

## Chapter 1: One Dream

Isabella tightened her grip on the wheel, her pulse hammering in sync with the go-kart's revving engine. The ocean breeze carried the scent of salt and gasoline as she flicked her gaze to the competition—his brother Rocco on her left, Marco on her right. The three of them lined up at the makeshift start line along the Santa Monica shoreline, the sun setting behind them, casting streaks of orange and purple across the sky.

Marco turned, flashing his signature smirk. His hazel eyes, always filled with mischief, glinted beneath the shadow of his helmet. "Hope you can keep up, Isabella."

She rolled her eyes, though her stomach twisted in that familiar way it always did around him. Marco had been her partner in speed since they were kids, the person she imagined standing beside her in motorsports, battling for first, pushing each other to be better. The fastest. The fiercest. Rivals on the track but equals in their love for racing.

"Just try not to eat my dust," she shot back, nudging the gas pedal.

The signal was given, and they launched forward. Isabella gritted her teeth as her kart shot down the narrow beach track, the tires kicking up flecks of sand. The roar of the engines filled her ears, the vibrations of speed thrumming through her fingertips. The ocean breeze whipped past, salt clinging to her lips. She maneuvered the turns with precision, feeling the thrill of speed course through her veins. But Marco and Rocco were right there with her, their karts inches apart, engines roaring like a pack of wild animals.

Rocco surged ahead at the last turn, blocking her path just enough for Marco to slip past her, taking first place as they crossed the finish line. Isabella's kart skidded to a stop, her tires kicking up a small cloud of sand. She ripped off her helmet, shaking out her wind-tousled hair, a light sheen of sweat sticking to her skin. Third place. Again.

Marco pulled up beside her and tugged off his helmet, ruffling his fingers through his dark, slightly damp hair. The sea breeze tousled it effortlessly, making him look even more annoyingly perfect. A bead of sweat ran down his temple, catching the last light of the sun. His breathing was still heavy, his adrenaline still high, but that signature smirk was firmly in place.

"You were flying out there. One of these days, you might actually beat me."

His words sent a rush of warmth through her, the way they always did. For a fleeting second, she let herself believe in that dream again—of them pushing each other, side by side, fighting for every inch of the track. But then a voice cut through her thoughts.

"Baby, that was amazing!" Kat's sugary tone made Isabella's stomach drop. She turned in time to see Kat throw her arms around Marco's neck and press a kiss to his lips.

The cheers from the small crowd muffled into a dull hum. Kat was everything a professional racer's girlfriend should be—tall, stunning, always impeccably dressed, even on the beach. Her makeup was flawless, her long, dark hair always styled like she had just stepped out of a salon. The kind of girl who belonged in the winner's circle, draped over her champion's arm, flashing perfect white teeth at the cameras.

Isabella? She could never be that. She never wore makeup, never had the patience for it. Her uniform was jeans and flats, her hair usually in a ponytail or thrown under a cap. She belonged behind the wheel, not in the spotlight.

Rocco stepped beside her, hands shoved in his pockets. "You know he's off-limits, right?"

She clenched her jaw, staring straight ahead, willing herself not to react. Not to let it show.

Rocco exhaled, his voice quieter this time. "Ella..."

She still didn't answer.

Marco had been Rocco's best friend since kindergarten, which meant he had been in Isabella's life for as long as she could remember. The three of them had been introduced to racing when they were just five years old, barely able to reach the pedals but already hooked on the adrenaline. Racing had been their bond, their obsession, their world.

Before she could respond to his brother, Cindy came running over, practically screaming with excitement, her phone held high in the air.

"Ella! That was insane! I got everything on video. TikTok is going to love this—this is the kind of content that makes people go viral!"

She was practically bouncing on her toes, her dark curls spilling over her shoulders as she waved the phone in front of Isabella's face. Cindy had been her best friend since they were four, always the first to cheer her on, the first to believe in her. While Isabella had always been about racing, Cindy had been about making sure the world saw it. She swore that when Isabella went pro, she would be her PR manager, her social media guru, the one making sure everyone knew her name. And the crazy part? Cindy actually believed in her—more than Isabella sometimes believed in herself.

"You're going to be famous, Ella," Cindy continued, practically vibrating with excitement. "And when you are, you're stuck with me."

Isabella laughed, shaking her head. "Like I could ever get rid of you."

"Third place," a voice cut in behind them, smooth and measured. "Not bad. But if you're serious about going pro, you're going to have to do better than that."

Isabella turned, pulse spiking, as Sianna stepped into view. Helmet tucked under one arm, mirrored sunglasses hiding her eyes, she exuded calm authority. Three years older and already graduated, Sianna had spent the summer in Europe racing with a Williams in the Formula 3—an invitation-only league Isabella could only dream of. Tall, blonde, and all business, she wore her half-zipped jacket like a trophy, the team logo catching the fading sunlight. Every race they had ever competed in, Sianna had won. Every single one. She wasn't just ahead in age or experience—she was ahead in skill. And Isabella felt it in her gut.

"Thanks for the pep talk," Isabella said coolly.

Sianna gave a half-smile. "Just keeping you honest."

And just like that, she turned and walked off toward the far end of the track, where a group of local racers were already huddling around the leaderboard. Isabella watched as Sianna joined them with easy confidence, offering quick greetings and casually mentioning her time with the European Formula 3 team. She laughed at something one of them said, then gestured animatedly as if recounting a race. It was subtle, but clear—she wasn't just saying hello. She was making sure everyone knew exactly where she had been, and what she had accomplished.

Beside her, Cindy leaned in and muttered, "Ignore her. She just wants attention. You will beat her this year."

Her dad's voice boomed across the track from the glass-walled office perched above the garage bays—a second-story lookout he used to oversee everything from race prep to training drills. The windows were cracked open, letting the sounds of revving engines and shouting teens filter up to him. "Ella! Matias just landed. He's on his way home! Let's go Home!" he called, his voice carrying effortlessly over the noise of the racing engines.

Isabella sighed, but this time, it wasn't out of frustration. The mention of Matias stirred something lighter inside her—excitement, maybe even relief. The thought of seeing him again, hearing his ridiculous jokes and watching him raid the fridge like he hadn't eaten in days, made her smile. Just like that, the sting of third place, the ache of watching Marco with Kat, even Sianna's smug return—all of it faded into the background. For now, at least.

## **Chapter 2: Matias Returns**

The house was alive with anticipation as Isabella, Rocco, and her dad, Antonio, finished the last-minute preparations. The late afternoon sun filtered through the windows, casting a warm glow over the living room. Even though Matias had visited every summer, this time was different. He wasn't just coming for a vacation—he was moving in, spending his senior year in California before heading to Caltech.

Isabella gave the couch pillows one last adjustment.

"Still with the pillows?" Rocco teased from the kitchen, where he was lazily snacking.

She shot him a look. "It's called being a host."

Antonio chuckled. "You two are acting as if he were a stranger."

His dad was right—Matias was family. His mother, Gabriela, had been best friends with Isabella's mom, Maria, since their high school days in Italy. Maria's brother had been a racer, which was how she met Antonio, a Spanish racer himself. Their love story unfolded alongside the adrenaline of motorsports, and after retiring, they eventually settled in California. Meanwhile, Gabriela married Matias's father and moved to Belgium. Despite the distance, their families remained close, keeping their connection alive through frequent visits and shared summers.

Every summer, he would come to Los Angeles, and in return, Isabella and Rocco would spend most Christmases in Belgium. That was how she had fallen in love with snowboarding—Matias had introduced her to it, just as she and Rocco had introduced him to racing. He had always liked it, but

for him, it was just a hobby. His real passion was engines and the cars itself, which was why he was coming now—to finish high school in the U.S. before heading to Caltech for mechanical engineering.

A car pulled into the driveway.

“That’s them,” Antonio said, stretching his arms.

Rocco was already moving toward the door when it swung open. Isabella’s mom entered first, smiling, and then Matias stepped inside.

The second she saw him, Isabella moved without thinking.

She and Rocco both lunged forward, crashing into him in a tight hug.

“Finally!” Rocco said, clapping him on the back. “Took you long enough.”

Matias laughed, steadying himself. “You guys act like I disappeared for a decade.”

Isabella pulled back, taking a good look at him. He was still Matias, but different. Taller, broader, with a little more muscle in his frame. His golden-blond hair caught the light in soft waves, no longer the messy mop she remembered but now casually styled. And his eyes—those deep blue eyes—still had that calm, steady focus she had always noticed, but now they seemed to hold a quiet confidence too. He just looked... older.

But his grin? That was exactly the same.

Rocco clapped him on the shoulder. “Dude, did you finally hit the gym or something?”

Matias laughed. “Figured I’d stop letting you win at everything.”

Antonio clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Good to have you here, kid. Your room’s ready. Take your time settling in.”

Matias nodded, dropping his bag by the door. His gaze met Isabella’s briefly, just a second of familiarity before he grinned again. “It’s really good to see you guys.”

Maria placed a hand on her hip and raised an eyebrow. “No hug for me?” she asked, feigning offense.

Isabella smirked. “I just saw you this morning.” She said while giving her a warm hug.

Isabella’s mother, Maria, was her best friend. She would never admit this to Cindy, because she knew it would make her sad, but it was true. Her mom was the most loving, kind, and understanding person on earth. Her dad was wonderful too, but he was also her coach, and sometimes—most of the time—he was very hard on her. Isabella had lost count of how many nights she had overheard her parents fighting about it. Maria never agreed with Antonio pressuring her so much in racing, and it was a constant source of tension between them.

That night, Matias went to bed early, exhausted from the jet lag. They all were forced to do the same since the first day of school was the next day. Isabella lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling a mix of nerves and excitement. It was her junior year. She was nervous about the challenges ahead but

also comforted by the fact that she would have Matias—one of her closest friends—by her side the whole year.

### Chapter 3: Seeing Matias in a New Light

Isabella yanked her school blazer off the hanger, her heart pounding as she hurried to get dressed. A swirl of excitement and nerves buzzed in her chest—junior year meant new classes, new chances, maybe even a fresh start. She could hear the chaos downstairs—her mom yelling about breakfast, her dad rummaging through drawers, looking for his car keys. The usual first-day-of-school madness.

“Ella, hurry up!” Rocco’s voice boomed from outside her door, followed by a sharp knock.

“Give me *one minute!*” she snapped, buttoning her blouse at lightning speed before grabbing her skirt. She shoved her feet into her sneakers.

By the time she bolted downstairs, the kitchen was a mess of half-eaten toast, open cereal boxes, and her mom pacing with her phone pressed to her ear. Matias stood by the counter, sipping coffee like he hadn’t a single care in the world.

Rocco pointed at her. “You’re late.”

“You’re *driving*,” she shot back. “So technically, if we’re late, it’s your fault.”

He rolled his eyes and grabbed his keys while he left through the front door “Let’s go.”

Outside, the morning sun had barely lifted over the horizon, casting long shadows across the driveway. Matias and Rocco were already by the car, waiting.

Both of them wore their uniforms—white button-downs tucked into dark slacks, navy blazers slung over their arms. On Rocco, the uniform had always looked perfectly fitted, as if it were tailored just for him. He carried it with the ease of someone used to being the center of attention.

But on Matias?

Isabella glanced at him, surprised. The lanky kid she had grown up with had disappeared. He had filled out, the blazer fitting snugly over his broad shoulders. His golden hair caught the morning sun, making it glow like it had its own light, and his blue eyes, usually so casual and unfocused, seemed to flash with quiet confidence. Even the way he stood—relaxed, confident—felt different.

She shook the thought away and climbed into the car.

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Pulling into the parking lot, Isabella felt the usual rush of nerves and anticipation. The first day of junior year. Everything felt the same—groups of students clustered near their cars, laughing, comparing schedules, catching up after the summer.

Except for one thing.

People were staring.

It wasn't unusual for heads to turn when Rocco walked through the halls. But this time, it wasn't just him. Isabella caught whispers as they walked past.

*"Who is that?"*

*"He is so cute."*

*"He looks so attractive"*

Isabella blinked, glancing sideways at him. Did he even notice? He didn't seem fazed, his usual easy expression in place. But now that she was paying attention, she saw it—the way people looked at him differently.

When he smiled, it wasn't just friendly—it was the kind of smile that made people pause.

A strange cocktail of surprise and confusion twisted in her stomach. It was still Matias—goofy, steady, her oldest friend—but somehow the way everyone else looked at him made her see him differently, and that unsettled her. And for some reason, the thought made her chest tighten.

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The morning passed in a blur.

Cindy met her outside the classroom, immediately launching into a rant about their new teacher's expectations.

"I swear, if we have homework *on the first day*," Cindy groaned, linking her arm with Isabella's as they made their way through the hallway.

"You'll survive," Isabella teased.

They had lunch together, grabbing their trays and finding their usual spot in the courtyard. Cindy filled her in on everything she had missed over the summer—who had broken up, who had hooked up, the latest drama that always swirled around their school.

But Isabella found her mind drifting.

Because across the courtyard, Matias was talking to a girl and a guy, both of whom Isabella barely recognized.

"Look at that," Cindy muttered, nudging Isabella's arm. "They're all over him."

She wasn't wrong. The girl leaned in a little too closely, laughing at whatever Matias had just said. And the guy—who Isabella vaguely remembered being on the soccer team—clapped him on the shoulder, as if he had suddenly become best friends with him overnight.

And around them, people kept whispering.

"Everyone's talking about him today," Cindy observed.

Isabella exhaled slowly. She had expected the first day to be like any other. But clearly, she had underestimated how much Matias's return would stir things up. A flicker of something stirred in her—like she was watching a version of him she didn't quite recognize. He was still Matias, but now

there was a shine on him that everyone seemed drawn to. It made her feel strangely distant, like she was standing just outside the circle, watching it from the edge.

As the final bell rang and the crowds began thinning out, Isabella and Cindy lingered by the lockers, chatting about their schedules. Isabella's gaze drifted across the hall, pulled by a familiar presence.

Marco.

He stood with his usual group, Kat pressed close to his side, her laughter ringing out. He looked the same as ever—relaxed, confident, the easy center of attention.

Cindy followed Isabella's gaze and sighed. "Why do we even look at them?"

Isabella smirked, but before she could reply, Marco turned his head and caught her eye.

He smirked, lifting his hand in a lazy wave. "Hermanita," he said in that teasing voice he had always used when they were kids, like she was still just his friend's little sister. 'Hermanita'—Spanish for little sister—used to make her smile, back when he called her that and it made her feel included. Matias was half Mexican, and he always threw in Spanish words when he spoke, something that people found charming about him. But now, the word made her stomach twist. She didn't want to be his little sister anymore.

Then he turned back to his group, as if the interaction had already been forgotten.

Cindy huffed. "He still calls you that?"

Isabella shrugged. "He always will."

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That night, the house was quiet, the chaos of the first day of school giving way to stillness.

Isabella moved through the hallway by instinct, slipping up the attic stairs like she had done a hundred times before. The wooden steps creaked softly beneath her feet, but she knew exactly how to step to avoid making noise.

Matias's door was open. She peeked in and found him sitting on the floor, surrounded by half-unpacked boxes. Books, sketchpads, and loose car parts were scattered around him, as if he had dumped everything out without a real plan.

"You settle in yet?" she asked, stepping inside.

Matias glanced up, smirking. "Define *settle in*."

She rolled her eyes and plopped down beside him. "You really just threw everything onto the floor, huh?"

"It's called creative organization," he said, tossing a wrench onto a pile of books. "You wouldn't understand."

She snorted. "Right."

They fell into their familiar rhythm of easy conversation.

“So,” Isabella said, nudging his foot with hers. “Are we racing this year, or are you going to pretend to be retired?”

Matias chuckled. “You really think I’d let you win that easily?”

She smirked. “Please. I’ve always been faster.”

“Debatable,” he said, stretching his legs out in front of him. “But yeah, we’ll practice. I want to race as much as I can before college applications take over my life.”

Isabella leaned back against the bed, her voice quieter. “I want to go pro. As soon as I can get enough sponsors, I’m leaving for Europe. I picture it all the time—late nights tuning the car in some garage outside of Milan, hearing my name over the radio, being told I’ve got the fastest lap. Winning races, traveling from city to city. That’s the life I want.”

Matias studied her, his expression unreadable. “You really want to go that far?”

She nodded. “That’s the dream. The real competition is out there”

“I get it,” Matias said. “But you know that’s what comes with it, right? You’ll have to be in front of the cameras all the time, doing interviews, acting like a celebrity—not just racing. That’s part of the game.”

Isabella didn’t respond, but she didn’t have to. He knew her well enough to understand that none of that—the attention, the cameras, the spotlight—was what she cared about. She wasn’t good at it, and she didn’t want to be. Somehow, Matias always had a way of making her think beyond what she said out loud, like he could read the thoughts she hadn’t figured out herself yet.

She changed the subject, nudging him playfully. “So, Mr. Popular—did you enjoy being the center of attention today?”

Matias laughed, shaking his head. “Please. I don’t care about any of that.”

But they both smiled. It felt good to laugh, to drop the serious stuff and just be them for a moment.

After a pause, Isabella asked quietly, “Do you miss your mom?”

He picked at a loose thread on the edge of the rug. “It’s hard sometimes, being away from them. But being here increases my chances of getting into Caltech. I had to make the most of this year.”

Then he looked up at her. “Have you ever thought about a plan B? I mean, if racing doesn’t work out?”

