

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 16[4,468 words]

Chapter 16

ELENA

The next morning arrived too soon—sharp, like it had been waiting to drag me back into a world I wasn't ready to face.

I stood in front of the full-length mirror in the guest room, my reflection staring back at me with quiet, hollow eyes.

The Black Veil Society academy uniform fit too perfectly, too neatly, as though nothing in my life had unraveled in the past four weeks.

The navy blazer sat crisply over my white blouse.

The fabric was clean, and structured.

I smoothed the blazer down over my torso anyway, pressing my palms over the seams as if I could smooth something inside myself in the same way.

The skirt fell just above my knees—modest, controlled, appropriate.

Deceptively so.

Because beneath it, wrapped in gauze and hidden from sight, my knees throbbed dully.

A constant, quiet ache that never fully left me.

Every movement reminded me of it.

Every step. Every shift of weight.

I adjusted the strap of my black backpack over one shoulder, forcing my posture straight, forcing myself to look like someone untouched by everything I had endured.

Then I stepped into the corridor.

It had been four weeks since the ridge.

Four weeks since Vincenzo banished me from his bed and sentenced me to sleep alone.

Four weeks of waking to the same unfamiliar warmth that lingered in my dreams—his scent, his heat, his unwanted presence haunting me even when he kept his distance.

He hated himself for still wanting me.

I saw the signs everywhere.

He lingered outside my door at odd hours, posture rigid, as if fighting the impulse to step inside.

When I caught him, he would turn sharply and disappear without a word, shoulders tight with self-disgust.

He entered rooms I occupied and immediately looked furious with himself for doing so.

His eyes would find me, darken, then slide away like the sight of me disgusted him—because it did, and because he couldn't stop looking.

Twice I woke to him standing at the foot of my bed in the dark, fists clenched so hard the knuckles were white.

He never spoke.

He simply stared, breathing controlled and angry, before walking out like being near me was a punishment he inflicted on himself.

When we passed in the hallway, his hand would twitch toward me before he yanked it back, a low growl of frustration escaping under his breath.

The accidental brush of his fingers against my arm sent unwanted heat curling low in my stomach.

My breath caught. Adrenaline surged.

Fear followed instantly—because this was the same man who had vowed to tear my womb from me if I ever carried his child.

And when our eyes met across any space, the conflict in his gaze was unmistakable: pure loathing for the weakness I represented in him.

He would clench his jaw until it looked painful, then force himself to look away, as if even acknowledging me cost him something vital.

He despised himself for it.

And I was learning to fear how much I noticed.

I descended the grand staircase slowly, each step calculated to hide the slight limp I couldn't fully mask.

My hands brushed lightly against the railing, not for support, but for control—something to ground me as I moved through the house like I belonged in it.

Like I wasn't just... passing through.

Normally, by now, someone would have shown up.

A soldier—silent, efficient—assigned to drive me to the academy.

He never allowed the same driver to take me twice.

Vincenzo saw to that, as though even the smallest familiarity was too much freedom for me.

They kept their distance in every way.

In words. In glances.

And I never asked why.

Because I didn't want to understand the rules of his world.

But today—

No one appeared.

No footsteps followed me.

No voice called out.

No “Signora” echoing through the hallway.

Just silence.

I frowned slightly as I reached the open garage doors.

Rows of vehicles stretched before me—sleek black sedans lined in perfect order, armored SUVs standing like silent guards, a matte-gray Lamborghini that looked less like a car and more like something built for war.

Nothing moved.

No driver. No escort.

No explanation.

“Which of the cars would you like to be driven in?”

The voice broke the silence—and the quiet confusion curling in my chest.

I turned.

Slowly.

Vincenzo stood framed in the doorway that led back into the house, as though he had been watching the entire time without interrupting.

He was already dressed for whatever business awaited him—tailored black suit cut to perfection, white shirt left open at the collar just enough to reveal the faint shadow of his collarbone.

His sleeves were rolled to mid-forearm, exposing strong, controlled lines of muscle.

The morning light caught him in a way that felt almost intentional.

It sharpened the line of his jaw.

Deepened the darkness of his eyes.

For a moment, I forgot how to speak.

My mouth went dry.

I hated that it did.

Hated the way my pulse jumped the moment his gaze stayed on me too long, the way something warm—traitorous—unfurled beneath my navel like a slow, uninvited flame.

I hated that my body reacted at all.

After everything.

After the ridge.

After the blood.

After the words he had thrown at me with such precision they still echoed inside my chest.

And yet—

There it was.

That pull.

Quiet. Persistent. Unwanted.

As though my body had decided, completely independent of my mind, that he was still something safe.

Something familiar.

Something... close to home.

I clenched my jaw, forcing my expression into something neutral as I turned my gaze away from him.

His eyes didn't leave me.

Those cold, beautiful eyes—sharp enough to cut, steady enough to trap—watched me with the same intensity he always did.

“Which of the cars would you prefer?” he repeated, slower this time.

Each word landed with quiet authority.

I swallowed.

Hard.

Then forced myself to look away from him completely, turning my attention toward the lineup of vehicles in the garage.

My eyes scanned the rows—sleek black sedans, armored SUVs, machines that looked less like transportation and more like extensions of his control.

And then—

The 2026 Toyota Hilux.

Matte black.

Lifted.

Rugged in a way that felt almost defiant in the midst of all that polished luxury.

I had noticed it weeks ago.

There was something about it that felt... different.

Something I secretly wished I could sit behind the wheel of instead of being driven like something that belonged to someone else.

I pointed at it without turning back to him.

“That one.”

A beat of silence.

Then—

A single nod.

“After you.”

I started walking.

Each step felt deliberate.

Like I was trying to prove something—not to him, but to myself.

That I could move through this space without being consumed by it.

Without being affected by him.

But I wasn’t alone.

I felt him behind me almost immediately.

Too close.

Close enough that I could feel the heat radiating off his body with every step he took.

Close enough that the faint scent of cedar and something sharper wrapped around me like a second presence.

Like he was marking the air around me.

Claiming it. Claiming me.

My skin prickled.

My breathing faltered.

My thighs tightened instinctively, betraying me in the smallest, most humiliating way.

I clenched my jaw harder, forcing myself to keep walking, to ignore the way my body responded to him even when my mind screamed otherwise.

Why?

Why him?

Why did my body still remember?

Why did it still react to the way he had held me that first night—careful, controlled, like I might break if he moved too fast?

Why did it still linger on the rare moments when his voice softened?

When his hand brushed my cheek without force?

When he looked at me like I wasn't entirely something he wanted to destroy?

I hated that part the most.

Because those moments made everything else worse.

They made it harder to hate him completely.

I reached the Hilux and pulled the passenger door open, slipping inside before I could think too much about anything.

The leather seat was cool against my skin, grounding in a way I didn't expect.

I sat upright immediately, staring straight ahead, forcing my body to still.

For control.

For distance.

For anything that would keep me from thinking about the fact that he was still right behind me.

There was a pause.

Long.

Heavy.

Then—

He stepped closer.

I felt it before I saw it.

I hesitated—just slightly—then turned my head just enough to glance out.

He was standing beside the open door, watching me.

Something unreadable in his expression.

Something deeper than the usual cold detachment.

Something that felt—

Too close to hunger.

A quiet tension coiled in my chest.

Then, without a word, he reached out and closed the door.

The soft click echoed louder than it should have.

And just like that—

He disappeared from my immediate space.

Only to reappear seconds later on the driver's side.

My heart stuttered when I realized what was happening.

“You’re... driving me?”

The question slipped out before I could stop it.

Small. Unsteady.

Almost disbelieving.

He opened the door and slid into the driver's seat without looking at me, adjusting himself with the same controlled precision he did everything else.

The engine started with a low, powerful rumble that vibrated through the seat beneath me and straight into my bones.

"Yeah."

Just that.

One word.

Final.

The truck reversed smoothly, the massive gates ahead of us opening silently as if the entire estate responded to his presence without question.

We pulled forward, exiting the garage and moving along the long, winding private drive.

Silence settled between us.

Thick. Electric.

I sat rigidly in my seat, trying to ignore the way my awareness sharpened in his presence. But it was impossible.

Everything about him pulled my attention.

The way his large hands flexed slightly on the steering wheel.

The subtle movement of his forearms beneath the rolled sleeves.

The controlled rise and fall of his chest.

The way his throat shifted when he swallowed.

Every small detail.

Every movement.

It all fed into something I didn't want to acknowledge.

Something I couldn't seem to turn off.

So I tried to distract myself.

To break the tension before it broke me.

Clearing my throat lightly, I spoke.

“So...”

A pause.

“I—”

Another breath.

“—how was your night?”

The question hung between us for a moment longer than I expected.

Then—

His voice came, flat and immediate.

“How was my night? Spectacular, really—if you consider lonely and boring to be spectacular.”

I pressed my lips together.

“You?” he asked, and I blinked, caught off guard.

“Four weeks,” I said quietly, keeping my eyes on the road. “Since you banned me from sleeping in your room. Let’s just say... I’m getting used to it.”

His glance lingered, sharp and almost disbelieving.

“Getting used to loneliness?” he murmured. “No one... truly adapts to loneliness.”

“I am not no-one,” I snapped, the words flying out before I could cage them.

The echo of that night four weeks ago slammed into me again — him holding the door wide, telling me I was unworthy of his bed, unworthy of his warmth, unworthy of anything but solitude.

He tilted his head, eyes narrowing with dark amusement.

I exhaled softly, turning my face toward the window as the estate’s manicured lawns slipped past in a blur of green and gold.

The motion steadied me in a way his presence didn’t.

“Violet—”

“Can we not talk about Violet?”

The words came out sharper than I intended—cutting, immediate.

I didn’t even realize I’d turned until I was already facing him, the tension snapping through me like a wire pulled too tight.

His hand tightened slightly on the wheel.

I didn’t stop.

“Is she coming for another dinner?” I pressed, my voice slipping despite me. “Another night where I’m expected to serve her like I’m nothing?”

“Or has she finally lost the baby she claimed I endangered?” I added, my voice tightening.

“Or is there a new accusation waiting for me this time?”

The last question landed harder than the rest.

My chest tightened.

Pain twisted there—familiar, sharp, and unwelcome.

Violet.

Always Violet.

“Wait until I’m finished before you speak.”

His voice dropped.

The air inside the truck shifted instantly.

“Is that clear?”

I froze.

The weight of his tone pressed against my chest, suffocating any response that might have come.

I turned my face away.

Said nothing.

And that was apparently the wrong answer.

The truck jerked violently.

Without warning.

Tires screeched against the road as he yanked the wheel sharply to the right, the massive vehicle fishtailing onto the shoulder.

Gravel sprayed beneath us, the engine growling in protest as we came to a sudden, harsh stop.

My body lurched forward against the seatbelt.

Pain shot through my knees instantly, sharp and immediate, tearing a gasp from my throat before I could stop it.

Before I could even process what had happened—

His hand moved.

Fast.

His fingers clamped around my chin, hard enough to make my breath hitch as he yanked my face toward him.

The movement was brutal.

My neck strained under the force, my hands instinctively reaching for his wrist as I tried to pull away.

“Vincenzo—”

“You don’t answer me with silence, Elena.”

His voice was low.

Dangerously calm.

But the grip on my face tightened, his fingers pressing into my jaw until I could feel the pressure.

“You’re hurting me—”

“I don’t care.”

The words came out flat.

His hold tightened further.

Tears welled immediately, hot and uninvited, blurring my vision before I could stop them.

One slipped free.

Then another.

Trailing down my cheek in quiet, burning lines.

“Please... let go of my jaw. You’re pressing too hard—I swear my jaw is going to break.”

I tried to pull his hand away again, my fingers trembling as they pressed against his wrist, but his grip didn’t yield.

“You’re hurting me. I’m already in pain—and my knee still hasn’t healed from your punishment.”

For a second—something shifted in his expression.

Not softness.

But something that looked disturbingly close to—something human.

He released me.

Abruptly.

As if the moment had never existed.

Air rushed back into my lungs in a sharp gasp, and I immediately brought a hand up to my jaw, cradling it as though I could physically press the pain back inside.

My fingers trembled as they hovered there, not quite sure whether to stay or move.

I chose to stay.

To hold it.

To keep the pain contained.

Tears continued to fall, silent and unrestrained now, sliding down my cheeks without permission.

I didn't wipe them away.

I refused to.

The Hilux idled on the side of the road, engine rumbling low beneath us, the sound filling the silence that stretched between us.

Heavy.

Alive with everything we refused to say.

He reached for my face like I was something delicate.

For a second, I didn't move.

Then his fingers closed around my wrist.

Just firm enough to guide my trembling hand away from my jaw.

The contact sent a jolt through me anyway.

His thumb brushed the underside of my wrist once—light, almost absent-minded—before he realized what he was doing and let go.

Too quickly.

As if the touch itself had surprised him.

My hand hovered in the air for a moment before dropping into my lap, still shaking.

I hated that he could see it.

His gaze shifted until it landed on my jaw.

On the marks.

Five distinct fingerprints already blooming across my skin, angry and dark, spreading like bruises that had decided to make themselves known.

For a moment, his expression changed.

"My hand left bruises," he said, the sharpness gone from his tone. "I didn't realize how tightly I was holding you."

Didn't realize.

The words echoed in my chest like something hollow and mocking.

I stared at him for half a second longer, then reached up and flipped down the passenger visor mirror with more force than necessary.

The small rectangular glass snapped open, catching the pale morning light and throwing it across my face.

I angled it slowly until the reflection came into focus.

My breath hitched.

There they were.

The five bruises.

Clear. Sharp.

Already turning from red to a deep, ugly purple, like something had been stamped into my skin and left to settle.

