



Her Spark (Smoke & Mirrors)

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Category: Romance

Description: Anna is a strong woman who has faced more in her short life than most while climbing out of the gutter. She and her best friend Lucy attend a hospital fundraiser for a night of fun where she crosses paths with a man who takes her breath away. When their conversation is cut short by a phone call revealing new information, it shakes the foundation of their budding relationship.

Aldo is a man at the top of his organization. At a hospital benefit, he meets a woman who knocks him off of his feet. When their conversation is cut short, he is left with a longing not only to explain the situation but to be a part of her life. He uses all of his resources to keep her safe and only asks for one thing, a chance to be honest and answer her questions before she cuts him out.

With secrets in the air and outside forces applying pressure to both of them, will their new relationship survive or crumble?

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Chapter One

Aldo

“Pain is relative but feeling anything is a gift.”

I

bring

my

bourbon

to

my lips again to keep from scowling at the snobby suits in the room.

Today isn't about my pension for destroying empires of perverts but about helping to fund the local medical college and sponsor more doctors to put on our payroll.

The more medical hands we have on deck, the fewer of my friends I have to bury.

“Mr. Angelini, it's my understanding that your family is matching the donations made here tonight,” she says to me through half-lidded eyes, looking at me as dollar signs and the power that I hold instead of a person.

I wish this was the first time that I was openly flirted with at these events, but it's no secret that the only thing between my wife and I is a written agreement.

"Yes, we strongly support the medical needs in our region. It's for the betterment of the community that will outlast us all," I answer, faking the pride that I know is expected to be in my voice.

She reaches out to put her hand on my arm and I take a step to the side avoiding the contact.

Just as my mask is about to slip, Enzo steps between us.

"My Apologies, Mr. Angelini has an important call that needs to be taken. We hope that you enjoy the evening and look forward to matching your donation." As the last word leaves his mouth, we turn and walk to the back staircase and the executive offices.

The other guards flank us, stopping and standing at the base of the staircase, ensuring our privacy.

"Anything I need to know, Enzo?" I inquire, part of me hoping it was an escape from the power trip of the wealthy and part of me hoping it's a bloody matter where I get to set my beast free.

Taking my seat on the couch overlooking the party, I can see the opulence pouring off of each of the wealthy guests and the gruff violence thinly veiled for all of the mafia families present.

"Fabbri sent us a message pinned to a corpse at one of our warehouses. Nothing was taken; it looks like he was making a point."

“Fuck. What’s the message?” I ask, grinding my teeth and slamming back the rest of the bourbon in my glass.

“You sit on a throne of lies, written in blood on his body.” Enzo cringed as the last word left his lips.

He must have known the man who died for us to get this message and I note to check in on him again when we are safe in the compound.

I pace the room, contemplating the most effective way to handle his retaliation.

Fabbri has been fighting for his seat with the most dangerous families in our region, but most of these seats are generational and we are very divided over the decision.

“He thinks that he can kill one of our men in our territory and get away with it. Instead of going in hot-headed, as he expects, I’ll call a council meeting locally and provide this to them and any further proof of his blatant disregard for our rules and order,” I say as I come to a full stop in the room, a rueful smile caressing my lips.

Enzo nods, pulling out his burner cell phone and making the call.

“Less, I know you are still at the location. Gather as much information as you can and bring it home. We’ll meet you there later.”

An angry vibration settles in my bones with the plan agreed upon and I know that I need to make my way back to the party downstairs.

I take one final deep breath as I walk through the dark hall, past the guards, and over to our table.

Everyone seems to be having a fun-filled evening of dancing and I recognize most of

the faces in the room from other charity events.

I pan across the crowd and suddenly the world stops around me.

The only thing that I see is her.

Her laughter floats with the music like a siren song pulling me in and I stand, intending to make my way to her.

I quickly remove my plain wedding band and drop it in my pocket with little thought towards my loveless marriage before waltzing to her.

She continues to laugh and banter with the woman next to her as they sway to the music.

Neither of them are in designer dresses but even if she were dipped in diamonds, her smile would outsparkle even the most rare jewels.

Before I can think it through, I make my way to her side, the smell of lilac filling my senses as I take her in entirely.

“Hello, beautiful,” I say softly, enamored by the way she moves freely in this space filled with vultures.

“Hello, tall, dark, and handsome,” she responds, a glimmer of mischief in her eyes.

She matches the movement of her friend without missing a beat until the dark-haired woman looks at her, nods her head in my direction, and walks toward the bar at the opposite end of the room.

I extend my hand, hoping that she’ll take it.

While I may take blood and truths by force, I will never take a woman by force.

She pauses for a moment to contemplate her decision before meeting my eyes and placing her hand in mine.

The moment our skin makes contact my heart soars and the rest of the room fades away.

Nothing else matters. All I want is to make her smile and I will beg, borrow, and plead to make it happen.

As the music changes we adjust to the beat, swaying, dancing, and laughing together as we find our rhythm.

With each turn, the colored lights overhead reflect on her purple sequin dress, accentuating her beautiful curves and soft pale skin.

Song after song plays and I have no interest in moving from this spot, but I see the sheen of sweat on her skin and a primal need to take care of her steps in.

I stop dancing, get her attention, and nod toward the bar.

She nods in agreement as we wander over to get a drink and the design of the room lessens the acoustics so you can be heard.

As we step up to the bar, the bartender hands me my signature bourbon and I indicate for her to get anything she wants.

“Can I get a Shirley Temple?” She asks, the red of embarrassment tinting her cheeks.

The bartender nods, putting the drink in front of her.

We step outside to the plaza and find seats under one of the cherry trees.

Comfortable silence falls around us, and for the first time in my life, I feel content.

Our eyes meet in the moonlight and I finally understand what all of the love stories through history were about.

There isn't a thing in this world that I wouldn't fight to be with her and keep her safe.

"I want to kiss you but I need to know you want the kiss first," I tell her, gently placing my hand just below her cheek, waiting for her permission to touch her again.

Just because she gave me permission to touch her on the dance floor doesn't mean that invitation extends to our more intimate setting.

A soft smile lights up her face before she places her cheek in my hand and nods in agreement.

Not wanting to miss the moment, I lean forward, one hand moving her drink out of the way and the other finding its way to the back of her head, tangled in her hair as our lips meet.

The kiss is like an atomic bomb in my life, any idea of her importance to me has multiplied and the entire axis of my world has changed.

We pull closer together as the kiss deepens, both of us losing ourselves in the magic before footsteps sound in our direction.

"Mr. Angelini, I apologize for interrupting but we need you urgently for this call with your father-in-law."

And then the magic was broken and I watched it disappear from her eyes.

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Chapter Two

Anna

“When reality hits you hard, don’t let it ruffle your feathers.”

A

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beauty of the night shatters and any potential future that we had flushes down the toilet.

I look into his eyes and I see the hope and want there, but I won’t do it.

There are some things that I will not allow myself to become and a side woman hiding in the shadows helping some lying bastard cheat on his unsuspecting wife isn't one of them. Then it hits me. Angelini. That’s one of the big mob boss families and I was just kissing his lips like we had a future.

I stand and turn to walk away when there is a delicate clasp of my hand.

“Can I at least know your name?” He practically begs, and the man who interrupted us raises an eyebrow. While he deserves nothing from me, it’s bad form to piss off a mob boss, even a lying and cheating one.

“Anna,” I whisper as I step away from him and make my way outside with tears blurring my vision.

All the colors and people blur together but I cannot crack right here.

Not where anyone can see me break down. I reach into my purse, flip open my phone, and call Lucy as I push through the front doors.

Taking steps toward the car, I slide my key into the door and unlock it as my phone rings.

