

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 21[3,445 words]

Chapter 21

ELENA

Four weeks later.

The air smelled clean.

A sharp contrast to the damp, suffocating stink of that concrete cell that still lingered in my memory like a stain.

I stood hunched over the bathroom sink in the guest wing of Vincenzo's estate, both hands braced against the cool marble.

My reflection stared back at me.

Paler. Thinner.

Still healing.

But alive.

My gaze dropped slowly to the counter.

To the three plastic sticks lined up in perfect, damning order.

They looked harmless.

Small. Insignificant.

But they might as well have been loaded weapons pointed straight at my chest.

Two pink lines.

On every single one.

Clear. Unmistakable.

Pregnant.

The word echoed in my head, louder with every passing second.

I'm Pregnant.

My stomach dropped violently, a cold, hollow sensation opening up beneath my ribs.

No.

No, no, no—

My fingers tightened against the edge of the sink until my knuckles turned white.

My heart began to race.

Fast.

Vincenzo had found me three days ago.

He had come like a storm.

One moment I'd been locked inside that hellhole, bracing myself for whatever came next—and the next, the entire compound had erupted into chaos.

Gunfire. Explosions.

Men shouting in Spanish and Italian.

The sharp, deafening crack of bullets tearing through walls.

And then—him.

Breaking through like something unstoppable.

Like something carved out of violence and fury.

I still remembered the moment he reached me.

The door splintering open. His eyes locking onto mine.

That split second where everything else disappeared.

He hadn't said my name.

Hadn't asked if I was okay.

He'd just crossed the room in three strides, and pulled me against him like he needed to make sure I was real.

Like I might disappear if he let go.

He carried me out himself.

One arm locked tightly around my waist, the other cradling my head against his chest.

I could still remember the rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my ear.

Fast. Relentless.

Gunfire had still been echoing around us.

Men shouting. Bodies dropping.

But he hadn't slowed.

Just held me tighter.

Like nothing else mattered.

Like I was the only thing that did.

Now this.

My gaze fell back to the tests, my heart racing wildly.

All three were positive—leaving no room for doubt, no room for denial.

During those four weeks in captivity, my body had already begun to change.

At first, I'd ignored it. Written it off as stress.

Trauma.

The aftermath of everything I'd been through.

But it hadn't stopped.

Morning nausea that left me doubled over on the cold floor, dry heaving until my throat burned.

Fatigue so deep it felt like it lived in my bones—like gravity itself had increased, making every movement twice as hard.

A metallic taste that refused to leave my mouth, no matter how much water I drank.

Smells—

God, the smells.

Everything was sharper.

Stronger.

And my body—my breasts—tender.

Swollen.

Aching even without touch.

So, as soon as I was rescued from Matteo's captivity, the first thing on my mind was to take a pregnancy test.

Just to be sure.

Just to confirm what I had already feared.

And now—

there it was.

Undeniable.

I was pregnant.

I leaned forward, my forehead nearly touching the mirror as my breathing turned uneven.

How the hell was I supposed to tell him?

Vincenzo.

The man who had once looked me dead in the eyes and said he would abort any child I carried.

Because it would carry my father's blood.

Because it would be tainted.

Vincenzo.

The man who had nearly sacrificed me—my life, my heart—for Violet.

Vincenzo.

The man who still woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, haunted by nightmares of what Vasquez had done to him years ago.

And now—

I was carrying his child.

My hands trembled slightly as they rested against the marble.

What would he do?

What could he do?

Would he look at me the same way?

Would he see this as betrayal?

As contamination?

As something that needed to be... removed?

My stomach twisted again, this time not from nausea—but from fear.

Real fear.

Because I didn't know.

And not knowing with a man like Vincenzo—was the most dangerous place to be.

I closed my eyes briefly.

Took a shaky breath.

Then another.

But the question wouldn't leave me.

It burrowed in.

Stayed.

I couldn't hide this.

Not for long.

My body would betray me soon enough.

A slight curve. A change in shape.

A softness where there hadn't been any before.

And with someone like Vincenzo—nothing stayed hidden.

Better he heard it from me.

Better I controlled the moment—before someone else twisted it into something worse.

Before Violet got to it first.

A soft knock on the bathroom door cut through my thoughts.

Sharp. Grounding.

I jerked upright immediately, heart jumping into my throat.

“Signora?”

I moved fast.

My fingers swept the pregnancy tests off the counter, shoving them into the small trash bin beneath the sink.

I grabbed a handful of tissues, pressing them down over the top—covering the plastic, the lines, the truth.

Then I flushed the toilet.

The sound filled the room.

Loud. Distracting.

Buying me seconds.

I straightened, wiped my hands quickly on a towel, and forced my expression into something neutral before reaching for the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened slowly.

Renzo stepped inside.

For a second, I just stared at him.

Three days had passed since the rescue, and I hadn't laid eyes on Renzo.

Ciro had mentioned Renzo was away—handling something outside the city—but now he stood in front of me, very much present.

Very real.

And different.

His shoulders were tighter than usual.

His posture more rigid.

There were shadows under his eyes that hadn't been there before.

And when he looked at me—really looked—something in his expression shifted.

Something heavy.

Something close to guilt.

“Can I hug you?” he asked quietly.

The question caught me off guard.

I nodded.

He crossed the room in two quick strides and wrapped his arms around me.

Careful.

So careful.

Like he was afraid I might break if he held too tight.

His hand rested lightly against my back.

His other arm circled my shoulders, steady but not restrictive.

And just like that—something in me gave way.

I melted into him.

My body leaning into the warmth, into the solid presence of another human being who wasn't trying to hurt me.

His heartbeat was steady beneath my ear.

Strong. Grounding.

For a moment—just a moment—I felt safe.

The first time in weeks.

My hands tightened against his shirt, gripping harder than I meant to.

He didn't pull away.

Didn't comment.

Just let me.

When he finally stepped back, slowly, reluctantly, his expression had changed.

"What did those Spanish bastards do to you, Elena?"

The question hung in the air.

Loaded.

I forced a small smile.

Crooked.

"What do you think they did?"

"The worst," he said immediately.

His voice cracked slightly on the word.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I looked down at my hands.

At the faint tremor that still lived in them.

I shrugged, exhaled, and sat on the edge of the bed, facing him.

"Honestly? I'm trying to convince myself it was just a shitty mini vacation."

Silence.

Renzo blinked.

“What?”

“I wasn’t tortured,” I said, lifting my gaze to meet his. “Not the way you’re imagining.”

That part, at least, was true.

Technically.

“They locked me in a room for four weeks. No sunlight. No fresh air. No contact with anyone except guards.” I paused, choosing my words carefully. “But the room was big enough. Bed. Couch. Bathroom.”

I exhaled slowly.

“They fed me. Three times a day. Water. I had space.”

Space to think. Space to plan. Space to survive.

“I knew Vincenzo would come,” I added quietly. “I believed it every single day.”

And that had been the only thing that kept me from breaking completely.

“And he did.”

Renzo watched me closely.

Like he was trying to see through the words.

Trying to find the cracks.

“That’s... not what I expected,” he admitted.

“Me neither.”

Renzo dragged the sagging three-seater couch across the floor with a low scrape that grated against the silence, positioning it just close enough to the bed that he didn’t have to raise his voice.

The effort looked deliberate, like everything else about him.

He dropped onto it heavily, elbows braced on his knees, hands clasped loosely as if he were trying to hold something volatile in place.

Then he looked at me.

That quiet intensity had always been there, but now it felt sharper.

Like he was dissecting every breath I took, weighing every word before I even spoke it.

Waiting for the truth, not just the version I chose to give.

“The Spanish are known for their brutality,” he said at last, his voice low, almost too calm. “So explain something to me... how the hell did they keep you for four weeks and not...” His jaw tightened, the rest of the sentence dying somewhere behind his teeth. “Not touch you?”

The air shifted.

I exhaled slowly through my nose, steadying myself.

Even now, the memory wasn’t dull—it was edged, like broken glass you could still cut yourself on if you weren’t careful.

“I held one of them hostage,” I said.

Renzo stilled.

“My father. Vasquez.”

That got a reaction.

His fingers flexed once, subtly, before going still again.

His eyes sharpened, locking onto mine like he didn’t want to miss a single detail.

“He came into the room alone the first night,” I continued, my voice quieter now.

“No guards. No restraints. Just him and that... look.” I swallowed, forcing the image away.

“Matteo had already spelled out the real reason behind my kidnapping and the specific role I was supposed to play — particularly for my father.”

“The moment my father entered the room, I understood why he was there.”

“He had come to force himself on me.”

Renzo’s expression darkened, something dangerous flickering beneath the surface.

“But Vasquez underestimated me,” I went on.

“He thought I was already broken. He believed being kidnapped and locked in a room would make fear burrow so deep into me that I’d become compliant within hours.”

A bitter smile tugged at my lips.

“Not only was I not scared — I refused to submit.”

I shifted slightly against the mattress.

“It’s true he would have touched me in the wrong way,” I admitted, my voice steady. “But he made the mistake of coming in unguarded. The moment he stepped fully into the room and tried to force himself on me, I moved.”

“I slid the heavy internal bolt shut — the kind that locks from the inside only. Then I turned on him and beat him until he stopped moving.”

Renzo leaned forward a fraction, eyes fixed on me.

I paused, letting the moment settle.

“The bastard dropped instantly. Didn’t even have time to scream.”

A faint, grim satisfaction colored my voice.

“After that, it was simple. I took the cuffs they’d left on the bed for me and chained him to the radiator pipe in the corner. Tight enough he could only twitch.”

Renzo winced instinctively.

“Didn’t he have a gun?” he asked, voice turning rough.

“Disarming armed men is one of my skills,” I said flatly. “I took it from him before he knew what hit him.”

“That was how I kept my father as my hostage,” I went on, voice low. “He became my shield. No one was allowed to attack me whenever food arrived.”

“Each time the guards brought a meal, I’d drag him to the door, gun pressed tight to his temple. They understood perfectly: one step out of line, one attempt to break in...”

My lips curved into a faint, dangerous smile.

“Vasquez dies on the spot.”

Renzo let out a low whistle, but there was no humor in it—just disbelief.

“I’m trying to believe this isn’t some Hollywood scene,” Renzo murmured, voice uneasy. “The Spanish are savage... pure evil. You can’t just play them like that.”

“Normal civilians can’t do what I did,” I replied, my tone flat. “I used what the CIA taught me. It sounds like a movie script, I know — but every word is true.”

“Matteo needed my father alive too badly to risk it. He couldn’t afford to let me kill Vasquez, so he wouldn’t let his men force the door. Whatever deal the two of them had running... it was far bigger than me. I saw it in their eyes before they locked me in. Killing Vasquez would have cost Matteo everything — losing me was nothing in comparison.”

Renzo dragged a hand down his face slowly, like he was trying to process the full picture.

“You held him like that for four weeks?” he asked.

I nodded.

I kept the gun on him almost the entire time,” I continued. “I slept in short fragments, never fully asleep. Every creak, every sound — I was already standing. Any movement, and my eyes were scanning the room. He was my leverage. I couldn’t allow even one mistake.”

Renzo stared at me for a long moment, something like awe mixed with concern flickering in his expression.

“That’s...” Renzo shook his head, stunned. “That’s not just nerves. That’s pure craziness.”

“It’s called desperate instinct to survive,” I replied simply.

He exhaled sharply.

“If this is really true, then you’re bolder and braver than most of us could ever dream of being. Holding your own father hostage while you’re the kidnapped one? That’s on a completely different level.”

I smirked triumphantly and adjusted my position on the bed.

After a beat, I shifted the focus away from myself.

“So what happened to Matteo? Did Vincenzo make him pay for kidnapping me?

A slow, dark satisfaction crept across Renzo’s face.

“Oh, he certainly dealt with Matteo,” Renzo said, leaning back, as if settling into a story.

“First thing he did... he made sure Matteo would never walk on those legs again. They were cut off—precisely, all the way to the waist.”

A shiver ran down my spine, but I couldn't stop the grim satisfaction curling in my chest.

“He didn't stop there,” Renzo went on. “While Matteo was still reeling, trying to survive after both of his legs were snatched, Vincenzo torched his two biggest warehouses and his three private ports — irreplaceable assets. He burned everything to ash.”

“No witnesses. No evidence. No trail. He vanished without a trace, refusing to give the Spanish any reason to escalate into open war.”

He added quietly,

“On the surface, it looks like pure bad luck. Internal failure. Or perhaps sabotage from a rival that no one can prove is even real.”

The room went quiet again.

“Vincenzo could've finished Matteo, and no one would have stopped him. The only reason he only took Matteo's legs instead of ending his life outright,” Renzo added, his voice lowering, “is because of Violet.”

I looked at him.

“Because of her,” I said.

