
NATASHA

Little Girl, Book One

REBEL CARTER



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2019 by ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc. and author
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Rebel Carter
Natasha

EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-002-9

v1

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's
advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Prologue

Natasha grimaced and squinted into the overly harsh light, her skin perspiring from the heat of the too bright lights overhead; it was nothing new. But that was life as a prima ballerina for one of New York's premier dance companies. The stage lights only seemed to increase in wattage with each performance, of which she was certain there would be many more before she hung up her pointe shoes.

At twenty years old, Natasha was in the prime of her career. The product of a legacy built on grace and strength. Both her mother and grandmother had been celebrated ballerinas, which meant that anything less for Natasha was unthinkable. Further sealing her fate was the fact that she was named after her grandmother—Natasha Lleyna Ochenko, the light of the Soviet Union, or at least until she fled, during the Bolshoi Ballet's only performance stateside.

It had caused quite a scandal.

Even now, the memory of her grandmother regaling her with the tale of her midnight sprint to freedom through Grand Central Station set Natasha's blood singing. Or was the sensation merely the adrenaline rush from the prospect of taking the stage?

Blowing out a calming breath, Natasha smoothed her hands over her costume, her sweaty fingers catching at the silk. She frowned, looking down at the twisted material. She needed to control her heart rate. There was no room for error, and a nervous heart made for nervous feet.

"Be still," Natasha murmured to herself as the orchestra music swelled around her, announcing her entrance. She turned to her partner, Alexi, who was a few years older than she was, a proud Russian who still sneered at her when he thought she didn't notice. He knew all about her grandmother's flight to freedom; everyone did. Natasha relished that it bothered him. It had been a small victory for her when they had announced her as the company's female principal dancer.

"Russians all around then, eh?" Alexi had said, regaining his composure after his handsome face had fallen at hearing her name announced.

"No," Natasha had said with a tilt of her head and a smile that had barely pulled up at the corners of her lips. "I'm a New Yorker."

Alexi had rolled his eyes at her and snorted, his attempt at camaraderie spent. "And I never forget it."

Natasha had flashed a smile that far more resembled the baring of teeth than a friendly overture. "See that you don't."

Allowing herself one last shaky breath, she pressed her lips into a thin smile at Alexi, her spine rigid, and took his hand as the couple stepped out from behind the curtain. Once they were on stage, Natasha's expression immediately softened to something resembling a lover's beseeching gaze. Skimming her palm along Alexi's, Natasha sprang forward, her free hand fluttering at her side, feet moving so fast, so light, that she appeared to be floating to the audience. Natasha closed her eyes, letting the music reverberate through her, feeling the steps in her bones. She knew the routine so well, she could have performed it in her

sleep, but for some reason, she wasn't able let go like she normally did during her performances.

Something wasn't right tonight.

She felt off; her heart moving too fast for her breath to keep time with. The effect had her gasping, and Natasha let out a little pant as she tried to take in enough air to stop the burning feeling spreading through her from her fingers to her lips. It was like liquid fire pulsing in her veins with each too quick beat of her heart.

Alexi frowned at her when she was half a second too late for a lift, but they managed through it. Her sweaty fingers slipped down his arm and glanced off his wrist, which she scrambled to hold, trying to stay steady on her feet. It wasn't easy, but Natasha forced her legs to move, to hit the jumps that would look ever-so-elegant when they perfectly matched Alexi's movements. Or rather, the movements should have been elegant if she had stayed in time with Alexi.

Instead, Natasha landed with a hollow thud beside Alexi, who found his feet soundlessly. There was no grace, no finesse that spoke of her skill and strength. Tilting his head to the side, Alexi gave her a sidelong look that to the audience was imperceptible but to Natasha's trained eyes spoke a thousand words. He knew that she was off, and he was concerned, not for her but for his overall performance.

"Everything okay?" Alexi asked her under his breath, and Natasha bit back her initial response of rolling her eyes.

"Yes," she grumbled, turning her face into his shoulder in a pantomime of a lover's embrace. Exhaling deeply, she closed her eyes and took a moment to collect herself as Alexi moved them effortlessly across the floor, but even as she leaned into his strength more than usual, she felt her legs begin to tremble.

With a frown, she shook her head and looked up at Alexi. "No, something's wrong."