Her response came sharp and certain. “There is no plan B. It’s racing in Europe. That’s it. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

They played cards on the floor for a while after that, their conversation drifting between jokes and memories, until she could barely keep her eyes open. Just like old times.

As she lay back on the rug, her eyes fluttering closed, Isabella felt something settle inside her—a quiet certainty. No matter how different everything felt this year, this right here still made sense. Matias, the attic, the soft hum of night pressing against the windows.



For all the unknowns ahead, she had this moment. A reminder of who she was, and who had always been there beside her. Tomorrow, the world would keep spinning. But tonight, she let herself stay in the stillness, warmed by the kind of comfort that didn't need words.

#### **Chapter 4: The Track Under the Sunset**

The next day after school, the anticipation buzzed through Isabella's veins as they drove out to the track. The air smelled of burnt rubber and gasoline, a scent she was growing more and more fond of. It was a crisp late afternoon, the golden sun beginning its slow descent, casting long shadows over the pavement. This was where everything felt real—where egos clashed, where speed was king, and where the hunger to win revealed who you really were.

Marco was the first to step out of his car, a grin plastered on his face as he spotted Matias. "Matias!" he called, his tone bright, almost brotherly, but Isabella knew better. Marco always saw him as competition, even if Matias wasn't aiming for the same goal. He had the natural instinct to measure himself against others, to constantly prove he was better, faster, more in control.

Rocco was quieter as he emerged from his own car, rolling his shoulders like he was shaking off the weight of the school day. He was always composed, his focus locked in even before the race began. His black racing gloves were already on, fingers flexing, ready. He didn't need to prove anything to anyone. He was the standard—the one they all chased.

Matias, on the other hand, was different. He stretched out lazily, running a hand through his hair as if this was all just for fun. He wasn't careless—he was skilled, fast, but he lacked the edge that Rocco and Marco had. He wasn't here to go pro. He was here because he loved the thrill, but he wasn't willing to risk it all like they were.

Isabella leaned against the railing, watching them move to their cars, each one with their own way of preparing. Marco's jaw was clenched as he adjusted his seat, fingers tightening on the wheel. His car, sleek and built for aggression, sat low and ready to pounce. Rocco was composed as always, slipping into his seat with effortless precision. Matias, casual as ever, tapped his fingers on the dashboard before gripping the wheel, a small smirk playing on his lips.

When the signal went off, the track came alive.

Tires screeched against the asphalt, engines roared, and the air pulsed with adrenaline. From the very start, Marco pushed harder than necessary, cutting in aggressively, forcing Matias to swerve slightly. Isabella tensed, gripping the railing as she watched him maneuver. He was fast, too fast for the practice run. He didn't need to push this hard, but he was making a statement.

Rocco held his ground, his driving smooth and controlled. He didn't flinch under Marco's pressure—he never did. His style wasn't about proving something; it was about precision, perfection. Marco, on the other hand, was relentless, his car weaving with sharp, almost reckless movements. Isabella saw it in the way he kept looking over, checking where Matias was, making sure he stayed ahead.

Matias, to his credit, didn't seem fazed. He kept his line, staying steady despite Marco's aggressive tactics. But even Isabella could see it—Marco wasn't just driving to practice. He was driving to win, even when there was nothing on the line.

By the time the session ended, the smell of burning rubber clung to the air, and the last echoes of engines faded into silence. The guys got out, some laughing, some stretching, but Marco was still in the zone, his gaze sharp.

Isabella waited until they were alone before stepping beside him. “You need to ease up.”

He turned to her, brows raising. “Ease up?”

“You’re acting like this is a championship race,” she said, crossing her arms. “Matias isn’t going pro, Marco. He’s not your competition.”

His jaw tightened. “That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t push him.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “There’s nothing to push. You’re fighting a race that doesn’t exist. You used to be friends before, you know?”

He didn’t respond immediately, just exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. She knew he wouldn’t admit it, but she also knew he heard her.

Before Marco could say anything else, a voice cut through the air, smooth and sharp.

“Well, well, if it isn’t my favorite competition.”

Isabella turned, her stomach twisting slightly as she saw her—Sianna. Again.

“Sianna,” Marco said with a smirk. “How was Europe?”

“Excellent, I’ll be back in a few months,” Sianna said, brushing her hair back. “Europe has been treating me well. More wins, more sponsors. You know how it is.” She let out a light laugh, but there was an edge to it. “Turns out, I’m not just good behind the wheel. I have a talent for the cameras too. Sponsors love a good PR face, and apparently, I clean up nicely.” She gave a mock sigh. “Who knew being marketable was as important as being fast? I bet you won’t have any issues with this, Marco. You’re a natural.”

Isabella clenched her jaw. Sianna had always been fast, but now, she had the connections, the sponsors, the exposure. She was getting everything Isabella wanted.

As if reading her thoughts, Sianna stepped closer, her smile smug. “I’ll see you in Palm Springs,” she said. “Let’s see if you’ve improved at all. Remember, having the last name Bellini is not enough.”

She turned and walked off like she had already won.

Marco nudged Isabella, leaning in with a playful glint in his eyes. “Maybe you should worry less about me and Matias,” he murmured, his voice low and teasing, “and more about figuring out how to beat her.” He gave a quick wink, then turned and walked off without waiting for a response.

Sianna’s words stuck with Isabella. Palm Springs. Just a few months away, and easily the most important national race on the calendar. Everyone in the racing world knew what it meant. A strong performance there didn’t just bring bragging rights—it meant getting noticed by scouts, landing sponsorship deals, and maybe even a path to Europe. That was the dream. And it was getting closer.

But she didn't want to get there because of her name. She was Isabella Bellini, daughter of Antonio Bellini—Ferrari driver in Formula 1 for eight years. Everyone in the racing world knew who he was. But she needed to prove she could get there on her own. She didn't want to be the legacy. She wanted to be the future.

Still turning Sianna's words over in her head, Isabella lingered by the track for a few moments longer, her feet rooted in place as the last rays of daylight lit up the pavement. Her stomach twisted—not just from nerves, but from the pressure of what Palm Springs could mean for her. With a steadying breath, she finally turned and walked toward her dad's office. He was there, half-hidden behind a long wall lined with old racing photos—snapshots of victories, crashes, and the kind of grit that built the track he had owned for years. He rarely got involved in her racing messes, but he always knew when something wasn't right.

She found him at his desk, reviewing a stack of maintenance requests. He looked up the second she walked in.

"She's back, huh?" he said, not even needing to ask.

Isabella dropped into the chair across from him and nodded.

"Good," he said simply.

She frowned. "Good?"

He leaned forward, resting his arms on the desk. "Yeah. Competition's good. She pushes you. Makes you sharper. Better. You'll never grow if you're always winning by default."

She stared at him, her mouth dry.

He offered a small smile. "She always finds a way to get in your head, doesn't she? She knows exactly where to poke—your insecurities, your fear that you're only here because of your last name."

Isabella looked away, heat rising in her cheeks.

"You get what you get because you're a damn good racer," he said firmly. "Not because of me. You've earned every bit of it."

His words echoed in her chest. Maybe this wasn't the setback she thought it was. Maybe it was exactly what she needed to show everyone how good of a racer she could be.

## **Chapter 5: Santa Monica Pier**

The Santa Monica Pier buzzed with life that Saturday afternoon, a mix of salty ocean air and the scent of fried food swirling around the crowd. The Ferris wheel turned slowly above them, and the chatter of street performers mixed with the occasional crash of waves below. It was the perfect place for a weekend hangout, even if Rocco hadn't exactly wanted to bring Cindy and Isabella.

"My parents practically begged me to bring you two," Rocco grumbled as he led Isabella and Cindy through the crowd. "It was supposed to be the boys only—Matias' official welcome weekend and all." He shot Isabella a mock-annoyed glance, but there was a faint smirk playing at his lips. "Now I'm stuck babysitting you two."

Isabella threw her arms around him in a quick, affectionate hug, the kind that said thanks without needing words. He rolled his eyes dramatically, but the smile tugging at his lips gave him away. Rocco liked to act like he was too cool for them, but everyone knew he was happiest right in the middle of their chaos.

When they arrived at the arcade, Marco was already waiting, leaning casually against a claw machine with his arms crossed. The arcade lights threw shifting patterns across his tall frame, his expression unreadable. His hoodie hung loose, his posture relaxed but alert. A few strands of dark hair fell over his forehead, casting a slight shadow in his eyes, only adding to the quiet mystery that always seemed to follow him.

As they approached him, the group exchanged quick greetings—Marco gave Matias a chin nod, Cindy flashed him a bright smile, and Isabella offered a casual, "Hey." Matias returned the smiles with his usual easy charm, while Marco's reply was more of a grunt than anything else.

"Let's hit the games," Rocco said, seizing the moment and motioning toward the row of arcade machines lining the pier.

Inside the arcade, the flashing neon lights and beeping sounds filled the air as they split into teams for a round of air hockey. The competition heated up quickly, with everyone getting way too into the game.

"I call Isabella for my team," Matias said smoothly, flashing a confident smile.

Rocco raised an eyebrow. "You sure about that?"

"Trust me," Matias grinned. "She looks like she's got a competitive streak."

Isabella rolled her eyes but stepped up to the table. "You better not slow me down."

The game started fast. Marco and Rocco made a solid team, their chemistry as longtime friends showing in their sharp reflexes and wordless coordination. But Isabella and Matias weren't going down without a fight. Matias played with precision, while Isabella used quick, unpredictable shots.

Cindy cheered from the sidelines, laughing every time someone cursed after missing a shot. She quickly slipped into full commentator mode, narrating the match with exaggerated enthusiasm. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's a heated match today at the Santa Monica Showdown! Team Mystery Transfer versus The Grumpy Bros!" she called out, pacing behind the players like a sideline reporter. "Isabella Bellini lines up the shot—will she do it? Will she crush their egos?" Her voice rose with every play, adding dramatic gasps and fake crowd noise until even a couple of nearby strangers turned to watch.

It was neck and neck, but finally, Isabella scored the winning point with a sharp, angled strike.

"Yes!" she squealed, excitement taking over as she turned to Matias. From behind the camera, Cindy announced with dramatic flair, "And the underdogs take the crown! What a legendary upset, folks—history has been made at the pier tonight!"

Without thinking, Isabella threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around Matias's neck.

Caught off guard for only a second, Matias laughed and instinctively lifted her off the ground, spinning her once in victory.

Cindy, ever the opportunist, had her phone out in an instant. “Oh, this is gold,” she giggled, recording everything.

From the corner of her eye, Isabella spotted Marco. He stood stiff, his jaw tightening as his gaze flickered between her and Matias.

“Lucky shot,” Marco muttered, voice lower than before.

Isabella, still breathless from the excitement, pulled back slightly in Matias’ arms. “Skill, actually, hermanito”

She was being sarcastic, throwing his usual nickname back at him—'hermanito,' the Spanish word for 'little brother'—with a playful edge. He knew he would make him mad.

Marco’s expression didn’t change, though for a split second, it looked like he wanted to smile at her comeback. But he held it back, jaw tightening again as he crossed his arms. “Rematch, then?” he added, his voice low but edged with challenge.

They ended up playing several more arcade games after that, laughing over a rigged basketball shooter and teaming up for a chaotic round of dance battle. Cindy insisted on ice cream, so they stopped at a stand for cones, flavors melting fast in the warm afternoon sun. As the sky turned shades of peach and lavender, they rode the Ferris wheel together, packed into a single car—feet swinging, voices overlapping, the ocean stretching endlessly beside them.

For a little while, Isabella felt like everything was the way it used to be. Like when they were kids, before the pressure of racing and rankings and European sponsorships. Back when Rocco and Marco didn’t act like they were above her just because they were older, when everything was easier and lighter. And Matias—Matias had always been great, steady and kind. He was still that person. Some things hadn’t changed at least.

But as the night approached, the energy began to shift.

The group slowly began to break off as the night came to an end. Matias left early, likely still adjusting to the time difference. Rocco disappeared for one of her typical Saturday night dates—Isabella didn’t ask who it was this time; the name would change by next weekend anyway. When Cindy’s older sister pulled up with the stereo blaring, Cindy gave Isabella a quick hug before vanishing into the car. Just like that, Isabella was on her own.

But she didn’t mind. Her house wasn’t far, and the walk gave her space to clear her head. The night still buzzed with the leftover energy of the pier—laughter echoing in the distance, lights flickering along the boardwalk, the scent of fried food still drifting on the breeze. It had all been enough to make her forget, if only briefly, about the race, about the track, and about Sianna. About how badly she wanted to beat her—and how that win could be one step closer to Europe.

She was halfway down the block when the low, familiar rumble of a motorcycle rolled through the quiet.

She turned.

Marco.

He coasted to a stop beside her, one boot down, helmet under one arm. He flipped up the visor, meeting her eyes.

“Need a ride?”

Her brows lifted. “Didn’t you leave to see Kat?”

He gave a lazy shrug. “She was with her friends. I got tired of waiting.”

Of course he did.

He extended the extra helmet toward her, casually like it meant nothing—but something about the moment tightened in her chest.

“I was walking,” she said.

“I noticed.”

For a beat, they just stared at each other. The air between them was thick with unspoken things. Then, without another word, Isabella took the helmet and slid it on.

Climbing onto the bike was like stepping into another world.

The seat was warm beneath her, and when she wrapped her arms around Marco’s waist, she felt the strength in his body—the heat, the tension, the quiet power just waiting to be unleashed.

“Hold tight,” he said over his shoulder.

And then they were flying.

The bike launched forward and Isabella’s breath caught in her throat—not from fear, but from the sudden, electric thrill of it all. The world blurred around them, wind tearing at her jacket, the lights of the coastline flashing past like stars shooting through the dark.

She pressed herself closer to him, her arms tight around his torso, her cheek brushing against his shoulder.

Every curve of the road became a dance. Every lean, every shift in weight, every pulse of the engine beneath her made her feel alive in a way she hadn’t expected.

The salt air whipped through her hair. The ocean stretched out beside them, shimmering under the moonlight like something magical.

It wasn’t just a ride.

It was a rush.

It was freedom and fire and something dangerously close to desire, all tangled up in the feel of Marco’s body against hers and the way she didn’t want it to stop.

When they finally pulled up in front of her house, her heart was still racing, her fingers reluctant to let go.

Marco kept both hands on the handlebars, not turning to face her right away. The engine idled low, the night suddenly too quiet.

“This is your stop, Bella,” he said, his voice low and even. She hadn’t realized how long she had been holding on to him, her arms still wrapped tightly around his waist. Embarrassed, she let go, her face flushing with heat. And then the name hit her—Bella. He had never called her that before. It felt intimate, personal, like a secret slipping out by accident.

She swung her leg over the bike and stepped onto the curb, still feeling the buzz of the ride in her chest. “Thank you,” she said, her voice quieter than she meant it to be.

Marco didn’t say anything right away. He just looked at her for a moment, then reached out, slow and deliberate, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. His fingers lingered against her cheek, light as a whisper.

It was a small touch. Barely there. But her skin tingled where he had touched her.

Marco smirked—less sharp, more thoughtful. “Good night girl”

And just like that, he was gone.

The engine roared as he twisted the throttle, and within seconds, he disappeared into the night.

Isabella stood in her driveway, breathless, the helmet still in her hands.

She didn’t know what had just happened exactly.

But the heat on her skin and the pounding in her chest told her one thing:

She wasn’t going to ever forget that ride.

## **Chapter 6: Flashback - The First Time I Knew**

It was the kind of summer afternoon that made the whole world feel golden. The sun blazed high above, warming the cracked driveway behind one of the neighborhood houses where all the kids had gathered. The scent of lemonade drifted through the air, mixing with the faint smell of warm pavement and grass that hadn’t been cut in weeks. Isabella could still remember the way her sneakers stuck slightly to the ground and the way her skin prickled with heat, a sunburn already forming across her nose.

They had built the toy car racetrack themselves—wooden ramps, spray-painted cones, and a finish line made out of torn white bedsheets and duct tape. It was wobbly and uneven, but to them, it was as official as anything they’d seen on TV.

She was seven. Marco and Rocco were eight.

And he had just won.

The small crowd of neighborhood kids cheered as his toy car zipped across the finish line, a blur of red plastic and spinning wheels. He always won, but today felt different. Maybe it was the way he leapt up—fearless and grinning—or the way the sun caught on the sweat along his hairline, making him look somehow older. Taller. Cooler.

Marco looked over at her—right at her—and his smile widened.

"Did you see that?" he called, his voice cracking just a little. "I beat Rocco by, like, a whole lap!"

Isabella nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Her voice would've cracked.

He jogged over the way only nine-year-old boys could—still all knees and elbows—and stopped in front of her, catching his breath. His cheeks were flushed, eyes shining.

"Next time," he said, holding out his hand, "you race with us. You're old enough already. Okay?"

Isabella's heart did this weird fluttery thing, like it wasn't sure if it was happy or nervous.

She tried to shake it off, clutching the half-melted popsicle in her hand like it might anchor her to the moment.

She stared at his outstretched palm, a smudge of dirt from the asphalt. And she remembered thinking: *That's it. I'm going to marry him.*

Not like a grown-up plan. More like a truth that had always been there, just waiting for her to notice. Like how you don't realize the sky is blue until someone points it out.

Seven years old, and already in too deep.

She never told anyone. Instead, she had just press her lips together, like she was trying to keep the secret from spilling out, and kick at the loose gravel with the toe of her shoe until the feeling passed.

But from that day on, something small and secret curled up inside her chest whenever he smiled like that—wide and shameless and just for her.

