

BLOOD & LILIES
BY SHARON JUST

Chapter One: The Night She Lost Her Mother

The rain in Naples fell like glass that night. Sharp, relentless, and unforgiving. Isabella Romano would never forget the sound of it—raindrops hammering against the roof of the villa, the smell of sea salt mixing with roses from her mother’s garden, and the distant thunder that rattled her nursery window. She was only six years old, but memory has a cruel way of preserving pain with greater clarity than joy.

Her mother, Elena Moretti Romano, had been the light of the household. Graceful, soft-spoken, with a smile that could hush Matteo Romano’s thunderous voice and melt the iron in his veins. To Isabella, she was warmth. She was bedtime stories in lilting Italian, delicate hands braiding her hair, kisses that smelled faintly of jasmine. To Matteo, she was everything—his queen, his compass, the fragile anchor that kept the shadows of the mafia from consuming him entirely.

That night, Elena was late returning home. A business dinner, she’d said, something to keep appearances polished for Matteo’s legitimate empire. The Romano name was tied to hotels, shipping companies, vineyards. To the world, Matteo was an ambitious businessman, cultured and intimidating. But the truth—the truth whispered in back alleys and bloodied basements—was that he was already a man climbing through ranks of the Italian underworld.

When the call came, it was not his consigliere or one of his capos who brought the news. It was the police. A "car accident," they called it. But even through the static of the line, Matteo knew better. He had enemies. Rivals. Wolves circling his family’s empire. And now, they had taken his heart.

Isabella remembered the scream. Her father’s roar, echoing through marble halls like a wounded lion. She had never heard him break before. The villa shook with his rage, men rushed in and out, phones rang, orders were barked. But all she remembered was her nanny clutching her shoulders, whispering not to cry, while her world collapsed.

Elena’s casket was white. Small orchids rested on the lid, Isabella’s tiny handprint pressed into the wood before they lowered it into the earth. And Don Matteo Romano was born that day—not the Matteo her mother had married, not the man who once laughed freely in the vineyards of Tuscany, but the man carved from grief and vengeance.

The funeral was a parade of power. Politicians, businessmen, priests, even rival dons came to pay respects, their dark coats slick with rain. Matteo stood tall, his daughter’s hand in his, but his eyes were two shards of blue ice. The entire underworld of Italy understood that day: Matteo Romano would never be weak again.

Isabella’s Childhood

In the years that followed, the Romano empire grew, fed by grief and sharpened into steel. Matteo swallowed territories across Italy, spreading influence into France, Spain, and Germany. He became one of the continent's most feared mafia bosses, ranking third in Italy's bloody hierarchy.

But within the villa, Matteo was not Don Romano. He was **Papa**.

For Isabella, life became a golden cage. She had everything a girl could dream of: ponies in stables, private tutors, designer dresses before she even knew their names. She never had to ask twice for toys, jewels, or vacations. The Romano fortune was limitless, and Matteo ensured his daughter never felt the hunger of the world beyond their gates.

Yet she felt hunger of a different kind.

Loneliness.

Her guards were always there—silent men in suits with guns under their jackets, shadows that loomed taller as she grew older. Her father adored her, but he feared losing her as he had lost Elena. He denied her playdates, chose her friends, inspected every invitation. She could not walk in Naples without two men at her side. She could not laugh freely at cafés without being reminded to sit where no bullet could find her.

Still, Isabella learned to smile. She carried herself like the princess of a kingdom built on whispered deals and blood-soaked contracts. Her beauty bloomed early: raven-black hair, porcelain skin, eyes a rare gray-green that reminded Matteo of Elena's. She was his living jewel, his untouchable treasure.

But beneath the diamonds and silk, Isabella longed for the simple. For messy laughter with friends. For anonymity. For freedom.

The Dream of America

At fifteen, she began insisting on English lessons. Matteo humored her, believing it was harmless. "A young lady should know the language of business," he said, stroking his trimmed beard. Isabella smiled, but secretly, she dreamed of more. She devoured English novels, scribbled phrases in secret journals, imagined a life where no one bowed to her last name.

At seventeen, she found her courage.

"Papa," she said one evening, sitting across from him at their long mahogany table. His blue eyes softened immediately; she had inherited Elena's gift of taming him. "I want to study abroad. In America."

The silence in the dining hall was suffocating. Enzo, standing guard near the door, shifted his weight. Riccardo's jaw tightened. The very idea was laughable: the only daughter of Don Romano, loose in a foreign country?

Matteo's hand stilled on his wine glass. "Isabella, you jest."

Her chin lifted. She had learned his strength, but she had also inherited her mother's quiet stubbornness. "No, Papa. I'm serious. I want to learn, to live, to see the world beyond these walls."

He slammed his glass down, wine spilling like blood across the white linen. "Do you wish to die? Do you wish me to bury you beside your mother?" His voice cracked, raw with the memory.

Tears stung her eyes, but she didn't falter. "I wish to live, Papa. To truly live."

For weeks, the house was a storm. Matteo raged, forbade it, threatened to lock her in the villa until marriage. But Isabella was her mother's daughter, and her persistence wore him down like rain on stone. Finally, he yielded—but on his terms.

The Penthouse

"You will go," he said one morning, his voice low, dangerous. "But you will not be free."

Isabella's heart leapt.

"You will use your mother's last name—Moretti. No one in America will know you are my daughter. You will not breathe the name Romano. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa."

"You will live in a penthouse I buy for you. Not a dormitory with strangers. Enzo and Riccardo will be your shadows—day and night. They will be your protectors, your jailers, your blood should it spill. If you defy them, you defy me."

"Yes, Papa."

"And Isabella..." His eyes softened, voice breaking for the first time in years. "If anything happens to you, I will burn the world to ash. I cannot lose you too."

She nodded, throat tight, her heart torn between gratitude and the familiar ache of the cage.

But when she boarded the private jet weeks later, watching the Italian coast fade into clouds, she felt something new. Not fear. Not grief.

Hope.

For the first time in her life, Isabella Romano—Isabella Moretti, to the world—was flying toward freedom.

HOURS LATER

The private jet landed in New York just as the sky blushed gold with dawn. Isabella pressed her forehead to the window, gray-green eyes wide as the skyline glittered in the distance. Skyscrapers pierced the horizon like steel promises, nothing like the ancient domes and crumbling cathedrals of Naples. This was not a city of saints and shadows; this was a city that breathed ambition.

Her heart pounded with excitement. For the first time in her life, no one here knew who she truly was. To the world, she was Isabella Moretti, another wealthy international student chasing an American degree. To her father's empire, she remained the untouchable jewel of Don Romano.

The jet doors opened, and the spell shattered.

Enzo and Riccardo descended first, scanning the tarmac with hawk-like precision. Both wore tailored suits that did nothing to soften the menace in their stances. Enzo, lean and sharp-eyed, moved like a shadow trained to kill. Riccardo, broader with a faint scar slicing down his jawline, had the calm patience of a man who had seen too much blood to be rattled by anything.

“Avanti, signorina,” Enzo murmured, offering his hand.

Isabella stepped into the crisp morning air, heels clicking on the metal stairs. Even here, even now, the invisible chains of her father's world followed. She inhaled deeply, pushing down the familiar ache. Freedom was relative, she reminded herself.

A black SUV waited beyond the gates, diplomatic tags ensuring they bypassed scrutiny. Isabella slid inside, the leather seat cool against her palms. The ride through the city was a blur—yellow cabs, flashing billboards, pedestrians rushing like ants. New York was alive in a way Naples never was, chaotic and electric.

The convoy stopped in front of a sleek glass tower overlooking Central Park. The doorman bowed as if he already knew her worth.

“Welcome home, Miss Moretti,” Riccardo said dryly, though his lips twitched in something resembling amusement.

The penthouse sprawled across the top two floors of the building. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the city, chandeliers glittered above marble floors, and every surface gleamed as though terrified of displeasing its owner. Her father's touch was everywhere—wealth as armor, excess as safety.

“This is too much,” Isabella whispered, awe and dread battling in her chest.

“Your father disagrees,” Enzo replied, setting her luggage down. “He wanted the best.”

That night, as she wandered the penthouse alone, Isabella pressed her palm to the cold glass overlooking the park. Far below, students her age laughed in groups, hands linked, no shadows at their heels. Her reflection stared back at her—polished, beautiful, untouchable.

And utterly alone.

The First Days

Columbia University was her father’s choice, not hers. Prestigious, selective, crawling with the offspring of billionaires and politicians. She arrived in a black car, Enzo and Riccardo trailing discreetly, though their presence still drew stares.

Whispers followed her almost instantly. The mysterious Italian transfer. The girl with designer bags and bodyguards. Some thought she was royalty, others a diplomat’s child. Isabella smiled politely, never correcting them. No one could know she was Romano blood.

Professors praised her English, still laced with melodic Italian cadence. Students invited her out, but she declined more often than she accepted. Crowded dorm parties were out of the question. Her life was curated, filtered, caged.

Still, she tasted glimpses of freedom. Walking across campus alone (though Enzo lingered at a distance). Buying coffee with her own money. Laughing with classmates about assignments. Each small act felt like rebellion.

But the ache never left.

At night, she lay on silk sheets in the penthouse, city lights flickering through her windows, and wondered what it would be like to be truly ordinary. To walk into a bakery without a shadow trailing. To kiss a boy without fearing her father’s wrath.

Enzo & Riccardo

Despite their role, the two guards grew into reluctant companions.

Enzo was the strict one—always watching, always two steps ahead of threats only he seemed to see. “Keep your head down,” he reminded her constantly. “Your father would kill me if you so much as stub your toe.”

Riccardo, on the other hand, was looser with his tongue. He teased her, smuggled her gelato, even rolled his eyes when she complained about being treated like porcelain. “You want to live, ragazza? Then live smart. Don’t make us bury you too young.”

Between them, Isabella felt protected and smothered in equal measure. They were not friends, but they were her reality—her father’s arms stretched across an ocean.

Memories of Matteo

Some nights, she dreamed of her father not as Don Romano but as Papa—lifting her high into the air in vineyards, his laughter booming as she squealed. Those memories clashed violently with the man who had slammed his fist on mahogany when she first mentioned America.

Matteo called her daily, sometimes twice. His voice softened when he spoke to her, though Isabella heard the steel beneath.

“Isabella, sei felice? Are you happy?”

“Yes, Papa,” she would answer, hiding the loneliness in her chest.

“Good. Remember, you are never alone. My men are with you. My eyes are everywhere.”

She never doubted it. Somewhere, always, someone was watching.

A Glimpse of Normal

It was during one of her afternoon walks through campus that Isabella noticed it. A boy at the far end of the quad, tall, broad-shouldered, sun catching in his brown hair. He moved differently than the others—confident, unhurried, as if the world bent around him instead of the other way around. His sweatshirt clung to the sharp lines of his swimmer’s physique, his laugh carried across the lawn, easy and unguarded.

She looked once, then looked away.

Unbeknownst to her, he had already noticed her long before.

Matteo’s Warning

One evening, weeks after her arrival, Matteo’s call came later than usual. His voice was harsher, heavy with smoke and fury.

“Isabella, listen to me carefully,” he said. “Your life is fragile. You carry my blood, and there are men who would cut you down just to hurt me. Never forget who you are. And never trust anyone.”

Her throat tightened. “Papa, I’m not a child anymore.”

“To me, you will always be the child I swore to protect,” he growled. Then, softer: “Do not make me bury another woman I love.”

Tears burned her eyes. She promised him obedience, as always. But when the call ended, she pressed her hands against the glass wall of the penthouse, looking down at the city where millions lived and loved freely.

Her father’s words weighed heavy—but beneath them, a spark flared.

A dangerous, reckless spark.

She would not live in chains forever.

And somewhere across that campus, a boy with hazel eyes was already falling for her.

Chapter 2: The Boy from the Water

The morning rush at Bennett's Bakery began at five-thirty, long before the rest of New York stirred awake. The hum of mixers and clatter of trays echoed through the compact kitchen, the warmth of ovens battling the bite of autumn air that seeped through the cracked windows. Ethan Bennett's hands were already dusted in flour by the time the first light kissed the horizon.

It was ritual, one he had known since childhood. His parents had built the bakery from nothing, pouring sweat into every loaf, every croissant. It was no empire, no gilded business tower. But it was theirs, and in this family-owned space, Ethan had grown into the kind of man who understood the rhythm of work, of patience, of consistency.

"Ethan, check the sourdough." His father's gruff voice carried from the back, muffled by the roar of ovens.