"Fuck," Alexi breathed, his eyes moving to stage left. She

knew what he was trying to do—attempting to attract their director's attention without giving away too much to the audience. She was grateful for his discretion even if she knew it was only afforded to her out of Alexi's own self-preservation. Natasha turned with as much grace as she could muster, which amounted to her nearly pinwheeling into one of the prima ballerina hopefuls sweeping by her to take her place along the stage.

"Goddammit," Natasha whispered. She forced her hands above her head, willed her fingers to do anything but splay formlessly in the air above her as she turned shakily through the flood of silk and feathers passing her by in a cloud of perfume and too much-pressed powder.

She turned her face to the side, lips pressed into a thin line as she took in another labored breath. Why was she falling apart like this? In all her years performing, she had never experienced anything on this level of nervousness. Natasha excelled at keeping her heart still and her feet steady, a skill passed on by the women in her family; but tonight, it seemed that all of her careful practice, all of her discipline and self-control, had seemingly left her to fend for herself on the suddenly too large stage.

Natasha, losing control of her grand jeté, stumbled toward the audience with a startled cry. Her feet felt like they had a mind of their own, like they were demon possessed and bent on destroying whatever sense of balance she had managed to salvage.

"God." She knew the audience had seen her misstep, not to mention the director whom she could see furiously flapping on stage left. He was livid. She could tell by the distinct snap of his frock coat, which reminded her of birds in flight. Spinning again, this time with some semblance of the prima ballerina she was, Natasha glimpsed her understudy standing anxiously—no, excitedly—near the director. A frown pulled at the corners of Natasha's lips, but she was only able to stare in disgust at the

other ballerina for a split second before her foot slipped out from under her.

In a swirl of silk, the prima ballerina of New York's premier company slipped and tumbled to the floor in a whirlwind of hands, locked knees, and gasps. A pair of arms hooked under her arms and the bright lights of the stage dimmed as she was yanked off stage.

She could hear the crowd moving, murmuring and rustling their programs to see if her fall was all part of the act, some sort of creative decision they had not been made aware of. Natasha swallowed hard, eyes sliding to the side, and watched the director usher out her replacement, the wide-eyed girl who had only just arrived from whatever cornfield from which cream-skinned naive girls popped out, fully grown and masters of dancing en pointe.

Natasha moved to push herself up to her feet, but her hands slipped out from under her, and she fell back onto herself with a small whimper. A sympathetic sound from a backup dancer made Natasha duck her head, a blush coloring her fair skin. What had happened out there? How was this real life? Only a few minutes earlier, she had been the star of the show, but now she was on her hands and knees, forgotten like yesterday's garbage.

"Here," the soft-eyed backup dancer whispered, giving Natasha a hand up.

"Thank you." Natasha allowed herself to be pulled to her feet before she shakily made her way away from the stage. She turned when she heard the familiar flapping of a frock coat and managed to deliver as scathing a glare as she could summon while wrapping her arms around her shaking frame.

"What happened to you?" the director demanded, his eyes—small beady things that Natasha had never liked to feel—on her. They were like cold fingers, Natasha had decided one day during practice, knowing the small man had been staring at her with a focus beyond that of artistic direction.

"As if you care," Natasha hissed, taking a shaky step back from him. He crowded her against the wall and she wanted to be anywhere but here, sandwiched between him and the cold cinder block at her back.

"You're the star. Of course, I care," the director insisted, but already, Natasha saw that he glanced at her understudy with an appraising and pleased look. She had to get away from him, and now. She felt sick at seeing how quickly she had been replaced.

"No. I'm not," Natasha whispered. She turned and slipped away down the hall toward the dressing rooms.

"Natasha!" The director was behind her now. His frock coat flapped as he stormed after her. "Get back here!"

"No," Natasha rasped, her legs carrying her straight past her dressing room. She didn't care about what was inside. A beaten duffel bag, a pair of sweats, the lunch she hadn't eaten. None of it mattered. Her grandmother had never trusted banks and had insisted that she carry forty dollars on her at all times, even when she danced. She would hail a taxi, and thanks to her grandmother's addition of a money pocket to her costume, there would be plenty of cab fare to get her home to Brooklyn.

"Natasha! Don't you walk out that door!" the director yelled at her. She ignored the screaming man and burst out of the backstage of the theater, stumbling into the alleyway. She could hear him still screaming, even when the door banged shut behind her.

"Get back here! Natasha!"

