was insistent with Libby that I wasn't ready yet, and now, I'm disappointed that he's leaving town. *What gives?*

Walking out of the studio towards the dressing room, my head is tilted down, looking for my key card, so I don't see the man as I run into him.

"Shit, I'm so sorry," I mutter without glancing up as I drop to the ground to pick up my bag, water, and towel. Thankfully, nothing embarrassing has spilled out.

"Is no worry," the stranger growls, and I finally look up to see him watching me. "Who are you?" He barks out the question with so much force that I'm surprised I don't get blown backwards.

"Scotlyn Rivers," I answer, standing and hugging my bag to my chest.

Recognition enters his gaze and is gone so quickly that I'm not sure I even saw it. "Ah, yes. You are one of mine."

Frowning, my jaw tightens. "I assure you, I'm no one's. Please excuse me." I attempt to circumvent the burly man, but he grasps my upper arm so tightly, I feel like it's going to pop out of my shoulder. "Let go," I grit out.

The man's upper lip curls back, and he stands taller, trying to be more intimidating. "No. You belong to me."

Wrenching my arm back, he doesn't release me. "Listen, I will call for security if you don't let me go right now, buddy." Saint always told me, never allow my fear to show. Bullies will thrive on it. And this man is most assuredly a bully.

He throws his head back, laughing loudly, as his hand drops. "I like you," he says, his accent thick, as he takes a step forward, pushing me back into the wall. "But do not deny me, prima."

"Hey, Scotty, are we—oh, uhm, am I interrupting something?" Libby bursts through the dressing room doors.

The stranger's head turns, and I see a deadly glare in his eyes as he spots my friend. Taking my chance, I slip away from him and rush towards her. "Yup, let's go." I push her through the door and flip the deadbolt as I slam it shut behind us.

"Who was that guy?" Her hand grasps my arm just below where he did, and without looking, I know his fingerprints were left behind, marking me. "What an asshole."

"You're telling me."

We quickly get dressed and leave the building in a rush before heading out for dinner at our favorite salad bar. We spend the next hour mostly in silence as we pick at our food, my encounter with the guy at the theatre still fresh in our minds and slightly worrisome because not just anyone has access to the building. Their security is tight. Which means he must work there. The thought sends a fearful shiver down my spine.

Jax

The drive into Delaware takes about an hour and a half, and I'm pissed the entire time. Seeing Mila isn't high on my priority list, especially after just meeting Scotlyn. I'm keeping enough secrets from her; I don't need one more. Thankfully, Dad has done a lot of the grunt work for me, so my job is to get her into her house to grab her belongings and secure her at another location after meeting with the detective assigned to her.

I should only be here a few days, and then I can hug my little girls again, and hopefully, convince Scotlyn to let me kiss her some more because not doing so would likely kill me. I never gave much credence to the things my parents said about instant love. Not after Mila. We were never in love, just having a good time. The girls were a surprise neither of us was prepared for, but we gave it a shot for them.

I thought the girls and I were getting along well as a small family, but after meeting Scotlyn, I can see we've been

missing a woman's touch. But not just any woman. The right woman. Scotlyn is the one I want. I'll do anything to ensure I don't fuck this up with her.

Parking in the hotel lot, I climb out, searching my surroundings as I grab my duffel bag from the back seat. Nothing appears out of place as I stroll towards the room number I was given. Knocking three times, the door flies open, and I suffer a moment of regret when I see Mila's bruised face and broken nose.

"Jax," she sighs like we're long-lost lovers.

"Mr. Slade," I correct her. I'm not falling into any old patterns with her. "Mrs. Winters, if we could step inside." My voice is cold as I move forward and she moves back, closing the door behind me. I see two beds in the room, with a compact table and chairs in one corner. A TV sits on the dresser, and a single door leads to the bathroom.

"Jax, we don't have to—"

"Mr. Slade," I repeat. I won't budge on that. While I respect Mila for knowing she couldn't give our girls the mother they deserved, it doesn't mean I have to like her.

She sighs and plops on the bed, a pout on her swollen lips. "Fine. Mr. Slade, I was simply stating that we don't have to be so formal. We know each other; we share chi—"

I stop her. "No, Mrs. Winters, we don't share children. *I* have children. You don't. You gave up that right, and this is the very last I'll speak of them. Do you understand?"

Her eyes roll, and I can tell it doesn't bother her one bit to not bring them up again. "Yes, Mr. Slade, I understand."

Nodding, I begin securing the modest room. Door locked, windows locked, curtains closed.

"Do you even want to know what happened?" she asks as I pull out my laptop.

"My job is to secure you at a new location after making sure you gather your belongings. The detectives will have a safe house ready for you in two days. That's all I need to

know.” Pulling up my email, I read through the file I was given again to ensure I hadn’t missed any details.

“Seriously?” Her foot stomps, drawing my attention.

Closing the device, I blow out a frustrated breath. Remaining professional in any job is essential, but she obviously wants to push the boundaries.

“You were told that if I took this job, there would be nothing personal between us. We are not friends, we are not co-parents, we are complete strangers, Mrs. Winters. And it will remain this way unless you’d rather I left. In which case, I’ll call the detective, and he can babysit you.” Her body tenses as I stand. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to order us dinner and make a call. Please do not come out of this room or peek out the windows.” I don’t wait for her to answer me as I leave.

Leaning against the hood of my SUV, three doors down from her room, I order a couple of pizzas and give Scotlyn that call I promised.

“Hey, you!” She sounds out of breath, and all I can picture is her dancing again. “You made it safely?”

“I did.” I grind my jaw. I’m frustrated about this entire situation. “What are you up to?” Anything is better than what I’m doing.

“Well, I can’t tell you that. But you’ll see in a few minutes.” Her giggle has me standing up taller.

“That so? And just what will I see?” I’m intrigued.

“If you hung up, you’d see,” she taunts, and I’m damn tempted.

“I’d rather hear your voice right now.” I’d rather she be in my arms if I’m completely honest. “I’d like to hear you moaning my name. Breathing heavily in my ear, squirming in my arms.” *Fuck*, why did I just do that to myself?

I’m a glutton for punishment, apparently.

“Oh, wow, Jaxson.” The way she sighs my name makes my dick stand at attention.

“Tell me what you’re up to, sunshine,” I demand with a little more force in my tone.

“One second.” Her voice gets farther away, and when my phone starts dinging, I know she’s sent me something. “Did you get them?”

Putting her on speaker, I pull up her messages and watch as image after image appears. Some are of her dancing, laughing, but the last one with the phone to her ear, eyes closed, tongue peeking out of her mouth, I know that one is from just now.

“Christ, Scotlyn. Are you trying to kill me here?”

“I thought it was important for you to have that last one, so you can see that I’m affected the same as you are by the distance between us.” She sounds sad, and I wish like hell I were there right now. “I have one more, though. Promise not to show anyone?” Her nerves shake her voice.

“On my life,” I vow, and I can see the image processing. “Holy fuck,” I groan.

It’s a shot of her from behind, bent forward at an angle towards a mirror so that I can see every curve of her body. She’s wearing a matching white lace panty and bralette. My dick is harder than it’s ever been, dying to be inside of her.

“Jaxson? Are you still there?” Her voice is hushed.

“Yeah,” I croak. “Just trying to find my tongue. You’re fucking gorgeous, sunshine. You take that just for me?”

“Yes,” she whispers. My cock twitches in my pants. “Libby sort of convinced me at dinner. She suggested that since we only had one date, you might need incentive to come back sooner rather than later for a second one.”

“Also, so he wouldn’t stray!” Her friend’s voice echoes in the background.

“Not a fucking chance I would stray. One taste was enough for me to know exactly what I wanted.”

“It was?” Scotlyn’s tone is reticent.

“Yeah, sunshine, it was. I really wish that I’d stayed now, though. Seeing you like this in person is going to be one hell of a treat.” Scrubbing my jaw roughly, I don’t know how I’ll last more than a night away from her.

“I wasn’t going to send the last one. I didn’t want to give you the wrong idea.” Her voice trails off.

“Never. You couldn’t. But when I get home, we’ll have a nice long talk about what we’re doing.” And I have to tell her about my girls.

“Do you know how long you’ll be?” I can hear the pout in her tone, and it makes me grin. Good, I’m glad she misses me.

“Three days at least.” Too damn many. “Sunshine, I’ve got to go,” I say as I see the pizza delivery arrive. Flaggering the guy down, he acknowledges me and heads this way.

“Already?” She’s going to fucking kill me.

“We’ll talk tomorrow. You still need to tell me what we’re having for dinner.” The virtual date idea came out of nowhere, but I’m looking forward to it for damn sure.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Jaxson.” She sounds as disappointed as I am that I have to end the call. And it damn near kills me to hang up with her, but I know the sooner I get this job over with, the better.

Paying for the pizza, I go back into the room to find Mila sitting in the same spot as before. “You hungry?” She nods but doesn’t say anything as she comes over to grab a slice.

Going back to my emails, I familiarize myself with her soon-to-be ex. He’s a lawyer with a bad attitude and a reputation for working with some of the worst criminals in the state.

“How’d you meet him?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “I was a server; he came in every night, asked for my section. He was nice at first. Then we got married.” Which is typical for men like him.

“How long has he been hitting you?” I know what the file says, but many women leave out the beginning when it was

just a slap here or there.

“Since our wedding night. But it wasn’t too horrible until about a year later. There were hospital visits. Excuses. Promises. I can’t do it anymore.” I believe her.

“Will he know who I am?” If he does, I will have to tell my parents and get extra security at the house because of the girls.

She shakes her head. “No, he doesn’t even know about the girls.” I breathe a little easier. “I kept that part of my past from him.” I express my thanks.

Mila will be going into witness protection until a trial can be set, so I looked up the one man her ex could very well send after her. He has ties to organized crime and likely won’t appreciate his lawyer getting sent to jail. Especially since she has evidence on both of them about the disappearance of the man’s last girlfriend. It’s the entire reason why she’s being secreted away.

“We’re switching hotels tomorrow, so you better get some sleep. It’s going to be a long day.” I don’t like staying in one place for long when dealing with criminals like this. There’s always the chance someone could recognize her, or they could follow us back here, no matter how many precautions I take.

Chapter 3

Scotlyn

Over the past few days, the director demanded more rehearsals and less downtime. Which meant I had to cancel my virtual date with Jaxson two days ago, and I still feel sick about it.

Diego typically requests that we relax and find our Zen in the two days prior to such an anticipated show, but someone must have spooked him because he's worked us harder than usual.

"Only six more hours until it's all over," Libby gasps, standing next to me as we're fitted into our costumes before entering hair and makeup.

"Technically four if you don't count the meet-and-greet afterwards." Sometimes counting down until the performance is done helps us cope with the exhaustion we know we're about to experience.

"Only four more hours." She laughs as we're tied into the bodices that restrict our breathing.

"Ladies." Diego enters our dressing room with two men behind him, one of whom I recognize. "This is Sergei Tumarov. You may know him as the owner of our grand theatre. He came all the way from Russia to watch you perform his country's most famous ballet."

Standing, we curtsy out of respect. "Is pleasure," Sergei says, invading my space and grasping my hand, kissing the inside of my wrist. "I will take you for dinner after show." When I'm about to dispute his command, Diego shakes his

head at me. It's the fear in his eyes that stops me from saying anything at all. "We wish you best of dancing tonight." His stilted English doesn't leave room for argument, so we smile and thank them.

"That was awkward," Libby mutters when they leave.

"You think? And what was with Diego?" That man isn't one I would peg as scared of anyone.

"Maybe they threatened to fire him if we botched this performance?" Maybe. But it doesn't seem likely. Diego has been here for nearly ten years and has never received a single disparaging review. There's no reason to believe tonight will be any different.

Going through hair and makeup takes up the rest of our free time until suddenly, we're on stage, the music playing. Diego's voice booms throughout the theatre, and then it's showtime.

The curtains draw back, the orchestra is poised before the front row, slightly below stage level but visible, and I give the cue to begin. The number starts slow, with soft movements and long, sweeping turns, as I slowly introduce the audience to Flora as she blossoms into a goddess.

By the time Libby joins me on stage, the other dancers have frozen in the background, waiting for their cue to begin again. Libby and I dance as though we are one, in sync like every time before, until the show is over.

A year of training and arduous work has come to a close, and we're panting—exhausted and slightly numb—and exhilarated. Waiting to collapse until the curtains have drawn to a close, we all breathe a massive sigh of relief.

"Ten minutes!" one of the stagehands calls to let us know when the special meet-and-greet will begin. We don't do them after every show, but since this is the first time Libby and I have been the principal dancers, Diego thought it important for us to do. We agreed. This time, there were no men to introduce romance into the story and turn the performance into anything

other than what it was. Two women transforming into whom they were always meant to be.

“That was amazing,” I compliment my best friend as we begin untying each other’s slippers as our preferred footwear is brought to us. I like a simple, fuzzy pair of socks to keep my feet warm, while Libby likes a pair of sneakers.

“It was beautiful,” she agrees.

Once ready, we stand together and head towards the stage exit to join some members of the audience.

“Nana, there she is!” A little girl’s voice catches my attention as soon as I step into the light. Twin girls stand with an older woman, who is watching me. Beautiful blonde curls topple from their heads, and wide brown eyes, the same color as milk chocolate, stare across the room at me.

Smiling, I stride towards them, wishing to meet them before anyone else. Crouching down to their level, they step into their Nana but are still curious.

“Good evening, primas.” They both giggle and share a look. “I am Goddess Flora.” Bowing my head, I pluck a twine of baby’s breath from my hair for them. “And these are for you.”

They each take a stalk and giggle again. “What do you say, girls?” Nana nudges them.

“Thank you,” they reply together.

