



A MAFIA ELITE
SERIES **NOVELLA**

DEFIANT **PRINCESS**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AMY MCKINLEY

DEFIANT PRINCESS

MAFIA ELITE PREQUEL



AMY MCKINLEY

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Defiant Princess

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THE FAMILY



CHICAGO ITALIAN MAFIA

Caruso Family

Antonio – (father, boss)

Nicole (second wife)

Tony (son)

Elena (daughter)

Brambilla Family

Benito (boss)

Julia (wife, deceased)

Liliana “Lil” (daughter)

Eva (cousin)

La Rosa Family

Robert (boss)

Angela (wife)

Marco (son, underboss)

Nico (son)

Trey (son)

Sofia (daughter)

Vitale Family

Emilio (boss)

Alessia (wife)

Enzo (son, underboss)

Emiliana “Em” (daughter)

Rossi Family

Frank (father, boss)

Carla (mother, deceased)

Alfonso (son, deceased)

Stefano (son, underboss)

Camila (daughter)

Marissa (daughter)

RUSSIAN MAFIA

PAVLOV BRATVA

Paylov Bratva

Yuri (boss)

Mischa (wife)

Ivan (eldest son, underboss)

Victor "Vic" (son)

Katya (angel of death, assassin)

CHAPTER ONE



LILIANA

Snow flurries chased me into Stone Hall, the private fortress—because no one in Chicago’s Mafia, the Five Families, was going to stay in a dorm—on Central Elite University’s campus. I slammed the heavy steel door to the rear entrance behind me, shutting out the cold December air, glad to be done with classes for the day. My backpack slipped from my icy fingers and fell to the polished cement floor with a thud. I murmured a greeting to the guard posted by the door, nudged my bag to the side because I had no intention of doing homework, then flipped the lock.

Our luxury fortress, a massive two-story building, contained everything needed, including a shared gourmet kitchen, living room, loft, private bed- and bathrooms, bulletproof windows, and weapons room.

Snow had dusted my hair, and I shook out as much as possible then froze at the echo of loud voices from deeper within the building. A chill that wasn’t from the weather skated over my body. Quickly, I kicked off my boots, tossed my coat, hat, and scarf toward the hooks in the rear entryway, then followed the heated argument to the living room, where I found the source.

“Stop, Tony,” Marissa hissed. She turned her head back to glare at him. “I’m no one’s possession.”

I flinched at the anger in my roommate’s voice then shifted deeper into the living room. I stood in front of the stairs, which gave me a better angle to see what Tony had done this time. Most of us weren’t his biggest fan—only Marissa and my cousin Eva liked him. Even thinking about him made me scowl. We were not close. Eva’s judgment was faulty because she cared too much about partying. She rubbed me the wrong way, maybe because she was so extra and flirty, which made me wary and reserved around her.

I eased onto the balls of my feet, ready to step in if Marissa needed me. Then she shoved out from under his arm, her dark hair clinging with static to him before she jerked away another foot. I felt bad watching, but I couldn’t leave in case I needed to run interference.

She pivoted so they faced one another. He snorted, and his features twisted into a cruel mask as he leaned down and got into her face. “That’s not what your father said after I agreed to marry you.”

My stomach churned at the mention of marriage. I hated how tight our fathers kept our reins.

“I don’t care what he said.” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared right back.

“You should.” Tony snaked an arm around her waist and drew her closer. “He told me to get control of you because you’re nothing but a disappointment.”

“Fuck you.” Marissa shoved off him again then headed to the second floor, yelling over her shoulder, “All you care about is power and what that’ll get you.”

I stepped aside, and Marissa stormed past me. I moved so that I blocked the way she'd gone. "Get out." I held Tony's dark stare.

He turned and strolled to the front door, grabbed his coat, and left with a resounding slam.

Screw him. I needed to check on Marissa.

I took the stairs at a jog, passed through the large loft at the top, then hung a right down the hallway to her room. As I rapped my knuckles on her door, another slammed downstairs, and Sofia's and Emiliana's laughing voices floated through the hallway.

"You guys here?" Sofia yelled.

"Upstairs!" I shouted as a muffled "go away" filtered through from the other side of the door.

Footsteps pounded on the stairs as a shriek and then a crash sounded behind Marissa's door. I rattled the doorknob. "Come on, Marissa. Open the door!"

Sofia and Emiliana raced up the rest of the stairs, both with guns drawn. I rolled my eyes. "It's only Marissa in there."

"Oh," Sofia said, tucking her gun into her purse.

Emiliana was slower to return her weapon. The hard gleam of the killer inside her was close to the surface, making retreat harder. She visibly shuddered then pounded on the door. "Marissa, it's just us. Open the door."

There was a click, and I twisted the knob then shoved the door wide. The three of us poured in to discover absolute chaos. Tears streaked Marissa's face. Broken glass littered the floor. Clothes were everywhere, some still on hangers. She strode for the easel set up in the corner, her fingers stretching

for the half-finished, Venetian-seascape oil painting as if to destroy it when Sofia lunged, grabbed it, then held it out of reach.

“What the hell happened?” Sofia’s eyes were wide as she whipped the canvas behind her back.

Marissa let out a frustrated scream then threw herself onto the bed and curled onto her side. A mass of long dark hair fanned across the pillow. She faced the wall, pulled her knees up, and wrapped her arms around them as silent, anguished sobs shook her thin frame.

I sat on the king-sized bed that dwarfed her then scooted so my back was to the wall and I could see a part of her tear-streaked face. Emiliana neared, and her gaze darkened with renewed fury.

“Hey,” Sofia said. “Talk to us.”

We exchanged glances, each of us as confused as the next about what to do. When Marissa didn’t answer, Emiliana and Sofia climbed onto the bed too.

Around us, Marissa would let her guard down and give in to her dramatic side. We were relatively safe in the fortress, where she could indulge her creative side. Her art gave her a way to voice to her emotions, and she was insanely talented at it. So was her sister, Camila—or she had been. Marissa’s father disapproved of everything she did. Back home, her mask would firmly snap back into place, and she would never let on that anything bothered her. I grabbed her hand, filled with unease. Our lives outside the university weren’t that different.

When Emiliana’s dark gaze swung my way, I mouthed “Tony” so she and Sofia both knew what sparked the crying

jag.

“What did that fucker do?” Emiliana growled.

Sofia rested a hand on Marissa’s shoulder, flashing me a questioning look.

Marissa swiped at her face then pushed herself into a sitting position, drawing her knees up and looping her arms around them. Then she held out her left hand, and our eyes dropped to a large diamond ring.

Dread hit me hard. “So it’s official, then. You’re engaged to Tony.”

“Yep.” She dragged in a stuttered breath then met our gazes with red-rimmed brown eyes and flushed cheeks. “Seems Dad didn’t want to wait to marry me off. It’s the same thing that happened to Camila.”

“Why?” I didn’t get it. Her dad had also married her sister to the enemy before she graduated college, but it wasn’t the same, not really. Camila had it so much worse.

Sofia furrowed her brows, glancing at Emiliana and me. “But to Tony Caruso, right? Not someone in the Russian Bratva?”

I tensed. That’s what had happened to her sister. And there were rumors that one of the Bratva had been spotted in Chicago. I sank my teeth into my lip. At least she wasn’t promised to one of the Russians.

Marissa let her head fall back, and some of the emotion was doused. “Ah—no. Not a Russian.”

“Tony’s an asshole.” Emiliana frowned. “What can we do?”

“Nothing.” Marissa’s lip trembled.

“How long do you have?”

She snorted. “The ironic part is that Tony said—and I don’t believe him—that he tried to convince our parents to let me graduate first.”

“He probably wants the freedom.” I couldn’t help it. Tony wasn’t exactly a saint. Tying himself to one woman had to be as much of a jail sentence to him as marrying him was for her.

“Yeah. I’m sure he does.” Marissa curled her shoulders in a little more. “Dad refused. We’re getting married over winter break. Tony said I can finish my senior year and graduate, but I have to live in their house.”

“With Antonio Caruso?” Emilana’s face drained of color.

Huge tears fell from Marissa’s eyes, following the tracks from earlier as she nodded. “He’s so creepy. I don’t want to be anywhere near him.”

“At least Nicole will be there.” I tried to smile but failed. Marissa’s eye roll only confirmed that.

“Will she be much help?” Sofia frowned. “Antonio has a puppet-master kind of grip with how he controls his wife and son.”