“Anna, is everything okay?” she asks without missing a beat. I can hear her over the music, but barely as she navigates to a quieter part of the room. The tears are freely falling at this point and I can’t hold them back.

“Meatloaf,” is all I have it in me to say through the sobs that wrack my chest.

“Fuck, I am on my way outside right now to the car. Are you already there?” she asks me, knowing that if I use our safe word I need her right now.

“Yes.”

“Okay, get in the passenger seat, baby girl. I am coming and I will drive us to your place,” she instructs me before the line goes dead.

Using the back of my hands, I wipe away the tears that have fallen before switching sides in the car.

Sitting there, I wait for the shimmer of Lucy's red dress to come through the front door of the event.

Reaching into the backseat, I find the soft blanket that I keep because Lucy always runs the air conditioning and this was our compromise to keep me from freezing to death.

I see the shimmer of her dress exit the door, followed by the guy who interrupted the best kiss of my life.

She turns around straightening her spine, and the world freezes.

She puts her finger on his chest and while she is too far away for me to hear, I can tell by the heaving of her shoulders she is yelling at him.

Without a fear in the world, she finishes yelling at him, doesn't wait for his response, and storms over to the car.

"Sorry, Babe. Bozo number one stopped me to make sure that I wasn't under the influence before I was allowed to drive you home," she says as she slams the door shut and starts the car.

"Lucy, they are mobsters. It would probably be in your best interest not to piss them off," I say, fear leaching into my voice for my fearless friend. She'll do anything to defend those she loves and sometimes puts herself in danger doing it.

"Actually, they are mafia men, and they don't like to make scenes in public with people who are not involved with the families. Although, that is the first time I have seen so many dangerous men in tuxes in one room," she corrects me as we pull away, headed in the direction of my apartment.

The tears fall down my cheeks as the city blurs in the darkness.

By the time we get into the parking garage and park in my spot, the tears have dried up.

Stupid men. Stupid lying, dirtbag men. Stupid heart that doesn't understand that he's married.

Before I know it, Lucy's at my door, thrusting it open and pulling me into her arms. Sobs still wracking my chest, I hold onto her.

The one bright part of my life. Through foster care, running away, and all of my struggles to get where I am today, Lucy has persisted as my person.

She never judges me but always tells me the truth even when I am making bad decisions.

"Let's go upstairs. I want to know everything from the moment I left," she tells me while petting my back to comfort me.

We walk in solemn silence from the garage into the elevator and up to my floor.

I feel numb like my whole life just got ripped away from me, but it was only a kiss.

We reach my door before I know it and get inside so that I can fall apart in the safety of my home.

After my front door shuts, I can feel Lucy at my back unzipping my dress, freeing me from its confines.

She steps away for a moment, going to my bedroom and grabbing something from

my drawer.

When she comes back she has two large t-shirts in hand and I feel my bottom lip tremble again.

My best friend knows me so well that I don't even have to tell her what I need, she just does it for me because I can't.

She drops her dress to the floor with utter disregard and throws on the other shirt.

We curl up on the couch and turn on the radio before I tell her everything.

The farther into the story I get, the more my heart feels like it has been ripped out of my chest.

“So you're telling me that he is one of the only men you have been genuinely interested in as an adult and he's married.

He didn't tell you that before he asked if he could kiss you?

Hold on,” she says with fire and determination in her eyes.

Lucy walks over to her discarded bag and pulls out her cell phone.

Before I can think of words to stop her she presses the dial button and holds up her finger for me to wait.

“I was hoping you would call me after our broom closet adventure. Miss me already?” he asks her with a cocky tone in his voice that causes my eyebrow to rise.

“No, this is a message I need to get to your boss. You do work for Mr. Angelini,

correct?”

“You know my affiliation, Rose Petal.” The warning tone in his voice makes my blood boil and I see the challenge in her eyes.

“Tell your boss that if he is going to kiss a woman and make her complicit in his adulterous behavior he could at least let her make that decision.” Then without waiting for a reply, she hangs up on him and I am stunned into silence.

“I'm sure he will get the message. Did you want to watch TV or curl up and get some sleep? You've had a long night,” She asks, always knowing what I need before I even do.

“Will you stay with me tonight? I'm scared to be alone” I admit, the defeat evident in my voice.

“Of course.”

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Chapter Three

Aldo

“Miscommunication is a bitch and so is knowing when you have fucked up.”

A

knock

on

the

door

pulls my attention from the paperwork in front of me, not that I was able to keep my focus centered on these agreements anyway.

All I can think about is the way she looked destroyed when she left the event.

My heart hurts for the first time in my life.

I never wanted anything before her. I knew my path from a young age, where people wanted to be doctors and astronauts.

I knew I would take over the family business and I was never allowed dreams outside

of that.

“Come in,” I answer the knocking bleakly, hoping for a small distraction from the pain in my chest. When the door opens I see Gio on the other side of it with trepidation in each of his steps.

“Boss,” he greets me in a formal manner, easing his tension a bit. He won’t meet my eyes and I know that whatever he has to say won’t be easy, but needs to happen. I grab the bourbon on my desk, swig it, and clear my throat to encourage him to speak.

“I got a call late last night from the friend of that girl you were with....” he starts and all of my focus finds him.

She better be okay, I had him follow them to her apartment to ensure that she made it home safely.

I stand and walk over to him grabbing him by the throat and pushing him against the door he came in before I grab the gun at my waist and put it to his temple.

“Finish what you were saying before I lose the last shred of my sanity,” I utter in a deadly tone trying to get my point across.

“She told me to let you know that if you were going to kiss a woman and make her complicit in your adulterous behavior you could at least let her make that decision. There is one upside, I not only have her address but I also have a number to call to connect us to your girl.”

“You are so lucky that you are well connected and know exactly what I need. Pack a bag quickly and wait outside my office to be released. Your punishment is that you are to leave and sit outside of her apartment and watch her. She was seen on my arm last night and even if she isn’t speaking to me at the moment I need her alive to

forgive me,” I say, releasing his neck and going back to my chair.

It is a little easier to focus on the contract that I need to sign now that I know what I am going to do.

Grabbing the notebook from the top drawer on the right side of my desk I start to pen a note.

Dear Lilac,

My shining star in the dark of night. I know how bad this looks but I beg for the chance to explain. Please, if you felt anything that I did last night you will have coffee with me and offer me the chance to explain myself.

Signed,

Do

I stand up and walk to the door of my office before pulling it open. Gio is standing there at attention waiting for further instructions.

“Slide this under her door,” I instruct him before turning around and letting a smile find my life for the first time since my lips were on hers last night.

With a pep in my step and determination in my soul again, I find my way to my desk and the stack of contracts is much easier.

Hours pass while I meticulously read each one and note any questions I have that need to be run by our attorney.

Once I have finished everything that I can behind a desk, I pull out my phone and call

Enzo.

“Hey, we need to meet and discuss your endeavors for the company,” before hanging up the phone, getting myself another drink, and getting cozy for a minute while I wait for my friend to arrive.

Enzo and I grew up together, he was younger than me, and being part of the family business already, we were both safe to be friends as children.

He has never experienced love but I know he has had his eye on a female serial killer that I have been asking him to keep an eye on to see if she is problematic for us.

So far he seems to be helping keep her under wraps, but in the decades that we have known each other, the man has never asked for a favor so I let this be without question.

I know that if she were a danger to us, she would no longer exist. My thoughts are disrupted by my phone ringing, so I shake my head to clear them away and answer the phone.

“Boss, your message has been delivered,” Gio’s voice rings through the line and my heart shudders in my chest.

“Hold on, her friend is calling,” he says momentarily before I hear the hold music. I can barely breathe, I am so nervous. Every nerve ending feels like it's on fire and the seconds are moving at a molasses pace. Each beat of my heart reverberates in my ears as the anticipation grows.

