The wife isn't me

Chapter 10

Dario called 9 times before noon. I watched the missed calls stack on the sealed phone through the clear strip of Isolde's silver pouch

Dario Armitage. Dario Armitage. Dario Armitage.

The name looked less like a person each time-more like an institution trying the same locked door with different hands.

We were in the back room of the copy shop when the 10th call arrived. The copier was still warm. Four piles of paper sat on the table, each clipped and labeled in Isolde's handwriting.

Hospital

St. Orla

Apartment / Access

Clinic Coercion

Relationship / Misrepresentation

My life, sorted by injury.

The phone buzzed again inside the pouch. Isolde looked at me.

"Do you want to hear it?"

"No." That was the honest answer. Then I thought of Dr. Merrow's folder closing over the words listed maternal guardian. "Yes." That was the useful one.

She took the phone out with gloved hands, placed it on the table, and started a screen recording before she played the voicemail on speaker.

Dario's voice filled the copy room. Not angry. Never enough to be useful at first.

"Aveline. You left the clinic without completing the consultation. Dr. Merrow is concerned, and so am I. Call me before this becomes something formal."

The message ended. Isolde saved it.

The next one was shorter. “I know Isolde is with you. She is not helping you. She does not understand the medical context.”

The third: “Your access at the apartment is paused for safety. Not revoked. Paused. I need you to understand the difference.”

Paused. That was a rich man’s favorite word for taking something without admitting it was gone.

The fourth message came with less polish. “Where are the documents?”

There. The empty drawer had spoken. Not in the words he chose – in the one he did not. He did not ask which documents. He did not ask what I meant. He knew exactly where his hand had gone first when he reached the apartment. Not to the bedroom. Not to the nursery. Not to the place where an anxious man might check whether a pregnant woman had packed clothes or medicine.

He had gone to the drawer. The evidence drawer.

I sat down before my knees made the decision for me. The chair was metal, narrow, and cold through my dress. My daughter shifted under my ribs as if trying to find a position where none of this could reach her. I wished I could offer one.

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Isolde stopped the playback. “He knows.”

“He knows the drawer is empty.”

“Not what you copied.”

“No.”

But the room on the 36th floor was in my mind so clearly I could smell the warm paint of the nursery. Dario opening the desk drawer where the donor invitation had been returned after I photographed it the first time. Dario finding nothing. Dario checking the console for the clinic card. Nothing. The authorization form gone from the envelope. The handwritten noté gone. The space where evidence had been quietly kept inside his apartment now as clean as his showered skin.

For 14 weeks, he had made me believe comfort was a kind of belonging. Now the empty places belonged to me. That should have felt like victory. It did not. It felt like standing barefoot on broken glass and being grateful the window was open.

I could be glad the papers were gone. I could still grieve the room that taught me where to hide them.

The sealed phone vibrated again. This time it was a text.

Where is the ring?

I looked at the small padded envelope on the table. For Dario Armitage. Hold for personal receipt only. Inside: ring, ultrasound copy. Not sent yet. Not surrendered. Waiting.

“Do not answer,” Isolde said.

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Your face was.”

I turned the phone away.

Another text appeared. Do not make me learn from staff what you took from our home.

Our. Home.

I had wanted those words once. Not exactly those – Dario did not usually waste ownership on sentiment. He said apartment, place, here, and ours only when he wanted to soften an edge I had noticed. But I had wanted some version of it. A shared pronoun. A door that did not ask an app whether I belonged. A bowl by the entrance that could hold my keys next to his without making either set evidence.

Now our arrived after he paused my access and asked staff what I had removed.

The copier clicked as it cooled. Somewhere beyond the back room, the owner spoke softly to a customer he had decided to let in through the front despite the CLOSED sign. Normal life pressing its face against the glass.

“He called it our home,” I said.

“He called your access paused. He is having a language festival.”

“It was never ours.”

“No.”

The word was kind because it did not pretend.

I placed one hand over the baby. “I wanted one thing from the nursery.”

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“I know.”

“Not the crib. Not the mural. The yellow blanket.”

Isolde’s eyes softened now, and that was almost harder than the no in the car. “We can buy another blanket.”

“That is what everyone says when they don’t understand which object is the wound.”

“Then we won’t replace it. We will remember it. But you are still not going back.”

My throat tightened.

