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THE
DEVILS
AND THE
DUCHESS

MARISSA FARRAR

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The Devils and the Duchess

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SR Jones

Castle View Press

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*To all our filthy Duchesses...who can't wait to be told to get on
their knees for the Devils.*

Content Explanation

This is a whychoose, dark, bully romance and as such contains scenes that are expected with the genre, including scenes of SA. For a full list, please check S.R. Jones' website at <https://skyejonesauthor.com/trigger-warnings>

Your mental health matters.

Join The Duchesses

Come and join the Duchesses at Marissa and Skye's Facebook group, [The Duchesses \(Marissa Farrar and S.R. Jones\)](#). Be the first to hear news about the series, get your hands on exclusive swag giveaways, and hang out with the authors!

To read a super spicy alternative scene from one of the Devil's points of view, and join the authors' newsletter, follow this link ->> <https://BookHip.com/DPVBFSD>.

Chapter 1

Mackenzie

“IT’S OVER. I—I CAN’T DO THIS ANYMORE.”

I wish my voice sounded stronger, but it wavers as the words I’ve been practicing in my head for weeks finally make it out of my mouth.

My throat is dry, and I’m trembling but trying to hide it.

Professor Paxton Kassell stands in front of me. We’re in his bedroom, in his apartment, as we so often are.

I’m his dirty little secret. He doesn’t want us to be seen in public.

A muscle ticks in his jaw. “Don’t do this, Mackenzie. I mean it.”

Fuck, I hate how attractive he is. His inner ugliness should mask the fact he has an incredible body and a head of thick auburn hair—hair I’ve raked my nails through often enough. His eyes are too gray to be called blue, but too blue to be gray—an individual shade I’ve never quite managed to pin down. There’s so much I thought I loved about him, but they were all surface lies.

He’s been my lover for the past year, but enough is enough.

I have to stay strong.

“I’m sorry, but it is. I’ve made up my mind.”

I should have stood up to him sooner. The moment he started to get possessive with me, interrogating me about

where I was going, who I was with, why I was wearing makeup, I should have to ended things.

I can't believe I've let it go so far.

Paxton is thirty-five years old, and I was only eighteen when he first made his interest in me known. Everyone at college swooned over him, and his classes were always full. When he kept making excuses to speak to me about my work after class, standing too close, and complimenting everything about me, I was flattered. Everyone else was jealous as hell—both the boys and the girls—and having his full attention made me feel special. It didn't take long for the talks about my work to become him 'accidentally' bumping into me in public. At the time, I genuinely thought it was accidental, but now that I look back I can see how stupid I'd been. My social media accounts had been public, and I was always posting about where I was and what I was doing. It wouldn't have taken him much detective work to figure out my routines.

I didn't see the manipulation and coercive control. I thought I was in love for the first time in my life—hell, I *was* in love. I was obsessed with him, and he was with me. The sex was incredible, and he completely took over my thoughts. I *wanted* to spend time with him, so I didn't care that I always had to tell my friends I was busy studying. But after about six months, I started to emerge from the sex-induced haze I'd been in and realized how much of student life I was missing out on.

He changed then. Questioned everything I was doing. Wanted to know why I was dressed in a certain way—who I was wearing it for. He never laid a finger on me in a violent way, but he threatened others. He told me that if he ever saw me with another man, he'd kill them and then himself.

“Come on, baby, you don't mean that,” he says, his lips drawing tight as his gaze hardens.

“I do,” I insist.

“Bullshit. You're too young to know your own mind.”

This is how he always is. Demeaning. Dismissive. I clench my fists and try to stand up to him. I remember the way he treated me after my father died. The fact he got jealous of me going to my own dad's funeral. Instead of comforting me and supporting me, this asshole was quizzing me on the length of my skirt.

Anger flares inside me. "I'm nineteen years old. Almost twenty."

He shakes his head dismissively. "Still a baby."

How dare he? This is why I've struggled so hard to make myself heard. Make myself seen. He hasn't respected a single thing about me since the day we met.

Oh, he acted like he did in the early days, made me feel like I was someone special. Told me I was mature for my age. That eighteen- and nineteen-year-old boys wouldn't understand me the way he did.

I grind my teeth. "Old enough to have been fucking *you* for the past year, though."

He edges closer. "If you really mean it, then don't we deserve one last time, huh, baby? You know how good I make you feel."

His hand slips up the outside of my thigh, cupping my ass cheek. I wish I was wearing something more substantial than my thin cotton sundress. It's early September, but it's still warm. Frustratingly, my skin reacts to his touch and heat pools between my thighs.

No, I remind myself. I don't want this. That's the whole point of this conversation; I need to put an end to it. But he has a way of manipulating me, of making me think I want things when I don't. I know he's going to use this to tie me to him again. No way will he let this be the last time. If I give in to him, he'll keep manipulating me.

He pulls me into him, jamming his cock against my flat stomach. He's so hard for me. How can he be so turned on when I'm in the process of breaking up with him? He lowers

his head and places his lips to my neck, giving me feather-light kisses and nibbles just the way I like it.

His hand moves from back to front, sliding between my bare thighs and cupping my pussy over my panties. He keeps kissing my neck, and I groan, my nipples hardening. I'm not wearing a bra today, as my sundress is smocked at the top, and the folds of the material hide my bust. It's a mistake. Paxton slips one strap of my sundress down and ducks his head farther to suck one of my pebbled nipples into his mouth. I push my hips against his hand, rocking back and forth, building the pleasure. His hot mouth feels incredible and, despite myself, I find my fingers in his soft hair.

Fuck, no. This is not how this is supposed to go.

He rubs the outside of my panties, and I know he can feel the dampness there.

He smiles against my breast, knowing he's winning.

With a start, I yank myself out of the reverie he's caused and pull away. "No, Paxton. I said this isn't what I want."

His expression hardens. "Don't fuck around with me, Mackenzie. I mean it. I'm not into playing your stupid little games."

"I'm not playing games," I insist. "I'm trying to break up with you."

"And I'm telling you that you're making a mistake. You're not breaking up with me, Mackenzie. You're mine. Your ass is mine, your mouth is mine, your pussy is mine. Got it?"

He yanks me back into him and covers my lips with his. There's no more teasing—he kisses me hard, claiming me, pushing his tongue forcefully into my mouth. My heart beats faster, but for all the wrong reasons, and the first flutters of genuine fear dance inside me.

His hand is back between my thighs, and instead of rubbing me over my underwear, he yanks it to one side and pushes his fingers inside me. It hurts, and I let out a cry, but it's swallowed between his lips.

I'm tall, but I'm also slight, and he's so much bigger and stronger. I bash at his shoulder with my fist and try to pull away, but his other hand clamps around the back of my head, pinning me in place while he thrusts his fingers inside me over and over. He's rough, but then I've always liked it that way, and I can feel that I'm wet. He releases the back of my head long enough to open the buckle of his belt and free his cock.

"No, Paxton. Please, stop."

But he's got no intention of stopping.

His fingers are an invasion.

"I'm going to make you come, baby," he says, breathing hard. "I'm going to make you come so hard that you'll never find anyone to replace me. Do you understand?"

He uses the heel of his hand to apply pressure to my clit. I hate the sensation of my climax building inside me. Does he think I want this? Haven't I said no enough? My pussy walls clamp around him as he fingerfucks me.

He grabs my hand and wraps it around his dick. "Touch me. I need your hand on me."

I try to snatch my hand away, but he covers it with his, using both our hands to masturbate himself. My breast is still exposed, my tits shaking with every move.

"That's right, my beautiful girl. You feel so good, baby. I want to be inside you."

He uses the size of his body to push me backward. The backs of my thighs hit the bed, and then I'm lying on my back on the mattress, him on top of me. His knee forces my legs apart, and he positions himself between them.

"Please, stop," I sob.

"You don't mean that. You know neither of us can live without this."

He rips away my thong, tearing the material, cutting into my skin. Then he tosses it to one side. I can hardly believe it. He's going to do it; he's actually going to do this. Does he think there's any way back from this? I always knew he was

controlling and dominant, but I never believed he'd stoop as low as raping me.

He jams himself between my thighs, his fingers on my clit, rubbing and rubbing, as though the stimulation is somehow going to make this any better. I'm not even responding physically now as fear has turned my body to ice. I want to close my eyes, to take myself somewhere else, to pretend this isn't happening, or that it's happening to someone else, but I can't.

I'm right here, living every second, experiencing every moment.

His breath is hot in my ear.

"Fuck, Mackenzie," he says as he positions himself at my entrance. "You know I'll never let you leave. You're mine, all mine. I don't give a fuck what you say. I need this pussy. This pussy is mine forever."

His hand wraps around my throat, and sheer terror takes over. I'm no longer thinking, only reacting. Will he kill me? Choke me and take it too far? I can't bear him on me another moment.

He squeezes my throat harder, and panic steals all reason, until only instinct, that pure, animalistic need for survival, remains.

Tears trickle from the sides of my eyes. Blindly, I reach out, fingers scrabbling along the bedside table, knocking over the contents, scraping the wood. My fingers find the notebook and pen I'd been using to do my college coursework only an hour earlier, sitting on the bed and trying to drum up the courage to have this conversation with him. It's a favorite notebook, I think distantly, a yellow one with bees on the cover. I like to collect notebooks.

Though my thoughts are on the notebook, it's the pen my fingers find purchase on.

Right as he's about to ram his cock inside me, I pick up the pen.

He won't stop.

I must make him stop.

He might kill me.

Survival kicks in, hard and fast.

I don't think. I just *do*.

I drive the pointed end into his neck.

Everything stops.

He lets out a strange little gurgle and rolls off me.

Dazed, I just lie there, staring at the ceiling, unable to move. I can't believe what's just happened, but I'm grateful it's over. My breath leaves my lungs in tiny, panicked gasps, and my heart smashes against the inside of my ribcage like it's trying to escape.

Still, I don't move. Don't think I can. My legs and fingers tingle with numbness.

Then I become aware of the odd noises he's making and turn to look.

Paxton is lying on his back, the pen I'd been holding moments earlier now sticking out of the side of his neck. A bubble of bright red blood swells between his lips, thick and shiny, and then bursts. His eyes slip shut.

Oh, fuck. Oh, Jesus Christ.

I throw myself away from him, stomach churning, and tumble off the side of the bed. I have to get out of here. I yank my clothes back into place, snatch up my torn panties, and then look around.

Is he dead? Have I killed him? I go to him and lift my hands, wanting to do something to help him, but I don't know what to do.

"Please, no, don't die."

He tried to hurt me, but we shared something, and now he's like this, because of me. What have I done? I've never been so scared. Distraught.

My DNA must be all over this place. *Shit, shit, shit.*

I grab my belongings and stuff them into my bag. It's not enough. I know it's not enough, but it's all I can think to do. My hand shakes as I take my phone from my bag and call the one person in the world I trust.

She answers within two rings. "Mackenzie?"

"Mom," I say, my voice too high-pitched, verging on the edge of tears.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

"I've done something, Mom. Something really bad."

"Did you get into another fight?" Her voice is tight and anxious.

I've always been the quiet, calm girl, but recently, since losing my father, I've not been regulating my emotions as well. It culminated with me getting in a fight, and accidentally breaking another girl's nose. I'd been defending a friend, but that didn't matter to the other girl's family who threatened to press charges.

"No, it's worse than that. Much, much worse. I need your help. I think I just killed my professor."

Chapter 2

Mackenzie

“DON’T SCREW THIS UP FOR US, MACKENZIE. OUR LIVES going forward depend on this working.”

I glance over at my mother who’s driving, focused on the road. Her face is blurred through my tears. I’m weak and shaky, drained from all the adrenaline and raw emotion. I feel like I haven’t eaten or slept for a week.

“Maybe I should have turned myself in,” I say.

“No.” Her tone is sharp. “I don’t ever want to hear that from you again.”

I hold back a sob. “I’m sorry. I just feel so guilty. I don’t deserve a second chance.”

“Yes, you do, and if you won’t accept that for yourself, then do it for me. I’ve only recently lost your father, Mackenzie. I can’t lose you as well. I don’t know how I’ll keep going—”

Her voice cuts off, and I can tell she’s close to tears, too. Guilt condenses like a rock in my chest.

“Okay,” I whisper. Then I repeat it, the word stronger. “Okay.”

“That’s my girl. Do this for me. You’re all I have left. We must be strong no matter what comes our way because you cannot go to prison. I can’t bear it.”

I nod at her and squeeze her arm. I’m not the same person I was twenty-four hours ago. I’ve taken a man’s life, a man who I’d once thought I loved. I’m drowning in grief, and it

isn't just the grief from Paxton dying. It's for the loss of who I once was, the future I once had.

I'd believed losing my father was the worst thing that could happen to me. I'd been wrong.

I know both our freedom depends on us running because, in the decision to make that phone call, I've made my mother an accomplice to my crime.

I'd give anything to undo what I've done. I've ruined both our lives.

After I'd phoned her, she'd made some calls. An old friend has offered to help hide me—hide us—but it comes with an ultimatum.

My freedom for my mother's hand in marriage.

My mom took the offer.

Maybe we could have gone to the police and argued that Paxton's death was self-defense, but rape cases are notoriously hard to prove and very rarely come with any kind of sentence for the rapist. Rape cases where the two people already have an intimate relationship are even harder to prosecute. Plus, Paxton didn't get the chance to actually rape me, so none of the evidence would have been present. The professor was a respected man, and who am I—some girl who's already known for having a temper? I'd be going to prison for a very long time. No one would look at me favorably and spare me a jail sentence.

My hands shake in my lap.

Mom reaches over and covers them with one of her own, giving them a squeeze.

“Mackenzie, darling, I know this is a lot, but you're going to need to hold it together. The rest of the students have no idea why we're here. You just need to be a normal student, living a normal life. We can't have anyone asking questions.”

A normal student, not a killer.

She taps underneath my chin. “You can fall apart in private, but not in front of the others. I need my tough,

confident girl back again, even if you're only faking it. Understand?"

I'll definitely have to fake it.

This is a lot to take in, but I nod. "I understand."

She shoots me an anxious look. "How are you feeling?"

I know she's not only talking about emotionally. I blow out a breath. "I'm not sure I even know how to answer that."

"Well, we're almost there," Mom says. "It's right around this corner."

I draw a breath and try to pretend my heart isn't thudding against my ribs. I'm anxious about this new chapter in our lives—no, more than anxious—I'm pretty fucking terrified.

But nowhere near as terrified as I would be if I had to spend the rest of my life behind bars with hardened criminals.

The repetitive clicking of the indicator catches my attention, and then we swing off the main road, which out here in the Adirondacks is pretty traffic free, and onto a winding driveway. Tall trees block the view, arching over the top of the road like a dappled tunnel. I might not want to like this place, but I must admit the effect is kind of beautiful.

We pass two stone pillars on either side of the road, both of which have 'Private— Keep Out' signs attached to them. There are cameras too, and high fencing. I swallow. After what I've just been through, at least I will be safe here.

I start to wonder if the driveway is ever going to end, but then the trees open up and I gasp.

In front of us stands a white stone building, complete with turrets and flags. It's as if the structure couldn't decide whether it wanted to be a tower or a castle and settled on being a mix of both. The place is truly impressive, rising from the ground like a forbidding sentry.

On either side of the huge main building, more tall, gothic buildings stretch out. I can hardly believe this is a school because it looks more like a fairy-tale castle.

Verona Falls University.

This place must be hundreds of years old. I'm not sure what it was before it became a university, but I bet it's got some stories to tell. If only the walls could speak.

"Holy shit," I murmur.

"Mackenzie!" Mom admonishes me.

"Sorry," I say, although I'm not.

I'm almost twenty years old. I can swear if I want. Besides, swearing is the least of my infractions.

I can't believe we're actually going to be living here—well, us and maybe two hundred students and professors. Plus, the man my mother is going to marry, though not because she wants to. This is no love match. She must marry him in return for our protection. That's the deal. Apparently, this guy has been creeping on her for years. My mom is stunningly beautiful and still turns heads wherever we go. Men are drawn to her like moths to the proverbial flame.

"Welcome to your new home," Mom says.

"Can't we live in a regular house, like regular people? Aren't there any on the grounds?"

"That's not how things work around here."

I bite the inside of my cheek. "No, I guess it isn't."

I think there are going to be a lot of things that aren't as I expect from now on.

The old Ford my mom now drives after we had to sell the Range Rover is completely out of place among all the Porsches and Maseratis. This place absolutely reeks of money.

I try not to be embarrassed at our obvious lack of it these days.

Mom finds a spot and parks the car.

The huge, wooden, double front doors swing open wide, and a man in his early forties walks out. He's a little younger than Mom, and as he nears us, I suck in a breath.

I haven't not met him before, and right now, I'm not sure why my mom isn't into him, because this man is gorgeous. Mom's already told me that he has Italian heritage, and I can see that in his olive skin and dark hair. He's got charisma too. It rolls off him in waves as he approaches us. As he walks out of the doors, he raises his arm in welcome.

I stare at his clearly expensive suit. What he's wearing probably costs more than the entirety of our belongings that are currently stacked up in the trunk.

I know without even being introduced that this is Verona Falls' dean. The man my mother has agreed to marry.

We climb out of the car. It's a warm day, and I squint in the sunlight. My body is stiff from sitting in one spot for so long, and I resist the urge to do a few stretches and remain upright to meet this man instead.

Mom greets him with a tight smile. "Nataniele. It's good to see you again."

"Lucia." He kisses her on the cheek and pulls her in for a hug. "How was the drive?"

"Fine," she replies. "We're glad to be here."

Are we? I bite down on my retort because I need this to work out.

"This is my daughter, Mackenzie," she introduces.

"As beautiful as her mother, I see," he says eventually.

"I have my father's looks," I reply.

I don't. I'm the spitting image of my mom, with her honey blonde hair, blue eyes, and long limbs, but I don't like the way he's looking at me. Plus, I hate that my father is dead and Mom is remarrying, despite me being the reason she's had to make such a drastic choice.

I want everyone to remember that he once existed, to know they can't just erase him from history.

The thought of my dad punches me in the chest with grief, stealing my breath. My eyes prickle with tears, and I swallow

hard. It's all still so raw, so fresh, and now my grief is compounded by what I've done.

"Let me show you both to our living quarters," he says. "Leave the bags. The staff will carry them."

I don't see any sign of staff, but perhaps this is the way they do things here. They make sure the hired help is neither seen nor heard.

We step out of the sunshine and into the gloom of the university halls.

I follow them through the building. High, vaulted ceilings reach overhead, and wood paneled walls are on both sides. Beneath my feet, parquet flooring is broken up by expensive rugs. The stern faces of previous deans and other scholars stare down at me as we pass. I've been around money before, and we weren't exactly struggling ourselves until the last couple of years, yet I've never seen money like this. The air is fragranced with the rich scents of wood, polish, and the white lilies in a vase atop a dresser. This place reminds me of something I'd imagined British aristocrats living in.

It's a very thin silver lining, but the education I'm going to get at Verona Falls University is second to none. I'd never be able to afford this kind of education on my own. We might have lived on the Upper East Side, but the past few years Daddy struggled to make as much money, so my education was decidedly not the same as most of my friends. It's an opportunity and, as much as I don't like it, I have no choice.

We take a spiral staircase up to the next floor.

"This is us," the dean announces. "Our quarters are here," he tells my mother, "and Mackenzie, your room is the next door down. I left it unlocked for you, but I will make sure you have your own key."

"Thank you," I mutter and keep walking, stopping at the door in question. I take the handle and push it open.

This is nothing like the usual university dormitory.

The bedroom is beautiful. Unlike the gloom of the hallway I've just left, tall windows let in plenty of light. The room is

decorated in white and pale gray, with accent pops of pink in the cushions, throws, and pictures. A quick exploration reveals I have my own bathroom with both a claw foot tub and a separate rain shower. I even have a small balcony with double doors leading out onto it.

Curious, I open them and step outside.

I draw a breath at the view. From the front of the building, the university looked to just have one face, but now I see the buildings are set out in a quadrant. There's an open-air courtyard in the center, though to describe it as a courtyard really gives no indication as to the size of the space. It's complete with white marble fountains, and a square pool filled with clear, blue water in the center.

I don't think I've ever seen anything like it.

Guilt sweeps over me. I don't deserve this. I should be locked up in a dark dungeon like the monster I am. I've taken a life.

A voice comes from behind me, and I jump.

"What do you think?"

I turn to find my mom standing there.

I open and close my mouth. "I'm not sure what to think. It's...too much."

"It's okay to admit you like it."

My stomach knots. She knows me too well. I don't want to admit anything because doing so feels wrong.

My eyes fill with tears again. I don't think I've stopped crying since it all happened. I keep replaying the scene in my head, reliving the moment I stabbed the pen into his neck and then realized what I'd done. Every time I think of it, I want to throw up. I'd just wanted it all to stop.

She crosses the room and pulls me into her arms. "It's okay. You're safe now."

I nod against her, not trusting myself to speak.

“Nataniele is waiting for us outside. Remember what I said about acting normally around everyone else?”

“I remember.”

I wipe my tears and follow her back out.

I see the dean has company. A young man stands at his side.

“Mackenzie,” he says, “let me introduce you to my son, Domenic. He’s a student here, too, though he’s a senior, and he’s majoring in math, so you won’t have many classes together. I hope the two of you will get on like a house on fire.”

The bolt of electricity that goes through me as I glance at his son is unwelcome. The guy is strikingly attractive, though, like a younger Nataniele, and also comes with a side order of the kind of charisma you can’t fake.

Domenic drags a hand through tousled light brown hair, his green eyes resting fully on me. He has high cheekbones and a generous mouth. He looks as though he’s perfectly aware of how good-looking he is—I can’t stand guys like that.

“Hey, Mackenzie,” he says.

“Hi,” I mutter, though my cheeks are already warming at his attention. Right now, I don’t want anyone’s attention. It’s safer to go unseen.

The dean speaks again. “I’m sure you’d like a tour of Verona Falls, get your bearings. I can show you both around.” He seems to think again, and adds, “or perhaps my son can show you around instead, Mackenzie.”

Domenic smiles widely, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Sure. I’d love to.”

His father beams back at him. “Great. That’s settled, then.” He turns his attention to my mother. “Gives us some time alone.”

Domenic sweeps out his hand. “This way.”

I duck my head and walk in the direction he's gestured. He joins me, and we walk together in silence until we turn down another hallway, leaving both our parents behind.

As soon as we're out of sight, he leans into me and whispers against my ear, "Pair of fucking gold-diggers."

At first, I think I must have misheard, but as I glance his way, I can tell by the glint in his sharp green eyes that I didn't.

I pretend I haven't heard him, but inwardly, I shrink. Is that really what he thinks of me and my mom? Then I force myself to lift my chin and put my shoulders back. That's not what's going on here, no matter what this asshole says. I wonder what he'd say if he knew the truth—that I'd killed the last man who screwed with me. I bet he'd be more careful with what he accuses me of.

I keep my mouth shut. The last thing I need is confrontation when I've only just arrived. My mother's words not to screw this up ring in my ears.

We head back down the stairs, and suddenly we're no longer alone. This must be where the study halls are located, as other people around our age filter out from rooms, converging in the corridor.

I'm a little panicked at the sudden number of people, claustrophobic and overwhelmed. I try to remember my way back to my room, and I turn to Domenic, planning to ask him if we can go back.

Ahead, a couple of voices call out to him from the newly formed crowd. He lifts his hand in a wave and goes to join his friends, abandoning me completely. He smacks a tall blond on the shoulder, and then mock-wrestles with a black-haired guy with tats up the side of his neck.

A girl I don't know—but then that's not unusual since, let's face it, I don't know anyone—catches up with me so we're walking side by side. She's short and dark haired and pretty.

"I saw you talking to Domenic," she says.

I think she's going to say he's her boyfriend or something. Great, that's all I need. Making more enemies when I've barely been here an hour. I can't deny it, though.

"Oh, yeah, I was."

"Stay away from him, and his friends, too," she warns. "They're bad news."

"In what way?"

"*Los Demonios*," she says, her accent perfect. Then she translates for me. "The Devils. It's what everyone calls them around here. You don't want to go anywhere near them. The three of them will make your life hell."

I don't tell her my life is already hell. That I'm barely holding myself together as we stand here talking as if we're just having a chat. I want to run away, but I have nowhere to go. I can't flee because outside these walls is a life sentence in prison.

I watch Domenic's retreating back.

"That's not going to be easy," I reply. "He's going to be my stepbrother."

Chapter 3

Mackenzie

“*AY, DIOS.*” THE PRETTY GIRL MAKES THE SIGN OF THE CROSS.

Well, that makes me feel better.

“What does *ay, dios* mean?” I ask.

“Oh, God.” She frowns and pulls me away from the men. I glance back at them and see the blond one raise his icy gaze to watch me. His hair is bleached and scruffy, the roots a shade darker, and he has a ring through the septum of his nose. I feel his gaze on my back the entire time I walk down the corridor with the girl.

“I’m Camile,” the girl says as we round the corner.

“Mackenzie,” I reply with a smile.

She seems friendly, and if there’s one thing I’m going to need here, it’s a friend. I have no one else. I have my mom, but it’s not the same. Besides, she knows what I did, and if I’m ever going to feel anything like normal again, I need people around me who will treat me like one of the girls.

Domenic is clearly an utter asshole. I imagine most of the students here will be. I know what rich kids are like. They’re vipers. Ruthlessness is embedded in many of the offspring of the rich from a young age, so they can compete in the cutthroat world they’ll enter as adults. I know girls as young as fifteen who were given nose jobs by their parents. God forbid they didn’t look perfect.

I’d found my own group, though. My friends were wealthy, sure, but the girls I’d hung around with weren’t cruel

or ultra-competitive. I was seen as a snob, ironically, by some because I didn't join in with the majority, but I'm not a snob. I'm just quiet. Reserved, I suppose. Or at least I was before my dad was killed and everything changed.

I wonder what my old friends will make of me vanishing like this. No one knows about my relationship with the professor, but will they make the connection when his body shows up and they realize I've gone, too? My mom made me destroy my old SIM card and we bought a burner. Mom doesn't want me to contact anyone, but I'll text one of my best friends, Lola, with the number once we get settled, and make up some kind of excuse for our abrupt departure. I won't be able to tell her where we've gone or promise to see her again soon.

Camile seems warm and friendly, but you never know how a person truly is until you get to know them. I wonder what she'd make of me if she knew who I really was—what I was capable of.

“Word got around pretty fast about you and your mother coming here. I didn't know who you were until you said Dom was your stepbrother-to-be, but people have been talking about a new girl joining us.”

I frown. “Who has been talking about it?”

“Verity, she's the queen bee and always hanging around the Devils. She thinks he's wonderful.”

“Oh,” I say. Great, so the rumor mill will already have been in full swing about me. I hate the idea that before I'd even stepped foot in this place, people would have been talking about me. Judging me. Thinking they know me.

They have no idea.

“What are people saying?” I ask.

“Not much. Just that a new girl is starting, and her mother is engaged to the dean. That's about it. But you must be the reason Dom has been walking around scowling.”

I sigh. “I don't want to get on the wrong side of anyone,” I say. “I get it must be a change to his life having a new

stepsister, but I don't want to start off on the wrong foot with him."

She shakes her head. "Trust me, there is no right foot with Domenic or any of those three. They don't call them *diablos* for nothing. Be careful. He's still angry about his mother's death, and I would hate for you to become the focus of that anger." She chews her lip and glances down the corridor, and then checks her watch. "I have to go. I've got a class in five minutes."

I nod. "I'm glad I met you. Hopefully see you around."

She smiles at me and rushes off, leaving me alone. I realize I don't know where the hell I am or how to get back to my room.

Sighing, I retrace my steps as best I can. When I reach the sweeping staircase that rises from the grand entrance hall, I recall that my room is up one flight and follow the stairs.

I find the corridor that leads to the section where my mother and I will be living and walk down it, grateful there is no one around. I'm struggling to keep my emotions in, and need my room so I can let them out and have a good cry.

Voices drift down the corridor, and I freeze when I recognize my mother's. She sounds in pain.

"Of course I understand, Nataniele. I won't mess this up. It's too important for all of us." There's a pause and the deep rumble of Nataniele's voice, but I can't make out what he's saying.

"Yes, I promise," Mom says.

I sneak closer, taking care for my footsteps not to echo on the polished wood floor. When I reach the door my mother went into with Nataniele, I pause. It stands ajar, and I peer through the gap.

What I see has me automatically taking one step back. My mother is against a dresser, and the dean of this institution, a supposedly upstanding citizen, I would have believed if I didn't know better, has her wrist in a tight grip.

“So long as we understand one another, darling,” he says before letting go.

Mom turns to walk away, but he still has her trapped between him and the dresser. He takes hold of her chin between his thumb and forefinger and presses a hard kiss against her mouth.

“I’m going to enjoy our wedding night, my darling.”

He laughs softly and walks away from her, leaving via a door on the far right of the room.

My instinct is to run inside and beg my mother to leave with me right now, but I know I can’t do that. She’s terrified of me ending up in prison.

When I reach my room, I close the door and throw myself on the bed. The tears come quickly. I don’t want to think about what I did, but I can’t help it. I miss my home. My friends. Most of all, I miss my father.

This place is cold, huge, and full of entitled assholes, and it seems the most entitled and assholeish of them all is the man holding my mother trapped into some sort of unholy deal, the dean himself.

This is all my fault. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll get us out of here, Mom, I promise.” I swear a solemn oath into my pillow and let the tears fall as I cry for everything I’ve lost.

Chapter 4

Mackenzie

THE EVENING ARRIVES, AND THE STUNNING VIEW FROM MY window turns into something entirely different. The grounds of the university are lit by glowing torches. It gives the place even more of an ancient air. It reminds me of a medieval fiefdom, not a modern university in America.

I thought it was strange that I'd never heard of the university. Mom said it was so exclusive few had, and it catered to a very particular clientele. It's the reason no one will think to look for me here.

Now, as I watch the flames lick at the dark sky, I shiver. Beyond the immediate grounds there is nothing but darkness.

"You shouldn't go out at night. The guard dogs will eat you for breakfast."

I jump and turn to see Domenic leaning against my open door. I didn't hear him open it. I thought the door would have locked automatically, but I must have been wrong.

"Or should that be supper?" he adds.

He laughs, showing perfect white teeth and, God help me, dimples.

"There are guard dogs?" I ask.

"Yes, and the fence at the outer edge of the grounds is electric."

What the hell kind of university has an electric fence around it?

“Seems a bit over the top,” I say.

“What would you know?” he sneers. “You are here begging along with your trailer-trash mother.”

My blood freezes. I stare at him and blink as his words curdle my insides.

My mother was born in a trailer park, but she left that past behind her a long time ago. Very few people outside of the family know.

“Oh, you think we didn’t do our homework?” He leans his temple against the doorjamb and watches me like a hawk.

I’m suddenly very grateful the professor made me his dirty little secret. No one knew about us, so Domenic won’t either. I thank God, and then focus on acting unconcerned.

I fold my arms over my chest. “I imagine you and your father looked into us thoroughly. Well done. You did your jobs well.”

His face pinches and his lips form a tight line. “Not me and Father. Me and my friends. We were curious about the new girl, the little princess from the East Side, so we did our research.”

In the past, my cool, controlled exterior has gotten me in trouble. When I was young, some grown-ups used to say I was insolent. As I matured, it made it harder to find friends. Now, though, I’m glad I have my fake icy exterior as a shield against the heat of this man’s hatred.

I can feel it radiating from him. He loathes me, and I don’t fully know why. If there is one thing I’ve learned about bullies, it’s never to let them smell blood.

I remember my mother’s advice to play it cool.

I shrug and saunter over to him. “Well, aren’t you clever? A star for the dean’s son. Now, excuse me. I am going to go find my mother.”

A hand grips my wrist in a vise, and I glance down. He’s holding me the same way his father held my mother.

“Take your hand off me,” I grind out.

He lets go of my wrist, and triumph surges in me, but the next moment he has me by the nape of my neck and spins me around and pushes me viciously onto the bed. I hit it with an oomph as the air leaves me.

Instantly, I’m taken back to the moment Paxton pushed me back on the bed. I freeze, my heart stopping, my blood stilling in my veins. Dom clearly doesn’t register my terror—or he doesn’t care—as his hand slams over my mouth.

He leans in close to whisper in my ear. “Don’t fucking push me, bitch. You and your mother will be gone in days if I have my way. Until then, stay away from me. Stay away from my friends, and show some fucking respect. You’re not better than us.”

I break my freeze and push him away. Before he can grab me again, I roll to my side and jump off the bed. I race to the door, wanting distance between us, and turn to him. I’m shaking all over.

“I want to be gone, too. Don’t worry. I imagine we have more in common than you realize. I don’t want to stay here for a minute longer than I must. And I don’t *think* I’m better than anyone.”

His face is a mask as he watches me.

“I *know* I’m better than *you*,” I add.

I expect anger, but instead he laughs. “Oh, darling, you’re nothing but the daughter of three generations of trash, and it doesn’t matter what you do. That will always be your blood.” He walks by me. “Come on, then, little stepsister. It’s time for us to eat.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

He arches one eyebrow. “Really? You’re going to keep our parents waiting, are you?”

Fuck. I have no choice. Mom would be furious with me if she knew I wasn’t getting on with Domenic.

I follow him out of the room, hating him so much I can taste it. When we enter the dean's room, which I realize is a whole suite, I'm shocked to see it isn't only my mother, me, Nataniele, and Domenic. The bleached blond guy with the nose ring is also in the room. He's tall, muscular, and his gaze is as icy as it was before.

"Sweetheart," Mom greets me.

She crosses the room and hugs me.

I don't know if I'm imagining it or if her hug is tighter than usual. "Did you enjoy getting shown around the place?"

"Oh, yes, it was fantastic." I smile at her and throw Dom a sideways dirty look.

"You must be one of Domenic's friends," I say to the blond. "We met earlier, while he was so kindly showing me around."

The blond glances at Dom and smirks. "Da. I am Kirill."

It was going to be bad enough having to sit and eat with my soon-to-be stepbrother and his father, but now I've got to also deal with Kirill and his coldly amused interest.

"Hey, Kill, you want a scotch?" Domenic asks his friend.

Kill? Good God, his nickname is as scary as he is.

"Are you both over twenty-one?" I ask without thinking.

"*Are you twenty-one?*" Domenic mocks as he pours the drinks with a roll of his eyes.

"Where I am from, we drink vodka in the womb," Kirill answers.

"Your first classes start tomorrow," my stepfather-to-be says to me. "The university is divided into houses, depending on where your residential rooms are located. There are four—north, south, east, and west. You're in South House, with Dom and Kirill."

"I see. Is that where all my lessons will be too?"

He shakes his head. “No, the lessons are all mixed. I think you’ll be in the east wing first thing.”

“I don’t know how to get to the east wing,” I say without thinking.

“You didn’t show her?” Nataniele snaps at his son.

“She wandered off before I could get to that part.” Domenic shrugs.

We all take our seats around the table. Kirill is opposite me and am surprised to find I’d even rather my stepbrother be in that position. Something about the demeanor of the guy gives me a real sense of creeping unease.

My stomach is in knots, and I’m not sure I can even bring myself to eat, though I know I must. I feel as though everyone is judging me. Nataniele knows what I did. What does he think of me? Is there any chance he’ll tell his son?

As we eat our first course of scallop and black mushroom soup in uncomfortable silence, I feel something against my thigh. I glance down and almost spill my spoon of soup down myself. A shiny, pointed toe of a loafer is sneaking up my leg.

Chapter 5

Mackenzie

I FREEZE, THE SPOON HELD HALFWAY TO MY MOUTH.

I lift my gaze and catch that of Kirill—across the table from me. The foot creeps higher, until it presses against the juncture of my thighs.

Shoving my chair back and dropping my spoon back into the bowl, I leap to my feet.

Mom glares at me. “Everything okay, Mackenzie?”

“I-I—”

I catch three sets of eyes staring at me, too, including the icy pair from across the table. There isn’t confusion or anger in his gaze, though. No, amusement is dancing in those baby-blues, and the corners of his mouth tweak in a smirk.

“I thought I saw a spider,” I finish.

“A spider?” Mom widens her eyes at me. “Seriously, Mackenzie. Since when have you been frightened of spiders?”

“It was a really big one,” I mutter, my cheeks flaring with heat.

“Well, it’s not there now, so please sit back down.” Her tone leaves no room for argument.

Carefully, I sit my ass back down in the chair, but instead of pulling it right up to the table again, I create some distance. Though Kirill has long legs, he’d have to slouch right down to reach me now.

I want to say something, but I can see the worry in my mother's eyes, and her words about not screwing this up ring in my ears. In any other circumstance, I'd be calling this asshole out, but now my lips need to be firmly shut.

I try to convince myself that maybe it was a mistake, and Kirill didn't realize how far across the table he'd reached his foot, but I can tell by the way he's still studying me that it was no mistake.

Despite my anxiety, I manage to finish my soup, and then it's taken away and the main course is brought out.

"You kids won't be eating like this every night," the dean says, though I can tell his words are aimed at me. "Most of the time, you'll be expected to eat down in the cafeteria with the rest of the students."

"I understand," I say.

The main course is a fillet of beef with a mushroom jus and dauphinoise potatoes.

I stare down at it, my mouth watering. I don't deserve to be served food this good—I should be on prison rations—but I have to eat. Questions will be asked of me if I don't, and I don't want to let Mom down any more than I already have.

I take one bite and manage to stop myself groaning. The rare beef melts in my mouth, and the potatoes are creamy and garlicky.

Mom and I haven't eaten like this in a very long time. Our diet lately has consisted mainly of ramen noodles and toast—not that I'd ever dream of complaining. The fact that we've had food in our bellies is enough to be grateful for, especially after our very public and dramatic fall from grace.

What happened with the professor was just the cherry on top of the sundae. We'd already been heading for ruin long before I completely fucked up both our lives. Money had been more than tight since my dad died.

I wish things could have been different.

Domenic leans in and speaks in a low voice. "I'm enjoying watching you put meat in your mouth. How about you get a mouthful of a different kind of meat later?"

I try not to choke. Is he fucking serious?

I glance over to my mom, hoping she might have heard, but she's talking to my new stepfather-to-be and isn't paying any attention to me.

I grit my teeth. "You try putting anything in my mouth, and I'll bite it the fuck off."

He chuckles. "We'll have to see about that."

I find Kirill staring at me, too, and my blood freezes. They aren't serious, are they? Am I in danger from these two? After what happened, my nerves are on high alert, warning sirens blaring through me.

If I told my mother what they'd said, she'd normally have us out of here in an instant, but I doubt that would happen now. We're here because we're desperate. We don't have anywhere else to go.

Besides, I think about what my mom is going to have to endure by being with Nataniele. She says he's an old friend, and she wants to be here, but I see the truth in her eyes. Isn't what she's having to go through exactly the same as me spreading my legs for my stepbrother to keep the peace? To keep us safe?

No, that's not what I'm doing. Just because he's made some dumb suggestive comments and his dickhead friend tried to jam his foot in my crotch doesn't mean I'm going to sleep with them.

How far would I go, though, if I had to? To keep us here?

I shiver at the answer my mind supplies.

Chapter 6

Mackenzie

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I WAKE EARLY.

I slept surprisingly well, but then I hadn't slept at all the previous night, and I'd been exhausted. My head is still full of what happened with Paxton, but now I also have my new stepbrother and his asshole of a friend to worry about.

It's another beautiful day, and the early sunshine is calling me. I go to the balcony doors, throw them open, and step outside. I inhale clean air and let my eyes slip shut, feeling the warmth on my face. I might not be happy about what we're doing here, but I'm grateful for the comfort we're living in. I compare it to the inside of a prison cell, and I know I have to appreciate this.

With my eyes still shut, I reach one arm into the air, enjoying the stretch, and then I repeat the process with my other arm. Then I swing up both arms and swan dive down into a forward fold, my palms and forehead pressed to my shins. I exhale and remain in the position, allowing as much of the stress and tension as I can to seep from my spine.

Though I haven't bothered to bring my mat from the car yet, I run through a couple of sun salutations. The sun warms my bare legs and arms, and, as I straighten again and end with my hands pressed together at my sternum, I open my eyes.

They lock with those of a dark stare from down in the courtyard.

The man watching me is bare chested, a towel thrown over his shoulder. Numerous tattoos cover his torso, shoulders, and

arms. He's at a distance, but I'm pretty sure he's got some on his neck, too.

Shit. How long has he been watching me? It never occurred to me that someone might see me. I glance down at the clingy camisole and very short shorts I'd worn to bed. I bet when I was doing a downward dog, my hips high in the air, half my ass was on show.

The guy makes no move to hide that he's still staring at me. He cocks his head to one side and drags his hand through his damp, dark hair. The corners of his mouth lift. Is that a smile?

Hesitantly, I smile back. I think this might be the other guy I saw Domenic with yesterday, but I could be wrong. There are a lot of people at this university, and I'm sure plenty have his build and dark hair.

The tats, though, they're something else.

Of course, he wasn't shirtless when I saw him the previous day. I assume he's coming back from the gym.

Aware we're just standing, staring at each other, I spin on my heel and go back into my bedroom. My heart is beating too fast, and my cheeks are hot.

Damn, why do all the guys around here have such an effect on me? They either make me hot and bothered or fill me with fear or rage. I shouldn't be feeling attraction toward anyone after what I've been through, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. Maybe my year of being a virtual prisoner of the professor has left me with a raging libido for the sort of experimentation my peers normally have while away at college.

I'm hungry after my yoga. I remember what Nataniele said about me eating with the rest of the students. I guess that means I need to find where the cafeteria is located. I half-wish Domenic had given me a proper tour yesterday, but then realize that would have meant spending more time in his company, which I could do without. Maybe I should have thought about getting Camile's Snap or something, so I could

contact her. I'm sure she'd have happily shown me around, and she'd probably meet me this morning for breakfast, too.

My stomach churns with nerves at the thought of heading into the cafeteria alone. How many people are going to be in there already?

I feel as though I have my new standing as a murderer tattooed on my forehead and everyone is going to know what I did. I've never experienced this kind of self-consciousness before, and it makes me want to hide myself away. It's only my promise to my mom to act normally that prevents me from doing exactly that.

I check the time on my phone and exhale. Okay, it's barely seven a.m., and classes don't start until nine. This is a whole heap of late teens and early twenty-year-olds—they're not going to be early risers, are they? Any luck, I'll have the cafeteria almost to myself.

I don't even know what my schedule is, or who I'm supposed to get it from. Is there an office here with someone who deals with all of that? I guess if Dom had actually bothered to show me around, instead of dumping me to go off with his buddies, I would have been told all of that stuff. I could have told Nataniele what Domenic had done, but that would have only gotten me deeper into his bad books—not that I wasn't already there.

Fuck him, I think to myself. I'm a grown woman now. I'm sure I can find my own way around.

My stomach growls. First, though, I need food.

I quickly shower and change, and take a moment to apply some foundation, mascara, and lip gloss. I don't know who I'm going to meet today, and I don't want to look like something the cat's dragged in. I'm also aware of how everyone I saw yesterday is kitted out in the best brands of clothing, while most of mine are from Walmart. We sold a lot of my good clothes, Mom's too, to try to keep ourselves afloat when things first went bad for us as a family. So now, I own very few nice things. I can't control that, but I can control

making sure my hair has been brushed and I don't have anything between my teeth.

I leave my room and head down the stairs to the first floor. I follow the scent of bacon and toast, and also stalk a couple of the other students who look as though they're going in the right direction.

The cafeteria is situated in the middle of the east side of the quadrant of buildings.

I push through the double doors leading into it. The space looks like it should be a library, not a place where people eat. It's circular in shape. The ceilings tower above me and are carved with ornate figures—angels and demons, I think. A catwalk runs the perimeter of the curved walls, and above them are pictures of stern looking men I don't recognize in gold frames.

