
NOW AND FOREVER

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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.

Chapter 1

June 1917, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Scott Kowalski 12, Sasha 10

The morning matinee showing at the Roxie Theatre was over, and the ushers herded dozens of children out of the theatre. All the employees knew where the children tried to hide to sneak extra viewings of whatever silent movie was playing. One by one, the closets, ventilation recesses, alcoves, and bathrooms were searched. The junior-sized hoodlums were sent on their way with a swat across their bottoms and stern warnings not to do it again.

No one checked inside the massive folds of the red velvet curtains on each side of the old stage where the movie screen had been hung when the theatre had been altered to accommodate moving pictures. Had they looked, they might have seen the scuffed and worn-out shoes showing slightly under the curtains.

Twelve-year-old Scott Kowalski had discovered his hiding place after being thrown out of the Roxie eight Saturdays in a

row. He'd broken the record for being the most thrown-out kid in the neighborhood. It was good for his tough-guy reputation, but that wasn't his goal. Scott didn't want to flaunt authority or cause any trouble, especially trouble that would tick off his old man.

He needed to stay inside the theatre, although not for the film being played. After the ten o'clock kiddie show on Saturday mornings, the Roxie played a feature show. Scott had to stay for the feature. Today's feature was a Marian Lovett romance. Marian was a doe-eyed beauty that the older boys thought was perfect, but she was just another girl to him. He'd suffer through the mushy stuff to see the fifteen-minute short after the feature. The short featured Bussy Buttrum and his Harem of Beauties, a spectacular chorus line of tap dancing, and high kicks.

Scott loved to watch tap-dancing. His deepest secret was that he wanted to be a tap dancer. No one could know his secret because if they did, he'd be called a sissy. Scott watched the feet of the dancers on the screen. He would practice those steps in the old, abandoned warehouse on Fuller Street. He would stomp bottle caps into the heels and toes of his heavy leather shoes and dream that someday he would be able to own a real pair of tap shoes.

When the short played on screen, he leaned forward, watched, and memorized every second of the tap dancing routine. He tried to burn the steps into his memory. He hid inside the curtains two times that day to watch the feature. Then, he had to leave.

It was six o'clock, and his old man got home before seven. All was well at the Kowalski household if everyone was home when Butch returned from the steel mill. Butch was a hot metal worker in the mills, a tall, stocky built man with arms like tree trunks. Butch was also *one of the guys*.

That meant he stopped at a bar on the way home from work. For the past year, Butch had been stumbling home drunk. The small tenement apartment would be quiet if Scott's stepmother

Irma could feed Butch and get him to bed to sleep off the booze. If she couldn't, Irma, Scott, and baby Anna were in for a night of yelling, swearing, and fighting. When Butch and Irma got into it, Scott would take Anna out on the fire escape. He could still hear the yelling, but they were out of the path of Butch's fists. Scott could take getting hit. He was a boy and tough. It made him angry when Butch was mean to Irma or yelled at baby Anna. It wasn't right, but he didn't know how to stop it. As tough as he was for twelve, he was not a match for his father.

As Scott left the theatre, he ducked behind a bunch of older and taller kids to get past the manager and the ushers. Once outside, he stopped to look at the posters of next weeks' picture shows.

"Leave me alone!" A high-pitched scared voice came from the alley beside the Roxie.

Scott looked around the corner. Freddie Barstow and his gang of creeps from 52nd Street were picking on a thin, young boy.

Freddie Barstow and his gang were a couple of years older and bullies. Scott didn't like bullies.

"Hey!" Scott's mouth shot open before he could stop himself. "Leave the kid alone!"

Freddie turned around and eyed Scott and that he was alone.

"Yeah, Pollock, what you gonna do about it?" Freddie snarled.

Scott leaned back against the brick wall and took on his *tough* stance. "Nothin," he said with a grin.

"Then, get outta here," Mousie Derrick yelled.

"Naw," Scott said. "I'm gonna watch. I need all the details. Cause when I tell Richie how his brother is sooo tough that he has to pick on kids half his size, I think he'll get a kick out of it."