Lurching forward, Natasha waved a hand over her head once her slipped feet hit the sidewalk. A taxi appeared almost immediately, and she was grateful that her costume was at least more than useful when it came to attracting attention in New York. Slipping into the backseat of the taxi, she barely had a second to collect herself before the director's fist hit the back of the cab.

"Natasha!"

"Brooklyn. Yesterday!" she cried, her fingers digging into the leather of the seat. "Please," she added as an afterthought.

Perhaps it was her manners, but the driver didn't comment on her attire or the man screaming her name on the sidewalk. Instead, he drove, and while he drove, Natasha thought.

"What am I doing?" she whispered to herself, her forehead against the glass, but no answer came. She had no idea what she was doing. She'd cracked, finally, after all those years of careful planning and discipline.

Natasha squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself not to cry. She would not cry, not after losing her nerve. Though, after only a few minutes, her efforts to stem the tears pricking her eyelids proved fruitless. She sobbed into her hands, which only added to her shame of running like a coward. Natasha had been many things, but until today, weak hadn't been one of them.

Chapter 1

It came as no surprise to Natasha that she didn't much like being a coward. The feeling of it hung heavily over her like thick smog on a hot summer morning in the city. For once, she was grateful for her family's no-nonsense approach to life. The older Ochenko women had put her to work immediately as a teacher in the family's small dance school. It was helpful to have a task, no matter how small, to stop her from dwelling too much on her run from the spotlight. Like Natasha's grandmother, her mother, Olya, was a beautiful dancer. Olya had only ever danced in small companies throughout the city, but what she lacked in prestige, she more than made up for with a personality big enough to fill any stage.

"What I was not given by God, I will make by my own hand," her mother had often sighed to her after another day of teaching at the dance school. Natasha had wordlessly nodded at her mother and continued with her own stretches, but more often than not, Olya had come to stand beside her daughter to inspect her form.

"Back straight, always," she would say, one hand lightly touching Natasha between her shoulder blades. "Heart steady."

Olya Ochenko possessed the passionate and all too focused demeanor of the obsessive ballerinas who pushed themselves to the brink of exhaustion. Natasha had always felt sorry for them for wanting to be more celebrated than their abilities allowed, though for all her talent, her own dance career had ended very nearly in the same manner as the women she had once pitied.

"Heart steady," she scoffed at herself with a slight shake of her head. A lot of good the mantra had done her when it was all on the line in what had been the most significant role of her career. Now, here she was, teaching children to walk en pointe with a fake smile plastered on her face while barely holding the memories of that fateful night at bay.

Stifling a groan, Natasha turned to face the classroom rapidly filling with an assortment of pre-teens. How had she gone from dazzling audiences of thousands in avant-garde costumes and makeup with her very own orchestra to wiping noses and sweeping the hardwood floors after her last student bounced out of her sight? Remembering was a dangerous game to play, even in the relative safety of her class. Life sprang into sharp focus on the rare occasions Natasha allowed herself to remember the feel of terror and anxiety that had crashed so hard and fast on her that she'd had no choice but to shatter. It wasn't safe to revisit memories of that night, or even her dance career, and safe was the name of the game for Natasha.

If she were honest, she couldn't count on what she would do next. She wasn't as steady as she pretended to be, but here among the barre and mirrors of her small class of twenty hopeful and bright-eyed students, she could pretend to be the ballerina who had commanded stages as awe-inspiring as the London's Royal Opera House and New York's beloved Broadway. Arming herself with a smile that she prayed reached her eyes, she glanced over the filling class, but then she froze. Her breath caught in her throat. He was here again.

The blond. Correction, the big blond.

He accompanied one of her most talented students, a slight girl of thirteen with big brown eyes and a broad smile that hid the powerful dancer capable of leaps that made even Natasha feel inspired to don her pointe shoes. Madeline danced with a joy that was contagious. She was the big blond's niece, but other than that, Natasha knew nothing else about the muscular man who graced her studio three times a week. He was broad-shouldered and well-muscled, something that even his loose sweats and zip-up hoodies couldn't hide. He had sparkling blue eyes that always seemed to find Natasha's green ones when she didn't anticipate it. Like the ocean or a bright summer day, which irritated her because the two images never failed to make her smile, which meant that an unbidden smile, a true smile, never failed to appear on her lips whenever the blond man looked her way. It was a chain reaction. Her smiles brought a grin to his lips that always made Natasha wonder what it would feel like to have his mouth against hers. His lips seemed out of place on such a muscular man, too sensuous for the angular jaw, high cheekbones, aquiline nose, and sun-kissed skin that made up his handsome face.

