



# APPLE OF HIS EYE

DARK & TWISTED TALES

TRACIE DOUGLAS

# APPLE OF HIS EYE

DARK & TWISTED TALES SERIES COLLABORATION

THE DIRTY JACKALS MC - BOOK 2

TRACIE DOUGLAS

**APPLE OF HIS EYE**

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## APPLE OF HIS EYE

Orphaned at a young age, Everleigh White's life is nothing like the fairy tales she loved as a child. Her wicked stepmother plans to sell her to settle unpaid debts. But Everleigh flees into the night in the middle of a storm.

With nowhere to go, she takes shelter through the open window of a neighbor's basement, hoping to buy some time and plan her next move. Only now she faces a new danger—one in the shape of a devastatingly handsome man, the President of the Dirty Jackal's MC, Kohen "Vortex" Prince.

When Kohen discovers a pretty, young thing hiding in a dark corner of his basement, the beast inside of him roars to life and vows to protect her at all costs. Even if the odds are stacked against them.

No matter the cost, the one thing Kohen's sure of is that Everleigh is his, and nothing—not even death—will stop him from claiming his woman.

*To my family.*  
*For always believing in me.*  
*No matter what.*

# THE DIRTY JACKALS QUICK GUIDE

## **Officers**

President: Kohen “Vortex Prince

Vice President: Cabe “Shakespeare” Jackson

Sargeant of Arms: Donovan “Bane” Reed

Secretary: Ryker “Coyote” Stevens

Treasure: Eli “Dutch” Cross

Enforcer: Xavier “Hardcore” Frost

Enforcer: Kane “Smoke” Thompson

IT/Cyber Security: Atticus “Code” Prince

## **Patched Members**

Silas “Pretty Boy” Knight

Griffin “Pothole” Scott

Patrick “Pappy” Hansen

Knox “Arsenic” Vidal

Heath “Cyanide” Stockwell

Rhett “Socket” Walker

Jude “Cutter” Johnson

Soren “Zenith” McFarland

Ryan “Rawhide” Prince – Former VP

Archer “Tiger” Jackson – Former President



## **Dirty Jackals MC Code**

1. Protect and honor the Club it at all costs.
2. The Club is a family, and always comes first.
3. Respect the Club, your brothers, your cut and your bike.
  4. Be loyal to the club.
  5. Never lie, cheat or steal from the Club.
  6. No rider gets left behind.
7. We take care of our territory and protect it.

## PROLOGUE

The gray sky above me booms with thunder, warning of the looming storm about to rage down onto us. But I ignored the sound. Instead, I study every detail of my father's face. From his slightly graying hair, to creases in the outer corners of his olive-green eyes, down to the round shape of his nose.

He's leaving... again.

It doesn't matter he barely arrived home two days ago or that I've barely spent any time with him. He's hours from boarding another plane and jetting off to some country in Europe.

"Why do you always have to go?" I ask, watching his face fall. Lee White crouches down, pushes his oversized glasses up his nose, and takes my hand in his.

"I'll be home before you know it." The soft tone of his voice strikes my heart, causing my throat to tighten with unsaid emotion.

"Daddy, please don't go." I throw my arms around his neck, and he responds by wrapping me tightly against him.

"Darling," Francesca's nasally voice interrupts the moment and I feel my father pull back, but I hold on to him tighter, not wanting to let him go just yet. "You're going to miss your flight."

"Please, Daddy, let me go with you," I beg. A dark, dreary feeling settles into my small chest, and it frightens me. It's an unfamiliar feeling—like if I let him go, I'm never going to see him again.

“I wish you could, my little apple.” He fingers the rose gold apple necklace clasped around my neck. It was a gift from my grandmother last year. One she’d given me days before she passed from a sudden heart attack.

“But I can go, Daddy. If you say I can go, I will.”

“Everleigh,” Francesca interjects sharply. Fear blooms in my belly, the type of fear only Francesca can instill within me. I ignore it, choosing to commit my father’s face to memory. Every line. Every crease. Every follicle of his shaggy beard. “Your father’s work is very important. The last thing he needs is a child to look after.”

“I don’t need looking after,” I reply matter-of-factly. “I’m nine. I can watch myself. I already do that while you’re—”

“Everleigh, that’s enough. Let your father go.” Francesca steps forward. Her cold, bony hand reaches out to me like a claw, but I twist out of reach and bury my face into my father’s neck. “Do you see what I have to put up while you’re gone, Lee?”

“Franny, give us a moment, will you?” My father grits between his teeth, irritation settling into his brow. It’s been a familiar expression since the day he arrived home with Francesca. I don’t know why he married her, because they barely get along. They fight a lot, and this time has been no different. Between her complaints about me and her whiny about him never being home, I don’t know why they stay together. She hates it when he pays me any attention and always tries to get in between us. Sometimes I wonder if she is the reason he tries to always stay gone. He never used to work this much.

“I hate it when you leave me here with her.” He stiffens at my words, because he’s always wanted me to have a mother figure. Maybe that’s why he married her... because of me. “When I grow up, I’m always going to be with you, daddy.”

“Sweet girl,” he starts, and I see the remorse in his face. He doesn’t want to leave me, but he doesn’t want to stay either. “Please, Ever, for my sake, behave for Franny. She’s new to this mothering thing—”

“You’ve been saying the same thing since you brought her home, Daddy. She’s not new to it. She’s just not good at it,” I shrug.

“When did you get so smart, little apple?” he asks, shaking his head. “Franny’s trying. Don’t you think you could try a little harder, too?”

“Sure,” I whisper choke, swallowing down the knowledge of what really happens when he leaves. I become invisible and unimportant. Just an irritation to her lifestyle. But if I keep my mouth shut about the flock of men coming and going all hours of the night, Francesca will leave me alone. That was a lesson I learned the hard way—what a loose tongue would get me. It only took once, and I said nothing to her about it—or anyone—ever again.

“Besides, when you’re eighteen, I’m sure you’re going to be too busy to hang out with your old man.”

“Oh, Daddy,” I giggle. “I’ll never be too busy for you.”

“Just you wait, little apple. You’re going to fall in love one day, and that man will take you away from me and this life. And he’ll love and care for you, in ways I can’t. You’ll be the apple of his eye.”

“Was my mother the apple of your eye?”

“Yes,” he breathes, his throat bobs as he swallows hard. “She was my everything.”

Sometimes it’s difficult for him to talk about my mother. He doesn’t speak of her often, but when he does, it’s obvious how devoted to her he was. He still is. Even with Francesca at his side. He’ll never love Francesca the way he loves my mother. And I think she knows it.

“You look so much like her, Everleigh.” His voice is a strangled whisper and his eyes rake over my face. He gives me a gentle smile and taps against my chest, right where my heart beats underneath bone and skin. “But you got the best part of her right here. Her heart. Her kindness. Her love. Her loyalty. Even her sassy. You are your mother’s daughter, little apple.”

“I wish she hadn’t died.” Guilt settles into my stomach, like it always does when I remember why she isn’t here.

I’m the reason.

She died giving birth to me.

My mother was sickly her entire life. But it didn’t stop her from dreaming about becoming a mother. Despite doctor’s telling her caring a child to term would likely kill her, she convinced my father to make her one. Even though he was determined to adopt, my mother wanted the total experience.

He could never deny her anything.

“How about when I get home, we take some flowers to her and stop for ice cream?”

“Really?”

“Yes, little apple, but I need you to be on your best behavior while I’m gone. Show Franny what a special girl you are.” All I want to do is make my father happy, even if that means I have to lie to make it happen. It doesn’t matter how I behave. I could be in my room for the entirety of his trip, and she would still say I misbehaved.

“I’ll behave.”

“Wonderful.” He smiles, and I watch the way his eyes crinkle in the corner from the muscle movement. “Now, I’ve got to get going. I love you, my sweet girl.” He pulls me into a tight embrace.

“I love you, too,” I whisper, and bury my face against his shoulder. My nose fills with the scent of clean laundry and his cologne, and I hold it in my lungs, trying hard to focus only on the warmth it spreads through me.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” When he releases me, it’s all I can do not to hold even tighter, but I don’t. Instead, I watched him turn away and climb into the car. The engine starts, and he looks at me once more before driving away.

Little did I know it would be the last time I ever saw my father.

ONE

EVERLEIGH WHITE

## *NINE YEARS LATER*

The sound of thunder fills my quiet bedroom, or maybe it was the roar of my neighbor's motorcycle pulling into his driveway.

Regardless, my nerves are on edge.

Not because of the storm. But because of the conversation happening outside my locked bedroom door.

"I'm telling you," Francesca half whispers with desperation in her voice. "The girl hasn't been touched. She's a virgin, worth far more than what I owe you."

"You expect me to believe you a junkie?" Raymond asks. His voice moves closer to the hallway leading to my bedroom. I look around the bare room and shake my head. There is nothing special about it. If it weren't for the mattress tucked away in the corner and the rickety table next to it, you wouldn't be able to tell someone lived here. Even the lamp I found on the side of the road has seen better days. "You'll say anything to get your next fix."

"I wouldn't lie to you, Raymond. Not about this." I can hear the desperation in my stepmother's voice. Raymond is Francesca's dealer, and he showed up tonight demanding payment.

Unfortunately, the money Fran inherited after my father's death was long gone. She spent the majority on lavish lifestyle and drug addiction. She lost her seat on the board of directors for my dad's company. I think they pushed her out, not that I blame them for making that move. She probably would have destroyed that, too. She sold off the house, the furniture, and the cars to keep going still. Then she got in trouble with taxes. Instead of throwing her in prison, like I hoped they would, they took the rest, leaving us destitute and broke.

Fran moved us into this two-bedroom dump two years later. It was the only place she could afford on the stipend she got



from the government. The money was just enough to keep a roof over our head and not much else.

Fran refused to work. Instead, she hooked herself to whatever loser would take her and earn the money he'd give her on her back. Thankfully, I'd become an expert at fading away into the background by then. I kept my head down and my nose clean. The less attention I drew to myself, the easier it was to be forgotten by her... and them.

Until my teacher started noticing the signs of abuse.

The one and only time CPS knocked on our door, I was hopeful. Maybe someone would finally rescue me from the hell I'd been living in. Only no one saved me, and their meddling pissed Fran off. She learned from that point on where to leave her marks—out of sight and made sure I could walk into school without noticeable discomfort.

I made it to the end of the year, drawing no more attention, but a new nightmare started for me that summer. Fran decided I was “done” with school and enrolled me in a home study program.

She alienated me from everything and everyone. If it wasn't for the weekly trips to the library, I convinced her to let me take I probably wouldn't have to graduate at all. Not that it's done me any good. She'll never let me out of the house, *and* I've offered to go out and get a job to support both of us.

“And how you going to explain her disappearance when someone comes looking for her?” Raymond's voice penetrates the fog my mind had briefly slipped into, causing me to lose my breath.

I hear Fran chuckle, and picture the calculated grin likely slapped across her lips. “That's not going to be a problem at all. She's an orphan. No one's going to notice she's gone, and if they do, well, she's eighteen tomorrow. Maybe she struck out on her own.”

My stomach sinks.

I realize she's thought this out and planned it for some time.

Thinking back, it makes sense. There were moments I caught her watching me with disgust and a hint of envy. It always sent shivers up my spine.

Now I know why.

This explains everything. It was the reason she kicked out the half dozen boyfriends she found trying to sneak into my room in the middle of the night, and why she didn't want anyone to know I existed. It would make it easier for her to use me when the time was right.

I was her last bargaining chip.

*No, I won't let this happen.*

The words prickle across my mind, and something buried deep inside of me wakes up. It fills me with strength and urges me to move to my closet. I push open a loose board and reach inside. I discovered the board the first time Fran barricaded me inside for one of her wild punishments. The scent of urine and other bodily functions permeates my nose. No matter how many times I scrubbed the carpet, the scent was ingrained in every fiber and every board. It remains a reminder of how bad things can get.

I crinkle my nose against the smell and push back the memories I spent in the dark. I press up onto my toes, giving myself more leverage to search for the small chain I hid years ago. It was the only piece of my family I could hide from Fran. My fingers graze it, and I snatch it up, letting the cool metal settle against my palm. I barely let my eyes see it before clasping it around my neck.

I shove my feet into the too-small, worn-out tennis shoes I found in the library's lost and found box and grab my hoodie I draped across the bed earlier. I pull it on over my head and cross the room to the window.

I stop and look around, making sure there's nothing else worth taking. Fran and Raymond's voices are no closer, but my heart hammers in my chest as I quietly slide open the window. Thankfully, Fran hadn't bothered sealing it shut when we moved in, but I think it was because of my complacency. She

believed she broke me, and deemed I was no longer a flight risk.

*Little did she know.*

I hoist myself up onto the window ledge, and the sound of thunder rumbles across the sky.

*Shit.*

The dark clouds look ominous, and the sound of fat raindrops hit the wet ground. I shiver into my hoodie, not just from the icy cold air making it's way through the thin material.

*Shit.*

I consider what I'm about to do, recognizing I have no plan. Any safe house or shelter I could run to; I'm positive Fran will search. My usual haunts are also off limits. I have nowhere to go.

*But staying is not an option.*

I'd rather walk the streets and face whatever dangers lie ahead than stay in this house a second longer. I let my feet touch the ground before I could overthink again and quietly slide the window closed.

Fate is testing my willpower because the second I take a step, the sky opens, and the fat raindrops turn into a downpour, soaking my hair. I move between the house and the dilapidated wooden fence dividing the property between our house and the neighbors. Glancing back at the pathway, I take a relieved breath. There isn't enough mud to track my steps.

I shiver against the icy wind penetrating the wet hoodie.

*Shit.*

I need somewhere to shelter, giving me time to come up with a plan, but I can think of nowhere that wouldn't expose me.

And then I see it.

My saving grace.

An open window.

I step toward the neighbor's house, trying to remember if I heard the rumble of his motorcycle this morning. I knew I had. He was home.

*Shit.*

Weighing the options before me, I have no other logical choice. If I want to escape Fran and her plan to sell me to Raymond, the window to my neighbor's basement is my only choice.

I send a silent prayer to the heavens above as I crouched down and shimmy through the small opening.

Hopefully, this doesn't get me killed.

TWO

## KOHEN "VORTEX" PRINCE

The sound of rainfall overtakes the music coming from the sound system I installed when I first bought my two-bedroom bungalow. It was a shithole until I got my hands on it a year ago. It's a work in progress, but it's also an escape for me. A place to crash when I need a moment to myself without all the noise of the clubhouse.

I drag in a deep breath, mute the television, and listen to the torrential rainfall pounding the ground. It's a welcome sound, but it's a terrible combination when it's near freezing outside.

I like the rain. It reminds me of happy moments in my life. The times before my parents divorced. I would sneak into their bedroom at night to climb in between them when the thunder rumbled over us. My brother, Atticus, wouldn't be far behind.

There are other moments it brings me back to.

*Moments with her...*

Lottie.

I haven't thought of her in a long time. She's the only woman to claim a piece of my heart. She's also the only one to break it, too.

Lightning flashes outside, and a second later thunder booms, causing the house to vibrate.

*Fuck.*

*The crew.*

*Atticus.*

The Jackals are out on a mission tonight, and my younger brother is with them. I reach for my cell phone, shooting off a text to the brother in charge this time, Smoke.

I like the rain, but it doesn't mix well with riding, especially when it's cold out. But damn, there is nothing in the world like riding a motorcycle down the open road without a care.

ME: Check in with me when y'all get back.  
Weathers ramping up outside.

SMOKE: 10-4, boss.

Rain in cold weather is never a good sign, especially for a biker. It means either you risk your life in the elements or act smart and choose a different mode of transportation. Knowing my crew, they opted for their bikes.

I take a breath and settle deeper into the oversized couch, listening to the storm as it passes overhead. The area experienced a record heat and drought this year. We didn't get much of Fall and this storm is a little out of character, but any precipitation is welcome. Even if it causes the roads to ice over tonight.

The dryer chimes, signally the end of its cycle, interrupting my thoughts and I take another breath. I'm not supposed to be worrying about this shit when I'm here, but damn if I can't shut it off. I bring the amber bottle I've been nursing for the last hour to my lips and discover it's empty.

*Well, damn.* I eyeball the fridge from across of the now open concept room. Knocking down the walls separating the living area from the kitchen was the first thing I did in my renovation. It made the house feel larger, and if I'm honest, it's good to have a direct line of sight to each door from any angle.

I stand and walk toward the fridge, intent on getting another beer, but something stops me.

The sound of a light scrape, and then a thump. It's soft, competing with the noise outside. I look around the room, trying to assess where it came from.

*Maybe it was the trees outside, scratching against the new siding. Or maybe it was the heater kicking on, I think to myself before backtracking my since I arrived this afternoon.*

No. It couldn't have been the heater. I never touched the control panel.

Straining my ears, I don't even breathe trying to determine if it was my imagination or ghosts of the past fucking with me.

*Skkkrrph. Thump. Skkkrrph. Thump.*

It sounds like something is being dragged across the floor.

*The fuck?*

I can determine it's not coming from outside.

*The basement then?*

I move toward the door leading downstairs into the unfinished space and hear it again. This time it's louder.

*Skkkrrph. Thump. Skkkrrph. Thump.*

My heart jumps, and I move across the room for the gun holster I set down on the side table—the one my mother insisted I must have to catch all the shit I remove from my pockets the second I walk in the door. I take the gun out of the holster and check the clip. Flicking the safety switch, I cock it and begin moving back toward the basement door. My feet are silent on the wooden floor, and I slowly turn the knob, listening...

Waiting...

I reach for the flashlight hanging on the wall. I push the door wider and step onto the wooden staircase, pausing a moment to let my eyes adjust to the darkness below. I take one step at a time, my ears straining and focusing on every sound.

From the rain falling outside. To the creak of the boards beneath my feet. To the static air hanging in the darkness. I wait for the bump in the night that has me on high alert.

The closer I get to the bottom, the colder the concrete room feels, and my eyes distinguish between the shadows.



Moments turn into seconds and seconds into minutes...

And then I hear it...

Not a bump.

Or a bang.

But a soft, shaky exhale.

Then an inhale.

And then nothing.

I take another step and my barefoot touches the concrete. It isn't just cold like I expect it to be. It's wet, too.

*Fuck.*

I click on the flashlight, shining it down to the floor to see a trail of small wet footsteps coming from an open egressed window. They are too big to be an animal, but too small to make me think it's a true enemy.

Better safe than sorry. I follow the trail to the darkest corner of the room, pointing both the flashlight and the barrel of my gun at the source.

