

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 7[5,968 words]

Chapter 7

ELENA

Vincenzo's residence had never felt like a home.

Tonight, it didn't even resemble one.

It was a fortress of glass and marble perched above the lake.

And tonight—it felt like a stage.

Set for my humiliation.

I stood in the far corner of the kitchen island, arms crossed so tightly my nails bit into the skin of my biceps.

The sting was grounding.

Necessary.

Anything to keep me from reacting.

The kitchen itself was a machine.

A living, breathing system of controlled chaos.

Seven women moved with precision around the space, dressed in crisp black uniforms that made them look less like chefs and more like a unit.

A team. Soldiers, even.

Knives flashed.

Pans hissed.

Heat radiated in waves from every station.

Voices stayed low—efficient, clipped, without unnecessary emotion.

“Pass the microplane.”

The command came from the lead chef—Chiara.

Mid-forties.

Iron-gray hair pulled back into a severe knot.

A face carved by discipline and long years of control.

She didn’t look up when she spoke.

A younger sous-chef slid the requested tool across the stainless steel surface without hesitation, without comment.

It stopped exactly where it needed to.

Everything here had purpose.

Tonight’s menu was... deliberate.

Slow-braised osso buco—veal shanks tender enough to fall apart after hours of simmering in white wine and stock.

Rich. Deep.

Designed to melt on the tongue.

Saffron risotto—golden, delicate.

Stirred patiently, until each grain reached the exact point of creaminess without losing structure.

Roasted heirloom carrots glazed with aged balsamic and thyme—sweet, earthy, balanced.

A fennel and blood-orange salad—sharp brightness cutting through the heavier dishes, dressed with olive oil from Vincenzo’s private grove.

And dessert—dark chocolate soufflés.

Individual.

Timed.

Each one prepared so perfectly that when they were placed before their intended guests, the centers would still be molten.

Everything here was perfect.

Or it was meant to be.

My eyes flicked over the spread.

Then away.

Not because I was impressed.

But because I refused to feel anything about it.

It had been less than two hours since I returned from the academy, and already I was expected to stand in this damned kitchen, preparing a meal for my husband and the woman he clearly preferred.

The thought alone tightened something sharp in my chest.

But being here—just this—was as far as I was willing to go.

I would not play along.

Standing here, alone, with the silence pressing in from all sides while Violet sat in the dining hall like she belonged there—like a queen at the head of a kingdom that should have been mine—was already insult enough.

I wasn't going to add humiliation to it.

The CCTV camera in the ceiling stared down at me.

A small, blinking dome.

I knew exactly what it would capture.

Or rather—what it wouldn't.

Me.

Standing still.

Uninvolved. Unwilling.

Let it record.

Let Vincenzo watch.

Let him see that I hadn't lifted a finger.

That I refused to play this role.

That I refused to become part of this performance.

The swinging door eased open with a soft, worn creak.

The shift in the room was immediate.

Not in sound. In presence.

The air seemed to sharpen—like something unseen had just stepped in and taken control of the space without asking for it.

I didn't turn right away.

I already knew who it was.

Ciro.

He moved like smoke through the space.

Tall.

Lean.

Dark hair swept back with casual precision.

His face carried that same balance of discipline and ease.

His gaze found me first.

Paused.

Flickered with something—surprise, maybe.

Or curiosity.

It was gone almost immediately.

Then his eyes shifted to the kitchen.

To the activity.

To the team.

And finally—to the unfinished risotto station.

He crossed the room in quiet steps, stopping just beside me.

Close enough that his voice wouldn't carry.

But not so close that it felt invasive.

"You're not participating," he said, his voice quiet.

"I'm not," I replied, just as calmly.

"Standing here is already more than I should be doing."

Ciro let out a slow breath and glanced toward the door, his attention flicking briefly outward, checking something unseen before returning to me.

"It's fine," he said at last.

"I'll keep him occupied. He won't come near the kitchen."

That made me pause.

I turned my head and looked at him properly for the first time, no longer just aware of his presence but studying it—measuring him the way I would anyone else in a place like this.

"And why would you do that?" I asked, my voice steady but edged with quiet suspicion.

"Aren't you all the same?" My gaze held his, searching.

"Vincenzo hates me. Renzo hates me. By all logic, you should hate me too."

I let the words settle before continuing, softer now but no less sharp.

"So why are you helping me at all?"

"Let him come," I added. "Let him see me standing here, doing nothing. Let him decide what to do with that."

