

Wrong Marriage. Right Bride (Wrong Vows Book 1) - Chapter 8[5,470 words]

Chapter 8

ELENA

Just as darkness began to swallow me whole, he released me.

I collapsed forward, gasping violently, ragged sobs tearing from my raw throat as I gulped down air in desperate, heaving breaths.

My chest heaved, tears streaming down my face while my vision swam and my hands trembled uncontrollably.

“I’ve never... done that before,” I whispered, my voice raw and tremulous, barely above a broken rasp.

There was no defiance left in me.

No fight.

Only honest fear.

Because I could see it clearly in his eyes: cold, murderous intent.

He hated me enough to kill me right here, and no one would ever know.

No one would come.

His eyes darkened as he studied me.

“Even better,” he murmured.

I forced my gaze downward, staring at the thick, rigid outline straining against the front of his trousers.

My mouth went dry instantly, a sharp pulse of heat flooding between my thighs before my mind could catch up.

Swallowing hard, I moved as if on instinct, slowly sinking to my knees on the carpet.

The rough fibers dug into my skin, a harsh reminder of how real this was — how completely I was submitting.

My heart hammered wildly as I settled there, gaze locked on the unmistakable bulge just inches from my face, the weight of his command still burning in my ears.

My hands trembled as I reached for his belt.

Leather slid through the buckle with a soft, controlled sound.

The button came undone, then the zipper, each noise magnified in the quiet room, each movement charged with an unspoken anticipation.

I hooked my fingers into the waistband, poised and ready, when the sharp ring of his phone cut through the tension like a blade.

He froze, subtle but undeniable, and I felt the imperceptible shift of his control.

He reached for the phone, but his eyes never left mine.

The weight of his gaze pressed down, demanding obedience even as his hand lifted the device.

I remained where I was, suspended on my knees, caught between compliance and a dangerous desire that I could not name.

He glanced at the screen, and immediately his expression changed.

His jaw tightened, his eyes flattened into steel, and the heat, the hunger, the barely restrained lust vanished as if it had never existed.

Control returned fully, absolute and unyielding.

He spoke into the phone, clipped and final, issuing commands that left no room for negotiation.

The conversation ended, the device returned to his pocket, and not once did he glance at me.

Without a word, he restored himself with deliberate precision.

He zipped, buttoned, picked up his shirt, slipped one arm through the sleeve, then the other, and buttoned it from the bottom up.

Each movement was precise and unhurried.

He slipped into his jacket and smoothed the lapels with a final, deliberate touch, as though nothing had ever happened, as though I did not exist.

I remained on my knees, my chest heaving with shallow breaths and my pulse hammering in my ears.

Humiliation came in waves that burned through me.

I had knelt.

I had obeyed.

And now he was leaving.

There was no acknowledgement.

He walked to the door and unlocked it.

He opened it, paused, and then left.

The soft click of the door closing was final, and the room seemed to collapse in silence around me.

I remained there, frozen.

Throat raw from his grip.

Lips still tingling from his kiss.

My knees pressed into the carpet, my arms wrapped loosely around them as if holding myself together could shield me from what I had just felt.

I stayed there.

Three minutes.

Maybe more.

Breathing shallow. Still on my knees.

Still trying to process what had just happened.

Then, slowly—my legs obeyed.

I pushed myself upright.

My knees screamed in protest.

A dull, throbbing ache spread through them.

My hands trembled as I steadied myself.

I curled them into fists.

Hard.

Anything to stop the shaking. Anything to stop the feeling.

I felt like trash. Worse than trash.

A wife who had been ordered to her knees.

And then left there.

Unfinished. Unseen.

Unimportant.

How much humiliation could one woman swallow in a single night?

I forced my breathing to slow.

I refused to cry.

Vincenzo didn't deserve my tears.

Not tonight. Not ever.

I turned away from the door.

Crossed the room.

Each step heavier than the last.

Until I reached the dresser.

The small black box from Matteo Alvarez sat exactly where I had left it.

Untouched. Perfect.

Wrapped in obscene luxury.

Silver filigree pressed into its surface like something delicate and expensive.

A wax seal stamped with the Alvarez crest held everything together.