Even now, all these years later, she could still feel it. That flutter. That summer. That moment she knew she liked him.

## **Chapter 7: Riding Together**

Nothing changed between her and Marco during the week after that ride. No lingering glances, no extra texts, no tension hanging in the air between them. Whatever spark she thought she felt must have been a momentary illusion—a trick of adrenaline or proximity. She replayed it more than once in her mind, wondering if she had misread something or simply hoped for something that wasn't there. But Marco acted the same, easy and casual, like nothing had shifted at all.

And maybe nothing had.

Still, a part of her felt unsettled, caught between what was and what might never be.



The following weekend, Matias had promised to help her improve her cardio. Biking was essential for any serious racer, and despite the exhaustion from a long week, she showed up. So did he—at exactly 7 a.m., already straddling his bike, looking like he hadn't even considered flaking.

"Didn't think you'd show," he said, offering her a half-smile.

"Same," she replied, grinning as she pulled up beside him.

The ocean was still waking up, their breath visible in the crisp air. A light mist clung to the coastline, blurring the horizon, and the scent of salt lingered in the air. Matias wore a dark compression shirt and track pants, his helmet pushed back as he adjusted the strap on his water bottle.

"Fitted racing hoodie? You're serious today," he teased.

She tugged on her gloves. "You said training ride. I came to win."

Matias laughed, that low, teasing sound that stirred something in her chest. "You always come to win."

They set side by side, tires humming softly against the paved trail. The path curved along the coast, the Pacific stretching wide to their left, its surface silver-blue under the rising sun. Waves crashed rhythmically below, muffled by the distance, and the breeze kissed their skin with each turn.

It felt like old times—but it didn't.

There was a quiet rhythm between them as they pedaled, sometimes falling into silence, sometimes trading light jabs. When the path tilted upward, Matias surged ahead.

"You've gotten fast," Isabella called, rising from her seat to chase him.

He glanced back, grinning. "Or maybe you've gotten soft."

"Rude," she shot back, but she was smiling, heart thumping for reasons that had little to do with exertion.

They raced short bursts along the trail, legs pumping, adrenaline buzzing. Matias's pace was maddeningly steady, his long stride effortless, while Isabella pushed hard to stay even. She refused to fall behind.

At one of the scenic pullouts along the trail, they dismounted and leaned their bikes against a low rail. A narrow dirt path led toward the cliff's edge, where the view of the ocean stretched wide and wild.

"Let's check it out," Isabella said, already walking ahead.

"Watch your step," Matias warned.

"I've got this."

But the uneven ground, slick from ocean mist, betrayed her. Her foot slid on a patch of gravel, and she pitched forward with a startled gasp.

Matias lunged, grabbing her arm and pulling her back toward him before she could hit the ground. His other hand landed on her waist, steadying her.

“You okay?” he asked, close—too close.

She nodded, breathless, her face just inches from his. “Yeah. I—yeah.”

He didn’t move for a second. Neither of them did.

Then he let go, stepping back. She laughed, trying to shake it off, though her heart was racing for reasons that had nothing to do with the fall.

Later, after a long loop back toward town, they followed a side path down to the beach and kicked off their shoes, the sand cool between their toes. Isabella rolled up her leggings, letting the edge of the waves lap at her ankles. Her long black hair was pulled into a loose braid that had already begun to fray from the wind, and the ocean light caught on her cheekbones, her eyes shining with mischief.

“You remember how we used to dare each other to do stupid stuff?” she said.

Matias grinned, his striking blue eyes narrowing with the same old challenge. “Used to?”

She squinted at him, already plotting. “Bet you won’t go in.”

“It’s freezing.”

“So? Scared?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he stepped forward, tugging his shirt off and wading into the water with a stubborn kind of pride. His skin gleamed under the pale sun, and Isabella followed with a loud yelp, splashing toward him and kicking water at his back.

“Oh, you’re gonna regret that,” he called, turning just as she splashed him again.

Soon they were both soaked to the knees, laughing and throwing handfuls of icy water at each other, breath catching with every cold sting. It was ridiculous. Childish. Perfect.

She hadn’t felt this alive in a long time.

Once they dried off and pulled their shoes back on, they rode another short stretch toward the racetrack. It wasn’t far—just tucked behind a cluster of eucalyptus trees. The gates were open, so they rolled in and found Rocco and Marco near the pit area, already warming up.

Rocco looked up and grinned. “Where the hell have you two been?”

Isabella just laughed, glancing at Matias. “Around,” she said.

Matias smirked. “Just doing some cardio.”

Matias and Isabella chuckled with the morning sun casting long shadows over the track, the air thick with possibilities.

Isabella glanced at Marco that moment hoping—maybe even expecting—something. But he was focused, serious. His dark eyes met hers, steady and unreadable, before shifting back to his work. Nothing had changed between them.

## **Chapter 8: Breaking Point**

There was something electric in the air that day—not the good kind. Not the thrill of an upcoming race or the buzz of high-octane engines. It was heavier than that. It clung to everyone’s skin like humidity, made even the mechanics fumble their tools. No one said it out loud, but everyone felt it: something was about to snap.

That afternoon, practice was brutal. Marco drove like he had something to prove—cutting corners, pushing limits, forcing Matias into tighter lines than necessary. The roar of the engines on the back straight sounded more like a warning than a rush of speed.

Matias didn’t take the bait. He drove clean, steady, controlled. Which only made Marco more aggressive.

From the pit wall, Isabella tracked every lap, her heart rate rising with every near-miss. She could see it happening before it did—the build-up, the tension, the inevitable clash. They weren’t racing the track anymore. They were racing each other.

Near the end of the session, Marco forced a close pass on the hairpin. Too close. His front tire nearly clipped Matias’ rear, sending both cars skidding, barely keeping control. For a moment, everyone held their breath, waiting for the crash that didn’t come.

Rocco stormed toward the track as the cars pulled into the pit. “Cut it out!” he yelled, voice sharp and furious. “You crash here and we’re all off the circuit for weeks!”

Matias tore off his helmet, sweat dripping down his jaw, eyes burning. “I’m not getting injured over your ego,” he snapped at Marco.

Marco jumped out of his car, jaw clenched, fists tight. “Maybe you just can’t keep up.”

Isabella’s breath caught in her throat. She had seen them argue before—plenty of times—but this felt different. This wasn’t about lap times or race prep. This was something deeper, something messier.

She stood at the edge of the pit, arms crossed. Her heart pounded—not from adrenaline, but from something far more exhausting.

Later, long after the engines cooled and the garage went quiet, Isabella sat on the hood of her car, watching the shadows stretch across the empty lot. The silence didn’t bring peace—it brought clarity. The boys she had grown up with, the teammates she once believed were unbreakable, had cracked somewhere along the line.

She always knew they’d drift apart. Knew that one day they’d end up on opposing sides—rivals, competitors.

But this... this was something else entirely.

## **Chapter 9: Flashback - The Last Toy Car Race**

Marco and Matias were twelve, and every Saturday was race day.

They'd meet in the neighborhood, usually at the top of the steepest driveway or down by the cul-de-sac where the pavement was smooth. All the kids brought their best toy cars—battery-powered or gravity racers—and they'd race them down makeshift ramps made of plywood, plastic crates, or old skateboards. Matias *always* won. His car was the fastest, the steadiest, the one that never flipped. Everyone called him “King of the Hill.”

Marco never said it out loud, but it drove him crazy.

One Saturday, he showed up early. No one else was around yet, and Matias's car was already out—parked on the edge of the sidewalk where they always lined up. Marco looked around, then pulled a tiny jar of Vaseline from his pocket and rubbed a little on the plastic tires—just enough to mess up the grip. Not enough to get caught.

But Isabella saw him.

She didn't say anything at first. Just stood there, watching him with her arms crossed. Then, right before the race started, she walked over to Matias and whispered something in his ear. He checked the car, wiped the tires clean, and didn't say a word.

And then he won. Again.

Marco didn't wait for the cheering. He grabbed his car, shoved it in his backpack, and walked off toward the alley. Matias caught up to him near the mailbox on the corner.

“You messed with my car,” Matias said. Not angry. Just... hurt.

Marco didn't look at him. “You always win. Every time.”

Matias was quiet for a second. “It's just a game, Marco.”

“No, it's not,” Marco muttered.

Matias frowned. “Friends are more important than winning.”

Marco didn't answer. He just clenched his jaw, turned away, and walked home.

## **Chapter 10: The Party That Changes Everything**

The house was stunning—whitewashed walls, wide windows reflecting the pinks and oranges of the sunset, and a patio that looked like it spilled straight into the ocean. Music thumped from inside, pulsing with the beat of something poppy and fun, while laughter spilled out into the driveway. The whole place buzzed with the carefree energy of high schoolers with no curfew and no worries.

It was the birthday party of a senior girl from Rocco's class—someone popular, rich, and confident enough to host a full-blown Malibu beach house party with a DJ, catering, and half the school already dancing by the time Isabella, Cindy, and Matias stepped through the front door together.

They had driven up the coast just before sunset, windows down, Matias at the wheel, music playing too loud. It felt like summer even though school was still in session—one of those nights that hinted at something about to change.

The living room had been cleared out to make space for a makeshift dance floor. Neon lights flickered along the walls. Girls in short dresses and perfectly curled hair twirled in circles while guys in graphic tees and baseball caps hung along the edges, nodding their heads to the beat. The smell of ocean air mixed with perfume and pizza.

Isabella stood out—not that she cared. She had thrown on jean shorts, white sneakers, and a black long-sleeve crop top. Her hair was up in its usual loose ponytail, and, as always, her face was bare. No makeup, no effort to be anyone but herself.

And somehow, it still worked.

“Classic Ella,” Cindy said approvingly, snapping a video of her from behind. “Effortless. Just wait until the girlies see this outfit. You’re gonna break the internet.”

“I don’t get why they care,” Isabella muttered, adjusting the hem of her shirt.

“They care because you’re not trying to be anyone else. That’s rare.”

She glanced around the room as they stepped farther inside. Rocco was already in the thick of it—back near the patio with a girl tucked under his arm, laughing like he always did when the world felt too easy. A little to the left, Marco leaned casually against the wall, talking to Kat. Her hand was on his chest, fingers curled into his shirt like she owned him. Isabella looked away without thinking too hard about it.

Matias leaned in next to her, nudging her elbow. “We should hit the bean bag toss before someone takes it over.”

Isabella smiled. “Let’s go.”

He took her hand and pulled her across the room with that usual mix of charm and confidence, like he had been waiting all night just to drag her into some friendly competition.

The party buzzed—people laughing, shouting over the music, balancing plates of food and soft drinks. Isabella barely noticed Marco and Kat anymore as she danced her way past with Cindy and Matias, the three of them weaving through the crowd, full of energy and light.

She wasn’t watching her step when it happened. One turn too fast and she accidentally bumped right into Kat, knocking her elbow with enough force to make her stumble slightly.

“Oh my god, watch it,” Kat snapped, stepping back like she had been shoved.

“Sorry,” Isabella said, not even stopping fully. “Didn’t see you there.”

Kat scoffed, clearly offended, but before she could say anything else, Marco stepped between them.

“Kat, seriously. Chill.” His tone was firm in a way Isabella hadn’t heard before. “She didn’t do anything.”

“She ran into me!”

“It was an accident. You don’t have to act like she did it on purpose.”

Isabella kept walking, not wanting to get involved. Still, she glanced back—just in time to see Kat throw Marco a furious look and shove his arm off her shoulder.

He had her back. Like a brother sometimes. It surprised her more than anything.

The party moved on. Games, music, a little more dancing. For over an hour, Isabella and Matias owned the bean bag toss. They played like a team—instinctual, competitive, and effortlessly in sync. Each time the bean bag landed perfectly on the board or slid into the hole, Matias raised his hand for a dramatic high-five, making Isabella roll her eyes through a smile.

Cindy stayed close, capturing every moment. Isabella’s socials were blowing up. Mostly girls—commenting things like *you’re such an inspiration* and *wish I had your confidence*. Isabella didn’t get it. For her, racing wasn’t a statement. It was just... what she did. But maybe, from the outside, that made it even more interesting.

After a while, her throat dry from laughing and shouting over music, Isabella slipped into the kitchen for some water.

Marco was already there.

He was leaning against the counter, arms crossed, staring at the floor like he was somewhere else entirely. When he looked up and saw her, his expression didn’t change much—but there was a flicker of something. Resignation, maybe. Or relief.

“She’s mad because I took your side,” he said, voice low.

Isabella leaned against the opposite counter. “Wow. That’s bold of you.”

Marco gave a one-shouldered shrug. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

There was a pause. The music from the other room felt far away now, just a low pulse behind the silence between them.

“You looked like you were having fun out there,” he said. “With Matias.”

She raised an eyebrow, a half-smile tugging at her lips. “We were.”

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with him lately.”

“Okay?”

“Just... noticed, that’s all.”

“Not like it’s new. He’s my best friend.”

“Still. It’s... different now.” His voice was quieter, rougher around the edges. “Bella.”

She blinked. “Why am I suddenly *Bella*?”

He smirked slightly. “It means beautiful in Spanish. I think it suits you well.”

Her stomach fluttered unexpectedly. “Wow. Big promotion. I’m glad I’m not *hermanita* anymore.”

He chuckled, but didn’t say anything. Just looked at her a second too long.

She almost asked him why he was being so nice, so protective for the first time, so interested about her relationship with Matias—but Rocco walked in with two slices of pizza, grinning like he owned the world.

“*There* you are! What are you two scheming in here?”

Marco straightened, grinning too, like a switch had been flipped. Isabella looked away, heart still racing from a conversation that felt a little too honest, a little too real.

## **Chapter 11: Tensions on and off the Track**

The garage smelled like oil, dust, and summer heat. Isabella sat cross-legged beside her go-kart, sleeves rolled up and grease staining her knuckles. The battery was giving her trouble—again. She leaned in with a screwdriver, muttering under her breath.

“Need backup?” Marco’s voice floated in from the doorway.

She didn’t look up, just smiled. “Only if you know how to keep your mouth shut and your hands steady.”

Marco crossed the garage and dropped beside her without a word, his thigh brushing hers. He picked up the multimeter and started checking voltage like he belonged there.

“You ready for your big sponsor moment next weekend?” he asked casually.

She blinked. “What?”

“The gala,” he said. “The sponsor who can get us to Europe is going to be there.”

She nodded slowly, the words sinking in. The gala wasn’t some school event—it was an industry gateway. If she made the right impression, she could finally find the kind of sponsor who would take her career to the next level. To Europe. The big leagues. That had always been the goal—her dream since she was a kid, sitting cross-legged on the floor, watching Monaco and Silverstone on TV with stars in her eyes.

But now, with it looming so close, her stomach twisted. Her palms felt clammy. Just the thought of shaking hands with someone who could change her life made her breath catch. What if she said the wrong thing? What if she choked? What if she blew her only shot? Then, still focused on the kart, she reached for a cable at the same time he did.

Their fingers collided—hard enough to startle, soft enough to linger. His skin was warm, rough from years of racing, his knuckles grazed with old scars. But it wasn't the touch itself that sent the jolt through her—it was that he didn't pull away.

Neither did she.

Her breath caught in her throat.

His hand slid against hers, deliberate and slow, as if testing some invisible boundary between them. A breath hitched in her chest, and for a heartbeat, she let herself believe this meant something. Maybe he *did* remember the party. Maybe he *meant* it. Her fingers stayed still under his, aching with the want to believe—but fear tangled with it, whispering that she was reading too much into a moment he'd forget again tomorrow.

She looked up.

He was already looking at her.

And for a moment—just one suspended heartbeat—it felt like time folded in on itself. Like she wasn't imagining it. Like there really was something sparking between them.

She saw it in his eyes. The hesitation. The pull.

She swore he was about to say something—*do* something—

Then—

Footsteps.

"Hey," came Matias's voice from behind them, light and casual. "Figured I'd find you in here."

Marco didn't flinch. He just pulled his hand back, easy and natural, and shifted his focus to the battery. "We were just messing with the battery," he said casually.

Matias stepped further into the garage, eyes flicking between them. Then his expression shifted back to neutral. "Your dad's looking for you," he said to Isabella. "Said he needs help moving something in the trailer."

She nodded, grabbing her rag. "Okay, I'll be there in a sec."

Matias waited by the door. Isabella didn't say anything else to Marco. Neither did he.

They left the garage, the echo of what almost happened trailing behind them.

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After practice, the sun was already dipping low behind the bleachers. Isabella walked alone, helmet in hand, her racing suit half-unzipped and tied at her waist. Her mind was still spinning from the garage—the way Marco had looked at her, touched her hand. The way he mentioned the gala like it was just another checkpoint on the road.

Her steps echoed as she passed the locker room, voices drifting out into the hallway. She didn't mean to slow down. But when she heard Rocco's laugh—and then Matias's—she hesitated.



She paused, just for a second.

Then she heard it.

The locker room was alive with post-practice banter—showers hissing in the background, cleats thudding against the concrete floor, the buzz of energy still lingering from the track.

“Yo,” Rocco said, yanking a hoodie over his damp hair, “who you bringing to the gala?”

Matias sounded confused. “Wait... we’re supposed to bring someone?”

“It’s kind of the point,” Rocco said, grinning. “Big fancy dinner, all the sponsors in one room, half the team flexing like it’s prom night.”

