

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 11[3,625 words]

Chapter 11

ELENA

Eight days had crawled by.

Not in the way time usually passes—quiet, unnoticed, slipping through your fingers—but in slow, deliberate increments that forced you to feel every single second.

Eight days since Vincenzo ordered me to report to his bedroom every night at 10:00 p.m.

Eight days since he had decided that my nights belonged to him.

The routine had become something I could measure my life by.

The door closing behind me at night.

The silence.

His presence.

Eight days of waking up tangled in sheets that smelled like him.

I stood beneath one of the towering obsidian pillars that lined the corridor of the Crimson Chamber within the Black Veil Society Academy.

Arms crossed. Back straight.

Watching.

The academy stretched out before me in its full, intimidating design.

According to the academy's one-year training syllabus, the first month was meant to be theory.

Codes. Hierarchies. Loyalty. Tradecraft.

Endless rules designed to strip you down and rebuild you into something useful.

But the remaining eleven months—that was where the academy showed its true face.

Everyone knew it.

By winter, half of us would be broken.

Limping.

Barely holding on.

But I refused to be one of them.

I wouldn't break.

I would endure—outlast every one of them—and when this year ended, I would stand among the survivors.

And Vincenzo would see it.

He would see exactly how strong I am.

My gaze drifted across the field.

Trainees moved in groups.

Laughter echoed faintly between the buildings.

Conversations carried.

They moved in clusters—three, four, sometimes more—like packs forming inside a structure that would eventually turn on itself.

I didn't join any of them.

Not because I didn't want to—but because I couldn't.

The whispers followed me everywhere.

Soft at first. Then louder.

Then impossible to ignore.

That's her.

The boss's wife.

The one who stole Violet Alvarez's wedding.

The words clung to me like smoke.

I ignored them.

Or tried to.

Because the truth was—none of this mattered to me right now.

Not the academy. Not the training.

Not the whispers.

My mind was fixed on something else entirely.

Renzo.

Eight days.

That's how long he'd been locked in the dark cell.

No light. No day.

No sound.

No sense of time—only breath, hunger, silence, and isolation.

And the consequences of a single mistake.

Because of me.

Because I had pushed. Because I had insisted on coming—and now he was paying for it.

A weight settled heavily in my chest.

Guilt.

Sharp. Persistent.

Vincenzo had ordered him locked away for seven days.

Yesterday marked the end of that sentence.

Which meant today—Renzo should have been standing at the front of the classroom, leading his session from 10:00 to 11:00.

Close-quarters knife work.

Yet when the hour came... it wasn't him who stepped up to the podium.

It was a replacement. A senior soldier.

I had been replaying the moment Ciro dragged Renzo away in my mind over and over again—his grip iron-tight, almost malicious, clamped around Renzo's arm.

The way Renzo didn't resist.

Didn't fight. Didn't say a single word.

The guilt in my chest pressed heavier with every passing second.

I had tried—carefully—to ask Ciro how Renzo had been during the week.

But he refused to comment on anything involving Renzo.

Lately, though... I noticed him watching me more often than necessary.

A fleeting glance at first, then longer, deliberate stares.

I wondered if it was part of some new task Vincenzo had given him.

My eyes met his more than once—while cooking, while arranging the supply room, while carrying water from the well, while cleaning the training weapons—and each time, he did not look away.

Not once.

The fact that no one would tell me about Renzo gnawed at me.

It was frustrating.

Painful.

I could only hope he was still alive in that cell.

That he had not been broken completely.

Because if anything had happened to him... I don't think I would ever forgive myself.

A lifetime of guilt would consume me.

I exhaled slowly, forcing my lungs to cooperate, forcing my mind to slow, to steady.

I tried not to think too much.

Tried to push the fear and despair to the edges of my mind.

But before I could fully pull myself back into the present, a flicker of movement caught my eye.

At the far corner of the Crimson Chamber corridor.

Two trainees.

Early twenties.

Built like they had spent their entire lives training for violence—broad shoulders, dense muscle.

They had someone cornered.

Pressed against the wall.

Moving her deliberately.

Step by step.

Guiding her toward the blind spot.

The one beyond the reach of the nearest CCTV dome.

My body reacted before my mind did.

I moved.

Fast.

Boots barely making a sound against the polished stone as I cut across the corridor at an angle.

Closing distance.

Fast enough to intercept.

Close enough now, I could see clearly who they had surrounded.

The only other woman in the academy.

There were forty-two men here, and only the Spanish girl and I stood apart from them.

The Spanish girl was smaller than me, her frame more delicate, almost fragile against the hard, predatory presence of the men closing in around her.

She couldn't have been more than five feet tall.

Dark hair pulled back into a messy braid that had long since lost its structure.

Her uniform hung on her frame, sleeves rolled up to reveal thin wrists—marked.

Scarred.

Old injuries layered over new ones.

Her back pressed flat against the wall.

Shoulders tense.

Eyes wide. Breathing shallow.

Frozen.

I stepped fully into view.

My voice cut through the corridor.

“What’s going on here?”

The two men who had her cornered turned at once.

The taller one first.

Buzz-cut.

A scar split across one eyebrow, giving his face a permanently irritated look.

His eyes flicked over me—quick, assessing—then shifted past me down the corridor.

Checking for witnesses.

Finding none.

A slow smirk formed on his lips.

“Look who it is,” he said, his voice low, edged with amusement. “Elena Orsini. The woman who stole Violet’s groom on her wedding day.”

The shorter one let out a dry laugh, folding his arms. “You’ve made quite a name for yourself. The Spanish have a bounty on your head—I’m surprised no one’s claimed it yet.”

His gaze slid over me, slow, assessing.

Then he smiled—thin, mocking.

“So what are you doing here?” The shorter one continued. “Looking for allies? That’s unfortunate... because no one here is stupid enough to stand beside you.”

A pause.

“And don’t get any ideas about us,” he added lightly. “We don’t make friends with liabilities.”

I kept my expression neutral.

“You’re the last people I’d ever consider befriending,” I said, my voice unshaken. “And you should learn to speak to Vincenzo Orsini’s wife with respect.”

A beat.

Then the shorter one laughed.

“Respect?” he echoed, amused. “From what we hear, Vincenzo doesn’t even acknowledge you.”

That hit.

Hard.

But I didn’t let it show.

“We’ve heard things,” he went on, tone thick with mockery. “A few days after the wedding, Violet Alvarez shows up at his mansion. Cozy little dinner, just the two of them... and you?” He let out a sharp laugh. “You were the one serving them.”

He shook his head, still grinning.

“They turned you into a servant in your own marriage. Isn’t that embarrassing? Even the staff in that house probably have more value than you.”

The taller one stepped closer, his expression twisting into something colder.

“And that’s not all,” he added, voice laced with cruel satisfaction. “Word is Violet’s carrying his child now... while you’ll be the one taking care of it when it’s born.”

He let out a humorless laugh.

“Honestly... you should hide your face. Everyone already knows what you are. If Vincenzo doesn’t give a damn about you... why should we?”

The rumors about Violet’s pregnancy had been circulating for days—passed between trainees like currency.

But hearing it said out loud—

It cut.

Sharp. Immediate.

A pain I couldn’t control.

Still, I didn’t step back.

Didn’t falter.

Didn’t give them what they wanted.

Instead, I straightened. Just enough.

Then I stepped forward, swallowing the pain, forcing my expression into something cold.

“Why are you pushing her into a blind corner?” I asked, nodding toward the girl without breaking eye contact. “Away from the cameras.”

The shorter one let out a low, mocking smirk. “How’s that your business?”

I held his gaze.

Steady.

“Bullying isn’t allowed here,” I said evenly. “If you’re trying to intimidate her, I’m not going to stand by and watch.”

The taller one shifted slightly—his posture loosening like he had just decided I was no longer a threat worth respecting.

His name patch read ENZO.

He slid one hand into the pocket of his uniform jacket, the movement deliberate—like he was reaching for something he didn't mind using.

"Since you're so eager to play savior," he said, voice laced with quiet amusement, "why don't you come stand in the corner with us?"

A slow, deliberate step forward.

"Let's see how tough the boss's neglected wife really is."

My jaw tightened—but only for a second.

I let my gaze flick to the girl.

She stood pressed to the wall, shoulders drawn inward, like she was trying to disappear into the stone behind her.

Her eyes were glossy with fear.

Lips trembling.

The kind of fear that wasn't new—just familiar enough to have worn her down.

Not someone who'd learned to fight it.

Someone who had learned to endure it.

"They're trying to bully you, aren't they?" I asked softly, turning my attention to her.

She hesitated.

Then nodded—small, jerky, almost ashamed.

Her voice, when it came, was thin. Fragile.

Like something that had been forced into silence for too long.

"Yes... they are."

She swallowed hard, her voice unsteady.

"Enzo's been after me since the first day. Asking me out, over and over. I told him no. I told him I'm not interested in him—or anyone—but he doesn't listen."

Her fingers curled tightly at her sides, like she was holding herself together.

“He says it doesn’t matter what I want. That he’ll have me anyway... that he always gets what he wants.”

Her voice dropped lower.

“He started following me. At first it was just... showing up wherever I was. Then it got worse. Waiting outside my dorm. Walking behind me to class. Standing outside the hall like he knew exactly when I’d come out.”

She let out a shaky breath.

“He corners me whenever he can—hallways, stairwells... anywhere there aren’t many people. And today...” Her voice faltered.

“Today he brought his friend.” She gestured faintly toward the shorter one. “They started pushing me toward this corner, saying if I tried to run... it would only get worse.”

Her gaze flickered—instinctively, fearfully—to Enzo’s pocket, where his hand still rested.

“They said if I report it, no one will believe me.” Her voice dropped to almost nothing. “That they’d make sure of it.”

Enzo laughed.

“Careful, little mouse,” he said, tilting his head with a predator’s amusement. “You really think running your mouth to her will save you from me?”

His tone wasn’t just a warning.

It was a threat.

I stepped forward.

Positioning myself between them and the girl.

My voice stayed even.

“Enzo,” I said, looking directly at him, “I could break both your arms and kill you before either of you draws another breath.”

A pause.

“That’s what I was trained to do.”

The shorter one shifted slightly.

Enzo's eyes narrowed.

"Walk away," I continued, my tone dropping just enough to carry weight, "don't come near her again. Don't even look at her."

For a moment—it looked like he might actually consider it.

He glanced over his shoulder again.

Still no one.

No witnesses. No interference.

Then back to me.

Something darker settled in his expression.

Challenge.

A slow, predatory smile spread across his face.

"I shouldn't come near her? Not even look at her?"

His laughter was low, almost deranged, unable to hide the thrill he drew from the moment.

"How about you step fully into the corner, where the cameras can't see what's about to happen?"

His voice dropped, dangerous.

"You said you could break my arms... kill me—so prove it. I want to see what the discarded, unclaimed wife is really capable of."

Behind me, the girl's breathing hitched again.

I didn't look back.

I reached behind me anyway.

Found her hand.

Small. Cold. Shaking.

I squeezed it once.

Reassuring.

“We’re leaving,” I said quietly.

Then I turned.

Guiding her with me.

One step.

That was all it took.

Because Enzo moved fast.

He stepped into our path in a single stride, cutting off our exit before we could even fully turn.

The hand that had lingered in his pocket moved quickly—and a folding knife appeared.

The blade snapped open with a sharp metallic click.

Four inches. Serrated.

Already angled. Already aimed.

Directly toward my ribs.

“Do not tempt me,” he hissed.

The girl behind me made a small, broken sound—barely a whimper—but I felt it.

My grip on her hand tightened slightly.

“Last chance.” His voice dropped lower. “Walk away, or bleed.”

A blade wasn’t allowed in the academy.

Every system here was designed to strip away anything that could be used as a weapon against another recruit.

But rules didn’t stop people like Enzo.

Somehow, someone always found a way.

Enzo’s hand edged closer, the knife grazing my ribs—sharp, lethal.

One wrong move, one slip, and my life could vanish before my body even knew what hit it.

“My patience has run out, Elena,” he said, voice dropping into a dark, almost amused tone. “Walk away. I won’t say it twice.”

He stepped forward half a pace.

My fingers flexed at my side, already calculating—one quick motion could disarm him.

My heart pounded, every nerve alive, muscles coiled for action.

Then a voice cut through the tension like a blade.

“Elena.”

Low. Calm.

Unmistakably authoritative.

Ciro.

Enzo’s smirk faltered.

Just slightly.

His friend stilled.

Both of them froze in place for half a second too long.

Because that voice—that presence—was not something you ignored.

Footsteps followed.

Each step echoing against the stone with deliberate precision.

By the time he rounded the corner, the knives were already gone.

Vanished back into pockets with practiced speed.

Bodies straightened. Postures shifted.

Shoulders tightened.

Their faces—once confident—drained of color.

Their eyes flicked toward the open field.

Calculating.

Measuring distance. Weighing escape routes.

Ciro came to a stop a few steps away.

Hands relaxed at his sides.

His hazel eyes swept the scene in one slow, precise arc.

The two of them.

The hidden tension.

The small woman pressed half behind me, eyes wide, heart racing.

Silence stretched.

Then I moved.

Stepping out of their shadow.

Pulling the small woman with me.

“All good here,” I said, shrugging slightly. “Just a little chat, that’s all.”

The lie was smooth.

Because in this academy—survival often meant knowing which battles to fight and which to let slide.

I’d deal with Enzo and his short friend later.

But Hiro didn’t need to know they were trying to bully her.

Ciro’s gaze flicked briefly to me.

Then back to them.

He stepped aside. Not intervening.

But not leaving either.

I didn’t look back at Enzo.

Didn’t acknowledge the tension still hanging in the air.

Instead, I kept walking.

Her small, trembling hand stayed in mine.

Her grip was tight.

But she followed.

Step by step.

We moved across the corridor. Through the open field.

Gravel crunching beneath our boots.

The structures around us shifted from confinement to exposure.

I guided her further out.

Far enough that the tension behind us faded into something distant.

Then I slowed.

And finally—stopped.

I turned slightly to face her.

Her eyes were still wide. Her breathing uneven.

But she hadn't let go of my hand.

"My name's Elena," I said gently. "Yours?"

She hesitated.

Then—"Bianca."

A brief pause.

"Thank... thank you," she added, her voice fragile, barely holding itself together.

"It's okay," I said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

"You don't look like you belong in a place like this. And I don't mean that as an insult."

"I know," she whispered, shoulders collapsing.

“My father... he forced me here. Said I was weak. That I had to be strong. But all I ever wanted...” Her voice trembled. “...was to make music.”

“I saved for months,” she continued, voice shaking, “every coin I could hide... just to buy a piano. Nothing fancy. Second-hand... I didn’t care. I just wanted to play. At night, when he was asleep, I’d play.”

Her gaze dropped.

“Three weeks later... he found out. He smashed the keys with a sledgehammer. Said my dreams didn’t matter. That I was destined to be... a mafia queen. Guns are more useful than music, he said.”

Her voice broke on the last words, soft and empty.

“Music doesn’t feed the empire. Guns do.”

The words landed heavy.

I’d heard variations of that story before.

Girls forced into roles they never chose.

Dreams traded for obedience.

She hesitated, then added, almost like it hurt to say it out loud—

“I hate it here.”

A breath trembled out of her.

“Every day feels like... drowning slowly.”

There was something honest in the way she said it.

Before I could respond, a sharp metallic sound sliced across the air.