Freddie Barstow's eyes turned to a mean squint, but he let go of the little kid's collar. "What's it to you if I rough up the sissy kid?"

“Nothin,” Scott said. “I just don’t want my guys getting blamed for something you jokers did. Drexel Street is supposed to be off-limits. Nobody is supposed to cause trouble. If you mess with the kid, I want to make sure the right guys get the blame. If Richie’s gang gets the blame, he’s gonna want to know who did it. Your brother likes taking his girlfriends to the Roxie. I see him all the time up in the balcony making out, and if the cops go after him, he’s gonna be mad, real mad.”

Freddie Barstow didn’t want to tangle with his older brother. Richie didn’t need a reason to push his younger brother around. He was a member of a dangerous gang and mean.

Freddie shoved the kid to the ground. “Go home, sissy! And, you watch yourself, Pollock. I’m puttin’ you in my book!” After having the last word, the boy sauntered around the corner, followed by his friends.

Scott looked at the kid and snorted. He was skinny, with light blond hair, and he was wearing a sissy Buster Brown suit. The boy was all eyes and fear, but he brushed off his shorts and walked over to Scott.

“Thank you. I don’t know why they were picking on me.”

“I do,” Scott snarled. “You’re a sissy. What are you doing out without your mommy?”

The kid blushed and gulped. “My mother is sick, and my governess said she didn’t feel well either. I told her I could walk to the Roxie by myself.”

Scott’s eyebrows lifted under his carrot red hair that needed to be cut badly. “Governess?” he repeated. “Where’d you come from?”

“Russia originally, ” the boy answered. “Everyone, but for me, I was born in America. My grandfather says I’m a first-generation American.”

Scott rolled his eyes at the kid’s dumbness. “Big deal, I’m second-generation Polish! What I meant was, where do you live? Here in Milwaukee!” he said sarcastically.

“Oh. On the corner of Mellon and Bradstock,” the boy answered politely.

Scott knew where those streets were, but they weren't near his neighborhood. Drexel was the dividing line street between what people in his neighborhood called the riches and them. He lived in a working-class neighborhood in Milwaukee. There weren't any houses down there, only tenement buildings.

“You'd better go home,” Scott said, wanting to be shed of the rich kid.

The boy nodded, but he looked fearfully over his shoulder and then straight ahead at the darkening streets.

“Ah, geez,” Scott grumbled. “I'll walk with ya, but don't get too close. I don't want nobody thinking I'm friends with a sissy.”

Scott started striding forward, and the boy followed silently.

“What's your name, kid?” Scott asked after the first block.

“Alexandro Stanislavovich Smirnov,” the boy said softly.

Scott stopped and looked at the kid. “Golly, that's a big name for a little squirt,” he laughed. “My name is Scott, Scott Kowalski.”

“Just call me Alex,” the little boy said, and he stepped up to walk beside his protector.

As they walked toward the part of the city where Scott had always been told that ‘rich’ people lived, he was busy looking at the houses. He'd never seen this part of Milwaukee before, and he liked it. The streets were wider and the buildings newer and cleaner than where he lived. There wasn't any trash spewing into the streets from overturned bins stacked against the buildings or vendor carts. The windows were clean, and he noticed there weren't any clotheslines stretching across the back alleys or from the upper floor windows. If the houses had them, they must be in the back.

“Do you like the picture shows?”

Scott almost didn't hear the question. He was too busy gawking.

“Yeah, I go to the Roxie every Saturday,” Scott said.

“I try if I can get away!” the boy said, looking at Scott speculatively. “You’re the boy who hides in the curtains and comes out after the show starts.”

Scott was surprised, and he made a threatening fist. “If you rat on me!”

“I won’t,” Alex said quickly. “That’s where I live,” he said, pointing.

Scott stopped and looked up at a large, gray granite house on the corner lot. “That’s a big place,” he said. “How many apartments are in there?”

Alex looked at him in confusion. “What’s an apartment?”

“Boy, are you dumb,” Scott growled. “How many families live there?”

