

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 2[5,924 words]

Chapter 2

VINCENZO

Ottavio tried to speak again—desperate, as if begging could rewrite the fate already sealed over him.

The effect was immediate. Violent.

The blade shifted inside his face, tearing through already ruined flesh, grinding harder against bone and teeth.

A wet, choking scream forced its way out of him—garbled, broken, barely human.

Blood surged fresh from the wound, thicker now, bubbling around the steel as his body convulsed.

His knees buckled, but the restraints kept him upright just enough to continue suffering.

Let him feel it.

Let him live in it.

His breathing came in ragged bursts, each inhale wet, each exhale worse.

And yet—

He still found a way to speak.

“You... bas—tard...” he gargled, the words mangled beyond recognition, torn apart by the blade lodged through his mouth. Blood spilled over his lips with every syllable. “Son of a... bi—tch...”

I said nothing. Just watched.

His eyes burned with something that refused to die.

Hatred.

Always hatred.

“It... wasn’t... just me...” he forced out, each word dragged through broken flesh, trembling on the edge of collapse. “that fucked... that bitch...”

His gaze flickered—briefly, deliberately—to Loretta. Then back to me.

My fist clenched so hard my palm split.

“Men... pay a fortune to have her...” he rasped, a sick, twisted satisfaction curling through the ruin of his expression. “Vasquez... the one who took you years ago... he became one of my best clients. Paid more than most—just to have her... over and over...”

His voice hitched, broken into wet, gurgling fragments.

“And I let him.”

A low, vicious silence followed—like the world itself recoiled from the words.

“I loved hearing her scream,” he breathed, a cruel, fading grin ghosting across his ruined face. “She made me money... my sweetest asset...”

Something inside me snapped.

Rage surged through me—hot, blinding.

My chest tightened as the truth settled in—he wasn’t just part of the world I’d heard whispers about... he was one of the monsters inside it.

I knew of that kind of place—where people traded their own children like currency, paying and profiting from their suffering—but I never imagined he would be among them.

A cold, sick disgust rose in my throat.

For a second—I didn’t breathe.

Didn’t move.

Then the name settled.

Vasquez—his best client?

My chest tightened painfully.

A man who should have been his greatest enemy... considering what he did to me.

Vasquez was one of my father's core enemies—the one who had kidnapped me at nine, tearing me away from Italy and dragging me across the ocean to California.

He was the one who had forced me into that cellar. The one who broke me—mind and bone with ruthless precision.

And yet...

That same man had been his most loyal client.

Paying the highest price.

Returning again and again to take what he wanted from Loretta.

My anger surged, hot and suffocating.

But what cut deepest wasn't even the thought of Vasquez himself.

It was the fact that this man—this monster—had already been dead.

Gone long before this moment.

Killed in a plane crash with his family.

And still... his shadow lingered here.

My vision tunneled, narrowing until all I could see was the man in front of me—and everything he had allowed.

Everything he had sold.

Everything he had destroyed.

Rage flooded my veins, thick and suffocating, burning through every inch of me until it felt like my skin couldn't contain it.

I looked back at Ottavio.

At the man who should have protected us.

Who had instead turned our suffering into profit.

I had thought—somewhere, deep down—that at the end, he might break.

Might beg.

Might show even a flicker of regret.

He didn't.

Even now, drowning in his own blood, he chose cruelty.

Chose pride.

Chose to hurt her one last time.

The sound he made—something between a laugh and a choke—was the final fracture.

Something inside me snapped.

Clean. Irreversible.

I moved before the thought could fully form.

My boot slammed hard into his shoulder, forcing his collapsing body upright again. Bone met force with a dull, jarring thud, his frame jerking under the weight of it.

He tried to fall—his body already halfway to death—but I didn't let him.

Not yet.

A sound tore out of me.

Raw.

It ripped through my throat like something dragged up from a place I had buried years ago—a place made of chains, darkness, and a boy who had once screamed until his voice broke.

My hands closed around the dagger's hilt—tight, unrelenting.

In one sharp motion, I tore it free from where it had been lodged in his cheek, tearing it loose in one brutal motion. Blood spilled in a sudden, violent surge as he convulsed beneath me, his body thrashing in raw, desperate pain.

But I didn't hesitate.

I drove the blade down with cold precision, forcing it through resistance, straight into the center of his head.

The blade punched through the crown of his skull with a sickening, unmistakable crunch.