The shape of his hand was mapped across my jaw, perfectly imprinted in a way that made my stomach twist.

The skin pulsed with every beat of my heart, a dull, constant ache beneath the surface.

If he had held on any longer—

I didn't finish the thought.

I didn't want to.

I snapped the mirror shut with a sharp click, the sound louder than it should have been in the confined space.

When I spoke, my voice came out flat.

"You act like hurting me isn't something you secretly enjoy."

My gaze stayed fixed on the windshield, on the empty stretch of road ahead that offered nothing but distance and silence.

He exhaled slowly through his nose.

A sound that could have been frustration.

Something closer to... restraint.

"I didn't intend for that to happen,"

The response came immediately.

It made something in me snap.

A bitter laugh slipped out before I could stop it, sharp and humorless.

"You don't intend...?"

I turned my head slightly, just enough to see him from the corner of my eye—his profile rigid, his eyes locked forward like the road demanded his full attention.

"Vincenzo, everything you've ever done to me has been deliberate."

"From abandoning your bride at the altar and taking me as your wife," I continued, voice tightening despite myself.

"To making it painfully clear that you married me only so I could suffer in your grip—for my father's crimes."

"You've shown me time and again that Violet comes first, even though we are married. That I would suffer if I crossed her. A woman who accused me of making her bleed, though I hadn't touched her at all."

"You could have checked the cameras... but you chose to look away."

My voice caught, then I forced it steady.

"You don't need to pretend with me. I will always be the daughter of your violator—and nothing can erase that."

Silence.

The accusation hung there.

Heavy.

I pressed my lips together, swallowing the emotion before it could spill further.

"Ever since you made me kneel on that razor-sharp ridge," I said, forcing each word out, "my knees ache every single time I move—even now, four weeks later, despite the fresh gauze the doctor applied yesterday. I still limp."

“You don’t honestly think I’ll ever forgive you, do you? You don’t think this is how I’ll live the rest of my life?”

I shook my head, the pain slicing through me.

I hesitated.

Just briefly.

Then lifted my hand again—just enough to brush lightly over the bruises on my jaw.

The contact made me wince.

“There,” I added quietly. “And just now—you almost broke my jaw because I didn’t answer fast enough.”

I dropped my hand back into my lap.

“Don’t tell me none of it was intentional.”

My voice sharpened again, cutting through the space between us.

“You choose to hurt me,” I said, eyes fixed ahead.

“Every day. Keep at it—it’s your season. But mine will come, Vincenzo. And when it does, I will make you pay for every pain you’ve inflicted. There will be no undoing it.”

Thick silence followed.

I reached up and wiped the last traces of tears from my cheeks with the heel of my hand, smearing faint streaks of salt and mascara across my skin.

My fingers trembled slightly as they fell away.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him shift.

Subtle.

But noticeable.

His shoulders squared.

His grip on the steering wheel tightened—just enough for the veins in his hands to press against his skin, just enough to betray that something inside him had reacted.

But he didn’t speak immediately.

When he finally did—his voice was lower.

Like he was choosing each word with precision.

“Well...” he paused, forcing down his words, then shifted.

“Violet only has a few days left... her heart failure has deteriorated rapidly.”

The words landed hard. Like a blow to the chest.

My breath caught slightly.

My hands stilled in my lap.

For a moment—everything inside me went quiet.

I swallowed against the sudden thickness in my throat, forcing the words past it.

“And how does her dying concern me?” I asked, my voice trembling.

A beat. Then his answer came—low, controlled, like a predator’s whisper.

“Because I need you to make a sacrifice, Elena.”

He paused, his eyes cold. “I need you to give your heart to Violet... so she may live.”

My chest dropped.

“Surely, this is some sort of prank!”

“I do not look like someone who pranks, do I?” he said, voice clipped. “You’ve already taken everything from her—and indirectly from me. Why not atone for your father’s sins by sacrificing your heart for an innocent life?”

I let out a sharp, humorless breath. “You’ve gone fully insane. Maybe check with the doctor—no one with a heart or a functioning brain talks like this.”

“I apologize if it sounded like a request,” he said, voice like steel.

“It’s not. It’s a command. Your heart, given in atonement to Violet... would finally earn my forgiveness.”

“You would kill me so your mistress can live?”

“You are already bound to die in my hands. It’s only a matter of time.”

“But at least your death would come with my forgiveness. You’ll get a proper burial—not left for the eagles and wolves to feed on, like I did with my father.”

My fear spiked.

Then he pressed the accelerator, nudging the idle car forward.

The Hilux rolled smoothly onto the road, the engine purring beneath us, alive and restrained.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

Did he really mean it?

No... no, it couldn’t be—but he sounded serious, didn’t he?

My world collapsed inward.

My chest seized so sharply it felt like something inside me had caved.

Air refused to come.

My lungs stalled.

Thoughts fractured, raw and panicked, until all I could hear was the violent rush of blood in my ears.

No—

That couldn’t be right.

It couldn’t—

He kept talking.

Unbothered.

As though he were reading from a report instead of handing me a death sentence.

“From the moment I saw you in that dressing room on my wedding day,” he said, voice flat, dangerous, “I wanted to end your life. I chose against it. Instead... I wanted you to suffer first, slowly, before the final act.”

“Be grateful. Your death will have meaning. Few are given such a chance.”

My chest tightened so sharply it felt like it might split.

The academy gates came into view ahead.

Tall. Iron.

Imposing.

Wrapped in ivy that made them look deceptively beautiful—like something sacred instead of something that held secrets.

Like something that would swallow me whole.

“I would give you a grand burial, Elena.”

The way he said it—almost... gentle.

It twisted something inside me.

“Kings. Queens. Dignitaries from every corner of the world.” His voice remained detached. “You would die as Vincenzo Orsini’s wife.”

He glanced at me briefly—just once—before returning his attention to the road.

“That is honor enough.”

The words hit me like a fist.

“You would have died cheaply anyway.”

He continued, as though weighing outcomes. “At Ruslan Baranov’s hands, or some other enemy’s.”

The name hit harder than expected.

“Instead...” His tone lowered slightly, “your death will have meaning.”

My throat burned.

“History will remember you as the woman who sacrificed her heart to save another.”

A sound tore from my chest before I could stop it.

Half sob.

Half broken, incredulous laugh.

My voice shook now, no longer controlled. “You think promising me a pretty tombstone is going to make me lie down quietly while you cut my heart out for your mistress?”

“She is not my mistress.”

“She is.” The words came out sharper this time, laced with something raw and unfiltered. “Whether you sleep with her or not, that’s exactly what she is to you.”

I turned fully toward him now, unable to hold it in any longer.

“The woman you’d kill for,” I said, voice trembling. “The woman you’d kill me for.”

The truck passed beneath the academy’s stone archway.

He didn’t slow.

Didn’t acknowledge the weight of what I’d just said.

“Elena, it’s time to accept your fate,” he said, quiet but piercing.

“In a few minutes, you’ll be on the table in the third-floor lab, offered for Violet. I’ll tell everyone you did it willingly—so your name is remembered forever.”

Panic clawed through me.

My pulse surged.

Every fiber of my body screamed.

“Like I said,” he added, voice cold as steel, “I’m giving you a choice. Don’t make it difficult. We can do this the easy way—or the hard, painful way.”

He turned the wheel sharply.

The truck veered off the main path, bypassing the grand academic buildings entirely.

Instead, he guided us toward a separate structure at the back of the campus—a sleek, windowless white building that stood apart from everything else.

Cold. Clinical.

Wrong.

It rose four stories into the sky, its surface reflecting the pale morning light like a blade.

Like something built for one purpose only.

I stared at it.

Then slowly—almost unconsciously—my fingers curled into my palm.

No.

Not like this.

Not here.

Not now.

My pulse hammered so violently I could feel it rattling in my teeth, a frantic, trapped rhythm that refused to slow.

The Hilux rolled into the shadowed loading bay beneath the building and came to a stop with a final, decisive thud.

Vincenzo cut the engine.

The silence that followed was absolute.

It pressed against my ears, against my chest, as if the world itself had paused to witness what was about to happen.

He opened his door and stepped out without a word.

The sound of his boots hitting concrete echoed once, then faded into the hollow stillness.

I didn't move.

My hands were clenched in my lap so tightly my nails dug crescents into my palms, the pain grounding me just enough to keep me from spiraling completely.

Through the rearview mirror, my eyes drifted—almost against my will—to the perimeter beyond.

The gates.

Closed. Immovable.

Beyond them, guards stood at intervals along the high stone walls, their postures rigid, their presence constant.

The walls themselves rose like something ancient and unyielding, topped with razor wire that caught the morning light and glinted faintly.

Even if I ran—

Even if I somehow got past him—

There was nowhere to go.

Italy wasn't just a country.

It was his territory.

His control.

Every road. Every exit.

Every shadow. Every safe house.

I had known that.

The passenger door opened.

I flinched.

Then forced myself to look up.

Vincenzo stood there, framed by the open door and the dim light of the bay, one hand resting lightly on the frame.

The other extended.

Not gentle.

Commanding.

“Come down, Elena.”

My breath hitched.

My legs—

I wasn't sure they would work.

They felt disconnected from the rest of me, like they belonged to someone else entirely.

“I know you're calculating escape routes,” he added, his voice quieter now. Almost... controlled. “But even if these gates were wide open, even if this building didn't exist—”

His gaze didn't waver.

"—you still couldn't run from me."

A pause.

Not threatening.

Just certain.

"Not in Italy," he finished. "Not anywhere."

My throat tightened.

I swallowed.

Forced air into my lungs that didn't feel like it was staying there.

Then, slowly—

I moved.

One foot found the running board.

The other followed.

The moment I shifted my weight, my knees gave a slight, unsteady protest, buckling just enough to make my breath catch.

I caught myself on the edge of the doorframe, fingers curling around the cold metal to steady myself.

For a second, everything tilted.

But I didn't fall.

Vincenzo stepped back.

Two paces.

Not far.

Just enough to give me space.

Or maybe—just enough to ensure I couldn't use the open door as leverage against him.

“Move.”

The word was simple.

I looked at him.

Really looked.

At the man everyone calls my husband.

At the man I had once foolishly let take my virginity, be my first.

At the man who had kissed me as if I were the only thing that mattered in his world—

It was hard to reconcile that memory with the man standing in front of me now.

The man who stood in front of me now.

Calm.

Unmoving.

The same man who had just told me, with that same quiet certainty—that he intended to end my life.

To give my heart away.

To save someone else.

And still—

God help me—some stubborn, broken part of me searched his face.

For hesitation. For doubt.

For anything.

Anything at all that might prove this wasn't real.

That this was just another one of his punishments.

Another test.

Another cruelty designed to break me—

but not this.

There was nothing.

Only cold resolve.

Steady. Final.

My chest tightened painfully.

I stepped forward.

One step.

Then another.

Each movement felt heavier than the last, like I was walking deeper into something I couldn't climb out of.

Like I was crossing a line that couldn't be uncrossed.

Each step echoed in my ears louder than the last.

My breath came shallow.

I took another deliberate step forward.

Forcing my legs to obey even as they trembled beneath me.

The concrete seemed to rise toward me with every step, like it was waiting—like it knew exactly what I was about to do.

Then—something inside me snapped.

Pure, survival instinct.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 17[4,731 words]

Chapter 17

ELENA

I TURNED.

Fast and violent.

And drove both fists into Vincenzo's face.

Left hook—sharp, brutal—slamming into his cheekbone with a sickening crack.

Right cross—driving straight into the bridge of his nose.

The impact jolted up my arms, pain blooming in my knuckles as cartilage gave way beneath the force of my strike.

For the first time since I'd known him—

Vincenzo staggered.

His head snapped back, eyes widening in genuine shock, as if he hadn't expected me—of all people—to hit him like that.

To fight back.

To break his control.

Before he could recover—

I moved.

Using every ounce of strength I had left, I launched myself upward and drove my body into him with brutal force.

My foot connected with his chest.

Once.

Then again.

The first kick slammed into his sternum.

The second caught him harder—square in the ribs—as he twisted instinctively to regain balance.

Air exploded from his lungs in a sharp, strangled wheeze.

His body crashed backward into the side of the Hilux with a metallic bang, the impact reverberating through the loading bay.

The force of it dented the vehicle's panel, the sound echoing sharply as one of the side mirrors snapped loose and clattered to the ground, spinning once before going still.

For half a second—

silence.

Then—chaos.

Boots slammed against concrete from every direction.

Voices shouted over each other.

“Secure the perimeter—!”

“Contact—!”

“Get her—!”

Men poured out of the shadows like they had been waiting for this exact moment.

From alcoves.

From behind vehicles.

From the side entrance of the medical wing.

Black tactical gear. Ear pieces.

Weapons already drawn.

Every movement calculated. Every reaction immediate.

The cameras—

I knew they were there.

Recording. Watching.

Capturing every second of what I had just done.

A ring formed around me.

Tight. Closing.

At least a dozen men.

Maybe more.

Most of them towering over me, their builds broad and imposing, their presence overwhelming in a way that made the space feel smaller with every breath I took.

Some raised compact MP5s.

Others held Berettas at low-ready.

And a few—held batons.

Ready to break bone with a single swing.

I didn't flinch.

Didn't step back.

Didn't lower my fists.

I would rather die here—on cold concrete—fighting every last one of them—than walk into that building quietly.

Than let them take me in.

Than let them cut into me while I was still breathing.

Behind me—movement.

Two men rushed to Vincenzo.

“Boss—!”

“Are you—”

He raised a hand.

Sharp. Commanding.

Instantly—they stopped.

Frozen.

Without looking at them, he pushed himself upright.

Slowly.