“Maybe you can convince Tony to get his own place? That way, you wouldn’t have to live under the same roof as the Caruso boss.” It was a long shot. I knew that, but the alternative was going from her father’s home to Tony’s father’s residence—from one abusive, controlling household to another. At least if they had their own place, she would have some semblance of peace.

A spark of hope flashed in Marissa’s eyes, and she straightened slightly. “I could try to push him to do that.”

“Play up the freedom angle,” Sofia said. “You and Tony enjoy going to clubs. I mean, you guys are friends, at least sort of.”

Emiliana snorted. She had no love lost for Tony. I understood—he’d always been a jerk, and after what Emiliana had gone through, I couldn’t blame her for not giving him even an ounce of the benefit of the doubt. Men triggered her if they touched her after the abduction, at least all except the one who’d saved her—Stefano Rossi, Marissa’s brother and the underboss to their father, Frank—another monster in power within the Five Families.

Honestly, we were all screwed up. My head thumped against the wall, and I closed my eyes briefly. “We were supposed to have the rest of our senior year until our fathers messed with our lives.”

Marissa squeezed my hand, her voice subdued. “I know.”

“At least you’re marrying someone you might be able to control.” I tried to find the positive.

Marissa snorted. “I don’t know about that. I mean, he’s a friend, but he’ll change as my husband. I already see it in the power he’s wielding that he thinks he has over me. And... I’m not attracted to him, not that way.”

Emiliana continued to scowl.

It had to suck for her, not being attracted to her future husband. I worried about that too. I squeezed Marissa’s arm. “That might change. At least you have friendship to use as a base.”

“I guess.” She didn’t sound convinced.

Sofia’s lips curved into a crooked grin. “If you do like Lil said and convince Tony to get a house of your own, you could

have more freedom. He likes to go to clubs, and I'm sure his father thinks what he does is frivolous. Having a place of your own should appeal to him."

I hoped at least one of us could make something of our looming arranged marriages work in our favor because it was very doubtful that it would for me. "My father will probably marry me to a toad twice my age, all in the name of what it'll get him." Inside, I cringed from guilt at my first thought, grateful I hadn't been promised to Tony.

Emiliana got off the bed and disappeared only to return with a few bottles of wine and four glasses. We each took one, and she opened the first bottle, pouring generous amounts for everyone.

"To us." She raised her glass.

"True friends," I added. "Sisters." We didn't have the same parents, but the blood we shared was rich, deadly, and meant there was no escape—we were Five Families Mafia princesses.

"No matter what, we'll be there for each other." Sofia clinked her glass with each of ours.

"To the bitter end," Marissa added.

I rested my head against Sofia, not wanting our time here to end. I loved this place. Sofia, Emiliana, Marissa, and I were the only ones staying in the family-owned building on campus. Everyone's brothers and Tony were older and had already graduated.

"We need to make the most of the next few weeks."

They murmured their agreement, and I knew that if Marissa had her way—to which we would acquiesce, considering everything—it would be one party after another.

I couldn't believe it was our senior year. Just thinking about being two weeks from winter break could have catapulted me into a panic attack. This place was my escape, and I wasn't the only one who thought that way.

CHAPTER TWO



LILIANA

I tucked my legs under me after dragging myself from bed at an ungodly hour, cursing the sunlight streaming through the loft's windows but grateful that we had a wet bar with everything needed to make coffee and the most comfortable couches. It was my favorite place to sketch, read, or lounge when I didn't want to venture far. And that morning, I could barely move from the pain of drinking way too much the night before.

Sofia, Emiliana, Marissa, and I had demolished the four bottles of wine Emiliana had brought to Marissa's room. Once we'd polished those off, we went downstairs and plowed our way through a few bottles of vodka. I even had a hazy memory of Marissa urging us to do body shots with tequila.

I groaned and snuggled deeper into the soft leather love seat, tugging a fleece throw tighter around my body. My hangover was epic. I wasn't going anywhere, including to my two classes that day. I clutched my large iced coffee, taking tentative sips and feverishly praying it would stay down.

Marissa stumbled in, her hip knocking against the edge of the bar counter. I winced from the sound and the bruise she would have soon. She shuddered then fell onto the cushion

next to me before reaching for my coffee. I passed it to her, studying the greenish tinge on her skin.

“This is your fault,” I croaked, motioning for her to pass the drink back then grabbing it and taking another gulp to ease my raw throat. Her fingers curled around my cup again, and I relinquished it because she looked worse than I felt.

After taking a tentative sip, she rolled her eyes and immediately winced. “No.” She raised her left hand so the massive rock on her ring finger sparkled. “It’s Tony’s fault.”

Sofia sauntered in and chuckled. “Is that what you think? It may be partially his, but it’s really your father’s.”

None of us wanted to unpack that, so I glared at Sofia and changed the subject. “Why do you look normal?”

“Because I didn’t do tequila shots.” She grabbed a mug, added creamer, then put it under the spout and pressed the button for coffee to stream out. “I switched to water sometime after my first vodka shot.”

“Wow, you cheated.” Marissa tossed a throw pillow that Sofia batted away with a laugh. “Since you’re feeling like an actual human being, get us some aspirin.”

Sofia disappeared, probably in search of aspirin, and I rested my head against the back of the couch. I wanted to slip back into sleep and wake up pain free, but what Marissa had said continued to roll around in my brain. “Sofia’s right. It’s not completely Tony’s fault,” I mumbled.

“What are you talking about?” Marissa yawned.

“It’s our fathers controlling our lives. It’s their fault.”

We fell silent as Sofia returned with aspirin for both of us and bottles of water.

“Thanks, Mom.”

I snorted at Marissa’s comment and how Sofia scrunched up her face at it. I studied how put together Sofia was with her trendy outfit and long hair falling in dark beach waves around her gorgeous face. Marissa and I no doubt resembled roadkill.

When I saw Marissa’s ring finger, I felt the noose tightening around my own neck, and I’d killed the feeling with alcohol. “The only one in our group who has a choice is you, Sofia.”

“For what?” Sofia sat in one of the club chairs, kicked her feet onto the ottoman, then took a sip of her drink.

“Who you’ll marry.” I frowned. “Em, too, but maybe she won’t have to commit to anyone.” Emiliana had good reason for her aversion to men.

The cheerful expression on Sofia’s face fell. “I might have more of a choice than you two, but there’s only one person I would want to be with, and there’s no chance of that.” She was talking about Enzo, Emiliana’s brother.

“Elena’s gone.” I hated saying it, but it was true. When Stefano and Enzo had gone to rescue Elena and Emiliana, they’d found evidence of Elena’s death. “The arranged-marriage contract between her and Enzo was voided with her death.”

Sofia set her mug down hard on the side table, and Marissa and I winced. “Even if the contract isn’t in effect, he’s lost to me. He came back different from searching for Emiliana. He’s cold and emotionally out of reach to me.”

“So change that,” Marissa urged.

Sofia swiped a tear that had escaped. “It’s never that simple.”

“Nothing is.” I caught Marissa’s eyes, and we shared a look that spoke volumes about our messed-up fathers.

“My path was chosen for me the day my sister was used as a bargaining chip with the Russians,” Marissa said.

I swallowed a little too loudly. She wasn’t wrong, and her older sister could attest to that—if she were alive. But Sofia stood a chance to change her future, and it killed me that she wasn’t doing anything about it. “I’ll face a similar existence, but my jailer is undecided so far. Not you, Sof. Change your fate. Do what Marissa and I can’t and be happy.”

The metaphorical sound of a ticking clock echoed through my entire body. I needed to change my fate.

CHAPTER THREE



LILIANA

I jackknifed into a sitting position from a dead sleep. The sketchbook and charcoal pencils I'd fallen asleep with fell to the floor with a heavy thunk. I blinked rapidly in the inky darkness of my room, searching for a threat. Whatever had woken me set my body into fight mode, and I eased the small bedside drawer open then removed my Glock. The cold weight of the gun in my grip helped to slow the surge of adrenaline from a flood to a trickle as I dropped my feet to the floor and slid off my bed.

By the silvery light of the crescent moon, I crept toward my closed door. With a slow turn of the handle, I opened it enough to peek down the hall. I could make out Sofia's form as she neared the stairs and stepped into the hallway, making sure my gun wasn't pointed at her. Sofia glanced over her shoulder and notched her head to the side. I took the opposite wall, mouthing, "What was that?"

"Pounding," she whispered, "at the front door."

We stopped in the loft, where Emiliana stood sentry at the top of the stairs, her gun aimed to fire on anyone who entered. I could make out a female form approaching the door from the living room before bright light blinded us.

