

# DREAM SPINNER

By Kristen Ashley

## *Teaser Chapters*

### **Prologue**

*Right at Him*

*Hattie*

It happened on the opening night of the Revue.

I knew it when I finished my dance.

And I looked for him.

They were there, all the guys (and Evie) to cheer us on.

To support us.

But when my dance was done, I didn't look to my friend Evie.

I didn't look to Lottie's man (and my friend) Mo.

I didn't look to Evie's guy (and also my friend) Mag.

I further didn't look to Ryn's fella (and yes, my friend too) Boone.

Or Auggie, who should be Pepper's, but he was not.

I looked right at him.

*Right at him.*

At Axl.

And he was looking at me.

Of course, I'd just been dancing.

But it was more.

Because I'd picked that song.

And it became even *more* when my eyes went right to his.

I saw how his face changed when I did this, and I didn't know him all that well, but I still read it.

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I knew exactly what it meant, the way he was looking at me, and the fact, after I'd finished dancing to that song, I'd looked right at him.

And what it meant was...

*I was in trouble.*

## **Chapter One** *Ivan the Terrible*

### *Hattie*

"It went well."

"Tens of thousands of dollars on teachers, leotards, pointe shoes, payin' for gas to drive you to class, recitals, competitions, and you're sittin' here tryin' to convince me all that was worth it seein' as you got the big promotion from being a stripper to being a burlesque dancer."

"It's not burlesque exactly. They're calling it a Revue."

"It's a fuckin' titty bar."

I sat opposite my father and decided it was a good time to start keeping my mouth shut.

Dad did not make that same decision.

"You can try to dress it up however you want, Hattie, but you're a glorified whore," he went on. "Though, just sayin', a whore's more honest. Least she doesn't take a man's cash while she's given' him nothin' but a tease."

I wish I could say Dad was in a rare mood tonight.

But he wasn't.

It was just that it was more foul than normal.

A lot more.

"I think maybe I should go now," I said quietly.

Dad shook his head. "You never could hack listening to reason. Or honesty. Or truth. I can see you're too fat to be in New York or London, Paris or Moscow, but for fuck's sake, not even the Colorado Ballet?" Again with the head shaking. "Instead, you're onstage at Smithie's strip club,"

Yes, whenever he got into calling me fat, it was time to go.

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I got up and started clearing his dinner dishes.

“I can do that,” he snapped.

He couldn’t.

He could barely walk.

Mismanaged diabetes.

The mismanaged part being, when I was fed up with his abuse, I’d quit coming to give him his insulin, take his blood sugar, make sure he ate, and doctor his booze by watering it down so his drinking didn’t put his body out of whack.

None of which he did for himself.

Three trips to the hospital, and the subsequent medical bills, which meant selling his old house (something I saw to), downsizing (something I also saw to), and putting up with his complaints he had about having to move (something I listened to, though the move part, I saw to), meant I kept coming back.

Mom didn’t get it.

She’d washed her hands of him years ago. Even before she did it legally with the divorce.

But I simply could not do nothing and let my father die.

And I knew this would happen if I did not manage his health and his life.

I took his dishes to the kitchen, rinsed them, put them in the dishwasher, tidied and headed back to the living room to remove the TV tray from in front of Dad.

Then I was going to get my purse and go.

“Hattie, it’s just—” he started in a much less ugly tone as I was folding up the tray.

“Don’t,” I whispered.

All these years, he thought he could dig in and dig in and *dig in* because... whatever.

He didn’t like his job?

He didn’t like his marriage?

He didn’t like his health?

He didn’t like his life?

So he took that out on his daughter?

And then he has a think about what he'd said, or what he'd done, and realizes he'd been a jerk, so he decides he can say he's sorry and that will wipe away all that came before, like it didn't happen.

It didn't wipe it away.

It never got wiped away.

A person was born clean.

But I believed they died with the stains their parents gave them.

Even if they lived to be a hundred and two.

I mean, seriously?

He'd called me a *whore*.

"I just wanted more for you, sweetheart," he said gently.

I looked him right in the eye.

"I started with a tour jeté down the center stage. It was massive. I was the first solo to go out. Ian wanted their attention. And I got it. He wanted to make a statement right off the bat this was a change for Smithie's. And I made that for him, and for Smithie, flying through the air in a titty bar."