Like the damage I had just done was nothing more than an inconvenience.

Blood poured from his left nostril in a steady, unbroken stream, dripping onto the crisp white collar of his shirt.

It spread across the fabric, soaking into the black silk tie, staining it deep red.

A smear of blood streaked his cheek.

Another marked the lapel of his tailored jacket where he'd instinctively wiped his mouth.

Still—he adjusted his tie.

Calm.

As though he were preparing for a meeting instead of standing in the middle of violence.

He touched the side of his nose lightly.

Winced.

Just once.

Fresh blood welled between his fingers.

And then—his voice cut through the space.

“Hold her.”

That was all it took.

Six men moved at once.

Coordinated. Brutal.

The first grabbed for my arm.

I twisted instantly, slipping inside his reach and driving my elbow into his throat.

He choked—gagging—and released me.

The second swung a baton.

I ducked just in time, the weapon slicing through the air above my head.

I came up fast, driving the heel of my palm into his nose.

The crack of impact was sharp.

Blood sprayed.

But there were too many.

Hands closed around me from every side.

My arms. My waist. My shoulders.

I kicked.

Thrashed. Fought.

Screamed through clenched teeth as I tried to wrench myself free, my body twisting in their grip.

But it wasn't enough.

They overpowered me. Dragged me down.

Hard.

To my knees.

And this time—the same knees—the same fragile, already broken point—hit the concrete with a force that shattered whatever was left of my restraint.

The gauze tore instantly.

Fabric ripping under the pressure.

Skin meeting concrete.

Raw. Unprotected.

Pain detonated through my legs in a white-hot surge, so intense it stole the air from my lungs.

My vision blurred.

Stars burst behind my eyes.

A strangled sound tore from my throat as fresh blood soaked through the ruined bandages, spreading in dark, ugly blooms across the white fabric.

My breath came in sharp, broken gasps.

Every nerve in my body screamed.

The men bearing down on my shoulders pressed harder, forcing my kneecaps into the concrete until pain shot up my legs in sharp, blinding waves.

My body bucked instinctively, twisting, straining against their grip—but it was useless.

Their hands didn't budge.

Their weight didn't shift.

I was trapped.

Pinned. Rendered still.

Vincenzo approached.

Slow.

Each step deliberate, unhurried, as if time itself bent around him.

As if he knew there was nowhere I could go.

He stopped directly in front of me.

Then lowered himself into a crouch.

Too close.

I could smell him before I could fully process him—blood, sharp and metallic, layered with cedar and something darker.

The scent wrapped around me, invasive, suffocating, familiar in the worst possible way.

His fingers lifted to my face.

I flinched immediately.

But this time—his touch wasn't rough.

His fingers caught my chin with a strange kind of restraint, tilting my face upward as though I were something fragile instead of something he was about to destroy.

My breath hitched.

His thumb brushed across my lower lip.

Deliberate.

Almost... thoughtful.

I jerked my head violently, trying to pull away.

I snapped at his fingers, trying to bite, to fight, to do anything that would make him release me.

The men holding me didn't loosen their grip.

Not even a fraction.

"Please..."

The word tore from my throat before I could stop it.

Broken.

Raw. Unrecognizable.

"You have all the power," I said, voice quivering, almost breaking.

"Please... don't do this."

My chest rose and fell too fast.

"I'm begging you, Vincenzo... I can't—please."

For a moment—something subtle shifted in his gaze.

Something that almost looked like it might break him.

But it didn't.

He leaned forward.

My breath caught.

His lips pressed gently to my forehead.

Soft. Lingered.

Reverent in a way that made no sense.

My entire body froze.

Every nerve went still.

“I’ll make the world remember your sacrifice,” he murmured against my skin.

“Every year, Violet and I will stand at your grave, lay flowers, and remember you.”

The words sank into me like something heavy.

“That much, I promise.”

Then—he pulled back.

Straightened.

As if nothing had just happened.

As if he hadn’t just kissed me like that.

As if I hadn’t just begged him not to kill me.

“Take her to the lab.”

His voice shifted instantly—back to that cold, commanding tone.

“Bind her hands and feet. Make sure she cannot move... or resist... when the surgery begins.”

He stepped back. Creating distance.

Ending everything.

The six men moved immediately.

Rough. Impatient.

Hands gripping my arms as they hauled me up, my body dragging awkwardly between them as my feet struggled to keep up with their pace.

My shoes scraped against the concrete, catching, slipping, scraping again.

Pain pulsed through my knees with every step.

“Vincenzo!” I screamed, my voice shattering almost immediately.

“Look at me—please! Don’t do this—Vincenzo, remember... the cave, the promises you made to protect me... please—have mercy! I am not my father... please—”

My voice cracked into something desperate.

“Please!”

Again.

And again.

But he didn’t turn.

Didn’t look.

Didn’t acknowledge me.

They dragged me toward the building.

Inside.

The first staircase hit like a wave of pain.

My heels caught on every step, my legs weak and uncoordinated as they forced me upward.

My shins slammed against the marble risers, each impact sending jolts of pain through my bones.

I twisted violently in their grip.

Kicked. Fought.

Anything.

One of them cursed sharply when my foot connected with his knee, the sound of impact echoing in the enclosed stairwell.

“Hold her tighter!”

A second later—

my shoulder was slammed into the wall with brutal force.

White-hot pain exploded across my side.

I tasted blood.

Copper flooded my mouth as my ribs screamed in protest, fresh bruises blooming instantly beneath my skin.

I gasped—but they didn't stop.

Second staircase.

I hooked my leg around the banister, desperate, clinging to it like it was the only thing keeping me tethered to reality.

For a split second—

I held.

Then—they yanked harder.

The force tore my grip loose.

Fabric at my knee ripped open again with a sharp, ugly sound.

Blood smeared along the steps behind us in dark, wet streaks.

Third staircase.

The air changed.

Sharp. Sterile. Cold.

Antiseptic flooded my senses, overwhelming everything else. It burned in my nose, clung to my throat.

Medical. Clinical.

The kind of place where things didn't get better.

They just got taken apart.

Rows of syringes.

Clear vials.

Folded surgical drapes.

A crash cart stood abandoned in one alcove, its defibrillator paddles gleaming under the lights.

Somewhere in the distance—a monitor beeped.

Uninterrupted.

Like a heartbeat that didn't belong to anyone.

They pushed through double swinging doors marked **LABORATORIO 3** in bold red letters.

Inside—everything felt colder.

Sharper.

The surgical lights were already on, suspended overhead on articulated arms like mechanical eyes waiting to observe.

Monitors blinked softly.

Instrument trays sat arranged with unnatural precision, metal tools aligned in perfect rows.

And in the center—a steel table.

Wide. Cold.

Waiting.

Leather restraints already unbuckled.

Already waiting for me.

They didn't hesitate.

They threw me onto it.

The metal slammed against my back, cold seeping instantly into my skin.

For a second—

I couldn't breathe.

The first restraint snapped toward my wrist.

I lashed out—kicking hard.

My heel connected with the man's groin.

He folded instantly, a strangled sound tearing from his throat as he collapsed to his knees.

The second man lunged.

I brought my knee up sharply—driving it into his jaw.

A sharp crack followed.

His teeth clacked together violently as he staggered backward, disoriented.

The rest surged forward.

Swarming. Closing in.

Hands reached for me from every direction.

I became nothing but motion.

Nothing but instinct.

Nothing but the part of me that refused to die quietly.

Elbow snapped upward into another person's throat—hard, precise.

A wet choke followed as the man staggered back, clutching at his neck.

I didn't pause. My body moved before my mind could catch up.

Knife-hand strike—sharp—into the side of another man's neck.

His body jerked, his grip loosening just enough for me to twist free.

Instep kick driving into a knee joint.

Bone gave.

The man went down with a strangled cry.

Every movement was muscle memory.

Every strike something I had been trained to do long before this place, before Vincenzo, before everything.

One man charged again—too slow, too confident.

I pivoted.

Hooked my arm around his and used his momentum against him—hip throwing him cleanly over my shoulder.

His body slammed into the tiled floor with a sickening crack.

He didn't get back up.

Another lunged.

I drove my palm into his nose with a sharp upward strike.

Blood burst immediately, spraying across the sterile white tile.

The room exploded into chaos.

Trays clattered to the floor.

Metal instruments scattered and rang out as they hit the ground.

Glass shattered somewhere to my left.

An IV pole toppled with a loud metallic crash, the drip line snapping loose and whipping through the air.

Surgical drapes tore as bodies collided with them, fabric ripping under the strain of movement and panic.

Alarms began to scream.

Sharp. Piercing.

And then—a man in a white coat appeared in the doorway.

A doctor.

His eyes were wide behind thin-framed glasses, his face draining of color as he took in the scene.

For one second—he froze.

Then—he turned and ran.

Shouting for security.

My breathing came in harsh, uneven gasps.

I stood in the center of the wreckage.

Chest heaving.

Blood dripping.

From my lip.

From the deep cut above my eyebrow.

From my knees.

My blouse—once neat, once controlled—now hung torn at the shoulder, fabric shredded and stained.

Blood dripped from my chin.

From my hairline.

From places I didn't even have time to identify.

Every breath burned.

Every inhale felt like dragging glass into my lungs.

The double doors slammed open again.

Hard. Violent.

Too many.

This time—twenty men flooded in.

Armored.

Weapons raised. Eyes hard.

No hesitation.

They had learned.

I saw it in the way they moved.

In the way they spread out.

In the way they didn't rush me the same way the first group had.

I tried.

God help me—I tried.

The first one came too close.

I swung—caught him across the jaw.

He staggered.

A kick followed—into the gut of another man rushing in beside him.

He doubled over.

But my body—my body was failing me.

My arms felt heavy.

Like they were filled with lead.

My legs shook with every movement.

My vision blurred at the edges, tunneling in and out like I was slipping in and out of consciousness.

My lungs burned.

Refused to fill properly.

There wasn't enough air. There wasn't enough time.

And there were too many of them.

They swarmed.

Hands seized me from every direction.

Wrists. Ankles. Shoulders.

I struggled.

Kicked. Twisted.

Fought with everything I had left.

But this time—

it wasn't enough.

They slammed me back onto the table.

The impact knocked the air from my lungs in a sharp, brutal burst.

Leather cuffs snapped around my wrists.

Then my ankles.

Then across my chest.

My thighs.

Each strap tightened with ruthless precision.

Metal buckles clicked into place.

Final.

Locked. Unbreakable.

I jerked once.

Twice.

But the restraints held.

My body sagged against them, trembling with exhaustion I could no longer fight.

Blood smeared beneath me on the steel surface, warm and sticky against my skin.

The men stepped back.

Slowly.

One by one.

The chaos faded.

The alarms continued to wail in the background, but the immediate violence was over.

The room settled into a tense, suffocating stillness.

Most of them filed out.

Some limping.

Some holding bruised ribs.

Others nursing broken noses or swollen faces.

Only two remained. One tall, the other short.

The taller one rolled his shoulder, wincing as he adjusted his stance, a fresh bruise blooming along his cheek where my elbow had connected earlier.

The shorter one lingered beside him.

Wiry. Scarred.

Blood still trickling from a shallow cut at his temple.

The taller man exhaled slowly, shaking his head.

“...Honestly,” he muttered, half in disbelief, half in something like reluctant respect, “this girl’s got a fucking iron spirit.”

His gaze flicked toward me.

“Took down six of our best like they were nothing.”

A short pause.

“Gave the rest of us real hell.”

A faint smirk tugged at his lips.

“Where the hell does she pull that kind of strength from?”

The shorter one didn’t answer immediately.

Instead—his eyes moved over me.

Slow. Appraising.

Wrong.

My stomach turned cold.

“I wish I could fuck her bloody before the doctor gets here...”

The words dropped into the room like something rotten.

My entire body went still. My breath caught.

Cold terror spread through my chest, sharp and suffocating, locking my lungs in place.

I stared at him through the haze of pain and exhaustion, my vision blurring at the edges but my mind forcing itself to stay sharp, to stay present—because if I let it slip even for a second, I knew what would happen.

“That’s the boss’s wife,” the taller man said flatly from a few feet away, his tone laced with caution.

The shorter one scoffed, a rough, humorless sound that bounced off the sterile walls.

“You call this bitch a wife?” he shot back, his voice edged with crude amusement.

“She’s about to die on that table. What the fuck does she have left to lose?”

My chest tightened at his words, anger flaring hot and sharp, cutting through the fear just enough to keep me grounded.

He stepped closer.

Too close.

I could smell him now—sweat, antiseptic, and something metallic like blood that hadn’t been washed off properly.

His fingers flexed at his sides, restless, predatory, as his gaze dragged over me.

Slow.

Undressing.

“Might as well give her one last ride,” he added with a low chuckle, like this was some kind of joke he’d been waiting to tell.

Something inside me snapped.

“You wouldn’t dare!” I thrashed violently against the restraints, straining with everything I had left.

The leather straps bit deeper into my wrists and ankles, cutting into already bruised, torn skin. Pain flared, sharp and immediate, but I didn’t stop.

I couldn’t stop.

I wouldn’t.

The tall man exhaled sharply, taking a step back toward the door.

“This is too fucking dangerous,” he muttered under his breath. “I’m out.”

For a second, hope flickered—thin, fragile.

The short man didn’t follow.

He stayed rooted to the spot, glancing back at the taller one as he left, a flicker of hesitation crossing his face.

“Close the door behind you,” he said quietly, watching the tall man exit.

Then the tall man vanished.

The door slammed behind him.

Sealing me in.

Now it was just me—and him.

The shorter man turned back toward me, rolling his shoulders as if loosening up for something he’d been anticipating.

His lips curled into a grin that made my stomach turn.

