

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 26[3,550 words]

Chapter 26

ELENA

The late-afternoon sun filtered through the lattice of the garden trellis, casting honeyed stripes across the stone path.

The light wasn't harsh—just soft enough to make everything feel still, suspended between moments, as though even time hesitated to intrude on what was growing here.

I stood before my gardenia bush.

The same one I had planted eight months ago, born from loneliness and quiet frustration—back when Vincenzo refused to believe the child I carry is his... and still doesn't.

Gardenias.

Fragile white blooms that opened in quiet defiance of the world around them, releasing their perfume only at dusk.

Back then, when the house had felt less like a home and more like a mausoleum, this plant had been the only thing that belonged to me.

Everything else belonged to Vincenzo.

Over the past eight months, Vincenzo had barely looked at me—unless it was to remind me I was there for a reason, and that reason had nothing to do with love.

And Violet—

She lived in the spaces I wasn't allowed to occupy.

I was the wife no one wanted.

The shadow stitched into a life built on revenge and obligation.

So I gave the only thing I could.

Softness.

To this plant.

I started by watering it myself, carefully, almost reverently—until the soldiers began doing it under my quiet instructions.

Even that small act felt like control.

Like I was still allowed to nurture something.

Something that would grow because I wanted it to.

I talked to it.

On nights when the silence in the house pressed so hard against my chest that I couldn't breathe, I whispered to the leaves as if they could hear me.

As if they understood loneliness the way I did.

And now—

Eight months later—

It had become something more.

A living promise.

Its leaves were deep green, glossy, full of life. The buds were swollen, almost ready to burst open into bloom.

And they would.

In one or two months.

Right around the time my child would be born.

I reached out slowly, my fingers brushing over the damp surface of the leaves—cool, fresh, grounding.

The scent lingered in the air.

Clean. Creamy.

Almost intoxicating.

It settled something inside me.

A quiet relief.

A fragile kind of calm.

I inhaled deeply, letting the fragrance fill my lungs, steadying the nausea that had become a constant companion these days.

My other hand rested instinctively over my stomach.

Round. Heavy.

Would my baby love this smell?

The thought came soft, unguarded.

Would he grow up surrounded by this scent and come to recognize it as something safe?

Would he press his tiny face into these petals one day and smile the way I did now?

The idea made something tighten in my chest.

Something dangerously close to hope.

A future.

A small, fragile one.

But still—a future.

“You should thank me you’re still alive, Elena.”

The voice cut through the quiet like a blade.

Sharp. Uninvited.

My eyes snapped open.

I turned.

Violet stood at the edge of the garden path.

And for a moment, I barely recognized her.

She was too thin.

Almost gaunt—like something inside her had been slowly eaten away from the inside out.

And yet—

Her belly was round and heavy.

Violet is nine months pregnant now and could go into labor at any moment.

She looked like she could topple over with the slightest movement, her balance precarious, her posture strained—but she stood there anyway, as if sheer will alone kept her upright.

Hatred burned in her eyes.

Bright. Unrelenting.

Unchanged.

She wore a cream silk dress that clung to her body in all the wrong ways—stretching over her frame, emphasizing her condition, her presence.

It wasn't just clothing. It was a statement.

The last time I had seen her clearly was eight months ago—lying in that hospital bed, pretending to be gravely ill in front of Vincenzo. Only after he left did I realize it had all been a lie.

Since then, she had existed only in whispers.

In reports. In absence.

Renzo had told me that Vincenzo had kept her at a distance.

“He still sees her,” Renzo had said once, almost reluctantly. “But not here.”

“Where?” I had asked.

“Her apartment.”

A pause.

“He doesn't bring her to the estate anymore.”

“Why?”

Renzo had exhaled. “He thinks she could be a problem for you, especially since you’re heavily pregnant.”

As if that was supposed to mean something.

As if that was supposed to comfort me.

Now I can’t help but wonder—what is Violet doing here?

And why is she this close to me?

She walked toward me with slow, deliberate steps, one hand resting under her belly.

“Don’t get too close, Violet. You’re always up to something, and I’m not in the mood for your tricks right now.” I said, keeping my voice steady despite the sudden tension coiling in my chest.

Violet stopped a few feet away.

Close enough.

She folded her arms beneath her chest, the movement lifting her belly even higher, making her appear both stronger and more fragile at the same time.

Her lips curled slightly.

“That bastard growing inside you has no right to be there. Agree to abort it... and you’ll live.”

My breath caught.

My arms crossed over my rounded stomach—protective, instinctive, almost defiant.

A silent barrier between her and the life growing inside me.

Violet noticed.

Her eyes flicked down for the briefest moment, tracking the movement, before snapping back to my face.

“Every attempt I made these past months to contact you about ending that thing in your belly before it grew... has failed.” She said, her voice tight.

She bit her lower lip until it whitened, as if holding herself back from saying more than she intended.

“Vincenzo only let me come to the estate today because I made it clear I’d hurt myself if he refused.”

I frowned slightly, trying to process that.

She let out a short, humorless breath.

“I even went as far as threatening to throw myself down the stairs in front of his men.”

Her eyes didn’t waver as she said it.

“I had to make him listen.”

A pause.

“Eventually, he caved.”

For a moment—

I almost laughed.

It came out as something bitter.

“So you blackmailed your way in, like you always do.” I muttered, shaking my head slightly

“I wonder how often you’ve twisted him to your will... it’s pathetic, really, to see a man so powerful wrapped around your fingers.”

Violet’s lips curved faintly.

“And that’s why you should be scared of me. If a man like Vincenzo can be bent to my will, imagine what I’m capable of.”

“Listen... I haven’t killed you all this time because I wanted to give you a chance—make sure you refused my offer—before I put you six feet under.”

Her voice was soft—poison wrapped delicately in silk.

The kind of tone that didn’t need to be loud to be dangerous.

I held her gaze, unflinching.

“Sometimes I can’t understand why someone as beautiful as you would be so cruel.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“It’s truly pitiful. You could have been extraordinary, if only you hadn’t let bitterness take hold of your heart.”

For the first time—

Something cracked in her expression.

Her eyes flashed, sharp and immediate, and she took a step closer, her posture tightening like a coiled wire.

“If the roles were reversed, you’d want revenge on the woman who took your man... and not just any day, but on her wedding day.”

The words snapped out of her like a whip. “Do you think I can ever forgive that?”

Another step.

“You’re the evil one here, Elena. Accept my offer and end it... or you and that child die.”

Her voice trembled now—not with weakness, but with rage barely contained.

Her gaze dropped to my stomach.

Lingered.

Burned.

Until I could feel the heat of her body pressing into mine, the tension between us almost suffocating.

Then her voice dropped.

Venomous.

“Death isn’t the only thing I can threaten you with.”

“Remember your little trip to California seven months ago? When Ruslan Baranov finally got his hands on you—I was the one who orchestrated it.”

“I told him exactly where you were. It still irritates me that Vincenzo got to you before Ruslan could finish the job.”

She added, as if savoring every word, “Pretty sure he would have killed you the moment you were taken to California—but he was taking his time, punishing you before finally ending you. Didn’t want your death to be too easy.”

Memories from seven months ago surged up, but I forced them down.

The horror wasn't just in my mind—it had happened.

I knew she was the one who had betrayed me to Baranov.

And yet... here I am. Still standing.

Still alive.

I studied her face.

The pinched tension around her mouth.

The fever-bright intensity in her eyes.

The desperation hiding beneath the anger.

I tilted my head slightly, my arms still crossed over my stomach.

"No one even believes the child I'm carrying is Vincenzo's. I've already done twenty-one DNA tests—none of them confirmed he's the father. So why, exactly, does it bother you that I'm carrying this child?"

My voice was calm.

"You think I didn't know the child is Vincenzo's? Do you think those negative DNA results just happened? I've controlled every one of them."

"Run a hundred more tests—here in Lombardy, anywhere in Italy—and they'll all say the same thing. That's how powerful I am, Elena. I will never let him know the truth."

"I won't allow him to see you differently. I won't allow you to fully ensnare him."

I froze, my chest tightening as the weight of her words sank in.

A storm of emotions roared inside me—rage, betrayal, fear, and a bitter, unspoken relief that at least I hadn't been imagining things.

Violet stepped closer, until our bodies were almost touching.

Our heavily pregnant bellies were separated by mere inches.

She leaned in slightly, lowering her voice.

“You want to know why I can’t let you keep this child? Because when your baby starts to resemble him—eyes, jaw, mouth—Vincenzo will see it. He’ll question it. And if he finds out I’ve been behind the false DNA results... everything I’ve done could be ruined. I won’t allow it. So, Elena, one last time... terminate the pregnancy, and you live.”

Something inside me snapped.

Rage surged—hot, blinding, uncontrollable.

I glanced down at her stomach—large, stretched tight, so close to mine it felt almost obscene—and then lifted my gaze back to her face.

“The only reason you’re still conscious is because you’re carrying a child. Say one more word about terminating mine, and I’ll make sure you never speak again.”

“And if you have any more tricks up your sleeve—especially after getting this close to me,” I said, my voice dropping slightly, “you’d do well to reconsider them.”

Violet’s eyes narrowed slightly, as if she were measuring me again—testing the edges of my resolve, searching for cracks she could exploit.

For a heartbeat, she didn’t move.

Then—deliberately—

Her lips curved.

Not in fear. Not in submission.

But in something far darker.

Almost... mocking.

Then, without warning, she moved.

Sudden. Unpredictable.

She lurched forward in a full-bodied collapse, like a tree being felled.

A performance.

Instinct took over before thought could follow.

I stepped forward immediately, arms snapping up to catch her, hands gripping her shoulders to steady her weight before she could hit the ground.

“—Violet!”

Her body pressed into mine, heavy and unbalanced.

Something sharp brushed against my chest.

A sting.

Quick. Faint.

My brows furrowed—but I didn’t let go.

A fingernail? A pin?

I ignored it.

Focused instead on keeping her upright.

Her breath hitched.

She gasped, clutching at me.

I helped her to her feet—firmly—and then pulled back abruptly, breaking contact.

“If I hadn’t caught you,” I said, my voice low and controlled, “you would’ve landed belly-first on that stone.”

I gestured sharply toward the ground between us.

“You could’ve killed your own child.”

My eyes locked onto hers.

Unwavering.

“Is that how far you’re willing to go—to stage another accident and blame me again?” I asked, my voice sharp.

Violet straightened slowly.

Unhurried.

Like nothing had happened.

Like she hadn’t just tried to turn gravity into a weapon.

She smoothed her dress over her stomach with deliberate care, her movements calm—almost graceful.

Her eyes lifted to mine.

And there—

In that look—

Was something darker than anger.

Something satisfied.

“You’re stronger than I expected,” she murmured. “But strength won’t save you forever.”

“If you make one more stupid attempt to fall,” I said quietly, my voice steady, controlled—, “I will let you hit the ground.”

Her breath hitched.

Violet took another step back.

Her face had gone pale beneath the carefully applied makeup, the color draining from her features as if the ground beneath her was no longer stable.

“Since you refuse to do as I’ve asked, don’t blame me for the misfortune that’s about to befall you.”

She kept moving backward.

Each step calculated.

Her eyes darted briefly toward the house, then back to me, as if measuring distance.

Planning her next move.

I didn’t follow.

Didn’t advance.

I stayed where I was, arms still crossed over my stomach, watching her carefully.

Like one watches a snake.

A snake that had already struck once—and would strike again if given the chance.

What now?

Another performance?

Another staged collapse?

Another attempt to twist reality until I was the one paying the price?

My eyes narrowed slightly.

I was ready.

But then—

I heard it.

Footsteps.

Heavy. Rapid. Approaching fast.

Gravel crunched sharply under deliberate, forceful strides.

I turned.

Vincenzo.

He was walking toward us like a storm given form—his coat flaring open with each step, his posture rigid, his presence overwhelming.

Behind him—

Ciro and Renzo.

Half-jogging to keep pace, their expressions tense, alert.

Vincenzo's eyes locked onto mine immediately.

Sharp. Intense.

Something in his gaze made my stomach drop slightly.

“Elena.”

My name came out as a bark.

Commanding. Demanding.

He stopped just a few feet away.

Close enough that I could feel the weight of his presence pressing into the space between us.

“Is it true,” he said, his voice tight, but edged with something I couldn’t quite place. “that you took my heirloom ring?”

I blinked.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

The question slipped out before I could stop it.

His jaw tightened.

“My mother’s ring.”

The words came out raw.

Like the mention of it physically hurt him.

“The only thing I have left that still feels like her.”

Silence fell.

He dragged in a breath, his grip tightening at his sides.

“For seven months,” he continued, his voice lower now, rougher, “I’ve torn this place apart looking for it.”

My confusion deepened.

“I thought one of my own men sold it to the Spanish—everyone knows what that piece means to me.”

His gaze sharpened.

Focused. Accusing.

“Then Ciro tells me this morning...”

His voice dipped slightly.

“...he saw you tucking it into your bra while you were out walking the grounds.”

The world seemed to still.

For a moment—

I couldn't even process what he had just said.

My mouth went dry.

"What?"

The word came out soft.

Confused. Genuine.

"I didn't even know you had an heirloom ring."

My brows furrowed as I tried to make sense of it.

"I didn't know anything that belonged to your mother still existed in this house."

A beat.

"And why the hell would I steal from you?"

My voice sharpened slightly now, frustration creeping in.

"You've given me access to your accounts, your cars, your entire damn wardrobe."

I gestured faintly toward the house.

"What possible reason would I have to take some sentimental trinket?"

Silence stretched between us.

Heavy. Tense.

I spun toward Ciro, disbelief sharpening my tone until it cut clean through the air.

"You saw me put a ring in my brassiere?" My voice rose, edged with incredulity. "Where exactly? Because I sure as hell don't remember doing anything of the kind."

My gaze locked onto his.

Unblinking.

“You’ve had eyes on me for months—I get it.” A tight breath. “But if you think you saw that, you’re either mistaken...”

A beat.

“...or lying.”

The accusation hung there.

Heavy. Pointed.

Ciro’s expression didn’t change immediately, but something in his jaw tightened.

He cleared his throat, posture stiffening in that controlled, military way of his.

And then, his eyes shifted.

Past me.

To Renzo.

“Use the metal detector,” *Ciro* said flatly. “Sweep her.”

The order landed like a slap.

Renzo’s jaw clenched instantly.

His hand tightened around the device he was already holding—a sleek, wand-shaped detector, matte black with a small digital screen and a thin coil at the tip.

The kind used in high-security screenings, except heavier.

More deliberate. More intrusive.

Renzo didn’t move.

“Boss, *Elena* wouldn’t steal your mother’s ring,” *Renzo* said, his tone firm but controlled. “Let’s not humiliate her over this.”

Ciro’s gaze hardened.

“*Renzo*.”

A sharp warning.

“Use the metal detector on her—now.”

Renzo's shoulders tensed.

"No. I refuse to embarrass the boss's pregnant wife over your bullshit claim," he shot back, his voice rising slightly.

The air snapped tighter.

Violet's voice slipped into the moment like a blade wrapped in silk.

Soft. Trembling.

Perfectly timed.

"Unless, of course, you're helping her hide the ring, Renzo," she said, her tone carefully innocent, "I fail to see why you can't just run the detector over her."

Her eyes flicked toward me.

Calculating.

"It's a simple check."

Renzo's grip on the wand tightened, his knuckles whitening.

He looked at Vincenzo.

Waiting.

The only person in this circle whose word actually mattered.

Vincenzo exhaled sharply through his nose.

Frustration. Control.

Barely contained.

"Renzo," Vincenzo said, voice low and final, "do it."

The order hit like a hammer.

Renzo stared at the ground for a long moment.

Jaw working.

Conflict written plainly across his face.

Then—

Slowly—

He let the metal detector drop.

It clattered against the stone path with a sharp, echoing sound.

“I won’t,” Renzo said, voice steady now, defiant. “It’s ridiculous.”

Ciro’s eyes narrowed.