"I wish I'd seen it," he lied.

"Well, I don't," I retorted. "Because you would have found something wrong with it. And you would have shared that with me. And I don't need that. Because I thought I was magnificent, and I probably was not, but at least it's nice to think I was, even if only for a little while."

On that, I moved to my bag while Dad called, "Hattie."

I said not a word.

I walked right out the door.

It was torture—stupid—but after that conversation, I did what I shouldn't do.

When I got in my car, I cued up Anya Marina's "Shut Up" on my iPhone, bluetoothed it to the car stereo and listened to it on my way home.

Repeatedly.

Doing this playing the dance I'd choreographed to it in my head.

And thinking about the look on Axl's face after I was done.

That first dance I danced for the first solo at Smithie's on opening night five nights ago when "Smithie's Club" became "Smithie's Revue."

The dance was slow, avant-garde, my movements staccato.

So when I'd do my double fottés, arabesque turns, and the final grand jeté that was reminiscent of Kitri, it came as a shock to the system for the viewer.

And by that time, I fancied, they didn't care I was dancing in a red turtleneck bodysuit that had the thighs cut up nearly to my underarms.

Even for the patrons of a strip club, it was about the dance.

Days before that, when Dorian had cornered me, saying he wanted to see all the girls' routines so he could set the lineup, I'd performed it for him, just him and me.

And when I was done, he sat side stage at his uncle's strip joint that he was reforming into something else, and he did this immobile.

"You didn't like it," I'd said, thinking the avant-garde part would be too weird for the gentleman's club crowd and I should go back to my first thought, pulling something together for "Dancing Queen."

"You're first," Ian had declared. "You're also last. If they see you first, they'll stay and drink until the lights go down on you."

My heart had thumped hard at these words.

"So you liked it?" I asked hesitantly.

Ian stood to his impressive height and stated, "Hattie, you took something beautiful and made it cool. Sexy...and cool." He nodded decisively. "You're first, baby, and you're last. Every night."

I loved that Dorian clearly enjoyed what I did.

But I worried that this would make Lottie, the current headliner (and my friend...well, she used to be), mad at me, but since I was avoiding all the girls, and had been doing it for so long (weeks!) I had it down to the art, I didn't know if she was.

Which was another reason why I was torturing myself with that song, that dance—a song I picked to a dance I put together to say things to Axl Pantera I wished I could in real life say because I knew he was going to be there.

And I was thinking all this, listening to that song, because if I thought about what I should be doing right then in order to get where I should be going that night, I'd break down, blubber like a child and probably get into an accident.

So yeah.

There it all was laid out, messy and unfun.

My life.

I had an abusive father that I, as a twenty-six-year-old woman, kept going back to and enduring his abuse.

I had Axl, a handsome man who'd asked me out, I'd turned him down, he started seeing someone else, but in the interim he saw me have a mini-breakdown, so then he tried to befriend me, which was worse than him just moving on to some other chick.

And I had a pack of friends I was avoiding because they all wanted me to go for that handsome man, even though now he had another woman, and he just wanted to be my friend. A pack of friends it had long since stopped being semi-kind-of-rude, (but understandable, considering how embarrassing the event was that started it) to constantly blow off and avoid them and now it was just ugly.

And that night was Lottie's pre-bachelorette-boards-at-Elvira's party, and Lottie, Ryn, Evie, Pepper *and* Elvira had all texted me to tell me they wanted me to come. And I didn't even know Elvira. I just knew she worked with the guys (that being Axl's guys, or more to the point, Hawk's guys (since Hawk was their boss): Mag, Boone, Auggie and Mo).

I'd heard Elvira's charcuterie boards were *everything*.

But no.

Nope.

Not me.

I wasn't there, enjoying life and being with my friends.

Instead, I did what I had to do to make certain my father lived another night. I tortured myself with a cool song that was a stark plea to take a chance with your heart. And I was going to go home, and I didn't know, binge *I Am a Killer* or something on Netflix, while all my friend were beginning celebrations to herald in one of the happiest times in life.

What was the matter with me?

I should go to the studio.

I should get some work done.

But that wasn't helping like it used to.

Because if I didn't have the guts to tell my father to take care of his own damned self...

And if I didn't have the courage to say yes to a handsome guy when he asked me out, further not having the backbone to accept him as a friend when he gave up on me...

