

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 4[5,480 words]

Chapter 4

ELENA

I turned, fury blazing, ready to strike again—and for a heartbeat, I thought I saw Amy.

Goosebumps raced across my skin.

But the face in front of me was not hers.

A tall man, dressed impeccably in a suit, moved with a strange grace, almost feminine in appearance.

My mind reeled, reality crashing back in.

I spun back to the fallen man, my chest heaving, eyes still burning with rage.

“I’m *Ciro*,” the new man said calmly, his voice cutting through the storm of my adrenaline. “Second in command to the *Capo*, *Vincenzo Orsini*.”

Capo.

An Italian Mafia boss.

The word stumbled across my mind like a stone in my chest.

Vincenzo... the boy I had once known—small, almost fragile, with that hesitant, nervous laugh, fourteen hours trapped together in that cave—he?

The same boy who had trembled at the dark, who had begged for scraps of hope, now sat at the apex of power?

My stomach dropped.

He wasn’t a boy anymore. Not by a long shot.

Where there had once been uncertainty, fear, and a flicker of kindness, there was now steel.

The sweet, scared boy of memory had risen, transformed into a man who commanded loyalty, fear, and death—and he wore it all like a crown.

The realization hit harder than any punch I'd taken.

Ciro, however, didn't flinch at the bloodied body sprawled on the ground—a cruel testament to my uncontrolled rage.

There was no anger in his face.

No shock. Not even the faintest flicker of surprise.

He only glanced at the man I had beaten to the edge of ruin, his body a grotesque map of blood and bruises.

And in that calm, detached glance, I saw it: he had already sized up the damage, weighed it, and moved on.

Perhaps Ciro had seen enough violence to make this look ordinary—but for me... the weight of it pressed down like stone.

My chest heaved.

My hands shook.

Guilt clawed through me with every ragged breath.

I wanted to undo it, to rewind time, to stop before I had gone too far.

I wanted him to stop—to not charge at me, not to fight me—but he wouldn't listen.

He wouldn't care.

Ciro moved with unnerving calm, each step precise.

He approached the body with a measured grace, almost feminine in the smoothness of his movements, yet there was a sharp, predatory edge beneath it that made my skin crawl.

He squatted down, hands hovering for a moment before probing carefully, checking the pulse of the man sprawled before him.

Every motion was clinical—yet charged with an unspoken power, the kind that could bend men to his will without a word.

I held my breath, heart hammering, unable to tear my eyes from the grotesque scene.

“Is he... dead?” I asked, my voice trembling, barely above a whisper. “I—I didn’t mean to... I begged him to stop... I...”

Ciro’s gaze didn’t waver from the bloodied man.

His voice was low, controlled, carrying a quiet authority that made my chest tighten.

“He’s alive,” he said. “And for the record, this is Renzo—third in command to Vincenzo Orsini.”

Third in command?

I had just beaten the third in command of a mafia empire to a stupor?

Relief hit me like a wave, sudden and overwhelming, and my knees gave way.

I sank to the floor, gasping for air I couldn’t quite catch, heart hammering so violently it felt like it might burst from my chest.

He wasn’t dead.

He was alive.

I looked down at my hands—still slick with his blood—and nausea rolled through me, hot and bitter.

Every drop, every stain, felt like a scar branded onto my soul.

The weight of my actions pressed down like stone, each breath a ragged struggle.

Ciro rose with a smooth, effortless motion, the kind of control that made everything around him seem slower, smaller, weaker.

His eyes flicked briefly to my bloodied hands, then to my trembling form, and for a heartbeat, I thought he might say something—anything.

He didn’t.

A faint, almost casual gesture invited me to move.

“Stand,” he said, voice low, calm, and precise.

Each syllable carried the weight of command, “The Capo is waiting at the altar. The bride... is expected.”

I hesitated, glancing down at myself—blood-stained, trembling, exhausted.

My body felt foreign to me, coated in the aftermath of violence I had barely controlled.

Yet, slowly, I forced myself up from the floor, letting Ciro guide me, one careful step at a time.

I kept glancing back at Renzo, a question burning in my mind: shouldn't someone be helping him? Ambulance? Medical team?

But Ciro ignored him entirely, leading me away until the distance became too great to see, leaving Renzo lying there, alone, yet alive.