Renzo nodded once.

“Even if Violet never learns that Vincenzo killed her father... losing him alone would shatter her. Vincenzo knows how delicate Matteo and Violet's bond was, and for her sake, he let Matteo live.”

He exhaled softly. “For all his ruthlessness... he would never hurt Violet.

My mood plummeted the moment her name slipped into the air.

Violet.

It didn't matter how casually it was said, how neutral the context—her name always landed the same way.

Heavy. Inevitable.

Like something I could never outrun.

Violet.

The invisible axis every decision in Vincenzo's life seemed to turn on.

Swallowing the pain, I asked, "Where's Vincenzo been?" I tried to keep my voice steady, though it came out softer than intended. "I haven't seen him around today."

As I asked about him, the revelation that I carried his child settled in my chest, heavy and unrelenting.

I knew I would have to tell him when I saw him.

"He's been buried in meetings," he said finally. "Cleaning up the Matteo situation. Tightening things. Making sure nothing comes back to bite us."

His tone was casual, but I caught the edge beneath it.

This wasn't just cleanup.

This was containment.

"But," he added, glancing back at me, "he'll be here by evening."

The words landed softly.

I nodded, my throat tightening in a way I couldn't quite control.

Since the rescue, Vincenzo had come every single day.

Like clockwork.

Not for long.

Three minutes, maybe less.

Always at the same time—usually when the nurses were already in the room.

While they changed dressings, checked vitals, adjusted IV lines.

Clinical moments.

Moments where conversation wasn't expected.

He would stand there—impeccable as always, untouched by the chaos surrounding him.

Hands in his pockets or clasped behind his back.

Eyes on me, but never too long.

Never too deep.

“Are they treating you properly?”

“Is the pain manageable?”

“Let me know if anything changes.”

Clipped. Controlled. Efficient.

Then he would leave.

No lingering.

No softness.

No questions that mattered.

But he came.

Every day.

And somehow, that had become enough for me to hold onto.

Renzo pushed himself to his feet, the couch creaking faintly in protest.

He stretched once, then looked down at me with something warmer than before—something almost... genuine.

“I’m glad, Elena,” he said. “Really glad you didn’t go through the worst of what the Spanish usually do to their enemies.”

I let out a dry, humorless laugh, the sound scraping against my throat.

“Didn’t think you’d be glad about anything that concerns me,” I replied, voice edged with ice. “Especially since you’ve hated me from the very beginning.”

Renzo huffed softly, not quite denying it.

“I didn’t hate you,” he said after a beat. Then, with a small shrug, “Okay—maybe I did. A little.”

That earned the faintest twitch of my lips.

“But things change,” he went on. “People change. Situations change.”

His gaze flickered over me, taking in the exhaustion I couldn’t fully hide.

“But I got to know you better,” Renzo continued, shaking his head slowly.

“And I realized how wrong I’ve been about you all this time. I apologized for my actions on the ridge — you remember that, right?”

I held his gaze.

“I don’t remember accepting your apology.”

He smiled faintly and moved toward the door, fingers curling around the handle.

“My next assignment starts in a week, so I’ll be gone for a while,” he said, glancing back.

“But until then... if you need anything — company, a distraction, someone to talk to, or just a body in the room when your mind won’t quiet down...”

His expression softened with quiet understanding.

“Call me. I’ll be there. Okay?”

A small flicker of relief warmed me.

“Sure,” I whispered.

I watched him leave.

The door clicked shut with a soft, final sound that seemed louder than it should have been.

And just like that—

The room felt colder.

Quieter.

My mood dipped again, heavier this time, sinking into something I couldn’t quite shake off.

Vincenzo would be here by evening.

The thought settled in my chest, solid and unavoidable.

I had to tell him.

This wasn't something I could keep.

He needed to know—fast. I needed to see his reaction immediately.

My hand drifted unconsciously to my abdomen, fingers resting there lightly.

I swallowed hard.

His possible reaction to the news of my pregnancy played out in my mind in flashes—and none of them were good.

Rage.

Cold dismissal.

A quiet order spoken in that same controlled tone he used for everything else.

End it.

The word echoed, even though he hadn't said it yet.

But he might.

And I had to be ready for that.

I lay back slowly, careful of my ribs, letting my body sink into the mattress while my feet still touched the floor.

Half-propped.

Suspended between rest and tension.

My eyes fixed on the ceiling.

I started counting.

Seconds.

Minutes.

Heartbeats.

Anything to keep my mind from spiraling too far ahead.

Time blurred the way it always did when you were waiting for something you couldn't avoid.

At some point, the light shifted.

The gold faded into softer hues, shadows stretching longer across the room.

The quiet deepened.

Then—

A knock.

Soft. Controlled. Real.

My heart jumped before I could stop it.

“Elena,” Renzo’s voice came through the door, slightly muffled by the wood. “Vincenzo’s around. He’s in his study.”

Everything inside me went still.

“Got it,” I called back, forcing steadiness into my voice. “Thank you, Renzo.”

“You’re welcome.”

I heard his footsteps retreating down the hall, each one fading until there was nothing left but silence again.

It’s time.

The words settled heavily in my chest.

I pushed myself upright slowly, bracing one hand against the mattress.

Pain flared along my ribs but I pushed through it, teeth clenching briefly until it dulled into something manageable.

Still, I moved.

At the vanity, I paused.

The girl staring back at me didn’t look like someone about to have a life-altering conversation.

She looked like a ghost.

Skin too pale.

Dark circles bruising the space beneath my eyes.

Hair dull, lifeless around my shoulders.

For a moment, I just stared.

Then I reached for the powder.

Light strokes.

Enough to soften the worst of it, not erase it.

I didn't have the energy to pretend to be whole—but I could at least look... less broken.

A quick spritz of perfume at my neck, my wrists.

Something subtle.

Something that didn't scream desperation.

Something that said I still had control—even if it was a lie.

I exhaled once, steadying myself.

Then I stepped out into the corridor.

The walk felt longer than it should have.

Every step echoed.

Past the guest wing's sitting room, where books sat untouched on polished shelves, spines uncracked, as if no one had ever truly lived here.

Through the arched gallery.

Down the wide marble staircase.

Across the main foyer.

My heels clicked against the polished stone, the sound too loud in the vast space, bouncing off high ceilings and cold walls.

Past the dining hall doors.

I didn't look inside—but I remembered.

Standing there.

Serving.

Invisible.

Watching him and Violet from a distance that felt like a different lifetime.

My jaw tightened.

I kept moving.

Finally—

The study.

The heavy oak door stood slightly ajar, a thin line of warm lamplight spilling into the dim corridor like an invitation... or a warning.

I slowed.

Inside, I could hear the faint rustle of paper.

The soft clink of glass meeting wood. The quiet rhythm of someone completely in control of their world.

Of everything.

Including me.

I drew in a breath.

Held it.

Let it out slowly.

Then I knocked.

A pause.

"I'll send for you when I'm hungry, Chiara," Vincenzo's voice came from inside—low, distracted, edged with authority that didn't need to be raised to be obeyed.

Something in my chest sank further.

“It’s Elena,” I said.

Softer.

Not as steady as I wanted it to be.

Silence followed.

Long enough to stretch.

Long enough for doubt to creep in.

Then—

“Come in.”

No hesitation this time. No softness either.

Just permission.

I pushed the door open wider.

And stepped inside.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 22[3,285 words]

Chapter 22

ELENA

Vincenzo stood near the tall mahogany bookcase, the warm glow of the desk lamp catching along the polished wood and throwing soft shadows across the room.

The space smelled faintly of leather and cedar.

He was in the middle of removing his suit jacket, movements unhurried.

He hung it on the brass coat stand beside his desk with the same care he gave everything else in his life, smoothing the lapel once before letting it fall into place.

Beneath it, he wore only a crisp white dress shirt.

The sleeves were rolled neatly to his elbows, exposing strong, corded forearms.

His collar was open, the top two buttons undone, revealing just enough of his throat to make something tighten low in my chest.

A shadow of stubble darkened his jaw, softening the sharpness of his face in a way that made him look more dangerous, not less.

For a second, I just stood there, framed by the doorway, suddenly aware of how out of place I looked in comparison.

He turned.

Fully.

His attention snapped to me in an instant—complete, undivided.

The kind of focus that made everything else in the room feel irrelevant.

“Hi,” I said.

The word came out smaller than I intended.

Thinner.

Like it didn’t belong in a room like this—or with a man like him.

His gaze moved over me slowly.

Not possessive, not consuming—but still thorough.

Assessing.

He took in the stiffness in the way I held myself.

The careful distribution of my weight, the way I favored one side without meaning to.

Nothing escaped him.

When his eyes finally settled on my face, something unreadable flickered in them.

“It’s your first time coming into my study uninvited,” he said.

His voice was low.

But there was a current beneath it.

“What’s troubling you?”

No softness. No pretense.

Straight to the point.

That was him.

And for once—I matched it.

I didn’t think.

Didn’t ease into it.

Didn’t dress it up or soften the edges.

“I’m pregnant.”

The words landed between us like a gunshot.

Silence followed.

He stilled completely.

It was subtle if you didn’t know him—but I did.

Every line of his body locked into place.

His shoulders went rigid.

His hand, hanging loosely at his side a second ago, curled slowly into a fist.

Tighter.

Tighter.

Until his knuckles blanched white beneath the strain.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet.

“Matteo deserves death.”

Each word was lethal.

Laced with something far more dangerous than shouting.

“I spared him—for Violet’s sake,” he continued, jaw tightening. “But now...” His eyes darkened, something violent surfacing beneath the control. “Now I’ll let him taste hell before I end him.”

The shift was instant.

Like a storm breaking without warning.

“Why?” I asked.

The single word cut through his momentum.

His head snapped slightly, his eyes locking onto mine in incredulity.

“Are you seriously asking me why?” His voice rose, not loud, but edged with fury now.

“He touched you.” A step toward me. “He got you pregnant.”

Another step. “He dared to put his hands on what is mine—”

“That’s not what happened.”

He didn’t hear me.

“I won’t stop at killing him,” he went on, the words coming faster now, darker. “I’ll wipe out his entire bloodline. His brothers. Their wives. Their grand—”

“Vincenzo.”

My voice cut through his like a blade.

Sharp enough to stop him.

I stepped closer.

Close enough now that I could smell him clearly.

“I know we haven’t talked about what happened during the four weeks I spent in captivity,” I said, keeping my voice steady even as my pulse raced. “Not properly. Not really.”

His breathing was still uneven—controlled, but barely.

“But you need to listen to me now.”

His eyes stayed locked on mine.

Waiting.

Tense.

Ready to explode again if I said the wrong thing.

“The only pain I endured,” I continued, “was being confined to that room.”

A flicker of confusion broke through the anger.

Small—but there.

“No one violated me,” I said clearly. “No one touched me.”

His expression shifted again—rage faltering, something uncertain pushing through.

“I wasn’t beaten,” I added. “Not once. They didn’t get the chance.”

My hands trembled slightly, but I held his gaze.

Held it.

Didn’t let him look away.

“This pregnancy...” My voice softened just a fraction. “It isn’t Matteo’s.”

Silence fell again.

He didn’t move.

“It’s yours,” I said.

The words felt heavier this time.

More real.

“I conceived the night I gave you my virginity.”

The room seemed to shrink around us.

Everything narrowed down to the space between us.

He stared at me.

Not like before—not assessing, not controlled.

Searching.

His eyes moved over my face, slower this time.

As if he were looking for something—any crack, any hesitation, any sign that this was a lie he could tear apart.

I didn't give him one.

I couldn't.

Because it wasn't.

When he finally spoke, his voice was barely there.

“Mine?”

It wasn't a question filled with anger.

It was something else entirely.

Disbelief.

I nodded.

Slowly.

His fist loosened.

Gradually.

Like his body was catching up to something his mind hadn't fully processed yet.

His fingers uncurled, tension bleeding out of them in small, uneven increments.

Then—

He moved.

Fast.

Three long strides closed the distance between us before I could react.

And then—

He pulled me into him.

Carefully.

Almost... reverently.

One arm wrapped around my back, the other bracing me in a way that avoided every injury without me having to guide him.

Like he'd memorized where I was hurt just from looking.

Like he'd been paying attention all along.

My breath caught.

His hold tightened.

For the first time—

He held me like I mattered.

Really mattered.

I could hear his heartbeat, strong and uneven against my ear. Faster than it should have been.

My hands hovered for a second before settling lightly against his shirt, fingers curling into the fabric without thinking.

When he finally spoke, his voice had quieted, the fury gone.

“You were never touched?” he asked again, disbelief lacing every word.

After all, the Spanish were notorious for acts like that.

I straightened slightly despite the ache in my ribs.

“Never,” I said.

Then, firmer—“Not once.”

The words didn't waver this time.