Cold. Displeased.

“What the hell has gotten into you, Renzo? How dare you defy the boss?”

Ciro bent, picked up the wand without breaking eye contact, and straightened again.

“If I find that ring on her,” Giro added, his voice dropping into something darker, “you’ll be considered an accomplice.”

Renzo’s expression hardened—but he didn’t respond.

Didn’t back down.

Didn’t move.

Ciro stepped toward me.

Each step deliberate.

The wand hummed faintly in his hand as he raised it, beginning a careful sweep.

Shoulders. Arms. Torso.

When the device passed over my chest—

It erupted.

A sharp, high-pitched beep.

Immediate. Unmistakable.

My heart slammed violently against my ribs.

“What—”

I jerked back instinctively, a sharp breath catching in my throat.

But before I could take another step—

Ciro's hand snapped out and gripped my upper arm.

Firm. Restraining.

“Don't run,” he said quickly, his tone still controlled but edged with urgency. “There's metal right there—inside your bra line.”

My stomach dropped.

My breath hitched.

Inside my bra—

There was nothing.

Nothing.

But the detector—

It was screaming.

Ciro glanced over his shoulder, looking directly at Vincenzo now.

“Should I retrieve it?”

The words landed like a spark in dry grass.

Vincenzo's expression darkened immediately—something dangerous igniting behind his eyes.

“And why the fuck would I let you put your hands inside my wife's dress?” he snapped, his voice dropping into something lethal, something that made the air feel heavier. “Have you lost your goddamn mind?”

His gaze cut to Ciro like a blade.

“Let. Go. Of. Her.”

Each word came out slow.

Deadly.

Ciro released me instantly.

Stepping back.

Both hands raised in quiet surrender.

“Apologies, boss.”

But the damage was done.

Vincenzo dragged a hand down his face, exhaling sharply, before his gaze snapped back to me.

Frost. Fire.

Something dangerously close to betrayal.

“Take it out,” he said, voice cold. “Whatever’s between your breasts.”

A pause.

“Do it yourself.”

The command left no room for argument.

My chest tightened.

I wanted to scream.

To tell him there was nothing.

That this was insane.

That I hadn’t stolen anything.

But the machine had screamed.

And four pairs of eyes were on me now.

Vincenzo—seething with fury.

Ciro—cold and unrelenting.

Renzo—torn.

And Violet—silent. Watching. Waiting. Triumphant.

My hands trembled slightly as I turned my back to them.

Just enough.

Just enough to give myself the illusion of privacy.

My shoulders hunched instinctively.

My fingers slid beneath the neckline of my dress.

Slow. Careful.

Then deeper—

Past the fabric—

Past the lace—

Until my fingers brushed something cold.

Metal.

My breath stuttered.

No.

That wasn't—

My fingers closed around it.

I froze for half a second.

Heart pounding violently.

Then—

Slowly—

Carefully—

I pulled it out.

A gold ring.

Simple. Old-fashioned.

Delicate filigree wrapping around the band.

At its center—

A deep blue sapphire.

It caught the dying sunlight as I brought it into view, scattering small flashes of light across the stone path.

My breath came out uneven.

I turned back around slowly.

Holding it between my thumb and forefinger.

Like it might burn me if I held it any longer.

My mind snapped backward—

Not to now.

But to minutes ago.

Violet.

Her “accidental” stumble.

The way she had lurched into me with calculated precision, her body heavy, her balance seemingly failing just enough to force me to react.

I’d caught her.

Instinctively. Reflexively.

Her full weight pressing into me, her breath sharp, her hands clutching at me as if she needed saving.

And then—

That sharp sting.

A quick, deliberate graze against my chest.

Not an accident. Not a fingernail.

Something else.

Something hidden. Something placed.

A weapon disguised as a moment.

My fingers tightened slightly around the ring now in my hand as the realization settled deeper.

That was the moment.

That was when she did it.

“I don’t know how this got here,” I said, my voice trembling despite every effort to hold it steady.

My grip on the ring tightened just enough to ground me.

I lifted my gaze.

Straight to Vincenzo.

“I swear to you—I didn’t know this ring existed until this moment.”

The word came out softer than I intended.

My throat tightened.

“Just... believe me.”

A beat.

My voice cracked. “Just once.”

Vincenzo didn’t move.

His eyes locked onto the ring in my hand.

Then—

Slowly—

His gaze lifted.

Up.

To me.

And what I saw there made my stomach drop.

Betrayal.

Sharp. Undeniable.

Like a blade driven straight through something vital.

“I gave you money, clothes, cars, access to everything I own.”

Each word landed heavier than the last.

“And you went after the one thing that actually matters to me.”

My breath hitched.

No—

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head slightly. “Vincenzo, I—”

But he wasn’t finished.

His throat worked as if swallowing something bitter.

“You must have overheard me talking about it.”

A step forward.

Closer.

“Or someone fed you the information.”

His eyes sharpened.

“The Spanish, maybe.”

My chest tightened painfully.

“You still won’t admit what they did to you when they took you.”

His voice hardened now.

Accusatory.

“You protect them even now.”

The words hit like a second blow.

Harder. Colder.

“I didn’t—” I started, but the words tangled in my throat.

Before I could finish—

Vincenzo stepped forward.

His hand reached out—

And for a moment—

I thought he was coming for me.

But instead—

His fingers closed around the ring in my hand.

He took it from me like it might shatter under too much pressure.

His thumb brushed over the sapphire once.

Then again.

Gentle. Unconscious.

A flicker of something softer crossed his face—but it was gone just as quickly.

Buried beneath something far more dangerous.

“Do you work for the Spanish now, Elena?”

The question came quietly.

Like he was afraid of the answer.

My breath caught.

The words felt unreal.

“You think I—”

I swallowed hard, trying to steady myself.

“I didn’t steal anything from you, Vincenzo.”

My voice shook.

“I would never—”

My eyes burned.

“Never touch something that belonged to your mother.”

The words broke slightly.

Can’t you see that?

Can’t you hear me?

“Can’t you—at least once—believe I’m telling the truth?”

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Chapter 27

ELENA

Silence.

That was his answer.

He didn’t argue. Didn’t accuse further. Didn’t defend me.

He simply held the ring between his thumb and forefinger like it was something fragile—and something lethal at the same time.

A piece of the past he had guarded like a secret wound.

His eyes lifted to mine.

Dark. Unreadable.

“You kept asking me to believe you, to trust you—even once—but the situations were always impossible to trust, Elena,” he said quietly, each word precise.

“If we’d found it on your bed, you could’ve claimed someone planted it. In your wardrobe? Same excuse. But tucked in the most private part of your body—between your breasts? Come on. How about you grow a spine and tell me the truth... for once.”

“I didn’t put it there.” I said, my voice thin, strained under the pressure. “

But even as I said it, my eyes betrayed me.

They flicked.

Just once. To Violet.

She stood a few paces back, one hand resting beneath her swollen belly, the other loosely folded over it as if cradling something precious.

Her lips curved. Just slightly.

That satisfied, quiet smile.

The kind that didn’t belong in a moment like this.

Then my gaze shifted again.

To Ciro.

Stone-faced. Unmoving.

The same man who had claimed he saw me tuck the ring into my bra this morning.

A lie.

A clean one.

It had been set up.

And Vincenzo—

He would never see it.

His focus snapped back to me.

He stepped closer again, his voice dropping into something quieter.

“The only reasons someone steals a piece like this,” he said, raising the ring slightly between us, “are money... or leverage.”

“Sell it. Pocket millions. Disappear. Start a new life far from me.

“Or,” his voice tightened, “hand it to the Spanish as payment. A favor. A promise. Escape. A fortune. Maybe even your sister’s freedom from Ruslan Baranov’s cage.”

“I don’t know what they promised you during those weeks they held you,” he continued, voice sharpening. “And frankly, I don’t care.”

“This—” He raised the ring, the sapphire glinting in the dying light. “—this proves it. You’ve been working with them. You betrayed me. After everything.”

“I won’t send you away. I won’t divorce you. You remain my wife... until one of us stops breathing.”

“But betrayal has a price. And you? You’re about to pay it in full.”

He turned to Ciro.

“Take her to the industrial cold room.”

The words landed like a physical blow.

“Let her feel what happens to those who turn on the family.”

My chest caved in.

No.

No.

Not the cold room.

Not that.

Not now.

Not when—

A sudden, searing warmth spread between my legs.

Sharp. Unmistakable.

My breath caught in my throat.

“Oh—”

Liquid.

Warm. Fast.

My water had broken.

It soaked through my dress in an instant, trailing down my legs and pooling onto the stone beneath me.

Clear. Steady.

I gasped, hands flying to my stomach as my body stiffened in shock.

“Vincenzo—” My voice broke, rising in panic. “My water just broke.”

For a split second—

Silence.

Then—

“Guards!” *Ciro* barked.

Three men emerged from the shadows almost instantly, their movements sharp, trained.

No hesitation. No questions.

They closed in on me in seconds.

Rough hands gripped my arms.

Another pair seized my legs.

“No—wait!” I struggled instinctively, panic surging through me. “Let go—!”

But they didn’t.

They lifted me.

Like I weighed nothing.

“Vincenzo!” My voice cracked into a scream as I twisted in their grip, desperation clawing its way up my throat. “My water just broke! The baby’s coming—now!”

No response.

He didn't turn.

Didn't look at me.

His back remained rigid.

Unmoving.

"Please!" I cried, thrashing harder now. "I'm in labor! Don't do this—please!"

My voice broke completely.

"You can't lock me in there—not like this—not with your child inside me!"

For a moment—

Just a moment—

I thought he might turn.

But he didn't.

"Lies," he said flatly.

The word cut deeper than anything else.

"No woman's water breaks at eight months."

"I'm telling the truth! Look at my dress—it's soaked!" I screamed, fighting against the men holding me. "I can feel him! The baby's coming—any second!"

My voice shattered into desperation.

"Please—look at me!"

Still nothing.

"Look at the puddle! Look at me!"

My breathing turned ragged, panicked.

"I'm begging you—don't let them do this!"

The men tightened their grip.

The world tilted.

And as they began to carry me away—

All I could hear was the echo of his final words hanging in the air—

And the silence where his belief should have been.

The guards didn't slow.

They carried me away from the garden—away from the scent of jasmine and gardenias, away from the soft rustle of leaves, away from Violet's smug, satisfied silence and Ciro's cold obedience.

Away from Vincenzo.

My heart pounded so hard it felt like it might split my ribs.

"Vincenzo—you can't let this happen! I am your wife!" I screamed, straining against their hold, my voice cracking.

"I'll die in that cold room! I won't survive! Our baby will die! Please—don't punish me, or our innocent child, for something I didn't do!"

My words echoed off the stone walls as they moved deeper into the estate.

Colder corridors.

Narrower passageways.

Every step felt like a descent into something worse.

"This is a setup! Violet set me up... can't you see it?!" I screamed, my throat already raw. "You're making a mistake—just listen to me!"

But no one answered.

No one even looked at me.

The guards moved with mechanical precision, boots striking the stone in steady, relentless rhythm as they carried me through a side corridor I'd never seen before.

The air changed.

Subtle at first.

Then unmistakable.

The warmth of the outside world faded with each step, replaced by something colder.

The walls closed in around us, lined with steel doors—heavy, industrial, like something that belonged in a facility meant to hold more than just people.

Something meant to break them.

My breath came faster.

My chest tightened.

“No—no—no...” My voice dropped into a desperate whisper as dread crept up my spine. “Please don’t take me any further... please...”

But they didn’t stop.

The temperature dropped again.

And again.

My wet dress clung to my thighs, the fabric already growing stiff against my skin, the dampness turning cold—too cold—far too fast.

We stopped in front of a heavy insulated door.

One guard shifted my weight slightly while another stepped forward, entering a code into a panel beside it.

Beep.

A pause.

Then—

A hiss.

The door unlocked.

And when it opened—

The air that rushed out nearly knocked the breath from my lungs.

Arctic.

Freezing.

Suffocating.

I gasped, my chest tightening instantly.

Inside was white.

Not the soft kind of white.

Not light. Not warmth.

Pure, clinical white.

Frost coated every visible surface.

The walls. The floor. Even the air itself felt heavy with cold.

A digital display on the wall glowed a harsh, unforgiving red:

-42°C.

“No...” The word slipped out of me, weak and trembling.

Panic surged.

I fought.

Really fought this time.

“Don’t—no—please!”

I struggled violently against them, my legs flailing despite the pain. “Don’t put me in here!”

One of my kicks connected, but it wasn’t enough.

“Please—I’m begging you!”

My voice broke into raw desperation.

“The baby—Vincenzo’s baby—he’s coming—I can feel him—he’s pressing down—I’ll freeze—I’ll lose him!”

For the first time—

There was hesitation.

One of the guards shifted slightly, his grip loosening just enough to suggest doubt.

Another muttered something under his breath.

Low. Uncertain. Almost human.

But they didn't stop.

They carried me forward.

Careful. Reluctant.

As if trying not to hurt me.

As if trying not to make this worse than it already was.

But that didn't change anything.

They were still doing it. And I was powerless to stop them.

My heart pounded as contractions began.

Sharp. Low. Painful.

They came without warning—tight waves that clenched through my abdomen and forced a strangled cry from my throat.

“Ah—!”

My body stiffened in their grip.

“No—no—no—” I gasped, panic rising again as another wave followed. “Not now—please—not now—”

The guards carried me across the threshold.

The cold hit harder.

Faster. Deeper.

I felt it immediately—like stepping into something that wanted to strip the warmth from my bones.

They lowered me—

Then set me down on the frost-covered floor just inside the room.

My knees nearly buckled on impact.

For a second—

Just a second—

I sat there, frozen in place.

Then instinct took over.

I lunged back toward the door.

“Don’t lock it—don’t leave me in here alone!”

My hands stretched toward the opening, desperate, shaking.

One of the guards caught my wrists.

Not roughly. But firmly.

Restraining.

Another moved toward the door.

“No—wait—please—!”

The door began to close.

Heavy. Immovable.

“No!” I cried, struggling harder as the first guard held me in place. “Don’t—!”

The seal shut with a pneumatic hiss.

A metallic clunk echoed through the room.

And then—

Silence.

Except for the low, constant hum of the refrigeration system.

The guards were gone, and I was alone; the cold didn’t creep in or ease around me—it struck all at once, violent, immediate, and utterly merciless.

My soaked dress turned stiff within seconds, the fabric freezing against my skin.

My breath hitched, coming out in thick white clouds that lingered in the air before freezing on my eyelashes.

My teeth began to chatter uncontrollably.

Hard. Fast.

Painful.

My jaw ached with every involuntary movement.

I wrapped my arms around myself instinctively, but it did nothing.

Nothing helped.

Nothing warmed me.

I forced myself to look up.

To take in my surroundings.

And then I saw them: frozen bodies, strewn across the room, each one still, lifeless.

My breath caught in my throat.

No.

No, no, no...

One man hung half-off a metal table, his arm stretched toward the door as if he'd tried to escape.

Another crouched in the corner, knees pulled tightly to his chest, his face locked in a permanent grimace of pain.

A third stood near the wall, one hand raised—frozen mid-plea.

All of them...

Blue-white. Lips darkened. Eyes open.

Glass.

Gone. Dead.

And on every wall—

Written in tall, stark, relentless letters—

“I AM A BETRAYER TO THE BLACK VEIL SOCIETY.”

The words echoed, repeating again and again, stretching from floor to ceiling, relentless.

A message. A warning. A sentence. A fate.

I froze, every muscle locked in place.

My pulse thudded in my ears.

“I didn’t...” My voice came out in a broken whisper, trembling. “I didn’t betray anyone...”

My gaze dropped.

“No...” I shook my head weakly, my arms wrapping tighter around my stomach as another contraction rippled through me.

Pain.

Real pain now.

Growing. Building.

“I didn’t steal the ring...” I whispered again, as if saying it enough times might make it true in someone else’s mind.

But there was no one left to hear it.

Only the cold.

Only the silence.