“Stop pretending you don’t want this.” He said, almost conversational now.

Almost... amused.

“It’s just one last fuck. I’ll make it feel good before they slice your heart out with knives.”

Rage surged through me, hot and blinding.

“Do not lay your fucking hands on me.”

The words came out sharp, defiant, but they were laced with something else underneath—fear.

He laughed.

A low, pleased sound, like my resistance only entertained him more.

Before I could move, his hand struck my inner thigh.

The slap cracked through the air, burning instantly.

I jerked violently against the restraints, but there was nowhere to go.

Nowhere to hide.

His hand lingered for a moment too long

Panic surged, sharp and suffocating.

“Let go, you bastard!” I screamed, my voice breaking, raw with fury and desperation.

“Get off me—don’t you touch me!”

He only laughed again, low and breathless, like he was enjoying this far too much.

Then he stepped away.

My heart stuttered.

For a second—

I thought maybe—just maybe—he was done.

But instead—he crossed the room.

Straight to the instrument tray.

Metal clinked softly as his fingers hovered over the tools, selecting something with slow, deliberate care.

My blood ran cold.

He picked up a scalpel.

The blade shimmered in the surgical light, silver and sharp.

He turned it in his fingers, admiring it.

Testing its edge.

“I don’t need to take your boyshorts off,” he said casually, like he was discussing something trivial. “Just cut a nice little opening right here—”

He gestured crudely toward my body, toward the space between my thighs.

“—and I can fuck you deep.”

My stomach twisted violently.

“Nice and easy.”

His grin widened.

“You might not thank me now, but you’ll sure as hell thank me when you get to hell.”

He took a step closer.

Then another.

The scalpel gleamed in his hand.

My pulse roared in my ears.

Loud. Relentless. Drowning out everything else.

Everything narrowed down to this single moment.

This single man.

This blade.

And me.

The man’s grin widened as he stepped between my spread legs, the scalpel catching the surgical lights in sharp, cruel flashes.

My stomach dropped.

No.

No—no—no—

I thrashed violently against the restraints, every muscle in my body straining as I tried to wrench free.

The table rattled beneath me, metal legs scraping against the tile, buckles tightening with every desperate movement.

“Stay still,” he muttered, almost annoyed, as if I were nothing more than an inconvenience.

His free hand pressed down on my thigh, pinning me more firmly in place.

Then—the blade touched my trousers.

Right at the inner thigh.

I felt the pressure first. Then the slow, deliberate push.

Fabric resisted for a split second—then gave way.

A soft, tearing sound followed as he dragged the scalpel through the material, carving an uneven path upward.

He worked with disturbing patience, widening the cut, shaping it into a crude opening around the most vulnerable part of me.

Each movement of his hand made my chest tighten.

Each shift of the blade sent a fresh spike of panic through me.

“No—!” I jerked harder, hips twisting violently, trying to disrupt his angle, trying to throw him off balance.

But he adjusted easily.

Like he expected me to fight. Like this was part of the game.

“Stop—!” My voice broke, shaking but fierce. “Get away from me!”

Tears burned down my temples, mixing with blood that had already begun drying on my skin.

I had heard stories like this before.

Seen what men like him did when no one stopped them.

“I’m not going to let you—”

My voice cracked, but I forced it out anyway.

“I won’t let you touch me like that.”

He chuckled under his breath, low and amused, like my resistance entertained him.

His hand shifted.

The sound of his zipper followed.

Cold dread slammed into my chest.

No.

No—

His other hand tightened on the scalpel as he worked his pants open, preparing himself with disturbing ease, like this was something he had done before—something routine.

Something he believed he was entitled to.

My breathing turned shallow.

Panic surged, wild and suffocating.

I twisted again, straining every muscle in my body—trying to move.

Trying to fight.

Then—the door exploded inward.

The sound was deafening.

Metal slammed against metal with enough force to crack the frame, the impact echoing through the room like a gunshot.

Everything froze.

The man above me jerked backward instinctively, his grip faltering.

The scalpel slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor.

For a split second—he stood there.

Frozen.

Exposed.

My head snapped toward the doorway.

Hope—sharp and fragile—cut through the terror.

Vincenzo stood in the entrance.

His suit was torn at one shoulder.

Blood streaked down his face, dried and fresh mixing across his skin, his broken nose still slightly swollen.

But it was his eyes—that made everything stop.

Dark. Cold.

Deadly.

There was something in them that I had never seen before.

Not just anger. Not just control.

Something far worse.

Something that promised consequences.

“Boss—” the man stammered, scrambling to recover, his hands half-raised as if that would save him.

“I was just—”

Vincenzo cut him off, moving like a flash—charging at him fast.

Like a madman, his fist clenched so tight I could hear bones cracking.

I heard it—the grinding of bone under pressure.

The first punch landed with brutal precision—right across the man’s jaw.

A sickening crack echoed as his head snapped sideways.

The second blow drove into his ribs.

Air rushed out of him in a sharp, pained gasp.

The third split his lip open, blood spraying across the white tile in a fine, violent arc.

But Vincenzo didn't stop.

He advanced.

Drove him backward.

Each strike more controlled than the last, yet somehow more devastating.

The man slammed into the wall with a dull thud.

Vincenzo followed immediately, pinning him there with a forearm pressed across his throat.

And then—he lost control.

His composure shattered.

What followed was not discipline.

It was pure, unrestrained fury.

He drove his fist into the man's face again.

And again.

And again.

Each impact heavier than the last.

Each blow driven by something deeper than anger.

Something personal. Something consuming.

Bone cracked. Blood splattered.

Teeth broke loose and scattered across the floor like debris.

The man's body jerked with every hit, his hands scrambling weakly at Vincenzo's arm, but there was no stopping him.

His face collapsed under the assault—nose flattened, cheekbone caved.

One eye swelling shut within seconds.

He sagged—but Vincenzo held him up.

Kept him there.

Blood poured from every split, turning his features into a slick, unrecognizable mask.

The man's arms finally came up—too late, too slow.

Vincenzo's fist slammed into his temple with a sickening impact that echoed in the room.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Each blow driven with brutal, unrestrained force.

The man's body went slack again.

His knees buckled.

Then he slid down the wall, leaving a smeared trail of red behind him as he collapsed into a lifeless heap on the floor.

For a moment—the only sound left was the echo of fists hitting flesh... fading into silence.

Vincenzo kept striking, even after the body had stopped moving.

Even after the man's head lolled to the side, unresponsive, eyes unfocused, lifeless.

He kept striking.

Hard.

Relentless.

Driven by something that looked less like rage and more like something breaking apart inside him.

Only when his breathing grew heavier—ragged, uneven—did the motion begin to slow.

His shoulders rose and fell sharply.

Chest heaving.

Then, finally—he stopped.

Straightened.

Blood dripped from his knuckles onto the tile, forming small, dark drops that spread outward in slow, uneven patterns.

A new presence filled the doorway.

The doctor.

The same one who had run earlier.

He stood frozen in the entrance, lab coat pristine, stethoscope hanging loosely around his neck.

His face drained of color as his gaze flickered across the room—the broken bodies.

The blood.

Me.

Still bound. Half-exposed.

Stripped and bleeding.

His eyes widened.

Too late.

Vincenzo turned.

The movement was almost too smooth.

In one fluid motion, his hand slipped inside his jacket.

A compact pistol appeared.

Raised. Aimed.

The doctor didn't even have time to react.

The gunshot cracked like thunder in the enclosed room.

The doctor jerked once—a neat, precise hole between his eyes.

His body stiffened mid-step. Then collapsed forward.

Dead before he hit the floor.

The silence that followed was heavier than the gunshot.

I flinched hard against the restraints, a choked sound catching in my throat.

My heart slammed against my ribs, every nerve in my body screaming at what I had just witnessed.

Another body.

Another life—taken in seconds.

Vincenzo didn't even look at the man again.

He strode to the door in three long steps, slammed it shut, and twisted the lock with a sharp, decisive motion.

The heavy deadbolt slid into place with a deep, final clunk.

He crossed the room and knelt beside me, reaching down to his ankle.

In a single, smooth motion, he drew a dagger from its sheath.

The blade was black-handled.

Wicked.

Sharp enough to catch the light and reflect it in a cold, unforgiving line.

He brought it to the first restraint.

Carefully.

Almost... gently.

The blade pressed into the leather strap at my ankle, slicing through it with controlled precision.

One by one.

Ankles. Thighs. Chest. Wrist.

Each cut was deliberate.

As if he were afraid that one wrong movement—one careless slip—would hurt me further.

The final strap fell away with a soft thud.

For a moment—I didn't move.

My body didn't obey me.

My limbs felt foreign.

Heavy. Unresponsive.

Every inch of me screamed in pain.

My knees throbbed.

My ribs ached with every shallow breath.

My face burned, swollen and crusted with dried blood.

My shoulders felt raw from the struggle.

Everything hurt.

Everything.

Slowly—painfully—I pushed myself upright.

The sheet beneath me was soaked in multiple places, dark red spreading unevenly across the fabric.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry and tight.

My hands trembled as I pulled the torn edges of my boyshorts together, trying to cover the damage as best I could.

My fingers shook as I held the fabric in place, forcing myself to curl my legs beneath me.

To reclaim even a fraction of control.

Vincenzo sat down on the edge of the table.

Back to me.

His shoulders were rigid.

Unnaturally so.

His hands clenched at his sides, then loosened... then clenched again.

Over and over.

His entire frame trembled with a kind of restrained tension I had never seen in him before.

Fine.

Barely visible.

But unmistakable.

I swallowed blood and saliva, my voice coming out hoarse, broken.

“You were going to let them cut out my heart for her,” I said, my voice trembling but steady enough to strike.

“Why loosen me up? Why kill the man who was about to take advantage of me?”

My breath trembled.

“You despise me so much... watching would have pleased you, yes?”

He exhaled.

Long. Broken.

Like something inside him had finally cracked.

“You don’t deserve this,” he muttered.

Not to me.

To himself.

“You don’t deserve any of the pain I’ve put you through, Elena.”

His hands tightened into fists again.

“Everything I’ve done to you...” His voice roughened, barely holding together. “You don’t deserve it.”

A pause.

Then, quieter, almost to himself—

“I feel I’ve crossed a line I can’t come back from.”

He swallowed hard.

The sound was audible in the silence between us, sharp in a room that still smelled of blood, antiseptic, and gunpowder.

When he spoke, his voice came out cracked—stripped of its usual control.

“You asked me in the car how my night had been—without you by my side. The honest truth? It was a lonely hell.”

“Full of nightmares. Of what your father did to me. Of the blood. The screams. The way he laughed while he destroyed me.”

A bitter exhale escaped him.

“Torture,” he muttered. “Pain.”

“I missed you—your presence, your warmth, your breathing beside me—were the only things keeping me sane.”

His hand dragged down his face again, this time slower, more deliberate, as if he were trying to physically ground himself.

“You’re not your father,” he whispered.

The admission sounded like something he’d fought to say.

Like something that cost him.

“Why can’t I just see that?” he murmured to himself, as if wrestling with a part of him he could not control.

I wrapped my arms around my knees, pulling myself inward as much as the restraints of my own body allowed.

Cold seeped into my bones.

Not just from the room—but from everything.

The weight of everything that had just happened.

Every movement hurt.

Every breath scraped against my ribs.

Vincenzo stood, pushing himself away from the table with a sharp motion, like he couldn't stand still any longer.

He walked around to my side, his footsteps measured but tense, each one echoing faintly in the room.

He stopped in front of me and looked—really looked—at the blood matting my hair, the swelling along my jaw.

The bruises darkening across my skin.

The torn fabric.

The way I held myself—curled inward, protecting what little I could.

Something shifted in his expression.

“I can never truly earn your forgiveness,” he said softly.

“I’ve done too much... too much to break you.”

Almost like he was speaking to himself.

Almost like he couldn't fully believe it.

“Violet saved me once—literally put her body between me and a bullet when I was sixteen.”

His jaw tightened.

“I remember screaming for help, crouched by her barely conscious body in the alley. That kind of sacrifice... it stays with you.”

The words settled in the space between us.

Heavy.

His voice roughened again.

“I do not want her to die, yes. But there is absolutely no reason you should be sacrificed for her.”

His eyes flickered, a darker shadow passing through them.

“Do you love her?”

The question cut through him.

I saw it.

The exact moment it landed.

His eyes snapped to mine—sharp, startled, like I had struck something deep and unguarded.

For a moment, he looked... caught.

Vulnerable in a way I had never seen in him before.

His mouth opened.

Closed.

Opened again.

Nothing came out.

The silence stretched.

Finally—quietly—

“I... I don’t know how to love. I can’t. I’m incapable of it—of loving anyone.”

The words fell into the room like something fragile.

Like something he wasn’t used to admitting.

His jaw tightened, as if forcing himself to continue.

“But I know how to protect. How to repay. How to make sure the people who matter don’t suffer.”

His gaze dropped briefly, as if the weight of his own words pressed down on him.

“That’s what I’ve been doing for Violet.”

I didn’t look away.

Even though my eyes burned and my body screamed for rest, for escape, for anything but this—

I held his gaze like a challenge.

Like a question he couldn't escape.

“Do you love me?”

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 18[4,303 words]

Chapter 18

ELENA

THE QUESTION CAME OUT softer than I intended.

But it landed between us like a blade.

His breath caught.

His eyes shifted—searching my face.

His throat worked.

Once.

Twice.

But no words came.

Only silence.

Then—he looked away.

Just like that.

Cutting the moment cleanly in two.

“Your heart will no longer be taken out for Violet. I’ll send female doctors to tend to your wounds,” he said, his voice returning—colder now.

“Violet... she can die peacefully.”