My shoulders lifted in a small, careless shrug that didn't quite reach my eyes.

"Let him punish me."

A pause.

"I don't care."

The lie sat between us, thin and brittle.

He didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he looked at me—really looked this time.

Not the passing, surface-level glance most people gave, but something deeper.

His gaze lingered just long enough to feel intentional.

For a fraction of a second, something shifted in his expression.

Subtle.

There was a flicker there—something that could have been amusement, or interest.

Almost flirtatious in the way it brushed past his composure before it could fully form.

And then it was gone.

Smoothed over.

Locked back behind the same calm restraint he had carried from the start.

Maybe I imagined it.

Maybe I didn't.

In a place like this, kindness was never simple.

It didn't come without reason, without weight, without something attached to it.

And that made it dangerous.

Ciro's voice softened, low enough to stay between us while still carrying meaning.

"You're not as unlikable as you think, Elena."

I held his gaze for a moment longer, searching for something—mockery, calculation, anything I could use to dismiss him.

There was none.

So I looked away first.

Back to the counter.

Back to the untouched ingredients.

Back to the role I had already decided I wouldn't play.

And yet... his words lingered.

When I finally looked at him again, the effect was worse up close.

Ciro didn't look like someone who should unsettle me.

He didn't carry Renzo's sharp, volatile cruelty, nor Vincenzo's suffocating, immovable authority.

His face was composed, the kind of calm that should have been easy to read.

But his tone...

Too measured.

It brushed against something in me I didn't want touched.

My stomach tightened.

He wasn't mocking me.

He was... watching out for me.

The realization sat wrong in my chest.

"Elena," he said quietly, "I understand why you're angry."

He held my gaze.

"You're his wife, yet you're being asked to serve him and another woman like this... anyone in your position would take that as an insult."

A brief pause followed.

“But Vincenzo doesn’t see you the way you expect to be seen,” he continued, his tone even.

“To him, you’re not a wife in the traditional sense. Not in the way that earns respect in a room like this.”

His words landed one after the other.

He glanced briefly toward the door before returning his attention to me.

“Disrespecting Vincenzo—especially in front of the staff—is not something you can afford to do.”

His voice firmed slightly.

“They all know it. The staff. The soldiers. Everyone who works under him.”

Another pause, shorter this time.

“And so do I.”

Something in my chest tightened at his words.

Because, deep down, I knew he wasn’t wrong.

Men like Vincenzo—men who built power on fear and control—didn’t forgive disrespect easily.

Disrespect wasn’t just an insult to them; it was a threat.

Disobedience challenged their authority.

And in a world like his, those weren’t mistakes you got to walk away from.

“Like I said,” *Ciro* began.

“I’ll make sure Vincenzo stays out of the kitchen tonight.”

“It’s already enough that you didn’t take part in the cooking,” he continued, measured and controlled. “But you will serve them. The way you were instructed.”

A slight pause.

“Properly. Respectfully.”

“Let the night end without turning it into a spectacle,” he added, his eyes sharpening just slightly, “especially one driven by Vincenzo’s anger.”

Silence.

Then, I exhaled quietly.

“Fine,” I said, the word reluctant, dragged out of me rather than given freely. “I’ll do as instructed.”

I swallowed hard, forcing down the last remnants of my pride as it gave way to something colder.

Ciro exhaled, quiet but noticeable, like someone releasing tension he hadn’t realized he was holding.

Then he straightened, turned toward the chefs, and when he spoke, his voice carried none of the softness he had shown me.

“Elena assisted in the preparation of this dinner,” Ciro said, his tone leaving no room for interpretation. “Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

All seven chefs answered at once, their voices perfectly aligned.

Then he turned and walked toward the door.

He didn’t look back.

The door swung shut behind him with a quiet, decisive click.

I remained where I was, my gaze fixed on the chefs as they moved through the final stages of the preparation.

Utensils clinked softly against metal, knives tapping in steady rhythm against the boards.

The final touches came together with quiet precision.

Plates were aligned, edges wiped clean, garnishes adjusted with an attention that bordered on obsession.

Every detail mattered.

Nothing was left to chance.

As the last element was set into place, the air itself seemed to change.

The scents rose and layered over one another, filling the kitchen with something rich and deliberate—the deep, slow-cooked savor of braised veal, heavy and indulgent; the delicate, almost floral sharpness of saffron woven through the risotto; and beneath it, the bright, clean edge of blood orange cutting through everything with quiet authority.