"Please," she gasps breathlessly. Her beautiful brown eyes are wide and filled with pure fear. I freeze, taking in every detail. She's tucked into the corner, her knees up to her chest, but her hands are raised and visibly empty. Her dark hair is soaked and plastered to her head. There is something about the way her mouth trembles. "Please don't shoot."

"Who the fuck are you? Why are you in my house?" I demand, keeping my gun trained on her. She might be small, but that's not to say she couldn't cause any harm. I don't know what she's hiding beneath the oversized hoodie drape over her body.

"I ..." she trails off, her eyes on the weapon in my hand. Her pink tongue darts out and runs along nervously along her plush bottom lip. She believes I won't hesitate to use it on her if I need to.

She's right. I won't hesitate. After all, *she* is the one who broke into *my* house. I notice a flicker of something masked

beneath her fear, but I ignore it.

“Why are you in my house?” This time I add a little more gruffness to my demand. “How did you open the window?”

“It was already open,” she answers softly, her eyes flicking toward where her wet footsteps started.

*What the fuck? Was it?*

I try to remember the last time I was down here was, or who was down here.

Fucking Atticus. I asked him a few months back to set up the internet. He ran a line for each room, coming up through the floorboards. I’m not one to leave my place unsecured and should have checked after he finished.

“Please. I needed to get out of the rain.” Her words are hurried and mostly mumbled.

I’ve never been a sucker for a pretty face, but something in my gut has me flicking the safety back on to my weapon as I lower it. How can someone so small be a threat?

“Were you checking for any window to climb into, or just mine?”

“It wasn’t like that... I live next door.”

*Shit*, I curse internally, wondering if I was too quick to believe she’s harmless. Is she tied to my crackhead neighbor? The last thing I need is that kind of drama in my life.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not—I-I wouldn’t,” she stutters.

“I’ve never seen you before.” I tilt my head, achieving the truth in my observation. The woman before me might be tiny, her face might show signs of malnourishment, but that doesn’t mean she’s here looking to steal something for her next fix.

Or at least, I hope she isn’t.

“You’d have to be home more often to notice me, I think. But then again, my stepmother doesn’t let me out of my room all that often.” She inhales sharply, causing her eyes to turn wild.

She gave me more details than she intended to. Her arms shake and her mouth quivers. “Please... don’t tell her I’m here. Please. I’ll do anything. I’ll leave.”

Her panic causes me to pause and truly study her.

I feel a shiver crawl up my spine and piece together the truth. The girl before me is young. Much younger than I initially thought, too. Her reference to her stepmother has me wondering if she’s a minor.

*Fuck.*

The last thing I need is to be accused of kidnapping.

“Are you armed?” She shakes her head, and I believe her. “Lower your hands.” She complies and wraps them around her legs with a violent shiver. Her dark hair falls in wet strands across her face, making her look even younger. “Are you cold?”

“I’m f-fine.”

“Wildcat, I thought I told you not to lie to me.” I take a step toward her, keeping the weapon in my opposite hand, and pointed away from her. The cold concrete cuts into my skin like shards of glass. I can only imagine how it must feel against her wet skin and clothing. I flick my head toward the stairs and offer her my other hand, letting the flashlight dangle at my wrist. “Come on, we’ll talk upstairs.”

“Please don’t make me go home,” she pleads. I hear the desperation in her voice... the fear. I don’t like it.

“You’re more afraid of your stepmother than you are of me—and I had a gun pointed at you,” I observe, wondering why that is.

“She’s...”

“A piece of work, Wildcat.” I cut in. It’s true. Francine *is* a piece of work. One I spend more time than I’d like trying to avoid. “I’d never wish her on anyone, including my worst enemy.”

“So, you know about her then—and her friend Raymond?”

I assume Raymond must be her stepmother's John, but I've never heard of him before. The Jackals aren't in the sex industry, well, not beyond our strip club a few streets over.

The first time Francine knocked on my door, she was quick to eye fuck me and offer her services. It was obvious she was high on something, but I brushed her off and have avoided her since. "Raymond?"

"Yeah, Fran calls him her 'good-time friend', but I think he's the one who's been selling to her." *Selling? What the fuck?*

"I've never heard of him, and what do you mean selling?" I ask cautiously.

"Drugs."

*Drugs? In Jackal territory? I think fucking not.* I never thought to wonder where my neighbor gets her fix, because the Jackals have made it their mission to keep our territory free of any dealing. I always assumed Fran had traveled for it. Though, come to think of it, the woman didn't have a car.

Seems like I need to bring this up at the next club meeting and have my guys look into it. If someone is running drugs in Jackal territory, they won't be for long. "Come on, let's get you off this ice-cold floor and into something dry."

"I'd rather die than go back to her house," she shakes her head, pressing further into the corner.

"I'm not taking you back." She peers up at me with worry knit on her brow. "We're going upstairs, and we're going to find you something warm to change into."

"Please don't hurt me." Her words are soft, and they caused my heart to twist in my chest. Her fear is genuine, and it tastes like acid in the air.

The thought of someone putting their hands on this beautiful girl stirs something deep inside of me. Something I thought died long ago.

A darkness...

A protectiveness...

A caring I haven't felt in the years.

It makes me want to hunt down the person responsible for instilling this fear inside of her and punish them. To torment them the way they tormented her. To bruise their skin, their heart, and their soul the way they have damaged hers.

*Is that why she doesn't want to return home? Is Fran her tormentor?*

I drag in a deep breath and steady the beat of my heart. I can't let her leave this room until I have an answer. "What did *she* do, Wildcat?"

"Nothing." The girl's eyes widened, and she shakes her head, but like her previous lie, I taste it hanging between us.

It's the only confirmation I need.

*Fuck.*

Everything connects. Starting the day, I moved in. The shouting. The cries. The moans and screams and wails of pain. I always thought they were the sounds of my crackhead neighbor servicing her clients. Never once did I think their source could be someone so small—this fragment of a female with sunken in cheeks and dark circles around her eyes.

"Don't lie to me, Wildcat," I growl, wanting her to understand the hell I'm about to unleash is not meant to frighten her. But it isn't just my Wildcat that needs to understand. It's me, too. The rage I'm feeling, the redemption I crave to give her... it's deeper than a man defending a woman. It's primal. It's possessive. "Did she put her hands on you tonight?"

"No." Wildcat shakes her head and something in her face transforms. It's like she can sense the wrath boiling under my skin, itching to be released. "But other times, yes."

"That fucking sorry excuse for a cunt is going to pay for putting her hands on you." My Wildcat looks at me, her brown eyes filled with something I can't make out in the dark, but I feel it.

She feels it too.

I will avenge this girl and I will protect her. No matter the cost.

*Mine!*

That last thought. That single word. It nearly knocks me on my ass, and I try as I might to push it away. I can't.

This girl.

This Wildcat.

She is mine.

Only, not in the romantic sense. How could she be? She's still a child. The vow that makes her mine—my responsibility, mine to care for, mine to protect—is one of guardianship.

“Let's go upstairs, Wildcat.” She moves out of the corner, shivering into the oversized hoodie, but hesitates before taking my hand.

“Promise you won't make me go back?”

“You're not going back,” I promise. “You're *never* going back.”

*One breath.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

She lifts her ice-cold hand and slips into mine. I ignore the way the connection sends a zap of electricity through my body, chalking it up to the rage I feel inside.

She's too young for an old man like me, even if she was legal.

THREE

## EVERLEIGH

The behemoth of a man pulls me up the basement stairs and into the warmth of his home. I drop his hand and pause, staring at the uncovered windows.

Windows I know Fran stalks him through.

I feel him studying me. “What’s wrong?” he asks, stepping back.

“She watches you,” I murmur. Fran’s become obsessed with this man, ever since he closed the door in her face. It wasn’t only the rumble of his bike that usually alerts me to his presence, but the primping and preening Fran does. The few times I’ve stepped out of my room, I caught her watching his house and staring at him through the windows.

“Shit,” he mutters, crossing the room and pulling the blinds down. It’s not out of character. I sometimes I hear her bitching about them being closed, so I don’t worry too much.

When he turns back toward me, I feel my heart stutter in my chest. Not out of fear or uncertainty. It stutters because the man standing in front of me is a fucking Adonis.

My brain malfunctions, causing my face to heat. I reach an icy hand to the hot cheek, letting the warmth spread down my arm and throughout my body, banishing the cold I was shivering from moments ago.

*Holy moly.*

Now I understand why Fran was completely obsessed with him. I would be surprised if she was his only stalker.



The man is much taller than I initially thought. But it's not just his height I am in awe of. It's...everything. The way his tight black tee emphasizes the sheer size of him, from broad shoulders to his trim waist. He takes care of himself, and I can't help picturing a sweaty version of him, curly at the waist to keep fit.

I let my eyes travel along the tattoos that peek-a-boo beneath his shirt, moving upward towards the scruffy beard covering his jawline. My palms itch to feel whether it's as soft as it looks. He stands still, with his hands on his hips, like he's allowing me to appreciate his maleness.

I find myself mesmerized by his icy blue gaze. I don't think I've ever seen eyes as blue as his, darker than the sky but brighter than the night. There's a familiarity with them, pulling me in deeper and deeper.

"I didn't see anyone" He trails off, the heat of his gaze on my face, my body, taking in the missing details from before. I must look a mess to him. "Wildcat..."

The sweet pet name causes my breath to catch in my chest. As much as I like it, I can't believe we haven't exchanged names.

He's a stranger to me.

And yet... I feel safer in this strange man's kitchen than I have felt in a long time.

"What is your name?" I asked, moving my eyes from him to the large room around us. It's much brighter than the dump next door, but I'm sure that has everything to do with the construction that recently wrapped up a couple of weeks ago.

"I'm Kohen. The guys call me Vortex, though. It's a club thing," he explains. "What's yours?"

"Everleigh," I tell him, feeling a little less awkward now. I like his name and use my next sentence to test how it feels on my lips. "It's nice to meet you, Kohen. Or should I call you Vortex?"

Kohen steps forward, walking past me toward the hallway behind us. "Kohen's good. I like the way it sounds on your lips," he murmurs, before shaking his head and clearing his

throat. Did he mean to say that last part out loud? “It’s good to meet you, too. Now, if you’ll follow me, I’ll get you sorted.”

“Sorted?”

“Yeah, a hot shower and some dry clothing.” He doesn’t stop, simply throws a look over his shoulder that has my feet squishing in my wet tennis shoes. I toe them off before stepping on the plush carpet, not wanting to track anything across it.

The layout might be the same as what I am used to, but it’s the differences in the details that keep me grounded. Because I know what’s down at the end of this hallway—the master bedroom. The one room I never allowed myself to step foot into at home.

“I only have this one room set up,” he explains, and I wonder if he can read my thoughts. Then again, I’ve never been good at hiding them—unless it’s Fran. I’ve trained myself to look and act only a certain way around her. “Come on.”

I frown before noticing I stopped moving and was standing in the middle of the hallway. I look at the door next to me and sigh. I stopped out of instinct. This door would be mine back at home. Shaking off the feeling of uncertainty settling into my bones, I push forward with one tentative step.

“I will not hurt you, Everleigh.”

“Am I that transparent?”

He shakes his head, offering me a gentle smile before pushing off the doorjamb and stepping into the room. “No, wildcat. It’s good for you to be cautious. Even with me.”

I cross the threshold into his bedroom and am met with Kohen’s scent. It’s woody, like pine, and something deeply earthy. The room is dark in contrast to the rest of the house. The walls are painted a deep red, with accents of black and gray throughout. I can see the thought put into each piece of furniture and scrap of fabric. It’s like walking into one of those fancy catalogues I’ve seen in the library.

But it’s comfortable, welcoming even. I get the sense this room is an escape for him, and where his very essence dwells.

The sound of running water fills the deafening silence around me, pulling my thoughts from the gigantic bed only a few steps away, back to reality. My head and my heart are exhausted. Not just from the range of emotions I've felt since hearing Fran barter me to Raymond, but because of Kohen's kindness.

He could have kicked me out tonight. Thrown me back to the wicked stepmother I've spent the last nine years with. But he didn't.

And now I'm standing in his bedroom, feeling emotions I never thought I'd feel again in my lifetime.

Kohen comes back into the room from the ensuite bathroom I hadn't seen him disappear into and I watch him cross the room like a man on a mission. He stops at the extensive wardrobe and begins pulling out various items of clothing. Sweatpants. A dark colored thermal. A pair of socks.

"I realize these are going to be much big on you, but they are dry and warm." He turns toward me, holding the clothing out to me. I take them, ducking my gaze from his because I can't think of anything better than surrounding myself with more of his scent. But also, because a massive lump has formed in the back of my throat. "The hot water valve is on the left," he continues, this time sidestepping me and moving toward the bedroom door. "Use the bottle of soap and shampoo in the stall. I left a washcloth on the counter along with a brand-new toothbrush. If you want to leave your clothing outside the bathroom door, I'll come back in a few minutes to gather them and put the washing machine."

He pauses for a moment, waiting for me to respond, but all I can do is smile and give a slight nod. I wish I had the words to thank him, to acknowledge his kindness, but my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. It's been a long time since anyone has shown concern for my well-being, and it's hard to accept.

He nods back, like he understands what's happening in my mind, and leaves, closing the door behind him.

I drag a shaky breath into my lungs and let the tears I've been holding back fall.

---

I STOOD UNDER THE HOT WATER UNTIL IT RAN COLD, LETTING my mind wander safely for the first time in years. It took almost every ounce of strength remaining in my body to dress and leave the warm cocoon of the bathroom.

Now, I'm sitting on a stool at his kitchen island, slurping down the hot soup and grilled cheese he made me. I can't remember the last meal I had, let alone a *hot* one.

It was so delicious I could cry.

"How old are you, Wildcat?" Kohen asks, and I pause, holding up a spoonful of soup to my mouth.

"That depends what time it currently is," I say, watching him glance down at the watch on his wrist.

"It's a little after one. Why does that matter?"

"Yes, because I don't want you to think there's a chance you'll be charged with kidnapping," I admit, and smile coyly. His icy blue eyes widen, and I take another bite of the grilled cheese.

*So. Damn. Delicious.*

His face transforms into confusion.

"It's officially my birthday. My *eighteenth* birthday."

"Wildcat..."

"Kohen... I didn't run because of the abuse," I cut him off, finally feeling brave enough to tell him the truth. I decided in the shower I needed to. He deserves to know why I ran tonight without a plan, and why I decided his basement was my only choice. "Although in hindsight, I probably should have run a long time ago. I probably would have had better luck on the street."

I'm not sure if I truly believe that last part, though. The one attempt I made had me running home, thanks to the stranger

who thought I was a hooker. When I told him no, he got out of his car and tried to grab me.

“Why did you run then?”

“She was going to give me to him,” I say carefully. “To Raymond. She owes him a lot of money, and said she’d tell anyone I ran off because I was old enough to be on my own.”

“Fuck,” he growls. The room turns heavy, and I feel his rage from across the counter.

“Raymond isn’t only a drug dealer.” I place my spoon on the counter on the table, feeling a fullness in my stomach I’ve only dreamed of feeling. “Fran’s never been one to complain about earning her keep on her back, though. Raymond sends clients all the time. Her bedroom acts like a revolving door. She’s always paid her debt to him this way. But this time... at her age, Raymond refused. He said she’d never make enough to pay off what she owes him by the time she’s dead and buried. She isn’t worth what she once was.”

“And you were her backup plan.” It was a simple statement, but still true. Kohen connected the dots much faster than I had.

“But I wasn’t about to let that happen.” I pick up my napkin and use it to keep my hands busy. “I’m eighteen, and there’s nothing holding me back. Even if she goes to the law to find me, now they can’t make me go back. I don’t need her either. I can get an identification card, find a job and rent an apartment all on my own.”

“But you need a plan,” he adds, reading in between the lines. “I don’t know if that open window was a blessing or a curse for you.”

“Considering I haven’t had a hot meal, clean clothes and a hot shower in ages, I’m going to go with a blessing.” I smile, but it turns into a yawn. His eyes narrow on me, like I’m a mystery he needs to figure out. “I can’t express how grateful I am to you. Any other person would have sent me packing. You’re a good man.”

“Wildcat, you do not know the man I am.”

“You saw someone in distress and did something about it. You can me shelter, this meal... hope.”

“I wasn’t fucking playing when I said the cunt will pay for what she’s done to you.”

“I know she’ll get her comeuppance, but please don’t do anything to put yourself in harm’s way. I don’t know what I would do if something happened to you because of me.” I yawn again, feel my eye grow heavier.

“Come on, we’ll figure shit out in the morning,” he murmurs, taking my hand and guiding me to his bedroom.

*Shit. Didn’t he say he only has one room set up right now?*

*Does that mean...*

“You can have the bed. I’ll knock out on the couch.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I prompt, disregarding the thought of falling asleep next to him.

*Crap.*

*No.*

*What?*

I can’t think like that.

I barely know this man.

*I’m just tired*, I summarize, forgetting to argue any further with him. That’s what this is, right? Just my mind wandering from exhaustion.

I barely remember the trip to the gigantic bed before my hits the pillow and I pass out.

---

“WILDCAT, I NEED YOU TO WAKE UP.”

“Huh?” I murmur from the dredges of sleep and jolt awake. I try to open my eyes, but it’s too damn bright. Sunlight pours in from the window to my right.

My right? No, that can’t be right. My window faces north.

*What the hell? Where am I?*

“Everleigh?” the same voice calls from somewhere in the room, but I’m blinded and disoriented.

*Shit.*

I squint against the brightness, sit up, and barely make out the man at the end of the bed.

A *very* large man.

I cry out and throw my hands up to protect myself.

*No. No. No.*

*He said I would be safe... he...*

“Woah, woah, Wildcat... it’s okay. You’re safe.” This time the voice comes from next to me, and I feel large steel arms surrounding me. The familiar timbre penetrates through my panic, and I relax against him.

*Kohen?* my brain whispers sleepily.

The voice.

The figure.

It’s Kohen.

“Morning,” I murmur.

“I was trying to let you sleep, but I’ve got an emergency at the club,” he explains, and lets me go.

“The club?” I ask groggily, trying to wrap my head around what he’s saying. I sneak a peek at the clock next to the bed and see it’s a little after ten. *Damn, I slept hard.*

“My crew just got in and shit... things didn’t go as planned.” He keeps talking, but I’m more confused now than I was when I first woke up. Though I have a feeling the club he’s referring to is the group of bikers I’ve seen on and off at his house—or rather, heard the rumble of their bikes and heckling.

“Is everything okay?”

“I can’t share that with you, Wildcat. It’s club business.”