And the certainty that I had just been condemned for something I didn’t do.

My only mistake had been catching Violet when she threw herself at me.

If I had stepped aside—

If I had let her fall—

If I had chosen myself instead of instinct—

She might have hit the stone hard enough to lose the child she claimed to carry.

But she wouldn't have had the chance to plant that ring against my skin in those split seconds of contact.

I'd cared too much.

And now—

I was paying for it with frostbite and terror.

My body trembled violently as I wrapped both arms around my belly, my fingers moving in slow, frantic circles, as if I could shield him from the cold through will alone.

"Hold on, baby," I whispered, my voice shaking. "Hold on..."

But even my hands felt numb.

The cold wasn't just on my skin anymore.

It was inside me.

Seeping deeper.

Into muscle. Into bone. Into everything that mattered.

Another contraction hit.

Harder than the last.

My breath hitched, a sharp sound breaking from my throat as my entire body tightened against the pain.

"No—" I gasped, doubling slightly. "Not now..."

But there was no stopping it.

The next wave followed quickly.

And the next.

Closer. Stronger. Relentless.

Between each contraction, I felt it—

Pressure.

Low. Deep.

My baby was descending.

Too fast.

Panic surged again, clawing its way up my chest.

“I can’t...” I whispered, shaking my head weakly as my teeth chattered uncontrollably. “I can’t last in here...”

I looked around the room again.

The bodies. The frost.

The words carved into every surface like a curse that had no end.

No escape.

My breathing turned shallow.

What if I couldn’t survive this?

What if he didn’t?

My baby—

My child—

Growing inside me.

Alive. Dependent.

And completely at the mercy of this freezing hell.

“I won’t die here,” I forced out through clenched teeth, my voice breaking but firm. “I won’t.”

Another contraction tore through me.

I cried out, gripping my stomach tightly as pain spiked through my abdomen and radiated down into my lower body.

“Ah—!”

My legs trembled beneath me.

My fingers dug into the fabric of my dress, clutching at anything to ground myself.

Fear clawed at my throat.

Made it hard to breathe. Hard to think. Hard to stay conscious.

The cold pressed deeper.

Then—

A sound.

Muffled.

From the other side of the door.

“Elena.”

My entire body went still.

The voice—

Low. Careful. Almost hesitant.

My head snapped toward the door, my breath catching sharply in my throat.

For a moment—

Hope.

A fragile, dangerous flicker.

“Vincenzo?” I whispered, barely able to form the word.

The cold pressed harder, distorting everything, making the world feel distant and unreal.

But that voice—

It was real.

Someone was there.

My chest tightened painfully.

“Vincenzo—!” I tried again, louder this time, desperation surging through me. “Please—!”

Another contraction hit mid-cry.

I doubled over with a strangled gasp, gripping my stomach as pain shot through my body.

“Ah—!”

The sound echoed in the frozen room.

I sucked in a sharp breath, forcing myself upright again, my voice trembling but urgent.

“Help me—please!”

My hands shook as I pressed one against the door, as if I could reach through it.

“I’m in labor—I’m freezing—please—just open the door—!”

My voice cracked completely now.

“I can’t stay in here—!”

A beat of silence followed.

Too long. Too heavy.

My heart pounded violently in my chest as I waited—

Frozen in more ways than one.

I could barely feel my feet touching the frost-rimed floor.

My teeth chattered violently, clacking so hard my jaw throbbed with every tremor.

“Elena...!” The voice behind the door grew clearer, and now I could tell who it was.

“Ciro—!” I called out, my voice breaking as my teeth continued to chatter. “Why... why did you lie about me?”

I reached the door, pressing my forehead against the freezing metal.

It burned.

Seared my skin with its cold.

“You kn-kn-know I was innocent...” I forced out between shaking breaths. “The ring... in my ch-chest... it was a s-setup...”

Silence.

Heavy. Stretching.

Then—

His voice.

Closer this time.

“Well, Elena...” he began, his voice slow. “I tried to make you see it—from the very start. From the moment I saw you punch Renzo in the face outside that dressing room, I caught feelings for you... but I know it’s forbidden. I know it’s wrong to want Vincenzo’s wife. I know you will never be mine... yet I crave you every single day.”

My fingers trembled against the door.

“That’s why I can’t stop looking at you,” he said softly. “Every lingering glance... every time I made sure you knew I was watching... hoping, just hoping, that maybe you’d see me. You never did.”

My chest felt like it was splitting open.

Not from the cold.

From the truth.

Or what passed for it.

“I—” My voice cracked. “I never—Ciro, I never led you on...”

“I know,” he said too quickly.

The cold pressed deeper into my bones.

“When you got pregnant... of course I knew it was for Vincenzo. But the thought of you carrying his child... it tore me apart.”

“If you ever bear a child, I want it to be mine.”

“I was broken, desperate enough to want to tear his empire down, take you, and run—but I couldn’t, too much was at stake.”

“I was also angry at you for not seeing how much I desperately wanted you.”

“So when Violet came to me with her plan... I said yes easily—to put you on Vincenzo’s worst side, to make it look like you had stolen his most precious treasure.”

“In truth, I was the one who took it from his safe and handed it to Violet to pin on you.”

“In the mafia world, betrayals are punished harshly—even if it’s our own son, a wife, or an outsider. I knew it would work. Because if I couldn’t have you... at least Vincenzo would never have you either.”

My chest seized.

My vision blurred as tears welled in my eyes.

They tried to fall.

They didn’t make it far.

The moment they left my eyes—

They froze.

Mid-descent.

Turning into fragile, crystalline trails that cracked when I blinked.

“Ciro...” My voice broke into a sob-shiver. “You... condemned my baby and me...”

My throat closed.

“...to death...”

My voice shook harder.

“...because of f-feelings I never even kn-kn-knew about?”

“Renzo is being treated as an accomplice in your crime. In forty-eight hours, he’ll be executed before all the soldiers.”

The words struck like a physical blow.

“He was convinced Renzo aided you in stealing the ring, especially since he wouldn’t run the metal detector on you.”

“Say your final prayers, Elena. In forty-eight hours, you’ll be nothing but a corpse. Most betrayals we’ve dealt with here don’t even survive forty-eight hours... some fall in less than twelve.”

Silence crashed back down.

But this time—

It wasn't empty.

It was full of everything he had just said.

And everything it meant.

I wasn't just trapped. I wasn't just freezing.

I wasn't just in labor.

I had been betrayed and sentenced all at once.

Ciro exhaled.

The sound traveled through the insulated steel like a ghost of a sigh.

"My love..." Cairo's voice followed, low and almost gentle. "It breaks my heart that this will be the last time we speak."

A pause.

"Yet it also gives me some twisted satisfaction," he continued, "that while I'll never have you... neither will Vincenzo."

My chest tightened painfully.

"Rest in peace, Elena."

"Consider it in advance."

A faint, almost tender emphasis on the words.

Then his footsteps retreated—slow at first, then faster, until they finally faded, leaving nothing behind but silence.

"Ciro!" I screamed, slamming my numb palms against the steel door. "Ciro—please! I can't die like this!"

My voice cracked into pieces.

"I'm eight months pregnant—my child is innocent! He's coming—right now! Please—open the door!"

My fists struck the door again and again, weak and desperate.

“Ciro!”

But the only answer was my own voice—echoing back at me.

Thin. Useless.

Gone.

I slid down the door, my legs giving out beneath me.

My back hit the frost-covered steel with a dull thud, the impact sending a fresh wave of pain through my already freezing body.

Another contraction hit.

Hard.

I cried out, my hands instinctively gripping my stomach as the pain tore through me in sharp, rhythmic waves.

No.

Not just a contraction.

This was labor—real, unstoppable, coming now.

The baby was coming.

And the cold—

The cold was killing us both.

Renzo.

The thought hit me like a fracture.

Poor Renzo.

He had chosen not to humiliate me.

He had stood up for me.

Chosen to believe me—at least enough to resist.

And now?

He would die for it.

Because Violet wanted revenge.

Because Ciro wanted control.

Because someone needed to be blamed.

Three lives.

Mine.

My son's.

Renzo's.

All because of jealousy. All because of lies.

All because of a truth no one cared to hear.

The cold intensified.

The hum of the refrigeration system deepened, louder now—like it was feeding on something, drawing heat from every living thing inside the room.

My breath came in shallow, trembling gasps.

Each inhale burned.

Each exhale weakened me.

It felt like breathing shards of glass.

My saliva thickened in my mouth, then chilled, freezing against my tongue.

Words became difficult.

Sticky. Broken.

“Help...” I choked out, my voice barely audible. “Someone... please...”

But no one answered.

No one ever would.

The pressure in my body surged again.

Low. Unbearable.

My baby was moving.

Descending.

This time, I couldn't stop it.

I felt it.

The shift.

The inevitability. The urgency.

"Ah—!" I gasped, doubling over, my arms locking around my belly as the final contraction tore through me.

I screamed.

Not out of fear now.

But from sheer, overwhelming pain.

I bore down instinctively, my body reacting before my mind could catch up.

"Come on... come on..." I whispered through clenched teeth, my voice shaking.

The pressure built.

Higher. Stronger.

Then—

A breakthrough.

I felt it.

The head of the baby.

Emerging.

"Ah—!" I cried out, straining, every muscle in my body tightening as I pushed with everything I had left.

For one fleeting, impossible second—

There was warmth.

Life.

Then—

Cold air struck.

The moment shattered.

And the head slipped back inside.

“No—!” I sobbed, my body collapsing slightly from the effort. “No... come on...”

The cold tightened everything.

Muscles locking.

Refusing.

Working against me.

My body was betraying me.

Again.

I screamed again, louder this time, pushing with everything I had.

The head emerged once more—

Just enough.

Just visible.

Tiny.

Fragile.

A glimpse of dark hair already dusted with frost.

Then gone again.

My vision blurred.

Darkened.

I could feel my strength slipping.

My limbs weakening.

My heartbeat slowing in uneven, erratic pulses.

My fingers—purple.

Useless.

My legs trembled beneath me, barely able to support my weight anymore.

“No... please...” I whispered, my voice breaking into pieces.

This time—

There was no hesitation.

No control.

Only instinct.

I gathered everything I had left.

Every ounce of strength.

Every breath. Every heartbeat.

Every fragment of will.

And I pushed.

Harder than before.

Harder than I thought possible.

A final, desperate scream tore from my throat.

And then—

It happened.

The body followed.

Shoulders.

Arms.

The rest of him—

Sliding free in a sudden, unstoppable rush.

Warm. Wet.

Alive.

For one fragile moment—

There was silence.

Then—

My strength collapsed completely.

I fell forward onto the frozen floor, my arms instinctively cradling the tiny, fragile body against my chest.

“My baby...” I whispered, my voice breaking as I tried to look at him.

His skin—

Blue-white.

Too still. Too quiet.

No cry.

No movement.

“No... no, no, no...” My hands trembled as I tried to rub him, to warm him, to bring him back.

But my fingers—

They couldn’t feel anything.

Nothing.

Not even him.

My own heartbeat faltered.

Darkness crept in at the edges of my vision.

I didn't know if I had passed out.

Or if I was dying.

All I knew—

Was that I was lying on a frozen floor.

Holding my newborn son.

And he wasn't crying.

His tiny, perfect face rested against my chest—still, silent, rimed with frost.

The last thing I saw—

Before everything went black—

Were the words carved into the walls around us.

Again.

And again.

I AM A BETRAYER TO THE BLACK VEIL SOCIETY

They burned into my vision.

Into my mind.

Into the last fragment of awareness I had left.

And then—

Everything disappeared.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 28[5,016 words]

Chapter 28

VINCENZO

Five hours.

Five endless, suffocating hours.

Since I'd given the order.

Since I'd told Ciro to lock Elena inside the industrial cold room.

The thought shouldn't have changed anything.

But it did.

I hadn't sat once.

My study felt like a cage.

The air was too thick. Too still. Like the room itself was waiting for something to break.

My boots struck the Persian rug again and again as I paced.

Back.

And forth.

Back.

And forth.

The pattern carved itself into my skull as much as it wore into the floor.

Every time I stopped—every time my thoughts dared to drift toward the lower levels—a sharp, suffocating pressure seized my chest.

And then—

Ciro would appear.

Always.

Like a shadow that refused to leave me alone.

“Boss,” he’d say, calm as ever. “The men are watching.”

I’d pause.

Every time.

“If you pull her out now, word will spread. They’ll say you spared a traitor. That you bent the family’s rules. And once that starts, everyone will think they can betray you without consequence.”

“But if you go through with this—even to your own wife—it sends a message. To everyone in Italy and beyond. That your power is absolute.”

His gaze would lock onto mine.

And every time I turned back.

Jaw clenched. Chest tight.

Forcing myself to believe him.

Forcing myself to believe Elena deserved it.

Forcing myself to believe the heirloom ring was proof, my chest would feel like it was being ripped apart by something savage.

I shouldn’t be doing this to her.

I know she betrayed the family, broke our code, and deserves punishment—but she was eight months pregnant, and that alone should have been enough to stop me.

But it hadn’t.

And now—

It haunted me, leaving me restless—torn between saving her and protecting my power in front of my men.

In truth, I no longer cared whose child she carried.

I didn’t care if the child she carried was Matteo’s or some nameless Spanish soldier’s. It didn’t matter.

The DNA results no longer meant anything to me.

I made my decision months ago.

That child was mine, and I would raise him as my own—protect him, give him my name, my legacy... my everything.

But Elena was in the industrial cold room, the temperature set at -42°C—a place meant for traitors to suffer and die.

What if she had been telling the truth?

What if her water had really broken?

What if she was in labor... in there?

My pacing quickened, growing more frantic with each step.

She wasn't just another recruit—she was my wife.

My thoughts were scattered, my chest aching unbearably.

From the moment I saw her in that dressing room, Elena had a profound effect on me, but my thirst for revenge for what her father did kept me from giving her the love she deserved.

After getting to know her better, watching her under my roof day after day, I realized how innocent she was at heart—too genuine, too unguarded to be capable of betrayal.

There was a quiet strength in her, a stubborn defiance that refused to break, even when everything was stacked against her.

And then there were the smaller things—the way her eyes softened when she thought no one was looking, the quiet kindness she showed without expecting anything in return, the fire in her spirit that drew me in before I even understood what was happening.

What possible reason would she have to steal my mother's ring?

Money?

She had access to my accounts—millions at her disposal.

Escape?

She knew I'd hunt her down to the ends of the earth.

The Spanish?

They had already taken enough from her.

Violated her.

Broke her.

I'd seen it in her eyes.

Still saw it.

Even when she tried to hide it.

So what could they have promised her?

What could possibly outweigh everything she had here?

My jaw flexed.

The questions didn't stop.

They multiplied and gnawed.

I couldn't stand there any longer.

Something inside me snapped, my heart roaring louder than reason. It felt like it would give out if I didn't go to her—now.

I wasn't about to kill my own wife just to save face before my men.

I shoved away from my desk.

Stormed out of the study.

My boots struck the corridor hard, echoing through the estate as I made my way toward the lower levels.

Cold. Purposeful. Focused.

But not controlled.

“Boss.”

Ciro again.

He stepped into my path without warning, like he'd been waiting—blocking me calmly and deliberately.

“Boss, don’t do this.”

My eyes snapped to him.

Sharp. Dangerous.

“Violet’s at the hospital. She’s very close to delivery and needs you. Go be with her—I’m not sure she can get through it without you. It’ll take your mind off this mess.”

I didn’t slow down. Didn’t even hesitate.

I pushed past him.

He fell into step behind me almost immediately.

“Boss—”

“Shut the fuck up, Ciro.”

My voice dropped into a lethal timbre.

“You expect me to kill my wife and my unborn child... just to prove a point to my soldiers about sparing a traitor?”

Silence.

Then I leaned my head slightly, my eyes burning with a darkness beyond anger.

“I don’t care what my soldiers think. I don’t care what anyone thinks. I will not stand by while my wife and unborn child freeze to death. I’m heartless—but not when it comes to my family.”