At the other end of the cafeteria is, I assume, the kitchen, though it's separated from this area by sliding doors, as though someone didn't want the staff to actually have to mingle with the students. In front of the sliding doors, but set far enough back to not get in the way, are long straight tables, covered in white tablecloths. On the tables, silver platters of food are piled high.

My mouth waters. There are pancakes, with a choice of different syrups and sauces. On warming trays, bacon is stacked, and beside it are eggs in every form, sausage links, mushrooms, tomatoes, and hash browns. There's a chiller cabinet too, which contains yogurts and fruits, and milk in all its varieties. I imagine they get a lot of call for almond and oat milks around here. There's also a bread section with white, granary, and seeded breads, and multiple kinds of pastries available. There's even a gluten free section. A silver dish on ice contains swirls of butter.

“You gonna eat something?”

I jump at the voice and spin around to find the tattooed guy from earlier standing right at my shoulder.

“Oh, it's you,” I blurt.

“Yes, it’s me. You’re the new girl, right? Kenzie.”

“It’s Mackenzie,” I correct him.

He shrugs. “I prefer Kenzie. I think I’ll just call you that.”

He throws me with his confidence. “Oh, right.”

“You going to get something to eat, then?” he presses.

I’m kind of relieved to have someone with me, even if this is one of Domenic and Kirill’s friends.

“Yeah, I’m starving.”

He nods approvingly. “Same.”

We part briefly to select plates, and then load food onto them. I go for pancakes, fresh fruit, and crispy bacon, and then look around for somewhere to sit. The tattooed guy has already found an empty table, and he beckons me over.

I sense the eyes of the other students in the room watching me as I join him.

“So, how are you finding it so far?” he asks.

I sit down and pick up the set of cutlery that’s wrapped in a cloth napkin. “I’m not sure yet,” I admit. “I’m a little out of my comfort zone.”

“In what way?”

“Well, you know...everyone around here comes from money, even more so than I expected.”

I’ve been around money before, but not recently. Not since Dad died.

He snorts. “Yeah, that’s pretty obvious. It costs a million dollars a year to come to Verona Falls.”

My jaw drops. “A million bucks? For one year? You’ve got to be kidding, right?” The top colleges don’t cost a tenth of that.

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

I do a mental calculation. If it costs that for each student to come here, and there are around two hundred students, then

he's talking about this place turning over two hundred million dollars a year. How is that even legal?

I remember the reason I'm here.

Maybe it isn't.

“Oi, Valentino!”

The loud voice cuts through the general chatter of the cafeteria.

My stomach sinks. Domenic is walking toward us, only he's not alone. His arm is slung around the neck of a beautiful blonde. She's looking at me as though I'm the shit she's just found on the soles of her Manolo Blahniks.

Inwardly, I cringe. I feel like a piece of shit, too.

“What the fuck are you doing sitting with her?” Domenic demands.

Valentino kicks out a chair and motions to it. “Sit down, D, and chill.”

“Chill? It's bad enough I have to see the cuckoo in the nest after hours. I don't want to sit with her in class time.”

Valentino glances at a watch I recognize as a Rolex and shrugs. “Not class time, yet, D. There's plenty of other places you can sit. I thought I'd get to know our new student a little bit.”

Domenic stares at Valentino for a long beat, but then he sits at the chair that has been kicked out for him. The girl goes to sit down, too, but Domenic points to a far table and waves her away. “Your bestie, Tabitha is over there. Go sit with her, Verity.”

It's not a question, it's an order.

Oh, my God, he's so rude and obnoxious. It seems I'm not the only one he treats like crap.

The girl pouts but says nothing as she sashays off. Her skirt is super short, and I'm sure it's shorter than the rules allow.

“You’ve got her well trained,” Valentino observes.

Domenic shrugs. “She’s a dumb bitch.”

His words shock me, and I can’t hold in the small gasp that escapes me. “You really are a woman-hating asshole, aren’t you?” I seethe at him.

“I hate dumb bitches, not all women.”

“You’ve been rude as hell to me too,” I point out.

He smiles, slow and nasty. “Like I say, I hate dumb bitches.”

My cheeks heat, and I can’t quite believe he’s said that to me.

Valentino shakes his head. “Ignore him. He hates Mondays.”

“Too fucking right.” Domenic stands and stalks to the food bar but returns with only a black coffee. He sips at it and scowls around the room.

“Why do you hate Mondays?” I ask, trying to have a modicum of polite conversation. After all, love him or hate him, this guy is my new family.

“It’s not Friday. Or Saturday. Or Sunday.”

“I like Mondays,” Valentino says. “The new start to a week. The days before us nothing but a blank slate upon which to create mayhem.” He laughs and leans back in his chair, stretching.

God, the muscles on him are delicious. I try not to stare, but when I look up, Domenic is watching me, and instead of his usual sneer there’s something else on his face. It disturbs me because I can’t tell what he’s feeling at all. There’s a careful blankness to his features, but his eyes are burning.

“Very poetic and all, Tino,” Domenic drawls. “Don’t you think, Mackenzie?”

“Erm, I suppose so.”

“I can write a poem for you if you like?” Tino, as Domenic calls him, grins at me and reaches out, shocking me as he touches my hair. “And ode to Mackenzie, the girl with the beautiful blonde hair.”

“Motherfucking parents.” The Russian accent has me pulling away from Tino’s touch as Kirill joins us.

Great, all three of them are here, and they make me so uncomfortable. Domenic makes me feel sneered at and looked down on. Kirill scares me, and Valentino is hot, but his friendliness holds what I think might be a mocking edge. I can’t quite tell.

“I saw Mackenzie doing her stretches this morning,” Tino announces. “She’s very flexible.” His tongue sneaks out, licking his full lower lip. “Bendy.”

My cheeks burn. “It’s yoga.” I need to get out of here.

“*It’s yoga,*” Kirill parrots like a child.

I roll my eyes, but inside I’m overheated and stressed. A lonely, scared girl out of her depth, and I can’t let those feelings overwhelm me, or bad things will happen. I don’t want these men knowing my weakness.

“Nothing wrong with being flexible.” Tino shrugs. “It’s very good for getting into new and experimental positions.”

Okay, he’s clearly not talking about yoga, and these bullying assholes have had about as much fun from me as I’m willing to give them.

“Well, gentlemen, excuse me, please.” I stand, and with as much dignity as I can muster, I exit the dining room.

Chapter 7

Mackenzie

I STILL HAVE NO IDEA WHAT MY SCHEDULE IS FOR THE DAY, SO I decide that needs to be my first priority. I pluck up the courage to stop two other students—a gorgeous brunette who is hanging on the arm of a striking black guy.

“Excuse me, but is there an administrator’s office?”

The girl gives me a fleeting smile. “Sure, it’s in west wing.”

“Thanks!”

I’m currently in east wing, so I must need to be on the opposite side of the university. It’s a bit of a hike, but I have time. Besides, if I don’t find the office, I won’t know where to go anyway.

I keep my head down, still hugely conscious of being the new girl. I sense eyes on me as I walk the corridors. There’s also a part of my brain—or maybe it’s my body—that’s on constant alert for Domenic. No, not just Dom, but Kirill and Valentino, too. *Especially Valentino.*

To my relief, I find the office. A shrew-faced woman sits behind a desk.

“Yes?” she barks at me.

“I’m Mackenzie Kingsland,” I tell her. “I need to enroll. I’m a sophomore.”

My name seems to get her attention, as she finally looks up at me. “Kingsland, huh? You’re going to be the dean’s stepdaughter.”

My stomach knots and I have to force the words from my mouth. “That’s right.”

“I was expecting you yesterday.”

I feel like I’m being reprimanded, though it was hardly my fault that I didn’t know where to come. “Sorry. I didn’t get the full tour.”

She sniffs and goes back to her computer. Her fingers fly across the keyboard, and she brings up what I hope is my schedule. “You want it printed, or are you okay with an app?”

“Umm, can I have it printed and the app?” I figure I’d rather have a backup than have to return to this sour-faced woman.

She rolls her eyes. “If you must.”

She clicks a button, and somewhere near the back of the office, a printer whirrs to life. She gets up from her seat and goes to retrieve my schedule. She thrusts it at me. “Here you go. Log-in for the app is at the top.”

“Thank you.” I let my gaze travel down the page, matching the days of the week with times and where I’m supposed to be.

I notice something. “Umm...is this the full schedule.”

She looks at me like she’s thinking ‘haven’t you left yet.’ “Of course, it is.”

I pinch my lips and frown down at it. My lessons consist of orientation, English Literature, art, sociology, and history. Where’s the math and science?

I thought this place was supposed to have one of the best educations money could buy. Hell, for the amount of money people are spending to attend here, surely they should have a basic core curriculum. Plus, didn’t Nataniele say Domenic was majoring in math?

“Don’t you have mathematics and science classes?”

She glances up at me. “Of course, we do.”

“They’re not on my schedule.”

She snorts. “There’s a reason for that. Now, get to class or you’ll be late.”

I’m not going to be late; I have plenty of time, but I do have to find my first class, and I don’t know how long that’s going to take.

It takes longer than I’d hoped to find the classroom for the first lesson of the day. By the time I arrive, I’m flustered and stressed again. This whole morning has put me on edge, and it’s not even nine a.m. yet. I choose a seat, but I’m clammy and shaky from all the stress.

I have to be careful not to get too upset or anxious or it can trigger me to get sick. Men are a health hazard to me, and I should avoid them at all costs. After the amount of stress and anxiety I’ve gone through over the past twenty-four hours, I’m surprised I’ve not been ill. I need to be careful.

Domenic won’t be easy to stay away from, since we live right by one another and our parents are now together, but the other two, I can try to steer clear of.

I check the time and see I have at least another fifteen minutes before class starts. I’ll nip into the restrooms and make sure I don’t look a red, sweaty, stressed mess before I meet the rest of the class.

I find the bathroom located down the hall.

Once the door closes behind me and the cool water of the faucet runs over my wrists, I relax a little.

Staring at my pink-cheeked reflection, I will my hot flush away.

The door creaks open, and my heart sinks as Domenic saunters into the room.

“This is the girl’s room, Dom. You can’t be in here.”

He comes right up to me, standing behind me, his arms bracketing me as he stares at us both in the mirror.

“My father runs this place, and I can go anywhere I like.”

He bends down and slowly and deliberately runs his nose up the side of my throat, inhaling.

I freeze as my body trembles on high alert.

What do I do now?

Chapter 8

Mackenzie

I HAVE TWO CHOICES, FIGHT OR FLIGHT. FREEZING LIKE THIS IS not an option.

“Domenic, I need to go to class.”

His gaze burns into mine in the mirror as he watches me like a hawk hunting the tiny mouse in the field. “No, you don’t. Class doesn’t start yet.”

“I, erm, I want to get there early.”

I turn around, trying to escape, but my breasts brush against the rock-solid wall that is his chest. God, he is astonishingly good looking, I realize as I stare up into his face.

The man could be a cover model for a men’s fitness magazine with his body and his face. It’s a pity it houses such a shitty personality.

Pushing at him, I clench my jaw when he doesn’t move. “Domenic, let me pass.”

“Only if you pay the toll.”

“What’s the toll?”

“A kiss.”

I suck in air. “You don’t like me, which you’ve made patently clear, so why would you want a kiss? A kiss is personal. It’s intimate.”

He nods. “You’re right. Okay. Get on your knees, then.”

My legs tremble. God, I hate this. I cannot do this. Not even for a roof over our heads. Not even for my freedom. Then I recall what happened, and I know I can't blow this up. I can't let Mom down.

I gather all the strength I possess, place my palms against Dom's chest, and shove him. He can't have been expecting it, because he rocks back on his heels, and it is enough for me to scoot under him and get away.

"Stay away from me," I say with as much steely calmness as I can muster.

"I'd much prefer a world where you and I didn't know one another, Mackenzie," he replies. "Sadly, this is our world, and if you're going to be pushed on me, there'd better be something in it for me."

"I have a suggestion, Domenic." I open the door and turn to look back at him. "Simply stay the hell away from me, and we'll both be happy."

"Oh, no." His voice carries behind me as I slip out of the door. "I get to decide the parameters here, Mack."

Mack? Mack! He did not. I hate that nickname. Fuming, but trying really hard to regulate my emotions, I turn to walk back to class, only to slam straight into someone else.

"Hey, slow down, Kenzie. Something on fire?"

It's Valentino. I don't know how to feel about this. I'm conscious that Dom is about to emerge from the bathroom, and I don't want to end up trapped between the two of them.

He spots his friend over my shoulder. "Hey, D. What's going on?"

"Nothing. I was just giving Mackenzie a little rundown on how some of our school rules work."

Valentino arches one dark brow. "In the girls' bathroom?"

Domenic throws back his shoulders and lifts his chin. "You got a problem with that, Tino?"

“If it means you’re trying to intimidate the new girl, then yeah, I do.”

I blink up at him, unsure what’s happening here. Is Valentino actually sticking up for me? The gratitude I feel is almost pathetic, but I’m desperate to have someone on my side. The fact this same person is breathtakingly gorgeous and covered in tats also helps smooth the way a little.

Domenic mock pouts. “Being nice to her isn’t going to get you into her panties, Tino.”

I can’t help but shoot Domenic a glare. How does he know that? I’m far more likely to let someone go in that direction if they don’t treat me like vermin.

“She thinks she’s better than us, though I have no idea why.” Domenic’s words bring me back to the present. “Look at how she holds herself. What were you? Daddy’s little princess? Did he tell you that you were special? No, not a little princess, you’re more...regal...than that. More like a duchess.”

Tino huffs laughter. “*Duchess?* I like that.”

I don’t. I’m nothing like a fucking duchess. Besides, duchesses have money and titles. I have nothing. I wish I was a duchess. My life would be much better.

Valentino hooks his arm around my neck and says, “Come on, Duchess. I’ll walk you to class.”

Though I don’t appreciate the name, I still find myself tucking into the shield of his body. A part of me is tempted to turn and flick Dom the bird as we walk away, but I don’t. I like the feeling of being under Tino’s wing. Other students send us appreciative glances. I bet we make a good-looking couple with his dark hair and mine so blonde.

We reach my class, and, to my surprise, he kisses the top of my head and then lets me go.

“Don’t let D get to you,” he says. “His bark is worse than his bite.”

Somehow, I doubt that, but I love that he's taking the time to reassure me. "Thanks, Valentino."

He throws me a wink. "Later." And he saunters off down the hallway, jerking his chin at those he knows, and bumping the shoulder of another guy.

Despite what happened in the bathroom, my chest feels a little lighter as I enter the class.

Only to be brought straight down to Earth again. On the seat next to where I left my bag sits the blonde, Verity. She's friends with Domenic and his little gang, and having her beside me during the lesson isn't my idea of fun.

As the class fills up, I keep glancing around me to see if any of the Devils come in, but none do. The relief is short lived because Verity turns to me and smiles, but it's as sharp as lemon juice.

"You must be Mackenzie. I'm Verity. Are you taking literature, too?"

Clearly, I am, as I'm in the literature class. "Yes. It's my favorite subject." I try to be friendly, but her gaze is burning a hole in me.

"Mine, too."

I glance around and frown. There are only women in the class. "Don't any men take the class?"

She laughs, high and false. "No, the boys don't take literature. They take the important stuff. Finance. Marketing. You know."

"It seems odd, though, that not one has elected to take this."

She frowns. "They can't take it."

"What?"

"They can't take this class. This is for the girls. The boys do a totally different curriculum."

I've never heard of anything like this. I stare at her. "I don't understand."

“In our world, you need certain skills as a woman, and certain skills as a man. Most of us will end up married by the time we are twenty-three, and we should be good mothers, hostesses, and interesting wives. The men have empires to run.”

I bark out a laugh, unable to stop it from escaping. I look around me exaggeratedly. “Okay, where is the portal I stepped through that took me back to the Victorian era?”

“You can laugh all you want,” she says. “The fact is that your life is going to be laid out for you. If you don’t find yourself a good husband, then whose protection will you be under?”

“Erm... no one’s? I don’t need protecting.”

I realize with a horrible start that now, since all the shit went down, I do need protecting. Is that why Mom chose this place? To get me a husband or something? It makes me wonder what brought all the other students here. Are they all here to be educated, or are they running from the cops, too?

She licks her glossy lips and leans in close. “Oh, Mackenzie. I think from what little I’ve heard, you need protecting the most of all.”

Her words make my stomach drop. What does she mean by that? There’s no way she knows, is there? No, that’s impossible. I doubt even the police will have worked out who’s responsible yet, though it’s only a matter of time.

Before I can ask her what she means, a young, very pretty teacher walks into the room and addresses the class.

She’s wearing high heels and a closely fitted suit, and her hair is pulled into a high ponytail. She looks more like a porn star than a teacher.

“She used to be your stepdaddy’s bit on the side,” Verity whispers. “She probably won’t like you. I imagine you’ll need to really work hard in order to pass.”

Then she sits back in her chair, pops the gum she’s chewing, and takes out a pen with a pink feathery plume attached and begins to write.

I hate her, I decide. Not as much as I hate Domenic, but a very close second.

Kirill, I don't hate, but he scares me.

Valentino is hot for sure, but he seemed to be laughing at me the whole time we interacted. The one truly friendly person I've met so far, Camile.

By the time lunch rolls around, I'm so beaten down and worn out by the stress of the day that I grab a sub from the cafeteria and rush back to my room to eat there in private.

I hide away for the entire hour. As I eat, big, fat tears roll down my cheeks. I yearn for my old life with the same raw ache that I miss my father. When he died, we didn't only lose him; we lost our entire lives. Then I did that terrible, terrible thing. Now, we're stuck here, in this horrible place, Mom and I having to play roles we don't want to.

After I've eaten, I take some time to unpack. I don't have much. We grabbed everything in a rush. I do have a framed photograph of the three of us together when I was small, and I place it on the table beside my bed.

Knowing I have to get back out there, I wipe my cheeks dry, pick up my bag, and open the door to leave.

I come face to face with my future stepfather.

"Mackenzie. What on Earth are you doing hiding away up here?"

My heart picks up speed and my mouth runs dry. "Sorry, Nataniele," I say.

"It's not Nataniele to you anymore," he says. "When you're around the other students, you will call me Dean Rossi, and in private here, you may call me Father, or Daddy."

His direct gaze and the diabolical twitch of his lips lets me know exactly what he means by that.

I stare at him in horror.

"I can't call you Father," I blurt, purposefully not using the D word. "You're not my father."

“Except very soon, legally, I will be.”

“You’ll be married to Mom, but that doesn’t make you my father.”

He steps closer and takes my jaw between his fingers, then squeezes as he turns my face up to his. He’s hurting me, and my hands curl into fists that I know I’ll never use if I want to escape this nightmare unscathed.

“Mackenzie,” he says so calmly and reasonably, as if he’s not crushing my chin in his fingers, “you do not disobey me.” He smiles at me, and it holds nothing but cold, supercilious cruelty. “Now, then, why don’t you go and mingle with the people you’re going to be spending most of your time with for the next year? You won’t make friends hiding away.”

He lets go of my chin and drops a kiss on the top of my head.

On legs like jelly, I push past him and hurry down the hallway.

This is worse than I had ever imagined it would be. I don’t know how I am going to survive this. I’ve lost everyone and everything that meant something to me, and I don’t think my mom knows just what a monster she’s made a deal with.

Chapter 9

Mackenzie

I DON'T KNOW WHERE I'M GOING OR WHAT I'M DOING, ONLY that I don't want to be here.

“Hey, are you all right?”

A female voice I recognize comes from behind me.

I blink fast, trying to make it look like I haven't been crying, and then turn to find Camile standing there.

I force a bright smile. “Sure. Just first day nerves.”

Her mouth pinches and she frowns as she leans slightly closer, getting a better look at my face. “Really? 'Cause it looks like you've been crying.”

Her dark hair is a silky sheet, and I get a waft of coconut shampoo. Her warmth and concern are like a hug, and frustratingly only makes me want to cry even harder. How can I explain to her all the shit I'm having to deal with right now? My homesickness is like falling down a black hole and knowing I'll never hit the bottom and I'll never be able to climb out again. I'm sick for a place I'll never go back to because it's not just about missing my old home. It's about missing my old life—a life that included my father—and that's something I'll never get back again.

I shake my head and stare at my feet. “Allergies,” I lie.

She pressed her lips into a line and then holds out her arms to me. “Those allergies look like they could use a hug.”

Though I barely know this girl, I can't help myself. I step forward, and she wraps me in her arms and squeezes me tight.

I hug her back.

She releases me. “There. Feel any better?”

Surprisingly, I do. “Thanks for that.”

“You look like you could use some cheering up. What are you doing tonight?”

“Err, sitting in my room. Reading.”

“No, you’re not. You’re coming to the campus bar. Bring your ID, though it’s mostly for show. They aren’t that bothered, obviously, but they need to make it look like they’re sticking to the rules in case anyone from outside is hanging around.”

Why aren’t they bothered about carding? I’m about to ask when another thought hits me. “It’s Monday night,” I point out. Seems an odd night to go out and get your party on.

She shrugs. “So? Every day is much the same as the other around here. Why wait until Friday when you can have fun Monday to Friday, and then again on the weekend?”

I don’t want to be sociable, but I need to fit in. I have to figure out how I’m going to build a life for myself in this hellhole, and going out with a friend seems like a good place to start. I remember how Camile warned me off Dom and his friends, how she’d called them the Devils. Did that include Valentino? Tino was nice to me earlier, stood up for me against Dom, and I didn’t want to lump him in the same category as my asshole soon-to-be-stepbrother. I am about to ask her, but the bell goes for class, and I check my schedule.

“Dress up,” Camile tells me. “Hotter the better.”

I force a grin. “Got it.”

THAT EVENING, standing in front of the full-length mirror in my room, I turn, craning my neck, to check out how my ass looks in this silver sequined dress. It’s far shorter than I’d normally wear, and it’s strapless, too, so my shoulders are bare. I must admit, though, I look good.

It's one of the multitude of items of clothing I found in my closet, clearly provided by the staff here on Nataniele's orders. The amount of sexy clothing is somewhat disconcerting. It makes the stuff I brought from home look like I've been dumpster diving for something to wear, though, quality wise. I pair the dress with some strappy heels. Maybe dressing the part will make me less hated around here.

The afternoon had passed without event. I'd gone to my classes and kept my head down. When dinnertime had arrived, I'd once more grabbed a couple of pizza slices to go and hide in my room.

A light knock comes at my door, and I glance around just as it opens.

"You look nice," Mom says from the gap in the doorway.

I hold my hands out on either side of me, as though to display my outfit further. "Thanks. I'm going out with a friend."

A genuine smile spreads from cheek to cheek, and her eyes light up. "I'm so happy you have a friend already."

"Thanks." I beckon her fully into the room, and she shuts the door behind herself. "How are you doing, Mom?" I ask. "I wish you had a friend, too."

She flaps a hand at me. "Me? Oh, I'm fine. As long as you're doing okay, I can handle anything."

I take her hand and give her fingers a squeeze. "I want you to be doing okay, too, though."

"I will be, soon," she tells me. "Oh, actually, while I'm thinking about it, Nataniele wants us all to have a chat tomorrow about the wedding."

I swallow. "The wedding? Already?"

"Yes, he says there's no point in waiting." Her voice lowers. "It makes us safer, the sooner it happens, darling. We'll have whole new identities." She pauses and adds, "I'd like you to be my maid of honor, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Of course, I wouldn't mind."

“Domenic is going to be Nataniele’s best man, so it makes sense to have the two of you together.”

I inwardly shudder at the idea of standing at an altar with Domenic, even if it isn’t the two of us who are getting married. I’ll do it, though, for Mom. I wonder how Dom is going to act at his father’s wedding. I can’t imagine he’s going to be too happy about us all standing there, playing happy families.

“Where is the service taking place?” I ask.

“There’s a chapel on the grounds.”

“What? Here? At Verona Falls?”

“Yes. Plenty of the students here are religious. They go to church on a Sunday, just like they would at home.”

For some reason, I find this image of the students going to church an odd one. Morals and principles don’t feel like they belong in the picture. The place has a strange vibe, and it doesn’t fit with its inhabitants all being good, upstanding citizens.

The door opens, and Nataniele takes us both in. He is a very handsome man, but his hard expression ruins the good features God gave him.

“Darling,” he says in that patronizing tone, “I’ve got two of the esteemed professors dining with us tonight. I’d hate for you to be late.”

His gaze travels over me, taking in every curve, and he nods as if in satisfaction. “I see you like the clothes you were provided with. You look good in it, Mackenzie.”

He comes over to us and touches my shoulder, making me shiver.

“It’s chilly out there,” he says. “Don’t get cold, now.”

Then he pivots on his heel and stalks off. Mom rummages around in my closet, her movements hurried, and grabs me a small, cropped cardigan and drapes it over my shoulders.

“There you go.” She smiles at me and pats my cheek, but her face is pale.

The gesture is so familiar and so tender it makes my chest ache. I smile at her, forcing myself not to be sad in front of her. “Thanks, Mom. See you later.”

“Have fun.”

She kisses my cheek and turns to follow her future husband.

When they’re both gone, I shove the cardigan back in the closet and grab my small purse as I leave the room.

My heels click-clack on the polished wooden floor and, as I turn a corner, I realize I’m utterly alone in this corridor.

The wood shines in the rich glow of the lights lining the hallway. All along the wall are those portraits of people from days gone by. I reach out and touch the walls, feeling the history of this place pulsing under my fingertips. How many people walked these corridors before me?

Like this, quiet and lit with those warm lamps, the university feels like a gorgeous wrinkle in time. I pause and stop walking and simply let myself soak up the atmosphere. On the wall a few feet away is a portrait that catches my eye. I head over and stare at it. The face in the painting is intimidating, almost frightening. Hooded, dark eyes, stare out at the viewer, and flared nostrils give the sense of anger, or deep impatience.

“He was killed right here, on the grounds.”

I jump at the voice and automatically put a hand to my chest.

I turn to find Kirill standing behind me, and my heart pounds. Oh, God. I’m alone, in this corridor with the one man in this place who scares me the most.

“Killed? Here? Why?”

“Blood feud.” He shrugs, and his light blue gaze roams over me. “Are you going to a disco?”

I flush at his words. Here I thought I looked the part, but it seems I got it wrong again.

“I was going to the bar for a drink.”

“You are dressed like you’re going to a fancy dinner, or a club.” He reaches out and grasps the material between thumb and forefinger. “If you do go dancing later, you can be the disco ball.” He chuckles to himself.

Then he spins me around, and I gasp.

“Da,” he says. “Put you on the ceiling and make you spin.”

“Kirill,” I say, “I need to go. I’m late.”

I’m tense as hell, expecting him to say something, or maybe take advantage of this situation and hurt me somehow, but instead he dips his head once. “Da. I will walk you.”

Then he walks forward and indicates with a flick of his fingers for me to follow.

My dress wasn’t the best choice, I’m realizing. Not because of Kirill’s snide comments but because it keeps falling down, exposing more cleavage than I want to. I discreetly pull it up, and Kirill smirks as he shoots me a quick glance.

“Don’t worry, Duchess. It won’t fall down. Your tits are big enough. They’ll make sure it stays in place.”

For a moment, all I can focus on is his horrible remark about my body, but then I realize something. He called me Duchess. That means either Dom or Valentino told him about their name for me.

“Are they natural?” he asks. “Or did you pay for them?”

“None of your business,” I manage.

“I like either,” he says.

Why does he think I care what his views are on breasts, the creep?

When we reach the grand staircase that sweeps down to the entrance hall, he gives a sarcastic little half bow. “Ladies first.”

I walk down the stairs in front of him, my body straight and alert the entire time. I wouldn't put it past him to push me down them.

The entrance hall is as intimidatingly grand to me as it was the first time we arrived here. Camile sent me a text explaining that to get to the bar, I go out of the back main entrance door, and across the quad, and it's in the building to the far right. She says you can't miss it, as from around seven in the evening they have door staff in place.

I stride ahead, wanting to get rid of Kirill, but he keeps in step with me. The air outside is cool and, for a moment, I wish I had brought the cardigan.

Rushing to get to the bar, I walk as fast as I can without tripping in my heels.

Kirill is right beside me, and I glance at him. He smiles back, and his gaze travels down until it hits my chest, and his smile becomes a grin. "Might have wanted to wear a padded bra," he says.

I glance down and want the ground to open up and swallow me. My nipples are showing despite my strapless bra and the texture of the dress.

"Don't worry. It's hot." Kirill laughs as we approach the men on the door.

They're wearing smart, dark suits and both nod at Kirill as he approaches.

He grabs the door for me and opens it.

The moment I step over the threshold, I think I've made a mistake. The place isn't busy, but it's not empty either. Every single head swivels our way, and people stare at me as I walk to the bar where Camile is waving at me.

Kirill is still right by my side, too. Why doesn't he go and meet his friends? I don't want him here.

He reaches the bar and nods at Camile before ordering a drink in Russian.

Camile smiles at me, but it's subdued, and for a horrible moment, I wonder if she's regretted asking me. I do stick out like a sore thumb. Most of the girls are wearing jeans and sexy tops. They are dressed up, yes, but not wearing slinky dresses.

Kirill takes the drink, holds the glass up at us, and then walks off into a darkened corner. The moment he is gone, Camile visibly relaxes, and her smile turns dazzling. "Look at you," she says. "You look gorgeous."

"I am way overdressed. You said dress up," I say, accusingly.

She grimaces. "Sorry, I should have been clear and said jeans and a sexy top. I wouldn't worry, though. You'd be right at home on a Saturday night."

The door opens, and I turn to see who is here. For once, I'm relieved to see Verity. Relieved because she's also wearing a sexy dress, as are her friends.

"See?" Camile says. "Now you're not the only one. You can't overdress around here, babe. Underdressing, though, is a crime. For the girls, in particular."

I'm about to ask her why when a deep voice behind me says to the barman, "Champagne for the ladies."

I whip around, and Valentino is behind me. He smiles at us. Walking around to the front of the stools we're perched on, he shoves his hands in his pockets and gives me a onceover.

"Looking good, Duchess."

"Duchess?" Camile raises her eyebrows.

"Don't ask," I reply.

I'm trying hard not to stare at Valentino, but he looks incredible tonight.

His t-shirt is made of a very fine knit, and it hugs every single muscle on him. Tattoos peek out of the short sleeves, and his black pants fit his thighs like a glove.

His dark hair shines under the lights, and as he smiles warmly at me and my friend, I realize I'm getting a crush on

this man.

That won't do. I can't let myself be vulnerable, not after the way my last relationship ended. Something tells me it's far too dangerous.

Chapter 10

Domenic

THE TEXT FROM KIRILL IS ABRUPT.

<Get down here, D. Your stepsister is here and she's looking like trash dressed as royalty and it's so fuckable. We can have some fun.>

I ought to be down there now, mingling with the minions, but the dark mood I've been in all day has ramped up since I walked in on my father and that bitch he's marrying, kissing and slobbering all over one another.

This fucking wedding cannot happen. It's a desecration of my mother's memory. An abomination, and I'll do everything I can to stop it.

The thought of Mom has the itching under my skin prickling at me. It always starts this way. An itch, a feeling that my skin is tightening, and then the anxiety comes. The panic. The overwhelming sense of impending doom.

Sweat forms on my temple and I clench and unclench my fists trying to shake it off. I need to fight...or fuck. No one around to do either with though, which presents a problem.

I won't do it again. Not again. I swore to God to stop.

It's wrong. Weak.

My father would be horrified, which I don't give a shit about, but Mom would too, and that I *do* care about. She'd be hurt, and worried. Upset that she'd let me down somehow if she knew what I did.

I glance at the dresser in the corner, my gaze automatically sliding to the bottom drawer where the box rests.

No, I need a distraction.

The adrenaline the panic causes has my dick half hard, and I think about what Kirill said. Maybe I should go down there and give that bitch some shit, but the mood I'm in, it might end up going too far.

<What is she wearing?>

I type the text and send.

<Strapless tight, silvery thing. Amazing legs, even better tits. She's been hiding the goods. Come and see for yourself. Verity is here. Looking for you.>

Verity, Verity, Verity. The girl is getting herself a bit too obsessed. I haven't screwed her. She's the daughter of a family who wants their daughter pristine when she marries. She's sucked my cock, though.

The thought of her lips wrapped around me doesn't have the usual effect, but then my mind wanders to Mackenzie and how she might look in that dress. She's fucking stunning, with that dark blonde hair, the big blue eyes, and long limbs. She's got this whole innocent thing going on. I haven't seen a single tattoo or piercing. She's so pure, and I want to fuck that up. The first moment I laid eyes on her, I wanted her. It's a problem because I fucking hate her and all her and her whore mother represent.

My dick is fully hard now, and angrily I unzip and grab it. Maybe I can fuck her and fill her with some of my hate. I jerk myself and groan. Yeah, take her from behind, her face pushed up against the wall, and her silver dress hiked up around her waist.

Is she a virgin? At her age and looking like she does, I doubt it. I wonder if she's into sucking cock. There's nothing I like more than a girl on her knees for me. It's such a power trip.

At the thought of her full lips wrapped around my dick, an orgasm races up my spine and I come, hard. I jerk myself

through it, and when it's over I catch my breath, my mind racing. Slowly, I put myself away and let my head fall back.

I hate her.

I want her.

I hate that I want her.

Her mother is unbearable with the way she's trying to make us all like them. Her simpering smiles make my fist itch to connect with her jaw. The way my father looks at her with a cold admiration makes me want to punch him, too. That's the way he used to look at my mother. She was his precious jewel. A possession, but an important one, and now another woman will take her place.

My father says he knows Lucia from years ago. Before he knew my mother. So, Lucia came first. Has he always wanted her, more than he wanted my mom?

Fuck.

The tightness is back, the pounding heart. It's no good. Nothing is going to soothe the beast inside tonight other than my routine.

I get up and go to my adjoining bathroom. Grabbing two clean towels, I return to the bedroom and place one on the edge of the bed, and the other I place by me on the nightstand. Then I open the drawer and pull out my box. Dark walnut shines in the low light of my room.

I sit on the bed and roll my shirt sleeves up. Then I undo my pants and push them down. I roll the soft material of my boxer briefs even higher on my right thigh.

Heart pounding in anticipation now rather than panic, I stare at the skin, crisscrossed with marks from previous moments of panic.

Sticky shame coats me as I face the evidence of my weakness. Blowing out a long breath, I open the box and stare at my collection of implements. Finally, I take out the red penknife and flick the knife open.

Holding it by my thigh, making sure my leg is on the towel, I cut.

Chapter II

Mackenzie

I SIP THE CHAMPAGNE VALENTINO HAS BOUGHT US, TRY NOT TO feel too self-conscious, and fail. It's not only about the dress now, but also that I'm standing in a bar clearly drinking alcohol when I'm underage. No one seems to be paying me too much attention, though—well, no one outside of Valentino and Kirill. I asked Camile about it and she said something about the college being so international that they weren't as strict as most countries who let you drink from the age of eighteen. However, they still card on the door and at the bar so as not to openly break the law.

I rarely drink, as it can make me sick, so I try to nurse it slowly but still drink enough to fit in. The fizzy, sharp taste is delicious, and it would be far too easy to knock it all back with how nervous I am.

A part of me longs for the oblivion that comes with getting really drunk, but I don't trust myself.

I find myself scanning the ever-growing crowd, wondering where Dom is. It's not that I want to see him, but I find not knowing where he is to be more unnerving. I'm the gazelle standing in long grass, innocently grazing, while a lion stalks up on me.

This champagne is so bad for me, but damn, I enjoy the way it's making me less anxious, and my body is loosening up. Over the next thirty minutes or so, Camile introduces me to a couple more people and they smile and welcome me, and I'm starting to feel like I might actually fit in here one day. If

there's a way I can block out what I did, pretend like it never occurred, maybe that will happen.

The whole time, I'm conscious of Valentino's gaze on me, and Kirill right beside him. I put my shoulders back and toss my hair over my shoulder and pretend like everything everyone is saying is both fascinating and funny.

I get a lot of questions about the reason I'm here, especially from the other girls, and the way they grimace when I say my mother is marrying the dean sets me worrying again about fitting in and making friends.

A flurry of activity draws my attention from the gaggle of girls, and my line of sight is drawn toward a new group of guys who have walked in. They seem to have everyone's attention. Girls flock around them, and other guys give them fist bumps and nods. Two of the new arrivals are identical—matching, thick, dark hair, and piercing blue eyes framed in thick lashes. It's hard not to notice them.

I lean in closer to Camile to shout in her ear. "Who are they?"

"The Vipers. Louis and Mattheo Laurant. They're from West House. They're essentially West House wannabe equivalents of the Devils. They're not good guys, either."

"You mean they're like Dom, Valentino, and Kirill?"

"Exactly. A girl killed herself here last year—jumped off the top of the tower, the building you see first when you drive up to the university. Landed in the parking lot on top of one of their Maseratis. Everyone said they pushed her to it. Some even say they might have been the ones who actually *pushed* her." Camile's brown eyes go wide, her brows peaked.

"God, that's terrible. Was there any investigation? Were the police involved?"

Internally, I cringe at the thought of the police.

She snorts. "As much as the police are ever involved in something that happens around here. They turn up for show, but they're all getting payoffs. It helps to have all the local

cops in their pockets to turn a blind eye at all the shady shit that goes on.”

Payoffs. That makes sense. Is that why my mother brought me here? “What—”

I don’t get to finish my sentence. A hand grips my upper arm and spins me away from Camile. I find myself almost falling into a broad chest, and, confused and flustered, I lift my gaze to find myself staring right into my future stepbrother’s green eyes.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” he snaps.

“What?” I’m still too shocked to formulate a clever response.

The hard planes of his face are like glacial ice, the light from the bar bouncing off the edges. The heat of his skin burns through mine. The rest of the room has vanished, so it’s only him and me. My ears buzz with a sound like tinnitus, but is actually my blood racing through them.

“You do realize you’ve got every guy in here thinking about fucking you?”

I scoff and try to pull out of his grip, but he holds firm. “Don’t be ridiculous. No, I haven’t.”

He yanks me closer, so my breasts are only a sliver of air away from being crushed to his chest. He speaks against my ear, his breath hot, his voice a low growl.

“Bullshit. Your skirt is so short I can practically see your pussy, and it would only take one false move for your tits to be on show.”

I recover myself and lift my chin in defiance. “What the hell has how I dress got to do with you?”

“You think I want to be related to such a little whore?”

My jaw drops and my palm tingles with the urge for it to make contact with his face. How fucking *dare* he?

“Fuck you, Dom.”

“It’s Domenic to you.”

I narrow my eyes, and, like a child, chant, “Dom-Dom-Dom-Dom.”

To my relief, he lets go of my arm. “All right, Duchess, if that’s how you want to play it. Just watch your back.”

He storms off again, pushing through the crowds of people. The bar is far busier now than when we arrived. The music is louder, too, the lights lower. On the dance floor, bodies writhe and bounce. Girls and boys, girls and girls, and even boys and boys grind up against each other. If there were a few less items of clothing, it would practically be an orgy. Why the fuck is Dom judging me so harshly when everyone else is acting like this? I spot Verity and one of her friends practically making out, but I can see they’re only doing it to catch the eyes of the men. From what I can tell, it’s working beautifully. There’s a small crowd of testosterone-filled guys surrounding the pair. Domenic isn’t there, though, and I get the feeling he’s the only one she really cares about.

Shaking with rage, I drain the rest of my champagne.

A hand touches my arm, and I spin on my heel, my mouth flying open, ready to launch back into Domenic, but instead I find Camile standing there, her eyes wide.

“Mackenzie. Are you okay? I saw Dom giving you shit.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. He’s just an asshole.”

“He is *such* an asshole,” she agrees. “Do you want to go? I understand if you do.”

I shake my head. “There is no way I’m allowing him to push me around.”

The champagne glass I’d only just emptied is full again, by some kind of miracle, and I take another sip. The booze is giving me a lovely layer of padding against the cruelty of Dom’s words, and right now, I need it. This is my second glass, and it has to be my last. I can’t let myself drink too much, because if I do, I risk giving away my secret to the entire bar. That’s the last thing I want.

“Good for you,” she says approvingly. “Come on. Let’s dance.”

I allow her to lead me out onto the dance floor, and we merge into all the hot, writhing bodies. I spot Valentino, dancing with some others. He notices me, too, and throws me a wink. My heart swells with his approval. I'm guessing he didn't see the confrontation between me and Dom, or he probably would have intervened like he did in the bathroom.

I switch my attention to Camile. I don't want my new best friend to think I'm ignoring her for a guy.

"I love this song," she cries and puts more energy into her dancing.

Feeling like I'm a part of something, I join in. The crowd bumps and jostles around us, but it's all good natured. Everyone's having a great time, and I understand why Camile had said there was no point in waiting for the weekend.

I let loose, and it feels amazing. I dance, my arms lifted high, shaking my hips and singing along to the music. I notice Kirill topping up my glass with yet more champagne, and Verity and her friends hanging around too, ordering their own bottle. I'm thirsty, so I head over to take a sip, but I manage to spill more of it than I drink.

"Whoops," I giggle as the icy cold bubbles spill down my cleavage.

I'm definitely drunker than I'd planned to be. Wow, this stuff gets you blasted. I've only had two small glasses. There's more of this one down my front than down my throat, but I feel so wobbly. It's a nice wobbly, but there's a niggles at the back of my mind that maybe I ought to leave. What if I react to the alcohol?

Valentino leans into me. "Keep that up, and you'll have me thinking about what it would be like to sip champagne off your tits all night."

I can't help myself. I gaze up at him from beneath my lashes and my tongue flicks out across my lower lip. "Maybe that's exactly what I'm hoping you'll think."

Oh, my God. What is wrong with me? It's as if some confident, sexy woman has taken over my body.

“Naughty girl,” he replies with a wicked smile that makes my blood fizz. “I like naughty girls.”

I angle my head. “Is that right?”

“What’s this, then?” a second voice comes from behind me. “Who’s being bad?”

My heart sinks. It’s Kirill. When’s he going to get the message that I don’t want him around?

“No one,” I snap.

“Relax, Mackenzie,” he tells me. “We’re only having a bit of fun. Isn’t that what you’re here for, too?”

He’s right. That’s exactly what I’m here for. And through my champagne goggles, Kirill no longer seems half as scary. In fact, he’s grinning at me, and his smile makes him seem friendly.

He can dance, too, I notice with approval. His muscular body moves in perfect time with the music, and a small crowd gathers around him, creating a circle with him in the middle. He moves his hips like a stripper on stage, and it’s clear he knows he looks good. Suddenly, he drops down, landing in a press up position from where he appears to be fucking the floor. People whoop and holler. He rolls to one shoulder, and then flips himself back up so he’s on his feet.

Okay, so that was kind of impressive and kind of hot. Despite myself, I’m clapping and hooting along with everyone else. I feel like I’ve seen a different side to Kirill.

I drink more champagne, and then find myself sandwiched between him and Valentino, and I grin from ear to ear, forgetting all the bad shit for one blissful moment.

Across the dance floor, I spot Dom standing, motionless, his arms folded across his chest. He’s staring right at me. What a prick. I bet he hates seeing me having a good time with his friends. If it’s something I can use to piss him off even more, then I will.

I force myself to flirt with Kirill too, flicking my hair, and leaning in too close to him whenever I speak. I catch him

staring at my tits and put my shoulders back and push them out even more.

Maybe I'm playing with fire, but right now, I'm happy to get burnt.

Chapter 12

Mackenzie

MY BRAIN APPEARS TO HAVE SWOLLEN TO TWICE ITS SIZE overnight, and it is pressing against the inside of my skull. My eyes are gritty and sore, and my mouth tastes like something has crawled into it and died. This isn't good. I need my meds.

I didn't draw the drapes last night, so the morning sun is hitting me full in the face. I turn my head and groan. I need water, pronto. Then meds. Then food.

What can I remember? I search my poor, dehydrated brain and try to put the pieces together. I recall the fight with Dom, and then dancing, and the champagne, but I didn't drink enough to feel this bad, surely. I was careful. My heart sinks. Fuck, was I flirting with Kirill? I was definitely flirting with Valentino. What happened after? Did it go any farther than just flirting? How did I get back to my room?