“Oh, okay.” I nod, pushing the blankets away and I swing my bare legs over the edge of the bed. “Wait, when did I take off my pants?”

“Right before you crawled into bed,” he smirks with a twinkle in his eye. I wonder if I enjoyed the little peep show, though the length of the thermal top probably covered everything worth seeing. Still, I can’t stop the rush of heat covers my face and I look away, feeling embarrassed. “You didn’t even say good night. Just kind of waved me off and burrowed under the blankets. From the looks of it, you slept damn hard, too.”

“I did.” I give him a lazy smile before seeing the folded pile of laundry at the edge of the bed. It’s my clothing.

“Look, I think you should go with me to the clubhouse. It’s not safe here alone.”

“To your clubhouse?”

“You can stay in my room while I meet with the guys, and then we’ll get you situated after that.”

“Do you think she’ll come looking for me here?”

“I don’t know, but after you knocked out last night, I heard a lot of shouting coming from next door and Raymond took off like a bat out of hell. I plan to have my guys investigate him and Fran.” He takes a step back, moving closer to the door. “I’m going to give you some time to get dressed.”

I nod, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, because I don’t know what to say. He walks out of the room and closes the door, leaving me to wrap my head around my current reality.

It’s safe to say there’s no reason for Fran to check for me with the neighbors, but Kohen isn’t willing to take a chance.

And if I’m honest, neither am I.



FOUR

## KOHEN

I didn't sleep a fucking wink last night.

Not even when Raymond drove off.

I stood in my darkened living room watching Fran chase Raymond's beat up sedan down the road, screaming her head off, begging for him to come back. She was loud, causing various neighbors to step outside their homes and investigate what was happening. It was their presence, and nosiness, that sent her back into the house with her tail between her legs.

The rest of the night was quiet.

Almost too quiet.

But I stayed vigilant, watching and waiting for any sign of danger.

I also spent too much time fighting the unease raging inside of me. I felt guilty, especially when I let myself think about the times I heard her crying next door and did nothing.

*Fuck.*

*How could I not see it?*

My stomach twisted with every memory I relived, and it nearly drove me mad, causing me to doubt the man I am. It was hard to keep from dwelling on the guilt eating away at me, leaving me raw and ragged.

I've *never* felt good enough in any aspect of life.

No, that's not accurate, because there was a time I felt good enough. I was happy. I was hopeful. I was everything I thought

I needed to be for her.

Lottie.

But I was wrong.

I wasn't what she needed, though. I wasn't what she wanted either, and it took me a long time to accept that fact. Ultimately, I may never be what a woman wants. How could I be?

I've seen firsthand what my chosen lifestyle does to a marriage. My parents divorced because my mother couldn't handle what the MC life entailed. She hated the parties, the women, the danger... and she left my father when he clarified that the club would always come before her.

And now, I'm that same clubs' president. How can I expect any woman to live second best, because my brother's—my club comes before love?

That's why when Smoke's text came in this morning, I jumped into action. I knew eventually my silent vow to protect Everleigh would butt up against my responsibility for the club. I just didn't expect it to be this soon.

When Everleigh came out of the bedroom, dressed and ready to go, I had to do a double take. There was a sparkle to her I hadn't seen before. Maybe it was because of how hard she slept, but she looked... different. Relaxed even.

She was calm compared to the chaos churning inside of me.

She understood when I explained why I wanted her to come with me, and that I would need her to lie low in the truck while we pulled out of the garage. She didn't flinch when I took her hand to lead her through the club's entrance and down the hallway toward my room.

I knew I couldn't hide her from the Jackals—I didn't want to, but I needed time to explain what was happening to them and get the ball rolling. Which is why I told her not to leave my room.

Many of the Jackals live in the clubhouse permanently, so the last thing I needed was for her to be wandering around

unprotected—unclaimed.

She nodded, and I left her to get comfortable.

Thankfully, church didn't run long, and we easily solved the problems from last night's mission. Smoke was right to call us in about the problem, though. Our lives as outlaws can sometimes be unpredictable, but we don't fuck around when the issues surround our primary sources of income.

Our charter of the Jackals doesn't deal with drugs. Sometimes we help run guns for other charters, and we offer a security service to a few high-end clients. Of course, we keep our noses out of their business dealings, but we've never had an unethical problem arise.

Yet.

The Jackals run a legit mechanic shop from the compound, and a few years back we purchased a local nightclub. One we have since revamped into a bar and strip joint called Coconuts. Some of the sweet butts, and many of the guys work on the legit side of our businesses.

Last night's mission focused on the shops' legit business dealings. We've recently implemented a budget friendly repair service to the community, but to keep it going, occasionally we must find other ways to keep inventory. Gray-area ways.

Our supplier demanded more money for the parts he agreed to sell us. We did not want to pay more. Hence, the problem. The supplier didn't understand he was fucking with professionals, and our response didn't go unnoticed. In today's meeting, we decided it was time to find a new connection—a better connection. One that wouldn't play *fuck around and find out*.

Then I told them about Everleigh and our last twelve hours. Everyone agreed Raymond and her stepmother needed to be investigated—and dealt with quickly.

Bane assigned Smoke and Hardcore to track down Raymond. While Code requested Coyote and Dutch to help him put eyes up Fran's house. I requested they bug the house, too. I don't know if either is looking for Wildcat, but I'll feel better knowing we have all our bases covered.

After the meeting wrapped, each one of my brothers offered me their hand and a silent promise to protect the girl. While I didn't have to claim her off limits to this group, I would have to in an official capacity with the rest of the Jackals.

I don't make it halfway through the common room when I spot her sitting at the bar, laughing.

What the fuck?

My heart jumps into my throat and I look around, trying to determine what Jackals' face I'm going to plant my fist into. Fuck. It's our newest patched member, Pothole. Great, the newbie, trained by Pretty Boy to charm the panties off any female in less than five minutes.

Everleigh laughs again, before bringing a straw to her lips. She looks up at her companion from under her thick eyelashes and I come unglued.

*Hell, the fuck, no.*

I push between the crowd until I'm shoving my way in between my Wildcat and Pothole.

*Fuck.*

*No.*

*She's not mine. Not like that.*

Pothole stumbles off the stool, a look of shock and confusion knitted firmly in his brow. For a moment I think he's going to push back at me, but he thinks better of it, and checks himself.

"I told you to stay in the room. What the fuck are you doing out here?" I shout over the music and laughter. The room grows silent, and I know I've garnered everyone's attention.

"I'm having a drink," Everleigh giggles, with an unapologetic shrug. Her lips tip into a shy smile, while she brings the straw to her lips again. If it wasn't for the way her wide innocent eyes reflected a moment of panic, I'd think she planned this perfectly.

"Yeah, boss man, now let girlie have her drink in peace," Pothole interjects, his eyes glued to her. He's looking at her

like he's seconds away from dragging her out of here and up to his room. "Where were we, sweetheart?"

*The fuck?*

"Leave," I command, my attention on him. I can't remember a time when I wanted to hit one of my brothers this much—I don't think I ever have. The feeling is foreign, but the thought of Pothole touching her, of anyone touching her, fills me with so much fire, I can't explain it.

I flex my hands into a fist, and drag in a breath, but looking into Wildcat's eyes, I recognize the flare of disobedience. Now my palms itch for another reason entirely.

*Fuck*, I clench my jaw. I barely know this girl and she has me testing my self-control like no other.

*She's not a girl*, the little voice inside my head says, reminding me it's her birthday.

*Fuck.*

It's her birthday.

Her eighteenth one.

And here she is in some biker club, drinking God knows what, being hit on my Pothole.

*Fuck.*

*Shit.*

What was I thinking bringing her here? She's too young for a place like this. Too innocent. She shouldn't be here.

My head feels like a mess, jumping from one thought to another, but I can't do this with everyone watching. Those who sat around the table with me moments ago know who she is, and I know they will fill the rest of the crew in once I get her out of here. I will still have to make a public declaration, though.

I take the drink from her hand and set it down on the bar top. She groans, but my hands are already on her, tossing her over my shoulder like some caveman.

“Seriously?” she fights, but I ignore her and whoops of encouragement from the audience of Jackals. I carry the wisp of a woman up the stairs, taking two at a time, and head straight for the privacy of my room.

I push away thoughts of her warm body pressing into mine, or what being alone with her could lead to. Instead, I focus on her care and safety. The last thing she needs is another horny biker sniffing after her skirts.

Don’t get me wrong. She’s a pretty little thing, and if things were different, I wouldn’t give two shits about who was trying to get under her skirts—me included. But Everleigh is too pure...too good.

I slam the door closed behind us and toss her onto the bed. She looks up at me incredulously.

“What in the hell was that?” She demands, her brow wrinkled with irritation.

“I told you to stay put.” It was a simple command. One I didn’t think she’d disobey, considering she’s listened to everything I’ve told her since finding her hiding out in my basement. “

“And? I’m an adult, Kohan. I decide what to do and not do.” Her voice cracks from a moment before garnering strength and courage at the end.

“Yeah? And what about your safety? You’re in the lair of some big, bad bikers, Wildcat.”

“You won’t let them hurt me.”

“No, I wouldn’t but you’re not claimed property either.”

“I’m not property.” She stands, puffing out her chest.

“In these walls, in this life, you are. Unclaimed you are open game to the men downstairs.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Which is why I told you to stay put,” I growl, running my hand through my hair. She sits down on the bed and grows quiet.

“I can’t be locked away again, Kohen. Banished to a room—I lived like that for far too long.” Her explanation makes my heart stutter and my irritation fizzle out.

*Fuck. Is that what she thought was happening?*

“The door was unlocked, Wildcat, or did you miss that specific detail when you rebelled?” I drop onto the bed beside her. “I didn’t have time to explain, but I never thought you’d think I was trying to hide you away. I had to get shit taken care in church—”

“Church?”

“The meeting. It’s what we call it,” I explain and hang my head. “I shouldn’t have brought you here. I shouldn’t have assumed you’d know how shit works.”

“Why did you bring me here, Kohen?”

“I couldn’t leave you,” I answer with a shrug. *Liar*, the voice inside snickers, but I ignore it. “What if Fran knocked on my door—or seen you through the window? I promised to keep you safe.” I pause, letting her feel the gravity of my words. I knew she’d be safe here, in my room, while I sorted everything out with the guys and explained who she was.

*Mine.*

The word sneaks in like a hammer, shocking my entire system.

No.

That’s not right.

She’s not mine. She’s not anyone’s.

“Besides, you’re too young to be drinking.”

“It was a soda, Kohen,” she sighs, her voice going distant. “My dad used to take me out for one on my birthday. It’s been years since I had one. Fran never acknowledged my birthday after my father’s passing.”

Another reason to hate my bitch of a neighbor and make her pay for all the shit she put Everleigh through.



“Besides, I was having a friendly conversation with... Pothole? Was that his name?”

I nod, feeling a fresh surge of anger towards the man. “Trust me, Wildcat, his intentions were anything but *nice*.”

“No way. He wasn’t hitting on me, though, because I told him I was with you.” I shake my head at her.

*Strike two* for my newest patched member. He knew she was with me but still pursued her—still goaded me. “But you aren’t wearing my cut, so you are open game. Pothole was being nice because he wants in your pants, Wildcat.”

“I’m not even wearing my own pants,” she exclaims, because she’s still wearing the sweatpants I loaned her last night. “But the other women out there?”

“They’re sweet butts. They belong to the club.”

I watch the wheels turn in her mind, as her face transforms into one of puzzlement. She’s trying to wrap her head around the world I’ve introduced her to tonight—sending waves of guilt throughout my body.

*Fuck.*

Despite the abuse, her world is a little sheltered. I’m sure all of this is a shock to her, but maybe it will help her understand why I need to protect her. The last thing I want is for her to find herself in a predicament she can’t get out of... at the hands of a Jackal, no less.

“I shouldn’t have brought you here,” I admit, letting my guilt take over because I’m exhausted from the emotional rollercoaster I’ve been on since finding her last night.

“Kohen...” She reaches for my hand, taking it between her two small ones. I know I should pull it away, but I don’t. Maybe I’ll burn in hell for wanting—no for needing to feel a physical connection with her.

“No, Wildcat.” I shake my head and tighten my hold on her hand. “You’ve experienced hell and deserve better. I can’t believe I let you step foot into this place.”

A new guilt washes over me. *Fuck, a place like this?* I've lived my life in this building, surrounded by these men I've pledged to lead. Deep down, I know they won't harm a hair on her head, and there's nothing wrong with our club.

Hell, in the biker world, we're what they would consider the good guys. Despite the shady shit we do, the Jackals take care of this town and the people. We've made it our mission to give back every step of the way. But it's the dark shady shit we do. I don't want her exposed to.

It's the lifestyle. The danger. The unknown. No one woman should have to go through that.

"You're wrong," she says and squeezes my hand. "I wouldn't have left this room if I didn't feel safe, Kohen. I wouldn't have been able to sit down and talk to Pothole. I wouldn't be able to tell you how I felt and still feel." One of her small hands makes its way to my cheek, cupping and pulling my attention to her. I recognize the rampant emotions she's battling, because I feel them, too. It takes all kinds of control to keep from leaning into her warm hand.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit this woman affects me.

She does.

In ways, I never thought possible.

"This world is too dark for someone like you, Everleigh."

"*This* world is exactly where I'm supposed to be," she breathes, and I wonder how much of what she said is truth, or words to make me feel less guilty for exposing her to the club.

"Fuck. How can you be this brave?" I reach up and run the pad of my thumb over her cheek.

"It's easy to be brave when you have a prince doing everything in his power to protect you."

"Wildcat." The way she looks at me, like I've lassoed the moon just for her. Fuck, I hate myself for not being a better man.

"I know we just met, but I trust you, Kohen Prince. I see the man you are underneath the gruff and leather. You could've

thrown me out, or called the police, or even taken me back to Fran. But you didn't."

"I'm no prince, wildcat. I'm barely a nice guy."

FIVE

## EVERLEIGH

I find it hard to believe the man standing in front of me thinks he's barely a good guy, when all he's done since we met is protect me.

Even now, in a building filled with the people he trusts the most in the world, he's got his shiny armor and he's ready to do battle for me.

"Well, for the record, I think you're wrong," I whisper. I don't think anything I say will change his mind because Kohen seems dead set on believing the worst of himself.

The silence stretches between us, and I lose track of time, standing here connected to one another. I know I should pull away. It's the smart thing to do.

"I like your necklace," he murmurs, stepping back and releasing his hold on me. I miss the connection instantly, feeling the cold press into my skin.

"It was a gift from my grandmother before she died." I lift a hand to the trinket and close my fist around the little apple. "It's all I have left of her, and my father."

"Tell me about them."

My throat threatens to close, and the emotion I've bottled for so long spills over. It's been a long time since I've allowed myself to think about them, to wonder how things might be different if they were still here. Would my father have left Fran? Would we still live in our old home? Would I be gallivanting around the world with him?

And my grandmother... would she have approved of Fran? No. I don't think she would have. I don't think she'd have let my father marry Fran, either.

"It's okay if you'd rather not," he murmurs, pulling me from my thoughts and back into the moment. I close my eyes, take a breath, and tell him the story of my life and the people I miss more than anything in the world. I tell him because I want him to understand who I am, but it's more than that. I want him to

When I'm done, I take a deep breath, and let the wonderful memories stay. Kohan sits on the edge of his bed, his blue eyes laser focused on me. He looks stuck somewhere between awe and something else I can't quite put my finger on. But I see the wheels turning deep inside his mind.

"So, what now?" I ask, throwing my arms out, feeling only a little awkward because he hasn't said anything.

As if breaking a spell or something, he bounds to his feet, grabs my hand, and pulls me out of the room. "Kohen? Are you all right?"

He keeps moving, stopping only when we're standing in the middle of the room. I glance about, noting the way the room is emptier than it was earlier, but every eye rests on us.

Kohen takes off his leather vest and tugs on my arm, causing me to stumble against him. My hand lands on his firm chest, and his arms tighten around me like steel.

*Shit.*

I look up, and the moment our eyes meet, I get a feeling of heat spreading through my body. I've never felt it before, but I like it. I also like the way my heartbeat has doubled, and the butterflies flutter inside my stomach.

I feel the warmth of his vest as he drapes over my shoulders. His scent envelopes me, amplifying the need growing inside of me.

*Holy shit.*

Kohen's blue eyes seem to glow the longer I stare into them. I find myself unable to look away and feeling lost in their

depths. Then again, I don't think I'd want to, even if I could.

Right here, in this perfect moment, I feel safe, and strong and... cherished. Even with everyone watching...

*Shit.*

I try to speak, to remind him of the surrounding audience, but don't get to utter a single word. Kohen's lips are suddenly on mine, pressing and prodding, turning my legs into my jelly and filling my head with a wondering buzzing.

Kohen's kissing me.

*HOLY SHIT.*

My first kiss.

My body, my mind, my heart, all three explode, filling me with lightning and honey. Everything about this moment... the magic and spontaneity of it... it's indescribable.

His tongue licks along the line of my lips, imploring and searching, begging me to open to him, and I can't hold back. I open my mouth to him, allowing him to plunder and claim every part of me.

I moan into his mouth, relishing his taste, drowning in his scent.

Desperate and achy, I wrap my arms around his neck, needing to be close to him as possible. But it still isn't enough.

Suddenly, just as quick as it began, Kohen broke away, ending the most perfect first kiss.

I mewl in protest, but he settles his forehead against mine, his breathing ragged and hot against my face. For the moment, I am happy to exist with him, breathing in his air and sharing mine.

"She's off limits, Jackals," he growls, but I don't miss the way his voice drips with lust and... need. "Everleigh is mine, and if anyone dares harm her, I expect my club—my brother's—to rise and stand beside me as I cut them down."

*Shit.*

*What the fuck?*

I pull back, silently questioning his intentions. It's clear from the way he's avoiding my gaze, he claimed me out of duty.

That kiss—my first one—was only for show.

I bring my fingertip to my lips and try my hardest not to let my disappointment show.

Maybe Kohen wasn't a nice guy after all.



SIX

KOHEN

## *TWO WEEKS LATER*

**L**ife has been a whirlwind of difficulties.

No, that's not quite right.

Let me try this again.

Life has been torturous.

Why?

Because of the little spitfire who tests my convictions and self-control every moment of every day. I've lived the last two weeks on the edge, caught between jealous rage or obsessed stalker. I can't function without confirming she's safe, and it's taken a toll on our relationship. Mostly because I insisted she have a bodyguard of some sort every time she steps off the compound.