We entered a separate room.

Three women were already there, moving with quiet efficiency.

They seemed young, in their early twenties, but their professionalism and focus kept them from betraying any surprise at the blood still clinging to my skin.

Ciro's voice broke the silence:

"Ladies, get her cleaned up and dressed. Fast."

He didn't wait for a response, walking to the door and closing it behind me.

I let my eyes roam over the three women assigned to dress me, their hands gesturing toward me, silently urging me closer.

I hesitated.

My stomach growled, a hollow, persistent reminder that I hadn't eaten anything solid in three days—just water, barely enough to keep me moving.

The emptiness gnawed at me, but beneath it was something sharper: a searing pain in my left side, a burning ache that twisted and knotted with every breath.

My ulcer flared like fire, stabbing deeper with each movement, and I bit back a groan, tasting blood and bile at the back of my throat.

For a moment, I wanted to throw myself at the women, demand food first, anything to dull the pain clawing through me—but I couldn't.

Would they even listen?

I had already lingered too long.

Vincenzo was waiting at the altar. And I... wasn't even dressed.

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to step forward, each movement a negotiation between exhaustion, hunger, and the burning, relentless pain in my side.

My hands shook.

My vision blurred at the edges.

The three women moved around me with practiced precision, guiding every step, their hands gentle but firm.

When I hesitated at the bathroom doorway, my body tense, one of them reached for my arm.

"It's alright," she said softly, voice soothing. "We'll be careful. Just let us help."

I swallowed hard, cheeks burning, and let them take over.

They undressed me with care, working silently but attentively, mindful of my shivering as warm water poured over my bruised, aching body.

My muscles tensed under the bath, not just from cold, but from the foreign intimacy of being cared for—humiliating and alien after years of running, surviving, never allowing myself to pause.

When the bath ended, they wrapped me in a soft towel and guided me toward the dressing area, supporting me as if I were fragile, lifting me over each step, over each hesitation.

My gaze landed on a pile of apples on the table.

Without a word, one of the women picked one up and offered it to me.

I snatched it greedily, biting down like a starving animal.

The juice ran down my chin.

The women exchanged startled glances, but didn't interfere.

I grabbed two more in quick succession, feeling the searing ulcer pain finally ease as the food met my stomach, the relief almost dizzying.

With that small comfort settling in my belly, they brought the wedding gown over.

The dress was immense, heavy, impossibly layered, and yet they handled it with the utmost care.

They helped me step into it, fastening the underlayers first, smoothing the silk over my skin, tying each ribbon and bow with meticulous patience.

Every motion was deliberate, repeated, ensuring nothing was askew, while I tried to remain still, overwhelmed by the strange, alien ritual.

Finally, they positioned me in front of the mirror.

I didn't need words—their hands straightened the folds, brushed stray strands of hair, applied the last touches of makeup.

I looked up, and the reflection was surreal: a perfect bride, draped in silk and lace, every detail immaculate.

And yet the eyes staring back at me were mine: hollow, haunted, carrying the weight of every brutal memory of the past five years.

Trauma and beauty collided in that impossible reflection.

They stepped back, satisfied.

Silent, patient, almost reverent in the care they had taken, they allowed me a moment to breathe.

"It's time." The eldest of the three women stepped forward, hand lifted in a gentle but firm gesture toward the door.

Her tone was neutral, yet there was something beneath it—an unspoken weight:

A bride awaited in the hall, poised, ready.

And yet... there was the strange, unsettling sense that somehow, in this moment, another woman was about to step into her place.

I nodded, letting them guide me.

Step by careful step, I followed, my heart hammering, my mind a chaotic swirl of fear, disbelief, and resignation.

I had never felt this kind of nervousness in years—not even during the nights I had spent running for my life through dark alleyways, dodging bullets, or hiding from men who wanted me dead.

This was different.

It was heavier, a weight pressing on my chest that made every heartbeat feel like a drum of warning.

I didn't know if it was because I was suddenly being made a bride, forced into a role I had never asked for, unprepared in every possible way.

Or if it was the knowledge that the original bride—the woman whose perfect day I had just stolen—was still in the hall, waiting, watching, poised to reclaim what I had no right to take.

Every step toward the main hall felt like walking a tightrope stretched over a pit of vipers.