“You are most welcome. Did you enjoy the show?” They nod, their curls bouncing, before one of them begins to yawn, and the other says, “It was our birthday present from Nana.”

“Well, happy birthday! What a special treat for me that you chose to come here.” They are the cutest little girls I’ve ever seen.

“Our birthday was two months ago. Nana got them on the day they went up for sale.” One girl stares up at the woman with nothing short of admiration in her gaze.

“The ballet is still a wonderful treat to celebrate such a special day.” The other girl raises her hand to touch my hair

before pulling back. “It’s okay; you can feel it.”

“You look like Ariel,” she whispers.

“The mermaid princess?” She nods. “Well, thank you. You know, I have an aunt named Ariel, and her hair is the exact same color. And when she sings, she sounds just like the sea princess.”

“Wow!” they respond in tandem.

After we take a few pictures together, their Nana announces, “Time to go, girls. We have to get you both to bed.” Grasping each of their hands before smiling down at me, she says, “Thank you for coming to speak to them. They were absolutely taken with you during the performance. You dance beautifully.”

Blushing as I stand, I wish I could talk to these three all night. “It was my pleasure. Please come back. We have wonderful summer programs for kids, and I believe there was a whisper of a winter event happening this year, too.”

Waving goodbye, they’re barely out of my sight before a meaty hand grabs my arm, aggravating the already bruised area. “Excuse you,” I snap at the man I now know as Sergei. “You really need to stop touching me.”

He doesn’t say anything as he and his companion drag me into the back of the theatre, where they throw a hood over my head. “What are you doing? Stop it! Help!” I call out, but I don’t know whether there’s anyone here to help me or if they can even hear me. I know that eventually, Libby will notice I’m missing, and she’ll raise hell, but for now, I’m on my own.

Jax

Sitting on the front steps of the main house, I know now, that the ballet Mom was taking the girls to was Scotlyn’s performance. I’m anxious to hear what they think of her dancing. Especially because I couldn’t go myself.

I only arrived home an hour ago, after the longest five days of my life. Mila is now settled with the Marshall’s service

before finding her way to her final destination. Retrieving her belongings went as expected. We switched hotels twice because her ex thought he was sly. I was better.

All in all, Mila is back out of my life, and after that first night, she never tried to get personal again. Never once asked about the girls or if I had re-married. For which I was grateful. I can talk all damn day about my girls, but not with her. Resentment would have bubbled up, and I wouldn't have been able to keep my mouth shut for long.

It's over now, and we can both move on. I'll be starting that with Scotlyn just as soon as I get these girls into bed. I promised to let them sleep at the main house because it's a weekend, and they enjoy getting up early with their Nana to make a big family breakfast. Which gives me time to call Scotlyn tonight and talk with her as long as I want without worrying that I will wake up one or both of my children.

Catching headlights come up the drive, I get to my feet and grin when I hear my family singing through the open windows of Mom's car. She did the same thing with me when I was a boy. It's how I knew she was meant to be my mom. Deidre never denied me a damn thing and made certain I knew how much she and Dad loved me every single day.

"Ladies, sounding lovely as always." Mom snorts at my lie because they were off-key, and she knows it.

"The girls were amazing, Jaxson, like always." Of that, I have no doubt. They love their Nana and wouldn't do a thing to cause her stress or pain.

Helping them out of the car, I notice the baby's breath in their hair. "What's this?" I ask as I follow them along into the house.

"The ballerina gave it to us." Bethy twirls and sighs.

"She was so pretty, Daddy. She had Ariel's hair." *The Little Mermaid* is their favorite movie to watch.

I grin because, by that statement, it means they've met Scotlyn. "Was she as kind as Ariel?" I ask as I help them take off their coats and hang them up.

“Nicer,” Bethy says. “She called us primas. Do you know what that is, Daddy?” I shake my head. “Prima is the top ballerina. She’s the best, and the goddess called us that.” Okay, now I’m confused and look up to mom for help. She laughs and shakes her head.

“Alright, primas. Up to bed, teeth brushed, and jammies,” Mom instructs, and they hop to it.

“Goodnight, Daddy,” they both call as they rush up the stairs.

“You don’t fool me, Jaxson Slade,” Mom says as she walks towards the kitchen, pulling out a jug of water. “Your eyes softened as soon as they mentioned the red hair. That’s her, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s my Scotlyn,” I murmur, amazed that she met my girls and was so kind as to give them what can only be described as a magical night.

“She’s going to be a perfect mother to those girls.” My mother hands me a glass of water.

“How do I tell her about them and not scare her off?” When I started talking to Scotlyn, I had no idea how things would go with us. No clue that after meeting her, I would see our entire life together. But now, I’m like a little boy waiting for approval.

I love my girls to death and would do anything for them, but I have no idea how to tell the woman I’d like to spend my life with that they exist.

“It’ll come naturally, Jaxson. When the time is right for you both, you’ll know just what to say. The best part is that she already knows them. She just doesn’t know they’re yours. And I’ll tell you, she ignored scores of people to meet the girls first. Her entire face lit up when she saw them standing with me, waiting, hoping they would get to meet her.” Sounds like Mom is just as in awe of her as the girls are. “So many people the world idolizes let them down once they’ve met, but she treated your babies like queens. Remember that.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Kissing her cheek, I watch her walk upstairs as Dad’s headlights shine through the window. Stepping outside, I wish him goodnight and head up to my loft.

The only thing I want to do is talk to Scotlyn and have a hot shower. Hitting the FaceTime button, I hope she isn’t too busy to talk to me now. We’ve been hit-and-miss with each other all week. She was frustrated that the director was making them practice twice as much as expected, and we had to skip our date.

As the call goes unanswered, I decide to shower and try again once I’m out. I send her a text first, so she knows what I’m doing if I don’t answer should she call me back.

I whip through a shower and slip into a pair of shorts before settling into bed. Trying Scotlyn again, it goes straight to voicemail this time. As if someone has shut off her phone. Disappointed, I hop on my laptop to see if there are any early reviews of her show yet. Maybe it didn’t go as well as she imagined, and she’s embarrassed.

But according to reviews and social media posts, the performance was outstanding, and Scotlyn is being praised. People are saying it’s her best work to date. Perplexed, I call her again.

Straight to voicemail. “Sunshine, it’s Jax. I really need to hear from you. Tell me you’re okay. Call me back.” Tossing my phone on the bed, I pace the apartment for hours, waiting for a call that doesn’t come, and I haven’t a fucking clue why.

Scotlyn

Confusion surrounds me as I stare at the white wall across from the bed I’m chained to. It’s been mere hours since the end of the show and I was dragged out of the theatre. I don’t even know why. This man, Sergei, he owns the theatre—or his family does—but I’d never seen him around before a few days ago. I’m not stupid; I know he’s corrupt, but there’s no way I’ve witnessed something, either.

I'm angry, frustrated, and puzzled. He doesn't scare me, not in the way I assume they're trying to. They have no idea who I am or where I come from. If they did, they wouldn't have taken me. There isn't a person on this planet that would risk the wrath of my father or brother.

"Hey!" I scream out again. "You're going to have to tell me what's going on sooner or later!" I'm ignored or unheard.

"Come on, Scotty, think." Leaning my head back against the chilly wall, I'm still in my dress and skirt from last night. At least the socks help keep my feet warm. Bending towards my hands, I pull my hair out of the restrictive bun and keep hold of a couple of the bobby pins. I was never able to master lock-picking when Saint or Bishop used to try and teach me, but it might be my only shot.

With not much room to maneuver my hands—they're bent in awkward positions—wiggling in the lock is difficult. I hear doors slamming shut and close my eyes, focusing on the mechanisms inside the handcuffs. It doesn't work, and panic sets in.

I'm aware of multiple footsteps entering the house, and I realize they're back, making me sloppy. With voices right outside my door, I quickly hide the other bobby pins, but I'm unable to get the one out of the lock.

"What are you doing?" Sergei growls as he storms through the door.

"I had to pee?" His hand reaches out so quickly that I don't have time to pull away.

Grasping my chin with an iron fist, he wrenches me closer so my hip hits the metal bedpost with bruising force. "Do not talk back. You are mine. We are to wed." My eyebrows raise to the roof.

"Like hell we are. I'm not yours or anyone's." With a feral growl, he tosses me back on the bed, my head barely missing the wall.

Dropping his weight down on top of me, he slams his hips between my legs, forcing his erection against my sex. I feel

sick. “You will be mine. I’ll take you home, and you’ll do as I say.” He seems so confident that I’ll submit to him.

The rebel in me rears her head. “No. I won’t.” His meaty fist buries itself in my kidney with such brutal force that if I had anything in my stomach, I would have puked. As it is, I’m dizzy and seeing stars.

“You will.” His other hand encircles my neck, squeezing, choking, stealing my breath until my eyes begin to drift shut from lack of oxygen. “You will say yes and be my wife. Not his.”

My hands release his wrist and claw at his face when I feel myself fading away. I can’t lose consciousness. Who knows what he’ll do to me if I do? Scratching at his eyes, I feel wetness on my fingers as he roars, sitting back.

The next blow is accompanied by blinding pain that causes me to retch up the little bit left in my stomach. All I feel after that is agony until mercy is granted, and I pass out.

Chapter 4

Scotlyn

Grasping awake, I see another horizon darken as the house remains silent. Almost too silent. I've counted three sunsets since being abducted. Suffered countless beatings because I won't stay quiet or obedient. I've gathered from pieces of conversation in both English and Russian—thank you, Aunty Nika and Uncle Dimitri, for making sure we had a few basics—that they're waiting for me to heal from the countless hours of abuse they've dished out and to be certain I won't try asking for help while going through airport security.

Sergei intends on taking me back to Russia and forcing a marriage on me that I don't want, and I wholeheartedly intend on making sure that doesn't happen. Which is why I fought back a little harder with his goon the last time. I haven't been allowed to change since getting here, so hiding the single key from his coat pocket in my bodice was a little tricky, but as I dig for it, I find it and nearly weep with relief.

I have no idea where I am, but I know that if this key fits and I manage to get free, I will have to run hard and fast. Closing my eyes, I say a little prayer before inserting it and turning. The restraint pops, and I feel instant relief and elation. I bite my lip to keep from crying out my victory.

Undoing the other cuff, I pull my stupid socks up to make sure they're secure on my feet. As my only protection for my most valuable asset at the moment, I need to keep them injury-free. Standing up, I steady myself with a hand on the wall. I'm weak from not being fed and given only minimal water while I've been here.

Creeping towards the door, I'm careful of my steps. I never heard any creaky boards while the men walked in and out of here, but that doesn't mean they don't exist to give me away. Holding my side, where I'm reasonably sure I have a cracked rib or possibly some bruised organs, I twist the doorknob. Relief overtakes me when I find it unlocked.

No lights are on, and I don't hear any noise to indicate someone is here. Even though I know there must be. They haven't put this much effort into breaking me just to leave me alone. Then again, maybe they genuinely have no idea who I am. Because surely, if they did, they'd know not to keep me here for long. My family is notorious for finding things and getting precisely what it is they want. Especially when one of their own has been taken. And my family has to know by now. I always call the day after a big performance. Mom would have been expecting my call. We had spoken two days before, and she knew how nervous and excited I was about it.

They have to know.

Somebody must know I'm missing.

Libby would; she would cause hell. We're as close as sisters.

This doubt isn't helping me any.

Shaking the thoughts from my mind, I move slowly and stick close to the walls down the hallway until I see the front door. The entrance to another room is right next to it, and I peer slowly around the corner. A burly body sleeps on the sofa, and I inwardly curse. I figured he would be here, but I was hoping he wasn't.

Weighing my options, I dart across the opening quickly and peer outside to see where I am. One vehicle sits in the driveway, city lights burn the night sky, and I breathe for the first time in days. It seemed like I wasn't in the vehicle long enough to be out of the city, but after the fog I'd been in, I wasn't sure.

Searching the walls for an alarm of any kind, I flick the locks open before glancing back outside to make sure there

isn't anyone patrolling. I know I should try to find a phone or the car keys, but I don't want to risk my captor waking up.

Opening the door slowly, I slip through the scant crack and quietly shut it behind me. Slinking down the steps on tiptoes, one creaks, and I jump off, making a mad dash for the bushes along the sidewalk. Hidden, I crouch down to remain out of sight and move as fast as I can until I'm three houses down.

Tears flow down my face as my body aches, and I know I must think quickly. Noticing an alley, I move stealthily through the streets, in random order so they don't find me, before finally spotting a pay phone. A rare commodity in this age of technology.

With no money, I make a collect call to my brother. He'll know exactly what to do. Instead of saying my name, I rush out, *please help me, Saint*, knowing he'll hear the urgency.

"Scotlyn?" he barks, and I cry, my body nearly collapsing. "Where the fuck have you been? We've been searching for you for days. Danny can't find you either."

"I don't know what to do, Saint. He took me, and I couldn't stop him." Leaning against the brick wall, I struggle to stay on my feet.

"I'm putting you on speaker, Scotty. Everybody's here." The fury in his tone doesn't bode well for my abductor.

"Baby girl, where are you?"

"Daddy!" I cry so hard I begin to hyperventilate.

"Breathe, Scotlyn; we need to know where you are." I can tell he's barely holding onto his anger.

Gathering my composure, I tell him, "I'm still in Baltimore. Sergei Tumarov, Daddy, he did this. He was going to take me back to Russia. Force me to marry him." I still feel sick about it.

"He owns the theatre," Dad responds, and I nod, realizing they can't see me.

"Scotty girl, it's Easton. Give me your location. Do you have somewhere safe you can go? Not home." Looking at the

cross streets, I tell him what they are and the name of the store I'm in front of.

"I do, but I don't know where he lives." Jaxson is the only person I can think of.

