

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 3[4,596 words]

Chapter 3

ELENA

My eyes stayed locked on Vin.

They refused to look anywhere else.

Not at the door.

Not at the two men standing by, ready to drag me out and end me without hesitation.

Only him.

Only Vin.

The same boy I had found all those years ago.

Broken. Bleeding. Alone.

Nine years old with eyes that had already seen too much.

I could still see it like it had happened yesterday.

The scrub brush behind my father's estate.

The way the wind had carried the scent of blood before I even saw him.

The cave—dark, shallow, hidden just enough to be missed.

And inside it...

Him.

A small body pressed into the dirt, shaking but silent—like he had already learned that making a sound only brought more pain.

I had been eight.

Too young to understand what I was stepping into.

Too soft to walk away.

I remember crouching in front of him, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure he would hear it and bolt.

But he didn't.

He just looked at me.

Those eyes—dark, hollowed out in a way that didn't belong to a child.

Too old. Too careful.

And still... fighting.

Not loudly.

But in the way he held himself still, like giving in wasn't an option he would allow.

I didn't move any closer at first.

Didn't reach for him.

Something told me he would run if I did.

So I stayed there, quiet, letting him look at me, letting him decide I wasn't something else sent to hurt him.

Seconds passed. Maybe longer.

Then, slowly—so slowly it almost didn't happen—the shaking eased.

The blood and bruises—marks that didn't look like accidents—covered his body, and something in me ached in a way I didn't understand.

I tore the hem of my dress and pressed it gently to his skin, wiping away what I could.

My hands shook the entire time, but his didn't move.

He just watched me—too still, too quiet for a nine-year-old boy.

“Does it hurt?” I remember asking.

He shrugged.

Not no. Not yes. Just... nothing.

Like the answer didn't matter anymore.

I gave him water.

He hesitated before taking it, like he was waiting for permission that wasn't there.

Even after the first sip, his eyes kept flicking toward the cave entrance, sharp and alert, like he expected someone to come crashing through at any second.

He never said who did it.

Not when I asked.

Not when I tried again, softer.

His whole body would go tight, his shoulders locking, his gaze dropping somewhere far away from me.

So I stopped asking.

And we talked about other things instead.

Small things at first. Names. How old we were. Nothing that could hurt.

He answered in short pieces, like every word had to be dragged out of him, like speaking too much might cost him something.

But I kept going, filling the quiet when it stretched too long, saying whatever came to mind just to keep him there—with me, not wherever his thoughts kept trying to pull him back to.

Slowly, he started to stay.

Hours passed without either of us noticing.

The light at the mouth of the cave shifted from bright to gold, then softer, then dim.

Shadows stretched longer, folding in around us until the world outside didn't feel real anymore.

And in that small space, something changed.

He stopped flinching every time the wind moved.

Stopped glancing at the entrance like he was counting seconds.

At one point, I said something stupid—about the moon, about how I thought it followed people who needed it—and he looked at me like he didn't know what to do with that.

Then, after a second—he smiled.

It was small. Careful. Like even that was something he wasn't used to.

But it was real.

And I remember thinking how strange it was, that a boy who looked like that—who carried that kind of silence in him—could still smile at all.

We stayed there as the night settled in, the cold creeping through the ground beneath us.

I moved closer without thinking, until our shoulders touched, then closer still when he didn't pull away.

He was still tense. Still guarded.

But he didn't move from me.

And that felt like trust.

The kind you don't name because you're afraid it might break if you do.

For those hours, whatever had been done to him loosened its grip.

Not gone—but quieter.

Held back by something as small, as fragile, as not being alone.

So I stayed.

Because even at eight, I understood it in a way I couldn't explain—if I left, it would find him again.

Whatever had put that look in his eyes... it would come back.

And I couldn't bear the thought of that.

Of him going back to it.

Not after he had started to breathe a little easier beside me.

Not after he had smiled.

I don't remember when sleep took me.

Only that I must have trusted the quiet enough to close my eyes.

But when I woke—

The cave had fallen into a different kind of silence.

Not the careful, shared kind.

This one was hollow. Empty.

Like he had never been there at all.

My hand reached for him instinctively—

Nothing.

Just dirt.

My eyes snapped open.