I made sure they didn't.

Silence stretched again.

Taut.

Then—

A sharp buzz cut through the room.

Once.

Twice.

Vincenzo's head turned slightly toward the desk.

The phone.

For a fraction of a second, he didn't move.

Then he walked back to it, each step just as controlled as before.

He glanced at the screen.

And just like that—

Something in his face changed.

It was subtle.

But I saw it.

The hard lines around his mouth softened.

The tension in his brow eased, just a fraction.

I didn't need to see the name.

I already knew.

Violet.

He answered immediately.

"Violet," he said.

And there it was.

That tone.

Careful in a way he had never once been with me.

“I’ll call you back,” he added, already shifting into something more controlled. “I’m in the middle of a discussion... but I’ll be with you soon.”

In the middle of a discussion?

He listened.

For a second.

Two.

Then his entire body went rigid again—but this time it wasn’t the same stillness as before.

This was different.

His free hand clenched at his side.

Hard.

So hard I heard the faint crack of his knuckles.

His jaw tightened, teeth grinding visibly beneath the skin.

Whatever she was saying—

It was getting to him.

Deep.

“No—” he started, but stopped himself.

Listened again.

And then—

Something snapped.

The sound that tore out of him wasn’t quite human.

A strangled mix between a growl and something wounded.

Before I could react—

His hand closed tighter around the phone.

Too tight.

The device crunched audibly in his grip.

Plastic splintering.

Glass fracturing beneath pressure it was never meant to withstand.

He crushed it.

The screen shattered completely, spiderweb cracks bursting outward as the casing bent and broke in his palm.

Then he threw it.

Hard.

The ruined phone slammed into the far wall with a violent crack and exploded into fragments—shards of glass and plastic scattering across the polished floor like falling ice.

Silence followed.

Breathless. Charged.

He didn't look at the mess.

Didn't acknowledge it.

His chest rose and fell once—twice—before he turned back to me.

"You don't have to lie to me, Elena."

His voice was rough now.

Not loud. But stripped bare.

My chest tightened.

"What... what are you talking about? I've never lied to you."

"My sister was violated," he cut in.

The words hit harder than anything he'd said before.

"Repeatedly." His jaw clenched. "By her own father. And by yours."

I froze.

“She got pregnant because of it,” he continued, his voice dropping further, quieter—but heavier. “I know what that does to someone.”

His eyes locked onto mine.

Not accusing. Not entirely.

But searching.

“I lived through the aftermath with her,” he continued. “Through every fragment of the pain.”

A pause.

“I would have understood if you’d been in a similar situation. It wouldn’t have made me hate you any more.”

Something in my chest cracked at that.

“But why claim the child you’re carrying is mine?” he said, voice cutting sharp. “Why would you try to make me accept the child of someone who wronged you?”

My throat closed.

Air felt suddenly harder to pull in.

“You just held me like I matter, like you believe me and are ready to accept the pregnancy—despite saying before that you didn’t want me to carry your child.”

“What changed between a few seconds ago and now, after you took that call?”

“The only man I’ve ever been with is you, and this pregnancy is yours,” I said, forcing the words past the tightness in my throat. “I have no reason to lie, but I’m still curious—why the sudden change?”

“Violet called.”

The name cut through everything again.

He dragged a hand down his face, fingers pressing hard like he was trying to ground himself.

“She was crying,” he said, voice duller now. Tired. “Begging me to spare her father’s life.”

Of course she was.

“She said Matteo confessed to her... about what he did to you while you were in his custody. Even though you just claimed you were never violated during those four weeks.

Each word landed like a blow.

A lie.

A calculated, filthy lie.

I opened my mouth—

But he wasn’t finished.

He wasn’t even really looking at me anymore.

His gaze had gone distant.

Pulled somewhere else entirely.

“I was violated too.”

The words were quiet.

So quiet I almost didn’t hear them.

But they hit harder than anything else in the room.

My breath caught.

“By your father,” he continued, still not fully present. “Many years ago.”

Something cold settled into my bones.

“Traumas like that never leave you,” he said. “Time doesn’t erase them. Nothing you build can stop them.”

His lips pressed into a thin line. “They hunt you.”

His gaze returned to mine.

“I know it feels shameful, but you don’t have to pretend it didn’t happen,” he said, voice softer but still intense.

“I would’ve found the best therapist to help you heal... and to guide you in whatever decision you make about the pregnancy.”

The room felt too small.

Like the walls were pressing in.

“Vincenzo, I was never violated.”

I stepped forward, ignoring the flare of pain in my side.

Forcing him to see me.

To hear me.

“I spent those four weeks in a locked room,” I said. “Holding someone hostage.”

His brow furrowed.

Confusion cutting through the certainty.

“My father,” I said. “Vasquez.”

That got his full attention.

“He’s alive,” I continued. “He faked his death. He’s been working with the Spanish the entire time.”

Silence.

“I took my father’s gun the first night he came in to harm me and seized him. He came alone. That was his mistake.”

My voice didn’t waver.

“I used the cuffs they left in the room to chain him to the pipe—tight enough that he couldn’t move—and used him as leverage so the soldiers wouldn’t harm me.”

The memory sharpened, clear and vivid.

“Every time they brought food,” I continued, “I had the gun pressed to his temple through the serving slot. Safety off. Finger ready. I told them exactly how it would go: one wrong move, one forced entry, and his brains would be on the wall.”

“They backed off,” I said. “Fed us and left us alone.”

“Matteo needed him alive,” I said. “Whatever they had going on—it was worth more than me.”

My hands trembled slightly at my sides.

I met his gaze head-on.

Unflinching.

“Violet does nothing but lie—and it’s pathetic how easily you believe her. No one touched me in those four weeks. I’m telling you the truth.”

Vincenzo didn’t speak right away.

But something in his face... broke.

“Your father?” he repeated slowly. “You’re telling me Vasquez is alive?”

“Yes.”

The silence that followed stretched thin, like a wire pulled too tight.

“I went to California myself,” he said.

“After the crash that killed him and his family, I had my men exhume the body. We didn’t rely on hearsay—we verified everything. DNA. Dental records. Bone structure. Independent confirmation.”

His voice hardened. “It was him.”

He took a slow step closer.

“His eyes locked onto mine—unyielding now.

“Your father is dead, Elena.”

For a moment, the room felt like it tilted beneath my feet.

“I don’t know what your investigation team told you,” I said, forcing my voice to stay steady, “but Vasquez was standing right in front of me four weeks ago. Alive. Breathing. Smiling.”

I let out a hollow breath. “Smoking like nothing ever happened. Like he hadn’t just erased himself from the world.”

I held his gaze. “I kept him hostage for four weeks.”

A faint, bitter smile touched my lips. “Maybe you should learn to investigate—or re-investigate—before jumping to rigid conclusions.”

My eyes hardened. “Or do you think I’m lying about my father being alive too?”

I smirked, even as pain tore through me.

He never believed a word I said... even though I always told the truth.

My hands curled slightly at my sides.

Vincenzo didn’t move.

But I saw the tension building again.

“My father told me I was never really his,” I continued, my voice steady but cold.

“He said the DNA test proved it. My mother had cheated. That my siblings and I were just mistakes — bastards he never wanted.”

I drew in a slow breath.

“The crash everyone thought killed him? He orchestrated the whole thing. He murdered my mother and my brother, then faked his own death and walked away without a scratch.”

Silence crashed over the room.

“Maybe now you can stop hating me so much,” I added quietly.

“Turns out I’m not a Vasquez after all.”

Vincenzo shook his head.

Once.

Decisive.

“Elena, I truly want to believe you,” he said quietly, “but your words are completely illogical. The trauma you endured is clearly clouding your mind. You might be hallucinating.”

His gaze hardened.

“You claim you saw a dead man in Matteo’s estate and held him hostage? How is that even possible? You’re mixing nightmares with reality. The Spanish would never kidnap someone and then allow them to take one of their own hostage. The story is laughable.”

He continued, voice rising with disbelief:

“You — injured, restrained, outnumbered — overpowered trained men? You took one of their most valuable assets, chained him up, and held him for a month... and they just let you?”

“And now you claim you were never violated? Yet Matteo’s own daughter is begging me to spare her father’s life because of what he supposedly did to you.”

Something hot surged behind my eyes.

Anger.

Tears burned—but I refused to let them fall.

“Well, since nothing I say is believable to you,” I snapped, my voice shaking with barely contained fury, “how about we run a fucking DNA test? Then you can see the truth with your own eyes.”

I moved closer, holding my ground.

“When the results come back, I expect an apology. For calling me a liar... and for doubting every word I’ve ever said.”

My chest rose and fell unevenly.

I turned sharply, unable to bear the suffocating silence any longer.

Before the tears could spill and betray me completely, I walked toward the door.

The distance felt endless, every step heavier than the last, as if the floor itself was pulling me back.

“I’ll arrange the DNA test for tomorrow,” he said quietly. “And if you’re right... I’ll take responsibility.”

I stopped with my hand on the door handle, refusing to face him.

“Responsibility?”

My voice cracked despite my effort to keep it steady.

“Will you take responsibility for every moment of suffering you inflicted on me... all because you thought I was Vasquez’s daughter? Because you believed your hatred and punishments were justified?”

“When the truth hits—that I’m not his child, that everything you did was based on lies—will you face what you’ve done?”

“I never carried his blood. I am not his daughter. And he’s still alive... ready to be found.”

The silence stretched between us, thick and unbearable.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low, almost broken.

“Elena... I already regret every bit of pain and suffering I caused you. More than you could ever imagine. I don’t expect your forgiveness. Hell... I’m not sure I’ll ever forgive myself.”

A painful smirk twisted my lips.

Without another word, I pushed the door open.

The moment it clicked shut behind me, the dam broke.

Hot tears flooded down my cheeks, blurring the corridor into streaks of light and shadow.

I didn’t care who saw me.

I didn’t care about dignity, pride, or appearances anymore.

All I wanted was to get away from him.

“Elena!”

Renzo’s voice echoed from the far end of the hall.

Sharp. Concerned.

“Elena—wait—”

My body moved faster than my thoughts, half-running, half-stumbling down the corridor, past the portraits, past the cold walls that suddenly felt like they were closing in.

I barely made it to my room.

The door slammed behind me with a force that rattled the frame.

And then—

My strength gave out.

I slid down the wood slowly, my back scraping against it until I hit the floor.

The moment I did—

The sobs tore free.

Raw. Broken.

The kind that ripped through your chest and made every breath hurt.

I pressed a hand over my mouth, trying to muffle the sound, but it didn't help.

Nothing helped.

Because the one thing I needed—

The one person who was supposed to believe me—

Didn't.

And somehow—

That hurt more than everything else combined.

Violet—always Violet—fed him a lie, and he took it without question.

No hesitation.

No demand for proof.

No scrutiny—nothing like what he put me through.

Instead, he shattered his phone in a fit of rage, tearing apart the truth I had just handed him... like it was worthless.

Like I was.

He believed my words were those of a madwoman—like I was losing my mind.

God, it hurt.

I pressed my palms against my still-flat stomach, my fingers trembling against the warmth beneath my skin.

There was something fragile there. Something real.

Something that had already been dismissed... before it even had a chance to exist in his world.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

My voice cracked. “I’m so sorry.”

The apology was for the tiny life that had already been questioned.

Doubted. Rejected.

I squeezed my eyes shut as a fresh wave of emotion surged through me, sharp and overwhelming.

A part of me—quiet, desperate, almost childlike—wished this wasn’t real.

That I wasn’t pregnant at all.

That I had been smarter.

More careful.

That I had taken the morning-after pill that first night, before everything spiraled into this mess.

But it had been my first time.

I hadn’t known what to do.

Hadn’t thought beyond the moment.

And now—

Now there was no undoing it.

I stayed there, curled against the floor, letting the grief settle into my bones until even breathing felt like something I had to fight for.

Time blurred.

Not in hours. Not in minutes.

Just... in weight.

Dragging.

My hands trembled as I wiped my face with the sleeve of my oversized shirt.

The fabric was damp now, clinging slightly to my skin, but I didn't care.

I pushed myself up slowly, using the door for support until I was standing.

Barely.

Each movement felt deliberate, like my body had to be convinced to keep going.

I walked to the bed.

Paused.

Then climbed onto it, the mattress dipping slightly beneath my weight.

I turned onto my side and pulled the pillow into my chest, wrapping my arms around it tightly—as if it could hold me together in a way nothing else could.

A fragile substitute for something I didn't have.

Something I needed.

Something that had just been questioned.

Tomorrow.

The word settled in my mind like a promise.

Or a challenge.

He'd do the test.

Fine.

Let him.

Let him bring in whatever doctors, whatever machines, whatever cold, clinical process he needed to confirm the truth.

Let him see the result with his own eyes.