It smelled warm.

Inviting. Perfect.

Chiara stepped back from the pass, her movements controlled, her posture composed, as though she were presenting something far greater than a meal.

“Ma’am,” she said, her voice steady and respectful, “the plates are ready.”

She paused, just long enough for the moment to settle.

“Would you like to serve?”

The question was polite, but there was nothing optional about it.

My gaze drifted over the line of dishes.

They were flawless.

Elegant in a way that made the effort behind them invisible.

I stepped forward and approached the long tray.

The stainless steel caught my reflection, throwing it back at me in a muted sheen.

Two plates waited in perfect stillness.

I looked at the plates again, taking in their beauty, their precision, their quiet arrogance.

This wasn’t just food.

It was a statement. Everything in this house was.

And tonight, this one was meant for her.

Violet.

The woman seated where I should have been.

The woman I was expected to serve.

I lifted the tray, the weight of it settling into my hands as my fingers curled tightly around the handles.

The metal pressed into my palms, grounding and biting at the same time.

For a fleeting, dangerous moment, anger surged—sharp and reckless.

I imagined it too clearly: the plates crashing against the table, porcelain shattering, food scattering across linen and glass.

Or worse—walking straight into that dinning room and overturning everything, reducing their perfect little dinner to ruin.

The urge burned hot.

Immediate. Tempting.

But I didn't move.

I held it in.

Not because I couldn't act—but because I chose not to.

Ciro's words lingered at the edge of my mind, cutting through the storm just enough to keep me anchored.

I tightened my grip on the tray, holding on to something else instead.

The anger. The humiliation.

I carried both with me as I turned and stepped out of the kitchen.

The noise behind me faded, replaced by the quieter, heavier stillness of the corridor.

My steps were measured, the tray steady despite everything coiling beneath my skin.

Then the dining room came into view.

Warm light pooled softly across polished surfaces, every detail curated to create something that felt less like a room and more like a carefully constructed scene.

At the center stood a long ebony table, set for two—not across from each other, but side by side, close enough to suggest intimacy.

White linen lay smooth and unbroken beneath gold-rimmed china.

A low arrangement of white gardenias and pale roses stretched across the center, their scent subtle, almost intimate, blending seamlessly into the atmosphere.

Vincenzo wasn't seated at the head of the table.

Not positioned at a distance that suggested authority or detachment.

He sat directly across from her.

Their chairs were drawn close—close enough that the space between them felt deliberate.

Beneath the fall of the tablecloth, their knees nearly touched.

It didn't look like a dinner arranged out of obligation.

It looked like something else entirely.

Something personal.

Not a man and his wife.

Not a man and a duty.

Just him and her.

And something inside me tightened at the sight, a quiet twist that settled deep and refused to loosen.

I approached the table slowly, every step measured, every breath controlled, forcing the weight in my chest to stay contained, buried beneath composure.

When I reached them, I lowered the tray onto the table with steady hands.

I lifted the first plate and placed it before him, aligning it perfectly, as though precision alone could anchor me.

Then I took the second and set it before her with the same care.

My gaze remained fixed downward, tracing the subtle weave of the tablecloth, focusing on texture, pattern—anything that would keep me from looking at their faces.

I didn't want to see him.

Didn't want to read whatever might be in his expression.

And I refused to look at her.

I turned, intending to leave.

Because that was what this required of me.

To serve.

To step back.

To disappear without making a sound.

But a voice stopped me before I could take a second step.

“Elena...”

It was soft. Fragile in a way that carried further than it should have.

The sound of it struck harder than anything else that evening.

I froze.

Every muscle in my body locked in place, my jaw tightening until it ached.

For a moment, I didn’t move, didn’t breathe, didn’t allow myself even the smallest reaction.

Then, slowly, I turned back.

Violet sat exactly as she had before—poised, composed, every inch of her arranged with quiet care.

The candlelight softened the edges of her pale skin, though it did nothing to hide the faint fragility beneath it.

Her dark hair fell over one shoulder in controlled waves, and the cream silk of her dress draped around her like something deliberately chosen to emphasize softness, to suggest delicacy.

She looked like something meant to be protected.

Something meant to be handled carefully.

Something that did not belong in a world like this.

And yet she was here. Sitting across from him.

“I know you have every right to be angry,” she said, her voice calm, each word placed with intention.