Last, if I didn't even have it in me to lay it on my friends, or if not, just tell them to back off, I was dealing with my own issues, and instead, it felt like I was losing them, and it was me who was making that happen...

Then I wouldn't (and didn't) have the ability to boss up and do something with what I was creating in the studio.

So that was me all around.

Hattie Yates.

Failed dancer.

Failed daughter.

Failed friend.

Failed artist.

But really freaking good loner.

I parked at the back of the house where my and three other apartments were and let myself in the backdoor, thinking at least I had this.

My pad.

A weird, funky space, part of a big, old home broken in chunks. But the landlords wanted to make it cool, so they did, with up and down steps, insets in the walls to put knickknacks, interesting lighting, creamy white walls and beautifully refinished floors.

Mine was on the first level.

Living room and kitchen up front, a step up to the kitchen from the living room. A wall that was open, seeing as it was made up of opened-back shelves. Shelves in which there was a doorway with three steps down to delineate my bedroom area. That back area had a walk-in

closet and biggish bath, which, no other word for it, was divine. And the only other room, what I was in now, a side area at the back that had a washer, dryer and some storage.

As décor, I'd gone with white and cream in furniture with dove gray curtains. Some navy-and-cream throw rugs. Black-and-white art or photos in white frames.

I added to this only shocks of color here and there. In some pictures, one with a frame that was geranium pink.

Turquoise. Sky blue. Lime green. More pink.

And my prize possession, a loud beanbag in primary colors that was covered in a print of flowers that I used as a beanbag as well as an ottoman.

My funky little me space. Small. Light. Bright. Interesting.

All things that were not me.

With ease born of practice in that small, dark room lit only slightly by the waning sunlight of a Denver summer night, light that was coming through the single narrow window, I went up the three steps that should lead me to my living room/kitchen.

And stopped dead when I got there.

Illuminated by the big wicker-globe-covered hanging fixtures, sitting back in my comfy, creamy armchair with his feet on my flowery beanbag was Brett "Cisco" Rappaport.

The man who, a few months back, had kidnapped Evie, Ryn, Pepper and me—my friends, but also fellow dancers (except now Evie had quit and gone full time as an engineering student and computer tech).

Then he went on to kidnap Ryn again some weeks later.

He'd since been cleared of the crime he'd been framed for committing by two dirty cops who had killed another cop.

But still, not a good guy.

In my living room.

"I'm irate with you," he announced.

Okay...

Did I run?

I mean, he didn't have any henchmen with guns trained on me this time.

So that was good.

But he didn't even say "hi" before he told me he was irate with me.

And he was nefarious, what with having henchmen and kidnapping women and all. I didn't know what he did to make a living, but I didn't think it was running an animal shelter.

"Um..." I started when he said no more and also didn't move. "Why are you irate with me?"

"Because I saw that first dance. And the second one. Also the last. And Axl Pantera saw that first dance. And the second one. Also the last. I also saw the man nearly come out of his skin, beating back the need to charge you on the dance floor, carry you to his Jeep, take you to his house, and tie you down until you swore you'd never leave him, and here I am." He extended an arm out to indicate my place while I fought to catch my breath after what he said. "Alone in your house with you, after you visited that waste of a space you call a dad. And where is Pantera?"

He leaned toward me.

I didn't move.

*"Not here."*

"Uh...he has a girlfriend," I shared, deciding to get into that and not the information he knew I'd just come from my father's, which freaked me out.

"He's seein' a woman. There's a big difference."

"I'm not sure after all this time she'd define it as that."

"All this time...what? A few weeks?"

"More like a few months."

He shook his head. "You women have way too many scruples."

Yup.

Nefarious.

I took a chance and stepped another step into the room because I was less afraid of doing that than taking one the other way.

"Can I ask...I mean, no offense, truly, but it's a little weird...so can I ask why you're here talking to me about this?"

"Because you're my girl and I gotta whip you women into shape."

Erm.

*What?*

“I’m your girl?” I whispered.

His brows shot up. “Didn’t Ryn tell you?”

“Uh—”

“Yeah, you’re avoiding your friends. *What is up with that?*”

Okay.

Now, how did he know *that*?

“How much do you know about me?” I queried.

And, yup.

Still whispering.

“I look after what’s mine.”

“I’m not really yours.”

“Well, see, this is how it goes.”