Everleigh has adjusted nicely since her arrival, though. She made fast friends with Mimi and Naya, charmed Millie into letting her help with the domestic chores in the clubhouse, and somehow has every Jackal wrapped around her little finger. Everyone dotes on her—loves her, even. She's the little sister they always wanted but never got.

They even call her Snow, like she's some fairy-tale princess.

That's great... right?

That's what I wanted... right?

Seems like my plan works well enough, because there hasn't been any indication Fran or Raymond are looking for her. Fran was angry and desperate after Everleigh's disappearance, but she's been more worried about finding her next fix.

Then why can't I shake the feeling something bad is coming our way? Everywhere I look, everywhere I go, I can't take my eyes off the horizon. It's like there is a darkness looming over our heads.

The darkness lessens when I am around her, though. The light she carries inside chases it away.

My Wildcat.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about our kiss. Of her and the way her small frame wrapped around me in response. I've spent countless nights reminding myself she deserves someone better and someone closer to her age.

But then she looks at me, opens her mouth, and challenges me. It's maddening, but she is everything I want in a woman.

Fuck.

Then there was the afternoon I came back from a meeting at Coconuts and found her on the stage, her leg wrapped around the stripper pole we installed last year. She was wearing a pair of skimpy cotton shorts and a sports bra. Not only was Mimi there giving her fucking pointers, but a small group of Jackals had gathered to watch.

I nearly went unhinged on them all, but I held it in. I climbed onto the stage, shot a dangerous look at all of them and picked Everleigh up to carry her upstairs. She balked and demanded I put her down, but I didn't listen.

She didn't like that. I didn't care.

She didn't know what she was doing up on the pole, what she was inviting. I don't care how many years of dance she did as a child. She didn't see the way my brothers looked at her. They knew better. She didn't.

She wasn't just learning moves—not that she needed to learn them anyway, because there's no way in hell I'm ever going to allow her to practice. The pole was there for girls who needed to make money. I supplied everything she needed, and if she wanted something more, all she had to do was ask.

She was pissed. I *still* didn't care.

She didn't talk to me for a few days. *That* I cared about.

I'd gotten used to her snark and bite. It felt off not having it to look forward to when I'd come back to the clubhouse. On those nights, we spent more watching one another than

enjoying the festivities. I'd feel her eyes on me, and when I knew she wasn't looking, I was watching her. It's like we were playing a constant game of cat and mouse.

It intrigued me.

*She* intrigued me.

But I wouldn't act on my interest, on the temptation she presented to me every day. I'd never allow her to stoop so low as a man like me. No matter how much I wanted her, or dreamed of her, or thought of her while jacking in my hand.

I did that a lot.

Every night.

It was the only way to keep from going crazy with need.

But it was never enough.

When she finally broke down and talked to me again, it was only to inform me she planned to go to the mall with Mimi and Naya. I felt like a dad telling his daughter to be safe, and I fucking hated that.

There's nothing about the way I feel that is remotely platonic. Even though I intended our relationship to be nothing more than friendship, I can't stop thinking about her in ways I know I shouldn't.

And I didn't know if I really wanted to stop, either.

SEVEN

## EVERLEIGH

When Mimi and Naya cornea me with morning, demanding I go shopping with them, I didn't have the energy to turn them down. And not because Naya was teasing my senses with the delicious smelling coffee she had prepared for me.

I swear this girl is a coffee guru. She must have been a barista in another life.

If I'm honest, I'm glad I came out with them today. Even though we've been followed from store to store by one Jackal—per Kohen's insistence. It was the only compromise we could agree to, because the man nearly came unglued when I told him about my plans.

After what seems like hours of shopping, we stopped in the food court for some lunch.

"Girl, you have got to tell us what the hell is going on between you and V." Mimi sips on her sweet tea, her caramel eyes wide with curiosity.

"Right? I got to know, like, how good is his dick?" Mimi's blonde counterpart nods enthusiastically.

"There's nothing going on between us." I shrug, feeling a heated flush creep across my face. They've been dancing around the subject all morning but I still wasn't prepared to talk about Kohen and I. Other than the fact he has deemed me off limits to the club, and privately states his claim on me is only for my protection, I don't know what is going on between us.

There is an attraction, at least on my part. A natural pull towards him. When he's not near, I think about him. And when he is near, I feel like I can't get close enough. I don't know if he feels the same, but anytime things move in that direction, he finds an excuse to change the subject.

"What the fuck do you mean there's nothing going on?" Mimi asks, a frown borrowing into her brow, almost like she's having a hard time believing me. "Have you seen the way he looks at you? Better yet, have you seen the way you look at him?"

"It's complicated." I give her, because honestly, it's all I have. It *is* complicated. And my lack of experience in this department makes it even more difficult for me.

"How complicated can it be? Just jump on that dick."

"Mimi." Naya exclaims.

"What?" Mimi shrugs, like it's no big deal. "Haven't you always wondered?"

"I don't understand, haven't you two..." I trail off because the idea of him being with someone else does something to me. I can't explain it, but it makes me territorial over him. Even though I don't have the right to be.

"I wish," Mimi sighs, her answer giving me major relief. I don't know what I would do if either had been with him. "As far as I know, there's only been one sweet butt who got to find out what that man is packing. She moved on a few years back and took that secret with her."

"You know...I've often wondered if pussy is his thing. I don't think I've never seen him with anyone, and he's always turned me down when I've offered." Naya frowns, looking deep in thought. "But then you came along, Snow. That man is into you."

"We've all tried at one point or another. Hell, if that man gave me the time of day, I hop on that dick faster than—"

"Mimi," Naya interjects, flicking her head in my direction.



“Shit. Sorry, Snow,” she stutters, but I don’t blame her. Kohen is an Adonis. Any woman would be a fool if they didn’t want a shot with him.

“He’s something nice to look at, that’s for sure,” I chuckle, waving my hand.

“Nothing’s happened between you two?”

“Just the kiss you both saw.”

“Wait, Snow, was that your first kiss? Are you a virgin?”

I nod and avert my eyes. I don’t want to see the pity on their faces because of my lack of experience. “Please don’t say anything to him. He doesn’t know it was.”

“Oh, darlin’,” Naya breathes, without a hint of pity. Instead, I hear intrigue. “You’ve got to tell him, give him the chance to make that shit right.”

“It’s okay, besides he’s indicated my age is a problem for him, being that I’m barely eighteen—”

“What do you mean, barely?”

“We met hours into my eighteenth birthday, and when he brought me to the clubhouse, we’d barely known each other for twelve hours. So, I get why the kiss didn’t mean anything to him and why he did it.”

“Wait a fucking minute, you’re telling me the president of the Dirty Jackals, Kohen Prince, brought you, a woman he barely met, to his clubhouse, and staked his claim—in front of everyone that matters to him?”

I nod, unsure of how to answer her.

“He draped his cut over you, Snow. He claimed you as his old lady.”

“Only because he wants to protect me. I’ve got nowhere else to go, and the clubhouse is a safe place for me to be until I figure shit out,” I explain, trying to reiterate what I’ve been saying since this topic came up. As much as I would love for her to be right, she isn’t.

“Two things,” she shifts, leaning closer to me. “First, the Jackals have plenty of places where you can be safe, but V’s choosing to keep you at the clubhouse. Second, why the fuck do you need a safe place?”

Shit, I swallow. I don’t know if I’ve said too much. Kohen said I could trust Mimi and Naya, but I worry telling them the truth will change their opinion of me. Will they still want to be my friend knowing I stayed with Fran for all these years because I was afraid to be on my own?

There’s something about these two, something familiar, like coming home. I felt the same feeling the night I met Kohen. I feel safe with Mimi and Naya, and I consider them friends.

I look at them both, chewing on my bottom lip as I contemplate giving them my truth.

No, I don’t think there’s anything I could say to them that would change their perspective of me. But it would make them understand what’s going on between Kohen and me better.

“Kohen is—was my neighbor,” I start, telling them everything, from start to finish, even a few things I haven’t revealed to Kohen yet.

“Wow,” Naya breathes when I am finished. Both she and Mimi have sat through the entirety of my story, occasionally reaching across the table to grip my hand or my shoulder.

“You are a strong woman, Snow. I can’t believe you went through all of that, and I am damn glad you crawled into V’s window. But I’ve got to stand by what I said earlier. A man like V doesn’t stake claim on a woman to protect her. All he had to do was verbally declare you off limits to the club. No one would have fucked with you. He’s their president, their leader, and his word is fucking law,” Mimi reiterates her point from earlier. Naya nods in agreement.

“The Jackals aren’t bad guys,” Mimi continues. “They party, they drink, they fuck, they like to have a good time, but when shit gets serious, they’re fucking serious. And I’m telling you, Vortex didn’t claim you to keep you safe. He claimed you to keep you to himself.”

“You don’t understand.” I shake my head because they have to be wrong, right? Kohen said I wouldn’t be safe unless he claimed me. “I told Pothole I was with Vortex, but he still sat at the bar trying to flirt with me. Why would he do that?”

“*You* told him. Not V.”

“What’s up, bitches?” Before I can respond, a busty brunette sits down in an empty chair. I remember seeing her the first night but haven’t seen her since. Both Mimi and Naya were visibly tense in her presence. From their body language, they don’t like her very much. “Who’s the new sweet butt?”

“I’m not—” I start, intent on setting her straight, but she talks right over me.

“Sweetheart, it’s no secret, I saw you at the club the other night talking to Pothole.” She tilts her head, giving me a fake smile. “And you’ve been staying at the clubhouse.”

“She’s not club property, Maria,” Mimi interjects, gathering her trash onto the tray. Maria’s full attention stays on me. She hadn’t even bothered looking at the other two.

“Did Pothole tickle you with that little love stick of his and convince you to take a ride on the back of his bike?” She laughs like the thought of someone wanting to be with Pothole is ridiculous.

“Actually, Snow is V’s property,” Naya declares with a snarky smile.

“Bullshit,” Maria hisses, her heads snaps toward Naya.

“Not bullshit,” Naya shrugs nonchalantly. “He announced it the in front of the club.”

“Interesting because I don’t remember hearing anything about,” she starts, but Mimi talks over her this time.

“That’s right, you and Pretty Boy disappeared right before church let out,” she smirks, like a cat playing with its prey. “I’ve never seen V so territorial about a woman. He even draped his cut over her shoulders.”

Naya smiles right alongside the redhead, and I realize they’re both getting pleasure out of seeing Maria flounder over the

news. “I thought you said something was going on between the two of you, Maria, didn’t you?”

Maria’s mouth opens and shuts, like she’s trying to come up with something to say. “I—I never said we were exclusive.”

“Interesting, because he told me wasn’t into sweet butts,” I say, bringing her attention back to me. She rolls her eyes and fidgets with her hair.

“Oh, sweetheart, don’t you see? I’m sure he said that to you because he didn’t want you worrying about living in the same house as his lovers. Hell, I’d probably tell you the same thing if I were in his shoes.” She sounds so fucking smug. It makes me want to claw her eyes out. “If I were you, I know I couldn’t deal with the women he fucks on the side.”

“Wait, *you’re* Maria?”

“So, you have heard of me?” She preens like a fucking peacock and all I can think about is how good this is going to make me feel.

“I’ve also heard how you’ve desperately desires my man’s dick—only to *never* get it,” I chuckle, going in for the kill. “I’ve also heard about how loose your pussy has become. Be careful sweet butt, or you’ll find yourself turned out on the street.”

“Watch yourself, bitch—”

“Old Lady,” I cut it.

“Excuse me?”

“I think the term you’re looking for is Old Lady. As in Vortex’s Old Lady,” I lean back, narrowing my eyes on her. She might have me questioning some things Kohen’s led to me to believe, but I’ll be damned if I let her see that. “Which, correct me if I’m wrong,” I refer to Mimi and Naya and continue. “Trumps club ass, and you exactly that. A piece of club ass. Nothing more. So, remember that the next time you open your mouth to me.”

Maria doesn’t like me. I can tell by the way she seethes after this last comeback. But I don’t give a fuck. I don’t like her

either.

“You might have the title, but I guarantee your man will be back in my bed the second his shiny new toy loses its glamor.” Maria stands and tosses her hair over her shoulder. She thought I was a little mouse. She didn’t expect me to bite back. “Men like Vortex don’t fuck around. They need proper women who know what they’re doing. Not little girls trying to place house.”

With that, Maria flounces away almost as fast as she appeared. It takes everything inside of me to remain in my seat and act like her words didn’t strike their target.

“Damn, girl, you are fucking fierce,” Naya interrupts, tearing my attention from Maria’s fading form. “Don’t read into anything that bitch said. V would never touch her. The only reason the Jackals keep her around is because of Pretty Boy. He has some strange fascination with her.”

“I don’t know what the fuck he sees in her,” Mimi sighs, almost like she’s heart sick about the whole thing. “It’s not like the Maria’s pussy is gold—believe me, I’ve seen it a time or two.”

“What? Gross?” Naya shudders, but Mimi doesn’t elaborate, and for that I’m grateful. The last thing I care to know about is anything regarding Maria and her private parts.

“I really heard someone complaining about her,” I admit with a chuckle. “They don’t get why Vortex hasn’t kicked her ass to the curb. Said she was a problem for Shakespeare at one point, too.”

“Oh shit, I almost forgot about that. She was obsessed with that poor guy, and pisses when he got with his Old Lady, Henley. We call her Duchess.”

“To be honest, I think she takes advantage of Pretty Boy. She’s only with him when he blasted out of his mind, and then she sweeps him off to his room. They never fuck with anyone around,” Mimi explains, and I wonder for a moment if she has a thing for the biker. The way she looks when talking about him almost feels unrequited.

“Holy shit, I’ve got an idea,” Naya exclaims. Her caramel eyes are alight with excitement.

“What? How to get rid of Maria?” Mimi asks.

“No, fuck that bitch,” Naya frowns and turns toward me. “I know how you’re going to get Vortex to admit he feels something for Snow.”

“Oh, shit.” Mimi claps her hands. “Let’s do it.”

“You don’t even know what her idea is yet, or if I want to take part,” I laugh.

“How would you feel about performing a little dance on the pole?” Naya asks, ignoring the part where I said I didn’t know if I wanted to take part.

“Are you crazy? V nearly lost his shit when he saw her practicing the move I showed her.” Mimi smiles even bigger, fidgeting eagerly.

“I don’t mean at the clubhouse. I mean at Coconuts.”

“Ooh, shit, yeah.” Mimi’s eyes go wide, and slowly her face transitions into the Cheshire cat. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Um, hello, I’m don’t think that’s a good idea.” Neither woman is paying me any attention. “Guys, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“He works tomorrow night at the club. If we start now, she can come up with a routine and I know Millie can put something together for her,” Naya rattles on, and begins planning everything. Mimi pipes in with song and costume and I recognize I’m not getting out of this.

And if I’m completely honest, I don’t know if I want to.

Maybe it’s time to push the limits with Kohen, and make him see me as a woman.

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THE ROOM IS DARK AND SMOKEY AS I STEP OUT ONTO THE stage. I see the bodies sitting and standing around the stage,

waiting for the lights to come up and reveal the newest dancer.

*Me.*

My heart pounds heavily in chest, not just from nerves but the anticipation of what I'm about to do. I can't believe I let the girls talk me into this, but nothing else has worked. Kohen has kept me at arm's length since our kiss, and no matter how many times I've tried to talk myself out of Naya and Mimi rationalizing, they aren't wrong.

I've been with the Jackals long enough to know he didn't have to kiss me to claim me off limits. He sure as hell didn't have to drape his cut over me, either.

He wants me.

I know he does.

I see it every time he looks at me. Feel it every time he touches me. Hear it in the way he says my name or calls me his Wildcat.

After tonight, when he sees me on this stage, I want to ruin his excuses. Ruin him. I want to show him I'm not the little girl he thinks I am and make him crazy with need. I want him to see me for what I am.

A grown woman with wants and needs of my own. And I want —no, I *need* him.

*Own it.* Millie's words echo in my head with each step I take.

And I will. Every single moment, because he's never going to let me step place into this place again. He may never let me speak to the girls again when he learns of their part in this whole thing. I step on my cue, tugging on the arm length gloves and take a deep breath.

If Kohen recognizes me.

Mimi and Yaya went all out on my makeup and hair. I hardly recognized the woman staring back at me when they finished. They painted me up to the nines, and the sheer red dress I designed, and Millie sewed, barely covering the *pièce de résistance*. A barely there black ensemble that crisscrossed

over my chest, around my waist, and in between my legs. I felt powerful and, for the first time in my life... sexy.

As the music cues, the strum of the bass fills my body, causing my hips to sway with heat and fever. The back lights turn red behind me, emphasizing the shadow of my body as I move. I feed off the anonymity of the moment and slowly, but sensually tug off the gloves, tossing them with the music transitions.

I step toward the pole, and turn toward the crowd, before sliding down, bending at the knees, my legs spread wide and the men around me whoop and catcall. I close my eyes, ignoring them all, and let myself get lost in the feeling coursing through my body. I picture the one face I want watching me at this moment.

Somewhere in the crowd, he's here and thrills me to no end.

The music transitions again, and I push off the pole to crawl across the stage. The sheer fabric of my costume brushes against my hot skin, and I gasp, imagining Kohen's hands on me.

Running my hands along my body, I rise to my knees and unlatch the back of my dress at the base of my neck. The front of my dress falls, but I vaguely hear the groan of the audience to see me still covered. I smirk, hoping like hell Kohen's one of them.

It's still dark on stage, but I can't help wondering if he's figured out who exactly is performing. The girls and I had a bet about how long I'd be up here before he had enough and yanked me off stage.

Rising, I let the sheer fabric fall to my feet and I carefully step out of it before kicking it off the stage. My body moves and pulses, remembering the years of training I had as a child and the hours I spent with Mimi and Yaya learning the way of the pole. I tease and taunt with my hands, bending and twisting in various moves. I let myself get lost in the moment... in the music.



The music crescendos and I know I'm almost to the end. Like I practiced, I make my way toward the pole at the end of the stage and wrap a leg around the cool metal. I extend the lines of my body and spin. I'm vaguely aware of the way energy around me shifts and begin my ascent, wrapping myself around the pole with grace.

If Kohen hasn't figured out it's me, he's about to know for sure. I spin again, anticipating the revelation about to happen. Smiling inwardly, I drop down the pole to catch it with the bend of my knee. I squeeze it hard, stopping at the exact moment the spotlight comes up on me. With one last toss of my head, I let myself hang and listen to the crowd shout and cheer for my performance.

But there's only one reaction I crave.

*His.*

I open my eyes and meet those of the man I pictured the entire three minutes of my performance. He's standing in front of the stage, with his arms crossed and his body tight.