His eyes widened—just a flicker.

But he didn’t stop walking.

Didn’t stop pushing.

“You’re making a mistake,” he said, voice tight now. “If you let her out this soon—”

I stopped dead, turning too fast.

“This soon?” I barked. “She’s spent five hours inside that freezing cold! Could you last five minutes in there, Ciro? Now stop bothering me and shut your mouth.”

Ciro didn’t back down.

“You’re making a mistake,” he repeated, as if he wished he had some power to stop me from going to get her.

I ignored him entirely and tore down the corridor.

Walls blurred past me, my heart pounding, my mind only on reaching her.

Stone walls flashed past in smeared shadows.

The air grew colder with every step—subtle at first, then sharp enough to sting my lungs, the metallic bite of frost already creeping up from the lower levels.

My boots slammed against the stone.

Harder. Faster.

Each impact echoed like a warning I couldn’t afford to hear.

Elena, please.

The thought wasn’t a command anymore.

It was a plea.

Stay alive. Just stay alive.

I reached the insulated door and skidded to a stop, breath ragged, chest rising and falling too fast.

I slammed my hand against the heavy, insulated metal door, the impact jolting up my arm.

Locked.

Of course it was locked.

My jaw tightened as the realization hit—standard protocol. The cold rooms were controlled access. Only Ciro and Renzo carried the override keys.

I turned sharply.

And there he was.

Ciro.

Still approaching.

Not rushing. Not panicking.

Just walking.

Like nothing in the world was about to collapse.

My pulse spiked.

“Open this fucking door,” I snapped. “Now.”

He stopped a few paces away, watching me carefully.

“Boss,” he said, voice calm—too calm. “Think about what you’re doing. You lose face. The men—”

I drew the Glock in one smooth, brutal motion.

The metal felt cold and alive in my hand as I leveled it at his chest.

“Ciro.”

His eyes flicked down—just once.

“Do you hear me?”

The room went silent.

Even the hum of the building seemed to fade.

“You of all people,” I continued, my voice dropping, controlled but edged with something dangerous, “know what happens when I lose my temper.”

The muzzle didn’t waver.

“Run. Over. Here.”

A beat.

“And open. The. Door.”

His composure cracked.

Not much.

But enough.

His face drained of color. His posture stiffened.

For the first time since I'd known him—

Ciro looked afraid.

“Okay—okay,” he said quickly, raising his hands slightly. “Boss... I’m opening it.”

He moved faster now.

Keys. Panel. Code.

The lock disengaged with a heavy, mechanical thunk that echoed down the corridor like a gunshot.

Then—

The door hissed open.

Cold air erupted from inside like a living thing.

I didn't wait.

Didn't think.

I shoved past him and stepped into the room.

The world inside was wrong.

A frozen hell.

White. Blinding. Still.

Bodies were everywhere—preserved in mid-motion, mid-scream, mid-plea.

The temperature display blinked in harsh red letters:

-42°C

My breath hitched.

Then I saw her.

“Elena—!”

She was slumped against the far wall.

Frozen.

Her head tilted slightly, lips parted in a silent scream.

Teeth bared in a grimace that didn't belong to life.

Her skin—pale as marble—had taken on a blue-black tint at the edges.

Frost clung to her lashes, to her hair, to every fold of her dress.

Between her thighs lay a dark, frozen pool of blood, stark against the icy floor.

And something else—something far too small.

My heart stopped.

The world narrowed.

“No... no—no—no—”

I dropped to my knees beside her, my legs trembling.

“Elena!”

I reached down and gently nudged her shoulder with my hand, then shifted my weight to press the tip of my boot against her side for extra leverage.

Nothing.

No movement.

No breath.

No response.

“Elena—fuck—Elena, wake up!”

My voice broke.

Shattered.

I forced my gaze downward again, hands trembling as understanding clawed its way into my chest.

The lump in the blood wasn't just blood.

It was a child.

Tiny.

Still.

The skin already turning rigid under the freezing air, the color draining as frost began to creep across him.

His limbs were still curled in that fragile, newborn shape—except he hadn't cried.

Hadn't moved.

My chest seized.

Then my eyes caught something in her hand—her fingers, still clenched and stiff from the cold.

I reached for them, careful—terrified that if I moved too hard, I'd break her, snap what was left of her body like fragile ice.

Her grip resisted at first.

Then loosened slightly as I pried her fingers open.

Inside—

A folded piece of paper.

I unfolded it with shaking hands.

A medical record.

Stamped.

Dated.

Three weeks ago.

My eyes scanned the page faster and faster.

High-risk pregnancy. Preterm labor possible.

Absolute contraindications: extreme temperatures, physical stress, and cold exposure—especially in the third trimester.

The words slammed into me.

Again.

And again.

I'd thrown her into the one place she was explicitly forbidden to go.

The one place that could kill her... and the child she carries.

A sound tore from me—a broken roar of grief and rage, as the paper crumpled in my hand.

“Ciro—!” I barked, my voice raw. “Ambulance! Now! Get every fucking doctor we have!”

I didn't wait for an answer.

I moved—quickly, desperately, every second a fight against time.

I slid my arms under Elena's body, lifting her in a single motion.

She was rigid and ice-cold.

Her head lolled slightly against my shoulder, her hair brushing against my jaw like frozen silk.

Then—hesitating only for a fraction of a second—I bent again.

Careful. Terrified.

And gathered the tiny body from the blood-soaked floor.

He was lighter than anything I'd ever held.

Too light. Too still.

I pulled him close to my chest.

My arms tightened instinctively around both of them.

Mother and child.

Fragile. Frozen.

Like something that would shatter if I breathed too hard.

“Move!” I snapped at the soldiers who had appeared at the doorway, hands outstretched.

“Boss, let us—”

“No.” The word came out rough. Shredded. “Don’t touch them.”

They froze.

I pushed past them, staggering into the corridor.

My legs strained under the weight.

My arms burned.

But I didn’t slow down.

My lungs dragged in air that felt like knives, my breath coming in short, ragged pulls as I forced myself forward.

Every step felt like punishment.

Every second felt like too much.

“Stay with me,” I panted, voice breaking as I looked down at them, helpless in my arms.
“Both of you—stay with me.”

My grip tightened, careful not to hurt her, and I whispered through broken words, “I’m sorry... I’m so fucking sorry.”

The house felt endless.

Not in size—but in the way it seemed to stretch and twist around me, every corridor longer than it should be, every staircase rising like it was designed to punish anyone desperate enough to climb it.

My boots struck the marble hard.

Once.

Twice.

Again.

“Move—move—get out of the way!”

Servants and guards scattered as I barreled through, their faces blurring into shadows at the edges of my vision.

Someone shouted my name behind me. I didn't stop to listen.

My lungs burned.

My chest ached with every ragged inhale.

Stay with me.

That was the only thought left.

Just those three words.

I burst through the main doors.

Night air slammed into me—cold, sharp, real.

Two ambulances were already waiting on the gravel, their lights strobing red and blue across the estate like a warning.

Doors open. Engines running. The smell of fuel and antiseptic cutting through everything.

Paramedics and doctors rushed forward immediately.

“Mr. Orsini—over here—”

“Place them on the stretcher!”

“Vitals—check vitals!”

Their voices overlapped, urgent, controlled—but not panicked.

I hesitated for a second.

My arms locked tighter around them.

I couldn't—

I couldn't let go.

Not like this.

A woman stepped forward.

She moved differently from the others—calm, precise, her presence cutting through the chaos without raising her voice.

Her eyes locked on mine, unwavering and piercingly focused.

“Mr. Orsini,” she said firmly, but not unkindly, “we need to take them. Right now. Treatment has to start in the ambulance if they’re going to survive.”

A pause.

“Please.”

The word hit harder than anything else.

My throat closed.

Slowly—

I forced my arms to loosen.

They took Elena first.

Carefully. Gently.

Like she was made of something that could break just by being looked at wrong.

They laid her onto the stretcher and immediately began attaching equipment.

Monitors. Leads.

Oxygen mask.

Her skin—still frozen—barely reacted to the warmth of the mask pressed over her lips.

“Sinus rhythm?” one of the doctors asked.

“Barely. Hypothermic,” another replied. “Prepare for resuscitation.”

They moved with speed now—precise, practiced.

IV lines inserted.

Warm fluids pushed.

A defibrillator wheeled into place.

“Pads ready.”

“Charging.”

Inside the second ambulance—

The baby.

My son.

So small. So still.

A nurse lifted him into a portable incubator, her movements careful, almost reverent.

Then she immediately placed two fingers on his chest.

And began compressions.

One.

Two.

Three.

Rhythmic. Relentless.

Desperate.

My chest tightened.

Inside the other ambulance, two female doctors worked urgently over Elena, and then the doors slammed shut—first one, then the other.

Engines roared.

And just like that—

They were gone.

Two streaks of red and blue cutting through the darkness as the ambulances peeled away down the drive, sirens screaming into the night.

Silence rushed in behind them.

I stood frozen on the gravel, the taillights of the ambulances already swallowed by the night.

Gone.

Just like that.

My arms were still curved in the shape of holding them—like if I stayed like this long enough, something would rewind.

Reverse.

Undo what I'd done.

It didn't.

The cold seeped through my coat, through my shirt, into my bones. But that wasn't what chilled me.

It was the silence.

Heavy.

Final. Punishing.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to move.

Turned.

Ciro stood a few paces away, exactly where he always positioned himself—hands clasped behind his back, posture straight, expression controlled.

Watching.

Measuring everything.

But something in the way he looked at me now felt... different—not concern, not fear, but something closer to calculation.

“Release Renzo immediately,” I said, my voice rough, stripped of everything.

“I want both of you at the hospital—now.”

Ciro inclined his head without hesitation.

“Of course, boss.”

A pause.

Then, almost casually—

“You should check on Violet while you're there. She's in the same hospital. Doctors say she's just gone into labor.”

The words hit me, strange and out of place.

Since when did Ciro care this much about Violet?

He'd mentioned her twice in the last twenty minutes.

I almost asked, but the thought slipped past me like smoke.

There was no room for it—not while Elena and my son fought for life, not knowing if my own actions would doom them.

I turned away without another word.

Every step felt heavier than the last.

Then I accelerated—striding, almost running.

I reached the nearest car—a black Lamborghini Aventador—and tore the door open.

Dropped into the driver's seat without thinking.

My hands moved automatically—key, ignition, control.

The engine roared to life beneath me with a deep, violent snarl.

I reversed hard.

Tires screamed against the gravel.

The back end swung out sharply, spraying stones into the air like gunfire.

I corrected, slammed into drive, and shot forward.

The gates barely cleared before I floored it.

The road into Lombardy stretched ahead in long, blurred lines—sodium-orange lights streaking across black asphalt like fire bleeding into darkness.

I pushed the car faster.

Two hundred kilometers per hour.

Then more.

The engine screamed in protest.

I didn't care.

Traffic appeared in flashes—headlights, taillights, movement.

I weaved through it with inches to spare.

Horn blared. Brakes screeched.

I didn't look back.

Didn't slow down.

My foot stayed welded to the accelerator.

My heart slammed in time with the engine.

Everything was too fast.

Except my thoughts.

Those dragged.

"Elena, I should not do this to you again—not after all the pain I've already caused... God! Please stay alive... let me spend the rest of my life groveling at your feet."

The words repeated again.

And again.

And again.

"Please... just hold on. You deserve every bit of the goodness life can give."

My grip tightened on the wheel.

Let her live.

Let the baby breathe.

I'll trade anything.

Everything.

The thought was excruciatingly painful and absolute.

Because I'd realized something too late.

I had hurt her.

Too many times. Too deeply.

Each one sharper than the last.

Each one cutting deeper than I'd intended—or admitted.

And she had taken all of it.

She didn't deserve any of it.

She never had.

My jaw clenched hard enough to ache.

I should have listened.

The hospital came into view ahead—glass and steel glowing white against the dark skyline, a stark beacon cutting through the night.

I cut across two lanes without hesitation.

Tires screamed again as I swung into the underground garage.

The car fishtailed; I corrected just in time and slammed on the brakes.

The Lamborghini jerked to a stop—so close to the rear bumper of a silver Mercedes that I could see my reflection distorted in its paint.

An inch.

Maybe less.

If I'd been slower—It would've been a crash.

I didn't think about it.

I was already moving.

Out of the car.

Engine still idling behind me as I slammed the door shut and sprinted toward the elevators.

Security recognized me instantly.

Heads dipped.

Doors opened without a word.

I didn't take the elevator.

I took the stairs.

Two at a time.

Then three.

My lungs burned.

My pulse thundered in my ears.

Every step echoed like a countdown.

By the time I reached the private wing, my breathing was ragged, but I didn't slow.

Didn't stop.

I burst into the VVIP corridor and grabbed the first nurse I saw by the arm.

Not hard.

But firm enough that she froze immediately.

"Is my wife here already?" I demanded, voice tight. "Elena Orsini."

The nurse blinked, startled.

Then pointed.

"Yes, sir. VVIP Ward 2."

I released her and moved.

Fast.

Straight through the double doors.

And stopped dead.

Violet lay in the bed, sheets twisted around her swollen belly, her face slick with sweat and tears.

Her hands trembled as she clutched at the fabric, her breathing uneven, strained.

Paolo stood at her side, holding her hand tightly, his expression tense but controlled.

Three nurses hovered nearby.

Monitors beeped steadily.

Violet's eyes found mine the moment I stepped in.

Relief flooded her face.

"Vincenzo..." she whispered, her voice fragile. "I've been waiting for you..."

Her grip on the sheets tightened as a wave of pain hit her—her body tensing, breath hitching.

"Please—stay with me," she gasped. "I'm about to deliver..."

One of the nurses stepped forward immediately, her posture straight, voice calm in that practiced, clinical way that came from years of seeing chaos and knowing how to survive it.

"Mr. Orsini," she began carefully, "she's been in active labor for over an hour. She's progressing well."

Her eyes flicked—briefly—to Violet, then back to me.

"The presence of the partner often accelerates dilation and reduces perceived pain. Studies show laboring mothers with emotional support progress up to thirty percent faster in the second stage."

A pause.

"You being here could make all the difference."

Violet reached out toward me, her hand trembling.

"Vincenzo..." Her voice broke. "Please..."

Something inside me tightened.

My chest. My throat. My pulse.

Images of Elena, frozen and still in that cold room, slammed into me—and the tiny body cradled against my chest, so small, so lifeless, so fragile that even now, thinking about it made my grip instinctively tighten.

My mind wasn't in this room.

It was back there. In that frozen hell.

With her. With the baby.

With the consequences of what I'd done.

I turned on my heel and walked out.

No explanation. No hesitation.

Just—

Gone.

Behind me, I heard Violet's voice falter.

"Vincenzo—!"

But I didn't stop.

In the corridor, I moved fast.

My shoulder clipped someone as I turned a corner—hard enough that both of us staggered.

A doctor in green scrubs.

"Watch—!" he started.

I didn't let him finish.

I grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into the wall.

Hard.

The impact echoed.

His head hit once.

His breath left him in a sharp, choked sound.

“Where the fuck is my wife?” I snarled, dragging him closer. “Elena Orsini.”

The doctor’s eyes went wide with fear.

“I—Boss—she was brought in minutes ago—VVIP Ward 1—across—”

That was all I needed.

I released him immediately.

Didn’t wait. Didn’t look back.

I crossed the hall in three strides and shoved the door open.

It slammed against the wall.

Empty.

The bed was made.

Sheets pristine.

No monitors. No staff.

No Elena.

For a heartbeat, nothing registered. Just emptiness. Then—rage exploded.

My vision tunneled as I stared at the empty bed like it had personally betrayed me.

“Where is she—?” I breathed.

No answer.

My chest tightened.

My pulse surged.

I spun back into the corridor just as Ciro and Renzo approached from the far end, their steps quick but controlled.

“What ward is she in?” I barked, voice echoing down the hall. “Thirty seconds—and I’ll burn this hospital down if she’s not in my sight!”