The break siren.

Loud. Mechanical.

It echoed through the entire field, signaling the end of the 11:00 to 12:00 free period.

Time was up.

I hadn’t even realized how long we’d been standing there.

Talking.

Bianca's hand twitched in mine.

Then slowly—she pulled it away.

“I have to go,” she said quickly. “My next lecture—”

Her voice faltered. But she forced it steady.

“I don't want to be late.”

“Okay,” I said softly.

But I didn't let her go immediately.

Instead, I met her eyes.

Held them.

Firm.

“If you need anything—anything at all—come find me in the Crimson Chamber hall.”

A pause.

“I'm usually by the pillars.”

I hesitated, then added— “Or just ask around. People know who I am.”

She gave a small nod.

Grateful. Relieved.

But still afraid.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Then she turned and hurried off toward the Hall of Shadows.

Her braid swung behind her.

Her shoulders remained tense.

Like she expected someone to strike from behind at any moment.

I stood there until she disappeared through the arched doorway.

Only then did I turn.

And then I saw them.

Enzo and his short friend were walking toward the Hall of Shadows, the same hall Bianca was in.

Damn it.

I wouldn't be there to help her.

To protect her. To stand up for her.

They both glanced back at the same time.

Our eyes met.

Triumph. Malice. Revenge written across their faces in cruel smirks.

I exhaled slowly as they disappeared into the hall, leaving a tight knot in my chest.

My heart ached for Bianca, and I promised myself I would check on her once the day's lectures were done.

I barely turned before I noticed Ciro, standing a few steps away, watching me with that intensity he had lately—something close to fascination.

I ignored it, forcing myself to believe it meant nothing, and started walking toward him, each step heavy with thought.

He adjusted his stance.

And met me halfway across the gravel.

Composed.

But I didn't care about his composure right now.

I needed answers—desperately.

"Please... just tell me," I said, the words ripping out before I could stop them. "How on earth is Renzo?"

A beat.

“Please tell me he’s fine.”

Ciro’s jaw tightened slightly.

Just enough to show the question had landed.

But not enough to give anything away.

“I can’t give you any update on him right now.”

Always the same answer. Always like slamming into a closed door.

“Why not?”

“Vincenzo’s orders.”

The ground beneath me felt suddenly unstable.

“Is he dead?”

The question slipped out faster than I intended.

Ciro’s eyes widened slightly.

“What?”

“Is Renzo dead?” I repeated, voice cracking now. “Seven days in the dark cell—no food, no light—if he passed out—if he—”

“He’s not dead.”

His voice cut through mine.

The tension in my chest didn’t fully release—but it shifted.

Ciro’s gaze stayed firm.

“That’s all I can say. For anything else... Ask Vincenzo yourself.”

His gaze locked onto mine.

“After all... you see him every night.”

There was something in the way he said it—an edge, a hint of jealousy, maybe.

As if he wasn’t pleased with me being with Vincenzo every night.

Or maybe I was reading too much into it—maybe his tone and expression meant something else entirely.

I forced a breath through my teeth.

Steadying myself.

“What were you doing in that corner with those boys?” he asked, shifting the subject.

“I told you,” I said flatly. “It was just a discussion.”

Then, carefully, I added, “I have a request.”

Ciro raised an eyebrow.

“Switch my hall to the Hall of Shadows.”

He hesitated. “Isn’t that where those two boys—and Bianca—are?”

“Exactly,” I replied.

A pause.

Then he smirked faintly. “So... you’re making friends already?”

There was something in his tone.

Caution. Disapproval.

Maybe even concern.

“Shouldn’t I?” I asked.

“No.”

The answer was immediate.

“You can’t make friends here.”

His voice dropped, firming. “It’s too dangerous.”

He gestured slightly toward the halls.

“Half these trainees are plants. Spies for rival families. Informants for the Spanish rebels.”

A beat.

“The Spanish have a bounty on your head, and anyone here would take any chance to hand you over. Focus on your training—your one year. Make us proud. Survive. Be one of the few who makes it to the end.”

Something inside me tightened.

“Isolated in every single way. I can’t make friends anywhere. Is this how I’m supposed to keep living?”

I scoffed, sharp and bitter.

I nodded, though it pained me.

“Understood. But Ciro... I truly thought you were the only kind one among you, Renzo, and Vincenzo. Yet the way you struck me with the baton that day I went on that mission with Renzo—it wasn’t natural. It felt... like a crusade against me. You would have hit me again if Vincenzo hadn’t stopped you. What changed? Do you hate me now too?”

He studied me for a long moment.

Something flickered in his eyes.

“I never hated you,” Ciro said evenly. “And I never will. In fact, I... I—” He paused, swallowed hard, and looked away, eyes distant for a long moment. “L

“Never mind.”

Then he shifted the subject. “I hope you understand... the child Violet is carrying is not Vincenzo’s.”

The words landed like stones, suspended in the air between us.

My brows knitted tightly.

“I refuse to believe that. Violet is carrying his child. There’s no reason to lie to me.”

His jaw flexed once.

“Exactly. No reason to lie. But it’s the truth. Vincenzo... he’s not cut out to have a family. Don’t fool yourself into thinking he could ever love you—because he won’t. Not now, not ever.”

My mouth opened, words stuck in my throat, my heart hammering.

Then the lecture siren blared again—sharper this time.

Final warning. Time was up.

I had to move.

But Ciro's words clung to me, heavy and insistent:

Vincenzo isn't cut out for a family...

Don't fool yourself into thinking he could ever love you—

My chest caved in, pain tightening around my ribs.

I took a step away from Ciro.

Then another.

"Elena."

His voice stopped me.

I paused.

For a fleeting moment, something unspoken passed between us.

Something fragile, heavy, and unsaid.

Then he exhaled, almost as if deciding against whatever he had meant to say.

"I... I have something I want to tell you," he said quietly, his voice hesitant. "But... it's dangerous to say. Rebellious, even."

I held his gaze a beat longer than I should have.

"Then I hope... someday you find the courage to say it," I murmured, letting my words hang in the air.

"Do you ever miss my old life?" He asked. "Running. Hiding. Fighting."

"I do," I admitted softly. "And... I think I will go back to it someday."

I swallowed hard, the thought cutting deep.

I couldn't keep living like this—not under Vincenzo's shadow, not trapped in this... suffocating life.

The lecture siren blared again.

I turned and walked toward the Crimson Chamber lecture hall, feeling the weight of Ciro's stare like a shadow pressing down on my back. I didn't dare turn around.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 12[5,017 words]

Chapter 12

ELENA

It was ten minutes to 10:00 p.m.—ten minutes before I would leave this room, as I had for the past eight nights, to go to Vincenzo's.

I sat at my vanity table, the oval mirror reflecting a version of me I barely recognized anymore.

Soft lamplight painted everything in warm gold, but it couldn't soften what was underneath.

My fingers moved on their own.

Foundation.

Concealer.

Mascara.

The ritual kept my hands from shaking.

Gave me something to focus on.

Something that wasn't the weight in my chest.

Something that wasn't the countdown ticking louder with every passing second.

The nightgown rested against my skin like a second thought.

Translucent. Ivory silk.

Thin enough to hint at every curve without revealing anything fully.

For eight nights, I'd followed the same pattern.

9:55 p.m.

Walk down the corridor.

Knock. Wait. Enter.

Then lie beside him until dawn crept through the windows.

Eight nights.

No touching. No kissing.

No claiming in the way I expected.

No violence. No softness.

Just... presence.

Vincenzo would lie there beside me, unmoving, his breathing steady.

Like he didn't need sleep.

Like he didn't need anything at all.

Like he was simply existing to remind me that I was not.

I didn't understand it.

And that was what made it worse.

Possession without possession.

Control without force.

Ownership without explanation.

Sometimes I wondered if that was the point.

Not to use me.

But to remind me that I didn't belong to myself anymore.

That even my stillness wasn't mine.

I set the makeup brush down.

My fingers lingered on it for a second longer than necessary.

Then I straightened.

Looked at myself one last time.

Held my own gaze.

Steady. Unflinching.

Then I stood.

The silk of the nightgown whispered softly against my thighs as I moved.

I moved toward the door, each step deliberate.

Paused at the threshold.

My hand lingered on the knob—an unconscious habit.

A shallow breath.

Then—I turned the knob.

And stepped into the corridor.

The house was silent.

Marble chilled my bare feet as I walked.

Every step sent a faint echo down the corridor, swallowed almost immediately by the vastness of the house.

I reached his door and knocked once.

"It's open," his voice came from inside.

I turned the handle, and pushed the door inward.

The room greeted me like always: dark, heavy, familiar.

I closed the door behind me with a quiet click.

A single lamp on the bedside table cast warm light across part of the room, leaving the rest in shadow.

Half of his face caught in gold, half swallowed by darkness.

Like he lived in two worlds at once.

He lay on his side of the bed, still.

Regal.

Breathing slow and even.

But never asleep.

Never when I entered.

I crossed the carpet, each step careful.

I slipped under the duvet, pulling it up to my chest, closing my eyes.

The ritual I had followed for the past eight nights—same time, same space, same unspoken rules—felt heavier tonight.

Minutes stretched.

My pulse refused to settle, my mind refused to quiet.

It circled back to Renzo—seven days in a dark cell.

Yesterday the punishment had ended, but nothing came of it.

No appearance. No update.

Just silence.

Not empty silence. A silence that felt final, like something had been erased.

My fingers tightened against the fabric.

I turned onto my side, the sheets whispering against my skin.

“Vincenzo.”

No response. Not surprising.

“Vincenzo,” I said again, firmer this time. “I deserve to know where Renzo is.”

Still nothing.

The silence pressed down on me, heavier than any answer could have been, coiling around my chest and refusing to let go.

“Please,” I whispered, thinner than intended, strained. “I just need to know he’s alive.”

My throat tightened.

“I caused this,” I admitted.

“I pressured him... pushed him to take me to that meeting.” My fingers clenched the sheets, knuckles white. “If something happened to him... because of me—”

The words stopped as he moved.

His eyes opened—slow, completely awake.

He rose in one smooth motion from the bed.

Bare chest.

Black sleep pants low on his hips.

The lamplight traced the planes of his body, highlighting every taut muscle.

He crossed the room with purpose.

Sat in the leather armchair by the window.

Legs spread slightly, elbows resting on his knees.

“I hate being pulled from my rest,” he said, voice low. “Not when I’m trying to escape the nightmares that hunt me.”

The words landed differently than I expected—honest, and unsettling.

I couldn’t look away.

Nightmares.

Plural.

A man like him—Vincenzo Orsini—hunted by them.

I didn't respond immediately.

Didn't know if I should.

So instead, I sat up slowly.

Clutching the sheet to my chest.

As if that could protect me from whatever came next.

"I just need to know if Renzo is alright," I said, voice tight, trembling with guilt and worry.

"His punishment should be over. I didn't mean to wake you."

He tilted his head slightly, eyes sharp.

"Why are you concerned about him? I decide when his punishment ends."

I exhaled, steadying myself.

"I just need to know he's okay."

My voice softened. "I don't have to see him. I don't have to speak to him. Just... tell me he's breathing."

Ciro had already told me Renzo was alive, but hearing it from Vincenzo... that would erase every lingering shadow of doubt, every heartbeat of fear twisting in my chest.

Vincenzo studied me.

For a long moment, I thought he might refuse.

Then—a sigh.

"Prepare me a coffee."

I blinked, taken aback. "What?"

"I'm not particularly skilled at making coffee," I admitted, hesitating. "I could ask Chiara—"

"Make it yourself. With your own hands."

His voice dropped—low, commanding.

“Go.”

I stared at him a heartbeat longer, taking in the weight behind the words.

Slowly, I inhaled.

Then I nodded once—without argument.

Without hesitation.

I slipped from the bed, bare feet brushing the carpet, the silk of my nightgown trailing behind me like a ghost of myself.

The moment the door clicked shut, the air shifted.

Corridors stretched endlessly, swallowed by shadow.

Moonlight cut through the tall windows in thin, silver bars, laying patterns across marble floors like prison markings.

I moved through it by memory alone.

Down the east staircase. Past the dining room.

Into the kitchen.

The industrial space was massive.

The espresso machine sat on the counter like something foreign.

I stared at it for a long moment.

Ten seconds. Maybe more.

Then I exhaled and reached for the beans.

My hands moved carefully as I measured the beans, but the moment I pressed the grinder—the noise shattered the silence.

Too loud.

I flinched slightly, my shoulders tensing as the machine roared to life.

Every sound in this house felt amplified at night.

Like it was meant to be heard.

I forced myself to focus.

Poured the grounds into the portafilter.

It slipped. I caught it.

Barely.

My grip tightened.

I tamped. Too hard.

Then, second-guessing myself—too soft.

I paused.

Adjusted. Pressed again.

The espresso machine hissed when I locked it in place.

Then came the extraction.

The first drops were slow.

Thick. Dark.

I frowned slightly.

It was already wrong.

I could tell.

But I didn't stop it.

I watched as the cup filled with bitter, over-extracted espresso.

Then reached for the milk.

Steamed it carefully.

Or tried to.

The steam wand sputtered slightly as I adjusted it, the milk frothing unevenly before collapsing almost immediately.

I stared at the cup.

A disaster. But it was done.

I didn't have the luxury of perfection.

Only compliance.

I placed the cup onto the saucer. Then onto the tray.

Added the spoon.

Lifted the silver tray with both hands.

And turned back toward the stairs.

The house seemed quieter now. Or maybe I was just more aware.

Every step echoed faintly against the walls as I climbed.

Halfway up the main staircase—I heard footsteps.

Quick. Urgent. Coming down.

My grip on the tray tightened slightly.

I looked up just in time to see Chiara.

She appeared at the top of the stairs and rushed past me without stopping.

Gray hair loose. Robe slipping slightly at her shoulders.

Her eyes were wide. Panicked.

Not her usual composed self. Not even close.

She didn't look at me. Didn't acknowledge me. She simply pushed past, her movements swift and purposeful.

Down the stairs in a blur, she reached the front door, unlocked it, and slipped out into the night.

The door clicked shut behind her.

Silence rushed back in, heavy and empty, as if the world itself had exhaled and held its breath.

My heart was pounding hard.

Something was wrong.

Chiara didn't run unless something was wrong.

My mind jumped immediately to the worst.

A breach. An attack.

The Spanish side?

A rival?

Someone inside the house?

Something worse?

I swallowed hard.

Forced my breathing to steady.

Then continued upward.

Step by step.

One at a time.

When I reached his door again, I knocked once and entered.

He was no longer in the chair.

My eyes shifted immediately.

Scanning.

He stood now. Leaning against the far wall.

Arms crossed. Completely composed.

As if he had never moved at all.

The room seemed smaller with him standing like that. Or maybe I just felt smaller in comparison.

I crossed the carpet carefully.

Each step quiet.

I reached the small table beside him and set the tray down.

The faint clink of porcelain broke the silence.

“Here.”

I stepped back slightly.

Waited.

His eyes dropped to the cup. Then back to me.

“Take a sip.”

I frowned, incredulous. “What—do you think I poisoned the coffee?”

“I don’t trust you, Elena. Never have,” he said, calm but razor-sharp. “

“But I need to know—just a fraction, enough—that I can rely on you. That you won’t strike in my sleep. That you won’t be bought by my enemies.”

“Prove it.”

“Take the drink.”