“She is in. She will meet you for coffee at Sly Fox Coffee at 7:00 am,” Gio says triumphantly. While I am extraordinarily happy to be seeing her tomorrow, Gio has a long night ahead of him.

“Good, you can watch her tonight and follow her to the shop in the morning where you will be relieved.”

“Understood, Boss,” is all he was able to get out before I hang up the line and hear a knock on my door.

“Come in,” I give the go-ahead to Enzo who has arrived just in time this evening.

He opens the door, walks to the liquor cabinet, and pours himself some peanut butter whiskey before sitting down across from me.

We both take sips of our drinks before diving into the business.

We discuss the real estate that we manage for all of our people to ensure that everyone is able to have a safe space to sleep at night and raise their kids.

Then we transition into the strip clubs and bars that we own all across the state to help clean the dirty money that comes in from the weapons trades that we deal in.

I had asked him for the specs on a specific building and how difficult it might be to acquire the apartment building that my Lilac lives in.

The information is easy, it's a faceless corporation and I can get it for market value and then increase the safety and security. Even if she doesn't want me after I explain myself, she was seen with me and I will not let anything happen to her because of me.

She deserves so much more than I can provide her but I so desperately want to be enough for her.

The next thing that I had Enzo do was put a GPS tracker in her car and a video feed of the hallway outside of her apartment.

The last file Enzo hands me is the background check.

There are still a few requests outstanding since information isn't at the tips of our fingers, but I have her driving record from the DMV and her police record from our detective at the local precinct.

I open the file and read up on how she was only questioned once in a bar fight because someone touched her and she laid them out cold.

It brings a smile to my face that my Lilac can defend herself when she needs to.

She has been pulled over for speeding before, but always seems to talk her way out of a ticket.

It says here that her fingerprints were sent to the local hospital for their records since she is an employee there.

If she fixes people, maybe she can fix the broken parts of my soul.

I lose hours digging into the file and Enzo sits there answering any of my questions and making a list of necessary security updates to her building.

By the time I look up, I realize how late it is and that I need to get to my room and get some sleep if I plan to win over my lady tomorrow morning.

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Chapter Four

Anna

“When in doubt, drink more coffee. What can go wrong?”

I

am

way

too

early,

but I couldn't sit still and watch the clock anymore and if I just went to the coffee shop I could get in at least one cup before he gets there.

The warm caress of the coffee will calm my nerves.

My mind wanders as I walk through the streets to see the shop around the corner.

I don't see anything out of the ordinary or any dangerous men as I complete the walk from my apartment.

The last steps into the coffee shop bring peace to my soul.

The only other place that has ever brought me hope is the library where I could find heat, escape, and adventure no matter how little funds I had.

Smelling the warm beans and fresh pastries wafting around the space, I feel some of my anxiety dissipate.

My head turns as the door jingles while other patrons enter the shop, but I am looking to see the man who brought me to life.

The barista takes my coffee order and is kind enough not to comment on my obvious reaction at the door.

Once I finish ordering a white chocolate mocha with caramel and whole milk, I pay with cash before waiting on the other end of the coffee bar for my drink.

I can see the door from where I stand and my body vibrates with the violent combination of hope and anger.

“Anna,” the barista calls out from behind the counter before setting down my drink and turning back toward the coffee station.

I pick up the warm cup and find my way to a table in the corner where I have a clear view of the door.

After I sit down I reach into my bag, pull out the vampire book that I have been reading, and pretend not to be bothered while I wait for him.

The jangle of the bells catches my attention and my heart stops beating when I see him.

Our eyes lock and the corner of his lip rises in a small smile. I am so fucked.

He takes strides toward me and signals with his hands for his guards to stay behind, near the exit.

With each step he takes, he gets closer to me and it feels like the connection between us strengthens when we are in the room together.

The rest of the room blurs and he is the only thing that I can focus on.

When he reaches the table, he stops, stands before the seat, and looks up at me.

“Is this seat taken, Lilac?” he asks me with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

The lump in my throat prevents my verbal response from coming out, so I nod instead.

I watch him take a seat and scoot his chair closer to me so we can talk without needing to project our voices across the table and over the ambient sound.

To stall and find my voice, I take another drink of my coffee and then put my receipt in my book as a bookmark before putting the book back in my bag.

“You asked to see me and have a chance to explain. I am here and ready to listen,” I tell him as I reinforce my spine and remember that he is married. Before he has an opportunity to speak, one of his guards appears at our table with a plate of pastries and a coffee for Aldo.

“Thank you, Enzo. Did you do what I asked?” he inquires with an even tone and quizzical expression.

Enzo looks at him, smiling, and nods before taking a seat near the door to give us privacy.

The baristas come out and go from table to table talking quietly to the patrons.

Once they visit every table, they turn off the open sign and lock the door so it can only be opened from the inside.

My jaw falls open in utter disbelief; this man just cleared out my favorite coffee shop so we could sit alone.

“Don’t worry beautiful, the patrons were all compensated with coffee cards to take their drinks to-go.

The staff and owner have been duly compensated for any losses they would suffer from shutting down early.

I know you care about this place and I wouldn’t want our meeting to affect your daily life negatively,” he says to me and reaches out his hand offering for me to take it but not forcing me.

Fear courses through my veins as indecision racks my system.

I promised him a chance to explain but not a chance to touch me, so I gently decline by lacing my hands together in front of me.

His face shows his disappointment for only a moment before he moves his hand and nods in acceptance.

“Let me start with the fact that I want to apologize for making you feel deceived. I only ask that you let me finish explaining before you leave. If you decide then that you never want to see me again, I will respect that.” Aldo looks over my face, watching me take him in and all of his words as they sink into my being.

“I can do that but I may have questions, do you prefer that I ask them all at the end?” I inquire, as I grab the notepad and pen from my bag and flip to the ribbon marking my available page.

“I would prefer that the questions wait until the end and then I will answer them, but I need to know if you want me to glaze over the darker side of what I do. I will give you full transparency if you want it, but sometimes the truth is a lot to mentally handle. I am not a good man, Lilac. I am not a good man to the world but I promise that I can be a man deserving of you.” His words spill out with sincerity and melt my heart and some of my resolve.

“I will take it all but if it becomes too much, can I have a safe word? I am a nurse in the local hospital here, and I know that there is a lot of violence in this city and that you play your part, but I might struggle to reconcile the man in front of me with the violence that you participate in,” I ask, hoping for honesty but not sure that I am ready for the utter violence that the man in front of me can inflict.

“We will use the stoplight system. Green if you are comfortable, yellow if you want to slow down, and red if you want to stop. Please understand that your boundaries are very important, and I will not know them all as we start and I need you to communicate them to me. I promise that I won’t push back.

I might ask questions to understand, but you are in control.

I might run a tight ship with my work but we do everything here with your informed consent,” he answers earnestly without breaking eye contact with me.

“Okay, thank you. I’m ready,” I say, taking another drink of my coffee and grabbing a cheese danish from the plate between us.

The first bite passes my lips and the burst of sweet and savory causes me to moan.

Fuck. That was not planned. The way that his fist clenches tells me that he isn't unaffected by my visceral reaction.

“Sorry,” I whisper as the blush creeps up my neck, encompassing my face. My shame causes me to look down and avoid eye contact to prevent further embarrassment.

“Look at me,” he asks me with a softer tone in his voice. I take a shaky breath and find my courage before looking up to meet his eyes.

“You do not have to apologize for the way your body reacts. You do not need to be ashamed of the beautiful noises that you make.” He speaks softly before reaching over to provide comfort, stopping inches from my knee and looking at me waiting for my consent.