The gala wasn’t just for fun. It was the unofficial start to the West Races—Palm Springs and Las Vegas, the two biggest regional events coming up in the next few months. Races Isabella had been preparing for all season. And this gala? It was where the real scouting started. Not just for skill, but for star power. Some of the biggest names in the sport had been plucked from evenings like this.

Matias laughed under his breath.

Rocco kept going. “You know everyone’s watching you now, right? Podium finishes, write-ups, girls are noticing. So what’s it gonna be? One of your new admirers... or are you just gonna ask Ella like you always do?”

There was a pause.

Matias didn’t answer right away.

Marco’s voice chimed in, flat and disinterested. “There are a lot of hot girls at this school. He’s got options.”

Then, almost as an afterthought: “I’m going with Kat.”

That was it.

Isabella stepped back from the doorway, her jaw tight.

She hadn’t even been part of the conversation. Just a name tossed into the mix. Not a real contender. Not someone *considered*.

Not the girl anyone thought to ask.

She told herself it didn’t matter.

Then she told herself it *did*—just enough to do something about it.

If they thought she was just the background racer, the grease-stained girl behind the kart, they were going to find out how wrong they were. She still heard their voices from earlier—how easily they’d spoken about other girls, how casually Marco had said he was going with Kat. It was like she hadn’t even been a possibility. Like she was invisible. But not for long.

She'd walk into that gala and show them all—the sponsors, the boys, *him*—that she wasn't just another helmet in the lineup.

She could be the star of the room.

## **Chapter 12: The Sponsors' Gala**

Isabella wanted to be undeniable tonight—not for Marco, not for Matias, but for herself. She sat still as Cindy flitted around her room like a whirlwind, tugging zippers, adjusting straps, and applying just the right amount of highlighter. The dress Cindy had picked was bold: deep red, with a slit up one leg and a neckline that demanded confidence. It hugged Isabella's form but moved with elegance, the fabric whispering power with every swish.

"You're not just going to turn heads," Cindy said, stepping back to admire her work. "You're going to make them spin."

Isabella turned to the mirror. Her lightly curled hair fell just past her shoulders, glossy and soft. Her green eyes, sharpened by a touch of liner, seemed to glow. For the first time in a long time—maybe ever—she didn't feel like she was pretending to belong. She looked like someone who had earned her place. Someone who couldn't be overlooked. The memory of past race days—greasy ponytails, overlooked sign-ups, secondhand gear—flashed through her, and she let it fuel her. Tonight, she belonged.

They arrived at the gala fashionably late. Cindy glowed in a sparkly champagne cocktail dress, her phone tucked strategically in one hand, already recording clips for TikTok. Rocco was inside with a date Isabella didn't recognize—someone tall and glossy and entirely uninterested in racing. The room was warm with chatter and candlelight, full of polished professionals, brand reps, and names Isabella had only seen on race broadcasts or sponsor rosters.

Matias spotted her instantly. He didn't hesitate, didn't wait for her to come closer. He walked up to her with easy confidence and kind eyes.

"You look good," he said simply.

Before Isabella could reply, Cindy popped between them, grinning. "More than good," she said, practically squealing as she ran off toward the dessert table, already filming again.

Matias turned back to her, his tone gentler now. "You look beautiful," he added. "But you do even without all the makeup. You didn't need it."

Isabella felt her cheeks warm.

"Come on," he said, offering his arm—not to claim her, but to support her. "Let me help you walk around. I want people to see you. Maybe we can find someone who'll sponsor you. For Europe. For your dream."

She hesitated for a breath, then smiled and took his arm. "Okay."

Together they moved through the crowd. More than once, she felt eyes follow them—some curious, some impressed. But there was one pair of eyes that didn't move at all.

Marco.

He stood near the far wall, drink untouched in his hand, jaw locked tight. He watched them like he couldn't look away. Like he didn't even blink.

Near the drinks table, a sharp-looking woman in a slate-gray pantsuit approached them with a smile. "Isabella Bellini? I'm with Albephar Pharmaceuticals. We've been following your races—and your videos. You've got a unique story. Authentic. Raw. We're looking for talent like that."

Isabella straightened. "Thank you."

"If you place top three in either Palm Springs or Las Vegas," she said, "we're prepared to offer a sponsorship for the Formula 3 summer program in Europe. We think you'd fit right in. No gimmicks. Just you."

Before Isabella could process that, another rep stepped up—a man with a slick suit and a confident smirk. "PPP Data Centers," he said. "I just wanted to say... you've got the full package tonight. If you keep that look going—polished, refined—you'll go far. With your last name and the times you've been posting, all you need is consistency. Keep showing up like this and you'll get our interest, no question."

She thanked them both, smiled, said all the right things. But as they turned away, something inside her tightened—not her chest, exactly, but somewhere deeper. Like her center was folding in on itself.

On the surface, this was everything she wanted. A room full of opportunity. People finally seeing her. Noticing. Choosing her.

But beneath the sparkle and the pressure and the compliments, something else stirred. Her excitement blurred into unease.

She didn't want just *any* sponsor.

She wanted the *right* one.

One that saw her—not just the numbers or the dress or the angles in her videos. Not just her last name or how good she looked in red. The fire, the grit, the girl who trained alone before sunrise. The one who earned every second on the track.

Albephar felt real. Straightforward. No frills, no polish required. Just her.

The rest? She wasn't so sure.

Matias turned to her with a proud grin. "That went well."

She nodded, her smile a little forced. "Yeah. It did." She paused, then gently let go of his arm. "Hey... thank you. For walking with me. For all of it."

"Of course," he said. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she said, more to herself than to him. "I just need a second. I'm going to run to the restroom and maybe get some air after. Alone, if that's okay."

He gave her a warm nod. "Take your time. I'll be inside."

Isabella slipped away, heels clicking softly on the marble as she made her way through the lobby. She stepped onto the balcony and exhaled. In the distance, downtown Los Angeles stood in silent profile—its glass towers catching the city's glow, sharp-edged and luminous against the velvet night. A breeze lifted the hem of her dress as she leaned on the railing. For a moment, she just breathed.

The door creaked open behind her.

"I'm fine, Matias," she said gently, not turning around. "I promise."

But then she heard the voice.

"It's me," Marco said.

She turned, startled. "It's—you. What are you doing here?"

He shrugged, walking closer. "Didn't really get the chance to say hello earlier."

The calm in his voice didn't match his eyes. He looked like he was holding something in.

"You look... incredible," he said quietly. "Seriously. That dress—tonight—you're impossible to ignore."

Her breath caught. "Thanks."

"You're close," he said, voice softer now. "That sponsorship talk? Europe's not far."

She nodded. "It's everything I've worked for. And if it happens, I'm not coming back until I make it."

"I believe it," he said. "You're going to make it. No doubt."

A pause. Then, "I'm close too. One brand is watching me. If I win the West Coast Championship, it could change everything."

She looked up at him. "You deserve it."

They stood facing each other. The world beyond the terrace felt far away. Even the music from inside was just a murmur now.

The space between them pulsed. Heavy with the weight of everything they hadn't said and everything they still felt. Unspoken things filled the air like static.

Marco stepped in closer, slow and sure, like he was giving her every chance to move away. But she didn't. She couldn't.

He reached for her—one hand sliding around her waist, the other lifting gently to the side of her face. His fingers brushed behind her ear, warm and steady, like he already knew the shape of her. He paused, just for a second, eyes locked on hers.

And then he kissed her.

It wasn't a question. It was everything he'd been holding back—frustration, longing, regret. His lips were soft but unrelenting, searching hers like she was something he'd lost and didn't know how to get back.

She gasped into him, and he pulled her closer, his hand curling at her hip. Her fingers found his chest, feeling the rush of his heartbeat under her palm. Her thoughts scattered.

But just as the world began to tilt, she broke the kiss.

"What about Kat?" she asked, her voice a whisper.

Marco's reply came instantly. "We're not together anymore."

That was all she needed.

She kissed him.

Harder. Deeper. Her hands tangled in his hair as he pulled her in, one arm around her waist, the other cradling her jaw. His mouth was heat and hunger, but his hands held her with care.

This was her first kiss.

And it didn't feel like a beginning. It felt like something that had always been there, finally unleashed.

She'd never been touched like this before—like she was something wild and worthy all at once.

When they finally pulled apart, breathless, the city lights blinked behind them.

Marco searched her face like he didn't want to miss anything.

And Isabella—she was still catching hers.

But she didn't step back.

And she didn't regret it.

## **Chapter 13: Confession**

That night after the gala, Isabella couldn't sleep.

She lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, heart still thudding with the afterglow of everything that had happened. The stars outside her window blurred with the haze of adrenaline, champagne bubbles, and the way his lips had felt on hers.

In one night, she'd caught the attention of a real sponsor—*Albephar Pharmaceuticals*, sleek and ruthless and everything she'd dreamed of. They'd seen her for who she was, not just another girl in the field, but a real contender. All she had to do now was medal in one of the next two championships, and Europe would no longer be a fantasy—it would be her future.

And she'd kissed the boy of her dreams.

Marco Rossi.

Just thinking about it made her toes curl under the sheets. That night couldn't have been more perfect.

Well, until Cindy barged in the next morning, interrupting her thoughts with the force of a hurricane.

"I *know* something happened," she said, eyes lit up, practically vibrating with gossip energy. "Spill. Everything. Don't lie to me, Isabella Bellini. I *feel it* in my bones."

Isabella smiled sleepily, hugging her pillow. "Okay. Fine. I'll tell you."

"Marco kissed me."

Cindy gasped so loud Isabella was sure half the building heard her. She clutched a pillow to her chest and stared like Isabella had just announced she was moving to Mars.

"He did *what*?"

Isabella flopped onto the bed, hiding her face in her friend's comforter. Her voice came out muffled but dreamy. "He kissed me. Like—really kissed."

"Oh my god." Cindy scrambled to sit cross-legged, shoving Isabella's shoulder. "You *have* to tell me everything. Start from the beginning. Where were you? What did he say? Who made the first move? Was it hot?"

Isabella groaned, covering her flushed cheeks. "Yes. It was hot."

Cindy screamed into her pillow.

They were in Isabella's room, which smelled like vanilla and dry shampoo. Isabella had barely slept. She'd replayed the kiss over and over again, drifting in and out of dreams that tasted like his mouth, felt like his hands.

"It was on the terrace," she whispered. "Everyone was still downstairs. He followed me up when I needed air. I was about to leave and then... he just grabbed me. Not rough—just like he *had* to. He looked at me like... like he couldn't stop himself."

Cindy's eyes widened. "And? Did he say anything?"

Isabella shook her head slowly. "No. Just kissed me. It was slow at first. Then it wasn't."

She closed her eyes, heart racing again. She could still feel his hands gripping her waist, the quiet desperation in the way he kissed her like he'd been waiting too long. The way she'd melted into him like she'd been starving for this, without even knowing.

God, she wanted more.

She *needed* more.

Cindy was absolutely beaming. "Oh my god, Ella. That's *so romantic*. I'm going to die. You're racing like a beast, you might get a sponsor, and you got kissed on a terrace by Marco *freaking* Rossi. What's next, Monaco?"

Isabella laughed, a flush still warm on her cheeks. “I mean, in one night I got kissed *and* might get a deal with Albephar Pharmaceuticals. What even is my life?”

She paused and looked at Cindy, serious now. “Thank you. For helping me with my socials. For pushing me. For being such a good friend.”

Cindy softened. “Always, Ella. You deserve all of it.”

“But... I don’t know what we are now,” Isabella admitted softly. “Maybe it was just the party. A one-time thing.”

Cindy gave her a look. “Do you *want* it to be a one-time thing?”

“No,” Isabella said, almost immediately. “God, no.”

She was still floating when she showed up to the track the next morning. The smell of fuel and rubber filled the air, and engines roared in the background as mechanics tuned karts and drivers geared up. Normally, she’d be focused—visualizing corners, mapping braking zones, studying her times.

But all she could think about was his mouth.

And then he was there.

“Good morning, Bella,” Marco said, low and warm, and kissed her on the cheek in front of everyone.

It was soft. Casual. But not.

Rocco dropped his helmet. “NO FREAKING WAY.”

He burst out laughing, pointing between them like a kid who’d just discovered two characters from rival video games were dating.

“I *knew* it!” he cackled.

Isabella blushed so hard she thought her face might catch fire. Marco just smirked, unbothered, adjusting the zipper on his suit like this was the most natural thing in the world.

Matias said nothing.

No teasing. No sarcastic jab. Just silence.

She glanced his way, catching the flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. Then it was gone, replaced with the usual cool detachment as he looked down at his kart.

She didn’t know why that bothered her.

She didn’t want it to. But it did.

Still, the moment was shattered in an instant when Marco came up behind her, laughing, and picked her up like she weighed nothing.

“If we kill it at the next tournament, we’re both going pro,” he said, spinning her once before setting her down. “Get ready, partner.”

And just like that, the worry faded.

Because the truth was—right now—she didn't care about rankings or rivalries. She didn't care about Matias' silent looks or the looming deadlines ahead. All she could think about was the taste of Marco's mouth, the way he made her feel like maybe she could be more than just a racer chasing a dream.

Maybe she could be wanted. Desired.

Loved.

## **Chapter 14: Hidden Corners**

The weekends became theirs.

It started quietly—an unspoken ritual after long hours of school and racing, exhaustion still clinging to their bodies, the adrenaline of competition pulsing in their limbs. Isabella would throw her hair into a messy bun, Marco would swap his practice sneakers for worn-out Converse, and they'd head out into the city like it belonged only to them. No announcements, no posts, no planning. Just a map of LA traced by instinct and desire.

They avoided crowds. It wasn't about being seen—it was about being together, tucked into the edges of places everyone else rushed past.

At Griffith Park, they wandered off the main path, following the worn dirt trail until it disappeared behind a crooked wooden fence. The trees above rustled with the late fall wind, sharp with the scent of eucalyptus and dusty leaves. He pulled her into him slowly, hands brushing her cheeks like she might disappear. When their lips met, it was soft and searching—still edged with adrenaline. His breath caught. Hers did too.

After that, the city became their secret playground.

They returned to Griffith Observatory, this time at night. The city stretched below them in glowing grids, the Hollywood sign glowing faintly in the haze. They sat along the outer ledge, shoulders touching, the cool air brushing the tops of their hands. Isabella tilted her head back to take in the sky—stars scattered wide and deep—and without a word, Marco leaned in.

This kiss was different. Slower. Intentional. His hand cupped the side of her neck, thumb grazing her skin with care. She melted into it, fingers curled lightly around the fabric of his hoodie. There was no urgency. Just heat, and the soft hum of belonging. Somewhere in the distance, a car alarm echoed, but it barely registered. The stars above them didn't blink.

Near The Getty, they wandered through the gardens and found a quiet alcove behind a stone wall. The scent of jasmine floated on the breeze, and warm stone pressed into her back as he kissed her again—deeper this time, their bodies close but still holding something tender between them. Her hands gripped the edge of his jacket, and when he smiled against her lips, she kissed the grin away. It wasn't just about want anymore. It was about the way she trusted him to hold her, the way he took his time.



At Runyon Canyon, they hiked just far enough to find a shady spot beneath an overgrown tree, tucked off the path. The air smelled like dry grass and sweat. She was laughing at something he said, flushed and winded, when he kissed her mid-sentence. This one was quick, playful, all teeth and tangled breath—until she tugged his shirt and kissed him again, slower, firmer, her heart thudding loud in her ears. He leaned his forehead against hers after, whispering something that made her blush.

They kissed in the parking structure beneath The Broad, shadows flickering under dim yellow lights, the sound of skateboards echoing in the distance. In the quiet stairwell of historic Hotel Figueroa, where echoes folded over marble and metal grates. In the back aisle of the Last Book Store, hidden between shelves of dusty vinyl, where the scent of old cardboard and incense filled the air. She pulled him down by the collar, her fingers brushing the line of his jaw, and he kissed her until someone dropped a record and they had to stifle their laughter.

One evening, they found a tucked-away bench in Echo Park, half-shielded by tall reeds near the water. The lake shimmered in the moonlight, ducks gliding silently across it. They sat there with ice cream melting between them, her head on his shoulder, her hand loosely woven into his. When he kissed her there, it was gentle and unhurried, their bodies curling toward each other like they had all night. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of his breath, slow and steady in the space between kisses.

Each moment was different—hungry, sweet, playful, slow. But they were building something. She could feel it in the way his hand always found hers. In the way he looked at her before every kiss, like asking permission had become sacred.

Isabella never said it out loud, but she knew.

They were a thing now. Quiet and hidden and real.

## **Chapter 15: Palm Springs**

The weeks with Marco had been unexpectedly perfect—soft moments tucked between training sessions and stolen kisses that made the world feel suspended. In those quiet corners of LA, everything felt slower, simpler, like nothing could touch them. But now, the real world was pressing in again. Palm Springs didn't care about warm nights or whispered promises. It cared about lap times and sponsor expectations. The morning heat was already rising as Isabella zipped her suit, and the weight in her chest returned—not from Marco, not from doubt, but from everything riding on the next fifteen minutes.

The night before the race, Isabella lay awake in her motel bed, the ceiling fan spinning slow and steady above her. Her stomach churned with nerves, the weight of the sponsors' words looping in her mind. The next two championships would decide everything. Her future in Europe. Her dream of Formula 3. Whether she would be just another local talent or something more. The sponsorship level would dictate if she got a shot at the junior program that summer—her best shot.

A soft knock tapped on her door.

Her dad peeked in, holding two mugs of chamomile tea. "You're thinking too loud again," he said, giving her a crooked smile as he handed her a mug. "Come on, sit up."

