

Chapter 1

Jax



The rules at The Dollhouse were simple: look, tip, and absolutely do *not* fucking touch. Most men managed at least the first two. There were, at least on occasion, those who needed some reminding about the third. That's what I was there for.

The club was packed wall to wall that night. New dancers tended to bring in a crowd, whether they intended to or not. Bigger crowds meant better payouts for the girls, sure, but they also meant we had clientele outside of our regulars. And, of course, *that* often meant a disregard for the house rules.

The man at the edge of the mainstage had been slowly building toward stupidity all night. He was the exact type I always expected that behavior from, unfortunately. Big gold watch, slicked back hair, and a well-tailored, clearly expensive suit that still served as a glowing example of money not being able to buy taste. The thing was hideous.

I'd watched him work his way to idiocy in increments. First, with the tray of shots he absolutely did not need. Then, with the way he'd lean over the table to wolf whistle at the bottle girls. Mainly, I watched the way he and his buddies leered and jeered every time a dancer walked by, miming a variety of lewd gestures to each other. So, it was no surprise when he finally decided to act up in a way that called for proper intervention.

Cherry was onstage when he decided to make himself my problem. She had the last set before the debut, which meant she was holding the room together by the thinnest of threads. That was, in my opinion, always the worst set to work. Everyone knew the new girl was coming out.

The regulars held onto their cash for that reason, wanting to see if the fresh new act was really worth all the rumors that circulated about her. The tourists wanted to feel like they were a part of something exclusive and new. And all the men with money wanted to say they'd been the first to see her. Those types always had a thing about being *the first*. Made them feel special, I think.

But, in the meantime, Cherry had to keep them all entertained. She was good at it, of course. Cherry was good at damn near everything when it came to performance. She moved beneath the stage lights like she didn't even understand the concept of being tired—all red curls, glittered skin, and that positively wicked smile that convinced just about everyone she might actually like them if they paid well enough. She didn't. In fact, Cherry didn't like most people. It was one of her better social qualities, in my opinion.

The man near the mainstage didn't seem to understand that, though. Or he didn't care. Either way, it was a recipe for trouble.

He leaned in too close as Cherry lowered herself toward the edge of the stage, one hand curled around the pole, the other trailing lazily down the line of her thigh. She was in red that night, naturally. Cherry always wore red when she wanted to make rent in one set. The rhinestones on her costume caught every light in the room and scattered it back like a kaleidoscope across the patrons closest to the stage.

The sleezebag in the ugly suit watched her like he'd forgotten the entire schtick here was selling a fantasy—watched her like he fully believed she *actually* wanted him. Gross. But it happened a lot in The Dollhouse. It was, generally speaking, the entire business model.

His friends noticed when his hand came up, reaching over the table and toward the stage. One of them laughed into his glass, another nudging him with an elbow. They were all watching now, waiting to see if he'd actually go for the grab or grope or whatever the hell it was he was planning.

Men like him liked to talk a lot of shit about how the girls performed for attention. But in my experience, no one loved an audience better than a man about to make an idiot of himself.

Cherry saw him, too, of course. And her smile stayed exactly as it was, but her eyes cut across the room and found mine. That was all the permission I needed. I pushed off the mirrored column I had been leaning against and started across the floor.

I reached the mainstage just as the man's hand brushed against Cherry's calf. I snatched his wrist before it could climb any higher.

He looked up, annoyed mostly, red-faced with indignation.

"Hey!" he snapped.

I smiled down at him. "Hi there."

His buddies went quiet. I loved that part—the little *oh, shit* moment when the fun was no longer quite so fun, and the group had to make the split-second decision on if they wanted to be loyal or smart.

Cherry gave me a subtle dip of the chin, rising smoothly from the floor and gliding away, never missing a beat. She kept up her dancing, drifting across the stage to the music as if she hadn't noticed anything at all. Professionalism was a hell of a thing.

The man tried to jerk his hand away. "What the hell is your problem?"

"Currently?" I looked at his hand, giving it a little wiggle. "You."

"I paid for this table, so I have the right to be here."

"Congrats. You know how transactions work. Your point?"

His jaw flexed. He had one of those faces that had probably been handsome once, before too many benders had softened him around the edges. Mid forties, good cologne, bad manners. Oh, and would you believe it? A wedding ring. If he'd been here with his wife, I don't think it would have bothered me nearly as much—if at all. Not that I necessarily cared about marriage as an institution. Frankly, I hated the concept. And I hated it because of assholes like this. I hated how pathetically optimistic

it was to believe that, in a place like New Babylon, anyone would truly remain loyal to a spouse.

“Get your hand off me,” he snarled.

I looked at his wrist, still trapped in my grip, and pursed my lips, giving him a *tsk* that I’m not quite sure he heard over the music.

“I’m gonna make this very simple, Mark. Can I call you Mark?” I gave him only a moment to respond. When he didn’t, I carried on. “You apologize to Cherry for me. Tip her like you’ve spontaneously regained your knowledge of manners. Then, you keep your hands where I can see them for the rest of the night. Slip up again, and I’ll start taking fingers. Don’t touch my girls, Mark.”

He narrowed his eyes, incredulous. “Do you know who the fuck I am?”

There it was. New Babylon’s most overused threat. You’d hear it everywhere in the city. Bars, clubs, restaurants, alleys, in the backs of police cars. They said it like a bank account had ever stopped a body from hitting the pavement.

“No,” I said. “Admittedly, I don’t. But I do know where your hand was.” I bend his hand back, feeling the pop of his joints beneath my fingers. He twisted with it, sucking air through his teeth.

There was a tiny, mean part of me that hoped he’d keep digging his own grave. I wasn’t proud of that part, exactly, but I’d stopped pretending I didn’t have it long ago. This city made it a very useful trait to have. Some folks handled the city life with drugs, with therapy, with friends, or sometimes God. I handled it by being a big dog in a room full of mewling pups. Like Mark. We all coped differently.

I didn’t realize Cherry’s first song was over until she sauntered up behind me, the rhinestones on her fishnets catching the light and, as such, my attention. I angled my head to meet her eyes.

“Hey, ma,” I said, flashing her a broad smile.

“Hey, baby.” She let her hand rest on my shoulder. I wasn’t a short woman—not by any stretch of the definition—but Cherry was taller by at least two inches in the shoes she wore.

“What do ya think?” I jerked my chin toward Mark. “What’re we doin’ with him?”

Cherry hummed, low and amused. “I think he’s sorry. But I do think I deserve an apology.” She put on her best kicked puppy expression. Mark didn’t speak. So, I twisted a little harder on his wrist. Good lord, he had weak bones. Tiny bones.

“I’m sorry,” he squeaked.

Cherry raised a brow, tilting her head.

“What for?” I asked.

“For touching,” he added, the words spilling out of him so fast I thought they might actually be genuine.

“See?” I mused. “That wasn’t so hard.”

I held out my free hand. He stared at it like I’d just asked him to give me his firstborn.

I nodded toward Cherry. “It’s respectful to tip your performers, Mark.”

For a long moment, he hesitated. It was only when one of his buddies glared at him that he reached into his jacket and pulled out a money clip. He peeled off a hundred and held it out.

Cherry didn’t move, and neither did I.

His face tightened. He added another.

“C’mon, man, I know that watch costs a band at least. You’ve got hundreds to wipe your ass with. Apologize to the lady,” I said.

After a long glower at me, he added a third. Only then did I take the bills and pass them to Cherry. She accepted them between two fingers and tucked them into the cup of her bra.

“Thank you, baby,” she purred. She slipped away, headed for backstage without another glance.