There was something practiced beneath it, as though she had thought through this moment before it ever arrived.

“Vincenzo and I... we’ve been together for over a decade.”

She paused, drawing in a slow, controlled breath, her gaze flickering toward him for the briefest moment before returning to me.

She continued softly, her voice steady but weighted with meaning.

“Ten years of knowing him... of having him in my life, of building something that didn’t happen overnight.”

Her fingers lifted slowly, almost delicately, coming to rest against her chest.

“He left me at the altar.”

The words were quiet, but they carried.

“In front of my family. In front of everyone.”

A faint tremor slipped into her voice.

“I was humiliated.”

Her breathing shifted, uneven now, as though the memory itself pressed too tightly against her.

“I fainted three times that day... from the shock... from the shame... from my heart—”

Her words broke off abruptly.

Her hand pressed harder against her chest, fingers curling slightly into the fabric of her dress as her breathing grew shallow.

“Violet—”

Vincenzo was already moving, his chair scraping back as he stood, the sound cutting through the room.

But she lifted a hand, weak and unsteady.

“I’m... fine,” she whispered, though the strain in her voice betrayed the claim. “Just... give me a moment...”

The words lingered, but the uneven rhythm of her breathing remained, hanging in the air like something that refused to settle.

I stood there, the empty tray still in my hands, watching it unfold.

Watching her struggle for breath.

Watching him watch her.

And felt nothing.

No sympathy.

No softness.

No instinct to step forward.

Only a quiet, hollow stillness where those things should have been.

“Violet,” he said, voice tighter now, “are you okay?”

Vincenzo leaned forward instantly.

Vincenzo Orisini was no longer the composed man.

His usual control cracked just enough to show something deeper beneath.

His hand crossed the table without hesitation.

Long fingers extended.

Palm open.

Reaching for her like he could physically steady her heart.

Like he could keep it from failing.

Across from him—

Violet swallowed hard.

Her lashes fluttered once.

Twice.

Carefully.

She lifted her gaze just enough to meet his.

“I just felt a sharp pain...” she whispered.

“...right here.” Her delicate fingers rose, pressing lightly against the center of her chest.

The gesture was small.

But intentional.

“My failing heart...” she added, her voice thinning just slightly at the edges, “...reminding me it’s running out of time.”

The words were gentle. Almost apologetic.

But the weight behind them—was not.

It was precise.

Each syllable chosen to land exactly where it should.

And they landed.

Not just with him.

But with me.

I felt it.

The way she said it—the careful emphasis, the softness threaded through each word—wasn’t accidental.

She wanted me to hear it.

To understand it.

To feel it.

Her fragility. Her tragedy.

Her failing heart—worn like something sacred.

My fingers curled slightly at my sides, but I kept my face still.

Because under any other circumstance—I might have pitied her.

Truly. Deeply.

From what little I had learned about Violet's family, heart failure was a pattern.

A quiet inheritance that moved from one generation to the next, taking without warning.

A woman robbed of time.

Of a future she had no chance to finish building.

Of a life that was slipping away long before it should have.

A body turning against itself in silence, betraying her from within while the rest of the world continued as though nothing was wrong.

That wasn't something you ignored.

But tonight?

After standing in that kitchen.

After carrying a meal I had not prepared.

After watching them occupy a world I was forced to stand outside of, to witness their closeness, their shared ease—I felt nothing for her.

Nothing.

"I'll be taking my leave," I said instead.

My voice flat and formal.

Then I turned.

Before either of them could speak.

Before he could command me to stay.

Before she could whisper another word meant to twist the knife deeper.

I walked away.

Each step an assertion that I still existed.

That I would not dissolve in the shadow of them.

As soon as I reached the kitchen doors, I swung them open and stormed in, slamming them behind me with a thud that echoed across the marble floor.

Silence stretched after me.

Then—movement.

I crossed the kitchen in three long strides, each step measured, but heavy with the weight of every thought I refused to release.

I slammed the tray onto the island.

Hard.

The impact reverberated through the room, porcelain cracking with a sharp, final snap that cut the air like a gunshot.

The tray shattered.

Fragments scattered across the stainless steel surface, some spinning before coming to rest, others skittering to the floor.

All broken. All useless.

Just like the moment.

Just like everything else I'd been forced to endure.

Chiara didn't flinch at the noise, the chaos, or the destruction.

She stood there, composed, unreadable, as if the room—and my fury—were nothing more than a breeze passing through.

