

A woman with long, wavy, light brown hair is lying on her back, looking towards the camera. She is wearing a black lace dress with a white lace trim at the neckline. Her hands are resting on her chest. The background is dark, and there are many small, sparkling diamonds scattered around her, particularly concentrated in the lower right corner. The text is overlaid on the image.

THIEVES' HONOR
BOOK ONE

PRETTY
LITTLE
THINGS

BROOKE HARPER

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TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains dark themes and highly sensitive topics.

For a full list of triggers, visit Brooke Harper's website:

<https://authorbrookeharper.com/thieves-honor-series/>

PRETTY LITTLE THINGS

They say there are two sides to every story...

Now both sides want to own me, claim me as theirs.

I'm a professional thief. High security to picking pockets,
doesn't matter. I'm an expert.

So when I'm hired to steal a priceless necklace by a wealthy
stranger, I don't hesitate to take the job. Little do I know, the
seemingly normal task will put me in the middle of two of the
deadliest gangs in The Quinate.

And their leaders might just kill me.

Hendrick Agnossio and Jac Miller are the heads of their
families—both young and handsome, but violent and brutal
killers who see me as their new prize.

Their bloody rivalry is generations in the making, and I've
been thrown right smack in the middle of it.

Even though I refuse to be part of their games, I can't escape
them. They're everywhere, poisoning my thoughts, under my
skin, heating my blood...

I may be a thief, but they've stolen my life.

Maybe even my heart.

For all you indecisive bitches out there:

*Now you don't have to choose between the two villainous,
dangerously sexy male characters. You get both.*

You're welcome.

ONE

MAGDALENA



The necklace is ugly under the bright fluorescent light.

A mess of emeralds, sapphires, rubies, diamonds—pink, yellow, white, black—in a handcrafted filagree setting.

Extremely ugly and worth an absolute fortune.

I trace a finger along the complex line of gems.

If you turn the overhead lights off and display the necklace under candlelight or gas flame, preferably clasped around the slender throat of a woman only wearing the gems, it's exquisite.

Because that's what it's made for, adorning naked flesh.

A woman would look phenomenal in this and absolutely nothing else.

I'm tempted to find a lover who'll appreciate that and wear it for him.

I'm fucking tempted to slide the necklace into my personal collection in the vault here in Harriet's basement workshop and tell the buyer it's lost to time.

I pick it up, and I swear it almost vibrates for me.

"Dang. Down, girl." Harry, my best friend and partner in crime, plucks the necklace from my hand, and holds it up to

the light. She shakes her head.

We're in the basement workshop of her store, where the stolen gems—as well as legit ones—are kept. It's no bat cave. It's a little soulless, but it does its job. She's got all the tools for examining and re-cutting the stones, as well as setting them. The normal set up for a middle-of-the-road jeweler in the diamond district of Delacroix City. No one would think there are hundreds of millions of dollars in art and jewels sequestered down here.

It's after five, so the store's closed and we're down here, in the non-descript, fluorescent hell hole where no jewel looks its best.

But it's a great space for a jeweler, and an even better one for a fencer.

“Give me that,” I say.

She shakes her head, weighing the piece in her hand. “I know that look. Your brain wants to lead us to landing a price on our heads. You're practically drooling.”

“Ours?” I look at her, raising a brow. “Who the fuck said I'd share?”

Harry pulls out a black velvet folding cloth and places the necklace in the middle, rolls it, and then picks up a basic tennis bracelet from a display cushion and tray. She bats those baby blues. “Ours.”

“I stole it,” I say, watching as she puts the cloth-wrapped jewels in the base of a large, plain bracelet box. She places a velvet-lined piece of cardboard in with the tennis bracelet and display cushion on top. A small sigh escapes me.

Harry slides me a look. “And you're the best goddamn thief around, Magdalena. But you have a problem. You're like

a pyromaniac.”

“I’m not into flames, Harry.”

“Pyromaniacs are drawn to flame, and you’re drawn to jewels. Left unfettered...” She trails off. She leans on the workbench, snapping the black velvet lined lid into place, shutting the bracelet box up and fixing it with a dark gray bow. She swings the work light up to hit my face. “They get into trouble.”

“What are you trying to say?” I slap the light away, so its pool of light hits the floor beyond the bench. The overheads are more than enough light if we’re not gazing at the necklace I stole in the early hours of the morning.

“I’m saying that your pretty, little, glittering obsession with jewels would get you dead if you didn’t have me to keep you in check.”

“You want an award, Harry?” I deadpan her, but she straightens and places the basic bracelet box into a black paper bag, which is a felony in my book. They deserve much better.

“C’mon, Lena. You’d last two seconds trying to rip off the maniac client, Anwar, who wants this.” Harry continues to commit crimes by shoving that bag into a generic black carry one. “You’re dying to keep it.”

I look at her. “I could fence it for a higher price.”

“No one else but me could fence this and live. You know that.”

“You just said there’d be a price on our heads,” I argue.

“I didn’t say we’d be dead.” She winks and saunters across the basement workshop and puts the carry bag away in the false bottom of a plain, battered safe and twirls the knob. “We

don't die easily, but I also don't feel like doing the extra work keeping you out of trouble for that necklace.”

The room has three safes. If the cops came down here, they'd only find tools of the trade, and if they had a warrant for the safes, they'd just find above board things. Harry is nothing if not meticulous.

I'm meticulous, too.

When I'm planning a job.

Carrying out the job, I'm also prepared for anything. Harry calls it reckless. I call it a perk of my craft. There are always contingencies when robbing. Maybe someone changed their alarm system, maybe they moved the goods. Maybe they stayed home or came back early. Anything can happen when I'm on rooftops, sliding in through upstairs windows or dismantling a complex alarm system. I live for the exhilaration.

“But it's so beautiful.” I gaze at the safe, then at her. “And it's a travesty to put it away like it's that tennis bracelet. Putting the necklace *with* the bracelet is another travesty—”

“Mind your tongue.” Harry doesn't even look at me, just pokes a tool into her mess of dark curls that she's pinned to her head and pulls open a drawer beneath the work bench. She throws down a file where the necklace was. “The client bought the bracelet for his wife.”

“Then we should definitely keep the necklace.”

“The guy kills people for fun, Magdalena. That necklace is ugly AF. Your eyes are all on the zeroes after the numero three.” She shoots me a look. “Or you're picturing yourself wearing it and I don't want to be party to your fuckin’

fantasies. Especially one that gets you dead at the hands of a sadistic gun runner with a penchant for torture.”

“You have fantasies?” I don’t mention she’s spot on about mine. Of course she is. She knows me best out of anyone in this world.

“You know I do.”

I snort a laugh. “Money.”

“Hard. Cold. That’s my fantasy and you know it, Magdalena.”

I roll my eyes then pick up the polaroid of the jewels and trace my fingers over it. I’m not ready to let the necklace go.

The thing isn’t mine, never was going to be mine, but after a job, I like to dream, indulge, and I can still feel the gems. “See? When we do the lights right, like in this picture, it’s gorgeous.”

“Nah.” She grabs another photo, this one with lights on. “Ugly. A. F.”

We keep detailed photos of every piece I steal. Match them against known photos, and if we ever need to get a fake made—there’s an actual, viable trade in that—we have enough for Harry to make it happen.

They also stand as evidence if a client decides to double cross us. They never have. But as Harry’s fond of saying, the killer word is *yet*.

These photos will go into a vault in a New York bank. Probably never to see the light of day again.

I snatch the picture she’s holding from her. Ugly my ass. The piece is a thing of beauty. “Where’s your romance?”

“Up the pussy of the lucky lady I spend hard cold cash on.” Harry blows out a breath and collects the photos, including the one I’m holding, and puts them in a pile. “I really should discreetly shop the necklace around.”

“The sadistic bastard?”

“Will never know a fake from the real thing.” She looks at me. “Not that I’d do that.”

She so would. Maybe not with this client, but Harry’s fantastic in fucking over a buyer if she finds us a better deal. She’ll risk everything, but only if the price is right. And if our heads aren’t in the sights of a gun runner with a hard on for torture.

My half-assed erotic thoughts aren’t the right price. I’ve known her all my life and we can read each other like a clichéd book.

“Beautiful in the right light.” I lean against the table. “The amount of money from the buyer is beautiful in any light.”

Yeah, she’s got a point. I might be the best jewel thief and cat burglar in the northern hemisphere, but Harriet Esterhazy’s a world class fencer. And I’m not talking pointy thin sword things.

She could fence the Mona Lisa. Probably has. The thing in the Louvre’s a fake.

I trail a finger on the workbench next to her, not touching the file. “New job?”

Harry ignores me as she gets up and goes to her coffee station in the corner near the stairs, but she bypasses all things coffee and looks over her shoulder at me. “Open the file, Magdalena,” she says as she pours two roughshod glasses of whiskey.

It's her drink of choice. That or rum. I like cocktails, finely crafted. But the whiskey, neat, will do in a pinch.

I take the proffered glass with my ring-free hand. It's not lost on me, the irony that I almost never wear jewels. I own two personal pieces outside the collection that's purely for monetary purposes; a ring on a simple gold chain with a locket.

A two in one, I guess.

My collection is ugly, tacky. Each piece is worth more sitting in a vault and never seeing the light of day than ever being worn. Not that I'd wear any of them. As I said, monetary only.

The ring and locket are worth nothing.

Except to me. And sometimes I'm not even sure why I keep them.

I've got money now, so does Harry, but we grew up hand to mouth, fighting for our lives on the mean streets of Delacroix City. We lived hard, survived harder, and wear the kind of scars that sing bright and deep inside.

But the money I already have? I might be fucking loaded, but I'm not loaded enough. It's not enough. I have a goal and I won't stop until then.

Delacroix, like New York, is a powerhouse. Not quite as flashy as the Big Apple, but it's where the real players, the Quinate, reside and run the east and western seaboards of America. It contains more might beneath its surface than its sister city.

I like being close to that kind of power.

And Harry likes to do her thing without being bothered.

“Open. The. File.” She nods at it.

I cast her a curious look. “Harry, this close to me stealing the Rose Garden”—that’s what they call the necklace I just stole, and have since the seventeenth hundreds when it was designed for a rich duke’s lover—“I don’t want to take on another high-profile job.”

“You’re getting weak in your old age. Open it.”

“Not weak, smart.” I run a finger over the pale-yellow cardstock of the file’s sleeve. “You know the score. People and law will be on high alert. They’ve been wanting me for years.”

“They think you’re a guy because they’re all egotistical, misogynistic straight dudes.” She rolls her eyes toward the ceiling. “Why you like them is beyond me.”

“I like cock?”

“Get a dildo or a woman with a strap-on.”

“Stop getting tetchy.” I put my drink down and snatch up the file. “I’m not saying I’ll take it, but I’ll look and—”

I flip over the cover.

One word is all it takes for me to shut it.

Quinate.

“No fucking way.” I shake my head. “Absolutely not.”

“Look at how much money, Lena.”

I narrow my eyes. “They can offer a billion, and I’m not getting caught up with them. They’re worse than the Mafia.”

“They *are* the Mafia,” she says, “and you’d take a billion.”

“Point and point. But the Mafia on crack. The big five aren’t friends, but they have a system.” I shove the file at her.

“Fuck one over, you fuck them all. You know this. They run this fucking town, New York, LA, Chicago... Dallas, Miami... Fucking half of Mexico and other hotbeds all over the world. No.”

She opens it and points to a number. “That’s a lot of zeros after the six.”

Shit, I look. “That’s...seven. Seven zeroes.”

“Lena, that’s a twenty-four/sixteen mill split. After fees and payouts. Our gross profit.”

Those fees and payouts are to do with the jewels themselves, not other fees and costs.

Even so...

My fingers start to tingle in that familiar way, like I’ve done the impossible and I’m about to steal billions in jewels.

“It’s the Quinate.” I make myself say it.

Harry hands me the file again. “Some of the Quinate.”

I glance at the page, reading on. Oh, fuck me. “This is worse than the Quinate. Anyone who’s anyone knows of the bitter hatred between the Agnossio and Miller families. I don’t want to be doing some fucked up Robin Hood shit, stealing from the Italian to give to the American.”

“Do your job,” she says, “and Agnossio won’t know.”

“I’ve never met these old guys, and I keep away from anything to do with the Quinate, but even I know of that hatred.” I shut the file again. “Absolutely not.”

“They’re not old, Lena...” She flips the file in my hands open and shifts some of the papers, pulling out two photos.

I almost forget how to breathe.

The men in the photos are beyond gorgeous.

I stare at the first one. His dark hair is something I want to touch, but I take in his face.

Dark, dangerous with cheekbones so sharp a girl might cut herself, and a mouth so sensuous that the same girl might willingly drown for a taste. The distracting eyes are smoke-ringed with charcoal and the kind that belong to a man who'd kill you while he makes you come.

Emphasis on the dangerous.

“That hot number is Hendrick Agnossio.”

“I don't care,” I say, my voice a little rough-edged.

She points to the other photo. “This one is Jacques or Jac Miller.”

Now this one is dark blonde with lazy curls, a laconic mouth that can probably send you to fucking heaven and vivid green eyes that will lead you into hell.

“Totally your type, Magdalena.”

I cut her a look. “Are you...fanning yourself?”

“I'm a cut and dried lesbian, but I know hot and those two are hot.” Harry shrugs.

“Harry!”

She rolls her eyes. “Hypothetically.”

I like them younger, less dangerous, way more malleable. Or older, very rich and malleable. I like easy, and then when I'm done, I like disappearing. With men, I don't want to think. I only want to be challenged regarding sexual positions.

These two?

Fuck no.

“It says here Miller hates Agnossio because of some telenovela shit.” I shake my head. “Daddy Agnossio fucking *murdered* Miller’s sister and Miller murdered Daddy A? Now they’re part of the Quinate so they can’t kill each other because it’ll upset the fucking power balance? Jesus, Harry.”

“Technicalities, Lena.”

I stare at my best friend. “She was twenty-one.”

“Technicalities.” She slaps another picture on top, and this time I actually gasp.

“That’s the Heart of Dark Desires,” I whisper.

Anyone who’s anyone knows of the necklace.

“I know.”

“But it’s been missing for decades,” I say. “People want this. It apparently went down in that plane...”

I stop, ignoring the gloat in her voice, and I stop reciting the story of the necklace.

Because I think this actually is the now-mythical Heart of Dark Desires.

The stones are set in black and gold work that’s so unbelievably intricate it’s almost in motion, A storm, one that invites the eye from the first stone that sits at the base of the throat, down along the other five to the final one. They’re a row of dark red rubies with such clarity they’re like drops of fire. Delicate chains come down from the diamonds that sit on each side of the top stone to link with each smaller one. Except the last one that hangs like a pendant, right between the wearer’s breasts.

It's extravagant. Extra.

Gorgeous in its pure decadence.

And it doesn't matter which light, candle, overhead or the sun that hits it, the gems burn with their inner fire. Including the diamonds that twist in the delicate chains like stars.

I want it.

The desire is real.

A throb between the thighs.

And I might be a little wet.

I try to breathe. "This is—"

"Not a fake." Even Harry's voice has dropped to a reverent whisper. "See?" She points to the settings of one small diamond and picks up her loupe, handing it to me.

"That one?" Harry points. "The claw right there is a little longer, fatter, than the others. Lilian Eichenberg always did everything deliberately. Germans. And this was a tell."

"Harry—"

"It's mostly unknown, her tell of authenticity. Making a copy of this piece good enough isn't worth it for the sheer value of all the stones and metals, the cuts and...I won't bore you."

She goes to close the folder.

"No!" The cry's torn from me.

The small smile that curves her lips earns a scowl, but I'm also too in lust to bother giving her a hard time. "No?"

"No." I hand back the loupe. It's just a picture, but even seeing it up close in a photo is giving me palpitations. "What's

the story?”

“Story is, Lena, you need to steal it from Agnossio and give it back to Miller.”

I shake my head. “And I bet Agnossio claims he owns it.”

“Politics bore me.”

“This,” I say, “could start a war.”

“This could put us close to hitting the billion dollar mark and livin’ the fucking dream. Whatever that is.” She smiles.

I frown. “It could get me dead.”

I pace. She joins me. “They’ll blame each other, Lena.”

“Okay, but they have this rivalry of hate and revenge and secrets.” I look at her. “Death, blood, violence and murder...”

“It’s not that different from most of the people we deal with,” Harry points out. “Rich dudes who want stolen merch are usually scary dudes.”

“That,” I say, “is my point.”

She blows out air and spins to pace backward so she can face me. “What? I wanna look at your pretty face.”

“Go fuck yourself,” I say absently. “Thing is, the rich dudes we deal with aren’t the Quinate. Even that sadistic gun runner’s a fluffy puppy in comparison. Our clients bring in big bucks for us because the rich and corrupt love being close to the richer and more corrupt. They love the powerful so they can feel powerful.”

“Losing you, babe.” She holds out a hand and ticks off things. “They aren’t the Quinate. They’re just members.”

“Which means,” I say, “they’re the Quinate.”

“Maybe by having them fight each other we’ll be doing the Quinate as a whole a favor?”

I stare at her. “How?”

“By them airing their bad blood?” She shrugs again. “How bad could it be? Slinging knife-filled insults? Don’t know, never been part of the Quinate.”

I stop. “What if it really does belong to this Hendrick?”

“But what if it belongs to blondie Jac?” Harry asks.

“You know if I take the job, we’re fucked.”

“You’re the best I know.” Harry squeezes my arm. “Take this job and we’re untouchable. We can do future jobs for the thrill, the fun, because we want. We deserve to be rich.”

“I don’t want to get caught in the middle...”

“You’ll be part of the legacy of the Heart of Dark Desires. You’re the baddest fucking bitch in town. The one who can steal anything.”

“This,” I say, “is trouble.”

I’ll have to locate it and then break in, then dismantle any alarms, which won’t be easy because this guy will have them out the wazoo.

“I just thought of something and you’re not going to like it. But...” Harry takes a breath. “We’re stealing from one to give to another. With other jobs, we cover our asses, move things about, pay for the independent evaluator and all the other small parts. Fees on fees on fees. We don’t need to do all that here. It’s going straight to Jac.”

“I don’t like it.” We authenticate, we go through a lot of steps for good reasons. “Harry?”

“It’s risky, but...” She stops, puts her hands on her hips. “They can war all they like and while they figure out who really owns it, we fuck off with all the money.”

I sigh because I want this challenge. And if we do what she’s suggesting, it’s thirty-six mill of all those millions for me and twenty-four for her. It’s worth it. That’s gross profit. There are fees of course, costs are always there, even without the usual middlemen.

Laundering, investments, carefully crafted tax havens and payouts.

Costs always exist.

But if we start with that kind of amount each, the net profit is great. Add the legend of the necklace and... “Who do I have to meet?”

“Jac Miller. I’ve arranged it.” Harry flashes a smile. “He loves pretty. He loves sexy. Go be a pretty, sexy thing for him.”

“When?”

She checks her watch. “Half an hour.”

“Bitch.”



Jac Miller’s pictures don’t do him justice. He’s fucking spectacular in person. Tall, muscled, tattooed from the hand that’s resting loosely on the glass in front of him to his neck, which peeks out from his collared shirt. And he has a shit ton of thick silver rings.

They're expensive, and they fit in with the young, elegant rich man look he has. One that barely hides the feral beast within.

I can smell it, beneath the elegant combination of spiced honey and lavender and leather; something dark and depraved that strokes against my senses.

He knows exactly the effect he has on women and the raised brow—slight, deliberately innocuous, completely insulting—says it all.

A demon who doesn't give a fuck about anyone or anything.

One thing that gets me as he gives me the once over is the tang of violent hate. Not at me. At something that just might include himself.

I don't usually come to the New Town quarter of Delacroix. It's where people who are rich, famous and gorgeous come to be seen. The hottest bars, the coolest clubs, the priciest chef-of-the-moment eateries.

Love the limelight, overpriced drinks, and the latest fashion and you'll love New Town.

Suits Jac down to the ground.

I stick out.

“The legendary MG ‘The Invisible Cat’ Rossi sent his dowdy assistant?” he asks in a voice that's all butter and heat.

“And Jacques Miller was stupid enough to think MG's a man?” I ask.

A small, nasty smile appears, coated in that innocuous civility.

I return it. I know exactly what I look like in my chocolate suit and beige, polka-dotted silk shirt with the girly bow.

My hair's smooth, pinned back, lips painted Politician Nude, a pale beige pink that's all wrong for me and guaranteed to never offend.

He cataloged, filed, and dismissed me. Right up to my comment.

I can almost see him recalibrate. "Let's cut to the fucking chase. I don't give a shit what's between your legs. The only thing I care about is if you can do the job."

"I'll need more money," I say.

"I'm paying you sixty fucking million."

I offer my wet-handed politician smile. "Expenses."

He raises a brow.

I don't take a seat and he doesn't offer one.

"Expenses?" he asks. "How so?"

"You say your...rival has your property. You're one of the Q and yet you need me to get it back. That tells me you don't know where it is, exactly. You don't want to be associated with its transfer of ownership, and you don't want to involve the authorities," I say. "So...expenses."

"It's the Heart—"

"I don't care if it's the fucking Salvator Mundi. I need expenses." At his frown I add, "The world's most expensive painting. Or to frame it in jewels, the crown jewels or just the old Hope Diamond. I need expenses."

When he doesn't answer, I start to turn because I'm willing to walk out the damn door of this upscale and trendy bar.

“Can you get it?” he asks.

I take a breath and look at him. “Once I know what I’m dealing with and where Agnossio has it, yes.”

“Deal.”

This time I turn and take one step.

“Rossi?”

I face him once more and those insane green eyes slide over me again. There’s a wicked light there that’s edged in sex and violence and my pussy throbs.

He’s leaning back, arm hooked over the chair next to him as he tosses back the contents of his glass. “Fuck this up and I kill you.”

“That,” I say, believing him, “is extra.”

“What’s MG stand for?”

“None of your fucking business.”

This time, I turn and leave and don’t look back.

TWO

HENDRICK



Someone's been following me for the past fucking two weeks.

Delacroix to Manhattan and even the one so-called pleasure trip I took to Vegas for a night. The hot sex there was pleasure, a cover, and the rest work. And while I'm not a paranoid man, and I can be single-minded with my work, building my empire to greater and greater heights, that feeling of being watched came with me to Vegas. I've got photos to prove it.

I sigh and lean back in the leather chair in my office at the Agnossio mansion.

Whoever it is, they're not making a move.

But they want something.

People always fucking do.

"Hendrick?"

"Someone's fucking following me." I look at Damon Reilly, my head of security, most trusted employee, and the closest thing a man like me has to a friend. I shrug. "I told you that."

He breathes out with barely contained annoyance. "What do you want me to do?"

I glance at the latest photo, a beautiful thing in shadow and blur and toss it at Damon. It's the latest in the pile.

"I'll have it framed."

He paces my expansive office in the mansion, where I work and rarely live. "That all you got, Hendrick?"

"I'd propose, but I don't know if I'm the marrying kind, or if..." I pull another photo over and squint at it, then put my boots on the desk. I admire his barely withheld wince. He knows the value of the antique desk, and the kind of *fuck you* to it and my father I'm giving. "That's a woman or man."

It's not that I don't value the art and craftsmanship that went into the piece, or the history. It's the fact my asshole of a father preferred a mausoleum mixed with museum to a place where family could thrive.

Besides, I could buy a thousand of these Aldon desks, if that many existed in the world.

Personally, I find the thing heavy-handed—too many scrolls and curlicues carved into the mahogany—and the gold edging is a little busy. But I appreciate it for what it is.

Just like I appreciate that I offended Damon's finer fucking senses.

"It's a woman." His sense of humor's packed up and left.

I'm aware it's a woman. The shape of the ass is too feminine, the curves just right, to be anything else.

I'm also fucking aware the ass is displayed in the cream skin-tight pants and knee-high boots to draw the eye—or camera—from the rest of her.

That's hidden behind a soft greeny-brown flowing top, her hair and face behind a hat.

Because they got a shot from the front, too, huge sunglasses, pale mouth.

And I couldn't tell you if she's a blonde or brunette, if she's twenty or a well-preserved fifty, but I know this particular sighting, taken yesterday, was designed to be seen.

By me.

The grainy one? I can't tell a fucking thing about the star of that little image, except she got caught by the lens, and was hidden, anyway.

"Maybe," I say, "I've got a fan."

"Or a stalker. Or..."

I cut Damon a dark look, knowing exactly where his words are leading.

"Whoever it is," I mutter, swinging my boots to the ground and rising. "She's a professional."

He remains quiet. Of course, she's a professional. She's evaded being photographed clearly. She's always in the shadows, in a crowd. With a hat, probably a fucking wig. I don't know.

"Sent by Jac?" Damon asks.

"He's not my only enemy."

The words sit in the air, like they're mocking me.

I don't bother checking to see if Damon follows when I leave the office, heading down the curved stairs to the second landing, and into the Art Deco sitting room. I like this floor more. It's still ridiculous in the cost of things and full-on time machine tour of rooms, each with their own era, but it's more

my mother, and at least the pieces chosen were done to create a mood.

I call this one *Gatsby Stoned* since it's got a slight romantic and subdued, laid-back feel with the Twenties glamor.

The plans for the upcoming gala are on the expansive coffee table, and I don't spare them a look as I get my jacket.

"Hendrick..."

I guess he did follow me.

"Yeah, I get it, Damon, I do. He's the big one, and on paper, he's the biggest threat," I say. "But in reality he's nothing I can't handle. And if that piece of arrogant shit thinks he can get to me or anything of mine through having me followed, then good luck to him."

Damon just folds his hands. "He's coming to the gala."

Rubbing a hand over my eyes, I sigh, then I pull on my suit jacket, and go to the wet bar. Damon's a rum man. He likes it golden, honeyed, with a hint of citrus. Cuban. Me? Give me the best of Japanese whiskey, darkly sugared with that bitter edge of toffee, and warmth of spice. I pour us both a drink, hold one out to him.

He mutters something under his breath. Then he takes the proffered drink.

"Everyone's coming to the gala, Damon," I say. "It's a fundraiser for underprivileged children. People love that shit."

"Spoken like a true humanitarian."

I raise my glass to him in a mock salute.

He just rolls his eyes. "I'm just saying we up the security. Around you, around here, around your place, and especially on

the night of the gala.”

I tap my hand on the coolness of the glass.

“Jac fucking Miller doesn’t follow me. He doesn’t send people to follow me.” I take a swallow. I don’t need to point out the Quinate members exist in a carefully balanced state of grace.

It’s the only way to stop the world imploding into chaos and bloodshed and death. It’s the only fucking way to rule and to get business done.

We have our own laws.

Regulations.

And dark and deadly punishments for those who break the laws.

Like when Jac took out my father.

When his father died, one might say it brought a kind of peace as soon after the bitter war ended. On the surface. I might want the prick dead. He might want me dead, but we both want our seats at the Quinate table more.

That and...the other members will destroy us and take the spoils if we step outside of the rules.

If our fathers were alive, we could conduct a protracted and bloody war.

But they aren’t and now we’re at the table.

Stale fucking mate.

“Miller’s got nothing to gain by having me followed.” I meet Damon’s cool gaze. “And I’m not fucking looking weak by upping security. We do business as usual. Same with the gala.”

Damon takes a sip of his drink, then sets it down on top of the gala plans. He pulls his Glock and checks the clip and slides it back into place at his lower back.

I happen to know he's got another gun in a holster, a knife and a third gun strapped to his left ankle.

His checking that particular gun is him making a point.

"Business as usual, Damon," I say in a quiet, deadly voice.

"Do you want me to fucking call you sir?"

"I want you to fucking be on alert," I say to him, "but keep things business as usual. Whatever this is, I don't think it's about ending up dead."

"Yet."

"I'm Hendrick Agnossio, man. I own my share of this town."

He looks at me. "So did your father."

"My father wasn't as cold as me. Wasn't as driven." In the right ways. I take a swallow of my drink and go to the picture window. It's getting dark. The lights are on and beyond the perimeters of my property, beyond the stretch of park and other places, the city glitters. "I'm smarter, harder to fucking trick. And after the near wipeout of the Quinate, killing me or any of the players, by any of the players, is a no win."

He knows this.

If I go down at the hand of Jac or a Jac affiliate, his life is done. His holdings are gone. Same if he goes down by my hand, no matter how much I might want that.

If it's by another Quinate, rules are the same.

And someone outside of us?

That person and every last living person they ever thought kindly of will cease to be. Or they'll live but their holdings, their organizations, all the operatives they thought they had will end.

For some, the latter is the bigger risk.

Failure and nowhere left to turn is worse than death, worse than the deaths of everyone they might care about.

We are, to most, untouchable.

But there are other ways to destroy that don't involve death or destitution. There are other ways to hurt, to make someone bleed.

I stay in my lane. I do my work, build my empire.

I leave fucking Jac Miller alone.

For now.

If Jac's planning something, right now, it's not my death. He'll want me to step out and break the Quinate laws binding me. But I don't have anything left. No family, nothing. There's the Heart of Dark Desires but... What's he going to do? Take it and wear it?

He can't get near it.

“And I'm aware of the world of hurt out there. But make no fucking mistake, Damon, I'll live my life. If someone wants to try and get me in a creative way, bring it on.”

“Hendrick—”

“I've got a Quinate meeting to get to. Do your job and I'll do mine.”



If I could shoot the smug face off the blond rich fuck, I would. He's only here, taking his father's place because that asshole's dead and buried. And Miller loves to hold court.

The splash and pomp of it all.

It drives me insane, just like the looks he keeps giving me. They're laced with hate, arrogance, and the erroneous belief that because he holds the position of the speaker, he holds the power. He doesn't. Every person at this table, high above Delacroix in the business sector, has equal power. It doesn't work, otherwise.

But Jac's never been a man of contemplation. He lives by extreme emotion, and he fucking loves the limelight.

Normally it wouldn't bother me. Much. The darkness, shadows, and quiet give more room to get things done. Where Jac calls attention, I slide by it. Which makes the moments I do take the stage compelling.

"So, we're agreed," Jac says, leaning back in his chair, a nasty little smirk playing on his mouth. "We take out Anwar."

The other members of the Quinate, Declan Kelly, Maximo Correia, and Ivan Jaroslav Marwood, don't move. Maximo's relaxed; he fucking hates Anwar so he could go either way. Ivan's mix of blue blood and bratva makes him exceedingly avaricious, so I know he wants Anwar dead, but also the connections and money Anwar's continuing to breathe brings.

And Declan... Kelly's hot-headed with a cold center. IRA heritage, Irish mafia made. He's got the same drive for attention as Jac, just he prefers to get it by dealing out death. When it warrants it.

He knows this doesn't.

Or he'd have fucking blown Anwar into smithereens himself.

Kelly knocks back his whiskey. "Jac, there are other—"

"Other ways, Declan?" Jac asks, leaning back in his chair. "Like peace talks?"

Kelly leans forward. "Other fecking ways."

"You getting fucking soft?" Jac raises his brows as he turns to Declan Kelly.

I stay quiet. Watching. Waiting. Kelly's not a man to be undermined, something Jac does often with deliberate carelessness and often.

Maximo and Ivan share a look.

The Anwar family is trouble, and if the world were an easy place, taking them out's a smart move. But the world's anything but that, and a loud-mouthed, middle rung gun running organization like Anwar's has tendrils and ties everywhere.

And Jac's gaze is on me.

He knows this.

The fucker's trying to manipulate.

"Anwar's connections are the issue, not the Anwar family, you feckin' piece of shite," Declan says, tone light, meaning deadly.

"You hate the prick, Max," Jac says to him, still looking at me.

"True." Maximo nods. "But I say we vote. Because Kelly's got a point."

Jac doesn't lift that gloating, hate-filled gaze from me. "Why don't we let Hendrick decide? Split the room fifty-fifty. The power balance is all yours, Hendrick."

I hate this, hate his attempts at manipulation, hate having to share a space with him. And he knows it. This fuck ruined my life. He wants me to check over my shoulder all the time. He wants me to step out of line when it comes to Quinate business.

But more than that? He wants me to look weak, to bow to him, make the tough calls and then when something goes wrong, he can blame me.

I nod. Offer him a small smile. "My thoughts on this subject have already been documented. I think you're all adult enough to make the right choice. Ivan, when you all make a decision, fill in Damon and he'll organize support accordingly."

I then rise as Jac's smirk spreads, and the waves of hot hate radiate from him.

One more second in this fucking room and Jac's brains are going to paint the wall behind him.

"Running late for something, I'm afraid, so I'll see you all at my gala." I keep my gaze on Jac. "Or not."

"Wouldn't miss it for the fucking world," Jac says.

Fuck Jac Miller and everything abhorrent he represents.



Elsa Nostrand, the date I left to meet, is late, but I don't mind.

The understated ambiance, rich and tasteful in both the low music, clientele, and deep reds and cherrywood of the bar in Old Town soothes something in my soul.

Oh, there's still a level of bullshit, just like in New Town, but here, people aren't out to make a point in a Jac Miller way, and the further from Jac-fucking-Miller the better.

So if the heiress is late, I can enjoy a drink in peace.

Elsa's very pretty, a good lay, and a better business move. I'm not intending on marrying her or having a relationship with her—not beyond what we have—but the rich man's daughter likes playing with fire, and I like her father's business connections. So I'll fuck her however she wants.

She can suck cock well enough. She can take it bent over a table in the cunt or up the ass.

Does she light infernos within me? Not on her life, but I'm not here for that. Keep the princess happy, and I get a piece of what her father's empire entails, a certain something money can't buy.

Which is why I'm at this upscale bar in the beating diamond-draped heart of Old Town, Delacroix. Not my fucking choice, I'd rather be working. I'd also rather be fucking a woman who likes to play my way.

Rough-edged, kink forward, sprinkled with danger, and maybe up for sharing. The latter is something I love but don't indulge in often.

Sharing a woman requires certain parameters. I don't give a shit about another dick. Even if I'm up her ass and someone else is buried deep in her cunt, no one's there for homoerotic moves, it's about pleasure and the woman. Usually it's spit roast territory, but even then...

Trust.

Someone who wants to play that way.

The things that need to align are sometimes too many working pieces. I like compartments, mess in the form of sweat and cum and wrecked beds. Not emotions. Not things spilling into other things.

Right now, I don't have time.

I don't have a woman like that.

Elsa's not ever putting out to more than one dick at a time.

I sip my whiskey and check my phone as it buzzes and lights up. She's running late, and her text is full of emojis that piss me the fuck off.

The fact I'm thinking about threesomes tells me all I need to know about the shelf-life of the Elsa situation.

I'm fucking bored.

I don't play games.

I'll indulge in casual sex, but I won't fuck someone I've gone cold on. It's not about raising the fucking mast, it's about my time and effort involved. I'd rather cut losses and move on if Daddy doesn't give me what I want.

I'm also not ready to stop fucking Elsa, but we're getting there.

Elsa's feelings on all this? It's not like we talk about that shit. Or much at all beyond the usual social fuckery. Thing is, I won't use a woman's emotions, either. Fuck, I've walked away from entanglements that would bring me things because the lady in question had her heart on her sleeve and mine didn't beat for her at all. Elsa isn't a rich heiress in love. She isn't

even one who sees me as anything other than what we are. Casual lovers. An arrangement.

She gets to tell her friends she fucked Hendrick Agnossio, and I hopefully get that something I want from her daddy.

Someone bumps into me and every nerve ending sends shockwaves vibrating through my bones. My hand jerks, and a hundred dollar glass of whiskey goes everywhere.

An earthy, smoky scent, one filled with jasmine, ginger and orange flower winds around me in this bar that's already crowded with perfume, noise and music.

It's at once dark and mysterious and a breath of fresh air that's carrying the notes of a secluded garden. It's the type of scent that invites a man to seek it out against warm, bare skin and breathe it deep.

It tells me two things.

One—it's the kind of scent that doesn't come from a bottle of perfume, but instead's born from a mix of soaps and shampoos and the chemistry of the wearer's skin.

Two—whoever owns the scent is very close to me.

"I'm so sorry," says a voice that's got a hint of smoke and secrets to it. "This idiot knocked me. I'll get you another."

The woman slides into the chair next to me at the cherrywood bar. I take my time before I look at her. She's got long-fingered, elegant hands, almost delicate. No rings, and her nails are short, painted a red so dark it's almost black.

There's a magnetism that makes me take my time as I turn to her. A resetting of equilibrium.

She's average height, slender but sweet in the right places, her cleavage showing what I call *handful perfection* tits. The

column of her throat is the ideal place to lick, bite, kiss, suck, and the mouth that's painted red is a wet fucking dream. She's got a pixie cut cap of vibrant red hair and dark amber eyes, the shade reminding me of my favorite Japanese whiskey.

A glass is placed in front of me and one in front of her. I know what it is before I take a sip.

I'm not an easy man to play, but right now, I'm willing to see her game unfold.

"Whiskey?" I ask.

"That's what's in your glass, the one I spilled, isn't it?" That voice purrs and does things no voice should do.

I nod. "Expensive whiskey."

"Top shelf." She holds her glass up in the air and I wait a beat before picking up the new one and clinking it against hers. "You live around here?"

I sigh and lean in, mouth against her ear, and breathe in that heady scent. "And you were doing so well, right up to that question. You know where my mansion is."

"I've never had the privilege." She turns and our mouths are close, within kissing distance and my cock twitches in my pants. Her pupils are dilated, just enough for me to know it's arousal.

Maybe it's me, and maybe it's whatever the fuck she's up to, but this lady's turned on.

"No, you haven't. Are you angling for an invitation?"

Her hand slides down and skips light along my thigh a moment. It causes my cock to harden, and my breath to catch.

Holy fuck, this creature should come with a warning.

She could be some kind of Jac bait, but I dismiss that thought; she's not an escort and she's not being paid.

Or rather, if she's being paid, it's not for this meeting.

I can smell curiosity.

Just like I can smell someone working an angle.

"Now who's being boring?" There's the merest hint of amusement in the smoke of her voice.

"I'm not *boring* you." I toy with *boring into you* but dismiss it. She's smart enough to pick up on the entendre. "Yet."

"I'd hope not." The amusement ticks up. "You do that here, and you might get arrested."

She's managed to read my mind. Interesting.

"Drill?" I ask. "Hammer?"

"You're either opening a hardware store or..." She smiles, lifts her chin and her lips almost brush mine. "One might think you're a man with a very hard and sizable bone."

"And I'm betting if I checked, the roads down below will be slick like it just rained."

The woman laughs. "Torrential?"

"Only one can hope."

I don't ask her name because someone like her isn't going to tell me. Not the truth, anyway.

My phone buzzes. I don't look at it. I know who it is.

"A pity you've got a date; I'd have liked to get to know you more," she murmurs.

“You and I getting to know each other would include orgasms and not too much conversation,” I say.

She slides her hand along my cheek, and it’s like a dusting of heat bursting into life. “I look forward to that. Enjoy your lackluster sex tonight and try not to think of me.”

The woman leans in, drops her hand, and licks my throat.

I immediately know it’s the single most erotic moment of my night. Even if I take Elsa to bed, which right now? I’m revising those plans.

The woman’s hips swing in a slightly exaggerated way that has every man and a few women staring.

As she walks away, I smile.

Things just got very interesting. Because that red mouth and the fine, perfect ass in the almost black dress ending a little too high on the top of perfect thighs? I’d recognize them anywhere.

Whoever my stalker is, whatever she wants from me, I’m more than intrigued in not only finding out what that is, but enjoying the ride to get there...

Our paths are going to cross again.

I’m certain of that fucking fact.

Especially since she just stole my wallet.

THREE

MAGDALENA



“Satisfied?” Harry asks as I get in the car outside the bar in Old Town.

I don’t take off the wig until Harry’s driven us back to the diamond district side of the city’s trade section.

Inside, I’m vibrating from being that close to Hendrick Agnossio.

Oh Christ, he smelled fucking amazing. Like black pepper and earth, cardamom and cacao. Rich, complex, smoky.

He might have tasted even better.

And his voice. Like velvet sandpaper on my senses.

It did things to my insides, just like Miller’s caramel butter voice did.

Jac Miller was a sensuous bastard who didn’t give a fuck about anyone or anything apart from himself. Women, to a man like that, are toys, things to be used for his pleasure and nothing more. I’m not saying a man that confident doesn’t know how to please, I’m sure he does, but I don’t think he cares about more than what he can get.

He’s hot and lives for his own pleasure.

Hendrick Agnossio is...

A different beast.

There's a coldness to him. Stone-cold killer comes to mind. A man so focused that I'm actually shocked he didn't know I lifted his wallet. I could have gone for the gorgeous custom Piguët watch, too, but there are times where pushing leads nowhere good, and getting caught showing off by taking a crime boss's watch from his wrist is one of them.

What I didn't expect was the heat.

The fires that melted me from the inside out.

He wasn't wrong about the state of my pussy. However, my wetness had nothing to do with the watch or lifting his wallet and everything to do with him.

"That fucking hot, huh?" Harry asks, startling me from my thoughts.

"Hotter."

The word spills out as Harry pulls into the garage that sits next to her store. She owns the building and the private garage. I rent an apartment downtown. I'm not a fan of my name on a deed. The rent's cash in hand, no lease.

I got the place like that with some tacky, expensive jewelry.

When I buy, it'll be when I make my billion.

"Did you learn anything?" Harry asks, opening the inner door to the building. "Or just get your flirt on? And don't tell me you didn't because your cheeks are all fucking flushed my girl."

She heads upstairs, to the apartment above the store where she lives. Once we're in, I kick off the shoes and head off to the bathroom, brushing out my blonde hair in the mirror's

reflection and washing off the makeup. Then I change into my jeans and top and head back out.

She hands me a drink. “Preferred the hot vixen look, but you do you, Lena.”

“Whiskey and Coke?” I wrinkle my nose.

Harry flops on her sofa and looks anything but sorry. “Sorry. I ran out of all the ingredients for a Cat Woman.”

“What the fuck is that?”

“A cocktail I just made up?” Harry gives my glass a look. “I don’t know. I’m not a high maintenance drinker.”

I take a swallow of the horrorfest in my glass then set it down. After sipping that expensive whiskey tonight, Hendrick’s favorite Japanese brand—I did my research—this paint stripper and warm Coke doesn’t float my boat.

Then I pull the wallet I took this evening out from my small round, structured clutch.

She gasps. “You did not.”

I look at Harry. Her baby blues are wide and she’s pointing with her glass at the contraband.

“Would you believe me if I said I didn’t?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she demands.

I shake my head. “Says the woman who convinced me to steal billions from the man.”

“Hundreds of millions.” She pauses. “Probably. And if it’s billions, it’s low end, two, three at the most. In jewel value without all the other add ons it’s hundreds of millions. And...”

“Harry?”

“Yes, babe?”

“Not helping.”

“We’ll go with a lot of zeroes.”

“So what’s a wallet?” I lay my hand over the plain, soft leather. “It comes with a good story.”

“A thief announcing she’s a thief is a good fucking story?” Her eyes narrow. “Did you do drugs?”

“No, but it’s best to lead him away from who and what I am.”

“Hit your head?” she asks. “Because it sounds like you’re planning to get caught.”

“No,” I say, “but if I *am* caught, then I’ve set up the narrative of being a thief.”

This is a bold-faced lie. I don’t know why I took the wallet. What Harriet’s saying is it’s reckless. Beyond reckless, really. But now I have? My excuse? It *is* a good angle. Not that I’m planning to get caught.

The wallet no longer holds the heat of his body, something that lit me up inside when I lifted it. His special brand of heat. That, and being so damn close to his mouth. It’s not just him... well, it’s him, because the man’s bona fide hot, just like Jac. He’s bona fide dangerous, just like Jac.

But Jac’s the client and Hendrick’s the mark.

There’s always something irresistible about the mark because the thing I’m going to steal is in itself, irresistible.

Learn all about the mark and I’ve a better idea where the necklace is.

Heart of Dark Desires.

I shift a little on the sofa.

Even the name is hot.

It draws me.

I breathe out slowly. The wallet's plain leather, a dark oxblood that's aging well. A person might think Hendrick Agnossio would have a black wallet, or just a money clip. This is infinitely more intriguing.

Fine craftsmanship, made to last, subdued. Belonging to a man who prefers to watch and wait and... I'm not sure. But he's hot enough, well-known enough, rich enough, and bad enough to be as ostentatious as Jac. I don't mistake him as someone lacking arrogance, or even flair. He has both.

It's just different than Jac Miller.

They're two entirely different beasts.

Jac Miller would have a fancy money clip in white gold or silver. Maybe encrusted with stones because he can. He wouldn't carry physical ID, it'd all be on his phone, along with cards. But I suspect he has someone who takes care of the mundane, like paying bills.

As for the Heart of Dark Desires?

He'd keep it in a special vault, built for the necklace, probably in a room where it's on display, bringing it out to impress a lover or to flaunt and use to mock Hendrick.

Hendrick...

If I had to rob Jac, it wouldn't be easy, but I'd know where he kept it, and that would be in the heart of his mansion. In that regard, Jac Miller's very readable. Getting to it would be the trick.

With Hendrick Agnossio I'm thinking he keeps it in a safe. Maybe if he's feeling reckless—which I don't think he does—two solid weeks of following him showed me a man who does things very deliberately, even down to the pretty whore he started fucking.

Hendrick wouldn't flaunt it. He might hate it, but he has it for deliberate reasons. Maybe he thinks he owns it. Maybe he fucking does and Jac is lying. I really don't care. But Hendrick's wallet shows me what our brief conversation and following him gave me: a man with deep and twisting complexities under a layer of simplicity.

The Heart of Dark Desires won't be in a bank vault. That's cowardly and boring to a man like him, even if it makes the best sense, security-wise.

It's at his home.

Question is, where's that? Where he sleeps might not be his home.

Then again, the mansion is where he conducts business and pleasure. Where he's seen.

Maybe it's there.

If it is, it'll be in an office, the one he uses, where he locks up things of importance but not things that he takes out to admire or gloat over.

I'm not sure that man knows how to do that.

If it's not there...

I'll locate the place he calls home.

“Do you and Hendrick's wallet want some alone time? Are you fucking conversing with it on another plane of existence,

and did it used to be called Bessie?” The heavy sarcasm in Harry’s voice snaps me out of the contemplation.

“Bertha,” I say, “she was an evil cow.”

“Can cows be evil?” Harry raises a brow.

“Anything can be.” I grab my drink and toss some back quickly, trying not to shudder at it. I pull my legs up onto the sofa. “I was trying to work out where Hendrick keeps the necklace.”

“The wallet is letting you know?”

I look at her, flip it open, and pretend to be listening to its secrets. “Bertha, tell me everything.”

Shaking her head, she crowds me and plucks the license. Harry whistles low.

“Changing teams?” I ask as she settles back into her side of the sofa.

“I’m just saying this man takes a killer photo.”

“Emphasis,” I say, “on the killer.”

The wallet’s clean. There’s almost one thousand in cash and that’s it.

“This is almost perfect, possibly the best fake ID I’ve seen.” She holds out the license to me.

I pluck it from her and look at it. She’s right, it’s a stellar fake.

“Fake,” I say, “like his date’s tits?”

“I haven’t seen them, so I don’t know if they’re fake or perfect.” She whips out her phone and sits back, obviously searching for Elsa on the internet. “Ooh, yeah, now that’s my kind of prime veal. Young, pretty, well-brought up, and

loaded. And those are real titties.” Suddenly Harry looks at me. “Jealous?”

“No.” My answer comes a little quickly. “But I don’t need some clinging socialite in my way at the gala.”

“You’re meant to be robbing him, not dating him.”

“That kind of girl is going to drag him off all over the place for sex.” I might be a little...annoyed by his pedestrian tastes.

I wouldn’t call it jealousy, though.

“Uh huh. And you’re going to rob him at the gala?”

I think about it. Jac wants that. To a man like him, the gala is perfect. But things don’t always work that way. “I’m casing the joint, and if it’s there, it’s mine. So yeah, his gala.”

I can almost feel the slide of the necklace’s stones under my fingertips, the weight of the piece in my hand. My pussy clenches.

It’s official. When I grab it, I’m trying that fucker on. Naked.

Shit, I’d be tempted to wine and dine myself in it and indulge in the sweet two-finger slide.

“Until we hand it over. Right, Lena?”

Meet fucking Harry; killer of dreams.

“Until then,” I say.

“Agnossio’s gala, huh?” She pokes me with a foot. “If it’s there, you’ll swipe it then?”

I shrug. “It seems easier than scaling walls and dismantling security systems. Not to mention he’s got it guarded at all times.”

“Because there’ll be no security that night?”

“There’s also going to be a shit ton of rich, famous and infamous people there.” I meet her troubled gaze. “As there always is at one of these events.”

Quinate events, galas, parties, fundraisers—they all depend on the particular member holding them—are beyond known. But the one people love is the Agnossio gala. I suspect it’s because Hendrick isn’t into the limelight, and if there’s one thing people love, it’s a peek into the unknown.

I kept away from all things Quinate. Rumors and stories always reach me, but I never took time to look up who’s who. Now, apparently, I’m like a card-carrying member of the Quinate fucking fan club. “It’ll be fine, Harry.”

“Shit, Lena,” she says softly, “it’s going to be a shitshow. Security everywhere, and how the hell could you move in that environment, let alone lift a mythical necklace you don’t even know is there, without being caught?”

“Chaos works.”

She’s not convinced. “Chaos has too many variables. It’s why it’s called chaos.”

“It’s a great cover. It works.”

“How are you getting in? You’ll need a job on the staff, or an invite.” Harry’s eyes widen, an idea coming to her. Then she shakes her head. “Jac Miller? Are you thinking of getting in via Miller? Because, I gotta fucking say, walking in the front door on the arm of Jac Miller is a ballsy move. Even for you.”

“Tempting, but no.” I think about it all. “I need a list of the invitees, those who are unattached, older, and who might be busy.”

She frowns. “Do not say easily bought off.”

“There are different ways to buy someone off.” I smile. “The most boring way is with money. And the least compelling.”

Now that the idea of the gala’s in my head, I like it more and more.

“Lena, I don’t like it.”

I toss back the remainder of the drink. “You don’t have to like it, *Harriet*. Just get me the information I need.”

“Hon, I’m not your research assistant.”

“Sweet thing,” I say, matching her tone, “you are if you want to add those millions to your account.”

I get up and shove my clothes, evening bag and wig into my backpack that’s sitting on the floor where I left it earlier that evening. I toss in Hendrick’s wallet.

“Going somewhere?” Harry asks.

“Home. We’ve both got work to do and I need a decent drink. Love you, Harry.”

She stands, crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. “Just try not to get killed.”



My phone rings again, and I ignore it as I pin my hair up.

Jac Miller’s a dangerous man to ignore, but I’m not about to be intimidated by the arrogant, gorgeous, SOB.

“You’re not gonna get that?” Harry asks.

“Nope.”

Sighing, she leans against my bathroom sink and watches as I apply makeup. She came over to my place tonight, wanting to go over the details of my plan for the gala one more time. And question my sanity.

“Are you an idiot, or just someone with a death wish?”

“This was your idea.” I slide in the last pin and tease tendrils free.

“Your panties got all moist over it.”

I apply lipstick, and then set down the tube of Vixen Red. “Leave my panties out of it.”

“Calm down.” Her words are light, but she doesn’t smile. “I just don’t know if ignoring Jac Miller is smart.”

“He likes intimidation. He thinks he’s the big man around town. And he loves to swing his dick. I’ve researched him, too.”

I spin for Harry in the slinky, shimmery backless black number I’m in. It’s floor length, a split up the side that only shows when I walk. It’s hot and sexy and guaranteed to have eyes on my tits, hips, legs and ass instead of my face. Men are, in their hearts, not overly complicated.”

“He’s powerful enough to mean his intimidation, Lena, and he *is* the big man around town. One of them.” She holds her hands up. “Don’t know about the dick part, but I’ll take your word.”

“For the past two weeks, I’ve kept the calls I agreed on. Beyond that? I’ve no obligation to pick up his calls. He doesn’t respect weakness.”

“He—” She stops. “Nice bag.” Harry holds up my clutch.

I stick out my hand. “It’s structured for a hidden bottom, light, but looks like it’s got weight to it, and holds everything, including purloined gems, brilliantly. Give.”

She hands me my bag, and I put my tools into it. Lock picks and a small device to listen to the pins in a safe. I also have a slim penlight that shows prints up if the safe in question’s got a keypad.

Anything more complex and I’ll need to return to the scene at a later date.

“You want his respect?” Harry asks, returning to the Jac conversation.

“No. I just don’t like being intimidated.” And fuck him for trying.

There’s nothing worse than a hot man who knows how hot he is and doesn’t give a shit about anyone or anything but himself.

That’s Jac Miller.

He uses people. Discards them.

Women are fuck toys for him and nothing more. He’s a man who indulges all his senses.

Not prowess in the bedroom. Women *cannot* stop talking about it. They line up to be thrown away by him.

But there’s something missing.

A heart. Maybe a soul. Possibly both.

He’s gorgeous and I don’t like him.

Then again, I don’t need to like him, I just need him to respect me enough to pay me, and understand he won’t ever see the Heart of Dark Desires until I get the money.

“Does he know you’re going to the gala tonight?” Harry asks.

The answer is no. But just like when he informed me he’d kill me if I screwed up, I don’t tell her.

“I don’t know. And I don’t care.” I slide on my shoes. “Wish me luck, Harry.”

“Not to sound like a broken record, but don’t get dead.”



The ride to the gala is one of the expenses that Jac Miller’s going to foot. In my bag are my tools, a burner phone, and Hendrick’s wallet.

Along with my invitation.

It took me a while, but I’m going tonight in Walter Vern’s place. Walter’s away on a last minute business trip, draping his twenty-year-old sugar baby in stolen diamonds. I got him the sugar baby, and the diamonds. For a sixty-year-old banker, he’s living it up and more than happy to let me go to this gala in his stead.

Money doesn’t talk.

Desires, secrets, and wants do.

The mansion is spectacular. Big, sitting on a hill on the edge of the park in one of the richest hoods in Delacroix, just over the river from the glittering city center. The big stone gates have guards I’m sure are armed to the teeth, but I don’t see any weapons as my invitation is checked. The long drive up to the monolithic mansion is lit with shimmery lights, and the gardens glow too.