Natasha felt the smile on her face before she was aware of even having smiled, and she blushed at the blond's ability to elicit such a response from her.

Natasha lowered her eyes and shook her head at herself. She had once been courted by New York's most eligible bachelors; there had never been a shortage of beautiful male dancers and directors vying for her attention. She'd had a brief dalliance with a senator at the start of her career, and her mother's favorite story after too many cocktails was the British lord who had proposed to Natasha after seeing her rendition of Swan Lake in London. Yet here she was, blushing and smiling like some provincial girl. It was during moments like this that her new life seemed surreal.

The blond had a way of throwing everything around her in

high contrast; even her own reflection seemed more vibrant, sharper than she had grown accustomed to seeing. And that meant that Natasha did her very best to avoid the blond like the plague.

She didn't even know his name, a feat that had been painstakingly carried out, given the small nature of the dance school. She knew that her mother and grandmother knew his name, which led to an even bigger reason Natasha avoided the man. She knew that if she expressed the smallest bit of interest in him, the two older women would stop at nothing until she was sitting across from him in a restaurant that served far too small portions while a waiter offered them overpriced wine by candlelight.

The blond's comfortable sweats and sneakers would vanish, replaced by a tasteful suit, maybe a tie, and his corn silk blond hair, which always fell haphazardly over his forehead, would be styled and combed perfectly. If there was anything her mother and grandmother loved equally, it was a sharply dressed man, which was what they would form the blond into before allowing her to get close to him.

Natasha didn't need fancy suits or expensive dinners; she liked him just as he was. And that was the crux of it, the catch 22 of showing interest in the man who accompanied Madeline to her lessons. He didn't appear sloppy in the casual sweats that he wore. Somehow, the soft cotton of his shirt, the athletic cut of his sweats, the unzipped sweatshirt hoodies that he jammed his hands into as he waited for Madeline all seemed to fit him like a glove. Armani and Gucci tailors could be brought to their knees at how beautifully the simple garments fit the blond's seemingly perfect physique. Thick, muscular thighs, a trim torso that tapered from wide muscular shoulders, and equally sculpted biceps that stretched the sleeves of his shirts just so set Natasha's heart beating a tiny bit faster.

Simply put, the blond was beautiful. Gorgeous, even.

Natasha wouldn't allow the matriarchs of her family to meddle in his simple beauty. It was better to observe him from afar, from the corners of her eyes, in the reflections of the mirrors that lined the walls, or in brief glances as she bid Madeline goodnight.

Natasha smoothed her hands over her hips and down the sides of her leotard. Flexing her feet, she limbered her ankles out by briefly rising en pointe. She liked to do it from time to time to stay warm between classes, and she loved how wide her students' eyes became when she did so with seemingly no thought, appearing to float as effortlessly as a butterfly. So she did so now and even gave a small turn, one leg raised behind her as she came to a stop and grasped the barre in front of her, lowering her nose to it with a small exhale. Even after everything, she felt at peace when her hands touched the wood of the barre. It was her anchor when her mind became too loud. The smooth wood under her fingers was a gentle reminder to breathe and move forward.

"Heart steady," Natasha huffed to herself, eyes still closed as she flexed her fingers on the barre.

A cough by her side made Natasha's eyes pop open. She looked and felt her blood go cold in her veins. It was the blond, hands in his pockets and his eyes on her reflection in the mirror in front of them. Abruptly, Natasha let go of the barre and lowered herself off her toes. Her hands went behind her back, and she schooled her features into a calm expression, one that did not bely how nervous she suddenly was at the blond's proximity.

"That was beautiful," he said.

Natasha's calm facade slipped at the words. Her mouth dropped open. She knew her cheeks were pink from the blush she felt creeping across her skin. "Oh." She closed her mouth and nodded slightly at him. "Thank you."

"I, ah, I'm here with Maddy." The blond rubbed a hand over

his face and jammed his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt. "I just, I wanted, well, I saw you just now, and I had to... I had to say something. Finally."

"Madeline is a very talented student." The words burst out of Natasha before she could stop herself and she cursed her suddenly tongue-tied state. "I mean, she's a very hard-working girl."