Let him read it in numbers and charts and biological proof that the child was his.

Let him face the reality that couldn't be argued with.

Let him realize—

That Violet had lied.

Again.

And let him sit with it.

Let him sit with the fact that he had chosen her word over mine.

The thought sent a strange, sharp flicker through my chest.

Not just anger.

Not just hurt.

Something closer to determination.

I curled tighter around the pillow, cheek pressing into the soft, slightly damp fabric, as if grounding myself in something tangible.

Tomorrow couldn't come fast enough.

And when it did—

I wanted to see his face.

Not just hear his conclusion.

Not just receive his apology.

I wanted to witness the exact moment his belief in her—

His unwavering loyalty to her—

Finally fractured.

Even if only for a second.

Because that moment?

That would be mine.

And it would be enough.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 23[4,112 words]

Chapter 23

ELENA

THE VIP PATIENT LOUNGE of the private hospital was more a curated extension of power than a medical space.

Cream leather armchairs were arranged with careful symmetry around a low glass coffee table.

Floor-to-ceiling windows stretched across one side of the room, offering a view of manicured gardens outside.

Fountains trickled in the distance, their steady rhythm the only real sound in a space built for silence.

Everything here spoke the same language.

Money.

Discretion.

Exactly the kind of place Vincenzo would choose for something like this.

For something that could decide everything.

I sat on the edge of one of the armchairs, posture stiff, hands clasped tightly together in my lap.

My fingers were locked so firmly that my knuckles ached, skin stretched pale from the pressure.

I forced myself to breathe evenly, but every inhale felt shallow—like my lungs couldn't quite catch up to my thoughts.

Across from me, Vincenzo sat on the sofa.

Completely at ease.

One arm draped along the backrest, his long legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed.

His posture was relaxed in a way that almost felt insulting, given what was at stake.

He held his phone loosely in one hand, scrolling with quiet, casual focus.

His expression was unreadable—until it wasn't.

Every so often, the corner of his mouth would lift.

Just a fraction.

Barely there.

But enough.

Enough to make something inside me tighten painfully.

Vincenzo Orsini didn't smile.

Not like that.

Not in a way that lingered.

Not in a way that looked soft.

Not in a way that felt... given.

And certainly not at me.

My chest felt tighter with every passing second.

I couldn't stand it anymore.

I rose silently from the chair, my bare feet pressing against the cool marble floor without a sound.

The chill seeped into my skin, grounding me as I moved, but it did nothing to steady the storm building inside me.

I walked behind him.

Close enough now to see the glow of his screen from over his shoulder.

I leaned forward slightly, bracing my hands lightly against the back of the sofa as I looked down.

And there she was.

Violet.

Her Instagram feed filled his screen.

A curated life that looked effortless, untouched by pain, untouched by anything real.

Grid after grid.

Sunlit photos taken on terraces overlooking the sea—golden light spilling across her skin, her smile soft and radiant in a way that felt practiced.

Close-ups of her manicured hands resting gently over the slight curve of her stomach.

Each image framed to emphasize it.

To remind the world—and maybe him—that she was carrying something.

Something important.

Something visible.

Videos followed.

Her laughing in slow motion, hair moving with the breeze, sunlight haloing her like she existed in a completely different world from the one I stood in.

Vincenzo lingered on each one.

His thumb hovered before scrolling.

Paused.

Repeated.

His eyes softened in a way I had never seen before—not once—not even in fleeting moments.

Not for me.

Not ever.

A dull, sharp pain bloomed beneath my ribs.

Deeper than any bruise.

I straightened slowly.

Stepped back.

And returned to my seat without a word.

Turning my face toward the window, I stared out at the gardens, at the fountains, at anything that wasn't him.

Anything that wouldn't betray how much that moment had just taken out of me.

When I finally looked back—

He was already watching me.

Still. Steady.

Unreadable.

Like nothing had happened.

As if he hadn't just reminded me exactly where I stood in his world.

Something in me cracked.

I tilted my head slightly toward him, forcing myself to meet his gaze.

"You really do love your Violet, don't you?"

The words came out quieter than I intended.

Faint. Fractured.

But they carried everything I couldn't hold in anymore.

"Even now..." My voice trembled, but I didn't stop. "Waiting to find out if the child I'm carrying is yours... Violet remains the sole occupant of your heart."

He didn't react.

“She’s all that matters to me,” he said, without hesitation.

No second thought.

Just certainty.

The statement hit me like a physical blow.

My breath caught sharply in my throat, as if something inside me had just been squeezed too tightly to function properly.

My chest tightened painfully, the air suddenly thin, like my body had forgotten how to breathe.

Over and over, my heartbeat stuttered—off rhythm, uneven.

I forced myself to look away.

To ground myself in something that wouldn’t shatter under the weight of that moment.

I kept my gaze fixed on the orchid.

How long would I let his words—his actions—hurt me this deeply?

No.

Enough.

I needed to become indifferent. Cold. Untouchable.

Until I found a way to leave him for good.

He would never choose me. Never.

Not when his heart had always belonged to Violet.

That truth had been there from the start.

The only problem was me—still feeling, still hurting, still letting him have that power over me.

It had to end.

And I would make sure it did.

Time dulled things.

The door opened with a soft pneumatic hiss, cutting through the silence.

The doctor stepped in.

Composed.

Five-foot-four, wire-rimmed glasses, his white coat pressed so perfectly it looked untouched by the real world.

He held a slim folder in one hand, the kind that carried answers people didn't always want to hear.

His eyes moved briefly between Vincenzo and me before settling on me.

"Signora Orsini..." he began.

But I was already moving.

I pushed myself up to my feet.

The chair behind me barely made a sound as I stood, my body straightening despite the tension coiled inside me. My heart pounded—but it wasn't fear.

It was certainty.

Confidence surged through me, reckless and unyielding.

"Please," I said, gesturing toward Vincenzo. "Give it to him."

The doctor blinked slightly.

"Let him see for himself."

A pause.

Then the doctor nodded and crossed the room, extending the folder toward Vincenzo with practiced calm.

I held my breath.

Watched. Waited.

This was it.

The moment. The proof.

The second everything would change.

Vincenzo took the folder without a word.

Opened it.

His eyes dropped to the page.

I watched his face like I was watching a verdict being delivered.

I waited for the shift—the widening of his eyes, the slight parting of his lips, the moment his certainty would crack under the weight of truth.

The moment he would realize—

I hadn't lied.

But it didn't happen.

Instead—

His expression hardened.

Not confusion. Not surprise.

Just... hard.

His jaw clenched.

A muscle ticked sharply in his cheek.

Once.

Then again.

He read the page without reacting outwardly, but something in him tightened.

Then—

Without warning—

He dropped the folder onto the side table.

The papers fluttered slightly as they settled, the sound too loud in the quiet room.

He stood.

“This... is what you think my time is worth?”

His voice was cold and cutting.

They landed like something final.

And then—

He turned and walked out.

No second glance.

The door swung shut behind him with a firm, decisive click that echoed through the room like a door being sealed on something irreversible.

My chest collapsed physically.

Like something inside me had just been ripped out.

“No—”

The word left my mouth on instinct.

I lunged for the folder, my hands shaking so badly the papers rattled as I grabbed them.

My fingers fumbled, trying to steady the pages as my eyes darted across the text.

I scanned the report, searching for something—anything.

Then I found it.

The line.

Bold and final.

Paternity Probability: 0%. The alleged father is excluded as the biological father of the fetus.

I froze.

My eyes widened slightly.

My breath stopped.

“No...” I whispered.

I read it again.

And again.

The words didn't change. They didn't rearrange themselves.

They didn't soften or offer a different meaning.

They stayed exactly where they were.

Impossible.

I wiped at my eyes with the heel of my hand, once... twice... as if somehow the blur would distort the truth enough to make it wrong.

But it didn't.

"No... this isn't real," The words tore out of me, raw and broken.

There had to be a mistake.

There had to be.

A switched sample. A mislabeled vial. A clerical error.

Anything.

Anything but this.

I didn't think.

I bolted out of the lounge, clutching the report in my hand like it was the only proof I had left.

The corridor blurred as I moved through it, my steps uneven, too fast, too desperate.

My heart pounded in my ears, drowning out everything else.

I pushed through the hospital hallways, ignoring the stares, ignoring the whispers, ignoring everything except the need to fix this.

The doctor.

I needed the doctor.

I burst into his office without knocking.

He was already inside.

Mid-sentence.

With another couple.

The room went silent the moment I entered.

“Doctor—” My voice cracked as I stepped forward. “There’s been a mistake.”

He blinked at me, startled—but composed.

“Signora—”

“There’s an error with this DNA test,” I said quickly, holding the folder up as evidence. “The child is Vincenzo’s. It has to be.”

The couple exchanged a glance.

The doctor, however, didn’t react with the same panic I felt.

He stayed calm.

Professional.

“The margin of error in our paternity testing is less than 0.0001%,” he said evenly.

Each word landed with precision.

“But if you’re that confident,” he added, “you’re welcome to return tomorrow for a repeat sample. We can expedite the results.”

I nodded.

Too quickly. Too jerky.

“Tomorrow,” I repeated under my breath.

Then I backed out of the room.

The corridor swallowed me again.

But this time—It felt different.

I barely remembered how I got to the garage exit.

The world felt distorted.

My fingers tightened around the crumpled report as I moved, the paper wrinkling further in my grip.

Hope.

There had been hope.

Now there wasn't.

I stepped into the garage.

Cold air hit me first.

And then I saw him.

Vincenzo.

Leaning against the driver's side of his matte-black SUV.

Arms crossed. Posture relaxed..

I walked faster.

Clutching the report tighter.

"There's got to be a mistake with these results—a serious one," I said the moment I reached him.

My voice came out breathless.

"This isn't possible!"

He didn't look at me.

Didn't move.

Didn't even acknowledge the report in my hand.

"Quit stressing me out, Elena," he said flatly.

The words were dismissive.

"Whatever you're carrying... it's the child of a rapist."

My breath caught.

Then—

Without looking at me—

“I gave you my word—I’ll kill Matteo for touching you,” he said evenly.

“I can make you watch exactly how much he suffers before I send him to hell. So tell me... why are you still trying to force a child on me that isn’t mine?”

Everything inside me went still.

“Wait—just listen to me.”

My voice shook, but I forced the words out anyway, clinging to them like they were the last thread keeping me from falling apart.

“I’ve only had sex once in my entire life. And that was with you. That night.”

The memory hit me as I spoke—faint, but vivid enough to make my chest tighten.

“I have no reason to lie. No reason at all. This result is wrong.”

I took a step closer, desperate now.

“Please—come back with me tomorrow. We’ll do another test. Together. See it through with me.”

For a moment, there was nothing.

Then—

He looked at me.

Cold. Distant.

“I have things to do, Elena,” Vincenzo said flatly.

His voice carried no warmth.

“I run an empire—legal and illegal. I don’t have time to sit through endless DNA tests because you refuse to tell me the truth.”

The words hit hard.

He exhaled slowly through his nose, gaze already drifting away from me as if the conversation had lost all importance.

“I kept trying to understand why you wouldn’t give up,” he said, his voice almost absent.

“I’ve told you before—I was a victim, my sister was, and now you are. I won’t hate you for it, and I won’t look at you in a way that would make you relive it. No... I get it. I understand the pain. Just... let it be, alright?”

My lips parted.

But no sound came out.

The words had stolen it.

“Vincenzo—”

“Get in. We’re leaving.”

“No.”

The word came out sharper than I intended.

I planted my feet firmly on the ground, refusing to move.

“I’m not getting in until you agree to come with me tomorrow,” I said, my voice trembling but stubborn. “You have to. You can’t just walk away from this.”

He studied me.

Long. Quiet.

Something unreadable flickering across his face—tiredness, maybe. Or irritation. Or both.

Then he sighed.

A sound that carried more weight than any argument.

“Fine,” he said at last. “I can’t promise I’ll come.”

My chest tightened.

“But I’ll give you whatever samples you need,” he continued, already dismissing the emotional weight of the moment. “Hair. Blood. Saliva. Enough to keep confirming the identity of the child you refuse to admit isn’t mine.”

The words stung.

Every single one of them.

He stepped past me, opening the passenger door of his SUV.

His voice came again, impatient now.

“Now—will you get in?”

I took one step forward—

Then stopped.

A voice.

“Mr. Vincenzo!”

The sound cut through the garage, urgent and breathless.

Both of us turned.

A young man—early twenties, suit slightly rumpled, chest rising and falling rapidly—burst around the corner, skidding to a halt as he tried to catch his breath.

He looked panicked.

“Mr. Vincenzo,” he said again, voice strained.

Vincenzo’s entire demeanor shifted instantly.

“What is it?” he demanded sharply.

The young man swallowed hard.