Panic hit instantly.

I sat up too fast, scanning the cave, my heart slamming wildly against my ribs.

“Vin?”

No answer.

Only the echo of my own voice.

Then I saw it.

Blood.

Not a drop. Not a stain.

A trail—dragged, uneven, smeared into the dirt as if something had been pulled away against its will.

It led out of the cave.

And disappeared into the dark.

My stomach dropped.

“No... no, no—”

I scrambled after it, hands slipping against the dirt as I followed the dark streaks across the ground.

“Vin!”

My voice cracked.

I didn’t care.

I ran.

Barefoot.

Through brush and stone and shadow.

Calling his name again.

And again.

And again.

Until my throat burned. Until my lungs screamed.

Until the sun began to rise.

But he was gone.

Gone like he had never been there at all.

No body.

No sign of a struggle.

Just blood. And absence.

I searched until my legs gave out.

Until I collapsed in the dirt, shaking, choking on something that felt too much like grief for someone I had only known for hours.

But it didn't matter.

Because those hours had changed something.

They had stayed.

Buried deep.

Like shrapnel lodged too close to the heart to remove.

And every night after that—

I replayed it.

Every word. Every look.

Every promise he had made in that quiet, broken voice.

“I'll find you again.”

“I'll protect you.”

“We'll be together when we're grown.”

Lies.

Or maybe—

Just things a broken boy needed to believe.

And now—

Here he stood.

Alive.

Not a boy anymore. Not even close.

He towered in front of me like something carved from war itself.

Broad shoulders stretched beneath the black suit like it had been made to contain something dangerous.

His jaw—

Sharp. Hard.

His mouth set in a line that promised nothing good.

And his eyes—

Those eyes.

Still dark. Still intense.

But no longer broken.

No longer searching.

They had become something else entirely.

Cold. Calculating. Deadly.

The kind of eyes that decided who lived and who didn't—

And didn't lose sleep over either.

His hair was shorter now—cut close, precise, every strand in place.

Everything about him radiated control.

Power rolled off him in quiet, steady waves.

Even the men by the door—the short one barely holding back his fury, the tall general with polished authority—didn't look like protectors.

They looked like weapons.

Waiting. Watching. Ready.

For his command.

And I knew—without a doubt—if he gave the word, they would kill me without hesitation.

Still, I didn't look away.

I couldn't.

Because beneath all of it—beneath the suit, the power, the violence—I still saw him.

The boy in the dirt.

The one who had smiled at me like I had given him something he didn't know he needed.

His gaze didn't waver. Not even for a second.

"Just tell me one thing."

His voice was low—quiet enough not to need volume to command attention, yet it filled the space anyway.

It filled me.

"Do you still desire me the way you did back then?"

The words hit too hard.

Like something sharp sliding between my ribs.

I froze. Completely.

My breath caught somewhere in my throat.

Desire?

Back then—

I hadn't even understood what that meant.

All I knew was that I hadn't wanted to leave him.

That I had stayed. That I had cared.

But now—

Now the word meant something else entirely.

Something dangerous.

Before I could answer—he stepped closer.

Closing the distance between us like it meant something.

Like it mattered.

"Because if you do..."

His voice dropped.

Darker. Lower. More dangerous.

“...I’ll cancel this wedding right now...”

Another step closer.

“...and make you my bride.”

My heart slammed violently against my chest.

Wait—

What?

My thoughts scattered, chaotic and unsteady.

Wedding.

Bride.

His wedding.

It all clicked at once.

The crowd I had passed. The decorations. The music.

The tension in the air.

This wasn’t just any day.

This was his day.

He was the groom.

And he was standing here—Covered in control and quiet violence—Offering to throw it all away.

For me.

For a girl who looked like this—

Sweat-soaked. Hair tangled.

Clothes stolen and worn thin.

A shadow of something that used to be whole.

I swallowed hard.

My pulse refused to slow.

This didn't make sense.

None of it did.

My life hadn't made sense for a long time.

Not since everything had collapsed.

Not since my father died in that plane crash—an explosion that stayed in the headlines for months.

A crash that didn't just take him... but my mother and my brother too.

My life turned completely upside down after the tragic loss of my family.

I joined the CIA in a desperate attempt to fill the void they left behind—anything to keep the emptiness from swallowing me whole.