"Give me their name, and I'll get you there," Easton says, and I can hear him speaking to someone.

"Jaxson. Jaxson Slade. He works in private security with his dad and uncle. He said they live about forty-five minutes out of town on a large parcel of land." I know Easton will come through for me; this is what he does.

"A town car is on the way. We'll stay on the phone until it gets there. The password is gravity on Pluto. If he doesn't say that, you scream bloody murder, kick him in the dick, and fucking run. You got me, Scotty?"

"Scotlyn?" Saint barks my name.

"I understand." I feel weak. Exhausted. "I'm so tired, Daddy." To the world, he's a cold-blooded killer, to me, he's a hero.

"We're coming, baby girl. I'll slit this motherfucker from balls to neck." And I know he's serious. Sergei is going to rue the day he touched me. I just need to survive the night first.

"Scotlyn, we'll be there in the morning. Make sure this friend of yours knows it." This isn't going to be good.

"A car is here." Standing taller, I wave him down.

A man in all black, with a gun holstered to his side, steps out and says, "Gravity on Pluto." Relief makes my knees shake, and I can't stand up anymore.

The man catches me as Easton speaks. "He's got Jaxson Slade's address and will take you there. You'll be given an envelope when he drops you off; take it and call us when you get settled."

I hang up, and the man places me in the back of the car. I lean against the cool window, shivering, and watch the night crawl by as we leave the city. Time passes, pain increases, and

as we pull into what surely isn't your typical old acreage, I feel sick to my stomach.

The driver helps me out of the car and hands me an envelope before I tell him he can leave. Staring up at the house and then over to the barn, I know where I'm going. Sluggishly, I stride towards the barn, hoping it is the one Jaxson said he has an apartment over. As I reach the heavy doors, I barely get one open before slipping through and sliding to the ground. I make it inside just as it begins to rain.

Crawling over to a bench with a blanket on it, I lie on the floor and silently cry as I open the envelope. Finding a new phone and some cash, I pull out the cell and turn it on.

Calling my dad, I'm unable to quell the tears, the heavy breathing, the constrictor tightening my throat. "I'm here, baby girl. Have you arrived?" I nod, but he can't see me. "I need words, Scotlyn."

"I'm here," I hiss out.

"Good. Can I speak to Jaxson?" I've never heard my dad so civil before.

Staring at the stairs leading up to what I think is the apartment, I gulp. "There's too many stairs."

"What?" I've obviously confused the man.

"He lives above the barn. There are too many stairs. I need to rest." A yawn cracks my jaw, and pain explodes along my face.

"Okay, baby girl, okay. Are you at least inside this barn, out of the elements? Easton says it's supposed to storm tonight."

"Mmhmm." For the first time in days, I feel semi-safe.

"Mom's here," Daddy says.

"Scotlyn? Sweetheart." Her voice cracks. "Are you alright?"

"I'm okay, Mama. Tired. Will you sing to me?" She used to do it when I was a little girl and had nightmares.

Her soothing voice filters through the speaker, singing “Hush Little Baby”. It was always my favorite song. By the second verse, I’ve placed the phone next to my head as I pull the blanket up higher, and I fall asleep to the sounds of her voice, lulling me into a sense of security.

Chapter 5

Jax

I'm up before dawn again, checking my phone and calling Scotlyn. I've filled her voicemail by now and have sent more texts than I care to admit. I've contacted the theatre looking for her, but all they tell me is where to send fan mail. They won't even say if she's safe or not. I've called a friend in the Baltimore PD, but he has no more answers than I do.

As the sun begins its ascent, I know the girls will be up soon, so I get dressed and put their clothes out before going down to feed the horses. I've been worried sick about Scotlyn, pissed that I can't find her, and as the rain comes down harder and the storm rages on, I'm determined to do something about it today. I can't let this go until I find her again.

As I pull on my boots and coat, I hear Ranger kicking up a fuss due to the storm. Opening the door, I call down to him, "Calm your ass down, you—...Scotlyn?" Red hair peeks out from the blanket I keep on the bench in front of Ranger's stall.

Rushing down the rest of the stairs, I drop beside her, pulling the fabric back and sucking in a sharp breath. Bloodied, bruised, pale. She wasn't just ignoring my calls; my girl had been fucking beaten.

"Daddy?" I hear Bellamy at the top of the stairs.

"I'm here, baby." I don't know which one I'm talking to, my daughter or Scotlyn.

"You found our goddess." The twins come running down but stop as soon as they notice Scotlyn's condition. "What happened to her?" Bethy sucks in a sharp breath.

“Call Papa,” I tell them as I hand them the envelope and phone in her hand. Slipping my hands carefully under her body, I pick Scotlyn up. Her costume is tattered and torn, blood-stained, and I feel my fury build. My blood boils with rage.

“Papa’s coming,” Bellamy says as they both follow me upstairs. “Nana, too.”

“Stay right here; wait for Nana,” I say as we enter the apartment. I’m unsure what I will find once I take the blanket completely off her body, and I don’t want them to see that.

Placing Scotlyn on my bed, she moans painfully but otherwise doesn’t wake up.

“Jax!” my parents call out as they climb the stairs. I hear Mom talking soothingly to the girls.

“I don’t know what the fuck happened,” I mutter when I see Dad enter the room.

“Jesus Christ,” he curses softly so the girls don’t hear him. “I’ll call for an ambulance.”

I shake my head no before he can do it. “She came all the way out here for a reason, Dad. Don’t call anyone yet.”

“Jaxson?” I turn to see Mom in the doorway, her eyes fixated on my girl lying in bed. “She was wearing that when we met her.” Which means she was taken the night of her show. I’ve spent all this time just calling and waiting to hear back from her when she was suffering.

“Fucking hell,” I hiss. “Can you watch the girls for me today?” I already know the answer.

“She needs a doctor, son.” I know he’s right. Fuck do I know he’s right. Brushing the stiffened hair back from her face, I try talking to her. “Sunshine, I need you to wake up. Tell me who did this to you?” And how did you get here?

“Hey, Dad, was there a BMW in the driveway?” I ask but get to my feet to look for myself.

“Nope. Semi-fresh tire tracks, though.” Gazing out the window by the door, I see what he’s talking about just as the

rain begins pelting the outside again.

“We’ve got the girls. Take care of her, and I’ll see if I can get in touch with an old doctor-friend of mine. She might still do house calls.” Nodding, I wait until they’ve taken the girls to the main house before returning to Scotlyn.

Lying in my bed, hair bloody and matted, is not how I pictured her being here. Going into the kitchen, I grab a large bowl and cloth, filling it with warm water. I plan to get her cleaned up and out of her shredded attire, with the hope that she’ll awaken by the time I’m finished. Spotting her phone on the counter, I grab it and search through it, immediately noticing that it’s not her regular phone; it’s a burner. Activated only recently, too, which means she either stole it or someone gave it to her.

Putting it down again, I grab the water and washcloth and head back to my room. Laying them on the nightstand, I begin undressing her, starting with her socks. Her feet are slightly bruised, but the thick cotton has kept them from being scratched up. Opening the table drawer, I pull out a small pair of scissors and cut the fabric of her stockings. There’s no way I’m getting her costume off without hurting her.

Bruising and scrapes start from her calf and travel farther up the more I reveal, worsening with each passing inch. “Fucking hell, Scotlyn,” I groan when I get to her hips and abdomen, displaying varying stages of black, blue, and purple bruising.

Pulling the flimsy fabric free of her body and tossing it on the floor, I cover her legs with a blanket so she doesn’t get cold. Grabbing the bodice of her costume, I snip slowly through the fabric when she shifts on the bed and groans again.

“Sshh, sunshine, I’ve got you.” She settles down, so I start talking more. “I didn’t know how to tell you this, but I have two girls. Bethany and Bellamy. They are big fans of yours, apparently. You’ve actually met them.” I choke this out because it’s hard to believe someone was plotting her kidnapping while she was treating my girls like princesses.

“You made all their dreams come true that night, Scotlyn. I’m so fucking sorry I wasn’t there to protect you.” It’s a burden I’ll carry with me to my dying day because I vowed to be her man, her lover, her protector, and at the first opportunity, I failed her.

“Jaxson?” My gaze darts up to see Scotlyn’s lush green eyes half open and watching me.

Placing the scissors on the table, I move closer and cup her cheek. “Hey, sunshine.”

Her chest struggles to draw in air as she grows emotional. “Hi.” Her chin wobbles and her throat tries valiantly to swallow.

Brushing my thumb along her cheek, I aim to keep her calm. “Easy now, I’ve got you. Nobody can hurt you now.” She nods her head slightly. “Just rest here and let me take care of you, okay?” Tears fall lifelessly down her cheeks as I continue cleaning her up.

“I tried to fight,” she croaks out. “I tried so hard.”

“Scotlyn, baby, don’t do this. You’re safe now. You got out. I’ll make sure nothing ever happens to you again.” Leaning forward, I kiss her swollen lips gently before pulling back. “I’ll find the bastard and make sure he pays for what he did.” Could have been a woman for all I know, but I don’t fucking care. Whoever hurt her planned only god knows what to do to her, and I’ll make them fucking pay.

“Water?” Her hand cups my cheek, and I hold her close, kissing the inside of her wrist.

Dragging the blanket the rest of the way up her body, I’m quick to honor her request.

As I’m pouring the liquid into a glass, I hear a vehicle pull up. Placing the cup on the counter, I again walk towards the window by the door. Three large men—one nearly as old as my dad—are exiting the vehicle, and I have to wonder if these are the men who took her.

Rushing back to the bedroom, I pull out my gun safe, quickly unlocking it, and I load my Sig and place it in the

small of my back. “What’s going on?” Scotlyn asks, trying to sit up but is unable to.

“Nothing. Stay put,” I command.

“No, wait. My daddy and brother are coming.” Her words give me pause.

“Big, lots of tattoos, look ready to kill?” She nods. I don’t put my weapon away. “I’ll be right back.” Taking the stairs down two at a time, I slide the barn door open at the same time my dad, Uncle Casey, and two cousins—Drew and Gunner—come out of the main house.

“The whole fucking family is here,” I mutter as the brawniest guy strides over to me. “Who the fuck are you?” I don’t know whether this is her family or the men who tried to take her, regardless of what she just told me.

“Where is she?” the big guy growls.

“Who?” Crossing my arms, I don’t back up when he tries to intimidate me.

“Jaxson Slade?” The lighter-haired man of the trio comes forward, holding out his hand. “I’m Easton Kincaid. This is Saint and Carver Rivers, Scotlyn’s brother and father. I’m the one who made sure she arrived here safely during the night. Is she alright?”

Shaking his hand, I can now see the resemblance to Scotlyn in the eyes of the other two men. “She’s upstairs now. We’re waiting on the doctor to get here.”

Saint and Carver step forward to enter the barn, but Drew and Gun stop them by closing the doors and refusing to move out of the way. A smirk crosses Easton’s face, as well as a hint of respect. “You have no idea who she is, do you?” he asks, and I shrug.

“She’s mine. What the fuck else matters.”

“The fuck you say!” I turn to see Saint with a hand on his father’s shoulder, the older man holding a blade in his hand, looking ready to slaughter.

“What do you know about who took her?” Saint hisses at me.

“My concern has been getting her taken care of. When she’s strong enough to tell me who fucking touched her, I’ll find him and fucking kill him.” Stretching my head side-to-side, I feel the tension tightening my muscles.

“It won’t be so easy,” Easton informs me. “Sergei Tumarov has already fled the country.” Pulling a picture out of his jacket, he hands it to me. The man resonates evil. “I’m betting once they discovered Scotty was gone, he cut his losses and left.”

“What’s your point?” Dad barks from where he leans against the SUV the group drove up in. I see Mom and Ev looking through the curtains of the house.

The sound of the barn door opening prevents Easton from answering. Scotlyn is wrapped in my sweater, attempting to push the door open further, so I rush to her side. “What are you doing? I told you to stay in bed, dammit.” Picking her up, I hold her fragile body close to my chest.

“I know.” She leans her head against me, shuddering from the exertion. “But I heard you guys arguing.”

“Baby girl,” Carver growls, but I see the anguish in his eyes. The matching anger to his son’s, as well. “What did he do to you?” The man cups her cheek, and I feel her sigh.

“Come on inside!” Mom yells from the front door. “It’s too damn cold out here for her.” There’s no arguing with the woman. Leading the way, with Scotlyn in my arms, I feel her gaze on me when she recognizes who’s called us in.

“Jaxson?” Her tone is quizzical as we enter the house.

“Sarah Fields will be here soon,” my mother informs us. “She’s coming in from the city. Coffee’s in the kitchen, boys. Help yourselves. Evie has breakfast cooking too.” It’s quite hysterical how all these men thank and follow her direction while I take Scotlyn to the living room, which can be seen from the kitchen.

Sitting in the overstuffed chair that faces where her family gathers, they are being poured coffee by Aunt Ev while Mom places a thick throw blanket across Scotlyn's lap and whispers in my ear, "The girls are in the den watching Ariel. You won't have long."

"They're yours, aren't they?" Scotlyn asks, and I'm not sure whether I sense sadness in her tone or not.

Gazing down at the woman in my arms, the woman I am quickly falling in love with, I can't lie to her any more than I could the twins. "Yes. Bethany and Bellamy."

Scotlyn

The agony zigzagging through my body makes everything around me appear out of focus and fuzzy. Everyone's moving, talking, planning, but I can't keep up. When I passed out on that barn floor, I truly wasn't confident that I would wake up again. My mama's voice was the comforting entity I needed to let go, and I was pretty sure it was the end for me.

