

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 1[4,211 words]

Chapter 1

VINCENZO

Lombardy, Italy

The wind tore across the ridge like a blade dragged slowly over skin, sharp and carrying with it the raw scent of pine and the distant chill of snow that hadn't yet fallen.

It clawed at my shirt, slipped beneath the fabric, and kissed old scars I no longer bothered to hide.

Up here, there was no warmth. No softness. Just the brutal honesty of the mountains.

Far below, the valleys stretched wide and indifferent—lush green folding into shadow, dotted with stone houses and narrow roads that twisted like veins through the land.

One of those roads led to Bergamo.

To the cathedral where a wedding is being held today—my wedding.

To a bride in white, standing at the altar — waiting for me.

And I will go to her.

I just need to handle something first—something important—right here on this mountain.

My jaw tightened.

Let her wait.

I stood at the edge of the ridge, my hands buried deep in the pockets of my black trousers.

The fabric of my white shirt clung faintly to my skin, damp from the morning mist that hadn't yet burned away.

No jacket. No tie. No symbol of the role I was supposed to play today—the groom.

In my left hand, the Beretta sat familiar. Steady. Cold.

Then it trembled.

Not fear—I knew fear.

This was older. Something that had never left, just buried deep inside me.

It moved quietly through me, constant... like an old wound that never truly healed.

The wind clawed at my scars again, and suddenly I was nine.

The small door creaked open again.

I knew those footsteps before I even looked up—before I saw his face.

His cane tapped against the floor, slow and certain.

I remember the sound more than anything.

The pause before the door opened.

What followed is something I've never been able to put into words.

Only the aftermath remained.

I inhaled slowly, forcing the memory back where it belonged.

Buried.

Before me, Ottavio Orsini knelt in the dirt.

My father.

The name alone should have meant power. Authority. Protection.

Instead, it tasted like rot.

His wrists were bound tightly behind him, plastic biting into flesh. The duct tape across his mouth had begun to peel at the edges, damp from his uneven breathing.

He struggled against it, producing broken, muffled sounds—half-words, half animal panic.

Pathetic.

His eyes flicked up to meet mine. I saw it all there. Fear. Denial.

He still didn't understand.

Even now.

Even here.

A bitter, humorless smile ghosted across my lips.

Today was meant to be my wedding day. But it was also the day of his reckoning.

Behind me, far down the slope, my men waited.

Engines idling. Radios silent. They knew better than to interrupt this. Some things a man had to finish alone.

In Bergamo, the church would be full by now.

Gold candles flickering against marble walls. Soft music filling the air. Guests whispering behind gloved hands, exchanging knowing glances.

The Orsini heir is finally settling down.

About time.

Power like that needs stability.

I could almost hear it.

The polite lies.

The quiet expectations.

The bride—beautiful, poised, chosen for all the right reasons—would be standing at the altar, her fingers curled around a bouquet she no longer felt.

Waiting. Wondering.

Humiliated.

Let them all wait.

Let them all learn what it meant to tie themselves to a man like me.

A sharp gust of wind swept past, tugging at the thin blanket draped over the figure beside me.

Loretta.

She sat in her wheelchair, unmoving, her small frame almost swallowed by the fabric wrapped around her legs.

The wind played with loose strands of her dark hair, brushing them across a face that had seen far too much for someone her age.

Her skin was pale, almost translucent in the mountain light.

Her cheeks hollowed by years that had taken more than they had given. But her eyes—

Her eyes were still there. Large. Brown. Steady.

They held no confusion. Only certainty.

I turned my head slightly, studying her in silence.

Once, those eyes had been filled with questions. Endless curiosity. Laughter that echoed through long hallways and sunlit gardens.

Now, they held something quieter. Something harder.

Loretta—my only sister, the one person I still count as family—had suffered in ways no one should endure.

She was left broken, reduced to a shadow of herself.

At the hands of the man kneeling in the dirt before us—Ottavio Orsini, my father.

My fingers tightened around the gun, as though the barrel were breathing back at me.