Ciro stopped a few feet away.

His face—carefully blank.

“Boss...” he said, and something in his tone made my stomach drop. “She was taken again.”

Silence.

The words didn’t process at first.

“She was what?”

Ciro didn’t look away.

“Taken,” he repeated. “By the Spanish.”

For a moment—

The world went still.

Then it shattered.

My knees buckled slightly.

I caught myself against the wall before I could go down.

“No,” I said, the word torn straight from my chest. “No.”

My head shook once.

Violent. Denial. Refusal.

“I chased those ambulances myself,” I snapped. “I watched them leave. How—how the fuck did the Spanish get her out of here?”

My voice rose.

“This place is locked down tighter than a vault.”

I stepped forward, aggressive and deliberate.

“Since when do the Spanish have access to a hospital we control?”

Ciro met my gaze without flinching.

“The only explanation I can see is that one of the soldiers here is secretly working with them and helped take Elena.”

The words hit like a bullet.

I froze.

Renzo, silent and blank, stood slightly behind him.

“We’re already sweeping CCTV and pulling access logs. We’ll trace exactly how they got in,” *Ciro* chirped, calm but precise.

I dragged a hand over my face, breathing hard.

Thinking.

Too fast.

Too many things colliding at once.

“Is the baby alive?” I demanded suddenly, my voice tight. “The baby—was the baby taken too?”

Ciro answered without hesitation.

“No.”

A pause.

“The baby’s in the ICU.”

Another pause.

“Stable. But critical.”

Relief and grief crashed into me simultaneously, so violently that I staggered.

For a second—I thought I might be sick.

My hand pressed to the wall again.

Steadying myself.

Only one man would dare touch *Elena* again: *Matteo*.

Months ago, I’d taken both his legs after he kidnapped her.

I could have ended him then, but spared him for *Violet*.

Now, there would be no mercy.

I exhaled sharply and pulled out my phone, already dialing as I jerked my chin toward Ciro.

“Take me to the ICU. Now.”

Ciro turned without argument, leading the way.

Renzo followed behind us, silent.

The phone rang.

Once. Twice.

Then—

“Orsini.”

Matteo’s voice came through on the third ring.

Calm. Measuring. Wary.

“You are really bold—and damn near stupid—to come for my wife again,” I snarled, not bothering with pleasantries.

“At a time when she should have been under hospital care, you kidnapped her!”

“What?” Matteo’s voice came through the phone, sharp with genuine confusion.

“I didn’t kidnap anyone. I wouldn’t dare.”

A pause—measuring, careful.

“You spared my life last time,” he added. “I’m not stupid enough to throw that away.”

My grip tightened around the phone until the edges creaked under my fingers.

“I swear on everything I am,” I growled, every word threaded with lethal intent, “if you’re lying—”

“I’m not,” he cut in immediately. “And while we’re on the subject—listen carefully.”

Silence.

“I never touched Elena—let alone violated her,” Matteo continued. “Not during the kidnapping. Not ever.”

My jaw flexed.

“Vincenzo,” he said, quieter now, “she was kept in a locked room the entire time. She used her father as leverage—kept him alive so we couldn’t hurt her without losing our bargaining chip.”

A beat.

“If she’s pregnant, it’s not ours. Not mine. Not any of my men’s.”

The words landed like stones thrown into still water.

Heavy.

Disruptive.

Unavoidable.

And somewhere in the back of my mind—

A memory surfaced.

Elena.

Standing in front of me.

Saying the same thing.

Over.

And over.

“I was never violated.”

“I’ve only ever had sex with one person—and that person is you.”

“Vincenzo, listen to me, please... I’m not lying.”

And I had looked at her—

And called her a liar.

I exhaled sharply, my thoughts colliding.

But Elena had done twenty-one DNA tests, and they all came back negative—yet Matteo’s words didn’t feel like a lie.

The Spanish rarely lie; they tend to take responsibility.

I ended the call without another word.

My hand dropped to my side as we reached the ICU doors.

Double glass panels.

Frosted for privacy.

Inside—

Low lighting.

Soft beeping.

The quiet, mechanical rhythm of machines keeping something alive.

I stepped closer.

And froze.

In the center of the room stood a single incubator.

Glowing.

Surrounded by wires and tubes.

Inside—

My son.

So small.

So fragile it made my chest tighten just looking at him.

His skin was still faintly blue under the warming lights, but there was color now.

Not much. Just enough to suggest that something had shifted.

A knit cap covered his head.

His chest rose and fell in shallow, uneven movements.

Mechanical.

Supported.

Not yet his own.

A CPAP mask rested over his tiny face, soft plastic and tubing helping him breathe when his body couldn't do it alone.

An IV line ran into his arm—so small, so delicate it looked like it shouldn't even exist.

But it did.

And it mattered.

It meant he was alive.

A nurse stepped out just as we reached the glass doors, holding a chart.

I moved before she could pass.

Blocked her path.

"Tell me the baby will live." I said, my voice lower now—strained in a way that felt unfamiliar

She stopped immediately.

Met my eyes.

Calm. Steady.

"He's stable," she said. "Premature, but strong."

My breath hitched slightly.

"We'll keep him here a few more days—monitor his lungs, regulate his temperature, feed him through the tube until he's ready."

A pause.

"But yes," she added, softer now, "he'll be healthy."

Something in my chest loosened.

Just a fraction.

But enough.

Enough to let me breathe.

She started to move past.

Renzo stepped forward, touching my arm lightly—just enough to ground me.

“Excuse me, boss.”

I didn’t look at him.

But I didn’t stop him either.

He stepped aside and spoke quietly to the nurse, their voices low—too low for me to hear.

I caught only fragments, nothing clear.

Then he returned.

Ciro stood nearby, watching me closely now.

“It’s not Matteo who has Elena,” I said to Ciro, my eyes studying him with the suspicion that had been building based on his actions all this time.

“And Ciro...” I added, narrowing my eyes, “how did you know she was taken by the Spanish?”

Ciro didn’t respond immediately, and that alone made my pulse spike.

Ciro opened his mouth—

Paused.

Then closed it again.

“I just...” he said slowly, choosing each word with care, “suspected.”

Renzo let out a quiet, humorless breath from beside me.

“‘Suspected’?” he echoed, his voice cutting through the air like a blade.

“You sounded awfully sure for something you call a suspicion.”

The tension tightened instantly.

I shifted my gaze to Renzo.

He stood a step apart from us, posture rigid but controlled.

His face was hard, carved from something deeper than anger—something heavier.

His eyes, shadowed and tired, held a quiet storm I hadn't seen before.

He hadn't forgiven me.

For the execution order.

For sending him toward death.

I couldn't blame him.

"Renzo," *Ciro* snapped, stepping forward, "What are you implying? And for the record, the boss wasn't asking you."

I raised a hand.

"Enough."

My voice cut through both of them like a command and a warning.

They both stilled.

I looked between them—two men who had stood beside me for years.

Blood brothers in everything but name.

Men I trusted with my life.

Or thought I did.

"Can I still trust either of you?" I asked quietly.

The question landed like a weight between us.

Ciro reacted first.

His expression softened instantly—almost too quickly.

The perfect image of loyalty.

Wounded.

Devoted.

“Boss,” he said, voice low, almost pleading, “you know my loyalty has never wavered.”

A pause.

“I can’t speak for Renzo, though I think it’s clear where he stands.”

“He stole what matters to you most—your heirloom ring—and handed it to Elena so she could sell it to the Spanish for whatever they’re offering,” he added carefully.

“I have pictures of Renzo entering Elena’s room multiple times... I wouldn’t be surprised if their relationship runs deeper than it appears on the surface.”

Renzo didn’t react to Ciro’s heavy accusation—not even a flicker of concern crossed his face.

His gaze stayed fixed on the polished floor, jaw tight, hands loose but tense at his sides.

When he spoke, his voice was stripped of rank, loyalty, and pretense.

Flat.

Dangerous in its own way.

“Vincenzo, you don’t ask questions like that after setting my execution for forty-eight hours from now.”

Silence.

“You have no trust left in me—so what loyalty are we even talking about?”

The words hit harder than I expected.

I stepped closer.

Slowly.

Then reached out and clamped a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Renzo,” I said, quieter now. “Forget titles. Forget ranks.”

My grip tightened slightly.

“You and Ciro—you’re my brothers.”

His jaw flexed.

“I told him to bring you because I never truly believed you helped Elena steal that ring.”

A beat.

“Not for a second.”

Renzo’s head lifted slightly.

But his expression didn’t soften.

If anything, it hardened.

He shrugged my hand off with a sharp, deliberate motion.

“As long as you still think Elena planted it in her own bra,” he said coldly, “we have nothing to discuss.”

My eyes narrowed.

The room seemed to tighten around us.

“Why are you so certain it wasn’t her?” I asked.

Before Renzo could answer—

Ciro moved.

Smooth. Effortless.

Positioning himself slightly closer to me, voice dripping with concern.

“Boss,” he said cautiously, “should I lock him up again? I don’t like how he speaks to you, and the other soldiers shouldn’t see such open defiance.”

Renzo’s eyes flicked to him—sharp.

Ciro continued, undeterred.

“Ever since you ranked us and made me second-in-command—and him third—Renzo has always been bitter. He’s hated taking orders from me and may well have been scheming against you in secret.”

A small pause.

“He hates you, boss. A man like that... deserves death.”

Renzo didn't react.

Didn't defend himself.

Just stood there.

Silent. Unmoving.

Watching.

Before I could speak—

A nurse approached.

The same one Renzo had spoken to earlier.

She held a crisp sheet of paper in her hands.

“Here you go, Mr. Renzo,” she said, offering it to him.

He took it without a word.

Looked at it.

Then extended it toward me.

“Have a look.”

I hesitated.

Just for a second.

Then accepted it.

Careful.

As if the paper itself could burn me.

My eyes scanned the header first.

Paternity Analysis Report – Short Tandem Repeat (STR)

DNA Profiling

My pulse slowed.

Then spiked.

My gaze dropped lower.

The conclusion sat there.

Clean. Unambiguous. Undeniable.

The alleged father, Vincenzo Orsini, cannot be excluded as the biological father of the child.

A pause.

My breath caught.

The world seemed to tilt.

Then the final line.

Probability of paternity: 99.9999998%.

The numbers blurred for a moment.

Then sharpened.

Seared into my brain.

My grip tightened on the paper.

Not in disbelief.

In realization.

In something closer to shock than anger.

Matteo had just confirmed Elena had never been touched during those four weeks of captivity, and now a DNA test had swiftly backed it up.

Pain ripped through me, raw and relentless, as memories of every time I had rejected her, every time I had doubted her and her pregnancy, surged through me.

My chest tightened, my fists clenched—rage at myself mingling with a grief so sharp it felt like knives biting into my heart.

Renzo's voice cut through the silence, steady and controlled.

"Someone in this hospital has been forging every one of Elena's prenatal DNA results."

I looked up slowly.

He didn't flinch.

"Twenty-one falsified reports."

A pause.

"This," he said, nodding at the paper in my hand, "is the real one."

Another beat.

"Pulled directly from the lab server before it could be altered."

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 29[4,486 words]

Chapter 29

VINCENZO

A heavy, crushing silence fell over the room.

Ciro reached for the paper almost too quickly.

"Let me see, boss."

I handed it over.

He took it, scanning it with practiced eyes, his expression unreadable at first. Then—just for a moment—his jaw tightened.

A flicker.

Then it was gone.

He looked up again, calm as ever.

“Boss,” he said, voice steady, controlled, “this is fake.”

Renzo’s head lifted sharply.

Ciro continued, undeterred.

“Vincenzo isn’t the father. Twenty-one tests confirmed that already. This contradicts everything we know.”

“Twenty-one falsified tests,” Renzo corrected instantly.

His voice was sharp now—cutting.

He turned to Ciro fully, eyes blazing with something close to fury.

“And you’re the one who’s been working for Violet.”

Ciro’s expression shifted.

Renzo stepped forward.

“You sold your loyalty the moment you realized Elena would never be yours.”

The words hit like a blade.

Renzo didn’t stop.

“What a fucking shame,” he added coldly. “Where’s your conscience? The oath you swore to this family?”

Ciro’s face flushed.

Color rising.

His jaw clenched.

His fists tightened at his sides.

“Careful with your accusations, Renzo,” he said through clenched teeth. “You’re treading dangerous ground.”

The tension snapped tight between them.

But Renzo didn’t back down.

Not even slightly.

He reached into his pocket.

Pulled out his phone.

Tapped the screen a few times.

Then looked at me.

“I just sent you a video, boss.”

Ciro stiffened immediately.

His posture changed.

Subtle—but noticeable.

He took a half-step forward, as if trying to get a better look.

Trying to intercept.

I raised a hand.

Sharp. Warning.

He froze instantly.

My gaze didn’t leave him.

Then I lowered my hand.

And opened the message.

Pressed play.

The screen flickered to life.

At first—grainy.

Unsteady.

A hidden camera.

The angle showed the lower corridor outside the cold room.

Cold. Dim. Empty.

Then—

Ciro's voice.

Low. Close. Intimate. Confessional.

"Well, Elena. I tried to make you see it—from the very start. From the moment I saw you punch Renzo in the face outside that dressing room, I caught feelings for you... but I know it's forbidden. I know it's wrong to want Vincenzo's wife. I know you will never be mine... yet I crave you every single day."

My chest tightened.

"That's why I can't stop looking at you. Every lingering glance... every time I made sure you knew I was watching... hoping, just hoping, that maybe you'd see me. You never did."

My pulse slowed.

My jaw locked.

"I was also angry at you for not seeing how much I desperately wanted you. So when Violet came to me with her plan... I said yes easily—to put you on Vincenzo's worst side, to make it look like you had stolen his most precious treasure. In truth, I was the one who took it from his safe and handed it to Violet to pin on you. In the mafia world, betrayals are punished harshly—even if it's our own son, a wife, or an outsider. I knew it would work. Because if I couldn't have you... at least Vincenzo would never have you either."

The video ended.

Silence slammed into the room.

I didn't move.

I just stood there—staring at the blank screen as the truth rewired itself inside my head.

Then slowly—

I looked up.

Ciro had backed away.

Two steps.

Maybe three.

His face was pale.

Bloodless.

His eyes darted toward the exit.

Like he was already calculating escape.

Like he thought he could outrun this.

The realization hit harder than anything else that night.

This—

This was the man I had trusted.

More than Renzo.

More than anyone.

The man who had stood beside me through wars.

Through blood.

Through betrayal.

Through everything.

And he had been the one to betray me.

Not for power.

Not for money.

But for something far more dangerous.

Obsession. Possession.

Lust twisted into something ugly.

Sick.

His sudden concern for Violet. His insistence that Elena stay locked away. His certainty about the Spanish—before anyone else even spoke the word.

Everything clicked.

Everything.

With devastating clarity.

I stepped forward.

Slowly.

Controlled.

My voice dropped.

Quiet. Deadly.

“Ciro... you betrayed me.” I said, each word precise. “You desired my wife? How dare you.”

Ciro swallowed.

“Boss—”

But I didn’t let him finish.

“You conspired with Violet to frame her.”

Another step.

“You painted her as a traitor, knowing exactly how this family punishes traitors.”

“You watched me send her into that freezing room.”

“You wanted her dead—because if you couldn’t have her, I shouldn’t either...” I whispered, my chest aching with the weight of his betrayal.

I could never have imagined such treachery.

Ciro’s back hit the wall behind him.

“You stood outside that freezing room,” I hissed, “whispering your perverse confession while she struggled to give birth alone at minus forty-two degrees.”

Silence crushed the room as I moved again, slow and predatory.

Ciro didn’t move forward. He didn’t fight.

He stepped back, yielding to the inevitable.

“And Violet...”

The name came out like something rotten on my tongue.

“I’ve always suspected her.”

Ciro tensed harder against the wall, shoulders pressed flat as though he could merge into it and disappear.

There was nowhere left for him to go.

No angle. No escape.