“Violet—she’s just been rushed here. She fainted completely.”

Silence.

For a fraction of a second—

The world seemed to hold its breath.

Then—

Vincenzo moved.

Fast.

All his earlier indifference replaced by something sharper.

More urgent. More alive.

“Lead the way to her ward,” he ordered immediately.

The young man nodded and turned, hurrying off down the corridor.

And then—

Vincenzo turned back to me.

Without a word—

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys.

Then—

Pressed them into my palm.

“Find your way home, Elena.”

No second glance. No concern.

Just—

Dismissal.

He turned and strode after the young man, his long strides already pulling him away from me, his focus entirely locked on her.

On Violet.

On the woman who mattered.

I stood there.

Frozen.

The keys pressed into my hand like a cruel joke.

He had left me.

Here.

In the garage.

Like I was nothing.

Like I had always been nothing.

My fingers tightened slowly around the metal.

So tightly that it hurt.

I clenched my jaw.

Then—

Without thinking—

I moved.

I followed.

Fast.

Each step sent a dull ache through my body, but I ignored it, pushing forward, keeping pace from a distance as I trailed behind him through the hospital corridors.

He didn't look back.

Not once.

Not even a flicker of awareness that I was there.

Every step he took screamed urgency.

Purpose. Devotion.

Everything he had never given me.

Everything he gave her.

I watched him move.

Watched how quickly he responded to her.

How instinctively.

And something inside me twisted painfully.

I wondered—

Bitterly.

Had he moved like this when I was missing?

When I was locked in that concrete room at Matteo's estate, holding a gun to my own father's head while praying—begging—that someone would come for me?

That he would come?

I doubted it.

I knew it.

Because I was the one he discarded.

The unwanted wife. The inconvenient truth.

The mistake.

And Violet—

Violet was everything.

Yet still—

I kept following.

Why did I keep following?

I didn't have a clear answer.

Maybe because he had left me standing there like discarded trash.

Or maybe—

Because some stupid, stubborn part of me still believed I deserved to be seen.

To be acknowledged. To matter.

Even if only for a moment.

Even if only as someone following behind him like a shadow he couldn't shake.

Even if it hurt.

Especially if it hurt.

Because pain meant I was still here.

Still fighting.

Still refusing to disappear quietly into the life he had already decided for me.

I watched him slip into the private ward.

I followed, stopping just outside the door, careful not to be seen—half-hidden by the frame, pressed against the wall, letting the cold seep into me as if it could keep me steady.

My heart hammered so violently it felt like it might give me away.

The corridor smelled of antiseptic and fresh lilies.

I pressed my palm flat against the cool wall, forcing air into my lungs.

Then I looked in.

Vincenzo didn't hesitate.

The moment he stepped into the room, everything about him changed.

He moved straight to her bedside, like the world outside didn't exist.

"Violet..."

His voice softened instantly.

Not just softer—lower.

Urgent.

Stripped of every layer of ice he usually wore, every trace of that cold, controlled distance he showed everyone else.

He reached out, placing the back of his hand against her forehead.

The gesture was instinctive and intimate.

"She's burning up," he said sharply, turning his head toward the room.

"Why the hell aren't the doctors here yet?"

His tone snapped back just enough to carry authority.

The young man shifted nervously at the foot of the bed, wringing his hands slightly as if unsure where to stand in a moment like this.

“They just left, sir,” he stammered. “They said they’d be back with more fluids—”

But Vincenzo wasn’t listening anymore.

Because Violet moved.

Her eyes fluttered open—slowly, weakly.

Her lashes trembled, her gaze unfocused for a moment as if it took effort just to hold them open.

She looked fragile.

Her skin had a waxy pallor under the harsh hospital lighting, lips pale, almost colorless.

“Vin...” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“You came...”

The words broke something in the room.

In me.

“Of course I came.”

Vincenzo dropped to one knee beside her bed, bringing himself level with her like gravity no longer mattered.

His voice deepened—thick, raw, stripped of everything except urgency and something dangerously close to emotion.

“I’ll always come for you.”

Always.

The word echoed in my head.

Violet’s trembling hand lifted slightly.

Vincenzo caught it immediately.

Without hesitation.

He cradled her hand between both of his, careful—almost reverent—as if she were made of something delicate enough to shatter at the slightest pressure.

“It’s...” she began, her voice wavering, “already a miracle I’ve lived this long...”

A cough tore through her.

Wet. Violent.

When she pulled her hand back slightly, there were dark flecks of blood at the corner of her lips.

She looked like she was slipping away in front of him.

He didn’t look away.

Vincenzo grabbed a handkerchief from his pocket—crisp white linen, untouched—and leaned in to gently wipe the blood from her lips.

His movements were careful and tender.

The kind of touch I had never received from him.

“God, Violet...” His voice broke slightly, just at the edges.

“I wish so badly that you could live longer... it pains me to see what this congestive heart failure is doing to you.”

The words were quiet.

But they carried weight.

Violet shook her head faintly, a small, pained movement that seemed to take all the strength she had left.

“No... no, Vin...” she whispered, her voice trembling.

“If it truly hurt you that I could die from my heart failure, you would have given me Elena’s heart... so I could live.”

Another cough.

More blood.

Her body trembled slightly as pain rippled through her, but she kept her eyes on him—like he was the only thing anchoring her to the world.

“I don’t want to die, Vin...”

The words came out broken.

Desperate.

Vincenzo stiffened slightly at that.

His hand tightened just a fraction around hers.

“You promised me,” Violet continued, her voice weakening but still pressing forward, refusing to let the moment slip away.

“You promised... you’d do anything... anything to make me happy... to keep me alive.”

A pause.

Her gaze sharpened just slightly, tears gathering in her eyes.

“Yes... you actually took her to the lab to have her heart removed for me... but at the last minute, you changed your mind... just as the doctor was about to do it.”

The accusation was soft.

But it landed.

“Do you...” Her voice shook, cracking at the edges. “Do you hate me now, Vin? Do you love her instead?”

For a moment, the room seemed to hold its breath.

Vincenzo swallowed hard.

I saw it.

That small movement in his throat. The tightening in his jaw.

The conflict.

But only for a moment.

Then—

“Elena is my wife,” he said softly, voice steady, eyes distant.

“She’s the kind of woman who makes you believe in goodness again... patient, gentle, endlessly kind. When she smiles, it feels like the world is lighter.”

My breath caught slightly.

“I hated her at first—because of what her father did to me.”

“But I don’t hate her anymore.”

A beat.

“I’ve watched her. Studied her when she thought no one was looking.”

My stomach tightened.

“She has a beautiful heart.”

The words were calm.

Certain.

“And how could I kill a woman like that?”

He shook his head slightly, almost as if the thought itself was unbearable.

“I can’t let her give you her heart, Violet. I won’t.”

The finality in his voice was absolute.

Violet’s face crumpled instantly.

The strength that had been holding her together—however fragile—collapsed.

Tears slipped down her temples, disappearing into the pillow beneath her.

Her breath hitched unevenly.

“So... she means more to you than I do now?” she whispered.

Her voice rose slightly, thin and shaking.

“After... everything... you love her... now?”

Her fingers tightened weakly around his.

“She charmed you...”

A sob broke through. “She stole my wedding...”

Her voice cracked harder now, unraveling.

“And now she’s stolen your heart too...”

The accusation hung in the air.

Vincenzo exhaled slowly.

His thumb brushed gently over her knuckles, a small, absent motion that felt more like habit than comfort.

“I didn’t give her a chance to steal my heart. I... may have given it willingly to her. What I feel for Elena... it’s close to love, though I don’t know how to love properly—or how to show it.”

“With you, Violet... I’ve been trying. I’ve been trying to show it all these years.”

His voice carried a quiet weight, the kind that made the room feel smaller, as if the air itself had shifted around his words.

“Die peacefully, Violet,” he said, voice steady, unyielding.

“I’ll see to it that your burial is the grandest this city has ever known.”

Violet shivered.

“You will never be forgotten.”

The words lingered.

Permanent.

For a moment, there was nothing.

Then—

Violet sobbed.

The sound came out harsh, broken, jagged—like something tearing from deep inside her.

Her entire body shook with it, her grip on his hand tightening weakly, fingers trembling against his.

“Just... leave me,” she choked out between sobs.

Her voice cracked, fraying at the edges.

“Let me be. You’ve made it clear I don’t matter anymore. Just go.”

“No.”

The response was immediate.

Vincenzo shook his head, just once.

Small.

But decisive.

“Let me stay with you a little longer—”

“Leave!”

Her voice shot up suddenly—raw, sharp, full of something deeper than pain.

Anger.

“Just... leave!”

The words echoed faintly in the room, heavy with emotion.

“You’ve already chosen her!” she cried, her chest rising and falling unevenly.

“Go!”

Vincenzo exhaled slowly.

Then nodded.

Once.

“Call me if you need me,” he murmured.

He released her hand and rose to his feet.

But before he could take a step—

Violet’s hand shot out.

Weak. Trembling.

But desperate enough to catch the fabric of his sleeve.

“Are you really going to leave me?” she whispered.

Her voice had softened again.

Fragile.

“You know I didn’t mean it...”

Her fingers tightened slightly against his sleeve.

“The doctors... they say I don’t have much time. Please... stay with me until my very last breath.”

Vincenzo paused.

Looked down at her. Not immediately responding.

For a moment, the world seemed to hold still again.

Then—

“I left my wife standing alone in the garage just to come to you,” he said quietly.

“I don’t even know if she can drive... or if she even remembers the way home.”

His gaze stayed on Violet, but something had shifted.

“I have to make sure she’s safe. Take care of yourself, Violet.”

The sentence landed differently this time.

Less like devotion. More like... duty.

“I’ll come back later... if I have time.”

And then—

He turned.

And walked away.

Toward me.

My body reacted before my mind could catch up.

I ducked behind the heavy privacy curtain just outside the ward, pressing myself into the narrow space between fabric and wall.

My heart slammed violently against my ribs, each beat louder than the last, threatening to give me away.

Footsteps approached.

Steady. Unhurried.

But still—

Purposeful.

I held my breath.

Through the narrow gap in the curtain, I watched him pass.

Shoulders tense.

Jaw locked. Eyes forward.

Focused entirely on the path ahead.

He didn't glance sideways.

Just kept walking.

As if the room behind him—and the woman inside it—had already been placed exactly where she belonged.

Behind him.

I stayed frozen until his footsteps faded down the corridor.

Only then did I slowly peek back into the room.

What I saw made my stomach twist violently.

Violet was no longer lying down.

She was sitting upright.

Her posture was rigid—too rigid for someone who had just been on the verge of death.

Color had returned to her cheeks.

A faint flush.

Her breathing was steady.

No tremors. No coughing. No weakness.

Her fists clenched the bedsheets so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

And her eyes—

Those same eyes that had been glassy, fragile, and tear-filled—were now sharp.

Cold.

Burning with something entirely different.

“Paolo,” she snapped.

Her voice was clear, strong, and commanding.

“Bring me that table water.”

The young man hesitated for only a second before scrambling to obey, rushing to hand her the glass.

Violet snatched it from him and drank deeply—quick, angry gulps, like she was trying to swallow down something far more dangerous than thirst.

Rage.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, breathing harder now, her earlier vulnerability completely gone.

“I swear I’ll kill that bitch Elena myself,” she hissed under her breath.

The words were sharp.

Personal. Calculated.

Paolo shifted uncomfortably, glancing toward the door before speaking cautiously.

“Aren’t you worried Vincenzo will question the heart failure?” he asked.

“Four weeks ago, we told him you had only hours left—and that Elena’s heart was the only one that could save you. That’s why he tried to take it. Now... you’ve lived these four weeks, and we’ve warned him again that your time is running out.”

He hesitated.

“If you keep surviving... won’t he question it?”

My blood ran cold.

Violet didn’t look the least bit afraid.

She exhaled slowly.

Then leaned back slightly, her lips curling into something that wasn’t a smile.

It was crueler.

“Let him question it,” she said. ““He’ll never discover I don’t have a single heart problem—every doctor in Lombardy works for my family. And Vincenzo trusts them completely.”

My fingers tightened around my phone.

Because now—

I understood.

Violet wasn’t sick. She had never been dying.

She had faked a fatal illness, using guilt to bend Vincenzo to her will.

Just like that—everything clicked into place.

My chest tightened.

Nausea rose in my throat.

I pulled my phone out with shaking hands, quickly swiping to the camera, pressing record before I could second-guess myself.

I angled it carefully through the gap in the curtain.

I needed proof. Something undeniable.

But before I could capture more than a few seconds of her furious face—

A hand clamped down on my shoulder.

Hard.

I jolted violently, nearly dropping my phone as a sharp breath tore from my throat.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 24[3,521 words]

Chapter 24

ELENA

Renzo.