That decision led me onto a mission with a team of twenty-one operatives, tasked with capturing one of the world's most dangerous men.

Al Chapo.

The CIA's most wanted.

A terrorist. A mafia hybrid.

A man who didn't just destroy lives—he erased them. Even now, his name makes something inside me tighten.

The mission was a disaster.

We failed.

Most of my team died at his hands. The rest were captured.

I was the only one who escaped.

And ever since that day... I've been running.

Even though Al Chapo is dead, I'm still running for my life.

Freedom never came with his death—only a new kind of fear.

I don't stay anywhere long.

I choose seats facing exits. I scan reflections in glass, mirrors, anything that lets me see behind me without turning my head.

Every footstep, every passing glance, every car that slows for a second too long—I notice it all.

I sleep light, if I sleep at all.

One sound is enough to pull me awake, pulse racing, mind already mapping escape routes.

Doors are always checked twice. Windows, too.

I memorize streets the moment I step into them—turns, alleys, blind spots. Just in case.

Because I know he's still out there.

Ruslan Baranov.

The man who took over after Al Chapo's death.

More dangerous. More patient. And far more personal.

He's not just hunting me for what happened on that mission—he's hunting me because of what I took from him.

He swore he'd never stop. That no matter how long it took, no matter where I ran, he would find me.

And when he does... he'll make sure I pay for everything.

This has been my life for the past five years.

Restless. Constantly moving. Always running.

From city to city. From shadow to shadow.

Like a fugitive who will never know peace—haunted by a past I can't outrun, and a debt that's still waiting to be collected.

Two hours ago, I had been sitting in a dingy restaurant on the edge of Bergamo.

If you could even call it that.

The place smelled like old grease and regret—Perfect for disappearing. Perfect for someone like me.

I had chosen the table near the window out of habit.

Always near an exit. Always with a line of sight.

My hands had been shaking when the plate was set down in front of me.

It had been three days since I'd tasted anything solid. Every attempt to steal scraps had failed. I'd gotten good at surviving on almost nothing—but even that had its limits.

Hunger like this isn't just emptiness. It's pain.

A slow, gnawing burn that twists your stomach until it feels like something inside you is eating itself alive.

Mine had been like that for years now—damaged, unpredictable. Sometimes it was a dull ache. Other times it came in sharp, crippling waves that forced me to double over, breathless, waiting for it to pass.

Five years on the run does that to a person.

No routine. No real food. No rest.

No life.

I couldn't remember the last time my body felt normal.

My weight had dropped long ago. My strength came and went depending on when I last ate.

Even my own body had started turning against me—my menstrual cycles became irregular, and the pain became constant, like something inside me had been worn down beyond repair.

And the worst part?

You don't get used to it.

Not the hunger. Not the weakness. Not the way your mind starts slipping when your body is pushed too far.

You just learn to endure it.

Barely.

I stared at the plate in front of me, my vision blurring slightly from how badly I needed it.

My hands trembled as I reached for the food, like my body didn't quite trust that it was real, like it might be taken away if I hesitated too long.

I had barely taken three bites when I felt it—that subtle shift in the air, the quiet warning that had kept me alive all these years.

The unmistakable sensation of being watched.

I didn't look up immediately. I never do.

Instead, I let my gaze drift lazily toward the glass beside me, using the reflection to scan without drawing attention.

That's when I saw them—two men standing across the street.

They weren't even trying to hide it.

Their focus was too sharp, too fixed, the kind of attention that doesn't waver. The kind that hunts.

Baranov's men.

I knew it instantly. You don't survive five years on the run without learning how predators look at their prey.

My stomach dropped, not from fear, but from calculation. Distance. Exits. Timing. Every detail mapped itself out in my mind with practiced precision.

By the time they started moving, I was already on my feet.

I didn't run. Not yet.

Running draws attention. Running confirms suspicion.

So I walked—steady, forcing my body to move like nothing was wrong, like I hadn't just signed myself up for another fight for survival.

One step. Then another.

Every nerve in my body screamed at me to move faster, but I held it in, keeping my pace measured until I reached the door.

The second I crossed it, I ran.

The world dissolved into motion.