I lifted an eyebrow, voice defiant. “So, tell me, which would be easier for me? Strangling you in your sleep... or poisoning you?”

“Poisoning me.”

“You can’t kill me while I sleep. The nightmares don’t let me. Now drink.”

“Enough hesitation.”

I drew a slow breath and stepped forward.

I lifted the cup, fingers wrapping around the porcelain, steadying it.

My gaze met his, and for a heartbeat I wondered—was this truly a test, or something else entirely?

That hesitation was all it took. My grip faltered.

The cup tilted.

Dark liquid arced through the air, searing the carpet as it soaked into the fibers like ink that refused to be erased.

Porcelain slipped from my fingers.

It hit the floor with a sharp, final crack and shattered.

The sharp crack echoed through the room, louder than it should have been.

Louder than I wanted it to be.

For a moment, everything froze.

My breath. My thoughts.

Even the silence.

Vincenzo simply watched.

Then—he nodded once.

“I knew it.” He pushed off the wall, each step deliberate.

He passed the spreading stain and leaned one hip against the table, close enough to reach me if he wanted.

“You spilled it on purpose,” he said, voice low and measured. “So you wouldn’t have to drink it.”

The accusation hung heavy between us.

“No—”

The word rushed out before I could catch it. “It was an accident. I swear.”

My hands rose slightly, almost pleading.

“You can check the kitchen footage. I didn’t tamper with anything. I would never—”

“The cup didn’t spill in the kitchen,” he interrupted, voice low.

“It didn’t spill while you carried it up the stairs. It didn’t spill while you set it down on this table. Yet somehow... magically, it spilled the exact moment you were about to take a sip.”

His head tilted slightly, almost thoughtful.

“Don’t insult my intelligence, Elena.”

The words landed clean.

There was no room left for argument.

I stared at the shattered porcelain and the dark pool of coffee spreading across the carpet like spilled ink.

The stain grew wider by the second, seeping into the fibers, permanent.

Just like the accusation now hanging in the air between us.

My throat tightened.

There was nothing left to say.

No explanation that would reach him. No truth he cared enough to believe.

In his eyes, the matter was already decided.

I had tried to poison him. And that alone changed everything.

The weight of that realization pressed down on my chest, heavier than any bruise, heavier than anything he had ever done to me physically.

I turned away without another word.

My legs felt unsteady as I crossed the room, each step slower than the last, like my body was resisting the movement.

I reached the edge of the bed and slid in, the sheets cool against my skin.

I slipped under the duvet, pulling it up close to my jaw, letting the weight of it settle over me like a fragile shield.

I curled onto my side, facing away from him.

Fear coiled low in my stomach.

Not just about the failed coffee. Not just about his accusation.

But about what came next.

About what a man who believed I had tried to kill him might do in the quiet of the night.

He hadn't touched me in eight nights.

Not once. But that had been before.

Before suspicion.

Before betrayal—real or perceived.

Before I crossed a line he could justify reacting to.

Belief changed men like him. Belief turned restraint into permission.

Into punishment. Into retribution.

I pressed my lips together, forcing my breathing to slow.

I knew he would find a way to clean the mess of coffee on the floor.

I was too exhausted to say anything.

Sleep came slowly, dragging me down.

And when it finally claimed me, it was anything but gentle.

I was back in the bunker.

Concrete walls loomed close, damp and cold, the air thick with the metallic tang of blood and fear.

Amy. My best friend. Ruslan Baranov's younger sister. Chained to a chair.

Her breathing ragged, eyes wide, pleading.

Her lips moved—but no words reached me, or maybe I didn't want to hear them.

My hand lifted before I could stop it.

My fist moved toward her face, and suddenly I was striking—again, and again.

Each punch tore a piece of me apart, and with every hit, I hated myself more than I could bear.

Every nerve screamed to stop, but my body had already betrayed me.

Her face blossomed red and black, a brutal mosaic of blood and bone.

My knuckles throbbed from the impact, the warmth of her blood smearing across my wrists, my shirt, my skin.

And still... something inside me fractured further with every strike.

Pieces of myself shattered, never to be whole again.

Then—his voice. Masculine. Sharp. Terrifying.

“Elena—stop!”

Ruslan. Her brother. Behind me, so close I could feel his breath on my neck, his rage radiating like heat.

“Stop hitting her. Right now. That’s an order!”

I tried. I really tried. But my fists moved on their own.

And then his hand closed around my throat from behind. Iron grip.

Fingers digging in, thumb pressing into my windpipe. Cutting off air.

Cutting off thought.

“You heartless woman,” he snarled. “After years of chasing you... I finally caught you. You killed my sister.”

His grip tightened.

I clawed at his wrist.

I fought. I twisted.

Every technique I had ever learned failed.

My knee drove back, but he was unyielding.

My lungs burned.

My vision darkened at the edges, everything collapsing inward.

And then—

I woke up.

Screaming.

“Please—please, Ruslan—”

My body jerked upright.

My hands shot to my own throat, gripping at nothing, searching for a hold that wasn’t there.

My chest heaved.

Air rushed in and out in desperate, ragged bursts.

Too fast. Too shallow.

Too much.

Sweat clung to my skin.

Soaking through the silk of my nightgown, sticking it to my body like a second layer of panic.

The room spun for a second.

Then steadied.

I was here. Not there.

Not in the bunker. Not in the room. Not with Ruslan.

Just here. Alive. Barely.

My breathing hitched.

I forced my hands down slowly, pressing them against my thighs.

Trying to ground myself. Trying to remember where I was.

What was real.

The edges of the world came back into focus.

And when I looked up—he was still there.

Vincenzo.

Standing exactly where he had been before I fell asleep.

Leaning against the table.

Arms crossed. Motionless. Watching me.

His expression unreadable.

How long had I been trapped in that nightmare?

Minutes? Seconds? Or some distorted stretch of time my mind couldn't measure?

Long enough for him to see it all.

Long enough for him to witness me fracture.

The realization hit like ice water.

Sharp. Humiliating. Inescapable.

Shame flared under my skin, hotter than the fear, hotter than the dream itself.

I reacted before thought could catch up.

My hands yanked the duvet over my head, burying myself in the fabric.

It swallowed me whole.

I curled in, folding into myself, shrinking smaller, tighter.

A futile attempt to disappear—into the mattress, the sheets, the shadows, anywhere that might hide me from his gaze, from his awareness.

Even here, in this cocoon of cotton and dark, I could feel him—Vincenzo.

The weight of his presence, silent and controlled, pressing just beyond the duvet.

Watching. Judging.

My chest tightened, heart hammering like it could shatter ribs.

And yet, beneath the fear and shame, a spark of defiance lingered.

I may be broken here, but I would not let him see me fully crushed.

“Everyone has demons that haunt them at night.”

His voice came. Firm—but not cruel.

“It doesn’t define you. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

I didn’t respond.

My breathing stayed uneven beneath the fabric, the duvet muffling the sound but not calming it.

Each inhale felt too sharp. Each exhale too shaky.

The silence between us stretched.

Then—the mattress dipped.

Subtle.

But unmistakable.

He had moved. My entire body tensed instantly.

Muscles locking. Shoulders tightening.

Breath catching in my throat.

He was closer now.

Close enough that I could feel it— his presence.

His heat.

Radiating through the air, steady and unbothered.

But he didn’t touch me. Didn’t reach for me. Didn’t force anything.

Just sat there. On the edge of the bed.

“You have no friends. No family. Only a Greek mafia boss hunting you for five years, thirsting for revenge because you killed his sister.”

I lifted my head slightly from the duvet, voice low but steady.

“And a husband who has no regard for me,” I added, completing his thought.

He didn’t flinch.

“This husband of yours offers protection. Provision. Nothing more. Love... affection... I could not give you that. And I never will.”

His words cut deeper than any knife.

I shifted beneath the covers, then slowly pulled them down just enough to speak.

My throat was dry, voice hoarse.

“...Vincenzo... someday—maybe soon, maybe later—I’ll escape this marriage,” I said, each word deliberate. “And when I do... you will never find me.”

Silence.

A low hum escaped him, almost amused.

“Frankly,” I continued, gathering courage, “being on the run might suit me better than staying under this roof... than being treated like an object.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I am not Ruslan Baranov,” he said slowly.

“And I’ll say it one last time: in this lifetime, you cannot escape me. Remember the three red lines I drew the first night of our marriage. They define your place. Accept it. Carry it. Your husband will never love you—but you will remain mine.”

He moved then, a fluid, controlled motion.

“Good night, Elena.”

I watched him for a heartbeat longer before pushing the duvet down and turning onto my side to face him.

He lay perfectly still on his back, eyes closed, expression smooth and unreadable — as though he hadn’t just dismantled me with every word.

Silence wrapped around us again.

I stared up at the ceiling, tracing the faint ribbon of moonlight cutting across the beams.

My pulse gradually slowed, but the question refused to leave me.

He still hadn’t touched me.

Not once.

The realization settled in my chest like a stone.

On our wedding day, he had called me beautiful — even when I looked like I'd been dragged through hell.

When he ordered me to my knees, his cock had been rock-hard, straining desperately against his pants.

I had seen the hunger in his eyes.

Then he walked away.

To Violet.

And ever since... nothing.

No hands sliding over my skin. No rough kisses. No demands for my mouth or my body.

Just this icy, calculated distance.

The thought twisted inside me.

Was I really so repulsive to him?

Or was he deliberately withholding himself — punishing me by letting me feel the constant ache of being unwanted while he gave everything to her?

The thought burned.

I shifted closer on the bed.

The distance between us felt smaller than it should have.

He was there—close enough that I could see the slow rise and fall of his chest in the dim light, the steady stillness he wore like armor.

I hesitated.

Then—

“Is the child Violet carries... truly another man's?”

My voice faltered, softer than I intended.

I swallowed hard, forcing out the rest. “I need the truth. Please.”

For a long moment, he said nothing.

Then, without even opening his eyes, his voice came—calm, and cold.

“I already told you.”

“I don’t like being disturbed... not when I’m trying to sleep.”

The dismissal should have been enough. Should have shut me down.

It didn’t.

I pushed myself up on one elbow, the mattress shifting beneath me.

A foolish, dangerous move.

I knew it the moment I moved.

“It’s... hard to believe you’ve never slept with her,” I said, my voice uncertain.

“I have not,” his reply was clipped and cold.

“I’ve already answered that. Stop asking questions I’ve already put to rest.”

“I’ve always given Violet the freedom to sleep with whoever she wants because I cannot give her that myself.”

His voice dropped into a low warning. “Now be silent. Push me further, and you’ll witness exactly what I’m capable of.”

For the first time, I believed him.

I didn’t know why—maybe because he had no reason to lie.

But a thought lingered, heavy and persistent.

If he never slept with her... why not?

Was it a choice... or something else?

Was his cock useless?

Impotent?

My chest tightened.

Was that the real reason he had never touched me?

Because he couldn't?

The thought hit me like a slow, sickening wave.

He had told me he was violated in the past — repeatedly.

Was that when it happened?

Was that the injury that left him unable to have sex?

Was that why he stayed so cold and distant, even when his body had clearly wanted me?

The questions spun faster in my mind, each one sharper than the last.

If he was truly impotent... then everything he had threatened suddenly felt far too real.

Before I could think better of it—I moved.

My leg swung over his body.

And I settled astride him. Knees bracketing his waist.

Hands landing on his bare chest to steady myself.

The contact sent a shock straight through me.

His eyes snapped open.

The shift in him was instant.

Controlled—but not as controlled as he wanted it to be.

For a single, fractured second—something slipped.

His pupils widened. His breath hitched.

His hands betrayed him.

They twitched, sliding instinctively toward my thighs, palms hovering just above my skin as if fighting the urge to touch.

Then he stopped himself, jaw locked tight.

“What are you doing?” he growled, voice rough and uneven.

“I need to know if my husband's dick is—”

His fingers closed around my wrists in a bruising grip.

“Get off me, Elena.” The command sliced through the air.

I didn’t flinch. Didn’t pull back.

“No.”

His grip tightened slightly.

Just enough to remind me—he could end this.

His eyes darkened.

“Do not ignite a fire you won’t be able to control. If I start... I will not stop.”

“Start,” I challenged.

I shifted my weight slowly, rolling my hips once in a teasing grind.

The movement pressed my core firmly against the thick, rigid line of his cock, feeling every inch of him straining hard beneath the thin fabric of his sleep pants and the silk of my gown.

My pulse spiked, a sharp rush of heat flooding between my thighs.

It wasn’t just fear — it was the dangerous thrill of pushing him, of feeling exactly how much he wanted me despite everything he said.

My heart hammered violently.

What if he snapped?

What if he grabbed me, flipped me over, and punished me for daring to tease him like this?

The thought made my stomach twist with nervous excitement.

But I didn’t stop.

“Elena,” he growled, the sound rough and strained, like he was barely holding himself back. “You have never been touched by a man.”

“So what?” I whispered, pressing my palms flat against the hard, carved planes of his chest.

His heart was hammering — fast, erratic, completely at odds with his controlled voice.

Beneath me, his cock jerked and thickened even more, pressing urgently against my pussy as if it had a mind of its own.

“The only reason I haven’t buried myself inside you and fucked you raw since the first night you shared this bed,” he rasped, hands clenching into fists at his sides, veins standing out on his forearms, “is because I won’t be your first. I don’t deserve you... and you don’t deserve a man like me.”

I didn’t flinch.

His body was screaming the opposite of his words.

“So you’ll never fuck me?” I asked softly, hips still subtly rocking against his throbbing length.

The silence crackled between us.

“Then why make me sleep here every night?”

My fingers dug lightly into his chest. “Why keep me in your bed if you refuse to claim me?”

His chest rose and fell beneath my hands.

Steady again.

Like he was regaining control.

In one fluid movement, he reversed our positions.

My back hit the mattress.

Air left my lungs in a sharp breath.

Before I could recover—his weight came down over me.

Dominant.

His hand closed around my wrists in one swift motion.

Before I could react, he dragged them above my head and pinned them against the pillow with a single hand—firm, unyielding, leaving no room to move.

I stilled beneath him.

Completely immobilized.

His body hovered over mine, close enough that the heat between us became undeniable, pressing, suffocating, impossible to ignore.

“Just because I choose not to take you like this...”

His voice dropped, low and dangerous, brushing against my skin like a warning.

“...doesn’t mean you should keep testing my restraint.”

My breath hitched.

His free hand slid down my side—slow, deliberate—until it found the hem of my nightgown.

He gathered the silk in his fist.

Then yanked upward in one sharp motion.

The fabric flipped over my head.

I lifted my arms instinctively to help him strip it off completely.

Cool air kissed my bare skin.

No bra. No panties.

Just me—shaved, exposed, vulnerable.

His gaze dropped.

And stayed.

I watched his throat work as he swallowed.

His eyes traced me—first my breasts, nipples already tight from the chill and something darker; then the dip of my waist; then lower, to the smooth, bare mound between my thighs.

Heat flooded my face.

My core clenched involuntarily under his stare.

He looked back up. Met my eyes.

For one terrifying heartbeat I waited for rejection—for him to roll off, to walk away, to prove once again that Violet was the only woman who could make him feel anything real.

Instead his mouth crashed down on mine.

Hard. Hungry.

Teeth clashed.

Tongues tangled.

He kissed like a man who'd been starving himself for weeks—weeks of lying beside me, smelling me, feeling my heat through silk and sheets without ever taking what he wanted.