Bone split beneath the force, resistance shattering as steel carved its path downward. I felt it—every layer it broke through—vibrating up my arms, lodging deep into muscle and memory.

His body twitched violently.

A final, grotesque surge of life.

His eyes bulged, veins bursting red against white, his limbs jerking in sharp, unnatural motions like a puppet whose strings had been yanked too hard.

I drove the blade deeper in a surge of rage, my grip unyielding as it pierced through his skull.

Through bone. Through brain.

Through what remained of him.

It burst out beneath his chin in a spray of hot, red mist.

Even as I did, the memories came crashing back—sharp, relentless—of my own pain... and Loretta's. The nights she suffered, the silence that followed, the damage he caused and allowed. It all bled together, fusing into something heavier than anger.

This wasn't just fury.

It was the weight of everything he had done.

My vision narrowed until all I could see was white—blinding, consuming.

For a second—

Everything stopped.

Then his body gave out.

Completely.

His weight sagged against my boot before slipping sideways, collapsing into the dirt with a heavy, final thud.

Still. Silent. Dead.

I stood there, breathing hard.

Waiting.

For something. Anything.

Relief. Satisfaction. Closure.

Nothing came.

Only quiet. Only the wind.

Only the absence of a man who had never deserved to exist this long.

Slowly, I pulled the blade free.

It came out with resistance—a wet, dragging sound that lingered in the air longer than it should have.

I stepped back.

My shirt clung to me, heavy and damp.

Blood had soaked through the white fabric, spreading in uneven patterns across my chest and sleeves.

It had splattered across my hands, my wrists, even my face—fine droplets drying against my skin.

I wiped at nothing.

Didn't bother cleaning it.

Didn't care.

Somewhere down the mountain, in the back of one of the cars, there was a fresh suit waiting. Tailored. Perfect. Untouched by this.

The suit I had been meant to wear to my wedding.

A bitter thought brushed the edge of my mind.

Guests sitting in polished pews. Soft music filling the cathedral. Eyes turning toward empty doors.

The bride—

Waiting. Humiliated. Angry.

Let them all choke on it.

This—

This was the only ceremony that mattered.

I turned.

Loretta remained seated in her wheelchair, still and quiet.

Her gaze was fixed on the body.

Her hands had twisted the blanket in her lap into tight, uneven folds, her fingers gripping the fabric like it was the only thing anchoring her to the present.

Tears slid silently down her cheeks.

Not broken. Just... steady.

But there was something else there too.

Something fragile.

Relief, maybe.

I moved toward her slowly.

Each step careful, as though any sudden movement might shatter whatever fragile balance she was holding onto.

When I reached her, I dropped to one knee in front of her chair.

The blood didn't matter.

The rocks didn't matter.

Nothing did.

Except her.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a handkerchief.

White. Clean. Untouched.

A small, almost ridiculous contrast to everything around us.

I lifted it to her face, dabbing gently at the tears tracking down her skin. My touch was careful—almost reverent—as if she might break under anything less.

My thumb brushed her cheek, catching the last of the moisture there.

“It’s over now, piccola,” I murmured.

My voice had changed.

The storm still raged inside me, but none of it touched her.

It never would.

“He can’t touch you again,” I continued softly. “No one can.”

She nodded.

Once.

But her eyes—her eyes kept drifting back to the body.

Her breathing changed—just slightly—but I noticed.

It became shallower, a quiet sign of panic creeping in at the edges.

Then I saw it—her hand, moving instinctively, slipping beneath the blanket to rest over the slight swell there.

Protecting. Hiding. Ashamed.

My chest tightened, hard.

Three months.

Three months since I found her in that pit, pulled her out, and tried to help her heal—only to realize she was carrying an unwanted pregnancy she never asked for.

A consequence of monsters. Too many men. Too many nights.

My father’s guests. Paying. As if it meant nothing. As if she meant nothing.

We never knew who. Maybe him. Maybe one of the others. The uncertainty was its own cruelty—a wound that refused to heal.

I hated it.

Not the child for existing, but for what it represented—for what it would always mean.

A daily reminder. A scar that breathed.

But I never spoke of it.

Not to her. Never.

That choice—that burden—was hers alone, and she carried it the way she carried everything else: silently, without complaint, without asking for help.

My jaw tightened as I reached forward, placing my hand over hers where it rested against her stomach—not claiming, not questioning, just there, steady and protective.

My other arm moved around her shoulders, careful and measured, drawing her gently toward me.

She resisted for a moment, then leaned in, resting her forehead against my chest.