When my vision cleared, it was apparent who was downstairs—Marissa. One of our guards was there, his gun pointed at the door. I couldn't read his lips but knew that he communicated to our security who had eyes on the outside entrance. A slight nod from him, and Marissa boldly opened the front door, which set my teeth on edge.

When I saw who had woken us, my lip curled in annoyance. It was Eva, my cousin. Marissa let her in. *I would have slammed the door on her.*

Our guard melted into the background after bolting the front door. The three of us made our way downstairs to find out what had caused Eva to show up here at two in the morning. A large part of me didn't care, and I contemplated going back to sleep. But I knew my friends didn't feel that way about her, so I stayed.

Cold air from the open door dropped the inside temperature, and I shivered. Aside from that, the closer I came to Eva, the more her distress affected me. Maybe something was wrong, and it wasn't her usual histrionics.

“Is it true?” Eva's red-rimmed eyes fell to Marissa's hand.

“What?” Marissa frowned, and her voice turned wary. She shoved her giant mess of hair back then crossed her arms over her chest. “About Tony? Yeah, we're supposed to get married over winter break.”

“Why are you upset, Eva?” Sofia asked. “You, Tony, and Marissa party together all the time. Do you like him more than as a friend?”

I almost laughed at the face Sofia made but shifted my gaze to Emiliana, who winked, clearly having also caught Sof's barely veiled disgust.

Eva's hand fell to her curvy hip, accented by her skinny jeans and a formfitting winter jacket that couldn't be warm. She had an hourglass body and flaunted it, flirting with every powerful male within her sight, which left a bad taste in my mouth every time.

"You don't know what it's like," Eva said.

"What are you talking about?" Emiliana's arm dangled at her side, but she continued to hold the gun in a firm grip.

Yeah, seriously. I could barely understand what was going on.

"To be on the outside." Eva's eyes lasered in on me, and I stiffened. "A cousin."

"You mean safe?" I snapped, taking the bait.

"None of us are safe." Sofia's tone matched mine.

"Not true," Eva growled. "Some are safer than others, like you four. You're royalty. No one will touch you."

Sofia scoffed. "You don't honestly believe that, do you?"

"I'm just sayin'. It's not as easy for the rest of us." Eva yanked the door open and stormed out into the night.

"What the hell was that about?" I took a few steps back and fell onto the living room couch. Was there more between Eva and Tony? Or did she just have her sights on him, and hearing about Marissa's engagement had snatched her scheme out from under her?

Emiliana shook her head. "She doesn't know what it's like to be us. Don't hold it against her. None of us are exempt. In a way, we're all expendable."

“True.” I could give my cousin that, but I saw her for the opportunist she was and believed she would find a way to get whatever she wanted, which I guessed was a wealthy husband. “We’re just in the limelight more. Maybe that’s what she craves.” It made sense. She didn’t know that I would have traded my lofty position in the Mafia with her in a heartbeat, including the arranged marriage I expected my dad to drop on me at any moment.

CHAPTER FOUR



EMILIANA

I curled my gloved fingers into my palms to warm them as Sofia and I trudged along the snowy sidewalks that the campus's groundskeeper struggled to keep clear, on our way home from class. Thick flakes fell in a continuous swirl, making his job impossible.

My skin crawled—not with goose bumps but as if ants raced over every inch—and I fought from breaking into a sprint. Even with the blanket of snow surrounding us, my gaze darted everywhere, searching for something out of the ordinary—a dark form, *anything*. My past had taught me a valuable lesson never to let my guard down.

Old memories were never far, and a walk in low-visibility weather triggered them easily. Even the sense of safety was an illusion. On the day I was betrayed, I'd been leaving the house, never suspecting one of our own. Just before reaching the car, a hood had been slipped over my head, and I was surrounded in darkness.

I glanced behind me down the path, making sure I wasn't being followed. The only guards I tolerated weren't far behind. I lived in a state of constant vigilance. That terrifying day, I'd fought against my attacker, scratching and kicking, screaming and struggling... until they drugged me. Even then, I still

thrashed, each blow getting more ineffective until I completely passed out.

I'm safe, I reminded myself as Sofia and I drew closer to the building where my class was held. I had blades strapped to my forearms, guns tucked into my backpack and jacket pocket, and another secured in a shoulder holster for good measure.

I took precautions—*always*. I didn't take my coat off in class, only unzipped it, so the weapons remained unseen. But I didn't care if everyone, including my professor, saw them. They couldn't say a thing to my roommates or me. Our families ran the school.

Sofia's hand curled around my arm, her eyes sparkled, and a tiny bit of worry slipped away. "We should go shopping and invite Eva to join us."

Yeah, no thanks. "I'll pass. Just take Eva." Sofia's shopping trips were epic, and I'd already exceeded my tolerance for being in public and around strangers. "You both love to shop, and maybe it'll get her out of whatever she's going through over Marissa and Tony."

"It's weird, right?" Sofia tilted her head, her long ponytail following the motion.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe she feels left out? They go out together to parties and clubs all the time."

"Maybe." Sofia pursed her lips. "We'll have to go to some parties this weekend."

I frowned, and her hand tightened on my arm.

"You have to, Em. It's our last weekend before the break. Marissa will need it, and we'll be all around you. I promise."

I hated that I needed that. More than anything, I wished I could go into a crowded space without anxiety so bad that I caved into myself or, worse, lashed out with every weapon within reach. But my friends helped keep me grounded, and I would endure it for them. “Fine. I’ll go, but only to one of our clubs.” If we went to Mafia-owned ones, there would be soldiers, and if something happened, we would have an army at our disposal.

“Sure. No problem. Or a party on campus.” She released my arm and gave me a side hug. “You won’t regret it.”

Famous last words. I was already regretting it. The sidewalk curved, and the portion that the groundskeeper had prioritized over all other walkways was free of snow as we rounded it to our building. I punched in the code as Sofia shivered beside me, hunched against the cold. After shoving the steel door open, we spilled inside to the welcome heat. The rich scent of sauce and melting cheese hit us hard, and my stomach growled.

“Hey, Em.”

My head whipped to the left, and a grin stretched my lips wide. “Hi, Enzo.” My brother held my gaze for a moment before it inevitably shifted to Sofia, who stiffened at my side. “Why are you here?” I peeled my coat off and hung it on a hook before kicking off my boots.

“Checking on you.”

I shook my head as I would have before my ordeal, doing what I could to reassure him. “I’m fine.” I wanted to say more, but he dealt with his own demons about what happened when I was abducted.

He furrowed his brows, and I sighed, knowing the lecture that was coming.

“You don’t seem fine.” He closed the distance between us, visually cataloging the weapons strapped to my body.

Sofia cast me a worried glance, and I knew what she was going to do before it even happened. “Stop,” she snapped as she slapped a hand on Enzo’s chest.

Enzo’s gaze honed in on Sofia, and deep longing swam in his dark eyes.

I fought from flinching. He meant well, but I was here for a reason. What better way to exercise my demons and work through my issues than to do it with my best friends, the women who coexisted in the Mafia as I did? I promised myself I would do that, given my second chance at living.

Sofia

I jabbed a finger into Enzo’s chest. He didn’t budge, but I would give Emiliana the space she needed. His heart was in the right place, but he didn’t get how much she struggled. She was determined to overcome her fears. He had no idea how much his well-meaning hovering was undermining the progress she wanted to make. They both had suffered in very different ways from her abduction and the subsequent hell that she’d endured—and still did, given the nightmares that frequently woke her.

I curled my finger back into my palm, hoping to seem unaffected, but I wasn’t. The deep cadence of his voice sent a volley of goose bumps over my skin. And the feel of his hard,

toned body beneath my finger had dredged up images of what we once were to each other, what we never could be again, no matter how much I wished things were different. “We need to go somewhere and talk.”

Seconds passed before an amused smile curved Enzo’s kissable lips, and he latched on to my wrist. He guided me into the mudroom by the back entrance then shut the door to the rest of the house, isolating us in the smallish space.

“Sure, this works.” I shook my head, looking to the ceiling as if I would find answers there. The attraction pulsing through me and between us made me revert to the safety of sarcasm. “Could have gone into any other room, but the mudroom is perfect. Definitely says deep, in-depth discussion.”

“Stop being a smart-ass.” His gaze flicked to my chest. “And you have a stain on your shirt.”

I pulled my long-sleeved light-pink shirt out enough to inspect the front. “What the hell? How did I get coffee on this?” I growled at him. He had to point it out, didn’t he? Dammit, I loved that shirt. “You’re lucky I’m only going to give you a minute of my time because I have to go change now.”

Enzo chuckled then crossed his arms over his chest.