He looks pissed... and starved. He looks at me like he's deciding what to do. Like he's stuck between tossing me over his knee and spanking me on this very stage or pin me against this pole and fuck me in front of everyone here—claiming me as his.

If I'm honest, I wouldn't mind either.

I grasp the pole with both hands and straighten myself. Ignoring the money being thrown at me from all directions. This dance wasn't about any of that, but I'm glad Mimi and Yaya will reap the benefit of my performance.

I turn and let my feet carry me downstage, sneaking a look over my shoulder at him. Kohen's eyes are wide and glued to my ass. I'm glad I let Mimi talk me into wearing a thong that nestled perfectly between the plump cheeks of my ass. I can't help deepen the sway of my hips, because his reaction has me tingling all over.

I barely make it off stage before Kohen is there, tossing me over his shoulder and carrying me off. He barks at one guy we

pass, and nervous laughter bubbles out of me with each step he stomps.

And he stomps.

All the way to the office.

EIGHT

## KOHEN

The second the door closes I set Everleigh onto her feet and quickly turn away to turn the lock. I lean forward to place my forehead against the cool wood and drag a breath into my lungs, trying to calm myself.

The blood in my veins pump with the heavy beat of the next set, making it impossible to forget the sight of her plump ass, and the way her body... like she was born to hear the music.

*Fuck.*

*Fuck.*

*Fuck.*

I should have pulled her down the second I realized it was her on that stage, and I started to. But... fucking hell, I couldn't.

I was stunned.

Frozen.

And so. Fucking. Turned. On.

I knew if I touched her, pulled her down off that stage before I had control, I'd find the nearest table and fuck her like a wild beast. I'd claim her over and over until neither one of us could move. And the last thing I wanted when I finally claimed her was a room full of men who were thinking the same thoughts as I was when the music started.

"Kohen?" My body shudders at the sound of her voice interrupting the various thoughts happening in my head. It

doesn't help how she says it either. Halfway between a moan and a plea.

Fuck me. How many nights have I laid awake with my cock in my hand, dreaming of that sound? How many nights have I released all over my stomach, only to be hard moments later because nothing curbs my growing appetite for her?

“What were you thinking?” I manage, barely gripping onto my sanity.

“Look at me.”

I grit my teeth and shake my head. I can't look at her right now. If I do... it's fucking over.

All the time I've spent convincing myself I'm all wrong for her, too old for her—will be for nothing. The last two weeks of torture and yearning...

“Stop fighting it, V.” I feel her soft hand on my back, burning through the layers of my leather cut and the flannel beneath it.

“Wildcat...” I trail off, unable to find the words to keep fighting. She deserves so much fucking better than me.

“I want you. No one else will do,” she responds, closer this time. If I turn, she be right there, chest to chest with me. “Stop seeing me as a little girl.”

“That's the thing, Everleigh. I've never seen you as a little girl. Never. Not for one second.”

“Then why? Why do you push me away?”

“I'm no good for you,” I growl, feeling fear surge through me. Fear because once I say the words out loud, there's no way she can't agree with them. Fuck, Wildcat, can't you see? You deserve a good man. A man who will love you, protect you, put you above everything. You deserve Prince Charming, and I'll never be him.”

“You think I want Prince Charming?”

“It's what you deserve.”

“Kohen,” she starts, but I can't hear another word of it. I can't keep putting myself... my heart... through this.

We will never be.

We can never be.

A knock on the door prevents the conversation from going any further, giving me the break and escape I need.

I turn the lock, crack open the door and Pothole passes me her clothing. He keeps his eyes on the floor and steps away without saying a word. Thank fuck. I set her clothing on the chair next to me, and slip out of the room, never giving her anything more than my back. “Get dressed. We’re headed back to the club.”

I close the door and make my way down the hallway. Realizing I’m not fleeing from the temptation, but from the other half of my heart.

And just like that, something deep inside of me breaks.

*It’s okay, I tell myself before embracing the rising dark. She’ll find her happiness once it’s safe out in the world for her to do so.*

---

I CLOSE MY EYES, DESPERATE TO LOSE MYSELF IN THE UTTER exhaustion wreaking havoc on my body.

Physically.

Mentally.

Emotionally.

*Fuck.*

I’m supposed to be some big bad MC President—not some lovesick sap. Besides, I had my great love, and she couldn’t handle being an Old Lady. Hell, she didn’t even stick around long enough to try it.

But damn it, Everleigh is not Lottie, and she isn’t asking me to give up the Jackals. She’s burrowed her way into the club, causing each of my brothers to fall for her sweet innocence. They treat her like family, and they respect her like she’s mine.

And it doesn't help I was a goner the second I looked into Everleigh's big brown eyes, wide and fear filled, while she held my hand like she knew I'd never hurt her. I didn't dare look at her tonight when I refused to give her what we were both so desperate for.

*Fuck.*

In return, she didn't say anything to me the entire ride home. Nor did she say anything when I walked her to the room, making sure she secured the lock.

That lock isn't meant to keep the men in this building out. They'd never hurt her or cross the line I drew that first night. No. That lock was to keep me out. To keep her safe from me and the temptation of claiming her.

My phone chimes on my nightstand and I reach for it, thankful for the distraction.

CODE: Got some more intel on "Raymond".

ME: I'm on my way down.

I type in and dress quickly. I'm shoving my feet into my shoes when my phone goes off again.

WILDCAT: I can't sleep. Please, V, I don't want to leave things so broken between us. Can we talk?

My breath catches in my chest, and as much as I want to reply, I don't. My head isn't on straight and the last thing I need is to say anything more to hurt her.

Instead, I put my phone in my pocket and head downstairs to Code's IT-Wonderland. No joke, that's what he calls it. I've never understood my brother, but his gift for everything technological has been one of the biggest modernizations the Jackals implemented when I became MC President.

It wasn't too long ago when Shakespeare and I talked about modernizing some aspects of the club, when we took on the leadership roles after our father's. We knew the benefit outweighed tradition. Especially for situations like this one, because the shit we've learned about Raymond was literally only one click away.

Raymond is a Wolf—literally. He's a patched member to a rival club, the Demon Wolves, from a county over. While we've had no real beef with the group, it appears as though they've slowly and quietly been encroaching into Jackal territory.

“Rough night?” Code asks the second I open the door to the dimly lit room.

I grunt in response, taking the seat next to him. We might be brothers in real life, but he knows better than to put his nose in my shit. Though, the way he's looking at me, he's heard what went down at name of strip joint.

“Don't start...”

“What? I wasn't going to say anything,” he smirks with a not so innocent shrug. “It's just, well, I heard you got quite a show tonight.”

“Atticus,” I growl, using his government name as his last warning. Brother or not, he's the one Jackal I won't hesitate to plant on his ass and claim it was caused by brotherly love.

“What the fuck are you doing, Kohen?” I glare at him, refusing to give him any kind of satisfaction. “I mean, if you don't want the girl, there are men here chomping at the bits to put her on the back of their bike.”

“Fuck you and fuck them.”

“You claimed the girl, but we all know you haven't laid a finger on her.”

“I'm not talking about this with you—or anyone.”

“You've been acting like an asshole, and not just to the Jackals, but to Snow as well.”

“Why the fuck does everyone keep calling her Snow?”



“Because she’s like Snow White, running from her wicked stepmother. But instead of the seven dwarves, she lives in a club full of badass bikers who will lay down their lives for her.”

“Do you even remember how Snow White’s story went?” I ask, not wanting to say the most important part of the book, because I’ll be damned if I speak that shit into existence. Snow White almost died and the dwarves couldn’t save her.

“Yeah. She takes a bite of a poisonous apple and falls into a deep sleep. And then the *Prince* comes along and plants a fat-ass kiss on her, waking her up.”

An apple... the thought stirs something inside and I remember the small charm always dangling from the chain around her neck. It’s of an apple.

“Tell me what you found about the Wolves.” I clip, changing the subject because the comparison is too close for comfort.

“I’ve had some of my guys running recon,” Code says, shifting away from a jovial good time guy to the techie nerd with a dark side. Shit’s happening in Jackal territory and before we do anything rash, we need all the information. “We’ve got some hidden cams and bugs in the areas they congregate the most.”

“Tell me we’ve got something to go on.”

“It’s not just drugs passing through our little town here,” he murmurs a second before the dark grainy video plays. I can’t make a lot of the details out, but there is a dark van parked outside an old warehouse on the east side of town. A man gets out, walks around it and disappears.

“What’s he doing?” Code opens another video, this time from an angle on the other side of the van. We see the same man appear at the backend of the vehicle. He looks around and opens the side door.

One by one, smaller figures appear. They stand in a straight line. One man waves his arms around, like he’s telling them what to do. A new person appears, exiting the warehouse. He stalks toward them with some kind of assault rifle in hand.

The line moves, left leg, then right left. They move in unison. But that's not what catches my eye. It's the very last in the line, the one who looks like they are being pulled along against their will. The one fighting the pull of the others in front of them.

"They're attached to one another at the ankle," I breathe and Code pauses the video before clicking a few keys and his mouse. The video zooms in and he drags the image down with his mouse, stopping at their feet.

"Tell me I'm not seeing what I think I'm seeing." He zooms out again and clicks play. We watch eight women disappear into the building, the gunman following close behind.

*Eight.*

This can't be happening. Not on Jackal territory.

"Is there anything else happening at that warehouse?" Code fast forwards, and we watch the driver get back into the van and drive off. Hours later, a different van drive up and we watch the women walk from the warehouse and load into it.

"They're trafficking women," my brother says the word out loud and it shakes me deep inside. This is what Fran was selling Everleigh into. If it wasn't for her smarts to run when she did... she could have been one of those eight.

"Who's eyes do we have on that building right now?"

"Dutch and Pap."

"Good." The wheels in my head turn. "Do they know about the vans?"

"I don't think so. There was a block of time no one could be on site. This happened during that block. You don't think the Wolves know we're watching, do you?"

My gut churns at the coincidence of it all. We barely set this operation up two days ago. I know my guys. If they say no one saw them, it's true.

"I don't see how they would. Our guys said it was all clear." I rise to my feet, feeling too eager to sit still. I run a hand

through my hair and sigh. “Send out a text. Church, nine a.m. sharp.”

“On it.”

For a moment I wonder if I should call them in now, but I want to test something out. “Do me a favor, call Dutch and Pap pulled back here to the clubhouse. Don’t mention what we’ve learned tonight until we bring it to the table.”

“You think we’ve been compromised?”

“Not yet, I don’t,” I admit, but I know my kid brother can see the worry in the way I’m suddenly uneasy. “Can you watch the live feed?”

He nods, typing a message into his phone. I’m sure to Dutch and Pappy.

I feel sick to my stomach with the realization of what’s been happening under our noses. We thought the Wolves were just running drugs and selling in our territory. Turns out these fuckers are doing much, much worse.

Fuck.

“You better burn it off, before you break something,” Code voices, watching while I pace back and forth, faster and faster as the aggression builds. I want to put my fist into those assholes’ faces. I want to make them hurt for what they’re doing—for what they’ve done. Mostly of all, I want to put them deep in the ground where they can harm another person.

I exit the room without another word and beeline down the hall toward the club gym. Since I can’t take my anger out on the Wolves, a punching bag will have to do for now.

NINE

## EVERLEIGH

I stare down at the warm milk in my glass and count the numbers of half-empty bottles of hard liquor sitting on the shelves behind the bar.

*Twenty-three... twenty-four...*

*Damn, how many bottles do they need?* I think and continue counting.

I don't know why I'm counting liquor bottles at two in the morning.

Maybe it's because I haven't been able to get my mind to shut down after the performance tonight. Or maybe it's keeping me from wondering why V didn't text me back.

He saw the message. I know he did. The little icon at the bottom of my message has his little picture, showing he saw it.

But I got nothing back.

All I know is that it's too damn dark and quiet for a building that never seems to sleep—and yet, tonight of all nights, there isn't a soul awake. There's no one to talk with and fill the deafening silence surrounding me. There's no one to keep my brain from obsessing over everything V said to me tonight.

Fuck, and he said so much.

I hate how much conviction there was behind his words.

*I'm not good to you.*

*You deserve Prince Charming.*

*I'll never be with him.*

I don't understand where this is coming from, or why he thinks I want some fucking fairytale. Maybe when I was a young girl, before the darkness consumed my life and took everything and everyone I've ever loved, I believed in them. But I was a young girl—a *fucking child*, who'd never know a day of hurt in her life.

I don't want Prince Charming.

I want a man who wants me more than needs me. Craves me like I crave him. Would take a bullet for me because I'd sure as hell take one for him. I want a man who will battle my darkness and will let me battle him.

What don't want is a man who thinks I want to be saved? If I've learned anything about myself in the last few weeks, it's that I can save myself.

I saved myself that night. I might've been unprepared and had no fucking plan, but I'm the one who opened the window to climb out.

I want a man to understand that I stay not because I need protection, but because I want to be here. I choose to be here.

I don't expect that man to be perfect.

There's no such thing as perfect.

“Wildcat?” My body reacts to the sound of his voice, long before my mind catches up to the reality of it. “What are you doing up? Are you okay?”

I turn to face the man whose words have haunted me all night. My limbs feel like goo, and my heart pounds in my chest. His hair is mussed, like he's been pulling at it all night... Or someone else has been—shit, no, don't go there.

“I couldn't sleep,” I tell him softly, feeling my mind spiral in the direction I don't want it to go. My eyes glance at the hallway behind him, and I swallow hard. “What are you doing up?”

The hallway that led to the sweet butt room.

*Her room.*

My blood in my veins turns ice cold and Maria's face flashes across my mind.

I felt her eyes on us the second we stepped into the room tonight, and though I tried not to look her way, I couldn't stop myself. She was smiling at me, like a cat playing with her prey. Like she knew what I had been planning with the girls didn't work out the way I hoped. Like she knew her claim on him was no long a myth in my mind. Then her dark eyes flicked from me to Kohen, and her face grew hungry.

"Code and I were going over some intel we got about Raymond and the Demon Wolves," he explains, shoving his hands into his jeans. He looks exhausted, sweaty even.

*Lies, my heart cries. Everyone went to bed hours ago. He doesn't want you to know he was with her.*

"Oh," I manage, swallowing the hard lump that formed in the back of my throat. Flashes of him with her fill my thoughts and I struggle to keep from letting his betrayal cut me too deeply.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." I turn back to my milk and push it away. I need to get out of here before I say something to make myself look more foolish than I already am in his eyes.

This entire time—it was never about not being good enough for me. He pushed me away and kept his distance because he's with Maria.

*Fucking Maria.*

I've never wanted to harm a person before, but I'd tear her eyes out right now, if I could.

"It's something by the look on your face." I can feel him step toward me, and remain steady, desperate to feel him closer but escape him just the same.

"I'm fine. I was thirsty, and wanted some milk," I murmur with a shrug. My chest aches, my head screams at me to move

faster, and my eyes burn with an onslaught of unshed tears, so I keep my head down. “I’m going to head back to bed now.”

The heat of his body is suddenly in front of me and stop myself from walking into him. “Wildcat...”

“Stop calling me that,” I grit between my teeth, trying to sidestep him. He steps with me, reaching for my arm. “Let me pass.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Is this because I didn’t reply to your texts?”

I take a deep breath and shake my head. If I respond any other way, I’m likely to spill my guts to him and the last thing I need is for him to know how jealous I am of Maria. And how angry I am at him for being with her instead of me.

“Everleigh...” My hearts stutters at the sound of my name on his lips.

Shit.

Until this moment, I didn’t think hearing him call me anything other than his pet name for me was better. But the amount of care laced in each syllable... does something deep inside of me.

“I want to go to bed, Kohen.” My throat feels thick with unspent emotion and words.

“Not until you tell me what’s bothering you.” His hand on my skin feels heaven. I resist the urge to lean into it to relax against them. I wish having his hands on me meant something more, something deeper.

He’s made it clear he isn’t interested in feelings. He isn’t interested in exploring things with me. I should accept that fact and move on, but something keeps pulling me back.

Right now, for example, he can’t let me walk out of the room. He refuses to let me go. I don’t understand why it fucking matters to him if something’s bothering me. For a man who



says he doesn't enjoy playing games, it sure feels like he's a master of cat and mouse.

My grandmother always said I had an old soul. I was too mature for my young age, too observant of the world around me. I understand what she meant now.

I might be young, but I'm not going to allow him to use that against me any longer. I might be inexperienced in life, but I'm not going to allow that to hinder me from the life I want. Whether Kohen is part of the equation, I'm done playing this game.

I won't hold back anymore. I've spent my life surviving. It's time for me to *live*.

And it's time for Kohen to face the truth.

Swallowing the hard lump threatening to choke the life out of me, I let the tears, the frustration, the anger out. "You are what's bothering me right now," I grit between my teeth and stare into his eyes. "This club is what's bothering me. This world is what's bothering me. That bitch you just fucked is what's bothering me." I watch his eyes grow wide, and he stumbles back a step, but I've come too far to give now. "No. You don't get to run away this time. You asked me what was wrong. Now you can stand here and listen to it all."

"Wildcat—"

"Don't fucking wildcat me," I hiss, squaring my shoulders and infuse whatever courage I have left into my spine. I have spent the last nine years of my life in hell. I'm done ignoring my wants and needs. "You don't want me—I get it—I hear you! But I need you to stop pretending like you fucking care about me."

"I do care—" he starts, once again trying to cut me off.

"Bullshit!" Kohen flinches and for a moment I revel in the shock buried in his brow. "If you fucking cared, you wouldn't have shut me out tonight. If you fucking cared, you wouldn't have let me shut you out. If you fucking cared, you would have told me the truth before you made a big deal about me being off limits to the rest of the Jackals."

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Maria. If you had simply told me there was someone else from the start, we could have saved ourselves all this frustration.”

“There is no one else, Wildcat.”

“You don’t have to lie, Kohen. She told me. Though I didn’t believe until now.”

“I was in the gym burning off some steam, and before that, I was in the surveillance room with Code.” He crosses his arms, looking down at his nose at me. He told me about the room for his IT guy, his brother. It was down the same hall. “There was some new information about the wolves. He wanted to go over with me before we called a meeting with the guys tomorrow.”

“Shit. I forgot,” I whisper, feeling the wind go out of my sail. Maybe I jumped to the wrong conclusion regarding to his relationship with Maria. Or maybe he doesn’t want me talking about his business. Then again, he isn’t mine to question.

“You forgot,” he scoffs. “Jesus, Everleigh. What the fuck do you want from me?”