"Thanks for saying so." He grinned at her.

"Of course." Natasha gave him a slight smile, her eyes darting to the clock ticking over the door, and she cleared her throat. "I should begin class. My grandmother will have me cleaning the entire school with a toothbrush if I'm even a minute late."

"Russian discipline at its finest," the blond joked, but as soon as the words fell from his lips, he winced. "I mean, well, it's just that she seems very old school and I've heard about her, you know, in the Soviet Union..." He stopped speaking then and looked at his feet with a huff. "I'm going to stop speaking now. Sorry, that came out all wrong," he apologized.

Natasha giggled, the sound surprising the both of them, and she clapped a nervous hand over her lips. "You're more right than you know," she said, her grin hidden behind her fingers. "You're observant that my grandmother has a penchant for the way things were, despite her midnight run to freedom. No need to apologize."

He nodded and took a step back. "I'll let you get on with it. Thanks for not thinking I'm a complete idiot."

"I don't th—" Natasha began, but he was speaking again, this time taking two steps closer to her until they were only a hand span away from one another. Natasha hated that she was instantly aware of his body heat, that she knew how little effort it would be to move her hand and have it touching him.

"I'm Silas." He held a hand out to her.

"Natasha," she replied, slipping her smaller hand into his.

"I know." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

At Silas' answer, Natasha felt like she stopped breathing. She met his eyes for a moment before she looked away and licked her lips. "I—"

"It's on Maddy's paperwork, her schedule," Silas said quickly with a gentle smile that set Natasha at ease.

"Oh, yes, of course." She gave him as friendly a smile as she could manage before she clasped her hands in front of her. "I should really start class."

"Of course." Silas cleared his throat and took a hasty step backward. "Have a, ah, a good class."

Natasha paused before turning to the classroom of students. It was simultaneously exhilarating and frightening to have Silas' attention wholly focused on her. She had admired him for so long that finally speaking to him was almost like a guilty pleasure.

"Thank you, Silas," she said. She liked how his name fit in her mouth.

He gave her a curt nod and then turned on his heel and strode out of the room. Natasha wished she could say that she didn't stay rooted in her spot, staring after him like an infatuated teen, but that was precisely what she did until he turned the corner and disappeared from sight. Natasha allowed herself half a second more of staring after Silas before she clapped her hands in front of her to call the class to order. A moment of getting lost in Silas' eyes was okay, so long as she made sure not to indulge in her guilty pleasure again. A man like that was the type to make a woman forget herself, which was the exact opposite of what Natasha had in mind for the foreseeable future.

Thankfully, she had the next ninety minutes of instructing her students to keep her mind from wandering too closely after Silas. She had just given her students their final series of turns to execute when a scowl twisted her pretty features, albeit only briefly before her cool veneer was back in place.

The reason for her scowl was, of course, a man.

But this man was not like Silas. He wasn't the type to make her forget herself or to cause her to lose her way in too-blue eyes. This man's eyes were hungry in a way she recognized from her time as a dancer. His looks were the type that took from a woman, the kind that made her skin feel like it needed a good scrubbing before it was fit to be touched again. He was the father of one of her students, a new one Natasha hadn't had much time to interact with.

Though Natasha had wanted to voice her dislike about the father who lingered far longer than necessary after class, the man who invaded her space at every turn, who used any and every excuse to touch her, she hadn't. She wasn't sure what stopped her. Every time she had thought about approaching her mother about him, she had stopped herself because it seemed silly; he was only in her life for ten or so minutes at a time, after all. Every time he made her uncomfortable, it was with his daughter nearby, and that made Natasha question her distaste for him.

However, during her last class, there was no mistaking the man's interest in her. He had invited her to coffee, an invitation that she had skirted around by giving an excuse that she was busy, that she didn't think it was best to mix the personal with business. The man had persisted until his daughter had pulled him away with an embarrassed look on her face. She had, for all her eleven years of age, understood that her teacher was uncomfortable, and Natasha had never been more grateful to the girl.

Now she scanned the classroom, thinking of the girl, and raised an eyebrow when she saw that she wasn't in line with the rest of the students. How had she not noticed that the girl wasn't in her class today? *Because you were too busy mooning after Silas*, a voice whispered to her. Natasha fought the urge to roll her eyes at herself and turned her gaze back to the class, watching her students move through their paces. It filled her with more than a small measure of pride to watch them improve as dancers. Her time as their teacher made her self-exile from professional dance

all the more bearable. It was hard to be upset with where she was in her life when she had so many eager and smiling students working their hardest to not only improve but to impress her. She smiled at them then and clapped as the final students spun across the studio floor.