Cuddling in Jaxson's arms now, with my dad, brother, and cousin sitting on the inviting sofa across from us, keeping watch, I should feel comforted. Safe, even. But if I'm honest, I'm paralyzed with fear. After the fiasco that was Nick...the way he beat me...I didn't think I'd ever feel this much terror again. But knowing that Sergei is still out there, I can't imagine how I will go on with my life and not be terrified of him coming after me again.

"Scotty." Easton's voice penetrates my thoughts, and when I lift my head to look at him, I'm immediately dizzy and feel nauseous. "Hey, hey, girl, none of that now." My cousin grins at me the same way he's done my entire life. Playful and filled with promise. A promise of retribution for what's happened to me.

"Easy, sunshine." Jaxson's voice is soothing as his hold tightens, and he turns us so I can see Easton without having to move myself. His gentle kiss on my temple has tears pricking at my eyes. The sweet gesture is almost too much right now.

“You ready, Scotty?” Easton tries again.

“For what?” I’m sure he’s already said, but I just can’t concentrate right now.

From the look he shares with Daddy and Saint, I get the feeling we’ve done this already. “I asked if you remember anything from the night of the ballet?”

I smile wide. “Two pretty, little girls. I wish I could see them again. I remember being their age and loving the ballet.”

Jaxson’s body tenses beneath me as everyone in the room grows grim. “What? Were they not there? Did I imagine them?” That would be disappointing. Despite it being my favorite performance of my career, those girls made the entire evening worth all the labor.

A strong hand with thick fingers and a callous palm slowly turns my head, and I’m staring into Jaxson’s stunning eyes as he watches me with concern. “Sunshine, they were real.” His voice is grave. “But I think you might have a concussion because, baby, I just told you an hour ago that those were my girls.”

“You did?” When I frown, there’s a pounding in my head, so I try to close my eyes, but I only get dizzy again. “I’d, uhm, I’d like...” Everything feels jumbled together as a reel of images plays through my mind.

The music from the ballet.

The dancing.

Laughter, smiles, excited fans.

Then pain.

So much agony. More than I’ve ever felt in my life. I flinch with each remembered hit, each slap, kick, punch. The abuse of being thrown around a dark room and terrified of never getting out.

“Mama.” I remember crying for her. Wishing she could sing to me when I finally passed out from pain and starvation. “Daddy, please.” I wailed for him in a way I haven’t since I was a little girl.

“Baby girl.” His voice is in my ear now. “Open your eyes for me, Scotlyn Rivers.” His words are stern, and I do as he says.

“Daddy.” My voice cracks as I catch sight of his tortured face. “He hurt me, Daddy.” Kneeling on the floor, the strongest man I know allows me to crawl into his lap like a dying dog, and he rocks me, humming my favorite song. “Where’s Mama? Why didn’t she come with you?”

“I should have let her. But I knew when I killed this son of a bitch, I couldn’t have her here to worry about when I was already petrified I wouldn’t get to you in time. I’m sorry, baby girl. I’m so fucking sorry this animal got his hands on you.” Carver Rivers doesn’t apologize to anyone. His entire life, he’s done and moved with purpose, so to hear him say sorry to me now, breaks my heart a little more.

“Why is the goddess crying, Daddy?” I hear a little girl’s voice and gingerly open my eyes to see who’s speaking. It’s the girls from my performance. “Is she going to be okay?” Each of them shuffles towards Jaxson, where he’s leaning forward in the chair behind me.

They both crawl into his lap with the same unshakable confidence I feel with my own father. “Yeah, Bethy, she’s going to be just fine in due time.”

Slipping his fingers under my chin, Jaxson leans forward and lays a light kiss on my lips. I can hear my father rumbling his dislike of the action, but when Jaxson pulls away, I follow and climb back into his lap, his girls sliding to each arm of the oversized chair.

I’m not sure which child is which, but when one of them reaches forward and brushes her fingers along my cheek, where I know there’s a huge bruise and cut, her nose scrunches up. “Daddy will fix you,” she says with such certainty. “He makes all our ouchies better.”

Clearing my throat, I feel the exhaustion pulling at me, and I know I won’t remain awake much longer, but I have to know. “What’s your name?”

The girls share a secret smile before they answer. “I’m Bellamy, and that’s Bethany. We’re twins.” They beam at me with such innocence.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you again, primas; I’m Scotlyn.” My body feels heavy and languid.

“You’re her,” Bellamy says, squeezing her sister’s hand. “Daddy went on a date with you.” It’s not a question, but I nod anyways and immediately regret it as acid rises up my throat.

“He really likes you,” Bethany murmurs, quieter than the other girl.

Crooking a finger at them, they slide off the chair arms and come to stand around in front of me, leaning closer. “I really like him too,” I whisper like it’s our secret. Their giggles lull me into a sense of comfort as I close my eyes again.

Jaxson doesn’t say anything, but I can sense his pleasure at my comment by the intense stare he gives me as I rest in his arms and by the way he holds me. I don’t know what the hell is happening in my life right now or why, but I’m optimistic that I’ll fight to explore more of what Jax and I have started. Especially now that I’ve met his precious daughters.

Chapter 6

Jax

“**S**he’s tough,” Saint reassures as he watches me from his perch against the doorframe leading down the hallway to the spare room where the doctor is examining Scotlyn.

The desire to accompany her and stay by her side nearly outweighs my parental instinct to be here for my girls. “She is,” I agree. “But he stole something from her. Something that will take her a long-ass time to recover from.” And I’m going to kill Tumarov for it.

“It’s not the first time.” I sit up straighter at his words while my girls continue eating breakfast while quietly watching cartoons.

Standing up, I walk closer to Saint. “What do you mean?”

Without looking at me, he says, “Scotty is different. She has a light inside of her. It’s addictive, alluring. Men want it. They want her. What they want most, unfortunately, is to extinguish it.” His cold gaze slides to me for a split second. “Easton, Bishop, and I spent years preventing it from happening. Scared off more pricks than she knew even existed.”

Saint pauses as we hear Scotlyn’s soft cry and whimper from beyond the closed door. Both of us poised to step forward but don’t because she’s requested privacy. Neither of us wanting to ask why but suspecting.

“She left for school, then moved here, where all her dreams came true. She had her dream career, her best friend,

and a man who was drawn to her light.” The more he speaks, the darker his words become, and I have a feeling about where this is going. “Nick beat her to within an inch of her life. He tried to isolate her, to cut off contact with her family.”

“You didn’t let him.” He doesn’t have to say it aloud. I’d have done the same thing for my own sister.

“*She* didn’t. When he was finally arrested, he pled guilty and got six months.” A sick smile spreads across his face. “He never made it out alive.”

“Damn shame,” I mutter as the door opens, and Sarah comes out, closing it behind her.

“She’s resting now. Nothing is broken, though there was a displaced rib. That’s the cry you heard. Thank you for not bursting through the door.” Her gaze slides between us. “She has a slight concussion that is on the mend, but she’s still in a lot of pain. Wake her up every few hours still, get her talking, drinking lots of water, and no heavy foods. Soups, toast, scrambled eggs, keep it light and bland for a couple of days. She’ll need help in the shower, as well, but no hanky-panky.” With a wink, she pats my shoulder and leaves as quietly as she came.

“You break her heart, Slade, and those little girls won’t stop me from breaking your neck,” Saint warns before entering the room to check on his little sister.

I get it; I get him. If the things that have happened to Scotlyn happened to Gracin, I’d be just as likely ready to kill as him. In fact, I’ve done the very same. Men tend to steer clear of her because she’s the only female in the family. My cousins and I can be formidable.

“Daddy?” Bethany pulls on my pant leg. Picking her up, I brush the stray hairs away from her face and smile at her worried expression. “Will our goddess be okay?”

Glancing into the other room, I see Saint sitting on the bed next to her. “Yeah, I think she’ll be just fine.” Peering back, I notice Bellamy standing up and watching us, too, riveted to my answer. “Hey, how about the two of you draw Scotlyn a

picture? I bet that'll make her feel better. Works for Aunt Gracin all the time."

Their faces light up at the idea, and I can already see Mom in the kitchen, pulling out paper and crayons for them. "Come on, Mister Carver." Belly goes over, grabs the intimidating man's hand, and drags him to the table.

Ordinarily, I'd keep a man like him, with death written in every line of his face, as far away from my girls as possible. But I have the feeling he needs them more than they need *him*, and if he's as close to Scotlyn as I suspect, they've just gained themselves another set of grandparents.

Scotlyn

"I know you're awake." Saint's deep voice is comforting as I try to rest. "We should be taking you home."

"No," I murmur. I'm not leaving. Baltimore is my home now.

"We can protect you better there," he growls, and I grin, knowing that will only annoy him more.

"You just want to be back with Lake." If not for the pounding in my skull when I open my eyes, I'd stare him down like I want to.

I feel him shift on the bed. Not much makes my brother nervous, but Lake does. "No, I don't." I knew he'd deny it.

"Then what's the hurry?" I'm met with silence, so I crack an eye open to see him scowling. "You'll get lines if you keep that look up."

"They're wide open here. Anything could happen."

"Easton said Sergei went back to Russia already. I wasn't worth the trouble he intended to cause, and he knew it." I hope that's true. If I'm being honest, the man terrified me. He had a malevolence that I'd never come up against before. Not even from Nick on his worst day.

I can feel Saint glaring at me. He hates when I talk down about myself, but it's almost impossible to argue this point. "That doesn't mean the danger is over."

"He's right." It's Jaxson. My heart starts to pound, and butterflies erupt in my belly. His voice is deep, too, dark, with a hint of something threaded through his words. I'm not sure if it's lust or another emotion.

"Don't agree with him," I groan. Sensing him walking across the wood floors, I hear the curtains being drawn along the rods to cover the blinds, and the room grows slightly darker.

"I don't agree with you going back to Florida; however, I do agree that we don't know if the danger has passed."

Gently repositioning myself, a thought occurs to me. If they're so worried about the possibility of something else happening, then that means I'm putting Jaxson's precious daughters in jeopardy, and I don't think that's something I could live with.

Gulping past the lump in my throat, I force the words past my lips. "Maybe I *should* go then." I sit up, pushing back the pain from moving so quickly. "I can't be the one responsible if something happens to your girls."

Scrunching my eyes so I can see a little bit, Jax is standing by the window with his arms crossed and an incredulous expression on his handsome face. He looks pissed. "Seriously? You think I'm not prepared to protect everyone on this property?" Saint stands up and gazes between us. Seeing the two of them so close, evenly matched in height and size, I'm a little afraid for whoever pisses them both off at the same time.

Alone, they're like brick walls. Together, they stand like entire buildings.

"It's not that."

"Then what?" His barked question has me biting my lip as I slowly lie back down, my pounding head not ready for an argument. "Forget it. It doesn't matter. You're not walking into and then straight back out of my life like we never happened."

Saint snorts. “Shouldn’t *she* be saying that?”

“Shut up, Saint,” I interject. “It’s not like you’re getting anywhere with Lake.” I hear him leave, grumbling about pain-in-the-ass women.

Turning on my side when I hear the door shut with a soft snick, I concentrate on Jaxson. Lord, he’s so good-looking, and he has this aura about him that draws me in. Even when I should be pushing him away.

Coming to lie beside me on the bed, he’s gentle as he touches me. Caressing one hand up and down my side. “How are you feeling?”

“Like someone beat the crap out of me.” I try to smile but wind up wincing instead. The curtains drawn over the shades have helped with the light, and my eyes are beginning to adjust. Jax raises a brow at me. “I’m sore, I want to sleep for a week, and I’d kill for a really warm bath.”

“You scared the shit out of me.” He presses his lips to my forehead, and I close my eyes, enjoying the contact, needing it more than I could ever express.

“Yeah, me, too,” I confess. I never thought I was going to see my family again. I was petrified of not getting to know Jaxson more, of exploring this thing between us. Never hearing Mama sing to me again.

“I don’t want you to leave, you know.” Pressing my body farther into his, his warmth seeps into me, making me sleepy again.

“Me either,” I murmur, the lull of comfort and safety allowing me to begin to drift off. I know that in his arms, nothing will happen to me. I appreciate that more than I thought possible.

Wrapping an arm under my neck, he eases my body closer to his. “Sleep. I’ve got you, sunshine.” And he proves it by not leaving my side until I’m awake again.

Chapter 7

Jax

“What do you mean he’s not in Russia?” I glare over at Scotlyn’s cousin Easton as he types away on his computer and pulls up video footage.

“A friend was able to get this from the Moscow airport. Sergei was not the one to get off that plane. It was a decoy. Which means he’s likely still in Baltimore and biding his time.” The man sounds half as frustrated as I feel.

“Find him, Easton,” Carver hisses from where he’s standing guard in the hallway leading to the room Scotlyn is sleeping in.

“I’m working on it,” he grits out before picking the laptop up and walking outside to sit on the deck, even though it hasn’t stopped raining in the two days they’ve been here.

“He works better in calm,” Saint supplies when I stare after the man.

“Jax.” My head swivels to stare at my dad. He nods his head to the side, indicating he wants a word alone. Following him out the back door, I gaze across the rear paddock where the horses usually graze. “Doesn’t Scotlyn have a roommate?” I forgot about that.

“Shit. Yes, Libby. They’re tight. They dance together at the theatre.” She’s quite the character.

“I think it might be time to bring the woman here. Just in case Sergei decides she might know where Scotlyn is.”

“You’re right. I’ll get Drew and Gun to go find her.” He’s already shaking his head at me. “What?”

“You and Saint should. She’s not going to trust two men who are not connected with her friend, and I want you to get your sister too. We don’t know if this man knows about you or not. She could be a target as well.”

I hadn’t thought of that. I don’t know who, if anyone, Scotlyn has talked to about me other than Libby. However, if Sergei got his hands on her, which is possible because the girls work for his theatre, then it’s entirely probable that he knew how to get ahold of Libby—who is not trained in the art of torture.