Was I really being wedded, or was this a twisted form of execution, a spectacle designed to humiliate me, to send a message to anyone who might think to cross Vincenzo Orsini or his empire?

My pulse hammered so hard I was sure the three women behind me could hear it, each beat a deafening drum in my chest.

I pushed through the door, the hinges creaking under the pressure, and entered a narrow hallway.

Dim antique sconces lined the walls, casting long, flickering shadows that danced across the dark oak panels like restless spirits.

My breath caught as I walked, each step tentative, the floor cold beneath my feet.

One of the women moved ahead, her posture rigid, movements precise.

Without a word, she guided me forward, her hand brushing lightly against my elbow, a small anchor in a storm of chaos inside my chest.

The hallway opened abruptly into a vast hall that stole my breath in a way no alleyway or prison cell ever had.

The space was enormous, impossibly high ceilings adorned with frescoes of angels and saints frozen mid-flight, massive crystal chandeliers dripping light like golden tears.

The illumination shimmered across polished marble floors, casting the room in an almost ethereal glow, but the warmth it gave was deceptive.

Every detail spoke of power—of wealth, of control, of threats concealed behind etiquette and silk.

Two factions dominated the hall, separated as neatly as rival armies on a battlefield.

To the left, rows of guests dressed entirely in black, sharp suits, tailored dresses, and veils that whispered of old-world elegance and cold menace.

Above them hung a bold banner in ornate gold letters: Famiglia Orsini — Territorio Sovrano.

The men sat with squared shoulders, eyes carved from stone, scanning, every gesture precise.

Women beside them wore diamonds like armor, their glances sharp, and unyielding.

To the right, an equally imposing line of guests dressed in crisp whites—flowing gowns, linen suits, subtle flashes of gold jewelry glinting with quiet pride.

Their banner read in flowing Spanish: Los Rebeldes Españoles — Sangre y Honor.

Their postures were proud, defiant yet disciplined, an unspoken challenge radiating from the stillness of their bodies.

The contrast was striking: darkness and light, old blood versus new fire, restraint versus defiance.

And yet... silence.

No raised voices, no drawn weapons.

It was a tense truce, held together by shared awareness of the stakes.

Watching it was like seeing two predators drink at the same watering hole, aware that one false move could ignite a massacre.

I felt my pulse thrum in tandem with the room's quiet, my hands clenching involuntarily.

In my short time hiding out in Italy, I had learned just enough to understand the brutal truth of this world.

The underworld here was a minefield, ruled by mafia clans whose bloodlines dictated loyalty and death alike.

Families like the Orsinis claimed their territory as birthright, expelling intruders by force if necessary.

The Spanish rebels fought back with equal ferocity, carving their own bloody corners.

And here I was, standing on the threshold of both, my body exhausted, my ulcer burning with hunger, yet forced into this surreal ceremony of order and control.

The soft footsteps behind me faded suddenly, and instinct made me glance over my shoulder.

The three women had melted into the crowd, unseen, leaving me utterly alone at the threshold.

My stomach twisted violently.

I realized then that no one would save me here.

Every step forward was mine alone, into a world of silk, and hidden teeth.

I drew in a shaky breath, hands brushing against the folds of my gown.

When I turned forward again, nearly every pair of eyes in the hall locked onto me.

The weight of their stares pressed down like invisible hands, probing, judging.

Whispers rippled through the rows, barely audible, yet they carried the sharp edge of curiosity and suspicion.

Each glance felt like a strike, each murmur like a cold hand sliding over my spine.

My pulse jumped in my ears, each beat louder than the last.

At the right side of the raised altar, a woman in an elaborate white gown huddled in the arms of a taller companion.

Her shoulders shook with quiet, trembling sobs, mascara streaking her pale cheeks in long, dark lines.

The woman holding her stroked her back with careful, mechanical tenderness, yet her eyes burned with restrained fury, a barely contained fire that made the air between them crackle.

That had to be the original bride—the one whose perfect day I had just usurped, without warning, without mercy.

My stomach knotted in guilt, and a tremor of shame ran through me despite the adrenaline that still lingered from my earlier fight.

Flanking the altar steps were four men in impeccably tailored dark suits, earpieces visible, posture sharp, eyes scanning like hawks.