I forced them to loosen.

I took a step closer to her, then crouched—bringing myself down to Loretta's level.

The world seemed to still around us.

Even the wind fell quiet, as if the mountain itself was holding its breath.

“Do you remember,” I said quietly, my voice rougher than I intended, “when you asked me if the moon followed us home?”

Her gaze shifted to me, and for a moment—just a moment—I saw it.

A flicker.

A ghost of the girl she used to be.

“You were convinced,” I continued, a faint breath of something almost like amusement brushing my words, “that it was chasing you. You cried for an hour because you thought it wanted its cheese back.”

Her lips twitched.

Not quite a smile. But close.

“You told me...” she murmured softly, her voice fragile but steady, “that it followed you because you were special.”

The memory hit harder than I expected.

It was three days before my ninth birthday—Loretta was eight.

We were on a rooftop in Tuscany that day. Warm tiles beneath our backs, melted gelato slipping through our fingers. Her laughter mixed with the hum of cicadas in the dark.

Before everything broke.

“You were,” I said.

The words came out low. “You still are.”

Silence stretched between us, heavy but not uncomfortable.

She held my gaze for a long moment, searching—maybe for doubt, maybe for weakness.

She found neither.

Slowly, deliberately, she nodded.

I straightened, the weight of the moment settling fully into place as I turned toward Ottavio Orsini—still kneeling in the dirt.

The wind returned, colder now.

Ottavio had gone completely still.

As if he could feel it.

The shift.

The end.

I stepped closer, my shoes crunching softly against gravel and frost.

Each step measured.

His breathing picked up again, fast and uneven behind the tape. His shoulders tensed, muscles straining against the restraints as he tried—one last time—to break free.

To speak.

To beg.

I stopped in front of him.

For a second, neither of us moved.

Father.

Son.

The distance between us felt infinite.

I tilted my head slightly, studying him the way I might study a stranger.

Because that's what he was.

A stranger who had lived too long.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance," I said quietly.

My voice carried easily in the open air, calm and devoid of emotion in a way that made it far more dangerous than shouting ever could.

His eyes widened as recognition flickered across his face, followed by something deeper—memory.

Good.

The Beretta rose in my hand, smooth, practiced.

The cold barrel pressed against his forehead.

He broke.

His entire body jerked violently, like a wire pulled too tight. Sweat beaded instantly across his brow despite the biting cold, sliding down his temple in uneven streaks.

His eyes widened, pupils blown so large the color nearly disappeared.

For a second, I saw how cornered he was—how terrified, how desperate to live.

He thrashed against the restraints again, as if some desperate miracle might still set him free.

His boots scraped uselessly against the rock, the sound sharp in the silence.

A strangled, panicked sound forced itself through the tape over his mouth, vibrating against the adhesive like something trying to claw its way out.

Begging.

I held the gun there.

Didn't move. Didn't blink.

Let him feel it.

Let him understand.

Time stretched, thick and suffocating, each second dragging like a blade across exposed nerves.

The wind roared around us, but up close—this close—it felt like silence.

Just his breathing.

Fast. Broken.

Fear had a rhythm.

And I made sure he heard his.

Then, slowly... deliberately...

I lowered the gun.

Not to his chest. Not to his heart.

To his thigh.

His entire body sagged.

Relief hit him so hard it almost folded him in half. His shoulders dropped, a weak, broken exhale forcing its way past the tape as if he'd just been handed back his life.

I watched it happen.

Watched hope crawl back into his eyes like a disease.

A smile touched my lips.

Thin. Sharp. Merciless.

In one smooth motion, I let the Beretta fall from my hand.

It hit the rocks with a metallic crack, bounced once, then spun into the underbrush where it disappeared from sight.

His eyes followed it.

Confusion flickered.

Then something worse. Understanding.

Slowly, I reached behind me, fingers finding the familiar weight at the small of my back.

The dagger slid free with a soft, intimate whisper.

Carbon steel. Balanced. Perfect.