Elegant.

My fingers trembled as I reached for it.

I tore the ribbon off first.

Sharp. Unceremonious.

The paper peeled away beneath my hands.

Inside—a velvet box.

Deep burgundy. Hinged.

I opened it.

Another layer. Black tissue paper. Folded with obsessive care.

I pulled it aside.

Inside that—a small satin pouch.

My stomach tightened.

Slowly, I untied the drawstring.

Opened it.

A crystal bottle slid into my palm.

Small. Delicate.

No bigger than a perfume vial. Stoppered with a faceted glass cork.

The liquid inside shimmered.

Pale amber. Beautiful. Unassuming.

My brow furrowed slightly.

I lifted it closer to the light.

Read the tiny gold-foil label.

Peach liqueur. Artisanal. Small-batch.

Infused with real fruit essence.

My stomach dropped.

The world tilted slightly.

No.

No—

I twisted the stopper open. The scent hit me instantly.

Sweet. Heavy. Undeniable.

Peach.

My greatest allergy. My greatest vulnerability.

The same scent that had nearly killed me at the altar.

My throat tightened on instinct.

I slammed the stopper back in place and dropped the bottle onto the bed as if it had burned me.

My breath came shallower.

I stumbled back three steps, clutching my stomach as nausea surged through me in sick, rolling waves.

My throat tightened—not from anaphylaxis yet—but from memory. From fear.

From knowing exactly what this could do to me.

How did they know?

Vincenzo had known. Since we were children.

I had told him in that cave.

But the Alvarez family?

How?

My mind raced.

Was this a message?

A warning? A threat? A test?

My gaze dropped to the bottle again.

Resting on the bed.

Harmless. Beautiful. Deadly.

They hadn't just sent a gift.

They had wrapped my death in silk and ribbon—and called it tradition.

I stood there—heart hammering, skin crawling—until the nausea finally loosened its grip.

Slowly. Reluctantly.

Like something being pulled back from the edge.

My breathing steadied in uneven increments. The tightness in my throat eased just enough for me to swallow without pain.

My fingers stopped trembling—barely.

Then I moved.

Fast.

I yanked open the closet doors and reached inside, grabbing whatever my hands landed on first.

My movements were sharp, almost angry—like I could physically outrun the memory of that bottle, that scent, that moment.

Long black lounge pants.

Soft. Loose.

An oversized charcoal hoodie followed—thick, heavy fabric that swallowed me whole.

One of dozens of pieces Chiara had insisted I take on the second day of this sham marriage.

Chiara — the head chef.

He had personally asked her to escort me to that exclusive boutique overlooking the hills of Lombardy.

I still remembered walking in with nothing but the clothes on my back and a knot of unease in my stomach.

No money. No power. Just me.

I walked out with armfuls of bags.

Silk blouses that whispered against my skin. Cashmere sweaters softer than anything I'd ever owned. Tailored jackets that made me look like I belonged.

And lingerie — delicate, expensive, and utterly unwanted.

All of it already paid for.

Vincenzo had handled everything behind the scenes.

He'd simply told them: "Let her take whatever she wants."

One of the few mercies he'd ever shown me.

Or maybe it wasn't mercy at all.

Maybe it was just another form of control — dressing me up like a doll that belonged to him.

Marking me.

Making sure I looked the part of the wife he owned.

I slid the hoodie on. Zipped it all the way to my chin.

Pulled the sleeves down until they covered my hands.

The fabric wrapped around me like armor.

Then I looked at myself in the mirror.

And for a moment—I didn't recognize the woman staring back.

Scarred.

Not just on the skin. But in the eyes.

In the posture. In the stillness.

Anger churned beneath my skin.

Matteo could try to kill me with peaches, wrapping death in elegance and calling it a gift.

Vincenzo could humiliate me with trays of food, with commands designed to strip me down, layer by layer.

But I would not break.

I spun away from the mirror and barreled out of the bedroom.

Bare feet struck the cold marble, two steps at a time, as I descended the grand staircase, heart hammering.

The sound echoed.

Sharp.

Like gunfire in the hollow quiet of the house.

My chest rose and fell rapidly—not just from the movement, but from the anger building inside me.