“What the hell!” I hissed, spinning on my heel.

My heart was still racing from the shock of his grip, adrenaline flooding my system as I faced him.

“You scared me!”

Renzo didn’t react to my outburst.

His gaze flicked briefly past me toward the ward door, sharp and alert.

Down the corridor, I caught sight of two doctors approaching—clipboards in hand, voices lowered in quiet professional conversation.

They were getting closer.

“You would’ve been caught spying,” Renzo murmured, his tone low but firm.

He stepped in, gripping my arm—not roughly, but with enough insistence to guide me.

“Come on.”

Before I could argue, he pulled me away from the curtain, steering me quickly around the corner and out of sight.

The moment we stopped, I yanked my arm free.

“Don’t grab me like that,” I muttered, though I kept my voice down.

My pulse was still erratic, nerves stretched tight from everything I’d just seen.

Renzo didn’t argue.

He simply leaned back against the wall, arms loosely crossed, eyes scanning the corridor for any sign of movement.

Then I spoke.

“Violet doesn’t have heart disease.”

The words came out faster than I expected.

“I just heard her. She was sitting up—no coughing, no weakness. Nothing. She’s been faking it this whole time. Playing the pity card to keep Vincenzo wrapped around her finger.”

Renzo’s expression didn’t shift dramatically, but there was a subtle tightening around his eyes—like something in what I said confirmed a suspicion he’d already been entertaining.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” he said quietly.

His tone was measured.

“She lies. A lot.”

A beat.

“But Vincenzo...” His jaw flexed slightly. “He doesn’t want to see it.”

My brows drew together.

“Why? Why is he so blind when it comes to her?”

Renzo didn’t answer immediately.

Instead, he glanced down at his watch—quick, almost automatic.

But I caught it.

That look.

A flicker of something that felt... off.

“I wouldn’t be here right now if I had the luxury of explaining everything,” he said.

There was tension in his voice now.

He met my eyes again.

“Vincenzo sent me here to sit with Violet while he handles... other things.”

I folded my arms, watching him carefully. “Then explain quickly.”

A pause.

Renzo exhaled, slow.

“I’ll tell you the full story later,” he said, quieter now. “About how she pulled him out of that ambush when he was sixteen. Took a bullet meant for him. Nearly bled out in his arms.”

My breath caught slightly.

That explained a lot.

“But not here,” he added. “Not now.”

I hesitated, then gave a small nod.

“Okay.”

Silence stretched between us for a moment.

Then—

Renzo studied my face.

“You’re okay, right?”

The question was simple.

But it landed heavier than anything else.

I let out a slow breath.

“No,” I admitted honestly. “But I will be.”

Renzo gave a small, crooked smile.

“You’re tougher than any of us deserve, Elena.”

The words lingered.

Unexpected.

And somehow... grounding.

He pushed off the wall, already shifting back into motion.

“I need to get back,” he said. “Vincenzo doesn’t like leaving things unattended.”

Of course he didn’t.

I nodded.

“Go.”

Renzo gave me one last long look—concern etched into the fine lines around his eyes, something almost protective lingering there.

For a moment, he didn’t move. Just watched me, like he was measuring whether I was about to fall apart or hold myself together.

Then his expression softened.

A brief smile tugged at the corner of his mouth—small, controlled, almost reassuring.

“I know how much it torments you that Vincenzo didn’t believe you... that you weren’t touched during those four weeks,” he said softly.

He drew in a faint breath. “But I believe you. I believe you’re carrying his child.”

The words almost brought tears to my eyes—someone actually believed my story.

My voice shook as I tried to speak.

“Th... thank you,” I whispered.

He gave a slight nod.

Then he turned and disappeared back toward Violet’s ward, his footsteps fading into the polished silence of the corridor.

I remained still, holding onto his words as if they could steady me.

For a few seconds, I just stood there, staring at nothing.

Then—

My phone vibrated sharply against my palm.

Once.

Then again.

Vincenzo.

My stomach tightened.

I answered before the second ring finished.

“Elena, where are you?”

His voice came through immediately.

The question hit me like a slap.

As if I had wandered off on purpose.

“Why do you care?” I shot back, sharper than I intended.

My voice carried more bite than I expected—but I didn’t soften it.

“You went to attend to your mistress and left me to find my way home. I’m probably lost.”

I started moving.

The parking garage lay two levels down.

I followed the signs, my steps uneven, heels clicking sharply against polished concrete as I descended the ramp.

The sound echoed faintly around me.

Cars passed in and out of the garage.

“Elena,” Vincenzo’s voice cut back through the phone, tighter now. “Send me your live location. I’ll come pick you up.”

I reached the level where he'd left me.

His matte-black SUV still sat in the reserved executive bay—long, low, and imposing, like it owned the space around it.

The key fob felt heavier in my hand than it should have.

I unlocked the car with a soft chirp, the sound echoing faintly in the empty space.

Sliding behind the wheel, I adjusted the seat quickly, then started the engine.

It roared to life beneath me—deep, powerful, almost alive.

A strange comfort.

I exhaled slowly, gripping the steering wheel with both hands as the engine settled into a steady growl.

Then I reversed.

The tires whispered softly over concrete as I eased the car out of the bay.

"I'm driving," I said into the phone, my voice steady now, clipped. "I don't need your help."

"Elena..." Frustration crept into his tone. "Just send your live location already."

"No."

I merged into the flow of exiting traffic, following the green arrows toward the main exit.

"I'll find my way home," I added. "Go attend to your mistress."

A beat of silence.

Then—

"I already left her side, okay?"

The words came faster this time.

Defensive.

But I didn't let it soften anything.

"Doesn't change the fact that you left me stranded in the garage like I was nothing."

My grip tightened around the steering wheel.

“I know I mean nothing to you, Vincenzo. But at least treat me like a person.”

The words hung between us.

I didn’t wait for a response.

Instead, I merged onto the road, turning in the opposite direction from the estate.

Not toward home. Not toward him.

The coastal road stretched ahead of me—wide, open, endless.

So I took it.

No plan. No destination.

Just movement.

After four weeks trapped within concrete walls, and barely four days in his home, I realized I needed this: driving through the city, just taking it all in with my eyes.

The windows were down.

Warm wind rushed into the car, whipping through my hair, tugging at my clothes.

Palm trees lined the road in dark silhouettes against the fading sky, their leaves swaying in the evening breeze.

The sky burned in soft oranges and purples as the sun dipped lower.

I drove.

Hands steady.

Letting the rhythm of the engine, the hum of the tires, and the movement of the road ground me.

Vincenzo exhaled—long and weary—like he was already exhausted with the conversation.

“Fine,” he said finally. “Such an act will not be repeated.”

A pause.

“Now tell me where you are... my men are having a hard time locating you.”

Of course.

His men were already trying to track the SUV.

I almost laughed.

A short, quiet sound that held no real humor.

“It’ll happen again. And again. A thousand times. Violet controls you, and you’ll obey her every whim. Stop pretending you can keep promises. You can’t. It’s revolting.”

The words slipped out of me before I could stop them—quiet, bitter, edged with everything I was trying not to feel.

A pause.

Then—

“Elena,” he said, softer now, something new threading through his voice.

“Not knowing where you are... it’s tearing me apart. I can’t lie to you anymore. You deserve the truth.”

He paused.

That made me glance at the phone.

At the small screen.

At the man who always spoke in absolutes—but never like this.

“Speak.”

I frowned slightly, easing my foot off the accelerator as the SUV rolled smoothly along the curved seaside boulevard.

The engine purred beneath me, steady and controlled, while the road stretched ahead in a long, winding line beside the ocean.

“Scrolling through Violet’s Instagram profile in that VIP lounge... that was on purpose. I only wanted you to hate me more. To show you that nothing positive can ever come from our marriage, to keep the distance between us.”

My grip tightened slightly on the steering wheel.

“It’s one of the many ways I push you away,” he added.

“But the truth is... it wasn’t her face I was seeing while scrolling through her feed. It was yours. Hard to believe, I know—but it’s the truth.”

The ache in my chest didn’t disappear.

It didn’t soften.

It just... changed.

Sharper.

More complicated.

My fingers loosened slightly on the steering wheel, like my body didn’t know whether to hold on tighter or let go completely.

“You want me to hate you?” I asked quietly, my voice barely rising above the wind rushing through the open windows.

“Didn’t you... already?”

A bitter, humorless half-laugh followed.

“I’ve hurt you over and over, Elena. There’s no forgiveness for that.”

His tone was flat now.

Certain.

Self-condemning.

“A man like me deserves nothing but hatred,” he whispered, breaking.

“I know you’ve always thought of escaping... I know you will, someday, no matter my power, no matter what I pray for. And I know you’ll come back for revenge.”

“But even an hour without knowing where you are... it’s already unbearable. I can’t imagine how I’ll feel when you finally leave me for good.”

His voice tightened just a fraction.

The words settled heavily between us.

My brows furrowed slightly.

“Of course I will leave. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow... but one day, I will walk away for good.”

When he spoke again, his voice had changed.

“Elena...”

A quiet exhale that sounded like it cost him something.

I slowed the car further, letting the road guide me.

“I know it’s foolish to ask, but... to be certain of my fate—you’ll never forgive me, will you?” he asked.

“No one who’s suffered as much at your hands could ever forgive you,” I said sharply.

A hollow sound escaped him.

For a long moment, he said nothing, as if the weight of my words had stolen the breath from his lungs.

“Can you tell me where you are?”

I didn’t answer immediately.

My eyes shifted forward.

The road curved again, opening into a broader stretch where a sign came into view:

Palm Oasis Beach

White letters against a deep navy background.

The ocean stretched beyond it—wide, restless, alive.

Golden sand spread out toward the water, dotted with umbrellas still open despite the fading light.

Something in my chest loosened slightly.

I pulled into the public parking lot, tires crunching softly over gravel as I slowed to a stop beneath a row of swaying palm trees.

The SUV came to rest.

The engine died with a final, low hum.

I leaned back slightly in the seat.

Then spoke into the phone.

“I’m at Palm Oasis Beach.”

A pause.

Then—

“Stay there,” he said immediately. “I’m coming to get you.”

And then—

He hung up.

I stared at the phone for a second longer before lowering it slowly into my lap.

Silence settled around me.

I took a breath.

Then stepped out of the car.

Warm sand shifted beneath me immediately, grounding me in a way I hadn’t realized I needed.

The air here was different.

Saltier. Softer.

It carried the scent of the ocean, sunscreen, charcoal grills, and something I hadn’t felt in weeks—

Freedom.

Distant laughter drifted on the breeze.

Bright. Careless.

Unburdened.

A young couple ran hand-in-hand toward the shoreline, their feet kicking up sand as they laughed, shrieking as waves chased them.

Nearby, a group of teenagers played an impromptu volleyball game near the waterline, their voices rising and falling as they dove, hit, and shouted, sand flying in golden arcs each time the ball landed.

For a moment—Just a moment—I stood there.

Watching. Breathing.

Further down the shoreline, a father lifted his small daughter onto his shoulders, her delighted squeals rising above the steady crash of the waves.

She stretched her arms wide like wings, laughing as he spun her in slow, careful circles.

Her mother stood beside them, phone raised, capturing the moment while laughing so hard she had to lean against her husband's back for support.

It was effortless.

The kind of happiness that didn't demand anything in return.

Normal.

Untouched by blood and lies.

I leaned back against the warm hood of the SUV, folding my arms across my chest as I watched them.

The metal beneath my palms held the heat of the day, still warm even as the sun began its descent, painting everything in gold and soft orange.

For a moment, I let myself breathe.

Just exist outside the weight of everything pressing down on me.

A low engine rumbled nearby.

A sleek silver Porsche rolled into the space directly beside mine, cutting through the softer sounds of the beach with quiet authority.

It slowed, gliding into place like it owned the ground it touched.

The driver's door opened.

And a man stepped out.

He was young—early twenties, maybe mid—lean, athletic, the kind of body that spoke of discipline without effort.

A white long-sleeve compression shirt clung to his frame, outlining his build, while black board shorts sat comfortably on his hips.

A sandboard rested casually under one arm like it weighed nothing at all.

The sun caught him just right.

He looked like he belonged here.

Then his eyes found mine.

He smiled warmly.

And he took a single step closer, like there was no hesitation in approaching me.

“Hi, beautiful.”

The words were simple, but they landed softly—without pressure, without expectation.

I blinked once, slightly caught off guard, before offering a small smile of my own. “Hey.”

“Dante.” He extended his free hand, his voice smooth but grounded.

The sunlight deepened the color of his eyes—warm, rich, like aged whiskey catching the light.

I took his hand.

His grip was firm—but careful.

Not overpowering. Just... steady.

“Elena.”

He repeated my name under his breath, almost like he was testing how it felt.

