

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 6[6,026 words]

Chapter 6

ELENA

The Black Veil Society Academy.

The place I had just joined, the first step into whatever life Vincenzo had decided for me.

The academy wasn't a school. Not really. It was a crucible.

A forge.

A place where men—and now women—were broken, sharpened, and remade into something lethal.

Something unstoppable.

The sleek black car slid over the winding roads of Lombardy, the engine low and throaty, the tires barely making a sound on the asphalt.

My escort—one of Vincenzo's soldiers—sat silently in the passenger seat, hands resting casually on his thighs, but his presence screamed readiness.

Every muscle tensed, every glance calculated.

Ahead, the academy emerged like a shadow rising from the mist, jagged walls clawing at the sky.

Its sheer black stone facade seemed alive, watching.

Towers pierced the clouds like knives, the windows glinting faintly with reflections of the overcast morning.

The gates—monstrous iron and steel—loomed closer with every turn.

Rusted hinges groaned like tortured metal, announcing our approach as if the academy itself were breathing, wary, testing me.

The grounds beyond were hidden behind high walls crowned with razor wire, and I could catch the faint glint of cameras.

I felt my pulse quicken, though I forced my face into calm neutrality.

I had survived far worse than intimidating architecture.

I had survived men who wanted me dead.

I had survived betrayal, ambushes, poison, and fire.

But even knowing that, the Black Veil Academy radiated a different kind of threat.

The car slowed to a stop.

My driver opened the door, gloved hands precise, almost reverent.

I stepped out, boots crunching against the gravel.

The air was colder here, carrying hints of pine resin from the surrounding forest and the faint metallic tang of discipline.

This wasn't just a place to train.

It was a place that demanded transformation.

A crucible where the sharpest, deadliest men of the European underworld had been forged, honed into weapons before the world even knew they existed.

And today, for the first time, I would step inside.

The academy rested on its own jagged islet, a place so remote that even the Italian government's satellites seemed to forget it existed.

The Black Veil didn't just train fighters.

It created ghosts. And nightmares.

No one left without scars.

I swallowed, tasting the bitter edge of anxiety and excitement at the same time.

My hands rested at my sides, trying to seem calm, but my fingers itched, and my muscles twitched with that old instinct—the one that had kept me alive for eighteen years.

Survive first.

Calculate second.

And never, ever look like prey.

Everything demanded submission.

As we approached the main gate of the academy, the car's engine hummed low behind us, its black frame receding into the gravel driveway like a shadow being swallowed.

Before I could even reach the threshold, a soldier—one of the guards stationed at the entrance—stepped out of the security post, holding a small biometric scanner embedded in the cold metal of the gate.

“Fingerprint,” he said, almost casually.

I pressed my finger against the smooth pad, feeling a faint electric pulse ripple up my arm.

A soft green light blinked once, twice, and the heavy iron gates groaned as they slid open.

The scanner confirmed I had permission to enter—permission I had not yet fully earned, but permission granted because of Vincenzo's name, his authority, and the invisible weight of the Society pressing behind it.

We stepped onto the compound together, the gravel crunching under our boots.

And then I realized something.

My escort wasn't behind me anymore.

I glanced over my shoulder, and the car was gone.

The man himself had vanished.

No warning.

I was inside the gates, and suddenly the reality hit me: I was on my own.

Here, no one kept records.

No one cared if a recruit survived or not.

Fail, and you weren't sent home. You were simply... erased.

Tossed into the lake, swallowed by the shadows of the island, forgotten like you'd never existed.

Goosebumps rose across my arms as I looked around the courtyard, the massive stone buildings looming over me like silent sentinels.

I drew in a breath, steadying myself, letting the fear twist into focus.

I had seen Renzo yesterday, just as Vincenzo had instructed, and I had asked him to find me something—any task, any role that could prove I belonged in this world, that I was more than a name on a ring.

Renzo. Third in command. Underboss.

The man whose face I had rearranged with my fists the day he had tried to murder me to prevent Vincenzo from marrying a “nobody.”

I could still feel the satisfying crunch of my elbow against his cheekbone, the wet shock of impact, the way his body had collapsed like a ragdoll.

Renzo had appeared without announcement, emerging from the shadows like a gladiator resurrected.

Bandages wrapped around his head, the white gauze stark against the dark bruising still visible beneath, made him look like a half-mummified soldier from some ancient arena.