A slow, burning escalation that had nowhere else to go.

The dining room came into view at the bottom of the stairs.

Everything looked untouched.

Candles burned low—wax melted into uneven pools.

Plates still sat on the table, remnants of osso buco cooling under the dim light. The faint aroma lingered in the air, mixed with something sweeter.

Blood-orange petals.

Decorative.

Violet's chair was pushed slightly back, as if she had leaned into him one last time before leaving.

As if she had belonged there.

As if she still did. I could almost smell her perfume.

Soft. Expensive. Polished.

The opposite of the smoke and steel that clung to Vincenzo.

The contrast made something sharp twist in my chest.

My jaw locked so hard my teeth ached.

I wanted to flip the table. Watch the plates shatter.

See the glass break. Destroy something.

Anything.

To match the chaos building inside me.

I pivoted sharply, heading toward the living room, my bare feet sliding slightly on the polished stone as I pushed through the arched doorway that led to the terrace.

Moonlight spilled across the space, silvering the edges of the lake beyond the glass railings.

The water outside was calm.

Like it hadn't witnessed anything at all.

"Careful... with that much fury, you might just set the whole house on fire."

The voice came from the shadows behind me.

I froze.

Then turned.

Renzo stepped into the light like he owned it, arms crossed over his broad chest.

Dark eyes pinned me in place.

His black shirt sleeves were rolled to the elbows, exposing tattooed forearms.

"Jealous?" he asked, voice low and mocking. "Jealous that Vincenzo had a grand dinner with Violet. Let me tell you something—Violet is the right woman for him. She always will

be. You? You're nothing but a convenience. A passing moment he could discard whenever he chose."

He took a step closer, gaze never leaving mine.

"Do you think you have any right to be angry? There's no love in your marriage. Only control. Only humiliation. So take a chill pill and stop pretending you matter to anyone in this house."

His words struck like ice in my chest, pain flaring where it had always throbbed.

But I didn't flinch.

I walked forward anyway, letting the hurt sit silent, and settled onto the small couch in the living room.

My hands rested on my knees, calm but tense.

"My reason for leaving my room," I said evenly, deliberately ignoring the sting of his cruelty, "Matteo Alvarez sent a wedding gift. Peach liqueur. The one thing I'm allergic to. One whiff, one drop, and I stop breathing."

I let the pause hang, heavy.

"So tell me," I added, voice steady despite the edge, "how the hell did Violet's father know I'm allergic to peach?"

Renzo's smirk faltered.

For a single, fragile heartbeat, something unguarded flickered across his face.

He straightened slightly.

"You're allergic to peaches?"

His voice lost its edge, replaced by something more cautious

Almost disbelieving.

"Yes," I snapped, my voice cutting through the space like glass. "And I want to know how Matteo fucking Alvarez knows something only Vincenzo should know."

His eyes narrowed.

When he spoke again, his voice had dropped—stripped of its usual mockery, edged instead with something darker.

“On the wedding day. Right before the priest began the vows... I saw Matteo lean in and whisper to one of our servers. Quiet. Quick. Almost hidden.”

Renzo finally sank into the chair across from me, but his eyes didn’t leave me.

“That same server brought Vincenzo a glass a few minutes before he kissed you. He drank it without hesitation.”

He paused, jaw tightening. “And then...”

“I couldn’t catch everything,” he admitted, eyes narrowing as if replaying the moment frame by frame. “But Matteo’s lips... they formed one word. One single word.”

He spoke it slowly, like a gunshot cutting through the air: “Peach.”

The word hit me like a bullet, sharp and cold.

My stomach dropped.

The room tilted beneath my feet.

No—

No, that couldn’t be—

The altar flashed behind my eyes.

The kiss.

Vincenzo’s lips on mine.

That strange, unfamiliar taste—

Followed by—tightness.

My throat closing. Air vanishing.

Panic.

Blackness swallowing everything whole.

I had convinced myself.

With absolute certainty. That Vincenzo had done it. That he had poisoned me.

That he had used that moment—our vows—as a demonstration of control.

A reminder of power.

A way to break me before I become his wife.

If Matteo was behind spiking Vincenzo's glass with peach—trying to kill me—it made a twisted kind of sense.