“Just us,” the boy answered. “My mother and father and my older brother and me. Oh, and the staff. Mrs. Genevieve, my governess, Mr. Clark the butler, Mrs. Harris the housekeeper, and Miss. Sally the maid. Mr. Clovis is the groundskeeper, but he doesn’t live there.”

Scott’s mouth fell open in surprise. “You mean it takes,” he counted on his fingers, “five people to take care of four people? Man! You must be rich, like the people in the picture shows!”

Alex thought about it and nodded his head in agreement. “I think so. Don’t you live in a house?”

“Not like this,” Scott said. “I live in a tenement with my father, stepmother, and baby sister. It’s nice. Irma keeps it clean, but it only has two rooms, a kitchen and living room in one room and a bedroom. Your folks must be really rich!”

The boy nodded again and started walking up the steps. He turned around and stuck out his small hand. “Thank you for saving me, Scott Kowalski.”

Scott grinned and shook the boy’s hand seriously. “You are welcome, Alex, and I ain’t ever gonna try saying the rest of your name.”

The small boy walked up the steps, and then he turned around again and shouted at Scott, who was already thirty feet away and running down the street.

“Hey, Kowalski! I’m not a sissy!”

August 1917

Scott waited until the lights were out and the intro piano music began before he slipped out from behind the smothering hot curtains and melted into the theatre's darkness to find a seat.

A minute later, someone sat down behind him and handed him a large bag of popcorn and strawberry soda pop.

“Hey, kid, you got the wrong person,” Scott complained, although his mouth started watering immediately at the smell of the popcorn.

“No, I don’t,” a young voice whispered in the darkness.

Scott squinted and looked at the boy. A set of bright blue eyes peered through a shaft of bangs falling into his eyes. Alex grinned.

“Hey,” Scott whispered. “Where’s the Buster Brown suit?”

“At home,” the boy growled. “You gonna yak or watch the movie?”

Scott looked at the large bag of popcorn in his lap. He took a huge swig of the pop and a handful of popcorn and settled back to watch the show.

So started a friendship between a rich boy and a poor boy. Scott paid his nickel to get into the show or snuck in during the morning kiddie matinee every Saturday. During the first-afternoon show, Alex usually joined him. After a couple of Saturdays, Scott showed the kid how to sneak into the curtains and hide so they could see additional shows. Two shows were all Alex dared

to watch. He had to return home. Alex Smirnov was a smart little boy and a lonely one. He showed up every Saturday for three months, and then he stopped coming.

Scott wondered if the kid's parents had discovered where he was going and had stopped him, and he decided to investigate. He walked to the corner of Mellon and Bradstock. There was a mourning wreath on the front door and black swags in the front windows. That meant someone in the house had died.

Scott snuck around the back of the house and into the alley. Climbing over the stone wall, he hid behind a row of hedges. He carefully made his way closer to the house hiding behind bushes and shrubs. Finally, Scott made his way to the windows, and he stood on his tiptoes to peek inside. He wasn't tall enough to see anything, so he snagged a bucket lying in a flowerbed and stood on it.

Scott almost fell off the bucket when he looked inside the house. He'd never seen such a place before except in the movies. The room was empty of people, but it was almost as big as the Roxie theatre. The ceilings were tall, and bookshelves were filled with leather-bound books, hundreds and hundreds of books. The desk in the room was almost as big as his parents' bedroom. The room was amazing to his young eyes. It was better than the places he had seen in the movies. Scott dragged his gaze away from the fine-furnishings and took his bucket to stand under the second window. It was part of the same room, and so were the next two windows. He moved on, pressing his nose against the glass, and saw more wonders. This room was fancy in a different way than the other room. This room had pink velvet sofas and chairs with carved wooden legs. Hanging over a round table was a huge chandelier. The boy's eyes widened at the size of the lighting fixture. He was so fascinated that he began to count the light bulbs.

The chandelier was taller than he was and almost as wide as the table it was hanging over. His nose was so close to the

window that it fogged, so he backed off. There were people inside. Most of the ladies wore black or gray, with fox furs draped over their shoulders and silly-looking hats on their heads.