When the car pulls up, my invitation's checked a second time as I get out.

Inside is like something from the bucket list of every rich person with something to prove.

Immediately I know while Hendrick might have grown up here, might work from here, sleep here on numerous occasions, this isn't where he calls home.

The necklace?

I won't know until I know.

There's live music and laughter in the marbled foyer and the second floor is being used, too, as people come and go on the stairs. I look higher, but the lights aren't lit on the third floor, where the office is. Where I put the safe to be.

To the right of the foyer is a great room, to the left, a ball room of all things. The fourth floor is where the bedrooms are, and the second floor holds living rooms, drawing rooms, a library, a small alcove for drinking and eating.

I know because I got the blueprints—which took some time getting—so I have everything memorized. And the office is where he'd have his safe.

My spine tingles, and heat washes through me as a voice like velvet sandpaper whispers down in my blood. "And you are?"

Hendrick Agnossio.

"Elena Jones," I say, turning. "You must be the host?"

My heart beats hard and fast as I look up into the smoke eyes of Hendrick. Christ, how can he be even better looking than I remember?

That scent of him, spicy, earthy, and delicious weakens all the parts of me, and I swoon in, hand slipping over him as I return the wallet. He doesn't notice a thing.

Easy as pie.

"I am." He raises a brow. "Who are you with, Elena? I'd remember inviting a beautiful woman like you."

This isn't the man I met at the bar two weeks ago. This is the deadlier version, one cloaked in a veneer of seemingly innocuous charm. I can't read him. Not the tone or his expression or the look in his eyes.

"Walter Vern invited me but had to drop out at the last minute." I fumble with my bag and reach in to pull out the folded check. "He gave me this to make up for his absence. To give to you?"

He doesn't take it, and behind that polite veneer an animal stirs, one that calls to me, and I throb deep inside.

"You smell very familiar," he murmurs. "Just can't quite place it."

I shiver at that. Smell. Not seem or look, but smell, like we've been intimate. "Must be my shampoo."

"Must be." Then he smiles, steps back. "I need to mingle. Donations go in the box at the front, for those feeling extra generous. Eat, drink, and have a good time. And Elena? Save me a dance for later."

A jolt of pure fire rushes through me.

"You want to dance with me, Mr. Agnossio?"

"Of course." The smile grows a little wider, and some of that façade slips. "I always enjoy a dance with the most fascinating person in the room."

FOUR

JAC



Nora Huston is drop dead gorgeous. Unironically pin up material. Dark curls, big blue eyes and a wide, soft mouth. She's one of the hottest young actresses around.

I really don't care if her tits are real or not; they're perfection, still at that almost gravity-defying stage. Big enough to be spectacular, small enough not to make her top heavy, and I enjoy looking at them, along with her cunt that drips with my cum.

Her party dress is on the floor of my limo, and I just enjoyed fucking her ass as well as taking her cunt. It's a cunt and an ass. What's not to enjoy? Even lackluster is enjoyable.

Now she's sitting opposite me, playing with her perfect tits, legs spread wide, displaying my handiwork.

She's a good actress, but not that good. The humiliation darkens her eyes, killing the arousal. She wants what she had when I was in LA; a shit ton of soul-shaking orgasms. It's why she's here, why she took her dress off the moment she got in my limo.

Even though she knew the rules of this trip, of being my date.

“Finger yourself,” I command, “then lick your fingers, and keep doing it until you’ve cleaned that cunt.”

“Jac—”

“Did I say fucking talk?” I shake my head. We’re coming from the airport, so it’s a long drive, especially when my driver takes the long, non-business route so I can fuck the life from whatever hot piece is in here with me. “You wanted this date?”

Nora nods. She wants back on the Jac joystick. She wants to ride it until she’s screaming, grinding down hard on me.

“I told you how it would all go down,” I say. At her next nod, I motion for her to finger herself and eat my cum. “You want more, you make it worth my while.”

“Yes, Jac...” She starts working two fingers into her cunt, then sucking them clean. After a couple of minutes, I grow bored.

I’m too distracted, too angry, to appreciate my own, live, personal sex show.

Angry with the fucking thief who won’t give me a thing, won’t jump when I say.

Distracted by my plans for the night, the week.

There’s also hate, but that drives me always.

One way or another, I’m going to find a way to make Hendrick suffer.

Right into the other side of hell, if I’ve got a say.

Trick is to get him to move first.

The necklace is a start. If I can get it.

This fucking MG Rossi is supposedly the best, and I need that. The legendary Cat needs to succeed where others have failed.

I fucking meant it when I said I'd kill her. I'll splatter the blonde's brains all over the fucking place if she fucks me over or fucks this up.

Carlos clears his throat from the seat next to me. I'd almost forgotten he had been here the entire time, enjoying the free show I provided him. "Boss?"

Ignoring Nora I say, "Yeah?"

"You wanted ETA at certain points?" Carlos, my bodyguard, is about forty, taller even than me, ugly, and built like steroids and an overgrown linebacker gave birth. "We should be there in thirty minutes," he says. "Security's tight on all fronts."

"Thanks, Carlos."

Nora stops, something that irks me. She was an average fuck, enjoyable but average, even when I spent that night with her. A little too easy, a lot too eager. Nice pussy, great rack and face, but average fuck. One I'm half regretting flying in from LA. She's here for the weekend, meant to be coming home with me into my bed tonight, but now I don't know.

There are rules to this date, and I told her what I wanted, what I'd do, and that's before I agreed to this. She's been chasing me for months. It's why I fucked her in LA. One reason I decided to take her as my date. The other? I know it'll piss Hendrick off.

She dropped his name as an admirer at one point, and I never forgot it.

“Did I say you can fucking stop?” I flick my glance at her, then at Carlos. “You want in?”

Carlos just unzips and pulls out a monster cock. I’m big, but that thing...it’s ridiculous and her eyes snap to mine in fear.

“Still ready to fuck who I tell you to?” I ask Nora.

The actress darts another look at the monster cock. “Y-Yes, Jac, b-but—”

“On him. Now.”

She licks her lips. “B-But—”

“It’s up to you, Nora. But I’m not touching you again if you don’t.” I like watching, I’m not into double teaming, unless the third is another chick, but this...

She’s rich, twenty-one, the world adores her for being a child star turned wholesome young starlet, so I’m making her my whore for the night. It’s fucking hotter than fucking her.

And she knew this would happen. She just didn’t expect me to ask her to ride a giant monster cock.

“Well?” I meet her gaze.

Nora does as she’s told, and she tries to ease down on him before Carlos pulls her all the way on, all the way down, and she gives a little shriek. He starts bouncing her and mauling her tits, and I go back to my phone, noting the moment when her little sounds of discomfort turn to moans of pleasure.

When I glance at them, she’s bouncing herself, his teeth gripping one of her nipples and her head is back as he thrusts hard into her. I scoff. It’s not as exciting an image as I thought. Not that I thought about it.

He comes and tosses her off him, dragging her face in close to his dick, but I catch his eye and shake my head. “Mouth is mine, Carlos.”

“Fair enough. Fine pussy,” he grunts.

“I’ll let you have it again. I think she’ll say yes. Won’t you, Nora?”

Her gaze darts to me, humiliation and arousal fighting one another, and then she glances at Carlos’s cock and hesitates.

She wants us both, she wants my orgasms, but she’ll take his if I won’t hand them out.

Her head bobs.

“That’s a yes, Carlos,” I say.

She’s shaking, breathing unsteadily, but I don’t think she came. I didn’t let her when we did it. I’d been planning on keeping her on edge for the night, before plowing her when we got back to my place, destroying her holes until sun up, but now... I’m not as interested.

“Before you put on the dress,” I mutter, unzipping my pants again, “I want you to get me hard and fuck me with your face. Then, I’m gonna come right down your fucking throat. What do you say?”

Real desire lights up her face. “Yes, Jac.”

I wait as her eyes devour my cock in my hand. It’s not even fucking hard. “And?”

“Thank you, Jac.”

I wave her in.

Nora slides her hands over me and sways in. I think she wants a kiss but fuck that. I told her what would go down. I’m

not kissing her, and she's not coming by my hand or cock until after the party.

I push her down between my legs.

Maybe she believed me and maybe she fucking didn't. Not my problem. It's hers.

The moment of a hot, wet mouth closing over your cock is fucking magic. Always is. The slide of a tongue, the sucking. Even shit blow jobs have that magic. And she's good. She really is.

I sigh and move her head with one hand, making sure as I get completely hard, I'm hitting the back of her throat. But there's something missing as I make her gag on me. As I hammer up into her mouth.

My phone buzzes, and I let her do the work as I take care of business texts. All it takes is a shove with my hand to make her go harder, rougher when I need it, and as my balls start to tingle and tighten, I hold her down. I come deep in her throat, cock twitching.

"How much longer?" I ask Carlos, holding her there, nose against my pubis, just long enough for her to start struggling.

He checks his phone. "Ten more minutes."

"Can you come that quickly?" I ask as she goes back down on me, tongue swirling, mouth sucking, like I'm a pacifier dipped in honey.

His gaze is on the famous actress still working me. "In her? Fuck yes."

"Go. Make it good." I lift her off me, my cock coming free from her mouth with a pop, the piercing gleaming with her saliva, and push her over to Carlos. He pulls her onto his lap

and plunges balls deep in what must be a sore cunt by now and fucks her as he fingers her asshole, pushing a finger in. I go back to my texts.

It doesn't take long for her moans to become annoying. I look over again, and he's got fingers on her clit. Soft bastard. Maybe I'll give her to him for the weekend.

She's embarrassed she likes fucking him; he lets her come. And I love the humiliation of her spending the weekend fucking an ugly bodyguard and not me. Because I know if I invited her in my bed and withheld orgasms, she'd still want to fuck me.

We pull up as she screams. I look over as I put my phone away. He's hammering up in her cunt and she's shaking, writhing, not looking at him. When they've both come, she dresses, and goes to fix her makeup.

"I don't think so," I say. "Freshly fucked is a good look for you, Nora. Let's go."



I've timed it all just right to make a grand entrance. Combine that with one of the hottest young things Hollywood has to offer, young enough and talented enough to make the A-list, and I know she sees a date with me as a boost.

That and the allure of billionaire bad boy Jac Miller is too much for her to resist.

I'm a bastard, I'm not overly interested in her wares anymore, but I'll help, point her in the direction she wants, like the fucking big name director who's here.

“Cheer up, Nora,” I mutter. “Paint on a smile and I’ll make that introduction.”

“Really? And after?” The hope in her voice annoys me to hell’s furthest edge.

I lean in, knowing eyes are on us. “Think about tonight as an audition.”

She goes still and looks up at me, hope suddenly flaring to life.

Fuck, the girl better not be thinking she’ll be wearing a Miller ring. That’s not happening. I like to fuck a lot of women. I love to play and sink down deep into pleasure, my way.

A wife—hell, even a steady girlfriend—isn’t what I want. Far from it.

But Nora’s good for the entrance. I make heads turn. Her by my side? It’s a double dose squared.

“For acting roles, Nora.” I smile for the clicking cameras, knowing she does, too. “Your precious A-list.”

“I want you, Jac.”

Her words turn me off, but we step into the grand foyer, all smiles as a sexy, beautiful couple. I fucking hate this place, but it’s opulent, decadent, dripping with money.

The Agnossio mansion gives even mine a run for its money.

And from across the room, I can feel the cold burn from Hendrick.

I look over all the glittery people and make sure I catch the dickwad’s eye. Then I smirk as I slide a finger into the

actress's mouth, and she sucks. The cold from him doesn't change an iota, but I'm sure he's fuming inside.

The pretty little Elsa, who I did try and fuck just to fuck with him, isn't there.

Maybe she's talking to someone.

It's not that she didn't want me—I know the look a woman gets when she's turned on—but Elsa's the well-brought up type and fucking Hendrick, to her, means no one else.

I hope she got bored and ran off with some boring fuck of a banker.

It'll rub in the fact I'm with Nora, his type, even more so.

I thrust my finger in and out of Nora's mouth, and she moans. His hateful gaze remains on us, face giving nothing but that ice cold away. Then something catches his attention, and he looks right past me to someone else and the expression changes. Heats up a little.

It's a look a man gives a woman he's interested in.

He's definitely not looking at Nora.

I want to turn but hold off. Whatever he's interested in, I'm going to take it from right under his fucking nose.



Nora's being pawed by a well-known billionaire lothario. I should go save her, I know, but I don't. The famous director's watching her, too.

I introduced them ten minutes ago, and the lothario only just swooped in when Anderson G— Gordon Andrews when

he's not living up the life of the cool *it* director—got distracted by someone else.

I'm sure she'll blow him, fuck him, star in his next movie and maybe even marry and divorce him. His edgy work is what Nora needs to get out of sweet girl typecasting. And Anderson's what she needs. She's what he needs, too.

Fuck, the bullshit of Hollywood is beyond boring. Give me people to blackmail, money to make, traitors to kill and hot, depraved women to fuck and I'm a happy man.

Strike that. Add the demise of Hendrick Agnossio into that mix, and I'll be happy.

I clench my hand, then pull out my phone and send a text to MG Rossi, demanding a fucking update.

“She doesn't look happy,” a low, smooth female voice says.

I don't turn. I know that voice. “MG fucking Rossi. How did you know I'm thinking of murdering you for jerking me around?”

“Says the jerk of all jerks himself?” She sounds amused.

“I'm beginning to think you're very fucking stupid, insulting me.” I pause. “But I'd like to know how the hell you got here moments after my text?”

The Cat laughs softly. “Sorry to disappoint, but I only have a burner phone on me tonight.”

I straighten up at that, nerve endings tingling. “You're doing it here?”

“Maybe. Checking it out, anyway.”

“You didn’t think,” I drop my voice to a snarl because I don’t need to be laconic around this woman, not with what I’m fucking paying her, “to tell me?”

“I thought about it and dismissed it.”

“You,” I say, “keep ignoring my calls.”

The music rolls over us, some jazzed up version of a pop song, and I’ll give fucking Hendrick this, the band is a clever touch. Those in the know are wetting panties and battling erections over who they are; an indie, highly-regarded, classy act that takes even the most insultingly benign bubble gum pop song and turns it slinky and cool. Those who aren’t...they just think it’s nice music that suits an event like this.

I’ll give it to him, but it also makes me hate him more. Hendrick is miserable, boring and thinks he’s better than everyone. Fuckwit.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Jac,” MG says, “I’m not a plaything for you. I’m not at your beck and call. We have calls set up, I keep them. Beyond that? If I don’t want to talk to you, I won’t.”

I know her real name. I know her address. Date of birth, police record or lack of one... On paper. Literally.

There’s a file on my desk at home with all that information, but I haven’t looked. I’m not interested in her beyond getting the job done. All I’ve read on MG Rossi or the Invisible Cat is about her skills. Beyond?

She’s a little too pale and plain for me. And me reading that shit about her history, knowing her name, well...it’s a waste of time. I’ll never think of her again once I have the Heart of Dark Desires in my hands.

No, that info’s there in case she tries to fuck me over.

And if she steals the necklace tonight... Heat rocks me at the thought, the perfection of it.

“How did you get an invite?” I ask as I look out and see Hendrick again.

A thought hits me, that maybe she’s working with him. He’s watching, that same look on his face...and he’s focused on her...

“I have my ways,” she coos.

“Hendrick?” I ask. “He’s interested in you.”

“I’m not an amateur. And the two of you should get a room or something. The way you eye each other.”

Hendrick moves off, Damon, his closest man, saying something to him, and they disappear into the foyer.

“He’s a bastard,” I say. “I’m sure you know the stories.”

“I’m sure I do.” She sighs, and as a waiter comes by with drinks, she takes a champagne and I take one of the bourbons. “Why’s she unhappy?”

“Who?” I ask.

“Your date.”

Oh, her. I look over and the lothario has a hand high up on her ribcage as he tries to cop a feel. The man’s a fucking idiot. I toy with the idea of taking him out one day soon, burying the pieces state by state until I hit California.

I really don’t give any fucks about Nora, but the man’s behavior is loathsome.

Mine too, I suppose, but the difference is I had permission, a verbal agreement to the debasement I handed out. He’s going for an unsolicited snatch and grab.

“She’s just...disappointed,” I say as I lean back against the wall and take a sip of the bourbon.

Small batch, beyond expensive, and I’m betting since there were only a few choices on the tray when the waiter came to us, Hendrick sent it.

“You’re saying the old Jac magic’s more fiction than fact,” she says.

Now I turn to her and go very still.

The woman I met at the trendy bar was pale, boring, a waste of time. Pretty enough in a plain washed-out way... This one is spectacular.

Her mouth’s red, the dress black and showing off a slender, toned figure, one I want to fucking touch. No wonder Hendrick’s interested.

This is the real MG. The confidence has a sultry edge and she’s taking in everything around her. She’s intriguing and hot and I want her under me. I want to fuck her hard so Hendrick sees.

I slide in close to her, and because I’m paying her millions, I place my hand on her stomach, and its flat, fluttery. She goes to move away but I follow.

Great thing about her fucking trying to get away from me is the high slit in her dress exposes her thigh, and I move in front of her, trailing my hand up that bare skin, pushing it up under the material.

Her skin is soft, warm, and buzzes under my touch. “I’ll give you your own personal ride to find out.”

“No thanks.” She slaps at my hand. I don’t move it. “You’re disgusting.”

“And yet you shiver when I touch you. Interesting.”

Her amber eyes meet mine. “Disgust.”

“Arousal.” I smile.

“Disgust.” She gives me the kind of hostile look that turns me on even more. “What did you do to the actress?”

“Nothing she didn’t sign up for.” I lean in, slide my fingers up under her dress some more, and the heat intensifies as I come dangerously close to her cunt. “Besides, I introduced her to a director she’s been wanting to work with and...seems they’re hitting it off. Or were. He’ll rescue her. She bores me.”

“I’m sure she’ll be happy about that.” She grabs my wrist.

I lock eyes with her. “If you don’t want to land in a shallow grave, unhand me.”

“The Jac Miller magic exposed.” But she lets me go. And I don’t think she’s feeling threatened. At all. “Death or sex, that it? If you’ll excuse me—”

“I don’t think so,” I say. Because I’m curious. Sure, I’m getting close to crossing a line here, but this jewel thief is saying no with her mouth, challenging me with her eyes, and crooning yes with her body. “I’m paying you.”

Her hips shift as her legs part a little, and my cock gets hard fast. “I’m not your whore.”

“Where do you hide your tools, little cat?” She has a small bag, they’re going to be in there, but I’m not above taking liberties. “Hmm?”

I trail my fingers over the top of her thighs and encounter bare, sweet cunt flesh. Not panties. I slide a finger down, and she’s gloriously wet.

Her breath's a little fast as I push slowly into her. "Here?"

In and out, in and out, the tight wet heat of her is beyond addictive, I don't know why. It's a cunt I'm touching, fucking with my fingers. Second one tonight. But...I don't think I touched Nora. I fucked her cunt, ass, and mouth with my cock, but it's not the same. This? I could finger MG all fucking night.

She moans even though her hate-filled eyes bore into mine. "You're a real vile bastard, aren't you?"

I move my thumb to stroke her clit, and she shudders a little, giving me another heat-dipped moan.

"You've no idea," I say against her ear as I start to stroke up and down and curl my fingers to rub her G-spot. I keep the pressure on her clit, too. "And I got here before that fuck Hendrick, didn't I?"

Her eyes snap into focus, and she looks at me with pure contempt.

This time, when she grabs my wrist, she means business. She drags my hand from her pussy, and with one slick move, bends one of my fingers back. It's so unexpected, the pain quick, that I step away with a growl. I add it to my mental list of how I'm going to make her pay.

Because this sweet cunt's going to pay. No doubt about it. And pay hard.

"You've got the hard on, but you're touching the wrong person. Maybe you and Hendrick should just sixty-nine, suck the other's cock, and get it out of your systems. Now I've got work to do."

She lets me go and goes to side-step me, but I grab her wrist, grinding the bones. Fury spikes to my core. "Speak to

me like that again, Rossi, and I'll fucking make you wish you were dead. Then I'll put a bullet between your pretty eyes. Get my necklace. Tonight."

With that, I fucking turn and walk away.

FIVE

MAGDALENA



What the hell's wrong with me? Letting a man I don't like or know feel me up like that?

A man who's, for all intents and purposes, my employer.

I can still feel him, that sear of desire, the way his fingers pushed into me, how he knew how to make a woman melt and want to beg for more. He wound me tight and made me want to beg to come in record time.

I can still smell him.

The lavender, spiced honey and leather, all infused with that particular bourbon sweetness and the dark magic of him. That has a scent, too. One that hooks deep.

Fuck.

I weave through the dancing people and try to find a way outside for some air. I don't even know if Hendrick allows people outside this horrible display of wealth.

There's an actual bar set up at the back of the ballroom, and I'm assuming, there's another in the great room across the foyer. I make a beeline for the bar and get myself an old fashioned, downing half of it quickly.

What I fucking need to do is case the place, make my way upstairs and see when I can slip to the third floor. If I can.

Last thing I need is to be caught up in the toxic pissing contest of Hendrick and Jac. If Hendrick saw me talking to him...

Forcing myself to breathe, I take a sip. Talking to someone isn't a crime, and while it felt like I was there forever with him, I think it was only a few minutes.

He wouldn't have seen Jac finger me—Jac at least blocked that from anyone's view.

I want to say how dare he. And yeah, I do. He took deliberate liberties. But that slips up a little in my own head's court of law when I have to admit I liked it. He made me wet. So did Hendrick, but Jac put his hands on me, fingers in me, and I would have come if he'd kept going.

Finding him a horrible person and getting turned on by him are two things that can exist together, and—

“I believe you owe me a dance, Elena.”

I breathe in, close my eyes, letting Hendrick's voice stroke over my edges. And I find a smile and turn. “Do I?”

“Being the host is like being the fucking birthday boy.”

“I think,” I say, as he holds out his hand, “that's your desperation talking.”

Finishing my drink, I hand him the glass, which he immediately passes to a waiter.

“Do they follow you around?” I ask.

This time he grins and it's real. Deadly, dangerous, devastating. There are more D words I could throw in, but those three will do. “Probably. They probably think I'll execute them all if they fuck up.”

His hand's still held out to me.

"Will you?" I ask, eyeing it.

"I'm not sure." The warmth of amusement runs hot through his voice. "But you could plead a case while dancing with me."

That earns a laugh, and I put my hand in his, letting him twirl me into the crowd. I can feel the burn of Jac's gaze, see the narrow-eyed look as I spin past him. I shift my attention from him and up to the darkly handsome features of Hendrick.

He's in a suit, white shirt, white tuxedo vest, white tie, with thin checkers of light gray running through it, and the suit's slightly darker than his wallet. He's insanely hot.

How two men can be so alluring, so dangerous, so different and yet so similar at the same time is beyond me.

By same I mean the ruthlessness. The games. And I'm betting Hendrick is as much of an asshole as his boyfriend, Jac. He just hides it better.

That thought doesn't stop me wanting to lick him again, press my lips to his, taste his skin, breathe in that scent, indulge in his heat and see if he can finger me as well as—or better than—Jac.

Shit.

What the fuck's wrong with me?

"No pleading, huh?" His voice is a deliberate tease. "*Death to All Waitstaff* is your motto?"

"I've got a T-shirt and everything."

His hand is electric as it slides down the bare skin of my back, right down to the borderline of inappropriate, and I

swoon a little as liquid heat bursts to life in my blood and down between my thighs.

Hendrick eases me in close. “A little warm?”

“A little.” I need to get away from both of them and fast, but there’s a part of me that wants this man’s hands on me, maybe moving lower. As if someone else just didn’t cop a feel beneath my skirt.

This dress demands commando in all areas, and I’m beginning to regret it.

“I’ll be your knight.” He offers me a smile as he leads me from the dancefloor and out the door, away from Jac’s glare.

Not that Hendrick actually gives me a choice, his hand on me is a touch too firm and his steps a little too determined. It’s force wrapped in elegance and finesse. So much so that I’m impressed.

Also, he’s taking me closer to where I want to be as he leads me upstairs, past rooms full of people. He opens a door at the far end. It’s a cozy little nook. The blueprint had it, but it’s been turned into a dark wood and velvet and leather reading room with scatter cushions and big chairs carefully curated to complement each other even as they’re mismatched.

On two walls are floor to ceiling bookcases, and there’s a beautiful, worn and gleaming ladder to whizz along on and select a book from the highest level. He waves me into a seat and pours two drinks from a decanter on a side table. He holds up one of the short, rounded glasses.

“Here.” He hands me the glass and leans against the wall opposite, collecting his. Then he crosses one ankle over the other, his elegant and power radiating.

It's almost cultured animalistic prowess, and it makes my stomach twist and swoop with longing. Lust.

He's watching me, nowhere near as overtly as Jac, but it's that same feel. Sure, he's looking at me, but it's deep. Like he's looking for something else. Something specific.

"Thanks," I say. I take a sip. It's smooth, complex—the Japanese whiskey he favors.

He takes a swallow of his and closes his eyes a moment, like it's a brief flash of appreciation.

Hendrick doesn't drink it for the name or pomp. He drinks it because he loves the taste. I like that. And I get the feeling if it was moonshine or twelve dollars a bottle of the crap Harry drinks and he loved it, he'd order it when out.

Or be drinking it here. Appearances be damned.

Though, I can't picture him liking something that wasn't complex. Like he is.

"Tell me something," he says, swirling his drink in the glass as he looks down at it. Then his gaze comes to mine, and it's nothing short of an electric zap. "Elena."

"I'll do my best."

"What's your honest opinion of my gala?"

I stare at him a moment. Then I take a swallow, a small one. "Pompous."

"Fuck, should I even ask about this...fucking place?"

"I like this room," I say.

He smiles again, the rare one that's got no agenda behind it. "Me, too. I think I like five rooms in this overgrown

mansion. But it's the family place. And...pompous is what these things do best."

"Galas or mansions?"

"Both."

My heart squeezes tight. I've met three versions of Hendrick. They're all him, but like a perfectly cut and polished gem, he's got many facets. But this one, the Hendrick who's a little contemplative, who's funny, who's more at ease, is my favorite.

Of course, I don't doubt he wants information. He might not know what, but he wants it.

"If I could stay in here and host remotely, I would."

"Well," I say, giving him a genuine smile of my own, "if you did that, I've got a feeling there'd be a lot of disappointed people."

"I can think of one who'd be ecstatic."

Jac Miller.

I let his comment pass me by.

"Where's your girlfriend?" I can't blush on command, but I can do embarrassed. I pretend to be just that. "I read the papers. I've seen your picture together..."

"Fishing in these waters requires a permit," he says.

"You're a hot guy—"

"Rich, infamous."

"—can't blame a girl for, uh, fishing."

"I'll give that cast a bite." He smiles, and it's still not guarded, but there's a hint of something else.

He can burn with his words, and I like that kind of flame.
If I wasn't planning on robbing him...

"We went our separate ways two weeks ago." Hendrick
takes a sip.

When I met him. When he was waiting for her.

Something in me spins slow.

And I force myself back on track.

He doesn't mention Jac, but I'm starting to believe he saw
us talking. There's no law against it, but if Hendrick is as
tricky as I think he is, his mind must be ticking. This is no
longer just me sliding into the party and hopefully being able
to get to the third-floor office and grabbing the necklace if it's
there.

Hendrick is showing interest in me, and it's like a mixing
of chemicals between him and me. It's hot, fizzing, waiting to
combust with one more drop either way.

He's seen me with Jac—I can't prove it, but there's no way
he missed that—and the chemistry there was unstable, chaotic,
just as this is controlled volatility...controlled by Hendrick.

A man who can do that is examining each and every angle.

I'm an infamous, world-class thief.

I keep my face out of things, and very few clients have
seen me un-costumed.

This is as close to that as I've been.

"Well," I say, "I don't think most women will shed a tear
over that."

He nods, takes a sip. "And you?"

"Your ego's big enough without me adding to that."

He laughs softly, gaze shifting to the door a moment, eyes hardening. But when he looks back at me, they're just like before. Utterly mesmerizing, everything except the heat that pulls there.

I stand. "Should I go?"

"I'm not asking. But to be fair it wasn't my best line." He pauses. "It wasn't a line, though, not really."

"You're asking if I'm getting hot and bothered?"

He smiles slow, reluctant. "We both know the answer to that. Right from the moment we met."

I jerk a little, almost spilling the drink.

"I don't like games," he says, making no move to approach me. "You felt it, too. Downstairs, when you came in, when we first met. The reaction? The pull? Two magnets in each other's fields."

"Wouldn't it work better if one of us was steel and the other a magnet?"

He shakes his head, finishing his drink, setting down the glass, and straightening. "That's boring. Magnets are more fun if it's one magnet attracting, or another magnet repelling. Nothing stronger than those forces, Elena."

My breath is wrapped tight in a knot in my throat. Every pulse point beats hard. I'm being pulled to him, him to me, and he's fucking right. Magnets, each of us.

Hendrick steps in close, his hand brushing liquid heat and desire against my cheek as he cups it.

"You're an intriguing man," I whisper.

His mouth almost brushes mine. “And you’re a conundrum. Walter Vern could never hope to get a woman like you. If he did, somehow, he wouldn’t let you come here alone.”

“I know him, he’s out of town,” I say, “like I said. You can call him.”

This close, he’s brushing against me and there’s a sizable erection forming. Very sizable.

My mouth waters.

“I really don’t care,” he says. And then Hendrick Agnossio kisses me.

It’s combustion. A slow, rolling, inexorable combustion. And it consumes. I sigh, and he takes that parting of my lips as the invitation it is. His tongue slides in and oh, fuck, can he kiss.

He kisses like art, like sex. He kisses with the seductive sway of the perfect diamond, something guaranteed to make me wet.

I kiss him back, all the heat, and magic of the art of the heist. It’s all there. The slide of our tongues is the slide under the radar of an alarm. The heat of his mouth is the heat of making that first real move. And the shift of his body, the melt of mine, the wet and hardness and heat and beat of hearts is the chaotic perfection of my fingers closing on the prize.

Maybe it’s because I think the necklace is here, and maybe it’s because he’s turning me on the way pulling off an almost impossible theft turns me on, but he’s loaded with the thrill and passion and singing illicit moments that’s my lifeblood.

When he lifts his head, it takes me a little too long to focus. To get back into one place.

“The answer is yes.” His words wash over me.

I frown. “What answer?”

“To the question I didn’t ask.”

I slip a hand up on his chest, curling fingertips against the soft material of his shirt. The thump of his heart is erratic and mirroring mine.

“What’s that?” I ask.

He looks past me again, then back at me, and this time he sighs. “That you want me, too.”

I step away from him, and he lets me go, and I realize as I do, I’m still holding the glass.

“More than Jac Miller?” I ask.

There’s no shock in his face, but there’s something else, almost...satisfaction? Disappointment? I don’t know. But now the coldness of reality hits, this goes two ways.

He definitely saw me with Jac. Jac saw me not just dance with Hendrick, but disappear and—

“Is that why you kissed me? Why you keep looking at the door? Your little frenemy Jac?” I pause. “I read the papers and online articles. It’s not a secret. He...he introduced himself to me before we danced. Kept watching you, but—”

“Sir.”

A voice says behind us. It’s male, low, and annoyed.

Hendrick holds my gaze a moment longer before lifting his eyes once more to the door. “This is Damon, Damon, Elena. Damon’s my...right-hand man.”

“And here I thought I was your fucking servant,” the man says behind me.

Hendrick grins. “He’s got attitude problems. Would you prefer I call you out as head of security? Self-appointed bodyguard? Grade A Pain in the Ass? Or just Future Corpse.”

“I’m the only one who’ll put up with you, so we’ll scratch the last one,” says Damon.

This time I turn, nodding a greeting at the man. Hendrick’s head of security. It was a subtle, deliberate drop of information, wrapped in easy banter, but I take it for what it is. A warning.

“Nice to meet you, Damon,” I say. I don’t offer my hand.

The man isn’t dressed like security. He’s got dark chocolate hair, blue eyes, an easy, charming smile, and he’s dressed like a guest. And wears an air of harmlessness that tells me he’s anything but.

“Likewise,” Damon agrees, not offering his, either.

Hendrick’s letting me know there’s the security and then there’s *security*.

Walking up the stairs isn’t a matter of me slipping past the man with the gun on his hip and wire in his ear. It’s me needing to somehow turn invisible.

Hendrick’s got no idea why I’m here. He doesn’t know I’m working for his enemy, or I wouldn’t still be breathing. But he’s letting me know he doesn’t trust me.

The host claps his hands and steps further from me. “I’m sorry, Elena, but if this guy’s hovering near the fucking door like a creep who lives vicariously through voyeurism—”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” says Damon. “Not everyone can have your winning friends and influential people skills.”

“I’m needed elsewhere,” Hendrick says to me, ignoring Damon. “Save another dance.”

With that, they leave.

I stand for a moment, head down. Then I deliberately rub a temple, pour myself some more of his fine whiskey that I don’t want, and I sit again.

It wasn’t just easy banter, it was real banter. They’re close.

Jac’s got a rival for his affections.

I want to laugh, but it isn’t funny. I take a swallow of the whiskey, then set the glass down. Then I open my small bag. I pull out my compact and lipstick, check my makeup and touch up my lips. I look kissed, mussed, half-satiated, desperate for more, and I don’t even know who I want that more from.

Both men pack a punch.

Though, I’d take Hendrick. I like him more, if like is the right word. He doesn’t rub me the wrong way while stroking me exactly right like Jac. He pulls me in. His magnetic field’s off the charts.

Of course, I’m not taking either man. I angle the mirror. There’s no one outside the room, though voices and music float in. There’s another room near the stairs. And there’s one or two powder rooms up here, as well as downstairs.

I need to play this right.

Powers of invisibility aren’t in my skill set, but timing is. And bravado.

I slide the compact and lipstick away and unzip the hidden layer to the bag. The place where I’ll put the necklace if it’s here.

Waiting is the hard part. I know where the bathrooms are up here, I can picture the blueprints in my head. This room is away from the other open rooms, closer to the bathrooms.

I close my eyes and tune in to the sound of clicks of locks, of doors. I tune out the other noise.

When both bathrooms are occupied, I make my move. I pause at the door to the reading room as a small, unassuming painting catches my eye and takes my breath. A Picasso that's worth...I don't even know what it's worth. My fingers itch, but I make myself ignore it and step into the hall.

There, I test both bathroom doors and then head to the room closest to the stairs. It's an easy matter to trip someone coming out, spill my drink.

The security man near the stairs comes forward to help the woman.

I move past them and straight up the stairs, into the darkness and shadows.

There's no time to pause. In my head I'm in need of a bathroom and there are plenty up here, but no one stops me as I take the stairs. I hit the landing and turn the handle of the first door. It's locked. This time I try the door of the study. I half expect it to be locked, but the knob turns.

And I'm in.

Darkness has hues to it, and this is deep midnight blues and blacks. Light spilling in through the window gives a splash of gold, and I know the ensuite's behind me, but I go to the desk and find the lamp, switching it on. Always have an excuse, and I wouldn't be in here looking for a bathroom in the dark, so light. Also, it helps.

The desk makes my knees tremble, and my pussy clench.

It's an Aldon.

Gorgeous, in the Aldon over-the-top way. And it's in amazing condition. The worth of this thing is up there.

And fucking Hendrick uses it like it's any old thing.

There's a computer, a coffee cup, a bottle of Yamazaki 55 and a glass, too. I know he usually drinks Hibiki, but I also know the Yamazaki 55 is worth a fortune. And I do mean fortune. He's...he's just...drinking it.

There are four zeroes after whatever number from four to nine came first on the price tag.

It's fucking hot that he's drinking it.

“Focus...”

I turn. Stop. I expected a search for the safe. It's there, in the wall, uncovered. It's an old-fashioned dial safe, not a keypad, so I set up in seconds. It takes almost no time to hit the sequence, and it's almost orgasmic, the sound of the last pin sliding into place.

I open the door.

There it is—what I'm looking for. Past the ring and earrings that I know are Agnossio heirlooms. It's a plain box that, once opened, glints and gleams with the Heart of Dark Desires.

“Sorry.” I pull out a black cloth from the hidden compartment, wrapping the jewels and dumping them inside. Then I slide them into the bag and zip it. I close and lock the safe.

With a breath, I stand, step out from the desk, and from the other side, I go to turn off the lamp when I hear a creak behind me.

Every nerve ending goes on high alert. A ripple of longing rides every single one.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Hendrick asks.

I give a little scream, pretending to be scared. It’s easy because my heart’s hammering. I whirl to face him. “I was looking for a bathroom. The two downstairs were occupied.”

“And it couldn’t wait?”

“N-No. It’s a big place, bathrooms are usually gonna be on every floor.” I offer a fluttery laugh as he closes the door and leans against it.

His eyes are on me, and they’re implacable. “So you came into my study.”

“The first door I found open. I used the ensuite.” And thank fuck for blueprints because I nod in the right direction. The other door is a closet or a place he keeps files. It’s just marked as part of this room.

“And how do I know you’re not here to rob me blind?”

It’s a moment of truth, and setting the bag on the desk, I step up and turn, holding out my hands. “Nowhere to hide anything.”

He just nods and crosses to me, picking up my bag and weighing it. “Heavy.”

“I know. The beads on that are glass. It looks good, but it’s a pain.”

“You don’t mind?” Hendrick doesn’t wait for an answer, he opens the top of the small round, structured clutch, and digs around, but to his eyes, it’s a lipstick, two compacts, a phone and a small, jeweled penlight that looks like a mascara case.

His gaze meets mine, and now those smoky eyes smolder, and I start to ache.

“Maybe I need to look elsewhere,” he says.

“For what?”

“Whatever it is you stole.” He puts the bag down and comes up to me. “Maybe it’s on you.”

Oh, fuck, it’s hard to breathe, and he hasn’t touched me.

Yet.

He’s going to.

I can read that in his face.

“I-I can’t hide anything in this dress,” I sputter against my better judgment.

“Still going to fucking check.” He skims his hands down over me, light like a lover, and far more devastating than if he’d gone for a hard, cold frisk, or a taunt like Jac.

He brushes against me, and that hard cock is there, and I want it more than I think I’ve wanted any man. Even Jac. I hate him, and I’d wanted him to work that depraved magic and force me to come... Hendrick? I want to eat him alive.

“Sweet fucking Magdalena,” he murmurs as he licks and bites my throat, and then I stop thinking as his fingers shift, dancing over me. When he steps back, the dress hangs open, exposing me.

Dimly, I’m impressed he pulled the kind of pickpocket move on me. He got all the hooks and eyes holding me in from the side fastenings and I didn’t even notice. Me. But I’m more focused on his gaze that burns into me, the way his hand

strokes over his covered cock, and the lust and male appreciation in how he fucks me with his eyes, caresses me.

“Take it off and turn.”

Part of me screams that this is insane. There’s no way I’m getting naked here and now, especially when I’m so close to getting out of here with the prize of a lifetime.

But the other part...that part knows that to be able to leave with the necklace and not be killed, it’s wiser to do as he says. Not fight.

So...I do what he demands. I slide out of my dress and turn, facing away from him.

“That ass is fucking perfect.” He’s there. The heat of his body pressed against me as his fingers start to stroke over me, and he kisses and licks and sucks on my nape, driving me almost insane.

He slides down between my ass cheeks, fingers a little at my ass before slipping down to dip into my pussy.

Hendrick does it slow. A shallow, lazy move, the angle perfect to push his fingertip to hit my G-spot.

I’m breathing hard, and then he comes back up, pushes that finger into my ass and I moan loud.

He stops. “Turn to face me.”

I do.

“I fucking love this blush.” He brushes his hands down my throat to my breasts, tweaking both nipples, and I bite my lip, trying to stay upright. It’s hard because every part of me is clamoring for more, telling me to run. Urging me to beg for him to take me hard.

This is fantasy territory.

My fate is in his hands. He can do what he wants. How he wants.

I'm in his mansion. Caught almost red-handed, and he can be as rough and forceful as he wants.

He can demand me to do what he wants.

I'm in heaven. On a slice of hell.

I want this so bad I'm practically coming from the thought.

His hands slide down my ribcage, to my hips, and then thighs, and I shift, spreading for him.

“By the blush, Magdalena, I think you're hiding something.”

“I'm naked,” I say, voice a little slurred.

He smiles. “There are places. And I think I might have felt something...”

To my shock, he goes to his knees and pushes apart my thighs. Then his tongue is on me.

I come. Just like that. It's an electric buzz of an orgasm that lights me up and makes me desperate for more. A taster of an orgasm.

He doesn't stop. He starts to suck and pull with his mouth at my clit and three fingers push into me.

I grip his hair, my head hitting the wall, and I'm just lost, gone. He's holding me up as he goes to town on my pussy, fingering me in long, hard strokes, ones designed to build the passion, filling an emptiness in me I didn't know I had.

Hendrick bites my clit, and I cry out, his tongue working the sensitive flesh, and I'm pulling hair, pushing him away,

urging him closer. I don't know what I want, except more of the exquisite pleasure that rushes me.

I start to grind into him, and he picks up on what I want and goes at it hard, pushing with his tongue and teeth on the left side of my clit, driving me up into almost too much territory and the buzzing pre-orgasmic pressure rides me.

His fingers hit that sweet spot inside me, and he adds a fourth, hammering away at a measured pace.

It's perfect.

I'm flying.

And then I shatter and convulse and lose it as I come. Wave after wave of pure, unfettered bliss crashes over me.

It's only when I hit the ground that I realize something.

He's called me Magdalena a number of times now.

Hendrick Agnossio knows who I am.

SIX

HENDRICK



She tastes like fucking heaven.

Elena Jones, aka Magdalena Rossi, aka MG Rossi, world-renowned cat burglar and thief, with a special interest in jewels, tastes sublime.

She's utterly delicious.

The Invisible Cat as most of the top ten most wanted lists across the US and Europe call her. Or, let's be honest, him... they think the Cat's a him.

In the underworld circles, she's never referred to as the Cat.

Jac would, to make himself feel like he's different, the fuck.

MG Rossi, if you can find her, is the one to seek out when you need a job so impossible or dangerous or ballsy done no one else will fucking do.

I have vaults in banks. Private ones. I've got the most high-tech security system in my penthouse downtown that pretty much only Damon knows about, and inside that, a high-tech vault room with a low tech, very thick steel safe.

I'm aware I don't need that security. If someone's going to be foolish enough to rob me, they're going to go through, well,

the hot naked woman I just fucking ate out. They also aren't going to be a person fond of living, either.

What's interesting about her is how she operates. Most use crews. A slew of experts in every field. But she works alone. Well, mostly alone.

I'm sure everything is cased, and every angle of attack worked out over months and months of intense fine points of study.

This is...what? Four weeks? I'm going from when I noted I was being fucking watched. And she just waltzed in here. At the gala. Alone.

Shit.

I'm sure she has someone. She must. There's got to be someone to help move the stolen things. And I'm betting someone like Magdalena might just poke around for a better price, too.

Maybe not with a Quinate member. That's certain death.

Then again, she's robbing, has robbed, or wants to rob me—another Quinate member, and I'm pretty fucking sure I know what it is she's after, so who knows? Maybe she's going to fuck us both over.

This is pure Jac. The bombastic nature, the best of the best. The fact she's beautiful.

Jac would hire MG Rossi.

There'd be no one else for him.

The fact she just walked in here? And is fucking drop dead gorgeous with the world's finest, sweetest tasting cunt?

If I didn't fucking hate that piece of shit Jac Miller, I'd buy a hat just so I could take it off to him.

She's gorgeous and perfect and dangerous.

She's also naked in my study where...well, I know what the fuck she was up to, and now I know why she's been following me.

Pity. Because I didn't lie to her about the magnetic pull between us.

I want her with a desperation I haven't felt in years. Maybe never.

To make matters even more complicated, I think I want her more now I've sampled her.

I get up, pull her hair to hold her against the wall, and then I kiss her again.

Last time it was all about the seduction.

This time it's about the claiming.

I kiss her hard and deep, bordering on violent. She moans into my mouth and kisses me back, her tongue seeking mine. It's a fucking glorious battle, a prelude to sex, because I know, then and there, I'm going to have her.

She's magic, her mouth, tongue, her taste. She makes a man want to devour, to beg, to coax her secrets out. She's the heat of passion and the sin of sex and whiskey. She's the sweetness of a woman and her own particular, compelling, taste.

Each kiss makes me want more.

I want to fuck her against the wall, on the floor, from behind. I want to handcuff her and make her worship my cock.

Mark her as mine.

Break her apart.

Claim her soul.

She's pure desire and the kiss devolves down into itself. Tongues, lips, teeth, wet heat, and sighs.

"Fuck," I say, breaking the kiss.

My breath heaves and so does hers. I've got one hand in her hair and the other back between her thighs, and she's rocking on my fingers. I didn't...shit. I didn't even notice my hand wanted another taste of her other heaven.

"Is—Is this your interrogation technique?" The whisper of her voice holds a thick and heavy haze.

Her mouth is not even an inch from mine, her breath warm and sweet. "It depends on the suspect. Whether or not it's you."

She still rocks on my hand, and I know I should pull it free. But don't do a thing. Magdalena feels too fucking amazing.

"What are we going to do now?" she asks.

"Fuck."

She looks at me, still rocking. "You're sure of yourself."

"You're the one getting off on my fucking hand," I say.

"And you," she counters, "are the one that put it there."

I move my mouth to her ear and breathe her scent, the earthy, smoky one that's infused with the fresh spice of ginger and erotic undertones of jasmine and touch of orange blossom.

As heady as the first time I smelled her.

More, because now she's warm, naked, and I know exactly what her skin tastes like. Her pretty fucking pussy with its perfect lips and tight hot hole. I know the taste and feel of her clit in my mouth.

Fuck, oh, fuck I can't stand it, pressed against her, and yet, right now I can't move. So I just breathe her in again, and trace the shape of her ear with my tongue. She's the kind of woman who'll make a man forget just why he stripped her naked in his office.

"But," I say, "You're the one without her clothes on."

I release her and step away, picking up my computer, but it's still off and it's only openable by both my print and a password.

She's not here for information. I toss it onto the armchair and grab the Yamazaki and pour some into my glass from yesterday.

"Want some?"

I expect her to dress, to try and run. I locked the door though the key's still in the lock. But she remains naked as she walks up to me, trailing a hand over the desk with a reverence akin to the way Damon eyes it as she does so.

Her hips sway, thighs glisten, and her cunt's red and swollen from my fingers and mouth. I lift my gaze and her perfect handful tits bounce a little, the areolae a rosebud pink, big like silver dollars, and topped with stiff nipples.

My cock aches.

She takes the glass and then a sip.

I drink from the bottle.

"That's very expensive booze," she says.

“I’m very aware.” I pause. “I bought it. Why were you in here?”

“Like I told you. Looking for the bathroom.”

“I know who you are.”

She waits a beat, like she’s thinking it through, like she’s trying to work out who I think she is. Or, rather, why I think she’s here.

“Seems my abilities are slipping. No one knows who I am.”

I take a deep swallow as her gaze dips to the desk, and her pulse throbs. The same way it does when she looks at me.

“Does my very expensive desk turn you on, Magdalena?”

The blush spreads over her, and I almost drop a nearly eighty-thousand-dollar bottle of whiskey. This is my drinking one. I have another couple in my collection in the cellar.

Dropping this bottle would be worth her blush.

But I take one more swallow and cap the bottle, setting it on the shelf near the window. Then I turn back.

She’s just there, savoring the amber contents of the glass. This is the color of her eyes, this whiskey. The dark amber, the almost priceless quality. Her eyes. That whiskey.

I come up to her.

Take the glass. And then a sip.

“Yes,” she says.

Lifting the glass to her lips, I tip it, and she takes the mouthful and swallows it. I then take a sip and give her one more. “Why are you here?”

“For the children.”

“Noble.”

“I thought so,” she says, stepping in and taking the glass and doing exactly what I did, except reversing the roles.

It’s fucking hot. Inferno level.

“And Jac Miller?”

“I hardly know him.”

“You,” I say, “were talking to him.”

“The clue’s in the word hardly.”

I smile. Take the glass, finish the contents. “I really want to fuck you.”

“I’m not stopping you.”

“It’s not getting you out of trouble if you’re ripping me the fuck off on behalf of Jac Miller. The man’s a piece of shit.”

“I know.”

“And he’s a—” I stop. “You know?”

She slides a hand down over my shirt and vest to my pants where she palms my cock. “I think he’s charming, way too sybaritic—”

“Nice fucking word.” My words scratch the air, and I slide a hand to the back of her neck. “He’s self-indulgent and eager to drown in pleasure and all the luxury he can splash loudly about. He takes no one or anything seriously.”

“Except for you, Hendrick.”

I take a second. “No. He wants me dead. Preferably by his hand. He just can’t do that because of the Quinate laws. So, he settles on hate.”

“He knows he gets to you, and he’s completely and utterly ruthless. He also knows he’s hot and women want him, and he’s also a dangerous, self-centered cold son of a bitch. You’ve a lot in common with him. You’re not sybaritic, but you indulge in your own way. And more importantly, you’re a cold, ruthless, murderous son of a bitch. Deadly and a master of bending rules over playing games. But whatever you might say, you play them.”

I run the glass over her tits as she starts to pull on my cock in the confines of my clothes. “Tell me more, Ms. Thief.”

“That’s low.”

“It’s what you are,” I say, a groan escaping as she unbuckles me, flips the button, and lowers the zipper. This time, as we hit something—the wall—the shock on her face is a mirror of what’s in my blood... Neither of us noticed we’d been moving across the room during this exchange.

“No,” she says as I toss the glass to the rug. That’s priceless, too, and I don’t give a shit about it. What I give a shit about, in this moment, is having her.

All of her.

She’s crack.

She’s opium.

She’s the finest of wines and the most lethal of moonshine.

Candlelight that dances and flickers and rocket fuel lit on fire.

I want to immerse myself in every part of her. Spend hours, days, years trying her. Indulging.

Just because I can.

Because it's going to be so fucking good.

I want to lose myself in her.

Why not? I've already apparently gone and lost my fucking mind.

"No," she says again, "what I am is an artist."

"If you say so."

"I do."

She's sliding her hand over my boxer briefs, jacking me off through the fabric. And she's going at it with long, squeezing strokes, the kind that paint me in fire. "I don't like him."

"You want to fucking talk about Jac fucking Miller right now?" I ask.

"You started it."

Fair enough, I did. "Then fucking stop."

"I don't really think I like you that much, either. More than him, but..."

"I still want to fuck you. And you want to fuck me. Don't you?" I tighten my hand on the back of her neck, the beat of her pulse hard on the edge of my fingers. She's utterly turned on.

"Oh, god, yes." Her hand works me, and she dips in, pulling me out. I shudder. My balls are so tight, I'm tingling. She runs her fingers over the tip, through the beads of precum. "Fuck, you're huge."

"And you're tight."

"Like we're made for this."

I laugh. “Talking?”

“Fucking.”

Her word punches the air from my lungs, and I pull her hand free and bring it to my mouth, biting it. Then I pick her up and lift her. A tidal wave rocks me, and she takes a sharp and ragged breath, one that runs right through me, stroking up my libido.

Her hands come around my neck, and I push her thighs apart and up. She hooks her legs on my shoulders, spreading herself wide, and when I look down, I’m rewarded with a sight that burns deep into me.

She’s imprisoned, her cunt split, red, wet, and it’s for the taking. It’s crude and celestial, and I grab my cock and thrust into her, deep.

We both groan. It’s so fucking tight. So goddamn tight and wet and hot, and my knees buckle a little from the sheer pleasure coursing through me.

She weighs next to nothing in my arms, which makes it easy to start slamming into her. She shrieks, but she pulls at me, makes me come at her harder, faster, and I’ve never felt this in my life. It’s sublime. It’s filthy. It’s all the fires at once.

I pull almost out and thrust into her, sinking into the heat and tightness. And then I do it all over again. Each plunge comes faster and faster and her hips move the little they can, up to me, to get more and we’re soon hammering into the wall. With nothing underneath her, I’m able to go balls deep and hitting her cunt hard with my cock.

Our mouths try to devour each other, and it’s pagan and wild. I can’t get enough.

“More.” She kisses me again, biting my lip. “Harder. Faster. More. Fuck me harder.”

“Dirty whore.” The words come from me on their own. It’s like I want to fuck her every way I can, even with words. The dirtier the better. I want to call her my slut, my cunt, my bitch, but I chant them in my head. For now. “Dirty, filthy little whore.”

I just keep fucking her hard, balls deep, and with each hard thrust, I come out of her a little only to slam back into her.

“Yes!” She drops a hand to my ass and pushes at me. “Whore fucker. Slut fucker. Teach me what I am.”

“My whore!” Oh, Jesus, her fucking *words*.

She moans as I hammer her harder, faster. “Oh, God! Yes! Fuck me! Fuck me!”

Magdalena’s so tight, she squeezes my cock with every thrust, every withdrawal, and I’m finding it impossible to hold on. Everything is alight, burning bright.

With a cry, she says, “I’m coming, oh...fuck! I’m coming!”

And she does. It’s fucking spectacular. She clamps down on my dick as I thrust in, right to the hilt. She spasms, shakes and the contractions of her orgasm are so fucking strong, she pushes me over the edge and I lose it.

My cock spurts hot and deep inside her. I shudder, pushing hard, like I need to climb into her, and every cell of my being vibrates and dances with pleasure.

“Oh, fuck. God. Damn.” I bite down on her throat and suck, earning another spasm from her.

In the aftermath, we're there, gasping, shaking. I'm still buried inside her and her head is on my shoulder, the hammer of her heart a mirror of mine. I take a breath and try and calm. I need to dump her on the ground, order her dressed, call in Damon, and have her ass hauled out of here.

"Sorry for the names," I say instead and pause. Those are *not* the words I had planned.

She laughs. "Do you think I'm a whore? A slut? A cunt? A cum bucket or whatever other nasty thoughts went through your mind?"

I ease her legs down then pull out of her, but I don't move away. She's wobbly, and I'm not sure she can stand on her own. I also don't want to let her go, which is strange to me. She's too soft and warm and smells way too good.

"No. What if I'd said two-bit criminal?"