After all, the Spanish rebels wanted me dead.

But the real question clawing at my mind was far darker: how did he know I was allergic to peach?

No one should have known.

Not here in Italy.

Not on our wedding day—the first time they even laid eyes on me.

It was impossible. And yet...

My breath came shallow.

Renzo exhaled slowly through his nose.

“Meanwhile, Vincenzo hates peaches.”

That pulled my attention back to him.

“What?”

Renzo leaned forward now, elbows resting on his knees, his focus sharpening.

“Always has.” His voice was quieter now.

He used to say—back when we were teenagers—that the only girl he'd never forget couldn't stand the smell of it.”

My heart stuttered.

“He said it made her throat close up.”

“He swore off it after that.” Renzo tilted his head slightly. “Stopped eating it. Drinking it. Avoided anything with even a hint of it.”

A beat.

“That girl... that was you, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, voice barely more than air.

Honest. “Only he can answer that.”

My fingers curled around the armrest, knuckles whitening.

I always thought Vincenzo had forgotten me after he disappeared from that cave.

Who would have guessed he never stopped thinking about me?

That he carried every word I whispered back then, every confession, every fear.

That he even hates peaches now—because I told him I was allergic, in that damp, dark cave when we were children.

Ironically, the same man who remembers me, who remembers even my allergies, is the one who despises me—who wants to tear me down until nothing remains of me, until I am nothing at all.

“The Spanish want you dead,” Renzo said, his voice slicing through my thoughts. “That’s what this is.”

I rubbed my arms beneath the hoodie, suddenly aware of the chill crawling across my skin.

“Matteo Alvarez isn’t exactly subtle when he’s angry. He believes you stole Violet’s future.”

“I believed it too,” Renzo added coldly.

His jaw tightened, eyes narrowing with clear disgust. “You showed up on her wedding day, fully aware of the history between you and Vincenzo. You stole her man and ruined what should have been the best day of her life.”

His voice dropped into something venomous. “No matter how I look at it... you’re just a heartless, evil woman.”

The words landed like a slap.

I met his glare head-on, my own voice steady despite the tremor beneath it.

“Renzo,” I snapped. “I know you hate me.”

“You hate me because I beat you bloody just minutes before I walked down that aisle.”

“You hate me because you made a promise to your dead girlfriend — Violet’s sister — to protect her.”

I took a slow breath. “But let me say this one last time: I didn’t know there was a wedding happening. I ran into that cathedral because it looked like the safest place to hide. I had no idea Vincenzo was in that dressing room. I didn’t even know it was his wedding. You were there. Did I look like someone trying to steal another woman’s man?”

My voice cracked slightly, raw with exhaustion.

“He made me an offer. I took it. Anyone in my position would have. Ruslan Baranov’s men were hunting me. Vincenzo offered protection. Hate me all you want, but that is the truth.”

Renzo opened his mouth to reply, but a calm, composed voice cut through the tension.

“Well, I believe her.”

Both Renzo and I turned sharply.

Ciro stood in the arched doorway.

The set of his jaw.

The quiet authority in his stance.

Every inch of him radiated control.

He stepped further into the room, eyes scanning us.

“How long will you keep hating on the boss’s wife, Renzo?”

There was no raised voice, yet the words carried unmistakable weight.

A quiet threat.

“You know that’s dangerously close to rebellion,” he added.

His gaze sharpened. “And you know the consequences.”

Renzo bared his teeth in something that wasn’t quite a smile.

It was sharper.

“Threatening me now, Ciro?” Renzo shot back,

His voice rose, thick with restrained aggression.

“Just because Vincenzo pinned that second-in-command badge on your chest doesn’t mean you get to forget where you came from. You and I used to be equals. Friends. On the same fucking level.”

His gaze flicked over to me, dripping with open contempt.

“There are no soldiers here who can enforce your authority, Ciro, so let me give you some advice: don’t play king in a room that isn’t yours. Stay out of business that doesn’t concern you.”

His gaze drilled into Ciro’s.

“Mind your fucking words... or I’ll be happy to remind you exactly where you stand.”

The air thickened, heavy with unspoken challenge.