"That was beautiful," Natasha told them, her voice holding genuine warmth for them all. She saw the students' eyes light up at the praise, and her smile grew wider. "I think we will have the best spring recital of all this year, with so many fine dancers to cast. Don't you think?"

A murmur of agreement rippled through the classroom, and her comment, Natasha saw, even pleased the parents whom she knew thought their sons or daughters were the next undiscovered star. Natasha stepped forward, ignoring the too intense father standing in the back corner, the furthest away from the rest of the students. It was when the students and parents began to filter out of the classroom that the father made his approach. Natasha's brow furrowed slightly as she tried to recall his name. She was almost positive it was Brandon. Brandon Peachtree. She gave him a neutral smile and nodded at him.

"Mr. Peachtree. How are you this evening?"

The man's eyebrow rose at the greeting, and he cleared his throat with a smile that seemed too slick to be genuine. Nothing like Silas. "Mr. Peachtree? Now, Natasha, I'd prefer it if you called me Brandon."

Natasha took a step to the side, toward the door where there was still a small group of students waiting to be picked up, and inclined her head toward him. "Of course, Brandon."

Brandon's eyes lit up at her use of his name, and he followed along beside her. "I wanted to speak with you...privately," he said, glancing at the cluster of people Natasha had been angling for. Internally, Natasha felt like screaming, but she couldn't let on that he bothered her. She knew men like Brandon. They took a no for a yes and seemed to thrive off of cornering a woman in the

name of persistence, and Natasha had no intention of accidentally feeding into Brandon's advances.

"What about?" she asked, keeping her voice calm and measured, all the while watching the number of students dwindle. Now there were only a couple left, which made her want to wrap up the conversation as quickly as possible to avoid being alone in the studio with Brandon.

Brandon crossed his arms over his chest and said, "I know you said you weren't able to go on a date, but—"

"I thought you assured me it wasn't a date. That it had been to discuss your daughter's progress in the class," she said, interrupting him.

Brandon frowned and let out a sigh. "Well, yes, you know what I mean."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think that I do." Natasha stepped around him when she noticed he was cutting her off from the few remaining students. He had now put himself between the students and Natasha, hiding her small frame behind his much larger one. She took a hasty step toward the center of the room so that she had the empty studio to her back rather than the barre that had just been at her fingertips. Something wasn't right. She could feel it in her bones, and she had no intention of finding out what was telling her to run, to get away from this man as fast as her slippered feet could carry her.

Brandon let out an impatient sigh and tilted his head to the side, giving Natasha an annoyed look. "You know what I'm getting at. Don't play coy, Red."

"Red?" Natasha's mouth dropped open. A shocked laugh escaped her. "Are you serious, sir?"

"It's Brandon," he said through gritted teeth.

"Sir, I think you should leave. I'm more than happy to discuss your daughter's progress in the class with you during normal school hours, but as you can see..." Natasha gestured to where the last student skipped through the doors with an excited look

on their face. Natasha bit her lip when she saw that it was Madeline, which meant that it was Silas picking her up. She wished she was staring up at Silas and not Brandon, with his too hungry eyes, which gave her a sick feeling in her stomach.

"I think right now works," Brandon said, his voice low. He took another step toward her, but not before glancing over his shoulder at the sound of the studio door clicking shut behind Madeline. "You can stop pretending now, Red. Everyone's gone."

"I wish you would stop calling me that, Mr. Peachtree."

"Brandon," he repeated, glaring at her. He took a step toward her and then another, until Natasha found herself backing up faster than her brain could process.

Steady heart, she thought to herself as she began to search for a way out of her situation. Her mother and grandmother were both gone for the evening, and her class was the last of the night, which meant that Natasha was all alone except for the off chance the janitor had arrived early. Her eyes darted over to where her duffel bag sat on the floor with her phone inside. If she could grab the bag and make it to the bathroom just outside the classroom, she would be able to lock herself inside and call for help. Looking back up at Brandon, Natasha licked her lips and cleared her throat to speak when he surprised her by suddenly reaching forward and grabbing her. His fingers dug roughly into her arms as he jerked her against him.