She sat against the headboard, curling her fingers around the warm cup. He sat beside her on the edge of the bed, his face lined with sun and years spent under the hood of old cars.

“You don’t have to win it all tomorrow, Ella,” he said. “Just drive like you mean it. Like you did when you were ten and refused to let that twelve-year-old from Riverside pass you.”

“That was different,” she mumbled. “Now it actually matters.”

“It always mattered to you. That’s the difference. Sponsors or not, Europe or not—nobody can take away your hunger. That’s yours. They’re just late to the party.”

She smiled a little at that, then leaned her head on his shoulder for a moment. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Get some sleep. You’ve got a race to light up in the morning.”

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The track outside Palm Springs shimmered in the morning sun, harsh and relentless. By 9 a.m., the heat was already rising off the asphalt in thick, visible waves. The circuit cut through the desert like a black ribbon, surrounded by low brush and dry sand. It was fast and exposed—nothing to block the wind or the sun, nothing to soften mistakes. The west curve, in particular, demanded precision—an open right-hander that tightened just enough to punish anyone who misjudged their entry speed.

Isabella was suiting up when a familiar voice called out behind her.

“You look tense.”

She turned to see Matias, sunglasses on, sipping from a bottle of water, dressed in team gear but no racing suit.

“You’re not racing?” she asked.

“Nah, sitting this one out. Not my focus anymore. I have been busy with school instead.” He held it up with a shrug. “But I came to watch you.”

Isabella raised an eyebrow. “Came to watch me? Really?”

Matias grinned. “Well, you and the fireworks.”

She chuckled, but the weight on her chest didn’t lift.

“You’ve got this,” he said, voice dropping just enough to pull her focus in. “You’re tighter on your lines than Rocco, and you brake later than Marco. You just have to believe it’s enough.”

“I want this, Mat. Like—badly.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s what makes you dangerous.”

He could always read her. Better than anyone else. Sometimes better than she could read herself. It was unnerving, comforting, and irritating all at once—how he could catch her thoughts mid-spin and steady them with a few words.

She looked at him, and for a second, the roar of the track faded.

“Just remember,” he added, “don’t chase them. Make them chase you.”

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The race was fifteen laps. Each lap took just over a minute—fifteen minutes of heat, grit, and mental sharpness. No pit stops. No resets. Just focus.

From the moment the green flag dropped, Isabella was in it.

She got a decent launch off the line but quickly fell in behind the front pack: Rocco in the lead, followed closely by Sianna and Marco. Two other drivers—both from Northern California, both aggressive in their cornering—slipped in front of her by lap three, boxing her in.

She stayed on them the entire time. Kept tight through the S-curves. Braked late into Turn 7. Took the inside line on the east hairpin twice, hoping to open a gap. But every time she gained a few meters, someone would close it again. No mistakes from her, no wide turns, no wheelspin—but they didn’t make mistakes either.

She was driving clean. Consistent. On the edge but never over it. The kart was responsive, the tires holding up despite the blistering surface temperature. But she couldn’t break through. It was like chasing shadows—she was close, right there, but never enough to dive into a pass.

She crossed the line in sixth. Behind Rocco, Sianna, Marco, and the two Northern California drivers. It was clean. Respectable. But not enough.

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Back in the pit lane, sweat dripping down her neck, she yanked off her helmet and ran a hand through her damp hair. She didn’t feel disappointed—just tight in the chest. Like a race unfinished.

A reporter stepped in her path, mic already raised. “Isabella, great run today—how does it feel to be second place in the women’s league?”

She blinked, stunned. “I was sixth,” she said flatly. “And there’s no women’s league. We all race together.”

The reporter hesitated, clearly uncomfortable, but Isabella didn’t wait around. She walked off, fast, jaw clenched, stomach twisting.

She found Matias leaning against the trailer, watching her with that look—the one that said *I already know what you’re thinking* before she even opened her mouth.

“What the hell was that?” she snapped. “Why would he even ask that?”

Matias didn’t even blink. “Because he’s a dumbass who doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Doesn’t change what you did out there.”

“I’m tired of this. Like I’m some side note. Some special category. I don’t want to be here *because* I’m a girl.”

“Then don’t be,” he said. “Be here because you’re fast. That’s it.”

She shook her head, emotions still raw. “I didn’t even make a mistake. I drove clean. I just... couldn’t pass.”

“I saw,” he said. “And so did everyone else. You held your own in a brutal field. But Isa—” he stepped closer, lowering his voice —“you can’t let people like that reporter get under your skin. You have to control your emotions. You already have the skill. What’s next is mental. Stay sharp. Channel it.”

She looked at him, searching his face. Somehow, he always knew exactly what to say—not to cheer her up, but to reset her. Like flipping a switch.

“You know me too well,” she muttered.

“Yeah,” he said, smirking slightly. “Scary, isn’t it?”

She laughed, just a little, the tension breaking.

“One more race,” she said, standing a little straighter.

Matias nodded. “One more chance. Show them why you’re here.”

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Later, after she had cooled down and changed, Isabella spotted Rocco and Marco off to the side of the lot, standing by the trailer with Antonio—her dad—between them. No teams, no PR reps. Just the three of them, talking excitedly, big grins across their faces.

As she walked over, she could hear the laughter and cheers. Marco saw her first.

“She’s here!” he shouted, and before she could react, he pulled her into a hug.

Rocco grabbed her next, lifting her slightly off the ground. “You’re part of this, Ella. We all are.”

“What’s going on?” she asked, a little breathless.

Marco’s face was glowing. “We just got the call. Based on today’s results—it’s official. We’re both going to Europe.”

“Full F3 season,” Rocco added, practically bouncing. “I’m going with Red Bull.”

“Aston Martin for me,” Marco said, clapping his hands once. “We did it.”

Antonio was standing behind them, arms crossed but eyes watery. Proud. “They called me just now too,” he said to Isabella. “Said they’ve been watching all three of you. Your time’s coming, Ella.”

Isabella looked between them, the two boys who had grown from competitors to something like brothers, and her dad—who had been in her corner since she could barely reach the pedals.

She didn’t say anything. She just threw her arms around them both, pulling them in tight. The hug was messy and sweaty and full of noise—laughter and congratulations and something else. Something quieter. Gratitude.

They had made it. Even if she hadn’t—yet—she was happy for them.

Deeply, honestly happy.

Because their win didn't mean her end.

It just meant the dream was real. Closer than ever.

## **Chapter 16 – Ojai**

After the Palm Springs tournament, there was only one place they ever went—Ojai.

Everyone was celebrating. Marco and Rocco had secured their sponsors—big names, solid deals, the kind that made a career feel real. Champagne had been popped. Speeches made. Coaches smiled. Parents cried.

But Isabella hadn't gotten the results she needed.

She hadn't said much about it. Just packed her gear, smiled when she had to, and nodded through the congratulations. Ojai was the best place to clear her head—to get away from the pressure, the noise, and the quiet truth that she might have just lost her chance.

They all drove up together that same afternoon, winding through the mountains in a quiet caravan. The sun was still warm when they arrived. No one said much on the way. Maybe everyone sensed the shift—excitement in the air, but something else too.

A quiet town nestled in the mountains just an hour and a half north of Los Angeles, Ojai felt like another world. The air was cleaner, the sky wider, and everything moved slower, like the land itself knew how to breathe. The ranch had belonged to her grandfather, Charlie. He had passed a few years ago, but the land stayed in the family. It was sacred to her—the kind of place where childhood memories lived right alongside the ones she was still making.

The land stretched for hundreds of acres—lemons and kiwis as far as the eye could see, broken up by winding dirt paths and clusters of towering oak trees. At the center stood the main house, warm and sun-faded, its white stucco walls wrapped in ivy and shadow. A pool glittered behind it, and the air smelled of citrus and sunshine.

They arrived just before sunset. Music played through the open windows. Rocco was the first to dive into the pool, with Marco and Cindy not far behind. Isabella sat near the edge, letting the warm tile soak into her skin, the rhythm of the music blending with the sound of splashing water.

From across the patio, she spotted Matias standing on the porch, half in shadow. He hadn't changed into swim trunks. He wasn't laughing with the others. He was just... watching. Not just watching them—watching her. And when she looked back, he glanced away like he hadn't been doing it at all.

She felt that look settle in her chest like a whisper she couldn't quite hear.

Before she could think too long on it, Marco appeared beside her, wet hair dripping into his eyes.

"Wanna go for a ride?" he asked, tossing his head toward the line of golf carts parked near the shed. "Come on, it's tradition."

She smiled. "I was hoping you'd ask."

They took off fast, the little electric cart zipping down the dirt paths, skimming between rows of citrus trees. The orchard lit up gold around them as the sun dropped lower. Isabella held onto the side rail, hair flying, laughing so loud it echoed.

“You’re going to flip us!” she yelled.

“I know!” Marco laughed back, giddy and wild. “Isn’t it amazing?”

They didn’t stop until they reached the far edge of the property, where the orchard gave way to hills and open sky. The view stretched for miles—mountains silhouetted against a burning sky, the sun a molten disk sinking behind them.

Marco pulled up under a massive lemon tree, cut the engine, and leaned back in the seat. Isabella stepped out, letting the wind catch the edge of her shirt, eyes locked on the horizon.

“It never gets old,” she said quietly.

“You always loved this place.”

“I still do.”

He got out of the cart and walked toward her. His steps were unhurried. Measured. When he stopped in front of her, the space between them narrowed to just a breath. The scent of lemons hung thick in the air—sharp and sweet. Somewhere in the distance, a breeze rustled through the orchard.

“I’ve been trying not to say this,” he murmured, his voice lower now. “But I can’t anymore.”

Her breath caught.

He reached up, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. His fingers lingered against her cheek, warm and steady. He didn’t move closer yet. Just looked at her. Like she was the only thing he could see.

“I’ve never felt like this before,” he said. “Not with anyone.”

His hand slipped behind her neck. Her skin tingled under his touch. She could feel the heat radiating off him, the press of his presence—solid and magnetic. Her heart was racing, but everything around them slowed.

Then, finally, he kissed her.

It was slow at first—tender, almost hesitant. Then it deepened. His other hand slid to her waist, pulling her closer until their bodies touched, until her fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt. The ground beneath her feet felt unsteady.

The kiss wasn’t just heat. It was something else—raw and real. Like he was giving her something he hadn’t let anyone else touch.

When he pulled back, his forehead rested against hers, both of them breathless.

“This... you... it’s real for me,” he whispered.

She didn't say anything.

He kissed her again, softer this time, guiding her down to the grass beneath the tree. The earth was warm, the blades of grass brushing her bare legs. The fading sunlight spilled through the branches, painting golden shapes across their skin.

His lips returned to hers—slow, open, lingering.

And there, under the lemon tree, with the sky melting into stars above them, nothing else existed.

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The next morning came with adrenaline.

The orchard motorcycle race was just for fun—something they always did whenever they were at the ranch. A tradition. A rush. A way to be kids again before the next round of seriousness set in.

Marco, Rocco, and Matias were already revving their bikes, helmets at their feet, full of cocky grins and trash talk.

Cindy stood off to the side, arms crossed, already sipping from a cold drink. “You all have fun,” she said. “I’ll keep my bones intact, thanks.”

Isabella held her helmet in one hand, looking out at the trail ahead. And for the first time, she hesitated.

The Las Vegas Race was coming up soon. A big one. She needed to stay sharp, focused—not bruised and bandaged. This wasn't a sanctioned track. It was wild orchard terrain, all dust and gravel and chaos.

“You don't have to,” Matias said quietly, stepping beside her. “It's not worth getting hurt right before a major race.”

His voice was calm, sincere. He didn't say it to stop her—just to remind her of who she was, and what was ahead.

But then Marco turned toward her, already swinging a leg over his bike. “Come on, Ella. It's tradition. You've got this.”

There was something in his voice—reckless and electric. Marco made everything sound possible, like fear was a waste of time. His energy was contagious. Wild. Addictive.

And she felt it again—that thrill in her chest. The need to prove she could hang with the best of them.

She looked between them.

Then she strapped on her helmet. “I'm in.”

They lined up at the edge of the trail that cut through the orchard—rows of lemon trees on both sides, tall grass and gravel underfoot, soft hills in the distance. The engines rumbled, the scent of fuel mixing with citrus in the morning air.

Then—go.

They launched forward. Rocco took the lead early, but Marco and Matias surged ahead, side by side. Isabella was right behind them, crouched low, focused, her front tire nearly kissing Marco's back wheel.

She wasn't there to play. She was there to win.

They weaved through turns, dipped under low branches, kicked up dust in each other's faces. Marco whooped into the wind as he cut a sharp corner; Matias leaned in with practiced precision. Isabella stayed close, riding like fire was in her lungs.

Until—

One curve. Too sharp. Too loose.

Her front tire caught a patch of gravel. The bike jerked sideways. Her balance tipped. And then—impact.

Her helmet cracked the dirt first, her shoulder next. She skidded across the ground, arms scraping over rocks and grass. Everything blurred.

"Isabella!" Matias's voice was the first thing she heard clearly.

He had seen it.

He hit the brakes, his bike fishtailing as he veered off the trail. He dropped it mid-motion and sprinted into the orchard, eyes scanning the grass until he found her.

Marco kept going.

Maybe he didn't see. Maybe he thought she was fine. Maybe he just didn't look back.

But Matias did.

He dropped to his knees beside her. "Ella, you're bleeding—can you move?"

She groaned, pushing herself up slowly. Her arm was scraped raw. Her elbow stung, blood already smearing into the dust. "Yeah. Yeah, I can."

Without a second thought, Matias took off her helmet and gently lifted her into his arms.

"I've got you," he said, voice tight. "Let's go."

She didn't argue.

Back at the house, Matias carried her straight into the kitchen. Only Cindy and their parents were inside—everyone else was still out on the orchard trails. Their mom gasped when she saw Isabella's arm, already fetching towels and the first-aid kit. Her dad rushed in with a bottle of antiseptic.

Cindy hovered close, wide-eyed. "Ella, oh my god—are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Isabella said, even though her arm throbbed.



Matias didn't leave her side. He helped her sit, stayed crouched beside her as they cleaned the cuts and wrapped the scrapes. His jaw was tight, his hands steady.

She was fine—sore, bruised, shaken—but fine.

A few minutes later, the front door opened. Marco and Rocco walked in, dusty and sweaty from the ride. Marco's eyes landed on her instantly—sitting at the table, her arm bandaged, Matias still at her side.

His expression changed in an instant.

He crossed the room quickly, helmet still in hand. "Isabella," he said, breath catching. "I didn't see you fall. I swear, I didn't realize until I got back and everyone was gone—I would've stopped."

She looked up at him. There was a flicker of something—guilt, maybe—behind his eyes.

"It's okay," she said gently. "I'm okay."

Marco glanced down at the bandage on her arm, then back at her. "Still... I'm sorry."

She gave him a small smile, voice soft. "Thank you."

Matias stood just behind her, silent.

The air in the room shifted. No one said anything more.

## Chapter 17: Flashback- The Steepest Hill in Belgium

The pine trees were dusted white, and the sky had the soft grey hue of early snow. The mountain loomed ahead, its double black diamond sign posted in red with a warning: **expert skiers only**. Isabella, just nine years old, stared down the slope with wide eyes. Her snowboard was strapped in, her legs locked in place and her heart pounding.

Her older brother Rocco, and his best friend Matias—both ten—had already taken off, their skis slicing through the powder as they whooped and disappeared down the run.

"You'll be fine!" Rocco had shouted over his shoulder, already halfway down, his voice fading into the wind.

But Isabella wasn't fine. Her hands were trembling in her gloves, and the snow beneath her felt like glass. It was her first time on a slope this steep, and everything in her body told her *this is too much*.

She usually wasn't scared of anything—**not ever**—but this? This was different. This was one of the only times in her life she could remember truly being afraid.

She stayed frozen near the edge, board perpendicular to the slope, breathing shallow and fast.

From the bottom of the run, Matias unclipped his skis and turned to look back up.

Where was she?

He waited.

Still nothing.

Then it hit him—Rocco hadn't stayed with her. He saw only two sets of tracks.

Without hesitating, Matias turned, pushed his way to the lift, and rode it back up.

The gondola swayed gently as it climbed over the trees. He scanned the trail and finally spotted her—a small, still shape at the top of the slope, board angled awkwardly, not moving an inch.

When he reached her, she didn't say anything at first. Just kept staring down.

"I don't think I can do it," she said finally, voice barely above a whisper.

Matias crouched in front of her, breathing hard from the climb. "Yeah, you can."

She shook her head.

"Okay," he said softly, "then let's not do it alone."

He moved behind her and reached under her arms, locking his hands gently around her elbows.

"Just press down with your board," he said. "I've got you. The whole way."

He started to move slowly, guiding her down the slope step by step. Her board scraped against the snow, jerking with every shift of weight, but Matias didn't let go. He kept her steady. She leaned into him with trust, pressing down and letting gravity take them.

It wasn't graceful. It wasn't fast.

But it worked.

When they reached the bottom, Isabella's face was pink from the cold and effort. Her legs were shaking. But she was grinning.

"You did it," Matias said, letting go and stepping in front of her.

She looked up at him, cheeks flushed, breath fogging between them. "Only because you were holding on."

## **Chapter 18-Interruptions**

That night, the house had gone quiet. Everyone was asleep.