“It’s not my fault Vincenzo made me his enforcer. Not my fault I outrank you in this family. Take your grudge to Vin,”

Ciro murmured, calm, almost teasing.

Without hesitation, he crossed the room in three easy strides and dropped onto the sofa beside Renzo—close enough that their thighs brushed.

Deliberate.

Renzo went still.

Tension snapping through him like a live wire.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Renzo demanded, voice low and dangerous.

Ciro leaned in.

Close enough that there was no room for doubt.

And then—he pressed a quick, mocking kiss to Renzo’s cheek.

Renzo froze for half a second.

Then exploded.

“What the actual fuck!”

He shot to his feet, fury igniting instantly.

In the same motion, he grabbed a bottle from the table—no hesitation—and hurled it across the room.

“Renzo—”

Too late.

The crystal bottle flew.

Sliced through the air.

Ciro barely moved—just enough to step aside.

It smashed against the far wall in a violent burst of glass and liquid.

Amber shards scattered.

Ciro exhaled a soft laugh.

Unbothered.

He retreated a few steps, positioning himself behind the opposite couch, his posture relaxed as if nothing had happened.

“Easy, Renzo,” he said lightly. “Temper.”

Renzo stood there for a moment, chest rising and falling rapidly, fists clenched so tightly his knuckles went pale.

Then, slowly—he sat back down.

“That’s not fucking funny.” Renzo’s voice was quieter now.

Ciro’s expression shifted.

The humor faded. In its place—something more authoritative.

“You’re right,” he said evenly. “It isn’t.”

A beat.

“And hating Elena isn’t either.”

Renzo scoffed under his breath.

“We all know how much effort you put into that wedding,”

Ciro went on, his voice calm but cutting.

“How badly you wanted your late girlfriend’s little sister to marry Vincenzo. To tie the families tighter.”

My fingers tightened slightly against the armrest.

“But it didn’t happen that way.”

His gaze flicked briefly toward me.

Then back to Renzo.

“And it isn’t Elena’s fault that Vincenzo changed his mind at the last second and chose her instead.”

“It’s Elena’s fault.” The words cut sharp, like teeth.

“Vincenzo hates her because she’s not... a proper woman.”

“I hate her too. Yet you... you seem to have a different interest.”

His gaze sharpened.

“I’ve noticed the way you watch her around the house—how your eyes linger a moment too long, how you follow her movements, how you catch her when she doesn’t realize, the way you notice the tilt of her head, the curve of her smile... Are you... nurturing feelings for the boss’s wife, *Ciro*?”

My breath hitched slightly.

“Careful with that accusation, Renzo. Just because I’m not bitter toward her doesn’t mean I... I—”

“Just stop!” *Ciro* snapped.

“Then stop defending her,” Renzo said, voice low, sharp. “Elena knew exactly the leverage she held the moment she stepped into that room. Don’t buy her lies about it being a coincidence. Storming into that cathedral’s dressing room? That wasn’t chance. She planned it.”

Ciro glanced at me then.

“Elena,” he said quietly, “you’ve made a powerful enemy in this house.”

A pause.

“And yet... I hope, somehow, he learns to tolerate you one day.”

I barely flinched.

Like I cared whether he tolerated me or not.

Renzo’s hatred didn’t intimidate me in the slightest.

I was Vincenzo’s wife—and by extension, his right hand in this house.

There wasn’t a single thing he could do that would shake me or make me show fear.

I shifted the conversation.

“Vincenzo left abruptly while we were both in the room after receiving a call. Do you know where he might have gone?” I kept my voice steady, forcing it even.

Ciro’s expression tightened slightly.

“Violet’s driver had a minor accident while taking her home after dinner. Scraped the guardrail—nothing serious.”

He paused, eyes flicking toward me. “Vincenzo went to make sure she was all right.”

The words hit me like a physical blow.

The room seemed to tilt slightly.

He had forced me to my knees, and I had obeyed — trembling, humiliated, lips parted and ready to take him into my mouth.

But he had stopped.

Just like that.

He had pulled away abruptly, as if the entire moment meant nothing, and left me there on the floor like discarded trash.

Because he had gone to her.

Violet.

She was the one who truly mattered.