“You,” I shout before I can stop myself, my conviction pattering away with each word. “I just want you, Kohen.”

“We’ve been down this road already. I told you—”

“Yes, you *told* me. You didn’t let me weigh in, didn’t let me have my say. You decided for both of us, and you have been doing so since the night we first got here. You treat me like a child, Kohen. I get that I’ve lived a sheltered life compared to you—”

“That’s the thing, Wildcat, your life wasn’t it sheltered. It was controlled, and you were fucking tortured.”

“Don’t you think making this decision for me is control? Torture, even? You might not be using your fists, Kohen, but you’ve already got my heart, and it’s fucking torture the way you keep rejecting it.”

“I’m doing what is right for you.”

“Says who?” I reach for his face, capturing it between my palms. “Who, Kohen? The club? They don’t give two fucks I’m sixteen years younger than you. They want you to be happy. They want you to have a partner who’ll chase away the dark. Someone who will support you when your back is up against the wall. Someone who will stand at your side when shit hits the fan. Someone who will celebrate with you when everything goes right.”

“You don’t deserve this life. You deserve someone who will put you before a club—”

“I want you, Kohen Prince, and everything that means—the club, the lifestyle, the danger and fear—all of it.” The fight in his eyes dims with each word until his forehead rests against mine and he closes his eyes. “I don’t know who she is, or what she did to you, but you deserve love. You deserve happiness. Stop fighting what fate wants to give you—to give us. Don’t you think we both deserve some goodness?”

TEN

## KOHEN

“Wildcat...” I whisper unsteadily. Her body trembles under my touch, and like that first night, when I kissed her in front of the club, the surrounding air is electric. I’m tired of fighting the pull I have to her. I’m tired of using any excuse I can to keep my distance from her.

*She wants me. The thought ripples across my mind, breaking the last bit of restraint I’ve been holding on to.*

*I want her.*

*So. Damn. Much.*

I lift my hands, setting them at her hips to pull her against me. Her soft body leans into mine, and I recognize how it’s rounded out beautifully in the two weeks she has been with me. There is a definite curve to her hip that wasn’t there before, and my hand sits perfectly in the dip.

She inhales, pressing her tits against me. *Ah, fuck, her tits...*

Seeing her on stage, her tits nearly spilling out of her costume, it nearly did me in. She’s everything I dreamed my woman to be, from her big wide eye, pouty lips and perfect shape. I’m captivated by her.

All she must do is look at me, nibble on her bottom lip and I am a goner. Does she know the power she holds over me?

No. I don’t think she does, because she believed I was involved with another. Although, she tried her best to tempt with me her performance.

My already hard dick strains, trapped against the zipper of my jeans. I wonder if she notices the way it pulses against her, twitching and seeking the warmth only she can provide.

Fuck.

I should drag Maria out of her bed, here and now, to put the viperous bitch in her place. She knows better than to use my name. I should rip her to pieces for twisting Everleigh up and making her believe the worst of me.

Fuck.

I let it go for now. Relishing the way my Wildcat feels, warm and pliant against me.

The beast will have to wait until we've had our fill of the sweet little Wildcat dangling before me. There's no way in hell I'm walking away, not when everything she's said is right.

I have given my past too much power over my future. I've let the sins of others stop me from claiming what is mine.

"You have to know what you do to me, Wildcat," I murmur, hoping and praying she stays right here in my arms. "How much I've held back. I've only dreamed of having you this close. Of touching you."

"You should know something," she hums, her small hands still on my face. "That night, our kiss, it was my first."

"It was?" Guilt swarms me. How did I not consider that? A first kiss is the moment most women treasure, and I turned into a public spectacle. Fuck. What an asshole thing to do, but instead of dwelling on it, I have a better idea. "I'm about to correct that memory."

This time when I claim her lips, time stands still, and the world stops spinning. This time I pour every ounce of want and need I've been holding back into it, because I never want her to doubt what I feel for her.

I claim her mouth, demanding even more when she opens to me. Our tongues twist and tangle, explore and seek with wild abandon. Her taste, her smell—it consumes me until I don't

know where I end, and she begins. We are one as our tongue duel in perfect harmony.

She kisses me back just as fiercely. Gone is the shy girl I kissed two weeks ago. Now she is a powerful woman. A woman who knows what she wants and is not afraid to go after it.

“More,” she murmurs against my lips, while trying to crawl up me. I scoop her up and she wraps her legs around me as carry her up the stairs to my room.

No.

Our room.

I don't know how we make it in one piece, but I'm depositing her on the bed in the next heartbeat and ripping off the oversized T-shirt she uses as a nightgown. My heart stutters at the sight of her, completely naked underneath.

*Fuck me.*

*She was sitting downstairs at the bar with nothing underneath.*

“Holy shit,” I exhale. “You are fucking beautiful, wildcat.”

I drop my head to take one small but perky breast into my mouth. She moans in approval, and I pluck at the other, capturing the taut little bud in between my fingers. My dick throbs, wanting to be released, but I am determined to make this moment memorable for her.

I will not rush her, and I plan to play her perfect little body like a fucking fiddle. I won't stop until she soaked and squirming, begging for my cock.

I release her breast with a pop, and trail kisses down her abdomen, stopping at her cute little belly button. I can smell her tangy, wet sex from here. I can't wait to dive into her folds and lick her clean. It's all I've wanted to do since seeing her on that stage.

I slide off the bed to my knees and yank her closer until her wet pussy is hanging off the edge. She looks up at me with a hooded gaze, her long dark hair spread out like a halo above her.

Fucking perfect.

“Spread your pretty little legs, wildcat.”

“Kohen,” she pleads, but does what I say. Her pussy glistens up at me with need, beneath a tuft of dark hair.

“Do you touch yourself, wildcat?”

“Yes.” She tosses her head back, bringing one small hand to squeeze a tight nipple.

“What do you think about when you touch yourself?”

“Unh,” she moans loudly when I slide a finger down her wet slit. I’m careful not to dip into her folds yet. I have every intention of teasing her, but fuck, she’s so responsive to my touch.

I kiss along her inner thighs, licking and nipping at her creamy skin, waiting for her to respond.

“Answer me,” I urge, playing my finger along her slit again.

“I think of you,” she rasps, her hands gripping the sheets in anticipation. “Touching me... there...”

“Here?” I ask, dipping my finger to graze across her sensitive clit.

“Yes.” She tries to thrust her hips forward into my touch. I use my free keep her from moving.

“Don’t move, wildcat, or I won’t feast on this delectable pussy you’ve presented me with.”

“Please,” she pants, but I let the anticipation grow. I want her begging for my touch, for my mouth, and for her release.

“Do you know how fucking beautiful you are, wildcat? So stunning. And mine.”

“Yours.”

“Yes. Mine to eat. Mine to lick. Mine to fuck. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”



“And when I fuck you tonight, it’ll be bareback. because I’m going to shoot my come so high inside of this pretty little pussy, you’ll feel it for days.” She mewls, and I push open her wet folds, taking in the sight. I lean forward to inhale her tangy scent, letting it fuel the lust inside of me. She smells like heaven, and I know her taste will be my undoing.

Hell, this woman is my undoing, and I was a fucking fool to deny myself what has always been true.

Everleigh White is mine.

I flatten my tongue against her and lick from top to bottom and back again. Letting her salty tang rest on my tongue, when I focus on the little bundle of nerves at the apex. Her moans throatily, raking her hairs through my hair, pinning me in place.

“Yes, Kohen, right there...”

I suck her clit into my mouth and plunge a digit into her slick channel. She combusts a second later, fucking my face and coming all over my hand.

It is a sight and sound I can get used to, but also one I don’t think I’ll ever grow tired of. The way her body accepts the power I hold over her, it’s fucking addictive.

*One...*

She only gets to control one, though.

The rest of her orgasms are mine.

ELEVEN

## EVERLEIGH

I tried to hold it in, to hold myself back from the edge he had me teetering on, but the second his mouth latched onto my clit, it was out of my control.

Wave after wave crashed over me, unlike anything I've ever felt.

Yes, I've touched myself, but I've never been able to make myself feel this way. If I'm honest, I never understood why women liked to have a man's mouth between their legs. I always worried I didn't smell right or look too appealing.

Now, I get it.

But it is more than the sensation of his hot, wet tongue on me. It's the way he quieted my fears and worries, expressing how beautiful I was—how perfect my pussy looked to him.

Damn. I think I could live with Kohen's mouth between my legs for the rest of my life. I am not kidding. It's like heaven on earth.

"Kohen, I want you," I mewl, feeling the last wave wash intense warmth into my limbs, but the ache I felt is still there. It wasn't enough. I need more.

"Patience," he murmurs, his mouth and tongue swirling on me in ways that make my toes curl and the pressure build again. This time he slips a second finger inside me, and the stretch adds to the pleasure.

I try rocking against his mouth, but his free arm clamps across my middle and he removes his mouth to glare up at me.

“You don’t come until I say you can, wildcat. Do you hear me?” His words leave me breathless, contributing to the feeling growing deep inside of me. I feel heady and unable to focus on anything but the vibrations and zings he acts sparks in my body.

“Yes,” I whisper, not entirely sure what I’m agreeing to because all I can think of is how much I want to come again. My answer must’ve pleased him, though, because a second later he is licking and tasting me again.

This time with fervor, like a man on a mission.

His fingers plunge relentlessly, hooking inside of me and hitting the right spot, making me see stars.

*Holy...*

“Hold on to it, wildcat,” he warns, and I glance down to find his midnight eyes on me. Seeing his mouth connected at the most sensitive part of me—nearly makes me come again. But I hold back, panting and focusing on how much I don’t want him to stop.

*Oh, my god...*

He hums with approval and adds a third finger to the mix. The sensation is almost unbearable. Between his tongue and fingers, I don’t know how much more my body can take before I combust. But his command keeps me from tumbling down into the cavernous abyss.

“Please,” I breathe, looking down into his eyes, getting lost in their depths. “I need to come.”

“Good girl, wildcat.” His praise does something to me, and I realize I like it. We’ve been so combative the last few weeks, and I want his praise. “You’re so fucking wet. Are you ready to come for me?”

“Please,” I beg, needing the release more than my next breath. He has me twisted up and desperate for him, for what he can give me. For what he controls.

“Come for me, beautiful,” he commands, releasing his hold on my hips, and allowing my hips to move with the tempo he’s

set.

I pinch my nipple as the first wave approaches, adding to the force it hits me with.

“Holy shit,” I scream, feeling my release flood his hand. His mouth moves from my clit, licking and slurping my juices, letting me freefall into the abyss.

I’m stuck somewhere between flying or soaring, delighting in the delicious feeling saturating every pore of my body.

I don’t know how or when, but Kohen settles over me, kissing and caressing my body.

“You want my cock, Wildcat?” I feel his hard length pressed against me, and I mewl, offering myself up to him on a silver platter.

It didn’t matter I came so hard I could barely see; it still wasn’t enough. I’m ready for him. I need him.

“Please,” I whisper huskily, running my hands down his back, realizing he’s completely naked.

When did that happen?

I look down between our bodies and see his massive cock jutting toward me, begging for release. It’s beautiful and thick, and for a moment I worry about its size.

“Don’t worry wildcat, your virgin pussy will take it like a champ,” Kohen chuckles before leaning closer. He must’ve has seen the worry written on my brow.

“Can I touch you?” I ask.

“If you touch me right now, wildcat, I’m not going to last. I want to make this good for me,” he murmurs and captures my lips with his.

He plunges his tongue into my mouth at the same time he lines his cock up with my entrance to push forward. I can’t breathe. The anticipation for this moment is almost too much—too excruciatingly slow.

I need him to move *now*. I need him to be deep inside of me, moving and thrusting.

He draws back and pushes forward again, this time moving deeper and stretching me even further. It's not as painful as I imagined, but I get the sense he's holding back as he allows me a moment to adjust to his size before doing it again.

"You're so fucking tight," he rasps, drawing back again. This time he pushes in a little harder, and I welcome the discomfort, thrusting my hips to meet him.

"More," I beg, but he uses his weight to me to pin my hips. "I need all of you, Kohen. Give me all of you."

"I don't want to hurt you," he murmurs against my lips, withdrawing again. He pushes forward, harder and harder with each new thrust, until I feel the last barrier between him and I give. The pain is only slightly discomforting, but it's nothing compared to the feeling inside of me. The feeling of perfection.

And he is perfect. Every fucking inch sheathed to the hilt inside of me.

Fuck.

I've never felt this full in my life—this complete.

"Fucking perfect," he groans when I squeeze my pussy walls around him. He rests his forehead against mine, his blue eyes dark and lusty.

"More, please."

"Greedy little wildcat," he chuckles, before giving me exactly what I want.

What we both want.

He pounds into me, over and over, pushing both our bodies to the limit. The connection is everything, but I beg for him to go deeper and harder still.

His hand snakes between us, and his thump presses into the little bundle of nerves, leaving me gasping. The sensation is just enough to sending me soaring again. But this time, my pussy clamp down onto his cock, not his fingers.

He grunts loudly with each thrust, each one becoming a little more erratic as he chases his own release. I feel the moment he shoots his hot load deep inside of me, coating my walls.

Fucking bliss.

“I love you, Kohen,” I murmur, watching him ride out his orgasm.

He looks down at me with a smile, and I see his response. I feel it when he leans forward and presses a tender kiss to my forehead.

“You better get ready, wildcat, because I haven’t had my fill of you yet.”

TWELVE



## EVERLEIGH

Much to our dismay, Kohen was called out this morning for a Club emergency. My heart beat a little faster now, worrying about the danger, but I had to trust him and the other Dirty Jackals. They know what they are doing.

I've spent the day floating on cloud nine and remembering every moment together with each bend and stretch of my body. It was everything I dreamed it could be, but so much more.

He made me feel things I never thought possible, and he pushed my body—my pleasure to every limit I thought I had, and beyond. He taught me what it meant to want, to need, to love.

It didn't bother me when he didn't say the words back, because I could see what he felt for me. I could feel it as he took me over and over. He poured everything he had into our night together.

"Girl, get your head on straight before you burn my sauce," Millie chuckles, the same way she's been chuckling since Kohen, and I came downstairs hand in hand.

"Yes, ma'am," I smile and stir the giant sauce pot.

When Millie told me what she was making for dinner tonight, homemade spaghetti, I didn't hesitate to offer my help. I always wanted to learn how to make sauce.

"I'm going to switch over the laundry. I'll be right back," Millie tells me from over her shoulder.

I sigh, letting myself get lost in the memories and feelings from just hours ago. He asked me not to shower him off yet before kissing me goodbye, and I happily obliged that request. I enjoyed smelling him on me. It only made my day brighter.

“There you are,” Maria enters the kitchen with a smile, almost squashing my cheerful spirit. She’s wearing low-cut jeans and a bright pink tube top. Her dark hair is teased into a mass of curls and her lips are painted a shade of pink that matches her top. She is wearing a pair of espadrilles to finish the look. Frankly, she looks cheap, like a woman who’s trying too hard. A woman who knows she might be on her way out. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“You have?” I ask, setting the ladle I was holding down, before I get the idea to slap her across the face and beat her senseless with it. I place a hand on one hip and lean on the counter. “Why is that?”

“I want to apologize about yesterday afternoon,” she offers, but I say nothing, and wait, watching her squirm with my lack of response. I’ve no doubt someone told her about Kohen and me, and how we were found in his bed—knocked out after round three. I know we were loud, too. “I shouldn’t have said what I did.”

“You mean, when you implied you and Kohen were a thing?”

“I was only kidding,” she shrugs, like it wasn’t a big deal. Like I should have known she didn’t mean anything by it, but we both know that wasn’t true. She wanted me to doubt what was between Kohen and I. She wanted me to believe her lies. Now she’s in damage control mode.

“Sure,” I reply, also with a shrug. But there’s something about the way she looks at me, like she has me all figured out. She has no fucking clue, so I play into it a little, trying to figure out her angle. “I believe you.”

“No, you don’t, and you shouldn’t.” She twists a finger into her hair, looking at me pointedly. Okay, so she’s got me there, but she’s been at this game a lot longer than I have. “Look, I know the girls filled you in about me and I don’t have the greatest track record with them.”

“Track record?” I scoff, letting her see how ridiculous I think she is. Mimi and Yaya are amazing women. They are my friends and have been since the moment we met. They’re the ones who warned me not to believe Maria in the first place, but the bitch played right into my inexperience. “Come on, Maria, be serious.”

“Fine. They hate me. I hate them. Blah, blah, blah.” She pops a hip out and crosses her free arm under her breasts.

“What do you want, Maria?” I ignore the way she pushes her breasts higher, as if she’s offering me something other than friendship. Instead, I focus on dipping the ladle into the sauce and stir it, waiting for whatever sob story she plans on trying to feed me next.

“I fucked up, Snow,” she half-whines, half begs. Maria doesn’t seem like the type of friend I’d ever want, but then again, she doesn’t seem like the kind of woman who would beg for another chance, either. Maybe I’m wrong about this. Maybe she really wants to be different. “Please, can we start over and *try* to be friends?”

“You want to me my friend?” I ask skeptically.

“Is it that hard to believe?”

“You’re not exactly the friend type,” I level, watching the way my honesty strikes her. If I wasn’t standing there watching her reaction, I wouldn’t of believed it, but the woman actually flinched.

*Damn, maybe I have her pegged wrong after all.*

*Maybe we all do.*

“It’s not like I asked for this... to be like this,” she murmurs, dipping her gaze from mine. “It’s more of a defense mechanism. I push them away before they can hurt me.”

I nod, unable to form words. I remember a young girl in grade school who used to do the same thing on the playground. She didn’t come from a happy home, and her parents often used her to hurt one another. Maria’s behavior, in theory, is not that different.

“All right, fine,” I proclaim. “We can start over.”

“Really?” Maria looks up with a smile on her face and excitement in her eyes. I nod, trying to ignore the way my body wants to physically reject the woman standing in front of me.

What could it hurt?

---

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” I ASK, WATCHING THE WORLD BLUR by as Maria races the midnight blue mustang through town. She pulled me out of the clubhouse, insisting we solidify our new bond with a shopping trip.

I wasn't too thrilled with the idea and tried to use helping Millie as an excuse. Maria was on a mission, though. She waved off my reasoning, stating Millie was used to cooking by herself, and she wouldn't mind if I took off.

I tried to pull back, but Maria was strong, and she didn't stop until I securely buckled into her vehicle. Come to think of it, she stopped talking all together once we pulled out of the parking lot.

“Maria?” I probe, noting the concentration on her face. It was almost like she's forgotten I'm sitting next to her. “Is everything okay?”