Magdalena shoves me from her as her eyes narrow. "I'd punch you."

"You could try."

"I'd succeed."

We stare at each other, and I'm aware it's a standoff. A strange battle of wills.

I'm starting to think more and more that she works for Jac. The man isn't exactly subtle. Flaunts dark-haired beauties because they're the ones I seem to be drawn to when I date, or fuck.

I don't think he knows I have a thing for blondes. Mainly because I keep away. And this one...she's got the corn silk color of a natural blonde, the pale shade that shimmers with the light of night and soft late afternoon light.

Her skin's smooth, like milk to use a cliché. But her eyes are riveting. Dark, golden. Deep. The dark brown of her brows would probably match her carpet if she had any. And the rich amber of her eyes and brows with the blonde hair is a stunning combination. She can pull off wild red lips, dark colors.

He might not know my affinity for blondes, but he does know me well enough.

He'd know I'd like someone of her caliber.

Of course, I don't think she was meant to get caught.

Her walking in here was both ballsy and insane.

Still.

She's here.

I catch her chin and push her back into the wall. "Why Jac?"

"You're not going to ask me to compare notes?"

That makes me pause. "There are notes?"

"No."

"But," I whisper into her ear, "you're working for him."

"I've met him. That's all."

"Is it?"

She shifts, fingers wrapping about my semi-hard cock. "Can I go?"

"Not on your fucking life."

"You calling the cops on a woman who's naked in your office is going to be interesting."

I move back then push forward, and she keeps her grip. I'm just slowly fucking myself into her hand. "I don't need to

ever call the cops.”

“So, you’ll just kill me?”

“I might.” I’m thinking about my next move which is pretty fucking hard considering her hand’s on my dick, and I’m thrusting into it, when she drops down to her knees.

She holds my cock in her hand and looks up at me. “Do your worst, but first, let me do my best.”

Magdalena licks my cock, and it’s white heat and pleasure that shoots through me with the contact of her tongue.

Slowly, she licks and kisses and tastes the head, her tongue a world of swirling sensations as her hand works me. And then she starts on the shaft, down and up, and she sucks one of my balls into her mouth which makes me groan, and both balls go tight as my cock jumps.

I slam a hand into the wall and stare down at her. “Oh, holy fuck.”

“Nothing holy about this...”

Magdalena sucks me into her mouth.

I look down and see that her lips are stretched tight and wide over me. She works me down and up, each time going further. It’s a sight I’m going to be beating off to for fucking years.

She starts going at me, tongue sliding when she can, a very slight scrape of teeth that’s got to be deliberate, because it’s not painful, it’s the right level of rough, the right side of intense. She’s so fucking wet. The suction of her mouth is something from the gods.

I slam my other hand into the wall.

“Hands behind your back, Ms. Invisible Cat. Just use your fucking mouth. Suck me down your fucking throat.”

All she does is make a sound that reverberates up along my shaft, and I nearly lose it. She does as she’s told and drops her hands before pushing her head on me more.

She’s divine, and I close my eyes, my body humming and my cock aching with a need that’s tense pleasure and almost pain. I begin to meet her thrust for thrust, going deep and hitting the back of her throat, over and over until she gags. Her reflex makes moves that should be fucking illegal on the head of my dick.

I want to hammer deeper and deeper and just hold it there, have her make me come by her fucking little involuntary moves at the back of her throat.

But I don’t.

I pull out and pull her up by her hair. “I want you to fuck me on my desk.”

“Hendrick...”

My name’s loaded with hushed lust, and I know it’s because of the desk as much as me, but I walk backwards, so fucking stiff I can barely stand it. I want all her holes. Cunt, mouth, ass. And I’m taking them all. But first, I want this more. I want her to fucking ride me on the priceless desk that’s probably making her drip as much as I do.

Fuck, I love a woman with a stylish fetish, and hers for the fine things, is hot. I bet she’d come on the spot if I draped her in stolen jewels.

I shove shit to the floor with one hand. There’s not much on the desk, I keep things clean, but the lamp lands on the

floor, casting light up at the ceiling and there's the thump of books and the mug.

“Get on me, Magdalena and ride my cock.”

“Oh, God...oh, yes...”

She's already shaking as she shoves me on my back, and I haul her up on me. I'm inside her in seconds, and I pull her in for a hard, filthy kiss before I push her up, so she's straddling me and bouncing hard on my cock.

I stretch her wide, her cunt lips pulling down as she goes up, and then she slams down on me. The sight of my shaft splitting her wide and disappearing in her is sublime. “All the fucking way up, Cat, and then all the fucking way down. Give me a show.”

“Your wish, Agnossio.”

She tosses her hair. It's half down now and it ripples. She throws back her head and thrusts out those gorgeous tits for me, and using powerful muscles, rises and falls on me, in measured, hard moves.

And she does it while squeezing my cock.

Heaven and hell are the same fucking place.

I reach up to rub her clit, and she comes hard. Slamming down on me, her body clenching me over and over, and I'm going to come if I don't get out of her right now.

So, as she's coming, I lift her off me.

I get up and push her back down, face first on the table.

Oh, fuck, I can see the spasms of her cunt as I look down at it.

It's total fire. It's art. It's...going to make me come right here if I don't fuck her again. I reach in with two fingers, her body gripping me.

“What—”

“Your ass,” I say, “is mine.”

“Hendrick—” She stops.

I pull out and paint her asshole, using my fingers to tease her open, loosen up the tight band for me. Her legs are spread, pussy drenched, asshole calling to me. I begin to thrust one and then two fingers in there.

As I do, I line up and start to fuck her cunt again. Small shallow fucks to get my cock primed and lubed with our juices.

“Is that a no?” I push in a third finger as I push into her cunt with my cock.

She moans. “I...”

“One word, Cat. One fucking word, and I'll walk.”

“Will you?”

I'm really not sure. She's panting, pushing back onto me. “I haven't decided.”

“You're not going to listen. You're going to do it anyway.” Her voice shakes. “So it doesn't matter what I say. You're going to take my ass anyway.”

Oh, fuck. She wants me to take her. She wants to play tease the corners of non-con. “Say no, sweet Magdalena, and maybe I'll fuck your ass. If you say yes...if you say anything else...”

You, me, handcuffs, I think.

“Then I have no choice.” The pleading note in her voice as she pushes back undoes me. “No. No. No.”

I pull my fingers and cock from her.

“What—”

“Shh... Say no again, slut.”

A shivery moan slides from her. “No.”

And I push my cock into her ass.

“Oh. My. God.” Her words bathe me, and I go in to the hilt.

I don't know what's better. Cunt, mouth, or this.

But I also don't need to choose. The tight stretch of her anus is something else, and I just start to pull out and then I thrust in.

“More.” Her ass rises. I shove it down on the desk, she's at the edge, but I want all the control. I start to pull out, and then I plunge into her.

Soon, I'm slamming into her, balls deep, and she's moaning, trying to get some purchase, trying to move, but I'm not letting her.

“More, you fucker, harder. Oh. Yes!”

I hammer into her, gripping both hips and slamming into her body. The sight of my cock pushing into her ass is almost too much, but we're both grunting and moaning and her words and commands start to unravel until I'm taking her ass so fucking hard it's like I'm nailing her cunt.

She comes deep with a howl, her body rippling over me. I can feel her orgasm from so many places in her, all around me, and I can't help it. I let go and come, too, my cock jerking and

spurting cum deep into her. I slam into her one last time and hold it there. Buried deep inside her.

Then I kiss her back, make my way up to her neck where I bite her nape like an animal laying claim. Dominating.

And she whimpers. Moans. Whispers, “Yes...”

I kiss her there.

Slowly, though, I ease out of her, and take in my handiwork.

She’s a glorious mess, dripping cum from her ass, from her cunt. Her ass is open, slowly closing back up, and I think I’m in love with this fucking image.

Then, I look down at myself. One leg’s out of my trousers and underwear, the other wearing them like a ball and fucking chain. And my cock’s still half hard, wet from her.

I just go and get the Yamazaki and remove the top. “If anything’s deserving of this expensive drop, it’s this moment.”

She’s still lying there, hands on either side of her head. And I take a swallow, then I offer her the bottle.

“Do you know how many of those there are in the world?”

“I’m aware,” I say, holding it out. “I own a few of them. And as I said, worth it.”

“Should I be flattered?” She sits up, then takes the bottle and sips, handing it back.

I take another swallow as she stands. “I would be.”

“Hendrick, I...”

“Do not,” I say, coming up to her and kissing her, sucking her lip into my mouth before biting down hard, “tell me you’re sorry or some other empty word of platitude.”

“Okay.”

“What did he send you here for?”

“I told you. I was looking for the bathroom. And I found one.” She points in the right direction. “I’m not working for anyone. I met him, didn’t like him. And I don’t like you, much, either.”

“You like fucking me.”

“There’s that.”

I want to ask if she likes fucking him, but I’m not asking that. I’m not going there. I pause. “So an infamous thief wanders into my party, into my office, to use the bathroom?”

“Maybe I wanted to steal the Picasso.”

She saw that? Most people don’t even know what the small little painting in the reading room is. Of course, she saw it.

“You don’t have the Picasso, Magdalena.”

“Got anything else worth stealing?”

I just smile at her. “What do you think?”

We just stare at each other, and...fuck. I take another sip and set the bottle down.

I pull on my clothes, and then draw up my underwear and tuck my still half hard dick away. “Do not leave.”

She looks at me, defiant through that dazed, fucked within an inch of her life and loved every moment look that strokes my ego like it’s my cock. “And if I do?”

“I’m Hendrick Agnossio. You don’t think I can find you?”
I pull my trousers up, but don’t bother zipping.

“Not if I don’t want to be found.”

“You underestimate me. I’m nothing like Jac.”

“You’re so wrong,” she mutters.

I narrow my eyes. “I take life and work seriously. And my life is my work. We’re nothing alike.”

“Christ, you’re a beautiful man. Pity you’re heartless.”

I laugh. “You don’t give a fuck about human hearts, Magdalena. They’re worthless to someone like you.”

“There’s the medical black market,” she says.

“Thinking of a career change?” I point at her. “Wait here.”

With that I go to the ensuite, turn on the light and shut the door.

Not one thing in here has been touched or disturbed. I go to the sink and turn on the faucet and lean on the edge of the vanity. I meet my gaze in the mirror.

I don’t look a fucking thing like what my reputation says I am. I don’t look serious, joyless, a man who lives to work and had a humor bypass years ago. And I don’t look like a man who slots pleasure into my schedule or lines up pleasure to do business.

Fucking hell, I look riled, wild, animalistic, a man who’s cracked open and let the things that snap and snarl in the dark out. I look like hot sex is my life. I look like I just fucked someone to the edge of our lives and want more.

I look like she did when I came in here.

Running a hand through the water, I wipe it on my face and through my hair, and then I turn the faucet off, zip up, and buckle my belt.

I told her to stay, but I'm wondering if she's still there or if she's dressed and hightailed it out. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I unlock it and...

Put it away again.

I'm not fucking calling Damon.

Let her run.

I open the door and step into the empty room. The door's slightly cracked.

Magdalena and her dress and bag are gone. I assume she put the hot piece back on, then again...

Laughing, I shake my head. I wouldn't put it past her to walk out fucking buck naked.

But if she did what I think she did, she got all dressed again.

I smile as I take the Yamazaki, then I sit at my desk, pour a drink and put my feet on the table as I lean back in my chair and down the contents.

I don't even bother checking the safe.

Things are going to get very interesting.

SEVEN

MAGDALENA



My body hums as I make my way down the stairs, both sets, until I hit the ground floor, and then I slide into the great room.

It's an orgasmic hum, and a part of me wants to go back up there and... What?

Tempt fate even more?

Shit, I need to work out my exit strategy. I look around.

Jac's feeling his date up on the other side of the room near the window as I saunter up to the bar and call the car I paid for out of expenses. I also order a mezcal old fashioned, a cocktail that soothes parts I know I can't soothe.

Drink in hand, I step back into the corner near the bar, where it's shadowy, so I can think. And, for some reason, I can't take my eyes off the hot and compelling figure of Jac.

I try and muster some sympathy for Nora whatever her name is, but I can't. When I say he's feeling her up, it's borderline arrestable. His hand is in the top of her dress. When he gets tired of that, he moves it. Right on up under her skirt of her gown. Shit, at one point he uses his other hand to yank up that gown, and he flashes her bare pussy where his fingers are pulling open her inner lips.

It's subtle because he's at the edge on the other side, it's brief. You wouldn't see it if you weren't looking.

But he does it.

Because he can.

He's disgusting.

The man isn't penetrating her. He's humiliating her. Three men see him, and three erections appear as he lowers the skirt, covering the hand.

I can tell from his movements, he's putting on a show; it's too exaggerated for him to be penetrating her. That only adds to the humiliation factor. Then he drops her skirt completely, puts his hand back in her top and kisses her neck so he can expose a breast.

Just a few seconds. Then he stops and just touches over the dress, making her suck his fingers that touched her pussy.

Jac Miller is... Something else.

Yeah, I really should feel for her.

He looks bored, she looks half-miserable, half-besotted and it's going to end in tears, but I bet she's fucked him every way to Sunday.

I don't even have to place a bet to know she'd go down on her knees and suck his cock here and now or bend over for him. She wants him that badly. Even with all that misery, she wants him.

For all I know, this is a game they play. She isn't slapping him, and she isn't pushing him away. She keeps sucking on his fingers, keeps trying to touch him, and I think he gets off on this shit.

Usually.

He's definitely not erect. And that's not fake boredom on his devastatingly handsome, pretty-boy face.

I want to judge; I really want to do that. But how?

After what I did with Hendrick?

Oh, hell, I can't believe I did all that upstairs on the third floor, that I got fucked in the ass on the Aldon desk and came on that priceless thing. I can't believe I rode his cock on the desk.

Actually, I can't believe I let him eat me out, or that I sucked that huge cock of his. Or that I let him bang me so hard and fast and brutal in all the best and delicious ways against the wall. He came in me. Hard. Fast. Deep. And then a long slow fuck on the table, and he pushed me off and...

Breathing out, I force myself to stop. My body's starting to roll with waves of need and desire. Of pleasure, memory, and that pull to the man I just stole priceless jewels from. Of the con-non-con game we dabbled in before he rode my ass, something I almost never do.

There's something way too intimate about it, and yet I practically demanded he fuck my ass.

I'd blame the whiskey but the small amounts we had of the Yamazaki weren't enough to get me tipsy, let alone drunk and foolhardy.

The only thing I was drunk on was him. His fine cock. Glorious mouth.

Jesus.

What I need to do is leave.

No. What I need to do is wait a few minutes.

He's still up there and these are unusual circumstances.

Normally, I'd have been out the door or window so fast and quietly that only the most alert of security would have seen me. But he knows I was up to something. Hendrick knows who I am. If he thinks I stole, if he found the missing necklace, then he's going to make a move now.

He'll have security looking, searching the grounds, the entrances, all these rooms.

I'm at the bar in the corner, a good vantage point. If there's a ripple of commotion, even one that shifts beneath the surface, I'd notice.

I'm already marking out the best places to go in here if that happens. I can call and send the car off and hide in the mansion until it all goes down.

Stealing from the coat check sounds great, but it's not ideal. That's all about timing and luck and then I still have to get out the door.

The back kitchens where deliveries come and go could be smart...if I had a uniform.

But hiding, waiting, and then working my magic and dismantling the alarm system after the place is shut down and darkened when this party ends is the best bet.

If the ripples appear, Hendrick will expect me to leave immediately. So I'll wait. Pretend our fluids aren't wet on my thighs. I didn't bring anything like a cloak or coat or even a shrug. It's not much of a distance from the door to the car when it pulls up.

I check my phone.

It's there.

I text the driver I'll be out shortly, and I take a final swallow of my drink. I'm about to set it down when a shadow falls over me and all my nerves spark and jump.

"Did you fucking do it, MG?"

"Fuck off, Jac."

He grabs my wrist, his hand squeezing tight. "You changed your hair."

"You shouldn't be talking to me."

Jac Miller offers me a nasty smirk. His free hand, the tattoos quite beautiful as they show from his snow white shirt, slides up to my throat. He brushes his finger over a tender spot there, then he slips down, between my breasts, and over so he can cup one beneath the fabric.

The brazen move shocks even me, even though I watched him do this to Nora, even as he closes his fingers to grip my breast.

"Nice little tits, MG. Did you do it?"

For a moment my brain goes to sex with Hendrick. But then I realize that's not what he means. He's talking about me stealing jewels no one knew were here in the first place. "This is not the place—"

"You think," he says, shifting in close, that lavender, leather, and honey of him winding about me, "you think I give a fuck about where we are? You think I give a fuck about Hendrick Agnossio and his boring and staid fucking ways? The guy's worthless. Probably can't fuck his way out of anything."

"And you?" I ask.

“What do you think?”

“I think...” I’m almost positive he’s up there with Hendrick in his skills between the sheets, that the confidence isn’t just ego, it comes from truth. That doesn’t change the fact he’s an asshole and I don’t like him, but he’s not delusional that way.

He’s far more dangerous than a man with a small dick and bad performance complex. Worse than a man who has no idea how to please a woman.

“I think,” I say again, “that you’re the kind of man who’ll maul a girl in public because he can because he’s a sadistic SOB with issues.”

“Really?”

I lift my face to him and bring my free hand in, sliding it over his cock. “Really.”

Oh, Lord, he’s huge, too. And he’s also got an action-packed hard on forming.

If I’m doing comparisons, he might be a fraction smaller in girth, but a fraction longer. It’s really hard to tell at this stage, but there’s a nice curve to him that I can see hitting certain things just right.

Or wrong.

Depending on his mood.

And if he’s that fraction longer, slamming home hard and deep’s gonna feel both bad and oh so good.

It really doesn’t matter.

They both have spectacular cocks. And at full erection, I’ve a feeling those miniscule differences won’t matter.

And...oh fuck, is he pierced?

“Like what you feel, MG?”

I squeeze hard, to hurt, and say, “It’s not a matter of what I like about you, which isn’t much at all, but a matter of whether you want to keep this thing or not. If not, keep on groping me. If you do, I suggest you take your fucking hand off my breast. Now.”

“You like it.” He shifts his hand down so his fingers are on my stiff nipple. He plucks at it, making me moan. “And do I look like a man who gives a fuck if you like me or not? But I know you like it rough, and dangerous. You’re all turned on.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him he’s not the one who has me hot and bothered, but the horrible truth is, in this moment, he’s right. His hand on me, his roughness, his complete disregard for me or my pleasure or pain is such a turn on that the now extra wetness slicking my thighs is pure Jac Miller related.

So I fucking give his cock a twist.

He sucks in a hard and sharp breath. Then he pushes into me. Not much—we’re in a room full of people, but we’re also in the corner and the shadows and he somehow knows I like what he’s doing, even as I hate it.

This man will hurt. This man can give great pleasure. And he *will* take without asking, and it won’t be a game.

He’ll get everything to the point where the game isn’t there, where the woman will do what he wants, and he’ll take it all if he’s inclined, leaving her begging for more.

Probably hating herself for it, too.

That was there in the eyes of the gorgeous young thing he has with him tonight.

“Moves like that, MG, are called challenges. I don’t ignore challenges.” He comes in close to my ear and bites the lobe. Hard. “Remember that.”

He lets me go but doesn’t move.

“Can you get the fuck out of my way?” I ask.

“I want what you took.”

I consider him and almost laugh. “You have that much confidence in me? I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be. I’m paying you millions. I expect results.”

I lift my hand, wrap my fingers about his tie, and pull him in against me. “You’re a fucking asshole.”

“And you play with fires you don’t understand. I want what’s mine. I want the jewels.”

My heart’s beating too hard, pulse racing hot and fast, and my mouth waters as I gaze up at him, that dark blond curling hair calling for me to touch it, the sensuous lips begging for me to taste them.

And he knows it.

The fucker knows it.

He plays with it like he’s playing a reckless game of chess or maybe xiangqi. Not shogi, the Japanese version. There’s something very Hendrick about shogi.

But strategy games...yeah, they’re both masters at strategy. Jac plays fast and loose. And he’s looking moves ahead of me right now, seeing where he can place the next

piece, to make his move, strike a win. Right now, he's using sex and that appeal to play me.

The self-satisfied little grin says it all. The sweep of his green gaze. The hunger of the lazy lion who's eaten but will eat again because he can. Because he enjoys a little bloodshed and taunt with his meal.

"If I had them, do you really think handing them to you here and now is a smart thing?" I ask.

"I'm game if you are." He plucks my nipple again, twists it, then pulls his hand free, bringing it to rest on my hip.

Shaking my head, I laugh, and I release his tie. "Then you're actually stupid. Get the fuck out of my way, and I'll be in touch."

Jac's fingers dig in as the muted noise of the party washes over us, and he moves again, sliding a thigh between mine. "I should finger fuck you within an inch of your life, but...I don't think so."

"Let. Me. Go."

His eyes narrow. "You're my little whore on my payroll. If I want to sample your wares, I will. And I don't think you're going to stop me."

"Your money doesn't have a sexual harassment or rape clause."

Jac's mouth curves up into a smile, but those green eyes are hard, glittering, hot and murderous. "I'm not doing anything you don't want."

"And how does your date feel?"

"Like she wants to ride the Jac joystick over and over again." His gaze drops to my mouth. "I'm not letting her."

She'll end up with the director for a while. After my bodyguard has her for the weekend."

My stomach drops. I'm not even sure where to start with all that.

"Don't worry, MG. She prefers a ride on me, but she likes the monster my bodyguard packs."

"Did..." I stare at him. "Did you just refer to your dick as a joystick?"

"I didn't come up with that, but I liked it, so..." He shrugs. "Nora knows what she's getting into this weekend. I told her what would happen if she got on the plane. She got on the plane."

"You're a real upstanding guy."

"I'm the monster, that it? Who's the upstanding one? Fucking *Hendrick*?" He laughs and I shiver. "Hendrick fucking Agnossio hides behind his money, mansion and guards and staid life. I'm sure he'll give a good three pumps, missionary style, and call it a day. Also, he killed my father, took my fucking family heirloom, and wants me dead."

"You want him dead."

"Never said I didn't, but that dickwad wants me dead, too. Make no mistake." He leans in, mouth on my ear, and I shiver again, this time with longing and desire I don't want. "Make no mistake I'll fucking finish you if you even think of fucking me over. Do you need a time limit on this?"

I grit my teeth. "No."

"Then—"

"When I have it, I'll be in touch. Now get the fuck out of the way."

He tilts his head but makes no move to step aside. “Or what? You’ll return my money?”

I’ve no intentions of that. “Or nothing. Move.”

This time, I don’t wait. I push past him and cross the great room, walking across the foyer and out the front door to the car.

Fuck.

What have I gotten myself into?



I don’t start shaking until I’ve switched cars and headed home to shower and change.

Every moment of that drive pulled those tendrils of tension so tight, it’s a wonder I didn’t shatter.

Once I’m done showering, I choose my clothes carefully.

This is done best in something loose, with places to hold all my tools. But rocking on up to a mansion of a mafia crime lord, a member of the Quinate, well, it’s going to take something slightly left of field.

I’m going to see Jac.

He’ll have security. But he’s not going to be as meticulous as Hendrick. Jac’ll have the biggest and best with him. He likes a show.

But beneath it all, he’ll have guards and a decent security system. He’s a man who doesn’t have to worry about someone rocking up. After all, most don’t have death wishes, and if they do, they don’t have one for their friends and families.

Quinate members aren’t known for threats.

They're not even known for promises.

They're known to keep their word. Cross them and die. That kind of word. Those who've tested that learned the hard way.

I've read all the fucking stories.

It'll be easy to get in. But it's not like it won't come with its own challenges.

I choose black stockings, underwear this time. And a dress that has flow, but not too much. It's evening, cat burglar-style. Long sleeves, fitted bodice. Last, I pin up my hair, fit a long sleek black wig and apply the red lipstick, and dump the Heart of Dark Desires into my glittery black bag that I can sling on as a makeshift backpack.

It's got everything I need.

Finally, I slide into black pumps I can move in.

I look exactly like the kind of woman he'd have coming up to his front door.

With a breath, I head out.



People never think about the back door when it comes to places like this.

Jac Miller doesn't live at the old Miller family mansion deep in the richest part of the suburbs, on the opposite side to Hendrick's place.

Five suburbs. All with a mansion that houses a Quinate member.

It's all so pissing contest machismo that I almost roll my eyes. Almost.

Because their pissing contest is one where people end up dead, enterprises decimated across not only Delacroix, but the country.

The city island is different. It's where the heart beats. Where they meet. And no one owns it. Or rather, they all do, however it's split. They own it. And other criminals who operate here do it within the laws set by the Quinate.

Not people like me. Because I've never had a need to steal from a Quinate member, or work for one.

Until now.

Jac's property is on the highest part of Millionaire's Way, named back in the previous turn of the century when a millionaire was beyond rich. Now it's populated by billionaires, rich kids, the young, the old, the beautiful. His three-story mansion is modern and surrounded not just by a stone wall, but properties of fellow billionaires on three sides.

No one goes in through the back.

In the burbs, he'd own all the block and call it his. Rather, he owns the block there and calls it his. But city is city and land is premium. So the mansion's huge, the grounds small in comparison.

Big oaks and other curated trees and garden-scapes take up a lot of the space. There's a giant courtyard with lights built into the ground and a state-of-the-art outdoor kitchen.

I move past all that and up at the back door. The alarm system's not difficult to spot and it takes me five minutes to dismantle all four alarms, including the hidden one.

That's the thing with a man like Jac.

Ostentatious means on display, like a taunt. He just succeeded in making my job easier.

Of course I'm not here to rob him.

The mansion is over the top and modern from the gleaming white and black edged kitchen. The tile work and marble perfect. The giant twelve-foot-long island has a special sink that slants to a hidden drain, and a push of a button raises up the taps and faucet.

Two dishwashers, a huge fridge. The kind of eight burner induction stove that foodies would drool over.

But I'm not there for an Architect Digest photo shoot, either. I move through the room and peek into the dining room that's like an atrium. Modern furniture, almost Zen-like.

I'm betting he spends almost zero time in here. There are other rooms but they're not what I'm interested in; there'll be a second kitchen for staff if he has a party, as well as a walk-in freezer, a massive pantry and a China closet.

Although what the fuck a man like Jac would want with the last is beyond me. But I assume it came with the place. I've seen the blueprints, so I know the layout.

I step out into the foyer in gray natural stone. Opulent, yes, but tasteful. Not what I'd think of Jac.

To me, he's more golds and marble. Or mosaics.

There's a sitting room with gray furnishings that are sleek, modern but not over the top. I continue, and then I head upstairs.

Every room's a surprise. I expected gaudy. A portrait of him, or his cock. Expensive and tacky modern art. But what I

get is modern art. Expensive but minimal.

Everything chosen with care. I want to dismiss it all as his interior decorator because he'll have had one, but there's nothing generic about it. The pieces are personal, the way art should be. Like the Picasso.

I know that one's personal and has meaning because of where Hendrick keeps it.

I push open the door on the top floor and stop.

Jac Miller's bedroom.

I swallow because there's something very unexpected about it.

There's an Alaskan king bed, the covers neutral grays, greens, and cream. Not even a silk or satin sheet in sight.

It's French linen. As in linen, the material. I can recognize it. I grew up poor, fighting to survive, but I know quality, and as I slide my fingers over the sheets, they're made with impeccable craftsmanship. And I bet it's organic and has a zero-carbon footprint.

I'm shocked he doesn't have the pedigree of his bedding framed.

Moving along, I trace the top of the bedding. What does Hendrick have? He's the one who strikes me as having a bed in linen. Soft, worn, beautiful. Maybe they're two sides of a disturbing coin.

He's got a giant ensuite, two walk-in closets either side of that to the right, and at the floor to ceiling window opposite on the left is a sofa, two chairs, and a coffee table with a computer, and some books.

Far on the other side of the bed, at the foot, is a second floor to ceiling window that opens to a huge balcony.

The more I look, the more my head spins.

This is not what I expected.

At all.

It's over the top, yes. But it's also understated.

I want to know *this* man.

“What the fuck, Lena?” I mutter, turning off this particular light and going down to the drawing room on the bottom floor.

I stay there for a minute, before I decide it's too deep in the house and take a bottle of bourbon and a glass from the great room and then I go to the kitchen and set my bag down, take off my wig, go to the fridge and peruse the contents. He's got handcrafted lemonade in a bottle and also ginger ale. I take those and open them to make a cocktail, then sit at the counter and wait.

I'm on my second drink in two hours when the front door opens and voices come in. Nora, a low rumble that's probably the bodyguard with the monster cock—though how Jac knows...actually, I don't want to know how he knows—then there is the caramel butter of Jac.

And my body buzzes.

Hendrick and Jac. They both set something off in me. Something no one else has ever done. Not to this degree. Not where my head gives over to the urges in me. Stupid, dangerous urges. Ones that only care about pleasure and nothing else.

Christ...

Jac's voice drops, snaps out words, and then Nora cries out, "But, Jac, I wanted—"

He responds. I don't hear his words. but the sentiment is clear.

Jac doesn't give a fuck what she wants or doesn't want.

And I remember he's an asshole all over again.

The door shuts.

I don't hear him approach, but I know when he appears.

Every nerve ending knows.

"MG Rossi. I don't remember inviting your ass here."

"You need a better alarm system. How was the rest of the party?"

"I'm not in the fucking mood to play," he says. "I assume you have my goods?"

I never looked at them at home or here, no matter the latent itch I ignored.

Because I suspect if I had, I wouldn't be here now.

I look at him. "I should put up the price."

"You should shut that mouth."

I get up out of the seat and finish my drink, setting the glass down with a clink. "Stealing from one Quinate for another? That's got to be worth more."

"You should have thought of that before your pitiful attempt at negotiating."

"Hendrick is dangerous."

"Maybe. To you. Then again..." His gaze slides over my dress and he steps up, lifting the skirt up to my panties, then he

drops it and looks at my throat. “Maybe you like it that way.”

I narrow my eyes, reach for the bottle, and pour the liquor in straight. “Touch me again and I’ll break your bones.”

“You can try.”

“I don’t have family for you to destroy,” I say. “You don’t scare me.”

He raises a brow. “I should. You have friends, though. Because you didn’t mention them. Do you have the fucking necklace or do you want me to fuck you?”

“You’re not fucking me.”

He steps away. “So you’ve got the goods. Come with me.”

Jac doesn’t look back as we go up to his study. I half expect him to sit like some kind of hot Bond villain behind the desk, but he flops down on the sofa, and I sit on the chair opposite and cross my legs.

His eyes are hot and hungry on the line of my thigh as I dig into the secret compartment of this new bag. My stomach flips and flutters, and honestly, I don’t know if it’s him or the jewels I pull out, still wrapped, that have me all turned on, or both.

“No box?”

“Nope.” I hold them out. “Did the bag I had look like it could fit a box in it?”

“I don’t give a fuck about your bag.” Sitting up, Jac takes the black velvet pouch and opens it, tipping the necklace into his hand.

It’s done with almost reverence, something that I find hard to reconcile with Jac.

He studies them, silently, for a long time.

Then his fingers shut tight about the Heart of Dark Desires.

Our gazes meet. “Are you playing some kind of fucked up game with me, MG?”

“No. That’s what he had. I took it. The box was just a box, not anything special, and—”

“This is *not* the Heart of Fucking Dark Desires.”

I stare at him, chest suddenly tight. “I haven’t had it evaluated, clearly, but it was—”

“This,” Jac says, pushing the necklace closer to my face, “is a fake.”

EIGHT

JAC



Fury moves hot and wild through my veins.

After all this time, all this pain and hate and anger. After all this fucking money I don't give a flying shit about, I'm handed a fake.

A fucking fake.

I don't need an evaluation. Or a loupe to see the little claw holding one of the gems, a claw that should be long, is perfect like the others.

I don't need anything to show me the clasp on it isn't one that's difficult to operate. That the stones don't have the right heat and depths and glow.

And this woman... This fucking cat burglar, MG Rossi, should be able to tell the difference between a fake and the real deal.

Even a good one.

She's talking.

The soft silk of her voice washes over me, and I really don't care that the burn of the timber of her voice that likes to whisper filth to my subconscious when she talks is there. I can't even process the words.

They don't matter.

What matters is she got me a fake.

Oh, I don't expect her to know all the tiny things I know about this necklace. The things no one else alive knows... except maybe Hendrick who's had it...but I expect her to know enough about this infamous, storied piece to be able to tell.

Someone of her caliber?

She should be able to tell a perfect replica from the real deal.

This ain't that. Not even close.

A dark thought hooks into me.

Fuck. The bruises on her throat, the dazed look to her when I saw her in the great room tonight before she left.

Hendrick's interest in her.

The way they sparked when they danced.

I figured he'd been slobbering on her throat, which is why I shoved my fingers in her before him. He's probably dying to stuff his tiny dick in her cunt, but I know it'd be a disappointing encounter for her.

Then another, less appealing thought comes to me.

I stand. Cross to her. And she falls silent.

With the fake in my hand, I lean down, grab her throat tight, and I squeeze. I've let her touch me. I've let her do a whole lot of things to me because it amused me.

Right now, I'm not amused. Right now, I want blood.

I grip tighter, pleased when she makes a sound.

What if she's been Hendrick's puppet the whole time? Playing me for a fool?

I narrow my eyes and half lift her from the seat so we're very close. There's fear in her eyes, genuine fear, and it turns me the fuck on.

"I know you're fucking him. How long have you been working for him?"

She starts to fight, scrabbling at my hand holding her, and I like how her face turns red as she struggles to breathe. It's more fear than not being able to breathe. I know exactly how to strangle someone. I know just how much pressure to make them think they're going to die and I know how to cut off the air. She can breathe. A little.

But she's too busy trying to fight me, hitting, flailing, and I lift her higher.

I've let her get away with a lot.

Not anymore.

I'm bigger, stronger, meaner than her. And I'll end her if she's fucked me over. End her slowly and with pleasure.

"Are you trying to claim you're not? That you're innocent? Trying to extort more money from me? Lure me with your little tits and tight cunt?" I say, "You're a fucking thief. Innocence isn't in your DNA. You're not getting another dime from me, and guess what? I've got a Hollywood actress panting for me. And that slut's got a body to fucking die for. Did you see those tits?"

I pause, reach up, and rip the front of her dress down.

Her tits are sweet handfuls, and they're gorgeous, but so are Nora's and I'm not here to compliment this woman. I'm

here to degrade her.

“Best of all, Nora will let me do anything I want to her. Debase her, pass her around, make her eat my cum from her cunt.”

I wait for a sound of disgust, of outrage, but there’s only contempt in her face.

It pushes me harder.

“She did that, you know, on the ride to the party. Then I fucked her face.” I move to her throat and bite hard, right where that fuck Hendrick did. “And if I asked, she’d come in now and eat you out while I fuck her ass.”

For a moment, I consider it. I don’t think either of these women are into girl on girl, but fuck, I’d make it happen.

I force my anger back down the right path. I pull her up to her feet and spin her until she hits my desk.

Our gazes meet and the air bursts into life around us, full of spark, of heat and tension.

MG tries to fight, but she’s not strong enough and I’m positioned between her thighs so she can’t kick. I use my free hand to sweep hers behind her. I smile. “You can’t get free.”

I ease up on the pressure on her neck, and she takes a gulp of air, her eyes glittering with hate and contempt that laser through the lust.

The dynamic is something that turns me the fuck on, even as anger beats in my veins.

“You’re—You’re a really fine fucking catch, aren’t you, Jac?” she gasps.

“I bet you’re soaked at the thought of me doing that to you.”

She struggles against my hand that holds hers. “Pretty never hides the ugly, and you’ve got ugly down in your soul. It’s something that shines through.”

Her words slice into me, though, slice deep in a way I don’t expect.

This woman has no idea who I am. No one does. And her thinking she understands me at my core pisses me the fuck off.

“And you want to ride that ugly, don’t you?” I ask.

“Let me go.”

I put my face close to hers. “So you can run back to Hendrick? Repor how you got one over Jac Miller?”

“If I’m not reporting to you, I’m not reporting to him. Get over yourself, you fuck.” She struggles again, but I tighten my hold. “There’s one person paying me and that’s you.”

“It’s a favor for that dickhole then? Gratis? How long? How long have you been playing me?” I give her a shake and her eyes spit fire.

“If you think I’m playing you, then why the actual fuck would I be here, Jac?” MG asks. “With, according to you, a fake?”

“To gloat.”

She struggles again. She’s breathing hard now, those sweet fucking tits rising and falling, nipples tight and begging for a man’s mouth.

My mouth.

A fresh bruise mars her skin right above her right fat, soft pink areola, and another wave of answer crashes over me.

Fucking asshole Hendrick. I hate that he got a taste of her first.

“You’re a smart man, Jac. At least I thought you were. Let’s just say I’m working for him, betraying you as you put it. Why would it be me here instead of him?”

I know why. If he came here and something happened, like I ended up dead—as if he’d be able to pull that shit off—or attacked me, he’d lose his seat at the Quinate table. He needs me to lose my shit and attack him.

Just like I need that from him.

Or at least, since I’m not sure I can pull off him going off the rails, destroy him in other ways. Like take all the women he wants. Like play the game and hire someone like MG Rossi to steal the necklace that means as much to him as it does to me. Only difference there is; the Heart of Dark Desires is rightfully mine.

“Well?” she asks.

“Who the fuck knows? He’s waiting for me to storm his castle?”

“Think about it. If I was going to fuck with you, I’d have built your hopes up over tonight,” she says. “I’d have gone in earlier. Whatever I was going to do, I’d do it with you knowing my every step, setting you up and planting the necklace and then quietly calling the authorities.”

“I own the authorities.”

“Maybe,” she says, trying to throw me off her, “but some things are too big and even those in your pockets will take a

free gift. Point is, if I was working with Agnossio, then here is the last place I'd be."

It's a pretty story and it's one with a ring of truth to it, but I still don't trust her, and I certainly don't trust him.

I bring her in close, mouths almost touching.

I could squeeze the life out of her. Cut her into pieces and send the choice ones to Hendrick, each with a piece of his fake necklace.

Disgusted, I shove, and let her go.

"You know what? It's been a long day and I need to wash the stink of Agnossio from me. Don't fucking leave."

"Or what?" she asks.

"I'll find you and kill you."



MG might go. Part of me wouldn't blame her as I strip down and shower.

But even if she does, this isn't over.

I don't believe her. Fooling around with my enemy is beyond stupid. I'd say maybe she couldn't help herself. He's rich, good looking...

So am I.

And women flock to me.

This isn't ego. It's fact. Cold and hard. I know what I have, and I know how to use it. I could keep passing around Nora, have her gangbanged for my pleasure. Find her another monster cock and have that man and Carlos absolutely ruin her

for anyone else, and I know she'd look at me with longing. I know she'd be wanting me.

Because when I finally made her come, she fucking sobbed. She shook and her eyes rolled back and she gushed. I made her come so hard she says she saw the heavens.

It's a line, but the thing is, she meant it. I'm capable of giving sublime pleasure, and also leading the woman up to the edge of the line and withholding it.

Nora would follow me anywhere for another taste of that bliss.

I'm a fucking asshole. I know that. But I didn't make her come here. I told her how things would go down, including playing with her, flashing her in public. She said yes.

She turned up.

When it came to the introduction to the director? She knew that was separate. If she didn't get on that plane, I'd still have done it. I'm not a total cretin. Mostly.

I breathe out and dry off, pushing my hand through damp hair.

Nora isn't the problem.

MG is.

This situation is.

Me wanting MG is. Fuck...how someone can go from that washed out bland thing I met that turned out to have teeth at the end of our first meeting, something that intrigued; to this. A hot bombshell that comes with her own brand of napalm and razor wire.

What's not to be fucking turned on by?

Maybe she didn't tell him or even work for him. Maybe she just liked him, and she got into wherever he had the jewels with a little strategic seduction. Or...I don't fucking know.

I've waited so long to get this. The fucking Agnossio family took everything from me. Everything. And mark my words, if that cunt's mama still breathed, I'd fuck her and kill her. Just like his father did to my sister.

Closing my eyes, I lean on the edge of the vanity in my bathroom.

Lili... Fucking Christ was she a handful. A gorgeous, vivacious handful and perfect pickings for a predatory bastard like Agnossio Senior.

He didn't rape her once. There was the time she went to the party at the Agnossio mansion—I'd been busy and didn't much care for them or the way her eyes shone when she looked at Hendrick.

But I'd been home when she came in, early hours, dress ripped, panties in her hand—she didn't let me see them, but I'm not a fucking fool, just like I knew what the marks on her thighs were from.

She was crying. Mouth bruised and not from being punched or hit.

Someone had had her.

Lili was fucking fifteen.

At first, I thought it was Hendrick, but he and Lili denied it. He pointed out she was jailbait and that wasn't his thing. And his girl at the time was smoking, so I believed him. And Lili? She denied everything, said she had a fight with her boyfriend.

It was around then a lot more business meetings happened, all when Lili seemed to be around and Senior didn't ogle her in front of my father, just when he thought he was alone.

I saw it. I loved my sister. I hated him.

His father raped her again and killed her on her twenty-first birthday. I saw that happen. Couldn't stop it until it was too late, so I fucking killed him. Gleefully. And then Hendrick killed my father for revenge.

The pathetic fuck denies that.

And for ten years now we've been at an impasse.

If I can't kill the piece of shit, then I'll destroy everything precious to him.

That necklace isn't his, but it's important to him. The history of it. How the ownership changed between families over the decades. But it's been ours—mine—fair and square. Or should be.

When it went missing a quarter century ago, the rift between the Millers and Agnossios formed, one too large and filled with blood and treachery to mend.

He has the necklace.

I always knew it. And the fake in a weird way is proof. A taunt.

Pulling on black silk pajama bottoms, I like to lounge about in, I pull on the matching robe, and staring at my rings, I turn the thick silver pinky ring on my left hand, the one with the emeralds.

My last gift from Lili.

It focuses me. For her, I'll fucking wipe the planet free of Agnossio vermin.

And anyone stupid enough to side with them.

Including MG Rossi.



“Took your damn time,” she says when I stroll back into the study.

I stop.

“You didn’t leave.”

“Clearly.” She sits in the middle of the foot of my bed. In one of her hands is the fake. She turns it, the stones and precious metals sliding against one another, and in my head, a clock ticks. I can fucking hear it. “We weren’t done.”

“Or,” I say, going to my walk-in closet. On the shelf right near the door are casual T-shirts, and I slip my hand beneath the neat pile on the sixth shelf and pull out my gun. I turn and stand in front of her and flick off the safety, “you were too scared to.”

MG raises a brow, and she really is beautiful. Now there aren’t layers of fake persona in the way, it’s the kind of beauty that calls to something in me. The deadliness, the intelligence, the wit and just plain old bravery that give her looks a vibrant edge.

She’s not soft. She’s not good.

She’s fascinating.

I’m not sure I’ve ever met anyone like her, and my cock stirs.

But I'm not here for a first fucking date.

I point the gun at her.

She lifts her chin. "I'm not afraid of you. So put that dick substitute away. I stayed because, as I said, we're not fucking finished."

"Do you know what happens if I kill you?"

MG sighs. "No one will ever find a trace of me, unless, of course, you want them to."

She dumps the necklace and gets up, not showing even an ounce of fear.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

"Either to an unmarked grave or home. You don't seem to be in the mood to talk." She starts for the door. "I'll refund your money, minus expenses I've spent."

"You've got some sizable ovaries," I say. "Sit the fuck down."

MG stops, takes a beat, then turns. Her gaze drops to my chest, to the tattoos, and she lets out a soft sigh tinged with a moan. "Why are the pretty ones so fucking tiresome?"

"I could ask you the same fucking thing."

"Save it. You're hot, and you know it, Jac. But hot isn't why I'm here."

I nod. "And why are you here?"

It's a good question. A great one. Something's off, almost like I can't quite keep my balance as the floor shifts and moves, like I'm on a boat. There's something that doesn't make sense.

Hendrick wants revenge for his father's death, and probably for me being the better man. He dates bland. I fuck hot. I take risks and I don't hide behind a veneer of old wealth and power. I have it, I'm aware, but I also ride my own wave.

He wants revenge, so why use my hire and send her here?

That's when I look at the hot little cunt on legs in front of me. I know it's beyond fine, that cunt. Just fingering it made me want to dive into the honeyed depths with abandon.

Maybe Hendrick discovered that, too, when he took his share of her. And maybe they're—

I stop.

He looked at MG tonight like he wanted her. I don't think I've seen him look at anyone like that. Except maybe Lili at a party before her twenty-first birthday. Which is why, if I hadn't seen his father rape my sister, I'd have blamed him.

The marks on her, how she looked when she came into the great room, her hair newly-fixed, the haze and...

She fucked him there.

At the party.

And now she's here with fake fucking jewels. I stalk up to her and trace the muzzle of the gun from her tits to her cunt. "Is he that good?"

"Who?"

I grin nastily. "Hendrick. Is he that fucking good a lay you'll turn? Betray me?"

"I wasn't aware sex meant betrayal."

Her words sting, send anger surging. "He turned you by sticking that dick in you? That it?"

She lifts her head. “It’s a fine dick.”

I’ve never wanted to hit a woman before. And right now, I’m close.

Instead, I toss the gun and pull her top down, trapping her arms, exposing her all over again.

“Maybe all it takes is a good fuck to get you to do your job, MG. After all, he fucked you so you wouldn’t, I’ll fuck you so you will.”

“Go to hell.”

“Sorry, MG, already there.”

I pull her to me and shove my hand up between her thighs, pushing her panties to the side. Oh, fuck, is she wet. I shove three fingers in her and start to roughly bang her. Then, I grab her hair, pulling her head back.

Our lips touch and something happens. I want to take her hard in all the ways, but instead, I kiss her slow, coaxing her into me, even as I fuck her cunt. She moans, following my mouth, the kisses soft and sweet and dipped in seduction. The first taste’s a revelation. Her scent, citrus, spice, and something dark comes at me, something I revel in. Her mouth is sweet and hot, her lips soft. Tongue talented and the kiss draws itself out until I’m aching.

I push her back and pull my hand free. I don’t want soft or romantic. I want to take her hard. Make her come, make her mine, wipe every memory of Agnossio from her.

I start pulling at her clothes. She helps and soon we’re both shaking, her dress on the floor, panties off as she’s grabbing and shoving at my robe and PJ bottoms.

“Leave the heels and stockings,” I say.

I don't think I've been this erect. I'm not vanilla in any way, but right now, I only care about her. Being in her.

I push her on the bed's edge, shoving up her thighs, holding them on either side of her so I can look at the glorious spread that is her cunt. It's red and swollen. Fuck, I want it and her ass. I want to fuck her skull and hold my cock in her throat so she chokes and comes while she does so. I want to eat her to another orgasm straight after that.

I want her ruined so no man who touches her can ever compare.

But right now, if I don't sink into her, I'll die.

I line up and plunge into her. Balls fucking deep and it's the most orgasmic thing. The tight wet heat of her is like nothing else. I start slamming into her and her hips rise to meet me with each hard thrust.

There's nothing like that extra drag of a cunt's tight tunnel on my piercing. And the shiver that runs through her, along with that guttural moan, tells me she appreciates that particular piece of jewelry.

But even without it, she'd be fucking perfection.

I hold her knees apart, so she's turned up to me, that sweet, tight cunt, and I hammer into it, making her grunt and groan. That pain-pleasure sound of the pounding is music. It shifts as she opens to me and I go deeper, faster. She's slicker now, her cunt sucking at my shaft, and she's just everywhere.

Staring down at her, at the red blush that spreads, the bounce of those tits with the hard nipples, the way she bites hard on her lower lip, the anger and fury and lust in her face as she looks at me... It's all a fucking turn on. She's grunting

now, her lower body trying to lift to take more of me, and she starts to clench.

A high-pitched sound slides from her as she shudders and spasms on my cock, and I can't help it, the head of my cock and my shaft are being squeezed by her and my balls are so tight that the pleasure just explodes. I come in her with a roar, bucking hard, grinding down into her, and I empty my cum deep into her cunt.

When I'm done, I pull out and slap her cunt with my cock.

The anger that comes over me with the aftermath of the pleasure is so white hot it almost brings me to my knees.

How the hell can that be the best fucking experience of my life? How can that cunt, this woman, dig down deep and uncover pleasure centers I didn't know I had?

Jesus. I push a shaking hand through my hair as she tries to get up and falls back on the bed, her legs collapsing, still spread, our fluids leaking.

I should make her fucking eat it. I should make her suck the bedding clean.

"Where do you think you're going?" I don't even hide the loathing in my voice.

The same loathing comes back at me. "Away from you."

Stalking over, I put a hand on either side of her head and lean in over her. "Who said I was done?"

"I think we're done," she says, her voice quiet, full of steel. "Move."

"Oh no, MG. That's where you're wrong. We're far from done," I sneer. "You don't stop working for me until I get what I'm paying for. And if you try to fuck me over, if you piss me

off, I'll force you to keep my cum inside you when I send you to my enemy."

NINE

MAGDALENA



My head spins. He's a stunningly beautiful man, the sex aside, his naked form art-worthy. The golden skin slathered with tribal and pagan-like tattoos, the silver nipple rings. The washboard abs.

The fucking Prince Albert piercing in that glorious cock.

God, the pleasure that thing brings. Or maybe it's just him because Hendrick's wasn't pierced, and I came all over him like it was going out of style, too.

But this man, just looking at the glory of his nakedness...

He's a modern-day Adonis, and though I just had him, he makes me want to drool.

Remove the personality, his taste for nasty revenge and humiliation, and he's perfect.

I haven't had the pleasure of seeing Hendrick naked, but I'm betting he's a different, more elegant brand of perfection.

Oh, fuck. Breathing is hard.

I'm trying to get a handle on what it is I've done.

It's not even fucking two men in the same evening. Sex is sex. It's who those men are.

Hendrick and Jac are extremely dangerous, and my libido has lost its mind over them.

How the fuck was I meant to know the necklace was fake? How the actual fuck did Hendrick know to put it there? How do I know it's actually fake?

Right now's not the time to contemplate it, not when the world's most decadent and dangerously hedonistic man not only just fucked me within an inch of my life, he's right over me, and I'm ashamed to say I want more.

Because I think the depths he's capable of are ones I desperately want to sample.

I try to take a steadying breath. His words about keeping his cum in me while sending me to Hendrick were filthy, yet they made my insides buzz to life. "How are you going to do that?"

He grins slow, slides over me so he can suckle a nipple, chewing with just the right amount of bite that he sets a keening note off in my clit. He starts on the next. When he's done, I'm writhing and panting, then he says, "Duct tape?"

"A little crude." I shiver from his touch. These threatening words are a hot form of foreplay that runs rough over my senses.

He slides a finger over my very sensitive nipples then down to play with my clit until a small orgasm jumps me.

"I could," he says, "shove a dildo up there, but problem is, you'll leak because I'll be filling you with so much cum, there's not gonna be room for anything else." He starts to finger me, lazily. "You're fucking tight. And I intend to come in you multiple times before I send you to him."

"He's probably sleeping."

“I never said,” he murmurs as he bites and sucks a trail down over my throat, “that it would be tonight.”

I rock against his hand and reach for his cock. “Planning on keeping me your prisoner?”

“It has its merits, MG.”

There’s a depraved part of me that wants to explore those merits that come with being his prisoner.

“What do you say? You want me to chain you up and fuck you every way I can think of? Force orgasms on you? Deny them? Get other men in? Women? What do you think? Want to be my prisoner, MG?”

He’s capable of all that, but he’s just provoking me with words. Like he tries to provoke me with using MG.

I’m pretty fucking sure if Hendrick can find my name, so can this man, so I’m betting either he couldn’t be bothered reading whatever file he has or thinks not using it will insult me.

He’s not nuanced enough, he’s not Hendrick. He lets his hate and senses and emotions blind him.

Hendrick doesn’t.

Hendrick does hedonism in a different way. And as good as this is, as skilled as this man is, I want to uncover Hendrick’s secrets more.

But damn, do I want to be fucked hard again and again by this man, too. He wasn’t lying about his skillset. And all he did was fuck me hard missionary.

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

“That it’s going to be hard to do my job if I’m your prisoner.”

He pushes his fingers in hard and then he spreads them, stretching me, and I gasp. “God you’re so fucking easy—”

“Get off me.” Anger suddenly takes hold of me at his words. I’m not one of his girls he manipulates.

He rolls off, but he keeps his fingers in me, and a leg over me. “I meant to please. If you fucking hung your Fuck Me shingle out for every man, why would I give a fuck?”

“Just let me go.”

“I’m not finished.” His eyes glitter with both lust and anger. “You fucked him, you’ve fucked me. I’ll bet he’s a pussy-only guy.”

“If you want him to take your ass, why don’t you ask him? Maybe you both can work it out through sex?”

He laughs, shoves his fingers in harder, rougher, and I moan. I always knew I liked my sex on the rough side, but this... The degradation, the domination... “He’s not my type.”

Jac’s still playing with my pussy, his fingers back to a slow lazy thrust.

“Did you get your dick pierced to make up for its shortcomings?” I ask nastily.

The strokes of his fingers don’t change, and I’m getting dangerously close to orgasm. “I might have shortcomings—”

“Basic human decency—”

“—but not in that arena and you know it. Your little cunt creams hard for me, doesn’t it?”

“You wish.”

He ignores me. “I got the piercing because I like them. If you’re nice, I’ll let you play with the nipple rings.” He pauses. “If you’re nice *and* you get me my necklace.”

I open my mouth to say something clever, but he goes on.

“I’ve been thinking,” he whispers, “how fucking spectacular you’d look in it. I’d fuck you in it, MG. And hard.”

I need to get out of here. Now. “Let me go.”

“No.”

I shove him with all my strength, and when he rolls off me fully, getting to his feet, I jump up, only to have his hand tangle in my hair. He tosses me back to the bed, this time face first.

Struggling, I try to get up, but he puts a hand hard on the back of my neck to hold me there and tugs my hips high so my ass is in the air.

Everything in me throbs with need.

“Not a word you get to use on me, MG. I paid millions for you. Consider this me taking what’s mine. No jewels, but hey, there’s a sweet cunt I bought. And my cock piercing, of course.”