Then he shook his head slightly, a faint look of appreciation settling on his face.

“What a beautiful name.”

Something in my chest eased at that—unexpected, but welcome.

He shifted the sandboard to rest more comfortably against his side, the movement revealing the strength in his arms beneath the thin fabric.

There was no arrogance in how he carried himself—only quiet confidence.

“Can you skate?” he asked. “Or sandboard?”

A small laugh slipped from me before I could stop it—light, unguarded, real. “No. Not at all. Though I’d love to learn someday.”

His grin widened instantly, boyish and inviting.

“How about today?”

I hesitated, glancing down at myself.

The simple cotton dress.

I wasn’t exactly... prepared for something like that.

“I’d love to,” I said honestly, “but as you can see, I’m not dressed for it. Maybe another time?”

He studied me for a moment—not judging, just observing—then tilted his head, that same easy smile still in place.

“Well, in that case...” His tone turned playful, but there was something earnest underneath it. “I have to ask for your number.”

My brows lifted slightly.

“So we can schedule that ‘another time.’”

A beat passed.

Not uncomfortable.

Just... thoughtful.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone.

“Why don’t you enter your number here?” I said, unlocking the screen and opening a new contact. “And I’ll call you.”

His smile shifted—something softer flickering across his face as he took the phone from me.

Dante lowered his gaze to my phone, his fingers moving with easy confidence as he typed in his number.

He didn't rush it.

Each tap felt deliberate, like he wanted it to count.

When he finished, he didn't just save the contact—he named it “Dante” and added a small wave emoji beside it.

Playful. Unapologetic.

A quiet signature of who he was.

Then, without breaking eye contact, he pressed the call button.

A second later, his own phone buzzed in his pocket.

He silenced it immediately, a faint, satisfied smile tugging at the corner of his lips, as though the moment had gone exactly as he intended.

He handed my phone back.

Our fingers brushed.

It wasn't accidental.

The touch lingered—just a fraction longer than necessary—warm, steady, and oddly grounding.

There was no pressure in it, no demand.

Just... intention. And somehow, it didn't feel like intrusion.

It felt normal.

Like something from another life entirely.

“I'll call you, Elena,” he said, his voice low and easy.

I nodded, a genuine smile breaking through my lips before I could second-guess it.

It felt strange. Real. Unfamiliar in a way that made my chest tighten.

“Okay.”

For a moment, neither of us moved.

Dante didn't immediately step back.

He just stood there, watching me—his gaze warm, open, curious.

Not in a way that stripped me bare, but in a way that seemed to... study me gently.

Like he was trying to memorize something he knew he might not get back.

Then—

Tires screamed.

The sound ripped through the beach atmosphere like a blade.

A black SUV barreled into the parking lot at dangerous speed, gravel spraying out in a violent arc as it fishtailed slightly before slamming to a halt beside us.

The sudden intrusion shattered the calm in an instant.

Heads turned.

Voices stilled.

Dust lingered in the air like a warning.

The driver's door flew open.

And Vincenzo stepped out.

Everything about him radiated tension—coiled, controlled, but barely contained.

His shoulders were rigid, his jaw clenched so tightly a muscle ticked beneath his skin.

His eyes moved fast—sharp, scanning—locking onto Dante... then me... then the sandboard tucked under Dante's arm.

His expression darkened instantly.

He crossed the distance in four long strides.

No hesitation.

No warning.

Before I could even process what was happening, his arm banded around my waist—firm, possessive—and pulled me sharply against his side.

My breath caught at the sudden force, my body reacting before my mind could catch up.

His other hand came up, cupping the back of my neck with a grip that was both grounding and claiming.

Then he leaned down.

And kissed me.

Soft. Brief.

Unmistakably possessive.

A statement.

When he pulled back, his gaze didn't linger on me.

It snapped to Dante.

Cold. Dangerous.

"Who is this?" he asked, his voice deceptively gentle as his thumb brushed lightly along my jaw—almost absentmindedly, but not quite.

Dante's easy composure flickered.

Not gone—but shaken.

His eyes moved between us, quickly processing the situation.

There was a flash of surprise. Then something sharper—calculation.

"Your boyfriend?" he asked, careful now.

Vincenzo's arm tightened around my waist in immediate response.

"She's my wife."

The words landed heavy.

"Oh." Dante lifted both hands slowly, palms open in a gesture of surrender, taking a small step back. "I had no idea she was married. No ring, so... my apologies."

“It’s okay, Dante,” I said quickly, before things could escalate further.

A mistake.

Vincenzo’s gaze flicked to me instantly.

“No,” he said.

The word was soft.

But it carried weight. Steel wrapped in velvet.

“It’s not okay.”

Dante’s posture shifted slightly, the sandboard lowering just a bit as the situation sank in.

Vincenzo didn’t look at him anymore.

His attention dropped to my hand.

Slowly, deliberately, he lifted my left hand, turning it over as if seeing it for the first time.

His thumb traced over my bare ring finger.

Empty. Unmarked.

Something subtle shifted in his expression—recognition. And beneath that... something more complicated.

“You’re not wearing your ring, Elena,” he said quietly.

Not angry. Not loud.

But the undercurrent in his voice was unmistakable.

“You’ll give men the wrong impression.”

His gaze stayed on my hand a moment longer.

Then—

He lifted it.

And pressed a kiss to the exact spot where a ring should have been.

Soft. Reverent.

Lingering just long enough to make my breath catch.

I froze.

Completely.

Too stunned to pull away.

Too aware of everything—the warmth of his lips, the weight of his presence, the silent message behind the gesture.

Behind us, Dante shifted.

Uncomfortable now.

His earlier confidence dimmed slightly as he adjusted the sandboard against his leg, suddenly looking less like the carefree stranger from moments ago and more like someone trying to decide whether to stay or walk away.

Vincenzo barely acknowledged Dante—just a brief, dismissive glance that stripped the younger man of any significance—before his attention returned to me, as if the world had already narrowed down to exactly one thing that mattered.

Me.

His hand slid from my jaw to my chin, his fingers light, almost careful, as he tilted my face up toward his.

There was no rush in him now.

Just a slow, deliberate focus that made my pulse stutter.

Then he kissed me again.

This time, it was different.

Deeper. Slower.

Intentional.

His lips moved against mine with a restrained hunger, as though he was holding something back—but only just.

A low sound rumbled in his throat, barely audible, as he tasted me like he needed to remind himself I was real, that I was here.

My body reacted before my thoughts could catch up.

My hands rose instinctively, slipping around his neck, fingers threading into the dark hair at the nape of his neck.

My eyes drifted closed, my breath catching as the outside world began to blur—fade—until it didn't exist at all.

For one suspended moment—

There was no beach.

No Dante. No hospital. No DNA test waiting in the wings.

Just him.

And me.

And something dangerously close to feeling wanted.

When he finally pulled back, the movement was slow and reluctant.

His forehead rested against mine for a brief second, our breaths mingling in the small space between us.

Then—

Just as suddenly as he had appeared—

Dante was gone.

Vincenzo released my waist, but his hand didn't let go of mine.

His fingers stayed wrapped around mine—firm, grounding, possessive in a quieter way now.

“Don't tell me you're jealous,” I asked, frowning slightly as I looked up at him.

The question slipped out before I could second-guess it.

“You're only ever jealous of someone you care about... someone you love.”

My voice softened, but the words didn't.

“And you clearly don't love me. So... what was all of that?”

He didn't answer immediately.

His gaze dropped to our joined hands.

His thumb began tracing slow, absentminded circles over my knuckles—steady, almost soothing, but with an undercurrent of control that never left him.

When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet.

“He, and every other man alive, should know... you belong to me.”

My breath hitched slightly at the simplicity of it.

His thumb continued its slow path across my skin.

“Call it jealousy,” he added. “Call it possessiveness. I don't care.”

He lifted his gaze to meet mine, something darker settling behind his eyes.

“You're my wife. That's final.”

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 25[3,111 words]

Chapter 25

ELENA

The words hung there—heavy, unyielding.

Not romantic.

Possession. Ownership.

Then his attention shifted.

His eyes scanned the beach slowly—taking in everything in one sweep.

The golden sand. The laughing families. The waves rolling in like a steady rhythm of applause from the sea itself.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

It wasn’t a harsh question.

But it was firm.

“I saw the sign while I was driving,” I replied, giving a small shrug. “Decided to stop.”

My fingers tightened slightly around his.

“I needed to clear my head.”

His eyes flicked to me again.

“But you’re not dressed for the beach.”

I looked down at myself.

The simple cotton dress. Still faintly wrinkled.

“Yes, I’m not.” I said quietly.

“Do you know what it’s like to be locked in a single room for four weeks? Losing track of day and night... I almost forgot what it felt like to move freely.”

“I needed this—driving through the city, letting my eyes take it all in,” I said, my voice quieter now.

The words lingered between us.

Something shifted in his expression.

“Would you... take a walk with me?” I asked, glancing up at him. “Just a little while, and then we can go home.”

His gaze held mine for a second longer than necessary.

Then he checked his watch.

A quick glance. Almost instinctive.

“I have a meeting with the Mexican cartel in ten minutes.”

The words were casual.

But the weight behind them wasn't.

My stomach dipped slightly.

Of course he did.

Of course there was always something else.

“I should let you go then,” I said.

I started to step away slightly—but his hand tightened just enough to stop me.

He tilted his head toward the shoreline.

“Come.”

Just one word. A quiet command.

I hesitated for half a second—

Then a small, unexpected smile tugged at my lips.

Tentative. Surprised.

But real.

And I followed him.

We walked side by side along the hard-packed sand near the water's edge, close enough that the waves occasionally rushed over our feet—cool, fleeting, grounding.

The ocean pulled at the shoreline in steady breaths, the sound blending with the noise of life all around us.

Children shrieked as they chased each other through shallow water, armed with bright plastic water guns.

The air carried everything at once—salt, smoke, laughter, life.

At first, Vincenzo stayed silent.

His free hand slid into his pocket, his posture still alert, still controlled, his gaze sweeping the surroundings like he was evaluating risks even in a place like this.

But slowly...

Subtly...

His shoulders loosened just a fraction.

His steps matched mine more naturally.

And for the first time, his focus wasn't entirely on control.

He watched what I watched.

The ocean itself—

The way the late sun caught the surface, turning it into something molten.

Something almost... beautiful.

And for a few quiet moments—

We walked like this.

I caught myself watching Dante.

He had moved farther down the shoreline, his shirt discarded somewhere in the sand, his board shorts clinging to powerful thighs as he glided across the beach with effortless control.

Every motion was smooth—balanced—like the sand beneath him wasn't resistance but something he had learned to dance with.

He carved a wide arc, turned, then spun—board flipping beneath his feet in a clean, practiced rhythm that drew the eye whether you wanted it or not.

"You're staring at him way too much." Vincenzo murmured beside me.

His voice was low.

I blinked and tore my gaze away.

"Just admiring the way he sandboards," I said evenly. "Nothing more."

"Quit staring at him."

It wasn't said harshly.

Before I could respond, his hand slipped from mine and circled my waist, pulling me into him so suddenly I lost my balance and collided against his chest.

His grip tightened.

He inhaled slowly, as if committing my scent to memory, before his lips brushed against my neck, warm and deliberate.

A soft sound escaped me before I could stop it, the world around us—the beach, the people—fading into nothing.

When I lifted my gaze, I found him already watching me.

There was hunger there.

Dark. Controlled. Barely restrained.

“You'll keep your eyes on one man,” he said softly.

“Me.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks under the weight of his gaze.

Then, just as suddenly, he released me.

But not entirely.

His fingers found mine again—sliding between them slowly, deliberately—until our palms pressed together, his grip firm, possessive.

I lowered my gaze.

Our hands looked... strange together.

His was larger.

Scarred.

Weathered by something far rougher than the life I knew.

Mine was smaller.

Still bearing faint bruises—remnants of everything I'd endured over the past weeks.

Yet here they were.

Linked.

Like something that wasn't supposed to exist.

It felt surreal.

We continued walking until the beach shifted beneath our feet—sand giving way to rougher terrain, where jagged rocks jutted out and waves struck harder, hissing as they crashed and retreated against stone.

The sound was sharper here.

More forceful. More relentless.

We turned back toward the main stretch.

Dante was still carving through the sand with that same effortless control.

I told myself not to look.

I failed.

Again.

Vincenzo's grip tightened—just slightly.

Not enough to hurt.

Just enough to remind me he noticed.

We walked in silence after that.

The kind that wasn't empty—but wasn't comfortable either.

Just... present.

When we reached the cars, he slowed, glancing once at his watch.

No change in expression. No outward reaction.

"You're late for the meeting," I said quietly.

"Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it."

Like it was nothing.

Like time bent for him.

He stepped closer to the car and took the keys from my hand—his fingers brushing mine again, briefly, intentionally. Then he slid into the driver’s seat without another word.