The realization hit me again—harder this time.

Elena hadn’t lied.

Not once.

Every word, every desperate plea... all true.

And I had refused to believe her.

Almost killed her for it.

Killed my own child.

Renzo’s voice cut through the sterile hum.

“And Violet never had any heart disease.”

The words landed cleanly.

Unflinching.

“She’s been lying. As you probably suspected.”

A cold pause.

“This hospital... it’s all compromised.”

His gaze flicked briefly toward the glass doors, then back to me.

“If you want real answers, use another facility. One that isn’t in Violet’s pocket.”

Silence followed.

I didn't question him.

Didn't need to.

The truth had been screaming at me for months—through inconsistencies, through too-perfect timing, through reports that never quite sat right.

I had simply chosen to ignore it.

My mind drifted—dragged back, unwilling.

Violet's first visit after the wedding.

The way she had stumbled into my study.

Clutching her side.

Tears streaming down her face, bleeding, as she cried out Elena's name again and again before finally passing out.

I could have checked the CCTV to know for certain—but I chose not to.

Because she had cried.

Because I believed what I wanted to believe.

I had punished Elena for it.

I could still hear my own voice that day.

Cold. Cruel.

Threatening to have her uterus removed—

The memory hit like a blade twisting deeper.

That single threat had driven Elena to try and escape.

All because I refused to see the truth.

My jaw tightened.

Violet would pay for every lie.

Every tear.

Every calculated move.

So would Ciro.

The thought settled into something colder than anger.

Something final.

I shifted my gaze.

And there he was.

Ciro.

Sweat glistening at his temple despite the hospital's cold air.

His eyes darted between Renzo and me like a cornered animal searching for a way out.

There was none.

"Vincenzo," he said carefully. "I'm the only one who knows where Elena is. Kill me now, and she's lost to you forever."

The words struck harder than any bullet.

Pain shot through my chest, raw and immediate, cutting deeper than anger, deeper than betrayal.

Renzo exhaled quietly beside me.

I couldn't look at him.

Because the shame of what I had done sat heavy in my chest.

I had accused him.

Trusted Ciro over him.

Ordered his execution without proof.

Without hesitation.

"Renzo..." I said quietly.

The words felt foreign.

Heavy.

“I’m sorry.”

He didn’t respond immediately.

Then—

A small, bitter half-smile crossed his face.

“Don’t,” he said simply.

His voice was calm and detached.

“I’m not the one who needs your apology.”

A pause.

His eyes flicked toward the ICU doors.

“Once Elena is safe—if she’s even safe—I will be gone from the family, no longer a part of it.”

That hit harder than anything else.

“You know the rules,” he said, voice heavy. “A family that brands me a traitor cannot keep me, even though I’ve never been one.”

“I could have been executed for nothing—and the truth would have died with me.”

My chest sank.

Two of my most trusted men will be gone.

One marches toward certain death.

The other... is leaving for another family.

I dragged my gaze back to Ciro.

“Where is my Elena?”

Ciro’s eyes flicked toward the corridor door—calculating.

Planning.

Still hoping.

Pathetic.

“It’s not like you don’t know how this works. Even if you somehow run out of this room, you’ll be found—and killed. So stop acting like a child and own up to what you did.”

“Your death is inevitable. The only question is how painful I make it. Tell me where Elena is, and maybe... I’ll consider making it quick.”

His breathing quickened, and then—his knees gave out in complete surrender.

He dropped to the floor with a dull thud.

Hands raised instantly.

Desperate.

“Vincenzo... I’ve betrayed you. No words, no apology will ever earn your forgiveness. But please—send me away,” he begged, trembling. “Anywhere. Banish me. Take it all. Just... don’t kill me.”

“I shouldn’t have lusted after your wife.”

His head bowed.

Even now—he chose that word.

Lust.

“Even if you hated her,” he added quickly, desperate now, “she was yours.”

A pause.

“I know that now.”

My control snapped.

“I know where your parents live. Where your two sisters live—in Naples. None of them will be spared if Elena dies. For the last time—” I growled, “where is my wife?”

The silence shattered.

Eight guards burst through the double doors at the far end of the corridor—boots striking tile, weapons drawn, movements sharp and coordinated.

It was Renzo who had ordered them here.

“Hold him.”

His command cut through the space instantly.

The guards swarmed Ciro in seconds.

Rough hands grabbed his arms, pinned him, twisted him down.

Ciro struggled once—

Then stopped.

Realizing there was no escape.

His chest rose and fell rapidly as he swallowed hard.

Then—

His voice cracked.

“She’s at Ironveil Warehouse. I had her taken there.”

The words landed like a detonated charge in my chest.

Everything inside me went still.

Ice replaced blood.

“You sent a woman who’d just given birth—” my voice dropped, dangerously quiet, “—in freezing agony—to that place?”

Ironveil Warehouse.

The name alone carried weight.

Ironveil Warehouse is one of our oldest properties.

Rusted steel. Leaking roofs. Decay in every corner.

A place we used when we wanted bodies to disappear.

Not to heal. Not to survive.

To vanish.

He had lied—claiming the Spanish had taken her, when in truth he was the one who had sent her to the worst place imaginable.

“Lock him up,” I said without looking at Renzo.

My voice was flat.

“I’m going to find my wife.”

Renzo nodded once.

The guards tightened their grip on Ciro, dragging him away as his voice echoed faintly behind us—pleading, breaking, meaningless now.

I was already moving.

I tore through the hospital corridors like a force of nature.

Shoulder checking anyone who got in my way.

Orderlies shouted after me.

“Sir—slow down!”

I didn’t slow.

Didn’t answer.

Didn’t care.

The elevator would have been too slow.

I took the stairs.

Three at a time.

Boots slamming against concrete.

Echoes bouncing off the walls.

My breathing steady.

But inside—

Everything was unraveling.

By the time I burst through the exit doors, the night air hit me like a slap.

I didn't pause.

The Lamborghini was already waiting.

I reached it, yanked the door open, and dropped into the driver's seat.

The engine roared to life the moment I turned the key.

Deep. Ferocious.

I slammed it into reverse.

Hard.

The car jerked back—too fast.

Metal scraped.

A sharp crunch echoed as the rear bumper collided with a parked white Porsche.

Then again—this time a matte-black Ferrari.

Alarms blared instantly.

Lights flashing.

A valet in a red vest sprinted toward me, waving his arms wildly.

“Hey! Sir! Stop! You need to—insurance—!”

His voice faded into nothing.

I didn't hear him.

I floored it.

The tires screamed.

Rubber burned.

And the Lamborghini shot forward like a missile breaking loose.

The world blurred.

The forty-minute drive became ten.

I pushed the car to its limits.

Traffic became irrelevant.

The warehouse appeared out of the darkness like something abandoned by time itself.

Squat. Broken.

Rust-streaked.

Windows either boarded or shattered.

I slammed the brakes. The car stopped.

The engine hissed, still hot, not fully settled, as I stepped out.

Already moving.

Running.

Two guards stood at the main entrance.

I recognized them immediately.

Former soldiers.

Ciro's recruits.

They raised their weapons—but too slowly.

I fired two suppressed shots, and they dropped before they could react.

I didn't look at them.

I kicked the door open.

Glock raised.

"Elena!"

My voice echoed through the warehouse.

Off metal. Off concrete.

Off silence.

The smell hit me first.

Oil. Rust. Old blood.

Leftover death.

To the left—

Crumpled shipping containers.

Twisted rebar.

Jagged shadows stretching across the floor.

To the right—

A rusted catwalk leading to a second level.

The silence was wrong.

Like the building itself was holding its breath.

I moved forward.

Gun steady.

Eyes sweeping every corner.

Every shadow.

Every possible threat.

My heart hammered against my ribs—

But my hands stayed steady.

Because now—

There was only one thing that mattered.

Finding her.

Before it was too late.

Then I heard faint footsteps above me.

Voices followed—low at first, then clearer.

Laughter.

The kind that came from men who believed they were safe. Untouchable. Comfortable in their filth.

I moved.

Slowly.

Boots pressed lightly against the metal grating of the stairs.

Each step measured.

No wasted noise. No warning.

At the top, I paused just before the landing.

A door stood half-open.

Yellow light spilled out in a weak, flickering glow.

Along with it—

The sharp, sour stink of cheap whiskey, stale cigarettes, and sweat.

Men who didn't know fear.

I listened.

Four voices.

Too relaxed. Too careless.

I exhaled once.

Then kicked the door open.

The door slammed against the wall with a violent crack.

Inside—

Four men around a folding table.

Bottles scattered across its surface.

Cards half-spread.

Smoke curling lazily through the air.

They froze mid-laugh.

One had a cigarette hanging from his lips.

Another had his hand on a bottle.

All of them looked at me.

For a split second—

Confusion.

Then realization.

Then fear.

I didn't give them time to react.

The four men fell under my shots.

Each bullet found its target before the first man could even form a word.

Silence crashed into the room.

I stepped inside.

Gun raised. Eyes sharp.

I moved past the bodies without hesitation, stepping over them as if they were nothing more than debris.

The room itself was small.

Cramped. Messy.

Just a temporary holding space.

I checked corners.

Behind the table. Under the windows.

Nothing.

Clear.

But I didn't relax.

Not even for a second.

Something felt off.

I exited the room and faced the second door.

Locked.

I stopped in front of it and listened.

And then—

I heard it. A faint rustle.

Movement.

Behind the door.

My grip tightened on the Glock.

There it was. Something.

Or someone. Alive.

I kicked the door hard.

The hinges gave way instantly.

The door burst open with a violent crack, slamming inward and crashing against the wall.

Inside—

Piles of discarded tarps and torn clothing rose like burial mounds around me, swallowing sound.

The room smelled of mildew and old motor oil.

The air itself felt thick, stagnant, as if the place had been sealed off from the world and forgotten.

I moved deeper into the room, Glock raised in a two-handed grip, barrel sweeping in slow, deliberate arcs.

My eyes tracked every shadow, every angle, every possible place a man could hide.

Every breath I took tasted like dust.

And something else.

Regret.

Then—

A sound.

A faint scrape.

Fabric on fabric.

Behind the tallest heap of rags to my right.

I stopped instantly.

Every muscle in my body locked into place.

I listened.

Nothing.

The silence stretched.

Too long.

Then—

Movement.

Sudden. Violent.

Before I could even pivot—

A body slammed into me from behind.

Arms like steel cables locked around my throat, crushing inward with brutal precision.

A forearm pressed hard against the side of my neck, digging into the carotid sinus—targeting the exact nerve cluster just beneath the jaw.

A trained move.

My vision exploded into white. Stars fractured across my sight.

My knees buckled immediately.

The world tilted.

Black creeping in at the edges.

But instinct took over.

I dropped my weight forward, forcing momentum to work in my favor, dragging the attacker with me just enough to break their balance.

My left hand shot up instantly, fingers clamping around their wrist.

I twisted—hard.

Bone grinding against bone.

At the same time, I drove my right elbow backward into their ribs with full force.

A sharp grunt of pain broke behind me.

The pressure around my throat loosened—just slightly.

But it was enough.

I inhaled.

A single breath.

Then I spun.

Breaking the hold.

And without hesitation—

I drove my palm upward into their chin.

Teeth snapped together with a sharp, sickening clack.

I followed immediately with a knee to the midsection—hard enough to fold them completely.

Then I hooked an arm around their torso, lifting with raw strength—

And threw them.

Their body slammed into the concrete with a heavy, echoing impact.

Air burst from their lungs in a pained gasp.

Silence fell again.

I dropped to one knee instantly.

Glock raised. Barrel centered.

Finger steady on the trigger.

And then—

I saw her.

“Elena...”

The word left my lips before I could stop it.

She lay on her back, chest rising and falling in uneven, shallow breaths.

Her dark hair was plastered to her forehead, damp with sweat.

Her hospital gown—torn at the shoulder—hung loosely from her frame, stained with dried blood and traces of amniotic fluid.

Her skin was pale.

Bruises marked her throat.

But her eyes—

Those eyes.

Storm-gray. Burning.

Alive.

They locked onto mine with something raw.

Hatred.

She didn't speak at first.

Just stared.

Breathing hard.

I lowered the gun slowly.

My hands were shaking.

For the first time in years.

I holstered it without breaking eye contact.

Without looking away from her.

She tried to push herself up.

Her arms trembled violently.

She barely got halfway before collapsing back against the wall with a weak, pained exhale.

One hand instinctively moved to her stomach—

But there was nothing there.

Empty. Deflated.

Her fingers curled slightly against the fabric, like she was trying to hold onto something that was already gone.

Her voice came out hoarse.

"Where..." she rasped, struggling to breathe through the words, "where is my baby?"

A pause.

Her voice cracked harder.

"Is he dead?"

The question hit harder than anything I had faced that night.

I swallowed.

Once.

Then forced the words out.

“He’s alive.”

Her head jerked up instantly.

The shift in her expression was immediate.

Confusion. Shock. Desperation.

“He’s in the ICU,” I added, my voice quieter now.

“Breathing on his own. Small... but fighting. The doctors say he’ll make it.”

For a fraction of a second—

Her entire face crumpled.

Relief hit her so hard it looked like pain.

Like she didn’t know how to process the fact that something she thought was lost—

Was still alive.

But it didn’t last.

Just as quickly—

The mask returned.

She pushed herself upright again, using the wall for support.

Her body trembled as she fought to stand.

Her legs wobbled beneath her weight.

She almost collapsed—

But caught herself at the last second.

“So what now?” she asked.

Her voice was ice-cold, each word laced with venom.

“Will you lock me up again?” she asked, her tone dangerously calm. “Throw me into another freezing room and watch while life slowly drips out of me?”

She took one deliberate step closer, eyes burning with quiet fury.

“After all, that seems to be your particular area of expertise.”

The words cut deep.

I advanced toward her, every step a weight, until my legs could carry me no more.

I dropped in front of her—hard—kneecaps slamming into the cracked concrete with a dull, punishing impact.

Pain shot up through my legs, sharp and grounding, but I didn’t care.

My head bowed.

For a man like me—

Kneeling meant something.

Everything.

“Elena...”

My voice broke on her name.

I reached for the hem of her dress but stopped just short of touching her. I didn’t deserve that.

“Forgive me,” I whispered, the words barely making it past the knot in my throat.

She just stared down at me.

“I know ‘sorry’ is pathetic. It’s nothing after everything I’ve done to you. Every single time I hurt you, every night I left you crying, every way I broke your heart and your trust... I see it all now. And I hate myself more than you could ever hate me.”

I pressed my forehead to the floor, shoulders shaking.

“I don’t ask for mercy. I don’t even ask you to love me again. Just... please. Let me spend the rest of my life trying to make this right.”

“Punish me. Break me if you need to. I’ll take every bit of pain you want to give me, Elena. Gladly. Just... don’t throw me away completely.”

“Please. I’m begging you. I’ll get on my knees every single day for the rest of my life if that’s what it takes.”

“Just... don’t leave me without even the smallest chance of your forgiveness.”

Her expression remained distant and unreadable — the face of a woman who had already cried every tear she possessed.

I lifted my head slightly from the floor, but I couldn’t look her in the eyes.

“I heard Ciro’s confession outside the cold room...”

My voice broke again.

“I heard everything. How he’s been lusting after you for years. How he got angry that you never noticed him... so he teamed up with Violet to destroy you.”

“They set you up with the ring. They made it look like you stole my heirloom.”

“And Matteo... he confirmed it. Neither he nor his men ever violated you. Our baby—our son—has always been mine.”

I clutched my chest like I could physically stop my heart from shattering.

“All this time... you were telling the truth.”

“Every single time you begged me to believe you, every time you cried and swore you were innocent... I refused to listen.”

“I let Violet secretly sabotage the DNA tests. I chose doubt over you. I humiliated you. I broke you. I treated the woman carrying my child like she was trash.”

I crawled forward on my knees until I was right at her feet.

“God, Elena... the way I treated you... it makes me sick. The memories of how coldly I looked at you, how I spoke to you, how I abandoned you when you needed me most — it’s killing me.”