"I see you licking your lips. You're a damn tease, aren't you, Red?" he growled, his breath hot on her face. "Like it rough. I know you do."

Natasha twisted to the side and tried to pull away, but his grip was too strong. "Mr. Peachtree, let me go."

"You think I don't see what you're playing at here? In this outfit that's barely clothing?" He gave her a shake, his eyes raking over her with a heat that made Natasha's stomach lurch. She wanted to cover up, to be anywhere but here, but no matter how hard she pulled back, Brandon only held fast to her.

"Stop it!" Natasha raised her hands up and shoved as hard as she could. "Let me go or I'll—"

"You'll what? You think I don't know why you dress the way you do? That I don't see the way you look at me?" Brandon was close now, pushing her back against the mirrored wall, his hands rough on her body and his hips grinding against her. Natasha could feel that familiar wave of panic that had dropped her to the floor her final night on stage. There was a roaring in her ears, and she swallowed hard, trying to stay on her feet while Brandon's breath was hot on her neck as he leered at her.

Pleading with a man like this wasn't going to do anything. She had to do something—and fast. Otherwise, she was going to end up as just another statistic in the Brooklyn crime blotter. Just as she was mustering her strength to give another shove at Brandon's chest, a movement over his shoulder caught her eye, and she had a fleeting sense of hope. Maybe a parent had come back to grab a forgotten jacket. She could use the distraction to escape.

"Did you hear me, Red?" Brandon was less than an inch from her face, his attention so focused on her he hadn't noticed that someone else was in the room. Natasha didn't answer him but, instead, craned her neck to see who it was. Brandon saw her attention shift, and he turned to look over his shoulder. It was only when he moved that Natasha was able to see who had entered the dance studio.

Silas.

A very angry Silas.

SILAS WAS LIKE AN AVENGING ANGEL. All golden hair, bright eyes that glittered like the wrong side of a knife edge, and clenched fists that looked capable of ripping out every floorboard in the dance studio.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Silas' voice sounded like a gunshot in the too quiet room.

"Mr. Peachtree was just leaving," Natasha blurted out. Both men turned to look down at her, Brandon with a scowl and Silas with a glare that burned Natasha to her core.

"The fuck he was," Silas growled, his eyes shifting up to the man whose fingers were still digging painfully into her arms. His eyes locked on to Brandon's hands, and he stalked forward. "Get your hands off her."

"Red..." Brandon said, his voice trailing off in a warning that made Natasha want to scream. How dare he act as if he had a right to her body, a right to touch her?

"Get your hands off me, Mr. Peachtree," Natasha spat, her emerald eyes flashing. She stepped to the side and finally managed to wrench her arms out of his hands. She hated that she would have bruises where he had grabbed her by tomorrow morning. Natasha shakily walked toward where Silas stood, eyes trained on Brandon, but she had only managed to take a few steps when Brandon spoke.

"You're a fucking tease."

Natasha preferred not to say anything. Silas was of a different opinion.

Silas stepped in front of Natasha, blocking her from the other man's view. "And you're a predator," he said, jabbing a finger at Brandon.

"Who the fuck are you?" Brandon scoffed, turning his attention to Silas. Natasha took a step back, watching the two men square off. Brandon wasn't a small man, but where his bulk was lithe, like a runner, Silas looked like he had been built for war. He easily had the other man by four inches and outweighed Brandon by at least forty pounds of solid muscle.

Natasha didn't envy Brandon's current situation.

"Mr. Peachtree, please leave. You and your daughter are no

longer welcome here," Natasha said, her voice ringing in the still too quiet room.

"What?" Brandon exploded. He took a threatening step forward, only to be rebuffed by Silas' imposing figure. "What are you saying?" he yelled at Natasha, though he had stopped his forward movement.

Natasha crossed her arms over her chest and met Brandon's gaze with a cool one of her own, despite the fact that she was trembling. "I'm saying that you are no longer welcome here and your daughter is no longer a student of ours."

For several moments, no one moved or said anything, and Natasha had the wild hope the man would just leave, that this night would just end and be another bad memory. But then he sprang forward, face twisted in a fury.

"You bitch!" he yelled. "You can't just kick my daughter out!" Brandon charged forward, his hand swinging wildly in her direction, but Silas intercepted the other man's swing without so much as breaking a sweat, and before Natasha understood what she was seeing, Brandon lay flat on his back.