His hips rolled once, grinding the thick ridge of his erection against my bare sex.

I gasped into his mouth.

The friction sent sparks racing up my spine.

His hand—the one not pinning my wrists—slid up my ribs, cupped one breast, thumb brushing the peak.

I arched into the touch without thinking.

He groaned against my lips—low, raw—then broke the kiss just long enough to drag his mouth down my throat, teeth grazing my pulse point.

He released my wrists.

Both hands went to my thighs. Pushed them wider.

I tensed instinctively—legs clamping together before I could stop the reflex.

He paused. Looked down at me.

“It’ll hurt less if you’re soaked,” he growled, voice deep and gravelly.

“I need you relaxed and dripping for me. Trust me on this... I’m going to make your first time so fucking good you’ll be begging for more.”

The words were soft.

Almost tender.

I swallowed.

Nodded once—small, shaky.

He waited.

Slowly—agonizingly—I let my knees fall open.

His hands guided them wider—gentle this time, thumbs stroking the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

When I was fully exposed he simply stared again.

Not judging. Not mocking.

Just... looking. Like he was memorizing every inch.

“You smell so good,” he murmured—almost reverent.

Heat flooded my face.

My thighs trembled.

He lowered his head.

I felt the first brush of his lips against my inner thigh—soft, deliberate—then higher.

Hot breath fanned across my core.

My hips jerked before I could stop them.

“Vincenzo—”

“Quiet.” One word.

Commanding.

Then his mouth was on me.

Slow at first—lips parting me, tongue tracing the seam in one long, languid stroke.

I cried out—sharp, surprised.

My hands flew to his hair, fingers tangling in dark strands.

He groaned against me at the pull.

The vibration sent another shockwave through my body.

He licked again—deeper this time.

Circled my clit with the flat of his tongue.

Sucked gently.

Then harder.

My back bowed off the mattress.

A sob tore from my throat.

He didn't stop.

One hand slid up to pin my hip when I tried to writhe away from the intensity.

The other pushed two fingers inside me—slow, careful, stretching me open while his mouth worked relentless circles.

The stretch burned for a second—then melted into something hotter, wetter, better.

I was dripping.

I could hear it—obscene, slick sounds every time his fingers thrust.

Could feel it coating his hand, my thighs, the sheets.

He curled his fingers.

Then he found it — that perfect spot.

The moment he stroked it, stars exploded behind my eyelids.

Pleasure surged through me like liquid fire, building higher and higher with every thrust of his fingers.

My hips bucked wildly against his hand as I hurtled toward the edge.

“Oh my God — Vincenzo!” I screamed, my voice breaking. “Yes! Fuck — right there!”

I came hard—sudden, shattering—thighs clamping around his head, back arching, a broken cry ripping from my throat.

He didn't stop until the aftershocks faded.

When he finally lifted his head his lips were glistening.

Eyes black with hunger.

He rose over me—slow, predatory.

Kicked his pants off completely.

His cock sprang free—heavy, thick, veins standing out, the tip already leaking.

My breath caught.

He settled between my thighs.

One hand guided himself to my entrance—nudged just the head inside.

I tensed again.

He paused.

Leaned down.

Kissed me—soft this time.

Tasting myself on his tongue.

“Breathe,” he whispered against my lips. “I’ve got you.”

Then he pushed forward.

The stretch burned.

Tears pricked my eyes.

He stopped halfway.

Kissed my temple. My cheek.

The corner of my mouth.

“You’re doing so good,” he murmured—voice wrecked.

“Just a little more.”

Then he drove his cock deep inside me with one powerful thrust, seating himself fully until his hips pressed flush against mine.

A sharp gasp tore from my throat.

I swore I could feel the thick head of his cock pressing into my lower belly — so deep, so big, it felt like he was claiming every inch of me from the inside.

He stayed still.

Let me adjust.

Forehead pressed to mine.

Breathing ragged.

When my hips finally shifted, testing him, a low, rough groan rumbled from his chest.

Then he moved.

Slow and controlled at first — long, measured strokes that dragged every thick inch of his cock almost all the way out before sinking back in deep, letting me feel every ridge, every vein.

The sharp burn slowly dissolved into liquid heat, pleasure coiling tight and heavy in my core.

My nails dug harder into his shoulders.

“I want more,” I whispered, desperate.

He gave it to me.

His rhythm quickened, hips snapping forward with growing force.

The bed creaked loudly beneath us as skin slapped wetly against skin.

He fucked me harder, deeper, each thrust driving me closer to the edge with raw intensity.

I wrapped my legs around his waist—pulling him deeper.

He buried his face in my neck, teeth scraping over my thundering pulse point.

“Mine,” he growled, the word vibrating against my skin like a brand.

That single possessive claim sent me spiraling.

I shattered around him for the second time, my pussy clenching violently around his thick cock as I screamed his name, body trembling uncontrollably.

He followed seconds later.

His hips jerked, rhythm breaking as a deep, raw groan ripped from his chest.

He thrust deep one final time and came hard, flooding me with hot, thick spurts of his release.

We stayed like that—sweaty, trembling, tangled.

His weight pressed me into the mattress.

For the first time in weeks I didn't feel like a prisoner.

I felt claimed.

And terrifyingly, dangerously wanted.

He lifted his head.

Looked down at me.

No words.

Just his thumb brushing a tear from my cheek I hadn't realized had fallen.

Then he kissed me again—slow, deep, almost tender.

Exhaustion crashed down like a tide.

Then darkness.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 13[3,533 words]

Chapter 13

ELENA

I didn't know if I passed out or simply slept.

When my eyes opened again, sunlight cut sharply through the curtains, flooding the room with morning light.

Vincenzo was no longer beside me.

The bed was empty, the sheets on his side cool to the touch.

He wasn't in the room at all.

The space felt strangely hollow, as if the intense heat of last night had never happened.

He had slipped away while I slept, leaving nothing behind but the faint ache between my thighs and the memory of his growl against my neck.

The room still smelled of sex—musk, sweat, the faint tang of release.

My body ached in the best way—sore between my thighs, tender in spots I hadn't known could be tender.

I sat up slowly, a soft wince escaping as my body protested the movement.

The deep soreness between my thighs sent a fresh spark of heat through me.

A shy, secret smile touched my lips.

I had always heard sex was good.

I had read the words, imagined it in the dark, but never truly believed how consuming it could be.

Now I knew.

It wasn't just pleasure.

It was devastating.

I wanted more.

I wanted him again — that thick, relentless fullness stretching me open, the way my body had surrendered so completely, the way the entire world had narrowed down to nothing but him.

I rose on trembling legs and reached for the nightgown crumpled on the floor.

As I pulled the silk over my head, the fabric brushed against my still-sensitive skin, sending little shivers racing through me.

I should clean up.

The thought came to me belatedly.

I eased out of Vincenzo's room and gently shut the door, turning my back on it.

Barefoot and still flushed, I walked down the long corridor, the cool marble floor sending little shocks through my soles with every step.

The cold only made me more aware of the deep, tender ache between my legs — a constant, throbbing reminder of what he had done to me.

The house was quieter now.

I pushed my door open and stepped inside, already turning the moment over in my head—

Then I stopped.

Everything in me went still.

Because she was there.

Of all people—the one person I never expected to find in my room.

Violet.

She stood in the center of my bedroom like she belonged there.

Pale silk robe tied loosely at her waist, dark hair falling around her shoulders in soft waves.

Her skin looked almost translucent under the light, her expression fragile—carefully arranged to appear fragile.

“Oh my goodness!”

She gasped, shrinking back a step as though I had caught her in something scandalous.

“I was just... wandering,” she said quickly, placing a hand lightly against her chest. “Out of boredom. I didn’t realize this was your room.”

I didn’t move.

Just looked at her.

She knew.

She absolutely knew.

Of all the doors in this villa—of all the rooms she could have wandered into—she had chosen mine.

And somehow, she expected me to believe it was an accident.

“I see,” I said at last.

My voice came out calm.

Still carrying the roughness of sleep—and something sharper.

“You can leave now.”

Her expression shifted instantly.

As if she had been waiting for that exact tone.

Her face crumpled into something soft.

Vulnerable.

Perfectly tragic.

“Oh... Elena...”

Her voice trembled as she stepped forward, slow and hesitant.

Like she was approaching something fragile.

“You stole him from me.”

Her voice was quiet—too quiet.

Soft enough to pass for hurt, if you didn’t listen too closely.

“And yet... you look at me like I’m the villain.”

She took a step forward. Then another.

Closing the space between us inch by inch.

“Why?” she asked, her tone almost trembling, almost sincere.

“I’ve never done anything to you.” A faint pause, her gaze locking onto mine.

“If anything...”

“You’re the one who took everything from me.”

I let out a quiet breath, more irritation than surprise.

“No one hates you, Violet. You’re not nearly that important.”

“Stop being dramatic.”

She was standing in my room.

In my space.

And somehow, she was the one looking at me like I didn’t belong—like I had walked into her life and torn it apart.

Like she knew exactly what had happened between Vincenzo and me last night.

I stepped fully inside the room.

She lifted a hand to her face, dabbing delicately at the corner of her eye.

A tear slipped free.

“I’m just a weak woman with a failing heart and very little time left,” Violet said, her voice soft and trembling with delicate sorrow.

Her hand drifted to her stomach, fingers brushing over the barely-there curve,

“It has always been my greatest wish to be Vincenzo’s wife one day. Now that I’m carrying his child... you don’t need to hate me anymore, Elena. We must raise this baby together.”

I’d be a fool to believe a single word coming out of this woman’s mouth.

“Get out.”

My voice cut through the room like ice.

Violet blinked, clearly caught off guard.

She hadn’t expected resistance.

“Elena, please—”

“Get. Out.” I took a step forward, my tone turning lethal. “Or I will make you.”

She stared at me for a long, tense second.

The air in the room grew thick and heavy.

Then the mask slipped.

The tears vanished.

The trembling lip steadied.

The fragile, delicate woman I had been watching disappeared in an instant.

In her place stood someone far colder.

Far more dangerous.

Her spine straightened, erasing every trace of vulnerability.

Her chin lifted. Shoulders squared.

The performance peeled away layer by layer until only calculation remained.

“I see you finally managed to whore yourself to my man,” Violet said, her tone laced with disgust. “You stink of sex and him.”

She stepped closer, eyes narrowing with barely contained fury.

“Vincenzo has never fucked me. Not once. I tried everything — even sent beautiful women to his bed — but he never touched them. Yet you... you disgusting slut somehow succeeded where I failed.”

Her voice turned icy.

“Don’t celebrate too soon.”

“He will never love you. He will never cherish you the way he cherishes me. If both of us were drowning, he would save me without hesitation.”

“This is only the beginning, Elena. I will win this war. I will humiliate you the same way you humiliated me on my wedding day. My family and my clan are already planning. We will make you suffer.”

I let a small, lazy smile touch my lips.

“Why does it bother you that I slept with my husband, Elena? It’s a marriage. What did you expect?”

I walked past her without hurry, letting the fabric of my nightgown shift against my thighs—still sensitive, still carrying the lingering ache of him.

“Of course I smell like him.”

I stopped near the mirror, glancing at my reflection before looking back at her.

“And I’m still sore.”

A small pause. “Deliciously sore.”

Her jaw tightened.

“I suppose it’s not my fault he chose to marry me,” I continued, voice calm, almost conversational, “and left you standing at the altar in front of every powerful family in Europe.”

I tilted my head slightly.

“If you were half as important to him as everyone pretends, he wouldn’t have humiliated you, your father, and your entire bloodline on what was supposed to be your biggest day.”

Her fists clenched at her sides.

Knuckles whitening. Shoulders trembling.

“If only you knew how powerful my family truly is,” Violet sneered. “You’d be on your knees begging for mercy. The entire Spanish mafia has a bounty on your head.”

I laughed softly, unfazed.

“Since you’re so eager to boast about your family’s power, let me tell you about mine. Ruslan Baranov — surely you’ve heard the name. A man more powerful than every mafia

family in Italy combined. He's had a bounty on me for six long years. Hundreds of assassins. Unlimited resources. All dedicated to hunting me down."

I tilted my head, eyes locked on hers.

"Yet here I stand. I've killed more of his men than he can keep track of."

My smile turned icy. "It's been more than two weeks since Vincenzo married me and left you standing humiliated in your wedding dress in front of the entire underworld. Your precious Spanish clan is furious... but they still haven't found me."

Her eyes flickered with uncertainty for a split second.

"Violet," I said quietly, voice laced with warning, "I'm not the soft, fragile woman you think I am. I'm a dangerous killer. If you're smart... you'll stay the hell away from me. Completely."

The silence that followed was thick.

Then she stepped closer.

I moved back—not out of fear, but refusal.

I wouldn't let her control the space between us.

"Stop coming closer."

My voice came out flat. "If you're looking for someone to hurt you," I continued, colder now, "find someone else."

A beat.

"And if this is some kind of setup..."

My gaze flicked briefly to the CCTV camera mounted in the corner—just long enough for her to notice.

"It won't work."

Silence stretched again, tighter this time.

I turned, finished with her games, and twisted the doorknob.

The door creaked open.

"For the last time—" My gaze pinned her, unwavering.

“Get out. Now.”

She didn’t move at first.

Instead, she smiled.

Cruel. Knowing.

Like she’d said exactly what she came to say.

She stepped past me—then paused at the doorway.

Glanced back over her shoulder.

“I will ruin you, Elena.”

“I will break you so completely that you’ll wish you had never been born. You’ll lose everything — including him.”

Then she walked out—rage trailing behind her like fire.

The fabric of her robe whispered against the floor as she moved..

And she left the door open behind her.

I stood there for a moment with my back pressed against the door, breathing slow and controlled.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

My pulse steadied gradually.

But my thoughts didn’t.

Why the hell was she behaving like that?

Was she trying to provoke me?

Push me into reacting—so the cameras could capture it?

So she could twist it? So she could present me as unstable?

Dangerous? Unfit?

The thought lingered.

My jaw tightened.

Either way—it didn't matter.

She wasn't important.

I exhaled slowly, letting the thought slip through my fingers.

I pushed her—every trace of her—out of my mind.

The room felt quieter now, emptier, as I crossed it in measured steps.

The bathroom door stood slightly ajar, a sliver of shadow cutting across the floor.

I pushed it open, stepped inside, and closed it behind me with a soft, final snick.

I turned on the shower.

Steam rose fast, fogging the mirror.

I stripped the nightgown off—silk pooling at my feet like spilled moonlight—and stepped under the spray.

Water hit my shoulders. Ran in rivulets down my back, my breasts, between my thighs.

I closed my eyes.

And remembered.

His mouth on me—slow at first, then ravenous.

The way his tongue had circled my clit with ruthless precision.

The vibration of his groan against my core .

Then his fingers—two, then three—curling inside while his lips sucked harder.

The stretch.

The burn turning to liquid heat.

My thighs shaking.

My back arching off the mattress.

The scream I couldn't hold back when I came—hard, shattering, soaking his face and the sheets.

The thrusts—slow at first, letting me feel every inch dragging out and sliding back in.

Faster.

Harder.

Deeper.

I pressed my palms to the tile.

Let the water pound against my back.

I didn't regret it.

Not one second.

He was brutal. Possessive. Cruel more often than not.

But last night he'd been something else.

Hungry. Focused. Almost reverent.

He'd made my first time unforgettable—just like he promised.