She looked at the broken tray.

Then at me.

No shock. No judgment. No curiosity.

Just understanding.

Without a word, she turned.

Walked to the utility closet.

Retrieved a long-handled dustpan and brush.

And returned.

She crouched.

Her movements were practiced—efficient in a way that came from years of doing this exact same thing without complaint.

She began sweeping the shards.

Each stroke deliberate.

Each motion precise.

The fragments gathered into a neat pile.

Organized. Contained.

Just like everything else in this place.

She tipped the debris into the bin.

The sound was soft.

Final.

Like something being erased.

Like the moment never mattered at all.

Then she straightened.

Turned back to me.

And spoke.

“How about you tell me, cara mia, your favorite food?” she said, leaning closer, her voice soft but warm, carrying that unmistakable Italian cadence.

“I’ll start making it for you right away—Ti prometto, you’ll eat and feel better in no time.”

Her voice was respectful.

“I’m not hungry. I’m angry.” I said.

The words came out rougher than intended.

Not directed at her.

But at everything else.

At the situation. At the night.

At myself.

She didn’t argue. Just nodded once.

And let it go.

I pushed forward before I could feel anything again in that kitchen, before I could make a mess out of my anger.

Then I turned and walked out.

The hallway stretched ahead—long, shadowed, silent.

My footsteps echoed faintly against the polished floor.

I kept my gaze forward.

But as I passed the open archway leading back into the dining room, I caught a glimpse.

Just once.

A mistake.

Inside, they were still there.

Seated together.

Closer now.

More relaxed.

More... present.

Violet’s laugh drifted through the room—soft, melodic, effortless.

A sound that belonged.

A sound I could never claim.

Vincenzo leaned toward her, listening, responding, his voice low and unguarded.

Candlelight flickered across their faces, warm and gold, softening everything.

For a moment, they seemed almost unreal—intimate, private, a world built only for two.

And I—was not part of it.

Not then. Not ever.

I tore my gaze away before it could settle, before it could hurt any more, and kept walking.

Step after step up the stairs, away from the light, away from the table, away from the life I had just been forced to witness.

But not away from the truth—no matter how far I walked, I would still feel it.

Everywhere.

Inside, my room greeted me with stillness.

I stripped out of my clothes without hesitation.

Jeans slid down.

Top followed.

Fabric hitting the floor in a soft, final sound.

I stood there in just my black boyshorts and bra, the air cool against my skin.

I let my gaze drift across the scars that mapped my body.

Jagged lines etched across my ribs, thin pale slashes running along my arms, burn marks darkening the curve of my shoulder blade.

Bullet grazes, knife cuts, and other horrors that left their mark long after the pain had faded.

Elena—a living map of survival.

Naples. Athens. Marseille.

Cities where I had run.

Cities where I had bled.

Five years of eluding Ruslan Baranov and his men.

Five years of never being safe.

And yet, standing here, in this room, watching what I had to endure tonight, I realized—it wasn't worse.

Not really.

It was just... different.

Different in a way that left no physical marks.

Different in a way that clawed at something inside me I couldn't bandage or hide.

A knock came at the door.

Soft.

"Who is it?" I asked, voice careful.

"Ciro."

The name landed quietly in the room.

My pulse gave a single, sharp kick.

I turned my head slightly toward the door.

"Come in."

Silence followed.

Then—

"No."

His voice came through the wood, steady but restrained.

"I don't have that right."

A pause.

“You might want to come out. I have a package for you.”

Anger flickered again under my skin.

I exhaled slowly, then crossed the room without bothering to dress.

I opened the door wide.

And there he was.

Ciro.

Standing in the hallway.

But the moment his eyes landed on me—everything shifted.

His gaze flicked across my exposed skin.

My bare midriff. The scars.

The thin straps of my bra cutting across my shoulders.

His eyes widened—just slightly.

Just enough to betray him.

Then, almost immediately, he dropped his gaze—too fast.

He took three quick steps back, creating distance as if it were instinct rather than choice.

“I’d appreciate it if you dressed more... modestly.” He said, his voice tightening despite the control he tried to maintain.

I didn’t move.

“Where’s the package?” I asked, holding out my hand.

Without looking up, he extended a small matte-black box tied with a thin silver ribbon.

I took it.

Turned it in my hands.

Heavy enough to matter. Light enough to be suspicious.

“Who’s it from?” I asked.

“Matteo Alvarez.”