What the fuck happened last night, and how the hell did I get so damn drunk?

I literally have no idea. As far as that part goes, my mind is a complete blank.

Groaning once more, I half sit and force my eyelids open. There's a glass of water and a couple of Advil on my bedside table. Where did they come from? I'm pretty sure I didn't put them there. There's something else as well. A note.

I sit up fully, the sheet falling away from my body.

I'm completely naked.

My heartrate kicks up a notch, bouncing off the inside of my ribs. What the fuck? Why am I naked? I never sleep naked. Where are my clothes? I spot my silver dress near the bedroom door, and my shoes have been tossed to one side, leaving a trail. Shit, my underwear is next, my panties left in a tiny puddle of silk beside the bed.

No, no, no, no, no.

What the hell did I do last night? I've got a feeling the note will give me a clue.

With a combination of curiosity and dread, I pick it up and open it.

My jaw drops.

Thanks for a fun night. Los Demonios.

Mentally, I translate. The Devils. Wasn't that what Camile had told me everyone called Dom, and Valentino, and Kirill? The three of them. Did that mean they were all here last night? Did they put me to bed, naked? Or did something else happen?

I feel sick. Literally sick. I think I'm going to puke. My mouth fills with a rush of saliva, and I throw myself off the bed and race to the bathroom. I get there just in time and vomit a hot acidic rush of old alcohol into the bowl. My skin is clammy but cold, and tears fill my eyes.

I need to check for any signs that I had sex with them. *Them?* Oh, God. Did I fuck them all? Surely, I'd remember something like that. I'm pretty sure I'd be feeling the aftereffects too.

Gingerly, I reach between my thighs, feeling for any signs that I've had sex. Everything feels normal. I'm not swollen, and there's no sign of semen. Maybe they used a condom, but I'm pretty sure I'd be sore if I'd been with three men. Even if I'd been with one, I'd be able to tell. It's not like I'm some blushing virgin. I have experience.

I groan again and lower my forehead to the coolness of the toilet rim. I'm still not one hundred percent sure that nothing happened, though. Even if we didn't have full sex, that didn't mean that a sexual act hadn't taken place. Was it really all

three of them? Even if they didn't lay a hand on me, they saw me naked.

Tears stream down my face. Fuck. What the hell is wrong with me? What is it about me that attracts these kinds of men? Do I have a notice written on my forehead that reads 'up for some sexual assault?'

I'm going to have to ask them, I think, but then immediately can't do the idea. No, I can't do that. It would be mortifying. But what could be worse? Not knowing? Having that hanging over me?

I'm pretty sure Dom is going to let me know exactly what happened soon enough. He'll use it to crow over me, probably to make his point that he got me all figured out, and yes, I am a whore. Three men at once? My God. It won't matter that they're the ones who took advantage of me, that I was the one so drunk I can't remember a thing. They're known here. They have a reputation and power. I'm the newbie.

I think of something else and want to cry all over again. What if this gets back to my mom? She'll be devastated, especially after what happened with the professor. She'll think there's something wrong with me—that I'm broken. Maybe there is. I can't let that happen. She's already trying to figure out how to live with a broken heart, and finding this out will destroy her. I can't do that to her.

No matter what they say, I can't make a fuss about this, or it will definitely get back to her. Besides, I remember what Camile told me last night about the girl who killed herself. She said the police were called, but they were paid off to go away. Is that what would happen if I made a complaint against the Devils?

I'm heartsick as well that Valentino would treat me that way. I know I've only known him a matter of days, but I'd honestly thought he was a decent guy. This blows that idea out of the water.

A memory hits me then. Of Kirill at the bar with Verity and the other girls when they were buying champagne. He topped up my glass, didn't he? I definitely recall as much.

What if he put something in there? He's depraved enough, I do believe. What if Kirill roofied me, and that's why I feel so bad? Is that the reason I can't remember much? Shit.

Normally, I'd be thinking about calling the cops, but I can't do anything to alert people to Mom and myself being here. It's too dangerous for us right now, and we need to keep a low profile. It makes me realize how vulnerable we are. I reassure myself that it doesn't seem as though anyone has touched me.

I need to sort myself out. I have class, and I can't let my mom see me like this. Knowing her, she'll stop by shortly and ask how my night went, and then I'll have to lie. Not about all of it, but certainly about this part.

I nip back into the bedroom and take the Advil—though it feels a little like accepting poison from a monster—and drain the glass dry. Then I get in the shower and let the hot water run over my face, drumming on my closed eyelids, hoping it'll wash away everything that happened last night.

When I know I'm running out of time, I turn off the water and get out. I dry myself off and dress in the baggiest outfit I can find—a pair of sweats and an oversized tee. I don't care that it looks like a sack on me. I don't want to be noticed. I just want to vanish into the background.

I could have done with running myself through some sun salutations—it would do both my body and my soul a whole lot of good—but I don't have time.

I'm sick with nerves at the thought of bumping into any of the Devils. What will they say to me? At least, with the weird way the classes are organized around here, I won't run any risk of bumping into them during lessons, but we have a Sociology lecture later this week—a subject I'm sure everyone has to take—and they'll be there for that. I wonder if Camile can help to fill in any of the blanks.

I manage to sneak out and avoid a conversation with Mom. I feel bad not saying bye to her before I set out for the day, but it's better she doesn't see me like this.

Not wanting to see anyone in the cafeteria, I avoid it and make do with some soda and chips from a vending machine. Not exactly healthy, but the grease, salt, and caffeine will do me good. I eat out on an embankment around the far west side of the campus, where not many people tend to gather from what I've seen.

When it comes time for class, I gather my courage and say a mantra in my head, repeatedly.

You're a bad ass bitch, and you got this.

By the time I enter the small room, I've tricked my nervous system into cooling down and asserting a sense of calm. Ever since I found meditation, yoga, and manifestation, it's helped me cope with some super dark times. I'll be damned if the stuck-up kids here manage to drag me down. I've been through far worse.

I smile as I enter the room as if everyone in here is my bestie. Camile waves at me from the corner of the room and I walk over to her.

"Hey, sexy lady," she says with a soft laugh. "You got the guys revved up last night."

"Yeah, about that." I lower my voice. "I was drunk, and I can't remember what happened. Did I leave with the Devils?"

"God, no. You think I'd let you go with Domenic?" She shudders. "You danced with the Devils. Hey, that could be a song. I danced with the Devils," she sings.

I roll my eyes but I'm smiling, too, even though it feels forced.

"Even Dom?"

"Yes, even Dom. Well, sort of. He kind of hovered around like an angry cloud. Then Kirill got all hot and heavy and did his stripper routine again for you, while you perched on a stool laughing. But you started to sway, and you were clearly inebriated, so I said I'd take you home, but I couldn't hold you up. In the end, Valentino walked back with you and me, holding you up. When we got to your room, Valentino helped you onto the bed. I got a call, so I waited outside to take it, but

he was only like three minutes. I swear if he'd been long, then I'd have checked in." She shrugs. "He came back out, said you were in bed, and that was that."

"I woke up naked," I tell her. "I hope he didn't see me naked."

She frowns. "I mean, girl, you were *gone*. Out of it. I don't think he had time to do that, and I was right outside the door. I'd have heard something because we could hardly hold you up. I figure you must have gotten up in the night and taken your clothes off and you just can't recall it."

I frown. Maybe, but it seems a stretch. Then again, if she says he didn't have time to strip me naked... Not that there would take much stripping. A dress and a thong? It wouldn't take a lot to get those off me, would it?

It's a relief to hear her version of events, though. I'd been painting a far worse picture in my mind about what had happened. Still, I don't understand how I got so drunk.

"Did I drink a lot?" I ask her.

She shrugs. "Babe, I can't tell you. I was dancing, you were sipping away at your champagne, and then you were dancing and I was drinking, then we were all dancing." She laughs. "You're okay now, though. *Bien está lo que bien acaba*, as my mom likes to say."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

"What begins well, ends well. Like the Shakespeare quote, I think. You need to stop worrying."

Deciding that she is right, and I've driven myself half mad with my worries, I smile at Camile and change the topic. "So, it's wild around here, huh? Is it like that every single night?"

She laughs. "Not every night. Some nights you go to the bar and there's hardly anyone there. Other nights, it's busy. Friday is always packed, though, and it's way crazier than last night."

Crazier than last night has me envisioning the final days of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The door opens with a bang against the wall, and Verity and her little clique of hangers-on strut in. Her gaze sweeps the room, and when it lands on me, they turn to two chips of ice in her face.

“She won’t like the attention you got last night.” Camile shakes her head and looks down at her workbook.

“You said Dom wasn’t hanging around me in that way, and he’s the only thing she cares about.”

“He was still focused on you,” she whispers. “If you ask me, it’s creepy.”

“Creepy how?”

I try not to look toward Verity as she walks by. She takes a detour right past me.

“You look pale,” she says with a sickly-sweet smile. “Aww, hungover?”

I frown at her. “A little.”

She shrugs. “Maybe you ought to stay home and leave the partying to the grownups.”

Verity turns her back on me and walks to her desk where she takes her seat, but I can feel her gaze burning a hole in the side of my face once she’s settled.

“You were saying about Dom?” I say to Camile. “You think he’s got an issue with me?”

I already know he has, but I want to see what it looks like from an outsider’s point of view.

“Yes. I don’t know what it is, exactly, but he’s too intense around you. It’s like he’s focused on you but with anger, or even hate. I don’t say that lightly. I’m good at reading people. Be careful around him.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. He’s a deeply fucked up person. He and Kirill give me the chills. Valentino seems nice, though.”

“Tino?” She rolls her eyes. “He has the charm, I’ll give him that, but nice? Ask yourself this. If you see a shark and it

seems friendly, but it hangs around with all the other sharks in the ocean, it's still a predator, right?"

I consider her words. "I guess..."

"I'm just saying be careful is all. None of them are remotely trustworthy in my opinion. It is why I keep my head down and try to stay under the radar until I'm out of here."

Two students I've not seen before walk into the room. They're striking girls, one with long red hair and one with a short black bob. Verity mutters, "Trash," under her breath, and she somehow makes it loud enough to carry around the room.

"What gives?" I ask Camile.

"They're here on a scholarship. We hardly have any people here who don't pay, but they have to take so many, or they'll be investigated. As you can imagine with the kind of parents sending their kids here, anyone from outside our world isn't treated too well."

What world? The kind of rich elite they are? They are that bad? I open my mouth to say something but snap it shut when Nataniele walks into the room.

"Class." He nods.

"Good morning, Dean Rossi," the class say as one.

"Today I am taking the class, as your regular teacher is sick. So, I believe we are reading a classic of literature, *Great Expectations*?"

"Yes, Dean," Verity simpers at him with a soft smile.

"She's so far up his ass, she can see his tonsils from the other end," Camile whispers.

I snort laugh and try to pass it off as a cough when Nataniele's head swivels my way.

"Something amusing, Mackenzie?" he asks.

"No, I, erm, got something in my throat."

"Yeah, Tino's dick," Verity says, loud enough for me to hear but not Nataniele at the front of the class.

Her words make my cheeks burn, but they also make me hot and bothered as the images of doing that to Tino flit through my mind. He's undeniably gorgeous. He's also got a sexy kind of power around him. Unlike Kirill, who goes through life seemingly showboating, whether by openly intimidating people or dancing like Magic Mike. Tino, on the other hand, is quiet but charismatic. He's got that soul-deep confidence, I do believe, where you don't need to show off.

Dom, on the other hand, simply acts like an asshole to most of the people around him.

Tino has the looks and charm to go through life being laidback and easy-going, and it makes him hard to resist.

"Well, now that you've cleared your throat, why don't you read for us?" He smiles at me, but it's cold.

"I don't think your new stepdaddy likes you very much," Verity whispers again.

"Ignore her. Just read. Page fifty," Camile says.

I hate that the term started before I arrived, so I missed some lessons. Opening the book at page fifty, I get to my feet and begin to read.

"Louder, please," Nataniele demands imperiously.

He's enjoying this. Being an asshole to me is giving him satisfaction, and he's loving this. He knows what I did. He has that knowledge to hold over both me and my mom.

Fuming, I read, trying to keep the pout out of my voice. If he knows he is getting to me, he'll probably do it more.

I ought to speak to Mom, but that might cause issues between them if she says something.

He doesn't pick on me any further, and I finish reading after ten pages, my face on fire by the time I sit down.

"Thank you, Mackenzie," Nataniele says. "Now, what do we think is meant by this chapter's focus on the way Pip behaves to others? Is he a hero in any way? Or is he as deeply flawed as everyone else in the story?"

A heated debate starts, but I zone out. As the minutes tick by, dragging us closer and closer to lunchtime, I know sooner rather than later, I will see my nemesis Dom again and his hangers-on, and I'm dreading it.

Chapter 13

Kirill

WHEN MACKENZIE ENTERS THE CAFETERIA AT LUNCHTIME, SHE looks nervous. She ought to. The girl got drunk out of her mind last night and ended up dancing with me and Tino, and it was the hottest thing I've seen in a long time. I can be a cocky asshole when I want to be, and most women love my body and my moves, but Mack seems somewhat immune to my charms.

I think I scare her.

My cock quite likes scaring her. I like that she's nervous and unsure around me. Would she be like that if we fucked? I think she's scared of Dom, too, but in a different way. She seems to hate him along with the wariness.

Tino, though, he's got her panting already. Women love him, but they all misjudge him.

He's a dark horse, Tino. He's got secrets I couldn't guess at.

My phone vibrates, and I glance at it to see it's my father demanding an update on how it is going for me here.

I swipe my cell from the table and stalk out of the lunch hall, giving Mack a wink as I pass by. I grin at the girls walking down the hallway, and smile casually at two of the Vipers, before I push my way through the doors into the center of the quad.

Walking across the gravel, I keep my cool, giving the odd nod or smile at those I pass, until I turn right and find the quiet corner I need.

Then I sit and try to control my breathing. Seeing that word on my phone, *Father*, makes me sick and dizzy. I hate it. This weakness I have. This fear. Nothing scares me in this world except for that man, and my deepest, most shameful fear, the dark itself.

My father is a tough man who believes you can't be Bratva unless you've suffered. "Son, the Russian soul is nothing but suffering. It's what we are built upon. You must suffer in order to be strong."

The beatings were not the worst thing. I carry with me physical scars from when I was as young as five, but I survived it. Harder to shake have been the internal scars.

My weakness.

Two things trigger it the most. Seeing his name on my phone, and the dark.

The motherfucking dark.

What grown man fears the dark? I hate it. Despite that, I can't control it.

Thank fuck we have private dorm rooms here and not shared dorms, because my big secret is the fact I sleep with a low light on. Getting trapped is also a head fuck.

I re-read the message from the man who gave me this weakness and grit my teeth. I type a quick reply.

Grades are good, Father. So far, all A's and one B. I will be fighting again soon.

The reply comes quickly, the three dots appearing, disappearing, and finally solidifying into text.

Make sure when the fight happens, you win. No one defeats the Bratva. Use any means necessary.

What kind of school sanctions physical, no-holds barred fights between its students? Verona Falls University, that's what kind.

I look up at the looming building. This is a place built entirely on money made from blood. Its foundations are

soaked in it. I'm surprised the river which runs around the outside of the western quadrant doesn't run red.

The windows are mullioned, and at night they glow from the light of the lamps outside. My room faces inward, toward the courtyard, which sucks for me. If I had one of the rooms facing the front, I could simply leave my curtains open, instead of having to turn on my light.

Fucking pussy. My father's disparaging tone rings in my ears. If he knew, he'd beat me black and blue, and he'd be right to.

With the sour taste of self-loathing coating my tongue, I shove my hands in my pockets and put my head down. I go back to the cafeteria to get myself some lunch.

The moment I enter the busy corridors, I snap back into my role. That of the scary Russian dude who will fuck you up, but also knows how to have fun. I grin at the right people, glower at the others, and generally put on a show.

Dom is the brooding, miserable one among us. Tino is the well-adjusted one, supposedly. Someone has to be the party animal who likes a good fight.

Not that we're allowed to fight, until it's our turn. In the ring.

When I enter the cafeteria again, Mackenzie is walking toward a table in my direct path, carrying a tray of food.

She glances at me, and her expression makes all the sticky shame I'm feeling coalesce into something else entirely. Her expression isn't flirtatious, as I might have expected after last night.

It's also not naked fear, though being a freak, I normally like people to be frightened of me. No, now there's an added air of faint disgust in the way she looks at me.

Does this bitch think she's better than me now?

Has one stupid night of sexy dancing with her given this girl the impression that I'm in any way to be toyed with?

Fuck her.

I speed up a little, and as she nears the table, casually stick my foot out and trip her.

With a small cry, she goes flying, landing on her knees, her tray of food scattering under the table.

A burst of laughter emanates from a nearby table, and I turn to see Verity and her friends giggling.

Mackenzie is trying to grab her food and put it back on her tray. She turns to me, and her face is bright red.

I cross my arms and simply watch her as she crawls about on the floor. I like seeing her on her hands and knees. I immediately decide I'll see her this way again soon, but preferably with fewer clothes.

“You need a hand with that?”

Tino appears like a knight in shining armor.

She's flustered. “Oh, erm, I'm... it's okay.”

“Hey.” He puts a hand out and touches her arm. “Let me.”

I catch his eye, smirk at him, and leave him to his savior routine.

Then I take a seat and plan some more ways I can play with the new girl.

Chapter 14

Mackenzie

FUCKING KIRILL.

He tripped me deliberately. I know he did. He saw me coming and stuck out his foot.

The tiny amount of defrosting I might have felt toward him freezes right back up again, but Valentino is on his hands and knees, helping me pick up my dropped tray. He sets it on a nearby table and helps me up, too.

I feel better, having him with me. He's like a shield against all the rest of this shit.

"I can get you another?" he offers. "If you'd rather not eat food that's been on the floor."

"It's fine, Tino. It's all prepackaged. But thank you."

I sit in the same spot where he's put my tray. The rest of the cafeteria have gone back to their lunches; the entertainment over for now.

Valentino slides into the seat next to me, and I'm fully conscious of how close his thigh is to mine. I'm tempted to lean into him, closing the tiny sliver of space, but I hold back.

"And how are you feeling after last night?" he asks. "I'm sorry if I gave you too much champagne."

He really does appear contrite. His lips pinched, nostrils flared, brow drawn down.

"It's not your fault. I'm an adult. I should be able to know my own limits. I just got carried away."

One corner of his mouth turns up. “Is it bad that I enjoyed seeing you getting carried away?”

I glance away, pressing a return smile between my lips. I shouldn’t be encouraging him.

“I’m paying for it today.” I remember how I woke up this morning. I’m embarrassed to ask him, but I need to, if only to set my mind fully at rest. “Camile says you helped put me to bed last night.”

“That’s right. You were a bit wasted.”

I bite my lower lip. “When you put me to bed...was I naked?”

His eyes widen, his brow lifting. “Naked? No, you were still in your dress. I took off your shoes ’cause they didn’t exactly look comfortable to sleep in, but that was all.” He seems to think of something. “Oh, I did get you some water and painkillers, too. I guessed you’d probably need them in the morning.”

I remember the note. “You’d left me a note that was signed from the Devils. I thought maybe there was more than one of you.”

“Oh, shit, sorry. Force of habit. It was only me.”

Much of the stress I’d been experiencing since waking up this morning leaves my muscles, and I let out a deep sigh of relief. I wonder why they go around signing notes as the three of them. Do they get with women together? The thought has a momentary throb of excitement pulsing at my core, but I push it away, disgusted at myself.

“Thank you for taking care of me.” I smile.

“Anytime...and Duchess?”

“Yes?”

“If I ever get you into bed naked, I absolutely guarantee you will not be waking up alone the next morning.”

My cheeks flush with heat. “Oh.”

He nudges his thigh against mine and leans in closer, lowering his voice. “And I love seeing you blush, too. Such a pretty shade. Makes me wonder what other parts of your body would turn such an enticing color.”

I draw in a breath, and my nipples tighten. A rush of warmth floods between my thighs, and I press them together. I want Valentino. There’s no doubting that. The last thing I need is to get involved with another man, but dating Tino will give me some kind of standing in this place. He’ll protect me from the likes of Dom and Kirill, and he might even get Verity off my back. Maybe it means I’ll be using him, but I’m past caring.

“Which parts in particular?” I find myself murmuring.

“I bet your ass would look incredible with my handprint on it.”

I can barely believe we’re having this conversation while sitting in the middle of the cafeteria, surrounded by people. He’s so blatant, and while it excites me, I’m also not the kind of person to be so obvious.

“Tino!” I exclaim.

He grins. “You did ask.”

“I know. Forget I said anything.”

The grin doesn’t leave his face. “Not going to happen.”

“What are you two talking about?” Dom interrupts us.

Jesus. Talk about a bad penny. He just keeps showing up.

I pick up a couple of items from my tray and get to my feet.

“None of your business.” I glance down at Tino. “See you later?”

“Definitely.”

I shoot a final glare at Dom and then stalk out of the cafeteria, careful to avoid any misplaced feet this time.

I've got thirty minutes until my next class, and I'm feeling well enough to spend that time on some yoga practice since I missed my normal morning session. Though I'm sure the university has a gym somewhere, I've yet to find it. Besides, I want privacy, so I head back to my room.

I reach my bedroom door and fish my key out of my purse.

"Mackenzie, there you are." I turn at my mother's voice.

"Oh, hi, Mom."

"I've been worried about you."

"You could have called me or texted."

She folds her arms. "I did."

I realize I haven't checked my phone in a while. I've been too distracted. "Sorry, Mom."

She places her hands on my shoulders and looks into my face. "You look tired, Mackenzie. Your eyes are bloodshot, and you're pale. You know you need to take care of yourself."

"I know, Mom. I'm sorry. I guess I got a little carried away last night."

She gives me a half-smile. "I want you to have fun with your new friends, but you need to take it easy." Her expression grows troubled again. "You haven't said anything to anyone, have you?"

"Jesus, of course not!"

Right now, I'm just trying to convince myself that nothing happened.

I'm tempted to tell her to let Nataniele know he should take it easy on me, too, after the lesson this morning, but I don't want to put her in the middle. She's already sacrificing so much for me. If I'd never been born, we wouldn't be in this mess now. Mom might still have lost Dad, but she'd be free. She wouldn't have been saddled with hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of medical bills, and she wouldn't have had to sacrifice her hand for my freedom. She could be living her

life, traveling, or meeting a man she actually wanted to be with.

Everything is all my fault.

Chapter 15

Mackenzie

THE REST OF THE DAY PASSES WITHOUT INCIDENT. EVERYONE IS planning to party again tonight, but I've bowed out. I learned my lesson yesterday. Instead, I walk some of the grounds, learning a little more about the area the university stands on.

It's lush and green and surrounded by tall oaks—the same trees which created the tunnel of branches on our approach to the university. I can hardly believe it's only been a couple of days since everything happened. I'm still on edge, terrified that the police will catch up with me, but it's starting to feel a little like it was all some terrible nightmare.

There's a cooler nip to the air tonight, as though fall is finally upon us. I'm looking forward to watching the leaves turn red and burnt orange, and to have the excuse to curl up under a blanket with a good book and hot cocoa.

“Evening, Duchess.”

I spin at the use of my nickname to find Valentino standing behind me.

“Valentino. What are you doing out here?” Has he been following me? I have a sneaky suspicion he has.

He gestures at his sneakers. “Just out for a run.”

“Oh, I see.” Now he mentions it, he's clearly been running. His dark hair is damp with sweat, his tanned skin glowing. Why was I being so distrustful? Paranoid much?

“What are you up to?”

“Walking,” I tell him. “I wanted to see some more of the university.”

He gives a cheeky grin and glances from side to side, checking we’re alone. “Let me show you a part you haven’t seen before.”

“What part?” I ask.

He hooks his arm around my neck, in that slightly possessive way he had in the corridor the previous day. “I’m going to show you my room.”

Maybe I should be grossed out at being this close to his armpit, but he smells of clean sweat, with pheromones pouring off him in waves. I have to resist the urge to lick the side of his muscular neck.

“Your room? Is that allowed?”

“Who the hell is going to say I’m not allowed to have you visit my room?”

For some reason, it’s Domenic’s intense stare that jumps into my head, but I shake it off.

I give a small laugh. “No one, I guess.”

I feel like I’ve lost control of my feet, anyway. Tino propels me forward, across the grounds, until we’re back inside. We walk a long, narrow, stone-walled corridor and then take a curved back staircase I haven’t come across before.

“Here we are,” he says.

Before we’re barely through the door, he grabs me and slams me up against the wall. His mouth claims mine, kissing me with such intensity, he steals my breath. His hand is in my hair, knotting at the roots. His thigh presses between my legs, connecting with my pussy and giving me something to grind on.

A groan of both surprise and desire escapes my lips. I’m not the sort of girl who normally does things like this, but the stress and horror of the past few days have left me so on edge that if I don’t take that edge off, I’ll crack.

He breaks the kiss long enough to say, “Make that noise again, Duchess. I want to hear all the sexy sounds coming from your mouth.”

His fingers tighten in my hair, and he pulls my head back, automatically lifting my chin. Then his mouth is on my throat, sucking, and licking, taking tiny pinches of skin between his teeth.

I moan again, knowing he likes it.

“That’s right, my sweet girl. Moan for me.”

I do, and his other hand cups one of my breasts over my shirt, pinching the hardened nipple underneath. Arousal condenses deep inside me, and I rub myself against his thigh like a cat in heat, my body craving his. My mind needing the obliteration of wild sex to destroy the dark thoughts, for a while, at least.

Maybe I should be repelled at a man’s touch, but I’m not. I’m still a hot-blooded woman with needs, and right now, Tino is offering to fulfill them. Maybe I’m also using this as a way to eradicate my last sexual experience—to replace the memory with something better. Hell, maybe I just need a taste of freedom after Paxton controlled my every breath, or so it felt, for those last few months. There’s a defiance in me doing this, and a small, dark part of me revels in it.

“Now, let’s see those tits,” Tino growls. “You teased me last night, only getting a peek of them in that sexy dress.”

He yanks my t-shirt over my head, and then unclips my bra. It only takes him a matter of seconds, and suddenly I find myself topless. I almost protest, but then his hot, wet mouth covers one of my nipples, while his fingers play with the other one, pinching just enough to hurt, and all coherent thoughts fly out of my head.

He sucks and bites, feasting on me, and with every second that passes, my desire deepens. I’m getting ahead of myself, but I can’t seem to say *stop*.

Valentino rises back up to kiss me again. My bare breasts brush the front of his t-shirt, the material rough, and I know I

want to feel him. Skin against skin. I grab the hem of the offending item and drag it over his head.

Fuck, his body is incredible. He's lean, and muscular, but not in a way that says he spends too much time at the gym, like Kirill. I allow my fingers to trace the lines of his muscles, and the shapes of his tattoos—a crow, a skull, a clock, a goat with a set of curly horns. There are so many more images, but he distracts me again.

“Feel my cock. See how much I want you.”

He takes my hand and places it over the front of his gray sweatpants. Christ, he's big and hard. I can already feel the heat of him in my palm. I picture how he'll feel pushing up inside me, how much I'll stretch and how deep he'll go. I almost come just thinking about it.

But no, I can't sleep with him yet. It's only been a couple of days, and after the last sexual experience I had, there's no way I'm ready for that.

“Tino, wait, stop,” I gasp. “This is too fast.”

He draws away, his eyes wide. “Fuck, sorry. You're not a virgin, are you?” The fact he stops immediately at my words helps calm my rising anxiety.

His question surprises me. “No, I'm not a virgin.”

“Shame, 'cause I'd have loved to be inside a virgin, but then I also like a woman with experience. A woman with experience knows what she likes. She won't settle for a man who doesn't know how to pleasure her. What do you like, Duchess? Do you like it slow and passionate, or do you prefer a good, hard fucking?”

Right now, the idea of Valentino giving me a good hard fucking is enough to make my toes curl in completely the right way. A shiver of anticipation runs down my spine. I can't do that, though.

I shake my head. “No fucking tonight, Tino.”

He nods and brushes the side of my neck with the back of his fingers, sweeping my hair away, and leans in closer. His

voice is a growl as he speaks against my ear. “I know exactly what I want, then. I want that pretty mouth around my cock. I want you to take me to the back of your throat and choke me down. I want to see your eyes widen as I spill my load.”

I whimper. “Oh, God.”

He hasn’t finished. “We don’t have to fuck, but if I don’t get to taste your pussy tonight, I may lose my mind. You wouldn’t want to do that to me, would you?”

I shake my head. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“Will you let me taste your sweet cunt?”

I jolt at the coarseness of the word, but the thought of his mouth on my pussy is enough to send me wild.

“First, get on your knees for a devil, Duchess,” he says with a wicked grin.

Like I’ve taken leave of my senses, I drop to the floor. I’m only in my jeans and sneakers, my top half bare so he can still see my tits. His hand goes to the front of his sweatpants and pulls them down, freeing himself.

Oh, shit. He’s pierced. And it isn’t just the bar through the head either. He has piercings right down his length, in what I think is known as a Jacob’s ladder.

“Like what you see?” he asks from above me.

“I—I’ve never sucked a pierced one before.”

“Just take it slowly. Now, open up.”

I’m not quite sure how I went from a walk in the woods to being on my knees with a cock down my throat, but who am I to fight destiny? To fight a few moments of feeling good in a world of hurt and fear? It’s not as though I haven’t already admitted to myself how much I like Valentino.

He presses the pierced head to my lips, and I part them, allowing him to slide across my tongue. Holy hell, he tastes good, salty and musky. The piercings are cool and hard, but they quickly warm with the heat from my mouth.

Valentino fists my hair again, and he moves his hips, getting into a rhythm. I try to keep up with him, swirling my tongue around him, holding him steady at the base, but he wants more than I can give. Within minutes, he's ramming himself into my throat, and I choke and gasp.

He sees my tears and stops. "Shit, I'm sorry, Duchess. Too much?"

"A little," I admit.

"Let me make it better."

He helps me to my feet and guides me to the bed. Quickly, I kick off my sneakers, and he strips me of my jeans. I slide onto the bed in a sitting position so I'm still facing him.

"No, not that way."

He flips me around so I'm on my hands and knees instead.

"Like this. It's a better angle."

I'm not sure what he means by that, but I'm too far gone to care. I want to come.

"Spread those knees. Let me see you."

I feel so wanton and filthy like this, but I do it. I can feel his gaze on my pussy, and he moves in closer.

He slides a finger inside me. "So hot, and wet, just how I like it."

I arch my spine and push back on him. "More," I beg, chasing oblivion now.

He lowers his mouth to me and runs his tongue down over my asshole.

I freeze, catching my breath.

"Dirty, filthy, girl," he murmurs, his lips against my skin. "You like that, don't you."

Then he spanks me, sharp pain, heat flaring.

I yelp.

He gives a small chuckle. “I told you I’d like to see another part of your body flush. So pretty. So perfect.” He smooths his palm over the place where he struck me, soothing away any residing sting.

“I want you to come all over my face, got it, Duchess? I want you to soak me.”

Even the professor didn’t talk to me like this. Tino’s dirty mouth turns me on even more, and I think I might just explode. I don’t know what I’d been expecting by being with him, but it wasn’t this.

He drops to his knees and covers my pussy with his mouth from behind. His hands clamp around my thighs, yanking me closer. He eats me like I’m the juiciest piece of fruit he’s ever tasted.

He thumbs my asshole, and this time I don’t even care. The extra pressure makes everything all the more intense and sends my mind spinning. I claw at the bedsheets, writhing my back, practically sitting on his face. He spears me with his tongue, over and over, and I think I’m going to lose my mind.

My entire body is one solid knot of tension. My stomach muscles and thighs quiver. I’m so close...so...close. I’m almost there.

“Oh, yes, oh, God. Fuck.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, stars exploding in my vision. My toes curl and my body shudders and shakes. My pussy clenches and pulses, sending a fresh rush of wetness onto his tongue.

I’m left a panting, sweating mess. Every muscle in my body has turned to jelly, and my head is swirling.

Behind me, Valentino sits back on his haunches. He wipes his face with the back of his hand.

“That’s what I like to see, the Duchess coming unraveled. Not quite so regal anymore.”

Chapter 16

Mackenzie

HIS WORDS HOLD THAT TONE AGAIN. THE ONE I THINK IS almost sneering at me, but when I look back at him, unsure, he smiles at me as if I'm the most precious thing in the world. He's still hard, and I don't want to leave him aching. I move until I'm once more sitting on the edge of the bed. Tino rises to stand in front of me.

Grabbing his hips, I pull him close. I take hold of the base of his cock with one hand and slide my lips over the head, tasting his pre-cum.

He's big, so I need to control things this time around. He lets me, looking down at me when I glance up, and sifting my hair through his fingers.

"I'll be gentle this time, Duchess, but you're going to learn to take me deep."

His words send a thrill down my spine. There's going to be a next time.

I double my efforts, and I can tell he's getting close as his hips start to move and he pushes deeper, making me gag a little again.

"Breathe through your nose," he commands, and I do as he says.

It makes it easier.

He's thrusting into me hard now, his piercings rough against my lips and tongue. With a groan, he spills hot and long down my throat.

I swallow as much as I can, but some of it ends up on my chin as he pulls out.

He smiles at me and brushes my lower lip and jaw with his thumb before pushing it into my mouth. I taste the salt of his cum and realize he's cleaning it from me and feeding it to me.

My cheeks heat at the depravity of it and only get hotter when he laughs. "That's it. Take it all and clean my thumb like a good girl."

He glances to the side, and I follow his gaze but don't see anything.

When he seems satisfied with my face and its general state of cleanliness, he hands me my clothing back as he dresses himself.

A horrible awkwardness washes over me. What now?

Does he want me gone? Do I stay? Are we going to hang out?

When I'm dressed, he leans down and tangles his fist in my hair as he bends and gives me a hard, deep kiss.

"That was amazing, Duchess. Next time, I'm going to have you sit on my face while you suck my cock."

"That sounds nice."

That. Sounds. Nice?

What the fuck? I want to curl up and die in the corner. He laughs, and it holds an element of surprise.

"Nice? I would hope so." He watches me, and something flashes across his face.

I'd almost say it might be regret, but for what? I hope he's not regretting what we just did, but everything he's doing and saying tells me he enjoyed it.

"You don't hook up often, do you, Duchess?"

I shake my head.

I'm not an innocent virgin, but my ill-fated dalliance with the professor meant I didn't date or mess around in my first

year at my previous college.

This is new territory for me. The professor liked to do things in a more civilized manner. He would open a bottle of red wine and pour me a glass. Then he'd put some music on and maybe we'd eat, or often we'd snuggle on the sofa sipping our wine. He liked jazz. I hated it but pretended to like it. Why do we girls do that?

At some point, we'd start kissing and we'd end up in bed. He'd never fall on me the minute we got through the door. Which wasn't to say he was boring. The man could be creative in bed, but he was...restrained in the run-up to the main act.

What happened on that final night was as rough as he'd ever been with me, sexually. His way of controlling me had been more of the psychological variety.

Tino just took what he wanted from the minute I stepped over the threshold to his room.

He was so intense I get a frisson that feels a lot like fear when I think of us doing this again. It comes mixed with a heady amount of lust, too, but there's definitely some trepidation there.

I glance toward the door. "Well. Thanks for a nice time." Oh, my God, there I go again.

"Duchess, the way you throw around the word *nice* to describe our encounter has me thinking I've done something wrong."

I'm about to say I thoroughly enjoyed it when he shocks me by slipping his fingers down the waistband of my jeans and between my folds. "You're wet enough. Did you come?"

"Yes, you saw."

"No faking it?"

"No."

"Good. Don't ever fake it with me." He slowly rubs my clit, and my eyes flutter closed. "Eyes on me," he demands.

I look at him as he strokes me. “Don’t fake it. I don’t like being lied to. If I fail to rock your world, you fucking tell me.”

“Okay.”

“Say, yes, Tino.”

“Yes, Tino.”

He pulls his hand free of my jeans and pats my pussy from the outside. “Good girl.”

Jesus, Tino is a *lot*.

“I, erm, ought to be heading back. My mom worries.”

“That’s sweet,” he says, but his tone tells me he thinks it is anything but.

“See you around.” I smile at him.

He grins at me as I leave, but as the door closes, I swear I see his expression darken.

I shiver and rush down the dark corridor, wanting to be back in my room.

When I arrive, I find the worst devil of all waiting for me. Dom is sitting on my bed. Shit, will he be able to tell what I’ve been doing? I’m sure my cheeks are still flushed, and my hair is a disaster. I quickly glance down to ensure my t-shirt is on the right way around and my jeans are properly buttoned.

“How did you get in here?” I demand.

I must not have locked my door. I make a note to always check before I leave.

He replies to my question with one of his own. “Where have you been?”

“None of your business.” I hold the door open, not wanting to be alone in the room with him. “Now, get out.”

He exhales and stretches out on my bed.

I grind my teeth. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Enjoying the vibe,” he says sarcastically. “You’re so fucking straight and boring.”

“You went through my things.” It’s a statement not a question. Of course, he did. Except he won’t have found the things I don’t want him to because they’re locked in my lockbox, and I have the key on me.

He says nothing, and I push the door wider. “Leave. Now.”

He gets off my bed where he’s been lazing and walks by me. He pauses as he meets me in the doorway. Leaning in, he inhales deeply.

“You stink of sex. Been playing with your pussy?”

“Get. Out.” I’m seething. I almost want to tell him Tino has been the one to play with it, but I don’t.

Instead, I aim for a mysterious Mona Lisa smile as he stares at me.

Let him wonder.

“Do you need help with it?” he asks.

His arrogant sneer makes me want to smack him.

“Trust me, Dom. If you were the last man on Earth, and I hadn’t sex for a thousand years, I still wouldn’t want you anywhere near me.”

He leans in close and shocks me when he bites the shell of my ear. It’s gentle, only a nip, but it’s fucked up and weird.

“Whatever, Duchess. We’ll see, now, won’t we?” Then he’s gone, and I collapse on my bed, a shaking, mixed up mess.

I need to change my lock and never forget to double check my door again.

Chapter 17

Mackenzie

TWO DAYS PASS BEFORE I SEE TINO AGAIN. UNFORTUNATELY, I see a lot of Dom, and some of Kirill, and I've been trying to avoid them both like the plague. Tino seems to have dropped off the face of the Earth.

I haven't been sleeping well. Nightmares have been plaguing my dreams. I don't know if it's the encounter with Tino that's brought everything back up in my subconscious or the fight with Dom, but I've been stabbing people over and over in my sleep. Each time, I burst awake, gasping for breath and covered in sweat, and I have to get up and distract myself with some yoga or a shower before I stop shaking.

I can't help wondering if Tino is avoiding me. We haven't exchanged numbers, so I'm not expecting him to text me, but I'm sure he could find me on Snapchat or something, if he wanted. Hell, he could just come to my room. There are plenty of ways he could see me again, but he doesn't, and his silence is deafening.

It does occur to me that we're not living in the dark ages, and, as a modern woman, there's nothing to stop me seeking him out, but I don't want to look desperate. As a modern woman, I can also have a random sexual encounter without expecting there to be a follow-up.

I finally see him three days after our tryst. I'm in the cafeteria when he arrives. My heart speeds up. I wonder if he'll be attentive the way he was before. Will he come over and sit with me? I'm alone because Camile is working on an

essay this lunchtime, and, despite a few friendly conversations, I haven't managed to make any other friends.

Tino glances around the room. I stiffen in anticipation as his gaze lands on me, but it sweeps past like a searchlight. He grins and heads across the room to sit with Dom and Verity.

A sour taste in my mouth takes hold. He didn't even smile at me.

I can't bring myself to eat anything. My stomach is a knot, and I feel excruciatingly on display. I keep my head down and get the hell out of there.

The afternoon passes slowly and, by the time I finally head back to my room, I'm feeling sorry for myself.

"Hey, Duchess." I turn at the deep voice.

Tino lounges against the wall by the entrance to the gymnasium. I haven't been in there yet. He's wearing gym gear, and I can't help my gaze flicking to the front of his gray sweatpants. The shape of a semi is shadowed beneath the material, and I catch my breath. A heated tingle floods between my thighs as the image of his fully erect, pierced cock jumps into my head. I see myself on my knees while he thrusts between my lips, and I can practically taste him on my tongue.

"You got a gym session?" I ask, trying to tear my thoughts away from him naked.

He arches an eyebrow, as though he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Something like that."

I sigh, trying to act nonchalant. "Well, enjoy."

I make to leave, but he grabs my wrist.

"What's with the pout, Duchess?"

"Nothing, I just need to get back."

"To your room? For what? To listen to Mommy and the dean make out?"

I yank my wrist back. "Is this how it's going to go? You got what you wanted, so now you're being a dick."

His eyes darken. “You think I got all I wanted?”

My stomach flip-flops at the naked hunger in his gaze.

His voice drops to a growl. “Oh, we didn’t come close, sweetheart.”

“Well, you’re not going about ensuring round two with this behavior.”

He cocks his head. “What behavior?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Making crass comments about my mom and ignoring me.”

“When did I ignore you?”

“Lunch.” I want to slap his smug face.

His eyes widen. “Seriously? You seemed fine, and I needed to talk to Dom. Wow, Duchess, who knew you were so needy.”

I flush and dip my head. Fuck. That was exactly what I was trying to avoid. I do not want him thinking I wanted anything more from him than he wanted from me.

“No, don’t go hiding. I like it.” He laughs.

He’s playing with me, but I can’t figure him out. Is it light-hearted, or is there a darker menace to his actions and words?

“I’m not hiding,” I lie. “I’m also not needy. A wave hello would have been polite.”

“I was holding my tray,” he points out. “I would have come over and said hi after I’d finished with Dom, but you were gone.”

I had left early. Without eating much. I felt far too on display sitting there on my own. My head is swimmy, and I realize that I ought to eat.

“I’ve got to go,” I say.

“Ah, don’t be that way, Duchess.” He puts his hand over his heart.

“I’m not. It’s fine, really. But I’ve not eaten much all day, and I need to. I feel a bit faint.”

“Are you okay?” All the mocking tone and expression disappears like a poof of smoke, and he seems genuinely concerned. His brow pulls down, his lips pinching.

“I’m fine,” I lie. “I really just need a blood sugar boost. See you later.”

I walk away because I’m getting hot and stressed. If I don’t eat, I could end up unwell. When I reach my mom and Nataniele’s quarters, I duck inside and go to their kitchen. I rummage around in the fridge and take out an apple, some cheese, and a chunk of bread. It’s basic, but it will do.

“Ah, eating pauper food?” Dom’s sneering tones make my back stiffen.

I turn to him. “Not in the mood right now.”

I pile up my plate and sit at the table. “Anyway, this isn’t pauper food.”

“It’s from the staff fridge.”

It is?

“You steal their food, though. Poor things.”

He must be bullshitting me. Why would the staff keep food here?

My skin feels too tight under his gaze. He’s watching me like he wants to see me lose it. I won’t give him the satisfaction.

“Sweetheart, there you are.” Mom walks into the room looking beautiful as ever. She could have been a movie star or a model if she’d wanted, but she married dad instead and her life took a different path.

He loved her, but their life wasn’t easy, and when he died, he left us in terrible danger.

“Glass of wine?” she asks Dom.

“Sure.”

She pours them both a glass, and he takes the offered wine and sips at it. It pisses me off the way she offers him some and

not me. I get it. I'm underage, and it's not the best thing for me, but he's treated like an adult, and I'm only a year younger and treated like a kid.

"We will be eating in around an hour, Mackenzie," Mom says. "You're welcome to join us."

I don't want to join them. Meals between the four of us are excruciating—and even worse if Dom decides to bring one of his friends along.

She pours another glass of the red wine, leaving the bottle on the table, and heads out of the room. "I'll just take this to Nataniele."

I reach for the bottle and defiantly fill my now empty water glass.