“Listen, jerk.” I kept my gaze firmly on his gorgeous face, not looking at the way his biceps bulged or thinking about how I would give just about anything to be in his embrace. He was the forbidden fruit, and I wanted what I couldn’t have.

I blinked a few times, forcing my thoughts away from how it felt when he touched me. It wasn’t going to happen, at least not anymore. We couldn’t, and especially not when he was

pushing my buttons—pointing out a stain on my shirt. He knew that drove me nuts.

I drew in a deep breath then made myself block everything else out and get to the point. “Em needs space. She’s doing well, and the helicopter-brother routine isn’t helping her.”

He’d changed so much after he and Stefano had brought Emiliana back from hell. I swore Enzo still had one foot back there. Anger clung to him, and he’d been withdrawn, pushing me away ever since.

It was for the best, though. We couldn’t be together, no matter how much I wished otherwise. My thumb ran across the scar on my palm, a reminder of the promises we’d made.

The intensity of his dark stare caused me to inch away until my back hit the door. Enzo smirked then advanced. Tension crackled in the diminishing space between us, and my body, traitorous bitch that it was, reacted.

“Enz—”

His hands threaded through my hair, and he pulled my face to his. His lips descended onto mine, and any thought I had of stopping him evaporated in the raging inferno he ignited in my core. My lips parted on a gasp, and he took control, deepening the kiss and pulling me in with him. Every inch of me was hyperaware of him. I couldn’t stop myself from melting into his embrace—what’s worse, I had no desire to. It was exactly where I wanted to be.

It was a bad idea. The only direction it could take was further heartbreak, but I was helpless to resist.

CHAPTER FIVE



SOFIA

I fell onto the couch next to Emiliana and across from Marissa. “How is it afternoon? I go to one class, and I swear the day is just gone.”

Marissa snorted. “That’s because it was your fashion class, and you stayed a few hours after to finish whatever project you were working on, addict.”

Emiliana snickered, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “True. I’m a fashion whore. It’ll never change. Where’s Lil?”

“Class,” Emiliana said. “She should be back any minute.”

The door burst open, and a gust of arctic wind followed Lil and Eva inside. “Shut the door!” we all yelled in unison, shivering from the instant drop in temperature. It felt like winter would never end.

Lil dropped everything in a heap and kicked it to the side before rushing over. Her features were pinched, and panic darkened her light-blue eyes. When she whipped off her hat, her hair cascaded around her face in a staticky mess of silvery blond.

“What’s wrong?” Emiliana stiffened, and with a flick of her wrist, a knife hidden beneath her sweater dropped from a spring-loaded sheath strapped to her arm, made specifically by

the martial arts master her brother had hired to teach her more than what he and Stefano already had.

Lil growled as she flung a hand toward Eva. “Tell them.”

Eva huffed and rolled her brown doe eyes. “What? It’s not a big deal.”

“She was talking to the Bratva!” Lil shouted in exasperation. “The fucking Russian mob.”

“You’re so dramatic.” Eva peeled off her coat and dropped into one of the club chairs with another roll of her eyes. “You’ve seen him, right? Why wouldn’t I talk to him?”

None of us moved as we gawked at her.

“Which one, Eva?” Marissa’s voice pitched an octave higher, and I cringed at the fear and hope there.

“Ivan.” Eva grinned. “The Pavlov underboss. He’s smokin’ hot too.”

“No.” Lil’s lips curved into a frown. “He is not.”

“Whatever, cousin.” Eva dismissed Lil with a wave of her hand.

Shit, this is bad. I had to do something because the desperation in Marissa’s eyes was putting me on red alert. Marissa would kill me, but... I slid my phone out and texted her brother about who had been spotted on campus. I would tell mine, too, but that could wait because I didn’t want them to descend on me like locusts. And they would.

Stefano’s response was instant: *Where are you? Where is everyone?*

Me: *In our building.*

Stefano: *Don’t let anyone leave. Be there in ten.*

I slid my phone back into my pocket and refocused on the minor spat between Eva and Lil. It held my attention for the five minutes that it raged on. Lil screeched at Eva, whose sly grin told me she had her sights set on the Russian and nothing *we* said could deter her. But she couldn't ignore one of the bosses. And while Stefano was only an underboss, she would have to listen to him or face the consequences of the Five Families coming down on her, especially if I told my dad.

“Did you ask him about Camila?” Marissa's question about her older sister, who was married to one of the Russians, stopped all conversation.

Tension rippled through the air, and I crossed the space to her, sank into the couch, and wrapped an arm around her. I wanted to smack Eva as badly as Lil did.

Eva had the decency to drop the mischievous grin when she looked at Marissa. “No. But I'll ask him. I'm sure she's okay.”

“How can you be so sure?” Marissa jumped to her feet as the door opened with a bang as it hit the wall.

Stefano slammed it shut behind him, strode into the living room, and gripped Marissa's shoulders. “I know what you're thinking, sis, and you need to stay away from him. Ivan won't tell you anything about Camila.”

“But we don't even know if she's alive.” Tears swam in Marissa's deep brown eyes.

“Of course she is.” Eva flipped her hair over her shoulder. “If she were dead, I'm sure you would have heard something.”

“Shut up,” Stefano snapped, and I stiffened on the couch, instantly aware of the leashed violence vibrating from him.

Eva's gaze dropped to Marissa's ring, and she surged backward, her cheeks infusing with color. "At least your dad married Camilla to someone close to her age and powerful, which is probably what Lil's father will do for her. With my luck, I'll end up with some dweeb who has one foot in the grave but gives my family a pass, like a judge, if I'm even thought of at all." Eva pivoted on her heel, grabbed her coat, and stormed out of our place.

No one tried to stop her.

"I've called in security. None of you will go anywhere without additional soldiers," Stefano informed us in a voice that didn't invite discussion.

We already had guards breathing down our backs. I guessed it would get even worse. I wanted to be mad about it, but the Bratva... they were the enemy. I couldn't blame him.

Emiliana's gaze was locked onto Stefano's, but she looked away at the order. He reacted to the shift in her attention by releasing his sister then going to where Emiliana sat on the couch and pulling her to her feet. "I mean it, Em."

"Why are you worried about me?" She raised her chin and glared at him. "You should be concerned about your sister."

Marissa snorted, angrily wiping her tears away. "Yeah, why so worried? Our futures are already fucked, thanks to our father. Maybe Ivan's here as runner-up to Tony? It could be that dear old Dad is seeing who has more to offer him to take me off his hands. You can't do a damn thing, Stefano, not with Camila either." She shot her brother a loaded look that landed on him then Emiliana. "Our hands are fucking tied."

Stefano frowned but didn't deny what she'd said. "You know I would do anything for you."

Marissa leveled a hard, defiant expression at him. “I know. But... we both know where the real threat is for us, and spotting a Russian is not it. Not for me, anyway. Not with whatever deal our father made—at the cost of our sister’s future.”

“Stay away from Ivan, Marissa,” Stefano warned then shifted the weight of his stare to Emiliana. “That goes for you too.”

“Me?” Emiliana’s brows rose in challenge, but her words lacked bite. “Your issues are ridiculous. I can handle myself. I’m fine, Stefano.”

He didn’t respond, and the rest of us didn’t move, riveted by the palpable sparks flying between them. For the most part, Stefano kept his distance. My interest was piqued when he growled something under his breath then ushered Emiliana into another room. maybe I was wrong about the chemistry between them.

“What do you suppose that was about?” Lil moved closer on the couch then leaned forward, her elbows on her knees.

“No idea.” We fell silent, listening intently, hoping to hear what was happening between them. Several minutes later, they emerged, speaking not a word as they returned to the room.

He went to Marissa and hugged her. “Stay safe. I can’t lose you too.”

Tears welled in Marissa’s eyes, and she gripped him tightly. When they broke apart, he left without another word.

I snapped my gaze back to Emiliana and her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. *Interesting*. “Anything you want to share with the class?”

“No.” Emiliana pivoted on her heel and left the room.

CHAPTER SIX



EMILIANA

The glowing numbers on my phone taunted me as I rechecked the time, unable to sleep in anticipation of what would happen soon. Clad only in a silky black camisole and matching panties, I pulled the fluffy duvet around my bare legs and sat cross-legged on my bed, attempting to study for finals. The pads of my fingers brushed my lips at the memory of Stefano's kiss. Before he left that afternoon, after kissing me senseless, he'd promised to come to my room later.