She always would.

I would never be more than a replacement — a temporary, unwanted wife.

He had already made that brutally clear.

Why did it hurt so much?

The pain came without warning.

It stole my breath, twisting viciously until my eyes burned with unshed tears.

I hated myself for feeling it.

I hated him even more for making me feel it.

My chest tightened.

I lowered my gaze to the floor, focusing on the glittering shards of glass scattered across the marble.

Refusing to let anyone see what it did to me.

Refusing to give them that.

I swallowed hard.

Forced my breathing steady.

I would not cry.

Not for him.

Not for this.

Not for anything.

Ciro cleared his throat, breaking the silence.

“I have things to handle.”

Ciro turned his attention back to Renzo, his voice calm but laced with quiet authority.

“And you — don’t forget the sit-down with the Sicilians tonight.”

Renzo grunted in acknowledgment, his body still tight with barely contained anger.

“Take the third battalion,” *Ciro* continued. “Full show of force. No mistakes.”

Renzo’s jaw clenched visibly, but he gave a single, curt nod.

Ciro’s gaze shifted back to me.

This time—softer.

“Stay safe, *Elena*.”

Then he turned and walked away.

“Bitch!”

Renzo’s fist crashed against the table, sending cracks spiderwebbing across the surface.

He stood abruptly, circling the shattered bottle like a predator stalking prey, every movement taut with rage.

Like he was fighting the urge to explode.

“Thinks he can just order me around like I’m some fucking foot soldier.”

His voice rose, heat bleeding into every syllable.

“*Ciro* and I have been with *Vincenzo* since we were fifteen—fifteen—”

He jabbed a finger at the floor as if pointing to the past itself.

“—bleeding in the same gutters, burying the same bodies, watching each other’s backs when no one else would.”

His pacing quickened.

“Same streets. Same enemies. Same blood.”

A harsh breath escaped him.

“We built this empire brick by bloody brick.”

“And what does he do the second he plants his flag and calls himself boss?”

His jaw tightened.

His voice dropped—colder now.

“Hands that second-in-command title to Ciro.”

He spat the name like it tasted wrong.

“Ciro.”

A pause.

Then—

“The quiet one.”

“The one who never raises his voice.”

He stopped pacing abruptly. Shoulders tense.

Fists clenched so tightly the knuckles drained of color.

“Is it because I’m short?” he snapped, turning slightly. “Because I don’t smile pretty when I snap necks?”

The last words cracked—not from weakness, but from something deeper.

A frustration that had been sitting in his chest for years and finally found a way out.

Silence followed.

Thick.

Uncomfortable.

His chest rose and fell unevenly as he stood there, caught between anger and something dangerously close to hurt.

Then, slowly—he straightened.

Rolled his shoulders.

Like he was putting the weight of the moment back where it belonged.

Burying it. Locking it away.

“Renzo.”

The name came from me.

He whipped around instantly.

“What!”

The word snapped through the room like a gunshot.

His anger redirected.

His dark eyes burned—sharp, daring me to flinch.

I didn’t.

I held his gaze.

“Can I come with you?”

Silence.

Then—a short laugh.

Completely devoid of humor.

“What the hell?” he said, incredulous. “You haven’t even finished your first year at the academy, and you think you can ride along on a sit-down with the Sicilians?”

I rose from the armchair slowly.

My movements calm.

I met his glare head-on.

“Don’t underestimate me.”

My voice was quiet but firm.

“I was a trained CIA operative for three years.”

That gave him pause.

“Black ops. Wet work. Infiltration. Extraction. I’ve walked into enemy territory where most soldiers wouldn’t last a day.”

I took a step forward.

“I’ve fought more wars, eliminated more targets, and survived more impossible missions than most of your men will ever see in their lifetimes.”

His eyes narrowed.

Studying me now.

“Don’t get me wrong,” I added, my tone sharpening slightly, “I’ll sit through every tedious lecture and sparring session your academy throws at me.”

A beat.

“But right now?”

I held his gaze. Unblinking.

“I’m more than capable.”

Another step.

“I’m useful.”

Renzo’s gaze dropped—just for a second.

Over my hoodie.

My stance. My bare feet.