“On it, Dad.” Walking back inside, I look at Saint, and he’s immediately on edge. “Take a ride with me.”

Without question, he follows me out the front door. “Leaving?” Easton asks but doesn’t look up from what he’s doing.

“Got a couple girls to collect.”

“Don’t kill no one, Saint.” The man stops short as he’s about to walk off the porch and glares at his cousin. “Tell me the lie, man, tell me the lie.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Saint growls as he walks away, and I raise a brow at Easton when he finally lifts his head. Shrugging me off, he continues what he’s working on.

“Kill people often?” My question is casual, but I expect an answer. If I’m going to have these people around my girls, I need to know who they are.

“Not lately,” he grunts before getting in my truck.

I wait until we’re halfway to the city before I repeat his words back to him. “Not lately?” Saint is a quiet man, intense, filled with scrutiny, and observant, so I know he understands exactly what I’m talking about.

“I don’t do it for the hell of it.” I wait because I’m sure he has more to say. Men like him often do, but they aren’t given the opportunity to. “Some people don’t deserve to live.” On

that, we can agree. There have been plenty of times I've been tempted, but I'm not a killer. I wasn't raised as one. Not like him.

Like Scotlyn.

I know who her family is. She assumes I don't, but I knew their names as soon as she introduced them. Where they come from, and who they are. Half the country is afraid of them, and the other half actively avoids them.

"Sometimes I must do the things others won't," he further explains. "Scotty's not like us, though. None of the girls are. They're pure souls. Too good for the world we live in. And each of us will do whatever it takes to keep them safe." I feel his eyes on me as we navigate the empty highway into Baltimore.

I don't respond because I agree with him. I would do the same for her, for my own sister, for my twins. Nothing would prevent me from protecting them.

The rest of the drive passes quietly, and as we approach the small house Scotlyn rents with her friend Libby, I grow unnerved. "Something's off," I mutter. I don't stop or slow down as I pass the house; rather, I continue down the street before turning right and parking in an alley a block away.

"Care to explain?" Saint asks while scanning the alley as we exit the vehicle.

"Don't think I can. The street is too quiet for the middle of the day. No dogs barking, nobody outside. Everyone can feel it, and if I had to guess, we're about to walk in on something they were expecting to leave for Scotlyn." *Like her dead best friend.* I don't voice that, however, because, for her sake, I don't want that to be the case.

"You were a cop once, right?" I nod. "You still have contacts?" I nod again. "Call them; have them come, flashing lights and sirens. We'll wait out of sight but keep an eye out for who stays and who leaves."

"You think someone is watching the house?" I ask as I pull out my phone to text an old buddy who's captain of his

division now.

Pointing towards a beat-up old van with blacked-out windows, he explains, “This is a nicer neighborhood. We made sure Scotty would be safe here, and that van is out of place. Nice cars line the street and driveways, but that one sits between houses on the road. It doesn’t belong.”

“They’ll be here in five minutes. I told them no sirens until they were on the block.”

“How many?” His eyes are riveted to the van.

“Three squad cars.” A thought occurs to me. “I’ll be right back.” Rushing to my truck, I grab my trackers and begin jogging back towards Saint, going straight past him. “Stay here,” I say.

Casually running up the street, I slip a tracker under the back bumper of the van so that if this is them, we’ll know where they go, before I circle the block and arrive at Saint’s side just as the three squad cars round the corner, lights and sirens blaring.

As Saint suspected, the van roars to life and leisurely rolls down the street before going out of sight. Opening the app for the tracker on my phone, we watch as the van heads towards the Cavanaugh district. It’s a seedier part of town and could be exactly where they were holding Scotlyn to begin with.

“You good here?” Saint grabs the phone from my hand. “I’m going to follow this.”

“Yeah, I need to know if Libby is in that house or not. Scotlyn will want to know.” Shooting my cousin Drew a text, I ask him to grab Gracin before swinging by to pick me up. “I’ll meet you back at the house.” He acknowledges my comment before taking off to my truck.

“Mr. Slade?” an officer asks as I approach.

“Yeah.” Staring up at the porch as another cop tapes it off, I know my assumption is correct. “She’s in there?” He nods. “Can I look?” Escorting me up the stairs, the scent hits me before the visual.

“Don’t touch anything, and don’t go past the entryway,” I’m instructed.

As soon as I see the girl, I know she’s been tortured. From the smell alone, I’d say she’s been dead a day or so. Tied to a chair, strangulation marks on her neck, and bruising on her face. Wearing only her underwear, it’s obvious they beat her.

But it’s more. So much fucking more.

These assholes will pay for what they’ve done to Scotlyn and her friend if it’s the last fucking thing I do.

Scotlyn

Watching the two little girls, who are the spitting image of their father, as they sleep in the fluffy chair in my room, I can’t help but feel incredibly fond of them. I never gave any thought to children before. Certainly not while I was with Nick.

I definitely shouldn’t be thinking about them with Jax; I hardly know him. Yet, I sense in my soul that he is my future. Which comes along with these two beauties.

They’re sweet, curious, and seem so happy. I listened to them whispering to each other before they nodded off, and they were obsessed with the fact that I danced. That I call them prima is a wonder and, apparently, a high honor in their close-knit world.

I gave them that—a tiny hint of happiness in such a cruel society. I’m more than terrified that I’ll be ripping it away, too. I would hate to be the reason for their innocence to be shattered.

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop.” My eyes shift to see Dad standing in the doorway, watching the three of us. Reaching out a hand for him, he shakes his head. “You should be resting.”

“I’m fine, Daddy. I feel better than I did when I arrived a few days ago. I’d like to get up, walk around, have something to eat that isn’t more broth than food.” Blowing out a breath, he comes over and eases me to my feet. “Will you help me

move them to the bed?” He glares at me this time, but I give him a cheeky smile, and he does as I ask.

“You shouldn’t be out of bed, Scotty. Your mother is worried sick, don’t make it worse.” Guilt hits me. Mama is the best person I know, and I hate to worry her.

“I’ll call her.” He nods his approval before relocating the girls. Once they’re settled, I tuck them in, ignoring the pain in my ribs as I bend and twist to get them comfortable.

“They’re kind of cute.” Holding in the laugh at his use of the word cute is almost more than I can bear.

“They’re adorable.” Brushing their wild hair away from their faces, I wish meeting them hadn’t been amidst something so traumatic.

Following Dad out of the room, I glimpse Saint and Easton through the front screen door in the glow of the porch light as we walk to the family room.

“Oh, you look much better.” Jax’s mom grins as she comes over, holding out a hand. “You must be hungry. What can I make you?”

“I’m okay.” Her kind smile reminds me so much of my mom.

“No, you’re not,” Daddy barks. “You just said you were hungry.” I am, but it was only an excuse to get out of bed. His arms are crossed as he stands next to Jax’s dad, Dom. I never thought I’d meet a man as intimidating as my father, but I think the elder Slade just might be.

“Okay, fine, but only if it’s no trouble.” I smile at Dee, and she glows.

“Not at all. I made loads of food with Evie today, so there’s plenty to choose from, or perhaps you want something lighter? Pasta is probably too much right now. More soup, maybe?” She starts rummaging through the cupboards before Dom grips her shoulders and whispers something in her ear that has her biting her lip and blushing.

My parents are the same way, and it's humbling to witness a love so strong at their ages. "How about a grilled cheese and some tomato soup?" Dee finally glances back at me as she straightens her shirt while Dominic smirks down at her.

"That sounds perfect." As she busies herself doing that, I finally take notice of who's missing and bite my lip. I want to ask where *he* is, but I don't know if I should be.

"He's on his way." Dom seems to read my mind. "Something came up, and he was held back in Baltimore longer than he planned."

"Thank you."

Dad holds out his phone for me to take, and I wander into the living room to sit on the overstuffed sofa in front of the bay window. I dial Mom while watching Saint and Easton work on the computer, their faces set in stone as they concentrate.

"Carver? Is our daughter okay?" Her anguished voice brings tears to my eyes.

"Hi, Mama."

"Oh, baby girl!" My eyes sting as I fight not to cry. "How are you? Did they catch him yet?"

"Better. I feel better. But I don't think they have. Daddy hasn't said anything." He would have told me if they had.

"Are you coming home with the boys then? I miss you so much." She asks me this almost every time we talk. I don't think she'll ever stop until I move back.

"I miss you too, Mama." My gaze shifts to the barn where Jax and the girls live before glancing at the door where his little cherubs are sleeping. "I don't know yet." I feel a connection to Jaxson. He could be something special to me, and I want to explore that.

Her sigh is heavy with knowledge. "He's the one, isn't he?" Laughing because she always knows me so well. "If he is, then you owe it to yourself to give it your best. Especially

given that Daddy tells me he has two beautiful twins who are already smitten with you.”

“I’m quite fond of them as well. They’re so sweet and inquisitive. You’d love them.” Headlights bounce down the driveway, and I get to my feet, hurrying to the door before they’re here. “I have to go, Mama. I’ll call tomorrow.”

“Alright, dear, I love you.” I’ll never tire of hearing her say that.

“Love you too.” Hanging up, I put the phone on a table and rush outside, forgetting that I’m only wearing one of Jaxson’s shirts and nothing else.

“Get back inside, Scotty,” Saint demands, but I ignore him as I make a beeline to the vehicle where I know Jaxson is.

I don’t know why, but it feels urgent that I reach him. “What are you doing out here?” he asks as he exits the passenger side.

My emotions bubble over as the last few days catch up to me, and I fling myself at him. Jumping into Jax’s embrace, he holds me close to his chest, with one arm wrapped around my back and the other cradling my head.

“You should be in bed.” His words are softer this time as I shake my head no. “Christ, you feel good in my arms.” Smiling at the compliment, I squeeze him a little closer. “I have to tell you something.” The shift in his voice has me leaning back, and I see from the look on his face that it’s not good. “Ask Ma to watch the girls, Gracin?” His question is directed at his sister, who grins behind her hand as she waves at me, mouthing, *we’ll talk later*.

“They’re asleep.” His smile warms his eyes as he gazes down at me. I can feel him walking, and when I notice he’s moving away from the house and towards the barn loft, my body grows tight with anticipation.

Despite everything going on, my feelings for Jaxson continue to grow and linger. He’s only proving he’s precisely the kind of man I’ve always wanted as my own. The kidnapping sharpened my desire. Showed me what it is that I

truly want and that wasting time waiting for something bad to happen isn't going to help.

I wasn't able to pay much attention the last time I was in here but seeing the beautiful creatures that Jax and the girls live above is humbling. Three heads pop out to watch us as Jax carries me upstairs.

Closing the door behind us, he walks into a room lit by moonlight shining through the massive window overlooking the land behind the building. "It's even more beautiful than the picture you sent me," I whisper in awe as he allows me to slip free of his hold.

My ribs twinge, and my feet sting, but nothing could distract me from the starlit sky and romantic setting.

"I have to tell you something, Scotlyn." Someone's dead. I can tell from his tone. I've been around death my entire life; I recognize the shift in the atmosphere.

"One more minute." I glance at him over my shoulder. "Just one more minute to believe whomever you are about to tell me is dead, isn't." Because I'm positive it's going to be Libby. My best friend. The sister I never had.

My dear, sweet Libby.

And it's all my fault.

Chapter 8

Jax

I knew she would figure it out. Scotlyn is too damn smart not to see what's right in front of her face. "Do you ever put a projector screen up on the side of the barn in the summer for movie nights?"

Frowning at the question, I recognize it for what it is. A distraction. "We haven't, no."

"I bet the girls would love it. Make beds in the back of the pickups, have a bunch of snacks, and put Encanto or Moana on the screen. It would be wonderful." I can almost imagine it. "Or Hocus Pocus in the fall. I bet they'd love that."

"You sound like you have experience." Leaning her head against the cool glass, she nods.

"In the back of my Uncle King's house is this huge rose garden. My mom and aunts spent a lifetime creating a magical wonderland. One year, when I was about eight or nine, my Uncle Luther got the idea to create an outdoor theatre. Aria, Hadley, Lake, and I would spend all day out there watching Frozen, Cinderella, or any other movie where we could sing and dance."

Pressing my front to her back, I hold her hips and breathe into the top of her head. She's so much tinier than me; I easily wrap around her.

"Libby and I—" Her voice catches and breaks my heart. "Libby and I spent the summer doing the same thing at home while practicing for our last show." Spinning in my arms, she

remains silent, but her tears flow like a waterfall. “We won’t get to do that again.”

Fuck. I hate seeing her cry. Pulling her in close, I hold her head to my chest as I rub soothing circles along her back. “I’m so sorry, sunshine. So, fucking sorry.” Her head nods, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Did she suffer?” Not a question I wish to answer.

“You don’t need to think about that.” As soon as the words are out, I feel her pulling away from me.

“Yes, Jaxson, I do. She was my best friend. My sister. The best person I knew. I need to know everything.” Anger darkens her eyes.

Cupping her cheeks in my hands, I lift her head to stare into her eyes. Pressing my forehead to hers, I clasp her tight. “Yeah, sunshine, she was tortured.” I’d have lied, but she would have seen right through me.

Grasping my wrists tightly in her delicate hands, she belts out a tortured scream filled with every ounce of agony she feels. I’m sure everyone in the house can hear her. As her body begins to drop to the ground, I scoop her up in my arms and carry her to my bed.

Crawling in beside her, I hold her as tight as I can, allowing her to feel everything she needs to. Her entire body shakes with her tears as she cries and screams out her frustration.

“I’ve got you, sunshine. I’ve got you.” And I’m never going to let her go. I know her dad and brother have been talking about taking her home with them, sorting everything out from there. I can’t let them.

I won’t let her go.

“I’m sorry.” She sniffles, glancing up at me.

“For what?” She is the last person who should apologize to anyone.

