



LOVE ON THE RUN

Kori Roberts

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Chapter One

Anthony “Tony” Tate glanced out the window from inside the unmarked van, his focus on the building across the street.

From the outside, it looked like any other storefront in the busy Humboldt Park neighborhood. The sign on the front of the building read SALON AND SPA, but Tony knew that was a deception. He and his partner, Jack Parker, had been investigating the owner for months. They’d received tips from informants that inside, there was a private area that offered select customers a far more intimate -- and illegal -- service.

They’d spent weeks doing surveillance. Finally, they’d gathered enough evidence to prove that the store was actually a front for the real business: a highly organized, and extremely profitable, human trafficking operation.

Tony knew from past experience with similar cases that the victims had probably been abducted from outside the US, smuggled illegally into the country, and held against their will. They would be forced to perform frequent, often violent, and sometimes deadly, sexual acts for countless numbers of customers on a daily basis.

He and Jack scheduled the raid for early morning when the legitimate part of the business wasn’t open yet. Too often these types of raids resulted in casualties, and they hoped to reduce the risk of endangering civilians as much as possible.

Tony glanced at his watch once more before he turned to address the group of police officers with him.

“Okay, here’s the deal. Jack, Ed, and I will hit the front entrance. Elizabeth” -- he looked at the newest member of their team -- “you’ll cover the back and side exits with Ron and Eric. We know there’s at least one armed guard in there at all times, but it could be more. So keep your eyes open, cover each other’s asses, and watch out for innocent bystanders.”

“And if anybody has a question, now would be the time to ask,” Jack said, looking around at the group.

Tony stared into the faces of his teammates, all of whom returned Jack’s gaze with confidence. Satisfied that they were ready, he said, “Okay. Let’s do this.”

They exited the van and ran across the street with their weapons drawn. When they reached the store, they forced the doors open and rushed inside. As soon as they entered the room, Tony knew immediately that their rescue was too late. The smell -- a sickly mixture of human waste, blood, and death -- greeted them at the door. They raced through the store and searched until they found the private room concealed in the back.

Tony quickly surveyed the scene in front of him. It was little more than a large storage area, filled with old, filthy mattresses and piles of trash. The lifeless bodies of several women and a couple of men littered the floor.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Jack swore softly, looking around the room as the rest of their team entered through a back entrance.

As they performed the futile task of checking for survivors, Tony tried to control the anger that boiled within him as he looked at each female victim. Mainly Hispanic and Asian, some of the women looked barely legal, and he suspected that others were probably nowhere near the legal age of consent. Tortured and malnourished, their nude bodies had bled profusely from multiple gunshot wounds.

Tony walked over to the first male victim and quickly saw that the man was Mikhail Satzkoi, the supposed owner of the store. The second man wasn’t so easy to identify. He lay facedown in his own blood with a gaping hole in the back of his head.

Jack came over to where he stood. “It’s like somebody knew we were coming.” Jack’s words confirmed Tony’s thoughts.

“It sure as hell seems that way. They obviously wanted to get rid of anyone who knew anything about this place.” Tony glanced around the room again. “This was a recent hit. The bodies are barely cool.”

As the room filled with more police and emergency technicians, Tony remained standing in the middle of the room and stared at the bodies of the dead young women. Finally, he sighed and shook his head. *Such a fucking waste.*

“Yo, T,” Jack called out. “You need to see this.”

Tony walked over to where Jack stood with the rest of the team. He looked down at the previously unidentified man. Someone had turned the body over so that it now lay face up.

“Recognize him?” Jack asked.

Even with half of his face blown away, Tony recognized the scar along the man’s jawline. A bullet from his own gun put it there a few years ago during an entirely different confrontation.

“Josef Michalovich,” he spat. Josef was a high-level member of a criminal organization run by Dimitryi Ivanov, the vicious and ruthless bastard behind the brutal massacre they currently had the displeasure of dealing with.

They’d been hunting Dimitryi for more years than Tony cared to remember. When he thought about all the violence and bloodshed Dimitryi had been responsible for, all the pain and suffering he’d caused...well, Tony wanted to commit murder himself. Starting with Dimitryi.

He remembered a night a few months ago when Jack’s fiancée, Clarke, had been taken, beaten, and almost raped and killed by one of Dimitryi’s sons.

Tony glanced at Jack. If the hatred burning in Jack’s eyes was any indication, his partner was thinking the same thing. Tony couldn’t blame him, because he felt the exact same way. Jack was his best friend, and Clarke was like a sister to him. And the damage that bastard and his sons did nearly destroyed them both.

Thanks to Jack, Dimitryi’s sons were no longer an issue. But their luck seemed to always run out when it came to Dimitryi. Like evaporating mist, he managed to disappear every time they closed in on him.

Dimitryi had been off their radar for months. But Josef’s presence at the scene made it apparent that Dimitryi was back.

Tony knew the man rarely left Dimitryi’s side and often functioned as his personal bodyguard. So if Josef was around, Dimitryi wasn’t too far away. Which meant he was back doing business as usual.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Jack asked.

“Yeah.” Tony returned Jack’s hard gaze with one of his own. “It looks like our boy, Dimitryi, is back on the block.”

* * * * *

Bianca Mendez climbed out of her car and locked the doors. She ignored the horns of angry motorists as she made her way across the street.

The high-heeled boots she wore looked great, but they definitely weren’t made for walking, let alone running -- especially not on snow-covered Chicago streets in February.

She’d been on her way to work when the police scanner she kept in her car alerted her to a multiple homicide. When she heard the address of the location, she changed direction and headed here instead.

Bianca had heard rumors about this place before. She’d received anonymous tips about the real services supposedly offered that weren’t posted anywhere inside the store. Bianca never had a chance to confirm any of the reports she’d received. Now it looked like she never would.

Plenty of police and emergency vehicles and, as far as Bianca could tell, just about every reporter in the city were parked in front of the building.

Yellow crime scene tape roped off the entire area, so she could only stand on the perimeter with the other onlookers and watch as members of the medical examiner's office carried out the victims on stretchers, their bodies concealed in black zippered bags.

Bianca had only been a reporter for a few years, but during that time, she'd investigated more than enough cases, witnessed far too many scenes that looked hauntingly similar to this one. Each time, the victims turned out to be women or -- even worse -- children.

As it always did in these situations, her heart broke a little more with each body they removed from the store. She counted eight black bags loaded into the medical examiner's truck before it drove away.

Scanning the area, she tried to find at least one friendly face in the crowd she might recognize and be able to sweet-talk a little information from. Considering she'd only been living in Chicago for a short while, she knew the chance of that happening was pretty unlikely.

Her gaze landed on an officer who kept shooting appreciative looks in her direction, and she decided to take her chances with him. Putting on her best smile, she approached him. His gaze tracked her every step of the way until she was standing in front of him.

"Hi," she said. "Busy morning, huh?" Bianca glanced around at the scene. "Wow, it looks really bad in there."

The officer grinned down at her. "Oh, yeah, it was pretty crazy before the police arrived. But now that we're here, you don't have anything to worry about. We have everything under control."

"Oh, yeah." Bianca nodded. She purposely kept her expression wide-eyed, her voice full of awe. "I can definitely see that." She tried not to laugh at the self-important look on his face. "So, what's your name?"

"Brian." His voice dropped an octave. He probably thought he sounded sexy. Bianca could practically feel him undressing her layer by layer with his eyes.

"So, Brian, now that the police have everything under control, what other information can you tell me about what took place here?"

The smile slid from his face. "You're a reporter." He practically spat the words out.

"Uh...yeah," she said lightly, her smile still plastered on her face. "So, can you --"

"No comment." He cut her off before she could finish her sentence, and she could only stand there as he turned and walked away.

Bianca looked around to see if there was anyone else she could talk to when she saw the side door of the building open. Her heart rate began to accelerate when she saw two familiar faces exit the building and head toward a waiting van.

Bianca had met both Tony and Jack when she'd first moved to Chicago. Jack was engaged to be married to her best friend, Clarke. And Tony was like a brother to Clarke, having been raised by Clarke's father after his parents died when he was a teenager.

She knew that Tony and Jack only worked on two types of cases: those involving drugs or sex. And she was willing to bet a week's paycheck that this case involved the latter.

Bianca called out to them to get their attention, but they didn't hear her and continued toward the van. She headed in their direction, but a different officer stepped into her path before she could reach them.

"You can't go this way," he told her. "The area is off-limits. You need to find another way around."

"But...I know those officers there." Bianca pointed in the direction of Tony and Jack. The look on the officer's face made it apparent that he didn't give a shit about who she knew. She was wasting her time. He was not going to let her pass. Jack and Tony climbed into the van, and she watched as they pulled away from the curb and drove off down the street.

She looked around at the other reporters on the scene, all still scrambling to find someone to talk to regarding the murders. Bianca didn't bother to follow their lead. She wasn't interested in the official press release the police department would eventually provide to the media. The facts she sought wouldn't be found in a carefully worded statement written by some unknown, uninformed public relations person.

No, she wanted the true facts. The *real* story.

Bianca turned and headed back toward her car, her resolve hardening with every step. These murders were no random acts of violence, and she was determined to find out if they were related to a larger case Tony and Jack had been working on for several years, a case involving Dimitryi Ivanov, a monster who had built a criminal empire from the rape, torture, and murder of innocent victims. If her suspicions were correct, the same bastard was responsible for causing the death and devastation she'd seen today.

Bianca had been investigating Dimitryi for what felt like a lifetime, living and breathing her story on him for so long, it felt like he was part of her life. Long before she'd started working at the news station, long before his son had kidnapped and tried to kill her friend, Clarke. Before she'd ever come to the US from Brazil when she was a teenager.

Bianca sighed. It was way too early in the morning for her to start an emotional journey down memory lane.

She got in her car and started the engine. As Bianca pulled away from the curb, her thoughts were on her next steps. Her deadline to complete this story for her news station loomed near, and the firsthand information she sought could only be found one way.

She had to go directly to the source.

Although she'd much rather talk to Jack, Bianca decided against it. The topic of Dimitryi was far too personal for him at the moment, Clarke's kidnapping having just

happened recently, and the memories were probably still too fresh, the wounds too raw. Besides, he and Clarke were busy getting ready for their wedding in a few months, and she didn't want to bother either of them or cause them any more pain than they'd already experienced because of Dimitryi.

She didn't know the other members of the team, so she couldn't ask them. That left Tony. She rubbed her brow. The thought of spending any amount of time with him -- alone -- made Bianca sigh again, but for totally different reasons.

It wasn't that she didn't like Tony; in fact, it was the exact opposite. She liked him a lot. A *whole* lot. Probably a lot more than she should. Definitely a lot more than she was willing to admit. And that was the problem.

The truth of the matter was that she didn't trust herself around Tony. He was so larger than life; his presence just consumed and overwhelmed her. In short, he fit the type of man Bianca secretly wanted. She could so easily fall for him and completely lose herself in the process.

She wasn't the only one who felt the connection. *Tony wanted her.* Bianca shivered; the knowledge of his attraction taunted her. She pretended otherwise, but it was impossible not to notice the raw hunger in his eyes or the possessive heat of his gaze when he looked at her.

Bianca tried to ignore him and maintain her distance, attempted to remain emotionally and physically detached, struggled to stop herself from giving in to what she truly desired.

She closed her eyes. It didn't pay to fight. The magnetism between them was too great, the mutual attraction too strong for her to resist. It made her body respond to his, ache for his every single time.

Bianca's thoughts drifted back to the crime scene. She and Tony needed to deal with whatever it was between them. Soon. First, though, her story took top priority. Tony was the one person who could give her the information she needed.

Bianca just hoped she didn't end up regretting her decision.

* * * * *

The phone rang several times before the familiar voice answered.

"What is it?" Dimitryi said.

"Reggie here. Tate and Parker hit the shop this morning, just like we thought they would."

Silence. "Were there any witnesses?"

"No," Reggie said. "I took care of them personally before the police got there."

"What about Mikhail and Josef?"

“Dead,” Reggie confirmed. “It was necessary, Dimitryi. I couldn’t risk them getting caught and talking.”

Dimitryi released a string of curses. “Those fucking cops have caused me nothing but problems,” he raged. “First, they kill Andrei and Guillermo, and now we’re forced to waste perfectly good merchandise and lose two more good men in the process.”

Once Dimitryi calmed down, Reggie asked, “How would you like to proceed?”

Dimitryi didn’t respond immediately, and Reggie waited patiently for him to continue.

“We have another shipment of cargo coming in a few months,” Dimitryi replied. “We’ll use it to replace what we lost today.”

“And,” Dimitryi continued, “I want Tate and Parker dead before it arrives.”

Chapter Two

Bianca found an available table inside Clarke's Café and watched her friend Clarke as she served customers in the busy restaurant she co-owned with her father. She'd been there a while before Clarke finally made her way over to her table.

"Hey, kiddo." Clarke plopped down in a seat across from her and blew out a tired breath.

"Long day?" Bianca gave her a sympathetic look. She worked too hard. Always had.

"You have no idea. It's been so busy today I feel as if it were the weekend. It's a good thing I'm still only working part-time." She chuckled softly. "I don't think I'd survive seven days in a row like this one."

"Well, I say the packed house is a testament to just how great the food is here," Bianca told her.

Clarke's chuckle turned to laughter. "Flattery like that will get you a free meal."

"That's what I was counting on." Bianca winked, her laughter joining Clarke's.

"Speaking of weekends, how are you spending yours?"

Bianca glanced quickly at the table in the far corner of the restaurant where Tony and Jack always sat. She'd planned to approach Tony tonight and ask him to help her. She was just waiting for Clarke and Jack to leave first. Still recuperating from her injuries, Clarke only worked a few days a week, and never later than seven o'clock in the evening. And Jack always took her home.

Bianca looked back at Clarke, hoping her glance at Tony hadn't been too obvious. Her friend's physical scars were gone, and her golden brown skin looked as flawless and beautiful as ever. But Bianca had known her long enough to recognize the strain in her hazel eyes, and she knew that Clarke still had a ways to go before all of the emotional scars completely disappeared.

"I don't have any specific plans," she finally responded. "Why?"

"I'm going for my first fitting of my wedding dress, and I could use a second opinion."

Bianca smiled. "Only three more months left until the big day. Are you nervous yet?"

"Please." Clarke groaned. "Don't remind me. I've got so many things to do between now and then that I don't have time to be nervous."

"Well, I'd love to help. Just let me know when and where, and I'll be there. And if you need me to help you out with anything else, just say the word."

"Thanks." Clarke looked relieved. "What would I do without you?"

Bianca looked at the woman who was more than just a friend. Clarke was a sister, and the only real family Bianca had left. "Luckily, you'll never have to find out."

They shared a smile before Clarke glanced at her watch. Bianca knew that Clarke needed to wrap things up. Jack was going to walk her out the door very soon.

"So, what are you eating tonight?" Clarke asked as she stood up from the table.

Bianca shrugged. "Since it's on the house, you choose."

"Cool." Clarke grinned. "Be right back." Bianca watched her until she disappeared into the kitchen.

As soon as Clarke disappeared from sight, Bianca's gaze drifted across the room to where Tony sat talking to Jack. She studied the two men. Jack stood well over six feet, with a muscular physique, jet black hair, and the most piercing blue eyes Bianca had ever seen. Unquestionably gorgeous. When Bianca first met him, she thought he was the best-looking man she'd ever seen. Until she met Tony.

It was as if someone had read her mind, seen her innermost secrets, her deepest fantasies, and used them to create Tony. He stood slightly shorter than Jack but was no less impressive, with a well-developed and powerfully built body. And his face -- positively breathtaking. He was nothing short of perfection; he was everything she could have dreamed of and wished for in a man.

Even dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a sweater, he looked incredible. Together, he and Jack made a stunning -- and intimidating -- pair.

Tony's face suddenly split into a grin as he began to laugh, and Bianca knew exactly what it would sound like, was convinced that she could actually hear it from all the way across the room -- so rich, so sexy, and so utterly masculine. She groaned inwardly as a shudder raced through her. God, even the thought of hearing his voice turned her on.

Bianca closed her eyes briefly and swallowed hard as she shook her head to clear away thoughts of Tony. "God, I am so losing it," she muttered.

"What's wrong?"

Bianca's eyes snapped open, and she looked up to find Clarke, a concerned expression on her face, standing in front of her table holding a plate of food.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, and smiled. “Just thinking about...stuff.” Her explanation sounded flimsy, even to her own ears. And from the way Clarke studied her, Bianca knew she wasn’t buying it, either.

“Are you...” Clarke began, and Bianca almost breathed a sigh of relief when Jack appeared behind her and interrupted the conversation before she had a chance to finish speaking.

“Time to go, baby.” Jack took the plate out of Clarke’s hand. Smiling, he sat the plate in front of her. “How’s it going, Bianca?”

“I’m doing better now that I see you’re going to take Clarke home so she can get some rest.” Bianca barely refrained from laughing. From the look on her face, it was obvious Clarke wanted to protest.

Ever since Clarke’s attack, Jack had become fiercely protective, and Bianca knew that his protectiveness drove her crazy. Personally, Bianca thought it was great. She liked that Jack took such good care of Clarke. It showed just how much he loved her. And, in spite of her claims otherwise, Bianca knew that Clarke liked it, too.

Jack barely gave Clarke time to say her good-byes and get her things before he ushered her out of the door.

Once they were gone, she glanced in Tony’s direction again. She saw him talking to Clarke’s father. She stayed seated a few minutes more as she gathered up her courage.

Finally, after a few minutes ticked by, Bianca took a deep breath. “It’s now or never,” she muttered. She stood up and headed toward Tony’s table.

* * * * *

Tony stared into the face of Clarke’s father, only half-listening to him. The closest thing Tony had to a father, he loved and respected Pops dearly. But at the moment, Tony found it next to impossible to focus on anything he was saying.

Although Tony wasn’t looking in her direction, he knew that Bianca was approaching his table. From the moment she walked into the restaurant, he’d been aware of her presence and had been discreetly observing her the entire time.

That was nothing new. He’d done more than his fair share of staring at Bianca during the past few months. She was, by far, the most beautiful woman he’d ever met, the type of woman that made men and women stare when they saw her.

She reached his table just at Pops finished speaking. “How are you, Pops?” She smiled at Pops, but Tony noticed that her gaze kept darting to him.

“You know, Bianca, I do believe that you get more beautiful every time I see you.”

“Well, thank you, Pops.” Bianca laughed and gave him a brief hug. “You always know exactly what to say. I bet you were quite the ladies’ man in your day.”

Pops leaned near Bianca and whispered loud enough for Tony to hear, "Don't tell anybody, but I still am."

Tony's laughter joined theirs as he shook his head at Pops's comment.

"Now I see where Clarke gets her personality from," Bianca told him. Her laughter died off as her focus shifted back to Tony. "Hi. Can I...would you mind if I joined you?"

Tony's brow arched as he stared back at her. He saw Pops looking from him to Bianca; his face registered surprise, the same as Tony felt. This was definitely a first. Bianca never voluntarily approached him or started up a conversation with him unless they were part of a larger group.

"Sure." He motioned toward the empty seat across from him. "Have a seat." Bianca hesitated, and she glanced uncomfortably at Pops. He gave her a knowing look, as if he could sense that she wanted some privacy, and he quickly excused himself and headed back to the kitchen.

Once Bianca sat down, Tony studied her while she toyed with the paper napkin on the table. As he waited for her to tell him what was on her mind, he noticed her cautious expression. It was obvious that she was trying to conceal her real thoughts and feelings from him.

Tony tried to mask his irritation. They'd known each other for three months and had seen each other damn near every single day since they'd first met. After all this time, it annoyed the shit out of him to see that Bianca still couldn't bring herself to feel comfortable around him.

Bianca finally spoke. "I saw you and Jack this morning at that murder scene over in Humboldt Park. You two are handling that case, right?"

Tony merely nodded. The fact that Bianca was at the scene wasn't all that surprising, considering she was a reporter. He remained silent, unsure where she was going with the conversation.

"So..." She cleared her throat. "I wanted to propose a partnership."

"Partnership." Tony stared at her, feeling even more confused by her comment.

"Yeah," she rushed on. "You know, a little sharing of information between two cooperating agencies."

Tony sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest as the meaning of Bianca's words finally sank in. "What are you trying to do, get me fired?" He made sure his voice sounded reprimanding. "You've been around long enough to know that the department doesn't permit the police to make official statements to the media -- especially about active investigations."

"I know." A guilty smile flitted across her face. "That's why I was thinking of something a little more...off the record."

Tony was already shaking his head, even as she said the words.

“Wait, wait.” She spoke quickly, holding up a hand to stop him from talking. “Just hear me out before you say no. Please.”

There was something about the way she stared at him, her gorgeous green eyes anxious and silently asking for help, her teeth worrying her full lower lip, and he already knew what his answer was going to be. With a sigh, he nodded slightly and waited for her to speak.

“I know that a lot of the cases you and Jack investigate are linked to Dimitryi Ivanov. And if my guess is correct, so is the homicide scene from this morning. I’m working on a similar investigation, so us pairing together would be perfect.”

“Really.” Tony frowned. “And what investigation is that?”

“Well, I’ve been doing a lot of research for a story I’m working on about human trafficking and the sex trade business.”

Jesus. Tony could only stare at her in shocked silence. He didn’t know what he’d expected for Bianca to say, but that was definitely not it.

“Human trafficking, huh?” Tony struggled to keep his voice neutral.

“Yeah,” she continued, completely unaware of just how upsetting her words were to him. Of all the things Bianca could have chosen to investigate, she just had to pick this one. Hell, she would be safer playing with a loaded handgun than she would being anywhere near this whole sex trafficking issue.

“I figured that we could get together and compare notes.” Bianca shrugged. “Who knows, maybe we’ll both learn something new that will help our investigations. So, what do you think?”

Tony continued to stare at Bianca. It was a horrible idea. In fact, it was quite possibly the worst fucking idea he’d ever heard.

He’d been working with these types of cases long enough to know just how dangerous and deadly the people behind the scenes could be. This world was definitely not for the faint of heart, and some of the things he’d seen over the years were enough to scare the shit out of even the most hardened men, let alone someone like Bianca. Whether she knew it or not, monsters really did exist, and they were called human traffickers.

“What’s your interest in this? I mean, what do you even know about trafficking other than what you’ve probably seen on some made-for-TV movie?”

For the life of him, Tony just didn’t get why she would want to go anywhere near this story. Okay, so he understood the part about Clarke; he could see how Bianca would want to make the person responsible for hurting her friend pay. Shit, they all felt that way -- and no one more so than Jack. But Bianca’s interest seemed so much deeper than even Clarke, as if, perhaps, a personal grudge drove her. If that were the case, then he wanted to know more.

He watched Bianca carefully and waited for her to respond. She stared off into space, as if lost in some old and unpleasant memory.

Finally, Bianca gave him a sad smile. “Trust me, Tony, I wish that was all I knew about it. Unfortunately, I’ve known about trafficking longer than I care to remember. In South America, particularly in Brazil where I’m from, it’s a common occurrence for people to simply disappear because of men like Dimitryi Ivanov. And I’ve seen firsthand the devastating affects it has on the families of the victims.”

Tony saw Bianca’s haunted eyes and heard the unspoken words in her comments. Her interest in this was a lot more private -- and painful -- than she was willing to admit. And he was sure there was more to her story that she wasn’t telling him.

“So, in answer to your question, I know far more about trafficking than I ever imagined I’d need to know, but not nearly enough to make a difference -- at least, not yet.”

“Okay. You’re right,” Tony conceded. “It’s obvious that you’re not new to the subject, and I can tell how important this is to you. But it’s not that simple.”

Tony watched as disappointment filled her eyes. Almost as if she’d expected him to refuse to help her.

He sighed and leaned across the table. “Listen, Bianca, it’s not that I don’t want to help you, but I don’t think you really understand what you’re asking me to do. If it ever got out that I was voluntarily passing information to the media, I would be in a shitload of trouble.”

“I *do* understand, Tony,” Bianca insisted. “I know how serious this is. But you have my word that anything you share with me will be kept completely confidential. I don’t expect for you to give up every single detail about your investigation, and I’d never release information that could get you or Jack into trouble. I just thought we could both help each other out here.”

He needed to turn Bianca down. Right here. Right now. She’d have to find someone else to help her. Better yet, he should tell her to scratch the whole damn idea and stick to a story a little less life-threatening, like parking scofflaws or tax evaders. Except he couldn’t bring himself to say the words.

“Look, Tony,” Bianca continued. Obviously, he didn’t look convinced. “I can understand why you’re reluctant to do this. It’s not like we really know each other that well, and here I am, asking you to go out on a limb and break all types of rules, just to help me.” She gave him a fleeting smile; then her face grew serious. “But I really believe we’re both on the same side here, and we both want the same thing. We want to make people like Dimitryi Ivanov disappear permanently.”

Tony didn’t know if it was the determination he saw in Bianca’s eyes or the passion he heard in her voice that did it. Maybe it was simply the fact that, for whatever reason, she’d asked *him* for help. Or maybe it was the way she sat there, looking so fucking irresistible that Tony found it impossible to say no.

He looked at Bianca, and instead of telling her to count him out, he went against department policy and his own common sense. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

"Yeah?" The brilliant smile she gave him lit up her entire face. She looked so genuinely pleased that it made his decision to help her worth it.

Even if he was already regretting it.

Although it disturbed Tony to voluntarily expose Bianca to any part of his cases, especially this one, it upset him even more to know that she'd undoubtedly continue to seek out information, with or without his help. At least this way, he could keep an eye on her and make sure she didn't stick her nose into something that could get her into a world of trouble.

"Well, don't get too excited yet. I do have a couple of ground rules." Tony tried to downplay just how good it felt to know that he was the reason for the happy expression on Bianca's face. "First, you can't release any stories until I've had a chance to look at them." Even as Bianca nodded her head in agreement, he continued to emphasize the point. "I'm serious about that, Bianca. This is my ass on the line here. The stuff I share with you will be sensitive and highly confidential, and if the wrong information leaks out, I'm the one going down."

Bianca gave him a solemn look. "I swear, I won't release *anything* without your approval." She smiled broadly. "Anything else?"

Tony paused, suddenly rendered speechless. He couldn't help but wonder if Bianca knew just how incredibly sexy she looked at that moment.

"Yeah," he finally responded. His voice sounded huskier, and he cleared his throat. "You have to follow directions. If I tell you information about a raid or an informant, it's not so you can go and seek these places and people out on your own. The people involved in this world are dangerous, and they wouldn't have a problem with using you or even harming you for their own personal gain." Just the mere mention of her getting hurt had Tony's heart skipping a few beats.

"No problem." Bianca looked so excited, she practically bounced in her seat. "Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it." Tony chuckled and then added, "For now, anyway."

"So, how soon can we start? Would tomorrow be okay? Where should we meet? I can come to you if that works better." She fired off questions so quickly, it was impossible to get a word in.

"Hey, slow down, take a deep breath." Tony couldn't help but laugh at her enthusiasm. "You're awfully eager, aren't you?"

She smiled sheepishly. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yeah, it is." Tony returned her smile. "Don't worry, it's all good." He paused. "But it can't be tomorrow. I already have plans for the evening."

Bianca suddenly grew quiet and she seemed unable to maintain eye contact with him. Tony gave her an odd look and searched her face. He couldn't understand the abrupt change in her demeanor.

“Right,” she finally said. “Well, I certainly wouldn’t expect you to cancel your date on account of me.”

She was jealous! If he hadn’t seen the flash of envy in her eyes or heard the hint of jealousy in her tone for himself, he would never have believed it.

A slow smile spread across Tony’s face. “Who said anything about a date?”

“It’s just...I...well...” Tony watched the blush spread across Bianca’s face as she struggled to respond, and the look on her face made him laugh out loud.

“I don’t have a date, Bianca.” He decided to put her out of her misery. “It’s more work-related than anything.”

“Oh...is it something about your case?” She perked up.

“Uh...no. Listen, what about Saturday?”

Bianca seemed to think about it. “I’m supposed to go shopping with Clarke in the morning, but otherwise I don’t have any plans.”

Tony snorted. “That’s a good thing. If you’re hitting the stores with Clarke, that’s going to take up most of your day, anyway.” He pulled his wallet out of his pocket and removed a card. He searched his coat pockets and found a pen. He wrote something on the back of the card. “Here.” He handed it to Bianca. “My cell number is on the front, and my address and home number are on the back. I should be home after six o’clock. Just come by.”

As Bianca took the card their fingers briefly touched, and it felt as if an electric spark shot through his fingers and straight to his groin. His cock immediately hardened. He glanced at Bianca, and from the slightly stunned look on her face, she’d obviously felt it, too. Tony refrained from grabbing her hand just to feel the sensation again.

“Bianca, you didn’t eat your dinner.” The sound of Pops’s concerned voice caught Tony off guard. He was so caught up in the moment with Bianca, he never heard or saw the other man approach the table.

“It’s okay, Pops. I wasn’t that hungry anyway.”

Pops frowned. “You’re skinny enough already.” His voice was filled with disapproval. “You could use a little meat on your bones.”

From where Tony sat, Bianca looked more than fine. She may be on the slender side, but she was far from skinny. And she had just the right amount of meat on those curves to keep any man more than satisfied.

Bianca laughed. “I guess I can take the food with me and eat it later.”

Her response seemed to satisfy Pops, who held up a bag. “I already wrapped it for you.”

After Pops walked away, Bianca looked at her watch. “Oh, it’s later than I thought. I probably should head home.” She stood up from the table and put on her coat. Tony got up as well.

“Do you need a ride?” His sudden question seemed to surprise both of them.

“Uh...no. I drove,” she told him. “I’m parked in the lot. But...thanks.”

Tony simply nodded and continued to watch as she fastened her coat and picked up her bags.

Bianca smiled. “Thanks, again, Tony,” she said softly. “I’ll see you Saturday night.” She headed toward the door. Tony grabbed his coat from the back of the chair and followed behind her.

She looked at him questioningly. “I’ll walk you to your car,” he said in explanation.

“You don’t have to do that,” Bianca protested, but Tony ignored her.

“I know I don’t have to.” He glanced down at her as they walked out of the restaurant to the parking lot. “I want to.”

They walked in silence to her car. While Bianca unlocked the doors and put her bags inside, Tony took a moment to admire her new silver BMW.

Once Bianca slid behind the wheel, Tony closed her door. She started the ignition and her window slid down.

“Thanks again, Tony. Good night.” She closed the window up and drove away.

Tony stood for several long moments watching as she drove out of sight before heading in the direction of his own vehicle, his thoughts firmly focused on Bianca.

He made no attempt to hide his attraction to Bianca, made no effort to conceal his desire for her. It would have been a waste of time, anyway. Nobody would have believed him, even if he’d tried. He’d done more than his fair share of staring at Bianca during the past few months -- and not always discreetly, either. Hell, all people had to do was watch his reaction whenever she was around to know exactly how much he wanted her.

Besides, it was impossible to *not* want Bianca. Everything about her -- from her long legs and sleek curves, to her soft golden skin and long, sandy blonde hair -- turned him on and practically drove him insane.

In spite of his desire for her, though, Tony tried to convince himself that his interest in Bianca was purely physical. He tried to pretend that her heart-stopping face and traffic-stopping body were the only reasons he wanted her.

But he was lying to himself; his attraction to Bianca was much more than just physical. Still, he’d been reluctant to approach her. He had an extremely high sex drive and demanding sexual needs, and he typically didn’t bother with women who were afraid of their own sexuality.

Tony unlocked his Avalanche and climbed inside. His thoughts drifted back to a distant memory of when he and Bianca had helped Jack and Clarke move into their new home. She’d thought she was alone, and so she was unguarded and unaware that anyone was watching her.

Tony had witnessed her true character that day when she’d accidentally stumbled across Jack and Clarke’s playroom. He saw the way the flogging and spanking toys seemed to

fascinate her, and he could sense her interest in the devices designed for binding and restraining.

In that brief moment, Tony caught a glimpse past the perfect exterior and self-confident personality to the real woman, the one who existed at her core.

Although he believed that submissive tendencies existed within her, he could tell that Bianca had yet to embrace what she truly wanted, and needed to accept, when it came to her sexual needs. And if the things she saw in Jack and Clarke's playroom surprised her, he'd shock the shit out of her if he showed her what turned *him* on.

So, for the first time in his adult life, Tony chose to ignore his feelings for a woman and not pursue her like he wanted. The harder he tried to stick to his own decision, though, the more it seemed that Bianca tempted and teased him until he was fast on the verge of complete madness. Hell, his dick got hard at just the thought of being near her, and he was forced to admit that not only had his plan backfired, it caused him to want her even more.

Tony drove out of the parking lot and headed home. He still wasn't completely sure if assisting Bianca was the smartest thing to do, but he was determined to do it anyway. He might not know her that well, but it was apparent that Bianca was as smart as she was beautiful. She obviously loved her work and was clearly committed to this story. If exchanging information about an issue that they both had a common connection to could help her career, then it would be worth the sacrifice and more than enough reason for him to do it.

His motivations were self-serving, as well. Helping Bianca meant he would get to spend more time with her. They'd have no choice but to finally deal with their attraction for each other. If that happened to lead to something more between them...well, that would suit Tony just fine. And if he got a chance to help Bianca explore a side of her own sexuality that she'd yet to discover...his cock hardened. That would be even better.

Tony smiled in anticipation, suddenly looking forward to assisting Bianca with fulfilling her professional dreams and her personal desires.

Especially her personal desires.

Chapter Three

Bianca stood at Tony's open door. There were very few times in her life when she found herself completely at a loss for words. This was definitely one of those times.

Tony stood in front of her wearing a pair of track pants and a sweat-soaked T-shirt. The shirt clung to his chest and gave her a hint of the perfection that existed beneath. A bead of sweat caught her attention, and she watched as it slowly rolled down his throat until it disappeared beneath the neckline.

"Come on in." Tony stepped back from the door. "Sorry if I smell bad." He wiped a hand across his brow as she passed him. "I just got home from the gym, and I haven't had a chance to take a shower yet."

Oh, she smelled him all right, and there was nothing bad about it. Every time she inhaled, his scent filled her nose -- earthy, masculine, and strong. She pressed her lips tightly together, trying to hold back the groan threatening to escape.

"Oh, no, you're fine...I, uh...I mean, it's fine." Bianca suddenly felt flustered as her face heated. God, what was it about this man that constantly made her blush like a teenager?

Tony just smiled and had the decency to pretend he didn't notice. "Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I'm going to run and take a quick shower. I'll be out in a few minutes."

Yep, that was just the image she needed. *Tony naked and wet in the shower.* She nodded and smiled as she took off her coat. She didn't trust herself to speak, because she wasn't completely sure her urge to groan was under control.

Bianca watched his retreating back before she wandered over to the window and stared out at the ice-covered lakefront below. It wasn't long before she heard the sound of the shower running, and the groan she'd been holding in finally escaped.

Why can't he be butt-ugly? It would be so much easier to ignore him if he were. As far as Bianca could tell, though, everything about him was perfect. No way in hell would she be able to ignore anything about him.

She'd never been attracted to a man before like she was to Tony. Gorgeous and physically fit, his mere presence screamed sexual dominant. When it came to sex, there were things about herself that Bianca had a hard time admitting. With secret cravings and hidden desires so extreme, she could barely acknowledge them -- even to herself.

So far, she'd been able to keep a tight rein on those emotions, but she knew she wouldn't stand a chance against a man like Tony. She could tell that he possessed the ability to go beyond her self-control, force her to face the sexual urges she still wasn't sure she was ready to deal with yet.

She didn't know how long she'd been standing there questioning the wisdom of this whole partnership thing when she saw Tony's reflection in the window behind her.

Bianca turned around and forced a casual expression on her face. She glanced at his loose-fitting sweatpants and the new, plain T-shirt he'd put on. The citrus scent of his soap drifted across the room, teasing her nose and making her tingle. Inside, she panted and tried to figure out which one turned her on more: Tony all sweaty or shower fresh.

"I'm just going to grab some water." Tony headed in the direction of the kitchen. "Would you like anything?" he called out over his shoulder.

Now wasn't that a loaded question. She'd probably shock the hell out of him if she told him what she'd truly like to have. "Um, water would be good." Yeah, she was definitely feeling parched all of a sudden.

Tony came back with a bottle of water in each hand. He held one out to Bianca. "Come on, we can talk in the office."

Bianca picked up her tote bag and followed him, desperately trying not to stare at his ass but failing miserably. Once inside the office Bianca sat on the leather chaise while Tony took a seat in the chair at his desk.

"So." She dragged her gaze away from his long enough to reach into her bag, pull out her laptop, and turn it on. "Where should we begin?"

"Why don't you start by telling me a little bit more about your investigation, and we can figure it out from there."

"Sure." Bianca scrolled through her notes on her laptop for a moment before she glanced up at Tony again. "Okay, this is what I have so far." She began to explain her story to Tony and the information she'd obtained about Dimitryi in connection to sex trafficking so far.

While she talked, Tony would occasionally interrupt to make comments or recommend changes to those parts of her story that were incorrect or needed adjustments.

Bianca typed notes the entire time, not willing to trust herself to remember everything they discussed.

By the time Bianca finally finished, it was well after ten o'clock. Damn, they'd been talking for over three hours.

"So, that's about it."

"Impressive." Tony nodded, his approval apparent in his expression. "You're on the right track so far. It's going to be a hell of a story once you're finished."

"Thanks." Bianca smiled and tried not to let his praise make her too giddy. "But there are still a couple of parts in the story that I'm unclear about."

"Like what?"

"Well, I know that most of Dimitryi's victims are shipped here from overseas like cattle, but what I don't know is whether he has any other sources."