Every muscle was coiled, every motion purposeful.

They were guardians of the order, predators disguised as attendants, and their presence reminded me how precarious my position truly was.

At the center of the altar stood two figures.

One, an older man in his early fifties, silver threading his temples, his lined face the map of decades of command, exuded authority born of experience and decades in control.

But it was the man beside him who held the room in thrall, bending the space around him with sheer presence.

Vincenzo Orsini.

He stood tall, impossibly composed, his black suit hugging his broad shoulders and lean frame like it had been tailored by someone who understood power itself.

Every line of him radiated control—elegant, lethal, magnetic.

Dark hair flawless, jaw firm, eyes sharp as razors.

But it wasn't just the appearance.

It was the aura—the cold, commanding dominance that wrapped the hall in its weight.

Power clung to him like smoke in a confined space.

He didn't need to speak; the room obeyed his presence instinctively.

And then those eyes—dark, piercing, unflinching—found mine.

I felt my breath catch.

This was the infamous Orsini heir, widely known as Il Mostro— a man who could shape destinies and unmake lives with a single word.

A man whose name alone sent shivers through Italy, whose enemies vanished quietly in the night, and whose empire bowed beneath the weight of his will.

And yet... who would have imagined that beneath this aura of ruthless power, behind the sharp suits and commanding presence, stood the same little boy I had shared fourteen fearful, fragile hours with in that cave behind my father's estate?

The contrast was almost impossible to fathom: the trembling child clinging to survival had grown into a man whose shadow alone could silence a room, whose decisions could bend life and death to his whim.

And today... today, he had chosen to disrupt his own wedding for me—a girl he barely knew.

My chest tightened, my hands curled at my sides, trembling despite every attempt at composure.

I knew what came next without being told.

Swallowing hard, I began the long walk forward, each step tentative, weighted by the hall and the crowd.

The aisle stretched endlessly, polished marble reflecting the chandeliers above, each click of my heels amplified in the silence, ringing in my ears like a metronome marking my dread.

My heart raced in tandem, anxiety coiling tighter with every step, every gaze following me.

Every movement I made was dissected.

Every hesitation, every small falter in my posture, would not go unnoticed.

Inside, a storm raged—fear, disbelief, and a hundred unasked questions spinning at once.

How had I—just a few hours ago, running on empty, my body screaming with hunger, barely two steps ahead of danger, close to being caught, my life hanging by a thread—ended up here?

How had I gone from that desperate, hunted version of myself to a woman in white, draped in silk and lace, walking toward an altar, about to be married?

And to a world I barely understood—a world of power, violence, and rules I had never learned, where every smile might hide a blade and every vow could be a trap?

At the base of the altar, I paused, forcing myself to exhale slowly, to anchor my racing mind.

I glanced sideways at the discarded bride.

Her tear-streaked face had twisted into something darker.

Lips pressed thin, eyes narrowed into slits of pure venom.

Every glance she sent carried the weight of a knife, aimed straight at me.

I felt it as if the hatred could cut through bone.

She was coiled, ready to strike, radiating rage that was both personal and primal.

If looks could kill, I would have dropped dead on the spot.

Her fury was unfiltered.

I tore my gaze from the original bride, forcing my trembling legs to obey.

Summoning every ounce of control I had left, I began the slow, deliberate climb up the few marble steps that led to the altar.

Each step felt heavier than the last, as though the polished stone itself resisted my passage.

When I reached the top, the priest, an older man with solemn gray eyes and traditional vestments, gestured gently yet firmly toward the space before Vincenzo.

“Please, my child,” he said, his voice measured, carrying the authority of decades spent guiding hearts and souls. “Step forward and stand directly before Signor Orsini so that we may begin.”

I obeyed.

Now, mere inches separated me from Vincenzo.

The air around him was thick with his presence, a tangible gravity I couldn’t ignore.

His scent—expensive, woody, faintly spicy—washed over me, stirring a strange mixture of discomfort and fascination.

When our eyes met, the intensity struck like a physical blow.

There was no warmth in his gaze.

Just a cold, unflinching calculation.

My chest tightened.

How could a man make such an impulsive, terrifyingly absolute decision?

For what purpose?