"You don't touch her," Silas growled. His voice filled Natasha's ears, and she felt a sudden shiver pass over her at his words.

"But she—" Brandon spluttered, looking bewildered at his sudden place on the floor.

"The only reason I'm not pounding you through the floor right now is that I don't want her to have to clean up the mess your sorry ass would leave behind. Do you understand?" Silas leaned down toward where Brandon scrambled on his hands to get away from him.

"I'll sue you," Brandon hissed, his eyes darting from Natasha to Silas. "I'll put this fucking school out of business."

Natasha rolled her eyes at that and snorted. "And how do you propose to do that with the camera footage we have of you?"

Brandon's face went white. "What?"

Natasha pointed toward the corner behind him with a wave of her hand. "You should wave to the camera. Real big and nice. A smile wouldn't hurt, either."

"You know you wanted me. You wanted this, even if your fucking cameras don't show it," Brandon said, standing up slowly and pinning Natasha with a leer.

Natasha crossed her arms, and Silas was there again, pushing Brandon in the chest with a quick jab of his hands.

"Get the hell out of here," Silas said, his eyes hard, his mouth pressed into a tight line.

"Don't touch me." Brandon tried to slap at Silas' hands, but he failed to come close as the other man gave him another shove that sent him stumbling back a few steps. "Back off!" he yelled at Silas, suddenly looking like a child who had been sent to timeout for bad behavior.

Natasha raised an eyebrow, watching the display, a smile crossing her lips when Silas backed Brandon up to the door with another well-placed jab of his hands. She hoped Brandon felt it tomorrow, that he bruised from where Silas' fingers had dug into his skin like her arms would bruise from Brandon's cruel touch.

"Leave. Now," Silas ordered. He pointed over the other man's shoulder as he spoke and added, "If I see you here again, I'm going to take you out back and show you some fucking manners."

"You're a thug," Brandon spat at Silas, who only lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

"I'd rather be a thug than a pervert. What were you going to do to her, huh?" Silas asked, his voice sharp. "Touching her like that. I'll break every last one of your fingers if you put a bruise on her."

Natasha felt that shiver sweep over her again, except, this time, it was in her belly, like the thrill that hit her right before she took the stage. And now there was no stage to take, no routine to execute; it was Silas making her feel like this.

"Red, lo—" Brandon said, looking her over Silas' shoulder, but the blond man snapped his fingers in Brandon's face.

"Did I stutter? Get the fuck out of here before I put you through the wall."

Brandon opened his mouth to speak again, but Silas cut him off. "Natasha, call the police."

Natasha gave a quick nod and wordlessly grabbed her phone. She had just started to dial when Brandon finally said, "*Fine!* I'll go; fine! Fucking shit." The man threw up his hands and then shoved the door to the dance studio open. "We can discuss this during business hour—"

A growl, an honest to goodness growl from Silas, had Natasha's pulse speeding up and Brandon backpedaling out of the room. He said something, but Natasha didn't know what because she was staring at Silas, the growl in his chest all she could focus on while he pushed Brandon out of the room. She swallowed hard when the dance studio door clicked shut behind the two of them. She could hear their raised voices in the hallway for a moment before they faded away, and she knew that Silas had kicked Brandon out of the building entirely.

It was only then that she let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding and put a hand over her mouth to stifle the anguished moan that slipped out. Her body was shaking, and that wave of anxiety she had barely been holding at bay hit her full force, and her legs gave out from under her. She hit the floor a second later.

Silas' growl still echoed in her head, growing in intensity until it roared so loudly that she found herself leaning forward on her hands, her phone slipping to the floor beside her. Natasha sucked in a deep breath and worked to stay upright, but it was no use; she was just so cold, so worn out. Her body felt like it was out of her control. She just needed to rest for a moment, and she would be all right. She would be strong enough to put the entire mess of the past twenty minutes behind her if she just closed her eyes

for a second. She slumped forward to the floor, the wood cold beneath her cheek, and she shivered as she took in another deep breath. She tried to focus on the only thing that felt like it was grounding her—Silas' growl, that low and throaty sound she'd felt down to her toes. If she just let the roar in her ears be his growl, then the cold settling over her wasn't so bad, the dimming of her vision not so scary. She felt safe with Silas, and safe was something she hadn't felt in quite a while.

It was nice, and so Natasha closed her eyes and finally let herself rest.