"What types of sources do you mean?" Tony looked confused by her comment.

"I mean, is he preying on people in Internet chat rooms or online dating services? Is he hooking up with mail-order brides?" She shrugged. "I'm just not sure if he targets the victims in more than one way."

Tony shook his head. "Nah, Dimitryi is pretty old school when it comes to this part of his operation. He'd never use the Internet for something like this."

"Really?" Bianca frowned. "Why not?"

"It's not personal enough," Tony explained. "Dimitryi is a sadist. He thrives on threats, intimidation, and brutality. He likes to see his victims terrified and living in constant fear for their lives and the lives of their families. He can't get that type of pleasure and satisfaction from anonymous encounters on the Internet."

"I never thought of it that way. But I can see your point." Bianca's thoughts drifted to a different place and time when she still lived in Brazil. She remembered what she and her mother went through because of Dimitryi, and she could see now that Tony's words made perfect sense.

That experience a decade ago taught her all too well the kind of horrific acts Dimitryi was truly capable of committing. Ever since the day her cousin had left home and never returned, she'd been obsessed with finding him.

Every piece of research, every bit of information she'd obtained about her cousin's disappearance since that time -- it all pointed directly to Dimitryi's operations.

More specifically, his sex trafficking activities.

Bianca wasn't just after Dimitryi, either. She'd set her sights on those who helped him commit his atrocities as well. Particularly the one directly responsible for making sure she'd never get the chance to look into her cousin's eyes, hear her laugh, see her smile again.

She even knew the name of the person she was after. It was a name that was synonymous with everything that was evil in the world; it was a word she couldn't say out loud without feeling overwhelming anger and immeasurable grief. *Reggie*.

"Okay." Tony's voice interrupted her thoughts. She looked up to see him leaning back in his chair, his arms folded in front of him. "What else are you unsure about?"

"This is probably the part that I'm struggling with the most." Frustration seeped into her voice. "I know that Dimitryi is involved in everything from drugs to sex trafficking to murder. But what I can't figure out is how he manages to hide all of that in plain sight without anyone noticing."

Tony laughed, the sound bitter. "That's because Dimitryi is one clever bastard." The way he said it told Bianca his words weren't meant to be a compliment.

"He pays less than scrupulous businessmen substantial sums of money to establish legitimate businesses that are used to cover up his illegal operations. On paper, the businesses appear to be owned by other people, but Dimitryi provides all the financial funding and receives most of the profits from the legal and illegal services. We still don't know all of the locations of his businesses, but we do have enough information to confirm that he operates mainly out of Chicago, with a few businesses in Nevada, and another handful in Europe."

"Wow." Bianca stopped typing the notes she'd been taking and sat back against the chaise. She stared at Tony over her laptop. "That's a pretty impressive setup. Dimitryi reaps all the benefits of ownership without being directly involved, and if the place gets raided, he's clean and clear because his name isn't attached to it."

"Exactly." Tony's smile was grim.

It was all starting to fall into place. It explained why the police had spent so many years searching for Dimitryi and still hadn't managed to find him. It must be hard to catch a person who lived in the shadows, under layers of protection provided by people who were more than willing to sell their souls and sacrifice the lives of innocent people for the right price.

That knowledge made her even more determined to see her exposé through to the end. She would never have closure until she exposed Dimitryi -- and those who worked for him -- for what they really were. *Animals*. And, like the animals they were, she'd hunt them down until they were made to suffer the same fate as their victims -- like her cousin, and Clarke -- and those pulled from the store.

"You know, it's too bad you can't include pictures of actual victims in the story." Tony's remark interrupted her thoughts.

"No." She gave him a playful smile. "But I have something even better than that." At Tony's questioning look, Bianca said, "When I lived in Atlanta, I did volunteer work for an organization that helped former victims of sex trafficking start new lives. I happen to have videotaped interviews that I did with several of them while I was there, along with their consent to use the information for my story, provided I don't reveal their real names or show their faces."

"Damn." Tony laughed. "You are good, I'll give you that."

"Thank you, sir." She bowed her head theatrically. "I do aim to please."

The smile slowly slid from Tony's face. "I'll just bet you do," he murmured.

In an instant, it was as if the temperature in the room shot up by at least fifty degrees, and Bianca's breath caught in her throat at the amount of heat she saw in Tony's eyes. The room went completely still as their gazes remained locked together, and for the life of her, Bianca couldn't manage to tear hers away from his.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "Um...so, the only thing I wasn't able to do was connect any of those women that I met back to Dimitryi's operation."

"That's because Dimitryi uses his victims until they become too old or too ill to perform, and then they're beaten and tortured to death and disposed of like garbage."

"Like the ones murdered a couple of days ago," Bianca commented.

Tony didn't respond, but it wasn't really necessary. All she had to do was look at his face for the answer. The clenched muscles along Tony's jawline hinted at just how much that situation still bothered him.

"I take it you were able to connect those murders to Dimitryi as well." She probed a little deeper.

"Oh, yeah. One of the victims was an asshole named Josef Michalovich, who worked for Dimitryi. While I'm far from sad that he's no longer among the living, his death just shows that Dimitryi doesn't believe in leaving witnesses, and he would rather sacrifice everyone -- including people who'd been loyal to him for years -- than risk leaving anyone around who might be able to talk later."

Tony seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, and Bianca stared down at her notes. She debated. Should she ask him the one question that would probably upset him even further?

Before she could make a decision, he said, "What is it?"

"Huh?" Her head snapped up, and she met Tony's gaze. "What do you mean?"

"You obviously want to ask me something, so go ahead. Ask."

Bianca thought about denying it, but the look on Tony's face made it clear that she was so busted. She laughed instead. "How did you know?"

"How could I not? It's practically written in a permanent marker across your forehead."

"Very funny." Bianca tried to look bothered, but she couldn't keep the smile off her face. "Okay, you're right. I do have a question." She paused. "You and Jack have been after Dimitryi for years, but you still haven't been able to catch him, right?"

"Yeah, we have. Why?"

"So, do you ever wonder if he's getting help from somewhere inside the police department?" A shadow passed over Tony's face, and Bianca knew that she'd touched a

nerve. She watched him carefully to see how he'd respond. Finally, he sighed heavily and nodded.

"As much as I hate to think that one of our own would do something like that, I will admit that it does cross my mind, especially when you have a situation like this last raid, and the victims were murdered less than an hour before we arrived." Tony glanced away from her for several seconds before he met her gaze again, his eyes filled with determination. "But trust me, even if Dimitryi is getting extra help, he's still going to slip up one day, and when he does, we will take him down."

"Yeah." She nodded slowly. "I believe you will."

Bianca glanced down at her laptop again. She couldn't believe three hours had passed already. It seemed like they'd just started talking. She suddenly felt sleepy, and she couldn't stifle the sudden yawn that escaped.

"Am I that boring?"

"Sorry." Bianca chuckled when she looked up and saw the amused expression on Tony's face. "And no, you're not boring at all. It's just been a long day."

Tony laughed outright. "If you spent the day shopping with Clarke, I'll bet it was long."

"You're right about that." Bianca smiled as she began to shut down her laptop. "But seriously, this was really nice. Thank you."

Even as she said it, Bianca realized just how much it was true. After spending the past couple of days worrying about this day, she ended up feeling much more relaxed in Tony's presence than she thought she'd be.

Between sharing ideas and throwing theories around, they'd spent most of the time just talking and laughing with each other. She got to see a side of Tony that she'd never experienced before. Instead of feeling like she was conducting an interview with a stranger, Bianca felt like she was chatting with a friend.

Bianca felt Tony's gaze on her as she began to pack up her things.

"No problem," he finally said. "Although I don't know how much help I've been. It seems to me you know plenty already."

"Well, I still appreciate your help. I'm sure you had better things to do on your Saturday night than spend your time with me."

"Trust me, Bianca, spending my evening with you was no hardship." There was that look again, the one that made Bianca want to clench her thighs tightly shut and fan herself.

Before she could think of a response, she heard the distant ringing of a phone. Tony didn't move and for a moment, Bianca thought he was just going to ignore it. His gaze remained on her. The look on his face left little doubt about what he was thinking.

Finally, he stood. "Excuse me for a second." Once Tony was out of the room, Bianca closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the chaise.

Thank God for interruptions. That was definitely her cue to leave. At some point while they'd been talking, they'd moved from a bottle of water to a glass of wine. Tony even managed to find some pretty impressive finger food for them to eat. Hell, she'd even taken her boots off and curled up on his chaise.

Yep, Bianca was enjoying herself just a little bit too much. She knew it was because of the company as much as the conversation.

She'd sat there for as long as she could and had tried to pretend that she wasn't moved by the sight of Tony sitting across from her, that huge mound between his legs still captivatingly, temptingly, seductively obvious in spite of the loose clothes he wore.

Of all the men Bianca had ever known, none had the ability to affect her as deeply as Tony did. Everything about him -- from the way he looked to the way he smelled -- was intoxicating. Just the sight of him made her heart race, her legs weak, and her panties wet. It took all of her self-control not to rub against him like a cat in heat whenever she was around him.

Every time Bianca looked at him, she got lost in his deep brown eyes, her mouth watered at the sight of his smooth, cocoa-colored skin, and she hungered for a taste of the only man she'd ever known who looked good enough to eat...and lick...and suck.

Bianca sat up straight and grasped her laptop bag. She needed to leave and put some space between them before she lost what little control she still had and gave in to the urge to drop to her knees, crawl across the floor, and remove those sweatpants with her teeth.

The faint sound of Tony's voice drifted down the hall. It was time to make her escape, while he was busy. She stood up and sat her bag on Tony's desk while she put her boots on. Zipping the last boot, she reached for her bag and inadvertently bumped his computer. Suddenly, the screen saver disappeared, and what it revealed left Bianca speechless.

Bianca stood there trying to comprehend the image she was seeing. The woman, her torso, wrists, and ankles firmly bound by rope, was suspended upside down as a man struck her with a whip. The image managed to capture the exact moment when the whip made contact with her ass, as well as her reaction to it.

It was the woman's face that paralyzed Bianca. Despite the pain the lash was certain to have caused, an indescribable pleasure filled her face, a look so intense that Bianca could almost feel it herself.

Bianca's heart started to race, her hands began to shake, and she knew that she needed to walk away, forget that she'd ever seen any of this. But her legs refused to move, her eyes refused to look away.

Despite her efforts, her hand reached out, grasped the computer mouse, and slowly scrolled down the screen. And Bianca could feel herself getting more aroused, more excited with each new image that appeared on the screen.

"Do you see something you like?"

The sound of Tony's low, rumbling voice made Bianca jump, and she spun around to face him. He was standing in the doorway watching her, his expression filled with so much heat, it was practically blistering.

"I'm sorry. I...I didn't mean to look through your things." Her voice sounded breathless, even to her own ears, and she couldn't get enough air into her lungs.

Tony shrugged, as if unconcerned. "They're amazing to look at." He never blinked; his eyes never wavered, never looked away from her face. Tony started to move in her direction, and Bianca's heart beat harder in her chest with every step he took closer to her. He continued to approach her until her breasts pressed against his chest.

Bianca was vaguely aware of him removing her bag from her shoulder and sitting it down on the floor before placing his large hands on either side of her, trapping her between him and the desk. She gripped the desk for dear life, terrified that if she let go, she would rip off his clothes.

"You still didn't answer my question." His voice was like gravel, his eyes like hot coal as he stared down at her. "Do you see something you like?"

"I'm not into that." Her words sounded thin to her own ears.

Tony leaned toward her until his mouth was next to her ear. "I see," he rasped. "So, I take it you've tried it before."

"I...no," she finally managed.

Tony's husky laugh filled her ear. "Then how do you know you won't like it?" His tongue traced along the inside of her ear canal.

Bianca's eyes rolled back, and she bit her lip to hold in her moan. "I'm not a submissive. I'm not weak." She wasn't sure who she wanted to convince of that more; Tony or herself.

"Ahh." He pulled back and looked down into her face. "Is that what you believe being a submissive is?"

"Isn't it?" she countered with as much bravado as she could muster.

"Oh, baby," he purred, and the sound made Bianca tremble. "You have no idea." His mouth came down on hers, and Bianca went completely numb for one breathless moment as the feel of Tony's lips against hers shocked her all the way to her toes.

His mouth suddenly disappeared, and Bianca's eyes fluttered open to see his lips hovering just above hers.

"You know I want you, Bianca." He stared down at her, his expression a mixture of hunger and heat. "And I know you feel the same way. We've been tiptoeing around our attraction for each other long enough. I think it's time we did something about it. I can see how much those images excite you; I can tell how badly you want to experience what she's experiencing, feel what she's feeling."

"That's not --"

Tony's mouth silenced her, his kiss drowning out her protests. He pulled back slowly, and Bianca looked into his lust-filled gaze.

Oh, God, how did he expect for her to think clearly when he kept looking at her like that, when those amazing lips kept stealing her breath away, when his hard body -- and even harder cock -- kept brushing against her and driving her out of her mind?

"Tony." She made one more feeble attempt to dissuade him. "I really don't think..."

"Shh." His lips found hers again. "Stop thinking so much. Spend the rest of the weekend with me. Let me show you what true submission is like, how good it can be...how good it can feel. And, if you decide that you don't like it, or it's not for you, it'll never happen again, and we'll still be friends."

"And...if I do like it?" Bianca managed to whisper.

The look on Tony's face was pure sin. "Then I'll show you things you've never dreamed." Tony nuzzled his lips up her neck. "Make you do things you've never imagined." He kissed along her jawline. "And you'd love every minute of it."

Tony stared at her intently, as if he could actually see the internal battle she waged.

"Listen to me, Bianca," he finally said. "I'm not proposing marriage here. I'm not expecting a lifetime commitment. I'm just offering a weekend of pleasure, a chance for you to explore something new, maybe even discover a part of yourself that you didn't know existed. We can worry about all of the 'what-ifs' later. Let's enjoy ourselves now and see what happens."

Even as the voice in Bianca's head screamed for her to leave, warned her that this was a bad idea, a big mistake, something she'd end up regretting later, the ache in her body whispered for her to stay, begged her to ignore that voice, and enjoy the pleasure that Tony promised.

Bianca met his eyes and saw the same passion, the same need burning in them that had her on fire, and the last of her resistance slipped away.

She lifted her head until their lips met, and she kissed him. Her tongue slid between his full lips, searching, finding, and mating with his until he was groaning and she was practically vibrating with need.

Suddenly, Bianca couldn't hold back a second longer; she urgently needed more than just his lips touching her. She began moving, her hands frantically clutching at Tony, one hand sliding over his closely-cropped hair, pulling his head toward her, desperately trying to get closer to him, wishing she could crawl up his body and deep inside of him.

Tony groaned and pressed her back against the desk. One hand tangled in her hair, and Tony held her head steady as his lips devoured hers. Bianca couldn't kiss him hard enough, couldn't get her mouth open wide enough, couldn't take his tongue in deep enough to satisfy the insatiable need that raged through her.

Tony's free hand cupped her ass, and he lifted her as if she weighed nothing. Her legs opened immediately as he pressed his hard, thick erection between her spread thighs. Bianca moaned into his kiss, and she rubbed her jean-clad pussy against him. He had her so hot and horny, her entire body rocked with spasms as she inched closer and closer to an orgasm.

Slowly, Bianca dragged her lips away from his. "I think I'm officially out of arguments," she panted.

Tony looked at her through heavy-lidded eyes. "It's about time."

Chapter Four

Since the moment Bianca first entered his house, Tony had come to several realizations. She was even smarter than he gave her credit for, she was funnier than he would ever have guessed, and she was sexier than any woman had a right to be.

When he saw her standing there, almost mesmerized as she stared at those photos, her face flushed and filled with need, her body so turned on she practically trembled, Tony also realized that there was no way in hell he wasn't going to have her.

He was reminded again of Bianca's reaction to the sex toys at Jack and Clarke's house. He would never forget the look of yearning on her face that day, so similar to the one she wore right now. Tony understood the cravings he saw burning in her eyes, had seen them too many times before not to recognize a woman with submissive desires when he saw one. Even if she didn't know she possessed such desires.

Even more than her physical beauty, it was that quality that attracted Tony to her. That submissive desire called out to his dominant nature, and it drew him to her more strongly than even the most potent aphrodisiac.

Hell, even her voice had the ability to make him hard. The unmistakable sound of her slight Latin accent always reminded him of tropical islands, sandy beaches, and warm breezes. Bianca was what fantasies were made of, and she'd definitely been the star of every one of *his* fantasies of late.

Now that he'd finally gotten a taste of what he'd craved all this time, it was so much better than he'd ever imagined. He could hardly wait, could barely keep his hands off of her.

Tony leaned down, and his mouth covered hers, the kiss hard and deep. "Bedroom. Now," he growled against Bianca's lips. Her green-eyed gaze met his, and she nodded slowly as he carried her down the hall toward his bedroom.

Once they were inside his room, Tony finally put her down. He saw her slowly opening her eyes, trying to focus on her surroundings. It didn't take long before he noticed her focus was fixated on something across the room. He looked in the same direction.

"It's called a love seat," he whispered in her ear as he led her over to the piece of furniture that looked like a cross between a chair and a weight bench and was large enough to accommodate two people at once. "It's one of my favorite toys. I can't wait to show you the things we can do on it."

Finally, he gave in to the need to touch, to feel, to hold. His mouth immediately found hers again; his lips, teeth, and tongue ravaged her. For a man who prided himself on his ability to stay in control -- especially with women -- Tony knew that his self-control was practically nonexistent when it came to this particular woman. He felt so desperate, so out of control for her, he knew he could never get enough, never be satisfied until he'd completely consumed, possessed, and owned her.

His urgency to be with her, to be *in* her, was so excessive, so intense, and so extreme, it was frightening. He was teetering on the brink of totally losing it, throwing her to the floor, ripping off her clothes, and rutting into her like a wild animal.

He finally managed to separate from her and place some distance between them by sheer willpower. Tony closed his eyes as he tried to regain some of his self-control. He'd wished for this moment more times since he'd met her than he cared to admit. And now that it was actually happening, he refused to rush, refused to race. He was determined to take it slow, make it last -- even if it fucking killed him.

When he opened his eyes again, his hand reached out to caress her face; his thumb slid across her swollen lips.

"Take these off. Slowly." His hand trailed down her body. "I want to see what I've dreamed about all these months."

He saw Bianca tremble. Her green eyes hungry and needy, she began removing her clothes agonizingly, painfully, torturously slow, and revealed herself inch by breathtaking inch.

By the time the last article of clothing hit the floor, Tony's cock was like a steel pipe in his sweatpants. The sight of her standing before him, looking so incredible, and so fucking unbelievable, riveted him. He wondered if she had any idea just how amazing and desirable she was.

Tony walked a slow circle around her as his eyes feasted on the sight of her. He stopped behind Bianca and pressed his clothed body against her bare skin, his lips against her ear.

"So fucking sexy..." Tony whispered as his hands reached around her to cup her firm, round breasts. "So perfect..." He met her gaze in the mirror that covered his wall closet. They both watched as he slid one hand down her smooth, flat stomach, over her bare mound, and between her slightly parted legs. "So wet for me..." Tony groaned at the sight of

his two fingers sliding through her slick folds and disappearing into her wet heat. Bianca's head fell against his shoulder, and his lips found hers. His tongue fucked her mouth, and his fingers fucked her pussy until she sagged against him.

"Tony...please..." she begged softly. The sound of his name whispered from her lips made his dick throb, and he felt another piece of his self-control crumble and break away.

Slowly, Tony eased his fingers out before he released her completely. He left her standing by the love seat and walked over to his closet. He slid one of the mirrored panels to the side and opened a large built-in drawer inside the closet. He pulled out a few things before closing it and sliding the panel back into place.

When Tony turned back to Bianca, her eyes widened at the sight of the ropes, vibrator, and condom packets in his hand. He walked over to where she stood and dropped the ropes and condoms to the floor and placed the vibrator on the love seat next to her. He pulled Bianca into his arms and leaned down to kiss her softly, lingeringly, before he slowly pulled back and looked into her eyes.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Bianca. I'm a very demanding lover." He kissed her again. "I'm going to ask you to do things that don't just excite you; they'll shock you, and even scare you." His lips trailed along her jaw and down her neck. "I'm going to push you past your comfort zone and test your limits. And I'm going to expect for you to do what I say, when I say, and for as long as I say." He breathed against her skin. "Do you think you can handle that?"

When he felt her nod, he lifted his head and released her long enough to position himself behind her once again. He looked at Bianca in the mirror.

"Do you know what a safe word is?" he asked softly, his hands gently moving over her naked skin. When Bianca shook her head, he said, "It's a way for you to communicate with me when we're together like this." He turned Bianca around so that she faced him. "I would never intentionally do anything to cause you pain that didn't give you pleasure at the same time. But, if I ever inadvertently do something that hurts or frightens you more than you feel you can handle, you can use the safe word, and I'll stop immediately. Understand?" At her nod, Tony asked, "What do you want your safe word to be?" Bianca looked back at him blankly, and he chuckled. "Okay, I'll choose for you. How about...princess?"

"*Princess?*" Bianca wrinkled up her nose, and the look on her face made Tony smile. "Is that the best you can come up with?"

"What? You don't like princess?" He couldn't keep the amusement out of his voice. "You can pick another word."

"No, it's fine, I guess. It just seems so...girly." Her tone was filled with distaste.

Tony cupped the sides of her face and kissed her. "Then I'll just have to make sure that you never need to use it," he whispered. "Agreed?"

Bianca smiled, slow and sexy. "Agreed."

Tony turned Bianca around again, and he felt her body stiffen slightly. "Relax," he murmured soothingly. "Just wanna make you feel good." He waited until he felt the tension leave her body before he picked up one of the ropes from the floor.

"Submission is about a lot more than just sex. It's about trust and communication, honesty and respect." He spoke softly in the quiet room as he began to expertly tie Bianca's wrists together and secured them tightly behind her back. "It's about voluntarily giving up your control to another person and allowing yourself to be rendered helpless." Tony brushed her long hair to one side and wrapped the remaining rope around her chest several times, positioning it so that it sat just above her breasts before connecting it to her bound wrists. "It's about shutting the whole world out and placing your mind, body, and soul into someone else's hands, knowing they'd never betray you, never hurt you, and never do anything that didn't bring you absolute pleasure."

Once he was done, Tony looked at her in the mirror. Bianca stood with her feet spread far apart, her elbows pointed out to the sides. The pull of the rope caused her back to arch and made her breasts jut out in front of her.

And her face. Jesus, it was enough to take his breath away. She stared back at him through eyes that were heavy-lidded and so passion-filled, they looked almost feverish. Her lips, red and swollen, were slightly parted, and he could hear the soft mewling sounds she made that intermingled with her shallow breathing.

Tony picked up the vibrator before sitting down on the padded cushion of the love seat. Carefully, he maneuvered Bianca until she was sitting on his lap, her back pressed against his chest and her legs spread wide open, straddling his thighs.

One hand moved possessively over her body, briefly massaging her breasts before continuing down to her wet pussy. Tony's fingers sank inside of her again, forcing a shuddering moan from Bianca.

"Submitting isn't about taking orders and abuse, Bianca, or about being weak and pathetic. It's about strength and power -- yours as well as mine." The hum of the vibrator suddenly filled the room. "I can use my strength to lead and control you, but it also takes strength for you to follow and yield to me. I may have the power to command and instruct you, but those are just words. The real power is what you do with those words." He moved the vibrator between her legs and placed it against her clit.

"Oh, God...please..." Bianca's back arched, and she cried out. Shallow breaths escaped her parted lips as she begged him for more.

Tony watched her face in the mirror the entire time as he slowly circled her clit with the vibrator, and his fingers continued to thrust inside of her. Bianca's eyes were closed, and her head fell back against his shoulder.

"Open your eyes, Bianca." He waited until she dragged her eyes open. "Look at yourself. You don't look weak or powerless, you look strong and powerful. Even tied up like you are, you're not helpless, you're in control." Tony could feel her thighs trembling, her

body shaking, and he knew just how close she was to coming. "You have the control to say what you like and don't like. You have the power to stop me at any time. All you have to do is use your safe word, and it ends right now." He stared at her reflection in the mirror. "But you don't want it to end, do you?" When Bianca shook her head, he told her, "I want you to say it. Tell me you don't want me to stop." He quickened the thrust of his fingers in and out of her, increased the speed of the vibrator against her clit, and watched as her juices ran out of her and onto the seat.

"I don't want you to stop...please. Don't stop..."

"Do you want to come?" he whispered against her ear, and Bianca nodded her head frantically. "Say it." His voice was low and firm.

"I want to come," she whimpered. "Please...let me come."

"Go ahead. Let go. Come for me." Tony had barely gotten the words out before Bianca wailed, and her body shook almost violently as she climaxed.

"Keep your eyes open," he demanded. "Watch yourself." He could see Bianca struggling to do as he instructed. "That's it," he encouraged her. "Look at how beautiful you are when you come."

Tony turned off the vibrator and let it drop to the floor. He wrapped both arms tightly around Bianca. With his face buried against her neck, he kissed along Bianca's collarbone and continued to hold her until her breathing returned to normal.

"Subs aren't subhuman, Bianca. They're far from weak, and they sure as hell aren't doormats. They don't seek this lifestyle because they're needy or insecure. They choose this way of life because it completes the person they are within. It eases the need, the hunger, and the cravings that can't be satisfied any other way."

He leaned Bianca forward just enough for him to stand up, and then he eased her backward until she rested against the leather seat back.

Tony picked up the other rope off the floor and tied it around Bianca's left thigh. He pulled the rope through the round metal hand ring on one side of the seat back and wrapped it around the back and through the hand ring on the other side before he tied it to her right thigh.

Once he was finished, Tony stood back to study his work. What he saw made him catch his breath.

The way Bianca looked -- undressed and uncovered with her legs pulled back and held open by the ropes, her pussy wet from her orgasm and ready for his touch again -- was better than any dream, any fantasy he'd ever had about her. It was enough to make him come right then and there.

His eyes remained locked on hers as he removed his clothes. To her, his movements probably appeared calm and controlled. But inside, he barely held himself together as his body shouted for him to go faster, move quicker, work harder.

Tony wanted her to wait for it, to feel the same ache and burn for it that he did. He ignored his own needs and continued to calmly undress. The effort to remain composed took more strength than he could have ever imagined.

When his sweatpants and shorts slid to the floor, he saw Bianca's gaze drop down to his hard cock. A mixture of awe and amazement crossed her face. Her mouth opened, and he heard her sharp intake of breath. When her gaze met his again, it was ravenous and red-hot, and it made him feel like a fucking god.

"You see what you do to me?" Tony wrapped his hand around his cock and slowly stroked up and down the thick shaft. Bianca watched him, and she whimpered each time his thumb slid over the crown and wiped the moisture from the tip.

Tony moved so that he stood over Bianca. He leaned down and kissed a path from her lips to her breasts, where he leisurely sucked on the nipples until they were like hardened berries in his mouth.

With a final lick Tony slowly eased to the floor in front of the seat. He rested his upper body on the seat cushion so that his face was between her spread and bound legs.

He took a moment to just admire the sight of Bianca's smooth pussy, the lips swollen and coated with her cream. Her rich, fragrant scent called to him, and his tongue flicked out and licked the slick pink folds.

His touch caused Bianca to hiss out a sharp breath. Tony continued to sample her. His tongue explored her; with every lick, he became more and more addicted to the sweet, honeyed taste of her.

"God, Tony...fuck!" Bianca's voice rang out as she writhed against the restraints.

"Don't worry. We will," he promised, his voice rough and heavy with need. "But not yet."

Tony returned to her pussy, and he feasted on her. His mouth continued to tease and torture until she screamed out in pleasure, and her juices flowed from her as she jerked and bucked on the seat.

"Oh, yeah...that's it, baby. Show me how much you like it...how good it feels." The sight, taste, and sound of Bianca, her body shuddering with the aftershocks of her orgasm, turned Tony on so much that he thought he would explode before he ever got inside of her.

Finally, Tony pulled back and reached for the strip of condoms he'd dropped on the floor. He ripped off one and dropped the rest back on the floor. Standing quickly, Tony sheathed his throbbing cock and then positioned his body so that he was straddling the edge of the seat facing Bianca.

He lined his cock up with Bianca's opening and thrust forward, penetrating deep, causing her to moan loudly and drawing an answering moan from him. He stopped and took a deep breath, his control shaky and slipping fast -- he'd wanted her too badly for too long.

He reached underneath her spread legs to grip the hand rings behind her, and her legs rested on his forearms as his cock began to thrust in and out of her snug channel.

“Oh, God...so good...I’m gonna...”

“Come for me, baby,” he panted out. “Let me feel it.”

He watched her eyes dilate and her mouth open as she cried out, felt her body shake and her pussy ripple around his cock as she came again.

Tony barely slowed down as he continued to pound into her heat. His hunger for her made him relentless. The more he experienced her, the more he needed her, couldn’t get enough of her, refused to think about stopping and ending the pleasure of being buried deep within her.

Each time his orgasm neared, he forced it back and made himself wait, anticipating the release his body so desperately craved.

Suddenly, Bianca made a loud, shrieking sound, and Tony felt her sweat-slicked body tense, her pussy pulse around his cock once again.

“That’s it, baby,” he purred. “Just let it go.”

Bianca looked up at him, her eyes hot and needy, pleading with him, and his remaining control completely unraveled.

“Bianca!” he yelled, his hips snapping forward hard as he came. His orgasm raced from the top of his head to the tips of his toes and back again before cum shot out of his cock and into his condom.

The sound of their ragged breathing echoed through the room. Tony used the hand rings to support himself and keep his weight off Bianca as he struggled to slow his pounding heart. He didn’t want to take the risk of hurting her while she was still tied up.

He leaned forward and gave her a deep, lingering kiss. When he opened his eyes, Bianca stared back at him.

“You okay?” Tony watched her carefully. He’d pushed her hard and rode her even harder. He needed to know that he hadn’t hurt her.

“Mmm-hmm.” She smiled, slow and easy. “I’m a little sore, but in a good way -- and definitely in good places.”

Tony gave her another quick kiss before he stood. He removed his condom and tossed it in the trash before carefully untying her. Gently, he rubbed her wrists and legs where the rope had left the skin reddened and sensitive.

Tony looked up at Bianca. “Better?” When she nodded, he picked her up and carried her to the bed.

Laying her down, he looked into Bianca’s face. Eyes closed, her breathing slow and steady, her expression sated and serene, she looked like a very well-satisfied woman. He

leaned over and kissed her closed eyelids, her nose, her lips, before he settled back on the pillow and simply admired her.

God, she was fucking incredible. For a person who claimed that she wasn't into submission and bondage, Bianca had responded better than some women he knew who were supposed to be experienced in it. She readily and eagerly took everything he gave her without a single complaint or a moment of hesitation. Her willingness only reaffirmed his belief that Bianca was made for this lifestyle.

"When did you come to the US?" he asked, suddenly wanting to know everything about her, wanting to listen to her voice as she told him about her life, loving the way her accent made her words lyrical when she spoke.

"I was fourteen when my mother and I moved here." She sounded drowsy.

"Where does your mother live now?"

Bianca's eyes slowly blinked open, and for a long moment she just looked at him. Tony immediately realized his mistake.

"I'm sorry." He laid his palm against her cheek. "I shouldn't have asked you that."

"No, it's okay." She gave him a soft, sleepy smile. "I lost my mother when I was nineteen. She had a stroke and died shortly after I started college."

"What about your father?" he asked gently, hoping his question wouldn't upset her further.

"I didn't know my father. He was nothing more than a stranger, a face in a picture, just some American man in Brazil when he met my mother. He hung around just long enough to make her think he loved her. Then he fucked her and forgot all about her. He was back in the States before she even realized she was pregnant."

"I lost my parents when I was young, too," Tony admitted. "I remember how hard it was to lose the two most important people in my life at that time. But I was fortunate enough to grow up with both of them. They were in my life for sixteen years. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been to never have known or even seen your father."

"Oh, I saw him. He just didn't realize who I was." Bianca's answer caught him by surprise.

"Shortly after my mother died, I decided to look for him," she went on. "I eventually found him living in Boston about four years ago, not long after my twenty-first birthday. He was obviously older, but otherwise he looked just like he did in the photo my mother kept on the dresser in her bedroom."

When she didn't speak for several long moments, he prodded her. "Did you say anything to him when you saw him?"

Bianca shook her head. "He was having dinner with his family, and I remember sitting a few tables away, watching him with his perfect little blonde wife, and his two perfect blond sons, living his life completely oblivious to what he'd created and left behind in Brazil

over twenty years ago.” She shrugged. “No, I didn’t bother to let him know who I was. It still wouldn’t have changed the fact that I probably meant nothing to him, and he definitely didn’t mean anything to me.”

She spoke as if it were no big deal, but Tony knew better. Not only had she lost one parent and never known the other, she’d had to survive on her own since she was a teenager, with no one to depend on, no one to turn to.

In spite of that, she’d managed to finish college, start a good career, and build a life for herself. Whether she admitted it or not, what Bianca had accomplished was a damn big deal, and Tony felt his admiration and respect for her growing by the second.

“So, was it just you and your mother growing up?” Tony asked.

“No.” Bianca shook her head. “My cousin, Jazmin, lived with us, too. My mother raised her after my aunt died.”

“What happened to her? Did she come to the US with you?”

She paused. “Jazmin...disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” He looked down at her. “What do you mean?”

When she still didn’t respond, he asked again. “How did she disappear?”

Bianca remained silent for a long moment before she finally sighed and rolled onto her side to face him.

“Jazmin was fifteen when she met this guy, Javier.” She practically spat the name out, like saying it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“She thought she was in love, and she ran off with him. She left a note saying they were getting married, and he was going to get her a job with his friend’s company. Weeks later, we saw Javier, and my mother confronted him. He pretended not to know what we were talking about, denied that he even knew who Jazmin was.”

Tony knew he probably should just change the subject, but the cop in him couldn’t let it go. “So why didn’t you go to the police?”

The look she gave him was filled with disgust. “Most of them were bigger criminals than the people they arrested. Every time they looked the other way when girls like Jazmin disappeared, it meant money in their pockets. They had no interest in doing anything to stop it. They even threatened my mother, told her that the same thing would happen to me if she didn’t mind her own business.” Frustration and bitterness had seeped into her voice, and he regretted he’d pushed the issue.

“My mother decided it was too dangerous for us to continue to live there, so she started making plans for us to move here. Almost a year later, just before we left for the US, Javier, his partner, and most of the police department were arrested on trafficking charges. But it was too late for Jazmin. We never heard from or saw her again.”

“I’m sorry,” he said for the second time, his words sounding woefully inadequate, considering what she’d gone through.

He knew that expressing the anger and outrage he felt wouldn't make her feel any better, either. In spite of all the risks, the frustration, and the danger, Tony truly loved being a cop, believed with all his heart in the motto, "To serve and protect." It was unfathomable to him how someone who'd sworn to uphold the law could choose to protect a degenerate who did those types of things to women and children.

He had a better understanding now of what drove Bianca's actions. The situation with her cousin explained why she was so determined to pursue her story on Dimitryi. She wanted to expose him to make up for not being able to save her cousin.

"You know it wasn't your fault," he spoke softly.

She gave him a smile that fell painfully short of happy. "In my head, I know that. I was only thirteen years old when it happened. But in my heart..."

Tony didn't know how to respond, so he just held her instead, his hand absently stroking her back.

"I've never told anyone about my cousin before, Tony. Not even Clarke."

He paused at the significance of her words. The fact that she was willing to trust him enough to share a personal and private part of herself that was obviously very important to her surprised and touched him in ways he would never have imagined.

"I'm not even sure why I'm sharing it now." She chuckled self-consciously and looked at him with eyes clouded with embarrassment. "I guess..." She gave a deep sigh. "I just figured you'd understand."

Tony cupped her jaw. Sliding his fingers through her hair, he rested them at the base of her neck. He lifted her head for a kiss. "I do understand. Thank you for sharing it with me."

They'd been lying together for a while before Tony finally realized that Bianca was out cold, her body limp and unmoving against him, her breathing steady and deep.

He should just let her sleep. She was probably sore. He should leave her alone and let her get some rest. Tony felt his cock swell and had to have her again.

Selfish bastard. He eased the covers from Bianca's body and began to place heated kisses on every inch of her skin, from her knees to her navel to her neck. By the time he reached her lips, she'd begun to writhe on the bed, and the sweetest sounds he'd ever heard flowed from her lips.

When her eyes opened, he stared into their fathomless green depths. "Time for round two," he whispered.

Chapter Five

When Bianca woke the sun barely broke the eastern sky. She glanced down at Tony's sleeping form before carefully easing out of bed. She didn't want to disturb him. Bianca found the guest bathroom, quickly used the toilet, and then stepped into the shower. She moaned as the heat from the water loosened her muscles, soothed her aches, and washed away her pain.

Bianca couldn't help but think about the previous night, about the things Tony had said to her and -- *oh, God*-- the things he'd done. By opening a door inside of her, he'd released a part of her that she'd repressed and ignored for far too long. She'd always sensed he might hold the key. He'd helped her see that it wasn't as scary as she'd thought it would be to let go and lose herself -- if only for a little while -- to someone else.

Bianca finished up in the shower, dried off, and went back to Tony's room. She stood in the doorway and stared at her jeans and shirt lying on the floor, hating the thought of putting dirty clothes on after she'd just gotten out of the shower.

She looked around the room and wondered if Tony would have anything she could borrow. An open drawer in his closet caught her attention. Unable to resist, she padded over to the drawer, curious to see what else he kept inside.