“Violet’s father,” *Ciro* added.

He still didn’t look at me.

“Apparently, it’s a Spanish custom,” he said, voice steady but distant. “When they attend a wedding—even one they didn’t plan for—they bring a gift for the bride.”

A quiet, humorless breath slipped out of me.

I glanced down at the box again, my fingers tightening slightly around its edges.

“I displaced his daughter at her own wedding,” I said. “And they still sent a gift.”

I lifted my gaze, studying him now.

“From what I understand, the Spanish and the Italians are already at war,” I said, my voice even but edged. “And if anything, it escalated the moment *Vincenzo* chose me over *Violet*—their so-called princess. That marriage was supposed to stabilize things, not fracture them further.”

I let that settle before continuing.

“So you’ll forgive me if I’m not exactly eager to trust a gift from them,” I added, glancing down at the box before looking back at him. “Especially one that came from her father.”

A faint pause.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a bomb inside.”

That made him look up.

Just enough.

But enough to meet my eyes.

“It’s been scanned,” he said evenly. “It’s not a bomb.”

A beat.

Then—

“I should go.”

A brief pause, like he was choosing his words carefully.

“I’m... not entirely comfortable staying.”

His hand lifted in a vague gesture toward me, then stopped midway, as if even that felt like too much.

“With this,” he added quietly.

A faint flush touched his face under the hallway light, and he looked away, jaw tightening as he reined himself back in.

“I trust you understand.”

He shifted, already half-turned to leave.

“Ciro.”

The voice came from down the hall, sharp enough to halt him mid-step.

Both of us looked.

Vincenzo was already walking toward us.

And at his side—Violet.

Still pale. Still fragile-looking.

But composed.

Her hand rested lightly on his arm, as though she belonged there.

As though she always had.

Vincenzo’s expression was unreadable at first.

Then his eyes found mine.

And something dark moved across his face.

Something possessive.

“Explain why you’re standing there, half-dressed, in front of my man.”

The question cracked through the hallway.

“I’m in boyshorts and a bra,” I said evenly. “That’s not naked.”

His jaw tightened.

Then his gaze snapped to Ciro.

Ciro straightened immediately.

“Boss,” he said evenly, “I warned her as soon as I saw her.”

A quiet beat.

“I know you wouldn’t want any man looking at your wife this way.”

I scoffed at his words, and Vincenzo’s gaze snapped back to me.

“You call me ‘wife’ like it’s some title I should honor,” I said, voice tight. “Especially when Vincenzo clearly doesn’t treat me like one. So why does it matter if another man sees me in boyshorts and a bra? It shouldn’t. It doesn’t.”

The air seemed to still.

Vincenzo’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“Ciro,” he said, calm and lethal, “leave.”

There was no hesitation.

Ciro dipped his head—brief, respectful—and turned on his heel.

His footsteps were quiet as he walked away, the soft sound of his shoes fading down the corridor until it was gone.

Silence rushed in to replace him.

Vincenzo removed Violet’s hand from his, despite her surprise and hesitation.

His tone was flat, but edged with something barely contained.

“Renzo will escort you home.”

Then he left her there, his attention snapping toward me.

He closed the distance in a heartbeat, close enough that I could feel the heat of his body press against mine, suffocating, demanding.

“Step inside.”

My heart slammed against my ribs, a single, urgent thud.

I froze.

“Elena.” His voice dropped, low and lethal, every word dripping with danger and control.

“Inside. Now.”

The command hit harder than volume ever could.

Defiance ignited in my chest, sharp and burning.

I wanted to snap back, to tell him he had no right to order me.

Wanted to remind him he had just spent that grand “happy” dinner with Violet—why wasn’t he escorting her home?

Why was he here, standing over me, angry that another man saw me dressed like this?

I wanted to say it all.

Every word of outrage. Every spark of pain at watching him give Violet everything I would never have.

I wanted to scream, to spill it all, to let him see exactly what he’d done to me.

I couldn’t hide it anymore—but I didn’t.

Instead, my jaw tightened, my fists clenched at my sides, and I let the silence carry the defiance he couldn’t touch.

I held his gaze, letting the weight of it press into me, heartbeat matching heartbeat.

Three long, heavy beats.

Too long.

Then—

I turned.

Stepped back into the room, deliberately, leaving the door ajar behind me.

He followed, silent, measured.

I stood at the edge of the bed, arms crossed, bracing myself—not to shrink, but to steel against whatever storm was coming.