I could feel her breathing—trembling.

I held her a little tighter—enough for her to feel it, but not to feel trapped.

Just held. Safe.

“I’ve got you,” I whispered against her hair.

The words were quiet, but certain. “Always. No matter what comes next.”

She didn’t answer, but she didn’t need to.

Her fingers curled into my shirt, gripping the blood-soaked fabric like a fragile anchor.

Her breaths softened against my chest, still uneven, but steadier with each passing moment.

So I stayed there—on my knees, in the dirt—holding her until the shaking eased, until her breathing settled, until the wind carried away the sharp scent of blood and left something quieter behind.

Something close to peace.

When I finally pulled back, I didn’t release her immediately.

My hands lingered—one at her shoulder, the other still resting lightly over hers—grounding her, anchoring her, making sure she was steady before I let the world touch her again.

Then, slowly, I leaned back just enough to meet her eyes.

They were still glassy with tears, lashes damp, cheeks flushed from the cold and everything that had just passed.

But beneath that—beneath the grief, the exhaustion, the quiet devastation—there was something new.

Something fighting to exist.

I held her gaze a moment longer before speaking.

“Ciro will take you to the airport.”

My voice was calm.

But softer than anything I had used all day.

She nodded.

It was small. Almost hesitant.

I rose to my feet slowly, giving her time to adjust, to breathe, to settle.

Then I stepped behind her wheelchair, my fingers curling around the handles—firm, steady.

Carefully, I turned her—not just slightly, but all the way around. A full, deliberate circle.

Three hundred and sixty degrees.

Until the mountain, the blood, the body—everything—was out of her line of sight.

No last look. No final imprint.

No more nightmares fed by that image.

She didn’t resist.

Didn’t turn her head. Didn’t look back.

Some things deserved to be left behind without ceremony.

I began to push.

The path down the ridge was narrow—too narrow for mistakes.

Uneven rock jutted out at sharp angles, loose gravel shifting beneath every step.

The wind had picked up, stronger now, whipping across the mountainside in cold, relentless gusts that threatened to unbalance even the sure-footed.

I adjusted my stance instinctively.

Angled the chair.

Controlled the descent.

Every step calculated.

My boots dug into the ground harder on the steeper drops, acting as a brake as I guided her carefully over jagged stone and exposed roots.

The wheels caught once—twice—but I corrected instantly, steadying the frame before it could jolt her.

“I’ve got you,” I said quietly, more to remind her than reassure myself.

Her hands tightened slightly in the blanket.

We moved like that for several minutes, until the path narrowed further, twisting into a jagged descent that the chair couldn’t safely navigate.

I stopped.

Measured the slope.

Then made the decision.

Without a word, I stepped around her, crouched slightly, and slid one arm beneath her knees, the other behind her back.

Careful.

Her body tensed for half a second as I lifted her, instinct kicking in.

Then she relaxed.

Her arms slipped around my neck, fingers curling into the back of my shirt. Her face pressed against my shoulder, breath warm against my skin despite the cold air around us.

I adjusted my grip slightly, ensuring her weight was supported without pressure on her stomach.

Protected.

Then I moved.

One step at a time.

Down the uneven descent.

Each foothold tested before I shifted my weight.

By the time we reached the base, the world opened up again.

The mountains gave way to something wider.

A clearing stretched out before us, carved cleanly into the landscape.

And waiting within it—

Power.

A line of black SUVs circled the space, engines idling, vibrations running low through the ground. Their tinted windows caught the pale morning sky and gave nothing back.

Men stood at intervals around them.

Still.

Alert.

Dressed in dark suits that concealed more than they revealed.

Rifles hung loose at their sides like they'd been born holding them. Earpieces caught the light. Their eyes never stopped moving.

My system. My army.

Enough to start a war.

Or end one.

The moment Loretta and I came into view, they straightened.

Ciro stepped forward first—my second in command—6’1, broad-shouldered, scarred, and unshakable.

“Boss.”

His voice was steady, respectful.

I gave a single nod. “Get her to the airport. Private jet. No detours.”

My gaze hardened. “You stay with her until she’s wheels-up.”

Ciro met my eyes, understanding the weight behind the order. “Understood.”

I stepped aside, lowering Loretta carefully back into her chair.

Ciro moved in, taking hold of the handles with the same steadiness I had used.

But before he could move—I stepped around to face her again.

Dropped into a crouch so we were level.

So she didn’t have to look up.