“You asshole—”

“This is how it’s going to go,” he says, “I’m taking what I want, when I want it from you. From all your holes. I’ll fuck your ass, your cunt, and that sweet tasting one in your face. And you’ll beg. And if you’re lucky, I’ll occasionally let you come.”

My pussy throbs with desire and everything starts to buzz and tingle. “Rape me all you want—”

“Who said a thing about rape? We both know this turns you on. When I fingered you at the party, you practically served me your cunt on a platter.”

He’s right. “Lies.”

“No, MG.” He strokes a finger through my pussy lips, and there’s a sucking sound and my entire pussy flutters. “That’s you and me I taste, but there’s a whole fuck ton of you. It’s like a fucking river back here, and you’re pushing out for me, offering it all. Again.”

“Get off me, now. I don’t want you.”

The fat head of his cock starts stroking me, pushing up and down from my ass to my clit, parting me as he goes, but not giving me what I crave. Not easing that ache and filling the emptiness inside.

How is he so hard, so fast after just coming?

“I’m going to fuck you so damn hard, maybe have your ass, too. Thought about the mouth, but I’m a little too angry so I might just keep my cock buried there a little too long and you won’t be able to breathe.”

“Stick it near my mouth and I’ll bite it off.”

“Promise?”

The laughter in his voice is tinged with dark erotic amusement, with black anger. “A fact.”

“You could try.” He thrusts a little. A tease, and he does it slow, so I feel myself open for him and it’s like desperation as I push onto him. He pulls back as I do. “Oh, yeah, you really fucking don’t want me, do you? Rape?” He does it again, and I can’t help but push out, trying to get him inside me.

The hand on my neck tightens.

“Have you got a rape fantasy, MG? I’m happy to oblige. Just admit you want me and maybe I’ll let you come.”

His words are like sex, they stroke into me, and he’s got me on the brink of coming, just by his filthy mouth.

“I’m not a sub. You can’t stop me.”

“Trying to get me to fuck you?” He does it again, slides the fat head of his cock along my pussy, pushing in, this time a little more. “Say please.”

“Go to hell.”

He sighs. Plunges in once. And I clench, coming around him. But the pleasure’s heat lightning, and he’s out of me fast, the piercing dragging on me. A moan breaks free and the fucker laughs.

“I’m not sure if I want this to hurt or not.”

Before I can ask what he means, his cock’s at my ass, and he pushes in.

I scream.

There’s a bite of searing pain because he doesn’t prepare me, and he slams in to his balls. Then he leans over me. “Did it hurt?”

“I’m getting a fucking giant dildo, hiring big men to hold you down so I can shove it up your ass. Dry.”

“My cock was wet from that geyser you’ve got going for me.” He reaches down and pushes two fingers into me, resting his thumb on my clit. “See? Fucking wet. And tight. Everywhere.”

With that, he starts to pull out, only to plunge back in. God...the piercing... And soon he’s just going at it. He

removes his fingers from me to hold my hips to slam into me as hard and deep as possible.

Both his hands have my hips as he fucks me, my ass high in the air, from behind. It's brutal and in this position, I can't get up.

I don't want to.

Because the bite of pain has leveled into pleasure and it's fast climbing towards the deep nirvana of an almighty orgasm and I'm pushing back into him, meeting his thrusts as rough as he gives them.

We don't speak. Just grunts and moans of savage need and passion, like we need to fuck the other into submission, only no one's giving in. All his anger is in this fuck, and mine, too.

I'm a seething ball of simmering pleasure, and there's more of it around the corner, and I hate him for it. I hate him for his accusations of working with Hendrick, I hate him for making me want him when I know what he is. When I know how despicable he is.

It's good.

So fucking good.

As good as with Hendrick, but way more violent. A level of roughness that isn't a game.

Jac Miller's reputation doesn't do him justice. There's off-the-charts chemistry here as he pushes me up, into wanting and needing more and more. That prize right there is one I'm determined to have and burst apart for. Jac Miller is a special beast.

He degrades and plays and humiliates. He gets off on denying the women he's let taste what he can give them. And I

see why they crawl back, let him flash them, let him hand them off to others.

I see it, and I hate it.

I'm not a toy for him.

“Don't you fucking come, MG. If you do, it's the last orgasm you'll ever get from me.”

He's close, his voice is slurring, and I'm close, too.

His words push me to the edge and a searing note of sublime pleasure starts to sing.

“Good,” I mutter, “this is the last time you fuck me.”

And with that, everything goes haywire. I come hard, my entire body convulsing, and he slams so deep, and I can feel him spurt in me. The heat of his cum, and his guttural cry makes me come again.

When he's done, he pulls out, and I collapse, rolling into a ball.

“Get out,” he says. “Now.”

Everything sore and aching, I get my things and go.



Jac wrecked my dress, so I stole a coat from the vast closet next to front door.

He had a car waiting, and I gave the driver the address to a place I stay in. Not my home, but a place I can hole up. I use it as a safety net, and a place for the few huge clients who want that feeling of knowing me.

Those are few and far between.

It seems a little moot with men like Jac and Hendrick, but I think I'll make this my home base for the foreseeable future.

After my third shower of the evening, I pull out some sweats and get dressed, my body sore, spent.

Satisfied.

Tomorrow, I know the shaking and self-recriminations will start. But right now, I can't give into it. Hell, I can't think about it. Just like I can't think about the sex and all the stupid things I managed to do in the last ten hours.

There's a bottle of butterscotch schnapps here, and I get it and drink, straight from the bottle. It's sweet, almost too sweet, but it's high in alcohol and it'll help me sleep.

I pull out the so-called fake necklace and look at it. The stones are too new, and there's probably a whole host of things that stand out as being fake. Things I could have seen if I'd had time, and things Harry would know at ten fucking paces.

Dumping it, I get out my phone. There's a couple of messages from Harry, but nothing in them to suggest she's under duress.

We have systems.

Physical ones, where something's moved or taken. My locket and ring—the only things I have of my family, my grandmother, the only things Mom never sold—I'd take them with me. I'd never move them and go. If I did, she'd know something was wrong.

Same with Harry's engraved silver 1950s loupe on a chain. It slides into what looks like a locket, and the woman who trained her, old, mean, acerbic, gave it to her. If that was left behind, I'd know there was trouble.

Then there's the ones in writing or in how we do it, or a voice message or call. Happy childhoods, or any myriad of things.

That's the thing with growing up and surviving together on the streets. We know each other, and we have warning systems that are so subtle it comes down to a misplaced punctuation mark.

But these texts are just Harry wanting to know how it went.

I'm about to toss my phone when it lights up.

I almost don't answer the call.

Almost.

"What the fuck do you want?" I take a swig from the bottle.

"That coat is something I want back."

Jac Miller's voice does things to a woman. Even if he was spewing out threats and nasty insults, I get wet from that voice.

Caramel butter.

And his nemesis makes me wet with that voice of velvet sandpaper.

Funny, Hendrick has a voice that fits the decadent nastiness of Jac. And Jac's fits Hendrick's elegant form of depravity down to the ground.

Or maybe I'm too sober and too sexed up to think straight.

I take a deep drink.

"Expenses."

“Fuck expenses,” he says. “You also took the jewels.”

“I’m going to get them evaluated.”

“I told you,” he says, as something moans in the background and my heart squeezes. Jesus, he’s fucking someone? “Fake.”

Then I hear two voices: his...mine... Oh. My. Fucking. God.

“Did you record us?”

“Call it... memory preservation.” He laughs. “Or potential tools to keep you in line.”

“Blackmail.”

There’s a click as a message comes through.

Me. Being fucked by Jac. It’s not a quality shot. But it’s me, him pounding into me. This picture is shit, but he no doubt has better ones, and of course, the actual video.

“You’re a fucking asshole.” I take a very long drink, my hand shaking.

“Got it all on tape. I like to watch. So I record my adventures.” The moans and passionate, hate-filled words filter in, along with the slap of flesh against flesh. “This might become one of my favorites. Fuck, when you push your ass or cunt at me for more, it’s breathtaking. I’m hard watching it.”

“You’re God’s gift to perverts.”

He laughs. “Stick your hand in your panties. I’m betting you’re wet. Does that make you the pervert?”

“Why are you calling me? Last I remember you forced yourself on me, came, and told me to get out.”

Jac doesn't speak for a while, then he says, "Because we're not done, MG. Not until I have my necklace. I'm paying you, and I own you until this job's done."

"And you forcing me into fucking you?"

"You really think I forced you?"

I swallow, clench my hand on the phone. "I didn't come to your place for sex, Jac."

"And yet..."

"I'm not sleeping with you again, and Jac?" I take another big drink. "I'm not working for Hendrick."

"But you fucked him."

"Yes," I say. "I fucked him and loved every moment. But I'm not working for him."

"You—"

"Listen to me, Jac." I'm shaking now because this is pure fire I'm playing with. "I'm not one of your girls you fuck with. I work for you, yes. But you keep your hands to yourself."

"I can, but can you?"

I ignore him. "We never had a time limit on getting the necklace. My first attempt failed—"

"Just make sure the second one doesn't. And MG?"

"What?"

"The you and me thing? The no fucking? I don't accept your terms."

"Then," I say, "find another jewel thief."

And then, I do something I'm almost positive never happens to Jac Miller. I hang up on him.



The next morning, the dread is as strong in me as the stiff muscles from rough, hard sex. It's not that I've been living like a nun, waiting for these two jerkoffs to turn up to spin my life out of control, it's that the men I sleep with are nice.

Maybe not nice people. They want the pretty girl, and they're always malleable, they always have money. And they treat me well. They fuck me in a way that doesn't float my secret fantasy boat.

They're never rough, they never take, and they ask but never get my ass, not unless I really like them or their bank account.

And last night, I let both Jac and Hendrick fuck my ass.

I reveled in the roughness. The elegant, edged danger of Hendrick that I know has darker, harder, more primal edges. And the naked, no-holds barred violence of Jac. He takes a woman to an edge and then beyond.

Both experiences were bone melting.

And I don't know how I ever let it happen.

Worse, I didn't get the fucking jewels.

I'm the best of the best. I'm so good that the authorities have no idea who I am. They think I'm a man, and the clues are just the ones I place. They lead them in circles.

So how the fuck did last night happen?

I can't even walk away. Even if I handed everything back, with interest, to Jac, he'd never let me walk without the necklace. And Hendrick... He saw me coming.

Maybe not me, but he knew Jac would try to get the necklace.

And he knew who I was from the moment I walked into the party.

I should have known. But I didn't. He captivated something in me he shouldn't have. And Jac...

I don't even know what the hell that was.

A meeting of ugly base truths, probably.

But sex isn't getting me out of this, and I'm not about to throw away my career, my reputation.

I want that necklace.

Fuck, it wouldn't matter if I was close to making my billion and retiring, like one small job away, I'd still want this job, because I want the necklace.

The knock on the door doesn't shock me, nor does the clinking of the key in the lock.

"Y'know," Harry says, barging in like she owns the place, which she does. "This isn't a safe part of Delacroix. You need better locks."

"Not in the mood, Harriet."

She puts a bag on the coffee table and sits down opposite me as she takes a sip from a to-go cup. Then she eyes the schnapps. "If I'd known you had your breakfast covered, I wouldn't have bothered."

"Things didn't go to plan," I mutter, grabbing the bag. There's a donut and a coffee, and I can smell the sugar and cream as I pull them out. "Things went wrong."

“So I see.” Her gaze is on the necklace. “That’s a fake. A good one, but a fake.”

I scowl at her and pull up my knees as I take a bite of the donut and then a sip of coffee. “How can you tell?”

“It’s good but not great, and I’m Harriet Esterhazy. Genius.” She sighs, sits back. “Also, your neck.”

Heat hits me.

“Which one did you do the nasty with?”

I don’t answer.

Her eyes narrow. “Look, Lena, I know you’re straight, but you’re still not that stupid.” Her eyes narrow further. “Fuck me, babe. You are that stupid. Apart from anything, they’re Quinate—”

“Save the lecture.” I set the coffee and donut down and hug my knees. “Jac is pissed.”

“How pissed?”

“Ready to kill me and chop me up, level of pissed.”

She sucks in a breath and nods, black curls bouncing. “And Hendrick?”

“He knows who I am. And he had the fake sitting in the safe.”

“Fuck.” She breathes out.

“Been there, done that.”

“It’s not a joke,” she snaps.

“I know, Harry.” I get up, grab my cup, and start to pace. Harry eats my donut. “Someone’s got the necklace.”

We both fall silent as the gravity of the situation crushes down.

“You’re better than this, Lena.”

“I’m not even going to ask if you think I’m a better thief than I was last night or if I’m better than the girl who gets her sex on with the wrong guys.” I stop pacing and look at her. “Which do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Both? It was dumb going there last night.”

Exhilarating, the kind of move that always gets me excited. But dumb. “Sometimes dumb works. Sometimes...”

“Lena, they’re Quinate. That’s how scary it is. It’s Harry not asking you sordid details level of scary.” She puts her donut-dusted hand on her chest. “Just know that it makes my lady parts shrivel because of who they are and what they could do to us.”

“I know.” I hiss the words. “It just happened.”

She frowns. “Their cocks accidentally slipped into you, right after your panties accidentally fell off?”

“No.”

“Hendrick worked out who you were and you fucked him?” I nod at her words. “And then you...what? Fucked Jac because you thought your life needed spice?”

“Shut up, Harry.”

“Moron.” She shakes her head.

“Hendrick’s either playing Jac with the fake and he knew he’d hire someone, or...”

She stands. “Neither knew it’s a fake?”

I look at her. “Jac knew. Immediately. He’s seen the real one, enough to know it.”

“It’s well documented in photos. Maybe Hendrick doesn’t know it’s a fake.”

“Shit.” I bite my lip. “Or it’s some kind of excuse for a bloody war.”

“I thought the Quinate had rules.”

I nod. “They do, which means there are always going to be exemptions. This could be one. And I’m a pawn.” I frown. Oh man... I’m in deep, deep shit, aren’t I? “It doesn’t matter. I need to find the truth, and hopefully the real Heart of Dark Desires.”

“And then, Lena?”

Hendrick. I need to start with him.

“And then, Harry, I’ll work out my next move.”

TEN

HENDRICK



One fucking week. How long does it take for Jac Miller to lose his shit?

“Hendrick? Are you paying attention?” Fiona asks.

I blink and give her an easy smile, leaning back in my chair at the restaurant. It’s not the latest hot thing, it doesn’t even have a Michelin star, but if Fiona claims it will, then it will.

She thinks I should invest. There’s no agenda for Fiona Murphy other than having a fabulous restaurant make it. And I can use above board investments. My name and money will keep it above board, too.

In all the years I’ve known her, she’s never steered me wrong.

I probably should have married her back when I dated her, not broken up with her. But that was sixteen years ago and twenty isn’t a good age to marry someone. I’d also been obsessed, but not in love like I thought because—

Not. Going. There.

“Always.” I smile again.

Her dark look tells me she doesn’t buy it. “What do you think of the mushroom dish?”

“Very mushroomy.”

She makes a sound, and irritation crosses her gorgeous face. From the bar, Damon’s gaze is pinned on her rather than the door. I know he’s besotted, well whatever besotted is to a man who’s as deadly as I am.

The moment I mentioned where I was headed, he started on Jac and danger and the fact I was robbed. Which is why he insisted on coming today. To protect me. From...I don’t fucking know. The regular dangers? The jewel thief I fucked? The wiles of Fiona?

Wiles I’m familiar with. Wiles he’d like to be if he’d just admit it.

Fiona’s spectacular, smoking hot, and fucking smart. She’s an acclaimed food writer who’s even more talented in the kitchen but prefers this side of the fire.

She’s not from a crime family, and I’m pretty sure the most she’s stolen is a heart and maybe a drink. She’s a breath of sanity in my world and one of the only people I don’t need a guard up around.

“Why haven’t you fucked Damon?”

She almost spits out her wine. “Your head of security?”

“You like him. And you’re either about to shiv me here and now or he’s into you. He’s not watching the door, he’s watching you.”

“He’s not into me. I’ve known him as long as you and he’s never made a move.”

I nod, toy with my whiskey glass. “Maybe you should make the move.”

“Maybe I don’t want to.”

“You like him.”

“Which,” she says, “brings me back to him. He strikes me as the assertive type. He’s never...asserted around me.”

“He’s also the stubborn type, and you and I used to be a thing.” I take a swallow of my whiskey.

“A million years ago.” She looks me up and down. “What’s wrong with you, Hendrick?”

I shrug. “We all deserve happiness, Fiona. That’s all.”

Fiona stares at me. “Who is she?”

“Excuse me?”

“The woman that’s got you like this. Not that insipid Elsa. It’s got to be someone intriguing because you keep away from intriguing.” She points at me. “You never get all...soft.”

“I’m not fucking soft.”

“Goosey, Hendrick.”

This time I eye her with dislike. “Not your business.”

She smiles at me and pats my hand. “And, Hendrick, there you have your answer for me and Damon. Not your business.”

We continue our rare lunch. Jac tried sleeping with her not long after all the shit went down, after Lili’s death, my father’s, his.

Fiona saved me, I know that. We got back together for about six months, but it wasn’t ever going to work, and Jac started his campaign of trying to fuck any and every woman I showed interest in or dated.

She said she didn’t.

She might have fucked him. She might not have even touched him.

And, as much as I hate Jac now, I began to hate him with a passion then.

Speaking of the tattooed, hedonistic and sadistic fuck himself, where the fuck is he?

Not one fucking word.

I expected to hear from him, but I haven't. It's been a week and not a fucking word. Of course, my little thief might not have been working for him, but I don't buy that for a second.

No way would Magdalena have known I had the necklace, and she left the priceless Agnossio jewels but took the fake?

Jac hired her. Had to.

And if I haven't heard from him, there's another attempt coming.

Must be since I know she's following me. She's not even been as covert as last time. Or to be fair, maybe she is, and I just know what to look for. Who to look for.

I'm not a fan of her following me.

But I'm a fan of other things.

Like her naked and writhing beneath me.

Yeah. I'd prefer her under me or against a wall. I think she'd look amazing in handcuffs and spread open while we indulged in a threesome. Something tells me she'd like it.

Oh, fuck, she'd look good in a collar and leash. She'd make a good partner as we chose the right third. If she's into women, I'd be into that. Two cunts to plough, two asses, two

mouths. Or fitting her with a strap on so I can take her ass as she takes the woman—

Shit. I stop myself before my pants get too tight, and I lose track of the conversation with Fiona. She already knows me well enough to know my mind is somewhere else. Last thing I need is her latching on to my depraved thoughts.

Maybe I don't really want to share my little cat with anyone else. Even in my mind.

Even with—

I stop.

Smile.

Check my watch.

“Fiona, I've got a meeting.” I give her an evil grin. “Damon will see you home.” And just to piss him off, too, I snap my fingers at him, get up, pay the bill, and leave the restaurant.



It takes two meetings, one shakedown and an afternoon date of convenience, for Magdalena to show herself. She walks into the laid back, luxurious bar fifteen minutes after me. I'm with a gun runner and Ivan. The gun runner looks about twenty-three, baby-faced, and is one of the most bloodthirsty people I know.

Ruthless isn't the word.

I'm fine with ruthless.

It's his penchant for sick and twisted shit and borderline untrustworthiness I don't like. My fucking father brought his

family—the Kincaids—into the fray and so we deal with him. It's always two of us when we meet the kid or another affiliate from them. Always a different combination because the kid—he doesn't deserve me to call him by his name because one day he's going down hard and bloody—almost brought the house down with sly insinuations about Jac to Declan.

I fucking hate Jac, but I put a stop to the gun fight in the fucking Quinate boardroom.

Nothing like well-placed word bombs when factions are at best frenemies, and at worst sworn enemies.

But I'm not as hot-headed as Jac. I could see through the kid's bullshit. Break us up, cause a war, get a bigger piece of the pie. Possibly even take over.

The baby-faced, one-man murder spree was smart. He didn't lie. Jac did what he said, but not to any of us; he didn't step on any personal affiliate toes. It might have blurred lines, but Jac killed fair game. He took out a problem that would have caused us all headaches.

But Declan wants a piece of Jac, and any excuse...

He might not hate him like I do, but there's zero love there.

If Jac had kept that idiotic dick of his away from Declan's three sisters, the bad blood wouldn't be so bitter. But Jac had to nail them all. In one night.

It's so fucking Jac, it's pathetic.

Not saying I'm pristine and pure, but that took it to a different level of depraved. Jac didn't give a shit about the sisters. Jac has some kind of fucking magic where they all kept wanting him and so Declan married them off.

Tonight's my turn with Ivan. I've had to deal with this Kincaid prick with Jac before and that wasn't fun.

At least the meeting's quick.

When it's done, I hang out with Ivan, and he says, "That piece of shit needs to go down." He looks past me. Nods. "What's up with the fucking hot blonde?"

"You might need to narrow that down." I lean back against the bar. "There are a lot of hot blondes."

"Fuck, man. I'm talking about the blonde at the other end of the bar? The one you noticed and ignored all through the meeting with the Fuck Face Kid." He's the only one of the others who's uneasy with the Kincaid dealings.

But even if we're on the same chapter, I don't know if we're on the same page. It's all a game of strategy, and it depends on what's behind the moves. So I wait.

He leans in close, picking up his rum. "The one you and Jac were on fire over at your gala."

"Jac's a dog," I say. "He's got a boner for anything female."

"He brought that poor actress as his date to taunt you and basically ignored her—when he wasn't flashing her wares." Ivan sighs. "God knows what he did to her on the ride there."

"He'll tell you. He loves to brag." I can't keep the bitterness from my voice. Not about the women he bangs. I don't give a shit. I don't even care about the ones he managed to fuck when I was fucking them. There's been no one I want to call mine. Not in ten years. So if he wants to fuck my leftovers, or fuck them after me, he can.

Shit. He probably did with Magdalena.

For some reason, that sticks somewhere in my throat.

“So?” Ivan prods.

“She’s no one.”

Someone.

Intrigue.

Delicious.

She makes me want to break Jac’s fucking pretty face for touching her.

I don’t examine that. In reality, he probably had her first.

In reality, he’s paying her.

She’s not mine.

At all.

He smirks. “Well, that no one’s got a pair of fucking killer legs, better ass, and fine tits.”

“Leave it,” I say with a growl.

“You got it, Hendrick. I’m out of here. Let me know when we can find a better dealer. Then we can bring it to the table.”

I look at him. “You really want to move on that?”

Ivan downs the rest of his rum. “Sooner the better.”

“We’re in a little deep, but I’ll look around to see what else there might be. Further afield.” I take a swallow of my whiskey.

“I’ll do the same.”

“We should keep it on the DL,” I say.

He gives a short nod. “Agreed. That fucking little shit’s going to bring headaches. We can deal, but I’d rather get a

better price and a more stable connection.”

“Someone,” I say, “who isn’t a serial killer in the making?”

“Something like that.”

“We’ll float it next meeting,” I say. “As a general idea. Not that we’re looking.”

When Ivan leaves, I order another drink. I don’t look to see if Magdalena’s still there. I know she is. The air vibrates with her, but she takes her sweet ass time heading over. I’m betting she’s waiting for me. I pull out my phone and text Damon, for a brief update.

I breathe in and there’s a tease in the air of her sweet, smoky spice and I close my eyes a moment to savor it.

“Hendrick, I thought it was you.”

I look at her—really look at her this time—and the breath’s knocked from my lungs. I go through all the responses and settle on innocuous. “It is. Have a seat. You ran off on me so fast, I thought you’d gone and robbed me.”

There’s the faintest blush. She’s wearing a sleek dress and heels, the dress is a deep copper that looks good on her, and it’s dipped in the front and short, showing off her curves. My dick stirs.

Her soft lips turn up in a smile. “I was there, downstairs, for a while. But I didn’t see you again, so I left.” She says this like we didn’t have intense fucking sex, like I didn’t pound her cunt or ass, like we didn’t go down on each other.

Like we were having a flirtation and not an accusation-filled battle.

I’m a little disappointed until she leans in, trails her hand down the front of my shirt to my cock.

“I thought,” she says, “you were going to find me.”

“I said I could. Not that I would.” I’m starting to burn with need. “If you promise not to lift my wallet again—it’s got sentimental value—or go for my watch like you’re about to, I can take you to my place here in Millionaire’s Way and see just how much you’d like to be found.”

Her eyes widen, like I’ve read her mind about my watch, and then a smile teases that sensuous mouth of hers. “You’re on.”



The wallet is sentimental, and I’d have been ready to rip people’s heads off if I hadn’t known she’d taken it. I only keep cash in it, and a fake license, and that’s when I take it out with me. Usually, I don’t. But that’s another story.

I take her to my place I bought for... That no longer matters and hasn’t for ten years. I couldn’t live here, but I use it for when I need to crash close to the big office when I have to play CEO.

It’s also great for meetings or fucking. I sleep here a lot, but I don’t keep anything but food and drinks here. If I need clothes, my staff organizes some to be delivered.

So, I’m thinking, as I get to the brownstone on the leafy tree-lined street, we’ll go through the normal bullshit of drinks and small talk. I’ll get a romantic dinner delivered. Fucking candles. Whatever.

I punch in the alarm code and unlock the door.

“Cat,” I say as we step inside. “Do you—”

Magdalena slams me against the wall, mouth on mine in a hot, carnal, searing kiss.

It's a wild storm that sparks up every part of me, and I think she's just declared it's open season. I kiss her back, grabbing her and spinning her so she's the one slamming into the wall.

Her hand is on my cock, trying to get into my pants and we're both shaking, needy. I push a hand under her dress, in her panties and she's fucking soaked. I plunge two fingers into her tight heat, and she comes hard around me instantly, her moans in my mouth like candy floss, so light and sweet.

I don't stop. I push a finger up her ass until she spasms again and paws at me.

She rips her mouth from mine and sinks down, freeing my cock to swallow it. Her lips are stretched wide, and she starts to go at me hard and deep and fast.

So deep she's gagging, the back of her throat working the tip, and I grip her hair because fuck, I'm going to come as she hoovers me. She's doing this herself.

I'm only grabbing her hair now and she's sucking and licking where she can manage to get her tongue, her lips are tight on me and the gagging is divine music, her drool nectar from heaven, and oh shit...

My balls are fire, and as a surge of such pleasure hits me, I shout and grab her, shoving her hard on me, so hard she starts to struggle as I come.

She has no option but to swallow me down.

When I'm done, I pull out. There's a line of cum and spit from my cock to her mouth and it's glorious.

I pick her up, and she wraps her legs around me, and we kiss. I suck her tongue hard, bite her lip, and kiss her all over again. Then I walk her to the bedroom.

“I like your conversational skills,” I say, tossing her to the bed.

“Yours aren’t bad, either.”

I had other plans, but they can wait. Right now, I need her cunt.

I shove her dress up and pull her panties aside, hauling her closer to me as I kneel at the foot of the bed, throwing her thighs over my shoulders. I want her to sit on my face, but first, I need a sample. A taste.

One leads to two, and soon I’ve got three fingers buried in her. I suck and lick and pull her clit with my mouth, working her G-spot, right up until she starts to shake. Then I stop.

“Strip.”

She looks at me, glaring. “Fucker.”

“You’ll like this, slut.”

Her body jolts and excitement hits her eyes.

“You’ll do exactly what I say,” I tell her. “Now strip.”

For a moment she doesn’t move, then she peels off the dress. Slowly, revealing her sweet body inch by agonizing inch. It doesn’t make sense that this turns me on like this. After all, her pussy’s on display, wet, red, swollen, panties askew and skirt hiked up.

Yet it does.

There’s something so fucking hot about it.

The cream lace of her bra matches the cream lace of her panties. Her hard nipples poke through the delicate lace. And if her panties were in place, I could basically see everything.

She's got stockings on. Sheer black, topped with a velvety band instead of lace, and heels of the stiletto kind.

Sex heels, I call them.

The dress drops and then she takes off the bra and slides the panties down.

Magdalena looks at me, and a part of me wants her in the heels and stockings, but I think I want her bare more. So I nod. And she kicks off the heels and rolls them down. I take her hand and lead her to the king bed. I lay down and motion for her to climb on me.

“I'm going to fucking eat you into multiple orgasms, and then I'm fucking you. Cunt and ass. Questions?”

“About this? No.”

I grin.

My cat slides up on me, cunt juice wetting my shirt, and I really don't care. I want more than the sample I had. I want everything she has, the entire meal. When she reaches me, I take a moment to enjoy the view.

It's one of the most perfect pussies I've seen. Even red and wet, it's tight and pretty, and it just invites a man to destroy it, leave it dripping with his cum, leave it gaping and ready for more.

I slide a finger over her, along the outer lips, the inner, and then up to her clit. She jumps. Wrapping my hands around her thighs, I pull her down on my face and start to lick and suck and nibble.

She moans and there's a thump as her hands hit the wall. I don't have a headboard. There are other places I can tie a woman up if I'm in the mood. And right now, I can just hold her to do what I want. Which is this.

I lick a path to her clit, then down, pushing my tongue into her, and I toy with her anus, teasing the tight ring of nerves, and I move up to slide along her slit, and down. I love tonguing her, the way her cunt is tight even on my tongue, and I push the tip of my thumb into her ass.

I'm rewarded with a small convulsion and a spasm on my tongue. I move up to her clit and start on that, filling the space where my tongue was with four fingers and start a slow upward beat.

I start with a gentle seduction, and as her excitement grows, she grinds down on me harder and harder. I push up into her with more force, a small hammering of her cunt and ass as I suck hard on her clit.

My other hand holds her.

“Hendrick, it's too much...”

I keep going. Pushing up as she pulls from me, through her protests as she comes on me, bouncing against me, and I don't stop. This time she tries to escape in earnest, and I know she's sensitive, but I can make her come again, a full body one. So, I keep up the assault with fingers and tongue, teeth and lips, sucking and fucking her and she stops pulling and starts shaking, pushing into me.

“Oh my God. I'm gonna... I'm gonna... Fuck!”

She's groaning and muttering and rocking on me. She's cursing me, praising me and then she screams out my name as she comes apart. Her orgasm is everywhere. The beat of her

clit, the pulse of her ass, the deep, wild throbbing clench of her cunt, and I'm rewarded with the gushing squirt of her cum.

Magdalena's still screaming, riding me, grinding on me. I can't breathe, and I don't care.

I push her, not stopping, for every last drop, for one more small throb of an orgasm before her cry turns high and thin and pleading.

Easing her off me, I roll her beneath me, pushing up on my arms. I'm fucking hard again.

"I want to put a collar on you and chains. Leather. Bind you so I can do what the fuck I want, no matter how prettily you beg. I want you handcuffed tight behind your back. But for now..."

Rolling off her, I open a side drawer and pull out a plastic teal clam shell. She stares at it. "What the fuck is that?"

"Remember when I went to that clothing store this week?"

"I—"

"You were following me, Cat. Don't pretend otherwise. You're good, but magnets, remember? Can't escape the elemental truth of that kind of attraction. I know when you're there. Like you do me."

She opens her mouth, shoots me a look. "Fine."

"It's also a discreet sex store. Lots of toys and fetish gear for the gentleman who requires discretion."

"How misogynistic of you all."

I grin as I set it down, and start to stroke her, spreading all those lush juices. "Women use it, too." I look at her and this isn't going to do. I want to pound into her hard. I *need* to

pound into her. And I want to take her beyond limits. Or start to.

I kiss her softly and push into her, and I fuck her for a few minutes. Not too hard, but enough to get her revved.

Then I crack open the clam shell and pull out the vibrator. It's for the G spot and the clit, and it's malleable and curves like a C. Once in, it stays until it's switched off and pulled free. I withdraw my dick, and push it into her, adjusting it so it's snug.

“Hendrick—”

“Thighs up and back, Cat. We're going for a ride.” I push her legs up and back, and ease into her ass. And then I stroke into her a few times and pause...

Then turn the vibrator on.

“Oh fuuuck!” She squeals.

I hold her thighs and let the device and my cock do their magic. I'm not going to lie. It's fucking hard not to come with the toy vibrating in her cunt. I can feel it all along my shaft, especially at the tip.

But I start to fuck her in long, hard strokes, holding her legs so she can't move. Within seconds, she's already coming.

She thrashes about, gritting her teeth, and I continue to plow her hard, digging my fingers into the backs of her thighs to hold her.

“Fuck. Fuck. Hendrick. Stop. Oh God.”

I slide down her body, fucking her and pressing against her so that the device pushes harder against her clit. “Is that a *stop* stop, or a *keep going* stop?”

“Keep going, you asshole.”

“Kiss me, Cat.”

She does, and it’s a kiss of desire, the knife edge of hate and love and everything between. It’s inevitable because she’s sucking at me, trying to kiss me harder, and I fall into that kiss. She’s like nothing I’ve ever had or tasted.

Every single nerve in me is on fire. Lightning snakes down my spine, and I come violently. Twitching, shaking, and convulsing as another deep body orgasm hits her. It’s so intense it’s almost unbearable, and I can’t help but stroke into her after, just to prolong the sensations that still flood me.

As I pull out, she whimpers, like the intensity is now beyond a good thing, and she’s trying to fight the device.

“Hold on, Magdalena.”

“P-Please...m-make it stop. *Stop* stop.” She’s trying to get it out of her, but her hands are clumsy, and she can’t.

“Hold on.”

I manage to hold her down and turn it off, easing it from her body.

She lies there, sprawled, barely moving.

Finally, she says, “Come here.”

I do.

To my surprise, sweet Magdalena slaps me. Then she pulls me to her and kisses me. It’s the kind of wet, needy kiss that comes after an intense moment. It’s one that seeks, and I give back. I need it too, and soon we’re kissing like teenagers, rolling on the bed, unable to get enough of the other.

When she finally lifts her head, she says, “So, do you still want to talk?”

ELEVEN

MAGDALENA



Hendrick's silent a long time.

I want to pretend I wasn't going to sleep with him again, but I know that's a lie. It's not even that I knew I wanted to. I knew I would.

There's something about him that's inevitable.

Magnets.

He's right there.

And if this was a different situation, if he wasn't Quinate and the mortal enemy of the carnal, beautiful, sadistic Jac Miller, my client, this could be something spectacular.

More spectacular.

He's just as beautiful, powerful, and deadly as Jac. Maybe just as sadistic. If I tell myself that enough, maybe it'll sink in.

Hendrick takes my hand and kisses my fingers, those smoke-ringed eyes watching close. A small shudder of delight passes through me because right now, he's mine.

"How long have you worked for Jac?"

"I don't work for anyone," I say. "I have clients."

"That isn't an answer."

I wait for him to accuse me of stealing the fake necklace, but then again, from what I know of this man, he plays honesty like it's a game of poker. He's honest. But it's how he's honest that's the tell, and right now, I don't know how to read him like that.

I know he knows.

But his end game in this and what he hopes to achieve is beyond me. It would be easy to have the jewels hidden so far away, in one of those vaults that I can't get into. Or have it in the world's most secure facility in Sweden.

Instead, there's a flaunt to the fakes. Or, if he doesn't know they're fake, to him putting them somewhere so easily accessible a thief with a fourth of my talent would have got in.

That's if they got by his security.

But security is always fair game. It's where things are hidden that's the game changer.

I have zero idea what he hopes to gain by being blatant enough that they're in Delacroix.

Which brings me to Jac.

What the fuck is his agenda?

Am I in the middle of some weird and deep game?

I could ask.

"It's the only one I have," I say. If I ask, I show my hand. So... I don't. "What's up with the hot babe?"

"Which one?"

"The one you've fucked. The older one," I say.

"An ex, a good friend. Do you want her number?"

“No. I’d love to know what this fight is with Jac, though.”

He bites each fingertip. “He wants me dead.”

“Your father killed his sister.”

He flinches. It’s so subtle that if I wasn’t in tune with him, I wouldn’t have noticed it. But I leave it be. For now.

“And,” Hendrick says, releasing my hand to push up from the bed, “he killed my father.”

“You killed his.”

“That’s what they say.”

I follow him up as he goes into the ensuite and turns on the rain shower. Then he turns against the glass outer wall of the shower as it starts to steam inside and folds his arms. “I don’t like being a pawn.”

He smiles and it’s not friendly, it’s not cruel. It’s...tired. “And here I thought you’d only met him a couple of times.”

Shit. I slipped up.

Before I can say a word, he holds up a hand. “Save it. Jac very definitely wants me dead. He wants everything that’s mine, he wants to destroy me, and I hate him, too. Sometimes I want him dead, but if it came down to it, I honestly don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean,” he says softly, “there are things he doesn’t know, things that are mine. And I fucking hate it all. There’s not a lot of joy. Hasn’t been in ten years. Except for you. There’s a joy in you.”

I just stare at him. I’m lost. I don’t even know where to start. Is he trying to unarm me by hinting at something sad in

his past? We all have sad things. My mom sold herself to feed me and then her drug habit. He's a billionaire. I'm not. But I don't let my poor, hellish past tie me down.

And he...he isn't the type, either.

Yet, whatever he's not saying isn't a game, I don't think.

"Hendrick—"

"Here's what I think. Jac hired the renowned Invisible Cat aka MG Rossi to steal something he believes is his, something he thinks I have."

I make myself say it. "And what's that?"

"The infamous Heart of Dark Desires."

"*Do* you have it?"

He grabs me and pins me to the wall of the shower that's growing warm from the water beyond. "Now where's the fucking fun in that, Cat?"

Hendrick bites and sucks my throat, and I moan. I've come more and harder than I thought possible, and he's somehow turning me on again.

"If you have it, I want to see it."

He just smiles. "You could run before you get too deep."

"In what?" Now I smile. "I just asked to see the jewels."

"They might no longer exist."

"And," I say, "you might have them."

"You never said Jac might have them. Why?"

He's a slippery bastard. I go to straighten, but he pushes me back and he's hard again.

“Why are you so interested, Magdalena?” He leans down and sucks and pulls on a nipple. Then he looks up. “I know you get off on stealing, and jewels are your thing, but you’re messing with Quinate things. Which means, because I don’t think you’ve got a death wish, one of us hired you, and this is all so fucking Jac.”

“Hendrick—”

“Be careful,” he whispers against my ear, “if you get in too deep, there’ll be no way out.”

I shiver and look at him as he raises his head. “Maybe I live for that shit.”

“Maybe you’ve got a fucking death wish after all. I’m going to shower. You can go home or join me.”

Going home’s the smart move, but he’s wrong, because even though he might be willing right now, to let me walk, Jac isn’t. Jac’s got blinders on and has a stubborn, vengeful streak. And he wants the jewels.

I could strike a deal, come clean and have Hendrick back me that he doesn’t have them, or...

No. This is Hendrick trying to throw me off the trail.

I can’t leave. He’s addiction in my blood, and I’m not done.

It’s more erotic foreplay with water and soap than showering. We don’t talk as I follow him in. He just kisses me, in slow, drugging kisses as the water comes down over us.

Then he soaps up and washes me, his fingers everywhere, arousing, questing. His mouth is on my throat and shoulder as he pulls my back to him, and he plays with my breasts,

massaging them, then he moves lower, gentle between my thighs.

He washes my pussy, and that soft touch is cruel because it's not enough and it's everything, all at the same time. It makes me boneless, throbbing and needing more.

I turn to him and wash him, too. His cock is so beautiful, almost too big, really. He isn't tattooed or pierced...well, almost tattoo free. There, beneath his left pec to the right, is one small tattoo. It's a series of curves and lines that look Arabic or similar. I touch it.

“What is it?”

“A word in ancient Demotic, an Egyptian language.”

“What's the word?” I ask.

“It doesn't matter. I was young. Tattoos aren't my thing.”

I return my attention to his cock, wanting it again as I soap it, pulling my hand along the skin, slowly and rhythmically jacking him off.

“Careful,” he says.

“Where's the fun in that?” I say as I sink down to my knees, pushing him back against the wall of the shower. “This is a beautiful cock, Hendrick.”

He laughs. “I bet you say that to all the men.”

“No.” I say. “Normally, I'm not into blowjobs.”

“Let me guess, the guys are all into receiving but not giving? Fools, there's nothing better than a sweet pussy to dine on. Especially if it's yours.”

A shiver of lust passes through me, and I lick a path along the shaft, tracing the heavy vein, sucking on the flesh here and

there. I love the softness that covers all that hardness, the taste of him, the velvet of his skin—he’s mostly clean shaven, except for the curated happy trail. I go down and suck his balls, and I’m rewarded with a hiss of air.

Then I move up and lick and sample the sweet, clean wetness of the underside of the head, the shower water clinging to him. And I lick over the head, tracing the shape.

I start to do it all over again, and I do, over and over, faster and faster until finally I suck him into my mouth.

“Fuck, keep doing that, and I’m in fucking love.”

His words send a jolt through me. He doesn’t mean it, of course he doesn’t, but it floors me because that was my exact thought when he ate me into that almighty orgasm, when he clamped that damn toy on me and rode my ass into orgasmic heaven and hell.

I didn’t mean it either, except on that base, hormonal lust level. The kind of love that’s primal, inexorable and right.

Not love like people think of. But lust and sex and blood.

Lust. That’s the word. A deep, insane lust.

I suck him all the way down until he hits my throat. Hendrick grabs my head, and he uses me as a vessel to fuck, pushing my head down, pulling it back, his own fuck puppet.

I love it.

The grip he has in my wet hair is brutal; it makes tears rise. It’s wrong, and it’s beyond amazing. I want him to treat me as nothing more than his vessel for pleasure because, unlike Jac, this man rewards as he takes.

“Fuck. Fucking whore. You live for this, don’t you? Cocks hammering your mouth? You’re just a vessel for my cum.

Fucking take it, slut, take it all.”

Then he comes, hard, spurting hot down my throat, and I swallow it.

I try and clean him with my mouth as he pulls out, still hard, but he’s got my hair, and he hauls me up and shoves me against the other wall. He hoists me up, and I clamp my legs around his waist as he sinks into my pussy.

Hendrick takes my mouth with hot, wild, deep kisses that claim. That *own*. And he bites and sucks a trail over my shoulder and back to my mouth. His tongue plunders as he pounds hard into me, so hard that I keep hitting the wall with force, and it’s that good, deep hurt full of pleasure and need inside.

It takes me a while, and I teeter on the edge.

He drops me to the ground, grabs my hair again, and turns me, only to hammer into my pussy from behind, so hard it’s like he’s trying to get his entire body inside me. It’s fucking delightful in the filthiest way.

I don’t even know where the orgasm comes from, but it sweeps me, and I scream out his name.

He isn’t finished. He pushes me down so my ass is high in the air, his hands biting my hips as the water pounds into my face, making it hard to breathe.

There’s a certain hint of panic to the lust as he slams balls deep into me. And in this position, he’s almost pile-driving me. He keeps hammering in and the pleasure builds and builds, and I almost choke as I come, my body convulsing and throbbing.

Hendrick cries out loud and grabs my hips harder, slamming in as he comes again, and I can feel him, the spurt,

the twitch, the way he strokes in and then holds.

When he's done, he withdraws and pulls me up into his arms and kisses me.

It's utterly devastating, the tenderness of it, and I'm thankful for the shower water because it hides the sudden tears I can't stop.



In nothing but his boxers—those form-fitting ones I love—he orders food, and I pull on one of his shirts. We eat Lebanese food with an old Cary Grant heist movie on the big screen that drops from the ceiling in the living room.

The movie's a definite dig at me and who I am, but I'm currently sexed out and high on Hendrick, the scent of him, the heat, the feel of his arms as I sit on the floor between his legs, loving the semi-erection he sports for me. The stiffness there sends ripples of latent desire through me.

He drops kisses on my shoulder, kisses my lips and fingers. He feeds me hummus, and a homemade whiskey sour while he drinks his straight. He rests a hand on my thigh when we're done eating, like this is what we do.

It's both surreal and natural.

The complexities of Hendrick leave me spinning because I can't quite work him out.

He's both open and incredibly closed. Laidback and content, driven, and...not joyless...not sad, but something... There's something dark that pushes down, that hooks around my heart.

The darkness in Jac is an angry one, but Hendrick's has a similar feel, the little he lets me see of that. A flash.

It's not like Hendrick's opening a door and asking me in, but this is intimate. Things slip free. Even if he hadn't worked it out with me and Jac, he'd know I was lying, hiding something. Which I am.

I rub a cheek against his arm, and he slides his hand over my hair. I raise my eyes to him. "What the fuck is this?"

"Asking the wrong person here, Cat." He sighs. "But I've a penchant for fucking complications no one needs."

It's an odd thing to say because on paper, and in my observations, Hendrick is nothing like that.

I can tell he goes for easy entanglements when it comes to lovers, and those are almost always something to push an agenda. I learned a lot about him in my deep dive into his life last week. Even with the women he fucks to fuck and nothing more, when they go their separate ways, there's no drama.

Uncomplicated in choice of anything like a relationship. Man of little feeling. Of only one-nighters.

Even in his past.

Unless he doesn't mean romantic complications, but something else... "Like you and Jac?"

"Something like that." He strokes his hand against my cheek. "I have no idea what I'm doing right now, either. That's the fucking truth. You and me? Magnets I didn't see coming."

"Or you could be playing me."

"Things aren't always so cut and dried, even when they seem it." Then he nods at the screen. "So, what's your professional opinion on this...?"



It's late, and I'm now wide awake. We had rough, hot sex again, in a slow burn way, one that even now, hours later, ripples through me.

Outside a storm's started, and though the sound of it is muted in the three-story brownstone, I can hear the crack and rumble of thunder.

Hendrick is asleep and doesn't stir, so I make myself get up.

As sweet as that interlude was tonight, I'm here in his home. The real one. I need to take advantage and search.

I pull on his shirt and creep downstairs to the ground floor, going room to room. There aren't any papers lying around. He has a computer in the study, but it's locked down. I can't find a safe, hidden or otherwise.

Making my way up, I search the floor with his bedroom and living room. Nothing there, either.

Slowly, using the intermittent lightning and streetlamps below, I search the third floor. Guest rooms, a small gym and a library.

I'm about to leave when I notice the painting on the wall. It's a Picasso.

But not just any Picasso, it's a larger copy of the one in the reading room at the mansion.

I stare at it.

Two options. Go back downstairs, get back in bed, and leave in the morning like nothing's going on at all and I'm not

looking for the Heart of Dark Desires. After that, I can vanish from Hendrick's life—as much as one can vanish on a Quinate member in the same city as them—and find another attack point.

Or search his place right now and get whatever intel I can. Maybe even the necklace.

It's a no brainer.

Option two, all the way.

I switch on the lamp and lift the painting.

A safe.

I don't have my tools. They're in my bag downstairs.

“Shit.” I could try and do it the old-fashioned way or get the bag. I reach out and pull the handle and almost fall over.

It swings open.

My heart hammers hard. I listen. There's nothing but the sound of my heart and the muted storm.

I step up to the safe and look inside. It's almost empty. There's a small jeweler's box and what looks like an envelope. Fingertips tingling, I pick up the box and open it.

A single solitaire. A pink diamond that's so gorgeous it hurts my heart. It's clearly an engagement ring.

I want it.

With a desperation I haven't felt in a long time, I want this ring.

Not to sell, just to have. To look at.

But it's not mine.

And taking it would be... Wrong.

I don't question that as I close the box and put it back. Next, I take the envelope.

All my blood turns to ice.

The cream envelope is sealed and there's a letter or note inside. But that's not what horrifies me.

On the front. In strong, male writing.

Angela Magdalena Jones.

My real name. My *real*, real name. The one I was given at birth and never use.

With trembling fingers, I turn it, going to open it. I stop.

Take this to Jac.

I almost drop it and then see it was on top of a card. All it has is a number and ***call me.***

I'm in this too deep. Fucking Hendrick knew I'd come up here looking and now he's making me even more of a pawn. I suck in a breath and turn, running down the stairs.

The light's on in the bedroom. Bed made.

Sitting on it are Hendrick's tie, my tools, phone, stockings, and shoes.

Panic bubbles up and breathing is almost impossible. I run into the bathroom. Towels are in a basket, but no dirty clothes. I rush out and go to his closets.

Empty. Not a stitch of clothing.

I race through the house, but every room is devoid of clothing, devoid of real paperwork. The fridge has staples that take ages to go bad, jars, hard cheeses, vacuum packed items and bottles of water and soda. There's a small organic milk,

still very within its use by date, proof this place is used and that's it. The pantry is full.

Oh God. He doesn't live here. He uses it, but it's not his home. He played me. He—

I go back to the bedroom and snatch up my phone, punching in the number.

But he doesn't pick up. It goes straight to a full voice mailbox.

Then a text comes through.

Cat, the alarm system will be armed in three minutes. You have that long to pick the lock and disarm it before the police arrest you. I suggest you dress, get moving and deliver the message to Jac.

My phone lights up again.

Move. Now.

TWELVE

JAC



The banging stops, but the thunder keeps going.

I jump out of bed and pull on my robe, grabbing my gun.

My people don't fucking bang like savages on the front door at four something in the fucking morning. No one does.

I take off down the stairs and stop when I hit the bottom step. There, across the gray stone of the foyer's floor, in a growing black puddle, is an angry, soaked world-class jewel thief.

And I mean fucking soaked.

The white shirt she's wearing—Hendrick's, it's totally his boring fucking brand—is see-through and she's naked under it.

One of his ties is hanging around her neck. She's in stockings that are ripped to shreds and in one hand is a pair of high, expensive heels, the other a sopping wet envelope and a small black case.

She looks like a drowned fucking call girl.

And my dick gets hard.

Because when I say see-through, I mean more than fucking see-through. It's a whole thing. The buttons of the shirt are mismatched to the button holes and the white shirt tails are

sticking to her thighs. Her beautiful cunt peeks through and the shirt's sticking to her breasts, nipples erect.

My gun's pointed right at her heart.

"I like dinner a little earlier and less waterlogged, but hey," I say. "I'll take it. Turned down the offer of sex tonight."

"Good for you," she says, dripping in loathing. "But I'm not here to fuck you."

I run my gaze over her as a noise grabs my attention from the direction of the kitchen. I know who it is, so I don't lift my gaze from MG, nor my gun. "I'm busy."

Carlos clears his throat. "I see that. Need help?"

"No, I don't need help, Carlos. If I decide you can have her, you'll be the first to know."

Her eyes widen as it registers who I'm talking to and what I've told her. But there isn't fear. Just disgust. Aimed at me.

"Not what I meant," Carlos says, his tone even, and as close as he gets to chastising me. "She broke in."

Her gaze swings to me.

"I fucking know. Well, she broke into the grounds. She knocked."

"*She*," MG snarls, "can hear you."

I ignore her. "Make sure the alarm's off. I don't need a swarm of guards hitting the house."

"Already done. Sir," Carlos says.

I almost smile at that, except MG being here isn't a happy moment.

Especially as she's in Hendrick's clothes and nothing else.

She's covered in more tiny bruises, the stubble burn on her face a real fuck you. I'm paying for her. Not him.

At least, I don't think he is.

But no.

She might be bouncing and coming all over his cock, but she's not exactly pleased to be here, and I highly doubt she'd dress like this if she were on his payroll.

Honestly, it's such a me move that if I didn't fucking hate Hendrick so fucking much, I'd high five him. I didn't know he had this level of fucked up shit in him.

He's capable of a lot, but this kind of sexual play and torture of the girl by humiliating her and sending her to me is out of my playbook, and not something I'd ever put him down for.

"I've got this, Carlos." This time I throw him a glance.

He doesn't say another word, just disappears, and I look at her with all the contempt I can muster.

"Do you have my jewels?"

She drops her gaze to the gun, then looks up at me. "Does waving a gun around make you feel like a man, Jac? Or do you think you can put it down? I promise I won't hurt you."

She holds up a sodden envelope.

I laugh and lower the gun. "Is that for me?"

"What the fuck is up with you two? Did you both have a fall out over the same woman?"

"What?" I laugh. "No. Hendrick's an asshole. So am I, but at least I have the balls to show who I am to the fucking world. You know the story."

“I know the story.” She nods and folds her arms, which has the delightful consequence of pulling the shirt up and exposing that cunt. Which, I’m guessing from the fingerprint bruises on her upper thighs, has been well used.

“But,” MG continues, “stories have a way of masking truth. I’m asking for the truth. You guys hate each other, there’s a family feud where no one can do anything because of the Quinate. So you’re both down to quibbling over fucking nothing?”

I glare at her and stalk up, grabbing her throat with one hand and slamming her against the door. I press the gun to her temple. The safety’s on, I’ve no intentions of splattering her brains, but I want to punish her. I want to put fear into her. I want her to understand she was mine first.

To play with, I correct myself. Mine first to play with. Because I paid for her. Fuck.

I take in a shuddering breath.

“Fucking nothing? He’s responsible for everything, and those jewels aren’t his. They’re mine. His family stole them, and I’m taking them back. Because all this shows is that he’s got them. I wasn’t sure until you got the fakes. But he’s playing a game, MG.”

“So are you,” she says, “with me.”

My gaze drops to her mouth. There’s a fucking story here. Why she’s soaked, in his shirt. I want the envelope she’s got in her hand, one that’s clearly meant for me, but I also want her to understand just what she’s in for.

She thinks she can walk away. She can’t.

The moment she opened her legs to Hendrick, she sealed her fate. She’s damaged goods now, and I’m going to make

sure she doesn't even remember his name. But first, I want him to see just how much she wants my cock.

In the past, I've been content to take the girls I can and fuck them behind his back. I've never wanted to stamp one as mine.

This one I do.

I've got her by her throat, and there's not a drop of fear.

There's hate, contempt, anger, desire and a lustful challenge.

Like it or not, this little whore wants me, just as much as she wants Hendrick.

Why else would she play his game by coming here like this?

I push the gun between her thighs, rubbing it along her folds, and fucking Christ, she moans.

Removing it, I lick her juices from the barrel. "Fuck you're a tasty slut. I see why he likes you."

"Fuck you."

"Oh, you'll be doing that. But first, get the fuck on your knees."

"No."

I think about pulling the gun on her again, but instead, I shove it in the pocket of my robe. I squeeze her throat a little harder. "On your fucking knees. I'm going to come in your mouth and you're going to dribble it on the asshole's shirt. Then you'll rub it in over your tits and give him the shirt. Got it?"

Her eyes narrow.

“Got it?” I say again.