"Already in," Ethan called back, sliding a tray from one rack to another. He wore a simple navy T-shirt, its fabric stretched across broad shoulders and a torso sculpted from years in the pool. His mother always said he was born for water—sleek, powerful, a creature built to cut through waves.

He tied off another tray of rolls before glancing at the clock. Swim practice started at seven sharp. He'd barely make it if he sprinted.

His younger sister, Ava, flitted past, humming as she arranged pastries in neat rows at the front. "Ethan, stop staring at the clock. You'll get there. You always do."

He chuckled, tossing a towel at her. "Bossy."

"You love it," she teased, flashing a grin before disappearing into the shop.

By the time he reached Columbia's Olympic-sized pool, his hair was damp with sweat, and his muscles burned pleasantly. He thrived on this chaos: the balance of bakery, school, and sport. It kept him sharp, alive.

The locker room buzzed with his teammates' chatter, but Ethan tuned it out. He belonged in the water. Always had.

Minutes later, he was slicing through blue, body moving in perfect rhythm—arms pulling, legs kicking, lungs burning in the best way. The chlorine stung his nose, the echo of splashes filled the space. Here, he wasn't the baker's son or just another student. He was the captain, the one everyone relied on to push harder, swim faster, lead stronger.

From the bleachers above, unnoticed at first, Isabella Romano watched.

She hadn't intended to. She'd only been wandering the athletic complex, half curious, half restless, Enzo's looming presence always at her back. But when she'd heard the distant whistle and glanced through the glass, she'd seen him.

Ethan Bennett.

She remembered him vaguely—a flash of brown hair, the sharp line of his jaw when she'd passed him on campus last week. But now, watching him in his element, she was momentarily caught off guard. His strokes were precise, relentless. Every muscle seemed honed by discipline, his body cutting through water with the grace of someone born for it.

Girls whispered his name from the sidelines. Laughter carried. Yet Ethan never looked toward them. His focus was absolute.

“Impressive, huh?” Riccardo's voice rumbled softly at her shoulder.

Isabella stiffened. “I wasn't watching.”

Riccardo smirked knowingly but said nothing more. Enzo, ever the silent shadow, merely folded his arms.

Isabella turned away, heat creeping up her neck. He was just another boy. Nothing more.

That evening, fate nudged again.

Isabella had grown restless in the penthouse, suffocated by marble walls and chandeliers that glittered like cages. Against Enzo's protests, she insisted on a short walk. The city, she claimed, was meant to be lived in. And though his jaw tightened, he relented, trailing after her with Riccardo at his side.

She drifted down quieter streets near campus, letting neon signs and the smell of roasted chestnuts pull her along. That was when she saw it: a small bakery with a warm glow spilling onto the sidewalk, laughter spilling from inside.

Bennett's.

Curiosity tugged her through the door.

The scent hit her first—vanilla, sugar, yeast, comfort. It was intoxicating, a far cry from the sterile perfection of her father's imported kitchens. Wooden shelves sagged under the weight of pastries. A girl, barely fifteen, hummed as she rearranged them, glancing up with a bright smile.

“Hi! Welcome. First time here?”

Isabella nodded, adjusting her coat. She was unused to being addressed so casually. “Yes.”

Before the girl could continue, another voice carried from behind the counter. “Ava, stop interrogating customers.”

Isabella froze as Ethan emerged, wiping flour from his forearms. He wore the same navy apron his sister did, hair slightly disheveled, hazel eyes lighting briefly in recognition when they met hers.

“Uh—hi,” he said, voice softer than she expected. “What can I get you?”

Her heart stumbled, but she smoothed her expression. “Just...something sweet. To go.”

He chuckled, pulling a box closer. “We’ve got chocolate croissants, apple turnovers, cinnamon rolls...” His tone was easy, unpretentious. He spoke like someone who belonged here, someone who didn’t need to impress.

She pointed to the croissant. He tucked it gently into the box, sliding it toward her.

“That’ll be four dollars.”

She blinked. “Only four?”

Ethan tilted his head, amused. “You were expecting more?”

Isabella fumbled for cash, her nails grazing the edge of the bills. Money had never mattered to her father—luxury had always been abundant. But here, in this cozy shop, she felt suddenly exposed, out of place.

Ethan noticed. His smile softened. “Don’t worry. First one’s on the house.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“Because you look like you needed it,” he said simply.

Her lips parted, but no reply came. She accepted the box, murmuring a quiet *grazie* before slipping out into the night.

Behind her, Ethan watched, inexplicably intrigued.

Back in the penthouse, Isabella sat cross-legged on her bed, staring at the croissant as though it were a priceless artifact. She broke it slowly, buttery flakes scattering across her silk sheets. The taste was unlike anything her father’s chefs ever made—warm, imperfect, real.

And though she told herself it was foolish, her mind replayed the way Ethan had looked at her. Not like a mystery to solve or a prize to claim. Just...a girl buying a pastry.

But she couldn't let herself fall into that illusion. Papa's words echoed, sharp as knives.

Never trust anyone. Your life is fragile.

So Isabella Romano, daughter of Italy's most feared mafia boss, closed the bakery box and pushed it aside. She would not let herself be distracted.

Not by warm smiles.

Not by kind eyes.

Not by Ethan Bennett.

Meanwhile, Ethan lingered long after closing, wiping counters that were already spotless. His teammates teased him for the way he sometimes got lost in thought, but he ignored them.

Tonight, his thoughts kept circling back to her—the mysterious Italian girl with sad eyes. He didn't know her story, didn't know her name beyond Isabella Moretti, but something about her tugged at him.

He had seen hundreds of beautiful girls in his life, but none of them had ever made him look twice like this. None of them carried themselves like they were both untouchable and desperately out of reach.

Ethan Bennett was falling.

And Isabella Romano hadn't even noticed.

Chapter 3: Cracks in the Glass

The penthouse was silent, as it always was. The kind of silence that pressed in from every angle, smothering, heavy. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the city below, but even New York—noisy, chaotic, alive—couldn't reach her at this height. It was as though Don Matteo had built her a tower in the sky, untouchable, unshakable, a gilded cage that glittered under the morning sun.

Isabella Romano sat curled in an armchair, a book open in her lap. She hadn't turned a page in ten minutes. Her eyes skimmed the words, but her mind was elsewhere.

Somewhere between memory and longing.

It had been two months since she'd arrived in the States, and still the ache of home clawed at her chest. Not Naples itself—not the crumbling streets or the endless whispers of the Romano name. What she missed was her mother, that hollow absence that never healed, no matter the distance. And, strangely, she missed the vineyards where she had grown up, running wild with bare feet, before the world had hardened around her.

Now she had chandeliers. Guards. Imported marble. But freedom? That had never been hers.

A soft cough from across the room pulled her from her thoughts. Enzo, leaning against the wall in his tailored suit, arms crossed. His sharp eyes scanned her like always, as though danger might materialize from her very shadow. Riccardo sat near the kitchen counter, methodically cleaning a pistol he wasn't supposed to flaunt in front of her.

Isabella sighed. "Do you two ever...not watch me?"

Riccardo grinned faintly. "That would defeat the purpose, ragazza."

"It's suffocating," she murmured, her accent curling around the words.

"Better suffocated than dead," Enzo replied flatly.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. She didn't argue. They were only doing what her father demanded. Still, each day she felt her skin grow tighter, as if she were shrinking inside a space that was too large, too pristine.

She rose abruptly, setting the book aside. "I'm going for a walk."

Both men straightened instantly.

"Five blocks," Enzo said. "No more."

Isabella didn't bother answering. She grabbed her coat, her purse, and swept toward the door.

The city air hit her in a rush, brisk and sharp, laced with exhaust and roasted peanuts from a nearby cart. She inhaled greedily, as though it might cleanse her. Down below, life moved fast. Couples bickered, children tugged at parents, students rushed with coffee in hand. No one glanced twice at her.

It was intoxicating.

Enzo and Riccardo flanked her discreetly, but she ignored them, letting herself sink into the crowd. For once, she wasn't Don Romano's daughter. She was Isabella Moretti, just another young woman in a sea of strangers.

She passed a bookstore and paused, tempted. Her father's library had always been filled with leather-bound classics, heavy with prestige. This store was different—bright covers, paperbacks spilling from every corner, handwritten notes tucked into staff recommendations. She slipped inside, ignoring Enzo's mutter of disapproval.

The air smelled of paper and ink. A clerk behind the counter offered her a distracted smile. She lingered among the shelves, fingers brushing spines, marveling at how ordinary it all was. No eyes followed her here, no one bowed their head in respect or fear.

She bought three books without thinking, tucking them into a paper bag. It was such a small act, and yet her heart fluttered as though she'd stolen something.

On the walk back, her gaze snagged briefly on a bakery across the street. Laughter spilled from inside, warm and golden. Her steps slowed, memory flickering—the croissant, the boy with flour on his arms, his quiet smile.

She tightened her grip on the bag of books. No. She couldn't think of that.

That evening, her father called.

"Isabella," Matteo's voice was gravel through the phone, heavy with smoke. "Tell me. Are you well?"

"Yes, Papa," she answered softly, curling up in her bed with the phone pressed close.

"You have everything you need?"

"I do."

Silence stretched. She could almost picture him in his study back home, a glass of scotch sweating against mahogany, his other hand brushing the photograph of her mother that never left his desk.

“You sound restless,” he said finally.

Her throat tightened. He knew her too well. “Just...different, here.”

“You must be careful. America is not Italy. There are men here who would use you as a pawn to hurt me. That is why Enzo and Riccardo—”

“Papa,” she interrupted, voice sharp before softening. “I know. I am careful.”

A beat of silence. Then his tone dropped, dark and raw. “I lost your mother because I was careless. I will not lose you.”

The ache in her chest deepened. She closed her eyes, tears pricking hot. “You won’t.”

After the call ended, she lay awake, the city lights painting her ceiling. She clutched the small locket at her throat, her mother’s picture tucked inside. And for the first time since she’d arrived, she whispered aloud, to no one but herself:

“I don’t want to live in a cage forever.”

Days blurred. She threw herself into classes, filling notebooks with meticulous notes. She went to the library often, drawn to its hush, where no one whispered about her guards. Sometimes she sat on the steps outside, just watching other students laugh, tease, flirt—normal things she’d never had.

One afternoon, she overheard two girls gossiping.

“Have you seen that Italian transfer? She’s gorgeous, but she’s...weird. Always with those scary guys.”

“Bodyguards, right? Who needs that unless you’re hiding something?”

Isabella lowered her gaze, heat rising in her cheeks. She shouldn’t care what they thought, but it stung.

She wasn’t hiding. She was surviving.

Still, a part of her longed to shake them and scream, *I’m just like you. I want to be just like you.*

But she said nothing.

Riccardo noticed the shift in her. One evening, as he drove her back from class, he glanced in the rearview mirror.

“You’re quiet, ragazza.”

“I’m always quiet,” she muttered.

“Quieter than usual.” His tone softened, rare for him. “You miss home?”

She hesitated. “I miss...belonging somewhere.”

Riccardo said nothing more, but she caught the flicker of pity in his eyes. It unsettled her.

The chapter closes with Isabella standing by the penthouse windows again, her reflection superimposed over the glittering city. She pressed her hand against the glass, as though she could touch the lives below.

The cracks in her golden cage had begun.

And though she didn’t know it yet, those cracks would only widen—until someone slipped through them.

Chapter 4: A Taste of Freedom

The ride home from Columbia was silent except for the low hum of the Bentley's engine. Isabella sat in the backseat, her gaze fixed out the tinted window, watching the blur of New York at dusk. The city moved with a pulse she couldn't quite match. Students spilling out of cafes, couples holding hands under streetlamps, laughter spilling from doorways. She wanted to be part of it, wanted to feel the rhythm in her bones, but instead she was locked away in her father's carefully constructed world.

Riccardo caught her expression in the rearview mirror. He didn't say anything then—he never did when she looked like that. But when they finally pulled into the underground garage of the penthouse tower and Isabella disappeared upstairs, the two men lingered.

Enzo leaned against the car, arms crossed, his usual hard edge settling over him. "She's distracted."

Riccardo smirked faintly, tugging at his tie. "Distracted? No, Enzo, she looks like she's suffocating." He pulled the tie loose, tossing it over the passenger seat. "She's been here weeks, and already I can tell this routine—home, campus, home—it's not enough for her. She's not built to sit in a cage, even if it's lined with silk."

Enzo's jaw tightened. "Our job isn't to make her happy. It's to keep her safe. Don Romano's orders were clear. Eyes on her at all times."