She still does not respond. I reach out slowly to touch her arm and she flinches at the connection. “Hey, where'd you go?”

“Huh? Did you say something?” She asks, never taking her eyes off the road.

“Yeah, I've been trying to talk to you. What's going on? I thought the mall was the other direction.” I try to sound calm, trusting even, but dread fills my gut. I brush it off as nerves, remembering the excitement in Maria's eyes when I agreed to be her friend.

“It is, but I know a little shop at the edge of town. I think you'll like. Is that okay?”

I nod, but I don't think she notices. She's too focused on the road. "I left my purse back at the clubhouse, though. Do you think we can turn around so I can get it?"

"I can spot you the cash," she offers. "You can pay me when we get back."

"Okay." I study the passing scenery, trying to make out anything familiar about it, but I can't remember the last time I was on this side of town. We're headed toward the industrial area, and I don't think there's much out this way.

"Do you think we can hit up the mall afterwards?" I don't know why, but I have this urge to keep her talking.

"What's with all the questions, Snow?" she grunts, her jovial composure melting away. "I thought we were going to try this friend thing out. Don't you trust me?"

"Of course, I do, Maria," I lie, swallowing the lump forming in my throat. I don't like the way her eyes have turned cold. "It's just... there was a store I wanted to check out again. They had this cute little mini skirt I could use your opinion on."

Maria grows quiet again and presses down onto the accelerator, as though we aren't moving fast enough now.

Something doesn't feel right. I've got to get some help.

"Do you think I can borrow your cell phone? Mine's back at the clubhouse, in my purse. I want to check in with Millie and let her know we'll be back in time for dinner. It bothers me to leave her hanging." Maria's lip purse, and her hands tighten on the wheel.

"Uh, sure," she finally answers after a few moments of awkward silence. I watch as she reaches behind my seat and roots around in her purse. "Crap, I must've left mine, too. "It's fine. I'm sure Millie's got everything handled. Otherwise, she can ask one of the other girls to help."

I try hard not to react, not to breathe wrong, because I saw her phone in her hand when she walked into the kitchen. I remember her sticking it in her purse. "Yeah, you're probably right."

Maria slows down, flicking on her turn signal. I swallow hard, looking at the desolate warehouses surrounding us. There's nothing here.

She pulls around one of the dilapidated buildings and parks out of sight. She then shuts the engine off and shifts her body toward me. "Wow. This was so much easier than I expected."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, refusing to look at her. Assessing the surrounding area, I search for a safe path through the decrepit buildings to get away from whatever she's planned. I unbuckle and put a hand on the door handle, but I'm not fast enough.

Maria strikes quick, and unfortunately for me, the bitch is precise. I feel a pinch in my thigh and look down to see a now empty syringe in her hand. My arms weaken immediately, dropping lifelessly into my lap.

"No hard feelings, darlin', but I warned you I wasn't to be fucked with," Maria smirks, reaching forward and yanking my necklace off. She looks down at it like a trophy before tucking it away into her pocket. She then flicks her head toward the windowless van now parked next to us.

My heart plummets when the driver opens the door, revealing the man I thought I escaped two weeks ago.

*Raymond.*

The car door opens, and he yanks me out of my seat. I try to scream, to fight back, but my body doesn't respond. Raymond smiles down menacingly at me, cradling my body like a newborn baby.

"I've been looking for you, Everleigh," he drawls, in a voice that has haunted my dreams since the moment I first heard it. I look around, trying to see who else it with him. Boots crunch on the gravel nearby, but whoever's with him is careful to keep out of sight.

*No, this can't be happening.*

"What the fuck took you so long, Tor?" Maria snarls, exiting her vehicle and coming around the back end.

“Cool your heels Triple Time, we’re here now,” Raymond growls at the woman who bated me to trust her.

I feel like a fool. An all too trusting and naïve fool.

“Well, hurry and leave. I’ve got to the bar for my shift. I don’t want the Jackals suspecting anything out of the ordinary.”

“You sure they don’t already know?” Raymond tears his gaze from me. He looks at Maria like she is a bug he wants to squish. “Don’t they have the compound wired like a vault?”

“Yeah, but I was able to take care of it, per Dodger’s instructions.” Maria’s voice fades. I don’t know if it’s because she’s walking away or because Raymond carries me around the van. “Once they see me walk in on camera at the bar, I’ll be one less suspect. Hey, let Hog know I’ll be in touch.”

I hear the mustang’s engine rev and a moment later speed away.

*Fuck.*

*Shit.*

What am I going to do? How’s Kohen going to find me?

*Fuck.*

I send up a pray hoping Maria didn’t do anything to Millie. She might be the only one who can save me.

Raymond jostles me over his shoulder, pulling me back from my thoughts. I hear the sliding door of the van open and he tosses me inside. My body slams into the hard metal, and I scream internally as blinding pain fills my mind.

Fuck, this is bad. Really fucking bad, I pant, trying to fight through it, but it’s too much. Darkness surrounds the edges of my vision, making the last thing I see before it consumes me, Raymond’s smug face.

“You’re mine now, Princess.”

THIRTEEN



## KOHEN

I cut the engine of my bike, feeling the frustration of the day wear on me a little.

And what a fucking day it shaped into.

Our plan to bust in on the Wolves went south, and the warehouse we planned to raid was emptied overnight. How we missed it happening, I'm not sure, but they left the place so clean it couldn't have been a coincidence.

We need to figure out how they got the jump on us, and fast. My best guess is they found the cameras we had on them, but we didn't know for sure. Not until Code got back to run the footage.

I unclip my helmet and drag in a breath, letting myself think of Everleigh's smiling face.

God, I fucking missed her today, but I'm happier than shit to have a woman like her to come home to.

If it wasn't for Dutch pounding on my door this morning about the meeting, I instructed Code to call the Jackals in for, I'd probably still be in bed counting her orgasms.

*Fuck.*

My Wildcat was everything I thought she'd be. Passionate. Responsive. Submissive, when necessary, and unapologetically demanding the rest of the time.

Her perfect cunt took my cock without hesitation. When she sucked me in and clamped down, I swore I was having an out-

of-body experience. I could see her and me, and we were perfectly connected as one. Like we were always meant to be.

I step into the clubhouse and the scent of scorched food smacks me in the face. I smiled, wondering if the smell was any sign of how things went in the kitchen. Everleigh wanted to learn and warned Millie about her lack of experience, but Millie didn't hesitate to take my woman under her wing.

From the smell, I hope Millie has a backup plan for a group of hungry bikers about to file in, because there's nothing appealing about the thought of burned spaghetti.

Dutch and Bane enter next, but they stop dead in their tracks.

"What the fuck is that smell?" Dutch chokes, pinching his nose dramatically. Bane grunts, looking around the room for danger. The man is always on high alert.

"Everleigh asked Millie to teach her how to make homemade sauce," I explain, crossing moving through the double doors into the kitchen. Neither Millie nor my Wildcat are manning the sauce pot smoking on the stovetop.

*What the fuck?*

"Wildcat, we're back," I holler, twisting the knob on the stovetop and killing the flame. I wonder if they got caught up in the other chores Millie mentioned this morning and forgot about the sauce. "Millie?"

*But wouldn't they smell it?*

The kitchen is clean, except for the ladle laying haphazardly on the counter closest to the stove. The sight of it causes my stomach to sink. In all the years she cooked for the Jackals, I can't think of a single meal Millie's burned.

"Dutch. Bane," I shout, clamping down on my growing panic.

*Something's wrong.*

*Very wrong.*

Dutch peeks his head in. "Prez?"

"Go, check Millie's room," I urge, moving out of the kitchen and down the hallway toward the laundry room. I clamp down

on my thoughts, trying to keep my imagination from running wild. The door is shut, and I try opening it, but it doesn't budge. It feels like there is something against it—holding it in place.

“Millie? Wildcat? Are you in there?” I shove a little harder and call out to them. Maybe they've barricaded themselves in the room. The door budges a little, and I feel the weight behind it shift. Through the crack, I see Millie's body slump forward.

*Shit.*

*Fuck.*

“Millie?” I shout, pushing even harder. The door gives a little more and I'm able to squeeze into the room. The laundry is strewn across the room, like Millie fought someone off, but with no other access to the room, I don't understand how she could have done so and ended up against the door. I crouch down to check for a pulse and her breathing.

She's alive.

*Thank fuck.*

But where is my wildcat?

“Prez?” I hear Bane shout, coming down the hallway. “Did you find them?”

“It's Millie,” I answer, searching the older woman's body for any sign of injury. There is none. “She's unconscious. Call Doc, get him here now. Did you find Everleigh?”

Bane opens the door wide, typing a hurried message into his phone. “No, she wasn't in your room.”

My heart stutters to a stop, and I look up at him in disbelief. “Did you check in the gym?”

“I did a perimeter check. There's no sign of her, V. Of anyone.” Dutch steps in behind Bane. He spots Millie on the floor. “Is it safe to move her?”

“There's no sign of blood or trauma. I think it's best to get her ready for Doc.” I shift, and carefully lift Millie into my arms.

Her body is cold, telling me she's been out for some time. "She was leaning against the door. How long until the rest of the crew get here?" The rumble of motors sounds off in the distance, answering me before either man gets the chance. "Come on, help me get her to her room."

"Here, let me take her. Doc'll be here in fifteen and Pap's not far behind," Bane takes Millie from me, letting me guide down the hallway toward her room. *Fuck, Pappy's going to flip his shit.* He and Millie might not be an official, but there isn't a single Jackal in this club that doesn't know who she belongs to—and I don't mean as the club's surrogate mother. Pappy's been in love with Millie for years. In fact, that's how she got her name, Little Mama. He gave it to her, claimed it went perfectly with his own.

Once Bane lays her gently down on the bed, I spring into action. Taking the stairs two at a time, I fling open every door, looking for any sign of my woman. Only there isn't any.

The Jackals are filing in as I make my way back downstairs. I find Atticus immediately and point. "I want the fucking feed from the last few hours. Now. I want to know who fucking took her, and why I found Millie unconscious in the laundry room."

"What the fuck is going on?" my brother's face sinks. "Took who?"

"Everleigh," I shout, feeling my sanity slip a little.

*Fuck.*

Saying the words doesn't make it any easier. It makes it worse. I shouldn't have left her alone today. I shouldn't have left her unprotected.

The air around us fills with tension, not only from me. But from the Jackals.

Do they blame me?

They should.

This is on me.

This is my fault.

I drag in a deep breath, feeling my lung burn from lack of oxygen. I've got to keep it together until we know more. "I gave you an order, Code. Let's go."

He moves finally, and I switch tactics. Instead of searching the kitchen again, I follow behind my brother, shouting orders to the others from over my shoulder. "I want the perimeter secured. Everyone brought in to shelter and the compound locked down. Get Shakespeare and Duchess on premises. Until we know if this was an attack on the club, or a single target, we aren't taking any fucking chances. And someone get eyes on Fran. I want to know if she's involved."

"Don't matter, Prez. Snow's one of ours, and no one fucks with one of ours," Coyote declares, and the group of men standing around grunts in agreement.

"Y'all heard Prez. Move out Jackals," Hardcore speaks this time and the Jackals disperse, moving in perfect harmony to carry out my orders.

---

"HOW IS THIS FUCKING POSSIBLE?" ATTICUS CURSES, rewinding the feed for the hundredth time.

"Can you back up any further?" I ask, knowing the answer already, but I'm desperate for a new one—a better one. He's gone back to the moment I walked out of the clubhouse this morning, the Jackals hot on my heels.

We watched the girls leave soon after, heading to the bar or the strip club for work. No one else went into the clubhouse and no one else left the clubhouse. Every camera, every angle—all reported the same thing.

"Take it frame by frame if you must, but there's no way she turned invisible and walked out of here." I rake my hands through my hair and down my face, pulling at my beard. "What about the warehouse? Can you check the feed and see if we've got anything there?"

"Brother, I can only move so fast," Atticus expresses. "I'm only a one man show."

“Fine, get me the footage and I’ll—”

“There,” he shouts, pausing the screen and then flicking back. He moves back and forth between them, but I don’t see what he’s talking about.

“What?”

“You don’t see it?” He flips between the two frames again, but I shake my head. “Look at Maria’s mustang.” He points and zooms in on the vehicle, flipping back and forth once again between the frames. It’s only the tail end, not noticeable if you don’t know what you’re looking at. He flips back and forth, this time adding a frame both before and one after. “It’s there and then it isn’t.”

“A delay in the feed?”

“No, the feed is continuous,” he explains, flipping between various angles. “We see her leave the club and walk to her car. But in the next frame, her car is gone. We should have seen brake lights, her backing out of the spot.”

“Someone fucked with the security feed,” I surmise, shaking my head. The news just keeps getting worse and worse. I fear we won’t get to her in time. I won’t get to tell her how I feel—I was a fucking fool to hold me all this time. To keep her at arm’s distance.

“But who? The system is a closed circuit, so you’d have to access the feed from inside.”

“There wasn’t anyone...” I trail off, trying to wrap my head around the idea, but it makes my stomach churn even more than it already was. As much as I don’t want to believe it, I have to consider it a possibility.

Someone inside the Jackals is a dirty fucking rat.

Someone who despises my sweet Wildcat.

Someone who—no fucking way.

Suddenly, I’m on my feet, my chair crashes into the wall. There’s no doubt in my mind who our little rat is.

I bet she’s been playing the Jackals from day one.

*That viperous bitch.*

“Where the fuck is Maria?”

---

PRETTY BOY TIGHTENS HIS HOLD ON MARIA’S DARK LOCKS, and she whimpers pathetically.

“Shut the fuck up, stupid bitch,” he growls, yanking her backwards to secure her bound hands to the steel beam in the middle of the dank room. He insisted on handling her himself, since he was the one who brought her into the clubhouse the first time. I think he feels responsible for Everleigh’s abduction.

And we know she was abducted because of the cryptic messages we’ve been able to decipher on Maria’s phone. She just hasn’t admitted it yet.

We also know who Maria is, and what her purpose in our clubhouse was. To spy and report back to the Demon Wolves. She’s kept them one step ahead of us, but I’m about to fix that.

Here and now.

This woman will give me the information I want.

Even if I have to cut it out of her.

“Tell me the truth, Maria, before this turns nasty,” I advise, trying to appeal to her without turning feral on her. My patience is wearing dangerously thin. “Where is she?”

I don’t know how long Everleigh’s been gone, but I know whoever’s involved with her abduction is as good as dead. If I don’t get to them first, there’s a line of Jackals upstairs waiting to have a go.

“If she’s lucky, she’s already dead,” Maria hisses, staring up at me with cold, menacing eyes. Then she smirks. “Unless that haven’t finished with her yet. Then I’m sure she’s having the time of her life.”

Pretty Boy reaches out to slap her hard across the face, wiping the smirk off her face. She snarls up at him, the sight of her

own blood staining her teeth. Pretty Boy, while always jovial at a party, was deadly when it mattered most. “You never learned what to do with that pretty mouth of yours.”

“I might’ve tried harder if you gave me something worth filling it with,” she spits at him, but before he can haul off and slap her again, I do it for him.

“You will answer me, Maria.” She glares up at me with hatred burning bright in her eyes. I curse myself for not kicking this viper to the curb when I became club president. She always been a problem for this club, but I don’t think any of thought she was capable of this. Her betrayal cuts to the heart of us. “One way... or another.”

“You think your threat scares me?”

“No.” I feel a deadly calm wash over me as I lean into the feral. “I don’t think there’s much in this world that scares you, *Triple Time*.”

“See, you don’t need me to find what you’re looking for,” she smirks. Once of the first things Code did was ask for her phone. They also tore apart her car and her area of the sweet butt room.

“You’re not wrong,” I acknowledge, because there’s no sense lying to her. Sinking down on my haunches until we are face to face, I drag in a deep breath. “But won’t it feel so fucking good to say the words yourself? To claim your victory? How long have you been spying for the Wolves?”

“No, I don’t think you’ve figured everything out. Have you, V?” She tosses her head back and laughs. “You don’t know where your precious little Wildcat is.”

“You will tell me—”

“That’s the thing. I can’t tell you something I don’t know.” She leans back with a smug smile. My hands itch to wrap around her throat and watch her life fade from her eyes. “Raymond, well, Tormentor, as I know him, was careful. He knew my cover could be blow over this, so he never told me where he planned to take her.”



“Tell me one thing, did your orders come from Hog or Raymond?”

“Both.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Very.”

“When was the last time you laid eyes on your man Hog?” I stand, not wanting to look at her anymore. Her betrayal to us will not go unpunished, but I plan to play with her the way she played with Pretty Boy and Shakespeare, and whoever else she dug her claws into.

“Do you know who I am?” she asks like her status with the Wolves means shit to me. Of course I know she’s Hogs, or at least she’s supposed to be his. “I talk to him every day.”

“Texting isn’t talking, Maria, neither is it seeing him.”

“What are you getting at?”

“You know we’ve been looking into the Wolves, digging into their business and past. I know you know because you told Raymond as much, and then we discovered the warehouse they’ve been working at was cleared out.”

“You talk too much, Vortex. Anyone ever told you that?”

“There’s been a coup, Triple Time.”

“A coup?”

“Hog and his most trusted men have... disappeared. And from what we’ve gathered, they’ve been gone for quite some time. With them missing in action, who’s stepped up to the plate to run the MC? I will give you one guess, Maria.”

“You’re lying,” she sobs, her smugness completely dissolved.

“You’re a fucking liar.”

“I’m going to ask you one last time, Maria. When was the last time you laid eyes on Hog?”

“He’s not dead. He can’t be dead.” She shakes her head, wiping at the tears falling freely from her eyes. Gone is the viper. In her place is now a broken woman. The orders she

thought Hog gave her weren't from him. We can't prove it, but at this moment, I know Hog and his crew were murdered by one of their own. "Hog, Nacho and a few others went up north six weeks ago. They were supposed to be back by now, but there were some issues keeping them there."

"Who did he leave in charge?" I press, hoping the revelation of what I've just told her will make her turn. Nacho was vice president, and I assumed whatever pulled them away from the club, they took their SOA and enforcers with them.

"Tot—tormentor."

"Do you know where he is?" She nods before looking up at me.

"Only on the condition you make my death quick," she sniffles, and tries to sit up straight. "I know I don't deserve it, but I'll tell you everything I know."

"Deal," I whisper, looking from her to Pretty Boy standing behind her. I don't know if the woman meant something to him, but he nods, letting me know he'll take care of her when we get what we need.