And the memory of it—of him inside me, of the way my body had opened for him, of the pleasure that had drowned out every fear and humiliation—burned brighter than any suffering he had ever imposed.

I soaped my skin slowly. Washed away sweat. Traces of him.

The faint stickiness between my thighs.

But I couldn't wash away the ache.

The soreness.

The quiet, dangerous satisfaction.

I shut off the water and stepped out of the shower, skin still flushed from the heat and the echo of everything that had happened since last night.

Steam clung to the mirror in thick, curling waves, blurring my reflection into something less like myself.

For a moment, I didn't recognize the woman staring back at me.

Hair damp. Eyes slightly shadowed. Lips still faintly swollen from sleep... and from him.

I looked away first.

Reaching for the thick white towel on the heated rack, I wrapped it around myself.

The fabric was warm, plush, and faintly scented with lavender.

The comfort was almost unsettling, how something so soft could exist in a place like this.

Water dripped from the ends of my hair, tracing cold paths down my spine as I moved across the heated marble floor toward the wardrobe.

Every step felt too loud in the silence.

Too exposed.

The wardrobe doors opened without a sound.

I chose a black boyshorts.

A matching bra.

I let the towel fall.

Cool air kissed my damp skin, raising goosebumps along my arms and spine.

I slipped into the underwear first.

Hooked the bra next.

The straps adjusted easily over my shoulders.

I pulled on high-waisted black leggings, then reached for an oversized charcoal hoodie.

It swallowed me. Exactly as intended.

I hadn't even fully settled into the space of my body—when the door exploded inward.

The sound shattered the quiet.

Wood splintered.

My entire body went rigid.

Vincenzo.

He stormed inside, his black shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, his posture rigid with barely contained violence.

His jaw was locked so tightly a muscle jumped along his cheek, eyes scanning the room with predatory precision.

Then they locked onto me.

Everything in him sharpened.

He crossed the distance in three strides.

Fast.

Before I could react—his hand closed around my throat.

“Explain to me what you did to Violet that made her bleed.”

His voice was lethal.

Each word carved from ice and fury.

“What?”

The word left me on instinct.

Confusion cutting through the shock.

“Answer me.”

His grip tightened just slightly.

Not enough to choke. Enough to remind me he could.

“Did you hit her? Push her?”

His thumb shifted, pressing lightly against the pulse at my throat.

“She passed out—bleeding between her legs—and the last thing she said before she went under was your name.”

For a moment—my mind stalled.

“You’re squeezing too hard... I can’t breathe,” I said, my voice shaking.

For a moment, the anger in his face softened—just enough for his grip to ease. A fraction.

But he didn’t let go.

His hand stayed on my throat—firm, warm, unyielding.

His thumb pressed against my pulse point, feeling the frantic rhythm beneath his skin.

“I gave you three red lines,” he said, voice low and deadly, “and you just crossed one.”

He leaned closer, eyes burning into mine.

“You hurt Violet... because you think her baby is mine, isn’t that it?”

“I did not touch her!”

The words snapped out of me, cutting through the tension in the room.

My breath hitched slightly with the force of it, close enough that it stirred the dark strands of his hair across his forehead.

For a fraction of a second—he faltered.

“Violet is trying to set me up,” I continued, my voice steady now, even with his hand still locked around my throat.

Not pleading.

“I didn’t lay a finger on her.”

A pause.

“Yes, she came into my room and tried to get a reaction. I didn’t give her one. If she got hurt, that’s not on me. The cameras show everything—you can check for yourself.”

His eyes searched mine.

Merciless.

Searching for something to justify the conclusion he had already drawn.

“If Violet loses that child because of this,” he said at last, his voice low, and lethal.

“I will make sure you never conceive. I’ll see to it that a surgeon removes your uterus so you can never carry a child—not in this lifetime, not ever again.”

The threat landed deep.

Not just in my ears. But in my chest.

In my ribs. Between my thoughts.

Like a blade driven straight into something vital.

For a moment—the world narrowed.

His hand was still at my throat.

But the pressure no longer mattered.

It was the words.

The intention behind them.

That cut.

Then—he released me.

But his eyes—they stayed on me.

Burning. Cold. Violent.

Like he wanted to tear me apart with his bare hands.

Then—without another word—he turned.

And walked out.

The door slammed behind him with enough force that the frame rattled violently.

Silence rushed back in to fill the space he left behind.

I stood there for a second.

Unmoving.

Breathing shallow.

My throat still remembered the pressure.

But it wasn't the physical pain that caught up to me.

It was something deeper.

A twisting ache that clawed its way up from my chest until it settled behind my ribs.

This was the same man who had been inside me last night.

Who had kissed me like I was something he couldn't afford to lose.

Who had groaned my name against my skin like it mattered.

Who had held me after—his forehead pressed to mine.

Breathing unsteady.

Like I was something more than just a pawn in whatever game he was playing.

And now—he was ready to destroy me.

To mutilate me.

Because another woman had pointed at me.

My knees gave out.

I didn't fight it. Didn't catch myself.

Just slid down the wall until I hit the floor.

The carpet pressed against my back as I sank into it, hoodie pooling around me, arms wrapping instinctively around my middle like I could hold myself together through sheer force alone.

Disappointment tasted like copper in my mouth.

Disappointment in the man I had allowed myself to see differently.

In the version of him I had let myself believe in—if only for a moment.

My chest tightened.

Last night returned to me in fragments.

The way I had climbed onto him. How I had taken the first step.

How I had let him in. Let him take what he wanted. Let him be my first.

I told myself it didn't matter—that it was just bodies, just need.

Just a husband and wife finally consummating a dry marriage.

Now... shame coils through me.

I shouldn't have.

I regret it.

I should have slept like I always did these past eight months.

Because the man who buried himself inside me last night—the man who whispered how good I smelled, kissed me like obsession incarnate—is now the same man threatening to steal my ability to conceive.

All because of his mistress's pathetic lies.

I pressed my forehead against my knees.

Tight.

Breathing uneven.

My teeth sank into the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood.

Something hollow opening up where something else had just been crushed.

Goosebumps rising along my arms despite the warmth of the room.

I couldn't stay here any longer.

Not under his roof, not within reach of his decisions, his rage.

Not after everything I had endured, not after the line he had just crossed so easily.

Something in me had finally given way—not in weakness, but in clarity.

If Violet lost that child, he wouldn't hesitate.

He would have me taken to a hospital, pinned to a table, and carved open like I had no say over my own body.

He would take my future from me—my ability to ever conceive—because he chose to believe another woman over me.

The thought settled heavily in my chest, not as panic, but as something colder.

This was where it ended.

I had stayed through too much already.

Through humiliation, through control, through the slow erosion of my own boundaries.

I had told myself I could endure it, that there was a reason to stay, that I could manage him, understand him, survive him.

But this... this was not something to survive.

It was something to leave.

I was done being patient.

Done waiting for him to see me, to choose me, to be anything other than what he had just shown himself to be.

I would leave him.

Completely. Permanently.

It didn't matter how much power he held, how many men he commanded, how tightly guarded his world was—none of it mattered.

I would find a way out, and once I did, I would never come back.

Never.

I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring the weakness still lingering in my body, and moved toward the bed.

Dropping into a crouch, I pulled my bag closer and began to pack with steady movements.

Cash, neatly bundled.

A burner phone, wiped clean of any trace.

The fake passport, still hidden in the inner lining.

A Glock, wrapped carefully in cloth, the magazine already loaded.

One change of clothes—dark, simple.

And the knife, small and sharp, taped into the seam where no one would think to look.

I checked everything twice, making sure nothing was missing, nothing out of place.

This wasn't impulsive or reckless.

It was a final decision.

I sat on the edge of the mattress, the weight of the bag pressing into my hands as I stared at the door he'd walked through just moments ago.

The door that had slammed shut behind him with the kind of finality that left no room for soft endings.

And something inside me—something fragile I hadn't realized I was still holding onto—snapped clean.

There was no going back to whatever last night had been.

No pretending it meant something he would honor.

He could keep his threats.

Keep Violet.

Keep the twisted satisfaction of using me as collateral for a past I had no part in—punishing me for my father's sins.

But he would never control my future.

Not this part of me. Not the part that refused to be erased.

Then I rose slowly, my body still taut.

I picked up the bag, its weight settling heavily in my hand—along with the knowledge of what it meant.

If he caught me trying to escape...

It was one of the red lines he had drawn. One he would not forgive.

I tightened my grip and walked toward the window.

The curtains parted with a quiet sweep, and light flooded in—soft, golden, almost gentle.

The lake stretched out beyond the glass, perfectly still.

This very night, I'm leaving.

It doesn't matter how much it hurts to walk away.

It doesn't matter where I end up—even if it's back on the streets, hunger clawing at my insides, running again... always looking over my shoulder, making sure Ruslan Baranov's men don't catch up to me.

I'll still go.

Even if I carry him with me.

The memory of him.

The weight of what happened between us—something I can't undo, something that will follow me long after I'm gone.

I turn away from the window, letting the last of the light fall behind me, the lake slipping out of sight.

The room grows quiet.

Still.

And I wait.

Not helplessly—never that.

My mind is already working, running through every step, every exit, every blind spot.

I mapped this place out from the moment I stepped into it.

Counted doors. Watched patterns. Learned the guards.

By the time darkness falls... I'll be gone.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 14[4,487 words]

Chapter 14

ELENA

The stolen Fiat roared north out of Lombardy, engine screaming as I pushed it past one hundred forty kilometers per hour on the narrow two-lane highway.

Old habits really do die hard.

Five years of running had refined this instinct down to muscle memory—different cars, different plates, different borders, all blending into the landscape as though I had never passed through them at all.

This one belonged to a middle-aged man who had made the mistake of trusting routine.

He had left the engine idling outside a gas station in Como, keys still in the ignition while he stepped inside to pay.

A perfect opening.

I had slammed myself into the driver's seat, shifted fast, and pulled away before the pump even had a chance to stop.

No plates swapped.

No time for that.

No room for error.

The road ahead stretched like a black ribbon cutting through pine forest and moonlit hills.

The air was crisp, cold enough to sting through the cracked window, carrying the scent of trees and distant water.

Switzerland was less than forty kilometers away.

Close.

Close enough to taste.

My fake Schengen passport—Italian identity, clean, flawless, embedded with a biometric chip that would pass any scan—was tucked inside the lining of my jacket.

I had memorized every detail of that identity.

Date of birth. Place of issue.

Every lie layered so precisely that even I could almost believe it.

Once I crossed, everything changed.

Zurich.

Then Berlin.

Then anywhere the Schengen zone stretched.

I had done it before.

I could do it again.

But this time—it felt different.

After Vincenzo had threatened me that morning—telling me he would cut me open and remove my uterus if Violet lost the baby—I hadn't seen him again until night, when I finally escaped his heavily guarded mansion.

I hadn't brought the phone I had bought after Vincenzo married me; I feared there could be trackers hidden in its casing, or code embedded deep enough to betray me.

And I knew a man like Vincenzo.

The moment he realized I had escaped, every resource he had would be unleashed.

Every satellite he owned. Every contact. Every man in his employ. Every corner of his power would activate in pursuit of me.

My grip tightened around the steering wheel.

Knuckles whitening as the leather creaked beneath my fingers.

I realized I had probably overstepped two of his sacred boundaries—one technically, but in his eyes, two of the three were broken.

The first: hurting Violet in her condition.

The second: I had dared to escape.

I couldn't risk being caught; if he found me, the outcome would be catastrophic.

My stomach turned violently at the thought.

I pressed my foot harder on the accelerator.

The engine roared louder in protest.

The Fiat surged forward, tires gripping the asphalt as the road began to curve more sharply.

The forest thickened on both sides, trees closing in like silent witnesses.

Headlights cut through the darkness, carving twin tunnels into the unknown.

Each turn felt sharper.

Each bend more dangerous.

The chassis shuddered under the strain, rattling as though the car itself might fall apart beneath me.

And part of me—a reckless, defiant part—didn't care.

Didn't care if the next turn sent me careening off the road.

Didn't care if the tires slipped, if the metal crumpled, if the car became nothing more than a twisted shell at the bottom of a ravine.

Better that.

Better a sudden end here—than being strapped to a table under his control.

After what felt like hours—but was probably closer to twenty minutes—the border signs appeared ahead.

My foot eased off the gas.

The engine's roar softened.

My heart, however, did not.

It slammed against my ribs, each beat louder than the last.

The checkpoint came into full view.

Two lanes.

Four border officers standing under harsh floodlights that turned the night into something sterile and exposed.

Automatic rifles hung low across their chests.

Their posture was relaxed—but not careless.

Alert. Watching.

Two cars ahead of me.

A sedan.

A compact hatchback.

Each one inching forward toward inspection.

My hands tightened slightly on the wheel as I slowed the Fiat to match the line.

Every second stretched.

Every breath felt too loud.

This was it.

The moment between running and being caught.

Between freedom and consequence.

I kept my face neutral.

My posture calm. My expression controlled.

But inside—everything waited.

Because whatever happened next—would decide whether I disappeared into the world.

Or was dragged back into his.

The first driver—a middle-aged man in a suit—was waved through with little more than a glance and a brief exchange.

He handed over his passport, nodded a few times, and within half a minute the officer stamped something and stepped aside.

His taillights shrank into the distance, slipping across the border and into Switzerland as if nothing could touch him.

The second vehicle—a compact hatchback carrying a young couple—wasn't so lucky.

They were pulled aside.

The female officer gestured them over while another opened the rear door.

Questions floated faintly through the night air, carried on the cold breeze.

“Purpose of travel?”

“Business in Zurich.”

“Duration of stay?”

“Three days.”

“Open the trunk, please.”

The sound of gloves snapping echoed sharply.

Flashlights cut through the darkness, sweeping across luggage, bags, the interior of the car.

A German Shepherd moved in slow, practiced circles around the vehicle—sniffing, pausing, circling again.

Its handler watched closely.

Then—the dog sat.

Clear.

The couple was waved through moments later, relief visible even from a distance as their car rolled forward and disappeared into the night.

My turn.

I exhaled once—slow, controlled—before inching the Fiat forward.

The red line approached.

I stopped.

Engine idling. Window lowered. Breathing even.

Face neutral. Eyes forward.

I could feel it—the weight of being watched. Measured. Assessed.

Two officers approached.

One younger. One older.

Both composed.

Both trained.

“Passport and registration, please.”

I reached for the glove box, fingers steady despite the tension coiling in my stomach.

I handed over the forged Italian passport and the vehicle documents—everything carefully arranged, everything stolen and repurposed.

The younger officer flipped open the passport.

Scanned it.

A pause.

A small green light flickered on the device.

No alarm. No flag.

Nothing.

“Purpose of travel?”

“Visiting family in Lucerne,” I said smoothly, my voice even, almost disinterested. “Short weekend.”

The lie rolled off my tongue easily.

The older officer didn't look at the passport.

He looked at me.

His gaze lingered longer than necessary—studying, dissecting, searching for something just beneath the surface.

“Step out of the vehicle, ma'am.”

My stomach dropped.

Just slightly.

“Why?” I kept my tone light. Curious.. “The others didn't have to.”

“Routine check,” he replied without inflection. “Please exit the car.”

I unbuckled slowly.

Took my time. Opened the door. Stepped out.

Hands visible.

Posture relaxed—at least on the outside.