The drawer was bigger and deeper than she originally thought, and it contained toys that she didn't even recognize. Something toward the bottom of the drawer looked familiar.

Intrigued, Bianca reached inside and pulled out the flesh-colored butt plug. It was obviously new and still encased in the original clear plastic packaging. She hadn't had anal sex in a long time. Her last couple of partners hadn't been interested or experienced enough to try it with her. She'd never used a plug before, had never had the courage to buy one, let alone put one inside her.

But the longer she studied it, the more intrigued she became. Bianca wondered how the smooth, cone-shaped plug would feel, stretching and spreading her more and more as it widened and went deeper inside her until the flared base pressed snugly against her ass.

"Have you ever used one before?" Tony's voice was right in her ear, his lips brushing her lobe. She was so wrapped up in her fantasy, she never heard him get out of bed or walk across the room.

"No." The word sounded more like a moan as Tony's hands began to knead her ass.

"The next time I fuck you, it will be right here." One finger slid between the round globes and pressed against her anus. "Have you ever let a man fuck you there?"

"I...yes." Her voice was a breathless whisper. Just the idea of what Tony suggested made her shiver.

"Good. That'll make what I have planned easier." He took the packaged plug from her hand and opened it. At her questioning look, Tony said, "I want to give you something to think about, to anticipate for the rest of the day." He left her standing by the closet while he went into the bathroom, and Bianca heard the water running. He returned with the plug in one hand and a towel in the other. Bianca saw the beads of water dripping from the plug.

Tony walked back to the closet and removed a small, long, unopened box, and Bianca saw the word "lubricant" written on the front. He sat on the edge of the bed and motioned to her.

"Come here." Bianca moved toward him immediately, trying not to appear too eager but unable to help it.

"Lay across my lap." She eased herself over his strong thighs. Tony rubbed along her back and over her ass for several seconds. "I'm going to put this plug in you, and you're going to wear it until I take it out. It's not as thick as I am, but it will stretch and prepare you well enough to take my cock later."

Bianca heard the sound of plastic tearing as Tony opened the box of lubricant. She felt the thin, long tip of the bottle slide into her body followed by the cool sensation of the lubricant inside her. The tip suddenly disappeared, and she waited for several seconds before she felt the warm head of the plug pressed against her hole. Bianca involuntarily tensed as soon as she felt the plug push into her.

"Relax." Tony's voice soothed, encouraged her to calm down and loosen up. "Just breathe...nice and slow."

She did as he instructed, and it wasn't long before she felt the tension and discomfort seep out as her body opened up and the plug slid into place.

"Good job." His voice was filled with approval. Bianca felt his lips on her ass. "How does it feel?"

She wiggled her ass for a moment as she tried to get accustomed to the plug. "Full," she finally responded, and Tony chuckled softly.

"That means you'll be ready for me later." He jostled the plug, and Bianca nearly fell off his lap as intense pleasure shot through her.

"Oh, fuck! Do it again. Please..." She was right on the verge of an orgasm, and it wouldn't take much to send her over.

Tony seemed to know it, too. "Uh-uh. No coming until I say so. Today you're going to learn a lesson in control." He ignored Bianca's protests as he wiped the excess lubricant off and helped her to her feet.

As soon as Bianca was standing, Tony pulled her into his arms, and her lips immediately sought his. Her muscles clenched around the solid weight of the plug inside her, and she moaned against his lips. "So, what's on the agenda for the day?" she asked when he let her up for air.

"Well, I'm going to take a shower and then we'll get dressed and go and find some breakfast." He sucked on her lower lip. "After that, I'm going to follow you back to your place so you can park your car and change your clothes. A little later on, we're going to watch a show."

Bianca frowned. "What type of show?"

He gave her one of those smiles that always made her wet. "You'll see soon enough."

* * * * *

"What are you thinking about?"

How beautiful you are. She'd never say it out loud, though. It wasn't considered macho or masculine to call a man that. Especially a man as tough and strong as Tony. But it was true.

Bianca remembered the art classes she had taken in school, and her favorite artists were always those who created finely sculpted pieces with great definition and amazing detail.

That's what she saw every time she looked at Tony. His large body was so well-proportioned, so precisely defined. And when he moved, it was with such masculine grace, he was like a walking work of art -- flawless, perfect. Beautiful.

"I was thinking about those pictures on your computer," she said instead.

She saw him smile, and he glanced over at her briefly. "I wondered when you'd ask me about that. For a while I thought you'd forgotten about them."

"Oh, I hadn't forgotten. But I've been a little...distracted since I first saw them, and I hadn't had a chance to ask you yet."

"The woman in the picture is an acquaintance of mine." He said the words so casually that for a moment Bianca thought she hadn't heard him right.

Bianca sat there thinking that she was going to have to do something about the sudden case of jealousy she'd developed that seemed to flare up with alarming frequency lately. It

seemed just the mere thought of Tony with another woman made her claws want to come out.

Which made no sense at all. She didn't consider herself a jealous person, had never been one to worry about the previous lovers of the men she dated. Hell, she and Tony weren't even dating; they were just fucking. She had no claim to him whatsoever, and yet she found herself unable to stop the protective and territorial feelings that raced through her, no matter how irrational they were.

"You'll probably get a chance to meet her and her husband at the show tonight."

Bianca's head snapped around at Tony's words. "Oh, so she's married?"

"Yeah, that's her husband in the picture."

Bianca tried to ignore the sudden relief she felt at his words; she tried to pretend that the huge grin threatening to spread across her face had nothing to do with the fact that the woman was married and unavailable.

"Speaking of shows..." She turned in her seat to look at him, and the movement caused the plug to shift. A wave of pleasure shot through her, so sudden, so intense, that it took her breath away. She clenched her teeth together to keep from moaning, pressed her legs together to keep from coming.

Tony glanced in her direction with a knowing smile on his face. He knew exactly what was happening to her, and he was obviously enjoying watching her suffer. Asshole. Big, arrogant, dominating, beautiful, sexy asshole.

"Where exactly is this show at?" Bianca finally managed to finish her sentence.

"See for yourself," he told her. She glanced out the window as Tony pulled into a parking space marked "Reserved" in front of a warehouse nestled among similar buildings in the River North area.

It wasn't until she heard the door slam that Bianca realized Tony had gotten out. He walked around to her side and opened the door.

"Come on, let's get inside." He reached for her hand and helped her exit the car. "It's much warmer in there."

Bianca couldn't get out of the car and into the building fast enough. She had on the warmest, longest coat that she owned. Unfortunately, it stopped just above her knees, and it did absolutely nothing to block the bitterly cold wind blowing off the Chicago River. Even with jeans and knee-length boots on, she was still freezing her ass off.

When he got to the front entrance, Tony unlocked the door before he took her hand and led her inside.

A mountain of a man in tight leather pants and a leather vest met them at the door. Bianca tried not to stare, but she never imagined leather clothes being made large enough to accommodate a man his size.

He wasn't ugly, exactly. But his expression was a little too hard, his features a little too sharp to be considered handsome, either. His bald head, goatee, and scary blue eyes only added to his already menacing appearance and made him even more frightening. Bianca tried not to appear like she was hiding behind Tony.

When the man saw Tony, his scowl quickly disappeared and a smile appeared that transformed his face and made him look like a completely different -- and much more attractive -- person.

"Hey, boss. I didn't know you were stopping by today." The man openly appraised her.

"How's it going, Jacob?" Tony reached out to shake the man's hand. "I wasn't planning to come in, but I had a change of plans." He glanced down at Bianca. "I have some work to take care of in my office."

She saw Jacob give Tony a knowing look. Jacob's smile widened before his gaze raked over her again. "I can definitely see that," he murmured. "Do you need any help?"

"Not this time." Tony's arm slid around her waist, his grip possessive. "I got it covered. We'll be upstairs. Make sure nobody disturbs us unless it's an emergency." Tony steered her toward some stairs.

"No problem. Let me know if you change your mind," Jacob called out behind them. "I'm more than happy to help out."

Before they could reach the stairs, someone called Tony's name. They both turned around, and Bianca saw two other men standing with Jacob by the entrance, trying to get Tony's attention.

He sighed. "I need to speak to them for a minute. I'll be right back."

Bianca watched him walk away before she finally focused on her surroundings. What she saw shocked her. When Tony first pulled up in front of the building, she didn't know what to expect on the inside. She certainly hasn't expected anything like this.

The completely converted warehouse was now an open, spacious room on the inside with high ceilings, exposed brick walls, and hardwood floors. Just as much time and effort had been spent on the interior decorating. Rich shades of deep reds and warm browns filled the cavernous room. Expensive-looking oriental rugs accented the floors. Several walls displayed tastefully done erotic paintings. The floor-to-ceiling industrial windows showed off layers of flowing draperies, which completely blocked the outside light and protected the privacy of the people inside.

Two large oval-shaped bars sat against the wall on each side of the room. Several people relaxed on overstuffed sofas or sat and talked at tables scattered throughout the room. The heat from the fireplace helped make the room warm and cozy, while the soft lighting and low music made the atmosphere intimate and inviting.

But it was the built-in stage in the center of the room that captured her attention. Like an island, seats surrounded it on all sides, guaranteeing those in attendance a great view no matter where they sat.

Movement from above made her glance up, and Bianca saw the second level overhead. People stood on balconies along each side and looked down at the stage area below.

The touch of an unfamiliar hand against her face and the feel of an unwelcome body pressed against her back startled Bianca as a stranger's voice filled her ear. "You're stunning. Who do you belong to?"

Bianca spun around and met his hungry leer with an angry frown. Before she had a chance to give him a tongue-lashing, she heard Tony behind her.

"She's mine." His low, deep voice practically overflowed with danger and warning. The man seemed to sense it, too, because he held his hands up and immediately backed away from Bianca.

"I'm sorry, Tony." He sounded nervous. "I wasn't trying to be disrespectful. I...I didn't know she belonged to you." He didn't wait around for Tony's response and quickly escaped to the other side of the room.

"Let's get you upstairs." Tony took her by the hand. "I want to be ready by the time the show starts."

Chapter Six

Bianca followed Tony up the spiral staircase to a locked door on the second level of the club. He unlocked the door and held it open for her to enter. Before the door completely shut, Tony's mouth covered hers as his hands slid under her coat and gripped her ass. The movement made the plug shift inside her, and Bianca gasped and shuddered in pleasure.

All too soon, Tony pulled back. He released her just long enough to lock the door from the inside before he quickly removed her coat and his own. He stepped away to lay their coats on a couch in the corner, and Bianca had a chance to focus on the rest of the space.

Talk about mixing business with pleasure. She'd been inside a lot of offices before, but never one like this. Decorated in the same colors as the rest of the club, Tony's so-called "office" was at least three times larger than any office she'd ever seen and looked like a cross between a police station and a porn set.

At one end sat a huge desk surrounded by several built-in security monitors and a bunch of other electronic equipment that Bianca didn't recognize. She watched Tony walk over to the desk and type something into his computer as he checked each of the screens that showed video surveillance of the inside of the club as well as around the outside of the building.

Bianca turned her attention to the other end of the room. It was filled with equipment of a different sort. During the past twenty-four hours, Bianca had begun to understand just how much Tony was into bondage and the BDSM scene. And what she saw only confirmed it.

It was more like a play area than a full playroom. In spite of the size, the space held more than enough bondage furniture, toys, and gadgets to keep a person entertained -- and pleased -- for a long time.

Bianca stared at the whipping post in the corner, and she felt excitement stir within her as she envisioned the bite of the whip or the sting of the flogger against her skin while she stood restrained and immobile against it.

A few feet away was a sawhorse, and she couldn't help but imagine the burn of the paddle as it landed across her ass while she was bound, facedown, on top of it.

In the far corner, a large, square wooden base sat on the floor with a pole in the center that extended at least two feet high. Bianca stared at it and tried to figure out what it was used for. Before she could, Tony's arms encircled her waist, his lips trailing along her throat.

"How do you like it?"

"It's beautiful." It was true. She'd never seen a place like it before. As his lips continued to move along her skin, Bianca let her eyes roll shut, and she leaned her head back, silently offering him more.

After his hands and lips teased her for several long and maddening seconds, she lifted her head and pointed toward the corner. "What's that?"

"It's a tower of pleasure."

Bianca tried to focus on Tony's words, but his tongue in her ear made it extremely difficult.

"How...how does it work?"

The sound of Tony's seductive laugh seeped into her pores, permeated her skin, and moved through her until she felt her pussy flood with arousal.

"You're going to find out real soon." Bianca heard the promise of pleasure in his words and couldn't stop the whimper that left her lips. So far, everything Tony had shown her exceeded every expectation she'd ever had. She couldn't wait for her next lesson.

A humming sound drew Bianca's attention to the back wall. She watched as the curtains automatically slid apart to reveal a glass wall that provided an unobstructed view of the entire club from Tony's office.

Bianca turned in Tony's embrace so she could look out of the window. "So, I take it you're not just a guest here?"

"No." He confirmed the obvious. "I'm a co-owner. My partners are the two men you saw me talking to earlier."

"They looked familiar for some reason."

"They should. You spent New Year's Eve at their other club."

Bianca thought back to the private party she attended a couple of months ago. She remembered Clarke introducing her to Scott and Dave, the owners of the club. They were the same two men she'd just seen downstairs.

"How did you decide to become partners?"

"We share a similar interest in this lifestyle. And when they approached me about opening this place, I signed on. There are plenty of clubs out there for people who are curious or just want to experiment with this way of life. That's not what this place is about. It's for people who like to play this way on a regular basis who want to be able to enjoy themselves in a safe environment." He gestured to the people in the club. "All of those people are either members or guests of members. A prospective member has to be sponsored by a current member before they can even be considered for membership. And nobody becomes a member until I've run a thorough background check."

"What about the guests?" Bianca asked. "How do you know some of them aren't serial killers?"

"We don't," Tony conceded. "That's why we invested so much into the security surveillance equipment inside and outside the club. We want to make sure people feel safe and protected while they're here. We rely a lot on security like Jacob. Trust me; he is one mean motherfucker that you do not want to piss off."

Bianca could definitely see that. Jacob was someone she'd avoid in broad daylight, let alone in a darkened club.

"All members are responsible for the behavior of their guests," Tony continued. "If a guest violates any of our rules, they're immediately removed and permanently barred from the club. And depending on how serious the offense is, we may revoke the membership of the member as well."

"Have you ever had to cancel someone's membership?"

"Just once, when we first opened the club a little over a year ago." Tony sounded irritated. "An asshole member brought his asshole friend with him one night. They both had a serious problem with gay people and thought they were going to spend the entire night gay bashing in a room filled with gay couples." Tony snorted. "Unfortunately for them, they picked the wrong gay couple to fuck with and ended up getting their asses handed to them before being kicked out of the club."

Bianca remembered Clarke telling her that Tony's partners were also lovers. "I'm sure that must have thrilled Scott and Dave."

"Who do you think gave them the beat down?" He chuckled softly. "But overall, we have good members who are very careful about the guests they bring here. There aren't a lot of places like this facility around, and our members like being able to come here to relax and enjoy themselves. Besides, our membership fees are pretty expensive, and members know they don't get a refund if their membership gets cancelled."

"And being an owner of a club like this doesn't cause a conflict with being a cop?"

"Not at all." Tony's voice was adamant. "Everything that goes on here is completely legal. I wouldn't be involved unless it was. The only thing that's sold here is liquor. And even that's monitored carefully. All sex acts are mutual and consensual. And those that aren't don't happen. Period."

Bianca nodded. She had no doubt that everything Tony said was true, couldn't imagine him having it any other way.

As they stood there she watched two men begin to set up pieces of equipment on the stage below.

"Okay, enough talking," Tony growled in her ear. "It's time to play." He released her and walked over to a cabinet next to the piece of furniture that she didn't recognize. Tony removed a dildo from inside the cabinet, and as Bianca looked on, he attached it to the tip of the pole.

Instantly, Bianca realized how the equipment was used, and the thought made her pussy flutter with anticipation.

Tony scanned the wall, which had an array of floggers, whips, and paddles hanging from hooks. He selected a flogger, and another item that reminded Bianca of a belt before he turned back to her.

He reached for her, his hand tangled in her hair as he kissed her deeply. Tony's lips kissed a trail along her exposed skin. Bianca's moans filled the silent room, her eyes fluttered closed, and her head fell back in pure bliss.

He suddenly released her. "Get out of those clothes. Right now." He was panting heavily. His eyes blazed, and his voice had turned hoarse.

She didn't waste time removing her clothes, her desire and excitement pushing her until she stood naked before him.

"Now mine."

Bianca's fingers trembled as she worked the buttons on his shirt, her hands sliding inside to push the material off his broad shoulders and down his large biceps.

He was so perfect, it was breathtaking. Just the sight of him left her speechless. Her hands moved slowly over his body, caressed his sculpted chest and chiseled abs, admired the way his smooth, dark complexion contrasted with her lightly tanned skin.

Bianca unfastened his pants and pushed them along with his underwear down his lean hips. Her breath caught in her throat when his cock sprang free. Long, thick, and hard, it seemed even more impressive than it had the last time she'd seen it.

She couldn't take her eyes off it. The longer she looked, the more she wanted it. With a whimper, she sank to her knees in front of Tony, taking his clothes with her, pushing them past his muscular thighs and strong calves until they settled in a pile around his ankles.

Leaning in, she rubbed her face over his taut belly, stopping to delve her tongue into his navel before moving past his pubes, inhaling the scent of him, worshipping the sight of him, savoring the taste of him.

Tony's cock was directly in front of her face, mere inches from her lips. Bianca wanted him in her mouth so badly, she was damn near drooling. She reached out and wrapped her

hand around the base of his shaft, its girth too thick for her fingers to completely close around it.

She pumped her hand up and down his cock, and it felt like velvet-covered steel as it slid through her fist. She looked up and found Tony's chocolate gaze staring down at her. He wrapped his hand in her hair and guided her head toward his erection.

"Suck me," he told her, and Bianca's mouth opened eagerly, her lips gliding over the large, mushroomed head, sliding down the veined, ruddy brown length, and taking him deep into the back of her throat.

"Oh, fuck..." Tony groaned; his eyes rolled back and his throat worked as his hands tangled in her hair.

Bianca gave an answering moan and sucked harder, his cock sliding along her tongue, and she wrapped her hands around his hips, encouraging him, urging him to take what he needed.

"That's it. Just like that..." Bianca started bobbing her head, taking Tony's cock deep into her throat and swallowing around the tip. Tony shuddered and thrust into her mouth, his body begging for more.

All too soon, Bianca felt Tony pull free of her mouth. He picked her up off the floor. His mouth covered hers and his tongue pushed inside, his kiss desperate and demanding.

The hot, hard length of his dick pressed into her stomach, and Bianca could feel the needy ache building in her abdomen and spreading down to her throbbing pussy.

She felt his hands gripping her ass, moving across the plug. "It's time to take this out."

Bianca nodded. Tony led her over to a door she hadn't noticed before that revealed a bathroom.

Tony placed the stopper in the sink drain and turned on the faucet. As the water ran, he squirted in a few drops of liquid soap. Once the sink was half full, he turned off the water. Gently, he removed the plug from Bianca's body and used a warm towel to cleanse and wipe her up before he dropped the plug into the soapy water.

As she followed him back into the office, Bianca saw that the two men who'd been setting up earlier were gone, and a man and woman had replaced them on the stage. The seats around the stage, empty only a few minutes ago, were now full, and spectators lined the two balconies overhead.

Like Bianca, the woman was completely nude, and the man with her was restraining her to what appeared to be a large cross. Bianca looked at Tony and saw that he'd moved the tower directly in front of the window.

"It's one-way glass," Tony explained when he came back for her and led her over to it. "She can't see you, but you'll be able to watch everything that happens." He positioned her so that she faced the window, and the head of the dildo was directly at the entrance of her

pussy. He locked the cuffs around her ankles to hold her in place before he slowly adjusted the pole and eased the dildo upward.

"Ahh, yes..." Bianca couldn't help the moans that fell from her lips as the dildo slid inside and filled her up. God, she wanted to come so badly; her body had been aching for release all day. She could feel it, just sitting on the edge, practically brimming over with pleasure and sensation, waiting to overflow and burst free.

"No coming," Tony warned as he somehow managed to read her mind once again. He stood and disappeared from Bianca's sight, and she felt him a short while later behind her. Suddenly she felt a moment of panic when something wrapped around her throat.

"Shh, don't be afraid." Tony's voice calmed her down immediately. "Remember what I told you. This is about trust. You have to be willing to trust that I won't hurt you. Can you do that? Can you give me your trust?"

"Yes." Despite only knowing Tony for a few months and intimately for only a few hours, Bianca instinctively knew that she could trust him, knew that he wouldn't do anything to purposely harm her.

"Good." He kissed her shoulder. "That's what I wanna hear. Hold your hair for me." Bianca held her hair away from her neck so that Tony could fasten the buckle of the collar around her neck.

Once she let her hair fall free, Tony pulled her arms behind her and fastened her wrists in the restraints on the leather strap that ran from her collar down her back.

"Is it too tight?"

"No," she managed to whisper. Tony sprinkled more light kisses along her shoulder before he disappeared again. Bianca felt like crying when he moved away from her. The restraints that held her steady wouldn't allow her to see where he'd gone.

A red ball attached to two black leather straps suddenly appeared in front of her face.

"Open your mouth." Bianca opened her mouth, and he placed the rubber ball between her teeth and fastened the straps behind her head. Bianca shifted the ball around with her tongue as she tried to adjust to the feeling of it inside her mouth.

"Does it feel okay?"

Bianca could only nod; the ball gag made it next to impossible to speak.

"You won't be able to use your safe word with the gag in your mouth, but that doesn't mean you can't communicate with me. If you need me to stop, just shake your head, and I'll understand." It amazed Bianca how Tony always seemed to know what she was thinking or worrying about, and he always managed to say the right thing to make her fears disappear.

"I wish you could see yourself right now." His voice whispered soft and low in her ear. "All bound, gagged, and ready for me, your pussy filled and leaking, your juices already running down the dildo. And soon your ass is going to be stuffed full with my cock. You'd like that, wouldn't you? You want me to fill you everywhere, don't you?"

She nodded frantically; her entire body was shaking, just silently begging for it, certain that she would go crazy if he didn't fuck her soon.

"Look at the stage, Bianca." She did and saw that the woman was now completely bound on the cross that faced in the direction of Tony's office. Bianca stared at the woman, and she could see the same look of need and anticipation on her face that probably matched her own.

The man standing next to her held a flogger in his hand, similar to the one Tony removed from his wall.

The lights in the club dimmed until only the stage remained spotlighted, and the music in the room changed as the show began.

Bianca watched as, almost in slow motion, the man's hand drew back and then snapped forward, and the flogger landed against the woman's bare breasts and torso.

A moan burst from her as a burn like nothing Bianca had ever felt before exploded across her back and ass.

The flogger landed against the woman's skin over and over, and each time, Bianca felt the corresponding burn as Tony's lashes mirrored the man's on the stage.

She held the ball tightly clenched between her teeth as she whimpered and moaned, her mind begged and pleaded. She felt too hot and too cold, her skin too tight, too tender. It was too much, and yet not enough, all at once.

Finally, the man on the stage dropped the flogger, and the lashes from Tony's flogger stopped as well. She felt Tony's hands, gentle and soothing, warm and caressing, moving along her sensitive flesh.

"You were amazing...incredible...unbelievable." His praise was like a calming balm, spreading over her; his kisses were soft and careful, relaxing and comforting her.

The man on the stage picked up a whip, and Bianca expected for Tony to do the same. Instead, she felt his hand at the entrance to her anus, and he slowly worked a lube-covered finger into her puckered hole.

Bianca moaned low; her muscles clenched tight around him. Soon, one finger became two, then three, the pleasure so overwhelming it was almost unbearable.

"Like that, do you?" His voice rumbled low, and the sound washed over her, made her tingle. After a few more thrusts, Tony withdrew his fingers. Bianca heard the faint sound of foil tearing, and a few moments later, she felt the head of his dick at her opening.

"Open up," he told her, as he pressed his hips forward and slowly worked his huge cock inside her ass.

Bianca cried out as he stretched her wide, spread her open, and filled her fuller than she'd ever been before. Her cries turned to whimpers, and she tried to pull away, but there was nowhere to go.

“Shh...you can take it.” Tony gripped her ass tightly, holding her wide open, and pushed into her tight channel, his thick length slowly sliding all the way in.

Oh, God, he was so deeply inside her, the feeling as much pleasure as pain. It burned and ached, so good and sweet.

Fully seated, he thrust slow and easy, and it wasn't long before Bianca's body relaxed and adjusted to him. Her eyes closed, her head fell back against his shoulder, and she gave herself up to the sensations.

It had been so long since she'd been filled like this, she'd forgotten how incredible it felt to be taken this way, and she knew she'd never be able to live without doing it again...with him.

“You love it, don't you baby?” he ground out. “You love having your pussy full, and my cock buried deep inside your ass at the same time.”

Tony thrust in time with the lash of the man's whip across the woman's body on the stage. Bianca's entire body trembled as he rode her harder. She gasped and thrust back against him.

It was so good, and she was so close, the pleasure building and building, filling her up until she was ready to overflow.

“Go ahead. Come for me.” She screamed around the gag as she came, clenching tightly around Tony's cock, shuddering almost violently.

“God, look at you.” Tony's words barely registered before she felt his lips touch her neck. His fingers dug into her hips, slamming deep within her, rocking her with the force of his thrusts.

Her second orgasm sneaked up on her, caught her completely by surprise, and left her barely able to breathe.

“Oh, fuck...” he groaned. “Love the way you feel when you come...”

His dick seemed to grow even larger, became ever harder inside her just before he yelled out, and she felt heat spread through her as he filled his condom. Tony held her tightly against him, his breathing heavy and ragged in her ear.

Tony's weight against her back slowly disappeared, and Bianca felt him carefully ease from her body. After he removed the gag and dildo and released her from the restraints, Bianca could think clearly again. She saw that the performance had ended, and the couple was no longer on the stage.

He pulled her against him and pressed his mouth against hers; his tongue pushed between her lips, and he swallowed her moans and whimpers.

When he pulled back, Bianca stared at him through heavy-lidded eyes. His smooth brown skin was still sweat-slicked, and it glistened under the soft glow of the light in the room.

“So, do you still think being submissive means being weak?”

Bianca shook her head. “No.” A smile slowly spread across her face. “Although I think I’m going to need some more lessons just to make sure that I’m correct about that.”

Chapter Seven

“Welcome back, gentlemen.” Captain Reyes was the supervisor of the Special Operations Division, and Tony and Jack’s boss. Tony looked up to see him and Elizabeth standing by their desks.

“You two did good work on that assignment.”

“Thanks, Captain.” Tony glanced between his captain and Elizabeth. “So, what’s up?”

“Elizabeth’s going to partner with you while Jack is gone,” he said. “That gives you both a few weeks to get her acclimated on your cases before Jack goes on his honeymoon.” His focus shifted to Tony. “Make sure she has access to all your files, particularly those on Dimitryi Ivanov.”

Tony glanced at Jack, who shrugged. “No problem.” Once the captain walked away and headed back to his office, Jack stood up from his desk.

“While you’re updating Elizabeth on our cases, I’m going to make a lunch run.” Jack announced. “Does anybody want anything?”

Elizabeth shook her head, but Tony said, “Get me whatever you get.” Once Jack was gone, Tony turned to Elizabeth.

“Here.” He pulled up a seat next to his desk. “Have a seat.”

Physically, Elizabeth wasn’t that imposing. Not very tall, with a thin, wiry body, it was easy to look at her and mistake her for someone much weaker. But it only took one look into those steel gray eyes to see the strength that lurked just beneath the surface.

“We haven’t had a chance to talk much since you transferred here,” he said once she’d sat down. “How’s it going so far?”

“Good.” She gave him a slight smile. “Everyone’s been pretty welcoming.”

“I’m sure they’ll continue to be,” Tony assured her. “You’re working with a good team.”

He pulled some files from his cabinet. "So, where were you assigned before you came here?"

"All over," Elizabeth said. "I spent some time in Englewood, Belmont, and Austin."

"Cool." Tony grinned at her. "That means you're used to the hard-core bad guys."

"You have no idea," she murmured as she reached for a thick file Tony held out to her.

"That's a copy of everything we have on Dimitryi's organization to date."

Elizabeth sat the file on the desk. "So, you and Jack have been after this guy for a while, huh?"

"Yeah, Dimitryi was one of the first cases Jack and I worked on together." Tony chuckled slightly and shook his head. "Shit, that was nearly ten years ago, and we're still trying to catch the son of a bitch."

"He tried to have Jack's fiancée killed, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he did." Tony's teeth clenched at the memory. "And he ended up with a dead son instead."

"Jack killed his other son as well, didn't he?"

Tony studied her for a moment. He pointed to the file that sat unopened in front of Elizabeth. "I guess you don't need that after all. It looks like you've already done your homework."

Elizabeth gave him a slightly embarrassed smile. "I figured I should learn as much as I could about the case, since I was going to be working with you on it."

"Good." He nodded in approval. "Dimitryi is as smart as he is deadly, and everybody on the team has to be on their game if we're going to bring that bastard down once and for all."

Tony spent the rest of his day covering his other cases with Elizabeth, but he was only half focused on what he was doing. He may have been at work physically, but mentally, a certain Latina occupied his thoughts. And he hadn't seen her in two weeks. His latest assignment had lasted longer than he'd originally anticipated.

The time away from her left him frustrated and horny as hell.

Today marked two months since the first time he and Bianca had been together, when he'd convinced her to lighten up, let go, and explore her sexuality. They'd been together numerous times since then, and she'd taken to each new thing he'd introduced her to faster and more eagerly than any woman he'd ever known. Being with her had quite literally been the best sexual experience of his entire thirty-five years.

Although they'd both originally agreed to keep their relationship strictly physical, he was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain his emotional distance from her.

They'd never made any promises to have a monogamous relationship with each other, and yet, Tony hadn't been with another woman, had no interest in being with another woman, since he'd started whatever this was between him and Bianca. The fact of the matter

was that after only a couple of months, he'd become completely addicted to her, couldn't get enough of her, wanted her all the time. She was driving him out of his mind.

When his last assignment ended, he'd been so anxious to see her that he'd gotten halfway to her apartment before his sanity returned, and he realized that it was three o'clock in the morning.

He'd sent her a text message instead, telling her he was home and wanted to see her, hoping that she didn't have plans already, knowing there was no way in hell he'd be able to wait much longer to see her. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he received a response from her saying she'd be waiting.

Now his day couldn't end fast enough, he couldn't get to her soon enough, couldn't fuck her long enough to satisfy him. Just the thought of being inside her caused a stirring in his groin.

Oh, yeah. He definitely couldn't wait for tonight.

* * * * *

"That man is suffering from a serious Napoleon complex."

In complete sympathy, Bianca glanced at her coworker, Traci, as they left their weekly staff meeting. "Tell me about it," she muttered, following her out of the conference room.

A senior investigative reporter at the news station, Richard Greenley led the investigative team and was an anchor on the evening news that reported the stories that Bianca and her coworkers busted their asses to research and write. He also happened to be one of the biggest bastards she'd ever had the misfortune to meet.

"In the future, Ms. Mendez, we'd all appreciate it if you and Ms. James would refrain from having side conversations during our meetings while the rest of us are trying to get some work done."

Bianca and Traci were halfway down the hallway before Richard's voice reached them. She turned to see him walking toward them, the rest of their team following closely behind him, no doubt hoping to see a few fireworks.

He gave her a pompous smile. "Speaking of work, we've yet to see this investigative masterpiece that you're supposed to be working on, which I'm sure was the sole reason you were hired here in the first place. Are we ever going to see the finished product, or was the whole story complete bullshit just so you could get a job?"

Fucking prick. God, she hated this little man. He knew damn well that her trafficking story wasn't scheduled to air until May, which was almost a month away. He was just being an asshole, as usual.

It was like Richard had some crazy love-hate thing going on when it came to her. He seemed to hate the fact she worked there, but he loved trying to get into her panties. Early on, he'd just been a pain in the ass to deal with, but he'd become the bane of her

existence since the last time she'd turned down his offer for a date and warned him never to ask her again, or she'd report him for harassment.

The fact that they worked together was more than enough of a reason for Bianca to say no. But it didn't help matters that the man looked twelve years old. Hell, he was about as big as a twelve-year-old, too. Considered tall for a woman at five feet nine, even in flats she towered over Richard by at least six inches. A little difference in height was okay, but she didn't want people to think she was out with her little brother. Besides, after being with a man like Tony, a little boy like Richard just didn't compare.

The thought of Tony made her smile, and for a brief moment, Bianca forgot all about Richard and his petty nonsense.

"Do I amuse you, Ms. Mendez?"

Yes. "Not at all, Dick." Bianca fought to keep her expression straight as she stared down at the shorter man. She knew how much it irritated him to be called by that nickname.

"Trust me," she continued. "The story is very real and extremely good. And that's why they hired me; to write great stories to help make mediocre reporters like you look good." She turned to walk away but stopped suddenly and looked back at him. "And don't worry. I used nice simple words so even you can understand. I'd hate for you to fuck up all of my hard work when you report on my story."

She and Traci walked away without sparing another glance in Richard's direction.

"Oh my God, that was beautiful." Traci laughed as they walked to their offices. "I wish I could see that bastard's face right now. I'm sure he's probably still standing in the hallway practically ready to implode at any minute."

"Good. I hope he does. I've taken more than enough of his shit since I got here, and I'm not having it anymore." Bianca reached her office and sat the notepad she'd been carrying on her desk. She turned back to Traci, who stood in her doorway.

"Don't worry about Dick." Traci's tone was dismissive. "Everybody knows he's an idiot. Just like everybody knows that the only reason he doesn't like you is because you wouldn't go out with him."

Traci's words made Bianca think about going out with Tony later that night. She was sure that he had another lesson to teach her, and she couldn't help but smile. Damn, she never recalled learning being so much fun.

"Oh, I'm not worried about that asshole," Bianca said. She glanced at her watch. "In fact, I'm officially done thinking about anything related to work for the rest of the day." She started to clean off her desk.

"You got big plans for the evening?"

An image of Tony naked flashed in her mind, and Bianca had to look away before Traci saw the blush that heated her face.

"Not really." She kept her voice carefully bland. "I'm just meeting up with some friends."

"Well, have a good evening. I'll see you tomorrow."

Once Traci was gone, Bianca's thoughts immediately shifted back to Tony. It still amazed her how, in just a couple of months, so much had changed between them. How important he'd become to her personally, how invaluable he was professionally.

Everything she and Tony had done together sexually, everything she'd learned from him about the world of dominance and submission, had completely changed her perspective about the lifestyle and altered her views on the people who lived that lifestyle.

She'd been to the club Tony co-owned several times since their first weekend together, and she'd met people from all walks of life, from janitors to judges, plumbers to politicians -- and damn near everything in between. Regardless of the role they identified with best, Bianca quickly saw that they were all strong and powerful in their own unique way.

And she had Tony to thank for showing her the difference, for helping her to understand that the desires she felt weren't immoral, the urges she craved weren't unnatural, and there was no reason for her to feel ashamed or be embarrassed by the things she needed to make her feel happy and complete.

Somewhere in between all of his lessons, they'd managed to find time to talk about her story. Over time, Tony fed her more and more information about his cases, and she was sure he'd shared much more with her than he should have. It meant a lot to Bianca to know he trusted her enough to do that, and she felt indebted to him because of it. With his help, she'd turned a good story into a phenomenal story. Bianca knew the finished piece would be one she'd be really proud of.

Tony had been working on another undercover assignment, and Bianca hadn't seen him in two weeks. Those had been two of the longest weeks ever. She'd gotten a glimpse of what Clarke went through every time Jack went away on an assignment, and she'd developed a newfound respect for her friend.

She'd be the first to admit that she'd missed him -- a lot. She'd spent her days nervous and on edge, worrying about him and wishing he'd come home safely. Her nights were spent lusting and longing for him, envisioning and dreaming about him while pleasuring herself.

What she'd begun to feel for Tony was far from friendly, and it made her question whether the whole "friends with privileges" thing was such a good idea after all.

She found herself wanting more with him, wanting to be more to him than just his friend and occasional lover.

Leaving the office, Bianca was no further in figuring out what to do about the new emotions that she'd developed for Tony than she'd been the last few weeks. She sighed. Until she could figure out the whole sordid mess, she was willing to take him however she could get him.

Chapter Eight

Bianca stared up at the ceiling inside Tony's office where she lay spread-eagled and shackled to a table. The soft glow from numerous candles illuminated the otherwise dark room.

Tony suddenly appeared over her holding a spray bottle, and he began to spray her entire body with a clear, warm liquid. Once he finished spraying, he rubbed the liquid into her skin, and Bianca realized that it was some type of massage oil.

There was a knock on the door just before it opened, and Bianca heard Jacob's voice.

"Hey, Tony I... Shit. I'm sorry. I thought you were alone."

"Its okay, Jacob. What's up?"

"Dave asked me to drop these papers off for you to sign. I'll just leave them on your desk."

Bianca could lift her head just enough to see Jacob move across the room toward Tony's desk. She'd seen Jacob frequently when Tony brought her to the club and had grown to like him quite a bit. In spite of his appearance, she'd discovered that he really was a nice guy.

As Jacob walked in her direction again, his hungry eyes traveled all over her body, and Bianca felt her nipples harden under the intensity of his gaze.

It should have bothered her that she was nude and laid out on display while another man openly stared at her. But all she felt was hot and horny instead. And the longer Jacob watched her, the more turned on she became.