FOURTEEN

## EVERLEIGH

*Why does my fucking head hurt?* I think while trying to open my eyes. But they feel like lead, heavy and uncontrollable.

I'm leaning against a cold, concrete wall and my arms are high above my head. They are secured at my wrist, and whatever it is cuts into the sensitive flesh when I try to bring them down.

*What the fuck?*

Slowly my sense of sound and smell come around, straining to make sense of the way my body feels, and why it's so fucking cold. The muscles around my eyes ache, but I crack them open.

It's dark, and from the smell of it, wet.

I look up, checking to see what is fashioned around my wrists and see thick plastic zip ties holding them securely to an old rusty pipe.

"Finally," a man grunts nearby. The sound of his voice makes me pause. My head snaps in his direction and I release a strangled gasp. "I was starting to think Triple Time gave you a little too much of her special little cocktail, princess."

Memories of Millie, and then Maria, and finally Raymond plays through my mind. A feeling of dread settles deep into my body, and but I push it down, far away from mind as possible.

I've got to keep a clear head.

*Shit.*

“I ought to cut out your heart for all the trouble you’ve caused me. Running away from home, shaking up with the Jackals, and giving their pussy-ass president what wasn’t yours to give.” Raymond leans back in an old metal chair, picking at his dirty nails with the tip of his butterfly knife. He’s wearing a denim vest like the Jackals’ leather cut.

He’s a member of the Demon Wolves. I remember Kohen mentioning the enemy club, but I hadn’t truly pieces Raymond’s association with them until now.

“Fuck you,” I hiss weakly, not ready to go down without a fight.

And I will fight.

Until my last breath.

He laughs louder, closing his knife with the flick of his wrist. The sound it makes is like nails on a chalkboard to me, reminding of all the nights I spent huddled in my bedroom, listening to him threaten Fran because she couldn’t pay for her last fix like she promised. Sometimes the next sound I’d hear was the jingle of his belt when he’d command her to drop to her knees.

“No, I don’t think I’ll give you the honor of fucking me.” He shrugs nonchalantly, like he’s got all the time in the world. “At least not until you’ve earned the right to have a real man inside your cunt and not some mongrel dog.”

“You think you are man enough for me?” I ask, feeling my sanity slip a little. “You’re an abusive asshole who gets off on treating women like shit.”

“I love hearing my victims scream,” he admits like it’s a common like to have. “You already know that, Princess, don’t you? Tell me honestly, did you take pleasure in hearing your *wicked* stepmother punished? I bet you did. I bet you enjoyed listening to her pain. I bet you wished you were the one inflicting it on her.”

“You’re sick.” I grit my teeth, trying not to think about how many nights he made Fran scream for him. I might hate the

woman and what she did to me, but I'm nothing like her—*like him*. I could never take pleasure in someone's pain.

"Tsk, tsk. Don't you know you shouldn't judge a man unless you've walked a mile in his shoes?" I bite my tongue, holding back my retort out of fear. "If you're a good girl, I might let you take part. I could find us the *perfect* victim. Teach you exactly where to target someone's body for ultimate pleasure—for *your* pleasure." Raymond's cold eyes rake up and down my body. He licks his lips before making a show, visibly adjusting himself. "Fuck Princess, just thinking about it has me harder than I've been in months."

I swallow my disgust and look away to hide the tears prickling the back of my eyes.

*Fuck.*

I don't know how I'm going to survive this, but I've got to keep my wits about me to get one step ahead of him. That was always Fran's problem. She never planned enough when it came to him. Maybe she loved the pain he inflicted on her. Or maybe she was plain stupid. Either way, I refuse to be anything like her.

"Where's is my stepmother?" I ask, trying to forget the way he thrust his bulge into his hand. "Why isn't she here taking part in my downfall?"

"That dried up skag is no longer useful to me."

*Shit.*

*Does that mean...?*

"She's dead?" I ask, my full attention back to him.

"It's a shame, really. Heard she got her hands on some powerful shit and couldn't handle it the high." Raymond sucks his teeth before an evil smile shapes his mouth. The concept of Fran's death feels foreign to me. Almost unbelievable. Not because I don't think she deserved to die, but the meaning behind it.

If Fran is dead, it means I've truly escaped her. I can let stop looking over my shoulder. It means the memory of my father

—and his legacy—can finally be fulfilled through me.

Maybe.

*If I can outwit Raymond.*

“What are you going to do with me?” I ask, trying to buy myself time. I don’t know how long I was unconscious and I doubt Raymond will give me that information if I ask. But maybe I can placate him, at least for now, to figure out a plan.

“Considering your connection to the Jackals has put my business dealings on their territory on their radar, I haven’t decided. Whatever happens, though, you still have Fran’s debt to work off.”

“I thought you’d want me for yourself,” I inquire, hoping he finds appeal in the idea. The idea of being touched by anyone other than Kohan leaves my stomach queasy.

He tilts his head, like he’s considering the thought. “You’re acting a little too willing for my tastes, honestly.”

“It’s just... well,” I sputter, trying to find the right words. The ties cut deeper into my wrists when I shift my body toward him. I use the curves that have filled in around my body to enunciate my assets. “Didn’t Fran tell you? I know how to be a good girl, Raymond.”

He narrows his eyes, letting them drift along the curve of my hip and breast. For a moment he’s let’s me believe my plan is working. “Good girls don’t run away from home, princess. You made it very difficult to track you down. Hell, if it wasn’t for Triple Time whinnying about the new girl Vortex claimed, I don’t think I would’ve found you. How *did* you manage to fall in with the mongrel?”

*Fucking Maria.*

“How’d you manage that viperous bitch?” I stall, turning the tables on him. I swear if I ever get free, she will pay for what she’s done to me. To the Jackals. My blood heats with anger, but I keep my face serene and free of my thoughts.

“Oh, I don’t think I manage that woman at all. That’s her man’s job.”

“Hog.”

“The one and only. The president of the Demon Wolves MC.”

*Well, fuck.* I wasn't expecting that little tidbit. I wonder how long she's been playing double agent.

There's a heavy knock on the metal door behind Raymond.  
“Tor, we've got incoming.”

Raymond stands and picks up a handgun, one I didn't notice. I was too focused on him to pay much attention to the objects in the surrounding room. “I hate to cut our visit short, but it appears we've got a pack of mongrels that need putting down.”

He cocks the gun and flashes me a cold, deadly smile. “I'll be sure to give their president your regards.”



FIFTEEN

## KOHEN

“Anyone got a twenty on Snow yet?” Bane speaks into his walkie, checking in with the other group we assigned to the warehouse’s main entrance.

From the top of the hill, there’s a good view of the warehouse below. Though, we haven’t seen a lot of movement.

There are only four Jackals here in our group: Bane, Dutch, Pothole and me. The rest are with Coyote, who’s task is to draw out as many Demon Wolves as they can, allowing the four of us will sneak in through the side and hit them from behind.

Maria gave up all the details we needed not only to find Everleigh, but to shut down the trafficking ring Raymond had gotten the Wolves into. Apparently, he’d been doing it behind Hog’s back for almost a year and was working with a bigger entity. Maria only found out about him from Hog a few weeks ago—well, Raymond pretending to be Hog.

“No, but I’m pretty damn sure they know we’re here,” Coyote responds, the second we behind to hear gunfire coming from their direction. “Tell me y’all are in position.”

“Shit,” Bane curses. “We’re going in.”

“10-4.”

The sound of the Jackals returning fire joins the ruckus. I motion Bane and Dutch to move ahead, knowing Bane will have shit fit if I run in before he does. We duck low to the ground, moving through the overgrowth between the hill and the building, stopping on Bane’s hand signal.

Mother fucker is in his glory right now, putting his military background to good use.

Once we get inside, Bane and I will go left, and Dutch and Pothole to the right. Attacks or kills will have to be swift and quiet. The less attention we draw to what's happening inside, the better chance we have of getting Everleigh out safely.

*That if she's still*—no, I can't let myself think like that. I've got to believe she's okay and we're going to get out of this. I focus on the building, listening for any sign of our enemy.

“Let's go,” Bane whispers, before sliding open the window he picked earlier for our entrance. Dutch moves quickly, his enormous form almost too big to clear the space. “Pot, you stick close to Dutch and let him lead.”

Pothole nods, and a second later Dutch's hand appears, motioning his partner in.

“Don't go all cowboy on me, Prez,” Bane growls, motioning for me to go next. The restraint I'm showing is extraordinary, honestly. I was ready to storm the building when we confirmed the information Maria had given us. It was Bane who got in my face to calm me down, and he was right. I'd be no good to my wildcat dead.

*Nearly there, wildcat, hold on just a little bit longer...*

---

## EVERLEIGH

MY HEART HAS BEEN IN MY THROAT SINCE THE FIRST BULLET went off. I knew Kohen and the Jackals would find me. I only hope no one is badly injured or killed.

A loud bang causes the walls to tremble, and I flinch. Shit. That was close, whatever it was. I hear shouting nearby and the sounds of boots running away from the door Raymond disappeared behind.

I twist my wrists, desperate to find some weakness in the plastic. Blood drips down my arms, and my skin will never be

the same as it shreds underneath the strain. You'd think with all the blood, I'd be able to slip through the ties easy enough.

Trying to think of another way, I study the rusty pipe above my head. There are three little bolts holding it in place, two of which look like it won't take much to get them to come out of the wall. I shake the pipe, and the bolts give a little. Maybe, with enough force, I can break it off the wall?

My legs still feel a little jelly-like, but I get them under me in a kneeling position. Whatever Maria had in that syringe; it's taking forever to leave my body.

"They're here for the girl," I hear someone shout, the gunfire much closer. I don't know how close they are, but if I don't do something soon, I might not make it out of here. I need to move while Raymond's and his goon are distracted.

Sweat drips down my back and I try pushing up onto my feet, but my strength hasn't returned.

"Fuck," I growl, refusing to be defeated. It is not an option. It is not an emotion I'm willing to embrace. I take my frustration, my fear and my rage and I grip the rusty pipe, shaking and pulling it with every ounce of strength I have. It nearly comes free of the wall, the one little bolt remains, holding it in place.

"Where's the girl?" I hear someone shout. The familiarity of their voice makes my heart stutter. It's him. He came.

"Fuck you," someone else responds.

"Wrong answer, asshole," Kohen growls, one second before another gunshot. I hear a grunt and a body hits the floor, making my heart stop.

"Kohen," I scream, finding the strength in my body to stand upright. "I'm in here."

"Wildcat?" He calls, his voice strong. The metal door flies open, banging hard into the wall, and a wild-eyed Kohen steps into the room. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm all right." I shake my head and he crosses the room to me. Kohen captures my face with one hand and kisses me

hard, just once. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“Me, too. Is Millie all right?” He tucks his gun into the waistband of jeans and pulls out his pocketknife. Making quick work of the zip ties, but careful not to cut my skin, the plastic gives and falls to the floor. He takes my hands to examine the damage done to my wrists.

“She’s fine. Angry about what happened. Worried about you.”

“It was Maria—”

“Well, well, well, look what we have here. The Mongrel and his bitch,” Raymond chuckles from the door, his gun trained on us both. “So fucking poetic.”

“Tormentor,” Kohen growls, his face filled with rage. He turns slowly to face the man, his hands raised.

*Tormentor? Yeah, that suits him better.*

“I see you found our little hideout.”

“Thanks to your little spy.” They did figure out it was Maria who took me. If we get out of here—no, when we get out of here—I want to know where the bitch is.

“That one always had a mouth on her.” Tormentor steps further into the room. His beady eyes trained on Kohen. “Did she give you a few good screams before you did her in?”

“This is over, Tormentor,” Kohen grits, ignoring his question.

“Ain’t over until I say it is, and you’ll know when it is because you’ll be bleeding out.” Tormentor’s eyes gleam and he smiles. The bastard is obviously painting the picture in his head.

“Is that what you told Hog when you killed him?” I frown, trying to keep up. “When you stole his club?”

“Ha, that fat bastard? He didn’t even see me coming. None of them did. They weren’t that smart. Not like you, Vortex, and your crew.” Tormentor turns his weapon from Kohen to me. “Now drop the knife or I’ll put a bullet in your woman’s head.”

The knife chatters to the floor, and Kohen tries to move between me and the gun, but when Tormentor takes a step forward, Kohen takes a step back, instead.

“Tsk, tsk, don’t go being self-sacrificing over some pussy. I’m sure it wasn’t *that* good.”

“Point the gun at me, fucker. It’s me you want to kill, remember?”

“I’m thinking it’s both of you, but I want to have some fun first. Test out that pussy you’re ready to die over.”

Kohen takes another step back, this time with purpose. The cold, hard steel of his firearm nudges against my arm.

Shit.

I forgot he tucked it away to unbind my wrists.

My heart thrums heavily in my chest, and I remember the afternoon my father took me shooting. It was on an afternoon before Fran came into our lives. I was young and don’t remember much of it, but my father let me pull the trigger once.

I could pull out Kohen’s gun, and end Tormentor’s life, couldn’t I?

“Course, I’d have to get my men in here to detain you. Don’t need you coming at me while show the bitch how a real man —”

“Fuck you,” I scream. The rest of his words fall on deaf ears, as I pull the gun and point it at Tormentor. I keep my arms steady and straight, and I squeeze the trigger. I watch his eyes go wide with shock, and everything moves in slow motion as the bullet strikes him somewhere in the middle.

I fire again, and again, and again until the gun is spent and Tormentor’s on the ground. Time speeds back up and I watch while he gurgles and chokes on his own blood, his dark eyes filled with disbelief.

“How does it feel?” I ask, feeling Kohen take the gun from my hand. He has one arm wrapped around my waist, and his lips

pressed to my temple. “Huh, you piece of shit. How does it feel to be killed by a *real* woman?”

Kohen tries to guide me out of the room, but I refuse. I want to watch him die. I need to see his life force flicker from his eyes as death’s coldness engulfs him.

Even when it’s done and over, Kohen has to pick me up and carry me out.

Tormentor would torment no more.

SIXTEEN



## EVERLEIGH

I don't remember the ride back to the clubhouse. I was too focused on the man I never thought I'd see again.

*Mine.*

We climbed onto his bike, and I wrapped my arms around him so tightly, I couldn't feel them by the time we pulled into the compound. He parked and carried me upstairs.

The second my back hit the bed, Kohen was on me. Kissing and touching. It differed from last night. Less hurried. Gentler, like he was afraid of hurting me.

"Please, Kohen, I need more," I beg the second he moves from my lips to my neck. My body burns for this man, and after what I've been through today, all I want is to feel him inside of me.

Marking me.

Claiming me.

Reminding we're alive and together.

His large hand reaches for the hem of my shirt, but instead of easing it off me, he rips it open to expose as much skin as he can. It isn't enough, as he shoves a paw under my bra to grasp my breast.

"Fuck," he growls, trailing kisses to along my collarbone. I rake my hands through his hair, over his leather cut, smiling inwardly.

*Mine.*

*My Dirty Jackal.*

He palms my breast, massaging it in his hand, then his fingers brush over the taut nipple. I moan, arching my back and offering him all of me.

His hands and my hands move in sync, flicking and unzipping both our jeans. We work in sync to shimmy out of them, never once breaking our kiss.

I feel his cock brush my stomach, and a rush of wetness between my legs.

Fuck. I'm ready. So fucking ready and desperate for him.

Kohen pulls back to remove his cut, but I stop him.

"Leave it on, Jackal." I whisper, and his mouth tips up into a smile, right before his cock pushes inside of me. He doesn't stop until he hits the root, and his pelvis is flush against me. The sting and stretch adds to the animalistic need coursing through me.

"More. Harder. Faster," I urge, wanting to wipe away the day for a few moments. Needing to free fall with him.

My heart pounds in rhythm with each thrust.

"I love you, Kohen," I breathe, staring into his eyes. I see his need too.

"I love you too, Wildcat." This time he doesn't hesitate to say the words, and I feel my mouth tip into a smile.

He pumps harder, faster, his balls slapping against my ass. We stare at one another, eyes connected. I am his and he is mine.

It's heaven.

It's bliss.

"Come with me," he commands.

And I do.

---

SOMETIME LATER, KOHEN LAYS WITH ME IN HIS ARMS AND I take a deep breath, ready to face what happened today.

To face what I did.

I killed a man.

The thought should bother me—it should scare me. But it doesn't.

Raymond, or Tormentor, deserved to die. Not just because of what he did to me, to Fran, and to who knows how many countless other women. He deserved to die because threatened what is most important to me.

My man, and the Dirty Jackals.

“Here, I found this on Maria,” Kohen hold up his hand, my necklace dangling from his fingers.

“I never thought I'd see it again,” I murmur, taking it from him. I look at the little apple, the piece of my childhood I kept safe and tucked away with a smile.

“We found it in her pocket when we searched her.”

“What happened to her?” I ask, looking at my gorgeous man.

“I left it up to Pretty Boy. Turns out she'd been drugging him for information to feed back to the Demon Wolves. That's how they've been always one step ahead.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I try to push up, but he tightens his hold around me. “I'm going to fucking kill the bitch.”

“I'm pretty sure Pretty Boy already took care of that. He feels really bad for what's happened.”

“He shouldn't. It's not his fault.”

“That's what I told him.” Kohen strokes my cheek. “He's taken a leave to get his head on straight.”

“Shit. Mimi going to be bummed.”

“Mimi?”

“Yeah, I think she has a thing for Pretty Boy, but Maria was always in the way.” I close my eyes and kiss Kohen chest and sight. “So, what now?”

“Now we figure out life, and what we want it to be.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Am I your old lady for real now?”

“You’re more than my old lady, wildcat,” he hooks a finger under my chin, bringing my face to his. “You’re the apple of my eye.”

# EPILOGUE

## ATTICUS

*S*he's back.

My heart stumbles out of my chest at the sight of the woman climbing out of her red Mercedes.

*Mine.*

I don't know whether to laugh or howl with anticipation, but my hands itch to control the camera I should have taken down long ago.

I didn't though. I couldn't. There was always a chance she'd return.

I promised myself to let her go once she married that douche accountant, but deep down, I knew he was wrong for her. I knew she'd be back.

Autumn Knowles is back.

My princess.

I'll be damned if I let her get away again.

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# ABOUT TRACIE DOUGLAS

Surviving on caffeine most days, Tracie Douglas lives with her husband, two children, and one dog. She spends her days chasing children and the fur baby, all while maintaining the illusion of sanity.

Her nights are spent toiling away at the keyboard, creating a world filled with hot men and strong women. She loves to read and write all types of books but tends to lean on the darker side of the spectrum. She's pretty handy with a crochet hook, too.

Tracie loves to hear from her readers!

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