"Orders, yes," Riccardo agreed. "But tell me—do you think she'll stay under those orders forever if she feels like a prisoner? Or will she start finding ways around us?" His smile dimmed. "You know her blood, Enzo. She's a Romano. They don't obey—they resist."

The silence between them stretched. Enzo's loyalty was unwavering, but even he wasn't blind. Isabella's mother's death had scarred the Don, yes, but it had also shaped Isabella into someone restless, hungry for something outside the Romano empire.

Riccardo softened his tone. "Maybe we give her a little space. Enough to breathe, at least. Lose the black suits, blend in. Shadow her without smothering her."

Enzo gave him a long look. "And if something happens?"

"Then we're still here. Always here." Riccardo shrugged. "But she might stop looking at us like we're prison bars."

The thought settled heavier than either admitted. Enzo finally sighed, tugging at his cuffs. "Fine. We adjust. But if this goes wrong, Riccardo, it's your idea."

"Fair enough," Riccardo said with a grin. "Now let's find you something less terrifying to wear."

The next morning, Isabella noticed the difference immediately.

Instead of Enzo's dark Armani suit and Riccardo's tailored charcoal, she found them both in the living room dressed like ordinary professionals. Enzo wore a crisp button-up and slacks, the sleeves rolled neatly to his forearms. Riccardo lounged in a leather jacket over a plain white tee, his gold chain tucked just out of sight. They looked...human.

She blinked at them from the staircase, her textbook clutched to her chest. "What's this?"

Riccardo gave a little bow. "Do you approve, principessa?"

Her lips twitched despite herself. "You look less like my father's soldiers and more like...what's the word?" She tilted her head, searching. "Accountants?"

Riccardo groaned dramatically. "You wound me."

But Isabella laughed—an unguarded, soft laugh that filled the space like sunlight. Even Enzo's stern face softened, if only for a second.

For the first time, walking through the campus gates didn't feel like dragging a spotlight behind her. The change was subtle, but Isabella noticed the way students' eyes didn't linger as long. Without the black suits shadowing her every step, she could slip into lectures almost unnoticed. She still had Riccardo somewhere nearby, still had Enzo watching from the edge of every crowd, but she could pretend—just a little—that she was ordinary.

That afternoon, she sat outside on the campus lawn with her literature book open across her lap. A group of girls from her class approached hesitantly, asking if she wanted to join their study group. Isabella's instinct was to refuse, but the warmth in their smiles made her pause. She agreed, just once.

Later, she wandered through the campus bookstore, fingers brushing over spines, inhaling the scent of paper and ink. She bought a poetry collection with her mother's name still echoing in her chest. For the first time since leaving Italy, she carried a bag that wasn't lined with wealth or shadowed by protection. Just a student's bag, filled with books.

It felt small, but to Isabella, it was freedom.

The sky was fading into a watercolor of orange and violet when Isabella found herself on the street corner near the little bakery she'd noticed weeks before. She hesitated. Enzo's voice in her head reminded her she shouldn't wander off. But Riccardo, across the street pretending to scroll his phone, gave her a quick wink as if to say, *go on, no one's watching*.

Her steps carried her inside.

The bell above the door chimed, releasing a wave of warmth and the sweet, comforting scent of fresh bread. Wooden counters gleamed under soft light, baskets overflowing with pastries, and somewhere in the back, laughter floated through—a child’s giggle, followed by a woman’s voice.

It was nothing like the sterile perfection of the Romano penthouse. This was...alive.

And then she saw him.

Ethan looked up, and instead of surprise, a slow grin spread across his face.

“I knew you’d be back.”

She blinked. “Back?”

He leaned against the counter, flour smudged near his jaw, hazel eyes glinting. “Yeah. Last time you came in, I told you the roll was four dollars and you looked at me like I was trying to rob you.” His grin widened. “Then I let you off easy. On the house. First-timers get special treatment.”

Her cheeks warmed. She remembered too well—her disbelief at something being so *cheap*, compared to the life she came from. She’d thought it was a one-off moment, already forgotten. But he hadn’t forgotten.

“You...remember that?” she asked cautiously.

“Of course.” His gaze lingered, steady, unwavering. “Some people are hard to forget.”

Her breath caught, and she glanced away, pretending to study the pastries. “Then maybe I’ll pay properly this time.”

Ethan’s grin tilted. “Only if you promise to keep coming back.”

He blinked, surprised, then smiled—an easy, unforced smile that made Isabella’s pulse stutter. “Well,” he said lightly, wiping his hands on his apron, “And you are...?”

“Ethan,” he offered. “And you?”

She hesitated only a second before remembering the name she always used here. “Isabella Moretti.”

The name felt strange in her mouth, but it was safer this way.

“Moretti.” He tested the syllables with his American tongue, the faintest grin tugging at his lips. “Italian?”

“Yes.” Her accent wrapped around the word.

“Thought so. The way you say it.” He leaned casually against the counter, not a trace of awe or curiosity in his tone, just...interest. “So, Isabella Moretti. What’ll it be? Sweet or savory?”

She glanced at the baskets of pastries, overwhelmed by choice, and finally pointed. “That one. What is it?”

He chuckled. “That’s a croissant. You’ve never had one?”

She stiffened. “We had them in Rome.”

“Right,” he said, unbothered. “But I promise ours will ruin all the others for you.”

Something about his confidence made her bite back a smile. He placed the warm pastry in a bag and handed it over. Their fingers brushed, and Isabella quickly withdrew, heat rising in her cheeks.

Outside her door, Riccardo leaned against the wall, arms crossed. Enzo stood beside him, expression unreadable. When Riccardo caught the faintest curve of Isabella’s lips through the open doorway, he nudged Enzo with a smug grin.

“See?” he whispered. “Breathing room.”

Enzo didn’t reply. But for the first time in weeks, Isabella slept with something close to peace.

The walk back to the penthouse felt longer than usual, though it was only a short drive away. Isabella sat in the backseat in silence, the small paper bag of pastries crinkled gently in her hands. Riccardo was humming along to something on the radio, one hand loose on the steering wheel, while Enzo scrolled through his phone with all the stiffness of a man on constant duty.

Neither of them said anything about the bakery, but Isabella could feel it in the air—the way Enzo’s eyes had lingered a beat too long on Ethan when he appeared at the door, the way Riccardo had pretended not to notice. She knew they’d report to her father if anything crossed a line. She just wasn’t sure what counted as crossing a line anymore.

Back in her room, she set the bag on her nightstand and unwrapped the croissant Ethan had tucked inside with practiced care. She didn’t eat it right away. Instead, she just looked at it—the golden layers flaking against the paper, the faint warmth still lingering as though carrying part of the bakery with it.

She didn't know why her chest felt strange, like she was holding onto something more important than a pastry. But she couldn't shake the sound of his voice: *I knew you'd be back.*

The next morning, campus was brighter. Or maybe she was.

Isabella found herself slipping more easily into her lectures now that the guards blended into the background. Students actually sat next to her, not shying away like before. A boy in her literature class asked her about her opinion on the assigned reading, and though she only gave a simple answer, it was the first time she'd been treated as just another student.

She carried her books across the lawn when she heard a voice behind her.

“Careful with those—if you trip, you’re going to lose an entire semester of notes.”

She turned to find Ethan walking beside her, hair still damp from practice, a backpack slung carelessly over his shoulder. His grin was lazy, but his eyes were sharp, as if he was paying more attention than he let on.

“I wasn’t going to trip,” she said primly.

“Everyone says that before they trip,” he countered, adjusting his pace to match hers. “Besides, I’d hate to see you have to start over.”

Isabella raised a brow. “Do you always follow strangers across campus?”

“You’re not a stranger,” Ethan said simply.

The words landed heavier than she expected. She hugged her books tighter, unsure how to respond. Fortunately, a group of students passed by, drawing Ethan’s attention for a moment, giving her time to collect herself.

When they reached the library steps, she paused. “This is where I’m going.”

“Good luck,” he said, backing away with an easy wave. “Don’t trip on the stairs.”

Her lips twitched despite herself. She disappeared inside, but the echo of his smile stayed with her longer than it should have.

That evening, Enzo cornered her in the kitchen.

“You need to be careful,” he said, voice low but firm.

She frowned, pouring herself water. “Careful with what?”

“That boy,” Enzo said, his tone clipped. “The one from the bakery. He’s around you too much.”

Isabella stiffened. “He’s just...there. I can’t control who’s on campus.”

“You can control whether you encourage him,” Enzo replied. His dark eyes softened slightly, almost reluctantly. “You know what your father would say.”

Her throat tightened. Don Romano would not approve. He wanted her safe, untouched, protected from anyone who could weaken the walls he’d built around her. But Ethan hadn’t felt like danger. If anything, he felt like the opposite—something grounding, something ordinary in a life that had never been ordinary.

Still, she said nothing. Just nodded, as if agreeing, and left Enzo to his suspicions.

Later that night, Isabella sat by her window with the city sprawled beneath her. The penthouse glimmered with wealth, but it was the silence she noticed most. No laughter. No bakery smells. No warmth.

She unwrapped the second pastry from the bag Ethan had given her—she hadn’t even realized she’d been saving it. She broke off a piece and tasted it, closing her eyes. Sweet, flaky, imperfect in the way only something real could be.

For a moment, she imagined herself in another life. No Don Romano. No guards. No secrets. Just Isabella, walking into a bakery because she liked the smell, teasing the boy behind the counter, paying four dollars for a roll and meaning it.

Her phone buzzed. A message from her father: *How was your day, figlia mia?*

Her chest squeezed. She typed back quickly: *Good. I studied.*

It wasn’t a lie. But it wasn’t the truth either.

When she finally lay down, her thoughts drifted—unwanted, but unstoppable—to Ethan’s grin, the steady way he’d said, *You’re not a stranger.*

She wasn’t falling. Not yet.

But the cracks in her cage were spreading, and she could feel the first rays of something dangerous bleeding through.

Chapter 5 – The Edges of Ordinary

The Romano penthouse was unusually still that evening. Isabella sat curled into the velvet armchair, textbook open on her lap but eyes unfocused, listening absently to the hum of traffic twenty floors below. Riccardo stood by the glass wall, surveying the skyline with his hands behind his back, while Enzo adjusted his tie in the reflection of the window, his sharp jawline rigid with the discipline of a soldier.

For once, they weren't watching her like hawks. Not hovering. Not reminding her to eat, or to get some sleep, or to check her phone every half hour. And she noticed.

Since their arrival in America, the suits had been shed. Her father had ordered it — “She must feel less like a prisoner, more like a student” — and though Riccardo and Enzo still looked every inch the professionals they were, the severe lines of their black Italian tailoring had softened into dark slacks and crisp shirts. They blended in better, less intimidating.

But Isabella could still feel the invisible chains.

Don Matteo's Study (Italy)

Thousands of miles away, in a villa that had once belonged to a noble family, Don Matteo Romano sat behind a mahogany desk. His fingers, thick with gold rings, tapped against the polished surface as he listened to his men.

Enzo's voice carried steady over the encrypted line. “She has adjusted better than expected, Don Matteo. The campus is...uncomplicated. No threats so far. We've made our presence discreet, and she seems more at ease.”

Riccardo added, “She's begun socializing. Laughing. A few classmates have engaged her, and she's not withdrawn.”

Don Matteo exhaled slowly, turning his head toward the portrait on the wall — a woman with dark hair and a smile that softened the sharpest corners of his memory. His late wife. Isabella's mother.

“My daughter deserves happiness,” he murmured, almost to himself. Then louder: “Do not confuse comfort with safety. Her blood is Romano blood. There are men in this world who would burn kingdoms just to touch it. Stay close. Stay vigilant. But if she laughs—” his voice faltered for half a heartbeat, rare for a man like him— “then let her laugh. It has been too long.”

“Yes, Don Matteo,” they answered in unison.

The call ended, but Don Matteo remained in his chair, fingers grazing the frame of his wife's portrait. He had promised her once, over her grave, that he would protect their daughter with everything he had. And he would. Even if it meant caging her behind shadows.

Campus – Shifts in the Air

Isabella hadn't realized how much she'd missed laughter until it came bubbling out of her, unbidden, in the middle of the library.

She was seated with three classmates, scattered books and laptops filling the table. Their literature professor had paired them for a group project on Shakespearean sonnets, and at first she'd been reluctant. She didn't do groups. She didn't do...people.