One of the women was wearing *widow weeds*, but not like the mourning black women wore in his neighborhood. This lady was wearing a shiny black dress with sparkling black beads on the collar and the hem. All the women drank tea from fancy cups or a red liquid from tiny glasses.

Scott blinked because a girl who looked a lot like Alex was sitting at an enormous black piano. He ducked out of sight when a man carrying a food tray came into the room. The girl took a glass of milk and a small sandwich from the tray. When she was finished, she began to play the piano.

Aleksandra was wondering how soon she could escape. She had already been trotted out and displayed for the benefit of her mother's friends. Her parents had been doing this since she'd been a little kid, and she hated it.

A week earlier, Vladimir Smirnov, her father, had died of a heart attack. Aleksandra had cried because she knew she would never see her father again. The truth was she had rarely seen her father. He had taken no interest in his daughter.

Robyert Smirnov, Aleksandra's older brother at twenty-eight, was a copy of his father. His son was what Vladimir had thought a son should be, and he doted on him. Robyert was intelligent, athletic, and had a mind for finance and banking. He was career-oriented and was second in charge of their father's company. Aleksandra knew all this because she eavesdropped on conversations she wasn't supposed to hear.

Work, Aleksandra knew, must be really hard because her father and brother rarely came home before eight o'clock in the evenings. She was required to go to bed at that exact time. She rarely saw her father or brother unless they were scolding her for doing something wrong.

Aleksandra looked around the room and watched as her

mother dabbed at her eyes to wipe away tears that weren't really there. Then, she almost choked when she recognized a face peering through the parlor window.

"Aleksandra, darling," Feodora Smirnov exclaimed dramatically, "Please leave mamushka alone to talk to her friends."

Aleksandra leaped to her feet, relieved to finally be allowed to escape. She heard her mother's words as she left the room.

"Poor, fatherless baby. She'll never know my wonderful Vladimir. I'm devastated."

Aleksandra ducked down the hallway and slipped out a side door running around the side of the vast mansion.

"Scott!"

He jumped off the bucket. "Alex, you're a girl!"

Looking carefully around, Aleksandra grabbed her friend's hand and pulled him across the yard to the carriage house. She pulled him inside.

In the dim light of the carriage house, Scott backed away from his friend. "You're a girl!"

"Yes, I'm a girl," Alex said, sounding defensive. "My father died."

"Oh, man! I'm sorry, kid."

Alex shrugged. "My brother is in charge now. My mother says Robyert is the head of the family. That means I have to do what he tells me to do."

"I'm sorry," Scott repeated.

Alex shrugged again. "My father was an investment consultant, whatever that is, and so is my brother. I heard Robyert telling Momma that things would be different now that he was running the business."

"What does that mean?" Scott asked.

This time Alex looked scared. "I don't know, but my brother doesn't like me. I heard Robyert say it was time for me to be sent to a girl's academy and that I would need a finishing school."

“What’s a finishing school?” Scott asked. “I go to the Captain Augustus Luther’s Elementary. Why can’t you go there?”

“Because it’s a public school,” Alex said. “Smirnovs have to go to private schools.”

“Why?” Scott asked.

The skinny shoulders raised and fell again. “I don’t know. They never tell me why I have to do something. They just order me around and say I have to do it. The General says it will be good for me.”

“Who’s the General?” Scott asked.

“My grandfather, he’s my mother’s father. He’s General Cummings now. He changed his name when he came to America. He believes the rest of us should do the same, and my brother agrees. He says lots of people don’t like Russians, and we should become more American than the Americans, whatever that means.”

“So, what are you going to name yourself?” Scott asked. “It ain’t going to be Alex, ‘cause you’re a girl, a sissy!”

Alex straightened and shoved Scott in the chest hard enough to push him back against a wall. “I am not a sissy!” she stated bravely.

“Okay,” Scott agreed, suddenly feeling bad. Geeze, not only was Alex a girl, but her father had died.

“Are you going to stop being my friend because I’m a girl?” Alex demanded.

Scott backed away a few steps. “I don’t know. You’re a girl!”

“Yeah,” Alex said, sounding sad. “And, that makes a difference.”