"I think Bianca likes you watching her, Jacob." Tony's low voice filled the quiet space in the room as he once again managed to put a voice to her thoughts. "Would you like to stay and watch?"

Jacob's gaze shifted to Tony and then back to her again, the look in his eyes even hotter than before. "Oh, hell, yeah." His response was a deep rumble.

Tony looked down at her. "Would you like that, baby? Do you want Jacob in here watching us while we play?"

Bianca nodded mutely, her body practically humming with arousal. Tony leaned down and kissed her until she was breathless and moaning before he finally pulled away. He disappeared from view, and when he returned, he held a small candle in his hand. Bianca's heart rate accelerated at the sight of the candle, and she knew exactly what he had in mind.

"Close your eyes." Bianca's eyes immediately fluttered closed. She felt Tony's lips on one and then the other eyelid before he pressed another brief kiss against her lips. "Keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them."

Bianca kept her eyes tightly closed, and she all but panted as she waited for what would come next. Just when she thought she'd lose her mind from the anticipation, she felt the first drops of wax from the candle hit her skin.

"Ahh!" She inhaled sharply; the heat from the wax caused her back to arch off the table. The sensation was like nothing she'd ever felt before, an erotic merging of pleasure and pain that was stunning in its intensity and left her breathless and begging for more.

"You liked that, didn't you?" Tony purred. He didn't bother to wait for her to respond, and Bianca felt several more drops trickle around her breasts and down her stomach.

"Oohhh...Tony!" she cried out again as the warmth from the hot wax spread over her like a sweet caress.

With each drip of wax that touched her body, Bianca began to feel almost high from the thrill of expectation as she waited for another precious drop to fall. Her body tensed as she anxiously anticipated the brief burn followed by waves of bliss.

Suddenly, the heat disappeared, and she experienced a burn of a different sort as Tony rubbed an ice cube around her nipple. The contrasting feeling of the cold against her hot skin was shocking and had her shuddering in pleasure.

Tony continued to tease her, randomly alternating between the wax and the ice until Bianca thought she would completely lose her mind. And the entire time Tony sweetly tortured her, she knew that Jacob remained somewhere in the room, watching. Being watched only served to heighten the pleasure of the experience.

Bianca didn't know how much time passed before Tony's mouth covered hers. He slid his tongue between her lips and stroked inside her mouth, his kiss deep and complete.

"Open your eyes," he whispered against her lips. Bianca's eyes slowly blinked open, and she looked into his face.

"I take it you enjoyed that?" Tony's expression was smug and confident, letting Bianca know he already knew the answer to his question.

"It was okay." Bianca fought back the grin that threatened to spread across her face.

Tony chuckled softly. "Liar." He kissed her again before he stepped back and removed his clothes and shoes.

While Tony undressed, Bianca glanced at Jacob. He sat on a stool several feet away, his focus entirely on her, his arousal evident in his eyes and by the bulge between his legs. When she looked at Tony again, he stood watching her with a knowing expression.

"That was a hell of a scene, Tony." The sound of Jacob's deep voice made Bianca look in his direction again. "Nobody does wax play like you." Jacob stood and headed toward the door. "I'll leave so you two can be alone."

"Hold up, Jacob." Tony's words returned Bianca's attention to him. His eyes remained locked with hers as he addressed the other man. "I'm not sure that Bianca's ready for you to leave."

Wait... what? She stared at Tony in surprise.

Jacob seemed to hesitate. "Damn, Tony, I'm not trying to cross any lines here, but I gotta be honest. Bianca's way too sexy, and I wanna play with her way too badly to just sit and watch."

"What do you think, Bianca? Do you want Jacob to play with us?"

For a moment, Bianca couldn't speak. Tony had shared a lot of things with her, but he'd never shared her with anyone else. She'd never been with two men before, didn't know what to think, didn't know how to respond. All she knew was how much the idea excited her.

Tony leaned down until their foreheads touched and stared into her eyes. "I can see how much you want to, Bianca," he whispered quietly, his words intended for her ears only. Bianca saw several conflicting emotions pass across Tony's face before he spoke again.

"I won't lie to you. The thought of another man touching you pisses me off and turns me on at the same time. But Jacob and I have shared women many times before, and I trust him completely. So, if it's what you want, I'm okay with it."

Bianca glanced past Tony into Jacob's hopeful face, and she couldn't deny the desire that raced through her. When she looked at Tony again, his expression was full of understanding. He kissed her again, a kiss full of passion and possession. Finally, he stood and looked at Jacob.

"You can have her orally only." His gaze shifted back to Bianca. "Nobody fucks you but me."

Bianca nodded. She wanted to include Jacob, but it was Tony that she really needed. He was the only man she wanted deep inside her that way, the only man who would ever truly satisfy her, totally complete her.

Jacob smiled broadly. "That works for me."

Bianca watched Tony walk over to a cabinet and remove something from it before he turned back to her. His long, thick cock jutted out, hard and proud, in front of him, and

Bianca panted with anticipation as he walked toward her, his expression predatory, his eyes smoldering.

Once he was standing between her spread legs, Tony suddenly dropped from her view, and Bianca peered down at the top of his head.

Without preamble, he buried his face in her pussy, his tongue thrusting in and out of her wet folds, his teeth nibbling on her swollen clit.

"Yes, yes. Tony, please..." Bianca barely noticed the words and sounds that fell from her lips. All she knew was Tony, and the way he made her feel. It was so mind-blowing, so earth-shattering, and so all-consuming that she was in complete sensory overload, powerless to focus on anything other than him, helpless to do little more than plead and beg for more.

Jacob appeared next to her, and his large hands began moving over her body, finally settling on her breasts, kneading and massaging them with amazing gentleness. Bending down, he took one of her nipples into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the hardened tip.

Together, they took her to the edge of ecstasy over and over again, always knowing when to continue, always sensing when to stop, and always denying her the pleasure of the release she so desperately craved.

Tony finally stood and settled between her legs. He leaned over and covered her mouth with his, then offered her a taste of herself from his lips.

His cock nestled between her spread thighs, and Bianca moaned each time his hard shaft rubbed against her wet pussy.

Tony's lips moved down to her unoccupied breast, and one hand joined his cock between her legs. As he and Jacob sucked on her nipples, he fingered her pussy.

"Ahh...Tony. Please..." Bianca pushed against Tony's fingers as she tried to take more of him inside her. She needed so badly to hold, touch, feel him, and the fact that she couldn't was about to drive her out of her mind.

"Please what?" Tony continued to torture her. "I want you to ask me, beg me for it."

"God, please...I need you to fuck me." Bianca was so desperate for him at the moment that she was willing to say anything if it meant he'd give her what she needed.

Tony finally straightened and his fingers slid from her. His gaze locked with hers, his eyes blazing hot. Bianca watched as he ripped the package open with his teeth, removed the condom, and slid the latex on.

She felt the head of his cock rub up and down her entrance, teasing her just enough to make her want to scream.

"You need me in here?" He thrust in her again, a little deeper this time, and she cried out at the brief pleasure.

"Yes...please. Now..."

Before she could take her next breath, Tony thrust inside her, his hips slamming against her as he fucked her hard and deep.

"Oh, Tony...feels so good..." Her teeth sank into her lower lip almost hard enough to draw blood, her nails dug into the restraints, and her toes curled. This is what she'd wanted, what she'd needed. This is what she'd longed for, what her body had ached for these past two weeks.

Jacob unzipped his pants, and Bianca turned in time to see him release his cock. Although not as long as Tony's, it was still thick and fully erect.

He moved closer until his cock was positioned directly over her head and Bianca immediately opened her mouth to take him inside. Her lips slid up and down his shaft as she sucked him as deeply into the back of her throat as possible.

"Jesus, fuck...you feel good," Jacob groaned, and his huge body shuddered with pleasure. He slid a hand under Bianca's head to support her as he fucked in and out of her mouth.

As she sucked him, Bianca could feel her orgasm building, felt it moving wildly through her body, gaining momentum as it went before finally shattering apart inside her.

Bianca was still screaming around Jacob's dick when he eased it from her mouth.

"Shit. Gonna come..." Bianca watched as milky strings of cum shot from Jacob's cock and landed on her stomach. He leaned heavily against the table for a moment, panting hard as he struggled to catch his breath before finally moving away.

Jacob was barely out of eyesight before Bianca switched her entire focus to Tony. The way he was gripping her thighs tightly, his body shaking from the tremors racing through him, told her how close he was to coming.

He leaned over so that his body lay on top of hers; his mouth covered hers, his kiss was hard and hungry as he pounded in and out of her.

"So fucking good with you...never been like this before." His words shocked her and thrilled her all at once. Bianca heard the raw emotion in his voice, saw the undeniable connection in his eyes that mirrored her own.

"Oh, *fuck*...baby...*yes*." He thrust inside of her a few more times before he bellowed her name. She felt the heat of his orgasm, and it triggered another explosion within her that left her completely spent as she gasped for air.

The welcome weight of Tony's body pressed her against the padded table as she listened to his ragged breathing in her ear.

He lifted his head and grinned down at her. "I think we need a shower."

"Yeah." Bianca returned his smile. "I think so, too."

Tony carefully lifted off of her, the wax and other fluids causing their skin to stick together. He quickly untied her and helped her off the table.

Jacob stood watching her with a smile on his face and fire still smoldering in his eyes. He reached out and pulled her into an embrace. He lowered his head and placed a soft kiss against her lips.

“Thanks for letting me join in. You’re amazing.” Jacob looked past her to Tony. “If Tony wasn’t my boss and my friend, I’d beat his ass and take you from him.”

Despite his words and the way he looked at her, Bianca knew Jacob wasn’t serious. And from the way Tony laughed, she could tell that he wasn’t too concerned, either. Besides, in spite of Jacob’s size, Bianca suspected that Tony wouldn’t have a problem defending himself against the larger man.

After Jacob left, Tony’s lips covered hers, and she automatically wrapped her arms around him, moaning softly at how good, how strong, how right he felt in her arms. Tony kissed her long and hard, his tongue twined and tangled with hers, and he didn’t stop until she was breathless and panting.

“Let’s get cleaned up.” Tony’s voice sounded deeper, huskier, than before. His hands glided down her back and cupped her ass. He lifted until her feet left the ground, and she locked her legs around his waist. “I want you again before we leave.” His teeth tugged on her bottom lip, nibbling and pulling it before sucking it into his mouth as he effortlessly carried her toward the bathroom. “Nice and slow this time.”

Chapter Nine

Viktor Sikolov leaned against the wall and tried not to wince. The woman's anguished screams felt like they would pierce straight through his skull and into his brain.

Reggie had brutalized and tortured the woman for what seemed like forever and showed no signs of easing up anytime soon. In fact, Viktor was pretty positive that Reggie had no plans of stopping until the woman had been silenced permanently.

His gaze flickered across the handful of women in the room who huddled together in horror as they watched Reggie beat the woman to death.

Finally, she fell silent, and her lifeless body lay still on the floor. Reggie looked at the other women.

"If anybody else is thinking about trying to escape, take a good look." Reggie pointed to the woman. "That's the only way you get to leave here."

Reggie headed in Viktor's direction, and he tried not to cringe in disgust.

"If you can't keep a few bitches in line, you're useless to me. If another woman escapes on your watch, I'll put a fucking bullet in your head, and they'll find you on the floor next to the dead cunt."

Once Reggie was gone, Viktor rubbed a shaky hand across his face.

"Get rid of her," he told the two other men who worked under him. He couldn't even bring himself to look at the woman anymore.

God, he needed a drink, maybe even a few. He needed something to dull the images of what Reggie had done to that poor woman.

He'd done a lot of fucked-up shit in his life, but never anything like what he'd seen tonight.

It just confirmed for him that Reggie was a complete fucking psycho. And Dimitryi was an absolute monster.

Viktor knew he needed to get out of this life as soon as possible. He'd been involved with Dimitryi's organization since he was eighteen. That was twelve years ago, and the things that he'd seen, the things that he'd been involved in over the years, had begun to sicken him to the point where he could barely look at himself in the mirror anymore.

Reggie was right about one thing. There was only one way out, regardless of who you were. But he couldn't let that stop him. He knew that if he didn't at least try, it was a guarantee that he was going to end up just like that woman.

Viktor couldn't let that happen. He had to figure out a way to get out of this situation, and soon. There was too much at stake for him not to.

* * * * *

Tony drove back to Bianca's apartment, his attention split between her and the road, his thoughts on the things they'd done earlier that night.

He could still see her spread out on the table, her skin covered with the hardened wax from the candle, her eyes filled with desperate need as he and Jacob filled her, her whispered words of pleasure filling the room.

When he first started this whole affair with Bianca, Tony never imagined that she would be as receptive, as open to the things that he'd shown her. He never dreamed that they'd still be together months later, and she'd still be interested in experiencing new things with him, learning new things from him. He never would have guessed that he would grow to care for her as deeply as he did.

Tony would be the first to admit that he'd gone to great lengths to remain free and unattached over the years. He'd taken pride in the way he'd completely mastered the single life, and he was sure that he'd forgotten more women that he'd fucked than he could actually remember.

For so long, he'd convinced himself that he didn't want anything more than that, didn't need anything more than the physical pleasure that a woman could provide. It wasn't that he didn't believe in love; he just didn't think it existed for him. He loved women; he'd just never been *in love* with a woman before.

He never thought he would meet someone who would make him want to give up the carefree single life and settle down. Until Bianca. Tony could admit, even if only to himself, that she was his perfect match in every way.

It took Tony a moment to realize that Bianca sat watching him with a smile on her face. His heart skipped a beat, and he realized that she was the only woman he'd ever known who could do that to him.

For a few seconds, all he could do was stare at her. She looked so amazing that she left him speechless at times. He used to think that Bianca didn't know how beautiful and desirable she was, but he was wrong. Tony could tell that she knew exactly how men reacted when they saw her, knew what they were probably thinking when they stared at her. Hell, he witnessed it himself all the time when they were in the club together.

The way she looked never seemed to affect her personality, despite the attention it caused. Bianca never appeared concerned or conceited about it, seeming to accept that her beauty was as much a part of her as breathing.

"What are you smiling about?" He reached out and stroked his thumb across her bottom lip, still slightly swollen and tender where she'd bitten it earlier.

"The look on your face." Bianca grabbed his hand and sucked his thumb into her mouth.

"What about it?"

"You look like you're ready to teach me another lesson." Her voice dropped lower, sexier.

Jesus. Tony could feel his dick getting hard. He'd never met a woman whose sexual appetite rivaled his own.

"The thought did cross my mind." His own tone had become raspier. "Although my lesson is going to have to wait until I can get you home."

Bianca reached over and cupped his erection. "Maybe we can have a practice session before the real lesson begins." She unzipped his pants, and his cock sprang free. Bianca unfastened her seat belt, leaned over, and took him into the wet heat of her mouth.

Tony used one hand to drive while the other tangled in her hair as he guided her head up and down his shaft. It took all of his effort to stay on the road as Bianca's lips, teeth, and tongue slowly drove him out of his mind.

"Goddamn, baby...gonna come." He tried to pull Bianca up, but she increased her efforts, her cheeks hollowed out as she sucked him even harder. His orgasm was approaching like a runaway freight train, and he couldn't stop it even if he wanted to.

Tony gave up and let his orgasm slam into him, roll right over him. He shot so hard, he thought his head would pop off his shoulders. Bianca continued swallowing around his cock, and it sent another round of shudders through his body as he continued to jerk inside her mouth.

Finally, she lifted her head and those green eyes of hers looked at him with so much hunger, he was tempted to pull over and give her the release she so obviously needed.

His cell phone rang before he had a chance to do anything. Tony pulled it from the clip on his waist. He checked the number and saw that it was Jack.

"What's up?"

“Sorry to interrupt your evening, but we have a witness who might be able to provide us with a lead on one of Dimitryi’s houses.”

“I’m listening.” Tony’s entire mood changed as Jack’s words put him on instant alert.

“A couple of uniformed officers spotted two men dumping a body in an alley just off of Fifty-Fifth Street. They gave chase, and the driver lost control and ended up crashing a few blocks away. The car burst into flames, and both people in the car were pronounced dead at the scene.”

“Please tell me they weren’t the witnesses.”

“No,” Jack confirmed. “But they are part of the lead. One of them was identified as Peter Fokin.” Tony was familiar with the name. He knew the guy as a low-level criminal with ties to Dimitryi’s organization.

“Turns out, the woman they dumped wasn’t as dead as they thought. She was rushed to the University of Chicago Hospital. Ed’s already there, and I’m headed there right now.”

The hospital was in the opposite direction of where Tony was headed, and he still needed to drop Bianca off. But if he hurried, he could make it back in about twenty minutes.

“I’ll meet you there shortly,” he told Jack.

“Tony, you might want to get here as fast as possible,” Jack said. “From what I’ve been told, she’s got some pretty serious internal injuries. She’s not dead yet, but she probably will be soon.”

Tony disconnected the call and glanced at Bianca. “We have to cut our evening short. I need to meet Jack at the hospital to talk to a witness.”

“Do you think she’s from one of Dimitryi’s houses?”

Tony nodded. “Probably, but we need to talk to her first. If we’re lucky, we might be able to get some information on where the actual house is.”

“Can I go with you?”

Tony opened his mouth to say no, but Bianca cut him off before he could speak.

“I’m not trying to interview her, Tony; I don’t even need to talk to her. I...” She sighed. “I just want to see her. I want to put a face to another one of that bastard’s victims.”

Tony knew he should drive straight to her house and drop her off, but he couldn’t resist the look on her face, the sincerity in her voice. Before he knew it, he turned on his police siren, made a U-turn, and headed back the way they’d come, toward the hospital.

“Thank you,” Bianca said softly and gave his leg a gentle squeeze, a grateful smile on her face.

“You wait in the hallway until we finish talking to her. Are we clear?” He tried to make himself sound tough and stern, in spite of the fact that he felt like a complete pushover at the moment.

“No problem.” Her response was immediate. “I swear I’ll stay out of your way.”

Tony didn't comment as he continued to speed to the hospital. By the time he pulled into the hospital parking lot a few minutes later, Tony still hadn't figured out how he allowed Bianca to convince him to bring her along on an official police investigation. He could see Jack's face when he showed up with her in tow. He just hoped that his captain never found out about it. He'd catch hell for sure if that happened.

Jesus, he was getting soft in his old age.

* * * * *

As promised, Bianca stood outside the hospital room door, and she peered inside as Tony, Jack, and another officer she didn't recognize tried to talk to the woman.

Even from where she stood, it was apparent the woman didn't have much longer for this world. They were trying to ask her questions, but from the looks on their faces, it wasn't going very well. She was obviously heavily sedated, and her responses seemed barely intelligible.

"Ed, can you translate anything that she's saying?" Tony asked the other man.

"Nah." He shook his head. "I don't know what language she's speaking, but it's not Spanish."

The woman suddenly said something clearly enough that Bianca heard it from where she stood in the hallway.

"She's speaking Portuguese." Three sets of eyes looked at her.

"Do you understand what she's saying?" Jack asked.

She nodded absently, her focus entirely on the woman in the bed as her legs moved of their own volition, drawing her farther into the room.

The woman had been so badly beaten that it was impossible to tell what she normally looked like. Her body was so mangled and broken, her injuries so extensive and extreme, Bianca was certain that she'd never leave this hospital alive. Swollen and misshapen features told the story of the violence and brutality she'd endured; blood-filled eyes revealed the pain and agony she still suffered.

The three men moved out of the way, and Bianca leaned down until her ear was right next to the woman's mouth.

"*Por favor...ajude-me.*" She repeated it over and over again, through lips that were raw and bleeding, her words slurred by teeth that were cracked or completely knocked out. Her voice was little more than a thin whisper as she pleaded for help.

"Shh...*você é seguro agora.* You're safe now." Bianca spoke softly, soothingly while fighting back the tears threatening to fall. "No one is going to hurt you. Do you speak English? *Você fala o ingles?*"

She saw the slight nod of the woman's head. "*Quem lhe fez este?* Who did this to you? Who hurt you?"

Her question seemed to trigger something in the woman, and Bianca watched as her eyes widened and filled with unimaginable terror. "Reggie...*por favor! Não me mate!*"

"Oh my God." For a moment Bianca couldn't speak, couldn't even move as paralyzing chills shot down her spine. Memories flooded her of the last time she'd heard that name.

"What's wrong?" Tony suddenly stood next to her, his strong hands supporting her as she took an unsteady step away from the bed. "What did she say?"

She looked into Tony's worried face. "She said" -- Bianca took a deep, shuddering breath as she swallowed around the lump in her throat -- "she said, 'Reggie, please don't kill me.'"

The sound of alarms filled the room, and everyone's attention was drawn back to the bed.

"Shit. She's not breathing." Jack immediately reached out and pressed the emergency button near the woman's bed.

"I'll get help." Tony moved toward the door, but the hospital staff arrived before he could leave the room. They were forced to wait outside.

"Does anybody recognize the name Reggie?" Tony asked once they were in the hallway.

Jack shook his head. "I've never heard it before."

"Neither have I." Ed spoke up.

Bianca wished she could say the same thing as she stood there, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, as if trying to hold herself together.

They hadn't been waiting long before a doctor walked out of the room and approached them.

"She didn't make it." He confirmed what they already knew. Tears ran down Bianca's face.

"I'm taking you home." Tony reached out and wiped the wetness from her cheeks. "You've had enough for one night." He looked at Jack and Ed. "There's nothing else we can do here tonight. We'll get together tomorrow and see what we can find out about this Reggie the woman ID'd."

"You're right," Jack agreed. "Let's get outta here." They all walked outside together. Tony took her by the hand and led her toward his truck. As Bianca climbed inside, she heard Jack's voice behind her.

"Thanks for your help earlier, Bianca. I'm glad you were here tonight." She could only nod. Her throat was too tight to speak. Bianca remained quiet on the drive home. Her mind was still caught up in the past.

"I'm sorry that you had to witness that." Tony's voice interrupted her thoughts. "I know it must have been hard, especially after what happened to your cousin."

"It was hard," she admitted quietly. "But not for the reasons you think." She saw the slight frown on Tony's face when he glanced at her.

"What do you mean?"

Bianca remained silent for a moment as she tried to put her thoughts into words. Finally, she took a deep breath and started speaking.

"I wasn't completely truthful with you when I said that I never saw Jazmin again after she disappeared." She met his eyes. "I did see her, just not alive." She waited for Tony to say something. When he remained silent, she continued.

"When my mother passed away, I had her body flown back to Brazil to be buried. While I was there, I went to see Javier in prison." She shook her head. "I don't know why I did. I guess it was because I'd just lost my mother, and I needed to look into his face again and try to understand why he'd taken my cousin away from me as well."

Bianca's voice cracked on those last words, and she knew she was probably only seconds away from a complete meltdown. She'd never talked to anyone about this, had barely allowed herself to think about it too deeply. The pain was as fresh today as it had been so many years ago. Tony's large, warm hand covered hers, and she held on tight.

"Anyway, I don't know if Javier found religion or had some other life-altering experience while he'd been in prison, but he definitely wasn't the same person that I remembered. He was the one who told me about Dimitryi, and how he was the one who snatched women that were used for Dimitryi's operation here in the US. He also told me that Jazmin had been shipped along with a bunch of other girls to Nevada." She wiped at the new round of tears.

"Before I returned to school, I spent some time in Nevada, going from one police station to the next, looking through photos of unidentified women who'd died in the area, hoping and praying that her picture wouldn't be among them. A few weeks passed, and I hadn't seen her picture yet. I'd just started to think that she might still be alive when I came across her picture at a station in Henderson, just outside of Las Vegas. She'd been dead for less than a year. She was barely twenty-one when she died, and she looked at least twenty years older. The police report said she was a prostitute, and they were looking for a person named Reggie, who they believed was her pimp and the person responsible for killing her."

She looked at Tony through blurry eyes. "There's no doubt in my mind that my cousin and this girl died at the hands of the same person. I suspected that Reggie was connected to Dimitryi years ago. And, after tonight, I'm certain of it."

By the time she'd finished talking long enough to focus on her surroundings, Bianca realized Tony had already parked outside her house. He faced her as he listened to her story, his focus intense.

He cupped her cheek. "You're an amazing woman. Did you know that?"

The look in his eyes told Bianca that Tony meant what he said. "What are you talking about?" She chuckled lightly, his flattery making her blush. "I'm far from amazing."

"Oh, yeah, you are," he insisted, his face serious. "You've experienced and endured things in your twenty-five years that would have broken many people twice your age." He leaned over and kissed her. "That makes you pretty damn amazing in my book."

He sat back and picked up her hand again. His fingers toyed with hers. "After what you just told me, I suspect you're right about Reggie and the connection between the women and Dimitryi. Like I said earlier, the name isn't familiar, but there are always new players popping up in Dimitryi's organization. And since Dimitryi operates out of both locations, it's completely possible that this Reggie is the same one from Nevada. I'll start looking into that lead tomorrow." He glanced at the clock on his console. "My lesson is going to have to wait for another day. Right now, it's time for you to go to bed." Tony turned off the ignition, got out of the truck, and came around to her side.

When he opened the door, Bianca hesitated. At his questioning look, she said, "I know it's late, but do you think you could stay with me for a little while? I'm just not ready to be alone right now."

"Yeah." He smiled and placed a soft kiss against her forehead. "I think I can do that."

Chapter Ten

Bianca's stomach rumbled loudly, and it reminded her that she hadn't eaten since breakfast. She'd been so excited about her plans with Tony that she'd skipped lunch in favor of the dinner they were supposed to have together.

It wasn't like she and Tony had never eaten together before. But this was different. When Tony was at her house the previous night, they'd both admitted to feelings that ran deeper than just friendship. They both agreed their relationship had become more than just physical.

Before he'd left, Tony asked her out. On a real date. Where they could get dressed up and go out together as a couple. It was an unspoken acknowledgment that was supposed to mark the beginning of something more between them.

Now that it was finally here, Tony was late. Really late. Like, more than an hour late. He was supposed to pick her up at nine o'clock, and they were going to have a late dinner. She glanced at her watch. It was after ten-thirty, and he still hadn't arrived.

At first, Bianca figured he'd probably gotten delayed because of work. But the later it got, the more worried she became. She was just about to call his cell phone when her doorbell rang. After she spoke to him on the intercom system, Bianca pressed the buzzer to unlock the outside door and let him into the building.

She waited for him at her apartment door. When Bianca saw him, her smile instantly dissolved at the look on his face.

"What happened?"

"Funny you should ask that." He chuckled humorlessly. "I was just about to ask you the same thing." He brushed past her as he walked into her apartment.

Bianca closed the door. "What's wrong, Tony? Did something happen?"

He stood with his back to her, and when he turned around to face her, there was so much anger in his eyes that Bianca had to force herself not to take a step back.

“Oh, yeah, something definitely happened. I made the mistake of trusting you, and in return, you hung my ass out to dry.”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t --”

“You didn’t what?” he yelled. “You didn’t lie to me? You didn’t use the information that I gave to you *in confidence* and distort it to not only make Jack and me look bad, but the whole goddamn department look like a bunch of fuckups just sitting around while Dimitryi runs around committing rapes and murders all over the city?”

“No! I’d never do that to you, to Jack. You should know that!” Bianca’s mind spun as she tried to figure out what was going on. The last time she talked to Tony a few hours ago, everything was fine. Now, he looked at her like she disgusted him. She didn’t understand why Tony would accuse her of doing something like that, why he’d ever think she’d betray him that way. Didn’t he know how she felt about him?

“I’ll tell you what I know. I know that I saw the nine o’clock news on the news station that *you* work for run a report on the story *you* wrote that was filled with information that *you* got from me. Shit, your boy Greenley mentioned everything but Dimitryi’s home address and social security number.”

Bianca was shaking her head even as he spoke. “That’s not possible. It can’t be. I’m not even done with the story yet. It’s not scheduled to air for another three weeks.”

“Well, apparently somebody at your station decided to run it early.”

“I just don’t understand...” Bianca closed her eyes as she stood there, too shocked to speak. It all felt so unreal, and she tried to convince herself that this wasn’t really happening.

God, please let it be a dream, some really bad nightmare that I’m going to wake up from. Please just let me open my eyes and see Tony looking at me with that familiar heat and desire in his brown eyes instead of the hatred and betrayal that fill them right now.

“That makes two of us.” He ran a hand over his head. “I thought we had an agreement. I thought that you weren’t going to run any stories without me seeing them first. I thought you understood how serious this is, how dangerous it can be. Your name was attached to that bullshit story. And once Dimitryi and his people get wind of it, this won’t be a problem for just me; it’ll be a problem for you, too.” He paced back and forth across her floor before he turned and glared at her again.

“After all the time that we spent talking about this, and after all your claims of how you wanted to be a voice for the victims, that pack of lies was the best you could do? I thought this issue meant more to you, I thought that I meant...”

His voice trailed off. He was so hurt, so angry, Bianca could practically see the emotions rolling off him in waves. She took a step toward him, but he pinned her with a furious look that stopped her in her tracks.

"Tony, you have to know that I wouldn't do that to you." Her voice was thick, her chest so tight that she could barely breathe. She could see everything between them unraveling in front of her, before it even had a chance to truly begin. "I don't know what Richard reported, but it wasn't my story."

"Really? Well, if it wasn't your story, explain to me how all of your information ended up in it?"

"I don't know! I never told anyone about our conversations. No one knew that you were my source within the police department. Please believe me, Tony. Please trust that I would never lie to you about this."

"Trust?" He looked incredulous. "You want to talk to me about trust after this?" Tony got right up in her face. "Tell me something, Bianca. Was it all a lie? All the conversations we had, all the things we shared, was any of it real for you? Did your cousin even exist, or did you just make her up so that I'd feel sorry for you and help you out?"

"Stop it!" Bianca shouted, and her body shook from Tony's verbal attack. "You fucking bastard! How could you say that? I never lied to you about my life, about my feelings, and especially not about Jazmin. You know how important she was to me." She knew Tony was upset and deliberately trying to hurt her. But it didn't lessen the pain of his words.

"At this point, I don't know shit anymore, Bianca." Such turmoil and anguish filled his eyes that it hurt to even look at him. "I thought I knew you, but I guess I was wrong. I would never have thought you were so ambitious, so ruthless that you'd do anything for a story, including fucking me for months just to get information. I hope it was worth it."

Without another word, he walked out of her apartment and left her standing there staring at the empty space where he'd stood.

* * * * *

"Where have you been?" Dimitryi demanded when Reggie answered the phone. "I've been trying to reach you for the past twenty-four hours."

"I apologize, Dimitryi." Reggie's voice was carefully respectful. "I've been busy cleaning up Viktor's messes. He's --"

"I didn't call to talk about Viktor," Dimitryi snapped. "There are more important matters to discuss."

"I understand, but I think you'll want to hear about this." Reggie ignored Dimitryi's outburst and filled him in on the attempted escape at one of the houses Viktor guarded and the death of two more guards.

"And you're sure the woman is dead?"

"Yes," Reggie confirmed. "She is now."

"Do you think she was able to tell the police anything?"

"It doesn't appear that she did." Considering Reggie had knocked out most of her teeth, it was highly unlikely that she'd been able to say much of anything at all.

"I'm concerned about Viktor, Dimitryi. I don't think he's as trustworthy as he used to be."

"Are you suggesting that he purposely allowed the girl to escape?"

"No." Reggie's tone was dismissive. "I think that was just a case of neglect on the part of those two idiots who worked under him. I'm referring to the change in his personality since we had that other issue with him. I just don't think his loyalty is as it should be anymore."

"I trust your judgment," Dimitryi finally said. "Watch him carefully, and if your concerns end up being justified, he'll be eliminated. But enough about Viktor. We have another issue." He paused, and Reggie waited for him to continue.

"Since you've obviously been busy with Viktor, I take it you didn't see the evening news."

"Uh...no." Reggie frowned. "I didn't."

"There was a fascinating story on trafficking that you would have enjoyed, particularly the parts that alluded to my involvement in it."

"Who reported it?" Reggie had known Dimitryi long enough to know exactly where this conversation was headed.

"Richard Greenley. Although it appears that Bianca Mendez made some contributions to the story as well." Reggie was familiar with Richard Greenley from seeing him on TV, but it was the woman's name that stood out. She was a friend of Tate and Parker, and that made her a serious problem.

"I want you to see to it that Mr. Greenley isn't around to do another story."

"What about the woman?" Reggie asked, surprised that Dimitryi wouldn't want to get rid of them both. "If her name was mentioned too, that means she probably worked on this story with him and has information as well."

"Leave her for now." Dimitryi spoke after a long pause. "If one of them has an accident, people will think it's just an unfortunate coincidence. But if they both turn up dead, it'll raise suspicions, especially with Tate and Parker. I don't need them nosing around us any more than they already are. And if she's smart, she'll take a hint and forget all about the story."

"And if she doesn't?" Reggie asked.

"If not, she'll be next."

Chapter Eleven

Bianca sat at the desk in Richard's office and waited for him to arrive. She'd been up all night, her confrontation with Tony the previous night leaving her so physically drained and emotionally devastated that she couldn't sleep.

She had no idea how long she'd stood there after Tony left. She'd waited for him to come back, to hold and touch her, to tell her that he didn't hate her in spite of his anger. She waited to hear him say that he believed her and still trusted her, that he still wanted her.

That moment never came, so she'd come into work instead, determined to figure out what the fuck was going on.

By the time the sun finally rose outside, Bianca had left "upset" behind a long time ago and had moved on to "out-and-out incensed." And all of it was directed at that son of a bitch, Richard.

She watched the piece he'd done at least a dozen times, listened in disgust as he twisted and altered her words, looked on in disbelief as he outright lied about the facts in her story.

Despite the pain it caused, after she'd seen the news clip, Bianca couldn't blame Tony for the way he reacted, couldn't be angry with him for thinking that she'd betrayed him. She knew that if the situation had been reversed, she'd think the exact same thing.

"There you are!" Traci suddenly appeared in the doorway, her expression a mixture of relief and worry. "I've been looking for you everywhere. I called you on your cell phone all last night, but I couldn't reach you."

Bianca remembered how she'd left work early to pamper herself a little bit before her date with Tony. The memory was enough to make her want to break down. God, it shouldn't hurt so much just to think about another person. It felt like someone had reached into her chest and had a death grip on her heart.

"I wasn't home," she finally said.

"I wanted to tell you something before Richard got in." Traci glanced over her shoulder before she walked further into the office. "I saw him in your office after you'd left yesterday. He was on your laptop, and when I came in and asked what he was doing, that sawed-off little fucker had the nerve to tell me to mind my own business. He's done some really shitty things to other reporters in the past, but nothing like this. I'm so sorry this happened to you, Bianca."

Traci looked so stricken that Bianca managed to find a smile for her. "It's not your fault, Traci," she told the other woman. "Thank you for trying to give me the heads-up. It's nice to know that someone's watching my back around here."

Although she truly appreciated Traci telling her, it wasn't necessary. Bianca had already figured out how Richard had gotten the information. She'd been so excited about going out with Tony that she'd left her laptop at work. The actual story wasn't saved on it, but all of her notes from her conversations with Tony were there. Richard had obviously used that information to create that piece of crap that he wanted to pass off as a legitimate story.

"What the hell are you two doing in my office?" Richard's outraged voice suddenly filled the room.

"Not nearly as much as you were doing in my office yesterday," Bianca shot back. She stood and stormed toward him. "Who in the fuck do you think you are to change my story without consulting with me first?" Her teeth were so tightly clenched, she could feel her jaw throbbing. "You know that piece wasn't supposed to air for nearly a month. You had no right to change the schedule without letting me know in advance."

"As the senior investigative reporter and the senior editor on this team, I have the right to make changes to any story, including when to run it." Richard brushed past her and sat down at his desk.

"Does it also give you the right to hack into my computer and illegally remove information that didn't belong to you?"

"Hey, you should be thanking me instead of giving me attitude." Richard gave her a smug smile. "I took your ordinary story and made it extraordinary."

Bianca didn't think it was possible to hate someone as much as she hated him. "No, you stole my research. You lied and twisted the facts and tried to ruin the reputations of good people who work hard to stop these kinds of crimes."

Richard shrugged unconcernedly. "I gave our audience what they wanted. I gave them a story that was interesting and entertaining, instead of one that would have bored them to death."

In that moment, Bianca knew that she was capable of killing another person with her bare hands.

Bianca didn't bother to waste another word on Richard as she walked out of his office. It wouldn't have made a difference anyway. The damage was already done.

* * * * *

Bianca saw Jack's Explorer parked in the driveway next to Clarke's Volvo as she pulled up to their house. She parked her car and sat there while she tried to work up enough courage to go inside and talk to them.

She dreaded this conversation, but she refused to let her friends believe that she'd had any part in trying to sabotage Jack and Tony or their investigation.

Finally, Bianca took a deep breath and got out of the car. She walked quickly up the stairs and rang the doorbell.

When Clarke opened the door, Bianca searched her face and found nothing but concern and understanding in her eyes.

"How are you doing, sweetie?" Clarke asked gently.

"I've had better days."

"Come here." Clarke pulled her into an embrace. "You look like you need a hug."

"Yeah." Bianca's laugh was shaky, her vision blurred by unshed tears. "I could definitely use one." She held on tightly to Clarke for several long moments before she finally released her.

Clarke ushered her in. She closed the door and led her by the hand over to the couch. Once they were seated, Clarke asked, "Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm fine." She met Clarke's eyes. "Is Jack angry?"

Clarke hesitated. "Yes. But not at you," she quickly added. "He and Tony got their asses chewed out pretty good today, and he's still pissed about that."

"I'm so sorry, Clarke. I swear, I didn't have anything to do with that story. I'd never do that to Jack."