The younger officer moved in first, performing a quick but thorough pat-down. Professional. Efficient.

Searching for weapons, contraband, anything that could justify escalation.

He found nothing.

Meanwhile, the older officer circled the Fiat, flashlight sweeping across the underside, checking the chassis, the wheel wells, the trunk.

Looking for anything.

Anything at all.

I stood still.

Breathing measured.

Heart pounding so loudly it felt like it might betray me.

Then—a third officer appeared.

Older.

More senior.

His uniform carried subtle distinctions—epaulets, insignia, authority that didn't need to be announced.

He wasn't looking at the car.

He was looking at me. Phone pressed to his ear.

Listening.

Processing.

Then his gaze sharpened.

His eyes flicked from my face to the screen in his hand.

Back to me.

Comparing. Matching.

My pulse stuttered.

Oh God.

No.

The border gate stayed down.

A small chance appeared.

I could move. I could run.

Step on the gas, smash through, and hope they didn't react fast enough for me to get into the forest ahead.

Smash past the barrier and pray they hesitated long enough for me to disappear into the forest ahead.

But bullets would follow.

They wouldn't hesitate if I forced their hand.

The senior officer lowered the phone.

“Please step this way, ma’am.”

“Am I being detained?” I asked, keeping my voice calm

He didn’t answer.

“Ma’am. Step this way.”

Before I could comply—a hand seized my right arm.

Rough.

Handcuffs—tight, unforgiving, cutting into my skin.

Adrenaline surged, making my heart pound in my ears.

I drew in a sharp breath and demanded, “What the hell is my offense?”

No answer. No explanation.

Just movement.

A black hood was yanked over my head.

Rough canvas.

Smelling faintly of oil.

Of sweat. Of use.

Darkness swallowed everything instantly.

Panic spiked.

My breath hitched against the fabric. My pulse roared in my ears.

My body tensed as hands gripped my upper arms, hauling me forward.

Gravel crunched beneath heavy boots.

Each step echoing.

No sane officer would cover my face with a hood right after handcuffing me.

This wasn’t routine—it felt like a kidnapping.

These men... were they working for someone?

The Spanish, maybe?

Could these officers really be delivering me to them?

After all, the Spanish had put a bounty on my head weeks ago.

But I never imagined border officers would be among those hunting me.

Then I heard it—the metallic click of doors opening.

And the sound wasn't of a station or a van; it was a car.

Cold air brushed against my skin for a split second before I was shoved inside.

Head forced down.

Body folded into the backseat.

The door slammed shut behind me.

The sound sealed me in.

Engines roared to life.

And then—we moved.

I sat rigid.

Hooded. Cuffed. Blind.

The world reduced to sound and sensation.

Every turn of the wheels. Every shift in acceleration.

Every vibration beneath the tires.

My mind fractured—splitting between possibilities.

Or could it be Ruslan Baranov's men?

Had he finally caught me?

That would be the worst—five years of running, evading his men, all in vain.

Ruslan Baranov didn't forgive.

He didn't forget.

Whatever vendetta he had carried for years, he would unleash it fully—and I would pay in the most unimaginable ways.

Or could it be Vincenzo himself, my estranged husband?

Whoever it was—the Spanish, the Russians, or Vincenzo—the punishment awaiting me would make hell itself look tame.

The car swayed through the turns, the motion sharp and uneven beneath me.

Tires hummed against asphalt, then shifted—rougher now, the sound vibrating through the floor into my bones.

Time lost meaning inside that hood.

Ten minutes?

Thirty?

An hour?

Each second stretched, feeding the panic coiling tighter in my chest.

My shoulders ached where the cuffs forced my arms behind me.

The metal bit into my wrists with every subtle movement, grinding skin raw.

Heat built beneath the hood, suffocating and thick, sweat gathering at my temples and slipping down into my eyes.

It burned.

Stung.

I clenched my jaw.

Forced my breathing into something controlled.

In through the nose.

Out through the mouth.

Slow. Measured.

Survival training.

The car slowed and turned sharply before the engine cut, leaving a sudden, heavy silence.

The doors opened, and hands seized me—rough, decisive, leaving no room to struggle.

I was hauled out of the car, my feet barely touching the ground before they forced me forward.

Cold night air brushed my skin beneath the hood, sharp and biting against the heat trapped around me.

I stepped on stone, then on smooth tile.

Each footfall echoed—controlled by the men guiding me.

Doors opened and closed somewhere in the distance.

Familiar.

They stopped and shoved me roughly into a chair.

The impact jolted my spine painfully.

Then the hood was ripped off.

Light exploded into my vision, harsh and blinding.

I blinked rapidly, struggling to adjust as the world came into focus.

Polished marble floors gleamed under tall windows that reflected the faint shimmer of the lake beyond.

Recognition settled in my chest like ice.

This was Vincenzo's villa, his study.

My pulse spiked.

The men holding me stepped back, but they did not leave.

They lingered, silent and watchful, as if waiting for me to make the next move.

I turned my head slightly.

Ciro stood to my left.

Arms crossed. Expression unreadable.

A wall.

Renzo stood to my right.

Freshly shaved head catching the light from the chandelier above.

Eyes dark.

Dangerous in a quieter way.

And then—I looked forward.

At the desk.

Vincenzo sat behind it.

Black shirt open at the throat. Sleeves rolled to his elbows.

Forearms tense with restrained power.

His posture was controlled.

But the tension in him—it radiated.

His eyes locked onto mine.

A part of me finally broke.

It wasn't Ruslan Baranov or the Spanish; it was my husband. I couldn't tell if I should feel relief or brace myself for the inevitable—my doom felt certain.

He leaned forward.

Elbows resting on the massive oak desk, voice low and deadly.

“On our first night together, I drew three red lines—lines you were never to cross. One, you shall never attempt to flee. Two, you shall never betray this marriage with another man. Three, you shall never harm Violet.”

“I warned you that as long as you obeyed, your suffering in this house would remain limited. Yet now, Elena... you have broken two of them.”

I swallowed and lifted my chin, holding my ground even as my pulse raced.

“You say I crossed two red lines, but I only ever broke one: I tried to escape. I ran because you threatened my body, my womb.”

The silence stretched between us, dense and suffocating.

Every breath felt loaded.

He stood, slow and purposeful, his gaze burning into me, commanding, leaving no room to flinch.

The chair creaked softly as he pushed back and walked around the desk.

His steps were predatory.

He stopped in front of me..

Too close.

His presence filled the space, cutting off everything else.

“Did Violet lose the baby?”

He smirked, as if amused that I had not yet realized the judgment he was about to deliver.

“I suppose you would be happy if she did,” he said, his voice cold and sharp.

“How can you be so heartless, wishing harm on another woman’s child?”

He crouched suddenly, bringing his face level with mine, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his breath.

“You were bold to think you could ever escape me,” he murmured, “ You overestimated yourself.”

“I am not Ruslan.”

He narrowed his eyes and slid his hand under my chin, lifting it, sizing me up as if measuring my limits before the final strike.

A flicker of something—anger, irritation, or something darker—crossed his face.

Then he made a subtle gesture while still crouching, and I felt it before I heard it.

The faint click of metal shifting reached my ears.

My handcuffs loosened and fell away.

I flexed my wrists as blood rushed back, a sharp, burning sensation flooding my hands and forearms.

I rubbed them slowly, testing, feeling the strength returning.

He straightened, towering over me once more.

I saw something shift behind the rage.

A slow, dawning awareness that I wasn't reacting the way he expected.

That I wasn't afraid in the way he wanted.

That I wasn't begging. That I wasn't breaking.

He finally understood.

I wasn't running because I hated him.

I was running because I refused to die slowly inside his cage.

He returned to his seat, eased back into the leather chair behind his desk, and exuded control with every slow, measured motion.

His elbows rested on the armrests, fingers steepling beneath his chin as he studied me like a problem he intended to solve permanently.

The lamplight carved across his face—sharp cheekbones, shadowed eyes, a jaw set with quiet authority.

He didn't look like a man. He looked like judgment.

Like consequence.

Then he spoke.

"This is Italy. My home. My rules. If I say you cannot escape me, you cannot."

"I gave you the red lines and warned you of the consequences, yet you dared to defy me."

"After I am finished, Elena, the woman who ran from Ruslan Baranov, the woman who thought she could slip through borders... she will be gone. What remains will be a shadow: broken, quiet, obedient."

“Every ounce of pride, every shred of defiance, I will crush until nothing is left of her.”

Vincenzo’s voice was calm and lethal, the kind of calm that promised pain.

“Now you start paying for every sin your father ever committed—and for every time you’ve disobeyed me.”

A cruel smile curved his lips.

“You will beg, Elena. You will scream. You will crawl and piss yourself and call me master while I break you night after night. You’ll wish Ruslan had found you first—because at least he would have killed you quick.”

“When I’m finally satisfied—when you’ve paid for every thrust your father took and every time you dared disobey me—only then will I let you die. But not fast. Not clean.”

He held my gaze, unflinching.

“When I said I would take your womb if Violet lost her child, I meant it,” he continued, voice sharp and controlled.

“But I will go further. I will take your heart from your chest and give it to her. Her life depends on it, and your suffering will ensure it. You will feel every second of what I do to you, Elena.”

My lungs tightened, my chest caving as if the air itself had been stolen.

I could barely remain seated under the weight of what he promised.

The room was dead silent.

Renzo and Ciro didn’t move.

They knew better than to interrupt their Don when he was savoring his prey.

Vincenzo adjusted his cuffs, bored now.

He turned to his men.

“Bind her legs.”

Renzo and Ciro moved instantly.

I didn’t fight—there was no point.

Their hands closed around my ankles like steel bands.

Heavy chain rattled as they wrapped it around my legs—once, twice—padlock clicking shut.

The metal was cold.

Rough links bit into my skin through the thin leggings.

Vincenzo watched impassively, his expression carved from stone as if whatever stood before him was nothing more than a routine inconvenience.

“Take her to the inverted V ridge at the back of the property,” he ordered, voice final. “The artificial one—the training peak we built for endurance drills. Force her to kneel on it. Bare knees. No padding. No shoes.”

The room seemed to hold its breath.

Renzo’s hands tightened fractionally on the chain, the smallest betrayal of tension.

His jaw flexed, but he said nothing.

Vincenzo didn’t look at him.

“It will rain tonight,” he continued, almost casually, as if discussing the weather.

“Cold, heavy rain. She will shiver. She will ache. I want her to feel every drop. Let her kneel there and think. Let her imagine every consequence of her defiance. Do not remove her until I give the order.”

A pause—calculated.

Ciro stepped forward first, gripping one of my arms.

Renzo took the other.

Their hold was practiced and efficient—but not cruel.

They dragged me toward the door.

I didn’t cry. Didn’t beg.

Didn’t give them the satisfaction of hearing my voice crack.

But inside—inside my chest—something tore open, raw and violent, like something being ripped out piece by piece.

“Stay back, Ciro,” Vincenzo called suddenly.

Ciro stopped mid-step. Released me instantly, stepping back as if burned.

His obedience was immediate.

Renzo didn't stop.

He continued alone, his grip steady, guiding rather than dragging now.

His silence weighed heavier than words ever could.

We moved through corridors I knew too well.

Each step echoed with memory.

Past locked doors, polished floors, and walls that had witnessed too much.

Out the service entrance.

Into the night.

Cold air hit my face like a slap.

The backyard stretched wide and dark, an expanse of controlled wilderness.

Manicured grass gave way to something harsher in the distance.

The ridge.

The inverted V rose from the ground like a warning—a jagged formation of artificial limestone, sharp-edged and uneven.

It had been built years ago, part of some twisted philosophy of discipline and endurance.

Every surface was angled, unstable, unforgiving.

There was nowhere to rest, nowhere to hide.

Only pain, multiplied by gravity and time.

Renzo stopped at its base.

The night was quiet except for the distant hum of wind.

"Take your shoes off," he said.

I looked at him.

For a moment, he didn't look back.

That was answer enough.

I bent slowly, fingers trembling only slightly as I untied the laces. Slid the sneakers off.

Let them fall carelessly to the side.

Bare soles met cold gravel.

The sting was immediate—sharp, biting.

“Walk to the ridge's peak. Kneel. And do not rise until I say so,” he said, letting each word settle like a weight.

Not an order.

A sentence.

I pushed forward, every step a battle against the chill crawling up my spine.

When I reached the ridge's peak, a shiver of fear ran through me.

Below, the jagged drop of the training cliff plunged into darkness, and the wind howled around the stones like voices warning me to turn back.

Scattered around the ridge were the remnants of past drills—broken boards, splintered stakes, and the sharp steel spikes of training dummies that had been flung and forgotten.

My chest tightened, and I almost froze—but Renzo's glare pinned me in place.

Not daring to hesitate, I lowered myself carefully.

The moment my knees touched the stone, agony ripped through me—sharp, merciless, as jagged edges bit into flesh and bone.

I sucked in a breath that escaped between clenched teeth, the pain burning through every nerve.

There was no adjusting.

No position that eased it.

Every shift only found a new kind of hurt.

Renzo stood over me, quiet for a long moment.

Then, his voice broke the silence—barely above a whisper:

“I’m sorry, Elena.”

I looked up at him.

There was something in his eyes—conflict, guilt, restraint.

Something that wanted to help but knew better than to try.

A small, humorless smile tugged at my lips despite the pain.

“You did nothing wrong,” I whispered, my voice trembling with pain.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for... Renzo... I’m... I’m just thankful you survived.”

A sharp stone dug into my knee, and a cry of agony tore from me.

I winced, gasping through clenched teeth.

“I was... I was worried... I thought you might have died... in that dark cell...”

My chest heaved as the pain tore through me. “This... this is my fate...”

I groaned, each sound carrying my torment, the jagged stone beneath me whispering that the longer I remained, the sharper its bite would only grow more unbearable as time dragged on.

His throat moved as he swallowed.

He nodded once, but didn’t speak again.

Renzo crouched a few feet away—close enough that his body broke the worst of the wind cutting across the ridge.

His posture was careful.

Like everything else about him.

The air itself felt wrong—thick, metallic, charged with the kind of silence that came just before violence.

Even the wind seemed hesitant, as if the sky was holding its breath.

Renzo’s voice came quiet, edged with something that didn’t quite match his usual restraint.

“I did not believe you struck Violet,” he said. “That you made her bleed, as she claimed.”

My throat tightened, but I didn’t look at him.

He continued, slower now, each word weighed before it left his mouth.

“I checked the camera feed,” he said, voice sharp. “It’s completely wiped. The techs call it a glitch, but it’s too convenient. I think she’s setting you up—and it’s working.”

It’s obvious she’s laying a trap.

Yet Vincenzo’s hatred is so thick he refuses to think rationally.

To him, logic doesn’t exist. Only what his mistress says matters.

My fingers curled slightly against the rough stone, nails scraping against the surface as another wave of pain rippled through my knees.

Blood had already begun to pool beneath me—dark, sticky, seeping into the jagged limestone like the ground was drinking it in.

I stared at it because it was easier than looking at Renzo.

The sky rumbled faintly in the distance, like a warning that hadn’t fully decided whether to become a storm.

My voice came out thin, scraped raw by cold and restraint.

“This hurts... so bad,” I groaned, every nerve on fire.

The words felt like surrender, and I despised myself for letting them out.

Tears slipped free before I could stop them—warm against my chilled skin, quickly swallowed by the wind.