When his eyes returned to mine, they were colder.

“Every meeting we walk into,” he said slowly, his voice dropping to something more measured, “every car we climb into, every room we step foot in—there’s a non-zero chance someone tries to put a bullet between our eyes.”

A pause.

“Or a knife in our ribs.”

“Or worse.”

His gaze locked onto mine.

“Do you understand that?”

I gave him a thin, knowing smile.

“I understand how the mafia works, Renzo.”

“I thought you wanted me dead.”

I tilted my head slightly

“So why warn me about the risks of sitting in on a meeting like that?”

My smile sharpened. “Well... this is your perfect opportunity.”

“Think about it. If something goes wrong... if a war breaks out in that room...” I held his gaze. “I’d be the first to die.”

A beat.

“Problem solved, isn’t it?”

His jaw tightened.

“No more resentment. No more bitterness over Vincenzo choosing me over your carefully planned wedding... over your precious Violet.”

My eyes didn’t leave his.

“She gets her man back.”

That landed.

His jaw worked.

Muscles tightening.

For a long second—I thought he might agree.

Not out of logic. But out of spite.

He stared at me.

Then—he exhaled sharply through his nose.

“I’ll have to clear it with the boss.”

His tone shifted back to control.

“Don’t tell Vincenzo.”

Renzo’s eyes narrowed.

“I don’t need his permission to prove I’m capable.”

Renzo's expression shifted into something sharp and almost amused.

"You think he'll let his fragile little paper wife tag along to a potential bloodbath?"

The words were meant to provoke.

To make me react.

"Well, Vincenzo isn't even here," I shot back, my voice cooling into something sharper, quieter.

"He's too busy playing savior for Violet after her driver 'accidentally' scraped a guardrail."

I paused, my jaw tightening slightly.

"This meeting won't take long, will it? In and out."

Renzo's gaze flicked away from me for a second—toward the wall clock above the fireplace.

9:07 p.m.

The ticking filled the silence for a moment.

"We'll be back before midnight," he said at last, voice slower now, weighing the angles. "Assuming nothing goes sideways."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Sicilians are dramatic," he added, "but they're not suicidal."

"Then let me come with you."

I stepped forward, closing the distance just enough to make it clear I wasn't asking.

"We'll be back before he even notices I'm gone."

That got his attention.

Renzo studied me like he was searching for something he could use later.

He found none.

Finally, he snorted.

“Fine.”

The word came out like a concession.

He jerked his chin toward the hallway.

“Go get dressed,” he ordered. “Something you can actually move in.”

A pause.

“No tight skirts. No heels.”

His gaze flicked briefly over me. “You need to be able to run.”

Another pause. “Or drop and roll.”

A faint smirk tugged at his lips. “Or climb a fucking wall if it comes to that.”

“If things go south, I’m not carrying you out.”

I huffed a soft laugh. “Bold of you to assume you could carry me at all.”

I started for the door—

“Hey.”

I stilled, glancing back over my shoulder.

“Can you handle a gun?”

I tilted my head slightly.

“Do you think we shot at cardboard targets in the CIA?”

His brows lifted just a fraction.

Then he gave a small, grudging shrug.

“Fair.”

A pause.

I let a faint smirk settle on my lips as I turned and made my way back to my room.

If Vincenzo came back early—if he found the room empty, if he realized I had left—there would be consequences.

But staying was worse.

Standing still meant thinking, and thinking meant reliving everything I couldn't escape.

The dinner with Violet.

The forced kiss.

The way he had walked out without a second glance, without hesitation.

If I stayed alone in this house, those thoughts would not fade.

They would circle endlessly, tightening with every pass, until they hollowed me out from the inside.

I could already see it—myself on the floor, curled into the dark, wondering how much more I could endure before something in me finally broke.

I refused to let it get that far.

Not tonight.

What I needed was movement.

Adrenaline. Risk.

Something loud enough to drown out the noise in my head.

Something sharp enough to cut through the ache settling deep in my chest.

Inside my room, I closed the door behind me with quiet control.

I pulled off the hoodie and lounge pants, letting them fall where they landed without care.

Cool air brushed over my skin, raising a faint trail of goosebumps,

I reached for black tactical leggings, pulling them on with practiced ease.