The blade caught the pale mountain light, gleaming with quiet promise. The handle—worn smooth from years of use—fit into my palm like it had been carved for me alone.

This was never meant to be quick.

My thumb nudged the leather sheath loose, letting it fall soundlessly to the ground.

I crouched in front of him.

Close.

Close enough to smell him.

Fear had a scent—sharp, sour, laced with something metallic. It clung to his skin, mixed with the faint ghost of expensive cologne he'd probably worn for the wedding.

How fitting.

With my free hand, I grabbed the edge of the tape sealing his mouth and tore it away in one brutal motion.

The sound tore through the air.

He gasped, a broken hiss escaping his lips as skin came away with the adhesive. His head jerked forward, breath shuddering in his chest like he had forgotten how to use his lungs.

“Vincenzo—”

My name cracked in his mouth.

Weak. Desperate. Wrong.

“Figlio mio, listen—” he rushed, words tumbling over each other, tripping in their urgency. “I know... I know we’ve grown distant. Things—things were not handled as they should have been. But I—”

His voice faltered under my gaze.

“I know I failed you,” he pushed on, faster now, grasping for something—anything—that might still save him. “When those bastards took you—when they—” His throat tightened. “The torture... the scars... you think I don’t remember? I fought for you. I pulled every string. I burned half the world to bring you back.”

A beat.

His eyes searched mine.

Looking for something.

Recognition. Gratitude. Weakness.

He found nothing.

“I kept you safe after,” he insisted, voice rising, desperation bleeding through the cracks in his control. “I sent you away because it was the only way to protect you. Everything I did—everything—was for you.”

I tilted my head slightly.

Studying him.

The lie wasn’t in the words. It was in the conviction.

Men like him always believed themselves.

“I deserve—” he began.

I moved.

The blade drove forward with brutal precision.

Not for his heart—that would have been mercy.

The dagger punched through his left cheek, steel slicing flesh with sickening ease, grinding against bone and teeth before bursting out through the other side.

A wet, choking sound exploded from him.

Blood sprayed.

Hot. Violent.

It painted the air between us in a fine red mist.

I stepped back smoothly, just enough to avoid it, my movements calm and controlled.

His body convulsed.

Violently. Uncontrollably.

His hands jerked behind him, useless, bound, his entire frame writhing as his mouth tried to form a scream that could no longer exist.

The blade remained lodged through his face.

A grotesque bar forced between his jaws.

Every attempt to move—every attempt to breathe—only tore the wound wider.

More blood. More pain.

He buckled forward, shoulders heaving, choking on his own breath, thick red spilling onto the stones beneath him.

Pooling. Spreading.

Staining the mountain like it had always belonged there.

I watched him.

Silently.

For a long moment.

This... was Ottavio Orsini.

The man who once ruled men with a glance. The man whose name had opened doors—or closed coffins.

Reduced to this.

Broken. Bleeding. Powerless.

He had never imagined this.

Not once.

Not even in his worst nightmares.

Getting him here had not been easy.

Nothing about Ottavio was ever easy.

For years, I had been hell-bent on revenge against my father—for what he did to my sister, for what he allowed to happen to me, for being the worst father.

But infiltrating his stronghold in Tuscany—the heart of his mafia empire—had been like trying to bleed stone.

Every assassin I sent disappeared without a trace. Every bribe I offered came back with a message—usually attached to a corpse.

He was always watching. Always calculating.

Paranoid enough to survive.

So I stopped playing his game.

Stopped chasing shadows.

Instead... I gave him something he couldn't resist.

Family.

The rumor spread slowly at first.

Whispers in the right places. Carefully planted conversations. A name dropped here. A confirmation there.

Vincenzo Orsini is getting married.

A powerful alliance.

A return.

The prodigal son is stepping back into the light.

I made sure it reached him.

When my official invitation finally arrived at his table, I knew exactly what he would do.

He called me himself.

I remember the moment clearly.

The line had been quiet for a second too long before his voice came through.

Warm. Familiar. Fake.