“I’m not your whore.”

“You are. A very expensive one at that. On your knees.”

She’s still got the envelope, shoes, and the little case.

“Dump the shoes, whore.” Hooking my foot behind her knee, I get one to buckle. It makes it easier for me to force the rest of her down to the position I want.

“If I’m the whore, you know that makes me the smarter of the two of us. I’m the one getting money, and you’re the one who can only get some by paying a girl.”

I stare down at her and laugh. Damn it all. If I wasn’t so fucking angry, if she hadn’t stupidly decided to fuck Hendrick, I’d really like her. She’s got a smart mouth, and I’m seeing the merits of that. Just like I’m seeing the merits of a woman who really fights me back. It’s beyond hot.

It’s sublime.

But this...

This is teaching Hendrick a lesson.

And I really want her fucking mouth.

Taking her hair, I pull her head back. “Open.”

She does—she doesn’t really have a choice. Then I guide my cock into that hot, wet hole.

“Oooh, fuck...” That magic of the first time of being in a woman’s mouth is off the charts with her. I push forward so I’m as deep as I can go, and I hold it. Fuck.

She’s gagging on me, her hands on my ass. One with the letter, the other flesh on flesh, but she’s not pushing me away.

Each time she gags, a jolt of pleasure races up my cock and through me, and I push in deeper.

I pull out and then start to stroke in. I treat her mouth like a cunt, and I take her rough and hard, holding her by her hair. The gurling and suction sounds are fucking music and the feel of her heat and sucking wetness beyond euphoric. Within seconds, I'm on the verge of coming, but I do all I can to hold off. The slight clink of the piercing on her teeth when I hit right is glorious, and I don't want this to end.

But as I push back, holding her beyond the point where she needs air, to where she starts to struggle and make copious amounts of saliva, I'm losing it. I can feel the climb of my balls, as they get tight and high and tingling with the need to come.

I hammer into her right from here, enjoying how her struggle for air makes her throat work my cock's head, like its own personal massager.

Oh, shit, if I could, I'd tape this and send it to Hendrick, but only my room's set up for that. My brain keeps dragging me back to her mouth, the sin and delights of it. I pull back, slapping her cheek to let her know she can take this chance to breathe—I don't want her passing out, and the gulps of breath slide over me, too, a pleasure all its own.

Then, I shove back down, deep, her nose smashed against my stomach, then out, then down. And finally, I can't hold back, so I let go of her hair and widen my stance.

“Head back. Mouth open.” I pull out until just the tip is touching her lips. When I start coming, I watch as my cum spurts into her mouth, my dick jerking as it fills her with my seed. To my surprise, her lust-hateful gaze locks with mine,

and she sticks out her tongue, as if meeting my challenge and asking for more.

Holy fuck. It's hot as hell.

When I'm done, I wipe myself in her hair. She's still there, mouth open, my cum sitting on her tongue like the dirtiest, filthiest thing of beauty I've ever seen.

"Oh, fuck that looks good. Fuck. Spit it on the shirt, cunt."

She's shaking, but she does as she's told, and fuck, if it isn't a show she puts on for me, as she lets the cum out slowly and then rubs it in, big circles, plastering the shirt and my cum over her tits.

When she's done, I drag her up. "How does that feel, MG?"

"Hendrick's better."

The words stab. Ticking time bombs in the air.

"Well, I guess I'll have to keep trying, improve."

"Not on me."

"Yeah, MG, on you."

"I'm not playing your games," she snarls.

I smile. "You just did."

"I didn't have a choice."

"There's always a choice," I say softly. "And you know it."

When she looks at me, there's desire and fury. Then she shakes her head. "Maybe there is. So I'm making mine. Whatever this piddly little fucking power play or game or whatever the fuck you two are doing is? Count me out. I won't be a pawn."

“You dropped your panties for the enemy, MG. It’s a little too late. I don’t know if you’re conspiring with him, so we see this through. You’re in my life, to do with what I want until I have my necklace.”

“Fuck. You. The answer is no.” Her voice starts to shake. “I’ll return your money. All of it. Including expenses. Consider this done. Just give me something to wear and I’m gone.”

“No.”

I don’t even need to think about it.

“Fine, I’m going like this,” she says. “Here’s your letter. You’ll have your money.”

I slam my hand on the door and box her in.

The letter is crumpled, wet, and the writing is bleeding a little from whatever fucking pen he used. Probably a fountain pen. He’s just that kind of asshole. And on the front’s her name.

I’m sure she thinks it’s there for her, like a warning he knows all about her, but it’s to let me know he knows all about her.

A threat against her? A word to me that she’s under his protection? I’m not sure. But I know that’s also his intent, for me not to know.

It works because I don’t know which way will piss him off more, terrorizing her and hurting her—if I choose to do so—or turning her to my bidding. It’s a strategic move, and until I work out his feelings on the matter, it works.

Of course, I’m not killing her. She’s the best bet I have of getting the fucking necklace. But Hendrick’s letting me know

he knows I'm after it. Fuck. He always likes to play five angles at once.

Angela Magdalena Jones. I knew her name was Magdalena and she uses Rossi. I never bothered reading the rest, but this will be in her dossier. Which took a lot to get. He has it too.

Even if she found his dick magic, she's not a kiss and tell type.

I slide her a glance, the anger rising again. Anger at her riding the fucking Hendrick train. She was mine first. Yeah, I'm back to that because it's true.

Yet another thing he took from me.

“Open it, MG.”

She doesn't hide the loathing. She can't stop the dip of her gaze down to my cock, but she does as asked and opens the envelope. She pulls the letter out. “Let me go.”

I snatch it. “No.”

She goes to move, but I pin her there, moving the hand on the door to her throat again.

I read the letter.

THIRTEEN

MAGDALENA



His face grows hot and angry as he reads. It's not a long note. But whatever it says pisses Jac off even more.

I know I should be scared, but I'm not. He won't kill me. He wants me too much for that. And I hate myself for wanting him, for loving the brutal face fuck he gave me, for loving the humiliation of the mouth of cum and his demands to stain Hendrick's shirt with it.

I'm angry enough to do it.

I'm angry enough to want to hurt both of them. Even though both men are big, tall, and could swat me like a fly. I'm no tiny little short thing; I couldn't do what I do if I was, but my average height and high level of fitness is nothing compared to them. Compared to them I'm about as threatening and strong as a blade of grass. But there are other ways to hurt, smarter ways, and boy, do I want to hurt them both for doing this to me.

If it was just about the stealing of a necklace I wouldn't mind, but I'm clearly in the middle of something bigger, darker, more sordid. Somehow, I've gotten sucked into this mess.

But more than the anger and the wanting to hurt them, I want out. Of this job. Of their lives.

“I want to go home.” My phone’s in one of my shoes and I’ll—

Jac’s hand tightens on my throat, and he drags me into the room, dumping the note on the table near the door.

He tosses me like a ragdoll so I land on a big, modern winged chair in red that sits on the other side of the front door. I don’t know what it’s for. Lazy bodyguards? Guests? Girls he likes to abuse?

Hysteria is nipping at my heels, and I shove it away. I need to think.

I go to rise, but he shoves me back down. His cock’s erect again, the sight of that sweet curve and piercing makes my palms itch to hold it.

“Pathetic,” Jac says, glaring at me. Then he turns, about to run away, so I take my chance and get up and make a run for the door.

He grabs me and pins me against the wall, his body pressed against mine, and he deliberately rubs against me, pushing his cock against my belly. How is he so fucking fast?

“Let me go, Jac,” I growl.

“Fuck no. The party’s just getting started.”

I shove at him, and he shoves back. Then he looks at me with such degrading pity I want to sink my teeth into him and draw blood.

“Not only,” he says, moving his mouth down to my ear, “did you fail in the easy job I gave you... Some fucking world class thief you are, MG. Aren’t you meant to be the best? Or did you just spread your legs and suck cock to buy that

reputation? I mean, I'd give you a solid three stars on Thieves dot com."

"Prick."

He runs his thumb up between my thighs, and I jump and shiver as he strokes over my clit. My traitorous body gets wetter than it was when he made me blow him.

"Cunt." He pushes a finger in and rocks his cock against me. "With," he murmurs, "a wet cunt."

"Don't touch me."

"You fucking love it, MG. Now, where was I? Oh, yeah, not only are you a sad excuse for a thief, but you went and fell for Hendrick's nice guy act. At least with me, I'm what I say I am. He lies and pretends, and you fell for it. And here you are, caught in my enemy's trap for me, his little fucking whore. One who runs his errands."

I slap him hard, and he rips his hand from my pussy and grabs my wrist, squeezing.

"You're an asshole. A fucking piece of shit." I glare.

He squeezes harder. "I wouldn't fucking do that again, MG, or you'll regret it."

"Really?" I'm beyond fucking caring.

I raise a brow, smirk, and with my other hand I hit him again, even harder. It's so hard his head snaps and the print of my hand stands out.

He looks at me. Eyes narrowing, and I know I've made a mistake.

I've hit an on switch in him. One I have no idea how to flip off.

One I'm not sure I want to.

Even though this look, right here and now, is what suddenly scares me.

It also makes my pulse leap and my body hum.

“Are you my whore now—and I do mean the slut without payment kind of whore—the one who'll do anything for a taste of my dick. Are you? I mean, look how you dressed to come see me? You even spit my cum onto your tits for me. What else will you do?”

He rips the shirt open, buttons flying, and he strokes his hand down my body, making my stomach flutter as he comes to my pussy and shoves his fingers in. “So fucking wet. Wetter than before. You're a little whore who'll take anything I demand. I bet if I summoned Carlos, you'd ride him, wouldn't you? Shit, maybe I could get someone else to take your ass, too. How about two in one hole? And you know what? You'd do it. You'd fucking love it and wish it was me.”

“You're disgusting.”

“And yet you're dripping on my floor just to get my cock in your tight cunt.” He sighs and bites hard on my nipple, pulling on it, and I try to shove him away, but it doesn't work. I'm rubbing up against his hand. I'm working his fingers deeper in me, and I'm pushing my breasts at him.

But I don't want him doing this.

I go for one of his nipple rings, but he bites my nipple so hard I yelp.

He lifts his head. “Only if you're good, MG.”

“I'm not riding anyone else.”

“Except Hendrick.”

I take a ragged breath. “Fuck you, Jac.”

“I’d get them in here, you know. I like watching, but thing is, I’m not ready to let others have you. Maybe I’ll cut Hendrick’s dick off and make you feed it to him while I ride your ass. Would you like that?”

“What the fuck’s wrong with you?” I demand. I’m writhing on his hand, and he works me hard and rough. I’m close to coming.

He knows it. Can feel it. The knowledge’s all over his beautiful face.

“The same thing that’s wrong with you, MG,” he says. “We like it rough. You like it rough. You want it to hurt. You want to be my toy.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

He moves his hand, just as I’m coming and the fucker laughs, pushing me. I tumble to the ground and it hurts as I land on my ass.

“Great view,” he says, looking between my thighs, making my blood burn, my clit throb. “Pity I don’t have my phone.”

I try to get up, but he puts a foot on my stomach, holding me down. He strips off his robe, and for a moment, I forget to breathe. He’s utterly glorious. Tattooed and pierced. A yang to Hendrick’s yin.

Right now, I want him, as much as I hate him. He’s a violent, cruel man, one with deep and abiding passions. He’s capable of highs and lows that can destroy, and I know I should run.

If he lets me, I know I should run.

If he lets me, I know I wouldn't.

"You're fucking hot, MG. It's the only reason I don't rip you to shreds. And I want you in a way I don't even understand. But that doesn't mean I'm forgiving you."

His foot moves up to my chest.

"I don't want your fucking forgiveness." I glare. Wanting him. Hating him. "There's nothing to forgive."

He slides his toes over my breast, and my pulse leaps. "That's where we differ. I just want to know why the fuck I want you so much."

His foot comes to rest on my throat. No real pressure, but he could, with a shift in his weight, crush my windpipe, snap my neck.

"Maybe because for the first time in your misspent life you've met a woman who doesn't simper and grovel for your scraps."

"Perhaps." He presses down a little. "It's a fucking conundrum."

"How about you take that conundrum and shove it up your ass."

He smiles, and it hurts something inside me, something I don't understand. Lifting his foot, he comes down and studies me. "You say that, yet you'd fuck my brains out in seconds flat."

"No accounting for taste," I say, spitting the words. "And I don't want you. I just want to get out of this."

"No. You want me as much as I want you."

“Jac, this is adrenaline, nothing more.” The lie sounds exactly like what it is, a pathetic lie, even to my own ears.

“Your heart’s beating wild, and you’re all flushed,” he says. “You fucking want me to fuck you stupid. I’ll make it hurt so good, MG. Punishment and pleasure.”

“Let me go.” I try to get up, but this time he uses his hand.

He’s right. Of course he is. I fucking want him. I want to fuck him senseless, and if I could get away with it, I’d have him in seconds flat. Moments.

I want him, and he knows it but he’s strong, and—

He grabs me and flips me, and my knees and hands hit the floor. He pushes my legs wide and he shoves his cock in me, all the way.

I shudder with the sudden fullness, and I can feel all of him, every inch, the way the piercing stimulates to a next level degree, the veins, and the way the slight curve makes him hit just right. The stretch. The delicious fullness. So there. So deep. So wanted, even though I know I shouldn’t.

He puts a hand on the back of my neck and squeezes, digging the other into my lower back as he rides me hard and brutal.

Each slam hits me deep, and it’s that resounding dull pain that’s edged with pleasure, but it’s an equal measure of both because he doesn’t let up. If anything, he gets rougher, slamming into me like he’s trying to get his cock to come out my mouth. And I slide on the stone floor with each thrust.

In this position, the drag of his cock as it comes out pulls the piercing against my insides, and it’s so good and so intense that I start to come.

He just keeps going, slamming his cock into me, his hand on my neck tighter and tighter. And he rides my orgasm, then he pulls out and drags me by my hair up and over the floor, using his free hand to squeeze my mouth open where he rams his cock into me, right to the back of my throat. He hammers me while I gag and twitch and suck because he feels so good. When it feels like he's going to come, he pulls out, looking down.

“You're a fucking mess of a whore, MG. But my cock fucking loves you. And you love it.” The caramel butter of his voice turns warm, a sharp dichotomy to his sharp-edged nasty words, and I shiver and convulse as an orgasm hits me even though he's not even in me.

Jac tosses me to the floor and forces my legs back. He holds my ankles and just plunges into me, bending down to bite and pull on my nipples, adding to the bruises.

When he's done with that, he picks me up and tosses me on his shoulder and shoves me on the chair, and he beats my ass. It's not a love spanking, it's a spanking designed to hurt and to punish, and I scream and come, anyway, and he knows it. Jac laughs.

Shoving me to the ground, he grabs my hair again and pulls me by it, like he's some deranged caveman, and I have to scrabble with my hands and feet to ease the pain. And yet... oh, God. There's something so seriously wrong with me because even though I hate it, there's a part of me that's so turned on by this, my vision blurs with heavy lust.

This time he makes me bend over, ass in the air, hands on the floor, and spits into his hand just so he can lather up his cock. Then he pounds into my ass so hard, I just scream. He grips me, half lifting my hips from the ground as he slams into

me over and over until he pulls out, pushes me over, and using his foot, shoves me onto my back.

He jacks himself, and then he grunts, spraying me with his cum.

We stare at each other, panting, his dick is in his hand.

I don't know what possesses me to do it, but I start wiping up his cum and sucking it off my fingers. Our eyes lock, and he turns feral, hungry. The same savagery moves inside me. It's like we're testing each other, trying to see which one will win this brutal game we're playing. He may think he's the reigning champion, but this time, I refuse to lose.

He drops down and shoves his fingers in my mouth. I meet his challenge by sucking hard.

I'm mesmerized, and I let him do it again, this time, letting him scoop up his cum and feed it to me, pushing his fingers deep into my mouth each time.

"Fucking suck them clean, whore," he says softly, cruelly.

I do because it doesn't matter what I said. I'd lick him head to foot for a scrap, for a taste, for the pleasure he can unleash.

In turn, I start to finger myself and offer my wet fingers to him. He sucks them in, biting down.

When he's done, he just looks at me and grabs my cheeks before pushing me away on the floor.

Reality comes back with a vengeance. I don't regret this exactly, it was too good, but I hate that I just joined the ranks of the Jac fan club. I'm no better than that actress he brought to Hendrick's party, am I?

And then there's the Hendrick thing where I'd do anything for a taste of him, too.

Suddenly, the humiliation crashes down, and I need to get the fuck away.

If I can.

I groan. It hurts to move, but I try to get up.

"Wait." This is a softer, different Jac. It's so unexpected, I pause. I don't know what to do with the tone, the lack of violent passion, the lack of arrogant control. "Let me..."

Jac reaches for me, and I scoot away.

Irritation flashes, and he takes my arm and I try to shake him off.

"Stop that," he says. "Fuck."

He doesn't let go. Instead, he eases his hand around my arm, and then when I fall, he takes the other, pulling me up to my feet.

I don't know why he's helping me. But he is. It's not loving or caring when he slides me into his arms, I know that. He just doesn't want me to collapse. Not unless he's doing the shoving.

I can't look at him.

"Can I go?"

"MG—Magdalen—"

"Can. I. Go?"

He breathes. It's a ragged sound. Like he's going to say something, but he abruptly nods. "Yes, you can go."

I'm not saying fucking thank you. He breathes out again, the sound jagged, like something's there, right under the surface, something that's almost regret. Which is stupid. Jac doesn't do self-reflection.

“Jac—”

“I'll find something for you to put on.”

I still don't look at him. “I don't—”

“You'll get arrested. Public indecency. Come on.” He scoops me up and takes me up to his room before dumping me on his bed.

“If you want more,” I say, “call someone else. I'm done.”

He goes quiet. “Is that what you say to Hendrick?”

“He doesn't get violent. I get hot for him. I can't get enough. And, as I said, he doesn't get violent.”

It's the wrong thing to say.

But screw him. The world's been handed to him and it's time for this asshole to learn things don't always go his way. Not how I feel, not who I want.

“You wanted it, MG. You want me. Tell me you don't.”

I don't say a word.

“Go ahead. Tell me. I want to hear it.”

I can't, and he knows it.

“You want me, and you'll want this.”

I eye him warily. I'm naked. I don't have clothes. I'm essentially at his mercy. And I think I hate Jac Miller more than I hate Hendrick Agnossio for putting me in this situation.

“Want what?” I ask.

He gets on the bed and pulls me to him.

“This.”

FOURTEEN

HENDRICK



Magdalena was meant to call me right after she delivered the note. I lied about the alarm. I had a car for her, waiting, but she ignored it. Instead, she headed out on foot in the rain. I know because the driver called, and I made him follow.

She dismantled whatever alarm he had because my driver told me no one opened the gates, that she did. And then she walked right up to Jac's, and banged on the door.

The driver left on my orders.

And now...I don't know where she is.

Yes, I do.

She's fucking Jac.

That bothers me more than I want to admit.

I know she's been fucking Jac. Mainly because it's a total Jac move. Manipulate with his cock.

Rubbing a hand over my eyes, I sit at the Aldon desk in the mansion. It's going on seven a.m. and I'm fucking beyond disappointed she ignored my text at five a.m., telling her to come here.

She knows I've got the necklace, and she's the kind to get wet and orgasm over such a thing. I saw her touch the table, I

noted the way she took in the Picasso. It's not just knowing the worth, she's got an eye for the rare and the sublime, the coveted. And I'm betting jewelry turns her all the way on.

I know because she's a woman made to be draped in jewels and she doesn't wear them.

If she does, they'll be something like the Heart of Dark Desires, so ostentatious and over the top in the worth and beauty and sheer sensual nature of them. Or it'll be something small and seemingly worthless.

Except to her.

Magdalena's that kind of woman. Private statements when it comes to jewels. She appreciates the nature of them.

I don't have a collection. It's not my thing. Just the necklace and the ring she didn't take. I wonder if she wanted to.

That and the other ring. But I keep that for other reasons. Not to do with family.

The diamond isn't big or fancy. It's worth a shit ton, and it's exquisite, but it'll also be obvious to someone like her that it's worth way more than the karats. I really don't think about it anymore. It lives in its own private mausoleum of the safe at that house. It actually took me by surprise when I put the letter in there. I'd forgotten all about it.

I check my phone again and glare at Damon as he comes in. He doesn't knock. But he's damn lucky I don't tend to carry a gun. I can do enough damage without one and when I do...well, that's one hell of a statement.

The man sets down a China cup in duck egg blue in front of me and takes a sip from the other one. I raise a brow at him as the scent of strong Colombian coffee rises.

“Is it a good fucking China moment?”

“You might not appreciate all the wealth in this place, but I do.” He offers a half grin as he pulls up a chair. “Besides, Janelle or whatever her name is in your kitchen, found out you were here, so she insisted.”

“Doesn’t she know I like being left alone?”

He sips his coffee. “She wanted to be alone with you.”

“Wh—” I stop, picking up on what he means. “This is why I hate this place.”

“She’s hot.”

“You hired her, didn’t you?”

He shrugs. “Gotta have something nice to look at around here.”

Damon isn’t asking where the thief is. I check my phone again, and he gets up. “You want me to postpone that meeting later?”

“Yes. No. Maybe.”

“I’m not your secretary, Hendrick. I expect a bonus come Christmas.”

“I’ll leave your head attached to your neck. How’s that for a bonus?”

He finishes his coffee. “A little lacking, but I’ll make do.” Then he hands me a slip of paper. “In case you want to chase her down.”

I eye it. “Thanks.”

“You don’t think Jac would hurt her, do you?” he asks.

“Not Jac’s style, not really. Humiliation, yes, but he hired her, and she hasn’t ripped him off. And...” I pick up my phone, type out a text, and press send, then I set it down. “I sent him a note. Her name on the front.”

Damon takes half a step and stops. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to end up at the bottom of the river?”

“Concrete shoes are so last century,” he says with a laugh.

I glare at the fucker. “I know what I’m doing.”

He doesn’t look convinced.

“Are you going to ask Fiona out?” I ask him suddenly. “I’m curious.”

“So you don’t want to talk about what you’re doing?”

I sip my coffee. “No, I don’t, but I thought I’d ask, anyway.”

“Trying to hand off your leftovers.”

“I’ll tell her you called her that,” I say.

“You’re a prick.” He pauses. “*Sir.*”

“I think I know what I’m doing,” I say quietly. “But her name on the front was the only way.”

“To poke the lion or to protect?”

“Both?” I sigh. “I don’t know about the meeting today. She didn’t call.”

He nods. “I’ll reschedule.”

When he goes, I close my eyes, letting the coffee cool as I lean back in the chair.

Her name on the front was something I contemplated about.

Her name on the front tells Jac she's under my protection, and I know who she is. And what she's up to. It claims her as mine.

Jac won't like that at all, especially when I told him I have the Heart of Dark Desires, and it's mine, and he'll never see it. He'll never find it.

I taunted him.

And I used Magdalena as my pawn.

I know, I know, I could have just sent him the note, kept her out of it. And I fucking know the last thing my cat wants is to be caught up in a Quinate cold war.

We're both playing with her. No one's innocent, not even her.

She'd have robbed me blind if she thought she could get away with it. Fuck, she thought she had the night of the gala, but I also know she'd have taken the Picasso if there'd been room.

She's meticulous, brilliant, and also a little impulsive. She's known for laser-like strikes, thefts pulled off like high art and sometimes odd things go missing. A painting when it's clear she's gone for jewels. A trinket when she's taking art. Not often, but every now and then the cat does something unexpected.

Like the Picasso would have been. If she had the time and means.

Magdalena's a spitfire who I know hates what I did to her, but I want to know what he said. His reaction. And I expected

her to come here, to yell, fight, push back. To challenge.

Because even though she may hate all this like I know she does, she also can't help herself.

She'll want to see the necklace. Touch it. Steal it.

She'll want to find out the truth of what's going on except...

Except she isn't here.

She didn't fucking text me.

My phone buzzes.

And my heart leaps, then it hammers.

But it's Jac.

Fuck you, dickwad. Fuck you to hell and back. Your little piece is nice and sullied, just like you. Do the world a favor and drop dead.

My hand clenches the phone.

Sullied?

Fuck, if he hurt...

No, he's letting me know he fucked her. Something I figured would happen. I made her dress...I don't know why I made her dress like that. Yes, her dress and bag were in the back of the car that she ignored. But I could have ordered my driver to stop and make her get in. I could have left them for her in the house.

I sent her basically naked to my enemy.

Does that make me as bad as Jac? Or worse?

Then again, Jac isn't going to rape her. He's only going to force a game she wants.

It's true, I know it.

So why the fuck do I feel guilty?

Shit, it's nearing eight in the morning, so I call my car, and grab my things. I've got an address, and though I'm not skilled at lock picking like Magdalena, I'm moneyed. I can make almost anything I want to happen.

It's a drizzling, gray morning and I have the driver take me into Delacroix. I smooth the paper Damon gave me out on my thigh and call the number.

Her number. The Invisible Cat's. MG Rossi's. Her underground ad that took my people a few days to find.

I've got no idea who her partner in crime is, but she'll have someone. They'll be sleek, professional, bland, and—

“Whoever you are go fuck yourself,” a voice says as the call's answered. “Unless you have a million dollars for me. If you do, give it over and then go fuck yourself.”

Honestly, I'm not entirely sure what the fuck I should say.

The voice gets tetchy. “Hello? Who is this?”

I stare at my phone on my other thigh.

Cat's partner is a woman, rough at the edges, surly and lacking in anything remotely professional.

“Get a lot of business with that attitude?” I ask.

She snorts a laugh, and there's a very high level of hostility in her voice. “I'm not looking for fucking business. At least not at this hour.”

“This is—” I fumble for the name Damon wrote, it's on the back of the note, but before I can say it, she cuts me off flat.

“You know who you fucking called.” She pauses. “And you’re shit out of luck in hiring us to help you with your event you need planned. We’re booked up. Big fuckin’ job, babe. Find someone else. I need my beauty sleep.”

“I’m not looking to fucking hire you. I’m looking for Magdalena.”

Silence meets my words.

Loaded with all the fucking sides and extra hot sauce kind of silence. It’s silence that won’t shut the fuck up.

A part of me wants to hire this woman as a trainee henchman. Henchwoman? I don’t really have one of those per se. A mini-Damon?

“Your partner?” I ask.

“I fucking know who she is. How do you know her?”

“How and why,” I start in a low tone, “do you think?”

“I think you’re a fucking dick, that’s what I think,” she says. “This has to be one of the pretty boys. Hendrick or Jac. I’m going with the first. Can’t see the other one calling.”

“Hendrick. And you are?”

Suddenly she goes silent. “What do you mean you’re looking for her?”

“She didn’t text like I...requested.”

The woman puts me on hold. Then she’s back. “She’s not answering. She always answers. Mostly.”

“I’m—”

“Where’s Lena?”

“Not with me or you, then. Fuck.” I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. “With Jac, I’m guessing, if she isn’t with you.”

“You can fuck right off. Asshole.”

And she hangs up. Jesus fucking wept, this woman’s like Cat on fucking crack. If she wasn’t annoying the absolute living shit out of me, I’d want to meet her. See who gave Magdalena a run for the stolen jewels in the attitude department.

Though my cat has more nuance than the ballsy woman who hung up. Even when she wanted to spit fire, a big part of Magdalena’s draw is her nuance, her layers.

I’m about to call back, see if the lady’s calmed at all, when we pull up.

A woman in a cashmere coat stands by the curb, gaze darting about. Fucking real estate people.

“Belinda?”

“This is highly irregular,” the estate agent whose life I can make hell says. “Ms. Esterhazy owns the apartment and a jewelry store a few blocks away and—”

“Consider your payment for helping doubled.” I hold out my hand.

She puts the keys into it. “And if someone asks—”

“I’m looking to buy the penthouse.”

There’s no penthouse, and I just walk past her and use the keys to let myself into the building.

And then the top floor apartment. I open the door and lock it behind me.

Esterhazy...oh, shit, is that who answered the phone? A friend who owns a jewelry store? She's got to be the *professional* woman I spoke to on the phone. Her partner in crime.

It makes sense.

I wander around the apartment, but there's no sign of Magdalena. This place is like mine in Millionaire's Way. A stop over, a place to lay low. And it's going to be where she'll come when she's being used like she is, or if she's on a job.

The apartment has clothes, food in the fridge, and a bathroom with a free-standing tub. I go into the living room and sit in the gray of the morning, answering emails on my phone.

Everything in me suddenly slows down, and I look up at the door.

I know she's there, behind it, about to come in.

I can fucking feel her.

Something scrapes in the lock.

FIFTEEN

MAGDALENA



I push and turn the makeshift picks in the lock, pausing. Exhaustion sits heavy like a haze over me as I stagger up the steps to the top floor. I'm not far from the diamond district. The place is the one I use when working or need to lay low, and right now?

I need to lay low.

Normally, I can take those stairs at a run.

My head hits the wood of the door, something thick and electric in the air, stopping me from opening it, stopping me from making the last move with the lock and stepping in.

Exhaustion.

That's all.

Muscles ache and each step is difficult, and all I want to do is pass out and sleep for about a week. My head pounds and that buzzing of a hangover that comes from bad decisions and no sleep swirls through me.

Jac got me a car, but I called a cab. For a moment I did think about heading home—to my real home, because I doubt either of them have that address—but it's a bullshit, rookie move going there. Everything I need's here, at the diamond district apartment.

Maybe I've led Jac here, maybe he doesn't give a shit. My money's on the latter, but with both him and Hendrick using me as some kind of plaything, I'm not helping them out in giving them more details of my life.

Fuck them.

And double fuck Hendrick for what feels like betrayal.

As for Jac? If I never see the beautiful monster again, it's going to be too soon. He hurt me. It doesn't matter if I liked it, he hurt me.

Worse, he went down on me in his room, ate me out, and made me come again. Then he fucked me hard and rough with a level of such exquisite cruelty that it sent me spiraling off in multiple orgasms.

But I expected that behavior from him. Hendrick not so much. Not that Hendrick hurt me, or got way too rough, the real heart-pounding rough like Jac, but the betrayal hurt.

No, Hendrick was almost worse than Jac.

He used the connection we seem to have. He took it and twisted it to manipulate me.

All that sweetness and pull and understanding, the slipping in beneath defenses was just to force me to play his game, throw me and our sex in Jac's face.

Fuck them both. Hard. And not in a sexual way.

I take a breath as I place my hand against the door, my eyes burning, gritty, throat tight. It hurts to swallow, and God only knows what I look like.

I don't have a key, but my lockpicks are in my bag and Hendrick has that. It takes me a few minutes to get the locks with the specialized hairpins I keep above the door. Hey, I'm a

fucking thief. I make sure my places are protected against others of my kind.

A small laugh erupts.

I push the door open... And I freeze as a prickling sensation comes over me. I'm not alone. I turn, throwing my shoe, and it hits the shape on the sofa.

A scream breaks free, and I slap my hand over my mouth, giving in to the shaking as I recognize the shape and the rough-edged velvet sandpaper voice. "Well fuck."

I recognize the pull in the air, too.

The same that gripped me in the hall. Exhaustion stopped me recognizing it.

"Go away, Hendrick."

Shrugging out of Jac's coat, I let it fall. I don't want it touching me longer than necessary.

There's a sharp intake of breath from Hendrick as he takes me in.

"Have a good time, did you?" he asks, sarcasm heavy in his voice. "Too good to text me back, I see."

"Give it a rest, Hendrick." I'm basically naked. I'm about to get completely naked, too, so I take off the cum-stained shirt and throw it at him, with the tie. "Preferably far away from here. And make sure you leave my keys on your way out."

"I don't have your keys."

My bag's sitting on the floor, and I just look at it, then I take a step forward so I can get to the bathroom. Or the bedroom. Or whatever alcohol I have. I need to wash away

everything that just happened, whether that's by taking a shower, sleeping, or by morning alcohol abuse, it doesn't matter. Whatever it takes.

Hendrick stands, his mouth pulled in a hard line. He needs a shave, and this is the most unkempt I've seen him. His hair's a mess from his hands and his tie's loose, his jacket discarded. Funny all the things you notice when something inexorably pulls you to him.

He's insanely hot and sexy like this. Not that he's not those things the rest of the time, he is. This is just the animal uncaged. The one who's fucked me. Only this time his dick isn't out of his pants.

It's hard though.

I drag my eyes back up and ignore the fact I'm getting wet. I don't even know how or why because my pussy hurts.

Everything hurts.

I've been stretched, pounded, spanked, face fucked and thrown around like a doll. I've been twisted into a pretzel and, sex—no matter what my pussy's saying—is the last thing I want or need.

"I forgot they were in there." He gestures at the bag. Of course he went through my bag when he took my things. When he sent me like his personal whore to deliver a message to his enemy. And then that enemy retaliated by turning me into his own slut so that I could return thoroughly fucked and hurting. At least, that's how it seemed to play out.

I really do hate both of them.

Maybe, right now, this man most of all, because...

Because he made me soft. He made me feel things. *For him.*

I hate myself, too.

“Go, Hendrick.”

“I didn’t ask you to fuck him, Cat. I asked you to deliver a note.”

“You asked squat, asshole. You stole my shit—”

“Just like you stole from me.”

“—and you sent me there dressed in just your shirt.”

“And,” he says, “you fucked him.”

“Like you don’t fuck whoever you want, whenever you want. He sure as shit does and you two are far more alike than you want to think.” I glare at him. Right now, I’m leaning towards the a.m. alcohol abuse into oblivion. “Besides, it’s not like we’re dating.”

“Magdalena?” He stares at me, then he really takes me in, and he frowns, concern and anger breaking out into a battle on his face. “Fuck—”

“Go away.”

“What the actual fuck?”

“It’s nothing that you haven’t done to me,” I say, side-stepping his hand as he reaches for me.

But Hendrick isn’t easily turned down. He steps in front of me and captures hold of my shoulders. “Magdalena?”

“What?”

His touch is gentle, his tone and expression utterly, violently murderous. The fury burns over him, leaving a haze.

“I’m going to fucking kill the bastard. And you—you—”

“Judging me’s rich,” I mutter, deliberately misinterpreting the anger.

His mouth slashes a line of bitterness. They infamously hate each other, Jac and Hendrick. Want each other dead. But this is the first time Hendrick’s truly meant it. In a hand me a hatchet and I’ll chop him up way.

“I’m not fucking judging you,” he snarls. “I’m fucking concerned.”

It’s like ripping something from me when I say, “It was just sex.”

A muscle moves in his jaw. “I know what it was,” he grinds out. “But you look like Jac beat the shit out of you, Cat. Like he...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, and he doesn’t give me a chance to answer. He just scoops me up and carries me into the bathroom. He sets me on the vanity, and goes to the standalone claw tub and fills it, picking up the bottles next to it, and sniffing each one until he finds a ginger and orange blossom liquid soap and puts some in.

Then he comes up to me. “You know the fuckwit deserves to be beaten, flailed, and killed for this, right?”

“Hendrick...” There’s a part that thrills at his words, but there’s another part which whispers that I liked what Jac did.

I want Hendrick to spill blood for me because liking something and it being the wrong sort of wrong shouldn’t exist, but does.

“For you, Cat. I’ll let him live. Say the word and I’ll burn the fucking world.” He touches his forehead to mine. “Get in

the water.”

“You’ve done this before,” I say through lips that don’t feel like they belong to me.

For a second, I think he’s going to ignore me, but he says, “I have. But not for many years.”

I want to ask who, but it’s not my business. He sighs and slides a hand through my hair and kisses me, even though I’m sure he knows what I’ve done with my mouth. “Hendrick...”

“Don’t. You’re right and wrong, you know. I haven’t been with anyone since Elsa and that ended after you stole my wallet in the bar. But we’re not...” He stops, eases me down, and turns me to the mirror. I gasp.

I’m covered in bruises. The heels of my palms and knees are bruised and there are hand prints on my throat, along with bite marks, ones where I can see the print of his teeth in places.

And a bruise on my cheek.

His eyes darken to a black flame. but I shake my head.

“He didn’t hit me. I... Hell, it must have been when he grabbed my face”—to feed me his cock— “or when I hit the ground as he flipped me.”

“And your ass?”

I don’t even want to look. My thighs are a mass of bruises, too.

“He...” I raise my gaze to his in the mirror. “We’re not an item, Hendrick. Not you and me. And certainly not Jac and me.”

It sounds lame and deliciously slutty and wrong.

“Yeah.” He leads me to the tub, turns off the water, and eases me in, and then he discards his vest and shirt, shoes and socks and starts to bathe me. He washes me all over, face, neck, breasts. He slides down to dip between my thighs and the folds of my pussy with the sponge.

I swallow. It’s good. Too good. My muscles slowly relax and release tension, even as his administrations set off another kind of tension inside. He’s not trying to rev my engine.

I don’t think.

“You...ah...you can get in if you want.”

“Not a good idea.” There’s warmth in his voice.

“I probably wouldn’t either.”

He’s sitting on the wooden round footstool that lives in here, and he leans forward, squeezes the sponge on my hair and kisses my head. “Not what I meant.”

Hendrick looks down and hands me the sponge and then stands to take off his trousers. “They’re wool. They’re getting wet. This is a very expensive suit.”

“Says the billionaire.”

“I like the suit,” he says.

But he makes no other move except to sit down and take the sponge to continue to wash me.

I sort of want to cry, but I’m not exactly sure why. The fact he’s being so gentle, and I need that? I desperately want to say it’s because I fucked both him and Jac in such a short amount of time, but it isn’t that at all. I feel a little dirty, but I also like it. As much as I don’t like them, or don’t like aspects of them; I want them, and this is fantasy territory.

But I'm so damn tired, and I'm caught in something I don't understand.

I take a shaky breath. "I get it—"

"Cat? If I get in that bath, I'm going to want to fuck you because you have an effect on me like nothing else." He picks up my hand and washes my arm. And my pussy really wants him back down there.

Oh, Jesus. I'm a mess.

"And," he adds, "I don't think you need that right now. You need some kind of after care."

"You sent me there."

"I know. Fuck, Cat, no one's pure in this scenario. Not you, not him, not me." He pauses. "Answer something for me. Was it rape?"

"No." I don't need to think about it, but he isn't any less angry. "He just got...extremely rough."

"Okay. And yet... You want to rob me blind. For that fuck."

A small smile breaks free. "He's paying me a shit ton of money."

"I was going to show it to you, you know."

A jolt runs through me. "Why?"

He's silent a very long time, just the splash of the water and the sounds of our breathing, along with the noise of Delacroix filtering in.

"Honestly? Lots of reasons. Some good, some bad, some convoluted. But the base reason is I know you'll fucking get

wet. And I have a fantasy of you in that, nothing else and me fucking you.”

“This sounds like a relationship, Hendrick,” I say. I’m only half joking.

That’s my exact fantasy, too.

“Want to hear the kicker here?”

“What?” My heart starts hammering.

“I sent the note to fuck with him, but your name, real name on the front means you’re under my protection.”

I swallow. “Like...you claimed me?”

His non-answer is answer enough. He claimed me like some caveman. These two men really are alike.

“I haven’t told you the kicker.”

“Which is?” I ask.

He slides a hand over my bruised cheek, fingers gentle as he turns my head to him. “I could fall for you, Cat. Maybe I am. It doesn’t make sense, but for the first time in ten years, I’m considering...something more.”

I’m trembling. This is why I’m so hurt by his betrayal. I could fall for him, too. Maybe I am. I want both him and Jac, but I want to know him more, on that emotional level. He’s a shifting sea. Jac is Jupiter’s storm.

“So what? We get a house in a small town and invest in picket fences?”

He laughs, but it’s sad. “Hardly. Love and all of that shit doesn’t always lead to something good. I’m just saying how I feel. I don’t really like playing. And no, I’m not staking a claim. I know you aren’t the type to want to be pinned down.”

“Hendrick...” I don’t know exactly what I want to say because nothing’s changed at all. And he’s right. I’m not that kind of girl. When I sail off, it’s going to be with Harry for our own adventures on a beach, and she’ll have all the girls she’ll want. I’ll choose boring lovers who can make me come but don’t give me anything wild, and the world will go on.

Hendrick and Jac will either keep playing their stupid games or they’ll kill each other.

“Just...just leave it there, Cat,” he says. He shifts the stool down and starts on my feet and legs, and my pussy gets ideas again. “Fucking hell, he did a number on you.”

“Maybe you two need to just have it out and move on. Neither one of you’s happy,” I say without meaning to.

“I work. I build my empire, and I stayed in my lane until a cat burglar snuck into my life. Happy is for fools.”

“That’s the kind of answer begging for questions,” I say.

“It’s all you get.”

I look at him as he shifts his chair behind me, and he starts to massage my shoulders and it’s orgasmic in the best non sex way. “And Jac?”

“Look, I fucking hate the asshole. But his life hasn’t been a bed of roses. I get why he’s like he is, but he just revels in it and doesn’t get out of his own way. He’s a dick. And he’s dangerous.”

“You did kill his father.”

He swears. “So they say. He definitely killed mine.”

“Well—”

“Cat.” He continues to massage me. He’s so damned controlled except when he’s fucking me. “You only have some of the story. A lot isn’t mine to tell, and mine isn’t anyone’s business. Not even Jac’s.”

I’m not sure what that means, but something tells me to remain quiet. So I do.

“My fucking father deserved it. Lili... Jac’s little sister... they say his mother died in childbirth, but his father was a violent man. He beat her mother so badly she died. And to keep Lili safe, Jac devoted his time to being raised to be like him, and doing what was asked.” Hendrick pauses and then his voice drops.

“He loved Lili. He did everything to protect her. Took all the beatings that would have gone her way, made sure she wasn’t there when he wasn’t, and he took those beatings beyond when he could fight back. To protect her.

“His father hit her once. Jac beat the living shit out of him, and told him he’d kill him if he put so much as a finger on Lili. He was always saving her. Until he didn’t.”

There’s a note in his voice I don’t understand. But I know it. It’s pain, pure, deep, old. It’s worn into him. The complexities of Hendrick are mesmerizing, but this hurts, because I can feel the edges of his pain.

“How do you know this?” I whisper.

“I just do.” He stands, holds out his hand, as he releases the plug. “Come on. You’ll be a prune otherwise.”

He dries me slowly and with reverence, and I know I don’t deserve it after fucking Jac. But he doesn’t say a word about that. Doesn’t taunt or bring it up.

“Magdalena, listen to me.” I meet his gaze. “Jac won’t thank you for knowing this. Leave it be unless he brings it up. We had shit fucking lives, but we handled it all differently. Jac blames me for losing everything, and in a way, he’s right. Just...just leave it. If he brings it up, let him.”

I yawn and nod. And there’s a small smile on his beautiful face.

“Hendrick—”

“I’m putting you to bed. Come on.”

He leads me dry, naked, and bruised to the bedroom, and after laying me in bed, he lowers the shades and pulls back the covers.

I don’t like being treated like a breakable doll, but I don’t have the strength to fight him.

He pulls the covers up and climbs on the bed next to me.

“Hendrick? Get under the covers.”

“Okay.”

He does, and the heat of him is amazing. I wiggle back against him, his arms coming around me.

“Cat?”

“Yes?”

“My other advice is return Jac’s money. You’re not getting the necklace.”

I smile and close my eyes.

As I drift off, I make a silent vow.

I’m getting the Heart of Dark Desires.

No matter what.

SIXTEEN

JAC



My date bores me to no end, and she knows it. Right now, her hand's landed on my dick on top of my pants, her intentions clear.

Of course there's some hardening. After all, it *is* a hand massaging my junk, but after another few seconds, I pick up her hand and give it back to her.

I haven't fucked anyone since things got weird in my room and I fucked the hell out of MG. It's Magdalena, but I like MG. It's snotty and gives me space to use it with derision. But yeah, it's been a good handful of days of goddamn celibacy.

It's got nothing to do with anything, I amend. Not the softness, not the violent roughness that surged out of control. I'm just bored.

I sent MG back to Hendrick after fucking her hard once more in the foyer, her on her hands and knees and me taking her from behind... I don't think I've cum as much as I have with her. Not in one night.

Upstairs, I ate her twice, a nasty little foray into manipulation by making it seductive that somehow turned back on me. I fucked her, and then as the sun started to poke its nose into the gray of the morning, told her to get out.

After I took her that last time in the foyer, really not wanting to stop yet, I sent her in the torn shirt, the tie, and one of my coats to Hendrick. She looked like a fucking mess, dripping with my cum from her holes.

I got her a car, knowing she wouldn't take it, essentially sending her out on her own, like a discarded piece of nothing.

Keep telling yourself that, you fuck.

Thing is, it's both true and a lie. I told her to go. But I didn't expect her to do that. And the car was a bluff because I knew she wouldn't take it. I didn't know she'd go and leave.

MG isn't a woman who follows orders.

And I—

“Gotta go,” I say to my date, who's name escapes me.

She starts to protest and reaches for me, but I tune her out and slide free of her. Then I call over the waiter, pay the bill, and just get up and leave.

Carlos is around somewhere. I don't really need him, but I like him. In a way, it's like having a friend. That you pay.

As Quinate, I have about a hundred friends to hang out with whenever I choose, but honestly, there's not one person I actually want to spend time with. They all want something.

I start walking through New Town in the drizzle. There's no destination in mind.

Why the fuck has MG not called me? Apart from anything, it's her fucking job. I'm still paying her to get me the necklace.

If Hendrick thinks the Heart of Dark Desires won't end up with me again, then he's a bigger fucking fool than I thought.

MG doing her fucking job is the only reason I want to hear from her.

That, and I might feel a little guilty. Sort of. I wasn't nice. Or kind. Not that I'm nice. Not that I do kind. Only to Lili and Lili's dead. I failed her, my one fucking purpose. But there's kind and there's...not decent. I'm not decent, but...fuck. I don't know.

I'm usually something better than I was. Because I was a grade A fuckwad, a royal bastard.

I lost control. Got too savage.

She liked it. She came each time. It was intense. Insanely intense sex that took things to the edge of everything, but my anger gave it a bitterness, made me rougher, crueler than I normally am.

Too fucking violent. Too close to my father...

That thought stings in different ways.

I usually let the woman know exactly what I'll do and the humiliation and pain and roughness and all the games have parameters.

This didn't.

Unbound and wild and dangerous. And full of hate and anger and lust.

I went way further than I ever do. As a big man, I'm aware of my strength. Overpowering MG wasn't just hot, it was easy.

I was aware, and I didn't fucking care.

She's got to be feeling it, even now. Shit, I can still feel it, on my knees, where I skinned them. And it took me a few days

to get past the ache. I'm fit, so is she, but she bore the brunt of it.

So, if I'm fucking sore, how the fuck is she doing?

I even called, but as usual, MG didn't pick the fuck up.

Maybe I went a step too far. It doesn't matter that we both wanted it, but—

“Jac?”

“What?” I snarl the word at Carlos, who's magically by my side now.

“There's a call? About drinks with an associate tonight?” He holds out the phone, and I take it. Then I hand it back.

“Tell them I'm busy.”

He does.

“Come on, Carlos. I'm in the mood to get drunk off my balls.”



My fucking head pounds the next day, and not just because of the hangover from my bright idea of getting wasted.

Carlos banged a girl in the bathroom of the upmarket club after letting her try some of the coke we shift. Coke he really shouldn't be carrying with him.

She walked funny when she came out of the bathroom.

She was off her tits on white powder, and he...wasn't. So I don't think he's using. Still...he shouldn't have it.

We distribute but don't sell.

Fuck, I'm not judging. I love cocaine. Love the heart racing surge of confidence and adrenaline it gives. Love how it cuts drunkenness in pieces and sobers you up.

I stopped doing it when I was in my early twenties because even then I could see the merits of selling and not using, and I fucking hated coke dick. Nothing worse than losing the edge of the erection. Of being unable to come because there are too many drugs in your system.

I'd rather bang a hot babe and get my rocks off than get off my balls on drugs.

Someone needs to put that on a fucking poster.

Using is just a messy slope I want no part of. So, I distribute, don't use and don't carry. The only drug I do apart from alcohol is a little weed. And even then, it's less than once a year.

I need to be on my game.

I fucking love control.

But I'm paying for the booze right now. Shit. Teaching someone a lesson, like I'm doing now, is less fun when I'm hurting.

The asshole I'm dealing with's gonna get the brunt of it all.

I hold my hand out and Carlos—who's wearing his sunglasses indoors, a sign he's hurting, too—stands close to me and gives me the white handkerchief. I wipe off the blood and put my foot on the man's groin. Dude's groaning and stupidly trying to get up.

"We'll try again, Trevor," I say. "Owing money to the Quinate is bad. Owing money to me is worse. But..." I lift my foot, only to bring it down on his cheek and push him hard.

“Trying to rip me the fuck off lands you a bullet between the eyes if you’re lucky and a nice torture session before death if you’re not.”

Trevor whimpers and the other people in the swank office—two of my men and six of his, who are all packing—watch intently.

I’m fucking Jac Miller. I’m Quinate.

And something tells me if I let the shit live, he’ll have problems replacing his security shortage tomorrow.

“Think fucking hard.” I look down at him. “Were you trying to cut me out of a million or were you borrowing illegally and now owe me triple and a finger?”

“Please...I just...I needed it...I...”

Needing money by stealing from Quinate is beyond bad.

He might have a nice office, but he clearly leads the life of excess without the capital to back that up. So I’m fifty-fifty on this.

Of course, his outfit greases the wheels for me. Then again... “Carlos? Who on his team’s worthy of taking over?”

Carlos looks about and brings a shaking woman over with a nod of his head. “This is the one I usually work with. She let me know the money would be late or maybe not coming, and Trevor has big debts.”

“Name?” I ask her. I don’t give a fuck. But asking names is the done thing.

Money is money and loyalty is loyalty. Debt changes shit. Even if Trevor wasn’t trying to swindle me, he’ll do it again to get out of trouble with other mafia. Whoever it is he owes to

might be one of ours, but I doubt it. I'm thinking small but nasty. Maybe Russian or Albanian.

Actually, I don't give a fuck about that, either.

He'll do it again if he lives.

Debts make morons untrustworthy.

"Nancy Carruthers," she says.

Nancy? Who the actual fuck names someone under the age of eighty *Nancy?* She's what? Forty?

"Want to take over? Pay rise, more responsibilities. You don't owe money, do you, Nancy?"

"No, sir. Mr. Miller."

The little breathy note of interest in riding the Jac joystick slides into her voice, and I smile to myself.

I'm hot. I'm aware of that. But I'm not so hot that I make women lose their minds no matter what. Case and point, one fucking cat burglar who won't call me back or pick up her phone.

But I appreciate the fact this Nancy has her head on straight enough that she's more interested in being pounded by me than reenacting a similar scene as Trevor.

She's a good choice.

I pull out my gun, lift my foot, and shoot Trevor in the head. I look at her. "You're hired."



A few hours later and I'm finishing the drinks meeting I put off yesterday. I think about calling the fuckwit Hendrick to

talk about this meetup. He's smart, I know his views on such things are insightful.

But I don't. Because fuck him. The man's a walking, talking dark cloud of fun-killer and long looks that, beyond the ice of hate he has for me, are all an *I told you so*.

He's totally going to go there if I make the call. He'll talk to me because it's fucking Quinate business, and he'll probably be right, probably bring up an angle I'm not seeing. He'll definitely gloat. I'll want to fucking kill him more than I usually do, and the asshole will take the discussion to the other Quinate. Who'll listen.

I know they will. The others respect him.

Fuck, I hate him.

I take a breath and toy with my bourbon and listen to Kincaid.

I'm not paying attention to his words. They don't change much, he's always selling something, always slimy and always looking for a way in, searching for cracks he can crowbar open.

No, I'm listening to his cadence and tone, to what he's not saying.

Kincaid tried to use me before to blow up the Quinate. Hendrick set that straight, and he must have wanted to die rather than do that. But money and power are more important to him than hating me, so he choked down pride and did the thing that protected my ass and made us all more money. And crafted the way to keep Kincaid down while appeasing him.

Appeased in a way that gave Kincaid little, protected us, and saved the fucking day.

He's really the absolute fucking worst. Hendrick. Frenemy to enemy to mutually beneficial equals. No matter how much better than me he thinks he fucking is.

Which drags me back to why I think about calling Hendrick.

Kincaid's up to something. He wants to expand, bring in other business plays, one he's tiptoeing about so it's got to be bad. I'm thinking sex slave girls. Maybe underage. That shit seems to go together. Move guns and girls. Heroin, too.

I just can't work out his angle.

There's no seat at our table, and if there was, he wouldn't be a candidate.

Not his father, and not him.

Kester—which isn't a fucking name—Kincaid's a nasty gun runner with less morals than me. One I pushed to keep in with the Quinate because his guns are quality, bountiful and cheap. He has connections to high stake underground gambling for those of us into that shit...buying in, not partaking because those things are a hotbed of filthy rich men and women who want all the decadence they can get.

And give those people enough decadence, enough thrills, and they'll part with money, power, and secrets.

But there are connections and there are positions of power. And they're not always the same. Kester's got the first, for some reason he wants the second. Or so it seems.

“What are you angling for Kes?” I ask, suddenly supremely bored by him because my phone just buzzed, and MG pops up on the screen. “Cut to the chase.”

“I’ve come into some interesting goods. Top quality. Young. Virginal.”

“We don’t do human trade, man.”

He nods. “These are stellar.” His voice drops. “American.”

“Fuck no.”

“I also have some new black ops level weaponry. And a new drug. Then...” He stops and smiles and it’s on the creepier side of creepy. “I’d like to present.”

“At a Quinate meeting?” I shake my head. “It’s closed doors. But I’ll float it.”

“Jac, if you do this, there’d be no need for the Quinate. Just you.”

“Back to the old days.” I could bring up the fact he tried to sell me out before, but I don’t. I’m good at this kind of fucking poker. “Good talk. I’ll be in touch.”

I finish my drink, shake his hand, and leave.



Carlos taps his hand on his thigh when we get in the car. “Jac, I don’t like him.”

“He’s into hiding under rocks,” I say.

“I don’t trust him.”

“Carlos, on a scale of one to ten of trust, he’s a negative twenty. I’m betting he’s going to try the others, too.”

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

“What I always do. Survive and prosper.”