The streets blurred past me as instinct took over, guiding me through alleyways I barely registered but somehow knew.

Tight corners. Narrow paths.

I turned left, then right, my body moving on memory and urgency, vaulting over a stack of crates without breaking stride.

Behind me, shouts erupted—too close, closer than I liked.

My lungs burned, my muscles protested, but I didn't slow down.

A ladder came into view, bolted against the side of a building.

I grabbed it without hesitation and climbed fast, my hands slipping slightly as strain shot through my arms.

Pain flared, sharp and familiar, but I forced myself upward, refusing to stop until I reached the top.

The rooftop gave me seconds. That was all.

I ran across it, the wind hitting my face as I pushed harder, then jumped.

The landing jarred through my body, pain shooting up my legs, but I rolled with it and kept moving, not daring to pause.

They were still behind me.

They never stopped.

I spotted the scooter just ahead—parked, unattended, the key still in place.

Luck didn't exist in my world, but I took it anyway.

I swung onto it, the engine roaring to life beneath me as I sped off, weaving through traffic with reckless precision, ignoring the blaring horns and shouted curses.

All that mattered was distance.

Space. Escape.

I didn't stop until the noise began to fade, until the city started to swallow me whole again.

Then I saw them.

Two power bikes, cutting through traffic behind me.

My stomach tightened as I glanced at the mirror and caught sight of the riders—the same two men. Still there. Still coming.

The bike beneath me stuttered slightly, just enough to send a flicker of unease through me. I looked down at the fuel gauge.

Empty.

Running on reserve.

It wouldn't last much longer.

A sharp breath left me as reality settled in. I wasn't outrunning them. Not like this.

My eyes scanned the road ahead, searching—anything, anywhere.

That's when I saw it.

The cathedral.

I didn't think or hesitate.

I swerved in on pure instinct, driving straight through the open entrance before the engine finally gave out.

I barely waited for it to die before I jumped off, my legs already moving, pushing myself forward.

Run. Hide. Disappear.

Anything to escape them.

Because I knew what would happen if they caught me.

They wouldn't kill me.

No... they would take me to him.

To Ruslan Baranov.

And there would be no mercy in what followed.

Only judgment.

I pushed deeper inside, my pulse hammering, my mind racing for any kind of cover—

And then I saw him.

Vincenzo.

Of all places. Of all moments.

Here.

On his wedding day.

In his dressing room.

The same boy I had spent fourteen fleeting hours with when I was eight... now standing in front of me like something pulled straight out of a past I thought I had buried.

“Elena...”

Vincenzo’s voice cut through the fog of my thoughts, sharp and commanding, yanking me back to the present.

I blinked once, the memory of running dissolving as reality snapped back into place.

He was still there.

Standing tall. Watching. Waiting.

His presence filled the room like a storm about to break.

“Do you agree to be my bride?”

The question hung in the air between us, as if every second I hesitated fed the tension.

I froze, my mind spinning.

A thousand thoughts collided at once.

How would he...? How could he make me, a woman who had appeared out of nowhere as his bride, take the place of the one originally chosen?

What would happen to her?

Would she be humiliated, displaced, erased?

Or was this some twisted prank, a test of obedience, of power, of control?

I couldn't breathe properly.

My pulse hammered in my ears.

The room felt smaller, charged with expectation.

"Yes," I said, without hesitation.

My voice was steady, though my chest thudded like a drum.

I didn't know how much power he had amassed, how far his influence reached, but one thing I understood—becoming his bride might be the only thing that could buy me some semblance of protection.

Some fragile shield in a world that had spent five long years trying to destroy me.

"Get the ladies to dress her," he said, turning to the short, angry-looking man in a tailored suit.

Then he looked back at me. "I'll be waiting at the altar."

And just like that, he left, his presence lingering like a storm aftershock.

I was left dazed, standing in the lavish dressing room with only two men.

The short man in the suit radiated anger, while the other, an Italian soldier in full uniform, simply waited, tense.

Their eyes pinned me as if I were some kind of intruder, some mistake they hadn't signed up to witness.

But they didn't know me.

Did they even have the slightest idea what I'd survived to be here, alive, breathing?

The short man dismissed the soldier, who nodded stiffly and left without another word.

Then the short man stepped closer, his gaze sharpening.

