The wife isn't me

Chapter 1

I went to the hospital to show my fiance our daughter's face- and I found his wife instead.

The ultrasound envelope was still warm from my hand when I stepped out of the imaging suite at St. Orla Women's Center. Twenty- nine weeks pregnant, feet swollen, back aching, stupidly happy. That afternoon, the baby had finally turned toward the scan. For three months, every photo had been a blur of elbow, spine, or one stubborn little fist. This time, the technician laughed and printed three copies.

"There she is," she said. "Looks like she was waiting for the right person."

I thought of Dario immediately. He had missed the appointment because of a meeting – that was all he said. A meeting that could not be moved, with people who would not wait, about something he would explain later. He had apologized three times that morning while buttoning his shirt.

"Go home after," he said. "Rest. I'll come to the apartment tonight and you can show me everything."

I should have listened.

Instead, I stood in the hallway outside Imaging Room Three, staring at a blue-and-silver sign near the elevator.

ARMITAGE FAMILY MATERNITY WINGDONOR RECEPTION – GRAND HALL, LEVEL ONE

Dario had not mentioned it. That should have been my warning, but I told myself there were explanations. His family name was on hospitals, museums, schools, buildings he had never entered. Maybe this was one of those things-maybe he did not know the reception was today. Maybe I was being silly.

The elevator was right there. I fixed my hair in the reflection of my phone, tucked the ultrasound envelope under my arm, and went down just to look.

The reception doors were open. I walked into a room full of champagne, cameras, and Armitage money.

The first thing I saw was Dario on stage. The second was the woman beside him.

She wore pale green silk and one hand rested under her pregnant stomach. Not as far along as I was – but there was no mistaking it. Pregnant. Standing next to Dario. Smiling for photographers.

A little boy stood between them in a navy suit, his hand tucked into Dario's jacket pocket like it belonged there. A small gold Armitage crest shone on his lapel.

The hospital director stood at the microphone. "We are honored tonight to thank Dario and Celine Armitage, whose generosity has made the new maternity wing possible."

=

G

A

Celine Armitage.

My fingers tightened around the ultrasound envelope. Dario had never told me about Celine – not once, not as a woman whose last name was attached to his in any way. When I asked why we had to keep the engagement private, he said his family was difficult. He said the winter vote would make them vicious. He said he was protecting me from people who would turn my pregnancy into leverage.

I had believed that too. He had put a ring on my finger fourteen weeks ago in the kitchen of the apartment.

"Soon," he had said. "Everyone will know."

The hospital director kept speaking. "As Dario and Celine prepare to welcome their second child, they have chosen to help other families welcome theirs in safety and dignity."

Their second child.

The words hit harder than any slap could have. The baby shifted inside me and I pressed one hand to my stomach before I could stop myself.

Second child. Then what was mine?

Dario looked down at the boy beside him and smiled. I knew that smile. I had seen it at two in the morning when our daughter kicked hard enough to wake him – he had laughed into my hair and said she had his temper. I had believed that smile belonged to

Someone near the back of the hall noticed me. Then another person turned. Then another. The whispers did not start loudly; they moved through the room in small pieces. A foundation assistant looked at my belly, then at Dario, and went pale. A donor's wife stopped clapping with her hands still raised.

Dario saw the change before he saw me. His eyes found mine, and for one second, his face went blank – not guilty, not afraid. Calculating. Then he touched the woman's elbow and stepped down from the stage.

He came toward me like I was a spilled drink on a white carpet.

"Aveline." His voice was low. "What are you doing here?"

I looked past him. The woman watched us from the stage, still smiling – but the smile had gone thin.

"Your wife is pregnant," I said.

His jaw moved once. "This is not the place."

"It seems like the perfect place. I seem to be the only one missing the introduction."

"You should have gone home after your appointment."

He reached for my elbow – a small movement, controlled, polite enough for a public room. The sort of touch that would look protective in photographs. I stepped back before his fingers reached me. The cameras did not flash, but I felt them turn.

For the first time, Dario's control cracked enough for me to see anger beneath it.

Home. The word hurt so badly I almost laughed.

AO

Litrad

Unsere Bindung brach sofort. Wir waren alles füreinander, bis seine Seelengefährtin alles hapter

"I brought the scan." I lifted the envelope a little. "Our daughter finally showed her face."

Dario's eyes dropped to it. For a moment, his face changed. Then he looked back at the room and whatever I had seen was gone

The little boy left the stage before anyone could stop him. He walked straight to Dario and slipped a hand into his.

"Dad," he said, looking up at me, "who is that lady?"

The room went still. No one coughed. No one moved. Even the cameras lowered.

Dario had time to choose. He had my ring on my hand, my child under my heart, his wife behind him, and his son holding his fingers. He chose in less than a second.

“She’s someone from work, Nico.”

Someone from work.

The words did not sound cruel- that was why they were worse. He said them calmly, like he was correcting a seating chart. Nicd nodded. Children believed what their fathers gave them.