Renzo had warned me that the marriage was meant to temporarily pacify the war between the Spanish and Italian mafias—the original bride was Spanish, her family seated here in the hall, eyes sharp and calculating, ready to defend their honor.

And yet... he had abandoned her entirely.

Right there.

In front of everyone.

Choosing instead to marry me, a girl he barely knew, in the presence of her entire family.

What kind of man does something so reckless, so impossibly audacious?

Was it truly because of those fourteen hours we had shared as children?

Could such a fleeting, fragile memory justify humiliating entire families, shattering a bride's heart, discarding the woman who had stood at this very altar moments ago as if she were nothing?

The audacity, the sheer weight of his power, left me reeling.

My mind spiraled, grasping for reason, for logic—anything to make sense of this act—and yet, no matter how I tried, I could not understand it.

It was madness.

The priest's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God and these witnesses..."

The priest's hands rose slightly, fingers brushing the ornate Bible before him. "...to join Elena Vasquez and Vincenzo Orsini in the sacred bonds of Holy Matrimony."

He paused, letting his gaze sweep across the hall, eyes lingering on the two factions seated like opposing armies.

"This union is not to be entered into lightly, but reverently, and in accordance with the will of God and the laws of man."

He adjusted the folds of his vestments and cleared his throat. "If any here can show just cause why these two should not be lawfully joined, let them speak now..."

His eyes shifted briefly to Vincenzo, then to me, steady and expectant. "...or forever hold their peace."

A heavy silence followed, a pregnant pause so dense I could almost feel it pressing against my skull.

The room seemed to inhale as one, waiting.

No voice dared rise.

Not a whisper.

Not a protest.

Not a single sign of resistance.

The tension hung in the air like a living thing, and my stomach tightened in response.

The priest turned his attention fully to me, his gaze softening slightly while his voice remained commanding.

“Elena Vasquez, do you take Vincenzo Orsini to be your lawful husband? Do you promise to be faithful to him in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer?”

He paused, tilting his head, “to love and to honor him, to cherish and respect him, all the days of your life?”

My heartbeat thundered, almost deafening in my ears.

I forced my voice steady, though it emerged quieter than I intended, trembling like the final leaf on a gusty branch.

“Yes... I do.”

The priest nodded solemnly, his eyes reflecting the weight of duty and ritual, then turned to Vincenzo.

“And do you, Vincenzo Orsini, take Elena Vasquez to be your lawful wife? Do you promise to be faithful to her in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, to love and to cherish her, to honor and protect her, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?”

The question hung in the air, heavy as marble.

Vincenzo didn’t answer immediately.

Those few seconds stretched endlessly, each one a tightrope I felt I might fall from.

My pulse spiked, my hands trembling slightly inside the folds of my gown.

I could feel every eye on us—on me—waiting for him, and the weight of it pressed like stone against my chest.

He simply stared at me, his expression unreadable.

Cold.

Perfectly still, a mask of control that made it impossible to tell whether he was weighing his words, second-guessing this mad, impulsive act, or simply savoring the power he wielded over the moment.

The air between us seemed to pulse with that unspoken authority, a pressure that made it hard to breathe.

Finally, his voice came.

Low, deliberate, and carrying a certainty that made the world around me seem to fall away.

“Yes.”

I let out a shaky breath I hadn’t realized I was holding, relief and fear knotting together in a dizzying rush.

The priest’s voice carried forward, echoing in the cavernous hall with the rhythm of centuries-old ritual.

“Let the rings be brought forward as a symbol of your eternal commitment.”

An attendant stepped up swiftly, moving with quiet precision, and presented an open velvet box containing two gleaming bands.

The priest blessed them briefly with a short prayer, nodding to us to begin.

“Elena, you may place the ring on Vincenzo’s finger and repeat after me: ‘With this ring, I thee wed, as a sign of my love and fidelity.’”

I lifted the larger band from the box.

It was heavy, cold against my skin, a weight that felt both literal and symbolic.

My fingers trembled as I reached for Vincenzo’s left hand.

When our fingers brushed, a sudden jolt shot through me—electric, unsettling, a spark igniting some hidden corner of my body.

His hand was steady, surprisingly warm, the skin rougher than I had imagined from a man who commanded from shadows.

The ring slid onto his finger with a precise fit.

Vincenzo took the smaller band in his hand with the same calm precision he carried in everything.