"Ah, look at the Duchess drinking wine with the grownups."

I ignore Dom entirely this time. I rummage in my bag for my tablet and, propping it up on the table, put on a YouTube video about Dickens. We have an essay on him due next week, and I figure some background information won't hurt. Then I eat, watch, and sip at my wine, all the while studiously paying no attention to Dom.

I feel him, though. His presence is like some evil spirit lurking in the room. You're aware of it even when you're not looking at it. Once I've finished eating, I down the rest of my wine and head out of the room. As I pass Dom, I give him the finger, and go back into the communal corridor leading to the dorm rooms. I get to mine and storm inside, closing my door firmly. To be sure of no unwelcome visitors, I lock the door.

God, I feel rough. I'm so tired. The stress of the past few days has not been good, and I shouldn't have downed that wine just now. Dom winds me up so much I lose my control around him. My hearing has gone strange—like my ears are plugged—and the floor is no longer steady beneath my feet.

Shit.

I need some fresh air.

Walking to the window, I reach for the clasp to open it when it hits me, the aura, and the drop I get in my stomach right before a seizure hits.

Oh, fuck, no.

Everything goes black.

Chapter 18

Mackenzie

“MACKENZIE? BABY? CAN YOU HEAR ME? YOU’VE HAD A seizure, but you’re okay. I came to talk to you and heard you as you fell and knocked the chair over.”

Mom’s voice is far away, and my limbs are so heavy.

“There’s a pillow under your head, and I’m just going to put you in the recovery position, okay?”

Gently, she maneuvers me, and then sits with me, holding my hand and stroking the back of it as she waits for me to be able to talk to her and move properly.

“Thank God I have a key,” she mutters. “Don’t try to move, darling. Just rest until you feel better.”

It’s been a while since one of these beasts has hit. I take my meds. I practice my yoga. I did drink, though. I need to stop that. I swear I didn’t drink that much, but my tolerance is probably super low. I thought I’d gotten away with it, as I didn’t have a seizure, but that, the stress, and the lack of sleep and healthy foods have all taken their toll.

I glance up at Mom. She’s crying, and I feel awful. I’ve been making Nataniele out to be the bad one, but the truth is I’m the cause of all her misery. She’d have been better off if I’d never been born. I swear there and then to never get drunk again, and to stop letting the Devils get to me. Screw them.

Screw them all.

When I’m finally able to make use of my tongue, I say, “Sorry, Mom.”

My voice is weak and faint.

“Hush. You don’t have anything to be sorry about. None of this is your fault.”

At first, I think she’s talking about my epilepsy, but then I realize she means our current situation. She’s wrong, though. It is my fault, and I don’t just mean what happened with the professor. If it hadn’t been for my seizures, we’d never have all the huge medical bills hanging over us. My meds alone cost thousands each month, and that’s not even taking into account the bills from the number of times I’ve landed in the hospital. I still don’t fully understand why Dad’s job never had decent medical insurance, but they both told me not to worry about it. Telling a kid—which I was back then—not to worry about something is completely pointless. Maybe if they’d explained it to me, I’d have worried less, but it had taken for me to be a teenager and have my own access to the internet to fully understand just how completely broken our healthcare system is. Parents shouldn’t have to go broke just because they were unlucky enough to have a sick kid.

“No, I’m sorry because I haven’t been looking after myself properly. This *is* my fault.”

She sighs. “Oh, honey. I’m not going to pretend like I’m happy you’ve been drinking.”

I widen my eyes at her perceptions.

She gives me a tight smile. “You smell of wine, and your lips are stained red.”

“Sorry,” I repeat.

“But,” she continues, “I also understand how hard this all is for you. You went through something hugely traumatic. It’s difficult enough leaving your whole life behind, and starting at a new school, but doing so this quickly after what happened, and having to navigate teenage life with your condition makes things even harder.”

Tears fill my vision, and I blink fast, trying to hold them back. I don’t want to feel sorry for myself. There are people who have it far worse than I do. I’m alive, after all, and I’m

free. Maybe I don't deserve to be. I don't want anyone else's pity, either, which is why I keep my epilepsy to myself, and it is why I lock my meds up. I don't want a cleaner to find them and talk.

The really stupid part is that I probably wouldn't be crying if it wasn't for Tino also treating me like shit. This isn't the type of person I want to be—I'd prefer to leave *him* crawling after *me*—but he's caught me at a vulnerable time in my life.

I draw a breath. "It's okay, Mom. *I'm* okay."

I am starting to feel stronger, though the familiar tiredness weighs down on my limbs. I normally need to sleep after I've had a seizure, sometimes for days, if it's been a particularly bad one.

For once, the thought of taking to my bed brings with it a wave of relief. I'll be safe there, hiding beneath my covers. Mom will bring me food and take care of me awhile.

Sometimes, even though I'm technically an adult now, all I need is my mom.

Chapter 19

Valentino

“MACKENZIE IS SICK,” DOM ANNOUNCES AS HE CATCHES UP TO me.

We’re running the track that goes around the grounds of the university. I’m bare-chested, my skin slick with sweat. My muscles are burning, my chest tight, but I like pushing my body hard. My ankle keeps tweaking with pain, and my shoulder screams, but I grit my teeth and keep going. I popped a pill before I came out, but I swear it hasn’t even touched it.

Breaking one bone is bad enough; having multiple broken at the same time fucking sucks. It fucked up my plans, too. Sports are my jam, and it’s even what I’m majoring in, though my father wasn’t happy about it. Once upon a time I’d considered going professional in football and perhaps escape my family’s business, but the attack saw the end of that. I was fucking good enough, too. I’d have escaped the cartel life, been famous, and drowned in money and pussy. Instead, my family legacy eventually claimed me, too, and trapped me in the web of vengeance and hatred that is the cartels’ world. The raid on our compound by a rival group had come silently at first in the dead of night. Once we were aware we were being attacked, it was too late to repel them all.

We got the women and children to safety, and even though I was still technically a child, at only sixteen, I stayed and fought. Big mistake. I got separated from my family and our security and cornered by the rival gang. They didn’t shoot me, thank fuck, but they beat me with sticks and broke multiple

bones. By the time my father's security found me, I needed a month in the hospital.

I live with the memory of that attack ingrained in my body daily.

“What do you mean, ‘she’s sick?’” I reply between breaths. “What’s she sick with?”

“No fucking clue. Her mom won’t tell me much either, and neither will my dad. They just say that she’s picked up something and needs bedrest.”

“You didn’t offer to keep her company in bed?” I tease.

He snorts. “Yeah, I can see her mom agreeing to that. I swear, the woman’s like a fucking mama bear around Mackenzie. She acts like the girl is eight instead of nineteen.”

“She’s nearly twenty,” I comment. “Few days from now is her birthday.”

“She told you when her birthday is?”

Dom seems jealous of my little insight.

I slow to a walk, catching my breath. “Nah, I asked Mrs. Tarnowski for her file.”

He slows to match my pace and cocks an eyebrow. “And she gave it to you?”

“Not the whole thing, but she gave me part of it. She loves me.”

“Filthy old bitch. She’s probably hoping to get a ride on your dick if she treats you like you’re something special.”

I chuckle. “Maybe I’ll let her. Pussy is pussy, right?”

Dom pulls a face, and I punch him in the arm. I’m not that desperate. My sneakers crunch on some reddish-orange fallen leaves. It’ll be fall here soon enough, and then the snow will start. Things always get interesting here when it starts snowing. It’s not as though we leave often—everything we need is provided for us on campus—but there’s a difference between being able to leave and being snowed in. People start to get even crazier than normal.

“Anyway,” I say, moving on, “Mackenzie went to a pretty crappy university before she came here. There’s no way she deserves to be at Verona Falls.”

“So why is she?” Dom wonders. “I know it’s only because her mom is marrying my dad, but what got her mom onto my dad’s radar in the first place? You say she went to a shit university, so it’s not like she’s from one of our families. It doesn’t make sense.”

I consider what he’s said. “I think it had something to do with her father. He died about a year ago.”

“Have you done some digging?”

“Yeah. Official story is he was shot during a robbery gone wrong, but I’m not sure that’s the whole truth. Why would a nobody woman and her daughter even land on your father’s radar?”

Dom scrubs his hand across his mouth. “Yeah, you’re right. There’s more to that story. I wonder how much of it we can use against her.”

I blow a low whistle. “You really don’t want her staying here, do you?”

“No, I don’t, because if she goes, her bitch mother goes, too.” He sighs. “That fucking wedding cannot happen. We need to stop it. If I make little miss perfection’s life hell, she might make her mother leave.”

“You think she’s perfect?” I ask, intrigued at how he sees her.

“She’s blonde, pretty, slim but curvy. She’s pretty damn perfect, on the outside, at least. Fucking prissy too.”

I’m not sure I want Kenzie to leave. I like playing with her, but maybe it will be fun making it happen. Breaking pretty things is always fun. It takes my mind off the pain, and the next pill. Anything to stop the screaming in my body is something I’ll latch on to. Sex works. So does hurting others.

“Maybe we can throw a very special, very private birthday party for our little Duchess? Just the four of us. I’m sure she’d

love some of the gifts we could give her.” As soon as the idea hits me, I smile.

“You really think she’d get herself in a room with the three of us?”

“Not unless we drugged her,” I say with a laugh. Then I sober for a moment. “Did you roofie her?”

Dom stares at me. “No. Fuck, man. Of course not. When?”

“The other night. When I took her home. She was seriously fucked up. I put her to bed, and she didn’t remember anything the next day. Girl had no memory of me undressing her.”

“You undressed her?”

I grin. “Of course. I wanted a look at the goods. Her body is perfect.”

It really is. I enjoyed arranging her pretty limbs all nicely before I pulled the covers over her.

Dom watches me closely. “Did you touch her?”

“Nah, her friend was lurking outside. Kenzie asked me if I undressed her, though, the next day, and I said no. Just to fuck with her head a little. Still, she didn’t drink all that much, and the girl was out of it.”

“I didn’t give her anything,” Dom says again. “Anyway, your plan won’t work because she hates me and Kill.”

“Hmm, maybe not,” I say. “But even if we don’t do that, we’ve got plenty to work with already. Any thoughts as to when we’re going to use it?”

“Can’t do much while she’s in her sickbed, though I’ve enjoyed the preview.” He smirks. “I hear Kill has, too. You were lucky to be the one to experience the real thing.”

I laugh. “Seriously, D, she was so fucking hot for it. She might have this good girl thing going on—not even one tiny wrist tattoo, for fuck’s sake—but she’s a filthy slut in the bedroom. She was absolutely gagging for it, and she wants more, too. I could see it in her eyes, even after I’d been

deliberately ignoring her for two days. She couldn't take her eyes off my cock."

He snorts. "Probably in horror."

"Horror cause my cock is a fucking monster," I say, unable to keep the pride out of my tone. "And she didn't even get to ride it yet."

"I don't see why you should get to be the one to fuck her first." He frowns as he stares at me, and there's something belligerent there I don't normally see. Does Dom hate her as much as he claims? Because he seems pretty pissed right now at me being the first to fuck her.

"Because I'm the only one out of the Devils who she doesn't think hates her." I make the point mildly.

Dom seems to let this sink in. "Maybe I can be a bit nicer to her if it means I get my dick wet."

"Why are you so upset about me being the first?"

He laughs. "Because your dick will ruin her pretty little pussy."

A couple of crows fly overhead, cawing their disapproval at us being here. They alight on one of the buildings turrets. Sometimes this place feels like living in a medieval castle.

"You have plenty of other pussy chasing you around. Verity is practically throwing herself on her back and holding her ankles wide every time you're around."

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, but where's the fun in that?" His lips curl in the corners. "I'd rather have someone who's going to fight me."

I shake my head. "You're fucking twisted."

"Takes one to know one. Now, are we running or what?"

Though my ankle twangs with pain, sending what feels like electric shocks up my leg and down through my toes, I break into a sprint. I'm still competitive, even against my fellow Devils. I pay no heed to the pain. As soon as I get back to my room, I'll take another pill.

Fuck it.

I might even take two.

Chapter 20

Mackenzie

I DON'T GO TO CLASS THE DAY AFTER MY SEIZURE. I COULD have happily gone to my seminars, as I felt fine, but Mom was worrying. I've already given her enough reason to stress out about me, so if staying in my room all day is going to make her feel better, then I can do that much.

Spending the day alone in my room gave me time to really think. For the first time in weeks, I had space to simply sit and consider all that has happened.

Some things don't completely add up.

How did my mom even know about Verona Falls and Nataniele Rossi? How did she know he'd create a safe space for us, considering what I did? Most people would have told her to get lost, or called the cops themselves, but not Nataniele.

While I appreciate the second chance, it's clear Nataniele has some pretty serious contacts. Camile mentioned they pay off the cops if something untoward happens here. How does my mom even know Nataniele? She says he's from her past, but what kind of past does she have to be involved with someone like him?

The more I think about it, the more I become convinced something else is going on. Something she's not telling me.

There's a break after my morning seminar today, and I'm in the library, trying to find information about either Nataniele or Verona Falls.

"Research?" I glance up at the deep, accented voice.

Kirill, great. My least favorite of the Devils.

“Something like that,” I mutter.

To my dismay, he sits opposite me, unloading his backpack onto the desk in front of him.

He can't see my screen, and I quickly get out of the news archives and bring up some research papers on the representations of poverty in Victorian literature for my Dickens assignment.

He looks at me across the desk, peering around his own computer. “Do you know anything about the price mechanism when it comes to economics?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No.”

“Oh. How about inflationary pressures on consumer cycles?”

“No, and no.”

I ignore him, hoping he'll get the message. Instead, he gets up and comes to sit next to me, leaning close.

“Why so unfriendly, Mack?”

I glare at him. “Maybe I don't like guys who put drugs in girls' champagne,” I snap.

His face turns dark and something truly angry grows in his icy gaze. “What did you say?”

“You heard. I was so drunk that night, and I know I didn't have enough champagne to be so trashed. I saw you pour my drink. You could have easily put something in it.”

“I don't fucking drug girls,” he snaps.

I laugh at his indignation. “Oh, you're too good for that, are you?”

He watches me and, so quickly it takes me by surprise, grabs the bottom of my chair and spins it, so I'm facing him. He widens his legs and captures my knees between his. His hands come down on either side of me, trapping me in place.

“No, I’m not too good for anything, Mackenzie, but drugging little girls isn’t how I get my kicks.”

“I’m supposed to believe you?”

“*Da*. Yes.”

“Just because you say so? You don’t like me, and you’ve intimidated me before, so why would I believe you?”

He grins at me, slowly and a little nasty. “You said it yourself, Duchess. I intimidated you. I like to see pretty girls like you unsure.”

Reaching out, he brushes a lock of hair from my face, his fingers trailing slowly back down my cheek, to my jaw, which he grips gently. I notice his fingernails are painted black today. He angles my face and brings his lips so close to mine they are almost touching, but not quite. I can barely breathe.

He smells of vanilla and spices, musky and sweet at the same time. His breath blows over my face, minty and warm.

“Your mouth is divine,” he says.

His rough thumb brushes over my lower lip, and my nipples pebble against my thin bra and t-shirt. He glances down, and his smirk tells me he’s seen.

“You see that? Now, are they hard from excitement or fear? Maybe, Duchess, it’s a mix of both, and that’s fucking heady. That’s what I like. Fear and excitement. Lust and hate. I like it when those things mix, and the person doesn’t know how to react.”

I try to take my chin from his grip, but he tightens it.

“Do you want to make a bet?” he asks.

“You haven’t got anything you can offer me that I’d take,” I reply.

“Maybe I do. I can make your life here easier. If I come sit with you at lunch, say hi in the corridor, then the others will start to treat you better too. Maybe not Verity, but the rest.”

“What’s the bet?” I ask.

“That your pussy is soaking. I bet you’re dripping for me, even though you don’t like me, and you’re scared of me. If I put my fingers in your panties, and you’re bone dry, I’ll be your new best friend. I’ll ensure all the other students treat you at least with respect. Must be hard only having one friend, and everyone else looking at you like trash.”

I don’t answer. I can’t take his bet. The bastard knows it, too.

When I speak, my voice comes out shaky. “Seems an odd bet. What would you get if you’re right and I was wet, which I’m not, but you’ve not asked for anything in return.”

“Your juices on my fingers would be enough for me, Duchess.”

I can’t speak. I can barely breathe.

“Not going to take the bet?” He kisses me once, hard enough to hurt. Then his thumb smudges my lipstick across my cheek. “Of course you’re not, because you’ll lose.”

He leans back in his chair. I glance down to see how hard he is. There’s a massive bulge in his jeans. God, he looks like he might be even bigger than Tino.

“You’re sick,” I snarl.

“You’re not wrong, Duchess. But what I am is someone who gets high on this.” He snaps his fingers between us. “This is heady as fuck, and you might hate it, but you can’t deny it.”

He puts his arms behind his head as he watches me, and I try not to look at how his muscles bunch. “Now, why would I go and roffie you and take away all this glorious head-fuckery?” Reaching down, he ostentatiously adjusts his massive cock and licks his lips. “When I take you, Duchess, you’ll be awake and aware of every damn moment.”

Then he gets up, snatches up his books, and shoves them in his bag as he walks out whistling under his breath.

When? *When* he takes me.

What does that mean?

My cheeks are hot, my nipples are hard, my pussy is wet, and my heart is pounding. God, Kirill alone is enough to make me feel as if I need to up my meds. Never mind when Dom gets involved.

These men are a disaster to my health, and I vow to avoid them all as much as I can.

Chapter 21

Mackenzie

“YOU’VE BEEN AVOIDING ME.”

I jump and turn around to see Tino lounging against the doorframe.

I had to leave the library to repair the makeup Kirill destroyed, and the nearest bathroom had seemed to be the best place. Now I’m not so sure.

“You can’t be in here,” I hiss. “This is the ladies’ restroom. Get out.”

What’s with these men and not respecting any boundaries?

He closes the door then drags the heavy metal trash can in front of it. As he steps forward, I step back.

My lipstick drops from my hand and clatters into the sink. I fumble to pick it up. “Seriously, Tino, get out.”

“You’ve changed your tune. You were all needy for my attention only a few days ago.”

“Yeah, well, things change.”

He cocks his head to one side. “What changed, Kenzie?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Sorry, Duchess.”

“Or that,” I snap.

“I came here to be friendly,” he cajoles.

“Oh, right. I’m sure you needed to put the trash can over the door to stop anyone coming in to be friendly.”

“I just wanted us to have a private conversation. There’s a film showing at the bar tonight. I wanted to see if you wanted to come with me.”

“No.”

He sighs. “Duchess, come on. What else are you going to do? You must sit alone in your room every night, staring at the four walls.”

“I don’t stare at the four walls.” I put my lipstick away and fluff my hair, some of my equilibrium recovered now. “I read or watch Netflix on my tablet. I’m perfectly fine.”

“Come and watch a film with me,” he says. “I’m not asking for anything more. Beats sitting in your room all alone. I’ll even buy you popcorn ... with butter.”

I swore off these men, but he’s right about one thing. To avoid them, I have had to sit in my room. I can’t do that forever.

Then he seals the deal. “Bring Camile. Me, you, and her. Not a date, just a movie in the bar. It’s not like half the university won’t be there.”

“You’ll buy Camile popcorn, too?” I ask, a smile tugging at my lips.

I really shouldn’t let this guy reel me in, but I’m so lonely. Mom is so wrapped up in planning her wedding, and besides, the company of a parent isn’t the same as hanging with people my own age.

It’s heartbreaking to watch my mom’s preparations because I can tell she doesn’t want to marry the man, and yet, all her time is spent on getting things in place to do so. It’s making me feel distanced from her because I know she’s only doing these things because of me.

I have no one here, except Camile, and I haven’t seen much of her.

Despite my better judgement, I find myself nodding. “Okay, but it’s only a movie. I’m bringing Camile, and you’re buying the popcorn.”

He grins at me. “Great. See you tonight, Duchess. Meet me at the bar.”

I STARE AT MY REFLECTION. I haven’t made the same mistake as the last time I went to the student bar. I’m wearing jeans and a t-shirt. The other girls can wear their sexy tops, I’m not playing that game tonight.

When I messaged Camile, she’d been excited to meet up. I didn’t mention Tino meeting us there in the message. That kind of news is better left to be told in person. I hope she’s not going to be pissed at me for turning this into a threesome—though not *that* kind of threesome!

The knock at my door has me checking my reflection one last time before I grab my bag.

“Mackenzie,” Camile says as she wraps me in a hug. “I was worried. You’ve been keeping yourself hidden away. Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry.” I hug her back. “It’s just been a lot. The move. Mom’s wedding. Dom.”

She smiles at me. “Dom on his own is enough. Say no more. The diablos are a handful.”

“Speaking of the Devils,” I say as I pocket my key. “Erm, Tino is meeting us at the bar.”

“What?” Her mouth turns down at the corners. “I was really looking forward to tonight and catching up. It’s going to be weird with him there.”

“He asked me to go with him and I refused, so he said it wasn’t a date and to bring you along. He says he’s buying the popcorn.” I nudge her.

“I can afford my own popcorn, and I really don’t want to have to speak to him all night.”

“We don’t. It’s a movie. We can sit together during the film and, after, you and I can grab a drink on our own. Deal?”

She sighs. “I don’t get why you keep letting these guys in. They’re not good people.”

She’s right, and I don’t know why I keep letting them get close to me again, either. Or why, deep in the dark at night, I find myself slick and wet thinking about them. Not just Tino, but Kirill too. Sometimes even Dom, despite telling myself I hate him. It’s a head fuck and one I wish I had more control over.

I should have learned my lesson to stay away from toxic men by now.

When we reach the bar, I spot Tino immediately. He looks hotter than ever tonight. He’s wearing one of those Henley style shirts, and it grips his athletic frame, highlighting his broad shoulders and his narrow waist. It’s not surprising I’m struggling to get my mind off him.

His dark hair shines under the spotlights above the bar. His eyes glitter as we approach, full of promise and menace, but his smile is easy.

“Hey, Kenzie, Camile.” He nods at my friend, but she returns the greeting by narrowing her eyes.

“I think that’s only like the third time you’ve lowered yourself to speak to me, Valentino.”

He doesn’t flinch or look pissed; his smile never falters. “Well, I’ll hopefully correct that tonight.”

She rolls her eyes, but there’s a faint flush of pink staining her cheeks. Camile might not like Tino, but even she isn’t immune to the man’s charms.

The projection screen is set up, and students start to take their seats. Tino orders us all drinks, Coke for me, beer for him and Camile, and, good to his word, he gets us all a huge bucket of salty popcorn.

“They make it right here at the bar, and it’s fucking awesome,” he says as he passes us our buckets.

“What’s the movie?” I ask.

“*Dirty Dancing*,” he replies.

“I’m surprised you’d watch a movie like that,” I say.

He clutches one hand to his chest. “Oh, you hurt my heart. I’m a real romantic.”

“A real douchebag,” Camile mutters low enough for me to hear sitting next to her, but not Tino, who is on the other side of me.

Right as the movie starts, two more people push their way past us and drop into the empty seats next to Camile.

“You have got to be joking.” She doesn’t even bother to keep her voice down this time.

I lean forward slightly to see Dom and Kirill now filling the chairs beside Camile.

She sends me a desperate stare, and I mouth, ‘Sorry,’ at her.

I catch Dom’s eye and glare at him.

“What’s up, Duchess?” Dom says, casually reaching into Camile’s popcorn bucket, and tossing a couple of kernels into his mouth. She snatches the bucket closer to her chest.

“What are you doing here?” I hiss.

He looks around, as though surprised to find himself in the student bar. “What? Here? In a public place? I don’t know... same as everyone else?”

Kirill leans forward, too. “Hey, Mack. We missed you.”

“What do you want with watching a film like this?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I love old movies. It’s my jam. This one’s a classic.”

I roll my eyes and sit back. They’re playing with me; I know they are. What the hell makes me so interesting? Is it just because my mother is marrying Dom’s father? It’s not like Dom is a small child anymore. Surely, he can get over not being the only person his daddy pays attention to.

Or is it nothing to do with that, and it’s simply because I’m the new girl.

Fresh meat.

Or is it that they can sense a darkness around me—*inside* me—an energy that draws them in. Perhaps, deep down, we're the same.

I struggle to focus on the movie. I'm conscious of how close Tino is to me, the way his shoulder and thigh casually press against mine. His proximity sets my entire body alight. This man ate my pussy like a fiend, and I can't help replaying the intensity of my orgasm in my head. I must be sending out pheromones like a teenage boy. While the sensible part of me says stay away, my pussy is all revved up and shouting *gimme more, more, more!*

I don't even know if Tino wants a replay, and anyway, I'd promised Camile we'd have a drink together after the movie is over, so even if he did offer—which I really should refuse—I don't want to upset Camile. She's my only real friend in this place, and I cherish that. I'm already treading a fine line by making her sit with the Devils. Dumping her to go off and have filthy, wanton sex with Tino would be a stretch too far.

He bumps me with his shoulder, as though he's picked up that I'm thinking about him. "Want to dance?"

"What? No."

I hadn't even noticed that people are getting up and dancing along with the movie, bumping and grinding. Despite myself, I smile. Their enthusiasm and energy are infectious.

Typical Tino won't take no for an answer. He grabs my hand.

"Sure you do." He leans in close. "I want to remind you how my hips move."

He pulls me to my feet, and, before I know it, I'm standing in the space between the lines of chairs, dancing with him. All of a sudden, it's not just the two of us anymore. Dom and Kirill have joined in, so I'm now in the middle of all three of them.

My arms are hooked around Tino's neck, and we bump and grind, but then he spins me around, and I find myself in

Kirill's arms. This man can dance, and I'm swept up in his moves. He rakes his bleached blond hair out of his face, a knowing smile trapped between his lips. Our hips move in perfect synchronicity, and, despite myself, the thought of what it would be like if we were fucking jumps into my head. All his focus is purely on me, his ice-blue gaze darting from my face down to where we're grinding together. Is that his cock outlined beneath his jeans? Jesus Christ. My breath grows shorter, and I find myself practically rubbing up against the impressive line. If there was no clothing in the way, I could wrap my legs around his hips, and he'd slide straight inside me. I picture us fucking right here, with everyone around us, and wetness floods my panties. My hands slide around his back and slip under his t-shirt. I'm expecting to find smooth skin, but to my surprise I feel a patchwork of lines and ridges. My brow must furrow slightly, and he notices.

Instantly, he pulls back and turns me away. I collide with a solid chest and suck in a breath.

Dom and I just stand there, me with my hands pressed to his pecs, our bodies wedged together. He stares down at me, his expression utterly unreadable. No one else seems aware of the tension between us. It's as though we're frozen in this little bubble together, and the rest of the room fades away.

He leans in and speaks against my ear. "You might think you're winning over my friends, but you'll never get on my good side."

I break the moment and step away. I hold his gaze, not wanting him to think he intimidates me. "I never thought you *had* a good side."

Chapter 22

Mackenzie

I ESCAPE BACK TO OUR SEATS TO JOIN CAMILE, PICKING UP MY popcorn from where I'd left the bucket on the floor, and shoving a handful in my mouth.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Of course, fine." I feel like she's asking that a lot of me lately. I can't be much fun.

"You looked like you were having fun out there."

"Just keeping them where I need them," I reply. "I'm looking forward to that drink."

She smiles. "Me, too."

I'm also happy to leave Tino hanging. I don't want him to think that he can just click his fingers and I'll come running.

The boys all sit back down, and I studiously ignore them, focusing on the movie. I try not to think about how I was fantasizing about fucking Kirill on the dance floor.

When the movie finishes, I grab Camile's hand and we head to the bar.

I realize I don't actually know much about her, and instantly feel bad for it. I've been so caught up in my own shit that I haven't made time for anyone else.

I'm buying. We both go for a diet Coke. I've learned my lesson when it comes to booze. I'm not promising to never drink again, because I'm sure that's a promise I'll break, but I'll definitely take it easy.

We find a seat in the corner, away from prying eyes.

“So, how did you end up at Verona Falls?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “Much the same as everyone else here. My father’s a ‘businessman’”—bizarrely, she puts the word in air quotes with her fingers— “and had money he needed to keep on the downlow. It helped that he also had a daughter who needed educating, so he sent me here.”

I’m not sure what she means by ‘keep on the downlow.’ “You mean he got a tax break by sending you here?”

She looks at me like I’m telling a joke we’re both supposed to be part of and gives a small laugh. “Yeah, exactly. *A tax break.*”

“What about the rest of your family? Is your mom...still around? Have you got any siblings?”

“I have a brother, but he’s older. He came here, too, and, like most of the guys, did really well. He’s twenty-seven now and is pretty much running Dad’s business for him.”

“Will you be involved in the business, too?”

This time she barks laughter. “Ha! Not if my dad and brother have anything to say about it. They’d prefer to use me as a bargaining chip, to marry me off to one of their contacts as an alliance, and to produce some heirs like a good little girl.”

My jaw drops. “You’re not serious? Like an arranged marriage?”

“Yeah. My mom’s marriage to my dad was the same. It’s pretty much expected. They’ve been married almost thirty years now, and they’re happy. Well, when my dad is behaving himself.”

I understand that her background is different than mine, and that I don’t know enough about it to know if that is the norm, or something to do with her particular family. I don’t want to say anything that disrespects either it or her. I can’t imagine marrying someone who my parents have picked out

for me, though. I'm not sure I can imagine marrying *anyone* right now.

"When is this likely to happen?" I ask, taking a sip of my Coke.

"After I graduate."

So soon? I swallow the drink down hard, in surprise. "Will you get to meet the guy first?"

"Oh, sure. We don't live in the dark ages. I mean, I probably already know him, or at least know of him. The families are all interconnected in one way or another."

"Oh, right. I see," I say, even though I don't.

"Anyway," Camile changes the subject, "I hear someone's birthday is coming up? Does that mean we get to party?"

I groan. "I really don't want to party." I think of how it turned out for me last time.

"What? Your birthday is on the weekend. We definitely have to party."

I also have a fitting this weekend for the dress I'm supposed to wear to the wedding. I have to make sure I'm in good form—emotionally and physically—for my mom. She's going to need my support.

"Maybe one drink," I say, "but no more."

She pokes her tongue out at me. "Spoilsport."

Chapter 23

Domenic

TODAY, MY FATHER IS INSISTING ON A FITTING FOR THE wedding suits, and I'm in an even worse mood than normal about it.

In Dad's typical style, he's brought the stylists to us rather than us needing to go anywhere. He'll never put himself out if it means putting someone else out first. Apparently, the same thing applies to his own son. The last thing I want to do on my weekend is play happy families with Mackenzie and her mom.

The thought of Mackenzie causes a fresh roil of anger to churn inside me.

She's always so fucking high and mighty. She thinks she's better than us, though I have no idea why. She's gold-digging trash, as far as I can see. I want to bring them both down, but I'm also conscious that doing so will put me on my dad's bad side, and I'm not sure how willing I am yet to completely throw myself out of his favor by destroying the people he's claimed as his.

My dad's apartment within the main building has a large sitting room, which we're in now, and a separate dining room, where we ate on the first night Mackenzie and her mom arrived. A set of double doors divide the two spaces, so I can't see Mack and her mother, who are using the dining room as a dressing area.

The tailor has an assistant with him—a young woman, probably around my age, if not a little older.

She drops to her knees in front of me, a tape-measure in hand. “Your inner leg is going to need some adjusting,” she says, wrapping the tape measure around my inner thigh.

“Get any closer and you’ll practically have your hand wrapped around my cock,” I tell her.

She blushes right up to the roots. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay. I’m just fucking with you.” I pause. “Unless you want me to actually fuck you, in which case, my room is two doors down.”

She blinks rapidly, unsure how she should respond. Maybe I’ll find her on my bed later. Then again, maybe not. I’m disappointed my dick doesn’t seem to be that interested either. There’s only one person it’s getting hard for lately, and I hate that. I hate *her*.

I haven’t seen Mack yet, but I’m hugely conscious of her presence in there. Obviously, my dad won’t see her mom in the wedding dress yet, but I’ve got a feeling they’re going to want to see what Mack and I look like together since we’ll both be standing with them at the altar.

The tailors finish up and start packing away.

A knock comes at the dividing doors, and Lucia opens it and pokes her head around. “Everyone decent?” she asks.

My father nods. “Yes, come in.”

“I wanted you to see Mackenzie in her dress.”

Lucia steps out of the way, and Mackenzie walks through.

Fuck me.

Mackenzie is beautiful. Knock out, tear my heart from my chest, tongue on the floor *beautiful*.

I’ve always thought she was stunning—begrudgingly—but this is on a whole other level. I thought we were just trying on the outfits, but she’s had a rehearsal with hair and makeup, too. Not that she really needs it—she’s gorgeous bare-faced and with her hair down—but she looks like she should be on the front of a wedding magazine.

The dress is champagne in color, with ruched sides and a corset back. The satin material hugs her curves perfectly, giving her breasts just the right amount of lift. It also has a daringly high split on one side, showing off a long leg with every other step. She's wearing strappy high-heel pumps, and I picture taking her foot in my hand and running my fingers up her shapely calf. I imagine her standing on me in those heels, the hard points digging into my skin, but she's not wearing anything except the shoes and the position she's in allows me to look up the length of those legs, to the secret place between them.

I tear my thoughts from the idea of Mackenzie dominating me.

"Stand together, you two," her mom says, a smile beaming on her face. "I want to take a photo."

"They'll be plenty of time for that at the wedding," Mackenzie says from between gritted teeth.

"No, there won't," her mom replies. "I'll be the one getting married, remember? I won't exactly have time to take my own photos. Now, stand together and smile."

We edge in closer together. Tension buzzes from Mackenzie like she has an electric fence built around her, purely to keep me away. I think she's wishing she could shove me away from her as hard as she can, and run from the room, but she's gritting her teeth and putting up with me, much the same as I'm doing for my dad.

Lucia snaps some photos, and then my father wants her attention. The two of them step away, heads together, deep in conversation.

"You look good in that dress," I tell Mack.

She blinks at me in surprise. "Thanks."

"But I bet you look better out of it."

Hell, I *know* she looks better out of it, but I'm not telling her that...not yet, anyway. I need to wait for the right moment.

She rolls her pretty blue eyes. “I should have known that was coming.”

I flick her a cold smile and keep my voice low enough that we won't be overheard. “Don't talk to me about coming. I'll be picturing my cum all over your tits. Tino says they're more than a handful.”

Her mouth goes round in shock at my words. Does she really think Tino wouldn't fuck and tell? Oh, sweet innocent girl. He does a lot more than that.

“Fuck off, Dom,” she hisses.

“You should know that I get what I want, Duchess, and if I decide that something is you, then I'll have you.”

“What?” She glares at me. “And I don't get a say in that? You know what that's called, right?”

“Oh, you'll want it. You'll be begging for it, in fact. I'll make sure of that.”

Chapter 24

Mackenzie

I WANT TO GET OUT OF HERE, AND OUT OF THIS DAMN DRESS.

Dom has gone into full on sex-offender mode, and I need to get the hell away from him before I tell Mom exactly what she's marrying into. If I do that, it'll make it impossible for her to marry Nataniele, especially after what happened, but then what would I do? Hand myself in to the police and confess everything? Mom's already begged me not to do that, not to leave her alone so soon after losing Dad. I might be willing to put myself in that position, but I won't do it to my mom.

My phone buzzes, and I glance down at the screen.

The phone is a burner, and Mom told me not to give the number to anyone back home, but I couldn't just completely cut myself off from everyone. I made Lola promise not to store it in her phone and to delete any messages I sent her. I haven't saved her number in my phone either because I didn't want to give anyone the chance to discover any of my contacts from back home, but I recognize it as Lola's anyway.

My stomach flips.

<Hey, babe. Hope you're settling in okay. Miss you! You'll never guess what. THE professor is missing.>

A rush of heat, followed by a dousing of ice-cold floods through me. Chilled sweat prickles across my hairline, and I find myself shrinking inward. She doesn't know about me and him, but she used to tease me about the way I always blushed when he addressed me in class. Plus, practically all the girls in

college used to crush over him, and half the boys, too. She's fully aware I'll know exactly who she's talking about.

The cell phone trembles in my hand.

He's missing, so it means the cops haven't found his body yet. Surely someone will go to his apartment to check on him? He doesn't have any family he's close to, no one who'll miss him outside of work. When the body is discovered, how long will it take for the police to put two and two together? How long for them to ask the right questions and learn about our relationship? My friends believe my mother is remarrying and that we're having to start over again somewhere new, but that's as much detail as I've been able to give them. There's no way for the cops to track us down here. We have no bills in our names, no rent to pay, no record of us whatsoever. Soon enough, Mom will remarry and then we'll have new names, too. While I know I've left DNA all over the apartment, I've also never been arrested. DNA is only useful if there's someone to match it to.

A male voice snatches my attention. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Dom must have noticed my reaction, the way the blood has drained from my face, the vibrations of my body.

He snatches the phone from my hand before I've even had the chance to close the screen.

"Give that back," I demand.

He ignores me and scrolls through the messages. "Who the fuck is the professor? Who is he to you?"

He lifts his gaze to mine, a strange kind of anger darkening his eyes. What is that emotion? Is it jealousy?

"What the hell do you care?"

"Who is this, Duchess?" Dom asks again waving the phone in my direction.

I make a snatch at it, but he holds it out of my reach. "It's none of your business."

"*You're* my business," he says.

I grit my teeth. “How the fuck do you figure that?”

“You’re going to be my stepsister, aren’t you? We’re family.”

“We’ll *never* be family.”

Isn’t that what he’s been telling me ever since I arrived?

He pinches his lips, his tongue pressed against the inside of his cheek as he thinks. “If you’ve got someone hassling you, you know you can just send him in our direction, right? The Devils don’t let anyone mess with what’s ours.”

My jaw drops. “Since when have I been yours? Or Tino’s? Or fucking Kirill’s, for that matter?”

He shrugs. “Since I said so.”

“Well, I’m not anyone’s, so get that idea out of your head. Now, give my goddamned phone back.”

Begrudgingly, he hands it over, and I quickly lock it so he can’t get back in.

“I hate to think of you with an ex.” His eyes narrow. “Did you fuck him? Is he the one who took your V-card?”

My cheeks burn. “Mind your own fucking business, Dom.”

But something has heated between us. He moves closer, blocking my retreat with his body.

I hate him with all my heart, I tell myself, yet my body isn’t listening. She’s too busy betraying me by getting all hot under the collar for this asshole.

Who the hell does he think he is, being possessive?

“Mackenzie?” my mom calls. “Let’s get you changed so we don’t get any marks on the dress.”

I’m so relieved to be called away. I don’t even look at Dom and, as soon as I’m changed, I make my escape back to my room.

Once there, I lie on my bed for a while and try not to think about Paxton. My chest tightens, and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the memory of him lying on top of me. It

had been so good between us at the start, I can hardly believe it ended up this way. The hot sex. The toxic power plays. The increasingly threatening behavior he exhibited before I tried to break up with him.

Dom would be like him. He's already toxic, and we've not even touched. Why do I get a lady boner for fucked-up dudes? Then again, I spent my first year of freedom tied down to an increasingly controlling man, and not having the fun my friends did, so maybe my hormones are just doing what twenty-something hormones always do. Making me want sex. Lots of sex.

Sex I missed out on for a controlling freak. I thought it was love, and by the time I realized it wasn't remotely that, it took me forever to pluck up the courage to get free. You could say I spent my first year in a cage of sorts. It might have been one of my own making, but it was still a cage, and now here I am, freer in some ways, more trapped in others, and isn't that ironic.

I try to chill out and read, but I'm a horrible mix of stressed, anxious, and confused.

I need to do something. Move. Burn off this horrible energy.

Throwing myself off the bed, I change into leggings, a tight, strappy running top with built in bra, and running shoes, and take myself outside. We aren't supposed to leave the boundaries of the college without letting someone know, which is weird as fuck, but Mom said it's because this is an isolated area.

Within the fenced-off grounds, though, there are running trails, and I hit one now. I choose the one that winds through the woods, wanting nature to soothe my restless soul.

I pound through the trees, loving the cushioned feel of the ground below me from the leaves and pine needles. It gives more bounce than the most padded treadmill belt.

After I've run for what feels like forever but is only twenty minutes when I check my sports watch, I see an incline and

push myself harder to get to the top. By the time I crest the hill, I'm panting with the exertion. Below me is a beautiful glen, and I stand, hands on my hips, as I get my breath back. I take in the view and smile as the sun shines right onto a green patch of grass. Late season flowers bloom down there, and I jog down the hill to look closer at them. There's a purple flower, which I don't recognize, and lots of pretty goldenrod. I wonder if they grew here wild or if someone planted them. They look planted, and the college is old, so maybe someone did this years ago? Perhaps a student. I imagine a young woman coming here and making a pretty spot for herself, away from the politics and backstabbing within the four walls of the building.

I test the ground with my hand, and, finding it dry, I sit and take my small bottle of water from my fanny pack. The cool liquid is a balm on my dry throat.

The sun still has some strength to it, despite the time of the year, and, when I'm finished drinking, I lie back and let the rays warm me.

I don't know how long I lie there, basking in the heat on my closed eyelids, but a dark shadow passes over me.

With a gasp, I try to jerk upright, but strong hands make contact with my shoulders, pushing me back to the ground.

Panic hits me, my heart knocking against the inside of my ribs, but then a familiar blond head swims into my line of vision.

Kirill is straddling me.

I try not to let my fear show. This man is the one out of the three who scares me the most. Other times, though, he can be fun and the friendliest. He's an enigma.

I shove at his chest, but he doesn't get off me or let up with the pressure on my shoulders.

"Get the fuck off me."

The panic builds. Is he going to do something violent? The scene with the professor plays through my mind, and I can't breathe from terror he'll hurt me...or I'll hurt him.

He laughs. “Relax, Duchess. I just didn’t want you running off anywhere.”

I grit my teeth. “God, what is it with you Devils?”

He surprises me by rolling off and lying next to me. Only our arms touch, but I jerk away. He reaches out and grabs my arm.

“Don’t leave.”

“Why the hell shouldn’t I?”

“Because you found my secret spot,” he says.

“This is *your* spot?” I ask. The surprise stops my fear for a moment.

“Well, not originally. I don’t know who planted the flowers or cleared the space of shrubs and weeds initially, but I found it last year and claimed it.”

I glance over at him and frown. “Someone must still come and clean the weeds,” I say.

“*Da*. But *who*? I asked the gardening staff, and they don’t come out here to the woods. Maybe it’s a ghost. Some student from days gone by who comes here and tends the garden in the woods in a lonely vigil.”

His words make me shiver.

Kirill turns and props himself up on one elbow as he watches me.

“You’re stunning like this,” he says.

I laugh. “What, all sweaty and hot?”

“*Da*.” He reaches over with his free hand and wipes his thumb under my left eye. “You have a lot of makeup on, but it has run.”

Oh, God, I bet I look awful. I didn’t clean my face before I went for a run, and I must have smeared wedding makeup all over me.

I sit up and wipe at my face, but Kirill grabs my hands. “Don’t. You look like you’ve been crying. It’s pretty.”

I stare at him. What a fucked-up thing to say.

I'm searching for an answer when he moves closer and cups my cheek and, as he looks at me intently, lowers his lips to mine.

Chapter 25

Mackenzie

MAKE HIM STOP.

My internal alarm screams at me. This man scares me. He's dangerous. I know as much, so why am I letting him kiss me?

I ought to push him off. Tell him no. Remind him I'm with Tino. Except...am I?

Tino probably doesn't see us as anything serious.

My mind rushes through all these thoughts, but then there's nothing but white noise as Kirill's mouth presses down on mine.

He doesn't kiss me the way Tino did, all aggression and heat. No, Kirill explores.

He surprises me because I'd have thought he'd be the roughest of the three. Instead, he gently increases the tempo of our kiss, until I'm panting for him. Like the frog in boiling water, he raises the temperature until it's too late and I don't realize that I'm already caught and cooked.