I nod, allowing him to touch me for the first time since our kiss, and the reaction that sparks through my entire being is unmatched.

My shoulders fall for the first time since I walked in and I am ready to hear whatever he has to tell me.

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Chapter Five

Aldo

“Honesty is the best policy, but the bloody truth might be my downfall.”

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relax

with my touch brings a warmth to my heart that I never thought that I would be able to experience with my position in the family business.

Patiently, I watch her breathe through her anxiety and take a sip of her coffee.

I would happily wait all day for her to be ready for me to speak without a worry in the world.

I have put all business on pause and cleared my calendar to ensure that she has enough time to be comfortable and get the answers that she deserves.

Today isn't about me, aside from the information that I provide.

Instead, today is about her and her comfort.

I understand that my life and the deals that have been brokered are not easily understood but if she feels the same spark that I do between us she will give this a chance.

“Are you ready, beautiful? Did you want to finish your breakfast pastry first?” I ask to ensure her continued consent in all of this mess.

She takes another sip of her coffee and it sounds nearly empty when she sets it back on the table.

Before I can even utter the words, Enzo is at the counter, presumably asking the barista for another one.

She settles into her chair before indicating that I should move forward with my story.

With her pen in hand, she prepares to notate any questions she has.

“Fifteen years ago, the family business was far bloodier than it is today.

The families had to beg, borrow, and plead for the weapons imported from outside of the country.

In the first five years of my time as a made man, I saw countless of my friends and people that I grew up with die in front of my eyes.

I knew at that moment that I would do whatever it took to secure a safer future for those who were left standing.

I went to my father, the previous Don, and asked him what I could do to help save the lives of those who entrusted us.

He spoke with the head of a powerful family in Italy whose daughter had just become of age and arranged our marriage.

After the arrangement was made, he sat me down and explained that there was now a contract in place between our families that included a clause where I would marry their daughter and that we would at least have one child together to signify the unity that exists.

What I wasn't told was that my bride was in love with a woman in Italy and would not want to even try to be a true participant in the marriage.

She came here so that her family would spare the person that she loves and agreed to be my spouse, but on paper only.

We have not shared a bed throughout the entirety of our marriage and kissed only on the cheeks on our wedding day.

After she settled here and found her footing, we used a clinic to impregnate her so that she would not betray her true love.

My son's name is Leo, and as per our contract, his mother is primarily in charge of his care.

I will introduce him to the family business and begin to prepare him to take over when he comes of age.

" I pause to let this sink in and watch dutifully as she scrawls her question on the page.

She looks up at me and takes another bite of her pastry as Enzo sets down her new coffee and walks to the other side of the room.

Watching and waiting, I see her dip her chin indicating she is ready for more.

“There is no love between us and I know that Bianca resents me for keeping her from her love, but it was her father that forbade them from speaking again. With this arrangement, I knew that things would not be easy, and I have found my release with some of the local discreet call girls so that no one will get the wrong idea. I cannot leave my wife without it costing countless lives and jeopardizing the safety of everyone that I have sworn to protect. Everything changed for me the night that we met. Before you, I could live with the constant faceless women and having to pretend that our marriage was real. But then I saw you.”

She takes a drink of her coffee before looking back up at me. For the first time since our kiss, there is hope in her eyes and I will do anything and kill anyone to keep it there. She reviews the notes that she made and makes some adjustments based on the information that I provided.

“What is the plan? I understand the spark and the romance of this, and believe me I feel it too, but I need a plan. I work twelve-hour shifts at the local hospital and come from nothing. Our tax brackets don’t even touch, so before I start something that could become serious, I need to know what your plan is,” she says before finishing the danish that she has been snacking on throughout our meeting.

I take a drink of my coffee and smile at her.

“My plan, you brilliant and beautiful woman, is to date you if you will allow me. I will easily fill my time while you are working and I respect that you have worked your whole life to get where you are. I am not here to rock your boat but to join you on it. If you want a step-by-step plan we can build one together to make sure that it

fits in your life, but I want this and I am willing to ask for my chance on my knees for you,” I promise her, knowing that I mean every word.

She reaches out to place her hand on mine and my heart skips a beat.

I do something that I have never done, I fall to my knees in front of her so she can understand the depths of my emotions for her.

A pin drop could be heard in this café but I couldn’t care less as long as she understands the lengths that I am willing to go for a chance.

“Aldo,” she whispers with her free hand covering her mouth in shock at me on my knees for her.

A moment passes in wonder and I think that maybe I have made it through to her when she moves her hand and reveals a smile below it.

She scribbles something in her notebook before ripping out the page and handing it to me.

“It’s my phone number, use it. We can date but I reserve the right to ask questions,” she tells me before she stands up and I follow her from my knees to standing before the woman of my dreams. Before she moves, she kisses me on the cheek, flustering me.

“I have a couple of errands to run today, but I would like to see you again when you can make time.” She goes to leave and I quickly grab her wrist with light pressure.

“May I kiss you?” I ask with a level of uncertainty that I have never felt before.

“Yes.” As soon as the word leaves her mouth, I pull her into me and press our lips

together. The passion unfolds as the kiss deepens and I groan. We come up for air with smiles on our faces before she walks out of the coffee shop. I stand there staring at where she left in utter disbelief.

“Don’t worry boss. I have a discreet tail on her to make sure that she is safe.” Enzo’s voice breaks me out of my daze. I needed to hear that because this is the second time we could have been spotted together, and it might place a target on her back.

“Good.”

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Chapter Six

Anna

“Bestie breakdowns and comfort snacks while I spill my soul.”

L

eaving

the

café

is

one of the most difficult decisions I have ever made.

I need to pick up groceries and prepare my food for the week, or the next few days of long shifts will wear me down.

Lucy agreed to meet me at home after her shift ends, and I know she is going to want a proper rundown.

Today is my Sunday, and while I would love to spend the day with Aldo, I honestly did not think he would have any answers that would warrant us ever speaking again.

Walking down to the local grocery store, I contemplate all of the information that Aldo told me.

Even with everything that he covered today, I know that we have just scratched the surface of what secrets he has needed to keep close to his vest. His story is crazy, and for any other man I would consider it too much and too far-fetched, but, he is a mafia don who pours his money into financing the very hospital that I work at.

His name isn't on any of the doors or buildings, but it was his family money that threw the fundraiser we met at.

I was able to connect the dots between his name when his guard spoke it and the donor list for the party.

Shopping on autopilot, I gather everything that I think I could need for meals this week and head to the register. Placing my basket on the belt, I patiently wait my turn for the cashier to ring in my food, while the mother in front of me finishes her transaction.

“Ma’am, I apologize but it looks like the card declined.

” The cashier says as politely as possible so as not to embarrass her.

The redness of shame finds its way to her face and her toddler squirms in the stroller while she digs in her bags and pulls out a few small bills, but not enough to cover her food.

Pulling out my card, I know that I will need to adjust my self-care budget for the month, but I won’t let a mother in my community struggle to feed her babies if I can help it.

“Let me get this for you,” I say with a soft smile and a soft flutter in my heart. The cashier seems stunned and unaccustomed to kindness between strangers. She tries to hand me the little bit of cash that she has.

“No need. Please, just pay it forward where you can,” I insist as I see the unshed tears fill her eyes.

She nods and loads the groceries into her cart and heads for the exit.

The young cashier rings in my groceries and I complete my transaction noting the new lightness in my chest knowing that today she will be able to feed her family regardless of her card and financial status.

I see a man in dark clothes barely in my peripherals as I go to leave the store.

My heartbeat starts to increase at the potential danger and I reach into my bag to feel my concealed gun.