“Vincenzo,” he said, like the years between us had never existed, like the blood and distance meant nothing. “We’ve been apart too long.”

I said nothing.

Let him speak.

“I know you blame me,” he continued, softer now, weaving his version of truth. “For what happened when you were nine. The kidnapping. The things they did to you.” A pause. Carefully measured. “But I never stopped looking for you. I never stopped fighting.”

Another pause.

“I saved you.”

The words sat there.

Ugly. Unwanted.

“I know I saved you too late... and that’s a regret I’ll carry for the rest of my life.”

His voice strained as he spoke, each word measured, as though even this cost him.

“It took me three years to find you... three years of your childhood that should never have been taken from you.”

His voice dropped, heavier now.

“Three years you spent trapped in that place... a trafficking den.”

He exhaled, steadying himself.

“I sent you abroad as soon as you were rescued. Not out of distance... not out of hatred—but because you needed it. You were vulnerable here. And I... I didn’t trust myself to help you heal the way you deserved.”

A pause.

“This place would have broken you all over again. Sending you away was the only way I knew how to keep you safe.”

Safe?

My grip on the phone had tightened then.

Not enough for him to hear.

Just enough for me to remember.

“I know you may never return to Tuscany. Some people even call you the prodigal son now—though you’ve built a life far beyond it. I’ve heard what you’ve built from nothing, one of the strongest mafias in Lombardy.”

His voice tightened, just slightly.

“You don’t need me anymore. I understand that.”

A pause.

“But I’m glad you sent me your wedding invitation.”

The edge in his tone softened into something quieter—almost fragile.

“It would be my honor to stand at your wedding... to offer my blessing. To see you happy again... and to know that, for a moment, you’ve found peace.”

Silence stretched between us—long, heavy, deliberate—until I finally spoke.

“I’ll be expecting you,” I said. Nothing more. Nothing less. A quiet invitation to his end.

Then I added, cold and certain:

“Just don’t expect forgiveness.”

He had laughed.

Soft. Confident.

Certain of himself.

“Ah, Vincenzo...” he said, like I was still a boy he could mold, still something unfinished.
“One day, you’ll understand.”

A pause.

Then the final lie. “Family forgives.”

The memory faded.

The mountain returned. Cold the way it had always been, and just as indifferent.

I stepped forward again, stopping just in front of him as he choked and bled at my feet.

Family.

My gaze hardened.

No.

Family remembers.

The fool never understood.

Not really.

Not even now, kneeling in his own blood, choking on the consequences of a life built on rot.

He thought the reason I had distanced myself from him after my studies abroad—the reason for the rift between us—came from the cellar.

From the chains.

From the scars carved into my back and memory.

He was wrong.

Those things... they had broken me.

But they hadn't turned me into this.

No.

That had come later.

The reasons came in ink—written in trembling handwriting across thin sheets of paper that carried the faint scent of fear and desperation.

Loretta's letters.

They reached me during my time abroad, in fragments—smuggled by one of Ottavio's soldiers who still had a heart.

After I was rescued at twelve, I was brought back to my father's estate. But he never seemed happy to see me—if anything, it felt as though he wished I had never returned.

I remember running to him, my body still aching, desperate for comfort. But he turned away, instructing his men to take care of me instead.

And barely two days later, he sent me abroad—to “school,” as he called it.

I was in my second year at university when my sister's first letter finally arrived.

All that time, every attempt I made to speak to her had failed. No matter how much I begged the bastard kneeling before me to let me speak to her, he refused—always telling me not to worry about her... that she was fine.

She wrote of the nights she could not escape, of a father who treated his own daughter as something to possess and break.

She spoke of feeling trapped like a prisoner in her own home, of learning to disappear inside her mind just to survive another day.

She begged me to come for her before the darkness swallowed her completely.

I remember my hand stilled on the page, the ink blurring beneath my fingers—smudged by tears, or by my trembling, I couldn't tell.

Something inside me shattered that day, like glass dropped on marble—sharp, sudden, and impossible to piece back together.