He reached for my left hand, his touch almost gentle at first, and I shivered at the sensation.

But as he tried to slide the ring onto my finger, it caught, refusing to pass my knuckle.

He frowned ever so slightly, applying a little more pressure.

Still, nothing.

The ring was clearly sized for the original bride—a woman so slender she seemed almost delicate, like a fragile skeleton draped in silk.

I, in contrast, was built differently.

My body had been forged on the run: muscles honed from five brutal years of survival, of endless chases, scrapes, and fights.

I wasn't fat, but I was strong—solid in the places where strength mattered.

Vincenzo's eyes flicked to mine, a flash of awareness passing through them, but his expression remained unreadable.

I swallowed hard, keeping my voice steady, "I—I think it won't fit," I murmured, barely above the measured hush of the hall.

Vincenzo's gaze didn't waver.

"Then we'll make it fit," he said simply, the words matter-of-fact, like this was nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

He tried again, more firmly this time.

The metal of the ring bit into my skin, pinching sharply, sending a sting that shot up through my knuckle and settled like fire in my nerves.

I winced, biting back a small sound that threatened to escape my lips.

He had forced the ring onto my finger knowing it would tear and hurt, and he didn't care.

That realization made fear coil in my chest like a living thing.

My hands trembled slightly—not just from the ring, but from the surreal weight of the moment: standing here, in a hall full of powerful eyes, on the verge of binding myself to one of the most dangerous men in Italy.

Vincenzo's jaw tightened, the muscles rigid beneath his skin as his dark eyes flicked briefly toward the priest.

“Proceed with the ceremony.”

The priest hesitated, just a fraction, before nodding and resuming the rite as though the moment had been nothing more than a fleeting shadow.

I stood frozen, the ring still burning against my finger, the raw tear where it had been forced digging into my skin with every heartbeat.

Pain radiated sharply, throbbing like fire up my hand, but I swallowed it down, forcing myself to stay upright.

Elena, you've survived worse than this, I reminded myself.

And yet... this hurt more than any wound I had endured on the run—not just physically, but deep in my chest.

Because this was not the boy I had known.

That timid, shaking child I had spent fourteen hours with in a cave, whispering promises and sharing secrets—he was gone.

This man, this Vincenzo, stood before me, eyes locked onto mine, utterly emotionless.

There was no flicker of care.

He did not flinch at my pain, did not even register the injury he had inflicted.

All that mattered to him was that the ring found its place on my hand—no matter the cost.

And that thought made my heart ache.

The priest cleared his throat softly.

His hands lifted slightly, palms open in that familiar gesture of solemn authority.

“By the power vested in me by God and the authority of the Church, and in the presence of these witnesses, I now pronounce you, Elena Vasquez and Vincenzo Orsini, husband and wife. What God has joined together, let no one separate. You are now bound in the sacred

covenant of Holy Matrimony, to love, honor, and cherish one another from this day forward, until death do you part.”

Until death do you part?

A ripple of murmurs swept through the grand hall.

The priest turned his calm gaze toward Vincenzo, his tone formal.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

My heart slammed against my ribs.

I swallowed hard, fighting the dry, uneasy twist in my throat.

This—this was really happening.

The words seemed foreign in my mind, almost impossible to believe.

The boy I had once shared innocent promises with in a dark, damp cave all those years ago—the boy who had trembled and laughed and feared the world with me—was now a man standing before me.

A man feared across Italy, a man who wielded power like a weapon, a mafia boss who could make empires tremble with a single decision.

And somehow, impossibly, he was now my husband.

Vincenzo moved deliberately, the kind of calculated, graceful precision that marked everything he did.

Two measured steps forward, closing most of the distance between us.

My stomach twisted—not just from nerves, but from the raw, undeniable dominance in the way he carried himself.

Then his large hand wrapped around my wrist.

He didn’t yank me toward him, didn’t force me into submission.

Instead, he leaned in, his imposing frame towering over my five-foot-five inches, his broad shoulders casting a shadow that dimmed the light of the chandelier above.

For a breathless, fragile second, his lips hovered just above mine.

I caught a faint scent—sweet, fruity, almost like ripe peaches—and my stomach knotted immediately, a visceral twist of unease and disorientation.

My pulse raced.