Hair of the fucking dog. I sit in my robe in the low light of my study, hair still wet. I have my third drink of the evening.

Third *quality* drink.

Without a stink of sadistic gun runners.

And finally, I pick up my phone and open Magdalena's message.

Fuck me. I grab my computer and open it, going to the relevant account. And then I go back to the message.

Mr. Miller, this is Ms. Rossi's assistant. I regret to inform you the job you hired her for cannot be completed. Please find the funds, including expenses you paid for, refunded in full. I wish you the best.

"Fuck." I call the number but there's no answer. It goes straight to voicemail.

There's only one way I know that will get her to respond, to get over this hissy fit.

Hissy fit? Fuck, I know what it is, and it makes something in me sit wrong, like I've swallowed something heavy, jagged. And yeah, it sits wrong. Whatever it is tastes a lot like guilt.

I recalibrate, shoving that feeling away, and send her one text.

Like hell.

SEVENTEEN

MAGDALENA



“Why are you here?”

My pussy’s throbbing, growing wet, at the sight of the man in black. This time he’s not in a suit, and that’s all it takes for my mind to be filled with fantasies of me and Hendrick doing kinky, nasty, delicious things in other people’s places while robbing them, as he likes to put it, blind.

I know why he’s here. It’s been a week now, and he finds time to stop by. A lot. These aren’t dates. They aren’t sex. They’re something I’m not really sure either of us know what to do with.

But I might shrivel up if he stopped.

“What would you say if I professed my everlasting love?” Hendrick asks, moving past me with a paper bag in his hands.

“And here I thought you’d done that.”

He laughs and goes to the kitchen, putting down the bag. I follow, watching him.

There’s whiskey, mezcal, crackers, and cheese. There’s also fresh fruit, Dutch carrots, and something in a tub that looks divine. He puts those in the fridge and makes me a mezcal cocktail and a whiskey neat for himself.

He fascinates me. Two days ago, he stopped in and fucked me hard against the wall. After, he just pressed me into it, holding me there, his mouth on my throat, my clothes in disarray, stroking my clit with his fingers back toward orgasm.

Hendrick told me he needed that, his day wasn't done, and I wasn't getting the jewels and then he left.

Today I read how in the past week there have been a whole bunch of violent acts. Murders, shake ups.

These things happen. I live in a city run by the Quinate themselves and every single person who went down were criminals, members of ugly little gangs. One was a human trafficker, and yesterday some slum landlord from Water's Edge—the real slums of the city, down by the docks—where the hookers and skin trade of the lowest kind happen.

I met kids who didn't go to school and worked with drugs and the fishermen, or on the docks. I met kids who made a buck by selling themselves. Not many of the latter, but one or two.

I never met one who did double duty. I want to put it down to it being just a joke. Harry says it is. I just hope that.

And Ray Rodgers? The now dead man?

That man took slumlord to higher levels. He fucked whatever women he could get his hands on. He turned out the pretty, young ones, letting them live for free in his apartments. He discounted the ugly or old ones by using them for sex parties, holes to be used and abused, and by free and discounts I mean he took the money they made and gave them enough for food and drugs.

I was too fast and mean to be caught, and too good at picking pockets to be desperate. And my mom? She was too

long gone to the drugs and that life to notice what I did.

But she kept the lock and the ring. And when she gave them to me, I knew she'd given up.

Harriet's mom was what some of the men called "free use." Married, used as a punching bag, and free for whoever wanted her, or whoever her husband gave her to.

It wasn't all a cesspool of despots and degenerates, but there were pockets that were.

We stuck together, Harriet and me. Had each other's backs and we pulled ourselves out.

"Did you kill Ray Rodgers?" I ask Hendrick suddenly.

"Why?"

I take the gingery-orange scented cocktail from him and lean against the counter in the small kitchen. "Because he's dead. Someone killed him."

"Bound to happen."

I swallow because my next question, if he answers, will tell me how much he knows about me. Things he'd have paid a lot of money to find out. "Did you do it?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"With my hands." He looks at me. "I squeezed the fucking life from the asswipe. That's after I beat the shit out of him and cut him up. The girl he was about to rape was twelve. Quinate own everything, in a manner of speaking, and I'm taking over that part of town. It's been under jurisdiction of the fucking Gimboni family, and they're not on the ball. They

collect and don't care. Money and power are their end all and be all."

I take a sip of my drink, and it's divine. He leans against the sink, eyes dark ice, his high cheekbones throwing shadow below, giving him an almost demonic look. The world's most gorgeous demon.

"For me?"

"Cat, there are ways to do things, and taking advantage of the desperate and poor isn't one of them."

I nod. "So you're one of the good guy violent murderers?"

"I prefer criminal mastermind." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "I'm cleaning up. Those docks and businesses are a goldmine."

"And the people?"

He shrugs. "There will be jobs, and it's not an overnight thing."

"Most men buy the girl flowers."

"I thought you'd like this more."

"So," I say, pulse pounding as I take another sip of the drink. "It's true love then."

"If I say yes?"

I'm not sure how to take those words or what to do with them. "Do you think I'll gush and fall into your arms and give up on the Heart of Dark Desires?"

"What would you say if I said yes?"

"I'd say there's a bridge in Brooklyn with your name on it I can sell you."

He nods, tosses back his drink and straightens, coming up to me. He takes my drink and sets it down, sliding a hand down my yoga pants and into my panties. I'm already slick and aching.

"There is an Agnossio Bridge in Brooklyn, but it's not for sale." He kisses a line along my throat.

Magnets. All I can think of is magnets calling to each other. Inevitable. Irresistible. And his mouth is pure decadence on my skin.

I moan and stroke the erection in his pants. I know one thing; I'm in love with his beautiful cock. I could ride it all day, suck it all night.

"Cat, I'm going to fuck you. Strip." He takes my mouth and kisses me long and slow and deep, an underwater tidal wave of a kiss that pulls me down into the heart of it, of him.

I'm a quivering, needful mess of nerve ends and pleasure centers. And he steps back, motioning for my top to come off.

I obey.

"Bra."

I unhook it and let it fall.

"Anyone tell you your tits are perfect handfuls? And tipped in the softest rosebud pink? I could suckle those fucking nipples for hours."

I shudder at that.

"Pants, but leave your panties on, Cat."

Being a thief, I've gone by different names throughout my life. To stay hidden. They've always been passive, just words. Even when I'd adopted my middle name as my first—

Magdalena. But for some reason, when he calls me Cat, it lights a fire in me. I never thought a name could do that.

How strange.

Shimmying, I take off the yoga pants and he sighs.

“So pretty.” He comes to me and sucks on my nipple, fingers working magic over my panties. Then the cool air hits fevered, wet skin, and he lets me go, stepping back. I look down, he’s pulled them to the side so my lips and clit hood are displayed to him. “Gorgeous.”

Hendrick strokes himself. He’s got his cock out, and it’s huge even in his big hand, and I shudder again.

“I’m giving you a word, Cat. Blue. Use it and I’ll stop. Say no and I won’t.”

A wave of pleasure rocks me.

Ever since I came home so bruised, looking like I was beaten, he’s held back, even in rough play. Because he’s been coming over a lot.

In the morning. Early afternoon. Night. Three in the morning. He turns up, and I’m surly because I need him here in ways I hate. My body’s beyond addicted and there’s no more Jac to worry about, now that I told him I quit.

There have been calls. No messages but calls that I’ve ignored. I had pretended to be Harry, a sweeter version of Harry.

Like hell.

The texts he sent plays in my head as Hendrick strokes over my pussy.

What the hell would it be like to have two hands doing this?

And then he shoves a finger in me and kisses me hard, obliterating the thought.

I want it rough. I love it rough. I want to be owned. Like I have no choice in it. I want to be taken and used and owned.

But...cared for, too.

I moan.

“Turn and bend over,” he says, stepping back from me.

“What?”

“Fucking do it.”

There’s a note of calculated savagery to his voice, and it makes me turn. I put my hands behind my back without thinking.

“Dirty fucking slut,” he says, that velvet rough voice shifting over me.

“Cunt.”

“Call me names again,” he says, “and I’ll make you regret it.”

Oh, God. I love this. Love the bite that’s in his tone, the command and challenge.

“Cunt. Slut fucker. Whore lover,” I push.

“Lower.” He pushes on my back until I’m bent right over, and he snaps something on my wrists.

Handcuffs. Where the fuck did he have handcuffs? Real ones by the feel.

“Key’s in the other room, slut.” And then he shoves a finger into my ass and pumps it. “Fuck, you feel good for a whore. Should I get a man over here to take that mouth? A man to fuck your ass while I fuck your cunt?”

“No...”

When Hendrick turns utterly filthy, he’s terrifyingly good at it. “You say no, but you want it.” He keeps his finger in my ass and then he slams into my cunt with his cock so hard the only thing keeping me upright is his free hand that’s caught in the chain connecting the cuffs.

It has the effect of him being able to keep me both upright and off kilter and so open that his cock hits me differently every time, and all I can do is take it.

My pussy grabs and clenches, fluttery with need as his shaft splits me apart. The head hits me deep, and all it takes is a tug, and I’m half up. Oh, God, his cock hits the front of my tunnel, all those nerve endings are battered over and over, and a thick vibrating pleasure begins to ring out.

“You fuck!” I cry, words wobbling. “I’m coming. You’re making me come.”

“Do it, whore. Squeeze my cock. See if you can make me cum.”

I can’t stop myself. I come hard, shaking, body jerking as the pleasure deepens, widens and swallows me whole.

“Oh, fuck yes, Cat. You just squirted all over me.”

He’s not lying. He’s sliding in fast now, deep, the extra wetness slicking the way even more, and then when he starts to twitch, he pulls out and drags me to the table.

“You think I’m going to come without making you work for it?”

I can’t feel my feet, and I stumble, legs buckling, but he yanks me with the chain of the cuffs, his arm coming around me to stop my arms being ripped up painfully, but the bite is good. A sweetness of its own.

Glaring at him over my shoulder, voice thick and low with lust, I say, “Make me.”

The lust is dark in him. When I glance down, his cock is glistening from my juices and so stiff my mouth starts to water. The tip drips with pre-cum.

He grins lasciviously. “Looks like you’re hungry.”

Hendrick pushes me on the table, onto my back and it’s the right level of uncomfortable as the cuffs gouge into my back and wrists. He drags me so my head’s hanging off, upside down, and then he feeds me his cock.

It’s a little too violent as my head’s at an uncomfortable angle. Breathing’s hard and his cock stretches my mouth, and everything makes it tight so he seems bigger, like he can’t fit, but he does, and the head hits the back of my throat.

His balls hit the top of my head with every stroke, and he grunts, rubbing the bulge in my throat from his cock.

“Fuck, look at that view,” he grunts. “You take my cock so well.”

He pulls and twists my nipples before he just slams into me, the room filled with the harsh guttural breathing from Hendrick and me, his groans and my gagging sounds.

He pushes into me, right to the back of my throat, again and again, his fingers sliding over me to my clit where they

work magic.

Hendrick's moves are harder, faster, from both ends, and I'm edging myself, trying to hold back my orgasm for his.

When he comes, I let go and the pleasure overwhelms, sending me into wild spasms. He twitches and jerks and then he surges back so his hot release hits my tongue, and he staggers. "Fuck. Oh, fuck."

Then he sticks his finger in my mouth and paints my nipples with his cum. "That was payback for ruining my shirt with him. Swallow."

He leaves me there, spent. All I can hear for a long moment is harsh, uneven breathing.

It's a moment of post bliss that hangs, where anything erotically charged can happen.

And the glug of liquid hitting a glass breaks the moment. Then comes the hiss of a zipper. I blink the tears from his mouth-fucking away, and he's standing, facing me, cock now away, holding a whiskey.

Watching me.

Like I'm his property.

His.

To do with whatever he wants.

A small spasm of pleasure hits me, and he comes over, taking a drink. "Did you just come?"

"No."

"I think you're lying." He comes in close, tips the glass then dribbles whiskey on my mouth and licks it off, kissing me

long and slow, taking his time, nibbling and sucking my lips, seducing my tongue.

Then he pours a little more on my throat, and he licks and sucks that up.

Next are my breasts, and he really takes his time, sucking and kissing and nibbling at my breast's flesh, paying attention to the hard nipples.

I'm burning. On fire. Everything is a giant throb of desperate need. I try to move as he pours more on my belly to lick and suck.

“Move and I'll tie your legs to the table and go watch TV.”

I spasm, and he shakes his head. “You like that idea, don't you, sweet Cat? Like being mine? To do with what I want?” Then he leans in, licks from above my clit up to my belly button, and I need him lower. “Is that what you wanted earlier when you came? Me to tie you up?”

I want it. All of it. And I came a little, he's right. So why am I fighting what I want? It makes it better, but it's more than that. All those answers are somewhere I can't reach them.

Then I can't think as he pours his expensive Japanese Hibiki whiskey on my pussy. The heated sting of the cool alcohol is divine, welcome. I shriek as his mouth laps it up, sucking on my pussy lips, licking up along my slit, and then closing around my clit.

I come. I can't help it.

Hendrick doesn't stop. He takes it slow and agonizingly gentle. This isn't one of the men I sleep with who think I want nice vanilla sex. This is the kind of man who intrinsically understands me. A man who's the calm before the storm, one showing that he's in control. That he is master of the storm and

every stroke of his tongue, each graze of his teeth, is a study in that mastery.

He slowly touches me now, pushing me on, and I'm past being too sensitive. I'm riding those twitchy little sensations like a bitch. I want what he's going to give me.

Hendrick's fingers move inside me now, hooking forward to rub my G spot on each slow, long thrust in and out. Then he sucks and licks my clit, long and slow, constant pressure that unfurls things in me, things that grow into deeper desire. They morph into a wilder need and then burst bright in a cascade of pleasure only to burn out of existence.

Over and over again.

That's how he leads me up to my orgasm. Each bright pleasure burst lasts longer, grows more intense until suddenly, it lights up everything and my being rolls in waves of delight, of intense glory as I come apart in deep, bone shaking throbs of release.

I don't remember getting to the bedroom. I don't remember him parting my thighs, all I know is he's in me, mouth on mine, fucking me like it's his life's work. Somehow, he brings another orgasm, or the one I had is still going, but this time, when he comes, he rolls us so I'm on top.

And, hands still cuffed, satiated, with him inside me, I sigh and fall asleep.



It's late when we shower. He feeds me mezcal cocktails and cheese. We're in my bedroom, and Hendrick, in nothing but pants, goes through the closet. If he notes the clothes aren't

really day to day wear, he doesn't comment. I don't know, maybe a beautiful, murderous, billionaire bastard like him has no idea about what women wear day to day.

He seems to think three-piece suits are the norm for men. His black outfit is one of his rare moments.

“Here.” He tosses me a white slip that goes with a sheer pale green dress. It's very short, but I put it on. “Naked is hot, Magdalena, but very distracting.”

“Are we playing house?”

He looks at me. “I've got no idea. It's all complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it.”

“I'm not showing you the necklace—”

The doorbell rings, and I get up. “Did you order dinner?”

I don't wait for him as I move through the apartment and buzz the person in.

I open the door and my breath leaves my lungs. My body goes into wild overdrive.

Jac Miller.

Oh. God.

EIGHTEEN

HENDRICK



“Go away, Jac,” she says. “I don’t want to see you.”

I turn off the lamp and go to the door, not sure if she wants me to remain unseen or come out.

I want to rip him apart, beat him within an inch of his life for what he did to Cat, the fuck. But I don’t. Not yet.

The door’s partially open, and I stand there, about to head out to face him, when Jac speaks.

“Sure you do, sweet fuck of mine. Unless you want me to blindfold you. That it?” he asks, all provocation.

She says, “No.”

“Tried it with Mr. Vanilla-Pants, did you?”

I’m Mr. Vanilla-Pants? He’s such an asshole.

“Go away.” But she doesn’t shove him. Magdalena doesn’t move.

“Not on your life. He gets you, only fair I do, too. Show you the better fuck.” He laughs. “But I think you know the answer to that. Me.”

Anger buzzes through me. I’m about ready to fly out the bedroom door and beat the shit out of Jac for showing up and

being an arrogant, self-entitled asswipe. For doing what he's doing.

Making a play.

I know the fuck.

For years he's been trying to screw women I'm sleeping with. Sometimes he succeeds, mostly he doesn't. He brags about the ones he bangs.

Normally it doesn't bother me.

With Magdalena? Yeah.

And that's knowing they've fucked.

Beyond that, though, I want him to feel pain for hurting her. It rips shreds from me, feeds a fire inside me. I want to fucking make the little shit bleed.

I've never felt rage like this before, besides when I discovered what was happening with Lili.

But something stops me storming out. The stiffness in her stance? The fact I probably shouldn't actually fucking kill Jac Miller, and not just because of the Quinate law.

That and she won't appreciate me coming to any kind of rescue, no matter how badly I want to. Damsel in distress isn't a mode I've found on Magdalena, and I've found plenty of them.

Like how she loves to argue, and it's almost a part of foreplay. Her need for rough handling and rougher sex. The way she falls apart when I take it slow. The way she came when I cuffed her.

And the way my cat can be furious and have a conversation. I think I'd rather fight and talk and poke about

abstract constructs of love and crime, good and bad, with her than anyone.

Fuck, discussing the weather with her would hold a level of intrigue and excitement that comes from her.

She's soft. She's hard. She's got a sweetness. She's pure acid. She's smart as fuck and independent.

But girl who wants saving?

No. That's not her.

I'm not sure Jac's ever been rejected before. Or if this is an actual rejection.

Because she wants him. As much as she wants him to go away.

I fucking hate that she wants him.

Hunger and anger and frustration war on Jac's face. "Don't you look all fucked? Or ready to fuck? What's your problem, anyway? Answer a fucking call, MG. You're not all that."

The fucker needs to shut his ugly mouth. Now.

"And yet," she says, "you're here. Got a problem, Jac?"

"His name's fucking Hendrick. You're adding to it. What's up with you returning my money? You're a fucking pain in my ass."

"Then go away," she says.

"Not until I get my share." The bastard grins at her, a sleazy, cocky grin.

Maybe this constitutes dire circumstances, and I can circumvent that Quinate law.

“I don’t have time for your moody bullshit right now,” she says.

“You know, I might have come by to apologize.” He points a ringed finger at her. “Ever think you’re the fucking problem, MG?”

My hands clench. The bedroom’s dark so he can’t see me, but the whiskey bottle’s in the kitchen, along with the mezcal. Even if he goes in there, I highly doubt it’ll register.

Jac isn’t stupid, far from it. And I don’t underestimate him when he gets out of his own fucking way. He can be smooth, tricky and utterly deadly. But he prefers the bombast approach. Flash and bang. Smoke and drum rolls.

Jac thinks he’s so fucking it, he doesn’t bother with subtlety

Maybe some of it is losing Lili, the only person I think he’s ever loved. Or maybe the only person he cared for who loved him back. I don’t pretend to have the ins and outs of Jac’s life, but I think he loved his father once. Before he beat it out of him, before the man lifted a hand to Lili.

Jac, under all the smug, hot hate and hedonistic life, the center of the universe, isn’t happy.

But I’m not his psychotherapist. I don’t like the fuck. On bad days I hate him, good days just can’t stand him, and when I say I want him dead it’s just that: talk, a vague esoteric want.

I’m not idiot enough to think that when Jac says he wants me dead he means anything other than that. If Jac could have his fucking way, he’d destroy and take and then kill me.

And Cat? Shit, he’s here probably to apologize but he can’t help being a nasty, demeaning piece of work.

Toward her.

The fury whips and writhes.

“Nice apology, Jac,” my cat says, and I hear the thick want in her voice, in there under the anger and frustration and dislike. I can also hear the longing.

I know because I hear it in her voice when we look at each other and talk, when she’s thinking of my cock, when she’s just come and wants more.

She always wants more.

His gaze shifts. I don’t know what he sees, but it makes the hate burn. “Been too busy fucking Mr. Boring, have you?”

She laughs, slaps a hand on her mouth as a reluctant grin comes to me. That *entendre* I made. When she stole the wallet.

“What?” he asks. “That boring?”

“You’ve no idea,” she says. Then she shrugs. “Private joke. What I do with Hendrick, isn’t your business.”

He glances at her wrists, at the marks left from the cuffs. “Fucker.”

“Really?” she asks.

He points the finger again, silver catching the light. “He marked you.”

“You left me black and blue.”

“Baby, you fucking loved it.”

She flinches. Cat did. He’s not wrong. She liked what I did to her. What he did. She fucking loves it rough. Except, perhaps, when he went too far.

We had a word, and he—hurt her. If it was a coldly deliberate act, I'll kill him.

“Jac, I returned your money. I'm not interested in you or your games. Go home. There's a reason I don't call you back.”

“Which is?” he asks.

“I don't want to.”

Suddenly, he saunters past her, a swagger in his step, his suit is fine chocolate with caramel and black small windowpane checks. And his shirt is lavender. His tie a caramel bronze.

The asshole dressed up, and I know if I put my hand between her thighs, she'd be wet. Just like she is with me.

“That's fucking bullshit,” he says, most definitely not reading the room.

He's reading the parts he wants to, ignoring the rest.

“We'll fuck, I'll let you blow me,” he says, “and we'll call it even.”

Actually, I don't know what the fuck he's doing. Jac can be crude. He can be cruel. He likes to manipulate and humiliate. But this is different. It's like he's pushing everything to see what happens.

Or maybe he's so furious she hasn't contacted him that he's pushing.

Money's on the latter.

And me? Fuck, I'm...angry, jealous, confused.

I'm not given to jealousy. There's been only one woman I got jealous over and that was ten years ago. This...I'm aware

of the effect he has on women. It's up there with mine. Only difference is I'm very choosy.

Jac is...Jac.

But he also wants her, and I'm beginning to think it's not because of me. Not really.

There's desperation there, somewhere.

"I'm not doing that, Jac. It's a hard fucking no," she says. "Got it? I'm saying no."

He stalks up, and she grabs something from the side table. He goes to dominate her, like he thinks her words are a game, and then I see what she grabbed. Right as she slams the barrel into his gut.

Cat's got herself a gun.

"MG."

"Touch me, and I'll shoot, Jac. It's loaded, and I do know how to use it."

He raises his hands. "I was just having fun."

"You know you sound pathetic, right? 'Please, officer, it was only a bit of fun. She wanted me to.'"

"Don't." His word is soft. Full of steel.

"Go away, Jac."

"I came to talk," he says, "all right? You—"

"Do not say I owe you. After last time, where you let me know you paid me for my services, remember you've got every dime back. I'm not financially obligated to a thing. Not even listening to your bullshit."

I wince because Jac would say that. The fury surges within me again. I've probably said worse to her, but we were playing. Jac removes that layer. And when he's angry...

He fucking hates I've been there. Just as much as I hate he has.

"MG, come on. It wasn't that bad."

She flips off the safety, and he goes still. "My bruises from you—where I looked beaten up, by the way—have faded, but you won't ever touch me again."

He pushes the gun back a little, which is ballsy, and he offers her his smooth, good Jac smile. "Admit it, maybe we went a little far, but you had fun. I know you did. All those orgasms."

My stomach twists and knots.

Both hands curl into tight fists. The door's open enough that if I move, Jac just might notice, or she'll look. As it is, I can feel her not looking, that's how aware she is of me. And her nipples are beading, pushing against the dress thing I gave her because it's sheer and short and it doesn't leave much to the imagination.

And now Jac gets to enjoy it.

At least he gets a gun pointed at him for the privilege.

Jac says, "You didn't say no."

"You're right," she says after a beat. "I didn't. And I enjoyed it, but as I said, that doesn't mean you get to touch me again."

"If you say so." He points to the sofa, and he takes the armchair opposite. My phone's on the coffee table but he wouldn't recognize it. We don't take selfies together.

“Sit there, MG.”

When she doesn't move, he taps a hand on the arm of the chair. Then he gets up, goes to the kitchen and comes back with my bottle of Japanese whiskey. He mutters something nasty and takes a sip.

“I said sit, MG. Please? You can keep pointing the gun at me. Hendrick's Hibiki whiskey?” He holds out the bottle to her, but she shakes her head, eyes narrowed.

“What happened,” she says, “to you leaving so you don't get shot?”

He shrugs. “I like to live fucking dangerously. Sit. Or stand.”

What the fuck is he up to? I can't move. I'm that soldered to the spot.

Jac's up to something, and he's angry, but that's pretty much what he does. What I don't like is the confidence, the way he's in control, not bothered by the gun.

I'd love to say she'd shoot him. Or that she wouldn't. But the thing is, I don't know what she's going to do. Neither does she.

It's not Jac's welfare I'm concerned about, more what this means to Magdalena. She doesn't like him, but she wants him, just as much as she wants me. It's so déjà vu that I'm greasy with it. I kill people. I make money. I'm a king in my world. How the fuck does she reduce me to this? Half-naked, barefoot in her bedroom, listening as she talks to her other lover.

Fuck buddy?

I have no idea what they are. I'm not even sure what *we* are to each other. There are feelings. That's there. The

magnetic field that pulls us in is just that. It's not a future or a world that contains happiness apart from that tiny, powerful field.

"You're an asshole, Jac—"

"That's besides the point."

"Tell me why I shouldn't just shoot you now."

He thinks about it for a few moments. "I'll ruin this fine suit and your carpet."

"There's no carpet."

"The suit?"

"You won't be needing it if I shoot you."

"Oh," he says, deadpan, "you're aiming to kill. Pity."

"Jac, just..."

"Magdalena, look, I *am* sorry. I didn't..." He pauses, and I can almost hear him thinking. "It went further than it should have. Not the sex, but how it went down."

"I still don't want you touching me. You bruised my face."

He frowns, narrows his eyes, and I'm betting he's zeroing in on the faint remainder of the bruise, a slight green and yellow hue now. And I can almost see his reaction, like someone just punched him in the guts. "Fuck."

"So you get why I want you to leave."

Jac sits, takes a few swallows of my whiskey, and I can almost see the wheels turn as he tries to find the best approach. If I were naïve, or maybe a better man, I'd think he was trying to make things better.

But it's Jac. He's trying to get back on track with his plans. He wants the necklace which he can't have, and he wants her to get it, which she won't. He also wants to destroy me. With her help.

I know fucking Jac Miller.

"I came here to talk, MG," he says. "Can I?"

"What about, Jac?"

And there it is, right beneath the contrition, the glint of purpose. I should go and throw him out on his ass. But I want to know, too.

And that contrition? It's keeping him alive. "First, MG... I..." He shakes his head, swallowing. "I never set out to hurt you. You like it rough, and... Shit. I'm sorry. I'm fucking sorry, okay? I let it get out of control."

I can't move.

Holy fucking everything.

Jac Miller just—

It hits me then. Him turning up, him dressing up. Him trying to scoff and act like it was nothing and him letting her point the gun when he could have it off her in seconds.

Jac Miller's feeling bad over what he did. He's looking to apologize and he's totally shit at it, but...

Yeah.

And for him, he just groveled. Badly, but Jac never does that. Ever.

"Well wow," she says, the sarcasm dripping, "you're sorry. What a man."

"MG." His tone is soft.

“Go away, Jac.”

He swallows again and he says, “I came to talk, not about that, but I fucking came to talk.”

“I’ll say it again. What about?”

“The past. I want to tell you a story, and...if you want to shoot me after, then go ahead.”

She considers him, then she finally nods and sits, still pointing the gun. “Talk.”

It takes him a while. He has more of my whiskey.

Finally, he sighs. “I need you to stop sleeping with Hendrick.”

“This isn’t talking, this sounds like you dictating my life —”

“You’ll keep doing it, probably, but I fucking hate him. Everyone knows that. No one other than Hendrick and I know why.”

“Jac,” she says. It’s a warning.

“I loved one thing in this world. My little sister, Lili.”

Lili. My stomach heaves like I’m going to throw up.

“She was beautiful, sweet, and I swore I’d protect her.”

He falls silent, and I close my eyes. I don’t want to hear this. Not any of it, but I don’t think even me going out there would shut him up.

“They said my mom died in childbirth, but it isn’t true. He killed her—my father, not Hendrick—so there was this perfect little baby, my sister, and she only had me.” He stares at the bottle. “Think what you want of me, but I loved her, and I protected Lili.”

Magdalena doesn't speak.

"I've got this memory, fuck, I must have been four at the time," he says softly, "Lili almost one, and it's so vague but so real I could touch it. I took her, and we hid from my father until they found us. Lili and me against the world."

Him and Lili.

This undoes me, kills the anger in a way I can't explain. I can't move because I remember this.

There was the time, when I was six until around eleven or twelve, that Jac followed me around and Lili followed him. Our fathers weren't enemies, but they weren't friends. Business worked better if they threw in. And as members of the Quinate, they grew more powerful. Untouchable.

And Jac had his shadow, one he protected. Right until he didn't.

"When she was fifteen, I think Agnossio raped her."

I can't fucking breathe.

He takes another swallow of my booze. "She'd just had her birthday, and she was friends with the chick Hendrick's fuck of a father, banged...well, friends with the woman's daughter. The woman was staff, so you know, easy pickings. Lili claimed she fell but when I asked the maid about those clothes, they were gone. And Lili never wore them again.

"Then she was twenty-one, a few months or so after her birthday, she called me in hysterics. I couldn't make it out, just something about her friend. *And* Hendrick. So I hightailed it to castle fucking Agnossio, pulled a gun to get in, and when I found the right bedroom, Agnossio Senior was holding Lili down. Slamming into her. Hitting her. She was struggling,

trying to get him off her. And he had his hands around her throat. It happened fast.”

I know the story. Not this part. Just the aftermath. And my eyes are burning. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I bite hard on my lip to stop sound escaping and wait.

Jac isn't finished.

I close my eyes.

“When he finished, I realized she had stopped struggling. He killed her. Crushed her windpipe, broke her neck. He killed my Lili.”

And Jac screamed *bastard* and pulled him off Lili's naked body, cum running down her thigh, eyes open, and he started beating my father.

Mercilessly.

Because I came in just as that happened. Lili had called me, too.

I tried to stop him, but Jac killed my father. He was blacked out with rage, had pushed the barrel of the gun in his mouth and shot him dead.

I didn't want him to just kill my father. I wanted the man to suffer first.

I hear him swig from the bottle, and there's absolute silence from Magdalena.

“Hendrick Sr. killed Lili, so I fed him my gun. Your boyfriend Hendrick came in, probably too late to the party and wanting a piece of Lili, too.”

He's right about one thing. I got there too late. My father had been fucking her for years. Statutory rape from age

fifteen, but Lili kept it up, right up to her death.

I know she always went willingly to him because my father kept a very extensive journal, one I found after he died.

And that night... Jac just handed me the missing piece. The part I'd been too late to see. It hurts.

“Are you going to shoot me?” Jac asks.

“I don't know.”

She sounds flat.

“Shoot the fucker who wanted to hurt my sister, not me, MG.”

Jac just called me a rapist. A would-be one. And...fuck, he meant it. I always figured he stopped me going to Lili's funeral because of what happened, but after, I had tried to go visit his father...because... Shit. Confessions were useless, but there was something of Lili's I needed, and—

I found Jac's father dead.

My name in the appointment book. A bullet to the head, through the mouth, in the same fashion Jac had killed my fuck of an old man.

And I got painted for that.

“He also executed my father,” he says like he's picking up on my thoughts. “Just like I killed his. His name was in the appointment book my father liked to have. And Hendrick, the coward, left him and won't admit to it either way.”

He laughs, and this time, I open my eyes. “And then we both became Quinate, so I couldn't murder the fuck. He can't kill me. He hides behind convention, not his truth. And his father and him, they...”

He stops. Drinks more of my booze. “Is the fucker here? This is his brand.”

“Jac,” she whispers, “stop.”

He’s not drunk, but he’s...shit, I don’t know. I don’t think he’s told a single person any of that. I know how much he loved Lili.

But he’s wrong about me.

Lili didn’t deserve any of that. Not one moment. Not when my father groomed her and certainly not that end. And I didn’t fucking know the extent until I found that journal.

But he’s right. I’m to blame for her death. So is Jac.

Why the fuck didn’t he save her? It was his one fucking job. Protect Lili.

And me? Jesus. I’m even worse. I should have known what was going on. *I should have known*. I should’ve made Lili pack up and gotten her to the other end of the planet. Keep all the toxins from her life.

“You should go Jac,” Magdalena says. “I have a lot to think about.”

“I’m sure you do.” He stands, and she turns, looks at the door of the bedroom for the first time during all this.

Her face is a study in horror and disgust, and I know then and there, I’ve lost her, too.

NINETEEN

MAGDALENA



I don't see Hendrick when I look, unable to stop myself, at the bedroom door, but I feel him.

The whole place vibrates with a storm of tension, all of it wrapped in and over itself. Knotted and tangled.

Jac's story is horrifying. It's more horrifying than what he said. Because the nightmare stuff for that poor girl is in what he didn't say.

He made some strong allegations, framed as fact. Not the rape, but about Hendrick. And it looks damning for Hendrick. It doesn't fit the man I've been fucking. I know people make excuses and I'm not. I know real monsters lurk in all kinds of wrappings, pretty and ugly ones. The fact it doesn't fit Hendrick doesn't make him innocent.

It doesn't make him guilty.

I go back to what he told me about Jac, how he gave up everything in his life to protect Lili.

They don't sound like the words of a sadistic rapist.

It also doesn't make him innocent, either.

As always, there are sides to stories. And Jac and Hendrick have hated each other over this for ten years, and it sounds like neither one has talked to the other.

Now that...

That fits them both.

One thing I don't get is why Jac came and told me this, what angle he's playing.

Maybe he isn't playing an angle, but people don't tend to bound up to someone and randomly unburden themselves. And certainly not Jac.

Then again, both have their reasons, I just can't fathom Jac's. He's a man who does things by shouting the reasoning and then backing it up with an all-star band of words and actions.

Like his apology attempt.

With Hendrick, he seems to explain agendas, or just avoid them. Quietly, patiently, evenly pitched. I know why he said what he said about Jac. It was a warning and an explanation, the aftermath of seeing my bruises and perhaps his hand in that. Not physically, but by way of their cold and deadly war with each other. Me in the middle.

When he told me the story about how Jac loved Lili, how Jac gave up joy and a normal childhood to protect his sister, it was a strange moment for all the things he didn't say, but it was also clear on what he was saying.

Not an excuse, but an explanation for why Jac is Jac and perhaps that Jac didn't mean to hurt me. But he did hurt me, no matter how much I liked it. It went too far and could again. Best to get out, to walk.

There was a lot there.

This? The Jac story? There's a lot there, too. I just don't know what Jac's agenda is.

“MG?”

“Yes?” I still have the gun, and Jac has his hand on the door, but he doesn’t open it. “You could ask me to stay.”

If Hendrick weren’t here, I... My body throbs, that addictive lavender and leather of him with its honeyed center curls around me, warming me from the inside out. I want Jac. I want Hendrick. And I don’t know what to do.

“You hurt me, Jac. A bad past doesn’t give you the right to do that.”

“I—”

I lower my voice. “I like it *rough*. I don’t want people calling the cops.”

“No one called the fucking cops. And you like it rough, like you just said.”

I suck in a breath. “And I don’t enjoy looking like I’m a victim of abuse. I felt abused. I liked what we did, but it went too far, and you hurt me because you could. You were angry. Liking it and looking like people should call the cops isn’t good.”

His shoulders lift. “I didn’t mean—”

“But you did it.”

He turns, leans against the door, his eyes glittering. It’s a pure Jac fuck the world move, but there’s something there, in the stillness to him, the way that it’s a pose and not Jac being Jac.

Maybe if I told someone my childhood story, I’d feel like he looks. Like he’s got a mask held up to his face.

“I don’t get complaints,” he says.

“Yeah?” I think about putting the gun down but hold on to it. “But I’m not one of your simpering fans.”

“You love my cock,” he says, “the sounds when my piercing pulls on you, fuck that’s enough to make any man bust one.”

I’m caught tight between these two men, and I hate it. I hate the games and the being pulled in each direction, and I crave them both. With Jac here, he’s right, I fucking love his cock, and I miss that feel when he really works it in me, moving so I get the maximum benefit of the piercing. But he’s too wild, too dangerous, even for me.

Jac touches my cheek, right on the almost gone bruise, but he doesn’t offer a platitude. He just rubs a gentle thumb there, then, as he moves to slip his hand beneath the hair at my nape, he takes the gun and tosses it on the side table, where it lands with a clatter.

“Good thing the safety was back on,” I say.

He pulls me into him, into his warmth, and even though Hendrick is there, I go. Willingly. Needing it.

“We’re not done, MG,” he murmurs low. “We want each other.”

I don’t answer.

“Tell me you don’t want me, and I’ll never see you again. Your get out of fucking jail free card.”

I take a breath. It would be easy, to take his out. Even if it only lasts a few days or weeks, it’ll get me the reprieve I need.

He massages the back of my skull, and I almost purr. “Well?”

“I—” I stop, make myself breathe, tell myself to just say it. “It doesn’t work that way.”

He smiles slowly. “Thought so.”

I look up at him, our eyes lock, and my heart thumps hard. Magnetic field. Pulling me in across a minefield. “Jac...”

“I’m going.”

He releases me, turns, and he walks out the door, leaving me staring after him.

There’s a part of me shocked he left without a fight, and though I’m empty, throbbing for him, I’m also glad he’s gone. He confuses me most of all.

Jac’s my type more than Hendrick in looks. I like a little arrogance. It comes with money, and those men usually leave a girl alone after having an orgasm.

Hendrick isn’t my type on paper, but fuck, he ticks the boxes. His dark male beauty, his intelligence and measured ways. The games of con-non-con he plays with me. His conversation whether we’re arguing or talking or flirting. He’s as forceful as Jac, as commanding. Just *different*.

Jac’s hedonism comes with a special arrogance, a special confidence that borders on being too obnoxious. He doesn’t bother with conversation in the way Hendrick does.

They both pull me to them.

They both tick every single right and wrong box in ways that matter. And in the bedroom? In the bedroom, they both exceed my own fucked-up expectations. On equal measures in different ways.

But Hendrick has depth, and we connect in a way I haven’t with anyone for a long time. The way we can talk even if

we're angry. Jac...Jac's over the top red-hot ways rub me the wrong way with nuggets of right. He's a minefield.

Maybe they both are.

Maybe I've just lost my mind because two hot men with amazing cocks who give me more orgasms than a girl knows what to do with have me in their sights and don't want to let go.

They're fighting over me. The realization rocks me like a shockwave.

I'm addicted to danger. I always have been. And now, I'm paying the price for it.

I want...

I don't know what I want.

This is complicated.

I don't do complicated.

"Magdalena?"

The velvet sandpaper of Hendrick's voice sends a cold shiver down my spine. And I turn, slowly.

He's completely dressed, the only man I know who can make black trousers and a sweater suddenly look like a suit. There's a coldness in his eyes that I've never seen. It's colder than the anger when he saw the bruises from Jac.

And...

Shit, seeing Jac, hearing his story, this... He's looking at me like he's what Jac accused him of. No, he's looking at me like I think he's what Jac accused him of.

It's how I know he didn't want to hurt Lili.

That and the tone in his voice when he's mentioned her.

He might hate Jac, but he's got a soft spot for the sister. Had.

I lick my lips, a thousand thoughts swirling. Anger, confusion, lust, dislike. For him, for Jac.

And that lust isn't just for him or Jac, it's also for the Heart of Dark Desires, because I know myself well enough to know that priceless, legendary jewel is why I'm in so deep. I want that, too. Maybe the same amount, or maybe more.

"What the hell's the agenda here, Hendrick?"

He stares at me, checking his pockets, pulling out that wallet. He stares at it a long time before putting it back. "I'm not Jac's keeper."

"Hendrick, he—"

"Accused me of being a monster? Of me wanting to rape his sister?" His mouth twists into a bitter line. "I heard."

"I don't think—"

"That fucking piece of..." He stops, pushes a hand through his hair, and that cold look blasts arctic winds right through my soul. "I should go."

He doesn't ask if I believe Jac. He doesn't offer excuses or denials. What I see is a man hurting, a man crippled with hate and anger and pain. And I think he thinks I believe Jac.

I'm not sure how much of what Jac said Jac believes, about Hendrick's intent that night when his sister died.

"You're not going to ask what I think, Hendrick?"

"Should I?"

“I think,” I say, not moving from where I stand. I’m more than aware it’s in front of the door, like I can stop him leaving. “I don’t think you’re what he said.”

“The bottom line in all this is that Lili is dead. I should go.”

“And yet you’re standing there,” I say.

He doesn’t move. “As Jac can attest, you’re really fucking hard to walk away from, Magdalena.”

He’s calling me by my real name again, and I don’t like it. “But you’re about to.”

“Thought you might want a clean sweep. You kicked out Jac when you actually wanted to ride him, and now, I’ll get the fuck out of dodge. Maybe you can join him and make effigies of me.”

“You’re an ass.” I stalk up and shove him.

“Magdalena.”

I shove him again, and he grabs my arms. “It was damning what he said, that it?” His words taunt.

I stare at him. “You and Jac and Lili—”

“Stick to robbing people,” he snaps. “With this shit, you don’t know a fucking thing.”

His words hurt. His eyes are colder, and I can hear in my mind a door bolting shut.

“Then fuck you, Hendrick. You both dragged me in the middle of your Lili feud. Neither of you tells the other a thing. You’re as bad as him.”

“How so?” he asks.

I shake him off and shove again. He grabs me and pulls me to the sofa, on top of him. I push him again, climbing up to my feet, and he sits, a cruel little smile, smug, like he bit off all the noses to spite every face. I want to hit him. My hand tingles with the need.

“Tell me,” he says. “How I’m as bad as fucking Jac.”

“Because I think you know more than he does and you’re not telling him. And what about his father, did you kill him? I’m guessing no. Because you have no qualms in stating the truth when you want, and I’ve found silence and side stepping from you, Hendrick, to be very loud and telling.”

“Fuck, next you’ll tell me you love me and really want to fuck Jac, too.” The look on his face is flat and cold and frightening.

I swallow hard. Because...because...there’s a part of me where that’s the exact truth.

There’s another part that could love the fantasy version of Jac who isn’t just a beautiful man with a perfect cock, a man who pushes the envelope in punishment and roughness, but a man who wants and deserves love.

I could love that fantasy and want to fuck Hendrick, too.

Hendrick and *his* perfect cock. Hendrick and his complexities. Fuck.

They both scratch itches. They both drive me wild.

“If I said yes?”

“I’d say fuck you and fuck Jac. And I’d probably take you, anyway.” He spreads his hands, palms turned up. “And this won’t ever work.”

Pain lances me as I put my palms on his and our fingers lace together. “This situation is messy, Hendrick. Messy as fuck.”

“Complicated.”

“I don’t do complicated.” I step up and slide onto him, thighs on either side, and I’m aching so close to the glory of him.

His glance dips low to my pussy, then back up. “I fucking hate complicated. And I just might love you anyway.”

I make a sound as he releases my hands and slips them up my thighs, fingering my clit as I push into him. He kisses me. It’s harsh, rough, at odd with his words.

I kiss him back harder, rougher, shoving onto his fingers. He keeps one hand on my bare wet flesh and fumbles with his pants and releases himself, and soon, I’m rubbing, humping against the smooth heat and hardness of his dick.

My anger is at odds with my feelings, too.

Or maybe it isn’t. Maybe we’re both angry at how we feel. It’s not what he wants, that’s obvious.

And it’s not what I want. Not these feelings, not the complications, not the trapped between two warring, dark gods.

I take his cock, fist it, and I rub it against my entrance. And then I sink down, taking him all the way. I bounce on him, biting at his throat, pulling at his hair.

Gripping me tight, working me harder on him, he kisses and bites back, and we’re in a frenzy of angry, violent animalistic need.

Hendrick tosses me off him. “Slut.” He pushes me so I’m spread before him, legs wide and he pulls me to the edge of the sofa, and he hammers into me as he kneels. “Whore.”

An orgasm hits me, and he grunts, pounding me through it, stroking and pulling and working my clit with his fingers. He dips into his mouth to have them more wet, so he can slide as he touches me.

“Yes...”

“My Cat. My whore. My. Beautiful. Cunt.” He punctuates the last words with a balls-deep thrust.

“No.” I mean yes, not blue, because for me that word still holds. Our eyes meet, and after what Jac said, there’s just the slightest hesitation. But I don’t wait, I shift my hips up, opening more to him, all I can do in this position. “I said *no*, not any other *word*, no. No. No. No.”

He lets out a shuddering sigh and pushes his cock slowly into me, and I take his arms, pulling him, trying to make him pound me. “That no, Hendrick.” I try and buck up, but I can’t. He’s buried deep, just making slow shallow thrusts, and I’m fraying.

But I want to fly apart.

“No.”

He groans. Slams deep.

“Fuck, Cat. Fucking slut. Take my cock. Take my cum.” He pounds into me again, savage, brutal all the good hurting, the good pleasure and I moan.

“Stop, no.” I look at him. “Stop...” And I tip my hips a little more.

His eyes aren't cold now. They're pure dark fire. Delight and lust and primal desire.

"Fuck you." He shifts, and his cock strokes hard on my G-spot with each deep thrust.

His cock is a sublime pleasure I don't think I'll ever grow tired of. It doesn't matter if it's a brutal fuck; an elegant, depraved Hendrick game or something slow and kink-filled... it's like he's made for me.

I love the feel, the taste, the way he hits every single place that needs it. He knows how to move just right to prolong pleasure without tipping the scale. He knows how to heat me up hard and fast, and I think I could kill for the promise of the full body insane orgasms he gives.

He's...I'm not sure I have all the words.

He pounds harder, and my head falls back, a groan sliding out as my insides start to pulse and pleasure soaks me down, overwhelming me.

I come hard and violent, the kind of spasms where the way I tighten on his cock has him swearing. He pushes right in, as deep as he can go and twitches, spurting his hot cum in me.

"Oh...oh my God. Oh, fuck, yes. Yes, yes. Fuck. Hendrick!"

I shudder and shake again, and when I come down, there are no kisses or softness or the sweet touches from him I yearn for. He pulls out and dresses and flops next to me.

It takes me a moment to pull my legs together, pull down the slip, but Hendrick shifts, winds an arm around me, pulling me on his lap, holding me. And we sit there.

My heart's pounding, and I gather courage. "A-At least talk to me."

"Nothing to say, sweet, beautiful Magdalena."

There's so much to say. About everything.

"You don't exist in a vacuum. Just...give me something. What about your past?"

He doesn't answer at first, letting silence settle between us. "What you see is what you get. I came through it. I was always rich. According to the world, my mother died when I was ten, but she left us. Left me."

There's a lot to unpack there. "Meaning?"

"Nothing."

And that's why this won't work. Not with him, or Jac.

"It shouldn't be nothing, Hendrick. I'm invested," I say.

"You shouldn't be."

"I don't do this shit. We need to end this. I don't do this, at all."

He nods as I sit up. "Or are you afraid?"

"What do you want, Hendrick?" This isn't an attempt on either side to move things along. And that's why it's dangerous because I don't think he's trying to get anything, either.

"Beyond fucking you? I don't fucking know. I don't know if there needs to be more. And I'm not sure you're wrong in wanting to end it." He pauses. "I'm also not sure you want that."

"I do. I don't. I don't know either. But it kind of feels like with you and me there needs to be more. Or there is more."

And..." I suck in a breath. "It's complicated and won't end well, and I don't want it."

He sighs. Gets up and goes to my closet and pulls out a coat. "Go fuck Jac."

With that, he opens the door and walks out, without looking back.

I pick up the bottle and find a throw blanket and curl up on the couch and drink. My heart hurts. His words stab at me, even with him gone.

Jac...I don't think he's any less complicated. A different complicated, but complicated. I don't want that, either.

But I gave back his money, and he'll get bored and go away.

So I'm happy. Of course, I'm happy. No complications, a flirtation with love I don't want or need. A flirt with all the obsessions a woman shouldn't have.

I take another swig, an unsettling reality sinking in.

If I'm so happy with them both gone, why do I feel so empty inside?

TWENTY

JAC



O kay, so fucking MG's mad at me. I didn't mean to bruise her like that. But I can wait her out. She'll turn up. She won't be able to resist the old Jac magic.

It's been a few days since I told her the story about Lili. I told her that because—

I don't know.

I needed to tell someone?

I've been trying to work out the ulterior motive beyond the obvious one—of making her dump his ass. I—

But it doesn't matter. Tonight, we set a trap and wiped some vermin off the face of the planet. It's crater style, and the Quinate has dissenters crawling back into holes and ready to please us because of it.

Everyone's drinking. Celebrating. There are girls everywhere, and I'm thinking of taking one home, or just fucking her in a corner. Maybe a blowjob. If I can find one I want.

The only one who's not with a girl, who's sitting in his damn plain black suit, is Hendrick.

He's in the corner of the club. It's a private one where we can invite people, do business, have orgies, or kill if we damn

well want to. But it's a place that weirdly both Hendrick and I don't use, and I think it's because our fathers did.

Hate Hendrick all I want, but we have that in common. We both avoid places they loved. Except the Quinate meeting room, high above this place.

Okay, I might feel a little guilty for suggesting Hendrick was going to take part with his father that night Lili died. Maybe he was. I'm just fucking beyond furious and always will be he tried to stop me killing his father. That he killed mine.

I really don't think Hendrick's a rapist.

Unlike his father.

But Hendrick sits, dark head bent over his phone, whiskey on the table, feet on the chair opposite, and his hand in one pocket.

Relaxed, like the dude has an agenda.

He's probably planning to fuck MG.

You'd think she'd be fucking over him by now.

I go over, pull out another chair, turn it, and sit. "Texting MG, fuckface?"

"Jac, you really need to learn shit about the world," he replies without even looking up.

"She dump you?"

"I'm not—" He stops and then glances up. "What I do isn't your business. If your thief you hired—"

"That you fucked."

"—isn't talking to you, maybe you need to look inside."

He puts his feet down and starts to rise. The familiar hot hate rises fast. “Says no fun Hendrick.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Jac?”

I wait until he looks at me full on, dropping his hand.

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Because she prefers me,” I say.

A strange expression comes over Hendrick’s face, but he picks up his whiskey and takes a sip. “I have no idea if she does, but I saw her when you were done with her.”

“Jealous.” I flash a gloating smile.

“No.” He leans forward, and his eyes are steel and ice. “I don’t do that to women. She was black and blue. Bite marks, the bruise on her face.”

“I didn’t—”

“Think? She’s not a punching bag, and she’s not something to play with when you’re mad at me. I told her you wouldn’t hurt her deliberately like that, but you fucked up. I’ve got a lot of work to do, and you’re taking up space I don’t have.”

He doesn’t say goodbye. He just goes.

Guilt isn’t fun, but it’s there, swamping me, sucking down on me to try and drown me. And maybe apologizing wasn’t enough. I need to do something.

Big.

Bold.

Bombastic.

Woo the way women like to be wooed. I don’t woo usually, but I’ll make an exception. She couldn’t even say she

didn't want me, so I'm halfway there, I'll woo my apology.

No way can she resist.



MG resists.

I'm not sure how. I haven't called her. I'm trying to respect her so-called wishes, but damn. Apart from everything, apart from that burn of need to see her, feel her cunt on my cock, mouth around it, her lips on mine, I still want that fucking necklace. And she's still the best bet of me getting it.

Hendrick Agnossio, the fuck, might have weirdly given me advice, possibly because being a joyless, boring cunt has downsides, but I don't think he's about to hand them over to me.

I need her.

I want her.

The order doesn't matter.

I did something today I've done for one other woman. I bought her the most beautiful, expensive drop diamond earrings. There's an upscale jewelry store in New York I flew to this morning. They'll make bespoke jewelry. On the spot if you have enough money and happen to be me.

When I got back this evening, I had them couriered to her place, in the store's suede black and gold bag, in a black suede finished box, the light gold silk cloth over the top of them on their black velvet display.

What else do you get a fucking jewel thief, but her own jewels made just for her?

You don't.

And...

She hasn't fucking called. She got it. The courier reported that. And considering the courier is trusted and on my personal payroll, I believe them.

At eleven, I'm drunk enough, annoyed enough, bored enough to invite two hot socialites over.

They're gorgeous. One with red hair, the other black, and they've got all the right fucking curves.

Carlos leads them into my living room downstairs where I lounge in my robe. Just the robe.

There are two other guards.

One of the girls giggles as she looks at me. "I'm so happy to be here."

The other takes a step toward me.

I don't lift my gaze from them. I'm intending to get off in spectacular fashion. Maybe make them kiss while I move from hole to hole. Or...I don't know. I haven't thought it through. Make it up as I go, probably.

"Carlos, champagne for them, bourbon for me."

The one approaching is nearly in touching distance and the other comes up, too. I hold up a hand.

"Stop."

They do.

"Strip."

With a breathless giggle, they do as asked and they both have spectacular racks, big, gorgeous tits. Nice cunts. The one

with black hair has wider hips, a thigh gap, and a landing strip, and she's wet. It's running down her leg, she's so fucking excited.

The other's tits are a little smaller, a little higher, dark rose nipples and narrower hips and zero hair. She's all swollen and reddened and glistening. As they take a glass of champagne and I take the bottle of bourbon, I wonder if Red's been fingering herself before she rushed over.

I don't care. They're cunts.

"Touch each other. Make it good."

They do, hesitant at first, but they warm up and I swig the bourbon. Carlos is standing by, on his phone. Handling some business or maybe he's got a chick who really wants his monster cock. I don't know and I don't care.

The two guards are trying and failing not to look.

When Dark Hair touches Red's cunt, the girl jumps. But Dark Hair knows her way around, and is stroking with some nice moves that I pay attention to.

Red's hips start to undulate and a moan slips free.

"Make out and keep touching." I think about it as they go in and start kissing. Dark Hair likes girls. She knows what she's doing, and she can kiss. I pay attention to that, too.

"You, on the floor," I say to Red. "Eat her," I tell Dark Hair.

It's pretty good. I then get them to sixty-nine, and I pick up my phone as I swig more of the booze.

Why the fuck hasn't MG texted? I call, hoping she'll pick up and hear all this, but it rings out. Instead, I just do some business texts.

I know there's a live sex show in front of me, and I know it's hot, but I'm just bored.