A pause.

“I’ll see to it that she is honored after her death.”

The words sounded forced.

Like something he was dragging out of himself piece by piece.

He walked to the exit.

Fingers curled around the latch, tightening on the metal.

“You forgot one thing,” I said.

My voice was weaker now, but it still cut through the silence.

He paused.

His hand stopped mid-motion, pivoting slightly.

“What?” he asked quietly.

“I asked if you love Violet. You said you can’t love anyone. Then I asked if you love me... I know the answer—a resounding no. You hate me. That’s obvious. But I need you to say it.”

He stood frozen.

Chest rising and falling slowly.

His gaze locked onto mine once more, and for a brief second—I thought he might say it.

Whatever it was.

But he didn’t.

Instead—he turned.

Twisted the lock. Opened the door.

And walked out.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Cutting me off from him completely.

I lay there on the blood-soaked table, my body trembling with exhaustion I couldn't fight anymore.

The room felt too quiet now.

And all I could hear—was the fading echo of his footsteps disappearing down the corridor.

Barely two minutes passed.

It felt longer.

Time stretched in that strange, distorted way it does when your body has been pushed past its limits—when every second is stretched thin by pain, shock, and the quiet aftermath of violence.

Then—the door opened again.

Softly this time.

Not with force. Not with authority.

Almost... hesitant.

Two women stepped inside.

Both wore pale-blue scrubs, their hair pulled back into tight, practical buns.

Their faces were pale—too pale for people working in a place like this—but more than that, there was something in their expressions that caught me off guard.

Fear.

Not the kind that came from uncertainty.

But the kind that came from knowing exactly who held power in this place.

One of them carried a stainless-steel tray.

It was heavy.

Laden with supplies—gauze, antiseptic bottles, syringes, sealed sterile packets arranged in precise order.

The other held folded towels and a change of clothing, neatly stacked in her arms like offering something fragile.

They approached slowly.

Carefully.

As if I might break further if they moved too fast.

Or worse—as if they were afraid I might still fight them.

I stayed where I was.

Curled on the table.

Legs drawn in tight beneath me.

Clutching the blood-soaked sheet against my body like it could shield me from everything I had just survived.

Like it could make any of this feel less real.

Their eyes flicked over me as they drew closer.

The split lip.

The gash above my eyebrow.

The dried and fresh blood.

The torn fabric.

The gauze at my knees soaked through in deep, dark red.

And the cuts—

I felt it in the way their gazes lingered there.

In the way the younger woman's hands trembled when she set the tray down.

The metallic clink echoed too loudly in the silence.

“Signora Orsini,” the older woman said softly.

Her voice was gentle.

“We’re here to help.”

A pause.

“Please... let us take care of you.”

The words hit differently.

Not clinical. But respectful.

Like I wasn’t just a patient.

Like I wasn’t just someone they had been ordered to treat.

The title alone unsettled me.

Signora Orsini.

It sounded too formal.

Too tied to the man who had just left this room.

Too tied to everything I didn’t understand anymore.

The younger nurse reached toward my arm, her movements slow, cautious—but her hand shook so badly she nearly dropped the bottle of saline she was holding.

She caught it at the last second.

A small, shaky breath escaped her lips.

The older nurse noticed immediately.

She placed a steadying hand on her colleague’s arm.

A quiet gesture.

Reassuring.

Then she looked at me.

“We were given very clear instructions,” she said.

Her voice remained calm, but there was an undercurrent of something... wary.

Respect, but also awareness.

“Mr. Orsini said you are to be treated with the utmost care.”

A pause.

“No pain, if it can be avoided.”

Another breath.

“No rushing.”

I nodded.

Barely.

The motion cost more effort than it should have.

My throat felt tight. Too dry to form words.

They began working.

The antiseptic stung as it touched my skin—but it didn’t burn the way I expected it to.

Their hands were gentle.

Every movement was controlled.

The younger nurse dabbed at my wounds with hands that still trembled slightly, but her touch softened with each second, as if she were forcing herself to steady.

The older one guided her silently at times.

Correcting. Supporting.

Never rushing.

When they reached the cuts between my thighs—the younger nurse froze for just a moment.

Her cheeks flushed immediately.

She looked away quickly, her breath catching as she whispered an apology under her breath.

“Sorry... I’m so sorry...”

But she continued.

Carefully. Respectfully.

The silence in the room shifted.

It became less about fear—and more about restraint.

Something in their behavior told me they understood exactly what they were dealing with.

Or more accurately—who.

They cleaned every wound.

Applied ointment with careful precision.

Replaced the ruined gauze with fresh, sterile layers, wrapping my knees gently but firmly, ensuring support without causing more pain.

Then—the injection.

They explained it in soft, careful tones.

Pain relief.

A mild sedative.

Something to help my body begin to recover.

I barely felt the needle go in.

Only the faint pressure.

Then warmth spreading slowly through my system.

When they were finished—the older nurse stepped forward and helped me down from the table.

My legs gave out almost immediately.

They simply weren't ready.

Or maybe—

I wasn't.

But she caught me before I fell.

Her arm wrapped around my waist, steady and firm, anchoring me upright without hesitation.

“Easy,” she murmured. “We’ve got you.”

We moved slowly.

The younger nurse supported my other side as they guided me toward the bathroom.

“There’s a private bathroom just through that door,” the older one said.

Her voice softened slightly.

“We’ve left fresh towels and clothing.”

A pause.

“Take as long as you need.”

They didn’t rush me.

Didn’t speak further.

They simply guided me forward until I could stand on my own.

And then—they stepped back.

Leaving me there.

The door closed softly behind me.

I leaned against the cool tiles of the shower wall as warm water poured down over my body.

At first—it burned.

From the sensation of water hitting torn, sensitive skin.

Then slowly—it softened.

The water turned pink as it swirled down the drain.

Blood washing away.

Layer by layer.

Evidence disappearing in front of my eyes.

I closed my eyes.

Pressed my forehead against the tile.

Let the water fall over my shoulders.

And for a moment—there was silence.

But even then—I couldn't escape him.

Vincenzo.

His face kept surfacing behind my closed eyelids.

The man who had forced me to kneel on sharp stone until my knees bled—and then carried me when I collapsed.

The man who had ordered my heart to be cut out for his mistress—and then came to save me before the procedure began.

How many more times would he come close to destroying me, only to pull back at the last possible second?

How many more times could my body survive that kind of violence—my mind survive that kind of emotional whiplash?

I stayed under the water until it ran cold.

Until my fingers pruned and the ache in my body dulled into a low, constant throb that I could almost pretend wasn't there.

But even then—the pain didn't disappear.

It just... settled.

Becoming part of me.

Like everything else.

When I finally stepped out, I wrapped a thick white towel around myself, the fabric soft against skin that still felt raw and overexposed.

The laboratory was empty again.

On a clean side table, something had been left for me.

Fresh clothes.

Neatly arranged.

A full academy uniform—crisp white blouse, navy blazer, pleated skirt—still folded with precise care.

Underwear still sealed in its plastic packaging.

And beside it—a pair of soft black flats.

Not heels.

Not something that would force me to suffer more pain.

A small change.

But one that didn't go unnoticed.

I stared at the clothes for a moment longer than necessary.

Then slowly—I dressed.

Each movement was careful.

Every time I lifted my arms, every time I bent or shifted my weight, a sharp protest of pain followed.

My knees burned. My ribs ached.

My skin pulled at every stretch.

But I didn't stop.

Didn't rush.

Didn't let the pain win.

The new gauze was already covering most of my visible injuries.

My knees. My forearms.

One cheek. The side of my neck.

I looked... contained.

Bandaged. Reconstructed.

Like a version of myself that had been patched together just enough to function.

A casualty made presentable.

I flexed my fingers once.

Twice.

Then turned toward the door.

Limping.

Each step sent fresh fire up my legs, but I gritted my teeth and kept going anyway.

I didn't have the luxury of stopping.

Not here.

The courtyard stretched wide and open as I stepped out into it.

Bright daylight. Fresh air.

Too normal for everything I had just been through.

I had barely crossed halfway when—I saw them.

Two figures approaching from the opposite direction.

My steps slowed.

Stopped.

Recognition hit instantly.

Renzo.

And Violet.

Violet saw me first.

Her reaction was immediate.

Her eyes narrowed, sharp and calculating, the moment they landed on me.

Her hand moved instinctively—settling over the slight curve of her abdomen, protective, almost possessive, as though my presence alone posed some kind of threat to it.

Her voice cut through the space between us.

“Shouldn’t she be on the operating table right now?”

“Vincenzo promised me her heart would be taken for me today.”

A pause.

Her lips curled slightly.

The urge to react—to strike, to retaliate, to wipe that smug certainty off her face—flared so sharply it made my palm tingle.

My fingers twitched.

But I forced myself to stay still. Forced myself to breathe.

She wasn’t the one who had broken me.

“Elena...”

Renzo’s voice broke the moment.

My gaze shifted to him.

His eyes scanned me slowly.

Taking in the gauze.

The limp.

The bruises darkening along my jaw.

Something in his expression tightened.

Not guilt alone—but something more conflicted.

I’m so sorry for everything you’ve been through.”

The words came out quietly.

I studied him for a moment.

Then gave a small nod.

“It’s okay.”

It wasn’t.

But saying anything else would take more energy than I had left.

Violet’s head snapped toward him immediately.

“Renzo, why the hell are you feeling sorry for her?” she snapped.

“You know what her father did to Vincenzo. You’re supposed to hate her with the same kind of fire Vincenzo does—if your loyalty to him still means anything.”

A beat.

“I’ll excuse you both,” I said quietly, turning slightly as I prepared to walk past them.

I didn’t have the energy for this.

Not now.

Not like this.

But before I could take another step—Violet moved.

Her hand shot out and clamped around my wrist.

Hard.

The grip was sudden.

Forceful.

Too tight.

Pain exploded instantly up my arm, radiating through every nerve in my body.

My breath caught sharply.

I stumbled.

My knees nearly buckled under the sudden jolt.

A sharp wince slipped through my lips as fresh pain lanced through my already battered body.

Every instinct screamed at me to pull away.

But I didn't panic.

I didn't lash out blindly.

Instead—I turned.

Slowly.

And looked at her.

My voice, when it came, was quiet.

“Get your filthy hands off me,” I said, voice calm but sharp.

“You really don't want to provoke me right now.”

My wrist twisted with deliberate slowness.

She resisted.

But not enough.

I pulled free.

Not aggressively.

Just enough to reclaim control.

To remind her—and myself—that I still had some of it left.

My gaze didn't waver.

“You already lied about me once,” I said, voice steady despite the ache.

“Claimed I made you bleed... that I almost caused you to lose your baby—when I didn't even touch you.”

A pause.

The words sharpened.

“This time... I might actually do it. Tear that baby from your body, let you bleed to death—and me? I’d pay no price. Nothing would touch me.”

Her face flushed a deep, furious crimson.

“How dare this bitch speak to me like that, Renzo?” she snapped, her voice cracking with disbelief and outrage.

Her fingers tightened over her abdomen as if grounding herself, as if my words alone had threatened something fragile within her.

“Hit her. Right now. Teach her a lesson.”

The command hung in the air.

Renzo didn’t move.

Didn’t even flinch.

His gaze flicked from Violet to me and back again, something restrained tightening in his jaw.

“She’s the boss’s wife,” he said evenly. “I would not dare lay a hand on her.”

The words were calm—but final.

Violet let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh, stepping closer to him as if she couldn’t process what she was hearing.

“What?” she demanded. “You can’t seriously mean that, can you?”

When he didn’t respond, her voice rose.

“Do you honestly think Vincenzo would punish you if you hit her—or even kill her—for my sake?”

Her tone sharpened, edged with something dangerously close to certainty.

“My Vincenzo despises this woman. He’d kill her for me, if that’s what I wanted. Anything... just to see me satisfied.”

The way she said my made something cold twist in my chest.

“Vincenzo didn’t marry her because of some childish fourteen hours they spent together as children,” she continued, words spilling faster, fueled by conviction.

“He married her to trap her under his roof... to punish her daily for her father’s sins.”

Her lips twisted in a cruel smirk.

“To make her suffer... until she’s broken.”

Her eyes flicked back to me, gleaming.

Then, almost proudly—

“He told me he could get fresh hearts from dozens of donors willing to save me.”

Her smile deepened.

“I said no.”

That caught my attention.

“I said I wanted hers.”

Her gaze locked onto mine now, sharp and triumphant.

“And he promised—he swore—he would do exactly what I wanted.”

A small, satisfied tilt of her head.

“As long as it made me happy.”

“Violet,” Renzo interrupted gently, his voice cutting through the tension, “let’s proceed to the laboratory. We’re running out of time.”

But she ignored him.

Completely.

Her attention remained fixed on me, as though I were the only thing in her world that mattered in that moment.

“If you somehow survive having your heart ripped out today,” she said, voice sharp and deliberate,

“I will contact Ruslan Baranov myself... and give him your exact location.”

The name hit like a gunshot.

My breath faltered.

Her eyes sharpened as she watched the reaction.

“He’ll come for you.”

“He’ll drag you out of Vincenzo’s territory if he has to burn it down to do it.”

The threat was intentional.

Deadly.

Ruslan Baranov.

The name alone was enough to summon memories I’d buried deep—nights spent running, hiding, surviving.

A past that never really let me go.

A man who didn’t forgive.

A man who never stopped hunting.

If Violet gave Ruslan Baranov coordinates...

He wouldn’t hesitate. Wouldn’t question.

Wouldn’t care who stood in his way.

He would bring war.

Straight to Vincenzo’s doorstep.

Just to reach me.

My stomach churned.

But I forced myself to breathe.