Only his eyes were fully visible, black fire smoldering in the one not swollen shut.

Renzo had made it brutally clear: before I could earn a place in the family, before I could prove myself or take on any real work, I had to survive the Black Veil Society Academy.

He’d ranted for what felt like hours about the dangers within those walls—how most who entered never walked out alive, how the training broke even the strongest, how a single mistake could mean disappearance, or worse.

He had tried to scare me, insisting I was better off as a housewife, cozy and safe, a trophy wife with nothing to risk.

But I liked challenges.

I always had.

I had spent my life running, surviving, testing limits, pushing myself into impossible situations and coming out bloodied but unbroken.

So when he asked, when he dared me to step into the fire of the Black Veil Society Academy, I didn’t hesitate.

I had accepted immediately, even knowing the risk.

Even knowing I could very well die.

Two burly male students barreled past me, sprinting toward the left wing of the academy, their boots kicking up gravel and echoing sharply against the stone walls.

The sudden movement yanked me out of my reverie, reminding me I was still inside these walls, still standing a few meters from the gate that loomed behind me like a warning.

I began to move forward, my steps deliberate, eyes sweeping over everything I could see.

The academy ran on a rigid, unbroken cycle: one year.

Twelve months of fire, of trial, of being stretched to limits.

I knew that every single day would be a test, every hour designed to push me past fear, past weakness.

But I also knew the reward at the end of that cycle: I would no longer be the silent bride who sat in the shadows of Vincenzo's villa, watched but unseen.

I would emerge different.

I would be a made woman.

A weapon.

A presence he could not ignore.

A force in my own right, bound only by the rules I chose to obey.

The thought brought a small, private smile to my lips, hidden from the world but fierce in its certainty.

Here, within these walls of stone and steel, I would prove myself.

Here, I would be reborn.

It had been seven days since Vincenzo and I had stood at that altar, bound in holy matrimony—seven days since my world had twisted itself completely upside-down—and in all that time, we had exchanged barely ten words.

He moved through the villa like a storm front, cold and controlled, never pausing.

Mornings I caught him in the study with Ciro, the enforcer, their words clipped, loaded with intent, discussing arms shipments from Eastern Europe, new Balkan routes, and ways to blind Interpol's gaze.

Afternoons he was locked in the private quarters with Renzo, combing over protection rackets in Milan's fashion district, extortion lists among port workers, contingency plans in case the Spanish decided to retaliate for the wedding insult.

I felt like a ghost in my own marriage.

Present, but invisible.

I could track his movements, note the shift in his moods, the tension in his shoulders—but I was a spectator, a bystander in a life that now belonged to him.

And I cannot help but wonder if this is how I am to live the rest of my life—married, yet ignored; bound, yet abandoned; cursed to a gilded cage of isolation where even his presence feels like a shadow I cannot touch.

A figure cut across the courtyard toward me—a woman tall, broad-shouldered, every step radiating authority.

Her presence yanked me out of my thoughts of Vincenzo, grounding me in the reality of the academy's ruthless world.

Black tactical gear clung to her like a second skin, her hair cropped close, every movement precise.

Capitana Livia.

Authority dripped from her in waves, silent and absolute.

Her eyes scanned me quickly, efficiently, noting my dress, my posture, my hair pulled back tight, the lack of distraction on my face.

My ring glinted in the sun.

She lingered there for just a half-second longer than necessary.

Not impressed. Not intimidated. Just... noted.

"You signed the waiver?" she asked, her tone sharp but neutral.

"Yes," I said.

"You understand that if you die here—" she continued, crisp and factual—"your family receives nothing. No investigation. No body. If we choose not to return it, that is the law. That is policy. You will vanish, officially and finally."

"I signed it," I repeated.

Even saying the words out loud sent a shiver down my spine, but I refused to let it show.

“Good.” She turned immediately—no welcome, no explanation, just the fluid motion of someone born to command.

Her boots clicked against the stone courtyard, sharp and final, before she disappeared into the shadows of the academy halls, leaving a hollow echo in her wake.

I barely had time to register the space she left behind when a voice cut through the murmurs and shuffles of the recruits—a crisp, amplified tone that seemed to slice the air itself.

Smooth. Authoritative. Cold.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” it said, carrying across the open courtyard like steel through silk, “assemble. Four in a row, ten columns deep. Now.”

All of us froze, scanning.

No one was visible on the raised platform.

No figure in the windows of the surrounding buildings.