I didn't think I would need it when I met with Aldo but I was more concerned with the after-effects of being seen with a mafia don than the don himself, especially when he got on his knees for me.

Moving slowly, I slip my gun into the belt of my pants and place all the groceries on my left side, freeing my right to react as needed.

I walk back to my car, checking every reflective surface to watch for the man as I near where I parked.

Placing the bags in the trunk hastily, I unlock the driver's side door hating the exposure as I climb into the driver's seat and lock the doors.

The self-defense instructions from my years of classes start repeating in my brain.

Do not drive straight home.

Do not go down any alleyways.

Do not let them get in the car.

If you have to shoot, shoot to kill because it might be the only chance that you get.

My heart is beating fast in my chest but I force myself to take even breaths and keep my head on the task at hand.

If I am being followed I am going to need all of the survival skills I have learned since college and Robert.

I pull away from my parking spot and circle through the busy neighborhoods just south of my apartment, checking for any car that might be following me before I pull into the garage and park in my space.

Keeping my head on a swivel and my right hand free, I pull out my groceries from the car and head inside.

Once I enter the foyer, I set down my groceries and unsheath my gun before locking the door and carefully clearing every closet and hiding space in my apartment.

With the coast clear but the unease in my chest still present, I reholster the pistol and tuck it into my waistband to keep it nearby.

I put away the cold food that I brought and proceed to prepare my lunches, listening for any sounds outside the door while I patiently wait for Lucy.

Time passes quickly as I work through processing the veggies and prepackage all of my meals for this week.

By the time I finish putting the lids on the containers, there is a soft rhythmic knock at my door that Lucy uses to indicate that she is on the other side of the door.

I quickly saunter over to the door, unlock it, and open it only to be barrel-rolled by my beautiful best friend into a hug that sweeps me off my feet.

“Hey, Luce,” I chuckle as she finally puts me down. Her responsive laughter is enough to lighten the mood. She gently pats my holstered firearm with a raised brow, waiting for me to fill her in.

“You, ma’am, have a lot to fill me in on, but don’t worry.

I brought hot chocolate to make this easier,” She tells me with a smile, pulling out the bag of her homemade hot chocolate mix that she covets the recipe for.

I stand there with tears in my eyes and a full heart, knowing that no matter what I say next, Lucy will ride or die for me.

While she will ask clarifying questions and advise me against things that are potentially harmful, at the end of the day no matter what decision I make, she will respect it and be here to hold me if it ends badly.

While she stands there and makes our cocoa, I spill a recap of my entire day and she just listens.

It all comes off my chest like a weight, and I know in this moment that my platonic best friend is the best thing that has ever and will ever happen to me.

Even if I end up old, grey, and alone romantically, I know that Lucy and I will always be together and hold space for one another.

When I finally finish the recap of my day and stop talking, I just look at her waiting for the questions that I know are coming.

“Anna, I love you and I respect your decision but how can a relationship with him go anywhere if he has to stay married to his wife?” She asks me with softness in her eyes backed by fire.

“I didn’t agree to forever but I did agree to go on dates and ask questions as we go.

I don’t expect him to have everything figured out without me and he seems to be willing to follow my lead on this.

Luce, he was on his knees for me. You could have heard a pin drop with how quiet the room got,” I respond, hoping that she understands my want to cautiously move forward and continue to get information.

“I love that, and maybe you could put that position to good use,” she taunts me, causing me to be bright red at the thought of him on his knees bringing me pleasure over and over again until I physically can’t stand anymore.

I shake the dirty thoughts away as she laughs knowing exactly what she did to me.

“I love you. Are you staying here tonight, or is it cocoa before you head home since I have work in the morning?” I ask, hoping that she will stay but also knowing that it might be safer for her if she isn’t with me right now.

“I have time for cocoa, and then, I will let you get your beauty sleep. No one needs a crabby nurse tomorrow.” She laughs, knowing that I am much nicer when I get sleep,

especially for the start of my work week.

When she finishes pouring the cocoa into two mismatched mugs before we sit down at the dining room table.

We each take a mismatched chair next to each other before sipping the chocolate deliciousness in front of us.

The two of us have been friends long enough that I know when she has the need to say something, so I reach over and put one of my hands on hers.

Her face always gives her away as she opens her mouth and closes a few times as she struggles to find the words.

“I am as worried about your heart in this as I am your safety. A man like him has more enemies than we can count. I know you can take care of yourself, but I promised that I would never leave you alone to fight your battles.” She finally admits her fear to me with unshed tears in her eyes.

I grasp her hand in mine and take a moment to cherish the amazing bond that we have built over the last five years.

“I promise that I will be honest with you the whole time, and that we can continue to discuss everything as it progresses so you can help keep my expectations realistic and feet firmly on the ground.”

“Good, because I love you and I might die, but I would take him out with me if it came to it.”

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Chapter Seven

Aldo

“Is it stalking, or following around my queen?”

I

know

that

I

need

to give her the space that I promised her, but my primal need to be near her is overwhelming my good senses.

It only took one phone call to the hospital administrators to give me an office space to work out of the hospital with the ability to oversee the nurse's station from two floors above it.

In an effort to respect her professional space, I have a view of her while she works on paperwork effortlessly as an elegant woman.

She has worked so hard to get where she is in life, and yet, she does things like

paying for a mother's food without batting an eye.

The size of her heart is unlike anyone that I have ever met before.

My whole life has been spent around spoiled and devious women who would not help someone in their family, let alone a stranger.

I spend hours of my day alternating between the makeshift desk and the landing where I can catch glimpses of her.

The mountain of paperwork that would usually drain me seems easier to complete, which has never happened before.

She is both fast and efficient at her job and I can't help but feel pride in my chest at my beautiful woman.

There is only an hour left of her day and Gio comes sprinting up the stairs, panic written on his face.

Instantly I am in boss mode and have to focus on what needs to happen but by the time he reaches me, he is out of breath.

“What happened?” I ask, trying to understand

“I'm so sorry Boss. I was following Lucy from work to her car and I was less than ten seconds behind her.

The quiet side road gave me minimal space to hide while she got in her car.

Mere seconds passed as I got on my bike and headed toward the street where she was headed to her car.

There was a painting van that pulled quickly off the road and when I had sight of where she was parked, the driver's side door was open and she was nowhere in sight.” He sputters out the last words and falls to his knees, waiting for my verdict.

This man that I have known most of my life is on his knees broken over his actions waiting for me to punish him for something that I know he would have died to prevent.

I stand up and walk over to him. In the next moment, I place my hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze to indicate that I need him to stand up.

He lifts his head first and meets my eyes.

Giving him as much reassurance as possible with my eyes, I wait for him to stand up.

“I know how you feel for the woman. There is no way you would have put her in danger or allowed her to exist in a dangerous situation without you. Stand up, we have some calls to make.” I try my best to reassure him, knowing that the more I can calm his brain the higher clarity he will reach.

“The van said ‘Ivan’s Liquor’ but that is all I got as it passed me,” he says, his voice barely carrying to me... I rub my face knowing that our next move may start a war, but I can’t think of one good reason to turn my back on this.

“That’s one of the Russian-owned businesses in town,” I utter, but there is a pause as I let the information sink in to Gio. He needs the reassurance.

“Call our men, we are going to need every available hand. I will call my informant and see if I can get a location of where they would be holding your girl. Afterward, we will get a final plan together and I will summon my Lilac and tell her what happened.” I give the instruction and then I dial the nurse's station.

“I need to speak with Anna, it's a family emergency. Tell her it's Aldo.” I instruct the nurse who picks up the phone. I watch as she comes over to the station and picks up the receiver.

“This is Anna,” she answers the phone, confused, but ready.