Forced myself to steady my voice.

“I’ve had enough of your threats... and your boasting,”

My tone was controlled.

Empty of emotion.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have lectures to attend.”

I turned.

And this time—I walked away.

Each step cost me.

My body protested with every movement.

But I didn't stop.

Behind me—silence.

She didn't follow. Didn't call out.

But I felt it.

Her gaze.

Heavy. Burning.

It pressed into my back like a physical force.

Like invisible needles boring into my skin.

Hatred radiated from her in waves so thick I could almost taste it.

Almost felt it clinging to me as I walked away.

THE REST OF THE DAY was nothing but torment.

I barely heard the lectures.

My mind refused to stay present.

It kept drifting back to Violet—her threats, the cold certainty in her voice when she promised to expose my location to Ruslan Baranov.

That wouldn't just cause chaos.

It would be war.

Because Ruslan wouldn't hesitate.

He would burn Vincenzo's empire to the ground just to get his hands on me.

My fingers trembled slightly, whether from pain or exhaustion, I couldn't tell.

My head pounded with every heartbeat.

At exactly 3:00 p.m., the final bell rang.

The sound echoed through the academy like a closing gate.

Students around me shifted, chairs scraping softly, papers being gathered, quiet conversations breaking out in hushed tones as the tension of the day began to unravel.

I didn't join them.

I couldn't.

I moved slowly, gathering my things with deliberate precision.

Every motion sent a fresh ripple of pain through my body—my knees flaring, my ribs tightening, my bruises pulsing in protest.

But I kept going.

Step by step.

Breath by breath.

When I finally stood, I had to steady myself against the desk for a moment longer than I liked.

Just to make sure I wouldn't fall.

Then I started toward the main gates.

Each step was measured.

But it cost me more than I was willing to show.

I didn't get far before a soldier appeared.

As if he had been waiting.

He moved quickly—falling into step beside me with practiced discipline.

His uniform was crisp.

His posture was straight, but his gaze lowered respectfully the moment he acknowledged me.

“Ma’am,” he said quietly.

Not loud. Not intrusive.

“Mr. Orsini instructed that I drive you back to the residence today.”

I nodded once.

“Okay.”

No resistance.

I didn’t have the energy for either.

He adjusted his pace instantly, matching mine as we made our way toward the executive bay.

The vehicle was already there.

A blacked-out SUV.

The kind of car that didn’t just transport people—it announced power before it even moved.

The doors were opened for me.

I slid into the backseat carefully, lowering myself with more control than I felt.

The moment I was inside, I leaned back into the seat and let myself sink into it.

As far as it would allow.

My body immediately protested.

Every joint screamed. Every bruise pulsed.

I closed my eyes.

Just for a second.

Tried to breathe.

In.

Out.

The car started moving almost immediately.

The outside world blurred past the tinted windows as we pulled out of the academy grounds.

And then—there was silence.

The kind that gave your thoughts too much space to breathe.

We had barely covered a few hundred meters—still within sight of the academy’s outer gates—when the atmosphere inside the SUV shifted.

It was subtle at first.

A tightening of the air.

A change in rhythm.

Then the soldier’s voice cut through the low hum of the engine.

“Signora...” he said, his tone initially controlled, professional—trained. “There are strange cars behind us.”

His gaze flicked to the rearview mirror.

Tension crept into his voice despite his effort to contain it.

“Three of them. Moving too fast.”

A pause.

“I’m reporting this.”

His wrist lifted immediately toward his mouth, thumb pressing the comms button as he prepared to transmit.

Something in his tone—something in the timing—made my chest tighten.

I pushed myself upright in the backseat.

The movement tore through my injuries instantly.

A sharp, brutal stab of pain lanced through my ribs.

My breath caught—but I forced myself through it anyway.

Gripping the headrest in front of me, I twisted around, angling my body to look through the tinted rear glass.

What I saw made my stomach drop.

Three black sedans.

Low. Sleek.

Unmarked.

They closed the distance with frightening speed, engines growling low and aggressive as they surged forward like predators that had already locked onto prey.

“Call it in,” I said, my voice tight but controlled. “Now.”

The soldier’s thumb pressed harder against the comms.

But before he could even finish the transmission—

Everything changed.

The lead car surged forward.

And rammed us.

The impact hit like a hammer.

Metal screamed.

My entire body was thrown forward violently, restrained only by the seatbelt digging painfully into my chest.

The force knocked the breath out of me.

For a split second—everything blurred.

The SUV lurched.

Fishtailed.

The driver fought for control, hands tight on the wheel as the tires screeched violently against asphalt.

“Hold on!” he barked, though it sounded strained even to him.

He wrenched the steering wheel, trying to stabilize the vehicle.

The tires bit back into the road—

but we were already losing momentum.

“Did you get through?” I forced out, my voice thin, breath uneven.

No answer.

His knuckles were white against the steering wheel.

His eyes darted—mirrors, road, mirrors again.

Assessing. Calculating.

Trying to survive.

Then—

A red sedan surged up on our left flank.

Too fast.

And slammed directly into the driver’s side door.

Glass shattered instantly.

A spiderweb of fractures exploded across the window before collapsing inward in a spray of shards.

The SUV lurched violently sideways.

Metal screeched as we scraped along the guardrail, sparks bursting outward in a bright, terrifying shower.

The world tilted.

“We are under attack!” the soldier shouted, but even his voice was starting to crack under pressure.

Then—the third car struck.

From behind.

Hard. Deliberate.

The final blow.

The impact shoved us forward with such force that the entire vehicle seemed to snap.

The SUV lost balance completely.

The ground dropped out from beneath us.

Time slowed.

We tipped—

then rolled.

Once.

The roof slammed against concrete.

The sound was deafening.

Metal crushing.

Glass exploding.

My body jolted violently against the restraints, every wound screaming in protest.

We rolled again.

Sideways this time.

The world spinning.

Up became down.

Side became air.

And then—

we came to a brutal stop.

Upside down.

The SUV lay crumpled in a ditch, the roof crushed inward, windows shattered, the frame groaning under the weight of its own damage.

Shards of glass rained down around me like jagged, deadly snow.

The smell hit next.

Burning rubber. Fuel. Hot metal.

A faint, dangerous scent of gasoline beginning to leak into the cabin.

For a moment—everything went silent.

White. Numb.

Disoriented.

Then—sound returned in fragments.

A high-pitched ringing filled my ears.

Distant horns.

The crackle of the dying engine.

The groan of twisted metal settling.

My breath came in shallow, uneven gasps.

I was still alive.

Barely.

Pain came back next.

My head throbbed violently.

Something warm trickled down my temple—fresh blood mixing with the dried streaks already clinging to my skin.

And the seatbelt—

It dug into my chest with merciless pressure, holding me suspended upside down like a broken puppet left hanging after the performance had ended.

My vision swam slightly.

Through the fractured side mirror, I saw them.

Movement.

Outside.

Six.

Maybe eight.

Men.

They emerged from the three cars with practiced coordination, their movements sharp, disciplined, efficient.

Black tactical vests.

Balaclavas.

Automatic rifles held low.

They swept the area first—checking angles, scanning for threats.

Then they converged.

On us.

On the wrecked SUV.

On me.

My heart dropped into something cold and still.

The driver's door was wrenched open with a groan of tortured metal.

It sounded almost like the vehicle itself was screaming.

Rough hands seized the soldier by the collar and dragged him out into the daylight.

His head snapped to the side as they pulled him free, blood already streaming from a deep gash across his forehead.

His seatbelt had saved him from being thrown clear during the crash—but it hadn't spared him from the violence of the impact.

He groaned once.

Dazed.

Before they hauled him away without ceremony—like something that no longer mattered.
Like cargo.

His body disappeared around the side of one of the sedans.

Gone.

Just like that.

Then—

it was my turn.

The rear passenger door was torn open with a violent screech, hinges protesting as if they might snap off entirely.

Two masked men leaned in immediately.

One seized my arm.

The other grabbed my ankle.

They yanked.

Pain exploded through my entire body.

A sharp, searing shock that ripped from my joints through every nerve at once.

My body was dragged across broken glass and twisted metal, the interior of the wreck cutting into me with every movement.

Fresh blood welled from reopened wounds, staining the inside of the vehicle in dark streaks.

Gauze tore away in strips, useless against the force they used.

I cried out.

I couldn't stop it.

The sound tore from my throat, raw and involuntary.

But they didn't slow.

Didn't care.

Didn't acknowledge my pain.

They handled me like cargo.

Rough. Mechanical.

As if I were nothing more than an object to be moved from one place to another.

Sharp voices cut through the air between them.

Spanish.

“Muévela rápido. El jefe quiere esto terminado antes de que Orsini se entere.”

Move her fast. The boss wants this done before Orsini finds out.

My blood ran colder than the air around me.

This wasn't random.

This was targeted and timed.

They dragged me across the ground toward the nearest sedan, the gravel biting into my skin as my body scraped along the surface.

The trunk popped open with a dull mechanical click.

Without ceremony—they shoved me inside.

My head slammed against the metal interior, a sharp, sickening crack that sent a spike of pain through my skull.

My knees folded tightly against my chest, already bruised joints protesting violently at the sudden compression.

Then—the lid slammed shut.

Darkness swallowed me whole.

Instantly.

Completely.

The world vanished.

No light. No air.

Just silence and suffocating blackness.

The engine roared to life beneath me, the vibration of it shaking through the trunk as the car lurched forward.

Tires spun briefly against gravel—then found asphalt—and we moved.

Fast.

The confined space grew hotter almost immediately.

Air trapped.

Stale. Claustrophobic.

Heat built with every passing second.

Sweat broke out across my skin, stinging every cut, every open wound.

My breathing turned shallow, uneven, my chest rising in small, careful movements as I tried not to aggravate the pain in my ribs.

I curled inward instinctively.

Protecting myself.

As much as I could.

But every bump in the road sent fresh agony through my body, jolting my injuries and making it impossible to stay still.

My thoughts spiraled.

Panic creeping in.

But I forced myself to focus.

Think.

Act.

Do something.

With trembling fingers, I reached down along my thigh, searching through the folds of my ruined skirt.

My phone.

Please—

I found it.

Still there.

Miraculously intact.

The screen cracked in a spiderweb pattern across the glass, but it powered on when I pressed the button.

Relief hit me so hard it almost hurt.

I swiped to unlock it.

Blood from my forehead dripped down, smearing across the glass.

I wiped it away quickly with the heel of my hand, leaving faint red streaks behind.

Another drop fell—this time from a cut in my palm—landing on the screen like a mark.

The display glowed faintly in the darkness of the trunk.

And there—

Vincenzo's name stared back at me.

My breath caught.

I pressed call.

Once.

No answer.

Twice.

Still nothing.

Three times.

Straight to voicemail.

"No..." I whispered, voice trembling, breaking apart in the dark. "No, no, no..."

The battery icon blinked at the top of the screen.

4%.

Panic tightened in my chest.

“No, please...”

I hit call again.

Nothing.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to breathe as my hands shook.

“Vincenzo...”

The word came out broken.

“I know you hate me,” I whispered into the empty darkness, my voice cracking under the weight of everything I couldn’t say out loud, “but please... just answer.”

3%.

The battery dropped again.

I switched quickly to messages, my thumbs trembling as I typed as fast as I could in the dim light.

Every second mattered.

Vincenzo,

We were attacked on the road home. Car rolled. They dragged me out. I’m in the trunk of their car—black sedan, heading somewhere. I don’t know where.

My fingers shook harder as I continued.

They were speaking Spanish.

Spanish rebels, maybe.

I know you loathe me. I know I mean nothing to you.

But I’m still your wife.

Please save me.

I hit send.

2%.

The screen dimmed slightly.

The light flickered in the confined space, barely illuminating my hands, my trembling fingers, the blood staining my skin.

For a moment—nothing happened.

Silence.

Only the hum of the engine.

Only the motion of the car.

Only the sound of my own shallow, uneven breathing.

Then—

it rang.

The screen lit up suddenly.

His name flashed across the display.

Vincenzo.

My heart slammed against my ribs.

I answered immediately—before the first ring could even finish.

“Keep your phone on, Elena.”

His voice came through the speaker immediately—low, urgent.

“Stay on the line. Don’t hang up.”

Panic, wrapped in steel.

“I’m tracking you right now.”

The words hit harder than they should have.

“My battery’s at two percent—”

My voice cracked as I spoke, trying to keep the connection alive, trying to hold onto him—

But before I could finish—

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

The screen went black.

Gone.

Instantly.

Silence swallowed everything.

Darkness pressed in.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 19[3,407 words]

Chapter 19

ELENA

My chest tightened violently.

“No—”

My voice came out broken, too quiet to even echo in the confined space.

The trunk felt smaller.

Hotter.

The air thinned with every passing second, growing thick and stale, pressing against my lungs as if it no longer wanted me to breathe.

My head swam.

The combination of blood loss, shock, and fear began to blur everything together.

My thoughts scattered.

How would Vincenzo ever find me now that my phone was dead?

Where were these Spanish rebels taking me?

Was this the moment my life took yet another cruel turn?

My chest constricted as panic set in.

Time stopped making sense.

Seconds stretched. Or collapsed.

Minutes bled into each other.

I couldn't tell anymore.

I lost track of everything except the sound of the engine.

Then—the car jerked.

Hard.

The tires crunched over gravel—then dirt.

The sound changed.

We were slowing.

Stopping.

My pulse spiked instantly.

Every nerve in my body snapped to attention.

The vehicle came to a complete halt.

Silence followed.

A heavy, suffocating pause.

Then—the trunk lid flew open.

Light exploded into the darkness.

Blinding.

My eyes burned instantly as the sudden brightness stabbed through the blackness I'd been trapped in.