Before I could identify it, before I could pull away or brace myself, his mouth descended.

The kiss wasn't ceremonial, or fleeting—it was commanding.

His lips pressed to mine gently at first, almost deceptively tender, then deepened, exploring and claiming as though the hundreds of dangerous eyes around us, the rival factions, even the discarded bride glaring daggers from the side, were nothing more than empty air.

Heat flared wherever his body pressed against mine, a shock of sensation that made my blood race and my limbs tremble.

His free hand rose to cup the side of my face, possessive and sure, fingers splaying along the curve of my jaw, tilting my head ever so slightly.

Every movement was measured.

I was acutely aware of every detail—his warmth, the roughness of his palms, the undeniable power in his touch—but also the faint, underlying scent that hadn't left, that twisted my stomach into tight, uncomfortable knots.

When he finally pulled back—slowly, almost reluctantly—the world shifted beneath me.

Vertigo threatened.

My lips still tingled, the taste lingering like fire and fruit combined.

Peach.

My mind recoiled instinctively, the knot in my stomach tightening into a coil of fear.

No.

Peach was my deadliest allergy—one I had confessed to him during those long, intimate fourteen hours we spent together as children.

I had told him everything: how, at age seven, a single sip of a peach-flavored drink had sent me spiraling into a coma for three days.

Even the faintest whiff could trigger a milder reaction, but direct contact like this, pressed against my lips in a deliberate kiss?

This was far beyond mild.

My eyes widened, vision already beginning to blur at the edges.

The peach scent clung to me.

It wasn't an accident.

My mind raced even as my body began to betray me.

Had he done this on purpose?

The man who had just married me, who had rewritten both our lives in a single audacious decision—had he remembered my confession from years ago and weaponized it?

Was this some twisted ritual disguised as a wedding kiss?

A public execution in the opulent guise of matrimony?

My legs felt like liquid beneath me.

The marble floor seemed to shift and sway as the grand hall blurred, black and white merging into a dizzying, surreal mosaic of fabric and faces.

Sharp stabs of pain bloomed deep in my abdomen, radiating outward in cruel waves.

I reached out blindly toward the tall, commanding figure of Vincenzo, fingers grasping at nothing but empty air, my mind screaming for help, for intervention, for some anchor in the chaos.

He didn't move.

He simply stood there. Watching.

My balance gave out completely.

I collapsed backward onto the altar steps, the hard marble biting into my spine with a deafening thud that seemed to echo through the cavernous hall.

Pain lanced along my back.

Every breath became shallow, punctuated by involuntary, sharp gasps that burned in my throat and lips.

My mouth tingled, lips swelling as though someone had poured molten acid over them.

My tongue thickened slightly, making it difficult to swallow.

My throat constricted, tightening with a cruel, suffocating pressure that set off a spike of panic in my chest.

Yet the hall remained eerily quiet, the murmurs of astonished witnesses distant and meaningless, almost like they existed in another world.

No one moved.

No urgent commands rang out to summon an ambulance.

No one rushed forward to help.

No one even seemed to notice that I was spiraling toward death from a deadly allergic reaction—triggered by the peach my new husband had just pressed to my lips, here, on this altar, in front of hundreds of witnesses.

Vincenzo had no reason to hate me. No reason to want to kill me.

He had chosen me, in this surreal, impossible moment, over everyone else, in front of both factions of his dangerous world.

And yet, here I was, writhing in pain.

I tried to move, to lift a hand, to call out, to plead for mercy—but my body betrayed me entirely.

My arms felt leaden, impossibly heavy, my legs trembling like wet noodles under the weight of despair.

Each attempt to rise or shift seemed futile, as if the marble beneath me had fused to my bones.

Only the faint, ragged sound of my own breathing cut through the deafening silence of the hall, each inhale a struggle, each exhale a fragile thread barely holding me to life.

My vision narrowed.

The towering, magnetic figure of Vincenzo, began to fade into darkness, his presence receding as if I were slipping from reality itself.

I tried again to call out, a weak, strangled sound, but it caught in my throat, stifled by swelling and the thickening burn that clawed up from my stomach.

I didn't survive everything—the chase, the ambushes, the endless nights running through shadows—just to die now.

Not like this, in the hands of the man who had once been my friend.

And then the darkness claimed me.