“Lilac, this is an emergency. I need you to come up to the third floor to office 322 right away. I promise that I would not ask this of you lightly, but grab your bag, let your supervisor know that you won't be back today, and that you will keep her apprised of the situation,” I tell her, hoping to convey the seriousness of the situation.

“Give me five minutes,” is the only response that I get before the line goes dead.

I watch her sprint to her supervisor's office and then she disappears in the direction of her locker.

As soon as she is back in sight and headed up the stairs, I retreat to the office.

This is a conversation that needs to be had in private, where she can react however she deems fit instead of the person she typically has to be inside of these walls.

Her soft knock on the door is all the time I have to prepare before she walks in, face flushed and she stops, fear filling her eyes. I lean up and pull her into my arms.

“Lilac,” is all I get out before her shoulders started shaking. Holding her closer to me and I feel my heart break knowing that I am going to have to tell her about Lucy.

“Tell me,” she instructs through her sobs.

“The Russians have taken Lucy. I will have my men get her back...” is all I get out before this beautiful girl pulls out a gun. My jaw hits the floor as she grabs a couple

of extra magazines from her bag and prepares for war.

“Baby, as hot as it is for you to be armed, I can handle this.” In half a second, she has the barrel of the gun pointed right at my dick as Gio enters the room. He lifts his gun and points it at her before he meets my eyes.

“Gio, I don’t care if she fills me with more holes than Swiss cheese.

If you ever point your gun at my woman, I will have your existence erased from history.

Do I make myself clear?” I ask with no kindness in my voice, a hard edge to my tone that I have never used on him before.

With trepidation, he lowers his gun but does not put it away.

“If you do not sheath your gun right now Gio, I will cut off your trigger finger and preserve it in a jar for my lady.” At that moment she presses my bulge with the tip of the gun and kisses my cheek.

“I am going to get my best friend with or without your help. If you try to stop me I will shoot off your dick before I even have the chance to try it for myself.” Her words cause my dick to get harder as they leave her mouth.

This fucking incredible woman has no fear of me and it is the most refreshing experience that I have ever had in my life. She is everything that I need and more.

“Gio, when and where are we meeting the reinforcements?” I ask, unphased by the loaded gun aimed at my family jewels.

“All of our men are converging at dusk and meeting two blocks from the warehouse

where we suspect they're holding her.

It's their territory, and if we assemble too soon, they could move her or worse.

"Gio rattles off the information, his eyes bouncing between the two of us with uncertainty.

She looks at her watch and we have enough time to change and drive over to the location.

"Lilac, I need you to give your keys to Gio. You and I will ride to the meeting point together and he will arrange for your car to be brought to your apartment," I say with a smile.

"You don't have the gate key to get it in after hours," She responds, lowering the gun and holstering it. I see Gio's shoulders relax at the sight.

"Babydoll, I own the building. There is no issue with any of my men putting your car away for you," I inform her and watch the crease in her brow as she processes the information.

"Since when?! I signed a lease renewal three months ago, and as far as I know, the company has not changed," she stutters, confusion and uncertainty filling her beautiful eyes.

"Technically, I took possession of the building this morning. I have the paperwork if you would like to see it." I reach back onto the desk and grab the envelope, ready to hand it over to her so she will believe me. She just stands there opening and closing her mouth, trying to find the words.

"Why?" She asks me, pulling away for the first time since she walked into the room.

As much as I want to force this, I let her pull away, because even if she told me that she never wanted to see my face again, I would be in the shadows doing everything in my power to keep her safe.

“I started the process the day that we met. From the moment that we connected, I knew that I would do anything to keep you safe. I bought the building that you are living in so that I could increase the safety and security without disrupting your comfort,” I answer her as honestly as I can.

She searches my eyes for something before leaning into me and placing a soft kiss on my lips.

The kiss kicks my primal need into overdrive and I dive deeper into the kiss, my hands finding purchase in her hair.

She nips at my lip and I groan in response.

A phone ringing disrupts us and we pull apart, breathing heavily.

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Chapter Eight

Anna

“Hell hath no fury like a best friend on a mission.”

A

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Gio

answers

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phone, embarrassment creeps up my neck as the realization that I basically just climbed Aldo in this office with him still here hits me.

I look down at my feet to hide my shame.

Gio whispers into the phone and we catch our breaths from the impactful kiss the call interrupted.

A strong hand finds my chin and brings it up to meet his eyes.

“Never be ashamed of the explosive chemistry that we have. I know that I’m not,” he

says to me with a taunting grin. He places a soft kiss on my cheek to reinforce the meaning behind his words as Gio wraps up the call. I reach into my bag and pull out my keys before handing them to Gio.

“I am not a damsel who sits in the car, so what’s the plan?” I ask, hoping for something more concrete now that it is understood that I will be going to get Lucy. Both men's jaws fall open and they just stare at me. I stand there, cross my arms, and raise my eyebrow, waiting for a response.

“Love, I won’t try to make you stay on the sidelines, but I am begging you to stay by my side so that we can get both you and Lucy out of this situation in one piece.

If you stay near me, then we can jointly focus on getting your friend out of this with as little harm as possible.

If you wander off, I will shift my focus to protecting you instead of finding the person that we came to get.

” He cups my cheeks and stares into my eyes, allowing me to see his sincerity and the fact that every action he has done since we met has been to respect my wishes to the best of his ability.

He has given me choices that no one ever had before.

“When this is over, I need to sit down and tell you why I would gladly lose my life if it meant saving her, but for now, let's go save my best friend,” I promise him and pull his hand toward the door.

He is everything I could have asked for and more with his only flaw being his loveless marriage.

We walk hand-in-hand to the parking structure and stop at his car.

Gio opens the trunk and grabs something before heading over to us.

Aldo takes the dark cloth items from Gio and it looks like a bulletproof vest. He opens the back door and sets one of the vests down in the seat before handing me one.

I set my bag on the floorboards and examine the vest.

“Can you help? I have never put one of these on, and I know you will feel better if you know that I am secured properly.

“ As I finish my sentence, he laughs and it is a comforting sound that warms my soul.

I pull my sweater over my head and throw it in the back of the car, leaving me in a camisole and yoga pants.

The goal was comfort today after work, but luckily they will also work for the rescue without slowing me down.

There isn't a thing in this world that I wouldn't burn down for Lucy, and God forgive the people who stand in my way.

Aldo smiles at me in my more relaxed state before he slides the vest over my head, positioning it on my body before securing the sides and brushing my hair out of my face. He grabs my sweater out of the car and hands it to me with a soft smile.

“What they don't know will surprise the shit out of them,” he says with a smile as I pull on the sweater over the vest. We climb into the car and I grab the extra magazines from my bag placing them in my sweater pocket before I buckle into my seat.

Gio takes the front seat to drive us to the location, and we check our guns to ensure that they are loaded.

It is a tenuous time traveling between the hospital and the meeting place, almost thirty minutes away, but Aldo holds my hand the entire drive, craving the contact.

“I would pull you into my lap so I can keep you close, but your safety will always be a much more prominent concern over my comfort,” he tells me as we come to a stop in the alley with the rest of the cars.

When the door opens, he steps out and holds his hand towards me to join him.

I slide across the seats as the men gather around us, hopping out of the seat.

I shut the door behind me and look to Aldo, ready to hear him lead his people for the first time.

“Listen up, the target here is to get to Lucy. She is five foot five with brown hair and brown eyes. This is Anna and she will be by my side for this; do not let anything happen to her or you will meet the Angel of Pain,” he instructs his people and I am in awe of the power that he commands every time he opens his mouth.

This incredible and powerful man has been on his knees for me, and while our connection is incredibly strong, we haven’t even had sex yet.

Finding the hair tie at my wrist, I pull back my hair in a braid to keep my field of vision clear.