I flinched hard, squeezing my eyes shut, trying to shield myself from the overwhelming glare.

“¡Rápido!” someone barked.

Hands seized me again.

Too many. Too rough.

They grabbed my arms, my shoulders, pulling me out of the trunk with no care for my injuries, no concern for the damage they were inflicting.

Pain flared instantly as my body was dragged into the light.

Air rushed in.

Hot. Dry.

Overwhelming after the suffocating darkness.

My legs buckled the moment my feet hit the ground.

I collapsed immediately.

My knees slammed into the dirt with a sharp, grinding impact that sent fresh pain surging through my entire body.

My palms hit the ground instinctively, scraping against sharp stones and loose gravel.

Blood welled up instantly from reopened wounds, warm and thick against my skin.

I forced my eyes open.

Blinking. Struggling.

Tears mixed with the glare of the sun, distorting the world in front of me as I tried to focus.

Through the haze—

I saw them.

Men.

Surrounding me.

Masks still on.

Ten.

Twelve.

More.

Black balaclavas concealed their faces, but their eyes—sharp, alert, calculating—were visible beneath the fabric.

Tactical vests hugged their torsos, rifles slung across their chests, fingers close to triggers without quite touching them.

They stood in a loose semicircle around me.

Controlled. Ready.

The ground beneath us was cracked concrete, stretched wide and uneven, leading toward a massive fortified compound that loomed in the background like something carved out of war itself.

High stone walls.

Barbed wire coiled along the top.

Guard towers at each corner, already active—figures moving within them.

Floodlights swept in slow, deliberate arcs, even in the late afternoon sun, as though the place refused to rely on daylight alone.

This wasn't some abandoned warehouse.

This was a fortress.

A stronghold.

Spanish-controlled.

Built with intention. Maintained with power.

I tried to count them again.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four—

But the numbers blurred together, slipping out of focus as my body refused to cooperate.

My arms felt like they belonged to someone else.

My legs trembled violently just trying to keep me upright on my knees.

Even if I could stand—even if I could fight—even if I could land one clean hit—

I wouldn't survive long enough to make it count.

A low groan broke through the tension.

I turned my head sharply to the left.

The soldier.

The one who had driven me.

He was being dragged forward between two masked men, his body barely able to support itself.

His uniform was in ruins—torn, soaked through with dark crimson across his chest and shoulder.

Blood matted his hair, and one of his eyes was already swollen nearly shut, forcing him to squint through pain.

They shoved him down.

Hard.

Forcing him to his knees directly in front of me.

His head lifted.

Slowly. Painfully.

And for one brief second—our eyes met.

There was something there.

Regret. Apology. Fear.

But also—acceptance.

Like he knew what was coming.

Like he'd already accepted it.

Before he could speak—before I could—

A gunshot cracked through the air.

Sharp. Final. Deafening.

The soldier's body jolted once.

A harsh, involuntary jerk.

Then collapsed forward into the dirt.

Still.

Silence followed.

Blood began to spread beneath his head, dark and thick, seeping into the ground in slow, obscene patterns.

My breath caught.

Completely.

My chest locked.

My body froze.

For a moment—I couldn't process what I had just seen.

Then it hit me.

Hard.

My heart seized so violently I thought it might stop entirely.

I whipped my head toward the source of the shot.

Two men emerged from the shadowed archway of the main building.

The first—Matteo.

Violet's father.

Mid-fifties.

His dark hair streaked with silver, though it didn't dull his presence in the slightest.

His suit was tailored, immaculate, entirely out of place in the chaos surrounding him.

But he wore it with ease, confidence and control.

He walked like a man who had never been questioned in his life.

Like a man who expected obedience from the world.

The second—

I couldn't breathe.

My lungs locked instantly.

Impossible.

My mind rejected what I was seeing before my eyes could fully process it.

Vasquez.

My father.

The same sharp jawline.

The same cold hazel eyes.

The same faint scar cutting through his left eyebrow—the one he'd gotten in a bar fight when I was seven years old.

He wore a simple black shirt.

Sleeves rolled to the elbows.

A cigarette rested between his lips, smoke curling lazily upward as though nothing around him mattered at all.

He watched me.

Not with urgency. Not with concern.

But with detached amusement.

My breath hitched violently.

My entire body went rigid.

"No..." I whispered under my breath.

It wasn't possible.

It couldn't be.

He was dead.

He had to be dead.

My family had died in a plane crash just days before I turned sixteen.

I remember the moment clearly—I was in the backyard of my father's house, kneeling in the grass, when the news came.

I screamed until my throat burned raw. I cried until my chest ached.

I had lost my mother, my little brother, and my father all at once—a heartbreak that shattered me completely.

And yet... here he stood.

Alive.

Smoking. Smirking.

Watching me like I was nothing more than a curiosity.

Matteo stopped a few paces away.

Close enough that I could smell him.

Whiskey.

Sharp. Burning.

It clung to his breath, mixing with the faint scent of expensive cologne and dust, like a man who didn't care how he carried himself anymore—only that he was seen.

He glanced over his shoulder toward my father and smiled.

“Surely,” Matteo said smoothly, his voice carrying easily across the open space, “seeing your father again after over a decade isn't what you expected, Elena.”

The words settled into my chest like something heavy.

My throat tightened.

My voice came out broken, fragile.

Barely audible.

“Dad?”

Just that one word.

Soft. Raw.

A plea I hadn't realized I was making until it left my mouth.

Vasquez's expression hardened instantly.

The warmth I had been searching for—the ghost of the man I remembered—vanished.

His eyes darkened.

“Don’t,” he said, voice low and lethal, “Ever call me that.”

The word hit harder than any physical blow I had taken today.

My chest caved inward as if something inside me had been struck and shattered at once.

My breath caught.

Stuck somewhere between inhale and exhale.

For a moment—I couldn’t move.

Couldn’t think. Couldn’t process.

After everything.

After years of believing he was gone.

After mourning him.

After building a life around the idea that I had lost my family—this was what waited on the other side of that grief?

This?

I stared at him.

Searching.

Desperately.

For something.

Anything.

A flicker. A memory.

The man who used to lift me onto his shoulders so I could see fireworks.

The one who taught me how to shoot before I could spell my own name.

The one who used to ruffle my hair and tell me I was stronger than I looked.

There was nothing.

No recognition. No warmth.

Just contempt.

Cold and absolute.

Vasquez took a slow drag from his cigarette, watching me like I was something beneath him.

Then he exhaled through his nose.

Smoke curled upward.

Like a dragon breathing out something poisonous.

He took a step forward, crushing the cigarette beneath his heel.

The motion was deliberate.

As if he was stamping out more than just ash.

“Still reeling from the shock of me being alive?” he said, smirking.

“Your whore of a mother made me disown you—and your sister—ages ago.”

The words landed like a blade.

My breath hitched violently.

The ground beneath me felt less real.

The betrayal cut deeper than anything I had endured today.

Deeper than the agony I felt when Vincenzo had tried to tear my heart from my chest for Violet.

Deeper than the countless blows his men rained down on me.

Deeper than the pain of being dragged from that overturned car, bloodied and helpless.

My own father.

My blood.

Looking at me with pure, unfiltered hatred.

I searched his face again.

Harder this time.

Frantically. For something.

Anything that would remind me this was a mistake.

That he would soften.

That he would say my name differently.

That he would look at me and see me.

There was nothing.

Just disgust.

Cold and unwavering.

My hands trembled against the dirt.

I forced myself to stay still.

To stay upright.

Even as everything inside me cracked open.

Everyone hated me.

Vincenzo.

The man who couldn't decide whether to destroy me or save me.

Violet.

Who wanted my heart carved out of my chest.

And now—

my father.

The one person who should have been safe.

The one person who should have loved me without question.

Calling me my mother whore like it was her name.

Like she had always been one.

Tears burned behind my eyes.

But I refused to let them fall.

Not here.

Not in front of them.

Matteo stepped closer.

His boots crunched against the gravel.

He stopped just a few feet from me.

Close enough that I could see the faint curve of his smile.

“Now that your kidnapping has been... successfully executed,” he said, smooth, almost amused, “you should know why you’re here.”

His eyes glinted.

“First—because you disgraced us. As a family and as an organization.”

His voice remained smooth, almost detached.

“That day was supposed to be Violet’s wedding. We dressed her in our finest. Families flew in from Madrid, Barcelona, Seville. Everyone came to watch our daughter marry the love of her life.”

He gestured vaguely, as if recalling something distant. Something ruined.

“But what did you do?” His gaze returned to me, sharp now.

“You showed up—knowing exactly the history you shared with him. Knowing he would choose you.”

My stomach twisted.

“You stole her groom. On her wedding day. In front of all of them—while the entire Spanish society in Italy watched us be humiliated.”

“That is not—” I started, my voice weak but defiant.

He didn’t let me finish.

“Did you really think we would let that go?”

His eyes hardened, something colder settling beneath the surface.

“That we would forgive a disgrace like that?”

I clenched my jaw, fighting against the rising panic, the urge to scream, to defend myself, to tell them the truth—

That I hadn’t stolen anyone.

That I had run into that church seeking shelter.

Seeking safety.

That I hadn’t even known there was a wedding happening until I walked in and saw him—

Vincenzo.

In a suit.

Eyes wide.

Fury burning beneath the surface.

I hadn’t stolen anyone.

I hadn’t planned anything.

I had been running.

Running from Ruslan’s men.

But none of that mattered.

Because they didn’t want the truth.

They wanted a reason.

And I was it.

Words formed on my lips.

Then stopped.

Because I knew—deep down—anything I said would fall on deaf ears.

“And secondly...” Matteo gestured lazily toward Vasquez. “Your father wants you here.”

“He wants you to satisfy his needs from time to time... and if you do so without causing problems, you’ll be well taken care of.”

The words hit like ice water.

“Satisfy his needs?” My voice cracked on the last syllable.

Matteo’s smile widened.

“Your father—Vasquez—likes them young.”

“After staging his death in that plane crash everyone believed killed him, he came here—to Italy—to disappear. To make sure the people back in California truly believed he was gone.”

“And while he was here...”

A pause.

“He had his needs met. Many times. With many ladies.”

His gaze hardened slightly.

“But Vincenzo’s sister... she was his favorite.”

Silence stretched.

“Ever since Vincenzo rescued her, there’s been a void.”

His eyes settled on me.

“And now... you’ll fill it, Elena.”

My stomach lurched violently.

What the hell—

Vincenzo had been right.

My father had truly violated his sister.

“You’re saying...” I forced the words past the lump in my throat, my voice trembling. “My father would... violate me? From time to time?”

Matteo gave a lazy shrug, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“Crude way to say it, but yes. Nothing new under the sun, Elena. Fathers have been violating their own blood for centuries.”

He took two deliberate steps back.

“Take this woman to the black square,” he commanded.

Four men surged forward.

They seized my arms and hauled me upright.

My knees buckled instantly; pain exploded white-hot through my legs.

I didn’t fight.

They dragged me backward across the compound yard, boots scraping dirt, my gaze locked on my father’s face the entire time.

He watched me go—cigarette back between his lips, smoke curling like a noose.

No remorse.

No recognition.

Just cold, amused detachment.

I kept staring, willing this to be a nightmare, willing him to call out, to stop them, to show one flicker of the man he used to be.

He didn’t.

My father’s face stayed fixed in that same cold, detached mask as I was dragged away, as if nothing about what had just been said—or done—mattered to him.

Even as the distance stretched between us, I refused to look away.

I kept staring.

Burning the image into my mind.

Holding onto the last clear view of him, as though if I stared long enough, hard enough, he would change his mind.

Move.

Do something.

Anything.

Prove that this was some cruel illusion—something born from blood loss, shock, or a mind that had finally snapped under pressure.

My breath hitched.

My hands trembled where they hung uselessly at my sides.

No.

No, this couldn't be real.

I forced my focus inward, desperate for anything to ground me.

My fingers moved instinctively.

I dug my nails into the inside of my arm—hard.

Pain exploded instantly.

A strangled breath slipped from my lips.

I did it again.

Harder.

The sting deepened, blooming across my skin, anchoring me painfully to the present.

This was real.

Too real.

It hurt.

My own father—alive.

After all these years.

After everything I had believed.

He had stood there. Looked at me. And treated me like I was nothing.

An object.

Something to be used.

Matteo's words echoed in my mind.

He wants you to satisfy his needs from time to time...

My stomach twisted violently.

My own father wants to violate me.

After years of believing he was rotting in the ground... my skull's pounding too hard to wrap my mind around it.

To even believe he had been alive all this time—secretly living here in Italy while I suffered...

While I lived like I had no family.

No one to call home.

No one to cry to.

I was drowning in it.

And all along, he had been alive.

Watching.

Hating me from a distance.

The realization settled deep into my bones, cold and suffocating.

I didn't realize I had stopped breathing until air finally rushed back into my lungs in a sharp, painful gasp.

The four men dragged me across the compound without a word.

Their boots scraped against dirt and stone, the sound grinding into my ears with every step.

My feet barely touched the ground.

They carried me more than I walked.

Like something that didn't need to be handled carefully.

Like something that didn't matter if it broke.

I didn't resist.

My head swam.

The world tilted slightly with each step, but I forced myself to stay awake.

To stay conscious.

To see.

Because I refused to disappear into darkness while they did this to me.

They pushed me forward.

Shoved me toward a heavy steel door.

It groaned open with a low, grinding protest.

And then—

I was inside.

The door slammed shut behind me.

A sharp metallic clang echoed through the space.

Followed by a lock.

I stood there for several long seconds.

Barely moving. Barely breathing.

Letting my eyes adjust to the dim light.

It was large.