But somehow, the boy across from her cracked a joke about the sonnet being Shakespeare's "failed Tinder bio," and before she could stop it, she had laughed. Not the polite, controlled chuckle she used at charity dinners in Rome. A real laugh. The kind that felt like it shook something loose inside her chest.

"You've got the prettiest accent," one of the girls said with a grin.

Heat rushed to Isabella's cheeks. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I am...still learning English," she murmured.

"Well, don't lose the accent," the girl said. "It makes everything sound poetic."

Isabella smiled faintly, hiding in her book again, but the warmth lingered.

She was blending. Slowly. Carefully. Like an ice sculpture thawing, drop by drop.

The Invitation

"Hey, Isabella."

She looked up after class, startled to find one of the girls from her group jogging to catch up with her. "You doing anything later?"

Isabella blinked. "Later?"

"Yeah. The swim team's got an open practice. You should come watch. Our captain is insane in the water—like, Olympic material." The girl grinned. "It's fun. Loud. Normal college stuff."

Normal. The word thudded against Isabella's ribs like a foreign language.

She hesitated. Enzo and Riccardo would never—

But when she glanced back, both men were standing a short distance away, pretending to scroll through their phones but obviously watching.

The girl followed her gaze. “Those your brothers?”

Isabella stiffened. “No. Just...friends of the family.”

The girl shrugged, not pressing. “Well, bring your family friends if you have to. Come on. It’ll be fun.”

Isabella found herself nodding before she could overthink it.

Poolside

The indoor pool was alive with noise and motion. The smell of chlorine clung to the air, mixing with the faint tang of sweat and laughter. Students filled the bleachers, cheering as swimmers cut through the water with sharp, clean strokes.

It was chaos. Pure, unapologetic chaos. And Isabella, in her tailored white blouse and pressed trousers, felt like a porcelain doll placed in the middle of a carnival.

Riccardo and Enzo flanked her like shadows, their expressions carved from stone. But for once, she didn’t care if she looked out of place. Her eyes were already searching the pool.

And then she saw him.

Ethan Bennett.

He was nothing like she’d seen behind the bakery counter. Here, he wasn’t a boy rolling dough with flour on his arms. Here, he was a force. His body sliced through the water with raw power, every muscle flexing in perfect control. When he surfaced, hair slicked back and water dripping down broad shoulders, the sound of the crowd dimmed in her ears.

Her throat tightened. She hadn’t expected this. Hadn’t expected him to look like—

He climbed out of the pool, water sheeting down his torso, droplets clinging to the lines of muscle carved by years of discipline. Teammates slapped him on the back, laughing, shouting something she couldn’t hear. But Isabella only saw the ease in his smile, the way he carried himself like he belonged to this world. Like he owned it.

And then his gaze caught hers.

For a split second, he stilled. Then his lips curved into that same infuriating grin she remembered.

The grin of someone who'd already caught her slipping.

The Conversation

After practice, as students filed out, Isabella stayed frozen in her seat, pulse hammering. Riccardo cleared his throat, but before he could suggest leaving, Ethan was walking toward her, towel slung over his shoulders, hair damp and wild.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” he said easily, eyes glinting. “Don’t tell me you came all this way just for a swim lesson.”

Isabella straightened, lifting her chin. “I was invited.”

“Invited,” he repeated, amusement tugging at his mouth. “Right. And you just happened to accept.”

Her lips parted, indignant, but words tangled on her tongue.

Ethan leaned a little closer, lowering his voice. “You keep showing up where I am. Should I take the hint?”

Her cheeks flushed hot. “Don’t flatter yourself,” she muttered, clutching her bag tighter.

He grinned wider, as though her denial was the very confirmation he wanted. “If you say so, Moretti.”

She froze at the way her name rolled off his tongue, too casual, too certain. He’d noticed her more than she realized.

Before she could reply, Riccardo stepped forward, posture stiff, protective. Ethan’s grin didn’t falter, but he raised his hands slightly, palms out, before backing off with a wink. “See you around.”

Isabella swallowed hard as he walked away, towel draped carelessly across his shoulders, teammates calling his name. She told herself the heat in her chest was irritation. Only irritation.

Isabella’s Reflection

The ride back to the penthouse was silent. Enzo drove, Riccardo sat beside him, and Isabella stared out the window at the blur of city lights.

She told herself she wouldn't go back. That she didn't care about him, that the way he looked in the water had meant nothing. But her fingers kept replaying the way he'd leaned close, the teasing in his tone, the shameless confidence in his grin.

No. She wouldn't fall. She couldn't.

But her heart beat traitorously fast anyway.

Ethan's World

Back at the locker room, Ethan slumped onto the bench, towel rubbing through his hair.

"Bennett," one of his teammates said, smirking. "You've been distracted lately. What's her name?"

Ethan laughed, shaking his head. "No one."

But when the others filed out, leaving him alone with the hum of the pool filters and the lingering scent of chlorine, he let himself admit the truth.

Her name wasn't no one. It was Isabella Moretti. And for reasons he couldn't explain, she had lodged herself in his head like a song he couldn't stop humming.

Even in the water, even when his lungs burned and his muscles screamed, she was there. Dark hair, sharp eyes, that accent that turned every word into poetry.

He leaned back against the cool tiles, closing his eyes.

He was falling.

And he didn't even want to stop.

Chapter 6 – Cracks in the Walls

The autumn air in Boston carried a faint bite now, that early October chill that whispered winter was coming. The leaves had begun their slow transformation, warm oranges and deep crimsons scattered across the sidewalks where Isabella Romano—Isabella Moretti to the world—walked alone.

Her boots tapped softly against the pavement as she hugged her coat tighter. Even with Enzo and Riccardo following at a respectable distance, pretending to blend in, she felt strangely bare. Not because of the cold. But because of him.

Ethan Bennett.

His name clung to her thoughts like stubborn perfume. The poolside meeting replayed again and again in her mind, the sight of him emerging from the water, hair slicked back, skin glowing under the harsh indoor lights. His smile when he teased her. The warmth in his voice when he'd spoken her name like he already knew her heart.

Isabella hated it. And loved it.

Her father had built walls around her life. High walls, guarded by men with guns, iron gates disguised as luxury penthouses and private schools. Walls to keep her safe, to keep her untouchable. And yet, one boy with a swimmer's shoulders and a baker's smile was starting to make the walls tremble.

She sighed as she stepped into the lecture hall, forcing herself into the daily rhythm of college life. But fate, as if mocking her efforts, refused to let her run.

Because Ethan was already there.

The Unexpected Moment

He was leaning casually against the wall, waiting outside the classroom door like he had all the time in the world. His damp hair meant he'd just come from practice, his duffel slung carelessly over one shoulder, water bottle in hand. Students passed him with glances, some girls whispering, some lingering with shy smiles.

But his eyes didn't waver. They locked on her instantly.

“Ciao, Moretti,” Ethan said, his grin slow and mischievous.

Her heart stuttered. He'd started using Italian whenever he spoke to her, teasing her with bits and pieces he'd picked up, and it always made her want to smile. She tried not to, tried to summon that cool distance she relied on.

"You shouldn't lurk around corners. People will think you're strange," she replied, shifting her bag higher on her shoulder.

"Strange?" Ethan echoed. He pushed off the wall, moving closer, lowering his voice just enough to make it intimate. "I was waiting for you. That's not strange. That's intentional."

Her throat tightened. "Why?"

"Because..." He tilted his head, studying her face, and then smirked. "You keep running away before I can finish what I want to say."

Isabella froze, pulse quickening. He couldn't know. He couldn't possibly guess what weight she carried. Still, her walls shot up. "Maybe I just don't like talking."

He chuckled, the sound low and warm. "You talk just fine. You're just scared when it's with me."

Her breath caught. Damn him for being so perceptive.

"Ethan—" she began, but he cut her off.

"Walk with me," he said simply, his tone soft but firm, the kind of voice that made refusal impossible.

The Rooftop

She should have said no. She should have gone into the classroom, sat down, taken notes. But instead, minutes later, she found herself on the rooftop of the campus library, the city sprawling beneath them in a mosaic of glowing windows and twilight sky.

Ethan leaned on the railing, hair tousled by the wind, eyes glimmering as he watched her instead of the skyline. Isabella stood a step away, hugging herself, every instinct screaming danger while her heart begged her to stay.

"You're impossible, you know that?" she muttered.

"In what way?" he asked, grinning like he already knew.

"In every way," she snapped lightly, but her lips betrayed her with a ghost of a smile.

Ethan leaned closer, the playfulness in his expression melting into something deeper, something that made her chest ache. “Isabella...”

Her name sounded different on his lips this time. Not teasing. Not casual. Heavy. Honest.

He reached for her hand. Slowly, giving her every chance to pull away. She didn't.

“When I first saw you, I thought you were... different,” he said quietly. “Not because of how you look, though—God knows you're beautiful—but because of the way you carry yourself. Like the world is a place you're only visiting, and you're afraid to touch it too much.”

Her throat closed, tears threatening. He didn't know how close to the truth he was.

“I can't stop thinking about you,” Ethan continued, his thumb brushing over her knuckles, gentle, reverent. “I've dated before. I've liked people before. But this... this is different. I like you, Isabella. More than I've ever liked anyone.”

Her defenses cracked. The words washed over her, filling every hollow place inside her chest she'd kept locked since childhood. Her mother's death, her father's suffocating love, the gilded cage she lived in—it all felt so heavy. But Ethan's confession lifted some of it, like he'd peeled back her shadows with his light.

She wanted to kiss him. God, she wanted it so badly her lips trembled.

But then she heard her father's voice in her head. Don't risk her. Don't let her heart be touched. Don't let anyone close enough to hurt her.

Fear surged. Isabella jerked her hand back, tears stinging her eyes. “Mi dispiace,” she whispered, the Italian slipping out unguarded, raw. *I'm sorry*.

And before Ethan could move, before he could ask, she turned and fled, her boots pounding against the rooftop tiles, the wind stealing the sound of her sob.

The Fallout

Back in her penthouse, Isabella collapsed on her bed, shaking. Enzo's voice echoed faintly from the kitchen, asking if she wanted dinner, but she ignored him. Riccardo knocked once on her door, then left her alone.

She buried her face in her pillow, heart aching. She had wanted to stay. She had wanted to believe she could be normal, just a girl falling for a boy. But she wasn't normal. She was Isabella Romano, daughter of Don Matteo Romano, hidden in America like contraband.

If Ethan knew, he'd run. Or worse, he'd be dragged into her father's world. And she couldn't—wouldn't—let that happen.

Ethan

Meanwhile, Ethan sat in the empty pool long after practice ended, the sound of dripping water echoing in the silence. His teammates had left hours ago, but he couldn't move.

He replayed her face, the way her hand had trembled in his, the way her eyes had looked at him like she wanted everything and nothing all at once.

He knew she was running from something. He didn't know what, but he wasn't about to let her go.

“Isabella Moretti,” he muttered, leaning his head back against the cool tile. “What are you hiding?”

The Whispers

Across the Atlantic, in a dimly lit villa in Naples, a man lit a cigar and listened as one of his men spoke.

“We've traced a rumor,” the subordinate said cautiously. “They say Don Romano's daughter has been spotted in America. At a university.”

The man's eyes narrowed, smoke curling from his lips. “Romano's precious girl?” He smirked. “Far from her father's shadow. Vulnerable.”

A dangerous pause stretched, then he murmured, “Do we make a move?”

The rival boss's smile widened. “We watch first. Then we strike.”

And across the ocean, Isabella's world teetered, unaware that danger had already begun to circle.

Chapter 7 – Shadows in the Crowd

The sun had barely risen, spilling pale gold over the Boston skyline, when Isabella Romano woke with an ache in her chest. She didn't want to open her eyes, didn't want to face another day where her thoughts betrayed her at every turn.

Ethan's voice lingered still, the echo of his confession wrapping around her like chains. *I like you, Isabella. More than I've ever liked anyone.*

It had been days since that rooftop moment, and yet every detail haunted her—the warmth of his hand, the sincerity in his eyes, the way her own heart had stumbled forward only to slam into the walls she'd spent her life building.

She pressed her palms against her face, whispering into the quiet of her penthouse room. “Stop it. You have to stop.”

But even as she said the words, she knew they were a lie.

Avoidance

She saw him everywhere.

Crossing the quad with his swim team, shoulders broad beneath his varsity jacket. At the bakery counter when she stopped by to pick up coffee, flashing that easy smile at a customer. In the library stacks, his head bent over a textbook, hair falling into his eyes.

And every time, Isabella ducked her head, turned a corner, or slipped into another aisle.