The sound came from everywhere and nowhere at once—speakers hidden in the eaves, microphones overhead, cameras probably observing our every twitch.

A subtle tension threaded through the air, the kind that made every inch of the courtyard feel tighter.

The formation began awkwardly.

Recruits jostled against each other, muttered curses under their breath, shuffled like pieces on an uneven chessboard.

A tall man with a jagged scar across his jaw collided with a shorter recruit, earning a sharp hissed, “Watch it, stronzo.”

Another dropped his bag, scrambling to retrieve it, delaying the line and earning a terse, clipped warning from someone behind him.

I barely moved, letting others bump and stumble around me.

I was patient.

Observation was part of survival.

Two minutes later, forty-four bodies—including mine—stood in something resembling order.

Rows and columns aligned on the gravel like soldiers on a parade ground.

Silence settled, a tangible thing pressing into my lungs.

The voice spoke again, smooth as polished steel but sharp enough to cut bone:

“Welcome to the Black Veil Society Academy.”

A pause.

“Of the forty-four standing before me, forty-two are Italian. Two are Spanish. Treat that as fact, not opinion.”

The words landed like hammers.

I felt the tension spike around me.

Some shoulders stiffened, some eyes darted toward the Spanish students.

Old hatreds die hard. But here, they would not survive.

“It is true—the Italians and the Spanish have fought for generations. Some of you have lost family to Spanish bullets. Some of them have lost family to ours. That ends at these gates. Discrimination against the Spanish will be punished by the removal of two fingers. No warnings. No exceptions.”

A collective gasp rippled through the ranks.

I didn’t flinch.

They weren’t bluffing. The academy did not tolerate weakness, and I had no intention of testing it.

“Treat everyone as equal. That is rule one.”

Another pause. Weighty.

“And of the forty-four, only two are women. The rest are men.”

I felt their gazes sweep over me and the girl behind me, assessing.

The attention pressed down like a tangible force, thick and uncomfortable, but I did not waver.

My chin stayed high, shoulders relaxed, eyes forward.

Confidence was armor, remember that.

“The women are off-limits,” the voice continued, cold and factual, “in any way, shape, or form. Cameras are everywhere—corridors, dorms, showers, classrooms. Touching them without consent will result in immediate and severe punishment. Rape will be punished by death... and the death of the perpetrator’s entire family. This was made very clear in the contracts you signed. Do not test us. Do not test the rules. Do not test your survival.”

The silence that followed after the warnings settled like a graveyard.

Even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

“There are two lecture halls,” the voice continued, void of warmth. “To your left is the Hall of Shadows. If your number is one through twenty-two, that is your hall. To your right is the Crimson Chamber. Numbers twenty-three through forty-four, you belong there.”

I lowered my gaze to my badge.

Number forty-four.

Dead last.

Fitting, I supposed.

Vincenzo’s order had probably rearranged the roster to place me here deliberately.

Last, but visible.

Crimson Chamber hall.

That was my lot.

“Additional information and schedules will be provided as needed. Good luck, ladies and gentlemen. Proceed to your halls.”

The ranks dissolved like clockwork, bodies peeling off in two directions with robotic efficiency.

My boots scuffed against the gravel as I took a hesitant step forward.

I started walking toward the Crimson Chamber, letting the sound of my own boots echo against the courtyard walls.

“Number Forty-Four.”

The voice cut through the quiet, close this time, and human.

I stopped and turned, because that voice wasn’t coming from the speakers.

It was coming from him.

Vincenzo.

He stood across the courtyard, thirty feet away, his posture effortless but deliberate.

Hands tucked into the pockets of his charcoal suit, his body relaxed yet unmistakably alert.

Every inch of him radiated power.

Beside him, Renzo created a stark contrast.

Vincenzo’s six-foot-six presence was commanding in a way that made space shrink around him.

Renzo, barely five-four, was compact, wound tight, every muscle coiled like a spring ready to snap.

I had a subtle height advantage over him—just enough to notice—and that knowledge made a smirk rise against my will.

Renzo noticed immediately.

“Care to explain that smirk?” His voice was edged with threat.

I met his gaze evenly, letting the weight of my stare match the sharpness in his.

“I don’t owe explanations for expressions,” I said evenly. “Since when did that become your concern?”

His hands flexed at his sides, and I could see the fuse burning in him, a fuse so short it could ignite at any moment.