Yet the truth was, I was powerless then. Just eighteen. An innocent second-year university student, still trying to stitch myself back together after everything I'd survived in that trafficking den.

I tried—desperately—to reach my sister after that.

She was in Italy, and I was stuck in London, worlds apart in more ways than distance.

My father made sure of it. He had legal guardianship over my movements and financial control over my education, binding me to the terms he set.

Until I completed my final year, I wasn't allowed to return home. No exceptions. No negotiations.

I was trapped—watching from afar, unable to reach her when she needed me most.

And that was when it finally dawned on me—my father hadn't sent me abroad to heal. That had never been the reason.

He sent me away to keep me out of the way... to put distance between me and my sister, knowing exactly how helpless she would be without me.

From the moment that letter reached my hands, everything changed. School stopped being my goal. Survival stopped being enough.

All I wanted—needed—was power. Enough power to return, to tear my father down, and to pull my sister out of the hell he had built around her.

It wasn't easy. Nothing about it was.

Every step was a fight, every gain painfully earned.

It took years—years of grinding, of learning, of becoming someone I barely recognized.

And with every passing second, the thought of her still trapped under that roof... still suffering in silence... it tore at me.

I ached for her. I broke for her. And beneath it all, something darker kept growing—anger, sharp and relentless, refusing to fade.

And so, when I rose—when I became one of the most powerful mafia bosses in Lombardy—word eventually reached him.

My father heard.

He tried to reach me. Calls. Messages. Back channels through men who once bowed to him.

I ignored every single one.

To speak to him now felt like an insult—to everything I had survived, to everything my sister was still enduring. So I let his calls ring into silence... while I planned his downfall.

And when everything finally aligned three months ago—maps drawn, blind spots identified, every backdoor and exit memorized, every guard accounted for and assigned to a post—I stormed his estate with my men.

Ottavio trusted his system.

That was his first mistake.

The second... was underestimating me.

We moved at night. Unhinged—but controlled.

Because this wasn't just an attack. It was a purge.

We breached the outer perimeter without a sound—cutting power in sections, looping camera feeds, slipping through the cracks his system swore didn't exist.

My men moved like shadows given flesh, each one knowing exactly who to take out, exactly where to strike.

No warnings. No mercy.

A guard turned the corner—steel slid across his throat before he could speak. Another barely had time to register the figure behind him before a bullet, suppressed and soft, punched through the base of his skull.

Bodies were caught before they hit the ground, dragged into darkness like they had never existed.

Some of my father's guards saw me.

And in their eyes, I caught the exact moment it clicked—recognition dawning like a slow, terrible truth.

The prodigal son.

Returned.

Not to kneel. Not to reclaim a seat at his table—but to tear it apart.

I watched it spread across their faces. The confusion first. Then disbelief. And then... fear.

Real fear.

The kind that doesn't come from the thought of dying—but from who is standing in front of you when it happens.

One of them actually stumbled back, his grip tightening on his weapon like it could somehow save him. Another froze completely, his breathing turning shallow, uneven, like his body had already accepted what his mind was still trying to deny.

“Boss's son...” one of them whispered, voice cracking.

“No...” another muttered, shaking his head as if that alone could undo my presence. “He's not supposed to be here.”

But I was.

And I wasn't the boy they remembered.

There was no hesitation in me. No warmth. No trace of the son my father once sent away. Just something colder. Sharper. Final.

They saw it.

And it broke them before I ever touched them.

They tried—God, they tried—to resist me.

Men who had stood by him for years came at us with everything they had. Training, loyalty, desperation—it didn't matter. They fought hard, but not hard enough.

They failed.

By the time the alarm should have been raised—

It was already too late.

Most of my father's men were already down, their bodies scattered through halls that once echoed with authority. Silence replaced them. Heavy. Final.

I didn't stop.

I rushed inside, my pulse hammering, my mind already slipping past strategy into something far more dangerous. Her name was the only thing left in my head.

“Loretta!”

My voice tore through the estate, raw and unrestrained.