It was cowardly, she knew. But what else could she do? She couldn't let him in. If Ethan stepped into her life, he wouldn't just be stepping into her heart—he'd be stepping into her father's world. And that world chewed people alive.

Riccardo and Enzo noticed her detours, of course. They always noticed.

“Are we avoiding someone, Principessa?” Riccardo asked one morning as he followed a pace behind her. His tone was teasing, but his sharp eyes didn't miss the flicker of guilt on her face.

“No,” she said too quickly.

Enzo raised a brow but didn't press. They had learned long ago that Isabella pushed back hardest when cornered.

Still, her protectors exchanged a glance.

Ethan

For Ethan Bennett, the days blurred into a haze of confusion and frustration.

One moment, Isabella had been there with him on the rooftop, her hand in his, her eyes wide with something he'd swear was longing. The next, she'd ripped away, whispered something in Italian he barely understood, and fled.

And since then? Nothing.

She slipped away from him at every chance, leaving him standing alone in hallways, or catching just the back of her coat disappearing through a door.

His teammates noticed his mood.

“Yo, Bennett, you’ve been staring into space for ten minutes,” one of the guys teased after practice. “Don’t tell me the great swim captain’s lovesick.”

Ethan tossed a towel at him, but didn’t deny it. Not really. Because the truth was, he was.

And the more she pulled away, the more determined he became.

The Watcher

It happened on a Wednesday. The kind of ordinary, gray-skied day where nothing seemed unusual—until Riccardo noticed the man.

Isabella was leaving her afternoon literature lecture, chatting politely with a classmate who asked her about an assignment. Enzo walked a few paces behind her, scanning as he always did. Riccardo lingered further back, eyes sweeping the crowd.

That was when he saw him.

At first glance, the man blended in—jeans, a jacket, a backpack slung carelessly over one shoulder. He leaned against a lamppost across the quad, pretending to scroll his phone. But Riccardo’s instincts screamed. The man wasn’t scrolling. He was watching.

Not the crowd. Not the students.

Her.

Every time Isabella shifted, the man’s gaze followed. Precise. Calculated.

Riccardo slowed his pace, eyes narrowing.

When Isabella entered the cafeteria, the man moved too. When she exited, so did he. He kept his distance, but never enough to lose sight of her.

By the third time Riccardo caught him tailing, his blood went cold.

“Enzo,” Riccardo muttered into the comm clipped beneath his collar. “We have a shadow.”

Enzo stiffened, his hand brushing subtly against the inside of his jacket where his weapon rested.

“Location?”

“North quad. Male. Dark jacket. Backpack. He’s been following her since lecture.”

Enzo glanced quickly at Isabella, who remained oblivious, smiling faintly at something her classmate said. Then his gaze flicked across the quad, spotting the figure Riccardo meant.

His jaw clenched.

“Stay with the Principessa. I’ll tail,” Enzo ordered quietly.

Riccardo nodded once.

They had to be certain before alerting Don Matteo. But every instinct told them this was no coincidence.

Sending Word

That evening, after delivering Isabella safely home to the penthouse, Riccardo excused himself under the guise of checking the building’s perimeter. Instead, he pulled out a secure phone.

The number rang only once before connecting.

“Report,” came Don Matteo’s voice, sharp and commanding even across an ocean.

Riccardo didn’t hesitate. “We may have a problem, Signore. Isabella is being watched.”

Silence crackled on the line, dangerous and heavy. Then Don Matteo’s voice dropped. “By whom?”

“We don’t know yet. A man shadowed her today. Twice near her lecture hall. Again near the cafeteria. He’s not a student. He moves like a professional.”

Enzo's voice joined quietly in the background. "We tailed, but lost him in the crowd. He was skilled."

There was a long pause. Then the sound of Matteo's exhale. "Find him. Confirm. And, Riccardo..."

"Si, Don."

"No mistakes. If they've found her—if my enemies know where she is—there will be no forgiveness."

The line went dead.

Riccardo closed his eyes briefly, pocketing the phone. They would not fail him.

Isabella's Fracture

Isabella didn't know the full truth. She only knew Riccardo and Enzo had become suddenly unbearable—hovering closer, scanning every crowd like wolves on the hunt.

At first she thought she'd done something to upset them. But then she noticed their hands twitching toward their jackets too often. The way Enzo's jaw set when strangers got too near.

She hated it.

Hated the invisible cage reassembling itself around her, just when she'd started to feel like a normal student.

And yet, worse than that... was Ethan.

Because every time she saw him now, her chest ached with guilt. She had avoided him so carefully these past days, but avoidance didn't stop the truth. It only magnified it.

She wanted him. She wanted his laughter, his warmth, his presence. But every time she pictured his smile, she also pictured the cold, brutal world her father ruled. And in that world, Ethan could never survive.

Crossing Paths

Of course fate wouldn't let her hide forever.

It was late evening when she slipped into the library to return a book. She told herself it would be quick—drop the book off, walk out, nothing more.

But as she turned a corner, she collided with a solid chest. Her book tumbled from her arms.

Strong hands caught it before it hit the floor.

“Careful,” a familiar voice murmured.

Her heart lurched.

Ethan stood there, holding her book out to her. His eyes—blue-green, intense—met hers without flinching.

“Hi,” he said softly.

She swallowed hard. “Hi.”

The silence stretched, thick with everything unsaid.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” Ethan said finally, his tone gentle but firm.

Isabella’s fingers trembled as she took the book back. “No, I haven’t.”

“Yes, you have,” he replied, a faint smile tugging at his lips though his eyes were serious. “And I want to know why.”

Her throat tightened. She should lie. She should push him away again.

But instead she whispered, “I can’t.”

Ethan’s brow furrowed. “Can’t what?”

“Be close to you.”

His hand brushed hers briefly as he let the book go, the touch burning her skin. “Why not?”

Because I’m the daughter of Italy’s most feared mafia boss, she thought. Because my life isn’t safe, and if you get too close, neither is yours.

But she only shook her head, stepping back. “I’m sorry.”

Before he could stop her, she slipped past him, her chest aching as she rushed for the door.

Ethan stood frozen in the library aisle, watching her go. His fists clenched helplessly.

The Rival

Across the city, in a dimly lit apartment rented under a false name, the man Riccardo had noticed earlier that week sat at a table, sliding a photograph across to another figure cloaked in shadows.

The photo showed Isabella stepping onto campus, her face clear, her guards close but not close enough.

The second man studied the image, a slow smile curling.

“So it’s true,” he murmured. “The princess of Rome walks freely in America.”

The first man inclined his head. “Orders?”

“Patience,” came the reply. “Romano thinks he can hide her here. He thinks distance will protect her. But all he’s done is make her easier to reach.”

The shadow leaned back, lighting a cigar. Smoke filled the room, curling like promises of violence.

“When the time is right,” he said, his voice smooth as poison, “we’ll take her. And then Romano will learn what it means to bleed.”

Chapter Eight – Fire in the Crowd

The university festival was supposed to be harmless fun. Colorful banners stretched across the quad, lights hung from poles, and music blasted from the stage where a band played covers of old pop songs. Students laughed, couples clung to each other, and food vendors handed out everything from greasy pizza to fried dough.

To Isabella Romano—no, *Moretti* here—it was chaos. The sheer crush of bodies, the wild chatter, the jostling elbows, and the ever-present stench of beer made her skin crawl. Her heels clicked on the cobblestones as she moved through the crowd, her eyes darting, her heart in her throat.

Enzo walked a few steps behind her, dressed down in slacks and a navy button-up, his Italian suit abandoned as per Don Matteo’s request. Riccardo was more casual still, in a black polo and dark jeans, though the way his hand hovered near his jacket betrayed that the firearm never left his side.

“You don’t have to stay long,” Riccardo murmured, leaning close so only she could hear. “Just enough to show your classmates you tried. Then we leave.”

Isabella nodded but barely listened. Her pulse drummed. She could feel the weight of too many eyes on her—watchful, searching, dangerous.

It had been this way ever since she arrived in Boston. At first, she thought it was paranoia. But after the shadowy figure Riccardo spotted tailing her on campus days ago, she knew better. Someone was watching.

Tonight was worse.

She could feel it.

Slipping Away

When a loud cheer erupted from the crowd as the band struck up another song, Isabella used the distraction. She pushed forward, away from Enzo and Riccardo, her breath catching as she broke into the open street.

“Isabella!” Enzo called sharply, his voice cutting through the music. She ignored it, her legs moving faster.

She couldn’t breathe in there. Couldn’t *think*.

A yellow taxi was idling by the curb. Isabella raised a hand and the driver, a middle-aged man with kind eyes, waved her in. She climbed inside, her pulse racing.

“Where to?” he asked.

Isabella hesitated, then whispered, “Somewhere high... with a view of the city.”

The driver didn’t question it. He pulled into traffic, leaving the music, the banners, and her bodyguards shouting after her far behind.

The Skyline

The cab dropped her at a quiet overlook outside the bustle of downtown. The city stretched before her, glittering and alive, its skyline ablaze with golden windows. Isabella stepped out into the crisp night air, pulling her coat tighter.

Here, it was quiet. Just the hum of the city below, the occasional car passing in the distance. She finally let out the breath she’d been holding.

And then—

“Couldn’t let you run off alone.”

Her heart leapt into her throat. She turned, startled, only to see Ethan Bennett walking up the path, hands shoved in his jacket pockets. His hair was wind-tousled, his gray hoodie hanging loosely over broad swimmer’s shoulders.

“Ethan...” she whispered.

He offered a small, sheepish smile. “I saw you leave the festival. You looked... I don’t know... like you needed to get away. So I followed.”

Her lips parted, a hundred protests ready. She shouldn’t let him close. She couldn’t let him close. But when he stopped a few feet away, the concern in his eyes made her chest ache.

“I’m fine,” she lied.

He tilted his head. “You don’t look fine.”

Fire in the Dark

Before she could respond, the roar of an engine split the quiet. Headlights flared. A black SUV skidded to a halt near the overlook, its windows rolling down.

Gunfire exploded into the night.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

Isabella screamed as the bullets sparked against the stone railing.

Ethan didn't hesitate. He lunged forward, grabbing her by the shoulders, pulling her down with him. His body shielded hers, strong arms wrapping around her as they crashed against the pavement.

Pain lanced across his shoulder—hot, searing. He hissed, teeth gritted, as a bullet tore through his hoodie, grazing flesh.

“Ethan!” Isabella’s voice broke as she clutched him.

“Stay down!” he barked, pressing her lower, ignoring the blood soaking his sleeve.

The gunfire continued—until another set of shots answered.

The Cavalry

Riccardo and Enzo arrived in a blur. Tires screeched as their armored car swung into position, doors flying open. Both men drew their weapons, moving with deadly precision.

Enzo fired first, his aim sharp and unflinching. Riccardo covered the left, pushing forward with rapid bursts. The attackers cursed, returning fire before speeding off into the night, tires screeching.

The quiet returned—only the echo of gunfire lingering in the air.

Ethan lay still, blood trickling from his shoulder, his chest heaving. His eyes were wide, shocked not only from the pain but from what he had seen.

Riccardo and Enzo weren't just bodyguards.

They were soldiers.

And Isabella—sweet, secretive Isabella—was clearly not who she claimed to be.

The Penthouse

Back at the penthouse, Ethan sat on the leather sofa, wincing as Riccardo cleaned his wound with professional efficiency. His shirt was off, the bandage stark against his tanned skin, every muscle tense as his mind replayed the scene over and over.

“What the hell was that?” Ethan demanded, his voice sharp despite the strain. “Why do you even have guns? Why the hell did that car’s glass not break when they shot it? What are you, Isabella?”

Isabella’s hands shook as she pressed them together, her chest aching. She wanted to tell him everything. She wanted to lie. Instead, tears blurred her vision.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Sorry?” Ethan’s voice cracked. “I just got shot protecting you, Isabella! You can’t just—”

“She can’t tell you,” Riccardo cut in coldly, tightening the bandage. His dark eyes flicked up at Ethan. “And you don’t want to know.”

The air thickened, suffocating. Isabella pressed her palms to her eyes, trembling.

The Call

Then the secure phone rang. A shrill, demanding sound that cut through the silence like a knife.

Enzo answered, his jaw set. He handed it to Isabella with a grave look.

Her blood went cold before she even pressed it to her ear.

“*Figlia mia.*”

Her father’s voice. Don Matteo Romano.

Deep, commanding, furious.

“I have seen the reports,” he said in Italian, his tone like steel. “The news runs wild with whispers—my daughter spotted in America, my enemies sniffing at your trail like wolves. Do you realize the danger you’ve brought upon yourself?”