“I’ll be one of your instructors here,” Renzo said, low and controlled. “Trust me, signora—you do not want to test me. I can make your year a living hell. Every day, every hour... I can make it feel like the last.”

I tilted my head.

“I am your boss’s wife, Renzo. And I expect you to remember that when you speak to me.”

Renzo took a single step forward, the movement sharp enough to feel like a strike in itself.

His chest rose, shoulders squaring, fury tightening every line of his compact frame.

“Remember your place,” he said, voice low but cutting. “You didn’t earn that ring.”

Another step. “You stole it.”

The words came out harder now, edged with something that wasn’t just anger.

It was personal.

“You showed up on her wedding day—conveniently chased by ‘hunters’—and played the damsel until Vincenzo threw everything away for you.”

His lip curled.

“Shameless.”

He closed the distance again, fast enough that instinct kicked in before thought did.

I took a step back, eyes flicking past him to Vincenzo.

My so-called husband. He hadn’t moved an inch.

Hands still buried in his pockets.

Posture unchanged.

Face unreadable.

No warning.

No intervention.

No flicker of concern as Renzo leaned closer, like he wanted to tear me down in front of Vincenzo.

For a moment, a cold, sinking clarity hit me.

I didn’t matter an inch to him.

I was invisible in that space, likely nothing more than a vessel carrying my father’s sins.

My muscles taut, and I forced my pulse to remain steady.

Renzo's presence pressed closer.

His eyes burned with something too close to fury, black fire beneath the swelling and bandages.

"Are you proud of yourself?" he snapped, voice honed to a razor edge.

"Happy to ruin another woman's wedding? To steal her groom in front of her entire family, to humiliate generations of honor in a single day?"

I shifted my weight.

He lunged. Fast.

I pivoted.

Ducked under the swing, letting the momentum of his strike pass just inches above my shoulder, and drove backward three precise steps, opening space between us.

My pulse remained steady and focused.

He came at me again immediately, rage stripping away any restraint, any technique he had left.

There was no skill in it now—only pure emotion.

That was his mistake.

"Renzo."

The word cut.

Clean. Like dry ice snapping against steel.

Renzo froze mid-stride.

His chest heaved, muscles locked as though the command had physically seized him.

Slowly, he turned his head.

Then his body followed.

His gaze landed on Vincenzo.

Fury still burned there, but beneath it, something else emerged.

Respect. Fear.

A grudging, disciplined devotion.

“I won’t take disrespect from her,” Renzo said, his voice tight.

“Excuse us,” Vincenzo said.

Polite. Almost gentle.

Yet the words carried a gravity that bent the air around them.

Renzo blinked once.

Stunned.

Then the shift happened.

He dipped his head once, a precise gesture acknowledging submission without words.

Then he shot me one last look—venomous, promising this wasn’t over—before pivoting sharply on his heel.

His boots struck the stone with a precise rhythm as he moved toward the Crimson Chamber doors.

The instant Renzo disappeared, the air changed.

Electric. Heavy.

Vincenzo moved.

He pulled his hands from his pockets and stepped forward.

Just one step—but it shifted everything in the space between us.

Up close, he was overwhelming.

The light caught the planes of his face.

Eyes that didn’t give anything away unless he allowed it.

I held his gaze.

Silent.

A single strand of black hair fell across his forehead, softening him in a way that felt almost alien against the rest of him.

He looked like something stolen from a Renaissance painting.

Beautiful.

Perfect.

And terrifying enough to make you hesitate before stepping too close.

“Hi,” I said, my voice small.

My hand rose in a hesitant, half-formed wave, a gesture awkward and unnecessary.

He didn’t smile.

Didn’t flinch.

Didn’t react at all.

He just looked at me, eyes dark, fathomless, and said—

“Renzo has always wanted me to marry Violet.”

I held his gaze, waiting.

“Her older sister—dead now. Heart failure at twenty-three—was the woman Renzo loved.”

His voice remained Flat.

Detached.

Each word calculated. “As a man. As a soldier. As her brother—he failed her. Before Violet’s sister died, she made him swear to protect Violet. To see that she had everything.”

A pause, but not an uncertain one.

Intentional.

“The wedding,” he continued, eyes locked on mine, “was his masterpiece. Years of quiet maneuvering to make it happen.”

Another beat, each second punctuated by the quiet authority in his stance.