"Oh, I know that, and so does Jackson," Clarke said. "I've seen your work too many times before, and as soon as I saw that garbage, I knew immediately that it wasn't yours."

Relief flooded her upon hearing Clarke's words.

"You wanna talk about what happened?"

Bianca looked at her friend. "Yeah, I do." She began to speak and didn't stop until she'd told Clarke everything, including about Tony and her.

"Oh, sweetie." Sympathy filled Clarke's voice. "I'm so sorry that you had to deal with all of this on your own. I can't imagine how hard it must have been for you to experience all of that with your cousin and now this situation with Tony." Clarke paused. "I'll be honest; I can see why he's upset. But I also know him well enough to say that he won't stay that way for long. Once he calms down, I'm sure he'll realize that you would never have done

anything like that to him.” Her tone hardened. “In the meantime, I say we pay a visit to that little bastard Greenley. I’ll slit his tires, and you can throw a brick through his windshield.”

Bianca gave her a small smile, knowing that Clarke was joking and trying to make her feel better. However, her thoughts were still too wrapped up in memories of Tony and their argument to truly appreciate her friend’s efforts.

“You care about him a lot, don’t you?” Clarke’s softly spoken words caught her off guard, and Bianca stared at the other woman in surprise.

“It’s okay.” Clarke smiled knowingly. “Trust me, I know the feeling. I know how hard it is to keep your feelings for another person a secret, not just from them, but from the outside world as well.”

“You knew.” It wasn’t a question, really. The look on Clarke’s face made it obvious that she did.

Clarke nodded. “I’ve known for a while that the two of you were more than just friends.” She laughed softly. “I’d have to be blind not to know. Tony doesn’t just look at you like a man who wants a woman; he looks at you like a man who *knows* a woman -- physically and intimately. Hell, you two throw off so much heat when you’re around each other that I’m surprised you both don’t just spontaneously combust on the spot.”

“I still can’t believe you never said anything.”

Clarke gave her a sheepish grin. “Jackson has been teaching me the art of discretion.”

It was Bianca’s turn to snort. “In other words, Jack told you to mind your own business.”

“Well...yeah. I guess you could say that.”

Bianca couldn’t help but laugh at her friend.

“But seriously,” Clarke continued, “I was also hoping that you would come and talk to me.”

“I know.” Bianca sighed, suddenly feeling embarrassed that she hadn’t confided in her friend before now. “I just...”

“You just thought that since we know that Tony likes to play rough when it comes to sex, if we knew about the two of you, we’d know that you like it rough, too.”

Bianca stared openmouthed at Clarke. “Damn,” she finally said. “How in the hell do you do that?”

“What can I say?” Clarke shrugged and smiled. “It’s a gift.” Her expression sobered. “Listen to me, sweetie. Before Jackson, I never would have imagined that I’d like half the things he’s shown me. And now, I can’t get enough of them.” Clarke chuckled. “But my point is that just because you crave more than vanilla sex, it doesn’t make you strange or perverted, it just makes you...you. Trust me, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with a little kink in your life.” Clarke paused. “Or, in your case, a lot of kink.”

Their laughter filled the room, and on impulse, Bianca reached over and hugged Clarke again.

"Thank you," she whispered. "You are without a doubt the best friend, best sister, best family, a girl could ask for."

"Ditto, kiddo." The tears and emotion in Clarke's voice matched her own. "And don't worry about Tony. Just give him some time. I know he'll come around."

Bianca seriously doubted it, but she kept her thoughts to herself. Talking about Tony hurt more than she could deal with at the moment.

They both looked up at the sound of Jack's footsteps coming up the stairs from the basement.

"Hey, baby I -- oh, hi, Bianca. I didn't hear you come in." Jack walked into the living room where they sat.

She'd been nervous about how Jack would react when he saw her, but now she realized that Clarke was right. He didn't seem angry with her at all.

"Hey, Jack." She gave him an apologetic smile. "I hear you had a rough day today."

"Yeah, it pretty much sucked." Jack studied her carefully. "But I suspect yours was about the same."

Clarke stood up and walked over to Jack. She gave him a brief kiss on the lips before she turned to Bianca. "I'm going to let the two of you talk for a while. I'll be back." As she walked past Bianca, Clarke leaned down and kissed her on the cheek before she left the room.

"I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am, Jack. Did you get in a lot of trouble today?"

Jack shrugged. "Tony and I received written reprimands because we're the lead investigators on the case."

Bianca's face must have shown how upset she was because Jack gave her a reassuring smile.

"Trust me, Bianca; it could have been a lot worse. Fortunately, there's no way to prove that the story was based on information received from someone in the department. Otherwise, we could have been suspended, or worse."

"I want you to know that I didn't have anything to do with that story. I didn't know about it until...until later." She couldn't even bring herself to say Tony's name without wanting to cry. "Greenley wrote that story using the notes he took from my computer."

Jack nodded slowly. "I believe you. I couldn't imagine you deliberately doing something like that to either of us, especially Tony."

From his words, it was obvious to Bianca that Jack knew about her and Tony, too.

"I wish Tony felt the same way you did."

"It's not the same for Tony," Jack told her. "I suspect his feelings for you are a lot different than mine, and that's why it's harder for him to forgive than it is for me. I know he's pissed off right now, but he'll get over it, and when he does, he'll forgive you."

Bianca tried to hide the skepticism she felt, but the look on Jack's face told her that he'd seen that, too.

"Listen, Bianca, I've known Tony for a long time. He's my partner, my best friend, my brother, and I probably know him better than anyone. He's had a lot of women over the years, but I can tell you that he never had a relationship with any of them, never spent extra time just hanging out with them, and never really tried to get to know them, until he met you." Jack paused. "I know your relationship with Tony is none of my business, and he'd probably kick my ass if he knew what I'd said, but I care about the two of you, and I just want you both to be happy. I believe that you make each other happy."

Bianca nodded, desperately wanting to believe Jack, needing to hold on to some measure of hope that this wasn't the end for her and Tony.

"Dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes." Bianca and Jack glanced in Clarke's direction as she walked back into the room and sat on the couch next to Bianca. Reaching for Bianca's hand, Clarke said, "Why don't you stay and have dinner with us? Afterwards, we can talk some more, if you'd like."

Bianca smiled. Leave it to Clarke to always be so sensitive to everybody's feelings, to always try to make everyone feel better. She was sorely tempted to take Clarke up on her offer, still so in need of a sympathetic ear, a strong shoulder to lean on. But Bianca refused to continue to dump her problems on her friends.

"Actually, I think I'm gonna head out. I've already taken up more than enough of your evening. I'm sure you two have better things to do than listen to me all night." Bianca's words were meant to be a joke, to lighten the mood, but the sadness in her tone was evident -- even to her own ears.

"Hey." Clarke gripped her hand tightly, preventing her from standing. "You being here is *never* a problem. You know that."

Bianca glanced at Jack, and the expression on his face confirmed Clarke's words. "Yeah," she finally said. "I do." She picked up her purse. "But it's late, and I've had a pretty long day, so I'm gonna go." Bianca stood. Clarke and Jack followed behind her as she walked to the door. Turning, she hugged Clarke, then Jack.

"Thanks again." She looked between them. "For everything."

"Anytime you need us, you know we're here for you," Jack told her.

After she left Clarke and Jack's house, Bianca got into her car and drove in the opposite direction of her apartment, her entire focus on seeing Tony and trying to make things right between them again.

Chapter Twelve

Tony was about to enter his building when the sound of a familiar voice stopped him.

“Hi, Tony. How’ve you been?”

He turned around and looked at her. “How’s it going, Lisa?” He watched her strut toward him, those long legs moving across the pavement like it was her own personal catwalk. Her raven waist-length hair hung straight down her back and swayed back and forth with each step she took. Her smooth, dark chocolate skin was flawlessly done, and her makeup still looked fresh, even at ten o’clock at night.

“Much better, now that I’ve finally caught up with you.” She smiled, and her even white teeth contrasted with her dark skin. “I just got into town yesterday, and I’ve been trying to reach you since I got here.”

You shouldn’t have. “Oh, yeah?” Tony tried to sound interested. Lisa was a flight attendant he’d met several months ago, and they’d hooked up a few times when she’d been in town. Tony hadn’t seen her since he’d been with Bianca, and he really had no interest in seeing her now.

“Yeah. I was hoping that we could spend some time together before I flew out again this weekend.” She stepped closer until their lips practically touched. “I’ve never met another man who knows how to play like you.”

What Lisa wanted was obvious, and Tony knew exactly where this was headed. For that reason alone he needed to send her on her way. It had been a shitty day, and he was still fucked up in the head over Bianca. The last thing he needed was to complicate matters by getting involved with a piece of ass from his past.

“So, are you gonna invite me in?” Lisa moved even closer; her body brushed suggestively against his.

Still, he needed something to distract him from his thoughts of Bianca that were eating him up inside. If nothing else, Lisa made a damn good distraction.

“Yeah,” he said. “Come on in.”

* * * * *

“Make yourself comfortable.” Tony closed the door behind Lisa. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

He walked into his bedroom and sat on the bed with his head in his hands as he tried to get his shit together. Tony had been fucking since he was fifteen, and not once during that entire time did he ever have to talk himself into getting some pussy.

Lisa was still as gorgeous as she always had been, and from the way she’d been all over him in the elevator, she was still as eager. Yet Tony had no interest in her whatsoever. This shit with Bianca had him even more fucked up than he realized.

Finally, Tony stood and walked out of his bedroom. He heard Lisa in his guest bathroom when he walked past the door. He was still contemplating calling the whole thing off and sending her home when someone knocked on his door. He opened it and found Bianca standing on the other side.

A multitude of emotions flowed through him when he saw her. His body still battled with the lingering anger and the arousal that never seemed to go away whenever she was around. Even in jogging pants, her hair in a ponytail and no makeup, she was more stunning than Lisa could ever hope to be.

Tony didn’t know how long they’d stood there staring at each other before Bianca finally spoke.

“Hi, Tony. Can I come in? I was hoping we could talk about --” Bianca stopped speaking suddenly, and her gaze moved past him.

Tony glanced over his shoulder and saw Lisa, wearing only a towel, lurking in the background, far enough to be out of the way, but close enough to make sure that Bianca saw her there.

He looked at Bianca again. “This isn’t a good time, Bianca.”

She nodded. “Yes, I see that now. Well, don’t worry. I’m leaving. What I had to say obviously wasn’t important. Good-bye, Tony.”

Tony tried to harden himself against the hurt he saw on Bianca’s face. He tried to pretend that he wasn’t affected by the way her beautiful green eyes shone with unshed tears. And when she walked away and left him standing there without a second glance, he tried to convince himself that he didn’t feel his heart shatter into a million pieces.

Tony closed the door and turned to face Lisa just as she dropped her towel on the floor.

"I'm ready to play now." Tony stared at her nude body, perfect by most people's standards, and he felt completely unmoved. She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck; her lips immediately pressed against his, then her tongue slid deep into his mouth.

Finally, she ended the kiss and sank to her knees. Her hands immediately unfastened and unzipped his pants, her mouth finding and covering his cock.

No matter how he tried, Tony just couldn't get into it. Everything from the taste, the smell, the feel of her was wrong, and it left him completely cold.

After several long minutes, he carefully pulled his unresponsive cock from her mouth and lifted her from the floor.

"I'm sorry, Lisa. This isn't going to happen tonight."

"What do you mean?" Her face held the look of a woman who was obviously not used to rejection.

"I mean, I made a mistake when I invited you inside. It's late, I'm tired, and it's time for you to leave now."

"What is this about, Tony? You've never turned me down before." She still stood in the same spot, staring at him in disbelief.

Tony sighed as he readjusted himself and refastened his pants. "Look, Lisa, I'm sorry I wasted your time tonight. Here." He reached into his pocket for his wallet. "Let me pay for a cab for you --"

"Fuck the cab!" she shouted angrily. "This is about that Mexican bitch, isn't it?"

"What did you say?" He looked at her through narrowed eyes, the threat in his tone evident.

"You heard me!" She refused to back down, either too arrogant or too ignorant to realize that she was treading on dangerous ground. "This is about little Ms. Español who just left. Chiquita, Margarita, or whoever she is."

"Her name is Bianca, and she's Brazilian, not Mexican."

"Mexican, Brazilian, what-the-fuck-ever." She waved her hand dismissively. "It makes no difference. All those people are the same, anyway." Disgust filled her voice. "She's probably not even here legally, anyway," she muttered.

Tony stared at her in stunned silence, his anger growing with every passing second.

"Thank you," he finally said, and his voice was deceptively calm. "Thank you for reminding me that ignorance is color-blind, and racists come in all colors, shapes, and sizes, including a prejudiced bitch like you."

"Who do you think --"

Tony cut her off. "If you say another fucking word, I swear I will not be responsible for my actions. Now get your shit and get the fuck out of my house!" He was yelling by the time

he finished speaking. From the fearful look on Lisa's face, it was obvious that she finally realized just how angry he really was.

He practically threw her clothes at her and watched as she hastily dressed before he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to the door.

"The next time you're in town, make sure you lose my number before you get here." Tony slammed the door in her face before she had a chance to respond.

Even after she was gone, Tony still stood there, so pissed off that he wanted to hit something. He was far from naïve, but it never ceased to amaze him that even in this day and age, people still existed who held the same bigoted beliefs that Lisa did.

Shaking his head, Tony headed back to his bedroom, determined to go straight to bed, more than ready to see this fucked-up day come to an end.

Chapter Thirteen

Bianca fumbled with the phone on her nightstand as she tried to answer it and fought the temptation to throw it out of the window instead.

“Bianca, it’s Tony.”

Her eyes snapped open; the sound of Tony’s voice brought her fully awake. “Tony, if you’re calling about last night, don’t bother, okay? I got the message loud and clear.” She’d spent hours trying to erase the image of the other woman in Tony’s condo, wearing just a towel and looking at her with nothing but contempt in her eyes.

“That’s not why I called. Have you seen the news?”

Bianca frowned and glanced at her clock. It was barely five o’clock in the morning. “No. Why?”

“Richard Greenley was killed last night.”

Bianca sat straight up in bed, her heart pounding in her chest. “What? How?”

“The official report is that he was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver while crossing the street after he left a bar late last night.”

Bianca heard the unspoken message in his words. “What about the unofficial report?” She was almost afraid to hear Tony’s response.

“I think we both know the answer to that. Although we’ll never be able to prove it. Like I said, once Dimitryi found out about that story, somebody was going to pay.”

“Jesus...” Bianca just couldn’t believe it. She hated Richard, hated what he’d done to her story, but she didn’t actually want him to die, no matter how much she’d fantasized about it.

She turned on the light next to her bed, suddenly afraid to be in the dark. Every shadow, every noise made her feel jumpy and uneasy.

"Listen, Bianca. I talked to Jack, and he told me what happened with Greenley stealing your notes and making up that story."

Tony's sudden change in subjects caught her off guard. His words caused all the hurt and anger that she'd managed to suppress to rise to the surface again.

"Well, if you'd given me a chance, I would have told you myself."

"Yeah." She heard Tony sigh deeply. "About last night..."

"Tony, please. Just don't. I don't want to talk about last night. And if you mention another word about it, I will hang up this phone right now." Seeing the bony bitch in his house was bad enough. She sure as hell didn't want to hear the gory details.

"I just wanted to apologize, Bianca, that's all."

"I don't need your apology. I already told you that I got it. I know there's nothing between us anymore."

"What if I still want there to be something between us?" he asked quietly. "What if I still want more?"

I do, too, her mind shouted. She wanted to beg him to come over right now and make the ache in her heart go away. Instead, for the first time ever when it came to Tony, Bianca's mind overruled her heart.

"Princess," she whispered.

"What?" The confusion was evident in Tony's voice.

"That first weekend, you gave me a safe word. You told me to use it if you ever hurt me more than I could handle. Well, I'm using it now, Tony." Bianca closed her eyes and swallowed past the lump in her throat as the first of her tears began to trickle from her eyes.

"Everything you ever taught me, everything you ever did with me, was based on mutual trust. The trust between us isn't there anymore. You didn't trust me enough to believe that I wouldn't betray you, and after last night, I don't trust you enough to believe that you're ready to be with just one person. As you said many times, if we don't have trust, then we don't have anything at all. There's so much pain and anger between us right now, Tony. It hurts too much, and I just...I can't take it anymore."

Tony was silent for so long that Bianca began to think that he wasn't on the phone any longer.

"So, where does this leave us?" he finally asked.

"It leaves us in the same place where we were before. As friends. We'll still see each other, still talk to each other, just like we used to. And, in three weeks, we'll both stand up in our best friends' wedding."

"I know you don't want to hear it, but I am sorry, Bianca. I never wanted to hurt you, never meant for things to happen this way between us." She heard Tony's frustrated sigh over the phone before he swore softly. "Listen, I gotta go. I just wanted to tell you to be

careful. In fact, it might be a good idea for you to stay with Clarke and Jack for a little while until some of this stuff settles down. I don't think there's anything to really worry about, but Dimitryi's a crazy son of a bitch, so you can never be too careful. Just because we're not... Well, I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

"Don't worry about me, Tony. I'll be fine."

Bianca barely managed to disconnect the call before she curled into a ball and cried herself back to sleep.

* * * * *

Bianca rushed out the door and down the stairs of her building as she headed to her car. Her latest emotional breakdown had caused her to oversleep, and now she was late for work.

She'd just gotten inside her car when a man's face appeared in her rearview mirror. Bianca screamed and immediately reached for the door handle as Tony's words of warning rang loudly in her ears.

The man reached over the seat and grabbed her. Bianca began to struggle, but he held her steady.

"Calm down!" he demanded. "I don't want to hurt you."

She met his eyes in the mirror, expecting to see danger but finding only desperation instead. Slowly, she calmed down.

"What do you want?"

"My name is Viktor Sikolov. I work for Dimitryi Ivanov, and I need your help."

Chapter Fourteen

"You look beautiful," Bianca told Clarke as she helped her adjust her headpiece.

"You think so?" Clarke beamed and turned around in a slow circle. Her ivory satin spaghetti strap wedding gown fit her curvaceous frame to perfection. The plunging neckline and low-cut keyhole back revealed plenty of skin, and the delicately embroidered flowers adorning the front and back of the dress, leading down to the attached beaded lace train, made it both feminine and sexy, and so very Clarke.

"I know so." Bianca smiled. "Wait until Jack sees you. He won't be able to keep his eyes off of you in that gown."

The look on Clarke's face was pure mischief. "If I'm lucky, he won't be able to keep a lot more than just his eyes off me."

"Somehow, I don't think you have anything to worry about." Bianca snorted with laughter. "Jack can't keep his hands off you on a regular day, let alone your wedding day."

Suddenly, Clarke's face became serious. "Oh, God, B. I can't believe Jackson's actually going to marry me today."

"I can." Bianca blinked back sudden tears. "Jack's no fool. He knows what's good for him. And that's *you*." She wrapped her arms around Clarke and hugged her tight as she remembered all of the shit that Clarke and Jack had gone through over the years just to get to this day. Especially within just the last year.

"I am so thrilled for you, sweetie. You and Jack deserve to be happy."

"Now all we have to do is find someone who makes you just as happy," Clarke whispered back.

Before Bianca could think of a response there was a knock on the dressing room door before it opened slightly.

"Is everybody decent in here?" Clarke's father called out.

"We're fine, Pops." Clarke laughed. "Come on in."

Pops walked in, and Bianca thought her heart would leap out of her chest when she saw Tony behind him.

"Oh, baby girl, look at you!" Pops grinned broadly. "Don't you look beautiful?"

"Thank you, Pops." Clarke hugged him and then stepped back to admire him. "You're looking awfully handsome yourself."

"Wait a minute," Tony interrupted. "Aren't you forgetting somebody here?"

"Oh, that's right," Clarke turned to Bianca with a wink and a smile. "Bianca, that dress is gorgeous on you."

"Hey!" The affronted look on Tony's face made everybody laugh.

"Oh, Tony, I'm just joking." Clarke spoke in between laughter. "Besides, you already know that you look good," Clarke assured him. "You don't need me to tell you."

Bianca couldn't help but agree as she tried hard not to stare at Tony. The man didn't just look good, he looked fucking magnificent. The way he filled out that tuxedo made her salivate.

Since their last conversation, she hadn't seen Tony much during the past three weeks. A new assignment kept him busy, and their paths had only crossed briefly during that time. As she looked at him now, the familiar spark of need, the flame of desire that only he could ignite, flared to life. Suddenly, past memories of them together flooded her thoughts, and she blushed.

As if he were reading her mind, Tony turned, his hooded gaze met hers, and his eyes flashed with the same heat that warmed her cheeks.

"I agree with Clarke." Pops unknowingly interrupted the silent exchange between them. "Bianca, you look beautiful enough to be a bride yourself today." He glanced at Tony. "Don't you think so, Tony?"

Tony didn't respond immediately, his gaze still locked with hers, and she could see Clarke and Pops out of the corner of her eye, looking back and forth between them. Finally, Tony spoke.

"Pops is right. You look beautiful as usual, Bianca." He looked at Clarke. "You both do."

"I just wish your mother was still alive to see you right now." Pops hugged Clarke again. "She'd be so proud of you."

"You're gonna make me cry, Pops." Clarke sniffed and fanned her face with her hand. "And if I do, I'll mess up my makeup and then I'll have to start all over again, and I'll be late for my own wedding. I've waited way too long for this day to let that happen." Clarke gave Pops a watery smile. "Now, let's get this show on the road. My man is waiting for me."

* * * * *

Tony stood at the wedding reception bar, getting more and more pissed off with each passing second. Which of the three pricks standing in front of him should he beat down first?

Studying the three, he realized one of them was Jack's younger brother, Jeff. In all the years Tony had known Jack, he could count on three fingers the number of times he'd seen the man.

Tony knew Jack wasn't particularly close to any of his family, but he seemed to go to great lengths to avoid his brother. As he listened to Jeff's conversation with his asshole friends, Tony could understand why.

"Damn, look at the body on your new sister-in-law." The tall, lanky man with dirty blond hair smiled as he and Jeff stared at Clarke, who stood across the room with Jack talking to a group of people.

The third guy was square and beefy, with a big mouth and an even bigger midsection. He gave Jeff a lewd look.

"You think Jack still likes to share women like he used to when you two were younger?"

"Shit, I hope so!" Jeff laughed. "Man, I would love to get in on the action with Clarke. I never had a black woman before."

"What the fuck did you just say?" Tony demanded, confronting the surprised threesome.

That last comment was the deal breaker. These assholes had to be out of their minds if they thought they could get away with saying shit like that about a woman he considered his sister, and who was now the wife of his best friend.

Jeff managed to find his voice first. "Hey, Tony! How's it going?" Tony ignored Jeff's proffered hand as he nailed him with a hard look.

The family resemblance between the two brothers was unmistakable, but that's where their similarities ended. While Jack was a good man who he was proud to call brother, this one was nothing but a pathetic piece of shit.

The smile on Jeff's face faltered when Tony didn't respond. "Look, man, we were just joking. We didn't mean any harm."

"Oh yeah?" Tony's voice was deceptively calm. "Why don't I just call your brother over, and we can let him decide whether he thinks the things you said about his *wife* were a joke."

The look on Jeff's face would have been comical if Tony wasn't already struggling to control the urge to knock the little bastard on his ass.

"Aw, come on, man! We weren't serious. It was a compliment, really. I mean, Clarke's a beautiful woman. We couldn't help but admire her. I know she's off-limits."

Tony held back. Jeff was obviously scared as hell of Jack -- and with good reason.

“On the other hand, that sweet little señorita right there is a different story.”

There they went again. He’d just started to cool off a degree or two, and Jeff’s little punk friend had to go and fuck everything up again.

Tony knew immediately who he referred to, and his belief was confirmed when he saw the man staring at Bianca, who now stood talking to Clarke.

Before Tony knew it, he’d gotten up close and personal in the blond’s face, so near to the man that he could tell what brand of liquor he’d been drinking.

“The only thing that could possibly bring you more pain than fucking with Clarke is fucking with her,” he growled out, his voice sounding dangerous and threatening to his own ears.

“Jesus, man! I’m sorry. I didn’t know she was with you.”

His garbled words hit Tony like a slap in the face, and he realized that not only did he have the man pressed up against the bar, but he had a death grip on his throat.

Christ.

“Get the fuck out of my sight,” he said to Jeff as he released the man’s throat. “And take your friends with you before I forget that I’m at your brother’s and my best friend’s wedding reception and beat all of your sorry asses.”

After they’d left, Tony remained standing there, trying to get his emotions under control. Despite his desire for it to be different, Tony didn’t have any real claim to Bianca. Yet he was so possessive of her, he was ready to kill a man over her. Hell, he felt like *he* was the one who’d just gotten married.

“What are you doing standing over here, looking like you just lost your best friend?” Tony looked up and saw Jack standing next to him.

“*You’re* my best friend, asshole.” He tried to grumble, but he couldn’t keep the smile off his face at Jack’s words.

“I know,” Jack said drily. “So, what’s your problem?”

“I just finished chatting with your brother,” Tony finally said.

Jack sighed. “What the hell did he do this time?” Before Tony could respond he said, “On second thought, I don’t even want to know.” Tony saw Jack glance in Clarke’s direction. “This is my wedding day, and I’m not trying to spend my honeymoon in jail.”

“Smart man. Besides, I already took care of it.”

“I figured you had,” Jack assured him. “I know you got my back.”

“Always.” Tony nodded and then changed the subject. “So, have your parents gotten used to Clarke yet?”

Jack glanced at him with a slight grimace on his face. “Well, you know how my parents are.”

Tony did, and it still amazed him that a man as open-minded as Jack could have such straitlaced, uptight parents. Tony was pretty sure that was one of the main reasons Jack didn't spend that much time around them.

He wouldn't call them racists outright, but he knew they believed in a time when whites and blacks were separated. Although they always treated him politely whenever they saw him, Tony could tell they weren't thrilled that Jack's best friend was black. And now that Jack had a black wife, well, Tony could only imagine how they felt.

"But it's hard not to like Clarke," Jack said, and they both chuckled. "Between her and Pops, I think they've won them over."

"But enough about me." Jack looked at him. "What's got you all worked up -- besides my brother?"

Tony didn't respond immediately, his attention suddenly captured by Bianca and some asshole who grinned a little too much, looked a little too hard, and got way too comfortably in her face.

"How long are you going to wait before you do something about that?" Jack asked quietly.

Tony met his eyes, not even bothering to act like he didn't know what Jack meant. It had only been three weeks since things ended between Bianca and him, but it felt like years. He missed talking to her, seeing her smile, hearing her laugh. He missed how she felt, how she made him feel. Even now, his body craved her so badly, longed for the connection between them, the bond they used to share. Without it, he felt like he was dying inside without her.

"I wish I knew," he finally said.

"Well, don't wait too long to figure it out, bro, 'cause there are a lot of eager men who are more than willing to take your place." Jack motioned toward Bianca and the group of men that now stood around her.

"I know how easy it is to hide behind the freedom of bachelorhood, pretending that you don't need or want to be tied down by one person for the rest of your life," Jack continued. "But the only person you end up fooling is yourself. And a woman like Bianca isn't going to sit at home and wait around for you to figure out that being with her is more important than being alone." Jack patted him on the shoulder. "Don't let your pride get in the way and cause you to lose the woman you love for good."

* * * * *

"Hey, are you even listening to me?"

Bianca pulled her gaze away from Tony and looked at Clarke.

"Sorry, sweetie." She smiled sheepishly. "What did you say?"

Clarke studied her. "You okay?" she finally asked. "You've been distracted and fluttery all day. I mean, I know why I've been acting that way." Clarke laughed. "But what's going on with you?"

"Uh..." Tony chose that exact moment to enter her line of vision, and like a little puppy, her gaze followed him. She turned back to Clarke, who gave her a knowing look, her face full of understanding.

"You love him, don't you?"

Bianca wanted to deny it, tried to pretend it wasn't true. But every time she looked at Tony, her heart felt like it would burst wide open, and there was no way for her to run from the truth.

He'd owned her body since their first weekend together. It hadn't taken her long before she'd lost her heart and her soul to him as well. He'd consumed her to the point where she'd gladly give up everything for one more kiss, one more touch, one more smile from him.

"I know it's hard to forgive sometimes, especially when someone you care so much about hurts you. Nobody's perfect, B, and everybody makes mistakes. I'm not trying to make excuses for Tony, but he's a good man, and I just don't want you to let your fears cause you to walk away from a chance at happiness."

Clarke's words were dead-on; her friend knew exactly what demons haunted her. Bianca smiled and hugged her.

"Thanks, kiddo." She kissed Clarke on the cheek. "Who knew you were so good at this whole advice giving thing."

"What can I say?" Clarke laughed and linked her arm with Bianca's. "I had a great teacher."

* * * * *

"You know, you really do look beautiful." Tony smiled down at Clarke as they danced. "Jack is a very lucky man."

"Aw, thank you, Tony!" Clarke grinned. "I feel pretty lucky myself." They danced in silence for a while until Clarke finally spoke.

"I hope you know how much you mean to me, T. You've been more of a brother to me over the years than any biological sibling could ever have been. I couldn't love you any more than I already do, even if you were my own blood."

Clarke stopped dancing, and looked at him with serious eyes. "But I gotta be honest with you. In spite of how much I love you, I feel like shaking the shit out of you right now."

Tony looked at her in surprise. "What did I do?"

"It's what you're not doing that's the problem!" Exasperation laced her words. "This situation between you and Bianca is beyond ridiculous. Both of you are walking around like nothing is wrong, when everybody can see that neither one of you is happy."

Tony sighed deeply. First Jack, now Clarke. It was obvious they both planned to chew his ass out before the night was over. "It's not that simple, Clarke." He tried to keep the frustration out of his voice.

Just let it go. Wishful thinking on his part. He'd known Clarke all her life, and it wasn't in her nature to give up on anything.

"Why isn't it?" Clarke demanded. "She loves you, you love her. What's the problem?"

"Did she say she loved me?" Tony was too afraid to even hope that it was true.

"She didn't have to. It's written all over her face -- and yours." He heard Clarke's irritation before she sighed and softened her tone.

"Listen, Tony, I know I'm probably the last person who should give advice on relationships, considering everything that happened between Jackson and me. It's just that I love you and Bianca, and I want what's best for you both."

"I know you do. And I love you, too." Tony hugged Clarke and kissed her on the forehead.

"Hey!" Jack's voice interrupted them. "No kissing my wife without my permission."

Tony smiled as Clarke released him and went straight into Jack's open arms. He kissed her lingeringly on the lips.

"You ready to get out of here yet, Mrs. Parker?" Jack asked.

"I'm more than ready, Mr. Parker." Clarke stared up at him.

Despite Tony's happiness for two of the most important people in his life, he felt a tinge of envy at the amount of love he saw reflected in their eyes for each other.

"All right, all right, break it up," he drawled. "You two are looking at each other like you're about to start coming out of your clothes, and I don't think this is supposed to be that type of party."

Jack seemed reluctant to pull his gaze away from Clarke as he glanced in Tony's direction.

"I think you're right. Come on, baby." Jack kissed Clarke once more. "Let's go and say our good-byes so we can leave."

"Don't worry about it. I got it covered." Tony laughed. "Just get out of here already."

"Thanks, bro." Jack shook his hand and pulled him in for a hug. "I'll see you in a couple of weeks."

"Have fun," he said. "And make sure you take care of my girl."

Jack met his gaze, his expression serious. "With my life," he vowed.

“As it should be.” Tony nodded and extended his fist toward Jack, who tapped it with his own.

Chapter Fifteen

“Here’s the latest information we’ve obtained from our partners at the FBI on Ivanov’s operation right now.” Captain Reyes handed out reports to each member of Tony’s team.

Tony’s attention was immediately drawn to a particular name mentioned in the report. “Who’s this Reggie Peters person, Captain?”

“It would appear Reggie has replaced Andrei Ivanov as the new enforcer in Dimitryi’s organization. So far, Reggie has proven to be even more vicious than Andrei.”

Jesus. Tony rubbed a hand over his face as he recalled an earlier conversation with Bianca and her belief that Reggie was connected to Dimitryi. The information in front of him proved she’d been right all along.

“Captain.” Tony glanced up at the sound of Elizabeth’s voice. “Is there a description or any photos of Reggie Peters?”

Tony looked at his captain, who shook his head. “It seems those people unfortunate enough to encounter Reggie never live long enough to provide a description. And none of our informants have seen Reggie, so they haven’t been able to provide us with anything.”

“What about Viktor Sikolov?” Tony asked. “We’re already running surveillance on him, and I know we have more than enough probable cause to at least bring him in for questioning on extortion and prostitution charges. He’s fairly high up the chain in Dimitryi’s organization, so he might be able to shed some light on Peters.”

Captain Reyes didn’t respond immediately, and for a moment, Tony thought he would say no. They’d disagreed many times over the years on the best way to proceed with a case, and it wouldn’t be the first time the captain refused to authorize a raid that he or Jack had requested, particularly those involving Dimitryi or those associated with him.

“How soon can you set this up?” Captain Reyes finally asked.

"Sikolov meets with his men every Wednesday at that bar on Thirty-Fifth Street in Bridgeport. That's two days from now, so we can hit him then." Tony glanced around the table at the rest of the team, who nodded in agreement.

"Okay," the captain said. "Let's do it."

* * * * *

Tony sat in the surveillance van, barely noticing the background chatter of his teammates. Thoughts of Bianca consumed him and made it hard to focus on much else.

Since Jack and Clarke's wedding a few days ago, he'd spent damn near every night sitting outside her apartment trying to figure out how he'd managed to fuck things up so badly between them, and what he could do to make her understand that losing all of the other women he'd ever known combined paled in comparison to losing her.

Someone whistled softly, and the sound pulled Tony back to the present. "It looks like Viktor brought his girlfriend along." He glanced over at the rest of the team and saw them gathered around a screen.

"Does anybody recognize her?" Eric leaned in closer to the screen.

"Trust me," Ron laughed. "I'd never forget a babe that looked like that."

Something familiar caught Tony's attention, and he moved behind the group to get a better look. When he saw the image on the screen, he released a string of vicious curses. Even wearing a dark wig with her back to the camera, he'd recognize Bianca anywhere.

"We're going in," he barked out to his stunned team. "Right now."

"But..." Ed spoke up. "We hadn't planned to do this for another hour. There's still --"

"The plan just changed." Tony practically yelled, cutting the other man off in mid-sentence. "Now, get your motherfucking shit and move!"

Tony heard the harshness in his voice and saw his teammates' shocked expressions. He made a mental note to apologize to them later.

But at the moment, all he could focus on was Bianca, finding out why she was there, and figuring out a way to get her the hell out of Dodge as quickly as possible before she ended up arrested along with Viktor.

They were out of the van and rushing into the bar within minutes. As soon as he cleared the doorway, Tony searched for her. He saw Bianca running toward the back of the bar and took off in the same direction.

He caught up with her just as she reached the emergency exit. He pushed the door open, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her into the alley outside the bar. He released the door, and it slammed shut behind them.

Tony swung her around and pressed her up against the side of the building. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he whispered harshly in her ear as she struggled against his hold.

"Goddammit, Tony. Let go!" Bianca tried to snatch her arm away, but he wouldn't release her.

"Quiet!" he demanded. "You're not going anywhere until you answer my question."

"I'm helping you! Now let me go!"

Tony stared at her in stunned silence, too shocked to respond.

"Helping me?" He frowned down at her. "What are you talking about?"

The sound of sirens and approaching footsteps interrupted them before Bianca could respond.

"Get your ass out of here," he whispered urgently. "We'll finish this later." He pressed his hand into her back and forced her to run down the alley in the opposite direction of the bar. "Go. Now!" Tony watched until she disappeared around the corner and out of sight.

When he turned around, he found Elizabeth standing behind him, her cool gray eyes studying him intently.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"Just some piece of ass of Viktor's." Tony kept his expression bland, his tone dismissive. "She doesn't know shit. Come on." He headed back into the bar. "Let's wrap this up."

* * * * *

Reggie walked past the four armed guards stationed in the hallway and directly up to the closed door, stopping only long enough to knock once before opening it and going inside.

Dimitryi was seated in a huge leather chair behind his desk with his eyes closed, leaning forward on his elbows, his fingers forming a steeple in front of his face.

To the casual observer, Dimitryi seemed to be in deep thought. But Reggie recognized that look and knew there was a lot more going on with Dimitryi than what could actually be seen at the moment.

"Tate's team raided the bar today." Reggie had a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs in the room and completely ignored the muffled sounds coming from the other side of Dimitryi's desk.

Dimitryi shrugged, his eyes still closed. "Isn't that what we expected them to do?"

"Yes..." Reggie's voice was hesitant.

Dimitryi's eyes slowly opened. "Do I detect a 'but' coming?" he asked, his voice deceptively mild.

Reggie gave a brief nod. "The raid happened earlier than we expected, and our people weren't in place yet..."

"So, Tate and his team are still alive," Dimitryi said flatly.

"Yes, sir," Reggie confirmed.

Neither of them spoke for a moment, and the muted sucking sounds coming from behind Dimitryi's desk had graduated into wet slurping noises that echoed through the otherwise quiet room.

"What about Viktor?" Dimitryi finally asked.

"Alive as well," Reggie said, "and in custody."

"Is he talking?" Dimitryi sounded anxious.

"Our sources say no," Reggie assured him.

Dimitryi paused for a moment. His slightly flushed skin and briefly closed eyes were the only indication he gave that the activity behind his desk had finally come to an end.