We met when we could, which wasn't enough, and always under the cover of darkness. Too often, he held me at arm's length. But there were times, like today, when his need for me eclipsed his determination to wait until things were safer, and he threw caution to the wind. I greedily grabbed those moments because we both knew there was a very real possibility that things would never be safe enough for us to be together. Frank Rossi, his father, the Rossi boss, viewed me as damaged, an ill-afforded distraction.

Goose bumps rose along my exposed skin as my pulse beat frantically at the base of my neck. I sensed Stefano rather than heard him. Even so, I couldn't take any chances, so I raised my gun and aimed for the door that had eased open a fraction of an inch.

When it swung wide, Stefano stood with a wicked grin curving his devastatingly handsome face. I took in his solid, six-foot-three-inch frame, which moved with predatory grace as he approached me.

No words were needed as he reached for me. I rose to my knees, letting the textbook and gun fall to my side on the mattress. Then he was in front of me, and I pressed my hands flat on his chest while he placed one hand at my hip and the other around the back of my neck to draw me in.

“You’re so beautiful, Emiliana,” he whispered across my lips as he brushed a tender kiss on them before drawing back. “I would have come sooner, but Sofia took over the living room. It’s an explosion of fabric.” He chuckled, and I imagined what the room looked like. “She’s passed out on the couch.”

“No one else saw you?” One of the soldiers knew, but we didn’t need to mention it, as the guard wouldn’t report to Stefano’s controlling and evil father. I wished we could always be together and not in secret. But we couldn’t, and I would take whatever time we managed to carve out to be together. The only drawback was that we weren’t able to meet more often.

He shook his head and cupped my cheek. I leaned into his touch as he ran the pad of his thumb back and forth. I knew what he felt—smooth skin with no hint of the invisible scars that riddled every inch of me. Inside, I was ugly—broken, vengeful, and deadly. We had that in common, a beautiful exterior that didn’t match what lay beneath. It had always drawn me to him, and I guessed he felt the same.

He made me feel safe, and very few people had that effect after what I’d been through. I could be myself with him

because he understood me in a way few could. He'd seen enough of it firsthand. I saw the pain from my abduction in my family's eyes and locked the broken pieces of myself away to ease their pain. I didn't have to put up walls to protect Stefano. I could give him everything, and he was strong enough to take it.

As his mouth grazed mine, I gripped his neck, urging him to give me more. He answered the invitation of my parted lips and deepened the kiss. All our problems slipped away, and I moaned in pleasure. I leaned into his touch, melting against him. The way he made me feel was an addiction I never wanted to quit.

I tugged at his shirt, urging him to remove it. He broke the kiss long enough to take it off before stripping mine away. When there were no barriers. I lost myself in his touch.

There was only him—no fear, no nightmares, just the two of us.

My hands explored the contours of his strong shoulders and back. Beneath my fingers, the muscles shifted and bulged. My body hummed with need. His kiss turned insistent, and I matched his urgency. When he nipped at my lip then sucked it to ease the sting, I sighed then whispered, "I need you. I don't want to take things slow."

He growled before reclaiming my lips and trailing a hand along the inside of my thigh, and sparks of lust shot between my legs. I squirmed against his teasing touch. He dipped his finger into my heat, and I clenched around him before he withdrew and circled my clit. I gasped into his mouth then tore my lips from his as desire exploded inside me from his sensual touch.

After easing me back, he trailed kisses along my jaw and down my body until he found my clit with his tongue. I buried my fingers in the sheets as he teased and toyed with me until I bucked my hips against him. Stars exploded behind my eyelids as I climaxed.

I heard the tear of a condom wrapper. He leaned over me, a satisfied grin curving his sexy mouth. "You sure?"

"Fuck yes." I grabbed the side of his neck and pulled him to me. As he settled his weight over me, the tip of his cock rubbed over my sensitive clit, and I gasped. I wanted more. Then he pushed inside, and I could barely see straight from how right it felt.

My heart pounded, and I tried to get my breathing under control as I clenched around his hard cock. He thrust deeply, increasing his pace, and I wrapped my legs around his hips, wanting everything he was giving me and more.

Pleasure built inside me. Everything he did was so incredibly hot. The faster he went, the closer to the edge I came until I arched against him, my mouth opening with a scream he swallowed with a kiss. As I quivered beneath him, he chased my orgasm with one of his own before collapsing on top of me. My arms shifted, and I ran my hands along his back as we worked to regulate our breathing. He grinned at me with a sexy smile then moved to his side, pulling me with him. I eagerly rolled with him, rested my head on his chest, and then tangled my legs with his.

After we got cleaned up, he trailed slow circles on my back with his fingers, lulling me to sleep. In his arms, I relaxed. It wouldn't be long before I fell asleep. My only wish was that he would still be there when I woke. He wouldn't be. Someday soon, that needed to change.

CHAPTER SEVEN



MARISSA

I'd been up since four. Something had woken me, but there had been no alerts from the guards, so I assumed it wasn't anything other than my restless tossing and turning. I'd been dreaming of working on my canvas, blending shades of blue to finish the Adriatic Sea that surrounded Venice.

It was quiet, and with finals and my wedding to Tony approaching, I wanted to spend every moment I could in the present. I didn't have much to look forward to, so I sought what pleased me with a single-minded focus.

Too often, I felt like I was splitting apart. Strong emotions shot the shattered pieces of me in different directions—fear of how evil my father was and annoyance about how I had to act a certain way to shield my emotions from his view. Gut-wrenching grief for the death of my mother and our brother Alfonso, who had been gunned down in a park when he was just a little kid. The uncertainty of Camila's fate because our father had ruthlessly married her off to Vic Pavlov, a member of the Bratva.

I swiped at a tear that rolled down my cheek. Paint covered my hands, but I didn't care if my face was an extension of my canvas. I could use a little color in my world—and my art helped to glue all those scattered pieces of my soul back

together, at least temporarily. I stared unseeingly at the painting I was working on for my final exam. The sense of peace wouldn't last. When I laid my brush and palette down, dark thoughts would consume me. They were always close, and there was little I could do to quiet them.

I couldn't fix anything for my mother or brother. But Camila... if I could talk with Ivan, maybe I could find out what her life was like, assuming she was still alive. A dull ache pierced my thoughts, and I glanced at the slight bruise that encircled my wrist. Tony had become possessive since our engagement. A jolt of anger flared inside me. I would have to be careful about approaching Ivan. Stefano said he would talk to the Russian, but I would have an opportunity, as he was on campus.

It was just a matter of finding the right time to approach him.

CHAPTER EIGHT



SOFIA

A swirl of crimson silk flared as my fingers trailed over my fashion model's finished slip dress. It was perfect. The color conveyed power, the lines elegance, and the way the silky fabric hugged every curve and valley, shifting seductively around her legs as she moved, was pure sex appeal.

I couldn't stop grinning as the last model took the catwalk to the roar of applause from a celebrity-filled venue, wearing my final design for New York's Fashion Week. A sense of satisfaction and immense relief at being done with the line swelled within me as a buzzing sounded. I turned my head, trying to locate its source. As it grew louder, the room lost its sharpness. A strange hazy darkness crept around the edges of my vision until there was nothing left of the catwalk or venue.

Dammit. My alarm. I was at college, not at New York's Fashion Week as a headlining debut designer. I knew it was too good to be true. A hard shove on my shoulder pulled me further from the dream's hold, and I blinked slowly to find Lil's light-blue eyes inches from mine. Her hair fell forward, draping around us like a silvery-blond curtain.

When she saw that I was awake, she eased back. I groaned and shoved a tangled mass of dark hair from my forehead and

half of my face. A dull ache made its presence known in my neck from the weird angle I'd fallen asleep in last night on the living room couch. Soft laughter spilled from her lips as she helped to untangle me from the red silk dress, which I'd been dreaming about and had finished several hours past midnight, draped over my lap.

"Time to get up, Miss Fashionista." Lil's eyes sparkled as she pulled me to a sitting position.

The sizzle of bacon and the rich aroma of coffee permeated the air, and I inhaled deeply, realizing how hungry I was and wondering when I'd last eaten. I lost all track of time when I was creating.

Lil moved a bolt of black fabric before plopping down on the couch next to me. Then she bent forward, grabbed a mug from the coffee table, and handed it to me.

I curled my fingers around the steaming cup and inhaled before taking the first sip. Creamy goodness flooded my mouth and sparked my pile-of-mush brain. "You're a goddess," I croaked between sips. "Is Em cooking?"

Lil laughed. "No, but her brother is."

"Enzo's here?" *Has he seen me yet?* My hand went to my hair, and I tried to smooth it. I probably looked terrible.