“When I walked away from marrying Violet and chose you instead,” he said, voice steady, “I shattered every plan he had laid, every promise he made to her sister. I reduced years of careful preparation, every painstaking effort to make that wedding perfect, to utter futility.”

Silence settled between us.

Heavy. Insistent.

I crossed my arms slowly, grounding myself, forcing my pulse to obey me.

“That’s not my fault,” I said, steady. “I didn’t plan to crash your wedding, and I certainly didn’t expect you to abandon her and choose me instead.”

A beat.

“I ran into that church because Ruslan’s men were twenty seconds from putting a bullet in me.”

His expression didn’t change.

“Renzo doesn’t believe in coincidence.”

Of course he doesn’t.

But I don’t care.

He’s not the one I’m married to.

Vincenzo reached inside his jacket, fingers precise.

He pulled out a folded photograph.

He didn’t offer it immediately.

He held it there for a moment.

Then unfolded it with surgical care, “Is this the man hunting you?”

I looked at the photograph, and the world tilted.

Ruslan Baranov.

Stepping off a private jet.

Charcoal coat open over a black shirt, expression cold.

Eyes like knives.

Behind him—six men in perfect formation, dark suits, moving as if trained to breathe as one.

Wolves in human skin.

The sight hit harder than I expected.

My lungs constricted.

Memories surged without warning.

Amy—my best friend—her face a mask of blood and broken bone, screaming, every sound a knife in my chest.

Ruslan's voice reverberating through the shattered room, promising vengeance

Amy's blood pooling beneath my fist, sticky and hot, a brutal testament to the helplessness to the violence that had taken everything in a heartbeat.

I forced myself to breathe.

Then I nodded, voice tight, the word heavy in the air.

“Yeah.”

Vincenzo folded the photograph with meticulous precision and slid it back into his inner pocket with a calmness that was almost gentle.

“As promised,” he said. His voice was even. “You remain under my protection.”

A beat.

“Ruslan Baranov—or anyone else hunting you—will not, cannot, touch you.”

I swallowed.

The words should have landed like a shield.

Like relief.

Instead, they pressed down somewhere heavier, settling like iron in my chest.

“When you return home this evening,” Vincenzo continued, his tone shifting subtly—
“Violet will be at the villa.”

My stomach twisted.

“She’s dining with me tonight.”

Another pause.

His words hit harder than the steel of a blade.

I forced my voice to remain steady.

“Tell me if I’m wrong,” I said, voice steady.

“It’s been seven days since our wedding. Seven days, and I’ve barely seen you. We live in the same house, yet we haven’t shared a single meal. Haven’t even sat across from each other once.”

I flexed my fingers slightly at my sides.

“And yet,” I said, letting the words fall slow, “you’re inviting another woman into our home tonight?”

His eyes didn’t flicker.

“She’s not just another woman,” he said, voice even. “She’s Violet.”

“And,” he continued, calm, almost cruel in the restraint, “It’s my house, not yours. I do what I want. Don’t mistake my silence these past seven days for kindness. I’ve ignored you, yes—but that does not make you equal to me. It does not make you in charge of anything but yourself.”

The words landed like stones, and stayed lodged in my chest.

Pain bloomed, fast and vicious, cutting deeper than I was prepared for, deeper than I’d allowed myself to believe he could reach.

My chest tightened.

For a moment—a single, excruciating heartbeat—I felt something inside me give way, like pressure collapsing under its own weight.

“I believe I made myself clear,” he said, his voice lowering.

“I did not marry you because of what happened in that cave. Whatever debt you think I owed you died with our childhood.”

Each word followed with careful intent, measured like something placed exactly where it was meant to wound.

“I married you because it places you where I can see you... where I can reach you... where you exist within the boundaries I define.”

My breath caught, but he didn’t pause long enough to let me recover.

“To bind you to my world,” he continued, tone unflinching, “so that every choice concerning you belongs to me. Whether I choose to dismantle you piece by piece, strip you of every illusion you still cling to, or reshape you into something that serves a purpose I decide—”

The words settled, heavier with each passing second.

“—that is mine to determine.”

A quiet pause followed.

“And while you remain exactly where I have placed you,” he went on, his gaze fixed on mine with unrelenting clarity, “you will also learn the difference between proximity and possession.”

A step closer.

“You will watch me give Violet what you will never receive from me. Every kindness. Every softness. Every moment of affection that resembles something human.”

His voice dipped slightly, but infinitely colder.