"Good." Dimitryi relaxed and sat back in his chair. "Let's keep it that way. You were right about Viktor. He's become more trouble than he's worth. Make sure he's not around to post bail."

"Consider it done." A head appeared from underneath the desk, and Reggie barely spared a glance at the young man who emerged, his eyes cast down as he scurried across the room and out the door.

"Trying out the new merchandise," Dimitryi said in explanation, a slight smile on his lips, his gaze fastened on the young man as he left the room.

Reggie simply nodded, all too familiar with Dimitryi's varied sexual appetite.

"There is one other issue that we need to discuss, Dimitryi."

"What?"

"That reporter from the news station was with Viktor when the raid happened."

"That Mendez whore was there?" Dimitryi's voice held a mixture of surprise and anger.

"Yes, sir."

"What happened to her? Was she arrested as well?"

"No," Reggie replied. "Tate let her go."

"Interesting," Dimitryi commented. Reggie could almost see the wheels turning in his head.

"We have to do something about her, Dimitryi. It's obvious that she hasn't let the story go, even after we took out Greenley. She's still nosing around, and she's getting way too close. Considering how disloyal Viktor has become of late, we have no idea what type of information he may have already passed on to her. The sooner we get rid of her, the better. I would be more than happy to personally take care of her myself."

"I'm sure you would." Dimitryi sounded amused. "And you'll get your chance. But not yet."

Reggie frowned. "I don't --"

"Think, Reggie," Dimitryi interrupted. "This reporter is our link to eliminating Tate, which makes her worth much more to us alive than dead."

"True," Reggie finally conceded, grudgingly acknowledging the wisdom of Dimitryi's words.

"She is beautiful, yes?" Dimitryi asked suddenly.

Reggie hesitated. "Yes...extremely."

"Then she is of even greater value to us." A satisfied smile lit Dimitryi's face. "Once she's served her purpose, we'll make her disappear just like we do with any of our other merchandise. And if she's as beautiful as you say, I'm sure we won't have a problem finding an overseas broker willing to pay any price we name to take her off our hands and get her out of our way -- permanently."

"You are right, as always, Dimitryi." Reggie said respectfully, rising from the chair and walking toward the door. "I will see to all of the arrangements that we discussed."

"And don't worry, Reggie. I'll let you play with her first, before I get rid of her." Dimitryi's amused laughter followed Reggie out of the room.

Chapter Sixteen

“So, you’re telling me that Viktor came to you and said he wants to turn on Dimitryi?” Tony could hear the skepticism in his voice.

He stared across the room to where Bianca sat on her living room couch. Since the raid earlier that day, his thoughts remained so unfocused, his emotions so unstable, he barely managed to concentrate long enough to wrap up the loose ends on the raid before he’d come straight to her apartment. He was determined to find out how in the hell she’d managed to get involved with someone like Viktor.

“Yes,” Bianca said. “He approached me right after Richard was killed.”

“It’s not that I doubt you, Bianca, but are you sure you can actually trust him? I’ve known Viktor Sikolov for a long time, and the man is far from a Boy Scout. He’s been loyal to Dimitryi for years, and I find it hard to believe that he’s had a sudden attack of conscience.” Tony shook his head. “I mean, why does Viktor want out now? It would have to be something pretty damn serious to make him risk Dimitryi’s wrath just so he could get out of his organization.” Although for the life of him, he couldn’t imagine what that might be.

Bianca’s answer shocked him. “Love,” she said simply.

Tony frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Viktor’s in love with a girl at one of the brothels. Several months ago, he made the mistake of telling Dimitryi how he felt about her. Viktor asked Dimitryi to release her, but Dimitryi said no. Then, he offered to buy her freedom, and Dimitryi still refused. Viktor was ordered to stay away from her, and when he disobeyed, Dimitryi punished him by forcing him to watch the girl being raped repeatedly by multiple men.” Bianca shuddered. Revulsion clouded her face and disgust filled her voice.

“Now, all Viktor wants is out. And he’s willing to tell everything he knows about Dimitryi’s operation in exchange for protection for him and the girl.”

Tony stared at Bianca intently. He could see that she truly believed Viktor's story. If she was correct, it could be the break they'd been trying to get in their case against Dimitryi for years.

He sighed. "Okay, let's assume for a moment that he's telling the truth. Why didn't he just come to the police with this, instead of you?" Bianca looked at him like that was the dumbest fucking question in the world.

"He's a criminal, Tony. The information he has doesn't just incriminate Dimitryi, it implicates him as well, and he's scared he'll end up rotting in a jail cell next to Dimitryi. Plus, Dimitryi has eyes and ears everywhere, and Viktor was afraid of confiding in the wrong person and ending up dead. Viktor knew about my connection to Clarke, Jack, and you, so he came to me for help."

"And just when was he planning to do all of this?"

"He's been ready to turn himself in for the past few weeks, but you'd been on an assignment," Bianca explained. "By the time you returned, it was time for Clarke and Jack's wedding. I met with him today to tell him that you were back. I was going to call you to arrange a meeting with him when the raid happened."

"Listen, Bianca. I'm not going to lecture you about the risk you took when you met with a man like Viktor on your own. I want you to know that I really do appreciate what you tried to do here."

Bianca nodded and gave him a small smile. "No problem."

"I'm going to head down to the station and try to talk to him. I'll see what type of deal we can work out." He started toward the door. "By the way" -- he stopped suddenly -- "it looks like you were right about Reggie's connection to Dimitryi."

"Oh, really?" He saw the interest spark in her eyes. "How do you know?"

"I received a report from the FBI that confirmed it a couple of days ago."

"Good." Her smile widened slightly. "Now all you have to do is catch them."

"We will, Bianca." Tony's voice grew serious. "I swear."

They stared at each other for several moments. Neither spoke or moved. Tony finally tore his gaze away from hers and looked at his watch. "I'd better leave."

"Okay." Bianca nodded and started toward the door. Tony followed behind her. He couldn't help but admire the way her short silk robe clung to her body, and how it emphasized the sexy sway of her hips, the sweet curve of her ass. All he could think about was getting lost in the pleasure only she could provide.

Just as Bianca reached for the door, Tony turned his fantasy into reality. He pulled her into his arms and pressed her against the closed door. The feel of her body next to his made him instantly hard, instantly needy.

His hands slid under her robe, and he groaned when he found bare skin. He'd missed her so much, had longed to touch her like this again for so long. Bianca moaned, and the sound vibrated down his spine.

"We shouldn't do this, Tony." The words sounded torn from her, filled with equal amounts of need and anguish. "It's only going to make things worse."

"I know. I can't help it. I just..." Tony began pulling at her robe, the need to see her, to be in her almost overwhelming. He nipped at her exposed skin, wanting to mark her, to claim her, make sure that she knew she belonged to him. He pushed her robe past her shoulders, and it floated to the floor. His hands glided across her body, caressing and worshipping her soft, supple skin.

Bianca's hands started exploring, making him shudder. Her fingers were struggling with the fastenings on his jeans, and with a frustrated moan, she finally gave up, forcing her hand down the front instead, working past his shorts until he felt her soft hands wrapping around his hard cock.

Her touch set Tony on fire, and he reached between them to quickly open his jeans, pushing them down just enough to release his aching erection.

Using both hands, Tony reached between her legs, gripped her thighs, and lifted her off the floor. Bianca locked her legs around his waist; her warm, wet pussy cradled his dick.

He held her tightly as he leaned down, and his mouth claimed hers in a hard, almost bruising, kiss.

Bianca pulled back after a moment, panting hard. "Why can't I stop thinking about you? Why can't I just let you go?" Confusion lined her face. "Why do I have to want you so much, need you so much..." She breathed against his lips.

Her words trailed off, but Tony could see all the things she'd left unsaid shining brightly in her eyes.

"You know why, baby." Tony's voice softened. "And I do, too."

His mouth closed on Bianca's again; his tongue pushed inside as his cock pressed into her heat. She moaned loudly as she began helping, her muscles working, clenching him tightly as she rode him.

He pushed Bianca up against the door and thrust deep over and over. "Look at me."

Bianca's eyes slowly opened, and her passion-filled gaze found his.

"You belong to me," Tony ground out. His hands spread her thighs farther apart as he pumped in and out of her slick, tight passage. "Say it."

"Yesyesyes...yours...please..." Bianca was crying out almost incoherently, riding him desperately.

It was over quickly, ending as explosively as it began. A few strokes later, Bianca pulsed around him, her juices flowing out of her as that sweet pussy massaged his cock.

Tony shot hard, his back bowed, his vision blurred, and he bellowed her name as his seed poured from him into her. Bianca's head fell against his shoulder, her heavy breathing matching the pounding in his chest.

He managed to push away from the door and carried her on shaky legs through her apartment until he reached her bedroom, where he carefully laid her on the bed and followed her down, his dick still hard and buried deep within her.

Almost immediately, Bianca started riding him again, her hips gyrating and grinding against him, her pussy contracting around him.

"Jesus..." He groaned, moving with her, sliding in and out of her silky, wet heat. Shaky fingers reached out and cupped her face.

"What are you doing to me?" he whispered hoarsely, searching her face for answers but finding only the same raging hunger that was consuming him. "God help me...I can't get enough of you, can't stop thinking about you, can't stop needing you..." He started pushing into her again, his hips pumping hard and fast, his fingers tangling in her hair, pulling her face toward his and slamming their mouths together.

Their gazes remained locked as they thrust frantically against each other, their bodies pressed tightly together, their movements wild and ferocious.

Tony rolled so Bianca was on top, and he pushed up and into her snug channel. Bianca's head fell back, and she moaned loudly. She looked so beautiful moving over him, her eyes burning into him, her hair flowing over him. Tony reached up and massaged her breasts. His fingers pinched, tweaked, and rolled her nipples, and his efforts drew moans and whimpers from her.

"Ahh, Tony. So good..." Bianca leaned down; her lips covered his, and her tongue stroked inside his mouth. Her kiss was slow and unhurried, and her taste sweet and savory.

"Come for me," he whispered into her mouth. His hands gripped her hips, and he drove deep inside.

"Tony!" Her strangled cry echoed through the room as her orgasm washed over her.

The sight of Bianca coming mesmerized him; her lithe body shook and shuddered, her sun-kissed skin flushed and glowing, her warm pussy tight and vibrating. It was enough to push him over the edge for the second time as he emptied himself inside her.

Bianca slumped on top of him, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding on tight, inhaling the heady, intoxicating scent of her.

They remained that way for a long while, until Tony heard her slow, steady breathing. Reluctantly, he lifted her off him. His prick slid out of her body, and the sensation was pure agony. Nothing in him wanted to let go of the moment, let go of her.

Carefully, he eased her onto the bed next to him before he pulled off his jeans and tossed them on the floor next to the bed. Grabbing the bedspread, Tony covered them both and drifted off to sleep with her wrapped in his arms.

* * * * *

The vibration of Tony's cell phone woke him a couple hours later. He quietly eased from the bed and picked up his discarded jeans off the floor. Pulling his phone from his pocket, Tony quickly glanced at the number on the display.

"I got good news and bad news," Ed, his teammate, said when he answered. "Which one do you want first?"

"Surprise me." He tried to keep his voice low so he wouldn't disturb Bianca as he made his way to her living room.

"Viktor Sikolov is dead."

Tony paused. "Is that supposed to be the good news or the bad news?" He could almost see his lead going down the drain.

"Yeah, I can see how that could go either way," Ed agreed. "But in this case, it's the bad news."

"How'd it happen?"

"Don't know. They found him down in lockup with his head caved in. He'd been beaten so badly, they almost lost him on the way to the hospital. And just like most criminals on their death beds, Viktor got real chatty and wanted to confess all his sins before he checked out for good."

"I take it that's the good news?" Tony asked as relief washed over him.

"Right on the first try," Ed confirmed. "He told us about another one of Dimitryi's locations."

Tony had no doubt it was the one where Viktor's girlfriend was being held.

"Where is it?"

"Some tattoo parlor just south of Chinatown. You want the address?"

"Yeah, hold on a minute." Tony looked around the room for something to write with. He spotted a notepad and pen on Bianca's cocktail table and walked over to pick them up. "Okay, go ahead." After he wrote the address down, he tore off the sheet of paper and stuck it in his shirt pocket.

"We already have surveillance in place, and we're all good to raid them in the morning." Ed said.

"No." Tony frowned. "We're not waiting that long. I want to hit them before the sun comes up. I'm not giving that fucker a chance to figure it out this time." Or for someone to leak the information to Dimitryi before they arrived.

Tony thought back to their failed raid attempt a few months prior. His instincts told him someone inside the department was feeding information to Dimitryi. That was the only

possible reason he could think of that would explain how Dimitryi always seemed to know about their plans and managed to stay one step ahead of them.

Only he had no clue who might be helping Dimitryi, and he didn't have time to try to figure it out. For now, he'd have to rely on the element of surprise, move in quickly, and hope they arrived before anybody got killed.

Tony pulled on his jeans then looked around the room for his boots. He finally located them next to Bianca's robe on the floor by the door.

"Have you reached the rest of the team?" He pulled the boots on and quickly tied the laces.

"Yeah, I talked to everyone except Elizabeth."

"Okay, keep trying her and coordinate with everyone to meet at the station in thirty minutes. I want this raid to happen no later than three o'clock. That gives us" -- he glanced at his watch -- "about two hours from now to get all of our shit together."

"I'm on it. I'll see you at the station."

"Thanks, man. Later." Tony disconnected the call and walked back to Bianca's room. She'd turned over and was now settled on her stomach with her legs slightly parted. The bedspread no longer covered her, and Tony could see the fluid that coated her inner thighs. It reminded him that he hadn't used a condom, hadn't wanted to use one, and that alone told him just how far gone he was over this woman.

Sighing, Tony turned away from the doorway. He hated like hell to leave her alone, but he had no other choice at the moment.

He walked through her apartment and checked to make sure that all her windows and doors were locked and secured. He didn't like that she stayed alone, didn't like that she lived on the first floor in an old building with even older locks and little security. He didn't like the fact that she hadn't stayed with Clarke and Jack a few weeks ago, like he'd suggested. *Stubborn ass woman.* He was completely, absolutely, positively lost in love with her.

She needed an alarm system, new locks on her windows, and a stronger dead bolt on her door. *She needed to stay with him at his place where he could protect her and keep her safe.* Tony laughed to himself. Somehow, he didn't see that happening anytime soon.

He made a mental list of all the things she needed. If he couldn't convince her to stay somewhere else, he could at least help her make her apartment more secure. He didn't know what he'd do if she... Tony couldn't finish the thought. It was too upsetting to contemplate, too painful to imagine.

As Tony let himself out of her apartment, he felt as if he were leaving a part of himself behind. Bianca was forever imprinted in his heart, in his soul, and he vowed that once this latest situation with Dimitryi was taken care of, they were going to have a serious conversation. He wouldn't lie and promise her that everything between them was going to be perfect, or pretend that there weren't some issues they still needed to work out.

The only thing he knew for certain was that he wouldn't let their past mistakes prevent them from having a future together.

Chapter Seventeen

Shattering glass and splintering wood filled the predawn morning as Tony led his half of the team inside the darkened interior of the tattoo parlor. He heard similar sounds coming from the side of the building and knew the rest of the team were entering through a side door off the parking lot.

They struck swiftly, apprehending the three stunned guards stationed within the small store before any of them could draw their weapons.

As Ed and Ron handcuffed and searched the men, Tony and Eric quickly made their way through the rest of the rooms as they searched for victims and additional threats. The only thing they discovered was a third door, in the rear of the store, sitting slightly ajar.

Tony turned to Eric. "Call for additional backup while I check back here."

At Eric's nod, Tony opened the door and cautiously proceeded down the narrow hallway in the back of the building, stopping briefly at each door he passed, listening for signs of people inside.

As he approached the first corridor off the main hallway, Tony saw movement out of the corner of his eye, and he spun in that direction with his finger on the trigger of his gun. What he saw nearly gave him heart failure.

Bianca stood at a closed door, repeatedly pushing her shoulder against it, as if she were trying to force it open. Her back was to Tony, and he could tell she was too focused on what she was doing to notice him behind her -- just like she didn't know about the man who was practically on top of her, with his gun pointed at the back of her head.

"Just give me a minute," he heard her urgent whisper. "I'll get it open."

"You're not opening shit, bitch!"

Tony saw Bianca jump and turn around. Her eyes widened as she finally realized she wasn't alone.

"Police! Do not fucking move!" he yelled and leveled his gun at the man as he tried to control the blind terror and rage he felt.

The man's head snapped around, and he attempted to redirect his gun at Tony.

"No!" Tony heard Bianca scream at the same time he opened fire, shooting the man several times before he could fire a single round.

He completely ignored the prone man as he sprinted the short distance to Bianca. He pulled her trembling body into his arms and hugged her tightly for a brief moment.

"You okay?" His hands moved restlessly over her, needing to make sure she wasn't hurt before he released her.

"Yeah." Her voice shook when she spoke. "They're in here, Tony. I heard them." Tony saw that her hand still clutched the doorknob, and he finally understood what she meant.

"Okay, I'll get them out." He heard pounding footsteps behind him and Eric calling out his name. "How did you get in here?"

"Through the freight exit." Bianca pointed to the exit sign at the end of the corridor.

"Go," he told her. "Wait for me there. I'll be out in a moment."

Bianca nodded, and he watched her run to the exit, push the door open, and disappear on the other side. She managed to shut the door behind her a second before Eric turned around the corner.

"You okay, Tony?" Eric ran up to him, his focus locked on the body on the floor.

"Yeah, but we need to get this door open." Tony squatted down next to the dead man and searched through his pockets until he found a set of keys.

He stood and tried almost every key on the ring before he finally located the one that unlocked the dead bolt on the door.

"Cover me." Eric kept his gun trained on the door as Tony slowly opened it.

The first sight that greeted him was the group of young women huddled together on the floor in a corner of the small room. Eight pairs of frightened eyes stared back at him, all of them full of tears.

Dingy, threadbare T-shirts and panties barely covered their slight frames, and even with the limited light that filtered into the room, Tony could see the cuts and bruises on their pale skin.

He slowly lowered his gun. "It's okay," he tried to reassure them. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The sounds of additional voices could be heard approaching, and Tony looked up to see several uniformed officers moving down the corridor.

"Eric." He tried to keep his voice calm as he spoke to his teammate. "Have a couple of these officers help you move them into the store and find something to cover them with. Then, call dispatch and let them know we need female officers on the scene."

“Got it.”

“Check every room in the building,” he told the other officers. “Make sure there aren’t any other people hidden in them.”

Tony waited until everyone was busy completing a task before quickly and quietly slipping through the exit door. Once he was inside, he glanced around the small space. The only thing he saw were garbage cans and two steel doors that led outside.

“Bianca?” he called out, keeping his voice low, and he saw her cautiously peek from behind one of the garbage cans.

“Let’s go.” He went to her, gripped her arm, and pulled her toward the doors. “You’re out of here right now.”

Tony pushed the door open and carefully looked around before he led her into the alley. They walked to the end of the building, and Tony peered around the corner at the parking lot. When he didn’t see any other police in the area, he turned to Bianca.

“Where’s your car?”

She pointed in the direction of where she’d parked her silver BMW. The sun hadn’t completely risen yet, and the skies were still dark enough to conceal them as they quickly cut through the lot toward her car.

About a half block away from the building, they reached Bianca’s car. Just as Tony unlocked the doors, he heard his name being called. He turned and found Elizabeth walking toward him.

“I just got Ed’s messages about twenty minutes ago.” She sounded apologetic. “My mother’s sick, and I --”

“It’s cool, Elizabeth,” Tony interrupted. “If you want to make it up to me, you can come up with an excuse for my absence and tell the rest of the team that I’ll meet them at the station in a couple of hours.”

“Sure, Tony. No problem.” Elizabeth looked back and forth between him and Bianca. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks, Elizabeth. I owe you.” Tony helped Bianca into her car and got in on the driver’s side. As he pulled away from the curb, he saw Elizabeth still standing there watching them as he drove down the street.

* * * * *

“We have a problem,” Reggie told Dimitryi as soon as he answered his phone. “The house off of Chinatown just got raided.” Reggie paused. “They have the girls, Dimitryi.”

Dimitryi remained quiet, and his silence terrified Reggie far more than his rants ever did.

“Can they be eliminated?” he finally asked.

“Not at this point, sir. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement are now involved. Agents arrived, and the girls were placed into their custody.”

“I’ve lost far too much because of that black bastard and his partner. But it ends now.” Dimitryi’s voice was cold and dangerous, and it sent a chill through Reggie.

“I’m going to Nevada, and I want all four of them delivered to me immediately. You can have a little fun with the bitches, but I’m going to take care of Tate and Parker personally. And once I’m done,” he snarled, “you can bury what’s left of them in the desert.”

Chapter Eighteen

Tony stood in the shower, shaking like a leaf, barely holding on to his control. On the way to his condo he'd hardly uttered a single word to Bianca, had barely even looked in her direction, as he struggled to get his heart out of his throat and back into his chest where it belonged.

As he drove, he listened to Bianca confirm his suspicion that she hadn't been asleep earlier that night like he'd originally thought. She'd overheard his conversation with Ed. Somehow, she'd managed to make out the address from the notepad he'd written on earlier and learned the location of the raid.

She told him she'd gotten there early and had only intended to watch from her car. While she was waiting for the raid to happen, she saw a guard arrive and take a girl into the back of the building. After the guard left and Tony's team had arrived and moved in, she described how she'd snuck around the building and used the same entrance that she'd seen the guard enter. From there, she'd started searching the rooms for the girls.

By the time Tony reached his condo, he knew all about how she'd ended up in the middle of his raid, and why she'd only done it because she wanted to make sure the girls were found and freed without being hurt or killed.

But every time he got ready to forgive her for doing something so stupid that placed her in unnecessary danger, he'd see an image of that son of a bitch holding a gun to her head, and he knew that if he'd arrived even a minute later, she would already be dead.

It was that knowledge that filled him with such overwhelming anger and fear that it made his knees weak.

The bathroom door opened, and Tony felt a slight breeze as the shower curtains moved. He turned to face Bianca and paused. The confidence and self-assurance she always exuded was gone, and she stood before him looking traumatized and shaken, her eyes red

and watery, as if she'd cried long and hard. All of the anger inside him instantly drained away.

"Come here, baby." Bianca practically collapsed into his arms. She clung tightly to him, and faint tremors vibrated through her body.

Tony backed her against the cool shower tiles; his fingers twined with hers, and he raised them above her head. He pressed his body against hers, his cock already hot and hard between them.

He buried his face against her neck. He could smell the fruity scent of the shampoo and the citrus scent of the soap he kept in his guest bathroom in her wet hair and on her damp skin. His lips traveled up the column of her neck and over her chin until he reached her mouth, and he gave her a gentle, soothing kiss. Their lips separated slowly, their gazes locked together.

"Thank you for saving me," she whispered softly.

"No." Tony frowned. "You don't ever need to thank me for that. Don't you know that I'd do anything for you? *Anything*. All you have to do is look at me, and you fucking *own* me. Haven't you figured that out yet?" Bianca's eyes welled up with tears.

"When I saw you in that hallway, saw his gun pointed at your head, I was so afraid I would lose you..." Tony closed his eyes and released a shuddering breath before he looked into her face again.

"I didn't save you because it was my job, Bianca; I saved you because I love you, and I would die if something ever happened to you."

"Don't..." Bianca closed her eyes tightly and frantically shook her head in denial, her voice weak and pleading. "Don't say that, Tony. *Please*...nobody's ever told me that...ever meant that..."

Reaching out, he held her head steady. "Look at me, goddammit!" Tony demanded. Her red-rimmed eyes snapped open, and her gaze found his. "*I'm* telling you that I love you, and I *mean* it." His voice was low, his tone intense. Bianca opened her mouth, but he cut her off with another kiss before she could speak and then wiped the tears that slowly rolled down her cheeks.

"I know I'm not perfect, Bianca, and God knows, I don't have the best track record when it comes to women. Considering what happened between us, you have every right to hate and not trust me. But I swear to you that I'd gladly walk away from everyone, give up everything for you...for us."

Tony could hear the desperation in his voice, knew he probably seemed pathetic and weak, but it didn't matter. All he cared about was Bianca and making sure she knew how he felt about her, knew how much he needed her.

"You're my last thought when I go to bed, my first thought when I wake up, and damn near every other thought in between." Tony swallowed, his throat tight with emotion. "I need you like I need my next breath."

He kissed her again, long and deep, until she began to whimper softly, her body undulating against his.

Their lips parted reluctantly, and Tony reached behind him to turn off the water. He helped Bianca out of the shower, dried her off, and led her back into his bedroom. There, he took her into his arms again and let his hands roam. He touched her body everywhere.

"Scared me..." He nipped at Bianca's lips, along her jaw. "Promise you won't ever do that again."

She shook her head; a soft moan escaped her lips. "Never...promise..." Her hand wrapped around his erection, and she pumped up and down the hard shaft. "God, Tony." Her movements became frantic, her breathing shallow. "Missed you so much. Need to feel you deep inside me...want you to fill me up..."

Tony groaned; her words, her touch sent shivers through him, nearly causing him to explode.

"Don't worry, I intend to." He growled low against her throat. "But you need to be taught a lesson first."

He sat down on the bed and pulled her facedown across his lap. "Need to show you what's going to happen to you every time you disobey me, every time you put yourself in danger."

His hand slid over one perfect heart-shaped ass cheek and then he let his hand fly, slapping Bianca's ass and leaving a deep pink handprint in his wake.

Bianca bucked on his lap. "Aahhh!"

"Mmm-hmm...that's it," he purred. "Take it...feel it." He slapped the same ass cheek again and again, turning it a dark red.

"Tony!" Bianca jerked. Her back arched, and she thrust her ass toward him.

"I'm right here, baby, giving you what you want...what you need." Tony switched to the other cheek and gave it the same treatment before he started to alternate between them.

"Yes..." Bianca's head tossed from side to side; her low moans filled the room. Her hips thrust back and forth as she humped against his leg. Tony was positive her pussy would be soaking wet if he touched her there.

"I need to come, please..." Bianca begged. She pushed her ass toward his hand, her legs spread further apart, and Tony could see the evidence of her need as her juices ran down her legs.

"Uh-huh...show me." He changed his angle so that his palm landed directly across her pussy several times. She shrieked and cried out.

“Yes...oh, Tony, yes...” Her body convulsed, and she shook and shuddered on top of him as she came.

Tony leaned down and placed kisses over each crimson globe before he gently caressed her tender skin. Bianca eased off his lap, dropped to the floor between his legs, and slid her soft lips down his hard shaft.

“Oh, shit...” Tony groaned. His hands automatically wrapped themselves in her hair and guided her head, silently encouraging her to take more of him into her mouth. The sight of her lips moving back and forth over his dick completely captivated him.

Tony could feel his orgasm catching up with him, threatening to roll right over him, and he quickly eased his cock out of her mouth. Lifting her off the floor, Bianca straddled her legs over his thighs, and he helped her sink down onto his waiting erection.

Their moans and sighs intermingled as they began to move against each other, thrusting and grinding together.

“Tony...love you...” Her whispered words hit him like a fist, completely shattering his self-control. His orgasm erupted with such force it stole his breath and brought tears to his eyes.

Tony was clinging to her, breathing raggedly against her chest, barely able to think or hear past the roaring in his ears and the pounding of his heart. But he was acutely aware of her, sensing when she cried out, felt when she pulsed around his cock, still semi-hard and buried deep inside her.

Finally, Tony lifted his head, held her face between his hands, and kissed her. He leaned back and stared into her green eyes.

“Tell me again...please.” His heart was still thundering in his chest. His voice shook, and his body trembled.

Bianca’s watery gaze met his. “I love you.” She gave him a tremulous smile, but her voice was strong, her eyes sure.

He maneuvered them until they both lay on the bed facing each other, limbs entwined as they held on to one another in silence.

Tony was in a state of shock. He never would have imagined how much it would mean to hear Bianca say those three little words to him, to be able to look into her eyes and know that she meant every single word. To feel the exact same way about her left him speechless.

He thought about how much time he’d spent over the past several months trying to deny what now seemed so obvious, and he couldn’t believe how stupid he’d been to have jeopardized his chance to experience this moment, to have risked his opportunity to be with this woman.

He slid his hand into the back of her hair and brushed his lips across hers. “God, I love you.” Emotions made his voice hoarse. “I’ve never said that to a woman before; never felt that for a woman before...until you.” His mouth covered hers, and he tried to pour

everything he felt for her into their kiss before he slowly leaned away. "You're more than I ever thought I deserved, everything I could ever want, ever wish for."

He eased her onto her back, covering her body with his, kissing and caressing her until they both ached and sought release.

"Tony, please..." He held her gaze and gradually slid inside her, thrusting unhurriedly, loving her slowly and completely, making her moan, making her beg, making her his.

The sounds of their throaty whispers and ragged gasps echoed throughout the room and bounced off the walls, until they blended into cries of pure pleasure and absolute bliss.

Tony collapsed on the bed next to her, too drained to do anything more than wrap his arms around her. They lay together for several long minutes, and he listened to the rapid beating of her heart while he struggled to slow his own racing pulse.

Just as his eyelids became too heavy to hold open and he almost gave in to his body's need for sleep, his cell phone rang and dragged him back into consciousness. He snatched the phone off the bedside table, knowing before he even looked at the number on the display that it was someone from work. He was right. He didn't even bother to answer it, letting it go to voice mail instead.

He needed to get back to work. The rest of the team was probably trying to figure out what the hell was going on, and he knew he was going to have to explain why he'd gone MIA in the middle of his own raid. Hopefully, Elizabeth covered for him like she said she would. If not...well, Tony figured he'd deal with that once he got in.

He looked over at Bianca and found her watching him with sleepy eyes. "You have to go." She didn't really ask a question; it was more like she was acknowledging the obvious.

He sighed, nodded. "Yeah..."

Bianca started to rise out of the bed, and he stopped her. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to get dressed." She frowned in confusion. "You said you had to go."

"Yeah, *I* do. *You* don't have to go anywhere." He pulled her back until she was lying underneath him. "You're tired. Get some rest. You can stay as long as you need to." He'd be fine if she never left again.

A huge yawn suddenly escaped her, as if her body was reacting to the mere mention of rest, and she quickly covered her mouth to stifle it. "I am a little tired. Are you sure?"

Tony answered her with a kiss. His lips and tongue slowly explored her as he tried to commit every taste, every texture of her mouth, to memory.

The sound of his phone ringing again made him groan, and he reluctantly pulled away from her. Tony rested his forehead against hers and stared down at her. "I gotta go." He said it more to himself than to Bianca as he tried to convince his body to move. And it didn't help matters when she looked at him the way she did, those green eyes offering things that he knew he couldn't have if he planned to leave the house anytime in the near future.

God, he didn't want to go. It felt so good to just be there with her, wanting nothing more than to hold her, to look at her, to get lost in her. Damn, he was so whipped.

Finally, he forced himself up and off the bed and started to get dressed. Bianca quietly watched him, her expression half shy, half sexy, and it was giving him a full hard-on, making it extremely difficult to fasten his pants.

"You need to stop looking at me like that, or I'm never going to get out of here." His voice sounded deeper, huskier to his ears, his need obvious in his words.

Bianca laughed a little, blushed a lot. "Sorry."

Tony opened his drawer, rummaged through it a bit before closing it and walking back to the bed. He sat down on the side and held out his hand. "You can use this to lock the door when you leave."

Bianca stared down at the key in his palm and then back at him. "Oh...okay. I'll give it back when I see you later tonight." Her blush got a little deeper, and she looked away. "I meant, if I see you..."

Tony smiled at the look on her face. He cupped her chin and turned her head to meet his eyes. "You'll definitely see me later." He kissed her lips, her nose. "And the key is yours to keep."

Tony grabbed the rest of his things and left the room. He paused at the doorway and turned around. His breath caught at the sight of her lying there. Jesus, she was so fucking beautiful, it just blew him away.

"What's wrong?" She looked at him oddly.

"Nothing. I..." He cleared his throat. "I forgot how good you look in my bed."

The smile she gave him was nearly his undoing, had him ready to drop to his knees and promise her anything, so long as it meant she'd keep looking at him that way. He left before he could make a complete fool of himself, taking fresh images of her with him, a silly grin plastered on his face.

Chapter Nineteen

“Who is he?” Bianca looked up into Traci’s smiling face as she stood in the doorway to Bianca’s office.

“Who is who?” she said innocently.

“Oh, come on.” Traci laughed and walked further into her office. She stopped and rested a hip against the corner of Bianca’s desk. “Only a man could make a woman look the way you’re looking right now.” Traci continued to scrutinize her. “And judging from the smile that was on your face when I walked in, he must be some man.”

“He’s nobody special,” Bianca lied, the words feeling phony on her tongue and sounding false to her ears.

“Well, he may not be special to you, but you’re certainly special to him.” Traci walked out of her office and returned carrying a huge basket filled with fruit shaped like flowers. She sat the bouquet on the desk in front of Bianca.

Bianca knew she was grinning like an idiot, but she couldn’t help it. It was such a simple gesture, and yet it meant so much to her.

“So, open the card already.” Traci held the envelope out to her. Bianca took it from her and pulled out the card inside.

Bianca --

Something to brighten your day the way you’ve brightened my life.

I love you,

T.

P.S. -- Save the chocolate sauce for tonight. I have plans for it involving my tongue and your skin...

"Yeah, you don't think he's special, just like I don't think I need to lose twenty pounds." Traci patted her ample backside. "Honey, I swear, I haven't seen you look this happy in weeks."

Bianca could only laugh, not even bothering to try to deny it. She removed the plastic wrapping off the basket and offered some of the fruit to the other woman.

"So, are we going to meet him tonight?" Traci asked as she chewed on some pineapple shaped like a daisy.

"Tonight?" Bianca gave her a blank look. "What's tonight?"

"Don't even try to get out of it. You know we all get together and go out once a week. After Richard died, we stopped for a few weeks, but now it's on again, and you promised that you'd go the next time we went out." Traci crossed her arms in front of her. "Besides, we're going to that restaurant, Rumba, and every Thursday is Brazilian Night, so you have to go. We need for you to show us how the dances are supposed to be done."

Traci leaned across her desk and whispered. "And, you didn't hear this from me, but Richard wasn't the only guy at the station who wanted you." Traci sat back with a smile. "Make sure you wear your comfortable shoes because they all want to dance with you."

"Are you kidding me?" Bianca stared at her in surprise. "I don't know about all that, Traci," she hedged. "I don't want to give anybody the wrong impression."

"Oh, it'll be fun. Most the guys know they don't really stand a chance with you." Traci wiggled her eyebrows. "And those who don't know will figure it out pretty fast when your boyfriend shows up."

Bianca remembered agreeing to go out with her coworkers, and the restaurant did sound like fun. So did the idea of spending the night out with Tony.

"So, what do you say?" Traci persisted. "Will you be there?"

"I guess I'll come," Bianca said, giving her a smile.

"And you'll bring your boyfriend?" Bianca just shook her head at the hopeful note in Traci's voice.

"I'll see what I can do." She laughed and pulled a chocolate-covered strawberry from her basket. "But I make no promises."

"Good." Traci looked happy as she stood and prepared to leave. She paused at the doorway. "Your man wouldn't happen to have an accent, would he?"

"No." Bianca frowned. Traci's question sent a chill of apprehension down her spine. "Why do you ask?"

"It's just that some guy called several times for you before you got in today, but he wouldn't leave a message. So I thought it was a personal call." She shrugged. "When the gift arrived, I just figured it was from him."

"If it was important, I'm sure he'll call back." She kept her voice light and her expression nonchalant so Traci wouldn't know just how bothered she really was.

"You're right," Traci agreed. She glanced at the basket again. "Well, enjoy your gift. I'll see you later."

"Thanks," Bianca said, distracted. Her thoughts were still on Traci's words. The only person Bianca had known with an accent was Viktor, and she was pretty damn positive that he wasn't the one who'd called, so she had no idea who it might have been. And that's what bothered her.

She glanced at the basket again, and her thoughts shifted to Tony. When she'd finally woken up that morning, she almost thought she'd imagined the past few hours, had only dreamed that she was with Tony again, that he'd told her that he loved her. But when she looked around his familiar bedroom, felt his warm sheets wrapped around her, and smelled his scent on the pillows, she knew it was real.

She'd heard men tell her many times how much they loved how she looked, loved how she felt, loved how she made them feel. But she'd waited all her life for a man to tell her how much he loved *her*. She hugged herself. God, and now that it had finally happened, it felt so much better than she could have imagined, especially when it came from a man that she felt the exact same way about.

Her cell phone rang. Bianca snatched it up and a huge grin spread across her face when she saw the number.

"Hi." She barely recognized her own voice. It sounded all soft and breathless, like a little sex kitten, and it made her blush. She covered her eyes and shook her head. Jesus, she had it bad.

"Hey, baby." Tony's voice was a deep rumble, and it just poured over her, made her want to moan.

"You must have known that I was sitting here thinking about you."

"Oh, yeah?" His voice dipped even lower. "Were they good thoughts or bad thoughts?"

"Definitely good." She cleared her throat. "I got your gift. Wow. It was..."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I know. It was probably kind of sappy and a little over the top, right?"

"No!" she insisted quickly. "It's beautiful." She stared at the bouquet. "Nobody ever..." Her voice trailed off; she hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"I take it that nobody ever did that before," he said quietly. When Bianca didn't respond, he joked, "I see I have a lot of work to do."

"No," she argued. "You don't need to make up for other men's mistakes, Tony."

"I'm not just making up for their mistakes." Tony's voice turned serious. "I'm making up for mine, too."