He entered with long, deliberate strides, each one carrying a force behind him I had never felt before.

Heat, intent, obsession—he brought it all into the room with him.

Before I could react, his hand was at my waist, pulling me flush against him.

My body pressed against his, helplessly, and he didn't move.

Not a second.

He just breathed me in, the faint scent of my hair curling around him, possession written in every line of his posture.

Then he spoke, voice clipped:

“No one else will see you like this. Not Ciro. Not any man. You exist for me—and me alone. You are my wife, and certain parts of you... exist only for my eyes.”

I lifted a brow, voice sharp:

“Certain parts? We haven't even shared a bed since the wedding seven days ago. You've barely looked at me, let alone claimed anything. So which parts are yours?”

He exhaled slowly, jaw tight. “I am not ready to sleep beside the daughter of the man who ruined my life.”

Rage sparked in me.

I tried to shove him off, but he held firm, lifting my chin, his eyes locking onto mine.

And then his lips claimed mine—hard, demanding, savage.

I struggled, but he bit, kissed me like a man starved, his need raw and uncontainable.

When I finally pulled back, breath ragged, I spat the words out:

“Don't you dare kiss me with the same mouth you used on your mistress.”

“I did not kiss her,” he said, panting, heat pressing me against him.

His grip tightened, hands mapping my sides, pulling me closer.

It did nothing to soften my hatred for him.

“You’re mine, Elena.”

Flat.

Absolute.

“On paper. In law. In this house. That means no one else touches you—or worse, sees you like this.”

My breath hitched, small and involuntary.

“I am not yours,” I spat, voice trembling with anger. “Not now. Not ever. My heart... it will never be yours. You hate me, and you humiliated me in front of her—just to make her happy.”

“And I hope you enjoyed your grand dinner with her,” I added, voice laced with sarcasm, even as a dull ache pressed against my chest, the memory of them together replaying relentlessly in my mind.

His expression didn’t flicker.

Not even a twitch.

He released his iron grip on my waist and stepped back—but instead of leaving, he paused.

Slowly, he shrugged off his charcoal suit jacket, folding it neatly over the armchair as if marking his territory.

His hands moved to his cuffs, one button after another.

Every motion was intentional.

My eyes couldn’t leave him.

He rolled up his sleeves, revealing forearms corded with strength, veins faint beneath the skin.

Power, contained.

And then—he unbuttoned his shirt.

One. Two. Three buttons undone.

Each revealed more—muscle, tanned skin, a lean body built for control, for violence, for dominance.

I hated that my eyes followed.

Hated that my body betrayed me, heat blooming low and sharp despite the anger, despite the humiliation.

I pressed my thighs together, forcing myself back into control.

He removed the shirt completely, hanging it carefully beside the jacket.

Now fully facing me, wearing only black tailored trousers, the leather belt catching the dim light, the hard line beneath it undeniable.

My breath hitched before I could stop it.

“Come here,” he said.

Low.

Commanding.

I stepped back.

“No.”

The word cracked, almost a plea.

He advanced anyway.

One step.

Then another.

Deliberate, certain, closing every inch of space.

My pulse thundered in my ears.

“Have you known a man before?”

His voice dropped, assessing, binding the air around us.

I backed up until the wall pressed against my spine.

Cold. Hard.

No escape. No space.

I opened my mouth—but no words came.

His chest was level with my eyes now—close enough that every breath I took brushed against him.

Rising and falling with a control that felt almost unnatural.

Heat poured off him in waves, thick and suffocating, wrapping around me until I could barely think straight.

I could smell him.

Clean skin.

Expensive. Male.

Everything my body shouldn't have been reacting to—but was.

My nipples tightened sharply against the thin lace of my bra.

My breath hitched.

And lower—a traitorous ache pulsed.

“Speak.”

The word landed like a command meant to be obeyed.

My throat tightened.

I shook my head once.

“I’ve never dated anyone,” I said, voice barely steady, “never... had sex with anyone.”

The words felt too intimate.

Too exposed.

Something flickered across his face.

Surprise? Disbelief? Possession?

I couldn't tell.

His expression smoothed back into that unreadable mask he wore so well.

His hand lifted.

Slow. Intentional.

Two fingers caught my chin.

Not rough. But not soft either.

He tilted my face upward, forcing my eyes to meet his.

“So,” he murmured, low and deliberate, crawling under my skin, “my wife is a virgin.”

The word landed heavy.