“I don’t know how you can even stand to look at me right now. I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

My forehead touched the floor again, right beside her feet.

“Please... forgive me.”

“I know I have no right to ask. I know I’ve caused you pain that can never be undone. But I’m begging you, Elena. From the deepest, most broken part of me — forgive me.”

“Even if it’s only a little. Even if you can never love me again. Just... don’t let me live the rest of my life knowing I destroyed the best thing I ever had.”

“I’ll do anything. Anything you want. Just... forgive me.”

Her breathing hitched once.

“If I had died in that room,” she said slowly, her voice quiet but razor-sharp, “who would you have apologized to? My corpse... or our baby’s?”

I felt the words like a knife sliding between my ribs. My breath caught, and for a second I couldn’t speak.

“I don’t know...” I choked out, my voice raw and trembling. “God, Elena... I don’t know how I would have lived with it. I don’t know if I could have.”

Her eyes softened—just slightly.

“When I pulled you out of that cold room,” I continued, my voice dropping low and trembling, “when I saw you... frozen... barely breathing... still clutching our child... I thought I’d killed you both. I thought I’d destroyed the only family I’ll ever have.”

My throat tightened painfully.

I had to force the next words out.

“Because I was too proud. Too blind... too fucking stupid to listen to you. Too arrogant to believe your words mattered. I refused to see that you were never like your father — that you weren’t a Vasquez. I was wrong. So horribly wrong.”

I lifted my head and finally met her gaze directly, my eyes burning with shame.

A bitter, broken breath escaped me.

“Because it was easier,” I whispered, my voice cracking with agony, “so much easier than admitting I’d married a woman I didn’t deserve...”

I paused, the weight of the truth crushing me.

“...and then treated her like she was nothing.”

A single tear slipped down her cheek.

The sight of it broke something deep inside me.

I reached out with shaking hands but stopped short of touching her, terrified she would pull away.

She didn't wipe it away.

Didn't flinch.

Her hand drifted again to her stomach.

Instinctive. Protective.

Even though there was nothing left there to hold.

“Your apologies mean nothing, Vincenzo,” she said, her voice steady but exhausted, drained of all fire.

“You are heartless, all the way through. You never gave me even an inch of trust. Not one single chance to defend myself.”

“All because I had no family, no one to stand behind me. You took revenge on me for what my father did to you years ago... and I didn't even know about it. I was innocent, and you still punished me.”

She let out a tired, bitter breath.

“Your guilt means nothing to me. And if it truly means something to you... then let me go, Vincenzo. Let me go.”

The words stabbed deep.

I stayed on my knees, looking up at her with raw desperation.

“I'm not asking you to stay,” I said immediately, my voice thick with pain.

“If you want to leave — take our child and go. I'll make sure no one ever touches you again. Money. Passports. A new identity. Whatever you need. I'll sign the divorce papers right now if that's what you want. I'll let you walk away.”

I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“But if you’ll let me...”

My voice dropped, soft and broken. “I want the chance to earn the right to stand beside you. Not as the man who once owned you. Not as the man who broke you. But as the man who finally sees you. Who sees your pain. Who sees how much better you are than me.”

The space between us felt painfully thin.

Fragile.

Like it could shatter with one wrong word.

I lowered my head again, forehead nearly touching the floor.

“I know I don’t deserve that chance. I know I’ve lost every right to ask for it. But I’m still begging, Elena. If there’s even the smallest part of you that believes I could become someone worthy... let me prove it. If not, I’ll keep my promise. I’ll set you free. Just tell me what you want, and it’s yours. Even if it destroys me.”

“Then arrange the divorce papers,” she said, her voice cold and exhausted.

“Arrange a new identity for me. You should have to live the rest of your life knowing you will never get back the woman you treated worse than a slave.”

The words carved into me like broken glass.

“I... I will,” I whispered, barely able to get the words out.

My voice was hoarse, defeated.

She held my gaze for a long, heavy moment, her eyes filled with a weariness that crushed me.

“Now take me to our son,” she said quietly, her voice trembling just slightly. “I need to see him. I need to know he’s still breathing.”

“Okay,” I answered, the pain in my chest making it hard to speak. “Come with me.”

But she didn’t move.

Instead, she slowly slid down the wall, her back scraping against the concrete until she collapsed onto the filthy floor.

She drew her knees tightly to her chest, arms wrapped around herself, shaking as if the cold from that room had never left her bones.

She looked so small.

So utterly broken.

“You almost killed me...” she whispered, the words barely audible.

“I’ll never forget that for as long as I live.”

The statement shattered what remained of me.

Every cruel word I’d ever spoken to her, every time I’d locked her away, every moment I failed to believe her — it all came rushing back at once, choking me with agony.

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

Just a broken sound.

She sobbed once—two short, jagged sounds—then swallowed hard and wiped her face with the back of her hand. When she spoke again her voice was almost gone.

“Help me stand,” she whispered, so softly it hurt.

I approached her with extreme care, like a man walking toward something infinitely fragile that might shatter at the slightest touch.

Slowly. Reverently.

I crouched beside her, sliding one arm gently behind her back and the other beneath her knees.

She felt terrifyingly light in my arms as I lifted her.

“I’ve got you,” I murmured against her hair, my voice cracking with unshed tears. “I’ve got you, Elena.”

Her body, frail and trembling, leaned into mine instinctively.

She didn’t fight it. She was too exhausted to resist anymore.

For the first time in what felt like forever, she simply let herself be held.

I adjusted my grip, one arm firm beneath her knees, the other supporting her back, and began walking toward the shattered doorway.

Every step felt heavy with guilt.

Then she shifted slightly in my arms.

Her head came to rest against my shoulder.

Just for a second.

The small gesture sent a sharp ache through my chest.

It was the closest thing to trust I had felt from her in years.

Almost normal.

Almost like we were any other husband and wife leaving a room together.

But we weren't.

We never would be again.

I kept walking, saying nothing, afraid that if I spoke, the fragile moment would shatter.

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 30[4,810 words]

Chapter 30

ELENA

I had passed out in that industrial tomb, certain the freezing darkness had claimed both me and my child.

Waking in this warehouse had not felt like salvation.

It felt like a second punishment.

The air in this place smelled of rust, oil, and decay.

My stomach was flat now—unnaturally so—and the absence terrified me more than the pain.

No weight. No movement. No soft, relentless reminders that I was carrying life inside me.
Just... emptiness.

And pain.

The dull, relentless throb of afterpains.

The sting in my chest. The raw ache in my throat.

The silence where my baby should have been.

No kicks. No pressure.

Only the unbearable question clawing at my mind—

Is he alive?

I had hidden behind the tallest pile of crumpled papers and discarded clothing, every instinct I had left screaming at me to survive.

To stay hidden. To stay alert.

If anyone came through that door, I would fight.

Use whatever strength remained in these exhausted limbs.

Because weakness here meant death.

I had not survived everything I had endured just to die like this.

I was CIA-trained once.

Even broken, I could still be lethal.

And when I finally spotted a figure in the dim room, desperation overtook me.

I lunged forward, swinging wildly in a frantic attempt to knock the person unconscious.

But he was far more skilled than I expected.

In one fluid motion, he deflected my attack, twisted free, and sent me sprawling across the floor with a powerful kick.

Only then did the dim light reveal his face.

Vincenzo.

Shock didn't even begin to describe what slammed into me.

The man who had heartlessly thrown me and our son into a freezing room on the word of his mistress wouldn't hesitate to leave me to die in this warehouse if it suited him.

Why would he care now?

I had watched him beg for forgiveness earlier, his voice raw and desperate, as though absolution were something I could simply hand over.

As if I could erase the cruel words he'd hurled at me, the humiliation he'd forced me to endure in front of his mistress, the threats, the punishments.

As if I could forget it all and open my arms to him again.

No.

A man like that deserved nothing from me.

I had seen how broken he looked, yet I felt nothing.

Or at least, I told myself I felt nothing.

As far as I was concerned, his hatred for me was now perfectly mutual.

And yet... the truth was far more painful.

I had loved Vincenzo since the day we met as children in that hidden cave.

That love had never died, not even after he married me so abruptly, not even when I tried desperately to kill it.

No matter how hard I fought, the feeling refused to be quenched.

That was why every harsh word and every cruel action had cut so deeply.

But he had finally pushed me past my limit.

He claimed he punished me for what my father did to him.

As if that could ever justify the pain he put me through.

Now, hours later, I lay curled against his chest like a woman who still trusted him, my body betraying me even as he carried me out of the warehouse.

His arms were strong and careful around me, but I refused to let that soften the ice in my heart.

His breath hitched.

My fingers curled slightly into the rough fabric of his shirt, grounding myself against the storm of conflicting emotions crashing inside me.

He exhaled shakily, the sound raw and unsteady.

None of it moved me.

All I wanted was the divorce papers... and the chance to walk away from him forever.

“Elena,” he said, his voice low and rough, as if the words were being dragged out of him. “Stay. Please.”

He swallowed hard, the muscle in his jaw flexing.

When he spoke again, the firmness had returned, but this time it was laced with something raw.

“I will treat you better. I swear it. If you stay, I’ll give you everything—my name, my empire, my life. All of it.”

His grip on me tightened, almost possessive, even as his tone fractured.

“I trusted the wrong people. Ciro. Violet. My own fucking pride. I let them poison everything... I let them convince me you were the enemy when the truth was right in front of me the whole time.”

He exhaled shakily.

“I’m begging you, Elena. Don’t leave me. Let me prove I’m not the monster I’ve become. Give me one chance—just one—to show you the man I should have been.”

The warehouse seemed to hold its breath around us.

I let the silence stretch between us, thick and heavy.

Then I tested him, pushing just enough to see the truth.

I curled deeper into his arms, my voice deceptively soft.

“If you really want me to stay... if you want me to believe you can be a better man, then start by bringing me Violet’s head.”

I already knew he would never do it.

She meant more to him than anything—more than me, more than our child, more than his own soul.

If Violet still lived inside him, then every apology he’d uttered was nothing but empty noise.

Vincenzo didn’t even hesitate.

“That’s the easiest thing you could ask of me,” he said, his voice almost gentle.

There was no anger, no edge.

“I never loved Violet.”

I barked out a bitter laugh. “You keep saying that, yet you listened to her every word. You protected her. You showed her love. That is love, Vincenzo. You just refuse to admit it.”

“I was blind,” he admitted quietly. “Or maybe I didn’t want to see.”

His voice cracked. “I caused you unimaginable pain. I treasured a liar over my own wife. I threatened your body, your freedom... your life.”

The admission hung in the air, heavy and unforgivable.

My eyes grew heavy with exhaustion and a bone-deep weariness that made holding onto my anger feel impossible.

My hands trembled as I pressed them against his chest, still cradled in his arms.

“I just... I can’t wait to see my son,” I whispered.

We were nearly at the final exit of the warehouse when Vincenzo suddenly stopped.

He lowered me gently to my feet, his movements careful and controlled, then drew his Glock with practiced ease.

The sharp metallic click of the chamber being checked sliced through the silence.

“There are still men around,” he said, positioning his body in front of mine.

“Stay behind me, okay?”

I nodded wearily and slipped behind him, knowing I had nothing left.

If they attacked now, I wouldn’t be able to fight.

Every drop of strength had been bled out of me.

“Are they Spanish?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper as he scanned the shadows.

“No. They’re my soldiers,” he replied, jaw tight.

“But they were recruited by Ciro. The ones who locked you up here followed his orders. They’ve betrayed the family, just like he did.”

His jaw clenched harder.

Then everything exploded.

A figure emerged from the darkness and fired at the same moment Vincenzo did.

Vincenzo grabbed me and dragged me behind cover as two more gunshots cracked through the air.

He groaned sharply as we hit the ground.

Without wasting a second, he pulled out his phone and dialed Renzo, voice strained with pain. “Renzo—backup, now. Ironveil warehouse.”

That was when I saw it.

Blood was soaking through his left side, just below the ribs.

He had been trying to hide it from me.

“Oh my God— you’ve been shot!” Panic ripped through me like fire.

“I’ll be fine,” he groaned, pressing a hand to the wound.

But the sight of his blood triggered a memory so vivid it nearly knocked the breath out of me.

Years ago, in that same hidden cave where we met as children, he had been bleeding then too.

Without thinking, I had torn a strip from my own clothes to stop the bleeding.

I did the same now.

I ripped the bottom of my hospital gown with steady hands, folded the fabric, and pressed it firmly against his wound, trying to staunch the flow.

“Elena, don’t...” His voice was weak. “I deserve to die.”

“You are the father of my child,” I said fiercely, refusing to pull away. “So no—you do not get to die. Our son needs a father.”

Another gunshot rang out.

I snatched the Glock from his weakening grip and peered carefully around the edge of our cover.

My training kicked in instinctively.

I scanned the shadows with cold precision—two men crouched behind the large metal doors on the left, and two more positioned on the upper balcony, partially hidden behind the rusted railings.

I pulled back quickly.

“There are only four of them,” I said, breathing hard. “We can take them out.”

Blood was now dripping steadily from Vincenzo’s wound onto the concrete floor.

He tried to snatch the gun from my hands, but I held on tightly.

“Elena... give it to me.” Vincenzo rasped.

“This is my fight. Let me die saving you—if that’s what it takes.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” I snapped, refusing to let go.

“Your death doesn’t fix anything. It doesn’t profit me, and it sure as hell doesn’t profit our son. I need you alive, Vincenzo. I need you to suffer for every scar you put on me.”

Before he could argue, I risked everything.

I peeked around the edge of the crates and calculated the angles in a heartbeat.

The two men crouched behind the large metal doors on the left were exposed from this side.

In one fluid motion, I rolled out of cover, aimed, and fired twice in rapid succession.

Both shots hit true.

The men dropped instantly.

But the other two on the upper balcony had already spotted me.

They opened fire sporadically, bullets chewing into the concrete around me.

I was completely exposed.

A bullet whizzed past my neck—so close I felt the hot sting as it grazed the skin, missing my artery by less than an inch.

Suddenly, a heavy body slammed into me, driving me to the ground and covering me completely.

Vincenzo's frame pressed me down protectively as bullets continued to rain.

I felt the sickening impacts as rounds tore into his flesh, one after another.

I struggled beneath him, trying to push him off, but he was dead weight, as if he had already accepted this as the end.

"No!" I screamed.

When the gunfire finally paused, I shoved him off me with all the strength I had left and rolled to the side.

The last two men had stepped out from behind the rusted railings, thinking they had won.

I raised the Glock and fired twice more—clean, precise shots.

Both dropped.

I scrambled back to Vincenzo.

He lay sprawled on the filthy concrete, blood pooling beneath him in a widening crimson lake.

It soaked his shirt, his jacket, his hair.

Blood streaked down his face and neck, coating his hands where he had tried to hold pressure on his wounds.

His entire body was drenched in it.

When he had thrown himself over me, the warm, sticky blood had transferred to my clothes and skin as well.

I was now covered in it—my hands, my torn shirt, my arms—all slick and red with his blood.

I dropped to my knees beside him, heart hammering.

“Vincenzo, why the hell did you do that?” My voice cracked. “I could have taken them out...”

“No...” His breathing was shallow, barely there, each word a struggle.

His eyes fluttered, fighting to stay open.

“No, you... you wouldn’t have made it...”

I tapped his cheek urgently.

“Vincenzo, stay with me! You are not dying on me. Do you hear me? Never!”

His eyes opened again, glassy and unfocused.

A weak, pained smile touched his lips.

“I took... all the bullets for you,” he whispered. “It satisfies me... that I could sacrifice my life... for yours.”

“Vincenzo, please... don’t do this. Don’t die.”

“I deserve it,” he murmured, his eyelids drifting shut.

Just then, the screech of several cars braking hard echoed through the warehouse.

Footsteps thundered in.

Renzo led the team.

They moved with military precision.

Renzo’s face paled the moment he saw Vincenzo lying motionless in a pool of blood, eyes closed, chest barely rising.