Their champagne glasses are empty, and I look about. Whatever Carlos is doing, it's important, and the two guards are just rubbing themselves and watching the show. So I text Bec who's on staff, who I know's here.

Champagne bottle.

She comes in, and her face says it all. I've nailed her a few times, but she isn't into pursuing something or going there again. I think she likes her job more than me and I like that about her. So, she gives me such a look of derision that I decide the mood is ruined.

That and I'm kind of bored.

"Take the bottle, get dressed, and go home. I've changed my mind," I say.

Carlos sighs and motions to the naked women. They get up and leave. I'm over it. Over them. Over everyone.

I just go back to my emails and my bourbon.

Bec clears her throat. She and the two guards are still there. "Can I go and work, please, or do you want to order me to be your maid again?"

"You want this?" I grab my dick. It's not hard but it's still impressive.

"I've had that, Jac, but you're an ass. The answer's no."

I narrow my eyes as the guards find something else to look at other than the tension that starts to grow in the room. "Why don't you take off your panties. And you..." I point to the closest guard. "Finger her."

This is fucked, even for me. She said no. We don't have a thing, and she's not the kind to buy into my brand of fun outside one on one. But I'm mad. I'm suddenly fucking furious, and I want to lash out.

Why the fuck did I send two women home who wanted me? Why the actual fuck didn't I want them?

"Now."

The guy hesitates. There's a gun under one of the cushions of the sofa, I can't remember why, so I pull it out and point. It's not loaded. I know that.

He doesn't.

The guard goes up to her, and she whirls and slaps him hard.

Then she looks at me.

"Congratulations, Jac. I quit."

And Bec stalks out.

"Fuck. Shit. Fuck." I wave the guards out and drink more of the damn bourbon then drop my head in my hands. The gun's still there.

I'm just winning friends. And goddamn it, I actually need Bec. She's fucking good at her job. Which means I'm going to have to apologize. I guess I could kill her for quitting. But then I'd have to hire someone else. And...I like that she doesn't put up with my bullshit. Half the time I don't see her, don't think about her, that's how good she is.

You're right, Bec. I'm an ass. I'll double your pay. Send you to Paris for Christmas. I breathe in. Or wherever. Please stay.

A minute later a text comes in. *Bahamas for Christmas. Paris for summer, and Japan for spring.*

I grit my teeth.

Bec's a ball busting bitch. I feel even worse. I half type out I'm sorry but stop. If I'm doing all this, she knows.

Just like she knows me finding someone like her, someone who'll put up with me and do her job even a quarter as well as she does, will be impossible. She runs my office, she organizes everything. She sends Carlos all the things he needs for me to know, and no doubt tells him what he needs to make me do. She's pure fucking gold.

Add a big bonus. I text. Up to a million.

Good to know you know my worth. Make it two and I'll think about it.

Done.

I'll be here Monday. Keep out of my way.

I rub a hand over my face.

"Fuck everything," I mutter. I know why I'm not currently balls deep in one of the fine women I kicked out.

MG.

She's a plague on my mind.

Because he's had her and because I despise him, I call Hendrick.

"Drop dead," I say when he answers.

Hendrick sighs. "Maybe grow the fuck up, Jac, and maybe, if you want Magdalena to talk to you, you should try being nice."

“What do you know?” I snarl.

“Goodbye Jac.”

He hangs up.

“Fuck!” He’s been seeing her. Fucking her, having his dick sucked by that incredible mouth, enjoying her hot tightness, enjoying her no fucks given attitude.

Christ, I fucking hate him.



The next day, my mood’s even worse. Lili would call this a hissy fit. I’m calling it justified. So far, I’ve threatened to shoot three staff members. I’ve snarled and snapped and hurled threats at anyone who’s come near me.

I’m acting like I’m vying for gold in the asshole Olympics, and I’m angrier than I’ve been in years.

I can’t stop. I can’t reign it in. I make Carlos send everyone home, including himself. He’ll wait outside, I know that. But I’m at the point of unreasonable fuckhead that I might actually do something I really regret, say something I can’t take back. Or, God forbid, kill someone I like or need.

I shower, put on my robe, find a new bottle of bourbon, and have a drink and then smash it. Just because I want to. Because it feels good. And I have more.

Someone fucking knocks on the door at around four, and I storm up. Expecting Carlos, I rip the door open. “You fucker. I told you I’m not responsible—”

I stop.

MG.

In a pretty dress.

She's glorious, her pale hair pinned up on one side, wearing floral heels to match the floral dress, and she's got dark rose lipstick on.

I don't think she's dressed for me. She opens her bag, pulls out a box, the suede earring one, and opens it.

Without a word, she pulls both earrings from their display and flings them at me.

“What the fuck, MG?”

“These are yours. Fuck you, Jac.”

She turns, ready to just fucking flounce off, but I grab her and haul her in the house and slam the door. The earrings sit on the stone between us.

“Pick them the fuck up, MG, or I'll make you.”

Her eyes narrow. “And if I don't?”

Suddenly, I'm so hard it hurts.

“Try me.”

TWENTY-ONE

MAGDALENA



He's hard. His cock's on display through his silk robe, and he's not even bothered about covering it. I don't mind because it's gorgeous, and I'm weak.

I didn't come here to fuck him. I made sure I had plans. A meeting with an old client about a job. The job's something I can do in my sleep, and really, it's something that Harry could have arranged. It could have been handled over the phone. But seeing someone, having a place to be, curbs the temptation.

Or it should.

I've kept away from Hendrick. Mostly. There was the slip up the other night where I stalked him home, broke in, and we fucked each other senseless. I thought about following Jac the next night and doing the same, but I'm not ready to forgive him.

No matter how much I want him.

Then he sent the earrings. They're beautiful, beyond expensive and a lover's gift, to be worn. I don't want them. He should know I don't wear jewelry. But Jac...

"I'm not picking them up. What the fuck makes you think I want them?"

“You never wear jewelry, so maybe you didn’t have the right thing.”

“I don’t want those. Leave me alone, Jac. Maybe you can wear them on your nipples.”

He laughs. “Guess you’re trying me.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” I’m furious.

He puts his hand on my shoulder, and pushes me down to my knees. It doesn’t take much, my legs are traitors, and I’m salivating for his cock.

“Punish you. Open your mouth, MG. It’s been way too fucking long since I’ve visited this heaven, and I don’t think it’s fair Hendrick gets your wares for himself.”

I flinch at that, and I’m honestly not sure whether it’s out of excitement and lust, or disgust and anger. Maybe all of them.

But I open for him.

He strokes my cheeks. “Good slut.”

And then he shoves his cock in.

He fucks my face with his cock, grabs my hair, and forces it in as far as he can get it, as far in my throat as it’ll go. Hammering the back of that tender spot and setting off my gag reflex.

Jac groans as I gag. “Yessss...”

Holding me there, making me struggle, making me swallow, he pulls out and shoves in. My mouth’s full of saliva and it drips, I can feel it soak my chin, my cheeks, my throat, my chest. Soak my dress.

“Oh, fuck, MG. Pure fucking stellar filth.” He keeps hammering in. And then he comes. Hard. Fast. Hitting the back of my throat. “Suck hard.”

I do and he grips my hair tight, moving me back and forth, his body shaking.

When he’s done, he staggers back, pulling out.

I cough and splutter.

“Your fucking mouth, MG. Christ.”

Jac pulls me up, and I’m a wet, dripping mess, and he kisses me. It’s a strange kiss, loving, hard, deep, wild, brutal and soft. It’s a kiss I’ll dream of. It’s a kiss that makes me tremble and the world shift.

He lifts his head. “You look gorgeous like this. You always look gorgeous, but this...fuck.”

Jac is breathing hard, struggling. Like he wants to say more, but he can’t find the words.

Then he kisses and licks my ear. “Pick up the fucking gift.”

“No.”

“It’s an apology.”

“It’s a buy-off.”

“You’re ungrateful.”

“I don’t wear jewelry.”

“I know,” he says. “It’s why I got them.”

“You know you’re fucked up, right?” I ask.

“I know that. And you?”

“Need to be going.”

It's both the right and the wrong thing to say to him. Because it's the equivalent of pushing fingers through fur in the opposite direction to growth. He isn't sure he likes it, but I've got his attention and it riles.

"Sure you do, MG." He picks me up like I'm nothing, and there's a clatter as one of my shoes hits the stone floor. He then dumps me in the chair near the door and pushes my thighs up and over the sides, and he looks down at me, a small frown marring his perfection. "Too many clothes."

"Do not ruin this dress."

He grins, runs a finger along the low but decent neckline. "I'll get you another."

Jac tests the fabric, hooking that finger in and pulling it out toward him, and he nods, seemingly delighted with the give.

There's a rule I have with clothes apart from evening wear. Stretch and movement ready. My job isn't exactly a nine-to-five. And even gowns usually have something akin to give, like the easy release of the dress I wore to the gala, skirts with slits, hidden or otherwise.

Of course, it works against me, like at the gala. Like here.

Because all Jac does is push the straps down along with my bra. He has my arms in a light bind that way, and my breast exposed.

"I'm going to do this." He pauses. "Can I?"

I blink in confusion. Was he *asking* for consent? Jac, of all people? "Can I stop you?"

His gaze hits mine for a moment, and I can read the *yes*.

Something's changed.

Maybe he really is sorry for what he did.

He points a ringed finger at my breasts, then strokes over, pinching and twisting my nipples. And I moan.

“This is how I like your tits, exposed and presented to me.”

He flips up my skirt, completely exposing me, and he yanks my panties hard to the side, ignoring my small yelp.

“Panties should be banned on you. At the gala you went commando. That’s what I like.”

“I’ll put it on my list of *things Jac wants* and tuck it away amongst my pile of *no fucks to give* in the cupboard marked *not happening*.”

Jac kneels in front of me and sucks hard on one nipple and then the other. “These would look seriously good pierced. Rings in your labia.”

“I don’t have a piercing fetish,” I snap as his hand slides up my thigh to brush light against my pussy, making me want to moan. “That’s you.”

“MG, you’ve got a serious fetish for mine. Especially the one in my cock.”

The moan slides free. He’s right. I do. I fantasize about his cock and how its piercing works me.

He sucks hard on the other nipple, and then sitting back, he stares at my pussy. “Forgive me for losing it when I hurt you, I’ll worship your gorgeous cunt. I’ll make you come let’s say...three times, just from my mouth, and I’ll fuck you as much as you want.”

“Jac...”

How both him and Hendrick can make me so wet, so lustful, so fucking full of fantasies and need for them in different ways, is beyond me.

I'm here, desperate for everything. Oh God, what if—

He pulls the lips back hard, exposing me, pinning me. "Pink and pretty and fucking wet. Tight." He reaches in, fingers hooking just in me, and he pulls me open that way too. "I can see it, the tightness."

And then he starts to lick me. He starts low, hard, his tongue velvet rough, and he runs up from my perineum to my clit, then down. Next, he shifts and starts to suck hard on my lips, pulling them from my body, deep into his mouth. His tongue strokes inside and the fires leap.

I'm shaking. A tremor moving through my bones. My blood's hot and sparking, pulse points throbbing, and every nerve ending is turned like red-hot sunbursts to my pussy, like it's a sunset supernova by Jac's talented mouth.

He sucks my clit hard. Then he circles his tongue on it. He sucks harder. Deeper. Thrums his tongue. Soon he's doing this with abandon. It's rough and relentless, and a storm whips up wild and makes my body sing and my clit throb hard. I'm hit by a high, clear note of pleasure as I come.

Jac doesn't stop. He keeps going. He uses his weight and build to hold me down, hands on my thighs to stop them moving. I make small sounds.

It's too much. I'm too sensitive. Jac is the worst monster.

Another orgasm hits and I scream a little. This time, as the hard wave hits it morphs out, I push my pussy up and into his face.

Jac keeps going. He sucks and thrums and licks, and I'm high, I'm rolling. I'm nothing but a sea of impossible pleasure that's everything at once. And I burst again, a full body orgasm that makes me buck and jerk in the chair.

He looks up. "What the fuck, let's say four, a bonus."

This time, he uses his fingers. He starts to thrust into me, hard. It's rough and wild, and he sucks and licks and bites until I'm shuddering, crying, pushing at him as much as I can, and trying to get more. And he just does Jac. Does what he wants.

And what Jac wants is sublime.

This time, I scream so loud it echoes out, and because his fingers are in me, I clench down on them, hard, over and over again.

When it's done, he finger fucks me hard a few more times, then leans down and licks up all my juices.

"Taste yourself, MG."

He kisses me. An open-mouthed kiss, and it's pure Jac and me. It's dirty. Hot. Beautiful.

When he lifts up, hands on my thighs, he gets up, looks at me and mutters, "I wish I had my phone."

The thought of Jac looking at me spread out and wet and open and just fucked is both wrong and hot. Wrong because I'm not sure how much I trust him not to show others. For him to just think it's something to add to his collection.

I know he has one. He sent me a photo of me going down on him that time from the cameras he's got to have in his room.

He's depraved, filthy.

I'm filthy. I feel utterly dirty, like I've been rolling in it. I've basically told Hendrick I might be in love with him, kicked him out, let him walk, stalked him, and fucked him before running, and now here I am, like some kind of actual whore who's too dumb to get paid for her troubles.

He's hard again, and he just picks me up, pumps his cock and pushes me up against the door and fucks me from behind. Oh, that cock feels divine stretching me open and maybe this is payment enough. When he pulls out the drag sets me off, spinning into another orgasm.

The bastard laughs, puts a hand on my clit, the other on my hip and just slams into me, rough and wild, and soon we're both crying out with release.

When we're done, he eases out.

I stand there, legs wobbling as I pull my panties back into place and push my breasts back into my bra, pulling the top of my dress back up.

Fuck, I'm sure I look like a terrible mess, but I need to get out of here.

There's no comfort, no sweetness, just the fact he wishes he had a photo for his collection. And yeah, I feel dirty. No matter how much I loved it.

"I...I have to go."

"Take the earrings," he says from behind me, like he doesn't care.

He's an asshole and my eyes burn.

"MG?"

"What?"

“Look at me.”

I take a breath and turn. He holds out his hand, the earrings in his palm, but I shake my head.

His eyes narrow.

“So, that’s it? These aren’t good enough?”

I glare. “I don’t want them.”

“I got these made just for you.”

That hits something in me, but I swallow and make myself say it, because if I don’t, I might take them and if I take them...I don’t know what that might mean. “I don’t want them, Jac.”

“I see.” He looks me up and down. “Off to see your boyfriend?”

“You’re an ass, Jac. You think it’s okay to just fuck someone and leave them in the dust, feel like it’s some kind of personal victory.”

He steps close. “And you’re fucking Hendrick. He dates. So I’m guessing that’s what’s going on. You’re with Hendrick, but using me as your dirty little secret. I’m good enough for you to fuck but not to...”

“What?” I snap at him. “Date? Do you want to date me?”

“I don’t know what I want,” he shouts.

“Neither do I!”

We stare at each other. “Do you want me to hold you?”

Woah, wait a minute. Did Jac just...?

I step back.

“This is way too complicated.” I want him to hold me, and I want him to go away at the same time. “All of it. I wanted money and to steal the jewels. That’s it.”

“So,” he says, “take my money, steal the necklace, and I’ll fuck your heart out. It’s not complicated.”

He doesn’t quite look at me.

I take a breath. “You’re not a good person, Jac.”

“None of us are,” he says, “but you can’t stop thinking about my cock. Can you?”

I want to say no, but it would be a lie, just like me saying I don’t want Hendrick’s a lie, too.

“Thought so.”

“You can think?” I ask, and I know it’s a provocation.

“I’m not sure that’s what interests you.”

“Jac.”

He tosses the earrings to the floor, and I open the door to go, but he grabs me, pulls me in and slams the door. Then he boxes me against it.

He looks me up. And then down.

“Tell me you don’t me.”

I moan. “Jac...”

“I’m going to really fuck you.” He stops, looks at me. “Whore.”

And my body turns electric. I sway toward him. God, I’m fucked up. “Do your worst.”

The thought of just throwing the outside world away for a few hours and losing myself, of fucking him, of feeling of his

piercing in my pussy—slow. Hard. Fast. However—almost makes me come.

I want it again.

Desperately.

I want him.

Desperately.

One more time.

Then, I'm done. For good.

“My pleasure,” he says. “You’re going to fucking love my worst.”

TWENTY-TWO

HENDRICK



Jac doesn't make the afternoon meeting I have at a bar in Millionaire's Way. Stuffy and staid. Upscale and full of the well-heeled, the rich—both criminal and above board.

This is totally not Jac's scene, and Jac isn't known to be a player unless he chooses to. I should be glad he's not here. I'm not.

I'm pissed the fuck off. Maximo hands me a drink, and Ivan chats up a pretty girl as we wait for Declan to come back from his conversation at the bar.

The meeting isn't important for what we're saying; what we're discussing is meant to be overheard. It's a study in misinformation and testing of waters for sharks, boats for leaks.

Someone's poking about the edges of things.

I took out the slumlord dirtbag down where Magdalena grew up and ruffled Gimboni feathers. Apparently Jac took out an idiot who missed payments and annoyed a small underground gambling club. Declan's having some issues with drug shipments, and Ivan and Maximo are fine, but they've heard talk of a property developer who launders money jacking up prices.

None of this is falling on us. Just trusted affiliates.

It happens.

From time to time, a shakeup down the line rattles all branches. But there's also the Kincaid matter, and the kid's slimy. I've got a meeting with him, and his outfit is the subject of the upcoming Quinate meeting.

"Y'know, this fucking affects Jac," Maximo mutters, turning his dirty martini in his hands, and scowling at it. "It wouldn't hurt fucking Jac to actually take life seriously and turn up."

"That fuck just messes shit up," I say. "Maybe he's off killing someone."

Maximo snorts, picks up his drink. "Maybe he's got his dick buried in someone."

Maybe that someone's Cat.

The second theory of Jac getting his fucking dick seen to is the more likely scenario. And considering his behavior recently?

Yeah.

The jewel thief's a good theory.

I'm not a fan of that. Not of him fucking Magdalena.

It's probably true. I hate the fact she wants us both almost as much as I hate the fact she doesn't want anything to do with us. Even though I know she can't keep away.

"Can't kill him," I say.

The bar's low-key noisy, but quiet enough if someone wanted to listen, they could. Someone always wants to listen,

but I don't see anyone who stands out. I see people I know in passing, but that's the same with any of the haunts.

Magdalena loves what I have, loves the wilder rough brutality of Jac, and I don't know what to do about it. Or even if I should do anything.

She keeps coming back. And she'll do so until she snaps out of it. Or I close that door.

Jac won't give her up, not until he gets bored, and I'm not sure I have the strength to do that, either.

I never lied when I said I was falling for her. I am.

But love isn't the happy ever after.

It's pain. Bad decisions.

It changes nothing.

"Did I miss anything?" Declan asks as he returns. Ivan drifts over.

Maximo gives a sly smile. "Just Hendrick's plans of killing Jac. Now, who wants to get into the sex trade...?"



"Sex trade?" I shake my head.

Max rolls his eyes. "It's a good idea, I'm fucking going for it. Always money in sex."

"You just like the idea of being a sex toy king."

He laughs. "Maybe. But it's free money."

It's late afternoon. We're at the next place, downtown, where Kincaid asked to meet Maximo. I'm pretty fucking sure

Jac broke protocol and met the kid on his own because Max said the kid had an attitude, more so than usual.

Jac's a dick, but he doesn't like Kincaid and if he broke protocol...actually he probably just fucking did it because he didn't think.

The kid's late. A lame ass powerplay, but still one. I don't give a fuck. I've got nothing to do, but Maximo's getting irritated. Worried about the order he put in.

If I have my way this coming Quinate meeting, Kincaid's out and Max is going to have to get his guns elsewhere or cut a different deal with the kid.

It'll be more expensive, but it's not like he can't fucking afford it. And really, I've zero fucks to give. I don't need an overload of guns. I have enough, and I buy most of mine elsewhere. But Max has a different area of expertise, interests and revenue, and it means a lot of guns.

To each to their own, as long as it doesn't hurt the Quinate as a whole.

Kincaid rolls in with an actual entourage. Girls in slutty dresses and too much makeup, his idea, no doubt, of sophistication. He looks like a white boy trying for gangsta rapper, which isn't a good image.

He's got three burly guys who scream bodyguard, which isn't how you do it, and he's wearing a smirk I'm itching to punch off his face.

Forty-fucking-five minutes late and counting.

And even Maximo, who wants to keep him, is irritated. The kind of irritated where I need to put a hand on his arm to stop him from doing something stupid. Like killing the little shit.

It wouldn't be a bad thing, but this bar isn't Quinate, and though we have a vast majority of law enforcement on payroll, murder here can't be overlooked. And I'm not aiming for a couple of hours at the local downtown precinct.

He sighs. I release him.

The kid slides into a seat, a babe sliding onto him. A bored looking babe at that. The other stands there and makes eyes at both me and Maximo.

"We were both interested in your ideas," I say. "Tell us what you told Jac, Kester."

The smirk is back. "Apart from some stellar new black ops weaponry, so new the CIA and army are clamoring for it..."

Maximo sits up straight at that.

The smirk on the kid's face deepens, as does my urge to punch him.

Kester Kincaid drags the moment out.

"...what do you think of trade?"

Oh fuck me, he isn't going there. But the girl on his knee moves and offers him her neck. He pushes back her hair. There's a small tattoo. A barcode right behind her ear.

The girl's not scared. She's learned to school her features to give nothing away. I bet when she's fucked, she keeps that same expression.

Maximo is very still, and his hand's on his gun. This time, I don't make any move to stop him from pulling. He doesn't, but in that stillness is a vibration and he's close, real close.

"What kind of trade?" I ask.

"American. Top quality. Virginal."



Fucking Jac.

He fucking knew the kid had that one up his sleeve.

He could have said something. If not to me, then to the others. Jesus. I don't think he's stupid enough to even begin to try and float the idea of cutting a deal. Or letting Kincaid stay as our supplier of guns.

But a fucking heads up would have been nice.

We don't do certain things and trafficking is one. A hard no.

Oh, yeah. Fucking pillars of the community. We'll kill you in your sleep, but we won't traffic your girls.

At least with the kid trying to act like Jac was into it, he shot himself in the foot. Maximo wants the fucking kickass guns. He doesn't want a part of trafficking. Stores with sex toys, links to high end escorts and sex parties, yeah.

Kidnapped and tattooed women for sale?

No. None of us want that.

Even if we were those kind of shitheads, the whole sex trade thing on that ugly level isn't going anywhere good. Not even if you're Quinate.

When I float the nay for blocking Kincaid, I'll have majority. Not that I figure it'll be an issue when this side comes up, but...

I sigh and prowl around my actual real home. The one in downtown, the kind of place no one expects me to live in. Not downtown, not fucking Hendrick Agnossio. I pour a drink, and

stand at the window, looking at Delacroix as early evening descends. I have a shit ton of work, but all I can think about is Cat. Where she is. What she's up to.

We won't ever work, but fuck, I want her. I miss her.

In ten years, she's the one that's got to me. And maybe more than anyone because I'm older, more settled in who and what I am.

I take a breath that hurts something inside, and I follow it with a deep swallow of the Hibiki, needing the warmth.

I fucking miss Magdalena. Everything. It doesn't matter if it's smart or sensible or even makes a lick of actual sense. I miss her. All of her.

Talking and arguing. Being challenged by her, challenging her. The battle of wits. The quiet, contemplative conversations.

I miss her scent, that sweet spice and freshness. Orange blossom and ginger and bloom of jasmine.

I miss fucking her. Worse, I miss touching her.

It kills me knowing Jac's touched her, too. Probably is right now. No one else is going to keep him from fucking turning up to a Quinate thing. If he was with another woman, he'd leave.

He's a cold, sadistic bastard. Beyond sybaritic. But he lives to fuck with me, his anger burning hotter than his need to sink his cock in someone. He'd rather turn up and watch me suffer his presence than roll around in his hedonism.

Unless it's a woman he marked because he lost control.

Because he wanted her that much.

Because he couldn't fucking stand that I'd touched her, too.

Those fucking bruises. They hurt me, yes. And I know they made her ache. But I also know they made her ache in a way that scared her.

She liked them.

Just not the anger behind them because misplaced anger is misplaced. But that rough violence that lives in him is what she craves, and I don't go that far. I'm not built that way. Rough yes. Sharing? If it's the right woman, sure, but violent roughness that marks with abandon isn't me.

It's him.

And she told him herself she enjoyed it.

I saw her from her room, how she responded when he turned up, how her body buzzed.

For him.

Then me.

But she got wet for him.

I want to put my mark on her. Somehow, some way. The kind of bite that bruises, and she feels and sees for a while, something that sinks beneath the skin.

I've marked her before. I want to do it again.

Setting down my glass, I go and get my phone, and before I can stop myself, I call.

It goes to voicemail.

The questions I already know the answer to swarm my thoughts. Jac. Is that where she is? Who she's with?

Jealousy slices, white hot, through me and I actually really want him dead.

She's with him.

I can get confirmation with one call.

Because I'm apparently a masochist, I press another number.

"Hendrick."

The wariness in Damon's tone tells me all I don't want to know.

"Where are you?" I ask.

When he doesn't answer, I swear.

He sighs. "You know where I am. You sent me here, remember? Now hang up, find some hot girl, and fuck her."

I grit my teeth as pain lances me again. "I asked you to keep an eye on Magdalena, at her place. Is she there alone?"

"Go spend time with the necklace. Are you at home?"

"Define home."

"Don't be an ass," he mutters. "Home. Downtown. Your duplex hidden in a tenement building, that home. Geez."

I could do like he said. Fuck someone. There are enough candidates to choose from if I was that kind of guy.

"Is—"

"I'm not at her place, Hendrick, now go find something to do."

Ice and cold swamp me.

"Jac's. You're at Jac's. She's at Jac's." I keep saying his fucking name, like if I stop, she'll choose him instead of

rejecting us both. Worse. Choose him over me.

He doesn't speak for about two minutes. Then he says, "She's been in there a while. Stalked up hours and hours ago."

I close my eyes.

"She went to leave, and he dragged her back in."

Wait... My temper flares again. "Dragged her?"

"Not against her will." Then his voice grows kind. "Advice you'll ignore? Stay home, Hendrick."

"Not on your fucking life."



It didn't take much to get out of Damon which place Jac was at because Damon knew I'd know, anyway. Jac rarely goes to the family mansion. I don't blame him. Our family fucking mansions are cursed.

Full of bad fucking juju, bad fucking decisions, bad fucking memories.

I sent Damon home, so I can sit in my self-imposed torture and watch Jac's place from my car. He's got a mansion in Delacroix city, so the grounds, while big for city living, are small by other standards and the modern monolith mansion takes up a lot of the real estate.

It's dark, and the downside of fucking driving is not being able to drink.

Around ten the door opens and they emerge. Jac's shirtless and handsy, and Magdalena's disheveled, well-fucked and maybe a little guilty. And it fucking hurts. A knuckle duster punch to the guts that makes me want to throw up.

It's worse than seeing them fuck.

But I know the queasy pain of betrayal, even if this really can't be called that. It's how it feels, and this hurts worse than anything before.

Anger beats cold in my veins, and I want to fucking punish, to hurt.

To borrow a page from the Jac Miller Book of Destruction. They're both going to pay.

Only real question is *how*.

TWENTY-THREE

MAGDALENA



I know it's guilt that stops the fullness of satisfaction. Like I betrayed myself. Hendrick. And it sucks. Even if it makes no sense. I don't owe anyone anything.

They'd both fuck the next thing around the corner, no matter what they've both said. Hendrick told me there's been no one but me. Not since I lifted his wallet. I believe him. It's just I know others are around the corner. As many others as he wants.

Jac admitted in his fucked up way that he tried to bone two girls, had them eat each other and just couldn't get hard. And then there was the hot date who tried to stroke his cock but she bored him, too. He told me this because he figured it was me getting in his way, like some ghost of sexual fuckups coming to ruin sexual fun and games present.

And like a hot, X-rated Scrooge, he finally got the meaning of it all. He wanted me and not them.

He said all this with his arm tight around my neck as he plowed into me from behind and twisted my nipples, told me he'd take my ass next and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

Because he was finally hard, and he was going to take advantage of it.

As I said, fucked up, but weirdly sweet, Jac-style.

For him, too, it'll pass. Those hot women are around that corner. Swathes for both of them.

I'm not trying to make myself feel good or create wounds and reasons. It just is what it is.

I've no reason to feel guilty.

Still, the guilt remains, the sullied ground in dirt seems to seep beyond flesh and into bone.

Because I betrayed Hendrick, a man I might love, a man I ended things with and can't keep away from.

Hendrick who might be able to choose from those women around the mythical corner but doesn't want them. Hendrick who emotionally I want the most, who emotionally I betrayed.

And sexually, I...I want both men. For different reasons, some the same and with equal desire.

I'm exhausted, and it doesn't help there's a missed call from Hendrick. The client also called, but I can deal with him. There are a number of missed calls from Harry, and I know I have to call her back. As soon as I sort all this shit out.

Hendrick. Jac.

What the fuck do I do?

I want them and they want me.

If I ever gave up my life of crime, I never thought it would be because of this.

With a sigh, I get out of the car Jac got me, and then I send it on its way. Finally, after waiting, I get a plain old taxi to my actual apartment in downtown.

Even just getting the cab there's a gamble, but both of them know the other place, and I need...I need space to think. Without them turning up. Without the temptation of calling one or both to come over.

Even now, my body apparently doesn't understand the meaning of too much or enough sex. If I didn't have an IUD in, I'd be pregnant already, no doubt.

If I go home, I take that temptation away because I don't want them there. It's a hard and fast rule, and one I've stuck to. The only human outside a repairman or delivery boy who's been there is Harry.

The place is dark when I get in, and I turn on the lamps, lock the door and leave a trail of clothes to the bathroom where I spend a long time under the hot spray. Feeling a little more human, I dress and head out to cut through the living room to the bathroom when I scream.

Someone's on the sofa.

"Oh my God, Harry!"

She doesn't unfold her arms as she glares. "I'd say you need better locks, but I have keys." She nods at the coffee table.

There's also a bottle of cheap whiskey, two cups and a bottle of Coke.

I don't even complain that she made me a horrible Harry Cocktail...no what did she call it? The CatWoman? I sit on the chair opposite the sofa and take a deep swallow.

"Mmm, disgusting." I take another one, then look at her, all angry dark curls and pissed-off baby blues. "I'm sorry I didn't call back."

“Which time?” She studies me. “Don’t tell me you’ve taken stupid fucking straight girl to a new level of stupid and fucked them both at the same time because I know you returned all that pretty, pretty money to the even prettier Jac Miller.”

I swallow.

“Bitch.” Harry sips her drink.

“I can’t do the job, they’re Quinate—”

“You can’t do the job, but you can fuck them because they’re Quinate.” She sighs, ignores her glass, and drinks from the bottle. “I let you be because I thought you were working on getting the jewels, and if you got some bonuses via the gorgeous Hendrick, then it’s just the price, but...fuck, girl. You. Returned. The. Money.”

I want to laugh, but I think I might cry. A small sob breaks free and Harry mutters something.

“I also returned the earrings.”

“Woah.” She holds up a hand. “What fuckin’ earrings?”

“Harry, I...” I shake my head. “What’s wrong with me? I fucked up. I knew the job wouldn’t be easy, but there’s so much going on. But maybe—”

“Gonna stop you there, babe,” she says, swigging her favorite paint thinner masquerading as liquor, “because I’m thinking there’s some real bullshit about to come from you. And I’m disappointed. You’re the girl who can rob anyone, take anything, and the only morals you have are the ones pertaining to how wet the thing’s gonna get your pussy. If it isn’t getting you wet, it isn’t getting stolen.”

“I’m not sure that’s a moral,” I say.

“It should be.” She has another mouthful. “Point is you love hard jobs.”

“This—”

“And,” she says sitting forward, resting her arms on her thighs, bottle dangling as she pins me down with a look, “don’t fucking say these dudes are misunderstood or their jerkoff ways hide their pain, or the necklace belongs to Hendrick and you don’t feel right about taking it.”

“Harry.”

“Lena.” She mimics me, shakes her head. “It belongs to whoever’s paying you, and they’re Quinate. These aren’t good men. They might be good betwixt the sheets, but fuck that Shakespearian bullshit. This is simple. Money gets jewels. End of.”

“It isn’t that simple,” I whisper, downing the horrible drink in one go and swiping the bottle to refill my glass.

Harry swipes it back. “It is.”

I take a shaking breath, but she glares.

“Here’s a question for you, Lena. Who the fuck are you and where’s my friend?”

It’s a good question.

“I don’t know. I’m just...drained.” Emotionally. Physically.

“Yeah, hello invasion of the body snatchers person, you got her face right, but that ain’t her personality.” Harry frowns and says, “I just want to know why you’re letting two rich murderous assholes lead you around like a bitch in heat. Do you have a lead?”

I gulp down a sob.

Anyone else would toss the bottle aside, hug me, and say everything's going to be all right.

Not Harry. She just waits.

Since I know she won't let it go without some kind of explanation, the story comes out. The hot sex that she already knew about, the bond with Hendrick, which she didn't. The fact they both want me and I want them. How Jac hurt me and Hendrick bathed me and Jac got me apology earrings of the expensive kind. How I can't keep the fuck away from them and I don't know what to do.

I don't know what to do.

At all.

"Oh my God," she whispers, "Magdalena, this is bad."

"I know. And now I'm in so deep that I'm not sure ending it will do that. It's like we—"

"Not that crap," she says. "Do you know how much even the cheapest item is from that jeweler? They have one store. One. In Manhattan. A billionaire got them for you. They must be worth a fortune, like a medium to good fortune. An earring of money each would be great padding for our bank accounts. You'd sell the pair of course, just split the profit. And hello... fencer here. Why the actual fuck did you return them?"

I drink the whiskey straight, right from my mug. I don't even care that it strips flesh on the way down.

Thumping the mug on the coffee table, I shake my head. "Out of everything in my very sad and sorry tale, the earrings are what you took away from the entire thing?"

“Very, very, very expensive earrings, Lena,” she says. “What? If you’d kept the earrings, I’d say bounce all day on both the cocks and we’d be richer.”

“Both? At once?”

She shrugs. “Could be fun. If you’re into that sort of thing, that is.”

I start to giggle, and she joins in.

I laugh so much my sides ache and tears blur my vision. Fuck, I’ve missed her.

When I stop, I wipe my eyes and breathe.

“Shit, Harry.” I look at her as she calmly makes drinks. “What do I do?”

“Didn’t you say Bobby Ruben wants you to do a job?”

I wave a hand. “It’ll be easy, I’ll see him tomorrow.”

“See him tonight.”

“Why?”

“You do research on all jobs, even easy ones, we both do. So why not do the two birds with one stone. Find out more about the Heart of Dark Desires.”

Now I frown. “I thought it didn’t matter this time. All I had to do was give it to the client.”

“But Lena, you’re right, they’re Quinate, they hate each other, so either Hendrick has it but it’s actually a fake, one he doesn’t know about, or it’s real. Or he’s bluffing.”

“I don’t think he’s bluffing.”

“Then we need to dive into the entire history, the ownership isn’t something I came across, just a museum had

it, and should have it,” she says. “And it’s a convoluted past, like most infamous gems.”

“I don’t understand...” I pick up my mug and cup it in my hands. “How does it matter?”

“Two things, Lena. I think you need to get to the bottom of the bad blood. You’re a pawn in their games against each other and until you know—not just what they told you, but know independently—you won’t be able to let it go. Break the magic hold, break this whole bullshit of their power over you.”

“You said two things...” I trail off, my head snaps up. “You’re not thinking what I’m thinking?”

Harry shrugs smugly. “Depends on what you’re thinking.”

“That if I can find out the history and what this Heart of Dark Desires means, I can auction it to the highest bidder of the two for more money. Which is insane.”

“Not if we get the money while we’re far away,” she says.

“Quinate.”

“Us. We can beat the Quinate.” She pauses. “Or you know, replace the necklace with a better fake and walk with the real deal.”

“Oh shit,” I whisper.

“I know,” Harry says with an indulgent smile, “I’m a genius.”



The job for Bobby’s going to be easy to do. New Jersey, and it’s not urgent, a mansion of bad taste and crap alarms and run of the mill security. He wants paintings and jewels that are

worth a lot of money for payment he's not getting from a client. And it's going to be the kind of thing to clean up twice for him.

He gets the goods.

They get the insurance payout.

He goes and takes that money as payment.

It's a win-win for him.

And, as Harry says, brilliant cover for us pulling up roots when we need to. If we need to.

The research that we do that night from Harry's basement workshop gives me about a month before the perfect time for the job comes up. They'll be getting ready for a vacation they can't afford, and for that couple, it means a number of parties for...I don't care.

This kind of so-called rich person annoys me. They spend up bigger than what they have, and make huge splashes, get into trouble and parade around like they don't know the meaning of the word.

Robbing them is almost community service.

"See this?" Harry looks up from her laptop and turns it, showing me an old site of collected articles on another necklace.

"That's not the Heart of Dark Desires."

"I know, Magdalena," she says. "But this for a while was the *it* jewel. There are earrings and a bracelet with this. And that got caught up in a war over ownership. It's in a museum. They just call it the Everton Collection, which is boring AF, but whatever."

She's already fencing this Everton Collection in her head.

"But in the articles, they keep talking about the Heart of Dark Desires and who owns it. It's someone by the name of Vanderland, by the way, which totally sounds made up. Anyway," she says, "the Heart of Dark Desires has been warred over for years."

"Between the Agnossios and Millers?"

"No," she says. "Between the Fairgoods and Beaumonts, whoever they are."

She turns the computer back to face her, and I scroll through the dark web feed on the other one as I lean up against the workbench.

I open an article on the history of the Heart of Dark Desires, but it's really nothing I don't know. I pause as the name of a photo studio, very run of the mill, pops up under the last photo of a some beautiful, flaxen-haired pregnant woman wearing the necklace. Oh shit, it's Jac's mother. It just says Mrs. George Miller because whoever did this is some kind of old-fashioned misogynist.

There's another photo of a gorgeous dark-haired woman, Maria Agnossio, wearing it. There's no context for the photos. Of when they were taken. There's just the fact Mrs. George Miller's heavily pregnant, and Maria has a very small, happy little boy at her side who's got to be Hendrick.

I don't know who had it first, or when these pictures date back to. It's just the same studio, Lacey Photography, listed.

There are more photos here and there with the Heart of Dark Desires, by itself, held in a hand, on a neck, and they all have Lacey Photography under them.

I frown, pulling up some pictures of the gala. And then some of other Quinate events.

Candid or posed. Studio shot or party snaps, all things seem to be linked to the same photography studio.

I open another tab. “Harry, have you heard of Lacey Photography?”

“Why?”

“They seem to be the only ones who have a name to any photo of the Heart of Dark Desires or anything Quinate oriented.”

She types away. “A lot of people do that. I don’t. I do my own photos—jewels, not parties. Got no time for parties.”

“Focus, Harry.”

She sighs. “You can’t stop people taking photos, but you can control what’s released. And if you’re Quinate, you can control it all.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, my innocent little friend—”

“I’m taller than you.”

“—that most organized crime syndicates or outfits, or you know, geniuses like us, do that. Control what goes out. Like one seemingly run of the mill studio that probably also uses their business as a way to store photographic history and launder money. It also means that the Quinate can do shit in the open and then control what’s seen by the regular Joes.” She grins. “It’s pretty fucking cool.”

“I never knew of this.”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course not. This kinda thing isn’t what you should be wasting your time with.”

I glance at her. “Harry? Want to do some B and E?”



The studio’s small, but their alarm system is sophisticated and tricky as fuck. It takes me a while to get in. Longer than usual.

It’s not going to matter what we find, they’ll know someone was in here because I have to knock out cameras. I’ll have to make it look like a smash and grab when we’re done.

Harry’s up for this. She’s already picked out and packed up the expensive cameras with serial numbers that are marked if they get sold. The store won’t lose out and it’ll look like the place was hit by thugs looking for quick cash.

She’s at the filing cabinet and then on one of the offline computers, copying all she can find on the necklace.

I’m searching for Jac and Hendrick things.

There’s a file, and I hover, because it’s called *L.M/AgSr*. There are others similar, different combinations, and I don’t know the people in it, but I’m guessing for each one someone paid a lot of money to keep their photos. Or it’s for blackmail.

I press and open the file.

Lili and Agnossio Senior. She’s on his lap, his hand’s up her skirt, and she’s sprawled open, arm up and back in his hair. She looks so fucking young, it hurts. I look through a few and feel sick and copy them on the drive.

Hendrick’s father was definitely fucking the girl—underage girl, the bastard—and she looks into it. The word

groomed comes to mind.

I shift over to other photos, files of parties, and these I can stomach.

Young Lili, young Jac, they're there. Lili must be around the age that the perv had his hand up her skirt, around fourteen or fifteen, but she's not looking at Hendrick's dad. She's looking at Hendrick. And even in this photo, which is just a candid shot of the room, it's clear her heart's in her eyes and her heart belongs to Hendrick.

There are lots of photos, and I hate myself for searching out Jac. Watching how he's all about Lili. And I hate myself searching out the girl, who's all about Hendrick. And of course, I search *him* out and...

At some point it changes.

Lili's about eighteen and there's a photo where Hendrick's with a girl but he's watching Lili. Pretty little Lili whose heart hasn't wavered in these photos. But now there's hope and...a shine to her eyes.

His dad keeps away from her, but I see the looks at the girl. Subtle but I notice them because I'm studying these things like there's an exam.

Both Jac and Hendrick's fathers were fucking hot. And I see why Lili went for Hendrick's dad. But I can't shake the idea that he's the stand in for Hendrick in her mind.

Because Hendrick's Lili's universe, and it hurts to see.

It hurts more when he starts looking back at her. She's very pretty so I can understand why. And there's one photo where the two are next to each other, talking to others. They're to the side, and not at all the focus of the composition. But their fingers touch.

My breath catches.

There are more, so many photos, and most aren't some kind of secret tale I'm looking for. There's Jac draped in girls, eyes on his sister or glaring at his father.

There's Hendrick with whatever flavor he's dating.

And then...

It's a candid shot to showcase a house and beautiful people. I don't know where the house is, but the picture's meant to be of the glass doors open, the light on the patio and the man and woman who's place it is—they feature heavily in this series I'm looking at—but the photographer got it wrong and cut the man's head out of frame.

I'm not looking at that.

I'm looking in the foreground shadows to the side, I can just make them out. Just.

Hendrick and Lili.

Kissing.

I can't breathe as pieces fall into place.

Jac's little sister didn't have just some school-girl crush on Hendrick. She loved him.

And Hendrick loved her, too.

TWENTY-FOUR

JAC



I t's like MG's disappeared off the face of the fucking planet.

To be fair, I could search harder, but I don't know if I'll like what I find.

I'm thinking about her and fucking Hendrick. Of her fucking him. Because though she might like riding my cock, might like how I fuck her, and the chemistry's off the charts, they have a connection. I saw that. And I'm guessing their chemistry is something else, too. Up there with her and me.

And I don't like whatever this fucking feeling is inside, the one that sets the world slightly off kilter.

Especially because it's him.

Fuckface Agnossio with the rapist father he tried to fucking protect.

Regardless of the history, from families to enemies to frenemies, to all out combatants to business partners and Quinate members that spans back over generations, I know Hendrick liked Lili. And to see her like that, his father the one responsible...

And then to kill my father... I think the phrase is totally fucked all the way up, and if it isn't, it fucking should be.

I sit at the bar near where we hold Quinate meetings. I'm not ready to go. Not ready to see his smug oh, so serious face.

Maybe I should end it all. Kill him and let them do their worst. I don't have family.

There are my people, but...

No, even for me causing that mayhem and destruction's a no go. The Quinate will wipe them all out. The laws are the same for all of us. To stop us doing what I'm seriously contemplating.

I should have fucking killed Hendrick when I killed his father, that's what I should have done.

But I was lost to anger and grief for Lili.

I wasn't fucking thinking.

I am now.

I guess it's just making his life miserable until he makes that move so I can retaliate without retribution.

Will MG want me then?

Do I even fucking care?

I don't examine that too closely because I think that answer's something that's going to bother me, right down to the depths of my soul.

My phone lights up, but it's not MG.

Where the fuck are you?

Maximo.

I text him back. ***I'll be there. Tell dickwad to calm the fuck down.***

He hasn't said a word, says Maximo. But he's been here for ages. I got here early, and Hendrick was already here. Declan just arrived. You're late.

I'll be there.

I turn my phone face down.

Of course Hendrick's there. I know this is an important meeting, and I know he's pissed I chose fucking MG over the other drinks meeting we had. But I'll take her cunt and mouth and ass over that lot any day.

Do I miss her? I down my drink and get another. There's an emptiness in me, something I can't fill, and it kind of feels like there's a piece gone. When she's there, I don't notice it.

Maybe it's about the necklace. Because this is me, Jac fucking Miller. I can have any woman. I can have a roomful of them if I wanted, if I was into them. I just don't happen to want that, because—

Fuck it.

I want MG.

Her scent, the warmth, her voice, her everything.

But want's different from missing. I don't do missing. I don't think I've missed anyone except my mom and Lili. And Mom's faded. Lili hasn't. But this isn't like that. Missing Lili is missing my sister, my purpose, her future. It's the reminder of my failure.

I down my second drink and head to the meeting. They're going to vote connections with Kincaid out. If any of us want to deal with him, it's not with Quinate backing. And I'm for that. The guy's vile slime.

But I might need to piss Hendrick off. Act like I want him in.

When I push open the door, the others are talking and Hendrick's sitting, coat off, all serious and quiet, working.

He's got an iPad, phone, and notebook, and he's using them all. I fucking hate him.

Without even one word he manages to exude the attitude I don't take this seriously, like we're in a boardroom.

Just because I'm not joyless like him, because I like fucking good times, doesn't mean I don't take my role as king of my part of Delacroix, of my place at the Quinate table seriously.

I do.

And I pull my fucking weight.

I sprawl in my seat at the table's head, what I call the table's head. Hendrick's at the other end, and he doesn't look up.

Fuck him. I'm getting the fucking jewels, and the fucking girl and there's not a damn thing he can do about it.

Leaning back, I hook an arm over the back of the chair and twist one of my rings, bouncing my foot on a knee. And I wait. Because I'm not calling the meeting to start until he looks up. The others won't, tradition means it's me or Hendrick.

We're all rich, but the two with the most money, the most power, are me and him.

In here, it's an equal balance of Quinate power, but there's always been an air that we could make or break it. And if the Quinate falls, chaos will rain.

I like chaos.

Just not that particular kind of chaos. Not the idea of the absolute dregs rising to take what they can.

So the Quinate rules. But we both have the edge of being the two that if we went to war, if we tried to kill the other without just cause, then things would crumble. Like I said, the Quinate would come and destroy all the other person holds close, and I know it would mean the end of order in the city. The kind of end that would be felt everywhere.

The hate in me is hotter, more violent, the edge sharper.

MG has a lot to do with it.

Telling her about what his father did does, too. Because it makes everything I've stuffed down feel so much fresher.

Hendrick finishes whatever the fuck he's doing. He closes the cover on the iPad and neatens the pad of paper on top of what looks like a book. He takes his time, calm, deliberate moves, as he caps his fountain pen and puts it away in the pocket of his jacket.

Then he looks at me. The glare might be subtle, but the ice of it burns bright and sharp.

He makes a gesture, and it takes all I have not to launch myself at him.

Even from here, I can feel his disdain, the vibration of dismissal, the way he clearly thinks I'm not good enough to be here.

We stare at each other.

A hot-cold war of wills.

Everything stretches out.

It takes Ivan clearing his throat to break it. “Can we begin?”

“Yes,” Hendrick says, not lifting that cold, hateful scowl from me, “can we, Jac?”

“Well, I’m not allowed to kill you, so we might as well.” I look around. “I believe the first and most important thing is Kester Kincaid?”

“You’ve decided that’s now important, have you, Jac?” Hendrick’s words are quiet, measured. “Good to know.”

I’m about to rip shreds from him, when he continues, “Because you know his plans—”

“I saw him,” I say, barely holding back the snarl, “alone.”

Hendrick doesn’t smile. “I’m aware you took a risk for the team after his attempt last time.”

“When he tried to cause trouble for me?” I ask, the poison right at the surface.

“That’s what I said.” He doesn’t even bother casting a glance around the table. “But since you weren’t at the drinks meeting, and it was Maximo and I who met with Kincaid, we’re in agreement on the fact he’s been poking about. We’re interested in your thoughts.”

“And?” I ask. “There’s a fucking and.”

“And,” he says carefully, “the vote on stopping all dealings with Kincaid needs to be on the table, open, and to pass, unanimous. Issues?”

“Bring it on.”



It's unanimous. Of course it's fucking unanimous. Like there's any other way around that. But I remain at my seat as Hendrick does his, seemingly going back to whatever fucking work he's doing.

Another fuck you from the great asshole Agnossio.

When we're alone, I rise, saunter over, and park myself on the table, right in his space because a shit like him finds that annoying.

"So, when you were getting down with your little fucking side piece thief the other night..." I plant my hand right there, blocking his view of his iPad. "When you kissed her, could you taste my cum? Because it was in MG's mouth. And her cunt if you decided to eat her out. Got her pretty asshole, too. But that mouth...good, isn't it? Or does she not go down on you?"

Hendrick raises his head, reaches past me to shut the iPad for the second time, and looks at me. It's a look of pity and derision.

"I haven't seen her in a while, Jac, so I have no idea if she, as you so fucking sweetly put it, tasted of your cum."

He hasn't seen MG? Neither have I. Figured she was running there, but if she didn't, then I'm doubling down on the whole where the fuck is she shit.

Hendrick grins. "Not used to it, are you? Maybe it's your behavior that's causing this issue. You never normally have a problem keeping women about, no matter how appallingly you treat them."

"And what's your fucking excuse," I snarl.

He sits for a while then he says, "You know, Jac. I saw her leave your place, disheveled, and it was obvious what had

happened. I wasn't happy."

For some reason the gloat doesn't come on.

"I thought I'd take a fucking page from your playbook. Destroy you both. But..." He shrugs. "I'm tired."

"Of being a fuckhead?"

"Of you, of me, of this feud. I'm just so fucking tired."

I rise. "I don't know what mind games you're playing, Hendrick, but they won't work. I'll get the fucking necklace, get MG, and destroy you."

"Stop." He gets up as well. "Aren't you tired of this, Jac? All this hate. Lili—"

"Don't you dare say her name." I grab him so fast, I barely stop myself putting my fist through his skull.

Hendrick's big. I know he's got black belts. I'm a dirty, nasty fighter. But with him, I'm matched. In a big fight, I couldn't tell you who'd win. I'd love to say me, but I honestly don't fucking know.

Hendrick could fight me. We could do damage to the other.

But he doesn't. He only meets my glare head on, silently daring me to take the next step in my thoughts.

Disgust hits me, and instead, I let him go.

"I'm fucking done with you." I stalk to the door, but he moves fast and pushes me against it. As I said, we're matched. He's strong. This time, I don't fight him off. "Let me the fuck go, Hendrick."

"I'll say her name if I want," he says quietly. "Don't think because I don't often that I don't think of her. That I don't care."

Then he releases me and steps back. “Here.”

He hands me a black journal.

“What is it?”

“You won’t like it, but read it. And remember, I cared for her, too.”

And with that, he steps back so that I leave.

TWENTY-FIVE

MAGDALENA



The Bobby Ruben job is pretty much in the bag, and when he lets me know they changed their plans, it's easy to get to New Jersey and take a couple of days to set it up and then execute it.

Being out of Delacroix for a few days has the added bonus of not slipping up and seeing Hendrick or Jac.

After all I found, I needed that.

I'm processing the Lili thing.

"How did it go?" Harry asks as I step into her store. She's serving a customer, but at this point in our lives, we can discuss anything without people thinking anything of it.

"Same old," I say as I peek at the locket the lady's buying. "Pretty."

"Oh, you think so? It's for my granddaughter." The lady smiles.

"I know so."

"Put the kettle on in ten," Harry says, "and there's mail for you."

I head out through the back and down to the basement workshop. Harry's computer is open with a "press me" sticky

on it, center stage on her workbench.

Rolling my eyes, I do as asked. The words *Top drawer* is currently her screensaver. There's a file in there, and I pull it out. Moving her computer aside, I flip open the cover.

"Lucky me," I mutter. "Another job."

But as I look it's one of those good, boring, run of the mill jobs. Pays well and I can do it in my sleep. Plus, I can tap into the resources of the client to dig deeper into the Heart of Dark Desires.

I'm deep in everything, files spread around me, when Harry comes down to the basement workshop.

"Figured you'd be all up in it. Everything's locked away up there." She drags a chair over to the desk where I'm working.

"The client wants me to hit a small museum."

"I know," she says, "I got you the job. Easy, big pay out."

I spread a hand over the notes. "We still don't know who the Fairgood or Beaumont families are, there are a lot of them, rich and poor, sprinkled over our fair land," I say. "But according to the notes you made, most people aren't interested in who owns it. The family who had it commissioned lost it in a game of cards in Europe."

"There's no prize, Magdalena," she says, leaning on the bench. "No prize at all for who did it better. Unless it's me. If it's fucking me, I want a prize. Do you think if I get a prize, I'll be able to bang two pussies at once?"

"You're too sensible to do that."

"Nah, I have a lot of very filthy thoughts, some of them not for your straight ears, but what do you think of dildo

gloves? Or strap on hands?” She waves her hands and makes lewd thrusting motions. “I can be Harry Dildo Hands.” Her eyes widen. “Throw in a third pussy and put me in a strap on and—”

“Down girl,” I say, patting her arm. “Anyway, that family is still about, but I’m not even sure there’s anyone who remembers it now.”

“What about the other two?”

I shrug. “As I said, it all falls by the wayside, but you know who’s not ever mentioned as legit owners?”

She gets up, goes over to the coffee machine, gives it a look and pours two ‘thinking’ whiskies. Harry comes back and hands me one.

“I had a think.” She holds up her chipped mug. “And I’m gonna guess the fucking Agnossios and Millers. Or, as you might say, your bad choice in lovers’ families.”

I let that slide.