I moved like a madman—kicking open doors, tearing through rooms, ripping aside anything that stood between me and the chance of finding her.

Drawers crashed to the floor. Furniture splintered under my hands. I checked every corner, every shadow, every locked door.

Nothing.

“Loretta!”

My voice broke this time, but I didn’t care. I kept going.

Down corridors. Up staircases. Back down again. Blood smeared under my boots, but I barely registered it. My men called out behind me, trying to keep up, trying to redirect me, but I wasn’t listening anymore.

I wasn’t thinking.

I was hunting.

Desperate. Unhinged. Refusing to leave without her.

And then... I found it.

A door that didn’t belong.

Hidden at the end of a narrow corridor, heavy and reinforced—wrong in a way everything else wasn’t.

This was it.

I didn’t wait. I pushed it open.

The smell hit me first—thick, suffocating. It clung to my throat, heavy and impossible to ignore. Still, I kept going, forcing myself down into the darkness beyond it.

That was where I found her.

The place no one spoke about.

The Pit.

It lay beneath the estate, far below the polished floors and quiet walls.

The air there was different—stale, damp, heavy with neglect. The kind of place that felt forgotten, like time itself had turned away.

And there she was.

Loretta.

Something inside me broke the moment I saw her.

She didn't look like the girl I remembered.

Her hair was tangled and unkempt, falling around her face in uneven strands, as if even it had given up trying to hold itself together.

Her body told the rest.

Marks covered her skin—evidence of everything she had endured. Of everything she had survived.

But even survival has its limits.

Her shoulders sagged, weighed down by something heavier than exhaustion.

Defeat.

Not weakness.

Just the quiet exhaustion of someone who had been left alone for too long.

I didn't speak.

I couldn't trust my voice.

So I went to her.

Slowly, carefully.

And when she didn't pull away... I lifted her into my arms.

She felt fragile. Too light.

That was what I remembered most.

Her eyes stayed with me.

Half-open. Unfocused. Broken.

Not the kind of damage doctors could fix with time and medicine.

This was deeper and permanent.

I had promised her something that night.

Not out loud. Not in words.

But in the way I held her.

In the way I didn't let go.

Ottavio Orsini will pay.

And I meant it.

The sudden rise of wind swept past me, sharp and biting, dragging me out of the past.

It howled across the mountain, tugging at my clothes, cold against my skin—and just like that, I remembered where I was.

Not in the estate. Not in the blood and shadows of three months ago.

Here.

Now.

On this mountain.

On my wedding day.

For a moment, I had been completely lost—drowned in memories I had clawed my way out of. But the wind didn't let me stay there. It pulled me back, forced my eyes open to the present.

Ottavio was still on his knees—barely holding himself upright—fingers clawing at the ground as if he could drag himself away from what I'd already decided.

My dagger was still lodged across his mouth.

Not deep enough to end him.

Just enough to remind him.

Blood trickled in thin, trembling streams down his chin, pooling at his neck, soaking into his collar.

His breathing came in ragged, wet gasps—each one a fight, each one weaker than the last. His eyes burned with panic, with defiance that was slowly dissolving into something far worse.

Realization.

Pain twisted his features as he tried to speak, but the blade silenced him—forcing only muffled, strangled sounds to escape.

Good.

Let him feel it.

Let him remember exactly who he wronged.

A sharp chirp cut through the suffocating silence.

I didn't move at first.

My gaze stayed locked on him—on the way his strength was draining out of him like blood from an open wound.

The phone chirped again.

Reluctantly, I reached for it.

I had warned them.

No calls. No interruptions. Not until I was finished.

I glanced at the screen.

Ciro. My second-in-command.

I answered, my voice cold.

“Boss...” His tone was tight—rushed, but edged with urgency.

“The bride... she's stranded. Her family's getting restless—angry, even. They're threatening that if you don't show up by—”

“The wedding can wait. This cannot.”

Then I ended the call.

I didn't take my eyes off Ottavio.

I dropped the phone back into my pocket.