I run through my mental checklist; gun: Loaded, magazines: ready in my pocket, vest: secured, laces are double knotted so I don’t trip over them.

I don't think that there is anything else I could do to prepare.

Gio leads the team into position, and Aldo and I file behind him as we make our way from the alley to the warehouse where they are keeping Lucy.

The walk is made in silence with the team communicating in signals without spoken words.

Aldo keeps his hand in mine, making sure that I move within the safety of the pack, and for the first time in my life, I felt like I belong somewhere.

Lucy has always been family and I would rather die than give her up, but these men didn't even know my name until minutes ago and here they are protecting my life without a question or second thought.

We stop around the corner of the building and Gio goes ahead to secure entry to the warehouse door.

Everyone but him freezes when it swings open from the inside.

He moves so fast that it is hard to make out each individual movement in the dark, but he takes out the man's windpipe first before knocking him to the ground and using him as a prop for the door.

He signals us all to come to him so we can enter the building as a unit.

My heart is beating wildly but I put all of my feelings and emotions aside to focus on the task at hand.

As we enter the first door, the strobe lights and the smell of urine take over my senses and I force my body to focus.

We make it down the hallway to the first door that we open to find a stained bed and nothing else.

The second door on the other wall opens to two armed men at a desk.

They stand up and draw their weapons, but before they have them out of their holsters bullets fire from one of our men and they hit the floor.

Sadly, our time moving stealthily is over with those gunshots.

My shoulders tense, but I do not raise my weapon for fear of hitting someone on our side from this angle.

We hear whimpering coming from down the hall and continue to move in that direction when I see a large man standing behind her with a knife to her throat. It's Lucy, and the rage in my chest goes wild. All of those years of training to perfect my aim come down to this.

“Put the knife down and you might survive this,” Aldo booms from beside me as I raise my weapon.

The ogre of a man has the audacity to smile like he has no control over what happens next.

I steady my aim, breathe, and then fire.

The bullet leaves the chamber of my gun, finds purchase in the center of his forehead, and blows the back of his head off.

He falls to the floor as Gio and I rush for Lucy.

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Chapter Nine

Aldo

“This woman is akin to the air that I need to breathe”

“D

own!”

I

shout,

hoping

that they all hear me as I aim and fire three shots into the man.

My heart rate increases as the flash from his muzzle sends more panic into my heart.

The man slumps to the floor but I turn away while my men deal with the fallout.

I rush to find my girl crouched next to her friend, clutching her arm, and I see red.

I blink and find myself next to her, grasping her arm to inspect the wound.

“It's a graze Aldo, I'll be fine. I have had worse.” She attempts to comfort me, but

now I'm mad that he died too quickly.

I want to bring him back and force him to meet the Angel of Pain, but that isn't how life works.

It takes an enormous amount of effort for me to ensure that my grasp on her is soft even with all of the anger coursing through my veins.

While I may be a monster, I will never be her monster.

Focusing on my breathing, I see that Gio has taken off his jacket and placed it over Lucy since she was almost naked and bruised when we walked in here.

The delicate way that he zips her into his jacket and is careful not to add pressure to any of her wounds is heartwarming and genuine.

"I will go home with her, pack a bag, and keep her at my house until we get to the bottom of this and she is safe," Gio informs Anna with a reassuring smile. He places his hand on her shoulder before looking into her eyes.

"I promise I will do everything in my power, including laying down my life for Lucy. Please let him take care of you and I will worry about her. We will check in after the doctor comes to my house to examine her and ensure she has what she needs to heal," He says looking directly into her eyes, unwavering in his admiration.

She assesses him for a moment, weighing not only his words but also his body language before picking a response.

"That's fine with me if Lucy agrees, but understand this, Gio.

My aim is spot on, and I protect those I love even against an army.

” My woman wows me yet again with her response, and I am ready to fall to my knees again for her.

Her devotion to the people she cares for is unwavering and something to be admired.

I nod at Gio, communicating that the only way to clean up this many bodies in another territory is fire.

“Baby, do you and Lucy want to burn this place to the ground as retribution?” I ask with a glimmer of excitement in my eye.

The mischievous grin she responds with is indicative of her choice.

My men start by dumping bottles of vodka all over the warehouse and ensuring that no one else here is left standing.

The backdoor is open and one of the men might have escaped, but they will know that we wiped them out without any losses on our side.

We walk out of the room together, my men flanking the women that we came here for, and stop at the exit.

Everyone leaves us at the door and form a protective circle around the outer door, watching our backs.

“Okay, we are going to hand each of you a butane lighter. We will count down from three and then when we say ‘drop’, you drop them in the spill leading inside and allow the liquor to do the rest of the work. Are there any questions?” I go through the plan, making sure that both Lucy and Anna understand the instructions before we move forward.

Both of us hand over a lighter to each of the girls.

“Light it up, Fighter,” Gio whispers to Lucy, and I don’t miss the light in his eyes aimed towards her. Once his eyes connect with me and he nods, I know that we are ready. The girls maintain eye contact as they ignite the lighters.

“Three....two...one... drop.” As the last word leaves my lips, both women drop the lighters into the spill and the liquor ignites.

We quickly leave through the door and shut it behind us, forcing the fire farther into the building.

Quietly, we all walk back to the cars, watching for reinforcements or any additional problems. As we get to our vehicles we pause.

Lucy hugs Anna and promises to contact her regularly and to see her as soon as she feels up for travel.

With that, Anna and I get in the SUV that we arrived in but in the front seat instead of the back, and Gio uses the car next to us.

Since our destinations are different, it is easier to travel separately instead of delaying the doctor seeing Lucy,

Our drive back to her place is quiet but we hold hands the entire time and I park in a guest spot near the door.

After I put the car in park, our seatbelts unbuckle and we climb out of the car, the adrenaline starting to ebb.

I walk quickly to her side, unwilling to be separated from her for even for a moment

longer.

We move quickly from the garage to the apartment, needing more skin-to-skin contact.

She gets to her door and reaches into her bag only to frown.

“Fuck,” she utters defeat evident in her voice.

“I gave my keys to Gio which includes my apartment key. I refuse to stash one out here for safety reasons but I have no way into my apartment.” Her voice starts to waver and I reach into my pocket and pull out my keys.

I run my thumbs through the keys, finding the shiny new one that I had cut a few days ago, and slide it into the lock.

She stands there too stunned to speak as the door opens for her.

I gesture for her to enter first and much to my chagrin, she unholsters her gun and prepares to clear her apartment even though the door was locked, and I could not be more proud of her.

Unholstering my gun and following her inside, I lock the door behind me.

We clear the space in under a minute before she sets her gun and holster on the table and takes off her sweatshirt.

I am by her side in a flash when I hear her audibly hiss at the movement.

“Please let me take care of you?” I ask, and even though every bone in my body wants to demand, I know that type of behavior will get me nowhere with her.

She stops moving and nods while clenching her jaw.

My hands find the edge of the material and gently glide it the rest of the way off, careful to avoid her wounded shoulder.

Once the wound is uncovered, I am able to see that it is a bit deeper than I would like, but manageable at home.

“My medkit is in the closet in my bedroom, top shelf on the left side,” she answers my unspoken question without missing a beat.

I walk into the room and aside from the unmade bed, the room is tidier than someone who lives alone.

None of her furniture matches, but none of that matters to me.

I feel more at home in this apartment with her than I ever have in the opulent family home that I inherited.

I walk over to the closet and slide open the left side, ready to grab the kit.

and see the dress that she wore to the benefit.

The small bag is exactly where she said it would be, and I quickly head back to the main room and find her on the couch.