“And you will understand, in time, that no man will ever offer you that willingly. Not because you are incapable of wanting it...”

A faint pause, just enough to let the next words settle deeper.

“...but because I will make certain that no one ever gets the chance.”

My pulse hammered, but I forced myself to stay still.

“I want you to feel it,” he said, his voice soft now, deceptively so, “the absence of love.”

The silence stretched, taut and suffocating.

“The slow burn of want.”

“And one day,” he went on, “when your life begins to slip through your fingers, when you find yourself standing at the edge of it with nothing left to reach for...”

A pause settled.

“...you will understand that all you have ever truly known is absence. Not love. Not warmth. Only the long, quiet endurance of pain.”

Something in my chest coiled painfully.

I exhaled shallowly, fracturing under the weight of the words.

“Vin—“

“Whatever softness you remember in me...” His voice fell silent for a heartbeat.

“...died in that cave.”

The silence that followed was absolute.

“What’s left,” he said at last, lifting a single hand between us in a small, controlled gesture.

“...is this.”

Distance. Coldness. Control.

“You are my wife,” he said next, “In name. In law. In punishment.”

Every syllable landed like a verdict.

Another knife turned in my chest—sharper this time.

“Violet loved me fiercely. Always has. She dreamed of our wedding the way other women dream of sunsets—quiet. Certain. Inevitable.”

Each word painted a picture I didn’t want to see.

“I would have given it to her a week ago.”

A pause.

“I had the ring. The venue. The truce papers drafted.”

His gaze didn’t shift.

“Until you walked into that church.”

I folded my arms across my chest, nails digging into my biceps hard enough to ground me.

Anything to keep my hands from shaking.

Anything to keep the fracture inside from showing on my face.

“So this is your idea of punishment?” I asked, my voice steadier than the tightness in my chest.

“Keeping me at a distance while you bring Violet into your house whenever it suits you?”

Vincenzo tilted his head slightly, studying me.

Not like a husband. Not even like an enemy.

Like a subject.

“I don’t consider this punishment,” he said.

A pause.

“I consider this kindness.”

The word landed wrong. Wrong enough to sting.

Wrong enough to feel like mockery wrapped in silk.

“If you truly want to understand what my idea of punishment is,” he continued, his tone steady, almost indifferent, “then test me. Cross one of the three lines I set for you... and I’ll make it clear.”

His voice dropped colder.

For the first time, tears gathered at the corners of my eyes, blurring the edges of everything I thought I understood.

I held them there, refusing to let them fall, but the burn only sharpened the realization settling deep in my chest—

It had never occurred to me that a man could carry this much hatred.

Letting my tears fall would mean giving him something.

And I wouldn’t give him that.

“So,” I said, steadying my voice despite the weight pressing against my chest, “you married me just to make sure no man would ever want me.”

He didn’t hesitate.

“That’s right.”

The bluntness of it almost stole my breath.

“And tonight...” I continued, forcing my voice to hold steady despite the crack forming in it, “when I come home—I’m supposed to watch you give her everything I’ll never have.”

He stepped closer.

Closing the space between us until there was nothing left to pretend with.

The air shifted with him, carrying the faint, unmistakable trace of his cologne—dark wood layered with something warm and spiced.

The same scent that had clung to the rooftop sheets.

“More than that,” he said, his tone unchanged, as if he were assigning something routine. “You’ll serve us dinner.”

“You’ll prepare it yourself,” he added, watching me closely, as though measuring the exact moment the meaning would sink in.

“Violet asked for it,” he continued, almost idly. “She was... very specific.”

My breath faltered.

“She wants to see you in that position,” he went on, unhurried.

“Wants to watch you set the table, place the plates in front of us—”

Another pause, softer now.

“—and stand there while we eat, knowing exactly why you’re the one serving.”

His eyes didn’t leave mine, not even for a second.

“She wants to taste something made by your hands,” he finished quietly.

Something inside my chest tightened—then snapped clean through whatever restraint I had left.

“Hell no.”

The words burst out before I could stop them.

“Dinner is at 1800,” he said, as though I hadn’t spoken at all.

“Your classes end at 1500. I expect you home by 1600.”

Each word precise.

“You’ll work with the chef to prepare the meal.”

A pause.

“You’ll serve it.”

Another pause.

“That is not a request.”

My jaw tightened.