He stopped talking, took his feet from my beanbag and stood.

I went completely still.

He crossed his arms on his chest.

And call me crazy (which on my next thought, I apparently was), but in my opinion, he was kind of cute.

In a bizarre, bad-guy kind of way.

And if indications were correct under that finely tailored suit, he had a great body.

Not to mention, he was tall.

“I kidnapped you,” he reminded me.

“Yes, I remember,” I told him.

“And I still assert that was Evie’s brother’s sitch. I mean, he was the one who swung you girls out there. I was just reacting to his bullshit.”

I could argue that.

I didn’t.

“But regardless,” he shrugged, “I did what I did which *really* swung you girls out there so it’s up to me to look after you.”

This did not track.

Even a little bit.

“Uh...” was all I could get out to refute his statement.

Cisco didn't need me to speak.

He had more to say.

“And there's four of you, only one of me. Which means I need some assistance. Now Evan has that Mag guy. And my girl Ryn got her Boone. But still, the last two of you need to get the lead out. I work hard. I got some cake. But I can't be payin' guys to keep an eye on you girls forever. You need men in your beds.”

It sounded strangled when I asked, “Am I in danger?”

“Is the sky blue? Is the earth round?” he asked questions I did not want to hear after I asked if I was in danger. “You're a woman. It's a crapshoot you just walkin' to your car out back. Hell, just bein' in this sweet, hip pad by yourself. If Pantera was here, some guy broke in to do you harm, he'd shoot him in the face.”

Considering Axl was a commando as a profession, this was probably not far off the mark.

“For sure he'd scrape off that waste of space dad of yours,” he continued.

My back went straight at that.

“You're talking about my father,” I told him.

“Girl, Evie told me he was abusive. She said straight-out you had violence in your life when she was talkin' about your dad. And Ryn told me you checked out on all of them because he got in your head and you couldn't even dance all on your own and enjoy it without self-abusin' when you thought you'd fucked up. I mean, when that's the case, why do you go make dinner for this asshole every night?”

Boy, Evie and Ryn had talked a lot to this guy.

And that was the embarrassing thing that happened that made me retreat from my friends. I'd been dancing. I'd been loving it. I'd messed up. And I'd lost it...on myself.

This was embarrassing because Ryn had seen that, and I figured she'd told Pepper, Lottie and Evie about it.

Not to mention (and this wasn't embarrassing, it was mortifying), Axl had seen it too.

“He’s my dad.”

“Yeah, and Ivan the Terrible was a dad, and look how that turned out for *his* kid.”

Now I was more confused.

Ivan the Terrible?

“What?” I asked.

“The dude beat the shit out of his daughter-in-law because he didn’t like what she was wearin’. His son tried to intervene. Ol’ pops cracked him on the head, killing him. And the woman was pregnant, so she miscarried. That’s quite an afternoon for Ivan.”

Okay, I had to take a sec because...

How had something that had started strange, gotten so much *more* strange?

“My dad isn’t Ivan the Terrible,” I pointed out.

“Only ’cause he’s not a Tsar. If he had *carte blanche*, where would you be?”

This was a chilling question.

“We’ll let that go...for now,” he allowed. “We’ll let Pantera go for now too. You had dinner?”

“I was actually going to fast tonight,” I told him, and not because it seemed he might ask me to dinner, but because I was going to fast that night.

His head ticked sharply. “Why?”

“Why?” I parroted, since he was looking right at me.

“Your fuckin’ dad,” he bit out, his tone suddenly alarming.

Right, this had to stop.

“Mr. uh...”

“Brett,” he spat. “And tell me, you see the women at Smithie’s?”

“Pardon?”

“Women go there. A lot. And not just since Ian switched shit up. Also not only lesbians gettin’ their groove on. All kinds of women go there to party and to watch.”

I nodded. “It’s a thing. Women have embraced strip clubs.”

And this was true, though I didn't get it. Maybe female camaraderie. Maybe they thought it was edgy and cool. Whatever it was, we had nearly as many bachelorette parties as we did bachelor ones.

"So what do you think it says, they see a woman with a healthy body flyin' through the air five feet off the ground, the back of her head nearly touching the heel of her foot?"

I again went still.

He answered his own question.

"It says they can stop eating that bullshit people been feeding them. They can be in shape and do magnificent things and they don't gotta be ninety pounds do to them. So, I'll repeat, you had dinner?"