On the TV screen, Enzo had already switched to an Italian news channel. Headlines blared across the screen, her blurred photo displayed above captions about *La figlia del Romano* and violence in Boston.

Isabella’s tears spilled over. She clutched the phone, whispering, “Papa...”

“No more, Isabella.” His voice softened only slightly, the weight of his love twisted with fury. “You are no longer safe. I want you back in Italy. Tonight.”

Closing

The line went dead.

Isabella stared at the phone, her body trembling, her face wet with tears.

Across the room, Ethan sat in silence, his expression a storm of pain, confusion, and disbelief. He had stepped into her world, and nothing would ever be the same.

She opened her mouth, her voice breaking. “Ethan...”

He just shook his head, eyes dark, his heart already shattering from the secrets he didn’t yet know.

The city outside glittered coldly, uncaring, as the walls closed in around them both.

Chapter Nine – The Truth Between Us

The penthouse was too quiet. Too large, too still. The echo of Don Matteo’s voice clung to the air like smoke, suffocating in its weight.

Isabella sat on the edge of the sofa, her hands twisting in her lap, her eyes still red from tears. Across from her, Ethan leaned against the counter, his chest heaving as though he’d swum a hundred laps without stopping. His shoulder was bandaged, the white cloth already spotted with crimson.

He stared at her, and the silence burned hotter than any words.

Finally, Ethan spoke. His voice was low, raw.
“Tell me the truth.”

Isabella’s throat constricted. “Ethan…”

“No more excuses. No more disappearing. No more ‘I can’t tell you.’” He took a step toward her, his jaw tight, his gray eyes stormy. “You’re not who you said you are. Those men—Riccardo, Enzo—they don’t move like bodyguards. They move like soldiers. I almost died tonight because of you, Isabella. Don’t I at least deserve to know who the hell you really are?”

Her lips trembled. She wanted to lie. To say he was wrong. But the sight of the bandage on his shoulder shattered her resolve.

Tears blurred her vision as she whispered, “That’s why I stayed away from you. Because you *do* deserve the truth… and the truth will destroy you.”

“Then let it,” Ethan snapped, his voice breaking. He stepped closer, the anger in his eyes fighting with something softer, something desperate. “You think I care about danger? I care about *you*. And I can’t—” His voice cracked. “I can’t keep watching you walk away without knowing why.”

Isabella squeezed her eyes shut. Her chest heaved as the words clawed their way free.
“My name is not Isabella Moretti. It never was.”

Ethan froze.

“I’m Isabella Romano,” she whispered, opening her eyes, staring at him with naked vulnerability. “Daughter of Don Matteo Romano… Italy’s most feared man. The man people call king, monster, savior, devil. He rules half the continent’s underworld and the rest bows to his name.”

The words hung between them, sharp and unforgiving.

Ethan's lips parted, but no sound came out.

Isabella pressed on, her tears spilling now. "My mother died when I was a child. It broke him. He buried himself in power, in blood, in empire—and he wrapped me in chains made of silk and gold. I wasn't allowed to breathe without guards. I wasn't allowed to *be*. And I—" her voice cracked—"I just wanted to feel normal. To laugh without someone watching, to walk through a street without shadows at my back. That's why I came here. That's why I lied. Isabella Moretti was the only way I could leave Italy behind."

She inhaled sharply, wiping her face. "But it wasn't a lie that I wanted to feel... this. To feel *you*."

Ethan's chest rose and fell. He looked like the ground had been ripped out from under him, like everything he thought he knew had shattered.

"You're telling me," he said slowly, voice rough, "that the girl I've been chasing, the girl who laughs at my dumb bakery jokes, the girl who blushes when I look at her... is the daughter of Italy's biggest mafia boss?"

Isabella's silence was her answer.

Ethan laughed—hollow, pained, disbelieving. He ran a hand through his hair, pacing once before stopping dead in front of her. "And you still think you can keep me away after this?"

"Ethan..." She stood, her eyes pleading. "This is exactly why I tried to stay away. Yes, I have feelings for you. *Yes*, I wanted you. But wanting me means stepping into a world you can't survive. And I won't be the reason you're destroyed."

He shook his head, his eyes burning into hers. "Then don't you dare tell me how much you feel and then tell me to walk away. Don't give me both."

Her voice broke, trembling with agony. "I'm not giving you both—I'm giving you goodbye."

At that, the door opened.

Enzo stood there, his face unreadable, his posture sharp. "It's time," he said simply. "The flight is ready."

Riccardo followed, his gaze flicking to Ethan, hard and cold. "We'll have someone drive you home, Bennett. You'll be safe. But listen to me—what you saw tonight, what you heard, it stays locked in your chest. For your own good. For hers." His tone was flat, his meaning lethal.

Ethan clenched his fists, every part of him screaming to fight, to tear her away from them, to stop her from leaving. But Isabella stepped forward first.

Her fingers brushed his cheek, trembling. "I'm sorry," she whispered in Italian. "*Perdonami*."

And then she was gone, swept between Riccardo and Enzo, her dark hair trailing behind her like the last thread of a dream.

The door clicked shut.

Back at Home

The Bennett household was dim when Ethan slipped inside, the bandage on his shoulder pulling uncomfortably beneath his hoodie. He tried to move quietly, but Ava's voice pierced the silence.

“What the hell happened to you?”

Ethan turned to see his younger sister leaning against the hallway wall, arms crossed, eyes sharp. Her gaze immediately locked on the red stain seeping through his sleeve.

“It's nothing,” Ethan muttered, brushing past her.

“Nothing?” Ava grabbed his arm, her face paling. “Ethan, you're *bleeding*. What—did someone shoot you?!”

He yanked free, slamming his bedroom door behind him. But Ava pushed it open anyway, storming in.

Ethan dragged a duffel bag from under his bed, tossing in shirts, jeans, anything his hands landed on.

Ava's voice rose, panicked. “You're packing? You're injured and you're packing? What is going on?”

Ethan froze, his back to her. His shoulders trembled.

“I met someone,” he said finally. His voice was low, raw. “She's... she's not like anyone else, Ava. She makes me feel like the world's not just training and swim meets and bakery shifts. She makes me feel alive. And tonight, they tried to take her away. They almost killed her. And I can't—” His breath hitched. “I can't just sit here while she's being dragged back into something she doesn't want.”

Ava blinked, stunned. “Dragged back where?”

Ethan shook his head. “Doesn't matter. Just... far away. Across the ocean.”

Her eyes widened. “Wait—you're serious. You're going after her? To Italy?”

He zipped the duffel shut. “I have enough in my swim fund. Money I saved for competitions, camps, traveling for meets. It’s supposed to be for my future.” He finally turned, his eyes blazing with determination. “But my future’s not medals if she’s not in it.”

Ava’s lips parted, speechless.

He slung the bag over his shoulder, wincing at the pain in his arm. “I don’t expect you to understand. Just... don’t try to stop me.”

Ava stepped forward, her voice breaking. “You’re insane, Ethan. You don’t even know what you’re walking into.”

He smiled faintly, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Maybe not. But I know who I’m walking toward.”

Closing Scene

Later, when the house had gone still, Ethan sat hunched over his laptop, the glow of the screen painting his tired face. His fingers hovered only once before he clicked “confirm purchase.”

A one-way ticket to Naples, Italy.

The confirmation email dinged. Ethan leaned back, clutching his shoulder, the pain sharp but grounding. His heart thundered, not with fear, but with resolve.

Whatever shadows waited in Italy, whatever truth Isabella’s world held—he was coming.

Not even the Romano name could keep him away.

Chapter Ten – The Beginning of the End

Isabella

The jet wheels screeched against the runway, jolting Isabella awake. She blinked out of the window, her chest tightening at the familiar skyline of Naples. The city stretched like a labyrinth of rooftops, churches, and ancient streets carved into the earth itself. She hadn't been back in months, but it still felt like the walls of a prison snapping shut around her.

The Romano estate rose on the edge of the hills — a fortress of stone walls and wrought-iron gates, guarded by men in black suits with rifles slung over their shoulders. The closer the car drove, the smaller she felt.

When the doors opened, Don Matteo Romano was already waiting. The infamous Don. Her father.

For an instant, his face softened, breaking through the iron mask of the man the world feared. He pulled Isabella into his arms, hugging her so tightly she could hardly breathe. She let herself sink into it, just for a heartbeat, before the air around them chilled again.

“Enough.” Matteo’s voice cut sharp as he released her. His dark eyes swept the men lined at the gates. “Double the patrols. No one comes in or out without my word. You all failed once — you will not fail again. My daughter will not be touched.”

“Yes, Don Romano,” the guards answered in unison, their heads bowed.

More black cars arrived, heavy with grim-looking soldiers. Crates were hauled out of the trunks, the metallic clink of weapons unmistakable. Trucks followed, unloading more — rifles, ammunition, crates stamped with unmarked seals.

One capo stepped forward, whispering in Matteo’s ear. His jaw tightened, his nostrils flaring. Then the words slipped out, low but furious:

“It’s him. The same bastard who took your mother from us.”

Isabella’s breath hitched. A name she had never dared speak aloud. The man who had left her father a widower and her a half-orphan.

Her father’s voice hardened into steel. “If war is what he wants, he will choke on it.”

From her window later that night, Isabella stared down at the courtyard where men in black prepared for bloodshed. She pressed her forehead against the cold glass, her chest aching. She had escaped Boston only to land back at the heart of this — the cycle of violence she had always wished to leave behind.

And somewhere across the ocean, Ethan was still in her heart, though he would never understand this world. She told herself he was safer far away. But she didn't know the boy she'd kissed had already followed her into the fire.

Ethan

Naples was chaos.

The air was warmer here, saturated with smoke from scooters that zipped through traffic and the thick smell of espresso pouring from corner cafés. Ethan stumbled out of the arrivals gate, clutching his small bag. His Italian vocabulary began and ended with *ciao* and *grazie*, so every word spoken around him blurred into noise.

Still, he kept walking, weaving through streets that felt older than time. Stone arches, fountains, laundry lines strung between windows. And everywhere, men in tailored suits. They weren't just businessmen — Ethan knew enough to recognize guards, enforcers, watchers.

It sent a chill down his spine. Isabella had said her father was powerful, feared. Now he saw the truth of it in every corner shadow.

But how did one ask where a mafia boss lived? Walk up to a man in a suit and say: *Hi, I'm looking for Don Romano, is his daughter home?* Insanity.

Hunger dragged him into a small bakery tucked into a narrow street. The warm scent of bread and sugar almost felt like home. He slid into a chair, his heart thudding with both exhaustion and doubt. What was he doing here? He was a swimmer, a college kid, not someone who could wade into a mafia city and come out alive.

“Caffè?” a voice asked.

Ethan looked up. And blinked.

An American accent.

The girl holding the notepad grinned when his eyes widened. “Relax. Yeah, I'm American. Exchange program. Figured you looked lost.”

He almost sagged with relief. “Do you speak English?”

She laughed. “Fluently. You're not the first tourist who's asked me that.”

Ethan exhaled hard, smiling for the first time since Boston. “I'm Ethan.”

“Caroline,” she replied, scribbling on her pad. “So, Ethan... what’s a guy like you doing wandering Naples looking like someone dropped you out of a plane?”

Ethan hesitated. He shouldn’t say it. It was stupid. Dangerous. But his desperation won.

“I need to find... the Romano family.”

Caroline froze. Her pencil stilled against the pad. The easy smile slid from her face. “You shouldn’t say that name out loud here.”

He leaned forward, lowering his voice. “Please. It’s important.”

She stared at him, long and hard, before sighing. “Look, everyone knows who they are. But you don’t just *ask* about Romano. Not if you want to keep breathing. Still...” She scribbled something on a napkin and slid it to him. “There’s a bar. Their men hang out there. Tailored suits, expensive watches, the kind of guys who look like they own the street. If you want answers, that’s your best bet. But...” Her eyes narrowed. “Lose the American boy vibe. Or they’ll eat you alive.”

Ethan nodded, his fingers tightening on the napkin. “Thank you.”

As she left to grab his order, he leaned back in the chair, pulse racing. For the first time since landing, he had a direction. A thread.

Back at the Romano estate, Isabella pressed her hand to her windowpane, watching trucks of weapons being unloaded under the floodlights, her father barking orders like a general preparing for war. She wanted to scream, to beg him to stop, but her voice would mean nothing in the storm to come.