“I don’t cook,” I shot back, my voice rising despite my attempt to keep it controlled. “We have five chefs on staff. Full-time. They—”

“Violet wants you to do it.”

“And what Violet wants,” he added, “she gets.”

My heart fractured.

A slow, dragging rip behind my ribs, like something was being pulled loose one thread at a time.

I could feel the strain of it—the way my breath stuttered, the way my lungs hesitated before remembering how to work.

Vincenzo’s words replayed in my mind.

I wanted to believe the boy in the cave hadn’t completely disappeared.

That somewhere under all of this—

There was still something left of him. Something that remembered me.

I forced a smile.

The kind of smile you learn when you've spent years lying to handlers, to assets, to anyone who needed to believe you were something you weren't.

"Fine," I said, forcing a lightness into my tone that didn't quite belong there. "At least I have your protection. Your name. Your money."

I gave a small shrug, though the movement felt stiffer than I intended.

"I can buy whatever I want. Live comfortably. Live... large, as you would put it."

The words tasted hollow even as I said them, but I didn't stop.

"As for everything else..." I let out a quiet breath, "I suppose that's something I can endure."

I tilted my head slightly, trying to mask the ache, though every nerve screamed.

It hurt.

Badly.

But showing it—letting him see—would be shameful.

Unacceptable. I had to hide it.

Inside, something screamed.

Loud. Raw. Uncontrolled.

I'd never dated.

Never kissed anyone before that poisoned kiss at the altar seven days ago.

Never held hands in the rain.

Never shared a bed.

Never whispered ridiculous promises at three in the morning with someone who actually meant them.

The fourteen hours in that cave... those had been everything.

Me, pressing rags to his bleeding thigh while my hands shook.

Him, gripping my wrist like I was the only thing tethering him to the world.

Two children. Terrified. Clinging to each other in the dark because there was nothing else to cling to.

That was where it started.

That was where everything I'd ever wanted had begun.

No food. No music. No future.

Just a single, fragile promise:

I'll find you again.

I'll keep you safe.

We'll be together when we're grown.

He had been my first light.

My first hope.

My first secret.

And now... he had found me, only to chain me in shadow.

"Good," he said. "Keep your head down here."

A pause. "The instructors are brutal. The other recruits will test you. Don't give them an opening."

I lifted my chin slightly. "I don't need your warnings."

My voice cracked, just once, but that single falter carried everything I hadn't said.

"It's not like you actually care."

He didn't respond.

Didn't deny it.

Just... silence.

And that silence spoke louder than any words ever could.

My throat tightened.

I swallowed, forcing the soundless sobs back into a cage. “Can I go now?”

Vincenzo inclined his head slightly. “You may leave.”

I turned, determined to escape before the tears fell—but they came anyway.

Hot. Fast. Uncontrolled.

At first, they were silent—a tightness in my throat, a pressure behind my eyes.

Then, inevitably, they broke, shattering the control I’d clung to so desperately.

My steps faltered as I moved toward the stairs leading into the Crimson Chamber hall.

Each step heavier than the last.

My chest shook.

Small, broken sounds escaped before I could trap them.

Gasps.

Sobs.

Fragments of something I couldn’t hold together anymore.

I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth.

Trying to silence it. Trying to contain it.

But it leaked out anyway.

Quiet. Shattered.

I thought I was stronger than this.

I’d survived black-bag missions.

Interrogations.

Five years of being erased, of being someone no one could trace.

I had killed when I had no other choice.

But I had never—never—known what it meant to be hated with this quiet, methodical calm.

To be denied affection, reduced to humiliation and degradation.

And worse—far worse—from the one boy who had held my heart for eighteen years.

That was something deeper.

Something I didn't know how to fight.

I reached the short flight of stone steps leading to the hall doors.

And stopped.

My body refused to move for a moment.

Just stood there.

Shaking. Breathing uneven.

Then—

I wiped my face.

Hard. Furiously.

As if I could erase everything that had just happened.

As if I could reset myself by force.

The fabric of my sleeve came away damp.

My cheeks burned. My eyes stung.

I wished—desperately—for a mirror.

To see what I looked like.

To know if I was betraying myself.

If my eyes were red.

If my mascara—barely there as it was—had streaked.

If I looked weak. If I looked broken.

I drew one last shuddering breath, forcing my lungs to steady even as my chest still trembled with the remnants of everything I'd just been forced to feel.

Then I squared my shoulders.

Control.

That was the only thing I had left.