"No," I answered.

He nodded. "We're goin' out."

"Brett—"

"Hattie, listen to me," he cut me off, his tone again different. This time gentle, coaxing. "You don't get this, you never had experience with this, and I'm seeing it's my place to show you the way. All men are not created equal. There are men who give a shit. Ryn tells me you're set for Pantera. I can't go there. And just sayin', that ass, those curls," he tipped his head to me, "you're cute. Normally, I'd be all over that. But Ryn says it's gotta be Pantera. So this is not that. We're lettin' that go. We're lettin' your dad go. You're lettin' the fast go. And I'm gonna take you to dinner and you're gonna be around a man who doesn't treat you like shit. Start you gettin' used to that. We'll go from there. Yeah?"

I didn't know what it was.

I didn't know why I did it.

But I didn't hesitate to say, "Yeah."

He smiled at me, and that decided it.

He was definitely cute.

I walked his way and he escorted me out of my own place like it was his.

The henchman was out there, folding out of the sleek Lincoln town car at the curb in order to open the back door for us.

We got in, and after Brett settled next to me, he declared, “I feel like a steak. Do you feel like a steak?”

“Who doesn’t feel like eating a steak?” I asked.

“Atta girl,” he muttered.

His driver glided from the curb.

And call me crazy (and I’d be the first person to do that), but when we did, I thought for the first time in a long time that things were looking up.

“At dinner, we’ll talk about you wastin’ your time in that studio. And we’ll talk you *into* spendin’ time that you don’t waste in that studio. Got a coupla folks I know who own galleries. Your shit is good. Time to stop fuckin’ around with that and let the world know you got talent.”

My lungs seized.

Brett called out to the driver. “Call ahead. We’re not waiting for a table.”

Okay, maybe I was wrong about things looking up.

But for the life of me, even after what he’d just said about my studio and knowing people who own galleries, I felt I was right.

## Chapter Two

### *I Blew It*

#### *Hattie*

Sitting in my Nissan Rogue outside the studio the next morning, I again scrolled through my texts from last night.

Lottie:

Where are you?

Pepper:

Are you coming?

Ryn:

Girl. You are missing out!  
Elvira's boards are EVERYTHING!

Evie:

OK. Now you're worrying me.  
Strike that, you've been worrying  
me. Now you're SERIOUSLY  
worrying me.

My reply, copied and pasted to each of them:

Something came up! I'm SO  
sorry! I hate to miss it!  
Have SO MUCH fun!  
xo♥♥♥

I knew I needed to give it a minute (or a hundred hours of professionally directed time while sitting on someone's couch) to try and figure out why I was so terrified of spending time with them again after what Axl and Ryn saw when I was dancing.

I had just, until then, refused to give it that minute.

But sitting in my burgundy Rogue, giving it that minute, I realized it wasn't just because it was embarrassing.

It was because it was weak.

See, Lottie had it together. She totally knew who she was and she made no apologies (not that there were any to be made, she was awesome, still, she was a stripper, and before that she'd been Queen of the Corvette Calendar, and by my estimation, 99.9% of the population was judgy, so *they'd* think she had apologies to make).

She loved stripping, made a ton of money doing it and was at one with her looks and her body. She also had a great house she'd pulled together herself, as well as the love and devotion of Mo, who might look terrifying in a could-be-one-of-Brett's-henchmen type of way, but he was a softie.

And Evie was a genius. Like, certifiable. I'd seen her do mathematics on the fly in her head that I'd probably mess up on a calculator. Her family was way more messed up than my dad. But

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she'd scraped them off and moved on, going back to college to get her degree, fixing computers, living with, looking for a new house to share and now engaged to Mag, who was a super-cool dude and insanely into her.

Then there was Ryn, who had it just as together as Lottie. She was gorgeous and sexy and sweet and strong with a fantastic fashion sense and she'd just sold her first flip, a house she'd worked on herself. Now she and Boone were in the midst of waiting to close on their second because that was what Ryn wanted to do full time. Flip houses. And with Ryn as she was, I knew that would happen.

Last, there was Pepper, who had a daughter, Juno. And Pepper was the best mom in the world with Juno being the best kid ever, even if Pepper had zero support from her family and her ex was a total tool. Motherhood seemed effortless to her. No one messed with her or her kid, not even her family...or her tool of an ex.