Across the city, Ethan folded the napkin in his hand, tucking it into his jacket. The streets of Naples sprawled ahead of him like a battlefield he didn’t understand — but he would walk it anyway.

Two hearts, pulled by fate, running toward fire.

The beginning of the end.

The End of the Beginning — Part 2

Naples smelled of oil and lemons and history. It hit Ethan the moment he pushed through the door with a purpose.

He had not even booked a room. He'd landed, walked out, felt the heat and the pulse and decided—without plan, without permission—to keep moving. If Isabella had taught him anything, it was how to stop waiting for permission. She had said she wanted to be ordinary; she had tried. And when the world tried to strip her of that ordinary, he would walk into whatever that world was and stand with her.

Il Banchiere sat off a main square down a tight, slick street. A brass plaque hung crookedly by the door. Inside was dim and hazy with smoke, a hundred conversations overlapping like waves. The bar itself was long and varnished black; behind it stood a row of bottles like soldiers on a mantelpiece. The men clustered at the tables were the kind Caroline had described — suits that cost more than his apartment, the quiet watches, the hands that could make decisions and destroy lives.

Ethan's pulse clicked in his throat. He could have turned and run back the way he came. He could have gone to the nearest tourist office, asked for a map, retreated to the safe, announced world of hostels and guidebooks from which he would never again step into this underbelly. He didn't.

He pushed through the door and looked for a place to sit where he could watch without being obvious. The bar was only a step above a club for Bologna's old-money and new-violent; a single glance could tell him who belonged to which faction. He chose a table that allowed a view of the entrance and the far corner where a cluster of men—three in particular—sat like a small island. They were the sort of men who altered the temperature of a room. Ethan felt it immediately.

A waitress in a black dress and a tired smile approached. He tried the few Italian words he'd kept, but they stumbled out wrong; her face creased with amusement.

"English?" she asked in perfect, blunt American.

"Please. Yeah."

The waitress's smile slipped. "Here?" She looked at him sideways. "You are not one of them, eh .

"You want Romano? You want to walk to the lion's den?" a man said, blinking blearily at Ethan. He was older, face weathered like a well-used map; he wore a cachet of rings and smelled of cheap cologne.

Ethan turned. The man's mouth was wet with drink but his eyes were sharp as a butcher's blade.

"Maybe the kid is brave." He waved a hand, knocking ash into a tray. "Or maybe he's dumb." He laughed, a squawking sound that had more life than his words deserved. "Listen, boy, if you go look for Romano—" he hiccupped for emphasis "—you'll be dead before you look at the gate. They don't like strangers. They don't like Americans with big hearts." He tilted his head, studying Ethan—curiosity, amusement, and then something like pity crossing his face. "You should go home, boy. America needs you."

Ethan felt a heat rise to his ears. No one told him to turn back. The warning did not stop him. It didn't even slow him. It only hardened the center of him.

"Thanks," he said to the drunk man, nodding as though the man had offered directions rather than a death sentence.

The drunk's grin turned almost friendly in a way that made Ethan's skin crawl. "If you are stubborn—go to Via Sottile. But a word of advice. Lose the baseball cap. Lose the sneakers. Look the part. The wrong clothes will tell them you're not from here."

Ethan looked down at his own worn sneakers and hoodie and thought of how he'd once raced at dawn when the world felt simple — early mornings, bakery ovens, the smell of yeast and sugar. He felt suddenly fierce with the knowledge that he had left that world behind for this, for her.

He drank, listened, let the bar remind him in small ways of home—bread in the air, the clink of cups, the low human hum. But the corner men watched him with the same coolness one reserved for an exhibit at a museum. He would need to move carefully.

When a waiter rattled past, Ethan motioned for a coffee strong enough to glue him to the present. He sat and watched men talk in clipped Italian, and fought to catch words that skittered to him like minnows. Romano's name came up like a spell. It was the kind of name people used tenderly or with fear, never idly.

At some point, one of the suited men got up to leave. He passed by Ethan's table and gave him a glance that was both investigatory and dismissive. Ethan's palms dampened. He did not know exactly what he would say or do when he reached Via Sottile, but he had the address and the napkin and the stubbornness of someone who had just risked bleeding for something he could not yet name—except for the name Isabella.

When he stepped back out into the Naples night, the street was brighter, lamps halving the vapor of warm late-evening air. Via Sottile was close. He followed the directions carved into the napkin: a left past a shop that sold patterned scarves, a right by a fountain that tossed coins for children's wishes. Shops closed early, shutters down, but the bar that had been circled on the napkin glowed like a secret.

Il Banchiere had been a test of sorts. Via Sottile was a different matter — lower-light rooms, a different smell — whiskey and old smoke and the deep, dangerous perfume of men for whom

money was a weapon. Tailors milled outside a different bar in neat jackets, the kind of men who measured necks and were measured in return. Ethan moved with a new cautiousness. The napkin felt heavy as a promise in his pocket.

He had asked questions — quiet ones — and had been handed more warnings than than landmarks. But one drunken man and one brave waitress and one napkin were enough to set him on the road.

As he came down Via Sottile, a man stepped out of the shadows and lit a cigar in a way that seemed choreographed. A line of black cars idled a block away, and Ethan felt the hair prick along his arms. He should have turned back. He should have booked the first flight home. He should have been sensible. All the sensible parts of him sat on the other side of the Atlantic, indignant and practical, and they weren't moving.

He walked on.

The bar's door opened, and a man in a perfectly cut navy jacket stood in front of it for a minute as if considering whether to enter. He looked at Ethan, assessed him in half a second, then moved inside. Ethan's heart hammered. This was it. This was where people in suits came to be recognized by people in suits. This was also where he could be swallowed whole without a trace.

He stepped forward as if drawn by gravity, and then—the street opened up. At the far end, through a thin veil of fog and the glow of sodium lamps, a slice of something enormous and dark filled the skyline. It was impossible to see clearly from this distance, but even so, Ethan felt the air change. It was a different kind of silence: not the silence of people asleep, but the silence of attention held, of guard dogs poised to shift. The silhouette of what must be the Romano perimeter wall loomed beyond the last row of buildings, a brooding black line under the moon.

He had not come here to see walls. He had come for an address.

A man stepped out of the bar with a folder in hand and the careful gait of someone who spent his life avoiding trouble rather than causing it. He saw Ethan pause in the street and gave him a look—one part curiosity, two parts the ancient leisure of men who'd seen foreign boys lost before.

“You lost?” the man asked slowly, in accented English.

Ethan swallowed. “Are you from around here? I— I need to know how to get to the Romano estate.” He felt exposed as soon as the words left his mouth. Asking for the Romano estate was like asking for a volcano's address in a town built around its shadow. But the man did not recoil. He only smiled in the weary way of someone who had eaten better than most.

“You’re brave,” the man said. “Or maybe you’re stupid.” He tapped the folder under his arm. “Either way, if you go to Romano’s gates unannounced, they will shoot first and ask questions later.”

“Do you know where it is?” Ethan asked. His voice croaked.

The man’s grin split open like a knife. “Many know where it is, boy. Everyone knows where it is. But not everyone lives to tell. If you must go—”

“Then tell me anyway.” Ethan stepped forward, narrowing his eyes. “Tell me a place I can go, someone I can ask. Any hint. Don’t leave me to hunt in the dark.”

The man’s expression softened, then hardened. “There is a place,” he said. “Old man’s bar by the port. Drunk sells secrets for a euro. But listen.” He lowered his voice. “Before you even think of the gate—don’t. Not alone. Not in those clothes. They will spot you. Not just guards. Men who look like guards but are worse. You’ll be dead before you blink.”

Ethan’s jaw tightened. He felt something raw and stubborn rise up from his chest. Men like this seemed to live by a single rule: if a door closed on you, you were finished. But Isabella had been the light in his life. She had been something he could fight for. He could not simply retreat.

He pressed. “Isabella is there. She—”

The man’s eyes hardened at the name. “The Romano girl?” he said under his breath. “Romeo’s prince—no.” He shook his head as though the words were absurd. “Even if I want to help you, that name makes you famous and dead. But there is a drunk man by the port who loves to sell. Try him. He’ll say a lot for little.”

Ethan left with another warning, his heartbeat loud enough that he felt certain the man could hear it like a drum. He walked toward the port, past fishermen arguing about nets and women selling oranges, past shuttered stalls and the smell of frying dough. The port spread like a map: crates stacked like boxes of secrets, a lone lamp swinging. He found the old man in a plastic chair, a bottle at his side and a cardboard sign asking for coins.

Ethan sat on the crate across from him and waited.

The old man took one look and started chuckling, then he looked at Ethan’s arm, at the dried bandage the other man wore like a badge, and the chuckle turned into a snort.

“You’re an American, aren’t you?” he barked. Ethan nodded, which, in a way, was confession enough.

The old man squinted at him. “You got guts, boy. You come here asking questions about Romano like you’re angry at the world. Or you’re mad in other ways.” He took a long pull from the bottle and offered it, which Ethan declined. “You want the address? I can get you the route. But you must promise me something.”

“What?”

“Promise me you won’t make them come after me,” the old man said. “If Romano’s dogs trace their scent back to me, I’m finished.”

Ethan could hardly promise that. But he had to get closer. He forced a concession. “I won’t bring them back here. I’ll be careful.”

The old man squinted again, then spat. “You’re a stubborn one. Fine. There’s a path that sneaks past the olive groves—if you walk at dusk and don’t make a sound, you can reach the outer gate. But at that point, if you step a foot beyond the gravel, there are men who will shoot you on sight. They don’t like tourists.”

Ethan’s skin went cold. “You mean they’ll kill me.”

“You mean you’ll be dead before you get close enough to see the gate,” the old man said. “I’ll write it down. But remember—once you go there, back will be blocked.”

He scrawled a rough map on the back of a cigarette pack. The map was crude: a crooked line through an old olive grove, then an unpaved track, then a single gate like an x marked on a sailor’s chart. Ethan slid a few euros into the old man’s hand and took the pack like it was a relic.

As he stood, the old man called after him, voice huskier than the sea. “And when you leave, don’t tell anyone you were here. Not a soul. Not even the Americans.”

Ethan tucked the crude map into his jacket. He felt the thrill and the weight of what he’d done. He had a route—he had something more than bravado now. He had a paper that might lead him to the place where Isabella lived. He also had a warning: there were eyes that watched the town’s blind spots, men who would not think twice before snuffing him for trespass.

He moved through Naples again, but now everything had a sharper edge. He was warmer to the touch, the napkin and the cigarette-pack map an anchor in his pocket. He thought of Isabella’s voice—soft, Italian words she’d used when she’d fled him on the rooftop. *Mi dispiace*. I’m sorry. He thought of his blood on her rooftop, the way she had wept, the way she’d tried to keep him away.

The thought that he might die for her was not frightening. It was part of the calculus he had made in the second between watching her run and deciding to follow.

As the night deepened, Ethan walked toward what the map described. The route wound outward, away from the neon heartbeat of Naples and into the oily dark of the countryside that still clung to the city’s edges. The cobbles smoothed into packed gravel. An olive grove rustled in the wind like a field of whispers. He moved quietly, every step measured.

In the distance the Romano estate showed itself like a beast roused. It wasn’t visible at first—only a suggestion, a black cut in the horizon. As he moved closer, the estate revealed itself in

detail: floodlights, men leaning by armored cars, a constellation of security cameras blinking red like the eyes of insects. The smell of diesel and gun oil replaced the scent of bread and espresso.

He stopped just beyond the line where the olive trees thinned and stared. A hedge parted to a gravel drive. Past that, the gate—an iron maw, ornate and severe—stood between him and the world he had chased halfway across the globe.

And then he realized how close he was.

One step. That was the difference now. One step and the gravel crunched under his shoe, and the world he'd entered would know he was there. He felt the ground like a physical threshold under his feet; he felt the hum in his ears, the thin vibration of electricity and surveillance. He could see the armor plates of cars, the glint of smart black sunglasses catching the floodlight.

A black-clad guard moved at the gate as if he'd been carved from the night itself, his posture an unannounced promise that he would not look away. Ethan swallowed air that tasted like iron and smoke. He drew the cigarette-pack map from his pocket and unfolded it, tracing the route with his thumb as though it would grant him courage by contact.

He was one step away.

He had a thousand reasons to turn back. He had half a world of pasta and flour and a life that would always be quieter than this evening had become. He had friends who would think him a fool. His sister, Ava, would never forgive him for walking into this.