“Fuck—get him up! Pressure on the wounds, now!” he barked.

Two men immediately dropped beside Vincenzo, pressing hard on the multiple bullet holes while a third prepared to lift him.

Renzo himself knelt, checking for a pulse, his movements fast and professional, but the urgency in his voice betrayed his fear.

“He’s still breathing—barely. Move! Hospital, now!”

They lifted Vincenzo’s limp body with careful speed and rushed him toward the waiting vehicles.

Renzo spun back to me.

His eyes widened when he saw me kneeling there, covered head to toe in Vincenzo’s blood, frozen in shock.

“Elena—” His voice was tight with worry.

He crossed the distance in three strides, gently but firmly pulling me to my feet. “We have to go. Now.”

He wrapped a strong arm around my shoulders, supporting my weight as my legs threatened to give out.

The urgency in his grip was unmistakable—he half-guided, half-carried me toward the nearest car while shouting orders to the others.

“Get her in the back! Drive fast. She’s in shock.”

Inside the car, Renzo sat beside me, his hand never leaving my arm, offering silent comfort as the vehicle sped through the streets toward the hospital where my son waited in the ICU.

His jaw was clenched, eyes flicking between me and the road ahead, clearly torn between staying with me and the dying man they were rushing to save.

The rest of the drive passed in heavy silence, thick with panic and unspoken fear.

We reached the hospital garage in record time.

The car slowed, tires whispering against the concrete before coming to a smooth stop.

The engine died with a final, low rumble, and silence rushed in to claim the space.

Renzo moved instantly.

He helped me out of the car with one strong arm while simultaneously barking orders over his shoulder.

“Get him on the stretcher—now! Multiple gunshot wounds, left side and back. Keep pressure on the bleeds. Move!”

Nurses and orderlies were already waiting.

They swarmed the second car, carefully transferring Vincenzo’s limp, blood-soaked body onto the stretcher with practiced urgency.

Renzo never took his eyes off me as he guided me forward, his grip firm and protective.

Cold hospital air brushed against my skin the moment we stepped inside the sterile ward.

Renzo walked beside me—close, shielding, never equal.

His presence was a wall between me and the chaos.

Security recognized him at once.

Doors slid open without question.

Guards straightened and stepped aside, their postures shifting from alertness to silent compliance—respect and fear mixing in their quick nods.

Renzo issued commands in a low, controlled voice as we moved through the corridors.

“Elevator cleared.”

“Floor secure.”

“No one on this wing except medical staff.”

No shouting.

No panic.

Just quiet, absolute authority.

Yet through every order, his hand never left my arm.

Steady. Unwavering.

“I just want to see my son,” I whispered, voice raw.

“And that’s exactly where I’m taking you,” he replied, guiding me forward without hesitation.

He led me through the maze of gleaming hallways and hushed wards until we reached the ICU doors.

The moment they hissed open, the world narrowed to the glass panel ahead.

Behind it lay everything I had been fighting to reach.

My breath hitched.

There, bathed in the soft blue glow of monitors and gentle machines, was my child.

The incubator stood like a fragile fortress.

Small.

Encased in wires and quiet beeps.

Inside, my son’s tiny chest rose and fell beneath the delicate support of the CPAP mask—each assisted breath fragile, determined, real.

Alive.

My legs buckled instantly.

The last of my strength drained away in one overwhelming rush.

Renzo caught me before I could collapse, his arm wrapping around my waist with firm, grounding strength.

“Easy. I’ve got you.”

Tears blurred my vision.

The fear I had been holding back surged forward—sharp and suffocating.

What if Vincenzo didn’t make it?

What if he died tonight after throwing himself over me?

What if my son grew up without a father because the man who had broken me had finally chosen to save me?

“I need to know if Vincenzo will be fine...” My voice cracked. “Please go check for me.”

Renzo hesitated, his jaw tight, clearly torn between staying with me and obeying.

He didn't want to leave me alone.

"Go," I pleaded softly. "Please."

Only then did he release me, nodding once before striding away with swift, purposeful steps.

I took a slow step forward.

Then another.

My palm pressed against the cool glass, warm skin meeting cold separation.

I spread my fingers wider, as though I could reach through and touch him.

My son.

So small it hurt to look at him.

So fragile it terrified me.

But perfect.

I stood with my forehead pressed to the observation window, palms flat against the glass, staring at the tiny figure inside the incubator.

A soft knit cap covered his head, slipping slightly.

His minuscule chest rose and fell in a rhythm so delicate the entire world seemed to hinge on it continuing.

One tiny fist drifted near his cheek—opened, closed, opened again.

Slow.

Persistent.

As if even now he was reaching for something just beyond his grasp.

The sight of him fighting, simply existing, shattered something deep inside me.

A single tear slipped down my cheek, warm against my chilled skin.

It traced a slow path before dropping onto the windowsill with the softest sound.

I didn't wipe it away.

I drew in a shaky breath and forced my trembling legs to carry me to the nearest chair.

Strength had abandoned me completely.

Too many emotions crashed through my chest at once—relief for my son, terror for Vincenzo, exhaustion that went bone-deep.

I sank down and buried my face in my palms, eyes squeezed shut.

My mind kept circling back to Vincenzo.

Would Renzo come running back any second with the news that he was gone?

I didn't think I could survive hearing those words.

Yes, he had hurt me—destroyed pieces of me I might never recover—but I didn't want him dead.

Not like this.

Not after he had thrown himself over me and taken those bullets.

Time blurred. Minutes? Hours?

I couldn't tell anymore.

I only knew I kept stealing glances toward the incubator, just enough to remind myself my son was still fighting.

Each tiny rise and fall of his chest felt like a quiet victory.

A small rebellion against the freezing room where we had both been condemned during labor.

Every few moments my eyes flicked back to the corridor, waiting for Renzo to appear with news—good or devastating, I had no way of knowing.

The uncertainty twisted like a knife in my gut.

Before the fear could swallow me whole, footsteps approached.

Soft. Measured. Controlled.

I lifted my head.

A senior nurse stood at the entrance of the alcove, dressed in pale blue scrubs.

Her expression was calm, warm, but something in her eyes made my chest tighten with dread.

I could already imagine the words forming on her lips.

Vincenzo is dead.

“Mrs. Orsini?” she said gently.

“Tell me,” I rasped, my voice hoarse and trembling. “Is he alive?”

The nurse’s face softened further, a touch of wry humor warming her professional tone.

“He’s alive. Against all odds, actually.”

I let out a broken breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

“Seven shots to the back and one to the ribs should have killed most men,” she continued, stepping closer.

“But the bullets mostly missed vital organs.”

“One grazed his lung, another clipped a rib, but nothing hit the heart or major arteries directly. He lost a lot of blood, and we had to repair some internal damage, but he’s stabilizing now.”

“He’s in recovery, sedated and monitored closely. It’s going to be a long road, but he’s fighting.”

Relief crashed over me so hard my shoulders sagged.

I pressed a hand to my mouth to hold back the sob that threatened to escape.

The nurse offered a small, understanding smile.

“He’s tough. Stubborn, even. That helped tonight.”

She moved with calm precision to the incubator’s access panel, her gloved fingers adjusting a tiny flow valve with ease, the kind of motion honed over years of repetition.

Then she pressed her stethoscope gently against the clear dome, listening to the minuscule, insistent rise and fall of my son’s chest.

A single nod, almost imperceptible, conveyed her confidence.

“His lungs are maturing nicely. He’s stable. We’ll keep him here for a few more days to monitor him, but make no mistake—he’s a fighter. You should be proud.”

Her words cut through the haze of my exhaustion.

I stood and pressed my palm harder against the glass, willing it to feel warmer, more real, as though I could bridge the distance and cradle him against my chest.

I wanted to feel his tiny weight, to hold him like the most sacred treasure, to curl around him and shield him from the world that had tried to steal him before he even drew his first independent breath.

More footsteps echoed in the quiet hallway—heavier this time.

I turned at the sound, expecting another nurse, or perhaps Renzo returning with an update.

But it wasn’t any of them.

Vincenzo stood in the doorway like a ghost who had clawed his way back from death.

Shock slammed into me so hard.

My heart stuttered.

This was impossible.

The nurse had just told me he was stabilizing—sedated, monitored, fighting for his life after eight bullets.

Seven to the back, one to the ribs.

Yet here he was, standing barely ten feet away, pale as death itself.

He looked like hell.

A loose hospital gown hung off his broad shoulders, half-unbuttoned at the chest, revealing thick white bandages wrapped tightly around his torso.

Dark crimson stains already seeped through the gauze on his left side where the rib shot had torn into him.

IV lines still trailed from the back of his hand, the clear tubing swaying as he took an unsteady step forward.

His face was ashen, sweat beading on his forehead, and his breathing came in shallow, controlled bursts—like every inhale cost him.

A thin oxygen tube rested under his nose, and an ECG monitor clipped to his finger blinked with a weak but steady rhythm.

He should have been flat on his back in recovery, not walking these halls.

“Vincenzo...” The name left me in a broken whisper.

My legs felt weak again, but this time from pure disbelief.

“You— you were shot eight times. The nurse said you were stabilizing, sedated... How are you even standing?”

He didn’t answer right away.

One hand pressed lightly against the bandaged wound on his ribs, while the other held a plain black box—small, no larger than a shoebox—cradled as though it contained something dangerous.

His eyes, dark and unreadable, met mine for just a fraction of a second before he lifted the lid.

Inside, nestled on a bed of black velvet like some obscene jewel, was Violet’s severed head.

Blood still glistened along the ragged, brutal edge of her neck, fresh enough that a few thick drops slid lazily down the velvet lining and pooled at the bottom of the box.

Her eyes were wide open—glassy, bulging, frozen forever in a final, silent scream of terror.

The cut was disturbingly clean in places, almost surgical, yet savage in others where flesh and tendon had torn.

Her once-perfect lips were parted, skin pale and waxy under the harsh hospital lights.

The sight hit me like a physical blow.

My stomach lurched violently.

I staggered back, one hand flying to my mouth as bile surged up my throat.

A strangled sound—half-gasp, half-sob—tore from my chest.

The room spun.

I could smell it: the metallic tang of fresh blood mixed with something darker, fouler.

My legs threatened to buckle again, but I forced myself to stay upright, eyes locked on the grotesque trophy in his hands.

This was what I had asked for.

I had thrown the demand at him like a weapon, testing him, never truly believing he would deliver.

Yet here it was—proof that every word of apology, every promise to be better, had been backed by blood.

“I... I didn’t know you could...” I stuttered, words failing me entirely. “...You would...”

“She wanted to die of heart disease,” he said flatly, his tone eerily calm, almost casual, “so badly anyway. Month after month, feeding her lie, pretending she was fragile and sick—she got what she wanted.”

He closed the lid with the same controlled reverence he might have used to shut a briefcase, eyes locked on mine as if the act itself required no justification.

“Now,” he continued, voice softening, a strange warmth threading through the edge of it, “nothing stands between us. Elena—we can finally be a real family. Can’t we?”

I stared at the closed box, unable to articulate anything.

My mind churned, heart hammering violently.

The words echoed, almost absurd, impossible.

Nothing stands between us. Elena—we can finally be a real family. Can’t we?”

He stepped closer, urgency creeping into his tone, the kind of desperate pleading that made my stomach knot.

“I want you to know this,” Vincenzo said, his voice low and raw despite the obvious pain it cost him to speak.

“I want to be yours—fully, madly, completely. Not as the man who turned you into a lonely, abandoned wife. Not as the monster who trapped you in fear and my own mistakes. I want to be your companion. Your lover. Your husband. Everything I should have been from the very first day we met in that cave.”

He drew in a shaky breath, the black box resting in his hands like a dark offering.

“I will spend the rest of my life proving it... if you’ll let me.”

I swallowed hard, my voice emerging quiet but laced with years of poison and betrayal.

“You speak as if I’ve already decided to forgive you.” Each word left a bitter taste on my tongue.

“As though the threats, the freezing room you locked me and our son in, the endless humiliation, the months you chose her over me—can simply be erased because you finally realized I wasn’t lying.”

My eyes flicked back to the velvet-lined box, then returned to him.

“I’ve always told the truth, Vincenzo. From the very beginning.”

He didn’t flinch.

Didn’t argue.

He simply let the words settle, heavy and jagged between us, and then he lowered his gaze to the floor, shoulders tightening, chest heaving slightly.

Then—

He stepped forward and took both my hands in his.

His palms were warm.

Callused.

But for once—not commanding.

Not demanding.

They trembled just slightly as his fingers closed around mine, as though he was afraid I might disappear if he held on too tightly.

“I know,” he said.

The words came out low.

Heavy.

“I know I made you suffer—from the moment I forced that ring on your finger... until hours ago when I had you thrown into that cold room.”

His grip tightened—not to control me, but to steady himself.

“I know you can’t simply forget it.”

A beat.

“I’m not asking you to pretend it never happened. I’m asking you to stay. Let me be a proper husband to you. A real father to our son.”

His thumb brushed lightly over my knuckles—almost hesitant.

“Let me earn back what I destroyed... one day at a time.”

Silence settled between us.

I looked past him again—to the incubator.

Our son.

Still.

Breathing. Alive.

His tiny head shifted slightly, almost imperceptibly, as though he could sense something beyond the glass.

One small finger flexed—curling, then relaxing—like he was reaching for something she couldn’t yet grasp.

I swallowed.

Then looked back at him.

At the man who had broken me.

And somehow—

Was standing here asking to be rebuilt.

If I walked away now...

He wouldn’t stop me.

That truth hung between us, plain in his eyes.

The surrender.

The quiet acceptance.

The man who once ruled every corner of my life no longer believed he had the right to command me.

He simply stood there—pale, bandaged, still bleeding through his wounds—waiting.

For me.

And yet...

Somewhere beneath the fear, beneath the rage, beneath the bone-deep exhaustion, that eight-year-old girl still lived inside me.

The one who first saw him in that cave, bloodied and barely alive, and felt her heart stir in ways she couldn't explain.

The ache in her chest. The nameless pull.

That feeling had never truly died, no matter how cruelly he had tried to kill it.

It lingered still.

He stepped closer, slow and careful, as though I were something sacred he was afraid to break.

Then he rested his forehead gently against mine.

The contact was fragile, almost reverent.

His skin was fever-warm, damp with sweat from the effort of standing.

"I don't know how the hell to define love," he rasped, breath brushing my lips like a confession.

"They raised me to see it as poison."

He swallowed, jaw tight, the movement tugging at the fresh bandages soaked with his blood.

"But you..." His voice turned rougher, deeper, laced with raw regret.

“What I feel for you has always been stronger than every lesson they beat into me. Stronger than fear. Stronger than the hatred I carried. Stronger than the heartless son of a bitch I was raised to be.”

His large hand cupped the side of my face with surprising tenderness, thumb stroking my skin as if I were fragile glass he was terrified of shattering again.

“I fought it for years. I hurt you because I was too fucking scared to admit how much power you had over me.”

His eyes darkened with painful honesty. “I was wrong. You are my weakness, Elena — the only one I will ever kneel for. The only one I would bleed out for without hesitation.”

He leaned in closer, voice dropping to a low, commanding growl softened by surrender.

“I love you. Not the polished lie I told myself. Not the controlled version I tried to force. I love you raw. Completely. Madly. With every broken piece of me.”

“I’m yours — body, soul, and whatever future I have left. And I will spend the rest of my life on my knees if that’s what it takes to prove I’m worthy of you.”

I closed my eyes.

Just for a moment.

Let the words settle. Let them sink in.

When I opened my eyes again, I looked at him differently.

Not with forgiveness.

Not yet.

But with something softer.

Something... open.

Then he pressed the softest kiss to my forehead.

Not demanding. Not possessive.

Just... there.

Lingering. Reverent.

Like I wasn’t something he owned—

But something he was afraid to lose.

A voice cut through the fragile moment from behind the door, instantly shattering the intimacy.

“Boss... there’s someone waiting for you in the garage.”

Renzo said from behind the door.