“Falling apart. I don’t do that.”

“I think you can have a pass this time.” Her faint smile shoots straight through my heart.

Sitting up, she turns to face me, legs crossed, as she plays with the hem of my shirt. “I spoke to my mom tonight.”

“Oh yeah?” From what I’ve gathered, the two are quite close. “Bet she was relieved to hear your voice.”

“Yeah. I needed to hear hers too.” Gripping one of her thighs, I drag Scotlyn over me. Settling her on top of me, thighs spread on either side of my hips, I can already feel my dick growing, and from the way she bites her lip, I know she does too.

“They want you to go home,” I say as a distraction for myself.

Splaying her hands across my abdomen, she furrows her brow. “I know they do.”

“What do *you* want?” Straightening my legs out behind her, I lift my knees so she can lean back against my thighs.

Her shirt moves up, and I get a peek between her legs. *Jesus.*

Sweet fucking heaven.

Home. She’s my home.

“I want...you.” My eyes dart up to meet her stare. “A lot of things have happened this past week. Being kidnapped and nearly taken out of the country to be forced into a marriage I certainly didn’t want, put a few things into perspective for me.”

Brushing my hands up and down her thighs, she pushes my shirt up my chest. “Oh, yeah, like what?”

“Mostly, you.” Removing my shirt, I sit up, cupping her bare ass in both hands. I can’t help the way my fingers wander to explore.

“Tell me more,” I groan as my dick throbs against her, needing free and inside of her body. “Tell me what you want, Scotlyn.”

Ripping the front of the shirt open, buttons fly, and she presses her chest to mine. Her pebbled nipples stab into me, and I want to taste her, but I can't let go of her eyes.

Not yet.

“My life has always been smoke and mirrors. I've played the role of one character after another, and I love to dance. Nothing is more freeing than when I'm on stage and telling a story that only *I* feel.” Leaning back, she opens herself up to me.

Physically, emotionally, and mentally, Scotlyn gives me her all. And the woman I'm introduced to is everything I've ever wanted and so much more.

“But I think...” She pauses to shrug the shirt off her body before sitting up straight again. Grabbing my hands, she places them over each breast. A perfect cupful. Soft, elegant, flawless. “I think I'm done on stage now.”

“Why?” She has a gift. I don't need to see her dance to know she does. From the way my girls talk about her, that's all I need to know.

“Sergei took something from me. He stole the wonderment that came with each show. He stole my best friend. I can't go back because it feels like an insult to her memory.”

“I have the feeling she would want you to go on.” Libby didn't seem like the type of friend who would want Scotlyn to give up her dreams.

“She would, but...” Leaning forward, her lips are a whisper of a touch away. “I would need a new dance house, which would mean a new city, a new life. And for the first time, I think I've found everything I want right here. With you.”

Reaching around the back of her neck, I drag her closer, capturing her lips in a heated kiss. A torturous kiss because it doesn't feel like enough. Standing up, I hold onto her as I push my pants down, finally setting my dick free, and immediately, it seeks out her warmth.

Sitting back on the bed, neither of us needs to move too much for my cock to find the place it belongs. Sinking in to the hilt, Scotlyn sighs and lays her head on my shoulder. Arms wrapped around my neck, her wispy breath against my heated skin is like her nails scraping down my back.

“You’re my home, Jaxson,” she whispers before licking up my throat and crossing her legs behind my back. There is no room between our bodies. We’re wholly fused together.

“And you’re okay with a ready-made family?” Holding my breath, I wait for her answer as I feel her walls tightening around my dick.

Scotlyn

“Family is everything to me,” I respond, my body on fire with the need to move, with the need to give him as much pleasure as I can. “Your girls are absolute perfection, and I very much look forward to falling as completely in love with them as I have with you. And I hope that one day, they’ll love me too.”

“Yeah?” I nod, the look in his eyes nearly overwhelming as his own love shines through.

“Very much. Now, please, Jaxson, please make love to me. Make me feel alive because, right now, I feel so dead inside.” Confirmation of Libby’s death makes breathing nearly suffocating.

Spinning us around, he lays me back on the bed, our bodies fused together, moving as one. Capturing my hands in his, he holds them above my head. His hips begin to gyrate, our mouths just a breath apart as I lick across his lips.

“You love me?” His question is breathless as his hips spread my legs wider, his hulking body overtaking my entire vision.

“How could I not?” I breathe, rubbing my nipples against his chest. The bit of chest hair scratches across the sensitive nubs and makes me gasp.

“Tell me,” he demands as the base of his cock rubs up against my clit forcing my eyes to roll back in my head. “Tell me everything.”

“I can’t think straight,” I whisper as he nibbles on my lip.

Releasing my hands, he wraps his arms around me from behind, grasping my shoulders and holding me in place as his thrusting grows more frenzied.

“Oh god.” Moaning into his ear, I grip the strands of his short hair, needing an anchor. My body grows weightless, and stars dance in my eyes as he pounds into my core.

Light.

Hard.

Soft.

More. I need more.

“Jaxson,” I breathe out as my body illuminates. “Please.” I don’t know what I’m begging for.

“This pussy is so fucking tight. I should have never been able to fit. You know what that means, don’t you?” I shake my head no as he glances at me. “You were made for me.” Smiling at the idea, I find I like it very much.

“It’s too much... Too big.” The feelings building inside of me are overwhelming.

“No, sunshine, it’s just right,” he grunts, leaning down to suck a nipple into his mouth, which must have a straight line of pleasure to my sex because everything explodes, and I scream.

My ears ring. My vision grows dark. My body feels like it’s flying.

The more he touches me, sliding one hand up and down my side until he hooks one leg into his elbow, the more I want to cry from the intensity of my pleasure. Everything is so sensitive. I feel like I’m fire, and only Jaxson can extinguish me, but he’s building the flames higher with each ragged thrust of his hips.

“I’m not wearing a condom,” he grunts, and I realize I never thought about it.

“I’m not on the pill,” I confess.

That seems to set him off before either of us can make a clear decision because his body bucks violently, and I swear he plants the head of his dick in my womb because I feel him so deep inside of me that I never want him to leave.

Warmth invades every cell of my body as he continues to push deeper, dig in farther, while groaning into my neck. Our bodies are covered in sweat, and I know if a baby is conceived, I won’t regret it, and I doubt he will, either.

Because it will have been made with love.

“Jaxson.” As I whisper his name, he leans up and stares down at me, and I trace his jaw with a finger. The stubble tickles, causing me to smile. “What about your girls?”

Dropping his head with a gruff chuckle, he kisses my bare shoulder, trailing his tongue along my collarbone and up the column of my throat. “My girls have adored you since before they met you. Trust me when I say, give them a day to just spend with you, and they’ll love you more than they do me.”

“I doubt that.” But I love his optimism.

“I don’t.” His lips linger on my cheek as I feel him growing inside me again.

“We didn’t use protection, Jax,” I point out again. No reason to tempt fate.

“I remember.” His hands move down my sides to grip my hips as he begins pummeling me again.

“We don’t know each other well enough to know if— Ohhh!” My body lights up midsentence, and I can’t finish a thought.

“I do.” His voice is a flutter in my ear. “I know everything I need to know about you, and I also know I’m never, in a million fucking years, giving you up for anything.” He’s passionate, and I want to feel that as well, but I’m so scared.

Pushing himself up as he holds still, he continues, “You hear me, sunshine? I knew from the minute our eyes locked in that restaurant that you were the one for me. I was impatient before, I didn’t wait for you, and I can’t regret my girls, but fuck do I wish they had been with you instead.”

Tears prick my eyes at his words, and I don’t know what to say, so I show him wordlessly, with my body, what he means to me.

Lifting my legs higher up Jax’s sides, I lock my heels together behind his back and hold him as close as I can. I never want the way he makes me feel to vanish. No matter how scared I am, I know I’ll always be safe in his arms.

Chapter 9

Scotlyn

It's been a long time since I woke up in a man's arms. Even longer since I felt safe when it happened. There's no doubt in my mind that the reason for that is because of who it is, and as I stare up at Jax's face, softened by sleep, I recognize that the feelings building inside me are more than lust.

More than love.

I watched my parents and aunts and uncles' obsessions with each other my entire life, and that's what I'm feeling now.

Obsession.

Me.

The only thing I thought I'd ever be obsessed with is ballet and Hawaiian pizza.

Sometime during the evening, we fell asleep in a tangle of bed sheets and sweat. I'm now deliciously sore for more reasons than the beating I took. Stretching, I feel every twinge, every tingle, and I remember how this man's hands felt on my body.

Matching giggles have me freezing as I'm about to sit up and throw the blanket off. Glancing towards the door, I see identical sets of blonde hair and chocolatey brown eyes watching me.

Wiggling my fingers in a wave, they copy me and giggle again. Using my finger, I make a turning motion, and they do as I request and turn around while pulling the door closed behind them.

Slipping from bed, I make a dash for the bathroom attached to Jax's room, grabbing his shirt and a pair of shorts I find folded on his dresser. After cleaning up, I tiptoe out to see the door still closed. As I turn the handle, I hear more delighted whispers as I pull the door open and slip out.

"Good morning, primas." Their smiles are infectious and beautiful as they grin up at me.

"You and Daddy slept together." I bite my tongue at Bellamy's, I believe, observation until I realize she means *in the same bed*.

"We did."

They share a look before Bethany, the shier of the two, reaches forward to grip my hand. My heart swells when she pulls me down to her height. "Does that mean you'll be our Mommy now?"

If my heart gets any bigger, it's going to explode. Pushing back the happy tears trying to rise, I brush a hand across her soft curls. "That's a question we should wait to ask your Daddy." Reaching a hand out for Bellamy, I smile at them both so they don't feel rejected by my answer to their crucial question. "How about we make some breakfast while Daddy sleeps a little more?"

Bethy bites her lip before nodding; Bellamy is already dragging us to the kitchen. *I guess that's a yes*. Helping them onto the stools in front of the island, I ask, "Someone knows you're over here, right?"

"Papa is downstairs watering the horses," Bellamy states.

"Great. Wait right here while I go tell him our plan." They eagerly agree as I make my way to the door leading down to the barn.

"Mr. Slade?" I call out as I reach the bottom step.

"Call me Dominic." I jump at the voice from behind me as I spin. "Didn't mean to scare you." His hands are raised, and I see beside the stairs that there's a supply closet he had been in.

“The girls are upstairs, and Jaxson is still sleeping, so we were going to make breakfast. Is that okay?” His eyes roam up and down my body before wandering up the stairs.

“Are you sure you’re up for that?” My lips twist from side to side. “You were pretty hurt when you arrived. I don’t want you overexerting yourself.” I smile at his explanation. He sounds just like my dad.

“Positive. Nothing complicated, just something quick and simple.” It’s been a long time since I cooked for anyone other than Libby and me.

He must read the look on my face as I think of my friend because he pulls me in for a gentle hug. “I’m real fucking sorry about your friend, Scotlyn.”

Biting my lip to stop the flow of tears doesn’t work, and I wind up spending five minutes crying into Jaxson’s dad’s chest as he rubs circles on my back. “We’ve all been there, kiddo. I wish *you* didn’t have to, though.”

Nodding as I draw back away from him, I accept the small handkerchief he offers me and wipe my face. “Thank you, Mr.— Dominic.” He grins his approval. “I really appreciate your family’s kindness, especially with my dad and Saint. They’re both kind of intense sometimes.”

“Your family is welcome here anytime, sweetheart. I have a feeling Jax won’t wait any longer than I did with his mom to put a ring on your finger.” I blush as he laughs when I run up the stairs, closing the door with a little wave.

“Breakfast! What are we wanting?” I ask the girls who have been patiently waiting for me.

“Blueberry pancakes!” Bellamy cheers.

Bethany nibbles her lip before asking, “Strawberries and whip cream?”

“Both?” I offer, and from the looks on their faces, you’d think I just handed them the world.

From the laughter and shushing coming from the kitchen, I know Scotlyn is entertaining my twin tornados. I just hope she isn't overdoing it. Her body hasn't healed from her kidnapping, and last night, we spent more hours making love than sleeping. I know she must be sore.

Standing up, I grab my phone on the way to my dresser and check my emails. Finding one from Mila's handler that she's settled in her new accommodations and thanking me for my help, I give a quick, curt response and delete it.

The next one is a video.

Of Libby.

I knew if Sergei Tumarov and his guys were resourceful, they'd eventually find a way to get in touch with me, and since my contact information is public knowledge, it wouldn't take a genius to figure it out. All they'd need is a name, and as I watch the video of Libby's torture, I learn how they got it.

I don't blame the girl. She didn't deserve what happened to her, and I would never have expected her to hold out for as long as she did. She tried so fucking hard to protect her friend, but a person can only handle so much before breaking.

Getting dressed, I clean up before heading out to join the girls in the kitchen. I'm hoping to keep this email away from Scotlyn for now, at least, especially when I see her singing and dancing with my girls as they throw blueberries into pancake batter.

The sight is so carefree, and something I hadn't realized the twins were missing. A mother's presence is precious, of course, and I still remember some of the time before Deedee became my mom. She gave me things I never dreamed possible. My dad and Uncle Casey were great, but they couldn't provide what I was missing from the lack of a mother. As I grew up, I learned more about the woman who gave me life, and the more I discovered, the more I hated her. Especially given that she nearly got Dee and me killed.

Leaning against the wall beside the fridge, I cross my arms, watching as they do some fancy ballet move every time

one of them gets a blueberry in the batter. Flour, sugar, and a dozen other ingredients are splattered all over the counter, floor, and clothes. It's a perfect moment.

A perfect morning.

"Time to mix?" Bethy asks, gazing up at Scotlyn, and I see in her eyes how much the woman has come to mean to her in such a short period of time. Bethany is never this open with anyone outside the family, but they've bonded over ballet. Bethany's absolute favorite thing in the world.