But when he looked at the gate—so close he could smell the polished metal—he thought of Isabella on her window, pressed to the glass as the trucks of weapons rolled into her courtyard. He thought of Don Matteo's voice on the secure line, calling her *figlia mia*, and of the way those words held both protection and ownership. He thought of the look in Isabella's eyes when she'd told him who she was and fled from him, terrified that if he stayed, he would share her fate.

Ethan folded the map and slid it back into his pocket. He would not ask anyone for permission. He would not be told how to grieve or how to love. One step, he thought. One step and everything would change.

The End of the Beginning – Part3

The road into the hills outside Naples wasn't built for strangers. Ethan had been walking for nearly an hour, following the drunken slurs of a man who had told him — between gulps of cheap whiskey — that if he wanted anything to do with the Romano family, he should turn back while he still had breath in his lungs.

“Even before you stare at the gates of an estate like that, you'll be dead, ragazzo. They eat outsiders.”

The words repeated in Ethan's head as he trudged forward, the cold night air stinging his lungs. Yet his feet didn't stop. Each step was a vow. Isabella's name beat like a drum in his chest.

And then he saw it.

At first, it looked like something out of a story — iron gates towering ten feet high, gilded with a crest he didn't understand but recognized from whispered conversations in the bar. Stone walls stretched in both directions, disappearing into the dark. Beyond them, Ethan caught the faint outline of vineyards sprawling into the distance, the estate rising like a shadowed kingdom on the hill.

But it wasn't the beauty of it that struck him.

It was the security.

SUVs with blacked-out windows swept the perimeter. Men in dark suits patrolled with weapons that glinted under the moonlight. There were cameras, drones, and an energy that made Ethan's chest tighten — this wasn't just a house. It was a fortress.

Is this really her world? he thought, crouching behind a hedge. *Isabella... what are you caught in?*

Inside the Estate

Isabella pressed her palms against the windowpane of her room, her reflection pale against the glass. She had grown up surrounded by guards, high walls, and her father's iron rules, but tonight felt different. Tonight felt like the air itself was bracing for war.

Down in the courtyard, headlights cast beams across armored trucks unloading crates. Men in black moved with precision, their voices sharp and clipped. She heard the metallic snap of rifles being checked, the thud of boots against stone.

Her father was somewhere below — Don Matteo Romano, a man too powerful and too feared to show weakness. But when Isabella heard his raised voice in the war room hours earlier, she knew this wasn't just another territorial skirmish.

It was personal.

She had overheard enough: the name of the rival boss responsible for the ambush in America, the same name linked to her mother's death years ago.

Her fists clenched. She hated this world. She hated that every memory of her mother was tied to blood and vendettas. And yet she couldn't escape it.

Not even across an ocean.

Ethan's Near Capture

On the other side of the gates, Ethan crouched lower as two guards with flashlights walked the perimeter. Their Italian rolled off their tongues, fast and sharp, and Ethan's stomach sank — he couldn't understand half of it.

One of the beams cut dangerously close to his hiding spot. He pressed himself into the dirt, his palms stinging from the gravel. His chest rose and fell in ragged bursts, every muscle screaming to stay still.

Don't move. Don't breathe. Don't—

Crunch.

His sneaker shifted against a pebble. The sound was soft, but to Ethan it was deafening.

One of the guards froze, the beam of his flashlight snapping toward the hedges.

Ethan's blood ran cold.

The man stepped closer, gun shifting in his hands.

Another step.

The beam washed across Ethan's shoulder, blinding him in white. His heart slammed against his ribs.

And then—

The Attack

Engines. Loud. Fast.

Headlights appeared down the road, too many, too close. SUVs barreled forward at breakneck speed, tires screaming against the asphalt.

The guards at the gates turned, shouting in Italian.

Gunfire erupted.

The night exploded into chaos as bullets ripped through the silence, sparks flying against the iron gates. Romano's men returned fire, their rifles flashing in the dark. Ethan dropped flat onto the ground as a bullet ricocheted off the stone wall above him, spraying shards of rock into his hair.

Screams. Shouts. The roar of engines.

The attacking SUVs skidded to a stop just beyond the gates, doors slamming open as masked gunmen poured out, firing relentlessly. Romano's estate blazed with light as more guards surged forward from inside, their weapons thundering.

Ethan pressed himself into the dirt, his ears ringing from the gunfire. He could taste iron in his mouth, his throat raw from holding back a shout.

What the hell have I walked into?

Through the chaos, he forced his eyes open, glimpsing the crest on the gates lit up by the muzzle flashes. He thought of Isabella — her smile at the poolside, her soft laugh that still haunted his nights. She was in there. In the middle of all this.

He gritted his teeth, whispering her name like a prayer.

“Isabella...”

Inside the Estate

Isabella's body went rigid as the first crack of gunfire shattered the air. She stumbled back from her window, her heart slamming into her throat. Outside, flashes of light ripped through the dark, engines roared, and the estate thundered with gunfire.

“Signorina!” Enzo burst into her room, his gun already drawn, Riccardo at his side.

“What’s happening?” Isabella demanded, her voice breaking.

“They’ve come for your father,” Riccardo said tightly, his eyes never leaving the courtyard. “But they won’t reach him. Not tonight.”

Enzo pulled her away from the window as another round of bullets clattered against the estate walls. Isabella’s pulse raced, her stomach twisting into knots. She thought of Ethan again, far away, safe in America — or at least, he should have been.

But the ache in her chest wouldn’t let go.

Outside the gates, Ethan was still pinned in the dirt, his body trembling as the firefight raged. Vehicles crashed against the barriers, metal twisting, sparks flying.

Romano’s guards shouted orders, their gunfire hammering back against the tide of masked attackers.

And Ethan — an American boy who had only come here for love — was caught in the crossfire of a war he couldn’t begin to comprehend.

He forced himself to crawl, inch by inch, his muscles burning, his breath ragged. The dirt clung to his clothes, the air reeked of gunpowder, and the world around him was fire and blood.

Still, his mind whispered one thing, over and over.

I have to see her. I have to reach her.

The iron gates loomed above him, the Romano crest gleaming like a curse.

And as a rival gunman’s headlights swept across the road, Ethan froze in the blinding glare — just a heartbeat away from being exposed.

Chapter 11 – A Different Kind of Power

The Romano estate still smelled of gunpowder and burning rubber when dawn broke. The night before had been chaos—bullets riddling the walls, enemy vehicles blown apart in flames, men screaming in Italian as shadows fought for dominance.

Inside the grand marble hall, Don Matteo Romano stood tall in his tailored suit, his gun pressed against the forehead of the man who had orchestrated the attack. His men circled, their weapons aimed. The enemy boss knelt, trembling, beaten, his blood dripping onto the Romano crest carved into the floor.

Isabella stood near the staircase, her chest heaving, her eyes wet with tears. She had seen too much already—Ethan nearly killed in America, bullets whizzing past her head, her father’s fury boiling unchecked. Now this.

Matteo’s finger tightened on the trigger.
“This is for your mother,” he snarled. His voice was gravel and fire.

But before he could fire, Isabella cried out.

“Papà! Fermati!” (Papa, stop!)

The entire hall froze. The only sound was her heels clacking as she ran forward, placing herself between the gun and the enemy’s head. Her hands trembled as she pushed at her father’s arm, lowering the weapon.

Tears spilled down her cheeks. *“Mamma non avrebbe voluto questo.”* (Mother wouldn’t have wanted this.)

Matteo’s face cracked, his jaw clenched. He searched his daughter’s eyes, those same hazel eyes her mother once had, and for a fleeting second, Don Romano—the feared mafia king—was gone. In his place was only a father, broken and haunted.

He let out a shuddering breath, lowering the gun completely. The rival boss slumped, nearly collapsing in relief. Matteo’s men looked stunned—no one had ever lived once Don Romano made up his mind. But this time, mercy had been commanded not by strength, but by his daughter.

“Take him away,” Matteo ordered hoarsely. His men dragged the rival off. “And make sure the world knows—he lives because my daughter asked it. None dare test me again.”

Isabella clung to her father's chest, sobbing. Ethan, standing in the shadows with Riccardo, watched quietly. He had never seen a man like Matteo bow to anything—yet for Isabella, he did.

The Grave

Two days later, Naples was quiet again. The Romano estate was rebuilding, guards doubled, weapons lined in trucks like a fortress preparing for war. But for Isabella, there was only one place that mattered—her mother's grave.

She stood between her father and Ethan in the Romano family cemetery. The marble headstone gleamed in the soft Italian light, engraved with her mother's name: **Elena Romano, Moglie e Madre Amata.**

Kneeling, Isabella laid white lilies on the stone. Her voice trembled as she whispered in Italian:

“Mamma... ho trovato qualcuno che mi vede. Non il tuo cognome, non il nostro sangue... ma me. Non voglio più vivere nell'ombra della paura. Voglio vivere nell'amore, come tu avresti voluto per me.”

(Mama... I have found someone who sees me. Not your surname, not our blood... but me. I don't want to live in the shadow of fear anymore. I want to live in love, the way you would have wanted for me.)

Her tears fell onto the marble. Ethan stood silently behind her, his hands clenched, aching to comfort her but knowing this moment was hers.

Matteo knelt beside his daughter, his powerful frame bowing for the first time in years. His hand touched the stone, trembling.

“Perdonami, amore mio. Non sono stato l'uomo che meritavi. Ma ti prometto che proteggerò nostra figlia con la mia vita.”

(Forgive me, my love. I was not the man you deserved. But I promise I will protect our daughter with my life.)

For a long moment, silence reigned. The feared Don Matteo Romano bowed his head, his daughter's sobs soft against the wind, and Ethan—an American boy caught in their world—felt the weight of history pressing on his chest.

Back to America

Weeks later, the Romano jet landed in the United States. This time, Don Matteo stepped off the plane with them. The mafia boss in American soil was a sight to behold—flanked by Riccardo

and Enzo, his presence alone made the penthouse seem like a fortress. But when Isabella begged, “*Papà, vieni con noi. Solo per un po’.*” (Papa, come with us. Just for a while), he had agreed.

Ethan led them to his world—the Bennett family bakery. The sweet smell of bread, cinnamon rolls, and coffee filled the air. His mother wiped flour off her apron, his father came from the back carrying trays, and Ava peeked out with curious eyes.

Matteo sat at the corner table, dark suit immaculate, scanning the humble shop. Ethan introduced his family, and his parents welcomed Matteo politely, though with clear suspicion at the man’s intensity.

When Matteo quietly offered to fund the bakery’s expansion, Ethan’s father refused with stern dignity.

“We built this with our hands. We don’t take handouts, sir.”

Matteo tilted his head, studying him, then surprisingly gave a small nod of respect. Honor respected honor.

Ava, however, piped up cleverly. “But... what if it wasn’t a gift? What if it was a business deal? You could invest, but in a way where your name isn’t attached. Every year, we give you a share of profits. That way, it’s not charity—it’s partnership.”

For the first time, Matteo actually smiled.

“*Sei una ragazza intelligente.*” (You’re a smart girl.)

The deal was struck. Matteo respected the family’s pride, and the Bennetts kept their honor. Isabella watched quietly, her heart full—her two worlds, colliding, but not breaking.

The Champion

After a short rehab for his shoulder, Ethan was back in the pool. Months of training paid off as he stood at the edge of the national championship lane. The crowd roared, cameras flashing, and Isabella sat in the front row, waving an Italian scarf Riccardo had teased her with. Matteo sat silently behind her, arms crossed, his presence commanding respect even here.

The gun went off. Ethan dove. Every stroke was fire, every breath a promise. He touched the wall first, shattering the record. The arena exploded in cheers.

Soaked, breathless, Ethan climbed out of the pool—and without hesitation, ran to Isabella. He lifted her into his arms, spinning her around, their kiss landing on national television. The crowd roared even louder, commentators gasping at the sight.

Isabella’s laughter rang pure, her cheeks wet with happy tears. Matteo, still in his seat, finally let a smile slip—rare, small, but real.

Epilogue – A Different Legacy

Later that night, as the replay aired on television, Matteo watched silently from the Bennetts' home. Isabella and Ethan sat curled on the couch, hands entwined. Ava teased them endlessly.

Matteo murmured to himself, in the tongue of his homeland:

“Così voleva tua madre. Amore, non guerra.”

(This is what your mother would have wanted. Love, not war.)

And for the first time in decades, the feared Don Matteo Romano found peace—not in power, not in blood, but in seeing his daughter loved, cherished, and free.

The screen froze on Ethan holding Isabella high in victory. The world cheered, but for them, it was never about the world. It was about love that survived bullets, secrets, oceans, and shadows.

The end.

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