“So listen to me,” I said quietly.

Her eyes met mine, focused and present.

“If you ever need me—any hour, any day—you call.”

I held her gaze, letting the words settle.

“I don’t care where I am or what I’m doing,” I said, then added after a brief pause, “I’ll come.”

She tried to smile. It hurt to see—not because it failed, but because it cost her something.

Still, it was there. And this time, it reached her eyes—for the first time in months.

Her hand lifted in a small wave, her fingers trembling, but she didn’t stop.

I reached out and brushed my thumb lightly along her cheek.

Then I leaned in.

Pressed a soft, lingering kiss to her left cheek.

Careful. Gentle.

A promise without words.

When I pulled back, I didn't look away immediately.

I let myself see her.

Alive. Still here.

Then I stood.

And stepped back.

Ciro gave a slight nod and moved at once, guiding her toward the nearest SUV.

The words rose fast: "Ciro—wait. Take her back. Keep her here. Where I can see her. Where I can protect her. Where no one will ever touch her again."

But I clenched my jaw and swallowed them down, because I knew better.

This place—this life—wasn't safety; it was a battlefield.

There is an ongoing war in my city, Lombardy, between us Italians and the Spanish mafia factions.

I could give her everything I had—every man, every weapon, every ounce of power I controlled—but none of it mattered against chaos.

Bullets didn't listen. They didn't care about promises.

Out there—beyond these mountains, beyond my name, beyond this world—she had a chance. A real one.

No one would know her. No one would recognize her. No one would come looking.

I don't plan to end the war anytime soon, and I'm worried Loretta could get caught in the chaos.

Sending her away is the safest option—somewhere she can live, heal over time, and try to exist like an ordinary civilian.

I forced myself to stay where I was as Ciro guided her toward the long black limousine.

Every step felt like something was being pulled out of me, piece by piece.

He moved carefully, stopping at the door.

One of the men stepped forward instantly and opened it without a word.

Ciro lifted her into the car, making sure she was settled before stepping back.

Then he turned to the wheelchair, folded it with practiced ease, and placed it in the trunk before shutting it firmly.

He walked around and slipped into the front passenger seat.

The engine came alive.

Inside the car, she turned slowly, like it took effort.

Her hand pressed against the tinted glass, fingers splayed slightly, as if she needed the contact—as if she needed something between us that distance couldn't fully erase.

She waved. Small. Unsteady. Her fingers trembled.

And her eyes—God. Her eyes. They weren't just sad. Sadness would have been easier to bear.

They were hollow. Drained.

Sixteen years of hell lived inside them—years that began when she was eight and only ended when I pulled her out at twenty-five, just three months ago. I knew it was far too late.

The damage was written across her like a map no one else could read.

Her shoulders curved inward, even now—protective, instinctive—as if she still expected hands, pain, violation.

My throat tightened.

I forced myself to breathe.

I raised my own hand. Returned the wave.

It felt heavier than anything I had done today.

Heavier than the gun. Heavier than the blade.

Heavier than the man I had just killed.

Because this—

This was loss.

Not of life. But of something I could never give back.

That little girl—

The one who used to laugh too loudly.

Who believed the moon followed her home.

Who stole gelato and blamed the sky for it—

She was gone.

Completely.

In her place sat someone else.

Someone who had survived.

But survival came with a cost.

And I would spend the rest of my life paying for it.

The limousine began to move.

Slow at first.

Then steady.

Four armored Hummers fell into formation instantly—two pulling ahead like hunting predators, engines roaring low, and two locking in behind, tight and precise.

A moving fortress.

Every window dark.

Every weapon ready.

Every man inside prepared to die before letting anything reach her.

Dust rose behind them, thick and swirling, catching in the morning light as the convoy pushed forward.

I watched.

The vehicles snaked down the valley road, tires gripping and sliding as they rounded the first bend.

The sharp screech of rubber against stone echoed back toward me, cutting through the air like a blade.

Each sound hit something inside me.

Hollowed it. Carved it out.

Until there was nothing left but space.

The convoy disappeared behind the curve.

Gone from sight.

But I stayed there.

Staring.

At the empty road.

At the place where they had been.

As if I could hold onto it long enough—

They might come back.

Pain tore through my chest like something alive, like a wound that refused to close no matter how much blood had already been spilled.

My mind kept replaying it—the flicker of her hand against the glass, the hollow depth in her eyes, the way she didn't look back a second time.

Gone.

And I had let her go.