"You bet. Why don't you hop up here"—Scotlyn lifts her onto the stool—"and stir gently." After showing her how, she moves back, and that's when she sees me.

A blush creeps up her neck, and I know it's because she senses what I'm thinking. How much I want to take her back to bed and fuck her until I've planted a baby inside her. One that is going to be her twin.

"Bellamy, will you check on the whipped cream?" My child nods vigorously while running to do as she's asked.

Crooking my finger at Scotlyn, I motion for her to come to me. Wiping at the flour on her clothes—my clothes, actually—she smiles sheepishly as she stops half a foot away from me.

"Whatcha doing, sunshine?" Gripping the front of the shirt, I drag her forward. Her hands land on my chest, and I catch her by the hips.

"We thought we'd make breakfast," she answers at the same time we hear, "Oh no!" Glancing back, Bethy has splashed some of the batter on the countertop and looks near tears as Scotlyn rushes to her side. "No worries. We made plenty. We'll just wipe this up, and if there's not enough, that only means extra whipped cream, of course."

Holy shit.

Bethy has gone from near tears to chuckling in less time than it ordinarily takes for her to work through her hysterics. No one has ever been able to get her to turn around when she's ready to cry.

But Scotlyn did it.

With little effort and zero hesitation.

“Marry me.” All three girls stop what they’re doing to stare at me.

“What?” Scotlyn whispers as she catches the bowl Belly is carrying before it slides to the ground.

“Marry me,” I repeat. “Marry us.” Because that’s a packaged deal. I don’t need to say that, though, because I know she knows, and I also realize she’s more than thrilled with it.

“I...uhm...I...you’re insane.” Which isn’t a no.

Bethany and Bellamy have taken a step back as I move closer to Scotlyn, and I’m not sure if it’s because they’re nervous or don’t approve. My money is on nervousness that Scotlyn will say no.

“We asked if she would be our mommy now since you slept together last night.” Laughing at the embarrassment on Scotty’s face at Bethy’s proclamation, I can understand her reasoning.

“It’s an easy question, sunshine.” Gripping her shirt, I drag her motionless body back into mine, catching her before she falls. “Be my wife. Be their mom. Be the mother of all my future babies. But mostly, Scotlyn, be mine.”

“It can’t be that easy,” she whispers up at me.

“Or it can.” That seems to blow the air out of her sails because she stares at me in shock, the confusion dissipating.

“Can it?” I affirm. “I can say yes?” I nod my head more.

“You should say yes.” Bethy tugs at her shirt as she whispers the answer she wants.

“We’d really like it if you said yes. More than if there was a Frozen 3.” Bellamy grins from beside her sister.

“That’s a pretty big deal.” They agree. “Are you sure?” Scotlyn asks me, meeting my stare.

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my whole damn life.”

She is quiet, and the girls hold their breath before she finally answers. “Yes.”

Scooping her up in my arms, I seal our mouths together while the girls cheer and dance around us. Devouring Scotlyn, neither of us comes up for air for a prolonged few minutes, and if not for the girls’ hard work on breakfast, I’d be taking my future bride back to bed.

All I must do now is convince her father and brother that I’m good enough for her. A task to be worked on after we eat. It takes almost an hour for everything to be ready because the twins’ excitement is so great that they can’t stay still for a second or two. And I can’t keep my hands off Scotlyn. The need to be touching her at all times consumes me.

Chapter 10

Carver

It fucking eats at me.

The desire to be the one to slay my only daughter's dragons. To ensure her safety. I failed her once, so spectacularly, that I've been unable to forgive myself. Meadow tells me all the time that we have to let her live. Nobody realizes how often I've sent my son up here to check on Scotty without her knowledge. I'm sure they'd be pissed. Between the two of my girls, they'd make me feel guilty for my desire to protect the only other person who could break me.

But I won't stop.

I'll never stop protecting her.

And now that I've seen her with this man, his daughters, I understand... She's found the heaven I discovered when I met her mother.

She's also given me two other precious girls to look after.

I know the Slades can protect them just fine. Their reputation is stellar, but those little babies broke through my barrier the first time my Scotty smiled at them. They stole her heart then, and in turn, they got mine as well.

It's because of that, that I know I must let her remain here. I must leave my baby girl again and hope she comes home far more often than she has in the past.

"Dad." Saint's gravelly voice breaks through my thoughts as I stare up at the loft where I know my daughter and her new family are. "You know she's in good hands." I nod. Saint and

Easton did a military-grade background check on the entire family before we arrived. I realize they'll be good for her. Take care of her. But she's still my baby girl.

"I know, son. I'm just not ready." Glancing at him, I see he has something on his mind. "You found something?"

"Jax forwarded an email to East. He's got something." Following my son back to the porch where Easton has taken up residence, I watch the video, and I'm taken back in time to when something similar happened to my own Meadow.

My rage nearly boils over, and I vow that no matter what happens next, Sergei Tumarov will not live once I'm finished with him. Neither will his men. Because they've threatened to do the same thing to not only Scotlyn but those precious girls that I know will one day call my daughter Mommy.

It's time for the boogeyman to make an appearance once again.

Scotlyn

There is a shift inside the main house as we enter after a very messy breakfast. The girls and I used the rest of the fruit and whipped cream to make a fruit surprise for their Papa and Nana. But as soon as we walk inside, I know from the dangerous expressions on my dad, brother, and cousin's faces that someone is going to die.

"What is this?" Dee, Gracin, and Evie gush over what the girls have in their hands and immediately take them out of the room, distracting them from the morose tone of the house.

"What happened?" Gripping Jaxson's hand tightly, I attempt to maintain my control, but I know I'm close to the edge of losing it. He doesn't miss a beat and wraps both arms around me.

"I've found them. Sergei and his team, they may have hidden from Saint, but I've got them now," Easton divulges, and I nearly sag with relief. "They're on their way here." Panic freezes my heart.

“The girls...” I’ll die if anything happens to them.

“Casey, Drew, and Gunner are taking them to the panic room. It’s impenetrable,” Dominic reassures.

“How many?” Jax asks, his voice steely. Easton turns the computer screen around for us to see three vehicles driving quickly. “Do I want to know how you got that footage?”

“Drone, actually. We have about thirty minutes. They’re going to try and come in guns blazing. They only have about eight men, none of which are prepared for the force they’ll be met with.” Easton grins, and I already know what he’s going to say. “Saint and I spent the morning setting explosives outside, away from the buildings, but the animals are going to freak the fuck out.”

“What about Scotlyn?” Jax’s hold on me tightens.

“She’s staying right here.” East grimaces and flinches when Dad’s eyes land on him.

“Bait. I’m the bait.”

“No fucking way,” Jax protests, but I can see why this would be to our advantage. “We’re not using her as bait. She should go to the panic room as well.”

“No!” Spinning in his arms, I grip his shoulders, attempting to soothe him. “I can’t be where the girls are. I won’t put them at risk. Your mom, your aunt, Gracin, I won’t do it. If I’m here, I have the five of you watching my six. I know you won’t let anything happen to me, just like I won’t let anything happen to those sweet girls. I can’t be responsible for that, Jax, please.”

Growling, I feel his chest rumbling under my touch, the way his muscles tense and quiver beneath his flesh. I feel his frustration.

“Cavalry is here,” Easton announces as I hear the crunch of gravel from outside. Glancing out the window, I see my Uncle Luther, his son Nolan, and Easton’s brother Bishop.

“Uncle Luther,” I breathe out as he walks through the door. His arms open wide for me, wrapping me up in his embrace

before releasing me.

“Promised your mom I’d give you that as soon as we got here.” His eyes roam over me, and I know he’s checking me out to ensure I’m okay. “She’s fine, kid,” he reassures me. “Very eager to meet this man of yours, though.” Grinning, I step back and into Jax as I introduce him to more members of my family.

“Damn, Scotty, you sure know how to set the world on fire,” Nolan teases with a grin as he walks through the door with Bishop. Nolan is the biggest flirt I’ve ever met, and I can’t wait until he finds a woman to settle down with.

“How’s Lake?” At the mention of his sister, he grimaces, and I hear Saint growl.

“Hey, Scotty-girl.” Bishop kisses my forehead the same way he’s done for as long as I can remember.

Jax cocoons me in his protection as they all begin discussing the plan of attack before Sergei and his men get here. I see Dad, Luther, and Dominic talking in the kitchen, and from the looks of it, it’s intense.

Saint and Bishop exchange a glance when they notice it, too, and it’s like everyone is communicating silently as Easton informs everyone of where their place will be.

“Five-minute warning,” Luther says as he, Dad, and Dominic head outside with Saint and Bishop.

Jax and Nolan are staying inside with me. Nolan at the top of the stairs and Jax at the back of the house on the porch outside the kitchen door, while Easton will be on top of the barn with a rifle.

“Don’t take this off. Not for any fucking reason, Scotlyn. You got me?” After securing the bulletproof vest, Jax helps me put my shirt back on. “You don’t leave this house or my line of sight. Stay in the living room, be mobile. Pace back and forth, check your wrist like you’re waiting for something, but don’t sit down. Don’t stop moving.”

“I know.” Until now, my fear had simmered on the back burner. Now that I’m about to be left alone, it’s rising to the

surface.

“I love you.” Jaxson drags me into his body again and lays a claiming kiss on my lips. Not lingering for exploration, he lets me go and stares for a minute before disappearing, and suddenly, I’m by myself.

“Breathe, Scotty. You can do this.” Staring out the window, I see billows of dust from the road in the distance. “Walk, Scotty. Pace.” Convincing myself to move is more complicated than it seems. My feet are frozen in fear.

“Move, Scotty!” Nolan yells down the stairs, and it kickstarts my legs into doing as they’re told.

Lifting my wrist to check my watch, I hear the measured shifting of gravel again. My heart pounds inside my chest, threatening to break free. My ears ring with the remembered fear of when they grabbed me the first time.

Circling the island in the kitchen, I bend down when I spot a dish towel on the floor. Jaxson catches my eye and gives me a head nod. I straighten back up and feel more grounded as I place the towel on the counter.

Continuing with my pacing, I stop short when the doorbell rings.

They ring the doorbell?

Somehow, I didn’t imagine that happening.

Bad guys announcing themselves. It feels surreal, but I acknowledge that it *is* very real. This is the one shot we have to catch these guys and avenge Libby’s death.

“Coming!” I call out. *Did I sound casual enough?*

My feet drag on the short walk to the door. I know Nolan is sitting at the top of the stairs, waiting, and he’ll have my back. He may be an eternal flirt and like a good joke and video games now and then, but there’s no one more loyal to the family than Nolan Sutton.

He’s got my six.

Until he doesn’t.

Until the world around us explodes.

Nolan

“Scotty, get down!” I barely get the words out when the front of the house explodes. I watch in horror as her petite body is thrown halfway across the room, disappearing from sight.

I hear Jax from the back of the house as he shoots at someone while I take out the guy at the front door. Another explosion hits, and an SUV explodes into a ball of fire as it flips over.

“Scotty, talk to me!” Shouting to be heard over the commotion as I rush down the stairs and tackle the asshole who tries to enter the house, I easily slip a knife up and under his sternum, straight into his heart. He never stood a chance. “Scotlyn!” I shout again as I look over to see her body has shattered the wood table in the middle of the living room, and she’s unconscious.

“Scotlyn!” Jax comes running in from the back simultaneously as I rush to her side, and two more explosions occur in quick succession. “Fuck, sunshine.” I see it. For the first time, I see the way love breaks a man. Because if my cousin is dead, Jax will wish he were too.

“Someone grab him!” I shout when I see Easton and Saint come rushing in. “Saaiinnt,” I growl his name as he shoves me out of the way.

“Fuck off, Nolan.” Reaching for his sister, he checks her pulse, and when his head drops, my heart sinks.

“No!” Jax yells, breaking free from Easton’s grasp as my dad and Dominic come inside. “Sunshine...Scotlyn...come on, baby. Don’t do this.” Feeling for a pulse himself, he begins CPR while Saint cuts the vest off her.

“Scotlyn,” my dad hisses like he’s scolding her. Christ, between her and Hadley, they were constantly being scolded. And they always laughed everyone off.

One more laugh, Scotty; you can do it.

Jax

Too small.

She was too fucking small for that explosion.

Which could be good and bad.

Right now, it's bad because the concussion of the explosion stopped her heart. I think the vest I had her wearing took the brunt of the impact, but her heart...

Her sweet, loving, kind heart.

I promised I would protect her.

"Scotlyn!" Carver's tortured roar nearly immobilizes me as I continue compressions.

"Check her pulse," I order Saint. The big man appears to be frozen. "Nolan," I snap, and he jumps in as I pull back. Just as his fingers touch her neck, she starts to cough, and I've never felt such a profound sense of relief.

"Jax?" Her eyes are unfocused as she glances up at me.

"Sunshine." Leaning forward, I settle my lips over hers. "Don't ever fucking scare me like that again."

"Okay," she mumbles and smiles up at me.

"Baby girl." Carver drops to his knees next to me. "Baby girl."

"Daddy, are you...crying?" Reaching out for him, Carver brings her hand to his lips and kisses her knuckles.

"You died, Scotty." His broken words have her looking around the room, halting when she meets my stare. I nod. When she gets a look at her brother, tears crowd her eyes and spill over.

"I'm okay now," she tries to reassure but doesn't sound confident.

"Dad?" I look back at him. "Would you check on the girls? Make sure they're okay?"

Dropping a hand on my shoulder, he squeezes. "I'll take care of them, son."

"Ambulance is on the way," Easton informs us.

"Carv," Luther calls softly, and the two older men walk out of the house. Glancing out the window, I see they've got one man hog-tied on the ground near a burning vehicle.