I'm held in place by his lips on mine. Mesmerized by his tongue brushing across my seam, asking for permission, before darting into my mouth and tasting when I give in.

He groans into the kiss, and the sound makes me moan in response. He breaks off the kiss to look at me for a long beat. I swear there is something close to wonder in his gaze. Maybe Kirill is deeper than I had believed.

Or perhaps he's a player who knows exactly how to get a girl under his spell.

“God, you're so pretty, Duchess. My *kukla*.”

“What?”

“My *kukla*. My doll. Did you like Tino touching you? Do you like me doing it more?”

Dom mentioned Tino, too. Nice to know he's a kiss and tell kind of a guy—not.

I pull back slightly. “Will you tell the others about this, too?”

He nods. “We don't keep secrets from one another. Unless...you ask me not to?”

“So, you'd keep a secret for me?”

“If you let me touch you, Duchess, then yes, I'll keep it secret if you want.”

Is he lying?

If he's telling the truth, there's a heady rush of power in the possibility of breaking the bond between him and the other two Devils. This could all be tricks, though. Lies and temptations.

How can I let Kirill touch me, when Tino already has? That makes me a slut, according to most people, though I've only ever slept with the professor before all of whatever the hell this is started.

“So pretty.” His fingers trail down my cheek to my collarbone and dip into my cleavage before running back up my throat. They're feather light touches that have me shivering in response.

His blue gaze holds mine captive.

I know this man can dance, and I know how well he moves, so it's not a stretch to imagine he'll be talented with his body in other ways.

“We shouldn't,” I say. “Tino ...”

“Tino doesn’t know, and, if he did, he likely wouldn’t care.”

“He wouldn’t?” I’d never admit it out loud, but I’m a little hurt at the thought that he wouldn’t care if I slept with his friend.

“Are you and him getting married, Duchess? I must have missed the invite.”

Those fingers that are softly caressing my throat suddenly wrap around it, and he grips me tightly. He’s not choking me, but he’s dominating me, and I’d be a liar if I said my body didn’t respond to it.

His thumb brushes over my artery, almost tender but with an edge of threat I find horribly sensual.

“Let me make you feel good, Duchess.”

My voice is breathy. “And what do you want in return?”

“You don’t have to touch me at all,” he says with a smile. “Scout’s honor.”

It’s a trap, that smile. I know it is, but I still gasp when his other hand dips down between my thighs and brushes right over the front of my leggings, directly over my pussy, sending electric shocks through me.

“I want to see you. I want to touch you. Make you come. No one will know. No one ever comes through here.”

I should say no, but at his stroking touch, my eyes already flutter closed, and my breathing increases.

I’ve been so on edge for days that I need a release. I can’t get drunk. Can’t confide in anyone, not really. My run helped, but it didn’t stop the energy zinging inside me. Will this?

Can Kirill silence the nervous anxiety? If only for a while?

“Lie back, Duchess,” he purrs.

His voice is deep, his accent exotic, and his words are like a spell, weaving magic around me in this strange, hidden-away glen.

Perhaps if we do this, it won't be real. Maybe this is a dream?

I know rationally it's not, but it feels like one, all hazy and delicious.

Kirill kisses me again, trailing his lips feather light down my throat and collarbone as he carefully lowers me back to the ground. He unclips my sports bra and pulls my top down so my breasts fall free. He kisses one then the other, sucking my nipples softly at first, then harder.

When he gets to my waist, he pauses kissing and looks up at me before pulling my leggings down roughly. I gasp as the material burns my thighs and then gasp again when he does the same to my panties. He lifts my ass off the ground and puts something underneath me before settling me back down. I realize he's put the sweater he had wrapped around his waist under me, so I don't get dirty.

I'm about to thank him for being thoughtful, but he halts me in my tracks. He bends down, and his mouth covers my whole pussy. He sucks on me as if I'm a ripe fruit. I think I'm going to lose my mind, but then he stops and parts my folds with his fingers, holding me wide open to him.

He stares at me until my face burns.

"Kirill!" I protest.

"Your pussy is perfection. So pretty. Like a swollen flower, full of nectar."

What the fuck? I almost laugh, but then he parts me more. I try to close my legs, but he uses his hands to keep them apart.

"Uh-uh, don't go hiding from me, Duchess. I want to commit this pussy to memory so when I touch myself at night, I have all the details of it stamped in my mind. Your clit is so swollen, and you're so wet. Are you aching for me, pretty one?"

I don't answer him because I don't know what to say. I've never felt so exposed.

“One day,” he says, “I’ll find a beautiful toy to fuck you with, open you up for me and watch as you take it.”

Dear God.

“For now, my fingers will have to do,” he finishes.

He circles my clit a few more times, then pushes two fingers roughly inside me. He pumps them in and out, and, just when I feel as if I might come, he curls them, hitting that dark, secret spot that most men can never find. My trusty vibe can find it, but most men? Not a chance. Kirill has, though, and he presses on it hard enough to make me cry out so loudly a bird takes flight from a tree nearby, chirruping a warning.

“Oh, God.” I grab his wrist as it’s too much, but he only laughs and fingerfucks me harder.

My back arches, and I press down onto him, pleasure sweeping over me, again and again.

I come so hard I think I’m going to faint. My toes curl, and I shudder and jerk, strange sounds I have no control over peeling from my lips. It’s intense, and my pussy pulses around his fingers. I soak his hand, mortifying myself at how wet I am.

“Yes, that’s it, Duchess. Show me how much you feel me.”

He pumps inside me lazily a few times, drawing the aftershocks out for me.

Then he leans back and tugs at the drawstring on his joggers.

“You said I didn’t have to touch you,” I say.

Not that right now I’d mind. I want to see the goods. It’s just part of me, the sensible part, recalls all the times he’s scared me.

“Oh, you’re not going to touch me, Duchess. You’re just going to keep those creamy thighs of yours wide open for me. I’ll take care of the rest.”

He frees his cock, and I stare in half awe and half fear. He is huge. Bigger than Tino. I think he’s bigger than Dom, too.

I've not seen Dom, but I've seen his outline.

"You like what you see?" Kirill asks with a laugh.

He's leaking at the head, and he's wet and shiny there. He rubs his thumb over it, smearing his precum all around.

I watch and my throat runs dry at the show he's giving me. When he starts to fist himself, I fall back on my elbows and let a soft moan pass my lips. My thighs fall together, and he shakes his head.

"Thighs open, baby, I need to see your perfect pussy, so swollen and wet."

I do as he says, feeling utterly debauched as he fucks his fist while he stares at my pussy like a man possessed.

"The only thing that's missing is my cum," he says, his gaze darkening. A muscle in his jaw flexes. "One day I'm going to see it leaking out of you. Dripping out of every hole."

He clenches his teeth, concentration taking over. His breath quickens, and he shifts closer.

For a moment, I wonder if he's going to put it in me, but he doesn't. Kirill angles the head of his massive cock at my parted lips and, with a curse, comes all over my pussy in huge jets.

I stare in shock at the volume of cum. The heat splatters my skin as he spurts over and over.

When he's finished, he falls back onto his knees, panting. I swallow hard and don't know what the hell to do. I'm so sticky and wet down there. How do I clean it up?

I close my thighs, but rough hands pull them apart. I look up, confused, to see Kirill staring at where he's come all over me.

"So hot," he murmurs. "You're covered in me. I'd bet you'd look amazing covered in all three of us."

His words light a new fire in me, but I shake my head. This is all too much. I need to clean up.

"Do you have a tissue?" I ask.

“No, Duchess. I have nothing. You leave me there. Coating you. Pull your panties back up and go on back to college like a good girl. A good girl covered in Kirill.”

Oh, fuck, he’s deranged.

“You know only serial killers talk about themselves in the third person,” I snap. “I need to clean up.”

“You’re so funny, Duchess,” he says with a laugh. “I suppose you can use the leaves. Or...you could pull up your panties like a good girl. It would make me so hot to imagine you going about your day with my cum coating your pussy.” He thinks for a moment. “The only thing that would be hotter was if I’d fucked you, so you’d be carrying my cum around deep inside you. I like the idea of leaving my seed in you.”

His phone goes off, and he ignores it. The ringing ends and, horrified at myself, but not wanting to use the leaves, I pull my panties up, and my leggings. I’ll take a shower when I get back.

His phone rings again, and he swears as he takes it out of his pocket. His face pales, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say fear crosses his features.

“Duchess, I must take this call.” He lifts my hand and kisses the back of it. “Thank you for an amazing time. If you ever want more, you can find me here. I come here most days around this time.”

Then he’s gone.

Jogging through the woods, Kirill doesn’t look back once.

Chapter 26

Mackenzie

I DON'T WANT ANYONE TO SEE ME AS I SNEAK BACK TO MY room. I know my makeup is halfway down my face, and I must stink of Kirill's cum. The makeup I can put down to my run, but I definitely can't blame the smell of sex on exercise.

I'm relieved to make it back without anyone spotting me. I check the door is shut and locked, but then I remember how I've found Dom in my room. I grab the chair from my desk, drag it across the floor, and wedge it under the door handle. My mom won't be happy about me barricading myself in because she won't be able to get to me if I were to have another episode, but right now I need that peace of mind.

I'm shocked at myself for how I've just acted. I don't know what's happened to me since I've arrived here.

But then I shake my head. It's not as though I was little miss innocent to start with. While on some level these guys are far more twisted than me, I can't pretend I haven't already made some seriously bad choices when it comes to my love life.

How would Dom react to the knowledge that the man who took my V-card was so much older and more experienced, and when he tried to push me too far, I stabbed a pen in the side of his neck? How would he react to that? Would he be freaked out? Intimidated, even?

Or would he be jealous? Impressed?

I push the idea away. Why the hell would I want to make Dom jealous or try to impress him? I don't want to make Dom

anything, and I need to stop my thoughts going that way. This is all a million kinds of fucked up.

Kirill is bound to tell him what happened between us, though. How is Dom going to take it? Fuck, how is Tino? Kirill said he'd keep it to himself, but now the promise of an orgasm is off the table, I believe him about as much as I'd believe him if he said the world was ending tomorrow.

Maybe it would be better if it was.

My face burns, and I inwardly cringe.

What the hell have I done?

I strip off my sticky clothes and dump them in the hamper. There's staff here who'll take care of them, but I'm mortified at the thought. There must be a laundry room somewhere at Verona Falls for all the other students. I'm determined to find it.

I turn on the shower and get the water as hot as I can stand it, then climb beneath the spray. It's not only my body I want to wash off—it's also my shame. I tell myself I have nothing to feel shameful for. I am a young, single woman, and my body is my own, and I can share it with whomever I like, but still, I struggle.

Is it because it was Kirill I was with? Or is it because I've also been with his friend? Or it is because of the way he left me, jogging off into the woods without even a backward glance, leaving me to make my way back alone, still dripping with his cum?

Yes, I think that's probably at the heart of it.

He left me feeling used.

Fuck, he gave me an incredible orgasm first, though.

Just the thought of it sends my core tingling, and I clench my thighs together. What was it Kirill said about wanting to see me covered in all their cum? Is that a thing the Devils do? Do they like to share women? Is that why he said Tino wouldn't care if Kirill was with me, too? It wasn't that Tino didn't give a fuck about me—it was because he was used to it.

Would they want to share me? I shiver with pleasurable anticipation at the thought. I remember being sandwiched between them when we'd been dancing at the movie. Now, the scene refreshes in my mind, but this time we're all naked, and there's no one else around.

Oh, fuck.

I resist putting my hand between my thighs and masturbating to the thought. I can't let that happen. I'll be so screwed if I even entertain the idea.

Kirill never once mentioned birth control either. He's lucky I have the implant. But then I remember the other thing he'd said about him wishing I was carrying his seed around inside me. It sounded way too much like the thought of me being pregnant for my liking. I can barely look after myself, never mind a baby, and besides, I think Kirill would make a terrible father. He seems to have the emotional capacity of a brick.

I soap the rest of my body, and then wash my hair. By the time I step out of the shower, my skin pink, I'm feeling better.

It's my birthday tomorrow. I turn twenty. I can't say I'm looking forward to it. My life hasn't exactly gone to plan. It's my first birthday without my dad, and the whole day, all I'm going to think about is the person who's missing. It breaks my heart, and I wish so hard that I could go back in time and change things, stop him from leaving the house that night.

I don't know if I'll get the chance to blow out a candle on a cake tomorrow, but if I do, that'll definitely be my wish.

Chapter 27

Mackenzie

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SWEETHEART!”

My mom throws her arms around me and gives me a huge hug. I’ve only just gotten out of bed, and I’m still in my sleep shorts and my hair is a disaster.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say.

“I can’t believe I have a twenty-year-old daughter. How did you get so old?”

I shrug. “I don’t know...time passing.”

“Too quickly,” she says. “I swear I was only changing your diapers the other day. It’s like I blinked, and you were grown.” She produces a wrapped gift from her purse. “It’s not much, I know...”

I blink down at the rectangular shaped present, wrapped in pretty pink paper. “You didn’t have to get me anything.” Money is tight, even if we do have a roof over our heads now.

“It’s my daughter’s birthday. Of course I’m going to get you something.” She seems anxious, biting at her lower lip. “I hope you like it.”

I tear off the wrapping paper to reveal a picture frame. Inside the frame is a photograph of me and my dad from when I was about seven. He’s crouching behind me, his arms wrapped around me, and it’s clear from my expression that I’m laughing.

My eyes fill with tears, and a painful lump clogs my throat.

Mom claps her hand to her mouth. “Oh, sweetie. I’m so sorry. You hate it, don’t you?”

I shake my head. “No, I love it.” I sniff. “I just miss him, that’s all.”

She hugs me again, hard, the picture crushed between us. “Yeah, me too.”

“I remember when this photo was taken. We were on vacation at Disneyland.”

“That’s right. I managed to convince your dad to finally take some time off.” Her smile tightens, stress-lines appear at the corners of her mouth.

“I remember,” I say softly.

I loved my dad, but, looking from an adult’s point of view now, I understand he wasn’t always the best husband. He was away a lot, leaving all the childcare to Mom, and when he was around, he was often distracted. He got a lot of calls that seemed important, and that Mom always warned me not to interrupt when I was small. He’d always been a good dad to me, though. Maybe I still see him through rose-tinted glasses, especially now he’s gone, but I’m grown up enough to know things weren’t always perfect in their marriage.

I wonder if he’d be disappointed in me now—in the person I’ve become.

“What are your plans for today?” she asks.

I shrug. “Mainly just to chill. I’m going to do some yoga, eat breakfast, read, and basically lie in bed all day.”

She seems surprised. “Are you not doing something with your friends?”

“Nope.”

Camile had mentioned a drink, but we didn’t put any definite plans in place.

She arches an eyebrow. “You sure about that? ’Cause Dom was talking to Nataniele about using the bar for your birthday party. I’m pretty sure something is going on.”

I arched my brow. “He was?”

She clamps a hand over her mouth. “Oh, crap. I hope I haven’t spoiled a surprise or anything.”

“No, you didn’t. I’m sure he wasn’t being serious.”

“Why wouldn’t he be? You’re going to be Dom’s stepsister. I think it’s sweet that he’s making an effort for you.”

Oh, Mom. If only you knew...

“Yeah, sweet,” I mutter.

I don’t know how I feel about a party, assuming what Mom says is true. I don’t want to see any of them, but at the same time a part of me is craving their attention.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Am I some kind of masochist? I’d never considered it before, but I’m starting to wonder. Does a part of me enjoy being humiliated? Was that why I stayed with the professor for so long?

“I hope I at least get to have dinner with you before your party,” Mom says.

I nod. “Of course. I’d like that.”

THE REST of my day passes exactly as I’d planned, but after dinner, I return to my room to find a party invite slid under my door.

I unfold it and read.

It says I need to be in the bar at nine p.m. and that the dress code is glamorous.

I consider not showing up, but I’m pretty sure if I don’t, one of them will come and find me. I don’t want to be dragged there against my will. I’d rather walk in with my head held high.

I text Camile. *<Are you going tonight?>*

I’m a little disappointed I haven’t heard from her already, but I guess if she thought she was going to see me at the party, she might have wanted to give me some time with my mom.

The reply comes within seconds.

<*Wouldn't miss it! Happy birthday, bitch!*>

I find myself grinning. Okay, maybe this will be fun. I am twenty, after all, not fifty. I make a promise to myself to stay off the booze, though, and I won't stay out too late.

I turn my mind to what I'm going to wear. The invitation says glamorous, but I don't want to make the same mistake as last time.

MY STOMACH CHURNS with nerves as I head toward the bar. The music blasts out—old school R&B—and, despite myself, I find my hips and shoulders moving. I do love to dance.

I open the door, and my mouth drops. The place is heaving. Strung above the bar is a banner that reads 'Happy Birthday, Duchess.' *Duchess?* Are they fucking serious? They must have had that thing specially made.

This is too much. I don't even know the majority of the people here. They're complete strangers, though they seem to know me. Faces I don't recognize smile at me and wish me a happy birthday.

Desperately, I seek out a familiar face through the crowd.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I spot Valentino approaching me. My heart thumps at the sight of him. His dark hair seems even more tousled than normal, and a cute smile touches his lips.

He holds something out to me. "For you."

He hands me a small box with a ribbon tied around it. It looks like a jewelry box. That's the last thing I expected. I hope he hasn't gotten me anything expensive. It's not like we're together. I experience a flash of guilt at the memory of my time with Kirill in the meadow. Would Valentino have bought me a gift if he knew what I'd done?

I smile at Tino and pull off the ribbon. I open the lid and find myself frowning down at the contents.

“What’s this?”

It’s a flash drive. That’s so weird.

“Look at it later,” he says. “Enjoy the party first, then open your present ... in private.”

“Are you not going to tell me what’s on it?”

He throws me a wink. “That would ruin the surprise.”

I have to admit I’m curious, but I can’t leave the party to find out. Besides, I don’t want him to think I’m too interested. I assume this also means Kirill hasn’t told him about us being together.

I barely have time to give it any more thought as Camile slams into me, giving me a huge hug and screaming ‘happy birthday’ in my face. She grabs my hand and hauls me onto the dance floor.

“This is amazing,” she says as we dance. She has to lean in and speak up to be heard over the music. “I can’t believe the Devils did this for you. You must be really making an impression on them.”

A flash of Kirill coming all over me in the field jumps into my head, and I clear my throat.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“And there was me thinking Dom would hate his dad marrying another woman after his mom dying like that. You obviously sweetened the deal.”

Dying like that? I don’t push her for more information—it’s not the right time—but I’m still interested. It occurs to me that Dom and I might have more in common than we’ve given ourselves credit for. We’ve both lost parents we loved at the same time in life. Maybe it’s not the nicest thing to bond over, but it’s something.

I can’t help searching the crowds for them. They put this party on for me, so I feel like they’d want to say happy birthday. At least, I should thank them for the effort. It would be rude not to.

I'm still anxious about seeing Kirill. How will he act around me?

Finally, I spot them over at the bar. They're surrounded by girls, like their own little gang of groupies. Verity and her friends are with them. I don't want to approach them while I'm outnumbered. I carefully study their body language for any signs that they might be talking about me, or any dirty looks they shoot my way, but there's nothing. I take that as a good thing. Kirill must have kept his word and stayed quiet about us.

I carry on dancing. Someone hands me a glass of champagne, and I smile and accept it, though I don't intend to drink any. As long as I've got a drink in my hand, I figure no one will hassle me about not drinking.

The next time I glance over, Dom is standing behind Verity, and he's got his hand around her throat, while his other hand slides up under her short skirt. Verity is staring right at me, and her face is smug. As if I'd want to be her, being felt up in a bar in front of everyone. Ugh.

Dom's gaze locks with mine, and he smiles and then winks as his hand slides from view. He's incorrigible. Verity's expression changes—her lips parting, her eyes slipping shut. Christ. Is he fingering her in front of everyone? What the fuck is wrong with him?

A stir of jealousy toward Verity that I should not be feeling sours my stomach, and I turn away. I don't need to see him make her come.

I still feel like I should acknowledge the effort it's taken for him to do this for me, though. So what if he's with Verity? He's allowed to have a girlfriend. It's nothing to do with me.

Finally, I spot a break in the girl gang and make my excuses to Camile. I wind through all the people to join Dom at the bar. He's free of Verity's company for a moment.

"Thanks for doing this," I say, touching his arm. "It was really kind of you." I try to seem sincere and friendly.

He shakes off my fingers and shrugs. “Any excuse for a party. Anyway, this is on Tino, more than me.”

I give a half smile. “Right.”

He turns away, ignoring me again. No happy birthday. No ‘are you having fun.’ Nothing.

I’m not going to beg for his attention. Maybe I should be grateful they’re not focusing on me.

Verity returns—most likely from the bathroom—and simpers at him. She shoots me daggers as she slides right in front of him and winds her arms around his neck, but Dom ignores her and turns to watch me. I feel his gaze on me the entire walk back to my friend. My skin prickles with the weight of it, my blood fizzing in my veins.

Whenever I turn to glance at the men, at least one of them is watching me. They all seem to be in on some secret joke. I’m not sure what it could be, and what should be fun for me is turning out to be a strange night. They’re so fucking weird. Throwing me a party, then acting this way. Who does that?

I return my focus to Camile on the dance floor. Screw those guys. It’s my birthday, and I’m going to enjoy it with my new friend.

Chapter 28

Mackenzie

IT'S ONE IN THE MORNING BY THE TIME I GET BACK TO MY room.

My feet hurt from dancing all night, but I'm smiling. I'm tired but clear-headed from my lack of alcohol. I had a good night, and I appreciate the Devils throwing the party for me, even if they did ignore me most of the evening, except for the sly looks they kept sending me.

I remember the gift Valentino gave me. I'd slipped the box into my purse and then forgotten about it.

I consider waiting until morning before plugging the USB into my laptop, but curiosity gets the better of me. I can't wait. My mind turns over all the things he might have put on there—a favorite movie, or playlist, maybe?

When my laptop fires up, I plug the flash drive in and click open.

A view of his bedroom comes on screen.

What the hell is this?

At first, there's no one in the room, but then the door flies open like someone has kicked it from the outside, and two people stumble in. They're all over each other, tearing at each other's clothes, lip-locked. I quickly recognize Tino as being one of the people, and my stomach lurches. Why would he send me—

Just as the thought enters my head, I clock the identity of the person he's with.

It's me.

My jaw drops, and I sit up straighter.

On screen, Tino stops kissing me and says, "Make that noise again, Duchess. I want to hear all the sexy sounds coming from your mouth."

And I hear myself obey him, moaning loudly.

Christ, I sound like I should be in a porno.

He tells me I'm a good girl and then feels up my breasts while I'm rubbing myself up against him.

I can't tear my eyes from the screen. How does he have this footage? Does he have security cameras or something? Do the cameras belong to the university?

Tino rids me of my t-shirt and bra, so now my bare tits are on camera. They only stay visible for a matter of seconds before he's covering them with his mouth and hands, feasting on me. My head is thrown back, my lips parted, my eyes closed with bliss. I'm making noises that embarrass me.

God, do I really sound like that?

Then I'm pulling at his t-shirt and revealing his beautiful body to the camera, with all his muscles and tattoos. I certainly don't act like I have any intention of stopping or not wanting this. My hands are all over him.

He tells me to feel his cock, and the on-screen version of me doesn't hesitate. I'm groping him as much as he is me, but then I pull back, and we exchange a few words about how this is all going too fast. He asks me if I'm a virgin, and I tell him I'm not.

How the hell did he get this footage? Did he discover the university had put the security cameras in, and so demanded the footage? Why would he give it to me for my birthday?

Onscreen, he leans in and says something to me that isn't audible on the footage. Seconds later, I'm on my knees, sucking him off with one hundred percent effort. I'm literally choking on his cock.

The real me covers my eyes with my hands. “Oh, God.”

When I uncover them again, we’ve moved to the bed. Now we’re even closer to the camera. I go to climb on the bed, but he flips me around and says, “Like this. It’s a better angle.”

My blood runs cold. Better angle? I’d wondered what he’d meant at the time but had brushed it off. Now I understand. The position he put me in makes it so the camera is in a perfect position to show my pussy, my legs spread, my ass up in the air like a dog in heat.

“You knew,” I spit at the screen. “You motherfucker. You knew you were filming me. That’s why you changed my position, so the camera would capture every detail.”

I’m raging.

How fucking dare he? Not only filming me without my permission but then giving me the footage as a birthday gift?

What the hell was he thinking?

Not even pausing to think this through, I pull the drive out, shove it into my purse, and march out of the room.

When I reach Tino’s room, I bang loudly on the door.

“What the hell?” A male voice from behind me grumbles, all sleep hazy and gruff.

I glance over my shoulder at the man standing in the opposite doorway. I recognize him but don’t know his name. “Sorry, I was looking for Tino. Guess he’s not here.”

He lounges against the open door opposite Tino’s. Crap, I’ve woken him up.

“Most of Tino’s late-night booty calls don’t wake the entire dorm when they come looking for him.” The guy scratches his balls. “He’s probably in their den. Or at that lame party they were throwing for the new girl.”

Is he fucking with me? Does he not know I *am* the new girl?

He laughs. “She’s their new toy.”

“Lucky her,” I say, teeth grinding.

“Not really. Those freaks like to break their toys.”

My blood runs cold. *Their* toys. So, they *do* share girls?

“What do you mean?”

A male voice carries to me from inside the other room.
“Come back to bed, Spence.”

It’s worse. I haven’t woken him from deep sleep, I’ve interrupted his booty call.

The guy grins. “Got to go. Try their den.”

“I don’t know where it is.”

“In the basement of north wing. Where the furnace is.”

He shuts the door on me, leaving me shaking in the corridor.

What now? If I go after Tino in the den, I’ll probably have to face the others too, but why not?

If they are all playing games, perhaps they need to see I am not their toy, or their little mouse for them to bat around with their paws.

Terrified, but determined not to let them win, fueled by hate as much as I am chastened by fear, I take the stairs down to the ground floor. From there, I head for the back stairwell, which I hope will take me down to the basement.

It’s dark, so I take my phone out and turn on the flashlight. The stairwell is dark and deserted. It could be haunted for all I know. If any building is going to be haunted, it would be Verona Falls University. I have no idea when this place was built, but it’s got the vibes of an old English castle, or a grand, stately home. I can just imagine kings and queens once having lived here.

Hastening my pace, I rush down the stairwell and through the doors at the end. The lower level has a coolness to the air. It’s below the ground, so maybe that is why, and there’s a faint odor of dampness.

It has an air of decay about it at odds with the opulence of the upper levels. Why the hell would Dom and his friends hang around here?

I'm not sure which way the basement area with the furnace is. I turn left and head to the end of that corridor, but the only rooms are empty storage spaces. I retrace my steps, hurrying as the feeling of eyes on me makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. When I reach the farthest end, I see the big double doors ahead.

They have old stained-glass windows in them, and a red glow lights up the glass, giving the place a hellish vibe.

Fitting.

Pushing through the doors, I shove my phone into my pocket and prepare to give them a piece of my mind.

Nothing could prepare me for the sight in front of me.

I should turn and run, but I can't. My legs won't move.

Chapter 29

Mackenzie

THE THREE DEVILS HAVEN'T NOTICED ME STANDING THERE. The den is made up of a collection of a La-Z-Boy chair, a huge beanbag, and an old couch. A coffee table sits in the middle, half-drunk bottles of beer and an open pizza box, the contents gone, on top.

Dom is reclined in the La-Z-Boy chair. Tino slouched into the bean bag. Kirill lies with his feet up on the couch.

The three of them are completely focused on what's on the projection screen in front of them.

On the screen is me. My pussy, to be exact. They're all watching Tino's perverted little show. Worse, they're jacking off to it, together. They're so focused on touching themselves that they barely seem aware of each other.

Holy hell, these men are despicable.

Despite my horror at what I've walked into, I discover my voice has left me—the air in my lungs, too. I should speak out and demand to know what the hell they're doing, but instead my gaze darts between three sets of hands pumping three sets of dicks.

Of course, I've seen Tino's huge, pierced cock before, and I've also seen Kirill's. Dom's cock is new to me. His hand moves up and down the thick length, faster and faster, only pausing to swipe his thumb over the slit of the smooth head, rubbing in the pre-cum. His lips are parted, and I can tell from the rise and fall of his chest that he's breathing hard.

Not that I can hear him over the top of my own moaning that's coming from the speaker for the projection screen.

Them masturbating to that film tells me that all three of them are imagining fucking me right now. I don't want to feel it, but heat pools between my thighs and my clit tingles with a rush of blood engorging the area. I press my legs together, increasing the sensation. It feels dirty and wrong, but these are three gorgeous guys—no matter what fucking perverts they might be—and I'm still a hot-blooded girl.

I picture myself striding into the center of the room, stripping off my clothes, and getting on my hands and knees in the exact position I am on screen. I'd let each of them take their turn, let them use my body like the toy the stranger had said I was.

My nipples harden, and my pussy pulses. I squeeze my thighs tighter, wishing I had something to grind down on. I'm tempted to put my hand inside my jeans, but I resist, though the fantasy still plays in my head.

Would I come as hard with Dom as I did with Tino and Kirill? I imagine them each finishing inside me, and by the time the last one was done, the first would be ready to go again. My pussy would be swollen and dripping with cum. They'd use my body over and over, until I was left a shaking mess who didn't even know her own name.

No! Stop.

What the fuck am I thinking? I push the fantasy out of my head. This is so fucked up. I never gave Tino permission to film me, and I certainly never gave him permission to share the footage with his friends. I can't let this go on.

I force myself to move, taking steps into the room, though my legs are shaking, my knees weak.

I find my voice. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Fuck," Dom says and grits his teeth as he comes into his hand.

I'm mesmerized by the milky white fluid spurting from his slit. He doesn't even seem bothered that I've caught him. In

fact, he's staring right at me as he ejaculates.

When he's done, he lets out a laugh and grabs a towel from the floor beside him and uses it to wipe his hand.

I won't cry. I will not let these bastards see me shed one tear for them from now on.

The three of them turn away from the projection screen in front of them and face me. Dom tucks his still half-hard dick away. Tino smiles as if everything is great, and Kirill continues to slowly jack himself off.

I hate them, I realize with a burning fury.

"Ah, Duchess. You found our den," Tino says as he stands and walks over to me.

I'm relieved he's put his cock away and isn't approaching me with that monster in his hand. In this red light, he looks menacing but beautiful too.

He prowls around me until he's standing behind me. He lifts my hair, sifting it through his fingers and letting it fall back down around my shoulders. "So pretty and golden."

"Get the fuck off me," I snap as I step out of his reach. "Turn this off now."

"I haven't come yet," Kirill says lazily.

"Turn it off," I scream.

"Christ, Duchess. Dial down the drama. You'll give me a headache." Dom unfurls from his seat on the sofa and walks over to me, all loose-limbed menace.

"You filmed me?" I turn to Tino, trying to ignore Dom. "That's sick."

Valentino shakes his head. "No, it's not. Look how beautiful you are."

"Fuck you. It's a crime. Literally. You committed a criminal offense."

They all look at one another, and then Tino and Kirill burst out laughing.

Kirill sighs. “You have killed my orgasm.” He tucks himself away. “Good one, though.” He mimics me “*You committed a criminal offense.* You almost sounded like an upstanding citizen then.”

“I *am* an upstanding citizen,” I reply, though my stomach knots. That’s a lie. I’m a killer. A murderer. If only they knew... Maybe if they did, these fuckers might treat me with a little bit more respect. For a brief, glorious moment, I teeter on the edge of telling them, but then I remember it’s Mom who will suffer if I do. So instead, I try to give them a stern look. “What are you all doing? Have you lost your minds? You’re disgusting. Perverts. Sickos.”

“Weirdos,” Dom says, taking a pace toward me.

“Troublemakers,” Tino adds and steps nearer too.

“Freaks,” Kirill says and pushes off the sofa, heading toward me.

“*Devils,*” Dom whispers.

I shiver and belatedly realize something. These men aren’t normal students. They aren’t good guys. Or even slightly bad guys pretending to be good. They’re flat-out psychopaths, and I’m alone in a room with all three of them.

I edge back toward the door, though I’m conscious that Valentino blocks the way.

“Are you going to run?” Kirill asks me.

The way he asks that question makes me want to throw up. So casually interested as if I’m a science experiment.

“What if I am?” I try to keep my voice from shaking.

“We’d like that,” Tino says. “We like to chase pretty things.”

Oh, God, are they going to kill me?

I recall the words of the boy in the hallway—*they like to break their toys.*

“You’re all sick.”

I feel like throwing what I did at them as a threat—I killed the last man who fucked with me. Do they want to end up the same way? But that had been an accident, hadn't it? Could I do it again?

“You've already pointed that out, Duchess.” Tino sifts my hair through his fingers again. “Didn't you like your party? We enjoyed watching you, knowing that after you'd see our gift.”

I jerk away. “That's irrelevant right now.”

“Didn't you like your birthday present?”

My jaw drops. Is he serious? “Oh, you mean the porn film you made of me without my permission and are now showing your friends? No, I didn't like it. Not one bit.”

“But you look so hot in it, Duchess.” He looks at Dom. “Doesn't she, Dom?”

Despite everything, I find myself wanting to know what he says. Dom hates me, and he'll probably make some awful derogatory remark about me right now.

He shocks me when he licks his lips slowly. “No, not hot. *Beautiful*. You looked beautiful, Duchess.”

“Our pretty Duchess.”

Tino strokes my neck, eliciting goosebumps from my flesh.

“I'm not yours. I'm not any of yours.”

Kirill watches me, a darkness glittering in his gaze. He doesn't speak, but I know what he's thinking. He's thinking about how I've let him touch me, make me come, and covered me in his cum in return.

I gave Tino a blow job, and he made me melt under his wicked fingers.

The only one of these three I've not done something with is Dom. No wonder they think it's okay to share me. Have I asked for this? Have I given them the idea that it's somehow all right?

The picture I had in my head when I was watching them from the doorway jumps back into my mind, and I shake it away.

“I’m leaving now,” I say as determinedly as I can.

“No one can leave this room without paying the toll,” Tino says.

My heart skips a beat. I’m not entirely sure whether it’s in fear or anticipation. I tell myself it must be fear, otherwise I’m as sick as them.

“You guys and your fucking tolls,” I throw back. “What is it this time?”

“It changes. Depending on our whims,” Kirill says.

“Well, what are your whims tonight? I need to sleep before class tomorrow.” I feign boredom. Maybe if they don’t get anything out of me, they’ll grow bored and let me go.

“Oh, there she is.” Dom claps his hands. “The Duchess is back. That frosty, entitled air that our poor little urchin does so well.”

God, I hate him so much, I want to strangle him.

I glare at him.

“You’re looking at me like you want to hit me,” Dom says.

“I do.” Might as well admit it.

“Do you?”

I clench my fists. “Yes, fuck you. I do.”

“Well, then,” he says, dangerously low, “why don’t you?”

“As if I’d do that and give you the excuse to punch me.”

He jerks as if I’ve slapped him. “I don’t beat women, Duchess. Anyway, I doubt you’re good with your fists, but why don’t you slap me? Go on. I’d like it.”

I’m finding it hard to breathe in this room with these three men crowding around me, my pussy blown up on the huge screen, and the red light flickering from the furnace. I ought to demand the USB stick from Tino that he’s playing the movie

from, but what's the point? He'll have other copies. I need to think about how to get him to erase them all, and that will mean calming down some.

"Unlike you, I don't like hurting people," I reply, trying to regain some semblance of control.

Another lie. I hurt a man. Hurt him so badly that I ended his life. But that didn't mean I enjoyed it.

"You said you wanted to. Go on, smack me. Right there." He points to one of his perfect cheekbones.

I shake my head, but then he smirks.

It's so arrogant and full of disdain it makes my blood boil. I scream and slap him as hard as I can.

In shock, I stand staring in horror as his cheek turns red, the sound of the crack of flesh against flesh ringing in my ear.

"God, that's hot," Dom says.

His hand shoots out, and he grabs my hair and gathers it in a ponytail. I gasp in pain as he pulls my head back.

I try to get away, but I can't. Suddenly, his mouth is on mine, hard and demanding. He kisses me at first, but then he bites my lip, and I whimper as I taste blood. He releases my hair, pulls away quickly, and stares at me, breathing hard.

His eyes narrow. "A taste and then you can leave."

"You already kissed me," I say, confused.

A taste of what?

"No, Duchess. A taste of your pussy. I've been watching it on the big screen, and I want the real thing."

"No."

I step back and hit a wall of solid muscle. I don't even turn around. *Kirill.*

"Hold her," Dom says.

"I swear to God, Dom. I'll tell my mother." I won't, though, and we both know it. Even the idea of her knowing what's going on is mortifying.

“Oh? Do you want her to see your moment of fame?” He laughs as my cheeks turn red.

My heart hammers, and I’m short of breath. Are they really going to do this? It was one thing fantasizing about being with all three of them, but the reality of it is very different.

“One taste,” he insists. “I already know you like a man’s mouth on your pussy. I’ve seen the footage. I won’t hurt you. I won’t make you do anything else. Just one taste?”

“No,” I say again more firmly, though my voice is high pitched with panic. “Now let me go.”

No one moves.

I wait, braced for the moment he forces me. I’m trembling all over.

Dom crowds me until there’s no space between where I end and he begins. He reaches between my thighs, and his fingers brush right over the front of my jeans, grazing my core, and I whimper softly at the sensation. I hate him, and I’m angry and scared, but those feelings seem to be heightening my arousal.

“You want me to touch you,” he whispers. “You just can’t admit it.”

He strokes me through my clothes, expert fingers playing with my clit in a way that, even through the fabric, has me on edge within moments. It doesn’t help that I’d already gotten myself all worked up while I was watching them.

“You said no, Duchess. So, I won’t make you show me your pussy.” He is still rubbing me, the friction insane through the denim, and I’m trying not to show him how hot it has me. “I won’t lick it and taste it. I won’t make you come and send you back to bed all wet and hot but satisfied.”

He slaps the front of my pussy twice, and laughs. “You can go on back to your bed all needy instead. When you’re there, think about me and the things I could be doing to you.”

“You’ll never get a taste of me, if I have any say in it,” I grind out.

“Why not? Tino did.”

I glance at Kirill, unable to stop myself, and Dom’s gaze narrows as he glances between us both. “Oh, Kirill too?”

I don’t speak, but my cheeks flame hot.

“You kept that to yourself, Kill,” Dom snaps.

Kirill winks at me. “I promised the lady I wouldn’t kiss and tell.”

“You give yourself to Tino, and Kirill, but not me?” Dom’s jaw is set tight, his nostrils flared.

“Yes.” There’s no point in lying.

“Why?”

“Because I fucking hate you, Dom, and you’ve made it very clear you hate me in return.”

I reach between our bodies and grab his cock—he’s already hard again—squeezing it. “*You* can go to bed alone tonight and think about *me*. Think about the fact that both your weird friends have had a taste, and you never will.”

I squeeze hard enough to hurt him, and the rage in his eyes deepens with something else. It’s something primal. I realize he’s enjoying it. He likes the pain. Maybe the humiliation, too.

I tighten my grip to the point of what must be almost excruciating, and his breathing turns ragged. Holy hell.

Letting go as if I’ve been stung, I turn, push past Tino, and run from the room.

The sound of Kirill’s laughter follows me, and I hear Dom telling him to shut up before I’m out of earshot and racing up the stairs.

Chapter 30

Domenic

“SHE REALLY DOES HATE YOU,” KIRILL OBSERVES AS HER footsteps recede.

“Fuck you,” I snap, rounding on him. “What happened between you and her? Did you screw her?”

“No. She wasn’t down for that. I could have made her, but I was a gentleman.”

“So, what *did* you do?” Tino asks.

“I came on her and admired it.”

“Always with the cum,” Tino grouses.

I narrow my eyes. “Yeah, and you, always with the recording and watching. Don’t act like we don’t all have our own...preferences,” I say.

Tino shrugs. “At least I share mine, so you guys get to enjoy it, too.”

“Do you think she’ll tell her mother?” Kirill asks.

I barely need to think about it. “No.”

“Me either,” Tino agrees. “You know why?”

Kirill shakes his head.

“Because she likes it. She wants us.”

She does, I do believe. Tino is right.

“Also,” I add, “she wouldn’t want to appear as anything different to the pretty little princess she is in her mother’s eyes.”

“Why did you want to throw her a party?” Kirill asks. “We didn’t even fuck with her much. Yeah, we got to watch her knowing she’d get to see herself later, but it seemed a bit boring, if you ask me. We could have fucked with her more than we did.”

I shrug. “The party was more to fuck with Verity. She’s annoying me. I knew if I did that for Mack it would drive Verity crazy. Plus, it might be fun to see Verity trying to crack that icy, Duchess exterior,” I say. “If we push her to hate Mack more, she’ll make her life hell. Then her slutty mother won’t marry my father and they’ll be out of my hair.”

I do want her gone. I definitely don’t want her to stay just because she’s the most sinfully beautiful thing I’ve seen in a long time. Even if I did, it’s irrelevant. I can’t betray my mother by accepting my dad remarrying some whore. Mack has to go, whether I want to play with her for a little longer or not.

“I’d like to crack her wide open before she leaves.” Tino licks his lips.

“I want to break her into tiny pieces, so small she can’t put herself back together again.” My hands curl into fists.

“Metaphorically, you mean?” Kirill asks.

“Yes, metaphorically, you stupid cunt. I don’t cut girls up and put them in suitcases.”

Kirill reaches me in four strides and cuffs me around the back of the head. I smack him back and then he punches me half-heartedly in the stomach. We stare at one another for a long beat, and then we crack up laughing.

“So…” he asks between laughs, “what do you want to do with our little Duchess next?”

I rub my hand over my lips. “We’re running out of time. The wedding is next weekend, and I need her and her bitch mother running for the hills by then. It’s time to turn up the heat.” I think for a moment. “Let’s dig a bit deeper into her past. Her dad died, right? Who the fuck was he? Did he have

some connections and that's what got Mackenzie and her mother a free pass to Verona Falls?"

Kirill jerks his chin. "I have some contacts. I'll see what I can find out."

"It's the fight this week, too," Tino says. "You're fighting for South House this time, aren't you, Kirill?"

Kill cracks his knuckles. "Yeah, and I've been preparing for it. Don't worry. I'll still have time to do some digging."

"I have to admit," Tino pouts, "I'll miss her when she's gone. I'm kind of liking having her around."

I clench my jaw. "There are plenty of other girls for you to mess with."

"None like her, though. She's got this innocent look going on, but when she gets down to it, she's as filthy as a whore. Honestly, a guy could get used to having that sweet mouth around his cock."

Kirill nods in agreement. "Her body is smoking hot, too. Those long limbs and high tits. You've seen her, Dom, though perhaps not as much as we have."

He throws a wink to Tino, and I clench my fists. It's not often I actually come close to knocking one of them the fuck out, but I am right now. Why am I feeling this way? We always share women, and I've never been jealous. Maybe it's because they're *not* sharing. They got the chance to taste her, and I didn't.

"I'm going back to my room," I announce. I need to get out of there before I do or say something stupid. "I'll see you guys tomorrow."

I put my head down and leave the same way Mackenzie did. I follow in her footsteps. I'll go back to my room for a couple of hours, but I don't plan on staying there. I'm too wound up. I can't get Mackenzie out of my head, and I feel like I'm going to go crazy with it. I came while I was watching her little porn film, but it's not the same as having the real thing.

What is it about this girl? My pretty little soon-to-be stepsister. My cock jumps at the thought of us being related. My stepsister. Fuck, how I love the thought of that. Of being able to degrade her while calling her my *little sister*.

I stop myself. I can't have that fantasy. If I have my way, she'll be gone from Verona Falls before she's ever officially my stepsister.

My fingers itch, and I stuff them in my pockets. There's one thing that'll help, but I don't want to do it. Each time I get the urge and give in, I swear to myself it'll be the last time, and I won't be so weak again.

Each time, I fail.