Concrete walls painted a dull, institutional gray stretched around me, closing in without actually moving.

No windows. No escape.

Just walls.

A single narrow bed sat against one side, the mattress thin and worn, its surface stained and sagging.

No sheets.

Just a place to lie down.

And suffer.

Two metal folding chairs stood nearby, their legs slightly uneven, as though they had been used and discarded over and over again.

A couch sat along one wall—short, sagging, clearly salvaged from somewhere else—its fabric worn thin, seams fraying.

Next to it, a three-seater sofa in faded brown leather, cracked with age, one arm slightly collapsed inward.

And in the far corner—my breath caught.

A toilet.

Open. Exposed.

No walls. No partition.

Just a bare seat bolted to the floor, beside a showerhead fixed directly into the concrete wall.

No curtain. No privacy. No dignity.

A rusted drain sat beneath it, the only thing separating water from flooding the room.

That was it.

No table. No mirror. No clock.

Nothing.

My chest tightened painfully as the truth sank in.

This wasn't just a room.

It was a cage.

A place designed not just to confine me—but to break me.

To strip me of privacy and identity.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry.

This was where they planned to keep me.

Where they planned to use me.

Where I would wait.

For whatever came next.

My legs trembled beneath me.

I took a slow, unsteady step forward, then another, moving deeper into the room as if testing whether it was real.

Whether I was real.

My fingers brushed against the wall.

After the fucking bloodbath at the academy... after those endless, brutal fights with Vincenzo's men — punching, kicking, clawing just to stay alive, only to end up with more cuts and bruises than I could count...

That short bastard who tried to force his way between my legs.

I was beyond exhausted.

I could barely keep my eyes open during lectures, my brain screaming one thing only: get back to Vincenzo's estate, collapse face-first into that guest room bed, and let the painkillers knock me out.

Let my battered body heal somehow.

Who the hell would've guessed I'd end up here?

Kidnapped.

My body still black and blue, still leaking blood, pain ripping through me in fresh waves that refused to die down.

I looked down at myself.

What was left of me, anyway.

My uniform hung in torn, filthy strips, barely clinging to my body.

Blood had crusted over nearly every exposed inch—my forehead, my arms, my knees, my thighs—dark and stiff in some places, still tacky in others.

My knees—already ravaged from the mountain punishment—were swollen and raw.

Every small movement sent a fresh pulse of pain racing through my legs.

I couldn't sit.

Not on the chairs. Not on anything soft.

The thought of fabric pressing against open wounds made my skin crawl.

So instead, I moved carefully—slowly—lowering myself onto the cold concrete floor.

The moment I touched it, a shiver ran through my body.

I stretched my legs out in front of me, straightening them as much as my trembling body would allow.

Then I leaned back, bracing myself against the leg of the nearest chair, letting it support what little strength I had left.

My breathing was shallow.

Each inhale scraped against my ribs.

I swallowed hard.

My throat was dry.

“Vincenzo...” The whisper slipped out before I could stop it.

Barely audible. Fragile.

“Please... find me.”

My fingers moved instinctively, slipping into my pocket.

The phone.

Still there.

I pulled it out slowly, cradling it in both hands like it was something sacred—something fragile enough to shatter if I held it too tightly.

The screen was cracked.

Spiderweb fractures spreading across the glass like a wound.

The battery—dead.

No signal. No hope.

No way out.

But I couldn't let it go.

It was the last thread connecting me to something outside this place.

I held it close anyway.

Minutes passed. Or maybe hours.

Time blurred.

My body sagged against the chair leg, my head resting back as my eyelids grew heavier with every passing second.

My mind spun—images, memories, pain all bleeding together into something I couldn't separate anymore.

And eventually—exhaustion won.

I didn't mean to sleep.

Didn't want to.

But the body betrays you when it's pushed too far.

Darkness swallowed me whole.

I WOKE TO HOT, RANCID breath on my face.

My eyes snapped open instantly.

A man's face hovered inches from mine—close enough that I could see the pores in his skin, the slight sheen of sweat, the faint stubble along his jaw.

My entire body jolted.

“—!”

A scream tore out of me, raw and instinctive, as I shoved him hard with both hands.

He staggered back.

Caught off balance.

I scrambled upright, my legs trembling violently beneath me as I tried to stand.

Pain detonated instantly through my knees.

I gasped, catching myself on the arm of the chair as my body swayed dangerously.

My vision blurred for a second.

Then cleared.

And I saw him.

Vasquez.

My father.

Standing a few steps away now, watching me with a cold, unreadable expression.

But his eyes—those hazel eyes—they burned.

Not with concern. Not with recognition.

But with something darker.

Anger. Something twisted.

He held a cigarette between his fingers, unlit, turning it idly as if he were deciding whether to smoke it or use it for something else.

His shirt smelled faintly of stale smoke and whiskey, the scent drifting toward me with every step he took.

“What the fuck were you doing?” My voice came out sharp—cracked but filled with something I hadn’t expected.

Fear.

And something close to rage.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, slow and deliberate, as though my touch had somehow dirtied him.

“Checking if you were still breathing,” he said flatly.

His voice carried no warmth.

No emotion.

“Wouldn’t want you dying before we get started.”

My stomach lurched violently.

“Started?”

The word echoed in my mind, twisting into something worse the longer I thought about it.

He stepped closer.

I instinctively moved back—but there was nowhere to go.

My spine hit the wall behind me.

No escape. No space.

“You heard Matteo,” he said, his voice dropping lower—almost conversational, as though we were discussing something trivial.

“You’re here to make up for lost time.”

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 20[1,438 words]

Chapter 20

ELENA

Vasquez stood a few feet away, chest heaving, a trembling finger pointed straight at me.

Rage twisted his features into something unrecognizable—something feral.

The man in front of me wore my father's face, but whatever had once lived behind it was long gone.

"You will undress," he snarled, voice low, guttural, thick with something that made my stomach turn. "Lie the fuck down. And let me have my way."

For a split second, the room tilted.

From the sheer, suffocating weight of what he'd just said.

Then something inside me snapped back into place.

Cold. Sharp.

"Dad..." My voice came out rough, edged with disbelief and something darker. "This is not you."

The word hit him like a trigger.

His expression twisted further—something ugly and violent flashing across his eyes.

He bent abruptly, grabbed the small metal stool beside the bed, and hurled it straight at my head.

Instinct took over.

I ducked and twisted at the same time, my body moving before my mind could even process the danger.

The stool whistled past my shoulder, missing me by inches before slamming into the wall behind me with a deafening clang.

The impact dented the plaster, metal legs bending on contact before it dropped to the floor in a rattling heap.

"I've warned you," he panted, chest rising and falling heavily, "quit calling me 'dad,' goddammit."

His voice flattened.

“You, your younger sister, your brother — you were never mine. The DNA test confirmed every last one of you is a bastard.”

For a moment—everything stopped.

Sound. Breath.

Thought.

My lungs seized hard, like they’d forgotten how to pull in air, like my whole body had just been kicked in the chest.

“That’s not true.”

The words barely made it out.

“I found out you weren’t mine when you were sixteen,” he went on, voice flat and casual.

“Your whore of a mother thought she was smart. Figured I’d never catch on.”

A short, humorless chuckle escaped him.

“That plane crash that took out your mother and your brother?” He tilted his head, studying me like a bug.

“Yeah. I planned that shit. Made sure they didn’t walk away.”

The room dropped out from under me.

My fingers curled against the wall behind me.

No.

No—

“That’s not—”

“Your slut mother was heading off on her fake ‘vacation’ to spread her legs for her boyfriend,” he went on, ignoring me completely. “

“I’d known she was cheating for months, the stupid cunt.”

His lips twisted.

“I made damn sure that the plane crashed and burned.”

The words echoed.

Over and over.

I made sure that the plane crashed.

I tasted something metallic.

Blood.

I'd bitten my lip without realizing it.

He kept talking.

Calm. Detached.

Like this was all perfectly reasonable.

“After I set up their plane crash, I faked my own death so nobody would point the finger at me, then vanished. Ended up here in Italy.”

He gave a lazy one-shoulder shrug.

His eyes raked over me, cold and full of disgust.

“Best part? It let my lawyer boot you and your sister out of my house onto the fucking streets. Made sure you two lived like worthless orphans — broke, starving, scraping by in poverty. I wanted you both to suffer every single day.”

My chest tightened so violently it hurt to breathe.

I took another step back instinctively, even though there was nowhere left to go.

The wall pressed harder into my spine.

The room felt smaller.

The air thicker.

Harder to pull into my lungs

“It's hard to believe what you're saying when I see what a monster you've turned into,” I pushed the words out, voice trembling hard at first, then forcing it steady.

“But fine — let’s pretend Mom cheated. Was blowing her and her son out of the sky really the answer? Did it fucking satisfy you?”

My hands balled into fists.

“We were just kids. Innocent. We did nothing wrong. So why take it all out on us?”

For a fraction of a second—something flickered in his eyes.

Then it hardened.

“No,” he said, voice completely flat.

“You’re not innocent. You’re nothing but bastards.”

The word landed like a punch to the gut.

“You and your sister should count yourselves lucky you didn’t burn with your mother and that other little shit. And yeah... your suffering, your pain, your death — it would satisfy me a whole fucking lot.”

My stomach twisted violently.

His gaze dropped.

Dragged slowly over my body.

Revulsion crawled up my spine.

“Undress,” he repeated, voice low and lethal.

“Lie down on that fucking bed.”

He jerked his chin at the thin, stained mattress shoved in the corner.

“And let me have my way with you.”

The words dropped like stones.

“You’d do well to spread your legs and let me fuck you like the cheap slut you are — every time I walk through that door.”

Something inside me went completely still.

“Never.”

The word came out calm.

“That’s never going to happen.”

For a second, he just stared at me.

Then he barked a sharp and ugly laugh.

“Elena, I’m not repeating myself,” he growled. “My patience is wearing real fucking thin. Lie the fuck down — now!”

His finger jabbed toward the bed again.

Harder this time.

More aggressive.

“No,” I said again, shaking my head slightly. “If you’ve got blue balls, go fuck a whore.”

Silence dropped.

Heavy. Dangerous.

His eyes narrowed to slits.

“I see you want it the hard way,” he snarled. “Fine. For being a defiant little bitch, trust me — when I’m finished fucking you raw, I’ll let the guards line up and take turns on you.”

“Guards!” he bellowed, voice booming against the concrete walls.

The sound snapped something into motion.

I moved.

Fast.

Three strides.

That was all it took.

I reached the door just as boots started pounding from the other side.

My hand shot out, grabbing the internal latch.

I slammed it down.

Hard.

The mechanism clicked into place with a solid, final sound.

The door shuddered as something heavy hit it from the outside.

Voices. Shouting.

But the door held.

It was built like a vault—thick steel, internal deadbolt only operable from inside.

No one was getting in.

Not unless I let them.

I turned slowly.

Breathing hard.

My back pressed briefly against the door before I pushed away from it.

“It’s just you and me now, Vasquez.”

My voice had hardened.

No more shaking. No more cracking.

Only cold, flat steel remained.

“I’m not sure you can beat me one-on-one,” I said, staring him down. “But feel free to try. I won’t stop you.”

For a moment, neither of us moved.

Then, deliberately—slowly—

I crossed the room.

Every step hurt.

My knees screamed. My ribs protested.

But I didn’t show it.

Didn’t let it slow me down.

I reached the couch and lowered myself onto the edge of it, controlled, steady, my eyes never leaving his.

Watching. Waiting.

Ready.

He didn't come for me immediately.

Instead, he spun back toward the door, reaching for the handle.

I moved before he could take another step.

Pain screamed through my knees the second I pushed off the couch—but I ignored it.

I Ignored everything.

There was no room for hesitation. No space for fear.

Just instinct.

If he gets that door open... I'm done for. The soldiers will pin me down, and victory will be his.

I surged forward, closing the distance between us in two quick steps, my body moving on pure muscle memory.

Before he could react—before he could even register what I was doing—I drove my knee up hard.

Straight into his groin.

Every ounce of strength I had left went into that single strike.

The impact was brutal.

I felt it.

Felt the give.

Felt the sickening compression as bone met soft tissue.

A strangled sound tore from his throat—half grunt, half choked wheeze—as his entire body folded in on itself.

His eyes rolled back, face draining of color instantly as the pain hit.

For a second, he just stood there—frozen in shock.

Then he collapsed.

Completely.

Like a puppet with its strings cut.

He hit the concrete hard, limbs slack, breath coming in shallow, broken gasps.

I didn't wait. Didn't think.

I grabbed him.

My hands fisted in the fabric of his shirt as I dragged him—grunting with effort—across the floor.

His body was heavy, dead weight scraping against the concrete with a rough, grating sound that echoed in the empty room.

Every pull sent fresh agony through my arms, my ribs, my knees.

But I didn't stop.

I hauled him as far from the door as I could manage—into the far corner, where the shadows pooled thickest.

My breath came in ragged bursts by the time I finally let him drop.

He slumped against the wall, head lolling to one side.

I crouched—wincing—and pressed two fingers to his neck.

Pulse.

There.

Weak. But steady.

I pushed myself back up slowly, swaying slightly as dizziness threatened to take me down with him.

"I'll hold him hostage," I whispered into the silence, my voice rough, barely audible. "Use him as leverage until Vincenzo finds me."

My gaze lingered on his unconscious form.

“Over my dead body will I become anyone’s sex slave.”

The words tasted like ash.

I sank back against the edge of the bed, my body finally giving in as the adrenaline drained out of me all at once.

Pain rushed in to take its place.

Every injury. Every bruise. Every open wound.

But I stayed upright.

Stayed awake.

I had to.

I couldn’t afford to black out again.

Not here.

Not now.