She plucked a long red thread from my hair before dropping it onto a pile of scraps on the table. "How did it go last night?"

Her gaze darted around the room, and I followed its path. There was fabric everywhere, half-finished and completed pieces. My sewing machine was on the table, and I'd even dragged my adjustable and dress-form mannequins into the living room. I'd completely hijacked the space.

“I’m close to being done.” I snuck a peek into the kitchen, unable to stop myself. Enzo was so beautiful that it hurt. He stood over the stove with a spatula, his gunmetal-gray Henley stretched taut over his broad shoulders and drool-worthy biceps. Whiskey-colored eyes mischievously sparkled when he caught me staring at him, and my cheeks heated.

“Why are you here?” Busted, I had to say something. He flashed a crooked grin, and I sighed.

“We decided to make you all breakfast, since you’re drowning in finals,” Enzo said.

“We?” I glanced at Lil for clarification. The front door opened, and I shivered as cold air raced through the room.

“Your brothers.” Lil winked. “And Stefano and Tony, if they’re able to come.” She rested her head against the back of the couch. “Emiliana, Marissa, get down here!”

I gulped the rest of my coffee as Marco, my eldest brother, came over and ruffled my hair. Nico, the second oldest, tweaked my nose, said hi to Lil, then followed Marco to the island to talk with Enzo.

It wasn’t until Trey slammed the front door and flashed me an evil smile that I shoved my mug into Lil’s hands. Then my brother tackle-hugged me as I shrieked. “Get off me, you big oaf!”

His fingers tangled in my hair and messed it up even more.

“You lie! You’re *Cousin Itt*—have you seen your hair?” He took a chunk and flipped it over my head and my face.

“Wow.” I slapped his hands away before he fell onto the cushion beside me. “You’re lucky I love you, or you would be eating a bullet for a comment like that.”

“Please.” He slung an arm around my shoulders and pulled me to his side. “I’m your favorite brother.”

It was true. We were closest in age, and I had always gone to Trey if I needed anything. We got along well and liked to hang out together. I glanced around, noting that Lil had gone over to sit with the guys, and Emiliana had woken and joined them too. Marissa stood at the first landing, her hair as bad as mine.

“Am I still dreaming?” Marissa had a streak of cerulean paint on the side of her face. “Are those croissants? Just out of the oven?”

“What?” I jerked out of Trey’s hold and shoved him back when he tried to get to the kitchen, where a warm plate of croissants waited, ahead of me.

Emiliana chuckled, and Enzo leaned against the counter, his lips twitching as he tried not to laugh. I sighed at the flakey pastry, salivating for that first buttery taste as I brought it to my mouth. I bit down, and my teeth chopped onto the air. Trey held me in place with arms as strong as steel, his face near mine as he stole the bite I was going to take.

I saw red. “You’re a monster!”

Trey snickered then released me. He moved to sit on the other side of Lil. I slapped my palms against the counter, ready to launch myself out of the chair and toward my prankster brother. He was messing with me when I’d had too little sleep. Usually, we laughed together, but I was exhausted, hungry, and under-caffeinated.

The sound of a plate sliding across stone and stopping in front of me was the only thing that calmed me down. Enzo chuckled as he passed me a freshly made coffee. “Looking

sexy, Sofia.” He winked with heat in his eyes before he turned and poured a cup for Emiliana.

Marco glared at Enzo, but I rolled my eyes. We’d all grown up together and were close. Marco had nothing to worry about. Enzo wasn’t mine, no matter how much I wished he was. Things had been less complicated when we were children and he’d sworn a blood oath of protection to me. I simply couldn’t help the longing that hit me whenever he was near.

Marissa pulled a stool close then plucked a croissant from the plate that included frittatas, extra bacon, and some fresh fruit. I eased back into the chair, feeling slightly more normal with food in my stomach. I didn’t think I’d eaten at all the day before—I’d been too hard at work.

Trey leaned around Nico and smiled in understanding. He got me. I grinned back. I was hangry, and there were no hard feelings. “Finals are kicking my ass,” I offered as a halfhearted apology for getting irritated with him. A pang of sorrow gut-punched me as I noticed dark half-moons hanging beneath his eyes. He was pushing himself too hard, trying to be successful in his ER residency while staying on top of his duties to the family.

I loved being in the Five Families, especially ours. The La Rosa household was filled with laughter, unlike what Marissa Rossi and Lil Brambilla endured in theirs. As I looked around the island at everyone, love swelled in me. If only things could have stayed that way... but change was inevitable. And I only hoped that the Mafia life didn’t take too much from us, even though I knew it already had—I glanced at Lil—and probably wouldn’t stop.

CHAPTER NINE



EMILIANA

The guys had cleared out after eating breakfast with us, and after hours of studying, I was ready for anything that took me away from the stress of finals. I leaned a hip against the kitchen island, full from the dinner Sofia and I had made for everyone. It was the four of us, like usual, until Stefano barged in to check on Marissa—*and me*.

The memory of how Stefano kissed me filled my mind with drugging images. Being with him eclipsed everything that had happened to me and allowed me to just exist in the moment. Falling asleep in his arms was everything.

If things were different, we could be so much more to each other than stolen kisses in the shadows. But they weren't. It was the Mafia, and life was messy.

“Marissa.”

Stefano's deep voice snapped me out of my thoughts, and heat stained my cheeks. I jerked my hand away from my lips, which I'd been absently tracing, hoping he hadn't seen. His eyes flared, and I knew he had. It was a small glimpse into what he was feeling. Then the mask I hated fell over his features once more. The pain of loss burned through my veins. I wanted what we couldn't have, and Stefano concealing his emotions symbolized that and much more.

I would tear that mask off someday, and he would never wear it around me again. I was determined.

“Marissa”—he shifted to pin her with his intense stare—“this is serious.”

“I know, and I’m only *thinking* about getting close to Ivan to find out about our sister. I haven’t approached him yet.”

“Fuck.” He tugged her to him. “Don’t. He’s dangerous. I’ll find out about Camila.”

Marissa hesitated for half a second. “Promise?”

“I promise,” Stefano assured her, his voice gruff, raspy.

She drew back, and I gasped at the raw emotion on his face. I’d seen that expression when he’d dropped all pretense and showed me the real him the day he pulled me from hell. Pain radiated through my chest, and my hands shook. Not wanting Stefano to notice the tremble, I clasped them behind my back.

I felt hot and knew his gaze was on me. I’d always been able to feel it. I raised my chin in challenge. I was a fool to have thought he wouldn’t notice. He saw everything when it came to me.

Annoyed, I busied my hands by putting the dishes in the dishwasher. They needed to talk, and I had to stay out of it.

It wasn’t long before Stefano left, and Marissa turned to Sofia, Lil, and me. Mischief sparkled in her smile, and my heart sank. I knew what she had in mind.

“Tony’s meeting me tonight.” She held up a hand, palm facing us. “Before you say anything, I listened and am attempting to find common ground between us.” She winked.

“With a party, of course. He and Eva will be there in a few minutes.”

“They’ll be where?” Lil asked.

“There’s a party hosted by the football players, and we’re going. They’re meeting us there.” She pivoted and flew up the stairs, throwing one last comment over her shoulder. “Hurry up and change because this night is happening.”

The three of us hadn’t moved. Sofia rested a hand on my arm, and I turned toward her. “What?”

“Is there something going on between you and Stefano?”

I laughed, but it came out dark and forlorn. “You know their father. Frank Rossi married off Camila, his oldest, to the Russian mafia. Marissa is next, but she’s the lucky one. Maybe. And Stefano? His father will never relinquish power to him. A relationship between us cannot happen.”

“Of course it can! So what if he isn’t boss? Like you care about that.”

I reined in my emotions, determined to keep them close so my friends wouldn’t see how affected I was. “True. I don’t care, but his father does. He’ll make sure to choose a suitable wife for Stefano, and it won’t be me.”

“Well”—Sofia frowned—“dammit. Nothing is working out for us how we want it to.”

She was referring to Enzo. I had no idea what the problem was between them, but it was apparent that there was one. I would have to talk to my brother soon. They both deserved to be happy.

“We should go to the party.” Lil gave Sofia a slight shove in the direction of the stairs then motioned for me to follow.

“We need to enjoy the last week of true freedom that we have before the break. It makes me sick to think we only have one semester before we’re home again.”

“You okay?” Sofia wrapped an arm around Lil’s waist. She nodded but hurried up the stairs ahead of Sofia to get ready.