I blinked hard, but they kept coming, traitorous and unstoppable.

“Has anyone... ever survived this?” I whispered, grit in my voice despite the pain shredding my knees. “Renzo... I can’t... I feel like I’m going to die...”

Renzo’s jaw tightened visibly.

For a moment, he looked at the blood pooling beneath me—at the way it spread, slow and unavoidable.

Then he looked away, like the sight burned him.

The silence stretched.

When he spoke again, his voice had shifted—lower, heavier, stripped of its usual distance.

“I never trusted Violet.”

He said, each word deliberate.

“My loyalty has always been to her sister, and to the promise I made to her on her deathbed—to make Violet fulfill her lifelong dream of marrying Vincenzo.”

“That’s why it may feel like I hate you... but I don’t. I’ve observed you. You are... likeable. You do not pretend, and it pains me so much see you like this. I wish I could do something to ease your suffering.”

He softened, voice quieter now.

“You don’t deserve this. Vincenzo knew, deep down, that you do not deserve such cruel, inhumane punishment.”

“Elena... forgive me for how I’ve treated you these past weeks, since you became Vincenzo’s bride. I am truly sorry.”

That made my breath catch.

His words hit somewhere deeper than I expected.

He didn’t look at me as he spoke, eyes fixed somewhere beyond the ridge.

A gust of wind swept across the ridge, tugging at his coat, at my hair, at everything that wasn’t anchored.

The storm was coming closer now, pressure building in the air like something inevitable.

“How long... how long must I stay kneeling like this?”

I whispered, trembling, my knees raw and bleeding, every nerve aflame.

“Hours... maybe days,” Renzo said, his voice low.

Then softer still: “And when the rain comes... it will only make it worse, Elena. Much worse.”

He held my gaze, eyes full of conflict and something unspoken.

“But I’ll stay. Through it all. Let the storm fall. I’ll be right here with you.”

A sharp spike of pain shot through both knees as I shifted without meaning to—instinctive, desperate for relief that didn't exist.

The jagged stone bit deeper, tearing fresh layers of skin. I sucked in a breath, body tightening involuntarily.

"No," I whispered, teeth gritted against the pain. "Go. Leave me... I can endure this."

Renzo's jaw tightened.

"I won't leave you. I'd take your place in an instant if it meant you wouldn't suffer."

The words sank deeper than the pain.

I swallowed hard.

My arms strained uselessly behind me, wrists raw and burning from the cuffs.

I tested the chain—pushing onto the balls of my feet, trying to find leverage, trying to stand.

The chain snapped taut with a brutal, metallic pull.

My balance failed instantly.

Knees slammed back into the unforgiving ridge of stone with a sickening jolt, and a sharp cry tore from my throat before I could stop it.

Pain flared white-hot, radiating up my legs, stealing my breath.

Fresh blood welled and spilled, warm against the cold surface beneath me.

The black stone beneath my knees was already slick with red—my red—running in thin, fragile rivulets that drifted toward Renzo's boots.

I couldn't hold it anymore.

My chest tightened as tears spilled over, silent and unstoppable.

My whole body trembled—not just from the cold wind cutting across the ridge, but from the relentless, grinding pain in my knees.

Every second felt longer than the last, each breath a battle.

Ten minutes.

Maybe less.

And I was already breaking.

“Renzo... please... help me stand. This is... too much.

The words slipped out before I could stop them—small, fragile, almost childlike.

I hated how weak they sounded, but I couldn’t hold them in.

I lifted my head, looking up at him through blurred vision and wet lashes.

“I... I can’t bear it any longer

Renzo’s expression shifted immediately.

His jaw tightened.

I saw it then—the conflict.

The restraint. The anger he wasn’t allowed to show.

He bit the inside of his cheek, hard enough that the muscle in his jaw jumped, as if he was holding himself together by force.

For a moment, it looked like he might step forward.

Might help.

Might do something.

Then a voice cut through the wind.

“Leave, Renzo.”

Vincenzo.

The name alone felt heavier than the chains.

He stood at the base of the ridge, his presence commanding even from a distance.

A white cashmere coat draped over his shoulders, untouched by the dampness around him, paired with white trousers that somehow remained immaculate despite the wet grass.

His hair was slightly damp, curling faintly at the temples, as though he'd walked through the mist to get here.

His face was too calm.

And his eyes—those unreadable, piercing eyes—locked onto the scene like he was observing something far removed from himself.

Renzo hesitated.

His gaze flicked between me and Vincenzo, conflict written plainly across his features.

For a second, he didn't move.

Something raw flashed in his eyes—regret, maybe guilt, maybe something deeper he couldn't afford to feel.

His lips parted like he was about to argue.

About to refuse.

But then he stopped.

He swallowed it down.

Nodded once—sharp, controlled, military.

And turned away.

I watched him go.

Watched the only person who had even hesitated leave me behind.

Each step he took away from me felt like something inside me was breaking.

Until he was gone.

And I was alone.

With the man who wanted to destroy me.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 15[4,772 words]

Chapter 15

ELENA

Vincenzo didn't rush.

He climbed the ridge with slow, deliberate steps, boots crunching over the sharp stones as if the terrain owed him nothing.

The wind tugged at his coat, but he didn't react.

Didn't falter.

His focus was entirely on me.

On this.

On whatever he was about to decide.

He stopped in front of me.

Close enough that I could feel the faint heat of his presence, smell the subtle mix of rain and cedar clinging to his coat.

I lifted my head slightly, though the movement sent another sharp spike of pain through my knees.

My vision was hazy, tears still falling despite my efforts to stop them.

"I didn't hit Violet," I whispered.

My voice cracked—raw, fragile and desperate.

"I didn't even touch her."

Something quieter flickered across his face.

He said nothing in response.

Instead, he moved.

Metal scraped softly.

The cuffs around my wrists unlocked with a sharp click, and suddenly my arms were free—falling uselessly at my sides as circulation rushed back in a painful, tingling surge.

I winced, sucking in a sharp breath, fingers trembling as I tried to move them.

Then his attention shifted downward.

Another click.

The padlock at my ankles released.

The chain slackened, slipping free and clattering softly against the stone as he removed it completely.

For a second, I thought I was free.

I tried to stand.

My legs buckled immediately.

There was no strength left in them.

No support.

Just raw, screaming pain.

My knees gave out beneath me before I could even find balance, and I started to fall forward.

But I didn't hit the ground.

Vincenzo caught me.

His arms came around me with a strength that was almost effortless, lifting me off the stone before I could fully collapse.

He gathered me against his chest and held me there—steady, secure—as if I weighed nothing at all.

A sharp breath left my lips, half from the sudden movement, half from the shock of being lifted.

Rain began to fall in earnest.

Heavy, freezing drops crashed against my skin, soaking through my clothes in seconds.

The storm came fast, relentless, drumming against the ridge and blurring the world into streaks of grey and black.

Vincenzo adjusted his hold on me.

Pulling me closer.

Tucking my head beneath his chin as he shielded me with his coat, his body acting as a barrier against the rain.

Water streamed down his hair, along his jaw, dripping steadily as he turned and began to walk.

Down the ridge.

Away from the scene.

His pace was steady, unhurried, as if nothing in the world could rush him.

Inside the villa, he didn't stop.

Marble floors echoed beneath his steps as he carried me through the corridors.

The contrast between the storm outside and the cold, polished interior was jarring.

My wet clothes left faint marks against his coat as water dripped from us, leaving a trail behind.

Then—

Up the main staircase.

Through a set of doors.

Into his bedroom.

I barely had time to register the space before he moved again.

Into the bathroom.

And everything changed.

The bathroom was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

Black marble stretched across the floors and walls, polished to a reflective sheen.

The air was warm—heated floors sending gentle waves of heat up through my soaked clothes.

A massive rainfall shower stood in the corner, large enough to fit several people inside, its glass walls gleaming under soft lighting.

Everything smelled like him.

He set me on my feet—careful, almost gentle, like I might shatter under his touch.

The moment my soles met the heated marble, my knees betrayed me again.

They buckled.

A sharp gasp tore from my throat as my body folded, but before I could hit the ground, his hands were there—firm, gripping my waist and pulling me back upright with controlled strength.

He didn't let go.

“Easy,” he murmured, his voice lower now, less detached. “Don't try to carry your weight yet.”

I clung to him without meaning to—fingers curling weakly against the front of his coat as my legs trembled violently beneath me.

Every nerve in my knees screamed, the raw, torn skin protesting even the slightest movement.

For a moment, he just looked at me.

Not the way he usually did.

This was... different.

His gaze dropped, scanning me slowly—my face, my shaking hands, the blood still dried and smeared along my skin from the ridge.

His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

Then his hand moved.

Slow.

He traced the side of my thigh with his thumb, brushing against a streak of blood caught in the torn fabric of my leggings.

The contact was light—but it sent a jolt through me, both from pain and something else I couldn't name.

"Your skin is so soft," he murmured, almost like he hadn't meant to say it out loud.

His thumb lingered there for a second longer than necessary.

"Ten minutes on that ridge," he added quietly, eyes still fixed on the mark he was touching, "and you're already bleeding this much..."

There was something in his tone.

Not just observation.

Something... restrained.

Like he was measuring something he didn't fully understand.

Then, just as suddenly as it came, it was gone.

He straightened slightly, his hand withdrawing from my skin.

The absence of his touch left a strange, cold emptiness behind.

"Take a bath," he said, his voice returning to that same calm, composed tone from before. "I'll wait in the bedroom."

I stared at him.

Dazed. Aching.

Trying to process what was happening—what he was doing, what he wasn't doing.

He didn't look at me again.

He simply turned.

And walked out.

But he didn't close the door.

It remained open behind him, a thin sliver of the hallway visible beyond, like an unspoken reminder that I wasn't completely alone—but also not entirely safe.

The sound of his footsteps faded.

Then silence.

Steam was already rising in the bathroom, curling softly into the air, wrapping the room in warmth that contrasted sharply with the cold that still clung to my skin.

I hesitated.

For a moment, I just stood there—uncertain, exhausted, trying to steady my breathing.

Then slowly, carefully, I began to move.

I peeled the soaked hoodie off first, wincing as the damp fabric tugged against my injured knees when I bent slightly to pull it over my head.

The movement sent a sharp pulse of pain through my body, and I had to pause, biting back a sound.

Next came the leggings.

They clung stubbornly to my skin, sticking to dried blood and tender flesh.

I had to peel them off inch by inch, every movement sending tiny shocks of pain through my legs.

I gritted my teeth, breathing unevenly as I finally freed them and dropped them to the floor.

Last came my underwear.

My hands trembled as I removed it, my fingers careful, as though even the slightest movement might break something else inside me.

Naked.

Exposed.

Cold air brushed against my skin, and I shivered instantly, my body instinctively curling inward as I stood there for a moment, vulnerable and raw.

Then, with a deep, shaky breath, I stepped forward.

Into the shower.

The moment the hot water hit my skin, I flinched.

It stung—sharp and immediate—especially where my knees were torn and sensitive.

My breath caught, my shoulders tensing as the water lashed against me, each drop like a reminder of what I'd just endured.

But slowly...

It eased.

The initial sting softened into something warmer, something almost soothing.

The heat seeped into my muscles, easing some of the tension that had been locked inside me for so long.

I let out a shaky breath.

Then another.

My hands braced lightly against the wall as I tilted my head forward, letting the water cascade down my hair, over my face, washing away the dirt, the blood, the fear that clung to me.

For a moment, I just stood there.

Eyes closed.

Breathing uneven but steadying.

Letting the water pound against my shoulders, my back, my skin.

Trying not to think.

But thoughts came anyway.

Unwanted. Relentless.

I wondered—through the pain still lingering in my body, through the exhaustion pulling at my limbs—whether the man waiting in the bedroom was still the same one who had put me on that ridge in the first place.

Whether this—whatever this was—was just another step in something I couldn't see.

Or—

Whether something had shifted.

Something small.

Something even he couldn't control.

The water kept falling.

Warm. Endless. Unforgiving in its own quiet way.

And I stood beneath it.

Trembling.

Seconds slipped by as I let the water pound over me, my thoughts drifting... until his voice cut through.

"Are you done, Elena?"

Still naked, I frantically searched for a towel, but he was already stepping closer.

My right hand immediately covered the middle of my thigh, the other shielding my chest.

He was my husband, but I felt a flush of shame at standing exposed before him.

He bent slightly, reaching for me.

One arm slid beneath my shoulders, the other beneath my thighs, and in one smooth motion, he lifted me—effortlessly, as if I weighed nothing at all.

A startled breath escaped me as my body left the ground.

The sudden shift jolted every nerve, but what hit harder was the warmth of him—his body pressed against mine, cutting through the cold in a way that almost hurt.

I flinched—not away, but into him instinctively, because there was nowhere else to go.

My fingers twitched weakly, barely able to hold on as he adjusted his grip, securing me against his chest.

His hold was firm. But careful.

I rested my head against his shoulder, eyes half-lidded, exhaustion and pain blurring everything together.

Without hesitation, he carried me through, lowering me onto the edge of the massive bed with a gentleness that seemed to contradict everything else about him.

The mattress dipped beneath my weight, and for a moment, I just sat there—naked, shivering, trying to process that I was no longer on that ridge, no longer chained.

He stepped back, crossed the room, and opened the wardrobe.

Every movement was efficient.

He pulled out a charcoal-gray T-shirt and a pair of black sweatpants, then returned to the bed, placing them beside me without ceremony.

“Change into these,” he said.

His voice was calm.

I gave a small nod.

It was all I could manage.

I reached for the shirt he’d given me.

The fabric was soft.

Warm.

It slipped over my head easily, falling over my frame and down past my hips like a dress.

His scent hit me immediately.

I froze for a second, just holding onto that feeling.

Then my eyes shifted.

To the sweatpants.

I stared at them.

My stomach twisted slightly at the thought of pulling them over my legs. The waistband.
The fabric.

The pressure against torn skin.

It was too much.

I shook my head faintly and looked away, swallowing hard.

“I... can’t,” I whispered, almost to myself.

I didn’t expect him to respond.

From the corner of my eye, I watched him.

He had stripped out of his drenched clothes with the same quiet efficiency.

Broad shoulders moved under his skin as he changed, the line of his spine visible for a brief moment before the shirt covered him again.

Black joggers. A fitted long-sleeve shirt.

Dry. Controlled.

He never once looked directly at me.

Not while he changed. Not while he moved.

Only when he reached for his phone did his attention shift.

His thumb moved across the screen with sharp, impatient motions.

Then—He brought it to his ear.

“I don’t care.”

His voice cut through the room like a blade.

“Why the fuck are you not here yet?”

There was a pause.

I couldn’t hear the response, but I could hear the tightening in his tone—the restrained fury building beneath every word.

“Will she have to bleed out before you drag your sorry ass over?”

His jaw clenched.

Hard.

The muscles in his cheek flexed as he listened, but he didn’t soften.

Didn’t ease.

“You have two minutes.”

Another pause.

His eyes flicked briefly toward me.

Cold. Intense.

“If you’re even one second late, I’ll end you the moment you step through that door.”

He ended the call without another word.

Tossed the phone onto the nightstand with enough force that the lamp beside it wobbled slightly.

Then—

Silence.

The room felt heavier after that.

His gaze returned to me.

Specifically—to my knees.

The towel I’d pressed there earlier was soaked through, darkened with blood.

Fresh crimson still gathered at the edges, slow and sluggish, as if my body hadn’t fully decided whether to keep bleeding or stop.