“A family names Everton—”

“Fancy,” Harry says.

“—claimed the necklace was stolen.” I show her the computer. “Look.”

“That’s old.” Harry frowns.

“I know.”

Harry twists her mouth to the side. “I should have been able to find that. It doesn’t look like it’s something that should be hidden in a dark corner of the web. They’re offering a reward. Not a big one. And this looks old, but it’s hard to tell since it’s just a photo of the cut out.”

“Un-bunch your panties,” I say.

She gives me a look. “Keep out of my nether regions drawer, Lena.”

“I’m now officially scared to ever peek in there.” I smack her arm lightly. “Now listen. This Everton family’s gone, married into various others, male lineage only had female heirs or none and now it’s extinct. But they offered a reward about eighty years ago.”

“I’m lost.” Harry knocks back some of her drink.

“There’s another article. It’s really small.” I pull it up. “Seems that Everton got it back and donated it to a small museum in Seattle. Then it went missing again, got into the hands of the Agnossio family, or the Miller family. I don’t know. All we have is anecdotes and the photos which prove nothing.”

Her eyes get big. “Neither family owns it?”

“Nope.”

“But that doesn’t matter. We deal in stolen goods all the time, like the stealing stolen goods kinda thing. It’s the territory, so—”

“The reward article is from the museum. It’s called Vanderland and it’s still there. They still own the Heart of Dark Desires, and they have a reward.”

“I could fence the damn thing or we could just get Jac to pay for you to get it back.”

“No. They’d never let us live. They’re powerful.” I take a breath. “Hendrick murdered that slumlord down on Water’s Edge.”

“Ray Rodgers? That fucker?”

I nod. “For me. He found out I’m from there. Our upbringing. He’s going to rebuild, improve.”

“That’s some fuckin’ magic pussy you have. Did Jac raise the dead?”

“Jac’s up his own ass a little too much, but...” I pause because what I’m suggesting is dangerous. “We turn it over to the museum, collect the reward.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Or we tell them? If I can get near the real one, can we pull off a grift? We did it growing up. Not on this level, but if we can switch out the real for the fake, the museum will have a pretty appraiser, or they will. We walk with the diamonds and get the fuck out of town.”

“Or we get dead, Lena.”

I nod. “It’s a risk.”

“Let’s sleep on it,” she says.

I know she’ll say yes.



That night as I plot the robbery in my head, I keep returning to the Heart of Dark Desires.

It’s a good plan.

It gets me out of the whole thing of being in the middle of a war between two powerful, dangerous men. And everything I’ve learned makes it more and more complicated.

Maybe the kiss I saw that was accidentally captured was nothing more than something fleeting. And the fingers touching a trick of the camera angle.

The looks...well, that makes sense. Of course a young girl had a crush on the beautiful Hendrick. Even at twenty, he was gorgeous, a touch more boy than man, but grown up, and to a girl, everything.

What makes it all heartbreaking is the kind of easy pickings Lili must have been for a predator like Hendrick's father.

Maybe Hendrick knew, but I don't think so, because the looks changed with him from embarrassed to stand off interested to interested to... Well... Love. Joy. Something that's missing from him now.

Even young Jac who breaks my heart for what he could have been, the love when he looks at his little sister, the fierce pride and protective stance.

It's all there. Drops of water that glisten and gleam on parched earth. Fleeting and randomly caught and telling a story if you see it.

No one can compete with a dead girl.

And I don't want to.

Those two will rip themselves and anyone in their way, apart. Maybe not now, but one day.

I'm not interested in being their catalyst.

I don't want to be in the middle.

What I want is to get out, go somewhere, and just be. Somewhere that I'm not ripped into shreds by two dangerous men or how I feel whenever I'm in their vicinity.

I want them. Both. Voraciously.

So the only downside to my plan to get the necklace is I have to see them. Because I don't know where the fuck it is.

Flipping my pillow, I punch it into shape and lay my head on that pleasingly cool side. My bed's suddenly too big and empty and that bothers me because neither one has been here.

An hour later I can't sleep, so I slide from bed, dress and hotwire a car. It's really a stupid thing to do, but I'm planning on returning it. I just don't want to get public transport or a cab.

I drive to where Hendrick's place is, but even from the curb, I can see he's not there. Maybe I should break in and search, but Hendrick isn't the kind of man to have the necklace there or at the mansion. He's got it in another safe, wherever he calls home, a place all my searches have turned up empty.

But there's something soothing in sitting, close to a place he uses, and there's a ghost of energy about it. This is probably in my head, and so I drive to Jac's modern mansion.

That's lit up like a fucking Christmas tree, and from here I can hear music and laughter and my gut hurts.

No doubt he's fucking someone. Probably Hendrick is, too, wherever he is. And I should be glad if that's what they're both up to. But I'm not.

An ugly jealousy rips through me, even though I've been enjoying both of them.

I don't sit here long. I drive back, park the car, wipe it down, and slip some cash on the floor as payment for the gas.

I'm going to get out. And to do so I have to face them both. It's the only way. I'll follow Hendrick tomorrow, see where he goes for the night. Shit, maybe I need to get in there and see where he'd hide it, get a lay of the land.

My heart starts to beat fast and my pussy dampens. If something happens, it happens. And a last fuck...who'd blame me?

Shit, no, I can't do that. No matter how much I want to. How much I ache. I need to find Hendrick's place tomorrow, then do the run of the mill job, and then I'll choose the time to get them both there, and then...

I'm getting the fuck right out of dodge.

TWENTY-SIX

HENDRICK



Something wakes me. A singing in my senses.

All day today I've felt like I've been followed but no one reported anything, and I haven't been doing anything exciting. Head low, working. Jac has the journal, has for a number of days, and I'm waiting to see if he's going to talk, kill me, raise his stakes, or carry on, business as usual.

It's Jac, so anything fucking goes.

But in the dark of my bedroom, something is there. It's four a.m. And I breathe in and go completely still.

I can smell something. An earthy, smoky scent, laced with jasmine, ginger and orange blossom.

My cock's instantly hard.

"Fuck, Cat. I have a doorbell. And a phone."

She laughs. It's soft, shaking, needing. And then my bed dips. The blackout blinds on my windows are magic, casting the entire room in pitch black. I can't see her but I can feel her as her heat surrounds me and her mouth finds mine.

I slide a hand down over her, and she's naked. If this is a dream, I'm going to murder whoever the prick is who wakes me.

She tastes warm, wet, like sex and heaven. I kiss her slowly, with reverence, because I've dreamed of this, of tasting her, touching her is the cure to everything.

She melts in against me.

"Where's the fun in that," she whispers.

I roll her so I'm on top of her, and we're tangled in the covers.

"What the fuck are you up to?" I bite a soft path down her throat, sucking and sipping on her tender, silky skin and she arches for me.

Her nipples graze my bare chest, and I roll us back, pull off the covers. Then, I reach out and turn on the lamp.

Dark burnished light washes the room. I had it on super low so it doesn't do much, but it lets me see her. The light paints her, too. She's a golden goddess, a dream creature. A thing I want to worship.

I pull her down to kiss her again. Our lips and tongues meet, and I push up against her, so my cock rubs against the wetness of her cunt.

"It's it obvious? I'm trying to have sex with you, Hendrick," she says. "Do you always sleep naked?"

"Do you always break into someone's home that no one's meant to know about?"

She knows what I'm asking, what I'm saying. We both know why she's here.

Cat wants the Heart of Dark Desires.

I'd say too bad because the vault and safe are impossible to break into.

Almost.

This is the Invisible Cat rocking her cunt on my cock, thrusting the perfect handful tits out, blonde hair spilling over her shoulder as she does so.

If anyone can get in there, it's going to be her.

I know she wants me. I know she can't resist, just like I can't resist her, but she's not here to only fuck me stupid. She's here for something.

And stupid fucking bastard that I am, I'm good with it.

As long as she doesn't get it. And even then...for a taste of her sweet delights, I might be willing to pay the price. Maybe.

I tangle a hand in her hair and bring her in to me. As I move her body, pushing up and thrusting into her, my cock finding that hot, wet hole. She's nice and tight as always, and she stretches around me, moaning.

I've missed the sounds of her when she fucks.

I've missed all of her.

There's something different about this.

She comes in and kisses me, slow and long. Deep. She rocks on my cock, taking me deep, shuddering as I stroke my cock's head on those parts full of nerve endings, and we fuck in long, slow, deep thrusts. The fucking mimics the kissing.

But soon we're both lost in it, sighing, moaning, kissing and biting and fucking harder. I let her ride me how she wants until she's bouncing on my cock hard, and I take her hips and start to move her, slamming her down as I thrust up into her. She's making little sounds that stroke my shaft.

I need to be deep. I flip us again, taking her legs and pushing them up on my shoulders so she's stretched so right, so tight around me, and I start to angle in, hard, deep. Long.

Fuck, she feels good.

Soon we're both groaning, and she's whispering. "Yes. Fuck. Yes. I needed this. I needed you. God. Harder, harder. Harder."

I start to slam harder, my balls high and tight, everything aching and tingling.

I need her to spasm around me, so I pinch her clit, tugging and pulling, rubbing and pushing, doing all the things she likes. All the things that border on wrong. Letting out a deep and guttural moan, she gives me exactly what I want and comes. Her body jerks, clamping hard on me.

I grit my teeth and hold back. I want her to do it again. I need that wild orgasm from her that takes over all of her, that makes her squeeze my cock so fucking tight, it's like a fucking vice.

So, I hammer into her with violent thrusts, angling up to hit her G-spot, and then so deep it makes her moan every single fucking time. She's still coming around me, but I want that big one, the thing that seems to rip her soul out and put it back in better.

Under my fingers, her clit starts that deep throb, and she starts making sounds.

"Oh. Oh. Oh, I'm coming, I'm coming! Oh, Hendrick, you filthy, nasty fuck. I'm coming."

And she does. She comes so hard that it sets me off, too. My shaft being squeezed by her over and over, so fucking tight

that I can't help but let out an almighty roar as the pleasure flies through me, and I spurt and spurt in her.

I keep thrusting as I do, and her body keeps contracting tight as she thrashes.

She's crying, and she's so fucking wet that I know she squirted. My sheets are soaked beneath us.

Finally, I slam into her one last time, push her legs down, and roll us, so she's sprawled on me, my cock in her as the spasms grow softer and softer. Then, finally with a small twitch of her body here and there, it stops.

I let out a shuddering breath.

Fuck. Me.

“Actually,” I say as my heart starts to slow its mad beat, and I twirl her soft hair in my fingers. “I really don't care why you're here, as long as that's how you greet me.”

She snuggles in against me, and like this, I start to drift off. She does, too. I know because she whispers, “I really think I am falling in love with you.”

I close my eyes and take those words for what they are: everything and nothing at all.



In the morning my alarm goes off. The lamp's still on, but she's gone.

I didn't think Magdalena would stay. I pull on the shorts I'd worn working out yesterday and search the house.

Not for her.

But to see if she's taken anything. More importantly, to see if she got into the vault.

I check security, how I set it, too. Nothing seems to have been touched. But I open it, and go in. Open the safe.

Both items are in there. The pink notebook and the plain box with the necklace, which sits beneath a velvet cloth.

I close the box and do something I haven't done in years. I run a finger down the front of the pink spiral notebook. I haven't read it. Even now, I...I don't know. I feel like it's invasive. Or maybe I'm just a coward and I haven't read it because I'm afraid of what I'll find in there.

I dumped Lili when I walked in on her fucking my father, and she cried and swore it was going to end. I told her it was too late and... And that was a lie, too.

I'd have forgiven her. I had the fucking ring. I'd have married Lili if she'd lived. Taken her away, never let my ass of a father touch her again. I'm convinced he groomed her. He took advantage of her and her crush on me when she was a kid, fifteen. Way too fucking young and—

I didn't know.

I should have.

Honestly, I've no idea if we'd have worked. She was twenty-one, and I was twenty-six. People change. But even if it ended at some point in the last ten years, Lili would be alive.

I rub a hand over my face and pick it up. I lock up, tucking the notebook under my arm, and I put it in my briefcase, something I only use when I've got really crap and above board meetings.

Maybe I'll read it. Maybe I won't. Maybe I'll burn it. Or I'll give it to Jac, whenever he turns up.

Though it's going to contain things he won't ever want to know. But what it will do is show I loved her. Lili knew that. We just kept it secret because of the whole family bullshit and she wanted something for her.

She didn't want my fuck of a father to know.

I shower, dress in a dark gray and rust pin-striped suit. I choose a matching vest, a burnished orange shirt, and a dark gray tie.

Then I head into the office for my eight a.m. meeting.



It's around ten, and I'm working when the door to my office bursts open. Jac's there, in lavender and navy, something only he can pull off and not look like a total fool.

Instead, he looks like what he is: wild, hedonistic and dangerous. He glares as the building's security rush in after him, all of them scowling. Damon must have let him in.

I look at my phone. Sure enough, there's a message from Damon. One word. **Jac**.

No shit. I send back.

I glance at the security who all have their hands on their guns. And with a nod and raised brow, I send them off.

Jac glares at me, at the room, and he's about to say something, but stops, gaze falling on the pink notebook on top of my desk.

“That’s Lili’s,” he says after a tense moment. There’s surprise in his voice. And pain.

“I’m aware,” I say.

“It’s not yours, Hendrick,” he snaps. “It’s mine. She was my sister.”

He’s hurting. I don’t have to like him to cut him a little slack. “I thought you might want it. But...I’m not sure you should read it.”

Jac snatches it up. “And you have?”

“No. But...”

“You and Lili.” He breathes out.

“She’s written about me. She told me that. I just...” I look at him, swallow. “I loved her, Jac.”

“And your father?”

“I don’t condone what he did. Lili and I never happened until she was eighteen. Jesus, I’m not some fucking creep.”

“I read Agnossio’s disgusting journal you gave me. He wrote like he loved her, or she loved him. It was disgusting. He watched you and Lili? And then...” He makes a sound like a wounded animal.

“I read his. I know what you mean. But trust me, I didn’t fucking know what was going on between them. Not until she was dead.”

“I still fucking hate you,” he says.

He looks at me like he wants to pull his gun and shoot me. I stare him down.

We spend a long while, locked in some silent battle of wills staring contest, and then he says, “I’m setting the thing

with you and Lili so far aside, I'm not thinking about it."

"You do you, Jac."

He nods. "My sister and your cunt of a father were fucking." He frowns, and I try to keep the pain from his words showing. It's old pain. It doesn't hurt like it did. Not anymore. She's long dead. "That doesn't mean anything. The bastard still killed her."

"And you killed him," I say. "As far as I'm concerned, no one else needs to die."

He points. "You didn't want me to kill him."

"I wanted him to suffer, not get an easy way out, Jac. The man didn't deserve to live. But he deserved to go very slow and very painfully."

"What about my father?"

I don't answer. I didn't kill his father, but no one's ever going to believe me. Before I can say a word, Jac shakes his head and starts to pace. I get to my feet.

"Jac?"

He stops, faces me. "This doesn't mean I like you or that anything changes just—"

The door opens and whatever he was going to say vanishes. My heart squeezes tight.

Magdalena.

TWENTY-SEVEN

MAGDALENA



“I ’m so sorry to interrupt whatever you two were doing, but I’m guessing it wasn’t some exciting foray into the homoerotic arts.”

They both turn, stare at me.

Hendrick is cool, controlled. He eyes me with an eyebrow raised and the slightest hint of dark amusement under his mask.

Jac is different. There’s not a cool hint about him. He’s simmering, all in my face with an expression so filled with anger and disgust, that my muscles tighten.

It’s too much. In the same room with both of them. I can still taste the glory of Hendrick’s kisses. His cock, and the sublime, delicious ride I stupidly took myself on in the early hours. I want him again.

And oh, God. I want Jac, too. Desperately. Hotly, Savagely. Often.

Together.

I want them both at the same time. With them in the same space with me, my imagination runs wild.

It wouldn’t work. How could it? They hate each other, and even if this, right here, is some divine intervention, there’s no

way I could get them both naked, touching me.

My persona is untouchable Invisible Cat. Impossibly together MG Rossi.

Not even a hint of the storms clashing and rising inside me.

I even offer a smile as I step in further.

Of course, there's no such thing as divine intervention. I followed Jac here. I've no idea why he's here. I don't know the ins and outs of Quinate business or even their business.

Maybe they have a daily fight, push each other into trying to make the first move in their stupid pissing contest of death and destruction.

"Pity," I say, stepping further in the room, "because the mind does wonder what that would be like."

"Not with him," mutters Jac. "You on the other hand..."

This is the perfect moment for Hendrick to rub Jac's face in what happened, where I went in the early hours. But of course, he doesn't. He takes the higher road. "Not that we don't...enjoy your company, but we're in the middle of something. So why are you here?"

Jac glares. "I'm done. As I said, Agnossio, nothing's changed, and you still haven't told me why you killed my father."

Hendrick closes his eyes, and this is getting off track. My brain is starting to spark and spit with the buzz of wayward thoughts of the two of them, and needling them, pushing buttons and taunts are fun, especially where the fast-growing fantasies are leading me, but I don't think the three of us getting it on is going to happen.

More importantly, it's not why I'm here.

"I heard," I say, "I was outside the door. I actually don't think Hendrick killed him."

Jac's eyes narrow. "Taking your lover's side?"

"And what does that make you?" The words slip from me before I can stop them, but I hold up a hand to stop Jac answering.

It's Jac. He answers, anyway. "I don't know? Dirty little secret?"

I don't miss the venom and the hint of something else I can't quite pinpoint in his caramel butter voice.

"This is getting us nowhere," I say.

"Oh, I don't know. It might. Maybe not where you want to go, though?" Hendrick looks at Jac, then me.

I somehow withhold the flinch. "It's all complicated."

"She doesn't like complications," Hendrick says, poison in his velvet sandpaper tone.

"No," I say. "I don't."

"I'm with him, actually. In a manner of fucking speaking." Jac frowns. "Why the fuck are you here and how the fuck would you know about what he did or didn't do?" Then he offers a nasty grin and points at me and then Hendrick and back again. "Unless this is how you do pillow talk, MG."

"Jac." Hendrick pinches the bridge of his nose.

I take the helm.

"Think about it," I say, half turning to Jac. "If Hendrick did kill your father, wouldn't he rub your face in it?"

There's a pink book in Jac's ringed hand and I immediately know it's Lili's. Hendrick probably gave it to him.

I've got the drive on me, the one with all the photos, but I leave it in my pocket. It was going to be one of the plans to get Hendrick to take me to the necklace, and get Jac there, too. But since Jac came here, I don't think I need it.

"Who knows with him." Jac sends Hendrick a dark look.

Hendrick sighs. "I didn't kill your father."

"Your name was in the appointment book."

"Yeah, Jac," Hendrick says. "I'm that fucking stupid. I'll fucking do that, make an appointment, and kill him."

Jac's eyes narrow. "It was the same way I killed your fuck of a father."

"And everyone knew that. Water under bridges, Jac," Hendrick says in a dangerous voice. "I'll ask again. Why are you here, Magdalena?"

His attention shifts back to me so fast, I feel it like a light scrape against the skin.

This morning, Harry and I settled on three different plan scenarios. Since we don't need the one to do with the thumb drive as they're already both here, I'm going with the second.

I'm wearing wide pants and a long fitted top, all in black, it blends in, but I still look chic enough to be here at Hendrick's impressive building.

My research has shown he, like Jac usually works from home. But unlike Jac, Hendrick has an actual office he goes to for certain meetings. I'm pretty sure Jac simply slouches about looking good, being smug and entertaining himself. If he's got

other business, he'll either choose somewhere outrageous or inappropriate, or just go to whoever it is.

They both do it for maximum impact.

But I wanted to dress in something that could fit in most places because I had no idea where I'd track them to. And I have to fucking say, I'm currently having a fantasy about one taking my mouth, the other my pussy, while they're dressed, and I'm naked and being used by them on Hendrick's desk.

Which makes it hard to keep my brain on the second plan.

I summon an image of a beach. And me.

These two hot men try to crowd that fantasy, but I shove them back into Delacroix and me into reality.

"Actually, I'm interested, too." Jac points at me. "Did you follow me here?"

"She does that." Hendrick comes around to lean on the edge of the desk.

"I've been doing some research," I say. "I came across it this morning, prepping for another job."

Harry and I settled on that. Me telling them I've got another job. If I disappear, then they won't think anything until I'm long gone. I hope.

But first I need to get through these steps.

I slide the black bag I have on, the one that becomes almost invisible with this outfit around, and pull out the leather binder inside. Opening it, I say, "It's about the Heart of Dark Desires."

"You're not getting it," Hendrick mutters, "and neither is Jac."

“It belongs to me and you know it,” Jac says.

“No, it’s mine.” Hendrick folds his arms, and somehow, I stop myself from drooling over both of them.

My cool, distant mask is just that, a mask, and one that keeps slipping.

“Enough.” I push the word out, and pull out two identical sheets of paper, then two more. I hand one lot to Jac and the other to Hendrick. “In my research for this upcoming job, I found out some information. Have a read.”

They both look like they want to throw it down. They’ve been at war over the necklace for so long, since before Lili died from what I’ve learned, but it took on a real life after her death. Like it tethered her here, or something.

I don’t know. Harry decreed it doesn’t matter what the reasons are, and I guess she’s right.

They take their time, reading, glaring at each other occasionally.

Most of the information is real. All we did was tweak it, slide in a few things to make this work.

Hendrick looks at me and slaps the pages down, but his hand stays on them. “So what? The jewels are in my possession.”

“See why I hired you, MG?” Jac says coming up to me.

His fingers skim down my spine, and I shiver, right to my marrow, with need.

Hendrick’s eyes narrow and a fission of lust races through me at that look.

“The museum wants them, but they also need to be verified.”

“They’re real,” snaps Hendrick.

Jac growls a little. “Of course they are. We already know you tried to trick us off with the fake ones.”

I go in for the kill.

“Thing is, I don’t think those are the fake ones mentioned. You had them made, didn’t you?” I look at Hendrick.

He shrugs. “Sue me. I don’t trust the asshole who’s got his hands on you.”

“One hand,” says Jac.

I make myself step away and ignore the smirk from Hendrick. Why are these two assholes so beautiful and so infuriating?

“It mentions a fake necklace so good it takes an expert to recognize them.”

“You know, Cat. I’m not that fucking stupid to fall for this shit. I’m not taking you to the necklace, and I’m not giving it to the museum. And roles reversed, Jac would say the same.”

“True.”

“Then,” I say, stepping up to Hendrick, “show me them. Let me see the real Heart of Dark Desires.”

And Hendrick leans in, touches my cheek, and says, “No.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

JAC



Hendrick's right about her probably being up to something. He's right to say no, but I don't care. I don't give a flying fuck. I want to see those jewels.

Touch them.

After so long, just touch and be near the piece that came from my mom, that would have gone to Lili on her twenty-fifth, if she'd lived. If it hadn't gone missing.

MG shrugs. "Fair enough."

"Hendrick," I growl in annoyance.

"She's fucking playing us, Jac," he says to me, not even bothering to sugarcoat it. "Look, I'll admit, I'm curious, but there's no fucking way I'm letting her know where I keep it."

"I'm playing you," MG says, snapping the leather folder shut and giving a small little smile. "You're right. I'm playing you so I can see them."

"Nice try," he says with a shake of his head, "but I've told you, you won't be getting your pretty fucking hands on them."

She sighs. "This is the only job I've failed at completing. It was bound to happen, but you know me enough to know I love jewels."

That hurts.

I stare at her. “I gave you those fucking earrings, and you threw them at me.”

Hendrick looks interested. “I’ve never seen you wearing jewels.”

“That’s because I don’t.”

“I know,” I interject. “But these came from a very expensive place in New York. You know the place? Black Vetiver? I had them...”

“Oh fuck,” he says. “You had them made? Magdalena, those earrings cost a few million, and you threw them at him?” The fucker shakes his head and laughs. “Oh, man, you have a way with women, Jac.”

“I have a gun—”

“Stop.” MG looks at me. This is probably good because some very choice and crude words were about to be said. “How about this? Bring the Heart of Dark Desires to Ms. Esterhazy’s store. She’ll be able to confirm if it’s real.”

“Who?” I ask. “The chick I hired you through?”

“Absolutely not.” Hendrick folds his arms. “Not on your life.”

MG stares and rolls her eyes, but I’m close enough that I can feel her almost purr from the tension in the room, the sparks that fly from this strange little fucking gathering. “Please don’t tell me the big bad Hendrick Agnossio’s scared of interaction with a woman.”

She’s miscalculated. Me? I’d be all bring it the fuck on. With Hendrick, who’s such a dick, he wants to make the

moves, dictate more, and those words of hers are guaranteed to make him dig his heels in and shut it down.

Which is going to rob me of seeing the necklace, of getting it.

“No deal.” Hendrick looks at his watch. “I need—”

“You know what?” I look at them both. “Fuck you.”

I turn and stalk out. My limo is downstairs because I wanted to arrive in style. I get out of the elevator and walk across the foyer. Who knows what the fuck they’re doing up there now. She’s probably sucking his dick or getting it up the ass from him.

MG just robbed me. Like she’d snatched that fucking necklace and taken off.

I know that fuck—he’ll have the Heart of Dark Desires so locked down now that even if I spent three times as much as the damn thing’s worth to just get a peek, I’ll never see it.

And I might hate MG for that.

I grip the pink notebook tight, storm up to the limo, and hand it to Carlos, who’s standing outside. “Don’t read this.”

“Trouble followed you out,” he says, nodding past me.

“Jac...”

I close my eyes a second. Magdalena. Her voice is smoke and sex and something that already haunts my dreams.

I open them and turn, and she’s there in black, blonde hair gleaming in the sun, lips red. I’ve never seen anything so frustrating, so beautiful before in my life.

“Can we talk?” she asks.

“I don’t know, can we?”

She looks at the limo, then at me. “Now?”

“Carlos, take the front seat, tell the driver to take the long fucking route.”

I don’t say where. It’s more a drive around until I tell you to stop order. Opening the door, I gesture to her. “Get in if you want to talk.”



The silence is stretched so tight you could bounce a ball on it. And we’ve been driving for about five minutes.

For someone who wanted to talk, she sucks at it. There are a lot of things I could say, whip at the anger that bubbles beneath my surface, but I don’t.

Finally, she sighs. “I’m still not sure if I like you.”

“At this stage,” I say, “I know I don’t like you.”

The tension starts to beat, and she makes a sound, almost a moan, before she crosses those long legs, pressing her thighs together.

I know.

I’m looking.

And damn if she doesn’t wiggle her hips like she’s trying to get some action for her cunt.

“Got an itch that Hendrick can’t scratch?” I ask in a low voice. “One you need some real filth to satisfy?”

“Are you asking if you’re the filth?”

“I know I’m the fucking filth. You love filth, don’t you, MG?” I ask, voice full of loathing and challenge.

She unfolds her legs. “Fuck you, Jac.”

Despite her words, she moves from her seat opposite me to my lap. She climbs on, thighs on each side of me, and she starts to rub her covered cunt on my already hardened cock.

“God, you feel so fucking good,” she whispers. Then she kisses me.

It’s a hard kiss, deep. Full of tongue and the scrape of teeth. It’s hot and perfect, and I tangle a hand in her hair as I continue to kiss her, tasting the darkness of her, the glimmer of light and that dark, sweet tang of passion.

MG rubs her cunt on my cock harder now, working her clit on me, and fuck, she’s aiming for the piercing, angling herself to ride that with her clit, to really nail that itch she’s got. To sing.

“Fuck, MG.” I say.

“Don’t fucking say a thing,” she pants. “You’ll ruin it.”

That makes me grin. She’s a pain in my ass, but I love it.

She starts moaning as the kisses get hotter, deeper, darker, wilder, as she sucks my tongue, my lip, and I return the favor. She’s moving faster now, harder, and she’s moaning like a hot banshee, and then she starts to shake. Pushing in against me, shuddering as she comes.

When she’s done, she strips naked and drops to her knees before me. I haven’t had to say a word, haven’t had to command or dominate her. On her own, she pulls out my cock and sucks the head into her mouth, in the back of the damn limo.

Like she’s one of the girls I never remember. The ones I fuck and forget. But she’s making it seem sex back here is

new. Something we're inventing on the spot.

It's sordid, delightful, and the wet heat of her mouth is beyond spectacular. It's always magic, being in a woman's mouth, but she makes it something else entirely.

Almost fucking religious. She's just sucking and licking the head, over the piercing. She starts to bob, taking more of me in each downward dip.

I can definitely come.

All those problems? The boredom? The soft dick when looking at a personal live sex show? The not even bothering finding a woman since all that? Gone.

I'm so hard, I ache. Each time I see this woman, it's the fucking same. She's a boner machine. She's...I don't have the words for it, but she's like something that gets better. Each taste makes me more addicted.

And I'm not about to waste that fine pussy. I pull her up, turning her, and pull her thighs wide. Then I push her so she has to put her hands on the seat in front of her when I plunge into her from behind. It's the kind of view a man could never get bored of.

I fuck up into her, hard.

She's so tight as usual, and I'll take the sex. I'll take her.

I slip a hand around her waist, low, and pull her up so her back's on my front and I widen my legs to stretch her wide, to control her moves. Fuck, she's bliss. I move a hand up to pinch her nipples, the other sliding down between those stretched out thighs to stroke over her clit.

I whisper, "MG? Kiss me."

She turns her head, and her mouth meets mine. It's a desperate, hungry thing, hot because of what we're doing, and as our tongues meet, my balls contract and white-hot pleasure shoots through me. I come right as she clamps down hard on me, reaching bliss again, too.

When we're done, I pick her up and turn her, tucking her between my thighs, making her hold hers together, to keep my cum in her. Why? Because there's something so fucking wrong, so fucking dirty, so fucking hot about it. And I'm a sick fuck.

There's ownership to it, a way to say she's mine. All mine and not that dickhole, Hendrick's. I'd like to pretend that's true for a little while longer.

In this position, we're face to face, and once more, I kiss her.

This time it's slow, dreamy, drugging, and she groans softly into me, kissing me back. I could do this forever, kiss her like this.

But it ends because she pulls away and dresses as I tuck myself away and readjust my clothes.

"Some talk," I say.

"I thought so. Jac..."

Sighing, I trace a finger down her spine, and she shudders. "Don't."

"MG—"

She rolls her shoulders to push my touch away.

"We'll get to see them," I assure her.

"No, you pushed his buttons wrong."

I did, didn't I? I like to think of it as a talent of mine, really. Pissing him off.

Thinking, I tap my hand on the seat beside me, behind her back, where she now sits. "This museum... Did it say shit about a reward?"

She nods. "And it'll look good for whoever hands them over. Good press is good press, even for the Quinate."

"He'll never let me have them." I look at her. "But what if he can't have them either?"

"I don't know," she says, "This is—" She stops as her phone starts to vibrate, and she pulls it out. Holds a finger to her lips as she shows me the name on the screen. MG answers and hits speaker. "Hendrick."

"What are you playing at, Cat?"

I can hear his annoyed words, even without it being on speaker.

"Nothing."

He's silent a moment and then he says, "Jac'll never stop coming for them. I don't care about them, per se, but they're not his."

She slaps a hand over my mouth before I can speak.

"He thinks they're his and not yours." She looks at the phone. "Are you going to come to Harry's?"

"No." Hendrick says something that's muffled, and I'm sure the ass is working while he's talking. "I'm tired, Cat. Of all the bullshit. The glares, the hate, all of it. I just—it doesn't matter what I want. But what you gave us? I checked out the museum, it's legit, maybe some good publicity will be nice,

and if they have it, then part of the fight will be done. And Jac...”

“So you’ll come by?”

“Lili loved Jac, and he loved her. I told you he devoted his happiness, his life, to keeping her safe. He’s a fuckwit, but maybe this will let him move on? I’ll call him, and you and your friend come by tomorrow at ten. You know where. Downtown.”

“Done.”

He hangs up, and I frown at her phone like it holds answers. Maybe he did love Lili. Like, *love her*, love her. Smart MG seems to think so, and it twists something inside me, the way she looked when he said all that.

What he said about me—not the fuckwit part, but about how I tried to keep Lili safe, how he wants me to move on—it shifts things. Makes them hurt, feel thin like spun glass.

Of course, it could all be Hendrick working on winning points.

“You can let me out here,” she says.

I press a button, and when we pull over, I think we’re uptown somewhere. I haven’t paid attention through the tinted windows.

As she reaches for the door, she leans over and kisses me. “Until tomorrow, Jac.”

Then she gets out, and again, I’m alone, left to sit in the aftershock of her presence. So, I sit back, close my eyes, and wait for Hendrick’s call.



The tingling in my spine has nothing to do with MG, and everything to do with the necklace that I'm holding.

It's the Heart of Dark Desires, and I haven't seen the piece since I was a little boy. I've a memory of it from when I was small, so small I shouldn't remember, but my mom had it on. I remember her soft and round, and the necklace. I remember once showing baby Lili.

And then...

Nothing. I don't have memories of what happened. It was just gone.

For that ragged little memory, I want to grab the necklace and run.

I don't.

MG's giving off the energy she does when she's turned on. The pretty dark-haired woman in a suit next to her has got to be her friend, Harry. She's got a briefcase with her and she's droning on about ownership.

To the side of the big, wide living room in creams and neutral shades so boring they probably don't have a fucking color assigned, a room so fucking Hendrick, is the man himself, leaning against a wall in a black suit, his eyes on the necklace, on MG.

Of course Carlos is here, along with Damon, and two other security people belonging to Hendrick.

We're downtown, and the outside of the building doesn't match the inside. At all. If I liked Hendrick, I'd be fucking

intrigued by this. Because I'm pretty fucking sure he lives here, but I can't find anything within myself to care.

"Evaluate them," says Hendrick.

I pass them to the woman, Harry, who fucking drops them, and MG is there first.

"Do not hang on to the necklace, Magdalena," Hendrick says, nodding. "It's not that I don't trust you, but...fuck it. I don't trust you."

She hands the necklace to Harry, who glances at Hendrick, and puts it on the coffee table. She switches on a lamp that's been placed there for this reason. Pulling out a loupe, she begins to examine each stone and link.

"If the necklace is real, I can authenticate," Harry's saying, "and since neither of you technically own it, I'm obligated to return it to the museum."

"Over my fucking dead body," I snarl.

"I agree. Over his fucking dead body," Hendrick says.

Harry starts to point out all the little things on the necklace that make it real, including that claw. "This is real."

I want to touch the necklace again and MG does, too, but Hendrick nods to Damon, who comes in and wraps the jewels and hands them back to Hendrick.

Harry goes to her briefcase and opens it. She puts away the loupe, signs a certificate, stamps it, and places it on the table. Then, she swipes a bottle of Japanese whiskey and puts it into the case and snaps it shut.

"Certificate of authenticity," she says. And, at Hendrick's look she says, "I'm taking the fucking booze as payment and

compensation for all the headaches you put Lena through. Sue me.”

She heads for the door and leaves.

Then Hendrick looks at MG. Then at me and just says, “Wait here.”

He and his guards disappear.

“How is this helping?” I ask her since we’re alone.

“No one owns it.” MG shrugs. “Best bet is you two return it to the museum.”

“Fuck that, MG. No way.”

“Look at it this way. It’ll be easier to steal from there than here.”

Hendrick steps back in. “So what now?”

“She’s seen it, authenticated it, and Harry has to report it to the museum. She might, she might not. I think it’s smart if you hand it over. It’ll end part of your feud. You both claim to have found it and so on. And then, for a small fee...” she smiles, “I can steal it.”

“You’re kidding,” Hendrick says.

Before she can say a thing, I just shake my head. “No. This is bullshit. I don’t care what a piece of paper says. Your friend isn’t about to turn it in. And if she does, there aren’t any museum police. We’re the fucking Quinate.” I turn to Hendrick. “You know it’s mine.”

“And yet ownership’s nine tenths of the law.” He grins darkly. “You won’t get it, Jac. But handing the necklace to the museum does end some of the issues.”

“Give it to me,” MG says. “I’ll get the gems to the museum.”

“Fuck you.” I’ve had enough. “They’re not going anywhere. Make sure they’re locked away, Hendrick, and you, MG? Keep your hands off the Heart of Dark Desires.”

TWENTY-NINE

MAGDALENA



The guilt is harder than I thought to keep at bay.

When Jac touched the necklace, the real one, I saw the little boy. It broke my heart because it wasn't a man or boy looking at something pretty, but a lost child touching a happy memory.

I don't give a shit when someone's upset about losing something worth millions that's insured. Or stolen in the first place. That crap's meaningless.

Jac's face is why I don't take things that are memories.

Even for Hendrick, there's something there, too. I don't know what. It wasn't anything like Jac's level of guilt-making feels, but it was there, poking places that I don't like being poked.

Like conscience. Heart. That shit.

I can't give into any of that. Not even for a moment because this is the dangerous part of the game. These two men are deadly, and I'm trying to get out of it all still breathing.

Switching the blinged up fake for the real ones was the easy part. This is the hard part.

I look at the two men, and they make my heart squeeze, and a different kind of guilt along with shame comes up and

over me.

Feeling bad over banging them both one last time can go fuck itself. They'd do it. I just...it felt different with both of them, and not just on my part. It was like hitting a different level.

That's not helping me, either.

The three of us are all looking at each other.

"I'll see you downstairs, Carlos," Jac tells his overgrown security.

Hendrick's men aren't in the room, and soon it's just the three of us.

"Did you get what you wanted?" Hendrick asks.

Jac gives me a narrow-eyed look. "He wants to know if you creamed yourself."

"Jesus, Jac, always classy." Hendrick shakes his head. "But...did you?"

I don't know if he's asking if my panties are wet and I'm turned on, or if I got what I wanted.

The answer to both of those is yes.

And my fantasies are having a field day. The two of them. Me.

Shit. I take a deep, shaking breath.

I don't need the necklace to go to the museum. I don't need anything but for them not to call in someone else to check them over. Lock them up, donate them back to that Seattle museum, hire a lawyer to set up visitation rights for the Heart of Dark Desires and Jac and Hendrick.

Whatever floats their little worlds of death and destruction.

As long as they don't go and wave them about.

As long as they don't look at me with suspicion.

"Should we get someone else in?" Jac asks.

Hendrick's eyes are cool, unwavering.

"It's up to you," I say, trying to keep all my responses under lock and key. MG Rossi at the fucking helm here. But they both know me. A little too well. So I need to be careful. "Harriet's one of the best. And I know her, which is why I brought her, but if you need to call in someone else to evaluate, do it."

Hendrick's the one to watch here. He's not hotheaded. He can lock down emotions, too. Like I can. Jac's easier in this situation. He's a wildcard, but one who's all emotion right now. He doesn't want to let go of the necklace, and if Hendrick has it, they can still have their prolonged cold war over it.

If it goes to the museum, it won't happen overnight.

As I said. I don't care what they do. As long as they don't get it evaluated again.

Because good as Harry is at making fakes look real, she had almost no time.

The fact they stood up to scrutiny in here is telling of her work. It helped Jac held the real ones and when the fakes were wrapped up, Hendrick didn't look.

"I'll think about it," Hendrick muses.

I need to get out of here.

"Now that's settled," I say and rub my hands together, itching to leave, "I'd prefer it if I got paid."

“You didn’t do your job, MG.” Jac glares. “And fucking me in the limo isn’t your job.”

I make myself look at Hendrick. His face is cold, etched from stone. And though not one drop of emotion shows, I know he’s angry. I’m sure he knows Jac arrived in a limo yesterday.

“Hendrick.” Jac turns to face his enemy. “If you put that necklace in the museum, MG’ll steal the fucking thing.”

“By all means,” I say, spreading my hands, “do that. I’ll give it to the one who pays me the most.”

“Bullshit,” Jac says, “she’ll keep it.”

“I’m not starting a bidding war.” Hendrick steps up, eyeing me. “What’s your game here, Cat? I know you have one.”

I raise my chin and look at him. “I don’t. I just want this to be done, so I don’t have to worry about the Quinate killing me.”

“Fuck this all.” Jac is in my face. “I don’t trust her. What if she has the necklace?”

“I had it put away. Damon checked before it got itself all locked up again.” He makes no move to stop Jac when he puts his hands on me. “It’s going to be moved from here. And no, I’m not telling either of you where. Or when.”

“She might have it.” Jac starts to frisk me, and his hands are everywhere. I’m wearing a dress, it’s black with a lace overlay, and he slides a hand up between my thighs to stroke against my pussy. I bite my lip to stop a moan. “Number one, she’s definitely creamed herself. Number two, no panties.”

“Jac, leave her alone.” The warning note in Hendrick’s voice is clear. “She doesn’t have a stolen necklace in her

cunt.”

With a shrug, he pulls his hand free and shoves it down my top, exposing me as he does so.

And there’s a flash of heat in Hendrick’s eyes, and this time I do moan. I can’t help it. This is as close as I’m going to get to my two Quinate, one cat burglar fantasy.

“Or there, Jac,” Hendrick says, the scratch of his voice more pronounced, and he adjusts himself. Jac just pushes against me. “Let her go. She wore the dress because it’s hard to hide something like the Heart of Dark Desires in it. Didn’t you?”

“Yes.” I pull free of Jac and fix my clothes.

Hendrick nods to my bag. “But check that. She’ll have a hidden compartment or fake bottom.”

“Good idea.” Jac grabs it and turns it over. Lock picking tools, lipstick, tissues, my phone, a book and various things tumble out.

This bag doesn’t have a secret compartment. There’s a zipped area, but that’s standard. Jac acts like he’s never really been in a handbag before and finds it triumphantly. All that’s in there is gum, a couple of business cards from bars, a protein bar, and some artisanal dark chocolate.

“See? Nothing.”

Jac throws the bag down. “Okay, but—”

“Look.” I glare from one hot, gorgeous man to the other. “Do what you want. Both of you. I’m done here. I’m also done with both of you. This was just my way of tying up the loose ends, maybe making some money in the reward fee. But…” I take a breath. “Finally, finally being able to touch, just once,

the infamous Heart of Dark Desires. Fight over it for the rest of your lives. I really don't care."

"Fuck all this." Jac glares, turning and pointing a ringed finger at me in his darkest amber suit with black, red and green plaid. "And fuck you. I'm out."

He storms out the door, slamming it behind him.

I turn to Hendrick.

"You fucked him right after fucking me?" He shakes his head. "Of course you did." He won't look at me.

I deserve it. I know that. Not just for fucking Jac the day after fucking him. Which, to be fair, isn't anything new in our fucked-up scenario, but I deserve it for what I've just done.

Going down on my knees, my cheeks burn, and if Jac was here, he'd make a comment about this being my favorite position or where I belong.

What the hell's wrong with me? I'm pretty much in love with the man who won't look at me and I'm half in...I don't know what with Jac. There are times I could fall for him, times I actively hate him, and yet with it all, I want him as much as I want Hendrick.

I crave him. Crave how he treats me.

I finish putting my things in my bag and get up. I look at Hendrick, but he's still not looking at me, and I can't find any words.

I just stood here and let Jac maul me. So did he, I guess, but it was my body Jac's talented hands roamed over.

There's nothing to say, so I just head for the door.

“Fuck, Cat. Don’t.” Hendrick moves fast, and he catches my shoulder when I’m about to turn the handle. He pulls me to him and I go. As his arms come around me, I hold him, too. I need this. Him. The heat. The beat of his heart, the scent of him. All of it.

I might actually love him.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Cat, I don’t know what the fuck you’re up to, but I don’t want you to leave. I... I care about you.” He takes in a shuddering breath. “I get it. That means nothing. How can it? But even if we can’t make it work, we can have fun in the short term.”

I’ll want to be with Jac. Just as much as I want to be with him.

“Don’t say it,” he says. “I hate him, but you also want him.”

“I can’t explain it, Hendrick. I wish I could, but...”

“Jac and I’ll ride it out to the end, which is going to come. Neither one of us is going to give up on this. We’re too stubborn for that, you know this. The feud runs too deep, and now that feud, that competition, is amplified because it involves you.”

“I’m not a prize,” I reply. “Far from it.”

He frowns, and there’s pain in his gaze. Pain I’ve caused. “Is there anything I can do or say to make you forget him and be with me. Only me.”

I pause. I know I can’t give him the answer he wants, the one he deserves. I’m no better than them, am I? I’m a selfish bastard, too, because I want them both. Even after everything.

“Hendrick,” I whisper, glancing away, “please. I-I—”

He straightens, and for a long moment, he’s quiet. A sudden coldness takes over his expression, and he nods. “I see.”

I was expecting to be treated like the criminal I am. Get shoved under a microscope and not believed. But it seems the biggest threat is the one I didn’t see coming. The fact we stupidly fell for each other.

I know I have to go. I have to walk on him, on Jac. Stick to my plan. But my heart hurts.

He hasn’t trusted me enough to tell me about Lili, who I know that pink diamond engagement ring was for. Who he loved, man to woman. Who Jac loved, brother to sister.

Clearly he doesn’t want to go there, bring up his dead lover, and tell me how he felt. And keeping the ring tells me he’s still holding her up to everyone else.

I can’t compete with a dead girl.

Jesus, that’s one I didn’t see coming. Two men, one dead girl that they both still love. The brother and the lover who hate each other over her.

I don’t do complications for good reasons. And this is a doozy.

Besides, staying is dangerous.

I pull back.

“Complications?” he asks quietly.

“Complications. But...” I kiss him.

It’s just meant to be goodbye, but it’s pure gasoline, and we go from zero to burning passion in seconds. The kiss is

wild, hungry, deep. I can't get enough of him, and he slams me into the door, like he can't get enough of me, either. Hendrick Agnossio is all the magic. His tongue dances with mine and if there's some desperation, some bittersweet in the molasses of the kiss, the heated sex that lies beneath and no one even acknowledges it.

He has me up, in his arms, my legs around his waist and his fingers digging into me with a bruising grip.

I want to fuck him now. I want—

“Hendrick.” I rip my mouth from his.

He slowly pulls back from me, and I'm already missing the heavy press of his erection.

I get my bag, rip open the door, and run, forcing myself to not look back.

Because if I do, I'm never leaving him. Ever.



“Buckle up, buttercup,” Harry says, swigging the Hibiki she stole. She hands me the Heart of Dark Desires.

We're at my downtown apartment, where she was waiting for me. When I arrived, she took one look and rolled her eyes.

That was ten minutes ago.

Now I'm just...I don't know. Missing them? Them. Not just Hendrick.

“What if I love them?”

“Love? Who the fuck are you and where's Lena?” She hands me the bottle. I take a sip. “They're even hotter in person, so I get it, and trust, if they were women, I'd be all up

in that shit. Unless of course, I was robbing them. And then I'd say no way."

"But..."

"They're Quinate, mafia. Bad ass kings of their slices of the world. They'd kill you, and Jac's an ass. Hendrick is...I don't know. Look, I guarantee he won't be fuzzy knowing you stole it."

I frown. "One minute of wallowing. Geez, Harry, cut a girl some slack."

"No way, no how. If we're doing this, we gotta move. And they didn't make you happy."

She's right. They didn't. The Heart of Dark Desires is what I'm going to call a tip.

"I'm going to go. We'll leave in two days. I'll put word out you have a job, and when we get to our destination, I'll start looking into passing off the necklace. Start packing. Everything must go."

She leaves, and I get changed and start to pack. I'll hit the —

Someone knocks on the door, and I spy Harry's keys. Rolling my eyes, I open it and hand them to her without looking. "Here, Harry."

I look up.

There's a gun pointed at me.

My heart drops.

"Oh, fuck. You're not Harry."

THIRTY

HENDRICK



I t's been a week since Magdalena walked out my door.

I'm worried.

She's definitely the type to decide enough's enough and stay away a few days, but she'd come back. Eventually. She always has. I also haven't heard from Jac.

Normally he likes to call and tell me how much he hates me or to drop dead. Maybe Lili's notebook mellowed him, but Jac isn't exactly a mellow guy. Even as a kid, mellow wasn't in his vocabulary. He'll be at the Quinate meeting next week, so I'm sure he'll have choice things to say.

I'm hoping he's matured, but...

I'll believe that when I see it.

On the eighth day of no word, and when I break down and call, it goes straight to voicemail. I go to the apartment I know about. She's got another somewhere, but she uses this one enough, especially when working, and didn't she say she had a job?

"Come on, Magdalena," I mutter. As I knock again.

No answer.

I use the keys I got from the real estate woman because my money bought me a copy.

An uneasy feeling comes over me when I step inside.

No one's been there. It's devoid of not only any essence of Magdalena, but anything at all. Clothes are gone. The fridge and pantry emptied.

All the furniture's still there, just clothes and the rest of the things are gone.

Abandoned?

"Fuck."

Was I played?

I fucking knew she was up to something. Being played and her just being wiped away are two different things.

One suggests Magdalena doing it herself and that means her coming to me at some point because she can't help it. She has ideas about wanting to avoid complications and I'm with her. But wanting and being able to do that are different things.

The other suggests Magdalena didn't exactly leave of her own free will.

"Or maybe," I say, pulling out my phone and bringing up the underground number for her business. "She's just that good at the con."

Being that good and doing a con isn't smart with her career path. She needs to be honest in her criminal activities, reliable, or else no one would hire her.

I press dial.

"Fuck!" The number isn't in service.

I've been played. Jac, too. Wherever the fuck he is. I call him, but it rings then goes to voicemail. I send him a text.

Call me, asshole.

I get my car and go to the jewelry store which is closed. It's the middle of the fucking day.

Esterhazy owns this building and lives over the store. A perk of being rich as fuck; I can find most things.

I ring the doorbell and after a while it buzzes.

A strange feeling swoops over me as I climb the fucking stairs. When I reach the floor, I bang on the door and the jeweler opens it.

Her eyes are bloodshot, and she looks scared, pissed the fuck off, hungry for blood.

Harry glares. "You."

"Where the fuck is Magdalena?"

"She's gone. And it's your fault."

I push her inside the apartment and slam the door. "What do you mean gone? Where? Her place is empty."

"Both are," she says. "And it's your fucking fault. You and that other hot piece, Jac."

"She took off and it's my fault? I didn't fucking threaten her. Maybe she ripped us all off."

"You know?"

"Know what?"

"That we...we swapped the necklace. It's gone, too. I should have had it."

I'm too shocked to do anything but stare. Normally, I'd have a gun to her head. But how? When?

"She stole my fucking necklace—"

"Not yours or Jac's."

"—and took off with it? She fucked you over and me and Jac. I might not kill her. He will."

Actually, I'm not sure about that, not with Cat being the object of ire, but the more fear in this woman the better.

"No. Lena wouldn't do that. Not to me," she says.

"Yeah, sweetheart, to you."

Her eyes narrow. "I'm not your anything dickwad. And not me. I grew up with her. We've had each other's backs our entire lives. She'd screw you over, but not me."

"So you say."

"So I know," she snaps. "*She* was stolen."

"You don't steal people, Harriet."

"Kidnapped, whatever. We were meant to leave two days after we saw you. She was meant to call. She didn't. Her locket and ring are here. If she was gonna run off, that would be gone, too. It meant the most to her. Also, your friend Jac came by and hassled me. Said something about he didn't trust her. And he wanted the necklace."

"That's Jac being Jac. If he thought Cat had the Heart of Dark Desires, he'd yell at me, and probably threaten her." I shake my head. "But Jac thinks I have it. I think—thought—I had it."

"He came here, said he'd find her, and stormed off." She swallows. "We were going to leave the country. Everything

was planned and she...she didn't show. All her clothes, personal items are gone, but not the things in the safe, here. There are jewels worth millions and an item—locket and the ring—worth memories. Like I said, she wouldn't go voluntarily without those things. One means money, one means something."

"So..." I don't know what to say. My brain's speeding fast, careening around corners. I'm already sending out three levels of searches for her in my head, and Damon can—

"There's one more thing," Harry says, voice shaking. I don't think she's a woman given to that. "This came. It's why I have the store closed down. It came here."

She goes over to a bookshelf and picks up a thick envelope. Cotton paper.

Her name's on the front, and I open it, pulling out the small sheet of paper.

Harriet,

*I want the Heart of Dark
Desires in exchange for Magdalena.
I'll contact you.*

"See?" she says.

I frown. "Why the fuck didn't you come to me?"

"I thought you were in on it."

"Do I look like I'm in on it?" I ask.

“No, but it’s got to be that bastard Jac. I saw her bruises that time. He’s an ass. It’s got to be him.”

Thing is, I’m not so sure.

This is most definitely something Jac would do. And he did bruise her.

But he bruised her in a consensual sex game that went too far, and he thinks I’ve got the necklace.

Unless Cat was very stupid and told him she had it... Also, why would he ask for a necklace that Magdalena has and not Harry? She said she doesn’t have it anymore.

“I don’t think it’s Jac,” I say.

“Of course it is.”

“I know him. He calls her MG, not Magdalena. Kidnap isn’t his style.” I shrug. “And why the fuck would he kidnap a woman he’s already been fucking who has, according to you, the necklace?” I shake my head. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“He’s a guy.”

I ignore her. Worry begins to claw over my skin, but I keep the rising anger and fear off my face. “Call me if you hear anything.”

With that, I walk out.

This doesn’t make sense. I drive to Jac’s place, but it’s dark, and I don’t even see his giant, Carlos, around. Either he kidnapped her with an entourage, which...okay, would be very fucking Jac, or he’s out, or...

That bad feeling turns my stomach sending ice down my spine and fire up the back of my skull.

Something’s very, very wrong.

“Fuck.”

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THANK YOU

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WILT



He calls me his Rose

But he's determined to see me wither away

My mother kept me hidden my entire life, never hinting at the vicious crime family I was born into.

Or the dangerous men who were out for my head.

So when I finally step into the pageant stage's bright spotlight, he's there waiting for me.

Nikolai Wilder, the leader of one of the most powerful gangs on the East Coast.

He is violent. Cruel. Lethal. Undeniably sexy... And obsessed with the one thing that'll grant him the ultimate revenge.

Me.

But that'll mean bloodshed.

It'll mean war.

And it'll lead to my absolute destruction.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brooke Harper creates dark and sexy worlds for her characters to play. A lover of strong coffee and old tombstones, she spins dark tales of sex and sin, pain and passion, and misery and madness that'll have you flipping the pages and begging for more.

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