I get back to my room but stay out of the bathroom where the razorblades are kept. If I don't go near them, I won't succumb. I slip my hand under my tee and trace the scars beneath my armpit. The muscle flexes beneath my fingertips. I always do it in a place that's not going to get noticed—or at least not noticed so easily. It's normally the inside of my thighs, but sometimes there are already too many cuts in that area, so I have to choose a different one.

I've fucked plenty of women, but not a single one has seen me completely naked.

I pace around, trying to let enough time pass so I can do what I plan to do next.

Eventually, I leave my room again and sneak back up the hallway. It's after three a.m. now, and no one else is around. That's good. I can't have anyone seeing me.

I have a key to her room. She doesn't know that, of course, though she must be asking herself how I keep getting in there.

I kick off my shoes at the door, wanting to move as quietly as possible. No sound of movement or any other noise comes from behind the door. I'm sure she's asleep.

Carefully, I turn the key in the lock. I bet more modern dorms are using key cards by now, but in this place the doors are thick, solid wood, the locks heavy iron. There's a slight click as it catches, and I cautiously turn the key.

I pause, waiting to hear her cry of ‘who’s there?’ but none comes. My heart beats too fast, the blood pounding in my ears. That’s not the only place rushing with blood. I’m already hard at the thought of being around her while she’s so fucking vulnerable.

Entering the room, I seek out her bed. She hasn’t pulled the drapes, and there’s enough moonlight for me to be able to see her, lying there. She’s definitely sound asleep and has no idea I’m here.

I cross the room to stand beside her bed. Disappointingly, the covers are pulled up around her shoulders, hiding her body from me.

I can’t have that.

I catch one corner of the sheet between my fingers, and, like a poltergeist in a horror movie, slowly slide it down.

She lets out a murmur and shifts slightly, one knee bent, the other leg straight. She’s in only a small pair of sleep shorts and a strappy camisole. The shorts have ridden up, so half her ass is exposed, the skin pale and smooth and perfect.

Carefully, I sit on the edge of the bed. With each move I make, I pause after to ensure it hasn’t disturbed her.

I long to put my cock inside her. How hot and tight and wet she’d feel. I imagine her waking to me fucking her, the look of shock on her face. I’d clamp my hand over her mouth so she couldn’t scream and keep taking what I wanted. I know soon enough she’d give in to the pleasure and open herself wide to me.

Moving slowly, I slide my fingers up the inside of her shorts leg and have to hold back a groan. Fuck, she’s not wearing any panties. I go farther, between her legs.

From behind, I dip just the tip of my finger into that hidden part of her. She’s wet and hot. I *did* send her back to her room all desperate and needy. Did she masturbate when she got back here, touching herself while she was thinking about being with the three of us? Silly girl. Why is she fighting it so much? She

should just submit to us. We always get what we want, anyway.

As much as I want to slide my finger inside her, right up to the knuckle, I hold myself back. It would surely wake her.

She said I'd never get a taste of her, but she was wrong. I slip my hand back out of her shorts and place my finger in my mouth, sucking her arousal off. My cock throbs and jerks, practically demanding attention.

Down, boy.

I look around on the floor and spot her discarded panties. Dirty little bitch. She probably took them off so she could get easy access to her cunt. I scoop them up and then take my huge erection out of my pants. I lift her panties to my nose and inhale deeply, drawing the scent of her musk into my nose and throat. I know what a girl smells like when she's turned on, and she was definitely creaming her underwear for us.

I wrap the little slip of material around my cock, deliberately pressing the head to the gusset of the underwear where her wetness has left its mark. Then I start to slowly masturbate.

I slip my other hand back inside her shorts, lightly touching her again.

Jesus, I want more. I want to push my tongue inside her, and lick and suck and swallow. I want to suck her clit into my mouth and bring her close to orgasm, before pulling back again. I picture myself torturing her that way, even as my hand moves up and down my cock still wrapped in her underwear.

I finger her again, and she moans and pushes back on me in her sleep. If I'm not careful, she'll wake up. A part of me wants her to. I want the anger and the chaos.

Pushing carefully between her cheeks, I run my fingertip over her asshole. Has any man ever taken her here before? I vow to be the first. At the thought, my balls draw in, my cock growing even harder in my fist. My body bunches into tight muscle and all of my focus and energy goes to my dick.

I come silently and hard all over her panties, the jets of cum spurting over and over.

I slip my other hand out from her sleep shorts, then lean over and place a kiss at the spot right beside her eye. I brush a few soft strands of hair away from her face. I briefly debate taking the dirty underwear with me, but then decide to leave it as a present for her instead.

“Goodnight, Duchess,” I whisper in her ear.

Chapter 31

Mackenzie

THE MOMENT I OPEN MY EYES, THE MEMORY OF LAST NIGHT hits me.

I'm twenty years old now. That's like proper adulthood. And here I am worrying about some stupid boys. Well, men. They're all in their twenties, too, so it's not like any of us are kids anymore.

My stomach twists. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I feel completely trapped.

It's Monday, and I have classes. As much as I want to curl back up in bed, close my eyes, and pray for oblivion, I can't.

I could tell Mom I'm sick, and she'd believe me, but I don't want her to worry. She's got enough on her mind with the wedding on Sunday. Shit. I can't believe it's so soon.

She's going to marry Nataniele, and then Domenic will be my stepbrother. I'll be stuck with him for good. An emotion I don't even recognize solidifies like a cage around my heart. I won't let him break me. I refuse to. I'm better than him—better than all these abusive, asshole men—no matter what I've done or what they've pushed me to. I just need to stay strong.

I draw in a deep breath, feeling my lungs expand. I get to my feet, planning to roll out my mat and get some practice in. I'll put on some meditation music, light an incense stick, and hope it doesn't set off whatever rudimentary smoke alarms this place has.

But something stops me.

I pause, narrowing my eyes. Something is out of place, but I can't quite put my finger on it. Suddenly, it clicks in my head.

My panties are missing.

I'm sure I just tossed them on the floor before I went to bed last night. I was exhausted and in a mood, and I couldn't be bothered to put my dirty clothes in the hamper.

I look around, confused, but then spy them next to me on the bed. They are most definitely not where I put them.

Heartbeat increasing speed, I pick up the scrap of material and frown. They should be silky and soft, but instead they're...hard and crusty. Tentatively, I lift them to my nose and give a tiny sniff.

Eww.

I drop them again. What the actual fuck? If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were covered in cum.

My mind blurs. How is that possible? I wasn't exposed to any last night, was I? I think about how I watched Domenic orgasm. Did he get any on me then? Did he wipe the towel on my underwear? No, that's impossible. I was wearing my jeans. I never even let him see my panties.

Maybe I'm imagining things. I was wet last night, being around the men like that. I must have been wetter than I'd thought—and the smell is my arousal, not cum.

I allow that possibility to settle inside me. I prefer that to the other possibility, which is that someone came into my room while I was asleep and deliberately came in my underwear. The thought of being vulnerable while someone did that is just too much to handle right now.

With tweezer fingers, I pick up the offending item and carry it over to deposit it in the hamper. I breathe a sigh of relief now it's out of sight. I don't want to think about it again.

I turn my thoughts back to my practice. I need it more than ever now. I have to stay calm and relaxed. Being Zen is

important to my health, which kind of seems like a joke considering the madhouse my life has turned into.

AN HOUR LATER, I slip into my first class.

Verity and her friends are already there. As usual, she shoots me daggers, but I just roll my eyes. I have far bigger things to worry about than a bit of bitchiness. I spot Camile, and she lifts her chin in acknowledgement.

“Hey,” she says as I claim the spare seat beside her. “How was the rest of your birthday?”

“It was great, though I didn’t do much. I just went to bed after I left the bar.” I’m lying to her, and I hate myself for it.

“Yeah, I was pretty shattered after, too. I didn’t want to get out of bed this morning.” She gives a big yawn as though to demonstrate how tired she is. “Oh, what did Tino give you as a present?”

My face warms at the memory, and I squirm inside. “It was a flash drive of his favorite songs.”

The lies are tripping so easily off my tongue, it’s as though I’ve convinced myself that they’re the truth.

Her eyebrows practically fly off her forehead they lift so high. “He gave you a...what...mixtape? What’s wrong with a Spotify playlist?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe he knew he couldn’t wrap that.”

“Well, well, well, isn’t Valentino a dark horse? I never thought he had a single romantic bone in his body. Are the two of you, like, an item now?”

I flap a hand at her. “No,” I scoff. “Definitely not.”

She doesn’t look like she believes this part of my lie.

“And what about the other two? I can’t imagine they’d be too happy about Tino claiming you on his own. Everyone knows the Devils share everything.”

I swallow hard. “They do?”

I can't tell her. I just can't. Not about how I came close to fucking Kirill, too, or about the video Tino made of me, or how Dom rubbed me over my jeans last night, how I thought they were going to assault me.

If I do, she'll demand I do something about it. I'll have to tell my mom or, even worse, Nataniele. It'll blow everything up, and then what will Mom and I do? Where will we go? To live in our car, and beg for food, and pray the cops don't figure out what I did? I can't do that.

There's another reason I can't bring myself to say anything, too. A reason that lurks beneath the surface like a shark, silently swimming.

It's shame.

Is it something about me as a person that attracts these kinds of men? Am I asking for it?

What if Camile says I brought this upon myself? She warned me to stay away from the Devils, but I didn't listen. I thought I was big enough and old enough to handle them. Fuck. I was wrong. Will she say I shouldn't have led them on? That I was being a prick tease? It's not like I've been telling them no, is it? I've made out—heavily—with both Tino and Kirill. They probably think I'm a total slut. No wonder Dom assumed I'd be happy with him going down on me. He probably thought he was offering me a birthday treat.

My core flutters at the thought of Dom's tongue on me—in me—and him sucking and licking my clit.

That's the other reason for the shame. Deep down, locked away in a dark filing cabinet in my psyche, I want them. All three of them, and I'm scared of what that makes me.

Dangerously, I allow myself to entertain the possibility for a moment. What if I did just give in? Would life be better if I allowed myself to be theirs? There would be no denying that I'd have some seriously mind-blowing sex. But what then? What would happen when they were bored with me? I've

already seen what they're capable of—filming me and sharing the footage.

They don't want to be with me because they care about me. They know sex makes me vulnerable, and they're using it as a way to get to me.

It's working.

Worse, Dom hates me, and I do believe he'd use sex with me as a weapon. Another tool in his arsenal against me.

I can't give in to it.

“Hey,” Camile drags me out of my dark thoughts, “are you coming to the fight on Wednesday?”

“What fight?”

“South House against West House. This time Kirill is up against Louis Laurant, one of the Vipers.”

“Fight?” I frown.

“Yes.”

“Like the wrestling team?”

She laughs. “More like Fight Club.”

Fight Club? I scrape my brain for where I remember that from. It's an old nineties movie, right? One where they pit men against each other for the fun of it?

This place is so fucked up. I shudder. “Why would I want to go and watch that?”

Camile shocks me when she grins. “You might enjoy it. There's something kind of primal watching two hot guys go at it.”

Sometimes, I think my friend isn't as sweet as she seems. I shake my head. “My stepfather is the dean, or at least will be soon. I could get into trouble.”

Camile's brow furrows. “Babe, the dean knows all about it. The head of physical fitness and combat training will be there.”

“Combat training?” I feel faint.

What is she talking about? I open my mouth to ask her, but the teacher at the front of the class turns to me, and stares daggers. I close my mouth, not wanting to be picked on in front of the whole group. I'll ask Camile later.

It turns out I don't get the chance to as I don't see her for the next couple of days. We have classes together at the start of the week and the end, but Tuesday and Wednesday we only study together every other week, as the timetable is split.

There's a large lecture on Wednesday, and she's there, too, but she's right at the other end of the hall, and when I try to get to her after the two-hour lecture, she's already gone.

It's coming up to seven in the evening on Wednesday when I get the text from Camile.

<Babe, you coming to watch the fight tonight? Will be a good one.>

I type out a response.

<Where is the fight? Not sure it's my thing.>

She replies quickly.

<I'll meet you at the bar in ten minutes, and I'll explain what it's all about if you like, and then you can decide.>

I sigh. Part of me doesn't want to see grown men punching each other for fun, but another part of me—a stupid, needy part—wants to be there for Kirill. As if he'd even notice.

Not only him, but I want to see Tino again, and even Dom. Dom on his own is like a splinter under my skin, an annoyance. Get him with Tino and Kirill, though, and ever since I saw them all jerking off to me, the three of them together are like my sexual kryptonite.

I've slept badly for the past few nights, and it's because I'm a needy mess. I've never found myself so turned on. I keep waking from erotic dreams of the three of them doing depraved things to me. Some of those dreams have gone to very dark places, and I'm not sure if my inner psyche is okay. She seems to be having a moment.

Strolling across my room, I throw open my closet and stare at the clothes. What does one wear to a fight? In the end, I go for jeans and a light sweater with a glittery star on the front. It's kind of young and cutesy, but I like it. A brush of bronzer on my cheeks, chin, nose, and a slick of lip gloss, and I'm done.

I don't wear any jewelry, except for my heart shaped necklace, which was a gift from my father, and which I never take off. It's made of white gold and has a small diamond in the center of the heart. A spritz of Coco Mademoiselle, and I'm ready.

Nervous, and not sure why, I close my door and lock it. I need to change the damn lock. Someone is getting in my room, and I'm sure it is Dom. I don't want him prowling around in here. It's my territory. The only bit of space to call my home in this hellhole. He doesn't get to snoop around whenever he wants. I wonder if I can get the caretaker to change the lock without Dom's father's permission. Probably not.

I knock on Mom and Nataniele's door, and it's Mom who answers. "I'm going out for a while," I tell her.

I'm old enough I don't need to let my mom know where I am going, but she worries, and I love her.

"Oh, to the bar?"

"Yes, for a while, but there's a fight. Camile asked me to go and watch it with her."

Her face pales. "A fight?"

So, Mom doesn't know.

"Yes, darling." Nataniele's oily tones float to me as he walks up behind Mom and puts his hands possessively on her hips. "It's a Verona Falls University tradition."

"It's a wrestling match?" Mom makes the same mistake as I did.

Nataniele gives a short laugh. "No. Wrestling wouldn't equip any of your young men for fights in the real world, now, would it? These are proper fights."

Mom's lips pinch into a tight line. "I'm not sure I want you watching something like that, Mackenzie."

Nataniele scoffs. "Mack is a grown woman. It's a proud Verona Falls tradition. I often officiate at the fights, and when you're my wife, you'll be expected to attend when I do. Tonight, the sports master, Vladimir, will be officiating."

His hands release Mom's hips but only for his arms to wrap around her shoulders as he pulls her into him. Her back is to his chest, and I don't miss the way her body goes stiff and her eyes cloud over.

She doesn't like his touch.

"Well, have a nice night, sweetheart." Mom gives me a strained smile which contrasts with the shark's grin Nataniele throws at me as he reaches over Mom and shoves the door closed in my face.

Charming.

I try not to let the asshole get to me and head for the bar, happy at least about seeing Camile. When I reach the place, it's more buzzing than a Friday night. Wow. It seems this college likes to watch men fight.

I spot Camile in a corner not too far from the door. She waves me over and pushes a drink at me. I hesitate for a moment. Not that I believe for one minute that Camile would spike me, but I don't know what she brought over.

"Coke, babe," she says with a smile. "I know you don't want to drink much."

I ought to share with her why, but I hate talking about it. Instead, I smile at her. "Thanks so much. I'll get the next one. So, tell me, what is this about?"

A bell rings, and Camile glances at her watch. "Oh, hell. No time to tell, Zee. The fight is about to start."

"Zee?" I ask.

She grins. "Yeah, you hate Kenzie. But Mackenzie is a mouthful. I don't like Mack, so Zee it is."

Zee. I shrug. I don't hate it.

"Come on. You don't want to miss this." She pulls me up out of my chair.

I grab my glass and knock down some Coke, needing the caffeine, and then place it on a table by the door as we head outside. To the right of the bar is a large square. It's surrounded by what look like old stable blocks. I had wondered what this square is used for, and now I can see. There's a big, roped off section in the middle, with crash mats laid down.

At least they have mats; maybe this isn't going to be as bad as I thought.

I stiffen when I see Kirill make his way onto the mat. The sports master, Vladimir, nods once at Kirill. The crowd of students gathered around roars and claps.

Camile nudges me. "I think Kirill might just be the favorite, but with Louis as an opponent, it's going to be a close call. The girls do love Louis."

As soon as the second man steps into the ring, I recall him. It's one of the dark-haired twins, from the group Camile called the Vipers. The cheers are just as loud for him as they were for Kirill, and I can see why. He's a devastatingly handsome man. All dark hair and olive skin, with those astonishing blue eyes.

They're both wearing sweatpants and a light cotton sweatshirt. I'm shocked when they whip their shirts off, leaving them both bare-chested.

I glance around me, wondering where the boxing gloves are. "Aren't they gloving up?" I ask Camile.

She shakes her head. "No gloves, babe. Only rule is don't kill your opponent. Although, that's hard to police, and a few years ago, a student did get killed in the ring."

My jaw drops with horror. People actually die in this thing, and it's still going? How did it not come to a stop the moment someone got seriously hurt?

A second reason for my dismay slams into me.

Oh, good God. I might not know how I feel about Kirill, but I don't want to see him dead.

Kirill tosses back his blond hair and flexes his neck and shoulders. He's removed his nose ring, and I assume that's so his opponent can't rip it out. My gaze is glued to his muscles, but then I spot something else. White marks run crisscross over his tan skin. I pinch my eyebrows together. It takes me a moment to understand what I'm seeing.

His back is covered in scars.

A strange kind of fierce protectiveness rises inside me. I want to stride across the makeshift ring, grab him, and demand to know who did that to him. Are the scars from being in fights like this one? Maybe, but they look more like someone had taken a knife, or even a whip, to him.

The two men come together in the middle of the ring, bump fists, and then Vladimir rings a bell.

The crowd seems to hold its collective breath. Fists are raised, and the men begin to dance around one another. A girl shouts something at Kirill; I miss what and only hear his name. He glances over in her direction, and *bam*.

Louis' fist slams into Kirill's face.

Kirill stumbles and falls back a few steps, and I gasp.

This is going to be brutal.

Chapter 32

Kirill

PAIN BURSTS BEHIND MY EYES AND JAW AS LOUIS SMASHES HIS left fist into the right side of my face.

Motherfucker. He's going to fracture my cheekbone if I'm not careful. I stagger back a few steps and hear my father's voice in my mind.

Don't be distracted. Focus, son. The only person in this world who matters is the fucker in front of you.

Ignoring the pain, I raise my fists once more and dance around Louis. He's faster than I am, more agile, but I'm bigger and stronger. I only need to get one good blow landed and he'll go down. I'm a better kicker than he is, too. I trained in Muy Thai, so I kick as well as I hit. Louis, though, is one artful fucker on the fight mat. Catching him is the hardest thing, and avoiding his fast jabs requires focused concentration.

One half of the crowd is chanting my nickname: *Kill-Kill-Kill-Kill...*

Some might think that I've gained the nickname because it's a shortening of my real name, but that's not the truth at all. It's because I'm a cold-hearted motherfucker who won't hesitate to take out someone who is in my way.

Unluckily for me, my focus is shot. Dom wants rid of Mackenzie, and while I shouldn't care, I don't want her gone. I want that girl to stay around. I've had a taste, and now I want so much more. In fact, I want the three of us to take her, me last, so I get her full of cum.

Dom likes to think he's the boss of us all because of who his father is, but we all come from powerful families. Sometimes it's easier to sit back and let him get his way, but I'm not sure I can let this one slide.

Fuck. I shake my head. I can't get distracted again. I've had plenty of pussy in my time, so I'm not sure what it is about Mackenzie that has me so turned around.

It's not that I love her. I almost laugh at the thought as I dodge a sharp jab to my ribs. I like playing with her, though. Both her mind and her body.

Kukla.

My pretty doll.

In the glen, she was my tear-stained doll, and then my cum-covered doll.

I don't want Dom to chase my doll away.

Maybe I ought to try to create a threesome between us and see if a proper taste of her can persuade him to keep her around?

Louis lands another hit, this time a kick to my upper thigh, and it's far too close to my balls for comfort.

Focus, motherfucker.

I shake it out, loosening my shoulders and arms as I bounce on my feet.

He glances at something and, for a moment, he seems distracted. Curious, I move us around the ring, using my size to hustle him into changing positions and look where he was focused.

Mack. That fucker was looking at Mack, and she's still looking at him. Not me. *Him.*

Fury tears through me, jolting me to my core. These fights are not personal, and to be honest, I don't like them. As if we'd be using our fists like this on the streets. We aren't fucking foot soldiers. We have those to do this for us. I'd be straight to guns if anyone came for me out in the world, but

the college has this as part of its pedigree and a lot of the parents get kudos from their kids doing well in the fights. My father included.

Now, though, Louis has gone and made this personal. No one gets to look at my pretty little Mackenzie doll that way unless it's one of my soul brothers.

One of my fellow Devils.

I know the Vipers think they're on the same level as us, but that's bullshit. There are other gangs within Verona Falls, and they all want our superiority. It helps that Domenic is the dean's son. None of these other assholes have that on their side.

I let the fury burn through me as if it's fuel and focus on nothing but Louis' handsome, smug face. Does Mackenzie think he's handsome? Most women do.

I hate the thought, and a possessiveness I've never felt before roars through me. Gritting my teeth, I growl low and feral, and rear back with my fists before pounding Louis in a brutal, one-two hit.

A punch to the gut, and an upper cut to the face.

He staggers back, and I follow. Now he's stunned, I need to make quick work of finishing this.

Normally, I don't go for the face. With my strength, I don't need to. I can break a few ribs and put my opponents out of any fights for a couple of months. This time, though, I don't sugarcoat it.

Two punches crunch Louis' nose under my fist. He swears, and blood spurts from his ruined nose to cover me.

He yells in agony as he covers his nose with his hands and goes down. I kick him in the stomach for good measure, but Vladimir is already holding my arm, checking me.

"That's going to be a costly plastic surgery bill, there, Louis." Vladimir shakes his head as he pushes me away and then leans down to help Louis up. "Next time, remember that a pretty face isn't worth losing your nose for."

Vladimir laughs at his own joke. I don't join in. He reminds me too much of my father. He's a sick fuck who likes to make us hate one another and fight each other. It's not him in the ring, is it? He's not the one having to take the punches. It's easy to joke and laugh when he's not the one being hurt.

Louis throws me a rage-filled look of pure vitriol and storms off to join his twin. Vladimir holds my hand in the air. "Our champion for South House tonight, and now undefeated for the third fight in a row, is Kirill."

The crowd roars and cheers but I look for only one face, but she's gone.

Mackenzie isn't there.

Chapter 33

Mackenzie

I'M SHAKING AS I DRY MY HANDS ON THE THICK PAPER TOWELS in the restroom in the bar. As soon as the fight finished, I rushed back here and broke my no alcohol rule. I had Camile get one of the boys to buy me a small glass of wine and let the warmth of it fill me. It didn't stop the cold inside.

This isn't an ordinary college.

I knew it all along; of course I did. Now, though, I know for sure. What the hell is this place? Is it really safer than going to prison? Did we make the right choice by coming here?

The door swings open, and Camile walks in. She smiles at me, and I stare at her. Do I even know her? Is she in on this ... *whatever* this is?

"Babe?" Her smile drips from her face like melted wax. "What's wrong?"

"Camile, answer me honestly. What is this place?"

She frowns. "Zee, you know what it is. Your mother is marrying the dean. It's the most secretive and exclusive college in America."

"Do movie stars send their kids here?" I ask, knowing what the answer is. Of course, they don't.

"No, babe." Her face is serious, and she glances at the door. "You really don't know?"

"No. Camile, please, will you tell me what is going on?"

When she checks each stall, my fear only grows. She comes back to me and takes one of my hands.

“Mackenzie, this is a...specialist college. The families here are all from very old money, and none of them got it legally. Some of the biggest organized crime families in the world have sent their children here. It provides an education, and it’s also a charity.”

My eyebrows lift. “A charity?”

“Yes. It, erm, the money...” She drops her voice to a whisper. “They clean it. I can’t really say more.”

Oh, my God. The reality hits me and the room spins. I yank my hand out of her grip.

They launder money here. They send their kids, these crime families, and the boys get taught to fight and the girls are taught history and literature and how to cook and behave like proper little ladies. And all the while, their dirty money gets cleaned.

I push the heel of my hand into my mouth to stop myself screaming. I breathe through my nostrils, and when I get some control, I let myself speak.

“This is a fucking *mafia* college?”

To my surprise, Camile laughs. “No one would call it that. Take Louis and Mattheo, their father is the head of a whole government department in France. That’s like being a state governor here.”

I blink at her. “He’s a governor?”

“Similar. His brother is the mayor of Marseille.”

“So, they’re not organized crime?”

“They were, maybe still are, but they now also have local political power. There’s a girl, you’ve not met her properly, Marina, whose uncle is the finance minister of the Greek government. His family also owns half of Crete, and her father grows and ships marijuana. Do you see now?”

I nod, numb. “I think so.”

“We are our own Camelot. Our own royalty.”

“So, why am I here?” I ask, my voice small.

That’s not really what I’m asking. I know the reason I’m here. I just don’t know the reason my mother even knows of this place, or what ties her to Nataniele.

What secrets is she hiding?

Camile shakes her head. “Babe, I really don’t know.”

I appreciate her being honest with me. It feels like she’s the only one who has been. Something else dawns on me. “So, your family...?”

“Yeah, they’re an important family back home, too.”

By important, I now understand what she’s saying. She’s from a crime family. It suddenly makes sense to me that she talked about being expected to marry and produce heirs. It’s not part of her culture, in general. It’s part of her family’s culture because they are, whatever she says, organized crime.

She’s here because of money that’s been earned by illegal means—drugs, maybe, or people smuggling. My head spins. So that means Dom, and Kirill, and Tino are the same. Their families are also big crime families.

Another part of the puzzle clicks into place. If Dom is part of a crime family, and he’s Nataniele’s son, then it means Nataniele must be at the head of it. If Nataniele is at the head of a crime family, then my mother is about to marry us right into one.

Fuck.

I need to talk to my mom.

“Excuse me,” I say and push past Camile.

I’ve got a lot to process. My sweet, fun-loving new friend isn’t who I thought she was, but right now she’s at the bottom of the pile when it comes to things to worry about.

I slam out of the restroom, and, keeping my head down so I don’t have to make contact with anyone, I rush through the building. I take the seemingly endless corridors and stairwells

until I reach our living quarters. I assume my mom is going to be here—it's not as though she really has anywhere else she's going to be. I hadn't considered that Nataniele might be here too, but right now, I don't even care. If he is, I'll confront him as well.

I reach their apartment and hammer on the door. "Mom?" There's no instant reply, so I bang my fists against the wood again. "Mom? Open up. Now!"

The door opens, and my mother's surprised expression greets me on the other side.

"Christ, Mackenzie, what's wrong? What's happened?"

I shove past her and stride into the middle of the living room, then spin to face her. I've not seen any sign of Nataniele yet, which I take to be a good thing. Still, I don't want to talk about this if he's here somewhere.

"Where's your husband-to-be?" I ask coldly.

"He's at a faculty meeting."

Faculty meeting. I snort.

She puts her hands on her hips. "Mackenzie, what is going on with you?"

"Did you know?" I demand.

Something crosses her face, but she continues to play the game, blinking too rapidly for someone telling the truth. "Know what?"

"About what these people are? About the kind of place we're living in?"

"It's a university, Mackenzie. You know that."

I slam my fist against the surface of a small table beside me, and she jumps, her eyes widening. It's not often I lose my temper with her.

"Bullshit. We're surrounded by criminals. Nataniele is a *criminal*."

She blinks but doesn't respond.

“What?” I say. “You think it doesn’t count if they drive nice cars, and wear tailored suits, and eat fancy food? You think it doesn’t count if they own somewhere like this?” I gesture around me.

She lets out a sigh. “Mackenzie...”

“How the hell did you get caught up with someone like Nataniele, Mom? Did he have some kind of online dating profile that caught your eye?” I hold up both hands as though outlining a box. “Crazy mafia guy seeks heartbroken widow for rushed wedding. No questions allowed.”

She shakes her head. “It wasn’t like that.”

I race on, all my thoughts spilling from my mouth. “I know our life wasn’t perfect before, but at least we were honest. The things we owned, we came about honestly. Dad worked hard for us. He didn’t get involved with shit like this.”

She shakes her head and turns her face from me. Why isn’t she fighting me on this? Why isn’t she telling me that I’m right and she’s sorry and she should never have gotten us involved in all this shit?

“Mom?” I say, and now there’s a pleading tone to my voice.

“Why don’t we sit down?”

I clench my fists. “I don’t want to sit down. I want to know what the fuck is going on.”

“I didn’t want you to know. It’s not good for your health to get worked up about things. I guess I was stupid to think I could continue to hide it from you after we came here. You’re an adult now. I shouldn’t have kept trying to protect you.”

Hot tears prick my eyes and blur my vision. “What are you talking about?”

I knew, didn’t I? I can’t be angry only at Mom; I’ve been lying to myself. I kept thinking there was more, but I never took it upon myself to read up on anything I could find out about my father’s death. I suppose I’ve been scared to really

know. I liked having my head in the sand to a degree, and now it's been well and truly pulled out into the light.

She walks over, takes my hand, and pulls me to sit beside her on the couch. "Your dad wasn't just a businessman. I mean, he was, but the businesses he was involved in weren't exactly legitimate."

My jaw drops. "What?"

"That's how I ended up on Nataniele's radar. He...heard about your father's death and contacted me."

"With a marriage proposal?"

This still isn't making any sense.

"Marrying Nataniele wasn't agreed on because of what you did. I'd already been in contact with him. I'd already agreed to the wedding and starting a new life. I just hadn't told you about it yet."

"What? Why?"

"We owed money, Mackenzie."

"Yeah, I know, because of my medical bills." I sigh.

She nods. "Your medical bills were part of the reason we ended up owing money, and I hate having to say that to you because I never want you to feel to blame, or that your illness is a burden. It wasn't all of it, though. Once you get stuck in a cycle of debt, it can be hard to get out of. There were other debts, ones we took onboard to be able to do normal things like buy Christmas presents, but it was the *people* we owed money to that was the problem."

"Wait...what?"

I thought the revelation that we were living in a fucking mafia college was enough of a blow for one day, but now I'm learning that not only was my father one of them but also that part of the reason we're here is because of my illness leading my parents into a spiral of debt. No matter what my father did, and no matter what my mother says, at the end of it, they wouldn't have been in that mess without me. A tear spills down my cheek.

My mother continues. “The people we owed money to are dangerous. They threatened us—threatened you—unless I paid it, but how could I? I had nothing.”

I blink back tears. “Oh, my God.”

“This isn’t your fault, Mackenzie. I don’t want you thinking that. It’s not your fault you have a condition.”

My sadness morphs into something new. I’d believed everything was my fault, but it most certainly isn’t my fault that my father was a goddamned criminal. I find my whole childhood reshaping in my mind. We’d always had nice things, fancy vacations, a nice home, despite the medical bills. I’d believed we’d had those things because my father ran a successful import and export company. Yes, things got tougher the last year or so before his death, and I knew they were struggling for money, but before then, had they been in debt to these people way back? Now I have to question exactly what he was importing and exporting.

My dad isn’t the only one I’m questioning.

“Did you know?” I ask Mom. “Did you know what he was involved in?”

Her gaze cast down, she nods.

“How bad was it? I mean did he traffic people? Murder people?”

It occurs to me that the apple hasn’t fallen far from the tree. I’d believed killing Paxton had been an accident, but what if it hadn’t been? What if it had been instinct—a killer’s instinct passed on to me from my criminal father?

She flinches, and her face pales. “My God, Mackenzie, you knew your father.”

“Did I?” I interrupt.

“Yes. You knew what mattered, and he wouldn’t have done that. Couldn’t have done it.”

I sneer at her naïve words. “That’s an awful lot of trust, Mom, in a man who left us in debt with people who would harm us unless you sold yourself to another man.”

Her beautiful eyes fill with tears, but I can't stop the rage bubbling out of me like poison.

“When did you find out? After he died?”

She presses her lips into a line and draws a breath before she answers. “I've always known.”

Her reply hits me like a punch to the gut. I stare at her in total shock. “*What?*”

I can't believe it. I've always trusted her, and she's been lying to me my *whole life*. She married a man in the mafia? I suppose it explains why she's so seemingly calm about marrying Nataniele. I can't stand him, but maybe to Mom he's not that bad of a guy. Do I even know her?

I can't be around her right now. If I stay in this room a moment longer, I'm going to say something I'll live to regret. She's already hurt, and despite my anger, I still love her, but I'm hurt and confused, and I need some space.

I jump to my feet and run for the door, tears streaming down my face. I have no idea where I'm going or who I want to see. All I know is I have to get out of here.

“Please, Mackenzie,” my mother's voice chases after me. “Your health!”

I know what she's saying—that I need to keep myself calm in case I have another episode, but I don't even care about that right now. A tiny, spiteful part of me hopes I do have another seizure. A really bad one. And I hope she blames herself for it.

Tears streaming down my face, I head for the stairs, and as if my legs are carrying me there without my mind being involved, I run for the basement...and the Devils' den.

Chapter 34

Mackenzie

THE MINUTE I REACH THE DOOR TO THE DEN WITH THOSE hellish red, glowing glass panels, I realize what an idiot I've been. They won't want me here, and my tormentors are the last people on Earth to give me comfort.

I can't go to Camile, though. Not yet. I'm angry and humiliated at my lack of knowledge about the situation here. I have no other friends. At least Tino is sometimes kind to me, though I'm perfectly aware of how desperate that makes me, especially after what he did with the video.

A faint grunt reaches my ears, and I pause, hand on the door. What if they have a girl in there? Are they having sex with her?

My phone beeps, and I take it out of my pocket, glancing at it disinterestedly, expecting to see a plea to come back and talk from Mom.

It's not; it's a text from Tino. I don't even question where he got my number. These guys get whatever they want.

<At the bar with a sore Kirill. He needs some TLC. Why don't you come and join us for a drink? Your nemesis, Dom, isn't here, so it's safe. Maybe the three of us can take a walk around the grounds. It's a warm night. Lie under the stars... T>

I turn, about to go and join them, and damn it all to hell. If I've got to stay in some lawless, moral vacuum of a mafia college, I might as well at least enjoy myself. I'm pretty sure I've just been invited to a threesome with two hot men, and it

might stop the spiral of despair my mind is on. My fingers hover over the buttons to type a reply when I hear that sound again. A grunt, almost pained. From inside the room.

Tino and Kirill are at the bar, but Dom isn't. Is he in there with Verity?

Part of me doesn't care because I think I hate him now more than ever, but there's a part of me that is curious.

Dom is going to be my stepbrother, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Quietly, taking care not to make noise, I gently push open the heavy door on the right and peer in. There's no one in sight. I step inside and creep into the room.

I can't see anyone in this main space, but there's an area behind the projection screen, which is turned off now. The only thing lighting the space this time is the burning flames of the glass fronted furnace. What kind of place has a huge furnace like this in the basement with a massive safety glass door?

It reminds me of something out of a horror movie. As I stare at it, a sense of dread fills me. Do they put their... enemies in there? Is it used as a way of getting rid of people?

I shake my head. I'm letting my imagination run away with me.

“Fuck.”

The soft swearing comes from behind the screen, and I pivot away from the red door and the flames licking at it, to stare at the place where the sound emanated from.

That's Dom. I know his voice. I ought to leave. I imagine Verity giving him a blow job. The next sound is strange, it's like a pained groan. Not a sexy one, though. It sounds like he's hurt.

Wondering why the hell I care, I move toward the screen and step around it only to stare in disbelief. In a corner of the far end of the room, there's a huge mattress—super king, maybe—and it's covered in soft blankets and pillows. Propped

up on it, like some mad king of old, trousers around his ankles, is Dom.

He's got something in his hand, and he's pressing it to his inner thigh. The thing glints in the glow of the fickle light in this corner of the room, and I swallow. Is that a knife?

I step closer, mesmerized and horrified at the same time.

He presses against his leg again, and his head drops back as he pants a little. He wipes his hand on his thigh and smiles at the blood on his fingers. He cuts again, and I open my mouth, wanting to tell him to stop, that this is dangerous. He could get infected. Cut too deep. No sound comes out.

My mind is whirring. I can't process what I'm seeing.

This is a mafia college.

My father was a criminal.

Dom cuts himself.

The world has tilted on its axis, and I don't know up from down anymore.

"Fuck, yes," he grunts after making another cut. "Fuck you, *Daddy*, and your bride-to-be, and Mack. Fuck you all."

He spits the word *daddy* out with more venom than I've ever heard as his head drops back, and he wipes the blood on his hand across his forehead like war paint.

Holy shit, Dom is very fucked up. Very fucked up indeed.

He hates me, too, as if I needed further proof. I must get out of here.

I've got to find someone to talk to before I implode.

Stepping backward, intending to slip behind the screen, my ankle hits something. The loud clatter has my heart stopping.

Dom's eyes snap open, and his gaze lands on me.

Oh, *fuck*.

He pushes up off the mattress and pulls his pants up. I can't help but notice the massive bulge behind his briefs before he covers them. He's hard.

He is cutting himself, and he's hard?

"What are you doing here, Duchess?"

His voice is low and slurred. Is he drunk? I glance to the side of the mattress and see the bottle of scotch, lid off to one side.

Great, he's angry, drunk, and in the mood for pain. All my instincts scream at me to run, but I seem unable to move.

"Dom, you ... are you okay?"

He sneers. "Of course, I'm fucking okay. Why wouldn't I be?"

Helplessly, I gesture at his leg.

He watches me and then laughs. "Oh, you think because of what you saw that I'm not okay? It's not what you think."

It's absolutely what I think, but I'm not about to argue with him now.

"I need to go," I say.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he asks again.

"I came looking for ..." I trail off.

"*Tino*?" he asks in a nasty, sing-song voice. "He's probably fucking Verity."

He's in a poisonous mood. "I thought she was *your* friend with benefits, not his."

"She fucks whoever we tell her to fuck." He practically snarls the words at me.

Does she? Is that true? My stomach is acidic with the realization of just who these men I've been messing around with are.

Dom takes four quick steps, and his arms are around me before I can react, trapping me.

"Hhmm, you smell good," he slurs into my neck.

I push him off. "You're drunk."

“Not drunk enough,” he snaps. “Not for this fucking hellhole.”

“Oh, you mean the mafia university.”

He stares at me, pulling away so he can study my face. “You finally caught on, huh? Why is your mother marrying my father?” he demands.

“Fucked if I know. I wish she wasn’t.” I can’t give him my secrets. He’s as trustworthy as a snake.

“Same.” He lets out a soft, bitter laugh.

“You think I want to be here?” I throw back at him. “I hate it here. It’s an amoral pit of venom.”

“Wow, Duchess, don’t hold back.”

“No one is happy here, either.” I shake my head. “Everyone here is fucked up, or miserable, or vicious. It’s so toxic. I wish we *could* just leave. It’s not as though I want Mom marrying your dad either.”

“My enemy’s enemy,” he says softly. Then he snaps his face back up to look at me. “Nah. I dislike you too much to make you my friend. Even if our goals were to align.”

“How would they align?”

“Stopping the wedding?”

I suck in a breath. This is all I want, isn’t it? To stop my mother marrying Dom’s vile father. If I do, though, I could be plunging us into an even more dangerous situation. It’s not only about the police and what I did anymore. There are men out there after us. Men who might kill us. I can’t do that. No matter how much I might want to leave here, if Mom says it’s dangerous, I must try to ensure she can keep us safe.

“I don’t want to stop their marriage.” The lie is brazen.

His gaze hardens. “Of course, you don’t. You and your mother think you can lord it over everyone here once she’s married to my father. That’s not how it works. The women are not in charge here. *Ever.*”

“Oh, I know. I got the memo.” I’m breathing hard now, but something incredible has happened.

Whatever it is that Dom does to me, it’s chased away the despair and melancholy and replaced it with something that burns much brighter. Hate? Lust? Both? Either way, I’ll take it over the other seething emotions. At least right now, I feel alive.

“You’re looking at me like you want to hit me. You know I like that.”

“Maybe I want to do more than just hit you.”

No one is more shocked than I am when I press myself to him and kiss him, *hard*. He groans into my mouth, and on instinct, I bite his bottom lip.

He pulls back. Red blooms on his skin. He licks his lip and looks at me, something akin to awe in his gaze.

“Fuck, yes, Duchess. Now you’re talking.”

He grabs my hair and pulls it in his fist, making my scalp burn and my blood sing. He kisses me then, taking control, teeth clashing, tongues dueling. It’s intense, and more than a little bit scary, but it’s a heady fear, like being on a too-fast rollercoaster.

Out of control. This is out of control. I’m out of control. I need to stop.

The trouble is, I don’t want to.

He walks me back until I’m up against the wall, and he’s kissing me as he covers my front, cool wall to my back. Our kisses become even more desperate, and I reach for his zipper. He’s doing the same, his hand sliding down the front of my jeans, fingers dipping into my panties, to find me needy and wet.

We never stop kissing as we touch one another. This is insane. It’s like some fumble behind the bleachers, but a hell of a lot hotter and darker.

Dom’s fingers push inside me, the heel of his hand pressing deliciously against my clit as he fingerfucks me, hard

and desperate.

I take his swollen cock out of his jeans and jerk him almost angrily. I want him to come. I want him to hurt. I want him to feel good.

He tastes of heaven and hell all rolled into one. This is the man I hate, but I also crave him in this moment.

Lips leave mine to trail hot wet kisses along my jaw, biting as he goes, and then he's sucking at my neck. I realize he's going to leave a mark, but I can't bring myself to care. He sucks so hard, I cry out at how good it feels.

God, I'm going to come. So fast? It feels depraved and wrong. With this awful man, his fingers inside me coated in his own blood, his cock hot and throbbing in my hand.

"I fucking hate you," he whispers against my throat but his hot, wet kiss there feels like desperation and need.

"Ditto," I say.

"Shit," he groans. "I need to be inside you."

He picks me up, and I wrap my legs around him as if I have no say in the matter. He carries me to the mattress. The mattress with a fucking knife *and* his blood on it. I need to stop this.

I can't because I want it as much as he does. Maybe more.

He throws me down on the mattress and pulls his clothes off. I shimmy out of mine. My heart pounds with a mix of fear, desire, and excitement. I feel like I'm about to jump off a cliff into deep, deep waters.

This is insane. I've lost my mind. I've most certainly lost my morals. How did I end up in this literal den of iniquity, giving myself to the king devil himself?

"You're such a pain in my ass," Dom says as he crawls over me.

"Yeah, and you're like a thorn in my side. I can't dig you out even though I want to."

“You’re such a stuck-up bitch,” he growls as he bites my shoulder.

“You’re such a fucking douche,” I reply as I dig my nails into his ass so hard, I know I’ll leave marks.

“Bite me again,” he says.

There’s a hard-edge desperation to the command.

I bend my head and bite his muscular pec.

“Fuck,” he yells.

I stare in shock at the blood blooming there. “I’m sorry.”

I try to kiss it better, but he roughly pushes my face away.

“I like it. I don’t want your soft kisses, or your fucking, stuck-up, Duchess pity. Give me your hate, Mackenzie. Every last drop of it.”

I push his shoulder and slap at it. The crack of skin against skin rings out through the air.

“That’s it,” he hisses. “Fight me.”

He laughs as I hit him.

“Is that the best you’ve got?”

I scream and really start to punch at his shoulders and chest, and he lets me. He grins at one particularly hard blow, but I know I’m not truly hurting him. Not the way he did to himself with the knife.

He grabs my hair, and I flinch at the initial pull, but he winds it around his fist and the burn against my scalp lessens into a tug that is as hot as it is dominant.

There’s something hot and dangerous simmering in this room, and it’s not the furnace. The energy between us is combustible.

He licks my lips, and I part them. His tongue in my mouth is forceful, and he tastes of whisky and violence.