Then there was me.

And I was none of that.

But seriously, it *was* embarrassing, dancing free and breezy by myself in a room then screwing it up and losing it the way I did. Doing all this not knowing Ryn and Axl were watching.

No, not embarrassing.

Mortifying.

I mean, on the whole I was shy around good-looking guys.

Very few weren't.

But the one who saw me do that? The one Lottie had picked for me, tried to set us up, he'd asked me out, and I'd wanted to go, but I refused? *That* one saw me do it?

Forget about it.

And now...

I didn't know.

They were good people. Good friends.

We'd been kidnapped together!

But what did I say?

When they were so together and didn't let anyone shit on them, how did I explain why I continued to take care of my dad?

Especially when they knew it was him. They knew it was my dad who was the reason Ryn and Axl saw me self-harm.

And how did I share what I'd never shared? That I rented studio space, and worked on pieces, but never even attempted to show one, much less sell one?

Bottom line, how did I tell four totally together women who had been in my life for a good while, who all counted me as friend, that I had not let them into my life hardly at all?

Do unto others, right?

And I thought, if I cared about someone, gave them my time, and they didn't let me in, how would I feel?

Not good.

Of course, I could just let them in.

But the longer I left it, the harder that became.

And now...was now.

I'd blown off Lottie's pre-bachelorette party to go out to dinner with a (probable) felon.

And none of them had texted again after my text.

I wasn't sure I could come back from that.

The only thing I was sure of was that, right then, I was going to head into my studio. I hadn't been there in at least a week.

And maybe, what it used to be able to do—give me focus, calm, and an outlet to express things I didn't even admit to myself—it would do again.

Not to mention, Brett had told me last night over steaks that he'd had a look (breaking in to do so, and how I didn't feel disturbed and invaded by that, I had no idea) and he thought my stuff was "the shit."

"Want that piece in my living room. The girl folded in on herself," he'd said. "Think about how much you'll charge. I'll get you the cash and arrange to have it moved."

He'd actually said that.

And the girl folded in on herself, a piece I called “After,” made of concrete and rusted iron with some copper wire and carefully selected bits of stone, was one of the favorite things I’d done so far.

I didn’t want to sell it.

It was me.

But if someone wanted to buy it...

On this thought, I got out of my car, went to the door of my studio, unlocked and opened it, walked in, and for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, stopped dead.

Because Axl Pantera was standing right next to “After.”

*Right next to “After.”*

*In my studio.*

Where I expressed...

*Everything.*

My heart lodged in my throat.

He was tall.

Beautiful body (and I meant *beautiful*, so beautiful I wanted to form it from concrete and shiny steel so it could live forever).

A thick head of spiky silver hair atop fabulous features—strong nose, square jaw, gorgeous full lips and the most remarkable ice-blue eyes I’d ever seen.

Truth be told, he wasn’t handsome in a classical sense.

He was more rough, though I’d prefer to call it roguish. With a high forehead, heavy dark brows, hooded eyes that were quite deep set and downturned at the ends which gave him a look like he was always alert, always assessing, didn’t miss a trick.

I had no idea where he got that silver hair. He couldn’t be much older than me.

But he worked it.

“How did you—?” I started to ask how he knew about my studio.

“Stood them up,” he stated. “Again.”

What?

“Pardon?” I asked.

“Lottie’s big thing. Gearing up. That was last night. Shower is coming up. Bachelorette party after that. Next day, wedding. And last night you’re...what? Kissin’ your dad’s ass?”

And for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, I found my body stunned still.

This time it was to fight the pain.

“Told myself to have patience,” he continued. “This shit isn’t easy. I know. My dad didn’t hide the fact he wasn’t all that thrilled with the way I turned out either.”

Uh...

*What?*

He was...

Well, Axl was...

*Perfect.*

How could his dad not be thrilled with how he’d turned out?

“You, it was dance. Me, track and field. Dad was a track star. Sprinter. Long jump. I was the same, but better. A lot better. Didn’t make the Olympics though, and you would have thought me not doing that when the vast majority of athletes can’t, I was patient zero with the coronavirus.”