The lights were out. The music was off. The ranch, usually buzzing with movement and noise, had settled into a still, sleepy silence. Isabella slipped out of her room barefoot, the hallway cool beneath her feet as she made her way outside.

The pool shimmered under the moonlight. She lowered herself into the water without a sound, letting it wrap around her like a secret. The sting on her arm faded under the coolness, and for the first time all day, she let herself exhale.

She floated on her back, staring up at the stars, letting the water carry her. Her mind drifted—back to the race, to the fall, to the way Matias had looked at her. The way he'd held her.

Then she heard the porch door creak open. Bare footsteps on tile.

Matias.

He was shirtless, wearing only swim shorts that hung low on his hips, his skin warm-toned and still dusted faintly from the day. The porch light flickered just enough to highlight the lines of his chest—lean and sculpted, his shoulders strong, his jaw shadowed with stubble. His eyes found her in the water, and everything stilled.

“How are you doing?” he asked, voice low.

She swam slowly to the edge, letting her arms rest on the tile as she looked up at him.

“I’ve been better,” she said.

He stepped closer. Just enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his skin.

The tension between them was magnetic—slow-burning, silent. Her gaze dipped over his body without meaning to, and when she looked back up, he was already watching her like he could see right through her. The space between them felt thick with things unsaid.

She pushed herself out of the pool, water cascading down her body. Her bikini clung tight to her skin, her hair slicked back. The night air kissed her damp skin and sent goosebumps down her arms.

Matias didn’t move. But his eyes did.

They followed her—slow, deliberate—down her neck, her collarbone, the curve of her waist, the drop of water trailing along her thigh. She reached for her towel but didn’t rush to wrap it around herself. She didn’t break eye contact.

She saw it in his expression: the tension, the pull, the restraint. Like he wanted to move closer. Like he didn’t trust himself if he did.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For today.”

His jaw flexed slightly. “I’d do it again. Every single time.”

She clutched the towel a little tighter around herself, even though it didn’t shield her from the heat in his gaze.

“I’ll always be there for you, Ella,” he said. “I always have.”

They stood there in the stillness—close, unspoken things swirling between them.

She should’ve turned away.

But she didn’t.

And neither did he.

Then the screen door creaked again.

Marco stepped onto the porch.

He stopped mid-stride, bare-chested, damp curls tousled like he'd just washed off the trail dust. His gaze snapped to her—standing in nothing but her bikini, towel half-draped around her hips—and then to Matias, still motionless, shirtless, barefoot, a shadow among shadows.

“Well,” Marco said, voice tight, trying for casual. “Am I interrupting something?”

Isabella blinked, startled, but held her ground. “I just wanted to swim.”

Marco nodded, stepping further onto the patio, the tension in his shoulders masked poorly behind a crooked grin. “Of course. Always loved a good midnight swim.”

Matias didn't move. His arms were loose at his sides, but there was something unshakable in his stillness.

“I was just about to go in,” he said quietly, not breaking eye contact with Marco.

“How convenient,” Marco muttered, his smirk sharpening. “You're always in the right place at the right time, huh?”

Matias's head tilted slightly, his voice calm. “Or maybe you're just mad you never are.”

Isabella blinked.

She had never seen Matias continue on a fight like this. He was always reserved, composed—measured in a way that made him seem older than the rest of them. He never looked for trouble. Never gave in to unnecessary conflict. It was never worth his time.

But he was giving in now.

Standing his ground.

Letting the sharp edges show.

Matias turned, stepping toward the pool, his bare feet silent against the cool tile. The muscles in his back flexed as he moved, unrushed. Unbothered.

Marco narrowed his eyes. “What were you even doing out here?”

Matias didn't look back. “Going to the pool, if it wasn't obvious. Not that it matters to you.”

Marco took a step forward, still watching him. “You think you've got it all figured out, huh?”

“Marco,” Isabella warned, her voice low. “Don't.”

But Marco kept going, his voice rising, heat cracking through the restraint. “You think being the hero once makes you—”

“Shut up,” she hissed suddenly, stepping in fast, pressing her hand over his mouth. “You're going to wake everyone up.”

The movement was too quick.

Her shoulder flared with pain—a sharp jolt slicing through the soreness from the crash earlier.

“Ah—” she gasped, stumbling slightly.

Both of them moved at once.

Matias reached her first, hands catching her waist, steadying her. Marco’s hands came to her arm, protective, possessive. Their bodies hovered around hers, inches apart.

“You okay?” Matias asked, his voice low, eyes scanning her face.

Marco’s jaw was tight. “I’ve got it from here,” he said, pulling her gently toward him. “*You* have done enough.”

The air crackled.

Isabella stood between them, chest rising and falling, towel loose, pain simmering behind her eyes, but something else too—exhaustion. Not just in her body, but in her heart.

She looked at them both—Matias, steady and unreadable, and Marco, burning with something too close to jealousy. They stood like rivals in some silent standoff, and she was tired of being the space between them.

Her voice came out quieter than expected, but firmer than ever.

“You’re both being stupid.”

The words landed heavy. Honest. Raw.

“I don’t think either of you actually knows what you’re doing right now.”

She stepped back, brushing off both of their hands—not harshly, just enough.

The towel slipped a little lower on her hips, her hair still damp against her back, but she didn’t bother adjusting anything. She turned and walked toward the house, barefoot and bruised, her steps slow but certain.

Neither of them followed.

And for the first time all day, the silence didn’t feel charged.  
It felt empty.

She didn’t look back.

And behind her, the stars kept burning.

## **Chapter 19: The Part That Hurts**

They hadn’t exactly fought—but it was close.

Not yelling. Not fists. Just sharp words, short tempers, and that look in their eyes like they would never understand each other, no matter how long they'd known each other. That quiet tension between Marco and Matias was nothing new, but lately it felt heavier. More specific. Like whatever had always simmered under the surface was starting to boil—unspoken things slipping through the cracks.

And this time, it felt like it was about her.

Now, hours later, Isabella sat at the edge of her bed, a damp towel still wrapped around her shoulders. Her hair curled from the pool water, her skin tight from the sun and dried chlorine. The house had gone still. Everyone was sleeping or pretending to be. But Isabella couldn't stop thinking. Couldn't stop feeling.

The kiss under the lemon tree still pulsed in her chest. His words—*this is real for me*—still echoed.

He'd meant it. She didn't doubt that.

And the truth was—he wasn't the only one who had been dreaming.

*He was her dream, too.*

Since they were kids. The boy who made everything feel like a dare. The one who turned every quiet moment into motion, who never looked back, and somehow made her want to keep up. He had always felt like possibility, like freedom, like the fastest way out of any stuck part of herself.

And she had wanted him. For years.

But she had fallen.

*And he hadn't stopped.*

That moment replayed in her mind like a bruise that kept getting pressed—again and again.

There was no crowd. No noise to distract him. Just the crunch of gravel, the sudden break in rhythm, the absence of her behind him. When you're racing that close, you feel the shift. You *know*.

And he kept going.

She would've stopped. Without thinking.

Matias had.

She didn't want to compare them, but her heart was doing it anyway.

Matias had been the one to brake. To run. To kneel down and say her name like it was the only thing in the world that mattered. And it wasn't just that moment. It was *always*. The quiet check-ins. The way he remembered things she didn't even realize she'd said. The way he showed up without ever needing to be asked.

Something had shifted between them. She wasn't sure when, or how, or if it was even real. But it was there. And it was steady.

A soft knock broke through the quiet.

Her mom peeked in. “You still awake?”

Isabella nodded. “Yeah.”

Her mom stepped into the room and sat beside her on the bed.

“You’ve been quiet,” she said gently.

“I’m just... tired,” Isabella murmured.

Her mom waited a moment, then asked, “Was it the fall?”

Isabella’s gaze stayed on the floor. “Not exactly.”

“I think Marco knew I went down,” she said finally. “He didn’t look back, but... when you’re that close, you feel it. You hear it. The energy shifts. It’s impossible not to notice.”

Her voice cracked.

“He didn’t stop.”

Her mom stayed silent. Just listened.

“He told me this was real. That I was real to him. And maybe he meant it. But when it actually mattered—when I needed him—he didn’t choose me.”

Her throat felt thick.

“I would’ve stopped for him,” she whispered. “No matter what.”

Her mom reached out and brushed Isabella’s hair behind her ear, the way she always used to when she was little.

“Ella,” she said softly. “Sometimes love isn’t about how someone *feels* about you. It’s about what they *do* with those feelings.”

Isabella’s eyes burned.

“If he says he loves you, but he doesn’t show up when it counts... that’s not the kind of love that holds.” Her mom’s voice was steady. “You deserve more than words. You deserve someone who stops for you.”

And Matias had.

Not just today. Always.

“I love racing,” Isabella whispered. “I love winning. But people matter more. *He* mattered more.”

She paused. “But maybe... I didn’t matter more to him.”

Her mom gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “You don’t have to decide anything tonight. Just remember how it felt.”

Then she stood and left the room, quiet as the night itself.

Isabella sat alone in the moonlight, arms wrapped around her knees, the silence settling over her like a second skin.

And for the first time, her oldest dream felt like something she didn't want to chase anymore.

It felt like something she might be ready to let go of.

## **Chapter 20: The Apology**

Back in Santa Monica, the air felt different—saltier, louder, closer. The ranch was already a memory, golden and sun-drenched, tucked behind them like a dream they'd woken from too soon. The beach breeze carried hints of ocean spray now, and traffic hummed faintly in the distance, but Isabella barely noticed.

She was curled up on the porch swing outside her family's bungalow, one leg tucked under her, the other draped in a fleece blanket. Her arm still throbbed faintly, wrapped in gauze beneath her oversized hoodie. The sun was beginning to dip low, casting soft lavender light across the rooftops and palm trees. She rocked slowly, listening to the wind and hoping for stillness—but feeling anything but.

Then she heard it—the sound of footsteps on the gravel path leading up from the sidewalk, hesitant and uneven.

Marco.

He appeared at the edge of the porch, holding a small cardboard box and a pint of ice cream. His hair was damp from a quick shower, his shirt wrinkled like he'd changed in a hurry. His eyes searched hers as he stepped closer.

"I come bearing peace offerings," he said, lifting both items like they were sacred. "And a very bruised ego."

She tilted her head. "Is that... a LEGO box?"

He gave her a sheepish grin and held it out. "You always said real roses were overrated. So I figured—LEGO roses. The kind that won't wilt, die, or smell weird."

A small laugh escaped her, caught off guard. She took the box and turned it in her hands. The roses were bright red and absurdly sweet-looking, like something out of a love story made of plastic.

"They're kind of perfect," she said.

"I built them myself," he said. "I may have sworn at them more than once."

She nodded slowly and reached for the ice cream. "Mint chip?"

"Of course. Never chunks. I know better than that."

This time, she smiled.

He sat down beside her—close, but careful—not assuming too much. She popped open the lid and dug into the pint with the spoon he handed her.



“I didn’t see you fall,” he said after a moment. His voice was quiet. “I wish I had.”

She didn’t say anything right away. Her eyes stayed on the melting ice cream.

“I still should’ve checked. I should’ve looked back. I know that.”

She nodded once, but it was hard to read. Not angry—just guarded.

“And Matias...” he continued, “I was jealous. Really jealous. But when I saw him with you, I realized I should’ve been thanking him. He was there when it counted.”

Isabella’s expression softened, just barely.

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a small first-aid kit.

“I know your mom already patched you up,” he said. “But I wanted to do this. If that’s okay.”

She nodded again, and he gently unwrapped the gauze. The scrape was starting to scab, angry and raw. He dabbed at it carefully with antiseptic.

She winced slightly. “Still stings.”

“I’m sorry.”

He cleaned and rebandaged the cut in silence, hands slow and precise. When he finished, he looked up at her.

“I meant what I said in Ojai,” he said. “About falling for you. That wasn’t just heat-of-the-moment stuff. I’m in this, Bella. For real.”

She looked at him then, long enough to make it matter. Something shifted inside her—years of feeling too much and saying too little, all pressing forward at once.

“I know,” she said quietly. “I’ve waited a long time to say it, but... I’ve always been in love with you.”

His breath caught.

She kept going. “But when you didn’t come for me... when I hit the ground and it was Matias who showed up, not you—it just felt like racing will always be more important than me.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but she gently cut him off with a small shake of her head.

“I’m not saying that to hurt you. I just need you to understand how it felt. It wasn’t about the fall—it was what it revealed.”

He nodded, slowly. “I hear you.”

A quiet beat passed between them.

“But thank you for coming and saying everything you said,” she added softly. “This is a great restart. It means a lot.”

Marco reached for her gently, pulling her into a quiet hug. She didn’t hesitate—just leaned in, letting his arms wrap around her like a kind of promise.

Then, he kissed her on the cheek—soft, slow, warm.

When he pulled back, he didn't say anything else. He just stayed close, forehead nearly touching hers.

They sat like that until the porch light flickered on and the night began to hum around them.

Not perfect. Not simple. But maybe—for the first time—honest.

And maybe that was enough to begin again.

## Chapter 21: No racing

The scent of gasoline and burnt rubber clung to the air, thick and heavy under the afternoon sun. Isabella sat on the bleachers with her arms crossed, sunglasses shielding her expression. Down on the track, Marco, Rocco, and the rest of the team weaved through drills in their cars—tight turns, aggressive exits, flawless control.

She should've been out there.

But instead, she was up here, sidelined. Watching.

Her leg still ached from the crash in Ojai, and she was *still* not cleared to drive. It had been **several weeks** since the accident—weeks of icing, stretching, begging to be allowed back on the track. But it wasn't pain holding her back anymore. It was her mom. One furious phone call and the decision had been made. *You're not driving until you're healed. I don't care what's at stake.*

And since her dad was also her coach, he hadn't had a choice. He'd tried to push back—gently—but in the end, he backed off. Because when her mom drew a line, it stayed drawn.

So Isabella had spent those weeks at home, stuck in the simulator in the garage. Lap after lap with a fake steering wheel and a digital track, pretending like it was enough. But it wasn't. It never would be.

Sianna walked by, tone light but sharp enough to cut. "Honestly, what were you even thinking? Riding a motorcycle in the middle of the season? That's like asking to get benched."

Isabella didn't look at her. She just kept her eyes fixed on the track, jaw tight.

The bleachers creaked beside her as Matias dropped into the seat next to her. He handed her a cold water bottle and leaned back, watching the cars rip across the straightaway.

"You okay?"

She shook her head. "Not even close."

He glanced over. "You'll be fine. You just need time."

"I don't *have* time." Her voice was low and sharp. "The next race is everything. If I don't place top three, the sponsorship's gone. And my parents—" she paused, the words catching. "They're already putting so much on the line for me. What if they think I'm a liability now?"

Matias looked at her, his expression soft but steady. “You’re not a liability.”

“My mom thinks I am. And my dad’s stuck between trying to coach me and trying not to start a war at home. I’ve been stuck in that simulator while everyone else is actually out here improving.”

He didn’t try to argue. He just let the silence settle around them, letting her say it out loud without flinching.

She glanced at him. “College stuff. Did you send your applications?”

“Last month.”

She blinked. “Seriously? You didn’t tell me?”

“You’ve had a lot going on.”

“I still should’ve asked. I’ve been... distracted.”

Matias gave her a soft smile. “You don’t owe me that. But thank you.”

*Distracted.* She knew exactly what she meant. She’d been spending all her time with Marco—late nights in his garage, early mornings riding passenger seat on empty backroads, hanging out between classes instead of focusing on her own training. It had felt good. Easy. But now? Now it felt like a mistake she couldn’t afford.

Matias watched her for a moment, then asked softly, “Are you happy?”

She hesitated. “Yeah,” she said.

It came out too quickly. Too flat.

Matias didn’t press her. He just nodded once, like he understood more than she wanted him to.

Down on the track, Marco climbed out of his car and called up to her with a casual shout, “Isabella—get ready. We’re heading for ice cream soon!”

She laughed under her breath, her first real laugh in days.

Matias stood and offered his hand. “Let’s go before he starts honking at you like a maniac.”

She took it, letting him help her up with a soft wince.

As they walked off the bleachers together, Matias glanced over. “You’ll race next week. I’ll help you prep. I don’t care if it’s simulators or track time or laps in an empty parking lot. You’re going to be ready.”

She didn’t respond right away. But something in her chest loosened just a little.

“You really think I can still win?”

“I know you can,” he said. Then added with a crooked grin, “And if you can’t, you’ll still race—even if you have to pretend you’re me.”

She smiled, surprised.

“I’m serious,” he said, softer now. “One way or another, you’ll be out there.”

And for the first time in weeks, the doubt didn’t feel quite as heavy.

## **Chapter 22: Midnight Test Drive**

They wouldn’t let her race. Not until after Vegas. Not with the fall from Ojai still fresh in everyone’s memory.

Her mom had said no. Her dad had agreed, reluctantly. Even Marco was in agreement with her parents, telling her she wasn’t ready to go out there.

But Matias came to her at night.

He didn’t say much when he knocked on her window—just held up her helmet and whispered, “Come with me.” And she did.

Now they stood in the middle of an abandoned rooftop lot just outside downtown L.A., the skyline glittering like someone had strung stars across glass. A makeshift track wound through faded parking lines and plastic cones, neon tape glowing under the amber streetlights.

The only sound was the soft whir of the generator he’d rigged to power the floodlights and the occasional gust of wind rattling loose trash along the curb.

Matias’s kart sat at the edge of the track, sleek and stripped-down, the matte black frame catching the light like a shadow about to move.