Celine came down from the stage then, slowly, carefully-one hand under her stomach, the other resting on Nico’s shoulder once she reached him. She looked at my ring first, then my belly, then my face. Not shocked. That told me enough.

“Dario,” she said. “Not here.”

Her voice was soft, but it worked like a command. Dario looked toward the donors. The hospital director had gone still beside the microphone. The cameras were not flashing anymore – that made it worse.

“Come with me,” he said.

“No.”

His hand closed around my elbow. Not hard enough to look like force. Hard enough that I knew it was not a request. He guided me toward the side doors near the coat alcove. Celine followed with Nico, and at the last second she touched the shoulder of a foundation assistant.

“Take Nico back to the stage,” she said.

Nico looked at Dario. “Dad?”

“Go with her,” Dario said.

The boy obeyed. The side door closed behind us. The sound of the donor hall dropped to a low, expensive murmur. The corridor smelled like lilies and disinfectant.

“You never told me you were married,” I said.

Dario’s expression sharpened. “Lower your voice.”

“You asked me to marry you.”

“It is complicated.”

AO

Litrad

Unsere Bindung brach sofort. Wir waren alles füreinander, bis seine Seelengefährtin alles

“Are you married to her?”

He did not answer quickly enough. That was an answer.

“Are you married to her, Dario?”

His eyes went hard. “Legally.”

Legally. The word landed worse in the quiet.

“Legally married,” I said. “Publicly married. Standing-on-stage-with-her married.”

“Aveline.”

“Does she know about me?”

Celine’s expression did not move. That was answer enough too.

“Does your son know?” I asked.

Dario’s voice dropped. “Do not use my son.”

My son. Not the boy. Not Nico. My son.

I looked down at my stomach. For the first time since walking into the hall, I wondered what words he used for the baby when I was not there.

“No.” My throat burned. “Complicated is when a meeting runs late. This is you on stage with your pregnant wife and your son while I carry your baby two floors above you.”

Celine’s hand tightened on her clutch. A crack-small, but real. Then she fixed it.

“Dario,” she said, “she should sit down. Stress is not good for a pregnant woman.”

She said it gently. That made it worse. She sounded like the hostess of the corridor-like I was a guest who had become faint at the wrong time, like my body was something to be managed because it made the evening uncomfortable.

“Don’t,” I said.

Celine looked at me.

“Don’t pretend concern is kindness.”

For the first time, her smile disappeared completely. Dario saw it and moved another half step between us. There it was again-his instinct. Protect her from me. Protect the wife from the woman carrying his child.

Dario stepped closer. “You are upset. I understand that.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

AO

L

Litrad

Unsere Bindung brach sofort. Wir waren alles füreinander, bis seine Seelengefährtin alles

“Then explain it.”

“Not here.”

“We’re not in there anymore.”

His mouth tightened.

“You proposed to me,” I said.

“I meant it.”

I almost hated him more for saying that, because he sounded like he believed it.

“You painted the nursery wall last Sunday,” I said. “You said the clouds were crooked. You said our daughter would not care because babies have terrible taste.”

His face tightened. Celine looked at the side of his face. So she had not known that part. Good. Let something hurt her too.

“Aveline,” Dario said.

My name in his mouth used to make me feel chosen. Now it sounded like a warning.

“How pregnant is she?” I asked.

Celine answered before he could. “Twenty-four weeks.”

Her voice was soft. Polite. Perfectly controlled.

Twenty-four weeks. Five weeks behind me. Dario had been in my bed when she conceived. He had probably come home to me afterward and put his hand on my stomach.

My vision blurred at the edges. I forced it clear. I would not faint in this corridor. I would not give them that.

“And him?” I asked. “How old is your son?”

Dario’s mouth flattened. “Do not bring him into this.”

“You already did.”

Celine looked at me for a moment. “He’s six,” she said.

Six. There was no math to do, no room for excuses. Dario had not hidden a difficult past from me – he had been married, he had been a father, he had made me a promise in an apartment he owned while his son wore his family crest in public.

“We will talk tonight,” Dario said.

“No.”

The word came out before I planned it.

His eyes hardened. “You need to rest.”

“Don’t use the baby to manage me.”

“I am trying to protect you.”

That was the first thing he said that sounded almost gentle. It landed wrong. Protection did not feel like this. Protection did not pull a woman into a corridor after calling her someone from work.

I turned and pushed through the side door before either of them could stop me. The donor hall blurred around me. Faces turned. Someone said my name, or maybe I imagined it. I kept walking. Then I was through the lobby and outside under the hospital awning, gulping air that tasted like rain and exhaust.

“Aveline.”

Dario had followed me. Of course he had. I did not turn around until I reached the curb.

“Don’t come home tonight,” I said.

For the first time all evening, he looked truly surprised. “What?”

“Don’t come home tonight.”

Dario stared at me for one long second. Then the surprise left his face. What replaced it was colder.

“It’s my apartment,” he said.

End of chapter-

AO