"Who are you?" His hand hovered over his holster, but it was his eyes that were the deadliest—like he wanted to tear me apart with just a look.

"I know nearly everything about Vin... and you... I've never seen you anywhere before."

I let out a slow sigh, letting the edge of my confidence cut through the tension in the room.

My hands flexed at my sides, ready to move if needed, but my voice remained steady.

“Listen,” I said, locking eyes with him, “this isn’t my fault. None of this is familiar to me, and I’m still trying to process it myself.”

I paused, letting the words settle between us.

My chest rose and fell, my pulse quickening as I held his gaze.

“I’m not the one you should be angry at. If anything, you should follow your boss’s orders instead of taking your frustration out on me.” I took a small step forward, careful not to provoke, but asserting my space.

“So please...” My voice softened just enough to be almost coaxing, though the steel underneath didn’t falter. “Take me to the ladies to get dressed, and maybe then I’ll know if this is real—or just a dream.”

His fist clenched so hard I heard it.

Bone grinding against bone.

A sharp, ugly crack that echoed in the small room like a warning shot.

Renzo’s jaw tightened, teeth grinding together audibly as he stared at me like I had just walked in and insulted his entire bloodline.

“I would not let this abomination happen,” he spat.

Every word came out like it tasted bitter in his mouth.

His hand dropped.

Then closed around the grip of his pistol.

“I’d rather put a bullet in you right here,” he continued, voice dropping lower, more dangerous, “than stand there and watch you destroy everything.”

His fingers curled tighter around the gun, testing its weight, readying himself.

“If Vincenzo walks away from Violet—” He spat the name like it carried sacred weight. “The Spanish girl... this entire arrangement blows up.”

He stepped closer, his presence pressing in, heavy and suffocating.

Every inch of him radiated controlled fury.

“A marriage between the Spanish and the Italian is long overdue,” he continued, his eyes locking on mine, burning through me. “And I will not let some random... puta... ruin it. Not today. Not this wedding.”

“Call me puta again,” I said quietly, “and we’ll see how fast you bleed before your boss walks back in.”

His face darkened instantly.

A flush rising beneath his skin, anger pushing through every line of restraint he barely had to begin with.

He drew his gun in one fluid motion, but before he could even blink, I kicked it out of his hand.

Shock flashed across his face as I moved, instinct taking over, guiding his fist, deflecting, striking—two punches here, a step back there—positioning myself to fight.

If only he knew what I’d spent the last five years of my life doing?

Evading dangerous men, fighting off trained killers, disarming and incapacitating those who dared touch me?

If he understood just how lethal I am in combat, he wouldn’t even think about threatening me with a gun.

I wasn’t whole.

My anger was a razor edge, ready to shred anything—or anyone—in its path.

Mentally, I was fractured, a tightrope walker over the chasm of my own shattered past, teetering on the edge of a darkness that could swallow me whole.

One wrong move, one spark, and I could spiral out of control—destroying everything in my path, just as I had destroyed pieces of myself years ago.

The trauma of the CIA mission still clung to me like a shadow I could never shake.

I remembered it all—the night we, the three surviving members of a twenty-one-person team sent to capture Al Chapo, realized the mission was a trap.

We had been kidnapped, and every instinct for survival turned against me.

I remembered the orders—given by our captor himself—and how they forced me to do the unthinkable.

I was the one who delivered the punches.

One hundred and fifteen precise, uncontrollable strikes landed on my best friend, Amy's face, each one destroying what I loved most about her until she was unrecognizable, until life slipped from her eyes.

Every blow, every sickening thud, is still etched into my mind, a permanent scar on my soul, a reminder that I had become the instrument of horror.

I had been forced to kill my bestfriend, yet nothing in me felt like the same person afterward.

My mind had splintered, leaving me hyper-alert, restless, and prone to spirals of anger I could not always contain.

Every punch I threw, every move I made, carried the memory of that night.

It whispered through my veins, tightening my chest, clawing at my nerves.

The fear, the rage, the cold, mechanical precision—it was all still there, simmering beneath the surface, ready to ignite if provoked.

And now, here in this gilded dressing room, facing this short, furious man, I felt it.

The same old fire.

The same lethal instinct.

I could end him if I wanted.