The phone lit again. This time, Dario sent a photograph. Not the nursery. Not the drawer, The apartment console. Empty brass bowl. The surface polished, bare except for one folded square of tissue.

He had found where the ring had been wrapped before I moved it. He wanted me to know he was touching the places I had touched.

The message underneath: You are escalating.

I laughed once. It sounded ugly. “I am escalating?”

Isolde leaned over, read the screen, and said, “Congratulations. You have been promoted from fragile to strategic.”

The promotion did not feel as satisfying as it should have. I had not stopped being fragile that was the inconvenient part men like Dario never understood. A woman could be fragile and still act. Hurt did not make my hands useless. Fear did not turn my daughter into his evidence.

The cheap phone rang. Both of us froze.

Only 3 people had the number: Isolde, the copy shop owner, and the patient portal reset line. The caller ID showed PRIVATE.

Isolde picked it up but did not answer. We watched it ring out. A voicemail icon appeared 20 seconds later.

She played it on speaker. Celine's voice entered the room like perfume under a door.

"Aveline, this is Celine. I know this morning felt overwhelming. I am asking you, mother to mother, not to let anger push you into a posture you cannot sustain. Dario is upset, and when he is upset, he overcorrects. I can help keep this humane if you return to the apartment or call me directly."

Isolde's face went flat. Celine continued.

"You and I both know this child needs stability. Please do not confuse possession with motherhood."

The message ended. For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then I said, "She called me from a private number on the new phone."

Isolde reached for the device. "Then someone got it from the clinic desk or the portal metadata. We move faster."

"Can they track this one?"

"Not through your account. Not unless someone at the clinic writes down what they should not have had."

"That is not comforting."

"It is not meant to be. It is meant to tell us where the leak is."

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Leak. Such a small word for a room full of people passing around pieces of me.

"She said possession."

"I heard."

"She thinks I am the one possessing my own baby."

I expected rage to arrive. Instead, clarity did. It was quieter and colder.

“Send the envelope,” I said.

Isolde looked at me. “The ring?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. But do it anyway.”

The copy shop owner had padded mailers and a courier account. Isolde handled the chain of custody like a woman born arguing with receipts. She photographed the ring beside the ultrasound copy, then the envelope, then the courier label, then the pickup confirmation.

I wrote one sentence on the back of the ultrasound copy before she sealed it.

She was never yours to reassign.

No signature. Dario knew my handwriting. Let him.

While Isolde arranged delivery, I opened the cheap phone and checked the patient portal. The page loaded slowly. St. Orla’s logo appeared. Then my name. Aveline Ashby.

There was a new notification in the top corner.

Authorized access request pending.

Requester: D. Armitage

Relationship: Spouse / Authorized Support

My skin went cold so quickly I thought I might be sick. The lie was almost elegant. Spouse could mean Celine in every public room. Authorized support could mean him in every private one. Between the 2 phrases, he had built a bridge over the part where I existed.

“Isolde.”

She came back from the front desk and read over my shoulder. “Screenshot.”

box. I did. Full page. Time. Battery. URL. The little bureaucratic lie in its own gray

Spouse. Authorized Support.

Dario had entered my apartment and found the drawer empty. He had called. He had threatened formal action. And somewhere between the empty drawer and the polished console, he had decided the next door to try was my medical chart.

“Can he get in?”

“Not if you deny it.”

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“Can he say I am too unstable to deny it?”

Isolde did not answer fast enough. That was answer enough.

The sealed phone rang again. This time, Isolde played the voicemail without asking.

Dario’s voice had changed. Still calm. But closer to the bone.

“You are confused about what I want. I do not care about the ring. I do not care about the documents if you stop turning this into a case. care about my daughter. If Isolde or anyone else is advising you to run, they are putting her at risk.”

My daughter. Not the child. Not your pregnancy. Mine, because he was frightened now. Mine, because the drawer was empty.

The message continued. “Call me in the next 15 minutes. If you do not, I will have counsel file for emergency intervention before end of day.”

There it was. Not a threat text at midnight. Not soft clinic language. Formal. The next room. The next set of clean chairs.

I looked at the authorized access request glowing on the cheap phone. Then at the four paper piles. Then at the courier receipt for the ring.

“He thinks the file starts when he files,” I said.

Isolde picked up the folder marked Clinic / Coercion. “Then let’s make sure it doesn’t.”

-End of chapter —

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