I swallow it all down and pull him in for more. He is full of resentment, and I am full of vehemence, and when they meet, they create a white hot mix of explosive potential.

We're fighting, but we're also rutting against one another. I pull my mouth away from his, needing air, and pant as he thrusts his cock against my thigh. There's no finesse here, no foreplay—not that I need it.

“Are you on the pill?” he demands.

“The implant, but put a condom on.”

I know he's a sex god on campus, and I want to protect my health.

“I don't have any.”

“Then we can't do this,” I say, shaking my head.

“I'm clean,” he says.

“Oh, Dom. You lie as easily as you breathe. Do you expect me to believe you?”

Then I remember. “My purse,” I gasp as he rubs the head of his cock right over my aching clit.

“What about it?”

“There's a condom in there.”

He stares at me for a moment, and then with a low snarl he grabs my purse strap and pulls it to him.

“Who the fuck have you been using condoms with?”

“None of your fucking business. I can fuck whoever the hell I like.”

“Not anymore, you can't. You belong to us now.”

Practically throwing my purse at me, he watches with hooded eyes as I take the condom out.

“Put it on me, Duchess,” he orders.

My fingers are shaking as I reach for him. I can't resist stroking them around the head, and he hisses when I do. His thick cock twitches, and a pulse of pre-cum pearls at his head.

“Fuck, I'm going to explode if I don't get inside you,” he says.

I bite the foil and then rip, taking out the condom. When I roll it down his length, he watches, and the dark expression on his face fills me with trepidation.

“Turn around, on your hands and knees,” he orders.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to look at your face when I fuck you.”

“Screw you, Dom.”

He flips me over easily, and I pant as he pushes my face down into the mattress.

“You can still see the side of my face, fucker,” I taunt. I’ve regressed to childish insults now.

I should hate this, but I don’t. I ought to say to stop, but I don’t. How fucked up am I that I’m so wet and throbbing just a breeze could set me off and make me come?

How sick in the head am I that I like the fact he’s got my face pushed into the mattress and my ass in the air.

He trails a finger between my pussy lips and murmurs, “My little sister is so wet for me. You might hate me, but your cunt doesn’t.”

“Same goes for your dick.” I push back against his fingers. “Are you going to fuck me, Dom, or spend your time pontificating.”

“*Pontificating?*” He laughs, then slaps my ass hard.

“Fuck, *ouch.*”

“You deserved it.” Then he grabs my hips hard enough to bruise and pushes into me.

He slides in smooth and easy, probably because I’m so damn wet. I don’t want smooth, though, and I don’t want easy. I want him to fuck the emotional pain out of me. I want him to chase the demons away. Right now, the way I feel, I’d go into that stupid fight ring they have out there and throw punches. I can’t. So, if I can’t fight, then I might as well fuck.

“Are you going to give me nice and gentle, Dom, or are you going to put your money where your mouth is and show me how much you hate me?”

“Fuck you, Duchess.” He pulls out and then does just that.

He slams into me hard, and I moan as my hands fist into the sheets. Soon he’s fucking me so hard and fast, I’m moaning and shaking. He grunts as he slams into my cervix, making me see stars. It hurts, but it feels good too. It’s a distraction from the much worse pain inside me.

His hands fist into my hair again, and he pulls my face up from where he had it held down against the pillow.

“Oh, now you want to see my face?” I taunt. “Thought you were too much of a coward. Had to take me from behind so you could get it up.”

I don’t know what’s happened to me. Where is this deranged talk coming from? This is so weird, even for two people as clearly screwed up as Dom and I are. I might judge him for being a dangerous weirdo, but what am I? I killed a man. My lover. My professor. He’s dead because of me.

The way I did it? A pen in the neck? Maybe Dom isn’t the most dangerous person in this room at all.

If I hadn’t dealt with my emotions, would I do it again? Maybe? I’m covered, though, because I’ve found the best safety valve ever. I’m pouring all of my anger, hurt, disappointment, and rage onto *him*. He’s giving it back to me with every thrust.

“Don’t mistake me not *wanting* to look at your superior face to me not being *able* to, Duchess.”

He pulls out of me and turns me over, so I’m on my back. Our eyes lock. His finger trails over my jaw, cheek, nose, and then down over my lips.

“So exquisite. My little sister is so pretty,” he says.

I bite his hand in reply, and he thrusts back inside me. He grabs my hands and pins me down and fucks me hard, but he never takes his eyes from mine. Not once.

With Tino, a tiny part of me felt like an object, somehow. Like I could almost be any pretty girl.

With Kirill, the whole thing felt like a dream.

This feels like one of the most raw and real moments in my life. We don't look away from one another.

Not as my orgasm races through my veins, taking me over. Not as I gasp and shake at the intensity of it.

Not when Dom comes, too, straight on the tail of my own release, groaning and slowing his thrusts as he spills in the condom.

We don't even look away once it's over and the cold reality of what we've done rushes in.

Still staring at me, Dom sits up, taking the condom off and tying a knot in it. Watching me as if he can't quite believe any of this is real, he runs his hands down his body, my gaze flicking to watch for a moment before I'm caught in the laser beam of his stare again.

He brings his fingers up, and they're glistening with something. I realize it's blood. His blood, from where he's been cutting himself.

Never letting his gaze falter, Dom swipes two blood covered fingers across my forehead, and then down each cheek.

I recoil in shock and horror at what he's done. "What the hell?" I try to look away, to grab something to wipe my face, but he grips my chin, harsh and determined.

"No, don't wipe it off. You're mine now. I've blooded you, the way hunters do after a kill."

Oh, God.

The reality of what I've done rushes in hard and fast.

What kind of fucked up crazy am I to have thought doing anything with this guy was a good idea?

He kisses me, his lips nibbling at mine, and it's lazy now, sated a little. Dom like this, with the hatred fucked out of him,

is a different beast.

“Next time, no condom. I’ll show you a certificate of clean health. Kirill and Tino, too. I want to see you full of us all.”

“No.” I sit up, running my fingers through my hair in panic. “I’m not your fuck toy, Dom.”

“No, you’re our prim and proper Duchess, who we get to desecrate.”

“There won’t be a next time.”

He watches me as I stand, my legs shaking. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I’ve got to get out of here.”

“Of course there’ll be a next time. You can’t resist us, and it seems, for all I hate you, I can’t resist you either.”

“You want me gone, you fucking lunatic,” I scream at him as I gather up my clothes and pull them on. The anger isn’t really at him, though. It’s at myself. The girl who let the most fucked up guy in the college inside her. “Christ, talk about not knowing what you want. One moment you’re all, ‘Leave, Duchess, I want you gone.’ Then the next minute, ‘You’re mine, Duchess.’ Do you even hear yourself?”

“I never said I didn’t want more fun with you before you and your slutty Mom drag yourselves out of here.”

“See?” I pull my boots on as I point at him. “That, right there, is fucked up. I don’t mean just a little bit, Dom. You just fucked me, and you looked at me like I was something precious. Now, you’re denigrating me all over again.”

“Maybe I like fucking with you,” he says with an easy grin. “Maybe I like it that you don’t know what I think.”

“Or maybe, Dom, just maybe, you aren’t anywhere near as in control as you think you are. I think, *Domenic*,” I say his name with emphasis, “that you’re just as lost as I am, and all the games you play? They’re a desperate distraction from the misery that lives inside you.”

I see it then. So brief that when he blinks it’s gone, but I know what I saw. It wasn’t misery. It wasn’t hatred. It was desolation.

Deep inside, where he never wants anyone to see, Domenic is a black hole.

I swallow. This just got dangerous. Truly so, because this thing, this weird thread between us could end up breaking us all.

Black holes are deadly. They suck everything around them in and snuff out its light.

He grips my face again. “Don’t you dare wash that blood off, Duchess. You didn’t let me come in you, so now you have to sleep with my blood on you. One way or another, you’ll wear me. And don’t you think you get to tell me what is going on here. It’s not for you to know or to question. You are ours. Until we say you’re not.”

“I’m not yours.” I wrap my arms around myself, as if I can keep his cold darkness from touching me. “I’ll never be yours.”

He laughs. “That’s where you are so very wrong. We own you now. Unless you want your mom to know what a slut you are for Tino’s cock. And mine.”

My blood runs cold. “Did you film me as well?”

He laughs. “You’ll never know. Keep playing nice, and you’ll never have to find out.”

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

How could I have done this?

“I hate you so much,” I say as tears fill my eyes.

“Ditto, Duchess, ditto.” He forces a hard kiss on me before he lets me out of the door.

I stumble into the corridor and, on shaking legs, race from the room.

Chapter 35

Mackenzie

WHO THE HELL EVEN AM I?

I've completely lost touch with the girl I was only a year ago. A year ago, my life was normal. I went to a decent, *normal* school. I had friends. My dad was still alive. I hadn't murdered a man, and I wasn't fucking around with psychopaths.

I make my way through the maze of underground corridors, trying to find the stairs. I'm disoriented, and I'm struggling to keep my emotions contained. Being around Dom is a rollercoaster. One moment, I'm flying high, and then next I'm in freefall. One thing I know for sure is that I can't trust him with my feelings.

I can't trust him with anything.

Is there just a tiny part of me hoping he'll come after me? That he'll beg me to not leave and say he's made a mistake and that...what? That he cares about me? Who the fuck am I trying to kid? Dom doesn't give a fuck about anyone but himself.

Finally, I reach the stairs and grab the banister to keep my balance. I'm worried I might just pass out and fall back down them. My body doesn't feel like it belongs to me.

Neither does my soul.

I get to the top and open the door onto the first-floor hallway. I practically fall out onto the polished wood floors. I look up at the gold-framed painted portraits on the walls, all staring down at me, their eyes full of judgement.

My stomach rises and falls in that now familiar swoop. Everything feels strange, like I no longer recognize where I am. My hearing becomes hollow like I'm underwater.

A fresh wave of fear rises inside me.

“ZEE?”

A blurry face swims in my vision, and then solidifies to Camile staring down at me, her brown eyes wide with worry.

“Shit,” I manage to mutter. I'm lying on the floor. “How long was I out?”

“I don't know. Not long, I guess, or someone else would have found you by now.” She glances over her shoulder. “I'll go and get your mom.”

I grab her arm before she gets the chance to rise to her feet. “No, don't do that. I'm fine. It wasn't a bad one.”

“Wasn't a bad what? Did you pass out?”

“Help me get back to my room, and I'll explain.”

“Are you sure you're okay to walk?”

I'm a little woozy, and her hesitation is irritating me, but then feeling annoyed after a seizure is fairly normal. “Yes, I'm fine. I promise.”

She still doesn't look convinced, but she probably also doesn't want to leave me here alone while she goes to get help. I'm grateful no one else is around to witness this.

“You're hurt, though,” she says.

“No, I'm fine. Honestly. That's not the—”

“But you have blood on your face,” she interrupts.

I remember Dom smearing his blood on me, marking me as his. “Oh, it's not mine.”

Her eyes go even rounder. “What?”

“I can't explain here. Please, let's just go back to my room and I'll tell you everything there.”

I have the sudden urge to do exactly that—tell her everything. Not just about Dom, but about the professor and who my father really was, too. The desire to unburden myself from my secrets is almost visceral. But I won't do that to her. I won't make her a co-conspirator to my darkest secret and put her in such a terrible position.

I am going to have to explain the blood, though.

Camile helps me to my feet. I keep my head down, allowing my hair to fall over my face. I'd use my sleeve to wipe away the blood, but I can tell by the tension on my skin that it's dried already.

Thankfully, we get back to my room without bumping into anyone. Camile guides me to my bed, which I sit on the edge of, and she gets me a facewipe to clean off the blood. Then she goes to my bathroom to get me a glass of water. She presses it into my hands, and I take a tentative sip.

"You going to tell me what's going on?" she asks as she perches on the bed beside me.

I owe her at least some explanation. "I'm epileptic. It started when I was twelve, just when I hit puberty, I guess."

She places her fingers to her lips. "Jesus, Zee. I had no idea."

I shrug. "I prefer to keep it that way. I don't want to be treated differently than everyone else."

"Still, the people around you should know. They should be taught what to do if you have a seizure so they don't do something to make it worse."

"Maybe you're right, but I've normally got things pretty under control. It's just that coming here, and...what happened before has thrown my routine all out of whack."

"What about the blood? You said it wasn't yours."

I stare down at my hands. "It's Dom's."

"Dom's?"

It's like everything I'm saying is taking her one step closer to disbelief.

I squirm awkwardly. "We had sex."

"You *what?*"

I hurry on. "It wasn't intentional. It just kind of happened."

"Okay," she says slowly, "I don't get how you accidentally just had sex with that douchebag, and it still doesn't explain the blood."

Her words are not angry, but I can tell she's disappointed in me. Maybe if she understands Dom a little more, or at least how I found him, she'll get how I let it happen. I can't stand to lose a friend over this.

I let out a long sigh, debating how much to tell her. Can I trust Camile with someone else's secret? If I'm going to offer her any kind of explanation, I don't feel like I have much choice.

"You have to promise to keep this to yourself."

"Of course, babe. Whatever you want."

"You swear?" I insist.

"I swear," she parrots back.

I let out another breath and slump down. "Okay. Dom cuts himself."

"What? Like self-harm?"

I nod. "Yes. He cuts the inside of his thighs. That's where the blood is from."

She raises her eyebrows. "Do I want to know what you were doing with him to get blood from the inside of his thighs on your face?"

My cheeks burn hot. I don't normally share this kind of intimate detail with anyone. My relationship with the professor was a secret, so it wasn't as though I could even tell my best friend what we got up to between the sheets. Lola thought I was basically a frigid virgin.

“He-he kind of branded me with it.”

Her eyes practically pop out of her skull. “You have got to be fucking joking.”

“I found him cutting himself, and he was still bleeding, and then somehow we ended up having hate sex, and then he put his blood on my face and told me I was his now.”

“Holy shit, Mackenzie. I mean, apart from the hate-sex part, which is actually kind of hot, the rest of it is totally fucked up. What was one of the first things I ever said to you? It was to stay away from the Devils. Instead of listening to me, you’re fucking one of them—and he’s the worst of them all.”

“I’m not fucking one of them. It was a one-time thing. It won’t happen again.”

I don’t tell her how actually I’ve been involved with all three of them. I don’t tell her that I’ve let Tino lick me out and had Kirill come all over me. I don’t tell her that they talk about sharing me, and a part of me wants to know exactly how that would work.

She’d go nuts if she knew.

She takes my hand. “You’re going to let them destroy you. You need to look after yourself. You have to promise me, Zee. Stay away from the Devils, especially Domenic.”

“You know the wedding is happening in four days, then Dom will be my stepbrother, officially. We’ll be family. I’m not sure how easy it’s going to be to just stay away from him.”

She rolls her eyes. “Do I really need to say it? There’s a big difference between physically staying away from him and not spreading your legs for him.”

My skin heats further. She has a point.

“Besides,” she adds, “you can’t be fucking your stepbrother. You’ll be related. Won’t that be incest or something?”

I remember how he called me his little sister as he fucked me. Is that something that gets Dom off? I won’t tell Camile about that, or how I punched and slapped and bit him. About

how I fucking loved it. Again, I start to wonder about the state of my own mental health. I might accuse Dom of being fucked up, but am I much better? That was some of the hottest sex I've ever had. What would it be like if Valentino and Kirill had been there, too? Would they have stood around and watched me with Dom? Would they have masturbated over us, in the same way they had when they'd been watching the video of me and Tino? I picture Dom being done with me, but instead of throwing me out of the room, Valentino, with his huge, pierced cock, steps in. I imagine Kirill's mouth on my tits while Tino rams himself inside me. Maybe I could even have Kirill's cock in my mouth. The idea of fucking both of them while Dom watches is insanely hot. The three of them wanting me, desiring me, touching me.

Camile brings me back to reality with an elbow in my ribs.

"Ouch," I protest.

"Where the hell did you just go?" she asks.

"What? Nowhere!"

"Don't lie. You were thinking about him, weren't you? You were thinking about what it was like when you were having sex with him. You need to stop it, Mackenzie. Put him out of your mind."

"I will. I promise," I tell her. "I don't want Dom. The guy is a complete asshole. I hate him."

She looks at me as though she doesn't believe me.

I'm not sure I do either.

Chapter 36

Kirill

“YOU FUCKED HER.”

I do not say it as a question. It is a statement.

I can already tell from Dom’s smug expression and the way the man smirks to himself every five minutes.

It’s Thursday, and we’re supposed to be doing an essay, but none of us can be bothered, so we’re in the den getting stoned instead.

“What?” Tino glares at us both. “Dom fucked who?”

“Who do you think?” I snap.

“Well, to be fair, it could be any number of girls here.” Tino shrugs.

“Did. You. Fuck. Her?” I demand of Dom.

“What the hell is it to you if I did?” He laughs.

“You have to have everything for yourself, don’t you?” I accuse. “You’re so goddamn controlling, Dom. You had to take her first.”

“Technically, I got her last, and you kept your time with her a pathetic secret, so you can shut the hell up.”

Tino sighs and stands. “I’m out of here. You two are losing it. She’s a bit of fun. She’ll be gone soon. Dom, you shouldn’t have screwed her without us there. You know we don’t play like that. We only screw a joint project if we are all there.”

Joint project. Tino is such a fucker. Still, the wording makes me smile.

“She might not have anything to do with any of us again, anyway, after whatever happened here last night,” I grumble.

Dom scowls at me. “At least I didn’t film her, so there’s that.” Then he shrugs. “I might have let her think I did, though.”

I growl and let my head fall back on my neck. “What? Why? Now you are guaranteeing we never get another taste.”

The idea of not getting to touch her again, to cover her in my cum and massage it into her perfect pussy, her tits, maybe her asshole, fills me with anger.

“Kirill, are you catching feelings?” Tino says with a laugh.

“No,” I deny immediately. “I just want to fuck her. I want all of us in her, on her, marking her.”

“Christ, you need therapy. A kink is one thing, but when it’s your be all and end all, Kirill, you might need help.”

I give Tino the bird and scoot down on the soft sofa, until I’m almost horizontal.

“She’ll be with us again. I’ve basically threatened her that if she doesn’t then we’ll show everyone what a slut she is.” Dom laughs darkly.

Tino rolls his eyes. “We won’t be showing anyone that footage. If it makes her a slut, then so am I, and worse, I recorded her, so I’d be fucking ruined. Even somewhere like this, I’d be finished.”

“You’re not wrong,” I say thoughtfully. “The bigger question is, why hasn’t she thought of that?”

“What do you mean?” Dom gives me his full attention.

“She’s acting ... rash. Like a ball in that game. You know the arcade game with the silver balls.”

“Pinball?” Dom asks.

“Yes, this. She’s like a pinball, careening all over the place, and no reasoning behind her actions. Or very little. But why? Why hasn’t she figured some shit out?”

“She’s at least figured out what this place really is.” Dom takes the joint from Tino and takes a drag. “That took her long enough.”

I ponder his words, tapping my lip. “You know when you don’t think clearly?”

“When you want pussy?” Tino supplies.

“No, asshole. You don’t think clearly when you’re scared. Panicked. She’s so frightened of something, she can’t think clearly.”

Dom laughs. “Yeah, she’s scared of us, as she should be.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t think it’s that. You could see it in her before she even knew who we were. She came here like that. I think she’s got something she’s hiding.”

Tino drops back into his chair, clearly changing his mind about leaving. “What are you thinking?”

“That if we can figure out what it is, we can use it against her. We could get her to do whatever we want.”

Dom sits up. “Like get her to leave.”

I exchange a glance with Valentino. Neither of us would say it out loud, but I can tell we’re both thinking the same thing. We don’t really want our pretty Duchess to go. We’re having far too much fun. But Dom is our brother, and we’ll do anything for him, even help him get rid of a girl that we’d much rather keep for ourselves.

Suddenly, the power goes out, plunging us into darkness. We have the red glow from the furnace and the tip of the joint, but otherwise it’s pitch black.

My entire body freezes, and I clutch the edges of the couch as though I’m afraid it’s going to come alive beneath me and toss me off. My heart pounds hard against the inside of my ribs, and I’m sure it might explode. An iron band wraps

around my lungs and squeezes all the air out of me. I try to draw a new breath, but I can't.

I'm a small child again, locked inside a cupboard barely big enough for me to fit into. I can hear the heavy thud of footsteps getting closer. Though I'm terrified of being locked in this tiny space in the dark, it's the thought of what will happen to me when he takes me out of here that makes my fear worse.

Fuck. I'm going to die. I'm going to lie here in the dark, and I'll have an aneurysm, and die.

"Kirill?" It's Dom's voice. "Breathe, dude. It's okay. It's just the power going out. It'll be back on any second."

A strange sound comes from my throat, a weird wheezing that could also be a whine of terror.

"Focus on the light from the furnace," Tino says. "You're going to be fine." He fumbles, and then a white light illuminates the room in front of us. He's turned on his phone light for me.

I didn't even think of that. I'm so fucking scared of the dark, I didn't think about taking out my phone and using the flashlight on it.

To my relief, the lights flicker back on.

My lungs immediately loosen, and I suck in a deep breath. I swing my legs off the couch, planting my feet on the floor, and bury my face in my knees. I'm embarrassed that the other two saw me like that. My fear of the dark isn't something I like anyone to know about.

Neither of them speaks. They know this isn't something I want to talk about.

After a few minutes, when my breathing returns to normal, a hand taps my shoulder.

I look up, and Dom hands me the joint.

"We're running out of time," he says. "On Sunday, Mackenzie's mom and my dad say 'I do,' and then I'm stuck with her. She'll be my fucking stepsister."

“That’s hot, though,” Tino says. “Getting it on with your little stepsister.”

Dom rolls his eyes. “You’re fucked in the head.” Then he smirks. “But yeah, it was fucking hot.”

Chapter 37

Domenic

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING, DOM?”

I let out a sigh because I recognize the voice and I’m not in the mood. I turn on my heel to face her. I’ve just left the others, and I’m pretty baked. I don’t really want to have to deal with Verity right now.

“What do you want, Verity?”

“Just to see you. I never get to spend any time with you now that your new *stepsister* is on the scene.” She spits out the word like it’s a curse.

“You don’t have to worry about that. She won’t be here much longer.”

Her expression brightens. “Oh? Why is that? I thought the wedding was happening on Sunday.”

I grind my molars. “Yeah, it is, but there’s still time to make sure it doesn’t happen.”

She practically hops with delight. “Ooh, tell me what you’re planning.”

“I haven’t quite figured that part out yet, but we’re still fucking with Mackenzie, so you don’t need to worry.”

The truth is I’d prefer to have Mackenzie over Verity any day of the week, but I don’t even want to admit that to myself out loud. This isn’t just about what my dick wants. If Lucia marries my dad, then she’ll be replacing my mom, and that’s what is really eating me up inside.

Mom's death did a number on me. I might pretend I don't care about much, but when she died, it gutted me.

There are so many questions I still have unanswered. What was she doing driving my car that night? Where had she been going at two in the morning? Why had she lost control of the vehicle?

Both Mom and the car had been found the next morning. It had gone over a bridge, through the barrier, and crashed into the water beneath. She must have hit her head on the steering wheel—the airbag didn't inflate due to an electrical error—and she knocked herself unconscious. When the water rose high enough, she'd drowned, sitting right there in the driver's seat. She hadn't even managed to take off her seatbelt or try to open the door.

I'll never understand how my father just seemed to get over her loss within a matter of days. He never even asked any questions about where she was going or why she was driving at that time of night. If I attempted to look into things, he came down on me hard, saying he couldn't stand to keep dwelling in the past.

Then he just went out and replaced her with Mackenzie's mom. I have a sneaking suspicion that was his plan all along. They already knew each other; I know that much. Did Dad hear that Lucia was now a widow and decide to make space for her?

Had Lucia wanted that, too?

She and her bitch daughter just slid into the place of me and my mom.

A perfect replacement.

I need to keep those thoughts and feelings front and center. I promised myself I'd get the truth about what happened to Mom, and retribution for her. I can't let myself get distracted by how hot Mackenzie is. Never mind the fact that sometimes, in the deepest, darkest part of my psyche, when I look at her, I feel something...and it's not just lust or hate.

In fact, those feelings are just more proof of why I need to get her out of here.

“You know,” Verity says, sidling up close to me, “I’ve been screwing with Mackenzie, too.”

I frown down at her. “You have?”

I’ve seen some of the bitchiness, the laughing at her clothes, and talking behind her back. Is that what she means? That’s fine by me. Especially if it gets her out of here faster.

“Who do you think roofied her that first night in the bar?”

I stop walking.

“What?”

“I put it in her glass of champagne. She could barely stand up. It was hilarious.”

Ice cold fury runs through my veins. We nearly got the blame for that little stunt. “You did what?”

Her expression falters. “She deserved it. You said yourself that she acts all high and mighty. She needed knocking down a peg or two.”

“So, you thought it would be okay to drug her? Without my permission? You just acted as if you have the right?”

Who the fuck does Verity think she is? Mackenzie accused Kirill of this shit. What if Tino hadn’t walked her back to her room that night? Anything could have happened to her. One of those asshole Vipers might have gotten her and taken advantage of the state she was in. Rumor has it that they made a girl jump off the top of the tower last year. I wouldn’t put it past them to get their dicks wet if they found a girl half-conscious.

The thought of that happening to Mack fills me with an emotion I can’t even analyze. Why the fuck should I care? I do, though. About this. For reasons I can’t even begin to analyze right now, Verity’s confession has me livid.

I’m genuinely concerned about what I might do to Verity right now.

Verity pouts, and I want to tear her lips from her face. I remind myself that I don't hurt women...unless they want me to.

"I thought it would make you happy," she says.

I shake my head at her. "I can't even stand to fucking look at you right now."

"Dom!" she cries.

I lift a hand to stop her. "Don't."

I spin back around and storm off the way I'd been heading. Her pleas of, "Dom, please, wait," chase me down the corridor.

Mack had been drugged. No wonder she'd been so confused and had put her walls up. Wait until the others find out what Verity did.

They're going to go fucking nuts.

Chapter 38

Mackenzie

THE NEXT DAY, I HEAD INTO A LECTURE EXHAUSTED AND, frankly, terrified. This place is messing with my head so much, I'm scared it will kill me. I'm genuinely worried that if I don't leave here, I'll have a seizure bad enough to do me real harm.

What was Mom thinking bringing me here?

I guess she figured it would be better than prison. At least here I still have her, though things have been tense between us recently.

I take a seat near the back at the top of the lecture hall. I hate lectures more than classes, as sometimes the guys are in them, too, and it makes me even more stressed.

Camile sits next to me and shoots me a small smile. I hope we're going to be okay. I'm torn between not wanting to tell her anything else, in case it ends our friendship, and the basic human need to share.

Let's face it; there's no one else here I can talk to.

The whole place is toxic. Mom's relationship with Nataniele is freaky, and I get such bad vibes from him, and then there's the Devils. Ugh. Never mind Verity, the queen bitch herself.

Speak of the queen bitch and she shall appear. Verity slinks past us, her trusty Louis Vuitton backpack giving her away. Otherwise, I might not have recognized her because she's wearing a ballcap pulled down low over her face. She must have pulled her hair up into a pony tucked inside the cap because I can't see any of it.

Usually, Verity wears her mane of hair like a crown. It's gorgeous, so I don't blame her.

"She must be having a bad hair day," Camile whispers to me, and I giggle. While I try not to mock other women for their looks, I'll make an exception for Verity, who has been so horrible to me.

The doors bang, and I sink in my seat as heavy male footsteps descend the stairs. I don't know who it is, but I don't want to see any guys right now. I'm done with them; I really am. I glance to the side and see the Vipers—the twins and a blond guy I haven't met yet—strutting down the steps to take places at the very front.

I frown. "That seems enthusiastic for them."

Camile laughs. "The teacher of today's class is young, brunette, and very hot. The Vipers always sit at the front. She only comes in for this subject, and honestly, I think half of it is those fuckers like trying to make her uncomfortable."

"Does it work?" I ask.

"No. She's an ex-DEA agent."

"Teaching a class in a mafia college?" I hiss.

"*Querido dios*, Mackenzie. Please keep your voice down." Camile glances around, her eyes wide.

"I did. I whispered."

"You whisper-hissed, and you can't talk like that in the open." She's speaking so quietly I'm having to lean right into her to hear. "The lecturer talks about how people leave clues at crime scenes. It's an important class."

"I'm surprised we little ladies are allowed to take it." I shake my head.

"It covers things to do with how to clean certain substances, erm, from clothing and carpets and skin."

I cannot believe this. "No fucking way." I snort.

"Yes way, and Zee, you keep this up and I'm going to sit down there with the Vipers. Stop. Talking. About. It."

“There’s an actual *class* in it. I don’t think me *talking about* it matters.”

“Nothing weird about that. Lots of colleges have criminology classes and classes on law, and the rest.”

The doors bang again, ending our conversation.

More heavy male footsteps. I glance to my side and my stomach does a somersault. It’s the Devils, and God, do they look handsome as they stride down the stairs. My promise to myself and God falters a little as I watch them.

They get to where Verity is sitting, and Kirill pauses, then swipes the hat off her head, tucking it under his arm.

She lets out a cry and clutches her hands to her head, curling into herself as though she’s trying to vanish. Kirill leans down to say something to her.

I can’t stop staring at her head.

What, the actual fuck?

Camile says *querida dios* again but, this time, it’s a whispered prayer.

Verity has had her hair cut. Or, more accurately, Verity looks like she’s been attacked by garden shears. Her beautiful blonde hair is short, and much darker as it’s mostly what were her roots. It’s spiky, and not in a good way.

“It looks like she had a fight with a lawnmower, and then got dragged backward through a house fire,” Camile whispers in awe.

I giggle, but I’m feeling a strange sense of dread in my stomach. I hate Verity, but she didn’t do that to herself. Kirill just took her cap.

“Oh, God, I think the Devils did that to her,” I whisper.

Camile looks at me and rolls her eyes. “Zee, you’ve got to get with the program. Of course, they did. I told you they were fucked up and would ruin your life. Verity is their friend. If they did that to her, and God knows why, imagine what they do to people they want to fuck with.”

My stomach churns, and I scribble in my notes, writing stupid stuff, trying to distract myself because I cannot have a seizure here and now.

Luckily for me, the doors at the bottom of the lecture hall open and a woman with so much charisma I am jealous saunters in. She looks like that nineties game character, Lara Croft. Her hair is pulled up into a high ponytail, and even from here, I can see she's got cheekbones you could cut glass on. Her top is a tightly fitted black t-shirt, and she's wearing black, close-fitted jeans, and biker boots.

Glancing at the rows of students, she shocks me when she raises her arm, as if holding a gun, aims, and with a soft *boom* from her lips, pretends to fire. The student she aims at stands. It's a girl called Suzy, who I don't know to speak with.

"Suzy, what is the number one reason criminal's get caught?"

"Dropping their guard, Miss Davies."

"Exactly. Dropping their guard. Thank you. You may sit. Now, why does this happen? Complacency. Hubris, thinking you're better than everyone else will almost certainly lead to disaster. Today we're going to look at a very interesting true crime case where blind stupidity is what got the criminal caught."

I am so enthralled by her lecture that I forget my fears, and my panic, and the fuzziness warning me I might be going to have an attack subsides. I indulge in a little fantasy that one day I might have her confidence.

Maybe if I act as if I do, then I will? It must be amazing to be so comfortable and powerful in your own body. I make a vow then to try to channel some of Miss Davies' energy in the future as I go through life.

After the lecture, I head outside for some fresh air with Camile. "Wow, that was an amazing lecture."

"Yeah, you can see why the Vipers like her. As if they've got a chance."

Kirill saunters over. "Hey, Duchess, how you doing?"

He's wearing Verity's ballcap.

"Oh, crap, we've got that meeting," Camile says as she scrambles to her feet. "You coming, Zee?"

We don't have a meeting, but I know she's trying to keep me from the Devils, so I nod.

"No, wait. You can be five minutes late. I need a word with you." Kirill holds my arm.

I'm about to argue when his two wingmen stalk over to us.

Camile sighs, shoots me an exasperated look, but then shrugs. "Okay, *fine*. But don't be longer than five minutes, Zee, or we'll get shit."

"I promise I'll be there in five."

She turns and mouths *library* to me from behind the guys so I know where to find her.

"Can you guys make this quick?" I ask. "I've got to go."

Kirill spins the ballcap around, and I glare at him.

"Taking her hat was a dick move," I say. I want to ask if they did that to her hair, but I'm too scared of the answer.

"You wouldn't be saying that if you knew what she did to you," Tino growls.

"I know she hates me, and she's been nothing but vile to me, but still..."

"You know that night you thought you'd been drugged, and you blamed Kirill?" Dom asks, his jaw jutting at that angle that I know means he's pissed.

"I didn't accuse you," I say to Kirill. "I was just asking questions."

Kirill snorts but doesn't answer.

"Well, you *were* roofied." Dom folds his arms across his chest. "But not by any of us, Duchess. By that fucking bitch."

Rage, pure adrenaline-filled *rage*, floods my veins. My skin flares with heat. My heart trips. I forget all about my sense of right and wrong when it comes to that girl.

“Excuse me? She did *what*? She roofied me?”

“Yes, she did.” Tino nods. “She admitted it to Dom. Thought it would put her in his good books.”

She could have killed me. They don’t know I have seizures, but she could have made me so sick. Even without having epilepsy, it is a dangerous thing to do.

“Could have killed you,” Dom mutters, echoing my thoughts. As if he’d even care.

“I’m going to report her,” I say, turning to march back inside.

Dom grabs my arm. “To who?”

“Your dad. My soon to be stepdad. He’ll do something.”

“Like what? Give her detention?” Tino laughs at me.

“I’m sure this hotbed of depravity has better punishments than that.” I fix them with a hard glare.

“It kind of doesn’t,” Tino says softly. “Unless you do certain things, we’re encouraged to sort out differences ourselves, the way we will have to out there.”

Oh, my God.

“So, what? I’m supposed to fight her in that sick fighting ring you’ve got set up here?”

Kirill takes the ballcap from his head and places it on mine. “No, Duchess. We punished her for you. We held her down and cut off her hair, and we made a mess of it.”

“Yeah, we’re hardly qualified hairdressers.” Tino chuckles as if this is super funny.

My emotions are torn. I’m feeling sick, but also, there’s a part of me, a bigger part than I’d like to admit, that loves they did this for me.

“Why have you given me this?” I take the ballcap off.

“No, put it back on,” Kirill insists. “This is your crown to wear today. This shows Verity, and her friends, that if they fuck with you, we go after them.”

“Come on. Miss your meeting and come with us to the cafeteria,” Dom says *meeting* as he makes air quotes with his fingers.

“Wear your cap,” Kirill adds. “Show her what a fucking queen you are.”

Dom gives a slow nod. “We’ll be with you. No one hurts what is ours.”

Ours? I am not theirs. I don’t belong to them. Dom wants me gone, doesn’t he? Does this mean he’s changed his mind?

Unsure, but unable to resist the idea of Verity seeing me with the guys wearing her cap, even though I know it makes me no better than her, I allow them to lead me into the dining hall.

Chapter 39

Mackenzie

EVERYONE LOOKS AT US AS WE WALK IN, AND VERITY LOOKS the most. Her eyes widen as she sees her cap on my head, and then her cheeks turn a deep shade of pink as if she's been slapped.

Her friends glance at me, back at her, and then down to their plates. Verity's gaze slides from me to Dom, and she slowly lowers her eyes, until she's staring at her plate.

We walk right by her table, and I take a seat.

"What do you want for lunch, Duchess?" Tino asks with a mock bow.

I giggle. "A salad, chicken, maybe? Or tuna if they have it."

"I'll get it," he says.

He and Kirill walk off to the service line, leaving me with Dom.

"I thought you hated me and wanted me gone." I glance over at Verity. "That seems an awful lot of vengeance for someone you hate."

"Maybe you're growing on me a bit, sis."

I try to bite back my smile at his words. I can't let myself fall into something with these dangerous men. Plus, in a couple of days, he's going to be my brother, so that would be weird as hell.

"Like a mold grows on walls," he adds.

I snort and dig him in the ribs with my elbow.

“We told you, didn’t we? No one messes with what is ours.”

“How am I yours? If you hate me?” I don’t get these guys at all.

“Mine to hate. Mine to fuck. Mine to play with.” He says the words quietly, staring ahead, not at me.

“Like a toy?” I say, anger rising in me again.

“Yes, my pretty little toy. Verity doesn’t get to play with you. She did, and now she’s learned her lesson.”

Oh, my God. He’s so unhinged. But even though his words are insane, they’re also weirdly hot. Or, at least, they are to me and my supremely fucked up psyche. I need so much therapy, I’ll still be in counseling in my fifties at this rate.

“You do know that’s fucked up, right?” I shake my head.

“It is. Even more so is the fact you like it.”

“No, I don’t,” I lie.

He finally turns his gaze to me. “Liar, liar.” His words are soft. “I know for a fact your panties are wet. Your pulse has gotten faster at your neck, your eyes are dilated, and your cheeks are slightly flushed. Plus, when you get turned on, your upper arms get these cute goosebumps, and you’ve got them now.”

“I’m cold,” I snap.

“Ah, Duchess, do you want to borrow my sweater?” Dom doesn’t wait for an answer. He takes his sweater off, leaving himself in just a t-shirt and his jeans, and he hands it to me.

“Put it on,” he orders.

Like the stupid toy he claims I am, I take off the cap and put his sweater on. I do feel shivery and strange suddenly, but I don’t think it’s from the temperature of the room. The furnace in this old building is fierce, and the dining area is always warm from the amount of cooking going on here.

Still, I put the sweater on and immediately regret it. It's so warm, from Dom's body, and it smells of him. That woodsy scent he wears. It doesn't help with the wetness growing between my legs, or the ache for him, Kirill, and Tino that is building in me.

My mind keeps going back to the fantasy of me with the three of them.

"Shall we just get some snacks to go, and take this party down to the den, baby?" Dom purrs at me, low and depraved.

He's never called me baby before. I feel like something has shifted between us. Could this be all right? I've felt so vulnerable for a long time now. The idea of having three hard as nails men watching out for me is enticing.

Say no. Say no. Say no.

"Okay." Fuck my life.

He smirks at me and gets up, jogging to the service area and speaking to Kirill. The blond glances at me and grins. Then he puts some of the food he was getting back. Two minutes later, the three of them walk back to me, armed with prepacked sandwiches, chips, and sodas.

"Let's take this lunch elsewhere," Dom says.

Swallowing down my suddenly dry throat, I follow Dom and the others as we walk out of the room. I can feel all the students' eyes on me. They're all watching. Do they know what is going on? Do they know I'm fucking around with all three of these men?

The thought makes me ashamed, but as we reach the empty hallway and Kirill lifts my hair from my nape and sifts it through his fingers, I find it hard to care.

When we reach the den, the snacks are placed on a table. Dom walks to a large fridge and takes out four beers. He passes me one.

"It's lunchtime," I say.

"Live a little, sweet thing," Kirill says.

I do need to take the edge off because I suddenly feel as if I'm going to explode, and beer isn't high in alcohol, is it? I take a few swigs and relax a little as it hits me. I put the bottle down on the table so I'm not going to thoughtlessly drink some more.

"Do you like what we did for you, Mackenzie?" Tino asks, his eyes focused on me as he watches.

"When we did it, I got hard for you," Kirill says. "Knowing we were doing that for you. For our Duchess."

I'm too hot, and my heart is beating too hard. I feel as if I can't breathe.

Dom takes a swig of his beer and sets it down too. "I bought you a gift."

His words couldn't have surprised me more. "You did? Why?"

"Because I couldn't stop thinking about you. Wait here."

Then I remember the last gift I received from one of the Devils, and mistrust coils inside me. What do they have planned this time? It's bound to be something messed up.

He lifts one finger and then disappears to where I'd seen him cutting himself. He emerges again, a shoe-sized box in his hands.

"Here."

He gives the item to me. I glance down at the top of the box to see it's branded Christian Louboutin.

With my breath caught, I open the box. Inside are four-inch stiletto heels, black patent leather with ankle straps and peep toes. The insole is a gorgeous red silk, and the heel is crusted with glittering red crystals, and they have the famous red soles, of course. They're absolutely gorgeous and must have cost thousands.

"They're beautiful, but I'll never be able to walk in these."

Dom smirks. "You think I bought them for you to walk in?"

My cheeks flare with heat.

“Now, try them on,” he encourages.

I nod and go to sit down, but his grip on my arm stops me. “Take off the pants first.”

“What?”

“I want to see what your legs look like in these shoes.”

I glance around at the other two. They’re both nodding encouragingly. Fuck it. In for a penny and all that. We all know exactly where this is going. If they want to see me in a pair of thousand-dollar pumps, then why the hell not? I have to admit that I know I’ll feel sexy as hell with those on my feet.

Aware of all their eyes on me, I kick off my sneakers and then unbutton my jeans and wriggle them down off my hips. All three of these men have seen me in a lot less.

I realize I’m going to need to sit down if I’m going to stand any chance of putting the shoes on without breaking an ankle. I make my way to the couch and drop onto the cushions and set the box down beside me.

Aware of the three sets of eyes on me, I fold over to reach my feet—all that yoga has made it easy—but to my surprise, Dom drops to his knees in front of me.

“Let me.”

Dom takes my foot and lifts it so the heel presses hard against the middle of his chest. That must hurt. He catches a breath, and his gaze darkens. Yes, it clearly does hurt, and he likes it.

He fastens the ankle strap for me then sets my foot back down.

He whips off his t-shirt and repeats the process with my other foot, using the sharp heel to grind against the point between his pectoral muscles. He kisses my toes and runs his hands up my calf.

“Fuck, you are so hot,” he murmurs.

“Don’t hog her all to yourself, D,” Tino complains.

Dom smiles and lowers my foot, and then pulls me back to standing. Wow. The shoes completely change how I feel. My legs seem endless, and the height of the heels causes my hips to jut out and my shoulders to go back.

They've turned me into Mackenzie Kingsland, sex goddess.

Tino lets out a low whistle. "Holy fuck. Good call, D."

"Do you know what you do to me?" Kirill seems unable to tear his eyes from me.

"No." The word is broken, a strangled whisper.

He takes his t-shirt off, revealing those incredible muscles of his.

Next, he pushes his jeans down, and they pool around his ankles. He's wearing boxer briefs, and the front is tented with the size of him. "This is what you do to me, Duchess. You make me so hard for you."

My mouth waters as I stare, rapt.

"We all want you," Kirill says.

Tino hasn't glanced away. "Do you want us?"

"We'll make it so good." Dom whispers this into my ear, from where he's moved behind me. The three of them surround me. Wolves about to devour the lamb.

"All of you?" I ask, my voice shaking.

This is my fantasy, isn't it? So why am I so damn nervous?

Dom smirks. "Yes, us and you, baby. All four of us, together. We will make you forget everything. If you can remember your own goddamn name, then we aren't doing this right."

I should ask them who else they did this with. I should say no. But when Dom's lips find my throat and suck the skin there, and at the exact same time, Kirill pushes down his underwear, his massive cock slapping wetly against his stomach, I lose all reason.

Kirill pumps his fist lazily up and down his length, and the slit at the top of his cock pulses out a droplet of pre-cum. “Look what you do to me, pretty girl.”

“You make us all crazy,” Tino says as he walks right up to me and pulls Dom’s sweater over my head.

Next, he takes off my t-shirt, leaving me in only my bra, panties, and those damn hot shoes.

He shakes his head. “Swear to God, Mackenzie, you’ve got the best tits I’ve ever seen.”

I warm at his compliment.

Dom’s fingers run up my stomach, so feather light they almost tickle. He brushes under the wire of my bra, and then flicks his fingers over my hard nipples. I groan, and as I do, Tino bends his head and sucks one of my nipples into his mouth through the lace of my bra.