“You’ve been tuning it,” Isabella said, stepping closer.

He nodded once. “Had a feeling you’d need it.”

“You’re giving me your spot?”

“I didn’t race last round because I didn’t want to,” he said simply. “And I don’t need this one either. You do.”

He paused, eyes scanning the track like he could already see her there. “But it won’t be easy. I missed Palm Springs, so the points are off. You’ll be starting behind.”

Her stomach dipped. That meant Vegas would be even more of a long shot. The thought of catching up now, after weeks off, felt like threading a needle in a hurricane.

But Matias looked at her like he believed she could. Like he’d already done the math and still bet on her.

And somehow—against logic, against doubt—he was giving her more than a kart. He was giving her hope.

Her chest tightened—not with guilt, but with something close to gratitude. Not the kind you could say out loud. The kind that settled behind your ribs and stayed there.

She strapped in, pulled her gloves tight. The cool night air bit at her skin, but her blood ran warm.

The engine fired with a growl.

As soon as the tires kissed the pavement, her body remembered. The rhythm, the balance, the velocity. Her arms and legs ached from two weeks of healing, but the pain dulled beneath the roar of the engine and the rush of movement.

She wasn't thinking about Sianna. Or Europe. Or even Marco.

She was just here.

The kart glided through the turns with precision—tight and sharp and familiar. She took the curves like muscle memory. Let the wind slice across her jaw and the scent of hot rubber and cold concrete fill her lungs. The air was heavier near the turns, slick with dew, and she leaned into it.

And when she pushed down the straightaway—fast, clean, reckless—she felt free.

After the final lap, she coasted to a stop near the edge of the lot. Her breath came in bursts, her pulse thrumming in her ears. The engine ticked quietly as it cooled beneath her.

Matias walked toward her, a soft smile tugging at his lips.

"How'd it feel?" he asked.

She pulled off her helmet. Her ponytail clung to the sweat on her neck, and her cheeks were flushed from cold and speed.

"I felt like myself again," she said.

He didn't say anything—just stepped closer. She met him halfway.

Without thinking, she wrapped her arms around his torso. No adrenaline. No performance. Just instinct.

He held her back—slow, steady, warm. His hoodie smelled like cedar and brake fluid, and something distinctly him. His hands didn't grip. They rested—one on her spine, the other high between her shoulder blades.

Then—his forehead dropped to hers.

No one said anything. No one moved.

It wasn't romantic.

But it wasn't nothing.

His skin was warm, and she could feel the steady rise and fall of his breath against her chest. The faint scrape of stubble on his jaw brushed her temple. Her hands were still pressed to his back, her fingers curled lightly into the fabric of his hoodie.

The wind picked up again, gentle but sharp, tugging at the loose strands of her hair. The city sparkled behind them like it didn't know they were standing still.

For a heartbeat—two—they just stayed there.

She didn't know what he was thinking. But she felt it.

The tension. The almost.

The way his hands wanted to pull her closer but didn't.

And she—she didn't want to let go.

But they both did.

At the same time.

Slow. Gentle. With care, not regret.

Because they respected what this was.

Because she was still with Marco.

And even if they both wanted something else—this moment wasn't for crossing lines.

She looked at him. His eyes held a thousand things he'd never say.

"Thank you," she said softly.

He just nodded.

And together, they stood there for a little longer—on the edge of everything—without saying another word.

They drove back in silence, but something had shifted. Not the road, not the city. Just her.

### **Chapter 23: Flashback - The First Race**

Isabella stood at the edge of the karting track, arms crossed, and cheeks puffed out. The sun was hot on her face, and the smell of rubber and gas filled her nose. Her dad had already said no.

"Come on, please!" she had begged for the tenth time.

"You're six years old, Ella," he said, crouching down to her level. "You're not racing today. Maybe next year."

She huffed. "But I *can* do it."

Now she stood alone near the fence, watching Rocco and Marco pull on their helmets and jump into their karts. Her fingers itched just thinking about holding a steering wheel. The engines roared, and the boys looked so cool, zooming around like it was nothing.

"Why do they get to have all the fun," she muttered, kicking at a rock.

"Psst!"

She turned around. Matias was standing behind her, already half in his racing suit, his helmet tucked under his arm.

“You really wanna drive?” he asked, eyes wide and excited.

Isabella blinked. “Yeah, but... I’m not allowed.”

Matias grinned. “What if you were me?”

“Huh?”

He leaned in, whispering like it was a top-secret mission. “I don’t really feel like racing today. You wear my suit. My helmet. No one will know.”

Her mouth dropped open. “I’ll get in so much trouble.”

“Only if you crash,” he said with a shrug. “Just go fast and keep your helmet on. You’ll be fine.”

She hesitated. “What if it doesn’t fit?”

“It’s a little big,” he said, already helping her step into the suit, “but you’re small. You can hide in it.”

Her heart thumped hard as he zipped her up and dropped the helmet over her head. It wobbled a little, but once she grabbed the steering wheel and climbed into the kart, everything else disappeared.

The flag dropped.

She pressed the gas.

And she *flew*.

The wind whipped past her face. The track curved like she knew it would. She didn’t even think—she just drove, cutting the corners like she’d seen the boys do a hundred times, only faster.

She passed Marco.

Then Rocco.

Then everyone.

When she crossed the finish line, she hit the brakes and yanked off the helmet, face red and grinning.

Silence.

Marco’s eyes went huge. “Wait... *that’s Isabella?!*”

Rocco’s mouth dropped open. “No way.”

Her dad was frozen on the side of the track. “Isa...?”

Matias popped up next to him, laughing so hard he had to lean on the fence.

“I told you I could do it,” Isabella said, breathing hard but proud.

And right then, standing there in a sweaty too-big suit and a helmet almost rolling off her head, she knew one thing for sure:

When she grew up, she wanted to be a professional racer.

## Chapter 24: The Last Race

The red cliffs of the Nevada desert rose like giants behind the track, glowing beneath the late afternoon sun. On the other side, the Las Vegas Strip flickered with neon lights, already alive even before dusk. The final race of the Western Championship was minutes away. And Isabella's name wasn't on the roster.

She wasn't supposed to be here.

But this race—this *moment*—was everything.

If she placed in the top three, she could finally secure the sponsorship she'd been chasing all season: Albephar Pharmaceuticals. They were one of the few sponsors that saw her for what she truly was—a serious racer. Not a girl with a pretty face or a famous last name. Not a media distraction. A competitor. A contender.

It was her chance to earn her place. To step out of the shadow of her injury. To prove to the world—and herself—that she was back.

She always dreamed of racing for Ferrari, just like her dad. Red suit. Iconic crest. Italian circuits and world-class pressure. Maybe that dream was still far off, but any start in Europe was a good one. And this could be it. Her way in.

Officially, she was still recovering from the fall at the ranch. Her mom had pulled her from the season, told anyone who'd listen that Isabella needed more time. That her bones weren't ready. That she wasn't ready. Even Marco had backed her up—said she could wait one more year to qualify for the European Junior League. But Isabella knew what none of them would admit.

It wasn't about her injury anymore. It was about fear.

Marco especially. He carried the guilt of her fall like it was his own injury. Earlier that afternoon, they'd stood beside his car in the paddock, quiet and mostly hidden from the rest of the teams. He was adjusting something on the side of the car, jaw tense, hands moving too fast.

She watched him. The shape of his shoulders. The way his fingers stilled just before he spoke.

"I love you," he said, finally looking up and locking eyes with her.

Isabella felt it hit—heavy, sudden, real.

But even in the space between their glances, she knew the truth. Marco loved her, yes. But he loved the race more. The rush. The podium. The spotlight. And when it came down to it, she would always come second.

Still, she didn't look away.

She held his gaze and said softly, "I love you too. Good luck."



His eyes shifted—just barely—but she caught it. Surprise. Regret. Maybe even a flicker of understanding.

Then she turned and walked away.

But guilt clung to her heels. She hadn't told him. She should've. The words had sat on the tip of her tongue—*I'm racing today*. He deserved to know. Even if he was always about competition and thrill, something inside her said he would've understood. Maybe because of the guilt he still carried from her fall on the ranch. Maybe because deep down, he knew what it meant to need the track like oxygen.

But there was something else, too.

He wouldn't have understood that she was racing *with Matias's car*.

He would've hated it.

Marco was always jealous of Matias. He never said it out loud, but it showed—in his body language, the way he got quiet when Matias was around, the look in his eyes when she mentioned him. And now she was about to race under *his* name. With *his* help.

Her stomach twisted, but it didn't stop her. Because this moment was hers.

She moved through the paddock like a shadow, cutting behind trailers, slipping between crew members and officials. The farther she got from Marco, the sharper her focus became. She wasn't running away from anything. She was running *toward* something.

The far end of pit row was quiet and shadowed. Her car waited in the last garage, matte black with red trim, crouched low under the lights like a wild animal ready to spring.

Matias was there. Exactly where he said he'd be.

He looked up from a checklist, calm and collected. "You're late."

"I had to say goodbye," she said.

He raised an eyebrow, but didn't ask. Instead, he tossed her the racing suit. "Let's get to it."

She caught it but didn't move. Her fingers tightened around the fabric, and her gaze locked on him.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

He didn't look up. "Doing what?"

"All of it. Giving me your car. Helping me. Believing in me when no one else does." Her voice dropped, barely above a whisper. "You're always there, Matias. And sometimes I think you don't even know why."

He paused. Then finally looked up.

"I do know," he said.

She stepped closer. "Then look at me and say it."

He held her gaze. Something shifted in his expression—tension, hesitation, and something else... something burning just beneath the surface.

“I do it,” he said, voice low, “because I know you’re ready. Because I’ve seen you fight harder than anyone. Because I believe in you when everyone else doubts you.”

He stepped in—close.

“And maybe... because I don’t know how to not care about you.”

She stared at him, heart thudding. “You look at me like there’s something more.”

He didn’t flinch.

“You look at me like you *want* something.”

And then he moved.

He stepped in, grabbed her waist, and gently backed her into the wall. The cool metal met her back just as his body pressed into hers, solid and hot and full of energy she couldn’t name. His hand slid down her side, then to her thigh. He lifted her leg to his hip, holding her there like he’d done it a hundred times in his head.

Their lips were inches apart. Her breath caught. The noise of the world faded away.

Her heart raced in her chest like a car waiting for the green light. She had never seen him like this. And she had never felt like this.

Matias’s voice came low and rough, eyes locked on hers.

“You know why,” he said. “You want me to admit it.”

He leaned in just a little more. Her pulse spiked.

“I like you, Isabella. I can’t stop thinking about you. I never could.”

His forehead dropped to hers.

“I might never stop. You’re... perfect.”

She couldn’t move. Couldn’t speak. She was frozen in the heat of it, in the storm of everything he’d just said.

“This isn’t nothing,” he murmured. “But I won’t kiss you... not until I know I’m the only one in your head.”

And just like that, he stepped back.

He gently lowered her leg from his hip, his hands lingering at her waist for a heartbeat longer before falling away completely.

Isabella stood there, breath shallow, stunned, locked in place by everything that had just happened—and everything that hadn’t.

Matias picked up the helmet. Wordless. Gentle. He stepped close again and lowered it onto her head, his fingers brushing her jaw as he fastened the strap.

Then he met her eyes through the visor, steady and sure.

“You have to go get your dream.”

She climbed into the driver’s seat. The engine roared to life beneath her.

Tonight, she wasn’t asking for permission.

Tonight, she was taking her place.

## **Chapter 25: The Night Race**

The engines roared under the blazing lights of Las Vegas, the Strip glowing like a runway for gods. From the rooftop track, the entire city shimmered below—golden, red, electric blue, as if someone had spilled neon paint across the desert. Hotel signs blinked like stars, and Isabella could barely hear her own heartbeat over the pounding bass of the pre-race music.

Fifteen laps.

That’s all it was.

The rooftop circuit was mostly flat, but the number of tight curves made it a technical minefield. There were no elevation shifts to save you—just brutal corners and unforgiving walls. It wasn’t about raw speed tonight; it was about timing, precision, and knowing the track like it was stitched into your skin. One wrong brake, one curve taken too early, and your race was done.

She was already strapped into car number 2—Matias’s car. The leather of the steering wheel was slick under her gloves, the smell of fuel sharp in her nose. The black helmet hugged her head, hiding her identity under tinted glass. No one suspected a thing. The switch had been smooth. It was dark enough. No cameras pointed too close.

She was starting 11th out of 18 drivers. If she had entered the race under her own name—based on her Palm Springs finish—she would’ve started 6th. But Matias hadn’t raced last time, and so he’d been slotted further back in the lineup. It was a long shot, but not impossible. Not for her.

She needed to finish at least third. That was the condition the brand had given her. A podium finish in Vegas, and the summer sponsorship was hers. Europe. Junior Formula 3. Everything hinged on tonight.

Rocco was starting on the top. Then Marco. Then Sianna. The front of the grid was a pressure cooker of tension, talent, and egos. She’d have to claw her way through it, one lap at a time.

She kept her eyes forward as drivers moved to their positions. The lights overhead pulsed in sequence, music pounding from the speakers.

Marco walked toward his car, helmet in hand, stretching out his gloves as he glanced across the grid—and stopped.

He looked at car number 2. Looked again.

Isabella didn't move.

His brow furrowed, eyes narrowing behind the helmet visor. He froze in place for a second, staring. She knew the exact moment he recognized her. Even with the visor down, even from across the space.

His entire body shifted. He didn't wave. Didn't speak. But she felt it—his shock, the shift in the air.

Then he moved.

There wasn't time to waste. Without a word, he climbed into his car and locked in.

Her stomach sank. *Not like this*, she thought. *This isn't how I wanted you to find out.*

But it was too late.

The lights went green.

The world exploded.

Tires screeched. Engines screamed. Isabella slammed the pedal, her heart racing faster than the car.

She had to move. Fast.

Starting from 11th meant every second counted. She couldn't afford to play it safe—not tonight. She darted between two cars before they even hit the first turn, cut clean across the inside line to grab another position, then shot out of the curve like lightning. Four cars down in the first stretch. Controlled chaos.

By the end of the first lap, she was already in fifth.

Marco was right in front of her. He'd lost positions. The hesitation—when he'd seen her—must have thrown him. His lines were off, his rhythm uneven. That wasn't like him.

But she didn't slow down.

Lap two was about setting up the pass. She stayed tight, inching closer, drafting off Marco's tail through the back straight. Her engine howled.

On lap three, she made her move.

Right out of turn three, she caught Marco too wide, dove clean underneath him, and took the corner hard. He tried to recover, but the moment had already passed. Before the lap was done, she swept past a racer from Utah who had been running a solid fourth since the start.

Now she was third.

She had made it.

She just had to hold.

Rocco was still leading. Sianna was in second, quick and razor-sharp—but not unreachable. The track wrapped around the rooftop in a dizzying figure-eight, the city below shimmering like a mirage, but Isabella saw only the line. Turn after turn, she stayed calm. Consistent. Focused.

Each lap ticked down, the roar of the crowd and the scream of engines fading into background noise. By lap ten, Sianna's rear tires were starting to show fatigue, just the slightest drag in the corners. Isabella narrowed her eyes. Tracked her. Waited.

Final lap.

The hairpin loomed again. Sianna braked just a breath too late. Isabella pounced, cutting tight to the inside, their tires nearly touching. For a moment, it felt like flying straight into fire—but she held it.

She surged ahead coming out of the corner, engine howling into the final straight.

Second place.

She didn't look back.

The checkered flag waved.

The crowd lost it.

**"Matias Außer Mauer wins second place after Rocco Bellini!"** the announcer's voice rang out through the air. "What a finish! What a race! From eleventh to second—this is a moment the Vegas circuit won't forget!"

Isabella coasted into the pit lane and turned off the engine. Her chest rose and fell in sharp bursts. Her hands trembled around the wheel. She sat there for a beat, then pulled off the helmet.

Her long brown hair fell over her shoulders.

Gasps broke through the noise. Then came the explosion—cheers, shouts, camera flashes.

Everyone was stunned. She hadn't just earned second place—she had come from the back and claimed it with every ounce of grit and skill she had. The sponsors would be thrilled. But more than that, she had impressed everyone. Drivers. Coaches. Fans. The entire rooftop buzzed with disbelief and respect.

Rocco reached her first, pulling her into a sweaty, unfiltered hug. "You crazy, brilliant maniac," he laughed.

His dad followed, arms open, beaming. "That was world-class, *signorina*."

Even Sianna, ever composed, gave her a long, slow nod of approval and muttered, "Respect."

She searched the crowd.

Marco.

He was at the back, helmet off, still in his suit, no expression on his face. Just watching. Silent. Unmoving.

She started to step toward him, the weight of everything between them heavy in her chest—but before she could make it, someone tapped her shoulder.

“Come on,” a race official said. “Podium ceremony.”

She hesitated, then turned. Marco was still there, still staring.

But she had to move.

Rocco grabbed her by the arm and led her to the staging area. The walk to the platform felt slow and surreal, the noise of the crowd a distant hum. Matias was waiting just behind the steps. He didn’t say a word—just pulled her into a fierce hug and held her there.

“You did it,” he whispered. “You freaking did it.”

She smiled into his shoulder, then stepped onto the platform.

Flashes burst from every angle. Rocco raised his trophy first, grinning from ear to ear. Isabella followed, the weight of second place solid in her hands. Sianna stood tall beside her, expression unreadable but with a hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of her lips.