I hesitated only a second before opening the passenger door and getting in beside him.

The door shut with a solid click.

The engine started.

And just like that—

The beach disappeared behind us.

The drive back began in silence.

At first, it was quiet in the way that felt expected.

Comfortable.

The kind that came from two people not knowing what to say yet.

Outside, the sky deepened into dusk.

I leaned my head back against the seat and stared out the window.

The hospital. The beach. Dante. Vincenzo’s hand in mine.

Everything replayed in fragments.

“So,” I said eventually, breaking the silence, “where do I get the samples for the next DNA test?”

His grip on the steering wheel remained steady.

“I left them on the desk in my study.”

No hesitation.

“Hair. Enough for multiple runs. Do as many tests as you want.”

There was no resistance in his voice.

Just... acceptance of the process.

“And if the child turns out to be yours...” I swallowed slightly, my fingers tightening in my lap. “Will you accept it, or... will you make me end it?”

A brief silence followed.

But he didn’t look at me.

Didn’t rush to answer.

I’ve never allowed myself to imagine what it would be like to have a child.”

His jaw tightened slightly.

“But if—by some miracle—the child you’re carrying is mine...”

His voice slowed.

“I’ll never ask you to end it. Never. And it’s not only about Vasquez not being your father... it’s because I could never do anything to hurt you again.

My breath caught.

“So yes, I’d accept it.”

He paused again—just for a second.

“I’d be there,” he said, voice steady. “From the moment it’s confirmed... all the way to the day you give birth. I’d walk with you into the delivery room, and I’d be the first to hold our child.”

I turned to look at him.

Just for a moment.

I could hardly believe he was the one who had said that.

He glanced at me then.

Only briefly.

“I’ll have to learn how to make things right,” he said softly.

“Because you won’t be the wife I married for revenge anymore... you’ll be the woman carrying my child.”

The words settled between us.

Heavy.

I exhaled slowly, the tension in my chest loosening just a fraction.

“That’s not... what I thought you’d say.”

He didn’t respond.

But his hand left the wheel for just a second.

And reached across the console.

He took my hand, and I let my fingers curl into his.

The city lights stretched out ahead of us, glowing and shifting as we drove deeper into the night.

Colors blurred past the window—gold, blue—like the world was moving faster than I was.

The car rolled to a stop in front of the sprawling estate.

The house loomed ahead—dark, guarded—its long windows reflecting the faint glow of the estate lights like watchful eyes.

Vincenzo didn’t turn off the engine.

He just sat there.

Hands locked around the steering wheel.

Jaw tight, as if he was holding something back.

Something he didn’t want to say to me.

I unbuckled slowly, the seatbelt clicking into place as I reached for the door handle.

The silence between us stretched, heavy and unresolved.

“Aren’t you coming in?” I asked, glancing at him.

“I’ve still got a meeting, and I’m running late,” he said, tone flat and final.

“Go inside. I’ll let you know when I return.”

I hesitated a second longer, searching his face for something—

But there was nothing.

So I stepped out.

The night air wrapped around me immediately.

The door shut behind me with a soft thud.

I stood there for a moment on the driveway, watching.

Watching him.

The engine roared to life again.

He reversed smoothly, the headlights sweeping across the driveway as the SUV turned and moved away from me.

Gravel shifted beneath the tires.

The estate lights flickered across the glossy surface of the vehicle as it picked up speed.

And then—

He was gone.

The taillights shrank into the distance.

Small.

Red.

And then nothing.

The silence he left behind felt heavier than his presence ever did.

“Elena...”

The voice came from behind me.

I stiffened slightly before turning.

Ciro stood a few meters away beneath one of the security lamps, the yellow light catching the strong lines of his face and casting long shadows across the ground.

His broad shoulders filled the space easily, his posture relaxed but alert.

Two of the guards were just stepping away in the background, disappearing around the side of the house like shadows dissolving into the night.

He waited until they were gone.

Then he approached.

Unhurried.

Hands in his pockets.

Jealousy flickered across his face.

“I spoke with Renzo,” he said, coming to a stop before me. “He told me you’re pregnant.”

My arms wrapped around my middle instinctively, as if I could shield the life inside me from everything—especially the truth of it.

“With Vincenzo’s child,” I said quickly, almost defensively. “But he won’t believe it.”

My voice shook slightly.

“We did the DNA test today. It came back negative.”

My throat tightened painfully.

“He thinks...” I swallowed, forcing the words out. “He thinks Matteo or one of his men violated me. That this is the result.”

A tremor ran through my voice now.

“But I swear to you, Ciro—I was never touched. Not like that.”

Ciro exhaled slowly through his nose, a sound that carried weight rather than relief.

He glanced briefly toward the empty driveway where Vincenzo had disappeared, then returned his gaze to me.

“I honestly wished you weren’t carrying his child. Vincenzo didn’t deserve it—not after everything he put you through... the pain, the agony he caused you.”

I blinked at him, caught off guard by what he said.

He met my gaze directly now.

“Do you intend to keep the child or terminate it?” he added, voice low. “If it’s really for Vincenzo, as you say, he wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of it.”

“And you might not even realize it—he could go as far as slipping abortion pills into your food.”

My chest tightened.

“No, he wouldn’t... He said he’d accept the child if it’s his.”

Ciro’s expression intensified, rage flashing in his eyes. I could see his fist clench so tightly I could almost hear the tension. “Believe Vincenzo at your own risk,” he growled.

My mind spun. “You think... if he finds out the baby is his, he would really... end it?”

“You don’t understand Vincenzo like I do. He would terminate it. He wants no child—neither from you, nor Violet, nor anyone. And certainly not from you, because you’re a constant reminder of the torment he’s been through.”

My chest caved as panic gripped me.

Vincenzo’s soft promises from the car now felt like a cruel contradiction to Ciro’s warning.

Had he been lying to me the whole time—uttering love while planning to end my child before it even had a chance?

A man like Vincenzo... he could definitely do it.

“There’s something else you need to know.”

Ciro said, cutting off my spiraling thoughts

My stomach tightened

“What?”

“Do you know that Ruslan Baranov has married your sister?”

For a moment—

The world stopped.

No sound. No air. No movement.

Just that name.

Ruslan Baranov.

My chest caved inward as if something had physically struck me, forcing the air from my lungs.

My heart pounded once—hard—then seemed to stall completely.

I stumbled back a step.

My heel caught against the edge of the stone path, and I steadied myself with a sharp inhale.

“Please tell me that’s not true,” I said, my voice barely holding together.

“Please... tell me this is some sick joke.”

The words came out faster now.

Strained. Disbelieving.

“I don’t joke about things like this, Elena.”

The certainty in his voice—

The finality—

Made my stomach twist violently.

“No...” I shook my head, as if I could physically push the words away.

“No. That can’t happen. It’s not possible.”

My sister.

My little sister—Elena Junior—the only soft, untouched thing left from the wreckage of our family.

I had hidden her carefully, buried deep in California—far from everything that marked my past like a stain.

I made sure no one could trace her back to me.

Not Ruslan. Not Vincenzo. Not his enemies.

I had made her believe I was untraceable, that I might already be dead.

Five years ago, I even wrote her a letter, confessing my darkest sins.

I told her everything—the blood on my hands, the sins I couldn't take back.

I confessed everything to her:

Ruslan Baranov.

My sins against him.

The woman I murdered—Amy Baranov, his sister. His weakness. His heart.

The woman he would burn the world for.

In that letter, I told her the truth.

That Ruslan would never forgive me.

That if he couldn't find me—

He would come for her.

And now—

He had.

The realization settled in my chest like ice.

“How?” My voice trembled. “How did he locate her?”

“And Ciro... how on earth did you know I had a sister?”

His gaze stayed fixed on mine, steady and unblinking.

“It's my job,” he said, voice calm but firm, “to know everything about anyone who joins this family.”

A beat.

“Background checks. Family trees. Hidden siblings. Every detail—every connection—ends up on Vincenzo's desk.”

My stomach twisted.

“He's been too buried in wars and betrayals to go through it all. The finer details get overlooked.”

The night air suddenly felt too thin.

Tears burned behind my eyes, threatening to spill.

“Ciro...” I whispered, breaking. “I... I need your help.”

The word came out desperate.

My hands trembled as I clutched my own arms tighter, as if I could physically hold myself together.

“I need her far away from Ruslan,” I said, my voice breaking.

“He’s a monster... he’ll ruin her. He’ll make her suffer for everything I did to his sister. She’s innocent—she doesn’t even know any of it.”

Ciro shook his head slowly.

“Ruslan Baranov isn’t just powerful,” he said. “He’s untouchable. His reach goes beyond anything El Chapo ever had—more ruthless than any hunted man alive. If your sister is his wife now... she belongs to him. He’d burn cities to the ground before letting her go.”

The words rang in my skull.

“I’m sorry, Elena. There’s no extraction team in this world that could pull her out.”

My knees weakened slightly.

The ground beneath me felt unstable—like everything I stood on was shifting.

No.

No.

No.

This couldn’t be happening.

Not because of me.

My vision blurred.

Ruslan would break her.

Body. Mind. Soul.

He wouldn't just take her—he would make her suffer. Slowly. Methodically. for everything I did to his sister.

Vincenzo was already doing the same to me.

Blood for blood.

Pain for pain.

And I—

I would give anything to stop it.

Anything.

"I'd go," I whispered, the thought slipping out before I could stop it.

Ciro's eyes narrowed slightly.

"I'd go to him myself."

My voice steadied just a little.

"I'd walk straight into his territory. Let him finish what he started."

Because if it meant saving her... if it meant she got to live—

I would give myself up to him without hesitation.

"I don't care what happens to me."

Ciro studied me for a long moment.

Then—

"Violet knows Ruslan's hunting you."

My blood ran cold.

"Violet?" I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Our latest intel says she's desperate to contact him,"

Ciro continued. "She's offering your location in exchange for whatever scraps he'll give her... or simply to remove you from Vincenzo's life entirely."

The words settled in slowly.

“Violet will reveal your location sooner or later, and Ruslan will come for you like hell itself. And when he has you... I think he’ll finally let her go.”

My breath hitched, panic clawing up my throat.

“There’s no point turning yourself in to him. Just wait—he’ll come,” *Ciro* said.

A chill crept down my spine.

There was no reassurance in his voice. No attempt to help.

Only a quiet acceptance... as if my fate had already been decided.

There was no point in continuing the discussion.

With a heavy, aching heart, I turned away without saying another word.

My body moved before my thoughts could catch up—steps automatic, unsteady—carrying me toward the house.

The grand doors stood open, dark and imposing, swallowing me whole as I crossed the entrance.

Inside, the foyer stretched out in silence.

My footsteps echoed against the polished floors.

Every step felt heavier than the last.

Like the air itself was pressing down on me.

I didn’t stop walking.

I climbed the stairs slowly, one step at a time, my hand brushing the railing for balance more out of instinct than need.

The house was quiet, but my thoughts weren’t.

They screamed, overlapped, tangled into something unbearable.

Elena.

My little Elena.

My sister and I share the same name, according to my father's family tradition.

The name echoed inside my head with every step I took, softer each time—like a prayer I was afraid would go unanswered.

She was the only pure thing left in a life that had already taken too much.

The only piece of my past I hadn't stained.

I had protected her.

Or at least—I thought I had.

But now—

Now she was connected to something far worse than anything I had ever faced.

Ruslan Baranov.

The name alone was enough to make the air feel thinner.

Ruslan didn't just destroy. He dismantled.

Like a man who enjoyed watching things break under his hands.

And now—

He had my sister.

My breath hitched slightly as I reached the top of the stairs, my hand tightening on the railing.

He had her.

Chained her to him in a way that had nothing to do with love—and everything to do with me.

Because of what I did to his sister. Because of the blood I spilled.

Guilt clawed at my insides, sharp and relentless, tearing through any attempt I made to hold myself together.

But then—

Beneath the guilt...

There was that fragile hope.

Violet would reveal where I was.

Ruslan would find me.

He would end this. He would take me in place of her.

My throat tightened painfully as I reached my door, my hand hovering over the handle for a moment.

I whispered her name under my breath again.

“Elena...”

Soft. Fragile.

Almost afraid to say it too loudly—as if speaking her name could somehow bring more harm to her.

“My sweet, untouched sister...”

My voice broke slightly.

I pressed my forehead against the door, closing my eyes as a sharp wave of emotion hit me—too much, too fast, too overwhelming to hold back.

What was happening to her right now?

Was she scared?

Was she hurt?

Was she being broken in ways I couldn’t see?

The thought alone made my chest ache.

But if Ruslan didn’t find me in time—

If no one came—

Then I wasn’t sure I could carry this weight much longer.

And that was the most terrifying thought of all.