"You got her?" I grip Saint's arm, and he nods, still shaken up. "I'll be right back, sunshine. Don't move."

Reaching up, she grazes my jaw with her fingers, comforting me when I feel like I have nearly lost my entire world. "Don't be long."

Kissing the tips of her fingers, I promise, "Minutes." Her eyes follow me out of the house.

Taking a second to soak in the fact that she's not dead, I remind myself she's breathing and talking. That my girls are safe. And as I glance around the yard, I see most of the enemy is dead.

Carver and Luther stand over a body I assume is Sergei Tumarov. "This him?" I ask, noticing Carver is playing with a tri-blade knife in his fingers as he looms over the man.

"This is him," Luther confirms.

Kneeling next to Sergei, his eyes travel from Carver, and his knife, to me. "You made a mistake," I taunt. "You underestimated my desire to keep my woman all to myself." Reaching forward, I snatch the blade from Carver's grip and plunge it to the hilt into Tumarov's chest. "I guess I *can* kill a man for the right reasons, after all." Blood spills from his lips as he stares down at his chest and then up at me. "She's the right reason, and you fucked up."

Walking away, Carver and Luther appear a little shocked, and if I'm honest, I am too. But the only way to ensure Scotlyn is safe, that my twins are safe, is if he's no longer breathing in this world. Now he's not.

Entering the house, I hear sirens in the distance, and I see Scotlyn joking with her brother and cousins, so I know

everything will be okay. She's safe and alive. That's all I need.

Epilogue

Scotlyn

Several Months Later.

“Mama, you have to stop spoiling them.” Scolding my mother when it comes to Bethy and Belly never works. She completely ignores me to dote on her two granddaughters.

“I only see them a few times a year. I get to do this all I want.” She doesn’t even look at me, and Aunt Lilith laughs along with her as she spoils her *own* grandchildren.

“Once a month, Mama. We fly down here once a month.” Reasoning with her won’t work, and as I see Daddy come out back from the house, I know I’m in trouble.

He’s got two enormous matching pink flamingo inflatables, and the girls squeal their delight as he tosses them in the pool for them. Saint follows next with trays of snacks, and when I open my mouth to protest, I feel a hand cover it.

“Stop,” Jax growls in my ear from behind, his body pressing firmly against mine. My body ignites immediately. “Let them have their fun. All you’re going to do is stress yourself into going into labor.” He’s right; I know he is.

“I just don’t want—”

“What? For them to know they’re loved? Insanely loved by a huge extended family. I’m pretty okay with that.”

“I don’t want them too spoiled and having you not want to come back as often.” I hadn’t realized I was afraid of that until the words popped out.

Spinning me around to face him, Jax looks at me like I've lost my mind. Maybe I have. "Do you really think that could happen?"

"No," I huff out. It's the hormones; they make me crazy.

"We're here all summer because you want your mom around for the birth. Trust me, everything will be fine." When I started getting anxious a few weeks ago because I wouldn't be able to fly out here, Jaxson packed us all up, and we've been back in Florida ever since. I'm so grateful because I didn't realize how scared I was until I was up crying one night, and he finally coaxed out of me what was wrong.

"Why do you always have to be right?" Slapping his chest, I lay my head against his heart. The steady beat always grounds me when I'm feeling crazy.

"Because you enjoy arguing." His deadpan response has me looking at him with his handsome straight face, watching our sweet girls.

"I love you, Jaxson." Every once in a while—meaning almost daily—I get the urge to make sure he knows it.

His face softens as he peers down at me. "I love you more, sunshine." His lips are soft as they meet mine, and I sigh into the kiss. Close to a year ago, we almost lost this. My body went into shock when the blast from one of Sergei's guys went off early, killing himself and nearly me.

Jax suffered nightmares for months from seeing me dead. Sometimes, I still find him watching over me at night, staring at the rise and fall of my chest. It's been a growing experience for us.

He barely waited long enough for me to get out of the hospital before arranging for us to be married. It was a small ceremony—well, as small as can be with my family—but that's all it was. Just our families. And it was perfect.

And now we're expanding. The paperwork for me to adopt Bethany and Bellamy went through a few months ago, and we've been living in bliss ever since. With the baby coming in just a couple of weeks now, everyone is excited. Especially my

mom and all the aunts. Gracin and I have grown close, too, and I'm so grateful to have her in my life. She became a light at the end of an exceedingly long and dark tunnel that I didn't know I needed.

I never dreamed a blind date could lead me to the love of my life, but Libby was right; I'd never know unless I tried. I miss her so much; it's painful some days. But I know if she were here, she'd tell me to get over my grief and remember the good times we shared.

I haven't been able to perform or even think of performing again. And I've decided that with our growing family, I'm going to teach. I'm opening a ballet studio in Baltimore. And next door to that, Jax and his family will have a storefront for their private investigating business. He says it's so we can always be close, but I think it's because he's worried that something will happen to me if he's not around.

Either way, I'm pleased with the idea. Jax and the girls were more than I bargained for when we went on that date, but they're everything my heart desires, and now, I have it all.

The End!

Thank you for reading *Delicate Dame*. The next book in the series is [Dark Knight](#). Continue reading for a look inside Nolan Sutton's book, coming next in the series.

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Next in the Adair Legacy

Dark Knight

Adair Legacy Book 5

Unedited/subject to change.

Chapter One

Nolan

“This pole?” Sawyer pops up over the half-raised tent with the tiny pole for the awning above the door and I shake my head. Why the fuck I thought I could do this on my own is beyond me. But my best friend Holden and his wife Noelle needed some time alone before the baby comes.

So here I am, helpful Uncle Nolan to the rescue. Only camping is a fucking disaster. I should have rented an RV or a cabin at least.

“This one?” His arm raises triumphantly when I nod my head. Watching the kid come out of his shell over the past several months has been nothing short of a miracle.

“You’re really nailing this camping thing bud.” His boyish grin is the only reason we continue to try and figure this shit

out.

“It’s cause Dad and me camp out back all the time.” He says it like he forgets I’m there half the time too. We have a boys night nearly every weekend.

Getting the last pole in place, I hammer in the pegs as Sawyer sits back and watches. “Looks good, yeah?” I glance over at him to see he’s holding the bag of marshmallows with a sly grin on his face. *Damn, kid.* “Dinner first.” I tell him.

Noelle made me promise to feed him more than just sugar all weekend. We have hotdogs, burgers, some pre-made breakfasts she put together for us, and enough sandwiches to last a lifetime. I don’t think Noelle believed I’d bring anything other than marshmallows, water, and beer. “Burgers or hot dogs tonight?”

Popping open the cooler, I begin pulling out the condiments and placing them on the picnic table when he finally answers. “Hot dogs. We can roast everything tonight!” His excitement is contagious.

“Lets go load up on some kindling then.” Jumping to his feet, Sawyer is racing into the trees to find as many sticks as he can. Trailing behind him, I do my best to stop looking for trouble when there is none. It can’t seem to leave the family alone lately though. It seems to be one thing after another and I’d rather be over prepared than under. Especially when Sawyer’s in my care.

“This enough?” He turns to me with a bundle of sticks and twigs in his arms.

“Should be.” I nod. “Don’t run with those!” I caution when he jets back to our site. Sawyer’s story is a sad one. The growth in his confidence and his strength is something he must get from his mom. Because for damn sure, no man, could have the resilience that Noelle does.

“Now what?” Dropping his load next to the fire pit, he awaits my instruction.

“Place them inside like a teepee with plenty of room in the middle, then bunch up some paper, put it in the middle and a

few places around the base. I'm going to chop the wood." Nodding he begins his task while I grab the axe I brought and the wood we bought when we arrived from the back of my truck.

Finding a spot, a safe distance away from where Sawyer is working with deep concentration, I get set up and take off my sweater. It's been a while since I chopped wood. I forgot the sweat it worked up from the exertion. Keeping an eye on the kid, I take a swing and the block splits in half.

"Wow!" I hear Sawyer's voice and look up to see him sitting back in his chair, now watching me. Covering his mouth with a hand, he points behind me, where the road is and I groan, already knowing what I'll see.

A couple of women are walking their dogs past our site and stopped to watch the show I didn't mean to put on when I took off my sweater. "Ladies." Nodding my head, I turn back around and continue chopping. Sawyer is on the ground rolling with laughter by the time I've finished and as I'm bringing the wood over to the pit, I see more women have gathered around.

"I feel dirty." I mutter to the kid while he continues laughing before I grab the back of his coat and haul him to his feet. "Go get the wood you shit."

"Ohhhh Mom's going to be mad you swore." Running before I can grab him again, I know he's right. Noelle hates when we swear in front of him. I try my best, really, I do. But I've spent my life using the word *fuck* as a replacement for almost every word in the dictionary.

Reaching for my shirt, I'm about to put it on when one of the women catches my attention. Rail thin, paler than a white cloud, bright blue eyes, dull brown hair, wearing oversized clothes, she doesn't seem to realize when the group of women she was with has begun walking away, and they don't bother calling for her.

Intrigued, I glance from her to her group and back again, but she seems to be transfixed on me. Saying something to me with her eyes but I haven't a fucking clue what. When she

finally jerks back to reality, I'm fucking livid that it's because her wrists are bound with a rope being tugged by one of the older women.

"Uncle Nolan it's ready! I have the lighter!" Sawyer's comment has me turning from the woman to make sure he's not trying to light the fire on his own and rushing to his side. By the time I look back to where she was, she's gone.

Bea

"God, Bea, you're such a drag." My step-sister, Amarie laughs with her sister, Elsa, and my step-mother, Flora. The tug on the rope is a reminder that I can't be left alone.

Sometimes, I wander, or forget what I'm doing. Where I'm going. Who I'm with. Sometimes even, I forget who I am.

"Sorry." I mumble too low for them to even hear what I'm saying. My father rented one of the lake houses at Bliss Lodge and Camping for the summer.

An entire summer in unfamiliar territory means my step-mother and sisters get to find all new ways to torture me. I don't say anything to my father because it would upset him and he'd only worry more. And because of his indiscretions with my mother, he can't leave Flora.

I was an accident. Never meant to happen. Daddy had an affair with the woman who gave birth to me. A woman who was so addicted to drugs that she disappeared during her entire pregnancy, high as a kite, and ensured I would have brain damage for the rest of my life.

Nobody knew I existed until she died a day after giving birth to me from an overdose. She got in one last parting shot though.

Naming me Bean Plant Daley.

Life has been grand.

On more than one occasion I've been tempted to end my life. Just check out and never feel this emptiness again. The trouble is, I can't. I know it would hurt daddy. Despite his

flaws, he does love me. He favors me over Amarie and Elsa, and they use that as a reason to torment me. Flora has never liked me. I'm the bane to her existence.

"He was so hot. Did you see the way his muscles flexed while he was cutting that wood?" Amarie cackles to Elsa. They're obsessed with sleeping around. Always wanting something, someone new to throw in the others face.

"Please, he had eyes for me." Another tug on the rope as I continue to look back, hoping he'll follow. But I know he won't, he has a little boy. Rightfully so, he wouldn't risk the child to follow some woman just because I felt a spark when he caught my eye.

The way he looked at me, I felt seen, for the first time in my life, I felt like someone saw past the drab girl I am and through to the lonely soul begging for mercy.

As we approach the lake house on the other side of the campsite's, the rope is dropped and I'm free to wander the property. "For the love of god, Bea, don't get lost. I'm not sending out another search party for you." Flora snaps as I head towards the large swing in the sand by the water.

Nodding at her, I keep my head down, quickly getting lost in my own thoughts as I remove the rope from my wrists, until I'm stepping into the cool lake. The sudden change shocks me out of my head and I look up before turning to see where I am and trying to reorient myself.

"The swing." I whisper. Pulling out the small notebook and pen I keep in my jacket pocket, I begin scribbling down little notes about what I remember seeing.

My therapist says that should help. She's been saying it for years. But Dr. Kate is wrong. It's never helped and when I finally confessed that to her last week, she asked why.

Stress immediately engulfed me, and I forgot who I was, why I was there. She's heard about the episodes for years but until then she'd never seen one before. Her shock would have shocked me but the temporary amnesia makes me afraid.

Transient Global Amnesia is what I was diagnosed with when I was five. It would have been sooner but because of my developmental and speech delays, I wasn't talking until then. I couldn't explain to anyone that I forgot who they were and where I was. The more stressed I become, the more often the TGA happens too.

Which is far more frequently than I would like. I know Flora has been nagging my father for years to have me institutionalized, for some reason he hasn't done it yet. I'm not sure if he feels guilt for my condition or he thinks I'll grow out of it and finally be normal. Dr. Kate says neither will happen.

Glancing down at my notebook, I begin to draw instead of taking notes. Before long I've drawn the man and his son in their campsite. Smiling at the little picture, I wonder what they're doing now.

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(Hadley Adair, Ashton DeMarco)

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(Easton Kincaid, Stella Givens)

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About the Author

KL Donn is a USA Today Bestselling Author addicted to coffee and tacos. As a Canadian author she writes in multiple romance genres and isn't afraid of a new challenge. She brings you stories that will break your heart and heal it all in one breath. With over 60 published titles since 2015, she has many more planned for the future and enjoys connecting with readers.

On her off time, she's bingeing Supernatural, Grey's Anatomy, and raising 4 amazing children. Married for more than half her life, she experienced her own happily ever after with husband Steve, at just 17. You'll find them both at book signings once or twice a year, she's the shy one, he's there to tell you all about the books his wife writes and how proud he is of her.

Currently she is diving back into the Adair Empire world with the children and has plans to keep the series going with generations of dark stories to come.

Krystal loves connecting with readers so please feel free to get in touch with her at any of the platforms below:

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