I knew that.

But control... control was everything.

Losing it could destroy more than just him.

It could destroy me.

Yet my body was ready.

My mind was ready. And if he came at me... I would fight.

I tried to warn him not to make a move—to make him understand that I was far more dangerous than he thought—but before I could get a single word out, he moved.

Fast. Precise.

His hand slipped into the hidden sheath in his boot, and in one swift motion, he drew a dagger and hurled it straight at me.

I barely reacted in time, guiding the blade with the flat of my hand, letting it glance past me.

It missed—but only just. Close enough that if I'd been a fraction slower, it could have found my forehead.

“Please... don't make me do this,” I said, my voice low as I steadied myself, lowering into a guarded stance as every muscle coiled, ready to defend. “I won't be able to stop.”

He ignored my warnings and came at me again—no hesitation this time.

Just raw intent.

His fist cut through the air, fast and reckless.

I caught his wrist, twisted, redirected—but he followed through with a knee aimed for my ribs.

It clipped me hard enough to steal half a breath, and something inside me... slipped.

I staggered back a step.

Renzo surged forward, sensing it.

He fought like a man with nothing to lose—wild, brutal, relentless.

His shoulder slammed into me, driving me back, forcing me to pivot to keep my balance.

My heel scraped against the polished floor, barely catching myself before I went down.

“You're not making it to that altar alive,” he growled, already swinging again. “I'll kill you, puta, and feed your bones to the dogs.”

I blocked—but slower now.

His knuckles grazed my cheek, snapping my head sideways.

Pain flared, sharp and grounding—and then something darker answered it.

A crack beneath my skin.

My control.

Gone.

The world narrowed.

Sounds dulled. My heartbeat roared louder than anything else, pounding against my skull like a war drum.

The room—this wedding hall, these walls, this moment—bled into something else entirely.

Memories clawed at me.

Amy, my best friend.

The night in enemy territory when I had ended her life with a hundred and fifteen punches.

The precision, the force, the cold calculation.

It had changed me then—and now, as I blocked and guided this man's attacks, that same dark, lethal part of me threatened to rise.

Some of his strikes began landing.

My stomach grunted under the impact.

My shoulder stung.

My hand throbbed.

Panic started creeping in.

I could feel myself spiraling, the storm in my mind whispering that once I lost control, there would be no coming back.

"Stop... please, stop," I begged, my voice trembling but firm.

But he didn't.

His boot slammed into my ribs, a shockwave of pain ripping through me.

I was lifted off my feet and hurled into the window—the glass shattering around me as my spine collided with the frame with a deafening thud.

Pain erupted across my back and head as I tumbled onto the pavement outside.

Stars danced in my vision, and my lungs screamed for air that wouldn't come.

I crumpled on impact, clutching my side, each breath a stabbing, blinding agony.

Before I could fully gather myself, I saw him jumping after me, aiming to land on top of me.

My body reacted instinctively—I rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding the impact, and sprang to my feet.

My heart pounded.

Adrenaline surged.

I could no longer see the man as himself.

All I saw was red.

Rage. Pure, unfiltered aggression that burned hotter than fear or pain.

I charged like a woman possessed, every step fueled by years of trauma and everything I'd been forced to endure.

I didn't think. I struck. Hard.

First to the groin—he buckled instantly, a guttural roar ripping from his chest.

I didn't hesitate.

My fists hunted the soft, vulnerable spots a trained fighter depended on: the solar plexus, the throat, the knees.

Each strike was precise, deliberate, fueled by instinct and raw desperation.

His body flailed violently under the onslaught, each blow cracking against bone and muscle.

Pain exploded across him like wildfire.

Blood spurted from his mouth, his throat convulsing with ragged, choking gasps.

His knees wobbled, shoulders heaving as the shock of it stole his balance.

Then my hands found his face.

Again and again, I struck, releasing everything I had bottled inside for five long years—the fear, the hunger, the anger, the trauma.

Each punch was memory made flesh.

Each strike carried the echoes of Amy, the mission, the captivity, the endless nights of running and surviving.

Even after he fell to the floor, I didn't stop.

My arms moved on their own, powered by instinct and rage, striking until my body trembled and my knuckles burned.

Suddenly, a strong grip yanked me away.