My jaw tightened until it hurt.

“Boss...”

The voice came from behind me.

Renzo, my third in command.

I didn't turn immediately.

"It's almost twelve," he said, his voice steady but carrying a hint of caution. "Everyone has been waiting in the church since eight."

He paused, deliberately choosing his next words.

"Your bride is still at the altar," he added more quietly. "She hasn't sat down once. She's been standing there the entire time."

My eyes flickered at that.

"Three hours," he continued. "She refused to sit, no matter how many times she was asked."

Three hours.

Standing. Waiting.

For me.

"We promised them you'd be there by noon."

Silence followed.

Heavy. Expectant.

I exhaled slowly, forcing the remnants of something dangerously close to emotion back into place.

Then I turned.

The movement was unhurried. Every inch of it measured.

My gaze landed on Renzo.

He didn't flinch. Didn't drop his eyes.

But I saw it.

The tension in his shoulders.

The way his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

Respect.

And something just beneath it.

Awareness.

He knew exactly what kind of day this was.

I swallowed once, pushing down the knot tightening in my throat, and lifted my wrist.

The watch face gleamed faintly in the sunlight.

11:55.

Five minutes.

That was all that stood between this mountain—

And the man I was expected to become in the city below.

I lowered my arm.

Gave a single, sharp flick of my fingers.

The signal.

The response was instant.

Men moved into position like a well-oiled machine, forming a corridor around me without a word.

Boots shifted against gravel. Jackets straightened. Weapons adjusted subtly but deliberately.

I walked forward.

The armored Maybach waited at the center of it all.

Black. Immaculate.

Untouched by the blood still drying on my skin.

The door opened before I reached it.

Handled like it was something sacred.

Like I was something to be protected.

Or feared.

Both worked.

I stepped inside without a word.

The door closed behind me with a soft, airtight whisper.

The world outside vanished.

Inside, the air was cool and sterile.

A stark contrast to the chaos still clinging to me.

I leaned back into the leather seat.

It was smooth and unforgivingly clean against the mess I carried.

Blood had soaked into my shirt, dried in places, still damp in others.

It clung to my skin, sticky and heavy, but I didn't move to fix it.

Didn't care.

Let them see.

Let them smell it.

Let them understand exactly what I had been doing while they waited.

Up front, Renzo sat beside the driver.

Straight-backed.

Silent.

The entire vehicle felt like it was holding its breath.

Like even sound itself knew better than to exist without permission.

I let the quiet stretch.

Long enough for discomfort to settle.

Then I spoke. “Is Matteo present?”

Renzo answered immediately, his voice respectful, tight with restraint.

“Yes, boss. He came.”

A beat. “It’s his daughter’s wedding, after all.”

Matteo was one of the Spanish mafia—a spineless, weak man who also happened to be the father of my bride.

I had warned him not to come to this wedding, yet I knew he would ignore the warning and show up anyway.

And he did.

I let my head tilt slightly, resting against the seat as my gaze shifted to the tinted window beside me.

The reflection staring back wasn’t clean.

I didn’t have feelings for my bride—and it wasn’t personal.

A man like me, shaped by damage, doesn’t know how to love.

The idea of it has always felt foreign, unnatural.

She, however, was always there.

A girl who became obsessed with me early on—following me through college, then all the way to university—always calling herself my girlfriend.

At first, I dismissed it.

We were the only ones with ties to Italy in both my high school and university in London, and I assumed it was nothing more than familiarity.

But when I returned to Italy and she was still there, still pursuing me, it became clear—her feelings were real, whatever that meant to others.

And then, once, she saved my life.

After that, I let her into my space.

I owed her something—so I told her to ask for anything, as payment for her loyalty and what she had done.

She asked me to marry her.

Marriage was never part of my plans.

I had erased the idea long ago.

My only purpose was justice—for those who destroyed me, and for my sister.

But I honored my word.

That is how she became my bride today.

As for what this marriage will look like after the exchange of rings—once we stand at that altar—I don't know.

The car was already moving fast, as if racing against time—we had less than five minutes until the twelve noon we had promised to arrive.

The convoy followed behind us, maintaining formation and matching our speed, providing cover.

My hands rested on my thighs.

Still. Unmoving.

I flexed my fingers once.

Slowly. Testing.

They didn't shake.

They never did. Not anymore.

The city came into view gradually—stone replacing trees, noise replacing silence, life replacing the controlled emptiness of the mountains.

Soon, we arrived at the cathedral and descended into the private garage beneath it.