I shifted slightly.

Pain shot through me.

I inhaled sharply, gripping the edge of the bed for support as my vision blurred for a second.

Then—I spoke.

Because the question had been burning in my chest since the moment he lifted me.

“Renzo told me I might be there for hours... even days,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “But you came for me after barely ten minutes.”

“Why?”

My voice was quiet.

But steady enough.

I lifted my eyes to him.

Met his gaze.

For a long moment, he didn't answer.

Just looked at me.

Those dark eyes—dangerous, unreadable—holding mine like he was weighing something. Deciding something.

Then, finally—

His voice dropped.

“Because I couldn't stand it.”

A ragged breath tore from my chest before I could stop it, shaky and uneven, like my body was struggling to keep up with the weight of what he'd just said.

“Not because you believed I didn't hit your mistress?”

My voice wavered, but I forced it to hold.

“Not because you finally realized I ran because I refuse to let anyone—anyone—take away my right to choose whether or not I ever carry a child?”

The words came out sharper than I expected.

Defiant. Tired.

Broken.

He turned away from me, walking to the door with long, controlled strides.

He pulled it open just enough to look out into the hallway, his posture rigid, like sheer force of will could summon the doctor faster.

The silence stretched.

Thick.

Uncomfortable.

“Have I finished paying, or do you plan to make me suffer even longer?”

He didn't respond immediately.

Just stood there for a long moment, one hand resting against the doorframe as though he was restraining something inside himself.

Then, slowly—

He turned.

His eyes found mine again.

Dark.

"You boast so fucking much about being a trained CIA agent," Vincenzo said, his voice low and dripping with mockery, "yet you couldn't even last ten minutes before you were screaming and breaking like a weak little girl."

He paused, eyes narrowing, a strange tension threading his tone.

"After crossing two of my red lines, I should be peeling the skin from your body right now. I should make you beg for death in ways that would make grown men piss themselves. But here's the pathetic truth..."

A bitter, self-mocking laugh escaped him.

"I don't know what is wrong with me. I can't stand watching you suffer... for too long."

"You've turned me soft, wife. And I fucking hate it. So enjoy this brief mercy while it lasts."

The air left my lungs slowly.

I stared at him.

Words failed me.

Not because I didn't have them—but because none of them seemed capable of holding the reality of what he just said.

He exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his still-damp hair in a rare display of visible frustration.

For a moment, the control he wore so effortlessly seemed to slip—just enough to reveal the strain underneath.

"This isn't me," he muttered, more to himself than to me.

I swallowed hard, my throat tight.

My eyes dropped to the blood-streaked sheets beneath me, unable to hold his gaze any longer.

The red looked darker against the white fabric—evidence of everything I had endured.

Evidence of how far this had gone.

A knock shattered the silence.

Sharp. Urgent. Repetitive.

The door flew open before anyone could respond.

The doctor rushed in, coat askew, face flushed and glistening with sweat, as though he'd run the entire distance without stopping.

His medical bag swung at his side with each hurried step.

He didn't speak. Didn't hesitate.

He went straight to the bed.

Straight to me.

Kneeling beside me, he opened his bag with practiced speed, gloved hands already moving as his eyes assessed the damage with clinical precision.

His touch was gentle—but efficient.

I sucked in a sharp breath when he cleaned the wounds.

The antiseptic burned.

Sharp.

I tensed instinctively, gripping the sheets, my breath hitching as he worked, methodical and unflinching.

He didn't slow down, didn't flinch at the severity of the damage.

No skin remained in several places.

The flesh looked torn, raw, angry—like the damage had been done with intention and left without care.

He worked quickly to stabilize what he could: cleaning, applying antiseptic ointment, then layering sterile gauze over the wounds in thick, careful sections.

Every movement was precise.

Like he knew exactly how to handle pain without letting it interfere with his work.

When the bleeding had slowed, he reached into his bag again, pulling out a syringe.

“I’m going to give you something for the pain and inflammation,” he said calmly, his voice steady despite the faint sheen of sweat on his brow. “You’ll feel it within a minute or two.”

I barely had time to respond.

The needle pressed in.

A sharp pinch—

Then warmth spread almost immediately through my legs.

Soft. Dulling.

The edges of the pain began to fade, not gone—but no longer screaming at me with the same intensity.

He withdrew the syringe, disposed of it, and began packing his tools away with the same brisk efficiency.

Within moments, everything was zipped shut.

Order restored.

The doctor straightened, giving a small, respectful nod.

Before he could say anything else—

Vincenzo spoke.

“You may leave.”

His voice was quiet.

The doctor didn’t argue.

He simply gave a brief incline of his head and left the room without another word, closing the door softly behind him.

Silence fell again.

More suffocating.

Vincenzo moved.

Slowly.

He walked toward the bed and stopped in front of me, towering over where I sat.

His presence cast a shadow across my lap, his silhouette cutting through the soft light of the room.

I couldn't look away.

Couldn't look anywhere else.

"Even though it's becoming..." he paused, eyes narrowing slightly, as if choosing the right word with care, "...disturbingly difficult to keep hurting you," he continued quietly, "do not mistake any of this for kindness."

His gaze locked onto mine.

The words didn't come as a surprise.

My breath hitched.

My heart stuttered—then cracked wider, like something inside me couldn't quite hold itself together anymore.

For a moment, I couldn't speak.

But when I did—

My voice came out soft.

Almost defeated.

"You don't have to keep saying it."

A pause.

My eyes lowered slightly. "I already know."

He reached out without warning.

His fingers closed beneath my chin—firm, controlled—tilting my face upward until there was no escaping his gaze.

The contact was warm, grounding even, but his expression remained untouched, carved from something colder than the air between us.

“Do you take a morning-after pill after the sex we had last time?” Vincenzo asked, his voice low and dangerously calm, each word slicing through the silence like a blade.

I felt the question land heavy in my stomach.

Before I could even form an answer, he continued, eyes locked on mine with chilling intensity.

“I do not want you—” he paused, his gaze narrowing with deliberate disgust, as if the very thought repulsed him, “—ever, in this lifetime, to carry my child

My breath caught.

He didn’t just say it — he made it clear I was unworthy.

The words settled between us like something final.

The pain that followed struck deeper than the raw wounds on my knees, deeper than the cold that had already settled into my bones.

It bloomed inside my chest, stealing my breath in a way I couldn’t control.

For a second, I thought I might collapse under the weight of it.

But I didn’t.

I held his gaze anyway.

Even as my chin remained trapped in his grip, even as something inside me trembled violently.

“What if... what if I didn’t take the pill? What if I get pregnant?”

My words came out softer than I wanted, but I didn’t let them break.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he murmured, voice intimate and venomous.

“You are not fit to carry my blood. Your father’s filthy legacy runs through your veins, and I won’t let it poison the next generation. I’d rather spill my seed on the floor than let it take root inside you.”

His thumb pressed harder against my lower lip, eyes glittering with cruel satisfaction at the way I trembled.

The motion could have been mistaken for tenderness if not for the words that followed.

“Take the pills every single time I fuck you. Because the day I find out you’re pregnant with my child...”

He leaned in until his breath ghosted over my ear, voice dropping to a lethal whisper.

“I will rip it out of you myself before it even has a chance to grow. And then I’ll make you watch while I ensure you never get the chance again.”

“Am I clear, Elena?”

The finality of it made something inside me go very still.

My lips parted slightly.

My voice came out barely above a breath.

He would kill his own child?”

The question lingered.

“I will never allow my bloodline to be tainted by that filth.”

He released my chin with a light, dismissive shove, as though touching me had burned him.

The absence of his touch left my skin cold—emptier than before.

Tears burned behind my eyes, hot and insistent, threatening to spill.

I forced them down, swallowing hard, refusing to give him that satisfaction.

Instead, I let a small, trembling smile touch my lips.

“Since I would remain your wife,” I forced out, “does that mean you’d rather die without an heir at all?”

Vincenzo let out a low, humorless laugh, the sound sending chills down my spine.

“Yes,” he said, eyes narrowing with pure disdain.

“I would rather die childless than let a woman carrying the blood of my violator bear my child.”

The rejection sliced deep, making my stomach churn with humiliation.

He looked at me as if I were tainted, dirty — something he owned but would never allow to bear fruit.

Without another word, he turned on his heel and strode toward the door.

He yanked it open and held it wide, his powerful frame filling the doorway like a wall I was no longer permitted to cross.

“Leave.”

The command was sharp.

Final.

Delivered with the bored authority of a man who had already erased me from any future he imagined.

I hesitated, and his voice dropped colder.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Elena.”

“Get out.”

“The sight of you standing there pretending you could ever be the mother of my children disgusts me.”

My eyelids fluttered shut for a brief moment.

Just enough time to gather what little strength I had left.

Then I opened them again.

Slowly. Painfully.

My legs moved first.

I swung them over the side of the bed, the mattress shifting beneath me as I prepared to stand.

The moment my feet touched the floor, pain lanced upward through my knees—sharp, immediate.

A gasp escaped me before I could stop it.

My body swayed.

Instinctively, I reached out, catching myself on the bedpost as my knees threatened to collapse again.

I stood there for a moment, breathing unevenly, waiting for the wave of pain to pass enough for me to move.

Then I forced myself forward.

Step by step.

Each one deliberate.

Each one costing me more than I could explain.

My breaths came shallow.

Trying not to think about how every movement sent fire through my body, or on his words that had cut just as deeply, carving through my chest with quiet, ruthless precision.

I limped toward the open door.

“Elena.”

His voice stopped me.

I froze.

My hand still braced against the wall, my body angled toward the hallway, but my head slowly turned back toward him.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on my features now—visible in the droop of my eyelids, the faint tremble of my lips, the way my shoulders barely held themselves upright.

He stood where I’d left him.

Watching me. Reading me.

“The rule I set,” Vincenzo said, his voice dropping into that dangerously quiet tone, “coming to my bed by ten every night — it no longer applies.”

Confusion flickered through the haze of pain.

I parted my lips to speak, but he cut me off before a word could form.

“You’re no longer worthy of sleeping in my bed.”

His gaze raked over me with open disdain.

“From now on, you’ll lie in the dark by yourself, night after night, remembering exactly what you will never have.”

“No warmth. No comfort. No love. Just you, alone.”

“You’ll spend the rest of your miserable life knowing the only man who owns you has decided you’re unworthy of even the basic comfort of his body next to yours.”

“Sleep alone, Elena. Get used to it. Because that’s all you’ll ever have.”

Something in my chest twisted sharply, like a blade had been driven in and slowly turned.

For a moment, I couldn’t breathe.

The air caught somewhere between my lungs and throat, refusing to move as the weight of what he’d said settled deep.

The door behind me remained open.

A dark rectangle framing the empty hallway.

I stood there for one long moment.

Staring at him.

At his eyes—cold, steady, unbothered.

At the way he held himself, as if nothing he had just said carried any weight at all.

As if it cost him nothing. As if I cost him nothing.

My chest tightened.

My throat worked, trying to form words that refused to come together.

They were there—I could feel them pressing against my teeth, pushing at the back of my tongue—but the moment I tried to give them voice, they fell apart.

Disintegrated into something too fragile to exist.

My throat closed.

Constraining.

Swallowing everything back down into that hollow place in my chest where all his words had gone to live—and rot.

For a second, I thought I might say something meaningful.

Something strong. Something that mattered.

But in the end—

All I could manage was one word.

Barely a breath.

“Okay.”

It slipped out quietly.

Too small.

I hated it the moment I heard it. Hated how it sounded like surrender.

Hated how easily it fit into the silence between us, like it belonged there.

But I didn’t correct it.

Didn’t say anything else.

Because there was nothing left in me to argue with.

So I turned.

And walked out of his room.

The hallway stretched longer than it should have.

Or maybe I was just moving slower.

Each step felt heavier than the last, my body dragging itself forward while my mind lingered somewhere far behind, still trapped in the room I had just left.

“You’ll spend the rest of your miserable life knowing the only man who owns you has decided you’re unworthy of even the basic comfort of his body next to yours. Sleep alone, Elena. Get used to it. Because that’s all you’ll ever have.”

The words looped in my head like a broken record, each repetition carving deeper.

My fingers brushed against the wall as I walked—light, absent touches that I barely registered until I realized I was using them to steady myself.

To anchor myself.

To prove that I was still here.

Still real.

Still... something.

My knees felt wrong.

Unsteady in a way that had nothing to do with injury and everything to do with what I had just heard.

With what I had just accepted.

With what I had just been told about myself.

The words echoed.

Relentless.

From now on, you’ll lie in the dark by yourself, night after night, remembering exactly what you’ll never get.

My fingers tightened slightly against the wall.

You’re not worthy of sleeping in my bed anymore.”

My vision blurred at the edges.

I blinked.

Refusing to let it spill over.

Not here. Not in this hallway.

Not where he could somehow still be watching.

My breath caught.

I didn't realize I had stopped walking until I forced myself forward again, dragging my body toward the door at the end of the hallway.

Toward escape.

Toward somewhere that wasn't him.

When I finally reached my door, my hand trembled as it found the handle. I turned it slowly, the mechanism clicking softly under my grip, and pushed the door open.

The room inside was dark.

I stepped inside.

And the moment the door clicked shut behind me—

Something in me broke.

Quietly.

Like something that had been stretched too thin for too long finally giving in to the pressure it had been holding.

My body didn't fight it.

Didn't try to hold itself together.

My legs gave out before I even reached the bed, and I stumbled the last step, collapsing forward onto the mattress.

Face-first.

The impact wasn't hard.

But it was enough.

I didn't move for a second.

Just lay there.

Still.

Then slowly—like I couldn't stop myself—I pulled the pillow toward me and buried my face into it, gripping it tightly as though it could keep everything inside from spilling out.

But it didn't.

The sobs came anyway.

Broken. Muffled.

Shaking through my body in quiet, uneven waves that I tried—and failed—to suppress.

My shoulders trembled.

My chest tightened with each breath.

Small, fragile sounds escaped into the fabric beneath my face, swallowed by the pillow but still somehow too loud.

I had endured cruel words before, many of them from Vincenzo himself, but tonight was different.

These words didn't just hurt—they pierced, tearing through me like a sharp needle sinking into my heart.

My head ached.

Not the kind that comes and goes, but something steady and heavy, pressing against my thoughts, dulling everything that tried to rise to the surface.

My chest followed—tight, sore, each inhale feeling slightly too small, like my lungs were working against me.

And my knees—

God.

My knees ached in a way I couldn't explain.

It wasn't just pain.

It was... deeper.

Like grief had weight, and it had chosen that exact place to settle—pressing down, rooting itself into my bones, refusing to let go.

I turned my face deeper into the pillow, as if I could smother the feeling there, as if I could push it down into the fabric and keep it contained.

But it didn't stay quiet.

I squeezed my eyes shut, my fingers tightening around the pillow as if it were the only thing keeping me from falling apart completely.

And then—

In that fragile, broken silence—

I made myself a promise.

A quiet one.

The kind you don't say out loud because speaking it might make it less real.

I would never let him have this power over me again.

Whatever foolish hope I had carried, whatever feelings I had allowed to grow—I would tear them out, root and all.

I would build something cold in their place.

Something untouchable. So that no word of his would ever cut me again.

The thought anchored me, even as my body shook.

Somewhere between the pain and exhaustion, sleep took me without warning, pulling me under.