The cheers slowly faded as the announcer moved into the interview segment, the cameras turning toward the three of them under the podium lights.

“Isabella Bellini,” the reporter said, holding out the mic. “That was one of the most stunning performances we’ve seen here in Vegas. The question on everyone’s mind—do you want to do this professionally?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes. I’m going to Europe. This was the result I needed for the summer league there.”

The reporter nodded, eyebrows raised. “We actually have confirmation that McLaren’s development team in London might be watching you closely after tonight.”

Isabella’s eyes lit up. “That’s incredible. I’m excited to go to London for the Junior Formula 3 this summer. It’s everything I’ve been working for.”

The reporter smiled. “So we’ll be seeing you in Europe with your brother Rocco and your boyfriend—who you beat today—Marco, at least for the summer while they’re in Formula 3?”

She nodded, trying not to laugh. “Exactly.”

“Last one,” the reporter said, glancing at the crowd. “When did you *know* you wanted to be a racer?”

Isabella paused, the mic close, the lights hot on her face.

“The first time I knew,” she said, voice steady, “was when my parents still wouldn’t let me race. And Matias Auf der Mauer—just like today—he gave me his car. I got in. I raced. And I beat everyone.”

The crowd erupted.

She looked out toward the sea of faces.

Matias gave her a thumbs-up from below the stage, beaming.

And then—Marco.

Still there.

Still watching.

Their eyes met. Brief. Charged.

Then he stood. Turned.

And disappeared into the night.

The celebration blurred around her—handshakes, cameras, cheers. She slipped away the first chance she got, still wearing Matias's suit, the heavy second-place medal swinging against her chest.

She ran through the paddock, then down the metal stairs to the rooftop parking lot, breath catching in her throat as she spotted him.

Marco stood beside his Jeep, jaw clenched, keys dangling in his hand. The lights of Vegas lit his silhouette in gold and shadow.

"Marco," she called out, out of breath.

He turned slowly. His face was tight, unreadable—but his eyes burned.

"You should've told me," he said. "You should've said it was you. I knew it the second you looked at me on the grid, and it threw me off completely. I lost the damn podium because of it."

"I didn't mean for you to find out like that," Isabella said, walking toward him. "I didn't do it to mess with your race."

"But you *did* mess with it," he snapped. "You knew I'd be in my head the second I figured it out. And you didn't say anything because—what? You didn't trust me?"

She flinched. "I didn't say anything because you wouldn't even *let* me race. You were so wrapped up in guilt over what happened at the ranch, you treated me like I was fragile. Like I was a broken part of your past you had to protect instead of someone who could stand beside you."

"I was trying to protect you," he said, his voice rising.

"No," she snapped. "You were trying to protect *yourself*. You've been so obsessed with control, with winning, that you couldn't see what I needed. I made the podium today. *I* raced. And here we are—still talking about *your* race."

He stared at her, chest heaving. Then, suddenly, he shouted, "Because I *love* you!"

The words stunned the air between them.

“I love you, Ella,” he said, quieter now, almost broken. “And I should’ve trusted you. I should’ve known you were strong enough. I didn’t know—I *swear* I didn’t know you had fallen back then. But go ahead. Run to Matias. You clearly trust *him* more.”

Isabella’s eyes narrowed, voice low. “Matias is my friend. He’s been my best friend since we were kids. Of course I trust him.”

Marco shook his head with a bitter laugh. “We’ve also known each other forever. But I guess that doesn’t count for much, huh?”

“Marco—”

“Go to him,” he said, backing toward the Jeep. “He’s always been in love with you anyway.”

She took a step forward. “That’s not fair.”

But he was already pulling open the door. He climbed in, jaw tight, eyes burning with something too painful to name. The engine came to life with a rough growl.

“Marco,” she said again, softer this time. But he didn’t look at her. Didn’t blink. Didn’t stop.

The Jeep rolled backward, then turned out of the lot. The taillights glowed red for one long second.

And then he was gone.

Something broke inside her.

It wasn’t loud. It wasn’t violent. It was a silent, hollow crack in her chest, like the splintering of glass under pressure. She stood frozen in the middle of the empty rooftop, wind brushing the loose strands of hair around her face, Matias’s suit still hanging heavy on her shoulders.

Her legs gave a little. Her arms hung limp at her sides. Her chest heaved—but nothing came out.

And then the tears did.

Quiet at first. Then harder. Her hands pressed to her face as the sobs rolled through her, hot and uncontrollable, flooding out all the adrenaline, all the pride, all the fire.

She had won.

And it still felt like losing.

## **Chapter 26: The End of Us**

The call came on a Wednesday morning—just three days after the race in Vegas. The McLaren junior team wanted her. It was official. Albephar had confirmed the sponsorship, and her spot on the European circuit was secured. Isabella Bellini was going to London this summer. Three months of training, press, and a shot at something bigger. Her dream was finally taking shape.

She should’ve been floating. Ecstatic. And for a few hours, she was.



Her phone buzzed nonstop—texts from classmates, teammates, even her mom’s friends from Italy. Her mom had cried when she found out. A couple of junior drivers from the circuit posted stories about how “Isabella Bellini was headed to Europe.” It was happening.

But every time she looked at the messages, at the screenshots and tags, her stomach twisted.

Because Marco hadn’t said a word.

No congratulations. No questions. Nothing.

She hadn’t expected fireworks, but Marco’s silence hit harder than she thought it would.

It wasn’t just that he was gone.

It was the knowing. The certainty in her gut that this—*them*—was over.

And not just because of him.

It was because of her too.

She had raced behind his back. She hadn’t trusted him enough to tell him the truth. And he hadn’t trusted her enough to believe she could come back strong. They’d both let fear and pride drive them instead of honesty. Somewhere along the way, the thread between them had started to fray—and neither of them pulled hard enough to hold it together.

And even now, even with everything unraveling, part of her still didn’t want to believe it. She still wanted to cling to the version of them that had felt untouchable once. But that version didn’t exist anymore.

Their dreams weren’t on opposite sides of the world. In fact, they weren’t so different—just scattered across cities, circuits, and timelines. She was headed to London for the summer. Marco was going to Milan to race. She still had to finish senior year in California. And even if they wanted to find their way back to each other, the distance—physical and emotional—was already doing its damage.

The trust was broken. And a long-distance relationship, with both of them chasing momentum in different places, would only stretch what was already too fragile to survive.

She just hadn’t been ready to admit it.

The following week, she tried to talk to him—at school, at the beach, in the quiet spaces where they used to find each other without even trying. But it wasn’t the same anymore. Marco was kind, but distant. Soft in his words, but firm in his boundaries.

“I just need more time,” he said, again and again.

And each time, she could see the truth in his eyes.

He was hurting too.

He didn't say it, but she could feel it—how much it cost him to keep his distance. The ache in his voice when he said her name. The way he looked at her like he still saw the girl he fell for, even if he couldn't reach her anymore.

Two weeks passed like that. Quiet. Heavy. Waiting.

Then, on a pale Sunday afternoon, Isabella drove out to Malibu. She packed a towel, some water, and her journal, and let the coast pull her in.

The ocean was calm. The breeze warm and salty. She sat on the sand with her knees tucked to her chest, staring at the waves and thinking about everything she couldn't say out loud.

And then she heard it—the low, unmistakable growl of his motorcycle.

She turned before she could stop herself.

Marco was walking toward her, helmet under his arm, his dark hair shifting in the wind. He looked the same. But something in his posture had changed—less armor, more honesty.

"Hey," he said.

She stood, brushing sand from her legs. "Hey."

He nodded toward the water. "Mind if I sit?"

She shook her head, and they sank into the sand side by side.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then he said, "I heard about McLaren. That's huge, Ella."

She smiled faintly. "Thanks."

"I'm proud of you," he added, voice low. "You did it."

She turned to look at him. "I did."

A silence stretched between them, warm but heavy.

"I'm leaving," he said. "To Milan. Next week. Before graduation."

She just nodded.

He exhaled slowly, then looked at her. "I love you, you know."

Her chest tightened.

"I really, really love you," he said. "But you were right. Racing's still my priority. I thought I could balance both—us and the track—but I couldn't. I wasn't fair to you. I was selfish. And I'm sorry."

She looked down at the sand, then back at him. "I should've told you I was racing," she said softly. "I should've trusted you."

He nodded once. "Maybe I didn't give you a reason to."

“You didn’t,” she admitted. “But I didn’t fight for us either.”

“You were chasing your dream,” he said. “And I get that. Maybe more than anyone else.”

There was a pause.

“We both screwed it up,” she said. “Bit by bit.”

He didn’t argue. Just looked at her with something quiet and sad in his eyes.

She drew a circle in the sand with her finger. “I think I kept pretending that we could still fix it. That we were just... stuck. But it’s more than that, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It is.”

“The trust isn’t there anymore,” she whispered. “And if we can’t be honest now... how would we ever do long distance?”

He looked away, toward the waves. “We wouldn’t.”

They both knew it.

He reached out and touched her hand. Just once. A soft press of his fingers.

Then he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, slow and full of something that felt like a goodbye.

He stood, brushing sand from his jeans, and turned to go.

And just before he reached his bike, she called out, “We’ll see each other in London.”

He looked back, a flicker of a smile crossing his lips. “Yeah,” he said. “We will.”

And then he was gone.

She watched the silhouette of him fade against the setting sun, the sound of his engine merging with the ocean breeze.

Marco had been her first love. The kind that burns hot and fast and unforgettable. But not all love is meant to last. Not when timing is wrong. Not when dreams pull people in different directions.

Sometimes love isn’t enough. Not without choice. Not without choosing each other fully.

And for the first time in weeks, Isabella felt still. Not happy. Not heartbroken. Just still.

She was learning that peace didn’t always come with a perfect ending.

Sometimes it came with letting go.

## **Chapter 27: Close Enough to Burn**

The buzz of the championship had faded, but Isabella still hadn’t come down from it. Not really. She’d won. On her own terms. And for the first time in a long time, she felt like herself again—the version of her that wasn’t afraid, or waiting for someone to tell her *you’re ready*. She just *was*.

But then there was Matias.

And the way he hadn't kissed her.

He'd given her something that night—his truth, his heart, maybe even his control—and then he'd stepped back. Since then, he hadn't crossed a single line.

He was kind. Present. Still her anchor.  
But not once had he touched her again.

Not when they brushed shoulders in the garage.  
Not when they worked late tuning the car's new suspension.  
Not even when she sat beside him in silence, heart pounding, just *waiting* for something more.

And that was the thing—*she* was waiting now.

Because without her realizing it, Marco had started to fade.  
It wasn't bitter. It wasn't cruel.  
It was just... time.

The boy she used to dream about under high school bleachers, the one who made her feel seen and brave—that boy had changed. And maybe she had too. What she'd once thought was love now felt like history. Beautiful, messy history. A page already turned.

And Matias?

He was the space between the pages—quiet, steady, *real*.  
He had taken up space in her heart without asking. Without trying.  
And now that she knew it, she wanted to reach for him.

But he wouldn't let her.

It wasn't a game. He meant what he said. He wouldn't take her unless she was fully his. No lingering shadows. No confusion. No halfway.

And that made her want him more.

Because even now, with only two weeks left before she flew to London, Matias was still there—beside her, behind her, *for* her.

Knowing full well she was leaving.  
That she'd be miles and oceans away.  
That their futures weren't aligned.

He was staying in California. She was going after the European dream. And still—he put her first. Always. Without hesitation. Without resentment.

He helped finalize her racing profile, edited her highlight reel, called in favors with scouts, ran data analytics on her lap times—all without asking for anything in return.

It was selfless.  
It was maddening.  
It was the purest form of love she'd ever seen.

And he didn't say it. He didn't need to.

She saw it in everything he did. In the way he held space for her, quietly and without ego. In the way he refused to make her choose. In the way he'd rather watch her leave for her dream than risk distracting her from it.

Matias had made it clear: he wouldn't take a piece of her.  
He'd wait until she had *everything* to give.

It broke her heart. And it made her fall harder.

Like that night on the balcony.

The air was warm, the sky streaked with stars. The house behind them had gone quiet hours ago. Isabella sat on the edge of the concrete railing, hoodie pulled over her knees, sipping from a glass of something citrusy and cold. Matias leaned against the opposite wall, arms crossed, eyes fixed somewhere past the trees.

They talked about London. About her new team. The next phase of everything she'd been working for.

But not about *them*.

Not the almost.

Not the tension.

Not the part of her that ached every time he stood too far away.

At one point, she laughed—something about how her new racing suit made her look like a “shiny bullet”—and when she turned to look at him, his gaze was already on her.

But he didn't move.

Didn't smile.

His knuckles were white on the balcony edge.

“Why won't you come closer?” she asked, barely louder than the wind.

His jaw flexed. He didn't look at her this time.

“Because if I do, I'm not sure I'll stop.”

Her breath caught.

There was a long pause. The kind that said everything. She could feel it between them—the electricity, the fire, the unspoken permission she wanted to give him.

“Maybe I don't want you to stop,” she whispered.

That got his attention. His eyes snapped to hers, sharp and dark and full of all the things he wasn't letting out.

But still—he didn't move.

She watched him, a slow realization blooming in her chest.

He wasn't trying to protect her anymore.

He was trying to protect *them*.

Because once she left, there'd be no turning back.

Because the moment he touched her again, there would be no pretending it meant less than everything.

And because he loved her enough to wait.

So they stayed like that.

Two people burning in silence.

Close enough to feel it.

Too far to touch.

And even though it hurt—God, it hurt—she understood.

He had always chosen her.

And maybe it was time she chose him, too.

## **Chapter 28: No Way Back**

The house felt too still without Rocco. Too quiet.

He and Marco had left right after graduation—two duffel bags, a one-way ticket to Milan, and the kind of wild, reckless hope only best friends and dreamers could carry. Formula 3 was calling. Italy was waiting.

Isabella's dad had gone with Rocco, just for a few weeks, helping him settle into the city and navigate the first leg of the season.

And Isabella?

Her summer was just beginning.

A new team. A new continent. A new life in London.

It was everything she'd worked for, everything she'd fought for—and still, she felt the weight of what she was leaving behind.

Matias stood at the bottom of the stairs, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his worn hoodie, the same one he'd always loaned her on late nights in the garage. He didn't say anything at first, just watched her with those soft, steady eyes.

She wanted to memorize him like that.

She stepped into his arms, and he pulled her close—closer than he ever had before. His chin tucked against her temple, his heart beating strong and sure beneath her cheek. They didn't speak. They didn't need to.

He was letting her go.

"I leave in two hours," she whispered.

"I know."

They stood in silence, breathing the same air, holding on like it was the last time.

He would stay in California a few more days before flying to Belgium to visit family for the rest of the summer. And in the fall, he'd be back in Pasadena—just on the other side of town.

He'd gotten into Caltech after all.

She leaned into him a second longer, her fingers fisting the back of his hoodie like she could anchor herself there, just for a little while more.

When they pulled apart, neither of them looked away.

"I'll see you soon," she said, even though she didn't know if it was true.

He smiled softly. "Yeah. You will."

Her mom honked from the car. Isabella blinked hard, grabbed her bag, and forced herself down the steps, one foot after another. She didn't look back.

LAX was cold and humming and crowded.

Her mom hugged her tight at the drop-off curb, kissed her forehead, and told her to call as soon as she landed. Isabella nodded, held on a second longer than she needed to, then turned and walked inside.

She moved toward security, music already in her ears, blasting something loud and fast and distracting. She couldn't think right now. Couldn't let herself fall apart at the gate.

So she walked.

Bag on her shoulder.

Passport in hand.

Dream in motion.

She was almost to the first scanner when she heard it.

Faint. Muffled.

*"Isabella."*

She turned.

Nothing.

Just the crowd, a sea of strangers, none of them him.

She took a breath and faced forward again, willing herself not to hope—

*“Isabella.”*

Louder this time. Real.

Her heart stuttered. She spun around.

And there he was.

Matias.

Out of breath. Wild-eyed. His backpack hanging off one shoulder, a boarding pass in his hand.

Her knees gave out for a second.

He was here.

He was *here*.

She ran to him without thinking, crashing into his arms so hard it knocked the wind out of both of them. He held her like she was gravity itself, like he’d been falling ever since she left the house.

“You—what are you—?”

“I couldn’t let you go,” he said, pressing his forehead to hers. “Not like that. Not without trying. I waited long enough.”

She couldn’t speak. Could barely breathe.

He cupped her face, eyes shining.

“I’ll come to London with you. Just for the summer. Then I’ll start Caltech in the fall. But I need more time with you. I *want* more time with you.”

She stared at him, heart thudding, everything else falling away.

“I love you,” she whispered.

His breath hitched. He didn’t hesitate.

“I love you too.”

And then she kissed him.

Right there in the middle of the terminal, people shuffling past, the overhead announcements blaring. None of it mattered. Not anymore.

Because once they touched, there was no way back.

They had burned in silence for too long.

Now, they’d burn together.



And this time, they weren't afraid.

Not of the distance.

Not of the timing.

Not of each other.

Because this was real.

And they were finally ready.

## **Aterword**

Thank you for reading Close Enough to Burn.

Whether you loved it, cried with it, or yelled at a character or two—I'm just glad you were here. Stories like this don't mean anything without readers like you.

I'd love to write a second book in Isabella's world, and hearing what resonated with you (or didn't!) helps shape what comes next. If you have a moment, I'd be so grateful for your review on Amazon or Goodreads. Your feedback not only supports indie authors like me—it keeps stories like this going. Until next time

Daniela