She wasn’t fooling anyone. Sofia and I both knew that Lil was dreading graduation and having to move back home more than anyone but Marissa. I squared my shoulders and followed them upstairs to change for a night of partying. Our freedom was limited, and we needed to enjoy it while we could. Sooner rather than later, I knew it would end.

CHAPTER TEN



SOFIA

Pulsing bass notes traveled through the crisp winter night, dampening the sound of snow crunching under our shoes as we walked the short distance to the football house. A bottle of vodka dangled from Marissa's fingers. There would be beer, but we always brought our own alcohol.

We followed Marissa like rats behind the Pied Piper to the party, our guards trailing us and dressed like college students to blend in, our one requirement when Stefano and Enzo had assigned additional soldiers to keep us safe. Normally, I would have been upset about the restriction of freedom, but Ivan's presence was unsettling.

Emiliana shivered, and I glanced at her. The two of us had hung back a little while Lil and Marissa passed the vodka, laughing as they stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk. I looped my arm in Emiliana's. "It'll be fun." She grimaced, and I laughed. "They need it. When the semester ends, they'll return home to existences they would give anything to trade us for." Lil's father was unpleasant at best, and she knew her days were numbered until he informed her of who she would marry, based solely on what he would gain from the union.

"And that's why I'm going tonight, but I don't have to like it." She shuddered.

I knew her reaction wasn't from the cold. "Yeah, but you'll be with us."

"Mmhm."

The door to the party house flew open. A couple stumbled out and narrowly missed colliding with Lil, who had the bottle tipped back on a two-shot swallow. "We'll need to keep an eye on those two."

"Yeah," Emiliana said with a sigh. "They're feeling all kinds of pressure. It'll probably do them some good to let loose."

My gaze bounced around the yard and then to the house we were entering. "I keep expecting all the guys to show up and party with us."

Emiliana didn't even blink. "They said they would if they could get away."

I wasn't counting on it. We'd spent the morning with them, and they likely had a lot on their plates.

We entered the loud football house, and Lil fell back to buffer Emiliana's other side. A sliver of annoyance hit me that Marissa hadn't thought of Emiliana's issues with being touched or how her even going to a party was a big deal. Even tipsy, Lil had Emiliana's back.

I tilted my head ear to shoulder and was rewarded with a satisfying neck crack. "All right"—I shook off my weird mood, reached for the bottle Lil held, and got into the reason we were at a party in the first place—"let's do this!"

"Sofia." Dane's voice boomed over the music. The football player cast a wary but hungry glance at Emiliana before his gaze jumped back to mine.

Never gonna happen, Dane. He was one of the defensive ends and a total teddy bear wrapped in a mammoth body.

“Whatever you guys need, just let me know.”

I patted his solid chest and grinned. “Thanks. We’re going to dance.” I did a hasty scan of the crowd, picking out some of the players I knew. “Get Chase and Zion. We need a perimeter around us. Not interested in picking up any randoms, and it would be... better”—less blood would be shed—“if no one approached us.”

Emiliana snorted. “Why not make it interesting?”

“Evil, Em.” Lil shook her head. “Hey, Dane.”

We were only at the party because most of the guys on the team were cool. A few weren’t, but our friends kept them away, mainly because they worried about what we would do. It would be bloody if our families got involved.

Dane motioned over his head for the two guys I’d mentioned. People parted as we moved into the living room, where many danced. Dane stiff-armed the stupid ones who thought they could approach us. We could handle ourselves, but having football-player backup made it easier, less messy.

I caught a glimpse of Tony, who had found Marissa, in a corner and notched my head in their direction so that Emiliana knew. Eva waved then lifted her Solo cup in a toast from across the room. Guys were congregating around her. She was in her element.

As usual, Marissa did her thing, floating back to us like the social butterfly she was from time to time. She needed to talk to Tony about getting their own place away from his father’s home, so I wasn’t concerned that she’d already gone her own way. Some of the guards fanned out for better coverage. I

didn't see any close to Marissa, but it wasn't unusual for Tony to tell them to back off, that he had her.

“Chase.” Lil smirked then pulled the mammoth guy to face her as she rotated her hips in a figure eight to the beat. His light eyes sparkled with desire, and she threw her head back and laughed.

I faced Emiliana, linked our hands, and raised them over our heads. She grinned before doing a similar move to Lil's. With the guys surrounding us, Lil at Emiliana's back and me at her front, she was as free as she could be in such an environment. Neither of us was drinking, and I would keep it that way to support her.

Laughter bubbled up, and I let joy fill me as the music changed to something steamier with a heavier bass, vying for control of my heart as I melted into the beat. Through the writhing bodies, I searched for a glimpse of Marissa. Emiliana did the same. We both spotted her, still drinking and dancing with Tony.

When Lil turned, pointing somewhere beyond Chase, I shifted until I had a direct line of sight on our party friend. Tony was no longer by her side, and Marissa had wrapped an arm around some random guy we couldn't see through the crowd. “She's crazy.”

“Crazy stupid.” Emiliana leaned close to be heard above the music. “Tony's the jealous type. If he hears about her dancing up on anyone, he will lose his shit.”

I shrugged. “It's Tony. She can control him.”

She frowned. “Maybe.”

“We've probably got about an hour before the guys show up.”

She nodded, and I did my best to dismiss the thought of Enzo or Stefano, or worse, one of my brothers showing up to kill our fun. They'd been tightly wound since we spotted Ivan. I got it. Big bad Bratva making an appearance wasn't good. But it was our campus. No one would push us out or control what we did.

With that final thought, I let the vibrations of the music wash over me, heightening my energy as I laughed. It was bliss, and I sank into the experience of dancing and hanging out with Emiliana and Lil. My football friends were doing what we needed and keeping the idiots who didn't realize the risk they took with their lives by approaching us at bay. Tonight, I preferred them over our guards, as it gave us a sense of freedom we didn't quite have.

Emiliana grinned, and I moved in tandem with her, loving how her eyes sparkled. She was alive, free, and with us—comfortable enough to let go, creating memories we could share and keep.

Lil never strayed from our little circle, but I shot Chase a warning glare to ensure he didn't take advantage of my friend's drunkenness. I didn't think he was that stupid, but anything was possible.

Time passed in a blur of movement. Our bubble remained intact until it didn't. I sensed rather than saw another body closing in. My fingers slipped under my shirt, curling around the knife tucked into a hidden slot in my jeans at the small of my back. I half pivoted as a tall, athletically built guy stretched his hand toward Emiliana. She shifted into him before I finished my rotation.

Emiliana stopped dancing and shoved him back. Then she leaned into his space. "Any part of you that touches me is

something I'll cut off.”

A glint of silver flashed when she drew her blade, taunting him to try it. God, I loved that girl. She was wickedly fierce.

He raised his hands, fingers spread and palms up as he took a hurried step away. I laughed. Zion moved half a second later, grabbed a handful of the guy's shirt, and flung him backward. The drunken fool landed in a heap a few feet away from us while people shrieked at being jostled until they saw the look of imminent death on Emiliana's face and fury radiating from Zion.

Lil snorted. “Fucking idiot.”

She wasn't kidding. I strolled toward him, tossing my knife end over end in a catch and release. From the corner of my eye, movement tried to shift my attention, but I had a message to deliver, loudly so that those in the back were sure to hear it too. “Consider yourself lucky. If you come within an inch of touching her, she'll gut you like the pig you are then dance in your blood.” I flicked my hair over a shoulder. “Know who you're messing with.”

Zion hefted the guy over his big shoulders then proceeded to take out the trash. I followed as a sea of drunken college students parted for him. I glanced back at Lil and Emiliana, whose faces mirrored my amusement at the situation. Emiliana's dark eyes widened, and I whipped around to see what she was looking at. A tall, broad man with blond hair and arctic eyes met mine, and a chill skated over my skin—Ivan.

I frantically searched the crowd until I spotted Marissa arguing in a back corner with Tony. It was bad. We needed to get out of here. And even worse, Ivan was close to Marissa, and I had a horrible feeling that he was the guy she'd been next to earlier.

I scanned the area for easy exits. Zion must have been on his way back because dancers were shifting out of the way, but it also created space for Ivan. The music cranked up another notch. I grabbed Dane's shirt and pulled him down so his face aligned with mine. "We gotta go. Appreciate the dance." I winked, not willing to give anything away. It wasn't the time or place.

"Anytime, Princess."

I rolled my eyes then clasped onto Emiliana's hand, motioning toward Marissa. Lil shouted as I took a step away, and I paused. She swayed with her phone in hand.

"Marissa texted that she left."

"What the fuck?" Not good. I searched for her again, and alarm spread as I realized I'd lost sight of Marissa, Tony, and Ivan.