The transition was immediate.

Light gave way to shadow.

The sound of the outside world dulled, replaced by the controlled acoustics of enclosed space.

Tires whispered over polished concrete, smooth and quiet, the convoy gliding into position with precise coordination.

The car hadn't even come to a full stop before the door was opened.

I stepped out.

The air was cooler down here.

A line of armed officers stood waiting.

Not mine.

Italian military.

Uniforms pressed to perfection, medals catching the artificial light in sharp glints of gold and silver.

Boots polished. Posture rigid.

The moment my foot touched the ground—

They snapped to attention.

Salutes came sharp.

Synchronized. Perfect.

I didn't return it.

Didn't need to.

I held no rank. No official title.

No position within their structure.

And yet—

They stood like I commanded them.

Because in many ways—

I did.

They had seen me too often beside the president.

Too often in rooms where decisions were made behind closed doors.

Too often standing where men like me were never supposed to stand.

Influence spoke louder than rank.

Power louder than law.

When I had requested additional security—

To ensure the Spanish factions didn't turn my wedding into a bloodbath...

They had delivered.

Without hesitation. Without question.

Because they understood what would happen if they didn't.

Even with that—

I had limited who entered the cathedral.

The bride's bloodline was Spanish.

A complication.

A risk.

Only a handful of her relatives had been allowed inside.

Carefully chosen. Carefully vetted.

Matteo—her father—was not among them. He had earned that exclusion, yet somehow, he still managed to be present.

I stepped forward, leaving the garage behind me.

The weight of the day settled across my shoulders as I moved.

Like armor.

This wedding would happen.

No matter what stood in its way.

The promise would be kept.

Not for love. Not for tradition.

But because I had said it would be done.

And when I said something—

It was done.

The side entrance of the cathedral loomed ahead.

Heavy oak doors.

Old. Solid.

I pushed one open.

It groaned on its iron hinges, the sound deep and resonant, echoing faintly into the vast interior beyond.

Cool air met me first.

Then silence.

Renzo stepped in at my left without a word.

Broad. Tense.

Every inch of him coiled like a weapon waiting to be used.

On my right—

General Marco Rossi.

Italy's most decorated active commander.

His presence alone carried weight.

His uniform was immaculate, every line sharp, every medal precisely placed.

Neither man spoke. They didn't need to.

The three of us walking together said everything.

The effect was immediate.

Whispers spread through the nave like dry leaves caught in a sudden wind. Heads turned. Conversations died mid-sentence. Eyes followed.

Wide. Curious. Uneasy.

The organ faltered.

Just for a second.

A single broken note hanging awkwardly in the air before the musician corrected, lowering the volume instinctively.

Respect.

Or fear.

Sometimes they looked the same.

We didn't head toward the altar.

Not yet.

Instead, Renzo guided the path toward a narrow corridor off to the side—shadowed, quieter, away from the crowd and the spectacle.

The sacristy.

Converted into something more useful.

The door closed behind us with a soft, final click—sealing in privacy, as close as I ever allowed myself to get.

I crossed the stone floor without hesitation, each step echoing faintly, until I reached the wardrobe standing against the far wall, framed in dark walnut.

I stopped in front of it, opened it, and stared at the suit I would be wearing before stepping to the altar.

I glanced over my shoulder.

Renzo and General Rossi stood by the door, their backs turned but their attention fixed on it—guarding the space, giving me privacy without ever truly stepping away.

Half-privacy.

Enough.

I reached for the hem of my shirt and pulled it off.

The fabric resisted slightly, sticking to dried blood along my chest before peeling away.

I dropped it without care.

Then the trousers.

Discarded.

The new suit waited.

Perfect. Untouched.

Midnight-black wool, tailored with precision sharp enough to cut through perception itself.

Milan craftsmanship.

I stepped into the trousers first.

The silk lining brushed against my skin, cool and clean, a stark contrast to the heat still lingering beneath it.

The shirt came next. Crisp white cotton.

Each button fastened slowly.

Then the waistcoat.

Then the jacket.

Each layer building something different.

Finally, the shoes.

Black leather. Polished to a mirror shine.

I slipped them on, adjusting them with quiet precision.

Then the tie. Black silk.

Smooth beneath my fingers.

I looped it once.

Twice.

I was still adjusting the knot.

Fingers working the silk with slow, deliberate precision—tightening, centering, perfecting.

Then—

Chaos.

It hit the door like a break in formation.