She heard someone calling Tony's name through the phone. "I hope I didn't cause you to get into trouble at work today."

"Nah, Elizabeth covered for me like she promised, so everything was fine."

Next she heard a man speaking to him, and he sighed. "I can't talk long. I just got another case. A couple of dealers were found dead this morning." He sounded apologetic. "I still want to be with you tonight, but with this new investigation, it'll be pretty late before I can get away."

"The nerve of them to mess up our plans by getting killed," Bianca teased, and Tony laughed.

"Seriously," she continued. "I'm going to be up late anyway, so it won't be a problem."

"You working late, too?" he asked.

"No, I'm going out for dinner and drinks with some of my coworkers." She hesitated. "I thought that once you'd left work, if you wanted to...if you weren't too tired...you could just...well...meet me." Bianca knew she sounded like a complete idiot. She was glad she was speaking to Tony over the phone and didn't have to be in the same room with him at the moment.

"Are you asking me out on a date, Bianca?" She groaned at the amusement she heard in his voice. It took her a moment to realize that she was nodding her head and that Tony couldn't see her response. That was probably a good thing. Her face felt so hot, she was positive it was the same color as the red blouse she was wearing.

"Yes." She swallowed her embarrassment. "I am."

"In that case, I'd love to." Tony sounded pleased. He paused for a moment, and Bianca could hear him talking to someone.

"Listen, baby, I gotta go. Leave a message on my voice mail at home with the information about the restaurant tonight."

"Okay," she promised, "I will."

"And Bianca," he called out before she could hang up. "I want you to know that I meant every word I wrote on that card."

"Oh, yeah?" Bianca was smiling so hard her face hurt. "Even the part about the chocolate sauce?"

Tony chuckled, his voice soft and sexy. "Especially the part about the sauce."

"I love you, Tony," she blurted out. The groaning sound Tony released more than made up for the nervousness that raced through her at saying those three little words for the first time during the light of day.

"I love hearing you say that." Heat filled his low whisper.

"I love saying it." Her voice came out equally soft, equally needy. "I love being able to finally admit it."

“Good. I love you, too. I’ll see you later.” A soft click told her that the call disconnected, and she leaned back in her chair, staring at nothing for several long seconds, feeling so excited she was damn near giddy. She wished Clarke was back from her honeymoon so she could tell her that the search was over. She’d found the man who made her happy.

She was still daydreaming when the phone on her desk suddenly rang, startling her, and she quickly picked it up.

“Bianca Mendez.” Silence greeted her. She glanced at the display on the phone. No number listed. The call had been transferred to her from the in-house operator.

“Hello? Is anybody there?” She knew someone was on the line; she could hear noises in the background.

“Is this Ms. Mendez?” The caller’s words sounded slightly muffled, as if he were trying to disguise his voice, but Bianca clearly detected his accent. She immediately went on alert, certain that this was the same person who’d called for her earlier.

“Yes. Who is this?” she demanded.

“I’m a friend of Viktor’s.” *I don’t think so.* She’d spent enough time with Viktor over the past few weeks to know that he didn’t have any friends. He’d trusted exactly two people, and she was one of them. She didn’t know who the fuck this guy was, but he definitely hadn’t been a friend of Viktor’s.

“Viktor?” She kept her voice purposely bland. “Viktor who?”

“Listen, I need help, and Viktor told me to call you. He said I could trust you.”

“Really?” *Was that before or after he was killed?* “Listen, Mr...what’s your name?”

A dial tone was her response as the caller abruptly hung up. The earlier apprehension she’d felt had given way to outright fear.

Bianca hesitated for a brief moment before she dialed Tony’s number. She hated to bother him again. It was obvious that he was busy, but there was something very wrong with this situation, one too many coincidences that had her more than a little shaken.

After several rings, Bianca heard the automated voice prompt that said the call was being transferred to his voice mail. She debated with herself about whether to leave a message. She was still nervous and on edge about everything that had happened lately, and Bianca didn’t want to leave some crazy, frantic message that would worry Tony unnecessarily, especially if she was just overreacting.

Bianca sighed. *I’ll tell him tonight.* She hung up the phone and ignored the voice inside her that warned her this was far from an overreaction.

* * * * *

Bianca had gone shopping on her lunch break, trying to find something to wear for later that evening. She'd used up just about her entire lunch hour before she'd finally found an outfit in a pricey little boutique on Michigan Avenue.

Now she stood at the register, waiting for the cashier to ring up her purchase. She had the feeling that she was being watched. Bianca lowered her eyes and tried to subtly peer through her lashes. She caught several men throughout the room looking at her. The intent behind their gazes was clearly written on their faces -- purely, and only, interested -- so she dismissed them.

What she felt was different, darker, and it made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Bianca tried to brush it off as her imagination, but the feeling wouldn't go away. And after last night...she didn't even want to think about that. The images were still too fresh in her head. She couldn't afford to take anything for granted, couldn't be too cautious.

"Here you go, ma'am." The cashier held her bag and receipt out to her.

"Thank you." Bianca smiled and took her purchase. As she headed out of the store, she thought of her new outfit, and it made her feel a little better. It cost a fortune, but damn, she looked good in it.

Besides, she reasoned, this was the first time she was going out on a date -- a *real* date -- with Tony, and she wanted to look nice. Memories of the last time they tried to go out on a date intruded on her thoughts, and she pushed them to the side, knowing in her heart that this time would be different.

She was about a block away from work when the sensation that she was being watched became so overwhelming, she had to fight the urge to run. With her heart racing, she picked up her pace, quickly maneuvering through the busy downtown streets. She was only feet away from the entrance to her building when a hand suddenly landed on her arm.

"Gotcha!" Bianca spun around with her heart in her mouth and a scream on her lips. She looked into Traci's surprised face.

"Jesus, Traci!" Bianca snapped. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"I'm so sorry!" Traci looked genuinely concerned, and Bianca immediately felt bad for yelling at her.

"I saw you earlier coming out of one of the stores," Traci continued. "I tried to catch up with you, but you were moving so fast. Oh, honey, I really am sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, it's okay, Traci." Bianca tried to assure her. "I'm sorry for yelling at you. I was just startled when you came up behind me." She forced a smile. "I'm fine. Really."

"You don't need to apologize." Traci patted her on the arm. "You had every right to be upset. It was my fault. I don't know what I was thinking. Considering how many crazy people there are out there these days, you can never be too careful."

You have no idea. Bianca pasted a smile on and followed the other woman into the building.

* * * * *

"I followed her like you told me, but there were so many people around that I didn't want to risk grabbing her and making a scene." Reggie listened in silence as Yuri spoke, his voice clearly nervous. Yuri was a good worker, so there was no reason to doubt that everything had happened exactly as he'd claimed.

But it didn't change the fact that they still didn't have the woman, and Dimitryi was growing increasingly impatient. He was known for a lot of things, but patience was not one of them.

If there was one thing Reggie knew for certain, it was that the longer Dimitryi was kept waiting, the more someone would suffer because of it. And Reggie had no intention of being on the receiving end of his wrath.

"Where is she now?" Reggie asked.

"At work," Yuri said. "She met up with another woman outside, and they went in together."

"Were you able to set up a meeting with her?"

"No." Yuri sounded almost reluctant to answer. "But I did try. I spoke to her and told her that I knew Viktor, just like you told me, but she didn't go for it. I'm sorry, Reggie." The nervousness in Yuri's voice had given way to fear. "I'll keep following her. I'll have her before the end of the night. I promise. I won't let you down again."

"Of course you won't," Reggie said calmly. "Not if you wish to continue breathing."

Chapter Twenty

By the time Tony tied up some loose ends on his raid from the previous night and wrapped up for the evening on his latest case, it was well after ten o'clock that evening. He'd been awake for nearly twenty-four hours. He was hungry and bone tired, but he'd been waiting all day to see Bianca again, and there was no way in hell he'd miss being with her like he'd promised.

Tony made a U-turn in the middle of the street so that he could pull up in front of the restaurant for valet parking. When he stepped out of his truck, he saw several well-dressed couples entering the restaurant and heard the sounds of Latin music coming from inside.

He glanced down at his simple attire of jeans and a shirt. He hadn't had time to go home and change, so he'd taken a quick shower at the police station and changed into the extra set of clothes that he kept in his locker at work. Tony just hoped the restaurant didn't have a dress code.

He went through the revolving doors and up the stairs, his eyes slowly adjusting to the darkened interior of the restaurant.

"Is that you, Tony? What's up, man?" Tony turned around at the sound of his name.

"Hey, Hector. How's it going?" He grinned and shook the other man's hand. Hector was also a cop, and Tony had worked with him for several years before he transferred to another precinct. "Are you here for dinner?"

"No. I work here doing security a few nights a week."

"I've never been here before." Tony looked around the crowded room. "How is it?"

"It's nice." Hector smiled. "Great music, great food." A woman walked in their direction, her gaze locked on Tony. She gave him a flirty smile, her body so close that her bare arm brushed against him when she passed.

"And they definitely have great views." Hector leaned past Tony, still admiring the woman's retreating form. "You sure you wanna let her slip away? She obviously likes you."

"Nah, I'm good." Tony remembered a time in the not so distant past when he would have been all over a woman like that. But those days were over, and that was fine by him.

"Well, there are plenty of other women here to keep you distracted," Hector continued, "like that tall one on the dance floor." Tony's gaze followed Hector's to the dance floor, where people were dancing to live band music.

It was immediately obvious who Hector meant. Bianca was instantly recognizable, even among the throng of dancers. The band finished its song, and Tony saw her make her way through the crowd of people.

His jaw literally dropped open when he saw what she was wearing. The black leather pants sat low on her waist and were so tight they looked painted on. The soft-looking leather molded to her long legs like a second skin and made her already great ass look even better. The black halter top she wore crisscrossed in the front and dipped so low he could almost see her belly button.

Jesus, she made his mouth water and, just that quick, his hunger for food vanished, replaced instead with a different type of hunger that had nothing to do with eating.

Before she'd reached her destination, a man stepped into her path. His arms wrapped around her waist, and he attempted to pull her back onto the dance floor.

Tony watched with mounting fury as Bianca shook her head and tried to move around him, but he wouldn't let her go.

"What the hell is that guy --" Hector started, but Tony was halfway to the dance floor before the other man could finish his sentence.

He reached Bianca in time to see her struggling to get free of the man's hold. "Get your goddamned hands off of me and leave me the fuck alone!"

"What's the matter, baby, I'm not good enough for you to dance with?" he said, his words slightly slurred. One hand slid down Bianca's hip and headed toward her ass.

Tony grabbed the man's wrist and jerked him away. "What are you, drunk *and* stupid?" He placed himself between the man and Bianca. "The lady said no. Now leave her alone."

The man looked up at Tony with glassy and unfocused eyes. "Who's gonna make me, tough guy? You?" he sneered, his tone belligerent. He tried to puff out his chest and stand a little taller, sound a little harder. But he'd had so much to drink that he practically swayed on his feet.

Tony sighed inwardly. Some motherfuckers just didn't know when to take a hint, when to back down. "Trust me," he warned, "you don't want to do this with me. I guarantee it won't end well for you." He was teetering on the brink of complete violence, and this fucking idiot had no idea how close he was to getting the shit kicked out of him. "You need to walk away. Right now."

"Tony's right." Tony glanced at Hector, who'd joined their group. "You've had enough, and you're outta here."

"Look, why don't you two rent-a-cops go fuck yourselves and bother some of the other guests so the lady and I can have a little fun."

"Wrong answer." Tony twisted the man's arm behind his back, applying just enough pressure on his wrist to cause him severe agony, but not enough to actually break it. The man howled out in pain and dropped to his knees.

"Oh, shit, dude!" he yelled. "You're breaking my arm!"

Tony used his free hand to pull out his badge, and he bent down until he was eye level with the man. "You should have walked away like I told you. Now you're going to jail." He held his badge in front of the man's face.

"What...jail? Whoa, wait a minute." It never failed to amuse Tony how the threat of facing jail time always seemed to have an immediate sobering effect on a person.

"I wasn't trying to hurt her. I swear." The man grimaced, the pain he was feeling written all over his face. "I only did it because this guy bet me a hundred bucks that I couldn't get her to dance with me. He told me that he'd pay me that plus another four hundred bucks if I could get her to come outside with me."

What the fuck? "What guy?" Tony demanded and tightened his grip a little, as the sound of what he'd just been told pissed him off a lot. Five hundred bucks was a hell of a lot of money to pay for a bet to see if a guy could convince a woman to dance and go outside with him.

"I don't know who he is. I swear!"

"Get up." Tony forced the man to his feet, still maintaining a grip on his arm. "What's your name?"

"Jonathan...my name's Jonathan."

"Where is this guy, Jonathan? Show him to me."

The man looked around the room and then back to Tony. "He's not here. He was standing right over there." He nodded in the direction of the bar. "But he's gone now."

"What did he look like?" Hector spoke up.

"I don't know...just some guy with an accent." That made Tony pause. Apparently Bianca felt the same way.

"What kind of accent?" she asked, her voice sounding strange, and Tony turned to study her.

"I'm not sure." Tony turned his attention to the guy. "German, Russian...something European." Tony glanced at Bianca again. Something flashed in her eyes, but it was gone too quickly for him to identify it.

He looked at Hector, who shrugged. "He's probably long gone by now." Hector pulled out his cell phone. "I'll call for a squad car to pick up this one."

"No...wait." Bianca spoke up. "He's an asshole, Tony, but I don't want him to go to jail."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yeah." She spoke softly, and Tony saw her glance around at the onlookers who were watching them. "I just want him to go away and leave us alone so we can enjoy the rest of our night together."

Tony sighed and reluctantly agreed. "It looks like things are looking up for you," he said to Jonathan. "The lady is a lot more forgiving than I am, and she just saved your ass from a night in hell." He leaned near Jonathan's face, his voice hard and angry. "But let this be a lesson. Never touch what doesn't belong to you." He slowly released Jonathan's arm and watched as Hector escorted him out of the restaurant.

Tony put his arms around Bianca and held her close. Her arms wrapped around his waist.

"You okay?" He kissed her temple.

"Yeah." She pressed her face against his shoulder for a moment before she met his eyes again.

"You seem to be doing this a lot lately."

"What's that?"

"Rescuing me." She smiled slightly and looked away.

"Hey." He lifted her chin. "I'd do anything for you. Come on." He gave her a quick kiss. "This place is closing in an hour, and I'm not leaving until I get a chance to eat and dance with you."

* * * * *

It was a few minutes after one o'clock in the morning, and Tony stood with Hector outside the now closed restaurant while Bianca said good night to her one remaining coworker.

"You know you blew a lot of guys' fantasies tonight," Hector told him.

"Oh, yeah?" He glanced at Hector. "How did I do that?"

"By leaving with the most beautiful woman in the room." The other man laughed. "You and Jack were always known for claiming the best-looking women around."

"Since Jack just got married, I'm pretty sure his player card has been cancelled."

"So I'd heard. Well, I guess that means more women for you now, right?" Hector winked and smiled.

"Nope, not for me." Tony's attention was focused on Bianca. "I voluntarily turned in my own card already."

"I can't say I blame you." Hector was looking in her direction as well. "If I had a woman like her to go home to, I'd be unavailable myself."

After Tony said good-bye to Hector, he joined Bianca and her coworker.

"You remember Traci, right?" Bianca asked.

"Of course." Tony smiled. It was hard not to remember her. Traci was an attractive woman with ample curves, a great smile, and an infectious laugh. "It was nice meeting you tonight."

"Same here." She smiled again. "I just wanted to say that whatever you're doing to put that look on her face, keep doing it."

"Traci!" Even in the dark, Tony saw the blush coloring Bianca's cheeks.

"And the fruit bouquet was a very nice touch," Traci continued, completely ignoring Bianca. Tony chuckled as the other woman sighed wistfully.

"Fine, thoughtful, protective." Traci gave him a long look. Her rich brown face split into a huge grin, revealing the deepest dimples Tony had ever seen. "I don't know about your horizontal technique, but judging from the way Bianca's been smiling lately, I'd say it's pretty damn spectacular."

Bianca groaned and covered her eyes as Tony erupted in laughter. Yeah, he definitely liked Traci.

"Seriously," Traci said to Bianca, "you are one lucky girl. Tony could arrest me anytime."

* * * * *

Tony and Bianca rode in comfortable silence as he drove to his condo.

"Thank you for coming out with me tonight, Tony." Bianca's words were softly spoken, and he brought their entwined fingers to his lips.

"Thank you for inviting me." Tony glanced at her briefly, noting the tired lines around her eyes. "How are you doing, baby?" Concern laced his words. A lot had happened to Bianca in the past day, and he suspected it was wearing on her more than even she realized. "You're not still bothered by that prick from earlier, are you?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I'm not worried about him." The hesitation Tony heard in her voice made him glance at her again.

"Then what *are* you worried about?" he asked.

"Do you remember when that guy, Jonathan, said he'd made a bet with a man who had an accent?"

Oh, he definitely remembered, and that shit didn't sit well with him at all. Considering everything that had happened lately with his investigation and Bianca's research on Dimitryi, it just seemed a little too coincidental that a man with an European accent happened to show up at the same restaurant where she was and offer some drunken asshole a nice chunk of change to get Bianca outside, where she'd be alone without anyone around to hear her if she screamed.

Tony hadn't commented again about it, because all he had were wild conspiracy theories and no proof to back any of them up. And he didn't want to upset Bianca any more than she probably already was.

"Yeah," he finally responded. "I remember."

"Well, earlier today after I talked to you, I got a call at work. The guy said he was a friend of Viktor's, and that Viktor told him to call me. He kept trying to get me to meet with him, but I wouldn't. I knew he was lying. Viktor never mentioned any friends to me." She paused. "That guy had an accent, too. And when I went out for lunch today, I kept feeling like I was being followed. At first, I thought I was being paranoid because of last night." She grew quiet. "But after what happened tonight, I'm just not so sure anymore."

This new information from Bianca made his theories seem a hell of a lot more real, and his concerns about her safety that much more critical.

"Something's not right here," Tony said. "I don't think it's safe for you to be alone right now. I want you to stay with me until we can figure out what's going on." Tony would be fine if she never left again, but he kept that to himself for the moment.

He couldn't help but notice how Bianca sat quietly staring out the window, as if she were trying to avoid responding to him.

Several minutes of tense silence passed before Tony finally couldn't take it anymore. He pulled the truck onto the shoulder of the expressway, put it in park, and turned to Bianca. "What is it?"

She sighed heavily. "It's just that a few weeks ago, we were barely exchanging pleasantries with each other. Now we're in love with each other and talking about moving in together." When she turned and looked at Tony, so much uncertainty filled her eyes that it made his heart skip a few beats. "Our best friends just got married, and I want to make sure that we haven't gotten caught up in the afterglow of their happiness."

"Is that what you think is happening here?"

"I don't know, Tony, I just... So much has happened between us in such a short period of time, and I..."

Tony swallowed hard. "You what?" *Please don't say you've changed your mind about us.*

"I just don't want you to suddenly look up and realize that you've made a mistake and get tired of me."

"What?" Tony had prepared himself to hear her say a lot of things, but not that. Never that. He unfastened his seat belt, then hers, and pulled her into his arms. His lips sought hers, desperate to erase any doubts she had about his feelings for her.

"Love you," he breathed out. "Never get tired of you, never get enough."

Bianca released a helpless little whimper as her hands slid over his head, down his neck, and around his shoulders. Her grip was amazingly strong as she clutched him tightly against her.

"I love you so much. God, I missed you...couldn't wait to see you...need you so much..."

Tony kissed down her throat. His hands slid into the opening of her top, pushing the material to the side and revealing her bare breasts. His head dipped lower, and he sucked one, then the other nipple into his mouth. His actions drew soft moans from her.

He felt one of Bianca's hands between his legs, rubbing his erection through his jeans. She'd just started working his zipper down when light suddenly filled the truck.

"Fuck." Tony practically snarled as he glanced out the back window at the squad car that had pulled up behind them. He pulled Bianca's top together to cover her breasts and then he attempted to readjust his cock so that what they'd been doing wouldn't be so obvious.

He looked up just as the officer approached the door. He lowered the window and displayed his badge.

"How's it going?" The officer smiled and leaned into the window. "You need any help?"

"No, we're good. We were about to drive off when you pulled up," Tony lied easily. He tried not to bristle when the man's gaze lingered on Bianca just a little too long for his liking.

"Thanks for checking, Officer" -- Tony peered up at the man's name tag -- "Buchanan, but I got it from here." Tony's words were polite, but his tone was far from appreciative.

"Oh, sure...no problem." The officer finally took the hint and stepped away from the truck. Tony waited until he'd returned to his squad car and had driven away before he turned to Bianca. She sat there with her hand over her mouth, her body shaking with barely contained laughter.

"Oh, you thought that was funny, huh?" His words had very little heat in them, and he struggled to hold back his own smile. Bianca nodded and collapsed into a fit of giggles. His laughter soon joined hers.

"Come here." He cupped her jaw and urged her head toward his. The kiss he gave her was slow and deep. He gently pulled away and took a shuddering breath. "God, woman, you make me crazy. I can't think straight when I'm around you." He kissed her again. "If it wasn't so late, I'd take you to the club. It's been too long since you were all tied up and ready for me. I can't wait to see you like that again."

Bianca moaned. "Me, too. I can't wait to do it again, can't wait to feel it again." She kissed him, and it made his dick throb. "I missed your lessons, Tony," she whispered against his lips. "I dream about them, ache for them."

"I know, baby. Don't worry. I have plenty of things at home to take the edge off until we go back." His lips covered hers again, his kiss hot and hungry. "Come on, let's get out of here." Tony finally pulled away and refastened their seat belts. "Before I decide that I don't care that we're still in the truck and give the other drivers a sight they never expected to see on Lakeshore Drive before."

"Tony?" He paused at the sound of his name and turned to Bianca again.

"Is that offer to stay at your place for a while still open?" she asked quietly.

"You know it is, baby."

"Good." She gave him a heart-stopping smile. "Then I accept."

Tony leaned over and stole one more kiss before he started up the truck and pulled back onto the expressway. Getting Bianca to stay with him was a start. Now all Tony had to do was figure out how to turn "for a while" into forever.

Chapter Twenty-One

A slight glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye was the only warning Tony had that he and Bianca weren't alone when they entered his condo. He barely had time to react before pain exploded behind his ear and made his knees buckle.

A large forearm wrapped across his throat, the pressure brutal and excruciating, cutting off his air supply and causing his vision to blur.

"Tony!" Bianca's screams brought him back from the edge of unconsciousness, and a burst of adrenaline pumped through him as his instincts took over.

He slammed his head back and into his attacker's face. The sound of breaking bone and a painful groan told him he'd made contact. The hold on his throat eased just enough for him to take a deep breath, and he used the momentum to lunge backward and slam the attacker's body against the door.

The man made a whooshing sound as the air was forced from his lungs, and his grip loosened even more. Tony's elbow came up, and he swung it backward, connecting with the side of the man's head several times until the man's hold on him disappeared completely.

"No!" Bianca's screams made him want to roar with rage. *Hold on, baby.* Tony spun and grabbed the next man, slammed him to the floor, and smashed his fist repeatedly into the man's face.

"You come into my motherfucking house, you attack my woman. I'm going to fucking kill you!" he bellowed, landing several more punches before he was jerked backward. Landing heavily on his back, the weight of a new attacker rolled on top of him and pinned him to the floor. Tony found himself staring up at a gun with a silencer pointed at his face.

"What are you gonna do now, huh, cop?" Amusement filled the man's accented words. "Looks like I'm on top now, so that puts me in charge."

Tony never broke eye contact with the man as he carefully slid one hand beneath him, searching for his own gun but settling for his knife instead. He eased it from his belt and released the safety before he whipped his hand up and sank the blade into the man's neck.

Blood sprayed from the wound as the man's mouth opened in a soundless scream. He slowly fell to the side, his dead body hitting the floor hard.

A shadow moved, and Tony grabbed the dead man's gun. He turned quickly onto his side, pulling the trigger as he went, the sound of the gun firing muffled by the silencer. The man jerked several times as the bullets pierced his flesh, and his lifeless body crashed to the floor.

Tony scrambled to his feet. "Bianca! Baby, where are you?" He frantically raced from room to room in the house searching for her, before finally throwing the front door wide open and running into the hallway. He looked in both directions but couldn't find Bianca anywhere.

She was gone. Those bastards took her.

Fuck.

* * * * *

Bianca struggled desperately against the two men holding her as they dragged her, kicking and clawing, from Tony's condo.

When they reached the stairwell, they picked her up and carried her down the steps. Bianca continued fighting, raking her nails against every available piece of skin she could reach and sinking her teeth deeply into the hand that covered her mouth.

"Ahh!" the man howled, and Bianca cried out in pain when he struck her hard across the face, tasting blood in her mouth.

"Hey!" the other man snapped, and Bianca immediately recognized his voice as the person who'd called her at work. "Reggie said no hitting!"

"The fucking bitch bit me!" The other man grimaced in pain, and Bianca could see the places on his hand where her teeth had sunk deep enough to puncture the skin. "Goddamned wildcat." He glared down at Bianca.

"Yeah, well, you hurt her, and it's your funeral," the other man warned.

A car waited at the curb when they exited the building. The man holding her legs released them long enough to open the car door, and they forced her inside. The car pulled away as soon as the door closed, and Bianca immediately reached for the handle and attempted to get the door open.

"Don't waste your time, Ms. Mendez. You're not going anywhere until I say so."

Bianca's hands froze on the door, and she slowly looked to the side at the man sitting next to her.

"So, we finally meet. Although I feel like we know each other already, considering how much I've heard about you, and how much I'm sure Viktor told you about me."

Bianca had seen pictures of Dimitryi before, but they were always grainy and unclear and never provided a true image of the actual man. He was quite handsome, actually, in a dangerous sort of way. She judged him to be in his fifties, with fashionably long salt-and-pepper hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He wore a custom-made suit that Bianca was pretty certain cost more than her rent and car payment combined.

"Reggie was right; you truly are exquisite. I can see why Tate wants you so badly." He smiled, but his ice blue eyes remained cold and deadly. "Our overseas partners will be fighting amongst themselves for the chance to own you." He reached out and brushed his fingers across her face, his touch like acid, and Bianca had to brace herself to keep from flinching away.

"But I think I'll let Reggie have a little fun with you first. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Reggie?"

Movement from the front seat made Bianca look up. "Oh, my God..." Her blood ran cold at the sight of Reggie as outrage and horror warred within her. Reggie stared back at her with lifeless eyes and an expressionless face before addressing Dimitryi. "It'd be my pleasure, Dimitryi."

Dimitryi chuckled. "Nobody gives out pleasure quite like Reggie, as you'll soon experience firsthand for yourself."

The smile Reggie gave her was cruel and filled with promises of pain and torture. She knew that whatever Reggie showed her wouldn't have shit to do with pleasure.

"You..." Bianca took a deep breath. Her voice shook so bad, she could barely form words. "You won't get away with this. Tony will find you, and when he does, he'll kill you."

Dimitryi laughed hard, as if he were genuinely amused. "Tate has trained you well, I see. I have to commend him and Parker for picking pathetic whores who are amazingly loyal to them."

Anger immediately outweighed Bianca's fear as she listened to him, and it made her want to rip off his balls, scratch out his eyes. "I seem to recall that it was one of those 'pathetic whores' who managed to outsmart your son long enough for Jack to find him and put him down like the worthless animal he was."

Bianca took satisfaction in watching the arrogant smile slide from Dimitryi's face as she quickly prepared herself for his wrath.

"I admit I underestimated that little cunt of Parker's. But my son, Guillermo, was weak; he allowed himself to become distracted by a beautiful face, and it ended up costing him his life." The look he gave Bianca sent a sliver of ice-cold terror down her spine. "But rest assured, Ms. Mendez, that although I find you positively stunning, I have absolutely no reservations about killing you where you sit."

Bianca didn't consider herself an overly religious person, but she closed her eyes and found herself silently praying. She was certain she was sitting in the presence of pure evil.

The sound of ringing interrupted her prayers, followed by the muted sounds of Reggie speaking softly on the phone. She opened her eyes when the car pulled to a stop a few blocks from Tony's condo. She watched Reggie get out of the car and walk over to another car that had pulled up behind them. Reggie disappeared inside the car, and it pulled away from the curb.

Before Bianca had a chance to worry about what was going on, something pinched her. She looked down to see a needle sliding out of her arm.

"What..." Her mouth suddenly felt like it had been filled with glue as she struggled to speak. A warm haze settled over her, and her vision dimmed as she fought to keep her eyes open.

Oh, God, I'm going to die... even as she slipped further and further into darkness, the idea of never waking again didn't frighten her nearly as much as the thought of never again seeing the man who'd come to mean so much to her. "Tony..." she finally managed to whisper.

"Don't worry." Dimitryi's image began to blur and fade away. "You'll be reunited with Tate and your other friends very soon."

* * * * *

Tony raced past the elevators on his floor and headed straight to the exit. He ran down the four flights of stairs, three and four steps at a time, until he reached the first floor.

Exiting the building, he scanned the block in both directions and found nothing but empty streets and virtually nonexistent traffic at the early, predawn hour.

He turned and ran back up the stairs. Anger and dread fueled each step he took. It flowed through his body and formed a knot in his chest so big he could barely breathe.

Just as he reached his condo, his cell phone rang. "You and your partner have taken away many things that belonged to me," the caller said when he answered. "And now I have something that belongs to you." The call disconnected before Tony had a chance to respond. The display on his phone said "Unavailable," but Tony didn't need to see the number to identify the caller.

Dimitryi Ivanov.

Tony wanted to roar as unadulterated fury pulsed through him. So much rage filled him; he ached to rip that son of a bitch apart, piece by piece. As he stormed through the darkened living room, he completely ignored the two dead bodies on the floor. He vowed that before this was over, he'd do just that.

He was about to turn on the light in his bedroom when the faint creaking sound of his front door opening had him spinning around and retracing his steps. He still held the gun

he'd taken from one of his attackers in his hand. Tony lifted the weapon in front of him as he cautiously entered the living room.

He caught a glimpse of blonde hair just as he passed his bedroom doorway, and he placed his gun to the back of the intruder's head.

"You picked the wrong man to fuck with." His voice sounded lethal and venomous, his words hard as ice: cold, sharp, and dangerous enough to kill.

"Tony, it's me...Elizabeth." She slowly turned around with her hands in the air, and Tony found himself staring into the face of his temporary partner.

Tony kept his gun trained on her. "What the fuck are you doing here, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth looked around the room and back at him. "What in the hell happened here, Tony?"

"I asked you a question, Elizabeth. What are you doing here?" His patience and self-control were vapor-thin, and it wouldn't take very much to send him right over the edge.

"I'm sorry. I..." Elizabeth's eyes focused on the gun in his hand. "Ed gave me your address. I know it's late, but I needed to talk to you right away about Dimitryi." Tony stared at her for several long seconds as suspicion and doubt warred within him. Slowly, reluctantly, he lowered his gun and walked past Elizabeth until he reached one of the dead men on the floor. Squatting down, he searched through the man's pockets.

"You couldn't call me on the phone and tell me?" he demanded. When he didn't find anything, he moved on to the next body.

"No," Elizabeth said quietly. "I couldn't."

"Really? And why is that?" Tony spoke absently as he pulled a wallet from one of the man's pockets. Suddenly, he felt a stinging sensation in the back of his neck. He turned to find Elizabeth standing behind him with a syringe in her hand.

"Because Dimitryi wants to see you personally." She sounded like she was speaking from inside of a cave. Tony tried to lift his gun, but his arm felt like it was weighted down with a thousand pounds of lead.

"You thought you were so tough, didn't you, Tate? And look at you now. You're fucking pathetic." Elizabeth's distorted image appeared over him. "What made you think you were ever smart enough to take down a man like Dimitryi? You and Parker together didn't have balls big enough to accomplish something like that."

Two men soon joined her. "See if you can get him downstairs and into the car without ending up like these two."

Tony vaguely felt the men lift him off of the floor. "Don't worry, Reggie," one of the men assured her. "We'll take care of him."

"Bitch...kill you..." Tony's words came out slurred and barely audible as the impact of the man's words sank in. He made one last futile attempt to get away, but the drug she'd given him had turned his body into dead weight and made his efforts completely useless.

“Just relax, Tate.” She chuckled. “By the time you wake up, you’ll be with your precious little whore again.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cabo San Lucas, Mexico

“Gracias, Arnando.” Clarke smiled at the waiter as he sat her drink on the table in front of her.

“You’re welcome, señorita.” The man grinned, his eyes glued to Clarke.

“*Señora*.” Jack practically growled and held up Clarke’s left hand to display the wedding ring on her finger. Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Clarke cover her mouth with her other hand, no doubt trying to hide a huge smile.

The man wisely excused himself, and Jack glanced over at Clarke. Her efforts at trying not to laugh at him weren’t very successful.

“I’m glad you found that amusing.” He tried to scowl, but the smile on his face made it difficult, especially when she sat there looking so fucking incredible in that bikini.

Clarke had practically lived outside in the sun since they’d arrived in Mexico almost a week ago. Her golden brown skin now tanned a deep bronze, her skin was a perfect complement to the metallic gold material of the bikini she wore. The sun even kissed her hair, and she now sported golden streaks throughout her naturally curly hair.

Clarke leaned toward him, and Jack watched, mesmerized, as her breasts strained against the delicate material of her bikini top.

“Don’t be jealous, baby.” Her lips brushed across his. “You know I only have eyes for you.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not *your* eyes that I’m worried about.” Jack wanted to hold on to his indignation, in spite of the fact that his cock was already rock hard in his swimming trunks. Before either of them could comment further, his ringing cell phone intruded.

The expression on Clarke's face instantly changed from arousal to annoyance. "I thought we made a deal about the phones, Jackson."

Shit. She was right, of course. They'd agreed to check their messages only once a day and leave their phones off and in their room at all times. But old habits were hard to break, and he'd put the phone into his pocket instead of in the safe before they left their room.

Jack was still trying to decide if he was going to answer or ignore the call when Clarke made the decision for him. She reached into his pocket, pulled out the phone, and put it to her ear.

"This had better be important," she snapped. "We are trying to enjoy our honeymoon." She grew quiet, and Jack didn't like the look that suddenly developed in her hazel eyes. She lowered the phone from her ear and covered the receiver with her hand. "It's your captain." She held the phone out to him. "He said it's an emergency."

Jack immediately took the phone from her. "Captain, this is Jack. What's going on?"

"Jack, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but we have a problem." Jack felt dread settle in his gut as he waited for his captain to continue. "Tony is missing, and so is that reporter friend of your wife."

"When?" Jack glanced at Clarke; her eyes were wide and anxious as she nervously stared at him.

"All we know was that it was sometime overnight. A neighbor going out for a jog found Tony's door wide open around five-thirty this morning." Captain Reyes paused. "Dimitryi's involved, Jack. Our guys found obvious signs of a struggle and two dead bodies inside. We made a positive identification on them, and they both have connections to him."

"We'll leave for Chicago today."

"No!" His captain's urgent response made Jack pause. "We can't wait that long. We have a confirmation that Dimitryi is in Nevada, and we're positive that he has Tony and the woman there as well. I can have a car and backup available to meet you at the airport in Vegas by seven o'clock your time." Jack looked at his watch. That gave him a little over four hours to get there.

"I'll be there."

"Your wife is coming with you, isn't she?"

Not if I can help it. "We'll see," he said out loud, knowing that Clarke was hanging on to his every word.

"I know you're concerned about her safety, but don't worry. I'm sending enough men to watch over her as well."

Jack didn't comment any further, except to make arrangements to meet the captain's men. Once he ended the call, Jack took a deep breath and met Clarke's eyes.

"Dimitryi got Tony and Bianca, didn't he?" Clarke's voice was matter-of-fact, her words spoken more like a statement than a question. He answered anyway.

"Yeah, he did. But I'm going to get them back. I promise." He stood up from the table and waited for her to rise as well before he started toward their room.

"I'm going with you," she said from behind him.

Jack glanced over his shoulder at her. "No, you're not. You're going back to Chicago, and you're going to stay with Pops where it's safe until I get back."

"The only place I'm going is with you," she replied hotly.

Jack stopped abruptly and turned to her. "Clarke, baby, I don't have time to argue with you on this. I need to get to Vegas in the next couple of hours, and the only way I can do that is to fly. We both know you and planes don't mix well."

Clarke grabbed his arm and prevented him from walking away. "Let me tell you something, Jackson Davis Parker. Because of that bastard, half of my family is missing. You think I'm just going to sit at home and do nothing? I. Am. Going. End of discussion. And if it means that I have to fly in order to get there, so be it. You can drug me, sedate me, hell, you can knock me over the head if you need to, but you will take me with you. Are we clear?"

Clarke was like a walking storm, her voice booming like thunder, her eyes flashing like lightning. Her stubborn persistence made him pissed and proud all at once. God, he loved this woman.

Jack pulled her into his arms and gave her a quick, hard kiss. "Yeah, baby, we're clear."

She nodded. "Good. Now, move your ass. We have a plane to catch."

* * * * *

Las Vegas, Nevada

Bianca looked around the room where she was being held, hoping to find something she could use as a weapon, yet knowing that she probably wouldn't. Other than a table and a couple of chairs, the space was empty. Four large support beams were the only structures in the room that provided some degree of protection to hide behind.

The sound of the door opening made Bianca tense, and she tried to make herself as small as possible in the corner of the room where she sat on the floor. Two men entered, carrying Tony between them. They carelessly dumped him on the floor, where he lay still and unmoving.

As the men turned to leave, one stopped and looked in her direction. He gave her a slow lecherous smile and started in her direction.