"I'm texting Stefano!" Emiliana shouted over the noise.

"Do you see him anywhere?" My fingers dug into Lil's arm, my panic too close to the surface.

"Who?" Lil tried to yank her arm away.

I had a tight grip, and I pulled her closer. "Ivan. He was here."

She shook her head and then scanned the crowd with me. "I don't think so. But Tony was here. I'm sure Marissa left with him."

My gaze locked with Emiliana's wary one, and I knew with every fiber of my being that it would not end well.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



LILIANA

The rich aroma of coffee trickled into my room and eased me into consciousness. I stretched my arms overhead before flinging the covers back and sliding out of bed. I didn't have class and couldn't help the grin from pulling my mouth wide. The rumble of my stomach dictated my actions as I went into the hall and pounded on Sofia's closed door. When I knocked on Marissa's, no sound came from within her room, so I moved on to Emiliana's, which was open. When I peered inside, I found it empty.

On my way to the landing, I slapped my palm against Sofia's door again. "Get up, Sof. Let's go out to brunch."

My hair was a rat's nest, and I still wore my tank top and pajama pants. I would change later. What I needed to make sure of was that no one was eating yet. We had to take advantage of every moment before going home for winter break.

I found Emiliana on the landing with a mug of coffee in hand and her long dark hair falling in a damp curtain around her shoulders. She'd managed to get a shower in and put on clothes.

"Eva showed up last night after you passed out in your room. She crashed on the couch."

“Why didn’t she take one of the extra rooms?” I massaged my temples, wishing it would ease the ache in my head.

“She was wrecked and didn’t want to go home with her date. So she had him drop her off here.”

I snorted. That was unusual, but whatever. She could come eat with us. A muffled snore carried up the stairs, and I peered over the banister to see Eva sprawled across the leather couch, her hair a tangled mess around her head. “Let’s all go to brunch. Then we’ll figure out what else we want to do today. Gun range or shopping, maybe?”

A slow grin pulled at Emiliana’s lips. “You know what my answer will be.”

I laughed. Gun range was a no-brainer. “I’m good with that.”

“Is everyone else sleeping?” She glanced at the time on her phone. “And my brother texted. He’s on his way.”

“Which probably means Stefano or Sofia’s brothers will come. Maybe even Tony.” I frowned. “That’s gonna suck. We’ll have to deal with him a lot more to hang out with Marissa. At least she texted us again last night that she was fine and heading back to her room.”

“Yeah.”

Emiliana didn’t seem any happier than I was about Marissa’s looming marriage. “We don’t have much choice with Tony if we want to see Marissa.”

I didn’t want anything to come between us after what we had for the past three and a half years at school. We’d grown close, and the thought of how little I would see them almost brought me to my knees in despair. I hated how isolated my dad and Marissa’s liked to keep us.

I took a step back toward our rooms. “You want to tackle waking Sofia, and I’ll get Marissa?” Sofia took forever to get ready, but Emiliana had a way of making her hurry. Marissa was more of a throw-on-whatever-clothes-were-closest kind of girl, so she was out the door and in the action quickly. I was sure Eva was the same.

Emiliana set her mug on the counter then followed me as I headed for Marissa’s room. The thought that Tony might be in there with her had my hand hesitating on the knob. *Fuck it.* I twisted it and shoved the door open. My heart stopped, and the image before me paralyzed my vocal cords for half a second before a scream tore from my throat.

Our three guards rushed from wherever they’d been up the stairs and into the room, but all I could see was Marissa’s lifeless body sprawled across the floor. The scene came to me in fractured splices, my brain refusing to process the whole of what had been done to my friend—there was so much blood.

“Fuck!” Emiliana shouted.

Someone’s hand curled around my arm and yanked me back. Then Sofia’s frantic expression registered, and the weird buzzing in my ears receded until I could make out the words her lips formed.

Pounding feet on the stairs sounded just before Eva pushed her way into the room. Her body convulsed, and she dropped to her knees and emitted an ear-piercing scream. I grabbed Eva’s arm and tugged her away. Tears rolled down her face, and she shook uncontrollably. I eased her back so she couldn’t see Marissa’s body, shielding her as much as I could.

“Em’s calling Stefano. And Enzo—”

“Get the fuck away from the door, Sofia,” Enzo growled as he moved in front of her, protectively shielding her body with his.

When did Enzo get here? Shit. That was stupid of us. What if her killer is still here? My eyes locked on his gun, and sanity snapped back into place. I wasn't afraid of death, and I was no stranger to it. But she was our friend... it brought back the same feelings I had when Mom was murdered in front of me. My hands trembled, and a wave of nausea swept over me. I shoved it and the memory of Mom into a far recess of my mind to deal with later.

Emiliana had a gun in one hand and a knife in the other. She stood side by side with her brother. Both vibrated a cold ruthlessness, and I inched back to let them enter the room. Sofia's brothers would have been notified. Soon, the place would be crawling with Mafia.

Sofia and I grabbed guns from our rooms. She dragged Eva with her to the loft to wait for Emiliana. The guys would do their initial investigation and analysis.

“I can't.” Eva backed away. Her face was deathly pale, and unchecked tears spilled down her cheeks. She pivoted and fled down the stairs.

Sofia stood and stepped to follow but I grabbed her wrist. “Let her go.” Eva and Marissa were close, and she needed to process the loss in her own way. A guard would follow her back to the dorms.

After a brief hesitation, Sofia sank onto the couch next to me. “Tony was pissed last night. We all know he's got a temper.”

I nodded. “Do you think...”

“Yes.” Emiliana joined us and offered her opinion to my question. “It’s possible that he lost it on Marissa in a jealous rage.”

I shuddered then swiped the tears from my cheeks. They wouldn’t help. “I hate that the last memory of Marissa we’ll have is that.” She’d been beaten. Her last hour or so hadn’t been easy. How long she’d fought, suffering at someone else’s hand before her throat was slit, was something we would have to wait to hear. But given the swelling around her eyes, the split lip, and bruising around her neck, it had to have been some time, and before we’d come home from the party. Then there was her coloring.

“She’s been dead for a while.”

I shivered at Sofia’s statement. The gray pallor was a clear indication. “It had to have been before we came home from the party last night. The cameras...”

“I checked on my phone,” Sofia said as Emiliana sat next to us. “They were down for an hour last night.”

“Why didn’t we get an alert?” That made no sense.

“The feed was probably erased after.” Emiliana turned her haunted gaze to mine. “This never should have happened.”

I swallowed convulsively, refusing to give in to my body’s urge to purge whatever was left in my stomach from last night. “This was the one place we thought of as an escape.” Marissa and I considered it a haven away from home.

“I forgot,” Sofia whispered. “I couldn’t stop staring at her face. The bruises. The blood. The blue lips and lifeless stare.”

“What did you forget?” The volume of my question matched hers as chills danced over my skin.

“That we’re in the Mafia.” Sofia closed her eyes briefly. “Something bad is always just around the corner.”

“Even in here,” Emiliana said. “Nowhere is safe.”

“We need to be smarter,” Sofia said.

“We need to stick together.” Not like what happened last night. We didn’t even think twice when Marissa left. It was something she did often. We just never thought...

As our reality solidified, I couldn’t help but wonder if my days were as numbered as Marissa’s had been. Her imminent marriage to Tony was bad, but it hadn’t been enough to keep her safe. Would the same happen to me? The closer we got to graduation, the more I couldn’t shake the foreboding sense that I was on the same path.

“Let’s form a pact,” Sofia said.

Her hand gripped mine and Emiliana’s, and I felt rather than saw the half-moons that her nails would leave.

“For Marissa.” My voice cracked. “So her life, her death, is remembered.”

Sofia nodded in agreement. “Here and now, going forward, we are sisters.”

Emiliana made a small incision in her palm with her knife, and we circled around her. As blood welled, she passed the blade to Sofia, who did the same, then me. We pressed our palms together in a blood oath that would link us for the remainder of our lives.

As the blood smeared together, the promise became unbreakable, sworn in blood.

“If we need each other, we come no matter what and do what’s necessary to keep each other safe. No questions asked,”

Emiliana vowed, and Sofia and I agreed.

Inside, I felt the simple ritual change me. I was no longer alone. “Then we need to take our training seriously.” I zeroed in on Emiliana. “Bring in your guy. Let’s get this done. And then we’ll make the fucker who killed Marissa pay.”

The End

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If you enjoyed reading DEFIANT PRINCESS as much as I did writing it, I hope you’ll consider leaving a review.

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