Boots scraping violently against stone. A sharp, muffled curse. The sound of struggle—brief, contained—but enough.

My body reacted before my mind did.

I was already turning when the door burst open.

A woman slipped through the gap like smoke slipping through fingers.

Fast. Desperate. Unannounced.

She moved without hesitation, bolting past Renzo and General Rossi before either of them could fully adjust.

That alone told me everything.

This wasn't someone who didn't understand danger.

This was someone who had learned how to outrun it.

She scanned the room in a single, frantic sweep—desk, mirror, vestment racks, every possible exit—eyes wide, searching, calculating.

Then she ran.

Not toward the center.

Toward the side.

The narrow alcove behind the carved wooden screen—partially hidden, close to the confessional space.

Renzo and Rossi were already moving.

Fast. Lethal.

Guns cleared leather with sharp, unmistakable clicks—the sound of metal being drawn with intent to kill.

Renzo reached her first.

His hand shot out, gripping her arm with brutal force, wrenching it behind her back in one fluid motion.

She gasped. But she didn't scream.

The General was right behind her.

Beretta raised.

Cold steel pressed to her temple.

“On the floor,” Renzo snapped, voice like gravel. “Now.”

His knee drove into her spine.

Forcing her down.

Hard.

She dropped to her knees against the stone with a sharp intake of breath, her hands pinned behind her back.

I blinked once.

Then again.

And that's when recognition cut through the noise.

My gaze locked onto her face.

And the world narrowed.

“Elena.”

The name left me without permission.

Without thought.

The room shifted.

Her.

Here.

Now.

In this place.

“What the hell—”

“Stand down!”

My voice cracked through the space like a whip.

The command landed instantly.

Renzo froze.

The pressure on her arm eased—just enough.

The General hesitated, then lowered the barrel by an inch, not enough to signal trust, but enough to signal confusion.

Both of them stepped back.

Reluctant.

Their eyes flicking between me and her.

Trying to understand.

Failing.

The tension didn’t leave the room.

It just shifted.

Like a predator deciding whether to attack or wait.

Elena stayed on her knees in the alcove’s dim light.

Breathing hard.

But still.

Fear etched itself into every part of her.

Wide eyes. Tight jaw. Shallow breaths.

My gaze dropped.

There.

A scar. Jagged. Ugly.

Running from the outer corner of her left eye down across her cheek, stopping just short of her jawline.

Thick. Raised. Poorly healed.

Knife work.

Someone had wanted her to feel it.

To remember it.

My jaw tightened.

My fingers curled once at my side before I forced them still again.

She lifted her head.

And looked at me.

Recognition hit her like impact.

Her pupils dilated.

Her lips parted slightly—but no sound came out.

Just breath.

Shaken. Disbelieving.

“Boss,” Renzo muttered behind me, his voice low and edged with controlled aggression. “This woman is a spy—probably sent to kill you.”

His grip tightened on his weapon.

“The Spanish sent her. I’d stake my life on it.”

His stance shifted.

“Let me drag her to the altar,” he said, voice low and certain, already leaning into the decision. “Make her kneel where everyone can see her. Let them all watch what happens when someone dares to cross us.”

His eyes flicked briefly toward the door.

A faint, dangerous smile curved his lips. “We make an example. Right here. Right now. In front of every ally, every rival, every witness who thinks they can test us.”

His voice dropped to a near whisper.

“Let the message be clear—cross us, and you don’t just disappear... you’re remembered.”

His finger rested against the trigger.

Tight. Ready.

Renzo didn’t bluff.

When he spoke like that—

He meant it.

Unlike Ciro, who thought before he acted—

I didn’t acknowledge the suggestion with anything more than presence.

“I said stand down.”

The words came quieter this time.

But heavier.

He held my gaze for a second longer.

Then—

A breath.

Sharp and frustrated.

But obedient.

His finger eased.

He holstered the weapon.

The General followed suit, lowering his Beretta and stepping back into formation without a word.

They retreated toward the door.

But they didn't leave.

They just shifted into watchful silence.

Still confused. Still tense.

Still watching her like she was a threat waiting to explode.

I ignored them.

For now.

My focus returned to her.

"Elena..."

This time, it came softer.

Her name felt different in my mouth.

Older. Heavier.

She pushed herself to her feet slowly, trembling slightly as she did.

Her balance was steady.

But not relaxed.

"Vin," she said.

Soft. Familiar.

The nickname struck something buried deep.