"Kirill!" the other man called out and motioned toward the camera mounted on the wall. The guy sighed and nodded grudgingly before he gave Bianca one more look. "Next time." He winked and blew her a kiss as he left the room.

The door had barely closed before she scooted across the floor as fast as her bound hands and legs would allow. She reached Tony and lay next to him on the floor. She leaned her head against his. "Tony, baby, wake up," she whispered near his ear. "Don't leave me, please... I'm so scared. I need you."

"Right here...not going anywhere. Can't get rid of me that easy..." Tony's words were thick and groggy.

Bianca made a sound that was a cross between a laugh and a sob as she kissed him all over his face. Tony blinked his eyes several times, as if to clear his vision, and then he slowly tried to sit up.

"You okay?" His gaze finally settled on her.

"Yes...I am now." Tony started to reply just as the door suddenly opened. Dimitryi walked in, followed by Reggie and several armed guards. Two of the men immediately grabbed Tony and yanked him to his feet.

"Let him go!" Her cries were ignored as two other guards held her down, and she was forced to watch helplessly as the others took turns hitting Tony. After what seemed like an eternity, Dimitryi spoke.

"Enough!" Dimitryi casually walked up to Tony until he stood directly in front of him. "Anthony Tate, I must say what a pleasure it is to finally meet you in person. You and your partner have proven to be worthy adversaries over the years."

"Yeah, well, the pleasure is all yours, motherfucker, so you'd better enjoy it while you're still breathing, 'cause you won't be for much longer." Bianca flinched and bit back a scream when one of the guards struck Tony in the face. He turned his head to the side and spit, his saliva filled with blood.

"I've been waiting for this day for a very long time," Dimitryi continued, as if Tony hadn't spoken. "In fact, I'm planning a celebration tonight in honor of you and Parker -- who will be here very shortly, by the way." Bianca froze at his words, knowing that if they had Jack, it was certain they had Clarke as well. She glanced at Tony. The muscle pulsing in his jaw was the only acknowledgment she saw him give to Dimitryi's comment.

Bianca wished she could borrow some of Tony's courage at the moment, because fear held her in a grip so tight, it was practically strangling her. Her heart raced so fast and beat so hard in her chest, she was convinced it was going to explode at any second.

As if he knew she needed reassurance, Tony's gaze found hers. She saw nothing but love and strength for her in his eyes. His feelings helped turn what was quickly becoming an unimaginable situation into something a little more bearable.

Just as her fears began to ease slightly, Dimitryi's next words confirmed her thoughts about Jack and Clarke and turned her stomach at the same time.

"And we'll let your women provide the entertainment." A chorus of lewd chuckles echoed around the room. Dimitryi turned and pinned Bianca with a repulsive smile that

made her skin crawl. "After all, I did promise Reggie that she could have a little fun, and she's been so looking forward to spending some quality time with them tonight."

He walked toward her. Bianca tried to move away from his touch, but the guards held her steady. "I must say, you and Parker have impeccable taste in women," he murmured as he trailed his fingers down the opening of her top. He made a point to stop and caress her breasts along the way.

"Fuck you, you pathetic piece of shit." She spoke through clenched teeth, her hatred for him making her see red.

"And she's the perfect balance as well; an innocent angel on the outside, a filthy slut on the inside."

"I hope you enjoyed yourself just now." Tony's voice was deadly calm. "You make sure you hold onto that memory, because you're going to be taking it with you to your grave very shortly."

Before Dimitryi could respond, the door opened again, and a new guard entered. The man's heavily accented voice floated across the room, but Tony couldn't understand the Russian words he spoke. Once he'd finished speaking, a huge grin suddenly spread across Dimitryi's face.

"It seems that Parker and his wife have arrived in Vegas, and they should be at the house shortly." He motioned for everyone to leave. At the door, he turned to Tony. "I'll give you two a chance to be alone for the last time, while I leave to prepare for my latest guests."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jack stared out the window of the SUV he and Clarke rode in and watched the Nevada desert roll by. They'd been met at their gate by two men who confirmed that they'd been sent by Captain Reyes.

He turned his attention away from the scenery to study Clarke. For a woman who was completely terrified of planes, she'd done remarkably well. Even after all this time, she still managed to amaze him.

His cell phone vibrated, and Jack shifted to pull it out of his pocket. "This is Parker."

"Jack, this is Agent Matt Sullivan." Jack hadn't spoken to the FBI agent since they'd worked together to rescue Clarke when she got kidnapped months ago.

"Listen carefully, Jack." Matt spoke urgently before Jack could say a word. "You've been set up. The men you are with aren't there to help you. They work for Dimitryi Ivanov." Jack was grateful for the sunglasses he wore; otherwise, every ounce of fury and betrayal he felt would be on display for everyone to see.

Jack saw the driver glance at him in the rearview mirror, and he knew that he needed to say something quick before they got suspicious. "How's it going, Pops," he lied. "Yeah, Mexico is beautiful."

"I take it they're watching you," Matt observed.

"Oh, you know it." Jack put as much false cheerfulness into his voice as he could muster, when all he really wanted to do was kill each of the bastards with his bare hands.

"We're en route to intercept your vehicle. Our ETA is about five minutes. Do you have a weapon?"

"Of course. She's always by my side." He looked at Clarke, who stared at him in curiosity. Jack was sure she knew something was up. They'd talked to her father just before they left their hotel in Mexico and filled him in on what was going on.

“Good. You’re going to need it. Stay alert, Jack. We’ll be there as soon as we can.” Matt disconnected the call, but Jack kept talking.

“No problem. I’ll give Clarke a kiss for you.” He hung up and leaned over to kiss Clarke on the cheek.

“Something’s wrong.” Her voice was only a hint of a whisper in his ear. Jack nodded slightly. He held on to Clarke, trying to stay calm for her sake while fighting his own increasing unease.

It seemed as if hours had gone by before Jack finally noticed a car pull alongside their SUV. He caught a glimpse of someone in the passenger seat who looked a lot like Matt. Jack was still trying to figure out if he was correct when the car suddenly sped up, cut in front of their SUV, and slammed on its brakes.

Jack barely had time to register what was happening when the loud and jarring impact of metal crashing against metal had him bracing his feet firmly against the floor to keep Clarke and himself from slamming into the front seat.

The airbags in the SUV deployed when it crashed into the vehicle in front of it, and that seemed to stun the men long enough for Jack to pull his gun.

“Get down!” He shoved Clarke to the floor of the vehicle as he fired his gun, putting a hole in the back of the man’s head sitting directly in front of him. Jack immediately changed the focus of his aim to the man in the driver’s seat.

“Don’t you fucking move!” he yelled, barely hearing the sounds of smashing glass as agents broke windows and forced the doors open.

“It’s Matt, Jack. Are either of you hurt?” Jack kept his weapon trained at the man’s head until an agent forced the man from the car. He finally lowered his weapon and reached for Clarke. She wrapped herself around him, clinging desperately, her body trembling against his.

“You okay?”

She nodded. Jack glanced over her shoulder at Matt. “We’re good.” He helped Clarke from the SUV and into the back of another waiting car. Another agent sat in the driver’s seat. Matt climbed into the passenger seat.

“What the fuck is going on, Matt?” Jack demanded as the car drove away. Matt turned and looked at him over the seat.

“I know you have a lot of questions, but let’s hold off on them until we get you to the safe house.”

“I’m not holding off on shit until you tell me if you’ve found Tony and Bianca yet.” Insistent, he refused to back down until he knew for certain they were both safe.

Matt sighed heavily. “We don’t have them yet.” He held up a hand to ward off Jack’s next comment. “But we know where they are. We have an agent working undercover who’s confirmed seeing them, and we should have them very soon. I promise you.”

* * * * *

Tony leaned against the wall next to Bianca and stole a brief kiss, needing to feel connected to her, even if he couldn't actually hold her in his arms like he so desperately wanted.

Bianca leaned back. "Oh, God, baby, are you okay?" Her worried gaze moved over him like a caress, and he felt soothed by the love and concern he saw in her eyes and heard in her voice.

Tony's head throbbed like a son of a bitch, but there was no way in hell he'd tell her that. Instead, he leaned over and kissed her again. "Don't worry, baby." He tried to sound reassuring. "I'm fine."

The sound of someone at the door made Tony lean his body in front of Bianca. The cocktail of drugs that bitch, Elizabeth/Reggie, had given him still lingered in his system, and they made his body feel sluggish and unsteady. With his bound wrists and ankles, he knew he was virtually defenseless, making it next to impossible to protect himself against an attack. But he would gladly give his own life in order to save hers.

In spite of his weakened physical condition, Tony's mind was incredibly focused and fueled with a burning need for revenge. As he glanced at Bianca, trying so hard to be brave and not reveal just how terrified he knew she must be, Tony promised himself that before this was all over, he would personally see to it that Dimitryi paid for every second of pain and suffering he'd caused her.

The door finally opened, and the guard who'd notified Dimitryi of Jack and Clarke's arrival slipped into the room and closed the door behind him. He quickly walked toward them, pulling a knife out of his belt along the way.

"It's okay, I'm a friend." The heavy accent he'd spoken with earlier was completely gone. "My name is Tomas, and I work with Agent Sullivan." He squatted down in front of them. "Hold tight." He made quick work of cutting through the duct tape securing their ankles and feet.

Tony flexed his arms and legs, wincing in pain as circulation began to move through his limbs again. After a brief moment, he slowly stood, his legs shaky, and helped Bianca to her feet. She wrapped her arms around him, and he held on as tight as he could.

"We need to get outta here right now." The man's voice was tense and urgent. "It won't be long before Dimitryi figures out that your friends aren't on their way here like I said. And when he does, he'll be looking for all three of us."

"If they're not headed here, where are they?" Tony asked.

"Don't worry. Matt has them. They're much safer than we are at the moment."

Bending down, Tomas lifted his pant leg and removed a gun holstered to his ankle. "Here." He held the weapon out to Tony. "Take this." Tony tucked it into the waist of his pants and concealed it with his shirt.

"We're in the basement of one of Dimitryi's clubs, and we have to get back to the ground floor in order to get out." Tony and Bianca followed the man toward the door when it suddenly flew open.

"Going somewhere, Tomas?" Reggie walked into the room. Three guards followed closely behind her, their weapons drawn.

"Dimitryi asked me to get them ready for transport." Tomas's accent was back as he slipped into his role. But Tony could tell by the look on her face that Reggie wasn't buying any part of what he'd just said.

Tony had been in enough of these situations to recognize when things were about to go from really bad to totally fucked up in the blink of an eye, and he had no intention of allowing Bianca, Tomas, or himself to end up on the receiving end of any of it.

He was easing the weapon from underneath his shirt when he saw Reggie give Tomas a slow smile.

"I don't think so," she said calmly, and Tony had just enough time to push Bianca out of the way before he opened fire. His bullets found two of the guards, and he pointed his gun at the third guard who now had Tomas pinned to the floor.

Before he could take a shot, the sound of bullets flying past his head from the doorway drove him to the floor. He crouched down behind one of the support beams in the room as he returned fire in that direction until the man cried out in pain, and the hallway became silent.

Tony had been so focused on eliminating the guards that he'd lost track of Reggie, never realizing that she'd moved into position behind him until it was too late. He felt hard, cold steel press against the back of his head.

"Say good night, Tate." Tony never had a chance to feel the fear of dying before he heard shots, and the gun at his head suddenly disappeared. When he looked down, he saw Reggie's dead body on the floor next to him.

"Good night, you fucking bitch." He stared up at Bianca in shock. He didn't know when or how she'd managed to get hold of a weapon, but there she stood, a gun clutched in her hands as pure hatred burned in her eyes.

Tony stood and went to Bianca and pulled her into his arms. "It's okay, baby...it's over." She had a death grip on the gun, and it took him a moment to convince her to let it go. "You did so great." He spoke soothingly, kissed her gently, and finally managed to get the weapon away from her. "I'm so proud of you."

"I had to stop her." He heard the slight quiver in her whispered words, felt the tremor in her body. "She killed Jazmin, she wanted to kill you. I couldn't let her hurt you, let her..."

“Shh, I know.” Tony held her face between his hands. “You saved my ass, baby.” He looked into her beautiful green eyes, shining brightly with unshed tears. “Thank you...love you so much.”

“Guys, we gotta go before Dimitryi gets back and brings more guards with him.” Tony glanced at Tomas over Bianca’s head and nodded.

“You’re right.” He urged Bianca toward the door. “Come on, baby. Let’s get the fuck outta here.”

Once they were out of the room, Tomas locked the door and led the way down the hallway. Tony covered the rear, and they kept Bianca safely between the two of them.

They reached the stairs and ran up the flights until they reached the emergency exit door on the ground level.

“There should be a car waiting for us once we get outside. When I open this door, it’s going to set off the alarm, and that will bring a shitload of security from inside the club this way. So we gotta stay close and move fast. Otherwise, they’ll be all over us before we can get clear of this place and reach our ride outta here.”

Tony smiled grimly. “Then let’s do this.” They each grabbed one of Bianca’s hands, and Tomas wasted no time pushing the door open. The sound of the blaring alarm had them all wincing as they ran from the club into the dry heat of the Nevada night.

As soon as they were outside, they tried to blend in with the crowds of people on the street, moving as quickly as they could without drawing too much attention to themselves.

They’d walked about a half block when they heard a piercing whistle, and they looked in the direction of the sound. “Yes!” Tomas’s face split into a huge grin. “Let’s go!” They followed as Tomas zigzagged in and out of people and traffic until they reached a minivan parked across the street. The side door slid open, and they all quickly piled inside the van as the driver pulled away from the curb. Tony held Bianca in his lap, refusing to let her go, even for a second.

“Yes, sir, we have them.” One of the other agents in the minivan was speaking on a cell phone. “Everybody okay?” he asked. Tony looked at Bianca. Even bumped, bruised, and disheveled, she was still the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen.

“You good, baby?” He rubbed a smudge of dirt off her cheek and placed a kiss on her hair. She nodded, and her grip on him tightened slightly as if she never wanted to let him go. And that was more than fine with Tony.

He looked at the agent. “Yeah, we’re fine.”

“They’re okay.” The agent spoke into the phone again. “Our ETA is about fifteen minutes.” He disconnected the call and looked in their direction.

“I’m Agent Tim O’Neil, and this” -- he motioned toward the man driving the minivan -- “is my partner, Agent Jeremy Connors. It’s good to see everyone alive and in one piece. We’re headed to a safe house now. We should be there shortly.”

“What about Jack and Clarke?” Tony asked.

“Matt is taking them to the house as well. We’ll debrief once everyone arrives.”

“Hey.” Tomas spoke to Tony. “You did damn good work back there.”

“Thanks, man.” Tony reached out to shake Tomas’s hand. “So did you. You can cover my ass anytime.”

“It seems to me like you already have the perfect person for that job.” Tomas grinned at Bianca.

“She is pretty incredible, isn’t she?” Tony smiled at a blushing Bianca.

“Beautiful and deadly.” Tomas gave her an admiring look. “I hope you don’t mind me saying that you truly are an amazing woman.” He turned and smiled at Tony. “And you are one lucky son of a bitch.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tony and Bianca were the first to arrive at the house, and they took advantage of the private time to have a shower and wash away the filth, violence, and death from the past day.

Bianca followed Tony from the bathroom to the bedroom, and she went willingly into his arms when he opened them for her.

She raised her face, and Tony bent and covered her lips with his. The kiss was deep and long and needy. Neither of them was willing to let it end until they were both breathless and gasping for air.

Tony backed her against the bed until she fell on it, his large body coming to gently rest on top of hers. Bianca moaned into his mouth, her hands stroking along his strong back and muscled ass, her pussy wet and aching, rubbing against his hard, thick shaft.

Tony leaned back and looked into her eyes. "I love you," he whispered against her lips.

She smiled and looked into the most beautiful brown eyes she'd ever seen. "I love you, too...with all my heart."

Tony's eyes closed, and she felt him shudder as he released a breath. When they opened, he leaned down and kissed her again.

"Fuck me, Tony," she begged softly.

"Uh-huh. Anything you want." Tony continued to love on her, his hands and mouth driving her insane.

"You, Tony. I want you. Need you...love you so much," she moaned.

Bianca held his gaze as he slowly pushed inside her until they were finally pressed tightly together, skin against skin. The contact of their heated bodies made them both moan.

Tony made love to her with so much need and passion that it made her whimper, made her beg, made her cry as she lost herself in him: the taste of his mouth, the strength of his body, the pleasure of his touch.

They came together, hearts pounding, pulses racing, calling out each other's name as pleasure, pure and powerful, flowed through them and filled their bodies, hearts, and souls with love.

They were lying quietly together, sharing whispered words, unhurried kisses, and leisurely touches when they suddenly heard Clarke's voice moments before she burst into the room.

Bianca released a startled screech and pulled the covers tightly around them. Clarke made a similar sound before she covered her eyes with her hands.

"Oh, shit! God, I'm so sorry!" Embarrassment rang clear in Clarke's voice. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I was just so worried; I needed to see for myself that you were both okay."

"I tried to keep her outta here." Jack appeared in the doorway behind Clarke and gave them an apologetic smile. "But she couldn't wait to see you two." He pulled Clarke against him. "Neither of us could."

"It's cool." Tony chuckled. "The feeling's mutual."

"Listen, we're gonna go get cleaned up and give you two a chance to finish up here." A slow smile spread across Jack's face. "Should we plan on a quick shower, or do we have time for a long bath?"

Bianca groaned, and she heard Tony's deep laugh. "You still got jokes, I see."

"I do try." Jack's laughter joined Tony's.

"We'll see you in ten minutes, funny man."

Jack's voice sobered. "Seriously, bro, it's good to see you. You too, beautiful." Bianca smiled when he winked at her and led Clarke from the room.

* * * * *

Clarke and Jack were already in the living room when Tony and Bianca walked in. Tony shook Matt's hand and introduced him to Bianca.

"You arrived right on time. We just finished catching Jack and Clarke up on what's been happening since they've been gone," Matt informed Tony as he and Bianca found a seat together on the couch.

"Yeah, and I see you couldn't even stay out of trouble for a week, could you?" Jack grinned at Tony.

"You know I like to keep things interesting."

“Well, the really interesting stuff is what you don’t know yet,” Matt said. “Tony, when your team raided that house a few days ago, one of the women you recovered was the girlfriend of Viktor Sikolov.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I suspected she would be in the group, since Viktor gave us the location, but I hadn’t had a chance to confirm it.”

“As it turns out,” Matt continued, “Viktor gave her a disk with a shitload of information on it that she kept with her at all times.”

Bianca looked confused. “How did she manage to do that? I mean, she was probably used for sex all the time, right?” She looked around at the group. “How was she able to keep the disk safe and hidden away without anyone finding it and taking it away from her?”

“Viktor was a lot smarter than we gave him credit for,” Matt said. “Apparently, the information was kept on some fancy-looking little memory stick disguised to look like a necklace that she wore all the time. He’d also managed to sneak a cell phone to her that was sewn into the lining of a purse he’d given her. She had instructions to use it only if something happened to him. She was to contact Bianca and turn the disk over to her.”

Matt glanced at Bianca. “It seems other than his girlfriend, you were the only person Viktor truly trusted. Now that we’ve seen the information on the disk, I can see why.” He paused and turned his attention back to Tony and Jack.

“As you’ve figured out by now, Reggie Peters and Elizabeth Peterson are the same person. We believe her real name is Regina Elizabeth Petrova, but she’s used so many variations over the years that we’re not completely certain at this point. What we do know is that prior to the two aliases she’s been using, she was also known as Regina Peterova. Sound familiar?”

“Wasn’t that the name of Andrei’s girlfriend?” Tony asked.

“One and the same,” Matt confirmed. “It would seem our old friend Andrei taught her well. She stepped right into his place once he died.”

“Well, thanks to Bianca, we don’t have to worry about her any longer.” Tomas spoke up. Everyone looked in Bianca’s direction. “Man, I’m so glad you’re on our team.” Tomas smiled. “You are definitely one lady I would not want to piss off.”

“Unfortunately, Reggie wasn’t the only leak in the department,” Matt added. “Based on Viktor’s information, it appears Captain Reyes has been helping Dimitryi for years.”

“Jesus,” Bianca murmured, her expression filled with shock. “Now I understand why Viktor was so unwilling to trust the police,” she said. “It’s kinda hard to feel safe when one of the top cops involved in the case is also working for the enemy.”

“I guess that explains why Dimitryi was always one step ahead of us on damn near everything we did,” Jack commented.

“Yeah,” Tony added. “And it would also explain why Reyes always seemed to fight us on just about every decision we made involving the case.”

"I just don't get it." Clarke shook her head with a frown. She looked at Jack. "I know you and your captain didn't always agree, but from everything you've ever told me about the man, he was a well-respected cop with a great reputation. Why would he jeopardize all that for a piece of shit like Dimitryi?"

"I can answer that for you," Matt spoke up. "Reyes's wife is the sister of one Isabella Medina, who was the mother of --"

"Gil Medina." Jack growled out his name, his face a mask of fury.

"You got it." Matt looked at Jack. "According to Reyes, Dimitryi has been blackmailing him for years, using the lives of his wife and children as leverage to keep Reyes in line. It was because of Dimitryi's influence that Reyes finally gave in and called in some favors to get Reggie transferred to your precinct so that he could assign her to this case."

"Was Reggie even a real cop, or was that just one of her aliases?" Clarke asked.

"Her being a cop was probably the only legitimate thing in Reggie's whole life." Tim spoke from across the room. "She was also as corrupt and violent as they come."

"When I first realized who Reggie was, I just couldn't believe it." Bianca shook her head. "And to learn that a captain in the police department knowingly helped to put her in a position where she could have killed both Tony and Jack at any given time, I just..." Her voice trailed off, and she took a deep breath.

"I know he was trying to protect his family, but I just can't bring myself to feel sorry or have sympathy for him when he almost cost us our lives."

"If it's any consolation, I got the impression that Reyes hated Reggie and Dimitryi as much as we do," Jeremy added. "When we finally arrested him, he seemed relieved. I truly believe that he was only aiding them out of fear for his family's life. He's been extremely cooperative and has provided us with the locations of all of Dimitryi's houses. We've been making raids and arrests night and day, and we're destroying Dimitryi's empire a little more with each one."

Tony smiled grimly. "Too bad we couldn't bring Dimitryi down at the same time."

"Don't worry, Tony," Matt said. "Dimitryi's turn is coming. Real soon."

* * * * *

"All of this drama and danger has made me hungry." Clarke stood and stretched. "I'm going to find some food." She looked around the room. "Who else wants something?" A chorus of requests rang out, and she laughed.

"I'll help you." Bianca followed Clarke toward the kitchen.

Tomas got up as well. "I'll be just outside the door," he told them. "Try to stay away from the windows as much as you can, and let me know if you see anything strange."

Tony could feel Jack's eyes on him as he watched Bianca until she disappeared into the kitchen. He finally glanced in Jack's direction and sighed at the smirk on his face.

"I know you got a smart-ass comment you wanna make, Parker, so go ahead and get it over with."

Jack gave him an unrepentant smile. "Hey, I've been waiting a long time to see this, so I'm just gonna sit here and enjoy the moment."

"Oh, really," Tony said drily. "And what moment is that?"

"The moment I finally get to witness the great Anthony Tate get taken down by a little woman." Jack didn't bother to hold back his laughter. "All I have to say is, welcome to the club. Don't even bother to pretend that you don't like being a member."

"Honestly, I love it." Tony didn't try to deny it.

"Yeah," Jack agreed. "Membership definitely has its privileges."

Bianca walked out of the kitchen carrying several bowls of snacks. Clarke followed, her arms filled with drinks.

"We brought a little something for everyone to snack on," Clarke told the group. "The food's just about ready. I hope sandwiches are okay. I figured it was a little late for anything heavier than that."

"Sounds perfect." Tomas smiled at Clarke and helped her and Bianca set everything on the table.

Jack leaned near Tony, his voice low. "It feels good, doesn't it?"

"Hell, yeah." Tony's eyes remained on Bianca as she and Clarke returned to the kitchen. "Damn, if I'd known just how good it would feel, I would have done it years ago."

Jack looked in the same direction. "No, partner, you wouldn't have."

"How do you know?" Tony glanced at Jack in confusion.

Jack turned and met his gaze. "Because you hadn't met Bianca yet."

Tony smiled slowly and nodded. "I see your point."

* * * * *

Bianca saw Clarke stealing glances at her from around the open refrigerator door. So far, Clarke had refrained from asking her any questions. Bianca knew her friend well enough, though, that she could tell that Clarke was practically bursting with curiosity about her and Tony.

"So." Clarke finally spoke, and Bianca had to fight to keep from smiling. "You and Tony seemed really...um...cozy upstairs."

"*Cozy*?" Bianca snorted with laughter, unable to hold it back any longer. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

"Hey, I was trying to be tactful." Clarke's hushed laugh joined hers. "What I really wanted to say was 'well fucked.'"

"You should have gone with that description," Bianca told her. "It's *definitely* more accurate."

Clarke closed the refrigerator door and walked over to where she stood by the table.

"Seriously, B, this is the happiest that I've ever seen you in the entire seven years I've known you."

Tears burned her eyes. "I really *am* happy. You were right. Tony *is* everything you ever said he was, and more." Bianca reached out and took Clarke's hand. "God, Clarke, I love him so much."

Clarke nodded, and her eyes were just as watery. "I know, sweetie. If you love him that much now, just think of how much better it's going to be when all of this craziness is over and your lives get back into the normal swing of things."

Tony walked into the kitchen and headed straight for Bianca, immediately putting his arm around her and placing a quick kiss against her temple. "Is it time to eat yet?"

"The sandwiches are on the way right now." Clarke and Bianca finished loading up the tray with sandwiches and followed behind Tony, who carried the tray into the living room.

Conversation in the room slowed down some, as everyone's focus changed from talking to eating.

"So, does this mean that everything is over, and we can go home now?" Clarke asked after a while.

"Unfortunately, not yet," Matt answered. "There are still some loose ends that need to be tied up first, and since the four of you seem to be the primary targets, we want to make sure that you're all safe from danger until everything is taken care of."

"What about Pops?" Clarke looked at Jack, her face filled with worry. "Is he in danger, too?"

"Don't worry, baby. They have agents protecting him around the clock." Jack tried to reassure her. "He's fine. We'll call him later, so you can talk to him."

Bianca turned to Tony. "I should call my job. They probably think I dropped off the face of the earth."

"That's been taken care of." Matt spoke up. "As far as they know, you have a family emergency, and you'll be away for at least a week."

Bianca looked at him in surprise. "Why would they think that?"

"It was necessary," Matt told her. "We couldn't afford to take the chance of your job -- or any of the local media in Chicago -- learning about your disappearance and releasing information to the public that would be damaging to our investigation."

"You're right," she conceded. "I guess I hadn't thought about it that way."

“Looks like you’re on vacation for the next week.” The look on Tony’s face told her exactly how he wanted her to spend her days off.

Bianca was yawning by the time everyone finished eating. They made quick work of cleaning up and then Tony led Bianca toward the stairs. “Time for bed. You’re practically asleep on your feet.” Bianca couldn’t even argue. Her body ached all over, and she could barely keep her eyes open.

“Tony?” The sound of Clarke’s voice stopped them at the bottom of the stairs, and they turned back to look in her direction.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “Thank you for coming back in one piece and for bringing Bianca home safely. I don’t know what I would have done if something had happened to either of you.”

Tony walked over to Clarke and hugged her tight, gave her a kiss on the forehead. “I wouldn’t have had it happen any other way, sis.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Are you sure they’re inside, Sacha?” Dimitryi scanned the darkened house through the binoculars from his car parked about a block away.

“Positive,” Sacha confirmed. “We caught a glimpse of the women through the blinds about an hour ago, and no one has left the house.”

“Good. Let’s go,” he said. “We finish this now.”

Sacha seemed to hesitate. “Dimitryi, I’m not sure that we should risk going inside. There are at least three agents in there, but it could be more, in addition to Tate, Parker, and the women. There are only four of us. I don’t like our odds here. Why don’t we just blow the house, and be done with it?”

“No!” Dimitryi roared and slammed his fist against the dashboard. “This is no longer about business.” He turned to a startled Sacha. “I want to feel Tate and Parker’s pain when I kill their women. I want to see their fear when I put a bullet between their eyes. I want my vengeance. And I will have it. *Tonight.*”

* * * * *

Tony watched from the shadows of the room as the door slowly eased open, and Dimitryi walked in, his attention and gun focused solely on the forms in the bed.

Dimitryi moved across the carpeted floor until he stood over the bed. Reaching out, he pulled the covers off, revealing the pillows underneath.

“What...” Dimitryi threw the covers to the floor, swearing softly. Tony stepped behind him and pressed his gun against his temple before he could move again.

“Not quite what you expected, is it, asshole?” Dimitryi visibly tensed at the sound of Tony’s voice before his shoulders relaxed. He chuckled softly.

"That was very clever, Mr. Tate. It seems that I underestimated you."

"Yeah, well, that was your first mistake." Tony snatched the gun from Dimitryi's grip. "Too bad you won't get a chance to do it again."

"I suppose you want me to put my hands in the air and give up quietly as well." Dimitryi's tone mocked him.

"Oh, no, feel free to resist arrest," Tony urged, his voice vibrating with rage. "Give me an excuse to put a bullet in your head."

Light suddenly flooded the room as Jack and Matt entered with their weapons trained on Dimitryi.

Dimitryi glanced in Jack's direction. "Ah, there you are, Parker. Now all we need are those two little whores, and the celebration can begin."

Tony bellowed, and the sound was so wild, so ferocious, it was almost inhuman. One moment, Tony held a gun to Dimitryi's head, and the next he held him down on the bed with a hand wrapped around his throat, his gun shoved in Dimitryi's mouth.

"You have no idea who you're fucking with." He could hear Jack and Matt speaking, but the fury radiating within him had his ears ringing so loudly, his heart racing so rapidly, it was impossible to focus on anything other than Dimitryi.

"Don't think for one second that I won't take you out. Right here, right now." Tony spoke through teeth clenched so tight, his entire jaw throbbed.

"Anthony, don't you fucking do it!" Jack yelled. "This motherfucker is less than nothing. He's not even worth wasting a bullet on." Jack gripped Tony tightly by the arm. "Listen to me, Tony. I know you want to pull the trigger. I do, too. But we got him, bro. It's over. He's done."

Matt placed a firm hand on Tony's shoulder. "I swear to you, Tony, we're going to make sure that he won't be around to hurt Bianca, Clarke, or any other person again."

"Baby, please, don't do this." Bianca appeared in the doorway. "Don't let that animal destroy you...destroy *us*." Her softly spoken plea hit him with such force, it made him tremble, and he finally released his hold on Dimitryi.

As Jack handcuffed Dimitryi, Tony went straight into Bianca's arms, holding on to her as if his life and his sanity depended on it. Her loving words and gentle touches calmed him and guided him back from the dark, violent haze that had engulfed him, clouded his judgment, and threatened to completely overwhelm him.

As his world slowly righted itself, Tony became aware Tomas stood inside the bedroom and that Clarke stood quietly behind Bianca in the hallway. Tears slowly rolled down Clarke's face.

"As soon as our backup gets here, we'll take him and the others into custody," Matt told Jack.

“Good.” Jack pulled Dimitryi roughly off the bed and shoved him toward Tomas. “Go and put this garbage with the rest of the trash.”

Tomas nodded. “With pleasure.” He tucked his gun into the back of his pants and grabbed Dimitryi by the arm.

“Let’s wait downstairs,” Bianca said. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I can’t stomach being this close to him a moment longer.”

Tony led Bianca by the hand down the hallway. He heard Jack and Clarke behind him, followed by Tomas and Matt, who flanked Dimitryi.

As they walked down the stairs, Tony saw the other three men who’d been with Dimitryi handcuffed and guarded by Tim and Jeremy.

The sound of knocking drew everyone’s attention to the front door.

“Must be our escort,” Matt said as he and Tomas came down the stairs with Dimitryi between them.

Tony and Bianca had reached the bottom of the stairs when he caught a glimpse of movement above him. Everything seemed to go into fast forward as Dimitryi reached out and pulled Tomas’s gun from the back of his pants, his aim directed at Jack and Clarke, who were going down the stairs in front of him.

“Jack!” Jack’s head snapped up, and his eyes widened when he saw Tony’s gun pointed in his direction. Tony didn’t have time to explain as he opened fire. The bullets found their intended target, hitting Dimitryi so hard that he slammed into Matt before he tumbled down the stairs. He collapsed at the bottom of the stairs with the weapon still clutched in his cuffed hands.

Jack came down the rest of the steps and looked down into Dimitryi’s dead eyes before meeting Tony’s gaze. “Thanks, partner.”

“Any time.” Tony tapped his fist against Jack’s.

Additional agents suddenly appeared in the foyer. During the commotion, Tony had forgotten all about them. Judging by the splintered front door torn from its hinges, they had broken it open to get inside once they’d heard the shots fired.

“Jesus, I’m so sorry.” Tomas said as he and Matt came down the stairs to stand next to Jack and Tony. “I don’t know how I got distracted like that.” Apology and remorse filled his voice.

“Don’t sweat it, man.” Jack smiled. “Besides, we’re not the ones about to be measured for a wooden box, so it’s all good.”

“Well, this wasn’t exactly how I’d planned for things to end,” Matt said. “But this works, too.”

Jack pulled Clarke close to him. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s exactly the ending that Dimitryi deserved.”

"I guess this was the loose end that needed to be tied up before we could leave." Clarke looked at Matt. When he nodded in confirmation, she asked, "How in the hell did Dimitryi even know about this place to come looking for us here?"

"We can thank Captain Reyes for that," Matt told her. "We had him leak information to Dimitryi about the location of the house. We figured Dimitryi's hatred and need for revenge would drive him to make one final attempt on your lives before he disappeared again. Luckily for us, our gamble paid off."

Tony turned to Bianca. "Are you doing okay?" He could tell she was a little shaken, but otherwise she looked fine. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"I'm not," she told him. "I'm glad I saw it for myself. Now I know with absolute certainty that he's gone, and he's never coming back to fuck with any of us again."

"You're right," Matt agreed. "Although as soon as word gets out that Dimitryi is dead, there will be ten more just like him waiting in the wings to take his place."

Tony and Jack shared a look. "Then we'll just have to make sure that they meet the same fate as their predecessor," Tony said.

* * * * *

Tony leaned against the closed bedroom door, admiring Bianca as she stood looking out the window.

"Hey, baby."

She turned around and gave him a breathtaking smile. "Hi. Are they finished downstairs?"

"Yeah." He pushed away from the door and walked toward her. Bianca met him halfway, and he wrapped his arms around her waist. "Everybody's gone, and the car is waiting downstairs to take us to a hotel."

"Are Clarke and Jack ready?"

Tony nodded. "They were about to head downstairs when I came in here." He kissed her on the neck. "You know, I was thinking that since your job isn't expecting you back for another week, and I'm on furlough for the next ten days, we could just hang out here in Vegas for a few days instead of heading home tomorrow. What do you think?"

"Sounds good. But what about clothes?"

"I guess we gotta go shopping." Tony chuckled softly.

"Ooh, I definitely like the sound of that."

"I was also thinking that while we're here, you could start on your next story."

Bianca leaned back and looked at him in confusion. "What story is that?"

"Well." Tony cleared his throat. "I figured that since Las Vegas is the wedding capital of the world, you might be interested in doing a story on that."

Bianca stared at him with a shocked expression on her face. “Tony...”

“Hold on.” Tony put a finger to her lips to silence her. “I put a lot of thought into this story, so just hear me out, okay?” Bianca nodded mutely, and he continued.

“See, I know how much you like to research a story, so I thought we could pick a wedding chapel so you could experience the whole wedding ritual firsthand.” Tears leaked from Bianca’s eyes as he spoke, and he wiped them away with the pads of his thumbs.

“I also know that you need a partner in order to complete your research, and I would be so honored, so privileged, so proud to be your partner, if you’ll have me.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Bianca’s tear-filled words made him smile.

“Am I sure that I want to spend the rest of my life with the beautiful, smart, sexy woman standing in front of me?” Tony leaned down and kissed her. “Oh, baby, I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.” He rested his head against hers. “So, what do you say? You wanna go research a wedding chapel with me?”

“Just say yes already.” Clarke’s voice floated through the door. “The sooner you do, the sooner we can finish our honeymoon, and you can start yours.”

They chuckled softly at Clarke’s words. “She makes a good point,” Tony whispered. “So, what’s it gonna be?”

Bianca was nodding her head before he finished speaking. “Yes...yes...I love you.” Her soft lips covered his, and Tony moaned at their salty-sweet taste. “I promise,” she said, breaking the kiss, “you won’t regret making me your wife.”

“The only thing I’ll ever regret is the time I wasted when I could have been with the woman I love.” He took her lips in another heated kiss.

“Besides.” A slow smile spread across Tony’s face. “I know what to do if you get too out of line.”

“Oh, really? And what would that be?”

Tony’s hands slid down her back, and he gripped her rounded ass cheeks. “Turn you over my knee.”

Bianca laughed. “In that case, I’m thinking I’ll need to get out of line real soon.”

“I knew you were going to say that.” Tony’s deep laughter rang out in the room.

Bianca laced her fingers behind his neck and gave him a quick kiss. “You know me so well.”

“Yeah, I do,” Tony agreed, hoping that all the love he felt for her showed on his face. “And I love every single thing.”



Kori Roberts

Kori Roberts writes erotic tales of love, lust, and passion -- stories filled with strong, adventurous, and exciting characters who love hot, kinky, no-holds-barred sex.

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