“I—”

“And I still see him. He’s my dad. Now he thinks I’m an idiot I quit school to go into the service. I wasn’t a gold medal winner with millions in endorsements, he wanted me to be what he became. An attorney. Work at his firm. He’s in the thick of it. He gets off on it. He doesn’t see or tries to ignore or just enjoys the fact the prosecutorial system in this country is fucked to the point it’s a joke. The penal system is the same. And I don’t find justice a game where you rack up wins and losses on your personal score sheet and that proves how big your dick is when sitting next to you is a person whose life is at stake. He does not appreciate my opinion on these subjects, but he’s a scrapper. His description of himself. So he brings it up *all the fuckin’ time*. Just to get a rise out of me. I try not to take the bait, but he won’t let it go until I either walk out or double down.”

“That doesn’t sound—”

“Good?” he interrupted in order to finish for me. “No. It isn’t. I hate it. It drives my mother crazy. But I love her and I want to see her and that comes with seeing him. And he’s my dad.

There's a pull. Nearly impossible to fight. So I get it. How it's hard to let go. Hard to stay away. But my father never hit me."

All right.

I was beginning to rethink my friends being much better friends than me. Because it seemed *everyone* knew what I didn't quite openly share (but I still shared) during our kidnapping. This being about my dad getting physical.

And really, what happened during a kidnapping should stay with the kidnapping.

"Axl—"

"He never drove me to harming myself."

I closed my mouth.

He looked down and touched "After," a piece that came to his hip, and then his attention returned to me.

"This breaks my fucking heart," he declared.

I held my breath.

Oh yes.

He knew that this studio was where I expressed things.

"It's you as a girl and it's you as a woman, cast in cement, formed of iron, and I get it's hard to break free. What I don't get is that it isn't hard to come out of yourself and take someone's hand. You got at least half a dozen of them extended to you. Why the fuck would you not only avoid them, but slap them away?"

Since he wasn't letting me talk, even if he asked a question, I didn't say anything.

"Lottie's hurt, Hattie," he shared.

Oh no.

I closed my eyes.

"Yeah," he said.

I reopened them.

He kept going.

“She likes you. You mean something to her. Last night was so important, everyone’s gathering, Elvira’s pulled out her boards, all so they can celebrate one of their own, and where the fuck are you?”

“I had something come—”

“Don’t give me any of your shit.” He shook his head sharply. “I don’t buy it.”

I shut my mouth again.

“Mac has a heart of gold.” “Mac” being what the guys called Lottie, seeing as her last name was McAlister, at least for the next few weeks. “What the woman doesn’t have is the patience of a saint. So you blew it last night, Hattie. Fuckin’ huge.”

With this statement, suddenly, breathing felt alien to me.

Axl walked my way.

He got close.

He stared down his nose at me.

And breathing was a memory.

“And you dance for me,” he said quietly, but not a sweet quiet, an angry one, “begging me to kiss you like I mean it. I wait over an hour for you in the parking lot after, and you run away. You dance for a room full of people, but it’s all about me, then *you run away from me.*”

God.

I’d done that.

After the opening night of the Revue, I’d delayed as long as I could before I’d gone out.

Partly because the girls and guys were all meeting at an after-hours bar to celebrate, and I intended to do a flyby, but the longer I delayed getting there, the less time I’d have to spend there before I could say I was tired and leave.

Mostly, though, it was because I worried, after I looked at Axl when the dance was done, that he’d be waiting for me.

And he was.

Right outside the door.

And I’d run from him.

I hadn’t even allowed myself to think about it since.

But now that he brought it up...

*Humiliating.*

“The girls tell me you’re shy,” he said. “They tell me I gotta put in the effort. I do, and time and again, you make a goddamn fool of me.”

Oh no!

I didn’t want him to feel like a fool.

“Ax—”

“So yeah, Hattie, last night, hurting Lottie, you fuckin’,” he got nearly nose to nose with me, so close, I could see thin threads of midnight striking through the steel of his eyes, “*blew it.*”

And with that, he moved away, walked around me to the door, and he slammed it behind him.

I didn’t even turn to look at it.

I stared at “After.”

He was right.

That was me.

After my failed audition for the Chicago Academy for the Arts.

Mom had been there, and of course Dad, both of them together, even though she’d moved out and got her own apartment at least a year before.

I’d been fourteen.