Claiming. Mocking.

His thumb brushed the edge of my lower lip—the same one that still burned from his aggressive kiss earlier.

My breath caught.

I swallowed hard, hating how my body trembled despite myself, hating that he could see everything I was trying desperately to hide.

My gaze flicked to his mouth—those lips I both feared and wanted.

I forced my eyes away, but they betrayed me, jerking back up, then down again against my will.

They landed on the hard bulge straining against his trousers, undeniable and unrelenting, and heat surged through me despite every instinct screaming to look away.

“You’ll go down on your knees,” he said quietly, “and suck me.”

The words hit like a slap.

My breath stuttered.

He didn’t look away. “Like the innocent little virgin you are.”

Heat bloomed in my cheeks before I could stop it.

His voice dropped lower.

“That... is punishment enough for letting another man see you like this.”

I tried to jerk back.

His grip tightened instantly.

“I haven’t crossed any of your three red lines,” I said, voice shaking but defiant, “so why should I be punished?”

My chest rose sharply.

My body still burning from the kiss.

Still remembering. Still reacting.

But my pride—my anger—was louder and stronger.

I met his eyes, refusing to look away despite the heat crawling up my neck.

“Plus... it will be my first time,” I said, voice tight, trembling despite myself.

“I don’t want it... with you.”

My body betrayed me—cheeks burning, pulse hammering, every instinct screaming against him—but still, I held his gaze.

Vincenzo Orisini stood close enough that I could feel every word vibrate in the space between us.

“Your first time.” He repeated it like he was tasting the words, savoring them.

“Do you think that frightens me away, cara?” His voice dropped an octave.

“Everything you are,” he murmured, “will be mine to know first.”

His gaze pinned me, unrelenting. “And don’t mistake this for a request. This is an order.”

“Get on your knees. Unzip my belt. Pull down my trousers. Take my cock out. And suck.”

The command hit like something physical.

My breath snagged.

I forced myself to speak through it.

“Your dick’s twitching and desperate for a warm mouth, huh? Go ahead, call your mistress then.”

“Me? I’m your wife... not some cheap slut you can use whenever you’re horny.”

The moment the words left my mouth, his eyes darkened, and the air between us constricted.

I could feel it pressing in, suffocating, impossible to ignore.

“Let me be clear,” he said, voice low. “I may hate you, but I will honor the vows of this marriage. That means I have no reason to cheat on you.”

“Having dinner with your mistress is not cheating?” I barked, the words sharp, fueled by the anger and pain that still simmered beneath the surface.

“Cheating,” he said, each word landing like a stone, “is being sexually intimate with anyone who is not my wife. Violet will always remain my top priority, but nothing, nothing intimate will ever happen between us.”

I swallowed hard, my voice dropping to a hesitant whisper.

“It’s convenient for you to define cheating that way when it suits you. Am I also allowed to go to dinner with another man?”

He moved then, slow, controlled, but with a force I could feel through every nerve.

His hand shot up, wrapping around my throat.

It did not crush, but it was enough to steal my breath.

My back slammed against the wall, hard.

The air thinned.

My vision narrowed at the edges, darkness creeping in like a warning I could not ignore.

I grabbed instinctively at his wrist, fingers digging in, nails pressing against the taut skin, but he did not flinch.

“You would do no such thing,” he murmured, the words like a shockwave through my chest.

“You wouldn’t even try. You know why? Because you cannot. Because I will not allow it.”

My chest tightened at the weight behind his words.

This was not tenderness.

This was not affection.

This was ownership, raw and unflinching.

“In reality,” he continued, his voice low and dangerously calm, “you’re not just my wife.”

His grip tightened on my throat, sending a rush of heat through my skin.

“You’re my slut, too.”

He leaned in closer, lips brushing my ear as he spoke each word with slow, crushing weight.

“And that... is exactly what you’ll always be to me.”

Another squeeze, subtle but absolute. “Otherwise, what purpose could you serve as my wife?”

Another tightening.

“Now go down,” he commanded, voice low and measured, each syllable laced with absolute authority.

His fingers tightened around my throat with merciless precision, squeezing until black spots burst across my vision.

My lungs burned, desperate for air that wouldn’t come.

I clawed weakly at his wrist as my body convulsed, legs kicking uselessly against the floor.

The world narrowed to the crushing pressure, the roaring in my ears, and the terrifying certainty that this time he might not stop.

That he wanted me dead.