Kirill takes my hand and wraps it around his cock. He’s so big and hard. I give him a couple of strokes then swipe my thumb over the head, gathering up the precum and smearing it around. He draws a sharp breath, and then gives a groan—and I think it’s about the hottest sound I’ve ever heard. There’s a power in this—in bringing tough men to their knees.

He thrusts his hips, fucking into my hand, even while Tino sucks and pulls my nipple into his mouth through the lace of my bra and Dom kisses my neck.

“I want to be the first inside you,” Kirill says. “I want to feel the heat of your pussy wrapped around my dick, so wet and tight.”

“She’s got three holes.” Tino lifts his head from my breast. “One for each of us.” He locks eyes with me. “As long as our Duchess is okay with that?”

“You ever been fucked in the ass, baby?” Dom asks.

I shake my head. The professor wasn’t into that at all.

“You want to try? I’ll take it slow.”

“I’m scared it will hurt,” I admit.

Dom kisses my neck again, and his hands skirt my hips then cup my ass. “It probably will, but not for long. We’ll make it good for you, I promise. Think how full you’ll be, a cock in your pussy, another in your ass, and one in your throat.”

I blink. I hadn’t been expecting that. “Oh.”

Tino sweeps my hair from my face. “You know how to take me in your mouth. You’ve done it before.”

Yes, I have, but that was when it was just me and him. Now there are two other men involved.

“You’re ours now, Mack,” Dom says, “and one day you’ll be able to take all three of us down there. Two in your pussy, one in your ass. You’ll be so stretched, you won’t be able to think straight.”

I’m not sure I can think straight now. That sounds impossible.

“But-but won’t that mean your dicks will be touching?” I say.

Dom grins. “Yeah, but it’s all just fun and games, baby. It doesn’t mean anything. Like I might tell Tino to hold Kirill’s cock still while you ride on him, but it doesn’t mean they’re into each other like that. We’re brothers, like you’re my little stepsister, and family means we share everything, right? Even each other.”

This is all kinds of twisted, but I’m too far gone to care.

They close in around me again, hands all over my body, tracing every curve. Dom’s hand slips into my panties from behind.

Tino does the same from the front.

“Fuck, she’s so wet,” Tino says to Dom.

Dom agrees. “Wet enough for us both.”

Dom pushes two fingers inside me, and Tino does the same from the front, so his digits are next to Dom’s. I let out a whimper. I have both of them fingerfucking me now, two sets

of fingers inside me, stretching me. Will this be what it's like to have two cocks inside my pussy, only so much more, so much bigger? I realize that's exactly what they're preparing me for; they want me to think about it being their dicks.

My movement on Kirill's cock has stalled.

Dom slips his fingers from me and slides them across my perinium, to my asshole. "Someone pass me the lube."

Kirill steps away for a moment and returns with a small silver tube of lube. He yanks the lid off with his teeth, and Dom puts out his palm, where Kirill delivers a dollop. Valentino has continued to finger me the whole time, using the heel of his hand up against my clit to give me something to rub against.

"Let's take these off," Dom says, using his other hand to pull my panties down my hips. They pool around the fuck-me shoes, and I kick them off.

"And this."

Tino rids me of my bra, so now all I'm wearing are the crystal-heeled shoes and nothing else. My nipples are hardened bullets, and my lips tingle with arousal.

Dom moves back into position behind me. He applies the lube to my asshole. It's warmed from his palm and feels incredible as he touches me there. He adds some pressure and pushes his finger into my tight hole, and my knees almost buckle. "Oh, God."

The combination of Tino fingering me from the front and Dom at the rear suddenly puts me right on the crest of my orgasm. My stomach and thigh muscles tighten, pressure building low in my core. I can feel it coming, a wave I'm riding higher and higher. I can hardly believe this is happening, and I know we're only just getting started.

"Oh, God, oh, fuck."

They keep working me, fingering each hole. I'm sopping and squelchy down there, and I'm sure I can smell myself on the air. I don't care, though, and I chase my orgasm, desperate for release.

“Good girl,” Dom growls. “Come for your big brother.”

I hear the satisfaction in his tone, and I do, grinding down on both their hands. Pleasure takes over every thought and sensation, my inner muscles rippling and pulsing. I shake and shudder, crazy sounding gasps and cries peeling from my lips.

A couple of tremors of aftershocks run through me, and then I go limp.

Tino lifts my chin and kisses my mouth. “That’s right. All good and loosened up now. Ready for the main course.”

“Just,” I pant, “give me...a minute.”

Kirill goes over to the couch, strips off the rest of his clothing, and lies there with his huge cock jutting into the air.

“I’m ready for you whenever you are, Mack. Just climb aboard. I’m going to fill that sweet cunt so full of my cum, it’s going to be dripping out of you for days.”

I gulp. “But—condoms.”

“We’re clean,” he says. “We get tested regularly. Besides, we haven’t been with anyone else since you came into our lives.”

I admit I do want that feeling of skin on skin, without a rubber in the way. I go to him and climb onto the couch, unsteady on both my wobbly legs and the high heels, and swing my leg over his hips.

Tino stands at the end of the couch, leaning part way over Kirill’s face. It occurs to me that Tino could easily drop his balls into Kirill’s mouth in this position, and a giggle escapes me.

“What’s so funny?” Tino scowls.

“Nothing.”

I can lean over Kirill, though, allowing me to take Tino in my mouth, and Kirill can suck on my tits.

I hold myself up slightly so I can position Kirill at my entrance. He’s so big, and I tremble with anticipation.

“That’s right, Kill.” Dom says. “Fill our girl with cock.”

The other two watch, rapt, as I lower myself onto him. I’m so wet and swollen and ready. The head presses at my opening, and I feel myself stretch.

Tino’s tongue flicks out to lick his full lower lip. “Sink down, Duchess. Take him good.”

I do. Dear God. It feels so amazing. He stretches me and goes so deep. When he’s fully inside, right to the hilt, I grind my hips and rock on him a little. I place my hands on his chest, and my eyes slip shut.

Dom climbs on the couch behind me. He moves into position, his hands on my ass.

“We’re taking this slowly,” he tells me. “You’re going to be so full of cock.”

I feel full as it is. I can’t image how I’m going to fit any more dick inside me.

My knees are straddling Kirill’s thighs, so I’m already spread enough to give Dom access. He hasn’t stripped, only opened his jeans. I wonder if that’s so he can hide his scars from the men he calls his brothers.

He uses more lube, and the head of his cock presses against my asshole. I’m suddenly aware of his size. He applies pressure, pushing into me. My ring burns with the stretch. Panic goes through me. He’s never going to fit, not with Kirill inside me as well.

“No, no, stop.”

“Don’t say no to me, Duchess.” Dom’s tone is harder. “This ass is mine now. Relax your muscles and it won’t hurt so much.”

I whimper, but I push back on him and do as he says. I don’t really want to stop this, and as I relax, he’s right. The pain eases. He slides in deeper, and my eyes roll with a combination of pleasure and a deep ache. Kirill has held still this whole time, but now Dom is inside me, he starts to move.

“My turn,” Tino says.

He waggles his huge, pierced cock at me, and I change my position slightly so I can reach him. I'm leaning over Kirill's chest, and Tino angles himself to reach me. I open my mouth for him, and he slides his dick between my lips.

Fuck, I can't believe I'm doing this.

It takes a moment for us all to get some kind of rhythm going, but when we do...holy hell. It's insane.

Together, they build a crescendo until all of them fuck me hard. We all lose control. The air is filled with slapping flesh and groans and cries of bliss. I'm completely lost inside myself. The pleasure is almost overwhelming.

I'm going to come again, and I know I've no chance of controlling it. I give in completely, just as Tino grabs my hair and forces himself deeper.

Tino gives a grunt and spills himself down my throat. I barely have the chance to swallow. My orgasm wracks through me again and again, my inner muscles tightening and pulsing around the two men in my pussy and ass.

Tino grows soft in my mouth, and he steps back to give me some space, and I sit up more on Kirill, changing the angle slightly for Dom as well.

Within seconds, a third orgasm begins to build. I think I might pass out if I come again. I feel like I'm drunk, like the hormones and endorphins raging within have set me on a whole new level.

"Fuck, *da*," Kirill growls. "I'm going to fill you up, baby."

He rams himself faster, slamming into me, then with a guttural groan, holds himself deep. His cock jerks inside me, and there's a hot gush that signals Kirill coming again and again. I already know that when this man comes, he *really* comes. It's going to run from me like a river the moment he pulls out.

How many times am I going to come? I'm sure I can't possibly have another one in me, that I'm completely wrung out. But Dom reaches around me with one hand to rub my already engorged and sensitive clit. He wraps his other hand

around my throat and squeezes, not enough to cut off my airway completely, but enough to constrict things a little. I let out a whimper.

Then he fucks my ass, working my clit the whole time, and a third orgasm tears through me. I see stars. I'm no longer of this world, an astral projection.

Dom comes hard and holds me tight, seeming to forget his hand is around my throat. I struggle for breath for a second, then he releases his hold on me, and I gasp oxygen into my lungs.

Holy shit. That was intense.

We collapse together in a bundle of sweaty limbs.

Something changed between us in this room. We are a foursome now.

Chapter 40

Mackenzie

THE WEDDING IS TOMORROW, AND I'M NOT SURE HOW I FEEL about it.

While the thought of my mom being married to Nataniele fills me with dread, I have to admit, things around school have gotten better. Everyone seems to know I'm the Devil's Duchess now. When I walk down the corridor, there isn't a single person who doesn't nod and say *hi*. In the cafeteria, other students insist I jump the line to get my food first, and they make space at tables for me, so I have somewhere to sit. At the bar, I'm forever being offered drinks, though I always refuse them.

It's definitely a better atmosphere than when I first arrived. I'm enjoying the attention. I haven't seen much of Camile, and, to be honest, I'm kind of avoiding her, too. I feel bad about it, but if she gets confirmation from me that I'm allowing myself to be shared among all three of the Devils, she's not going to be happy. In fact, that's an understatement for how pissed she'll be. I'd promised her I'd stay away from them, and I did the exact opposite.

Truth be told, that makes me a shitty friend, but I'm not allowing myself to dwell on it.

There is one person I need to speak to, however, and that's my mother. I need to make sure she's happy to go ahead with the wedding.

I go to her room and lightly tap on the door. I got word that Nataniele isn't at Vernona Falls right now—he needed to go

into town to ensure the priest is ready for the ceremony—so I know I'll find her alone.

I wait for her familiar call of 'come in' before I open the door. I find her sitting at her dressing table, putting on her makeup. She looks so beautiful, my heart catches. What would I do if I ever lost her? She means the world to me.

She sees my reflection in the mirror and spins around on the stool.

"Mackenzie. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, of course. Can't I just come and see my mother?"

She raises her eyebrows. "Yes, you know you can see me anytime you like, but I also know my daughter, and I can tell you want to say something."

She knows me too well.

"Are you sure you want to marry him, Mom?" I blurt. "There's still time to back out. We can figure out something else if we need to."

She gets to her feet and walks over to me. "I'm fine, Mackenzie. I promise. Nataniele and I are probably more alike than I'd like to admit."

"But do you love him?"

She pauses and touches my hair, sweeping it back from my neck.

"Love isn't always the most important thing in a marriage. We're safe here, and financially secure. In a couple of days, we'll legally have new names, and then we can put all that terribleness behind us. Those things are important."

It all sounds horribly sad to me. Maybe that's because I'm young and not a parent, but the thought of marriage without love breaks my heart.

"I'll go to prison, Mom. If you don't want to marry him, then I'll face my fate and spend however long I need to behind bars. It won't be a life sentence. I'll get out eventually."

“Darling, I never, ever want that to happen. What is it they say? A parent can only be as happy as their unhappiest child? I couldn’t live with myself knowing you were locked up in some awful place simply because you were defending yourself.” She took a breath. “This is okay, Mackenzie. Maybe it’s not perfect, but what in life is?”

“As long as you’re sure,” I say, my voice trembling with emotion.

“I am. And what about you? Are you okay? I see you and Dom have been getting along better lately. That’s a huge relief.”

I nod and give a small smile. If only she knew.

“Yes. Things are bearable now, Mom.”

“Good.”

She pulls me in for a hug and kisses my cheek.

There’s one more relationship I need to work on, and that’s my one with Camile. I’m hoping I can convince her that my relationship with the Devils is completely separate from the one I have with her.

I’m hoping she’ll forgive me for breaking my promise. I could keep lying to her, but that would ensure a broken friendship for sure, and I can’t lie to the only person who welcomed me here.

I kiss Mom back and decide I might as well face the music right now. “I’m going to find Camile and grab a soda, Mom. See you later.”

“Bye, darling.” She gives me a small wave and goes back to her dresser.

I watch her in the mirror for a moment, committing how beautiful she looks right now to memory, and then I leave.

It takes me a while to find Camile, but finally I do, in the library. She’s reading in a far corner, at a table away from all the others. I grabbed some sodas and a couple of candy bars before I went looking for her.

I walk up to her waving the candy. “Peace offering,” I say.

She glances up at me and shakes her head. “Where the hell did you go the other day, girl? Honestly, I waited ages.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” I sigh internally. I seem to spend my life saying sorry to Camile, only to screw up all over again.

She takes the candy bar with narrowed eyes, but her lips are twitching at the corners. “My favorite,” she says.

“Of course. Always.”

She unwraps the bar and takes a bite. “So.” She chews as she speaks. “Spill. Where did you get to?”

My hands go to the button on my cardigan as I play with it nervously.

“Zee. I don’t like the look on your face right now.” Camile’s eyes widen. “What did you do?”

God, she can read me like a book. I glance around, but there’s no one at any of the tables nearest to us, and there’s nothing back here but rows of stacks and shelves. We’re in the academic journals section, far from the busier fiction section farther down. There are a few tables filled down there, with people who seem to be working on group projects. They’re probably doing things like ‘how to be the perfect mafia wife.’ Or ‘how to make sure your husband cleans up his crime scenes effectively.’

I almost laugh at the absurdity of my life right now. To add to it, I’ve done something so monumentally crazy, it makes this college look normal.

“I did something.” I lower my voice so it’s not much more than a whisper. “With the Devils.”

“The Devils, as in plural?” Her eyes stay wide but her lips purse into a thin line.

Oh, God. She’s going to judge me so much; I can tell. “I don’t want to lie to you. I hope we can stay friends because I think the world of you.”

“Mackenzie. I think the world of you, too, but you have such a self-destructive streak.”

“Why?” I demand with a hiss. “Because I want a little fun before I’m married off as the perfect slave wife to a mafia clan?”

She huffs out a long breath, but she doesn’t deny what I say. How can she? I’m right. Camile is being virtuous and good, for what? To simply be married off like cattle to a family who thinks she’s good enough to breed with their precious son?

This whole thing stinks. I can’t say any of that, as I don’t want to hurt her feelings, but not everything has to be said. We both know it’s true.

Her shoulder slump as though she’s given in to the inevitable. “What happened?”

“Something between the four of us.”

“Oh, God, honey. You don’t know what you’re doing. They’re dangerous. Dom the most of all. He’s a sick, nasty, twisted man. Dead inside.”

I stare at her, and a flicker of anger ignites within. I came here wanting to make sure we stayed friends, but her attitude is pissing me off. She doesn’t know him. Dom is a fuck-up, for sure. He has his issues, but he also has lots of feelings. In fact, he has such strong feelings he has to cut himself to stuff them back down.

The way everyone judges him is wrong.

“You don’t know them,” I say. “They feel things, just like everyone else.”

She scoffs. “Yeah, right.”

I look at her. Her pretty face shows she is worried, and I can see her anger, and her words all come from care and worry for me. It still hurts, though.

“You already know how deeply Dom feels things.” I’m desperate to convince her. “You saw me after I had that... episode.”

She shakes her head at me. “You mean because he branded you with his own blood?” The sarcasm in her tone is evident.

“You’re missing the point. He only did that because I caught him cutting himself. He feels pain so deeply that it’s the only way he can let it out. I wish you could see how far he goes to try to hide it from everyone. His thighs are covered with scars. It breaks my heart.”

There is nothing but silence hanging between us. I never thought of silence as having a color, but right now it seems as dense and dark as the night sky when there are no stars.

Finally, she speaks. “If you’re so concerned about Dom’s wellbeing, maybe you need to convince him to get help. You’re not convincing me that he’s any less fucked up by telling me this.”

“He’s no more fucked up than me.” I’m getting pissed again that she won’t accept what I’m telling her.

She holds her hands up as if in resignation. “Okay. Okay. Let’s agree to leave it. I love you, Zee. I’ve not known you for long, but you’re a good friend. The Devils are still scum to me, but I believe you that they have other sides. I still don’t think that means they won’t hurt you.”

“I can look after myself. I promise.” I smile at her, trying to take away her concern.

“I’m not sure when it comes to those men that is true.”

She picks at her jeans and then fixes me with a steady look. “I won’t say a word about what you told me, but I think it makes Dom even more dangerous. Not less. He’s seriously messed up, and he could end up making you the same way. What is it they say? Misery loves company.”

“We’re not miserable when we’re all together. It’s different then. They’re different.”

She stands and packs up her bag. “I have to go. I’ve got a meeting with one of the lecturers. Do you want to grab a drink in an hour? A proper drink?”

I nod. “That sounds like a plan. Meet you in the bar?”

“Yeah, Don’t stand me up!”

I laugh. “I won’t. I promise.”

She walks away, hips swinging, and I smile to myself. I did it, and yeah, she’s not happy, but we’re still friends. It went better than I could have hoped, really.

A shuffling noise behind one of the stacks full of records to the right behind me grabs my attention.

Shit, is someone there?

Standing quickly, I push my chair back and go to investigate, but there’s no one. I’m being paranoid because I know Dom will kill me if anyone discovers his secret.

Chapter 41

Domenic

I'VE COME TO THE DEN ALONE TO GET AWAY FROM EVERYONE.

My father is driving me crazy with his wedding talk. Who gives a shit about the fucking speeches? The whole thing is a joke. The other two Devils are pissing me off with the way they keep trying to push me toward letting Mackenzie stay.

My dick is onboard with the idea. He'd gladly let her stay. My mind, not so much. Unlike Kirill and Tino, who are both letting desire cloud their judgment, I can see clearly. We don't love her, and she most certainly doesn't love us. Hell, I don't even like her. I like her *body*, and her beautiful, perfect face. I might, deep down, admire her a little bit because she's damn brave, but like her? Want her around forever? Fuck, no.

Still, would it hurt to not send her packing right away? I stare at the projection screen. There's some ancient nineties movie playing, and I'm only half watching it. My mind is in turmoil. I should make her leave. Fuck up the wedding somehow and ensure she and her trash mother never darken my door again.

But. But. But.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't want another taste of her. I want to sink inside her again. To hear her cries and see her come undone. Mackenzie has this air of serene superiority about her a lot of the time. Not in some bitchy way, but as if she really is descended from royalty. Hence her nickname. Get her hot and bothered, though, and she's a carnal animal. I find the juxtaposition incredibly sexy.

I'm half hard now and contemplating putting some porn on when the door groans as someone pushes it open.

I turn, my mouth half open, ready to blast Tino or Kirill for interrupting me, when Verity walks in. Her hair looks better—she must have gone to a professional to have it tidied up. We purposely forbade her from going to a hairdresser and getting it sorted into something cool and edgy, instead of the hacked into horror it was.

I eye her suspiciously. “Did you fuck with your hair?”

She slinks into the room, and my hackles rise. She's wearing a strange smile. A purely evil one that drips poison and means she's contemplating something awful.

“You said no hairdresser, baby,” she simpers. Her whole façade is dripping with false sugar. “None of you said I couldn't mess about with it myself. I colored it ash blonde and cut it a little myself and used some gel.”

I stand abruptly and stalk over to her. Grabbing her hair in my fist, I pull her nearer to me. She gasps and tries to hold my hand to stop the burn on her scalp.

“We said to leave it the hell alone. That hair is your punishment. You don't get to turn into something cute.”

She stares at me, her eyes burning with something I've never seen there before. Verity has always been a bitch, but she's not a brave person. Not like Mackenzie. She's a bully, and she's underhanded. Shit stirring, bitchy asides, and catty comments are her stock in trade, and with me there's always been a deference in her body language. A submissiveness in her gaze. It's gone now.

“I thought you were so strong,” she murmurs.

What the fuck is she talking about?

She trails a finger over my shoulder and down my arm. I let go of her hair because this version of Verity is confusing me. Not sure how to react, I let this play out.

“I thought you were the most powerful one here. A god, if you will. It's why I let you get away with shit. I must align

myself with powerful men because, as a woman in this sick, twisted little world we inhabit, I have none.” She spits out the word *twisted*, her face contorting. “But you lied to me, Dom. You aren’t what you pretend to be, are you?”

“You ought to be careful, Verity. I can ruin you.”

“You could,” she says with a vicious little smile. “But not before I ruin you. I can bring your whole world crashing down.”

I watch her, completely taken aback by this woman, the real one who has been hiding behind a façade for so long.

“Or,” she says as she lets her fingers trail over my chest, “we could be friends again. I could help you. Maybe more than friends.” Her hand rests over my heart. “I could accept your faults. Your weaknesses. If you could accept mine. Together, we could be strong. Powerful. A unit few would dare try to harm.”

I sigh as if bored, but my heart is racing. This is weird. Wrong. I don’t know what she’s talking about, but it can’t be good. Does she somehow know I’m developing a soft spot for Mackenzie, despite my best intentions?

“There is no us, Verity.” I sneer at her, hoping she’ll get the message and leave me alone. Whatever this game is she’s playing, I want no part of it.

Her face transforms from pretty, bland girl, to something ugly and filled with a malice I didn’t know she possessed. I always thought her nastiness was a survival mechanism, but this Verity is much more vicious than I ever understood.

“All you stupid men, thinking you rule the world,” she says softly. “You can’t handle it, though, can you? Any of you?” She walks farther into the room. “You know my father? He goes to prostitutes and pays them to beat him. The powerful mafia enforcer.” She barks out a laugh. “Thing is, if my mother stood up to him about it, he’d hurt her. No one knows. They all think he’s this formidable, infallible figure.”

She stops by the projector, the lights from it hitting her and making her look otherworldly. “He’s not, though. The same

way you're not, Dom."

Not thinking things through, just acting on instinct, I stride up to her, grab her throat, and walk her back to the wall. I hold her there, not choking. I don't hurt women, I remind myself, because fuck me, right now I want to. She's smiling, though. The bitch is smiling at me.

"You seem stressed, Dom." She wraps her small hand around my wrist and just holds it. "Maybe I could go and fetch a knife and you could make yourself feel better?"

The world tilts on its axis and the room begins to spin around me. I stare at her, and she stares back, triumphant.

I'm finding it hard to breathe, but I can't let her know how much her words have torn me down.

"It's okay, baby," she says softly, her thumb stroking my inner wrist. "I won't tell anyone. We can be that team I talked about. You're strong, in some ways, but you have demons. That's okay. Let me take care of them."

I let go of her and walk to the small kitchenette area we set up here in the den. She watches me, her breathing high in her chest and rapid, giving away that she's nowhere near as calm as she's pretending to be.

When I turn my back on her, I suck in a gulp of air and try to control the raging anger building in me. It's not at Verity, though. I don't give a fuck about her or her games. I'm about to terrify her so much, she'll never think she can come for me again.

No, my anger, the white-hot, blinding rage, is all for Mackenzie.

That bitch. That two-faced, betraying, little bitch. She's the only one who can have told Verity.

Why? She hates that girl.

Because she hates you more, a voice says.

I'd been softening. Slowly bending to the idea of her staying here, with us, and becoming a part, somehow, of our three. Well, screw her. If Kirill and Tino think she's staying

now, they're in for a shock. I'm not only going to get rid of her. I'm going to ruin her life.

But first. First, I'm going to make sure Verity never utters a word of this to anyone.

I turn back to her, swiping the knife through the air as I walk to her.

Her face tightens, the smugness dripping from her like wax off a candle. The closer I get, the more fear creeps into her face.

Yeah, you ought to be scared, little girl, because I'm about to give you the fright of your life.

Chapter 42

Valentino

THE THING ABOUT SPYING ON PEOPLE IS THAT AS WELL AS getting an illicit thrill from it, sometimes you find out some *really* useful shit. This is one of those times. I'm almost humming with the need to show this to Dom and Kirill.

I know Dom said he wanted some time alone, but he'll be so interested in what I have to show him, he won't mind me heading down to the den. I text Kirill and tell him to meet me there, too.

I push open the door of the den and freeze.

Dom has Verity on the sofa, her clothes cut from her in tatters and a knife at her breast. He's not cut her, from what I can see, but what the ever-loving fuck is going on?

"Dom?" My voice cuts through the silence.

Verity isn't screaming, but tears are streaming down her face.

Dom turns to me, and he grins. The mad motherfucker grins.

"You want to come and take a slice of her before I do?" he asks.

"Dom, what the hell?" My voice is a growl. This isn't good. He looks feral, and Verity is traumatized.

"Let her go," I say.

"No. I don't think so. She needs a lesson first."

"I didn't do anything," she shrieks.

“Oh, you did plenty.” Dom takes hold of her chin and forces her to look at him. “You threatened me. Blackmailed me. You think you know something about me. About who I am and what I do. You know *nothing*.”

“Dom. Let her go and give me the damn knife,” I say, my voice eerily calm.

“Not sure I want to,” he replies.

“Come on. She’s not worth it. Verity.” I turn to her, and she stares at me, her eyes pleading. “What’s going on here? Did you blackmail him?”

“I only wanted to help,” she babbles. “I found out he cuts himself, and I wanted to help.”

Dom pulls his arm back, and I think he’s going to punch her, but he punches the sofa instead.

I act in that moment and grab the knife. I throw it across the room and pull Dom up. He can punch me if he wants, but I need to get some distance between him and Verity. Cutting her hair, making her life hell, that’s one thing. We did that for our Duchess, and it humiliated Verity but didn’t do her any long-term harm. This? He looks ready to murder her, and that’s quite another level altogether.

“Why don’t you get dressed, Verity?”

“In what?” she shrieks. “My clothes are in tatters.”

“Put your jeans on, and then wear this.” I take my sweater off and hand it to her. It leaves me in just a t-shirt, but the coldness I’m feeling isn’t from the cool air on my skin. It’s from something much deeper. The sense that things are unraveling.

Ever since our little Duchess arrived, the center hasn’t held, and now it’s all splintering apart.

Kirill bursts into the room, whistling, but the sound dies like a kettle taken off the stove. I turn to him and raise my brows. He looks at Dom, Verity, then me.

“What’s the party?” he asks sardonically.

“This fucking bitch tried to blackmail me.” Dom is pacing now, shooting me death ray glares. “Tino found me about to teach her a very painful lesson.”

Verity is shaking as she dresses.

“What were you going to do to her?” Kirill asks, as if this isn’t fucked up to hell.

“Cut her. Tiny cuts. Lots of them. To show her and remind her never to try to use information against me again.” Dom puts one hand behind his back and crosses his fingers very deliberately.

I understand right away. He wasn’t going to actually cut her. He’s trying to scare her to death, is all, but she sure knows about him cutting himself.

We Devils know everything about each other. We have no secrets.

“There’s no need for that,” I say casually.

“I wasn’t trying to blackmail him,” Verity says with a soft sniff as more tears run down her face. “I tried to offer my help. He cuts himself, and I wanted to make it better, to help him with the demons he has.”

I laugh. The sound echoes cold and heartless in the room. I’ve got to front this out, though.

“Oh, Verity, darling. You thought he cut himself to, what? Take away the pain?” I rub at my eyes as if I’m crying. “That’s not why he does it.”

“W-w-why does he do it?” Verity isn’t even looking at Dom. She’s too damn scared to.

“He does it because he likes it.” I hold her gaze. “He likes to feel that knife cut deep, and the pain. He likes to see how far he can push it. And more than that, he likes to do it to other people, too.”

She gasps, her face a mask of horror and fear.

“Dom.” I turn to him. “Do you swear now that if Verity never breathes a word of this that you won’t find her one night

and cut her to pretty ribbons?”

“If I must.” Dom sounds bored.

“Verity, do you promise, if you have our ongoing protection, and Dom’s word not to come after you for this betrayal of trust, that you will never utter a word?”

“I won’t say anything.” She gathers her things. “I don’t want your protection, though. I just want you to leave me alone.” As she passes me, she pauses. “And I’m not the one who committed the betrayal. Mackenzie is. She’s been blabbing her mouth about you guys all over college.”

She slips out, closing the door behind her.

Dom sags against the sofa, and I stare at him.

I know he cuts himself. I know it’s to stop the internal pain. I also know he can’t ever have that getting out. Just like I take pills to try to prevent my physical pain, it’s his way of coping.

I’d been harboring stupid, idealized dreams about Mackenzie staying. Us all getting closer to her. Those dreams dissipate like clouds under the hot sun.

“I want her gone,” Dom growls.

I don’t have to ask who he means.

“I might be able to help with that.” I take the drive out of my pocket.

My heart is heavy, but I know this is the right thing to do for my friend.

Chapter 43

Mackenzie

THE MORNING OF THE WEDDING DAWNS BRIGHT AND SUNNY.

I'm happy for my mom that it's going to be a lovely day. I always feel bad for people who have rain on their wedding day. It feels like a bad omen, even when it's something that can't be controlled.

Luckily, there is no sign of any bad luck today—at least in weather form.

I begin the day with some stretches and run through some calming sun salutations. It helps to relax both my body and mind. Today is going to pass by in a whirlwind, so I take the opportunity when I can.

I won't see Dom or either of the other men until we arrive at the chapel. Nataniele has kindly vacated his and mom's apartment, so we girls can take it over to get ready. It would be bad luck for him to see his bride before the wedding. I know Dom has gone with him, to the other side of the campus, and the other Devils will be with them as well since they're groomsmen.

I hope the four of us can spend some time together after the service. Things have been crazy busy with the preparations, and it doesn't feel as though we've had the chance to spend any real time in each other's company.

Maybe I'm being a bit starry eyed about them, but weddings always bring out the romantic side in people. While my relationship with the Devils has been mostly about

fucking, I can't help but hope that having a little romance injected into all our lives will do us good.

I realize more than a day has passed since I've thought about the professor and what happened. Where initially it felt like I could think of nothing else, I'm finally starting to believe I might be able to put it behind me. I know the Devils have helped with that, though they're unaware of the fact. Having my mind and body completely taken up with them has helped erase the past.

In a few hours, mom will become Mrs. Nataniele Rossi, and I will also change my name.

Mackenzie Rossi.

That Dom is also a Rossi does strange things to my insides.

When I've finished my yoga and taken some time to lie on my back and meditate, I shower and wash my hair. I throw on some casual clothes—since my dress is hanging with my mom's—and head down the hallway to Nataniele's living quarters.

My mom must have been waiting practically by the door, because the moment my knuckles hit the wood, she throws it open.

"You took your time," she cries. "I've been waiting all morning."

"Mom, it's barely eight-thirty."

"I know, but I've been awake for hours. Come in. I've got mimosas."

She must see my expression—she knows I shouldn't drink—as she rolls her eyes. "Don't worry, they're virgin."

I laugh. "Well, that's okay, then."

She seems genuinely excited, and I'm happy for her. I never thought things would work out with us both being happy.

There aren't only mimosas for breakfast. We also have a selection of pastries, smoked salmon with little wedges of lemon, plus asparagus and hollandaise sauce. There's even a tiny silver bowl filled with caviar sitting on ice.

"Wow," I say. "If we eat all that, we're not going to fit into our dresses."

Mom beams. "I know. Nataniele did good, didn't he?"

"He organized all this?"

"Of course."

I sip at my drink and help myself to some smoked salmon and caviar. It wouldn't be my normal choice in breakfast, but what the hell. It's a special day, after all. Maybe I've been wrong about him, too.

Before long, a knock comes at the door. It's the team of hairdressers and makeup artists that Nataniele has arranged. I've met them before, because they came to do the trial run, and everyone seems excited to be involved. The room becomes noisy and busy, and I allow myself to be seated in front of a mirror so I can get my hair and makeup done.

The next couple of hours pass in a blur. I'm primped and preened to within an inch of my life. I wonder how the Devils are going to react when they see me like this. I hope they love how I look.

Finally, it's time to get changed. I allow the stylists to help me into my dress, so I don't wreck my hair, and then they pull the corset tight for me.

Mom emerges in her dress, and my breath catches.

Tears fill my eyes, and I cup my hands over my mouth. "Oh, my God. You look so beautiful."

"Don't cry," she commands. "If you cry, then I'll cry, and my makeup will have to be done all over again."

I flap my hand in front of my face, trying my best to keep the tears from rolling down my cheeks, carrying my mascara with them.

“Sorry,” I say, sniffing. “I’m okay. I’m okay.”

We embrace, both careful not to ruin our hair, and then release each other.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“Definitely.”

A knock comes at the door, and it opens.

A man in a suit pokes his head around. “The carriage is ready.”

“Thank you,” Mom says.

We take a few moments to ensure we have everything, and that both the makeup and hair are perfect, and then we head down to the first floor and out to the front of the building.

A horse and carriage wait at the front of the university to take us to the chapel. Two white horses, feathers on their heads, paw the ground and snort into the air.

“Wow, this is gorgeous, Mom.”

I mean it, too. I’m not sure what I was expecting this wedding to turn out like, but Nataniele has really done my mom proud. With the gothic building of Verona Falls University behind us, this is like a genuine fairytale, and I’m blown away by the effort he’s made.

The driver helps us both up into the carriage, and then we’re off, the horses trotting along the track that takes us through the grounds and toward the chapel.

I’m excited about seeing Dom and the others. Dom is the best man, of course, but Tino and Kirill are also groomsmen. They’re all going to look so handsome in their suits. I hope they’ll like my dress—and be thinking about what I look like out of it as well.

I compress a secret smile between my lips.

We reach the location for the wedding—the tiny chapel set in a clearing of the grounds. Standing outside the arched doors are Kirill and Tino. They both look gorgeous in light gray suits that are made to measure, and a red rose in their buttonholes.

The conservative suits make for an interesting contrast to the tattoos crawling up the side of Tino's muscular neck, and Kirill's piercing. Kirill has slicked back his bleached blond hair. The pair look even hotter than normal, and my heart thumps.

The carriage draws to a halt, and they both move forward to help us down. Kirill helps my mother, and then Tino waits for me. He takes my hand as I climb down, and then his gaze flicks down my body and back up to my face.

He blows out a low whistle. "Wow. You look incredible."

I beam at him. "So do you."

He gives me a smile, and I witness something else flicker in his eyes. What is that? But even as I try to recognize it, the moment is already gone.

Tino takes my hand, pulls me in, and kisses my cheek. "See you in there," he says against my ear.

The two men vanish inside the small building to let everyone know the bride has arrived.

From inside, string music swells.

I turn to my mom. "It's time."

She gives a nervous smile and nods. I hold out the hook of my arm to her, and she takes it.

My mom doesn't have anyone to give her away, but it doesn't matter. I'm the one who'll be walking her down the aisle. I don't want to feel as though I'm giving her away, however. More that we're just binding ourselves to a new family.

I try not to feel a stab of guilt on behalf of my father at the thought.

Taking a steadying breath, I enter through the arched wooden doorway, my mother on my arm.

The chapel looks incredible. It's only tiny, which means there isn't room for much more than the wedding party, the priest, and a few guests seated either side of the aisle. To give

the illusion of a full orchestra, a projector screen has been erected to one side, and a video of an orchestra is played on it. I'm sure I recognize the screen from the Devil's den, and I'll take a guess that Tino is responsible for the footage.

I love that they've made an effort.

Dom and Nataniele stand at the front.

I hold Dom's eye as I walk and offer him a tiny smile. He doesn't smile back but I try not to let it affect me. He probably doesn't want to let everyone know about our relationship today. Today is about Mom and Nataniele.

Because the chapel is so small, it doesn't take long for us to reach the front. I lean in and kiss my mom on the cheek, and then hand her over to Nataniele. I move back, giving them some space.

The music fades, and the priest opens his mouth to speak, but he doesn't get the chance.

The image beamed onto the protector screen changes.

A murmur of confusion ripples through the small crowd.

It's Mom and Nataniele on the projector now. I think they're in their room. Has someone filmed a touching moment between them to show at their wedding? If so, it must be a surprise, as neither of them seem aware of it. In fact, Nataniele's brow is pulled down in displeasure.

Mom's voice fills the air of the small chapel, but it's coming from the projection, or whatever is being used to play the sound.

"I can't ever let her know."

Then Nataniele's. "She won't. What possible reason could we ever have to tell her?"

"I just worry, that's all. You know how badly she judged her dad when she found out the other stuff. What if—"

Nataniele cuts her off. "She'll never find out that you arranged to have him killed, Lucia. I'll ensure it doesn't happen."

I gasp and stumble back in shock. The space around me goes strange, the sense of being underwater. I can barely believe my own ears. Mom arranged to have Dad murdered? That can't be true.

I stare at the screen. This can't be real. I flick my gaze to my mom, still standing at the altar. Her expression is like nothing I've ever seen on her before—even when I told her about what happened with the professor.

It's utter horror.

Still, the footage continues to play.

Real life Nataniele bursts into movement. He rushes to the projector and starts to try to pull it down. Then he turns, his face so livid, I think he might shoot up the congregation.

"Turn this the fuck off," he says to no one in particular.

"She won't understand that I didn't feel I had a choice," onscreen Lucia says. "He was putting us in the hole, making so many bad choices with the wrong people and getting us into serious danger. We had all those medical bills to pay, too..."

"You did the right thing," the Nataniele onscreen reassures her.

On the projector, my mother covers her face with her hands. "I thought so at the time, but how was I to know he'd never renewed his life insurance policy? If only he'd done that, we'd have been okay. I should have realized he'd be a fuckup right to the very end."

I stagger away, unsure where I'm going, just knowing I need to put distance between me and my mother. I stumble back up the aisle, practically bouncing off each of the pews. My legs no longer feel as though they belong to me. My pulse pounds in my ears. My cheeks burn with anger and shame.

Everyone is staring at me.

From the front of the chapel, my mom cries, "Mackenzie."

I put out my hand, warding her off. I don't want her anywhere near me.

I don't feel good. The room is no longer solid around me, the floor tilting. I've receded from everyone around me, tunneling inside myself.

No, no, no. I can't have this happen in front of everyone. I don't want them to know.

My mother's voice filters through to me. "Mackenzie, please, wait. It's not what you think."

Something else occurs to me. The footage. Someone recorded that conversation and then went to the trouble to rig it so it would be played at the wedding. I remember the glimpse of regret I saw in Tino's eyes, and the way Dom didn't smile as I walked down the aisle.

It hits me—*they* did this.

And everything goes black.

Chapter 44

Domenic

WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING TO MACKENZIE?

My father is finally pulling the projector down, but I ignore him, focused on the scene playing out in front of me.

I knew this was going to be bad. I wanted it that way. I wanted her to pay for spilling my secrets all over the university. I knew this footage would not only bring an end to the wedding but would also make her hate me once and for all.

It would be enough to make both her and her mother leave.

But I hadn't expected *this*.

I also hadn't expected the flash of pain seeing her like this gives me.

Mackenzie hits the floor.

Her body shakes and trembles. Her beautiful mouth is curled to one side in a grimace. Her hands have become claws. The only part of her eyes that is visible are the whites.

"Kenzie!" Tino yells and runs to her side.

Kirill runs, too, joining him. "Oh, fuck. Mack? Mack!"

They both drop to their knees beside her. I'm rooted to the spot, staring on in horror.

"Don't touch her," Lucia cries. "She's epileptic."

What. The. Fuck?

Mackenzie is epileptic, and she's never said a fucking word. We've been basically torturing her, and she's got a...

I don't even know how to think of it. An illness? A disability?

Tino glances over his shoulder at me. I've never seen such terror in his dark eyes.

"I think she's stopped breathing," he says.

"Someone call nine-one-one," Lucia cries.

The enormity of witnessing this makes me realize something, and my walls crumble.

No, no, fuck no. This can't be happening. We can't lose her.

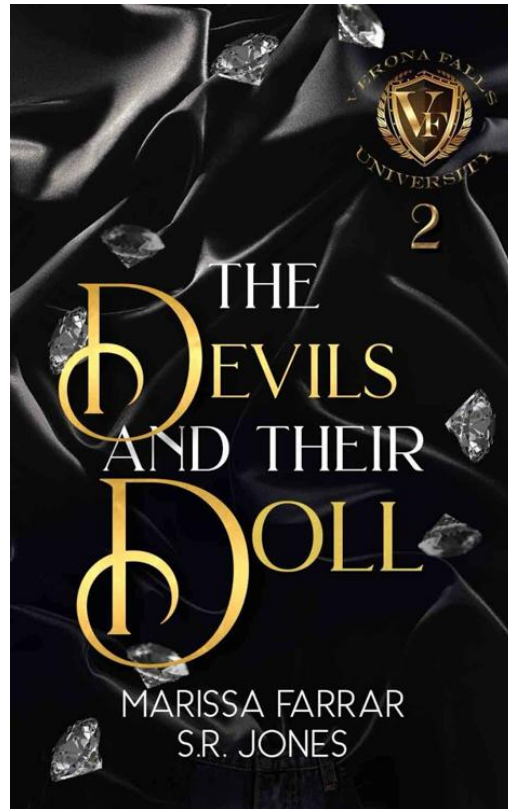
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Are you ready to play?

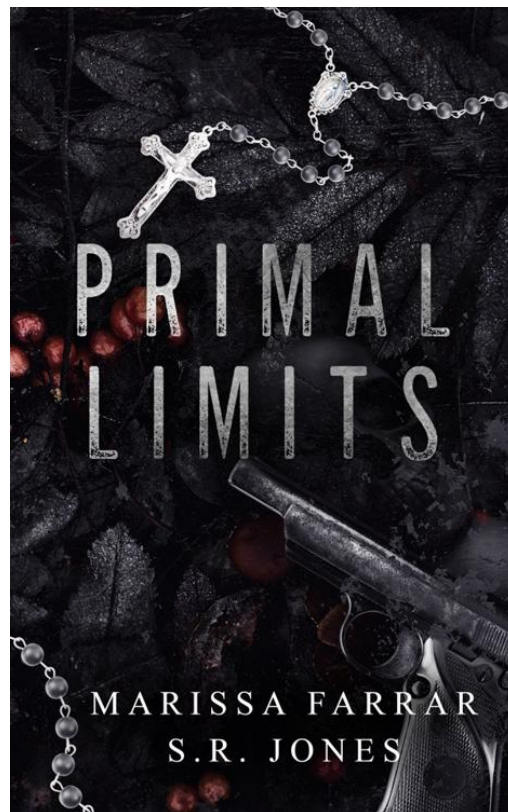
When I take on the job as a maid for four wealthy men on their private island, they mistake me as their plaything. Quickly, I realize they have a twisted game in mind: they want to chase me across the island and, if they catch me, they can do whatever they want.

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About the Author

SR Jones

Redeeming dark and dangerous heroes one book at a time.

Skye Jones is an award winning and USA Today Bestselling Author.

She writes dark mafia and contemporary romance as SR Jones, and angsty paranormal romance as Skye.

When not writing Skye can be found reading, dog herding, or watching gritty dramas on Netflix with her husband. She lives in the grey, windswept north of England, which fuels her taste for the dramatic and the gothic.

For a free read sign up for her reader club here:
<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/ca20ewxx71>

About the Author

Marissa Farrar

Marissa Farrar is the author of more than fifty novels of delicious literary darkness. If you're after light and fluffy, look away now. While she mainly writes dark reverse harem romance – occasionally teetering on the taboo - she's also written mafia m/f romance, and has even dived into paranormal, fantasy and sci-fi!

When she isn't writing—which isn't often—she's taking care of her menagerie of animals, spending time with her family, or binge-watching Netflix with a sneaky gin and tonic.

If you want to know more about Marissa, then she's normally hanging out on her Instagram page, TikTok, or Facebook group. You can also find out more about her books at www.marissa-farrar.com, or order signed books from marissafarrarbooks.com, or direct from her TikTok store.