Two years before that, my ballet teacher had told my father, “Don, she’s talented. There’s no doubt about it. She just doesn’t have the body for it. Through no fault of her own. Hattie’s healthy. Fit. Limber. She has grace and power. She’s just too tall and big boned. She simply isn’t built to be a prima ballerina.”

And even before *that*, Mom had said, “Hattie, sweetie, dance *for you*. If you’re not dancing for you, you need to *stop dancing.*”

I thought I was dancing for me.

I loved dancing.

I loved dancing and painting and calligraphy and helping Mom decorate her cakes.

“My artsy girl, my free spirit, my rainbow,” Mom used to call me.

But I'd messed up, twice, during my solo routine at the audition for the Chicago Academy. They'd let me start again, but not a third time.

And after, Dad had lost it, backhanding me, catching me on the jaw.

Right in front of everybody.

Huge drama.

*Huge.*

The teachers were horrified and *ticked*. They threatened to phone the police.

Mom had lost her mind.

"If you think you're getting custody now, Don, you're *insane*. I'll fight you 'til I die, *until I die, you monster.*"

And I'd retreated from their hate, doing physically what for years as they hurled it at each other I did mentally. I curled into myself in a corner, just like "After."

A teacher and Mom had talked me out of my solitary huddle, and all the way back to the hotel, Mom was on me, "Has that happened before, Hattie? Has your father touched you like that before?"

I told her no.

And he hadn't.

He'd never hit me.

But she stayed on me.

So I confessed that he'd pinch me. Grab my arm in a way it hurt. Sometimes pull my hair.

"How had I not seen this?" she'd lamented, openly torn to shreds. "How did I miss this? How didn't I know this was happening?"

I didn't have the courage to tell her it was because *I hid it*.

Though, it was out then and Mom had carried through with her vow. She dragged it all out into the open during the divorce and she won custody of me.

It came with a price though.

One I paid when I was with my father.

So my dad had hit me, my mom was a mess, and I felt guilt and shame I didn't tell her what was happening so it was me that made her feel that way, I was humiliated in front of the

admissions board of one of the most prestigious performing arts high schools in the US, this after I failed my audition because...

Well...

I blew it.

And I stared at "After" knowing I was really, really good at one thing.

Blowing it.

My phone rang in my bag, and automatically, I reached in and found it.

I pulled it out and it was a number I didn't know.

I was so in my head, against all the laws of dealing with robocalls, I answered it.

"Hello?"

"Hattie Yates?"

"Yes."

"Hattie Yates."

"Yes."

"Nice voice."

"What?"

"Nice voice. Nice tits. Nice hair. *Great ass*. Tie you down. Tie you down *tight*. Whip that ass.

Whip you until—"

I took the phone from my ear, disconnected the call and blocked the caller.

I did all of this remembering after what went down with Axl how to breathe.

And I was doing that rapidly.

Staring at my phone.

"Okay, okay, okay..." I whispered, deep in the trenches of flashback city.

Not my own flashback.

One that was about what had started all of this. Months ago. When Lottie got that creepy guy sending her even creepier letters which was why Smithie arranged a bodyguard.

That bodyguard was Mo.

Not long after, Lottie was living with Mo and fixing all her girls up with Mo's boys.

And now I had a call from a number I didn't know, someone who probably saw me dance, someone who'd found out my name, my number and was calling me telling me he was going to tie me down and whip me.

I should tell Mo, Mag, Boone...*Axl*.

I should call them and tell them what just happened.

But I'd blown it.

And it was just a creepy phone call.

Nothing to get excited about, right?

Though, they'd never shared in full, but when they found out who was sending Lottie sinister threatening letters and put him out of commission, the vibe with Smithie was super off for a while.

It wasn't just a crackpot.

It was worse.

And then there was the thing with Evie and her brother, the result of which got all of us (save Lottie) kidnapped.

Which carried on to Ryn having her thing, and a guy was shot dead on her back deck and a friend of hers was murdered.

So, I mean, it seemed like if shit could happen, it would.

And he knew my name.

My number.

Probably, if he was talking about my ass, where I worked.

And he could follow me from there to where I lived.

I shouldn't take any chances.

I reengaged my phone.

Went to Contacts.

And scrolled.

I hit the button to make the call and put the phone to my ear.

"Hey, beautiful," he answered.

"Brett, um...I think I need you," I replied.

*Dream Spinner*  
will be unleashed May 25, 2021

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