My fingers tightened briefly at my sides before I let them fall loose again.

Calm hands. Calm face. Calm everything.

And then—

I glanced back.

Vincenzo stood where I had left him.

Still.

Immovable. Unyielding.

The morning sun wrapped around him like a crown, gilding the edges of his tall frame, catching in the dark strands of his hair until they gleamed like polished obsidian.

The wind tugged lightly at his suit jacket, but he didn't shift. Didn't blink.

Didn't follow me with his body.

Only his eyes.

Fixed. Watching.

Cataloguing.

As though every tear I'd shed, every tremor I'd fought to hide, every crack in my carefully constructed composure—was something to be recorded.

I held his gaze for half a second longer than I should have.

Then I turned.

Because if I stayed—if I let myself linger in the space between him and me—I might break.

And I refused. I refused to give him even that much power.

I moved forward, each step deliberate, toward the massive doors of the Crimson Chamber.

The hallways around me seemed to hum with the weight of history, the echoes of every recruit who had ever dared to step inside before me.

Before I even reached the threshold, I heard him.

Renzo.

His voice carried through the heavy doorway—sharp, precise.

Authority embedded in each syllable.

I walked into the Crimson Chamber.

The doors swung shut behind me.

Softly.

Like a verdict that could not be reversed.

The echo of the closing doors wasn't loud, but it resonated inside me.

The Crimson Chamber stretched before me in dark, imposing symmetry.

Twenty-one men were already seated, their bodies rigid, disciplined, quiet.

They sat like soldiers awaiting inspection, but there was more to it than that—they were weighing the new variable entering their midst.

And that variable was me.

I didn't shrink.

I walked. Step by step, each boot striking the stone floor with calculated rhythm: click, click, click.

Every sound echoed.

Every echo carried my presence further into the room.

Each click was a declaration: I am here. I exist. I refuse to disappear.

Their eyes followed me, moving over me like hands, probing for weakness.

I kept my back straight.

Chin lifted. Face calm.

At the front of the hall, he stood.

Renzo.

Renzo's gaze followed me the entire way to my seat.

I didn't need to look to know it was there.

It pressed into my back, heavy, impossible to ignore.

I kept my pace steady.

I slid into the last seat along the end, pressed against the wall.

Strategic.

A spot that offered a full view of exits, minimized exposure, and gave me a semblance of control in a hall designed to strip it away.

Beside me, a man shifted.

Broad-shouldered. Late twenties.

Renzo didn't resume speaking until I had finished this small ritual of preparation, before resuming—as if I had never entered the room at all.

“—as I was saying,” his voice cut through the quiet, clipped, precise, “orientation week is not about coddling.”

He began pacing the platform, each step measured. “It is about stripping away illusions.”

A few recruits shifted slightly in their seats.

Subtle, nervous, human.

“You think you're hard,” he continued, voice smooth but edged, “because you survived street fights. Because you completed jobs that others failed. Because you betrayed—or were betrayed. That means nothing here.”

He paused, turning slightly on his platform, gaze sweeping over the room. “Hardness here is measured in two things.”

The silence tightened around us like a vice.

“Loyalty and Obedience.”

No one breathed louder than the others.

I forced myself to look straight ahead.

Renzo's voice cut through the room, sharper now.

“—and if any of you think your connections protect you here, think again.”

A few shoulders stiffened.

“Vincenzo Orsini's wife sits among you.”

That did it.

The room shifted.

A ripple of glances turned toward me—curious in some eyes, openly appraising in others.

A few lingered longer than necessary, amusement flickering at the edges of their expressions like they were watching a performance about to turn entertaining.

Renzo didn't acknowledge the shift.

He only let it land.

Then—

“Let me be clear,” he continued, voice tightening with controlled authority, “she gets no special treatment.”

The words were deliberate.

“Here, titles don't protect you. Not from the work. Not from the consequences.”

A beat.

“She bleeds the same.”

Another pause. “She fails the same.”

And then, colder—“She dies the same if she can't hack it.”

Silence snapped into place.

Renzo's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

A muscle flexing beneath the surface of control.

He held my stare for a long beat.

Two.

Three.

Then—he broke it first.

Turned away.

Resumed his lecture as though nothing had happened.

His voice returned to its steady cadence.

Rules. Protocols. Schedules. Punishments.

Each word delivered with the cold efficiency of someone who didn't just enforce discipline—he believed in it.