Something I hadn't touched in years.

Vin.

Not Vincenzo. Not boss.

Not Orsini.

Just... Vin.

Fourteen hours.

Maybe fifteen.

That was all the time she had known that version of me.

And yet—

She had held onto it.

Even after everything.

I studied her.

She wasn't the same girl I remembered.

Of course she wasn't.

She had grown.

Matured.

Into something sharp.

Dangerous in her own quiet way.

Her hair—dark, long, falling in loose waves around her shoulders—caught the light as she moved slightly.

Her cheekbones were more defined now.

Her eyes—

God.

Those eyes.

They had always been expressive.

Now they were storm-gray.

Deep. Heavy.

Carrying something I didn't recognize.

Something that had been carved into her.

She was beautiful.

But not untouched.

My eyes stayed locked on her, as if looking away for even a second would make her vanish.

Elena.

The name lived in my head like something that had never fully died.

The girl.

Not the woman standing in front of me now.

The girl who had found me when I had nothing left to give the world.

I was nine years old. She was eight.

That was when I first met her.

Not in a place where children are meant to meet—but in the shadowed mouth of a cave, during one of my few desperate attempts to escape her father's cellar.

At the time, I didn't know who she was.

Didn't know whose blood ran through her veins.

All I knew was that she sat beside me in the dirt like I wasn't something to be discarded.

She brought me water, her hands steady despite how small they were, and tore strips of cloth to wrap my wounds as best as she could.

She stayed with me after that, talking softly as if her voice alone could keep me anchored, even laughing at times when I couldn't find the strength to respond.

For a few stolen hours, I let myself believe in something—something fragile and almost foolish.

Hope.

And in that quiet space between pain and darkness, I made promises I didn't fully understand how to keep. Childish. Desperate.

“I’ll find you again,” I told her.

“I’ll protect you.”

“We’ll be together when we’re grown.”

Words spoken by a boy who didn’t yet understand what it meant to belong to men like Vasquez.

We spent fourteen hours together after that.

Hours that felt like something I’d never known—something almost safe.

Eventually, exhaustion pulled us under, and we both fell asleep.

That’s when they found me.

Her father’s men came with anger sharp enough to cut the air.

They woke me like I was nothing, like the attempt itself was an insult.

Their hands were rough as they dragged me away, and the cave—our brief hiding place—disappeared behind me in seconds.

I remember screaming.

Screaming for them not to hurt her.

She was still asleep.

Still unaware.

Still untouched by the truth that was about to change everything.

I didn’t know then.

I didn’t know she was his daughter.

Not just a girl hiding in the dark... Someone I had no right to promise anything to at all.

Vasquez’s daughter.

His blood.

His inheritance.

My stomach twisted at the memory.

When I realized the truth—three years into my captivity in her father’s cellar—that the girl I had spent fourteen unforgettable hours with in that cave was his daughter... it tore something open in me.

It didn’t just hurt.

It unraveled me.

That realization nearly broke me more than anything they ever did to my body.

Torture I could endure. Pain I could survive. But this?

This stayed. This followed. This changed everything.

I swore that if I ever found my way out of her father’s captivity, I would come for him. I would ruin him. There would be no mercy for the man who took my life apart piece by piece.

But worse—

Worse than all of it—

Was the thought that one day I might have to choose between justice... and her.

Then fate decided to play its game.

Vasquez died.

A plane crash.

Just like that—gone. His entire family erased with him.

And me?

I was left behind.

Alive. Angry.

A sleeper whose teeth had been pulled before he could ever bite. Years of captivity, of stolen revenge, and in the end... the man who destroyed me died before I could take anything back.

No closure. No justice.

Just silence.

And then—

Elena.

Standing in front of me like a ghost I never expected to see again.

His blood.

The last piece of him.

The last living remnant of the man who had stripped me of everything.

My hand shifted slightly—

Just close enough to the dagger concealed at my back.

I didn't draw it.

But the intent was there.

One word.

That's all it would take.

One command to Renzo.

And she would be gone.

Dragged. Forcibly.

Down the aisle.

Forced to her knees in front of the entire church.

Every eye watching.

Every witness marking the moment.

Italians.

The few Spanish families allowed inside.

My bride.

The woman I was expected to marry.

And then—

Execution.

Clean. Public.

A message written in blood.

The daughter paying for the father's sins.

That was how this world worked.

That was how I worked.

My breathing slowed.

But the thought didn't leave.

It lingered.

Waiting. Testing me.