The material fit like a second skin—flexible, reinforced, designed for speed and impact.

A fitted long-sleeve top followed, streamlined and close to the body, made to move without resistance.

Over it, I slipped into a lightweight leather jacket.

The jacket was perfect—lightweight, flexible, tailored to move with me rather than against me, with hidden compartments sewn seamlessly into the lining.

I stepped into my boots last.

They were low-profile and worn in, molded to my movements, their soles designed to grip whatever surface I crossed.

Then I braided my hair back, pulling it tight and clean, securing every strand in place.

Nothing loose. Nothing distracting.

When I looked at myself in the mirror, the reflection that met my gaze was not a wife, not a captive, and certainly not something that could be owned.

It was me.

Elena.

The woman who had survived five years on the run.

The woman who had outrun Ruslan Baranov's hunters more times than she could count.

The woman who had learned, again and again, how to endure without breaking.

I exhaled slowly, grounding myself in the moment, and then I moved.

I slipped out through the side door of the east wing, deliberately avoiding the main corridors, the guards, and the quiet, ever-watchful cameras mounted above.

Every step was calculated.

The night air met me the second I stepped outside, cool and clean, carrying the faint scent of pine and lake water drifting in from beyond the estate.

It steadied me, sharpening my focus.

I moved quickly but without sound, following the narrow service path along the edge of the property.

Gravel shifted softly beneath my boots.

The garages came into view ahead—dimly lit, isolated, waiting.

Renzo was already there.

Of course he was.

He leaned against a blacked-out Range Rover with the ease of someone entirely at home in the dark.

His arms were crossed, one leg slightly bent, his posture relaxed without ever being careless.

There was nothing idle about him.

A cigarette burned low between his fingers.

He took one last drag before flicking it to the ground and crushing it beneath his heel as I approached.

His gaze moved over me deliberately, taking in every detail.

Then something shifted—just enough to register.

Approval.

He pushed off the car and jerked his chin toward the twin superbikes parked beside it, their black frames gleaming under the dim garage lights.

The engines were silent, but there was something coiled in them—power waiting to be unleashed.

“Pick one,” he said.

I didn’t hesitate.

I stepped toward the nearer bike, my fingers brushing over the cold metal before I swung a leg over it in one fluid motion.

The seat settled beneath me, firm and familiar, the machine fitting like something I already knew how to control.

The scent of oil and steel rose faintly in the air, sharper than the enclosed weight of a car.

Renzo mounted the second bike with practiced ease, his movements smooth, unthinking.

The moment he brought it to life, the engine growled low and restrained, the vibration humming through the ground between us.

“Last chance to back out,” he said, voice carrying easily over the quiet rumble, his gaze fixed ahead.

He didn't look at me.

"Once we leave these gates, you're stepping into my world. There's no safety net out there. No one to intervene. No Vincenzo to pull rank and save you."

I pulled on the helmet resting on the handlebar, securing it with a firm click before settling my hands around the grips.

"Ride."

That was all I gave him.

A smirk flickered across his face, brief and sharp, before he leaned forward slightly and rolled the throttle.

The bikes surged to life in unison, smooth but powerful, the sound low and predatory as we moved toward the gates.

They slid open without resistance, as though the estate itself had already decided to let us go.

We rode through.

Behind us, the boundary closed.

The road opened beneath us, winding through shadow.

In front of us lay uncertainty, danger, and the fragile possibility of a meeting that could end in diplomacy—or bloodshed.

Renzo rode ahead without speaking, his silhouette steady, controlled, never once faltering.

I followed, the rhythm of the bike grounding me, the vibration steady beneath my body, the speed cutting cleanly through the noise in my head.

And for the first time since marrying Vincenzo, I felt alive again.

Not like the version of me trapped within his walls, bound by expectations and control—but like myself.

Like Elena.

The woman who moved, who fought, who took risks without hesitation.

To hell with the consequences.

This was what I understood.

What I thrived in.

Not playing the obedient wife inside a gilded cage, not shrinking within the confines of a mafia boss's world, but riding straight into danger with my pulse steady and my mind clear.

This—this was freedom.