“I figured that if this is going to hurt like a bitch, I might as well be comfortable.” She fills in the blanks for me, and I love that she is an open book for me even before I have to ask.

It makes my heart soar. I walk to the sink to wash my hands before digging into the

kit since clean hands are the first step in infection prevention.

Coming back to the couch, I reach in the bag and pull out all of the items that I could need.

Even with this being a compact kit, you can tell that she has taken the time to properly stock it, and as much as I want to know why, I think that is a question for a later time.

“I am sorry that this is going to hurt, Lilac, but I promise that I will never purposely cause you pain unless it is medically necessary. Even then, I will feel bad about it. Don’t get me wrong, I am a bad man, but I will never be a bad man to you,” I declare before cleaning the wound and causing her to hiss.

I flinch at the sound of her pain, but continue for her health.

Once the wound is clean, I put on an antibacterial cream and wrap it.

The whole time, she just stares at me quizzically.

“I have never seen a non-medical professional who could clean and dress a wound so fast. Do you have to do this much?” she asks and her lack of hesitation brings a smile to my face.

“Not often anymore, but before the deal my father made, I had to handle with a lot more gruesome wounds without a lot of help. I studied medicine in my free time as a way to save my friends and colleagues,” I answer her truthfully, never wanting to hide anything from her.

She reaches into her bag and calls her boss to let them know that she won’t be able to make it tomorrow and that her family emergency is going to keep her off of her shifts

this week. Once the call is over, she looks at me and the vulnerability in her eyes pierces my heart.

“Will you join me to sleep? I am exhausted from today, but I don’t want to sleep alone,” she asks, and I would never deny her this.

I nod, grab the firearms, take her hand, and we head off to the bedroom.

We change quickly, thanks to an extra set of clothes from the car, plug in our cellphones, and climb under her sheets.

The moment she lays her head on my chest, we both drift off for the most peaceful sleep I have ever experienced.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am

Anna

“Cinnamon rolls and movies are a great recovery.”

The smell of bacon and cinnamon rolls wakes me from the best sleep that I have ever had to an empty bed and confusion fogging my brain.

Forcing myself to climb out of the comfortable bed, I can still see Aldo’s shoes by my bedroom door, which means he didn’t leave.

As I step through the bedroom door, I see him standing over the stove in my kitchen with a pan that sounds like where the bacon is cooking.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he greets me without turning around, causing a smile to cross my face.

I walk up next to him and rest my head on his shoulder, unready to speak without some coffee.

He kisses my forehead with a chuckle before popping open my microwave, exposing a coffee from Sly Fox Cafe and the tears brim my eyes.

I can’t believe he did this for me without asking.

This man barely knows me, and yet he got me breakfast and coffee without any prompting.

No one in my life has ever done that but Lucy.

“I got a breakfast of cinnamon rolls, and I am making bacon. I had one of my men get you the coffee while he picked up the food because I am not sure how you take it and I knew you would need something to start out your day.” He fills me in before I can even ask.

I wrap my arms around his waist and pull myself into him, enjoying all of the comforts that he brings with him this morning.

At that moment his phone rings. It's Gio calling, and he rattles off questions about Lucy and what the outcome was of the warehouse while we were sleeping.

I grab my coffee and take some big gulps to prepare for the depth of conversation I know will come after this call.

Each drink brings me to more humanity as it enters my system.

It is almost 9:00 AM according to the clock on my wall, which means I slept in from my normal schedule. The call ends and he turns toward me.

“The update is that Lucy is okay, but she has some bruising and damage from fighting back when they took her and when they tied her in that room. They didn't have time to sexually assault her, but they stripped her of her clothes to make her feel powerless.

I have no doubts that they would have if she had been with them longer, but we got there in time.

She is going to stay with Gio until we can guarantee her safety at her own place.

When I am not here, I would like to post someone inside as backup so you are not

alone.

I understand that you might be uncomfortable with that, but it is just until we understand why she was a target and increase the security here so that you can feel safer in your own home.

Do you have any questions or need anything expanded?

” He ends with the question without hesitation.

I shake my head, unable to answer and just trying to process the information.

While I understand that I may have questions later, my brain is barely functional at this moment.

He dishes up breakfast and we sit at the table eating in a comfortable silence.

With the way that he looks at me, I cannot help but want to wrap myself in his lap so I can feel safe again.

“I had my guy drop off movies for us and we are going to spend all day relaxing on the couch together before I take you out for a real date that you deserve,” he promises me as we make our way to the couches, where he has pulled out the blankets and a couple of bags of snacks sit on the corner ready for us to enjoy.

We make it partway through the first movie before I need his lips.

My skin feels electric where we make contact.

He leans into the kiss, passion escalating as our tongues dance and the rest of the room falls into the abyss.

His warmth and touch consumes me, and I reposition to straddle his lap.

“We can wait, baby, if you want to. I am happy to just be here with you,” he reassures me without adding any pressure.

His willingness to wait until I am ready makes the decision for me without concern.

I pull my shirt over my head, baring my chest to him for the first time, lighting a new type of fire in his eyes.

His hands explore my hips and work their way up to cupping my breasts.

The soft moan that escapes me at his touch catches us both off guard as I press myself into his bulge.

He tilts his head back and releases a groan.

In one swift movement, he grabs my hips and stands from the couch, carrying me on his hips toward my bedroom.

I release a giggle at the sudden movement and the way it feels to be carried, most of my weight resting on his hips, rubbing as he takes steps.

As we reach the bed he places me down and shucks his shirt, throwing it at the door before reaching for my pants.

His fingers find their way below the hem of my pants, and as he pulls them down, he places soft kisses on my exposed skin.

Every kiss causes a surge of electricity to pulse through my body.

As my pants find their way to the floor, he quickly removes his own, smirking down

at my exposed skin.

Heat floods my cheeks and in response, he climbs up the bed, kissing my skin lightly as he gets closer to my face.

In one swift movement, his arms sweep under my ass and pull my knees over his shoulders before burying himself in my pussy.

“Oh, fuck,” I moan at the sensation of his tongue exploring my body.

The pleasure overwhelms me and forces my hips to buck uncontrollably before my orgasm crashes into me.

It hits me with a force that feels fireworks being set off beneath my skin.

With my eyes closed and breathing through the tremors, I feel him giggle against my inner thigh.

His finger slides along the moisture gathered before he slides in a finger and rubs my clit with his thumb.

The pressure builds as he slides his finger in and out of me before he adds a second finger.

Between the added finger and his thumb rubbing circles on my clit, my legs start to shake again as the cusp of another orgasm finds me.

Bowing my back off of the bed and no longer in control of my body, the orgasm takes full control.

“This is just the start baby. I want to ravish you over and over again until your bones are jelly and you have screamed my name so loud that the rest of the building knows

it,” he promises me with soft kisses on my hips before making eye contact with me.

As he brings himself higher on the bed, he leans over until his lips find mine.

I can feel the tip of his cock against my entrance as excitement bubbles in my core.

“I’m ready,” I whisper, still partially out of breath from my last orgasm.

He searches my eyes before slowly pushing himself inside of me.

With his dick fully seated in me, he begins to piston his hips driving my euphoria to new heights.

In one swift movement, he pulls my legs up and places them over his shoulder, giving us a new position.

The pressure from the changed position is enough to send me over the edge.

“I need you to cum again, Lilac. I can’t cum until I feel the way that your pussy destroys me for anyone else as you come apart,” he coaxes me, and the words do exactly what he wants because I come apart at the seams from my orgasm, incoherently whispering fuck over and over again.

His hips jerk as he thrusts into me again spilling his hot cum inside of me.

As he pulls himself out of me and climbs out of bed, he makes a promise.

“Baby, I will always choose you, even in the darkest of times. My soul belongs to you.”