The wife isn't me

Chapter 11

We had 15 minutes because Dario had given me 15 minutes. That was his mistake.

Men like him confused deadlines with control. He thought a clock made me smaller. He forgot that clocks also told witnesses when to move,

At 12:06, Isolde put me in the back of her car with a bottle of water, 2 crackers, and the cheap phone.

“You download. I drive.”

“Where?”

“Bank first. Then St. Orla records. Then anywhere with bad coffee and a public notary.”

“That is a destination?”

“Today it is a lifestyle.”

She pulled into traffic with the calm aggression of a woman who considered turn signals a legal argument.

I logged into St. Orla’s portal on the cheap phone and denied the authorized access request. The app asked if I was sure. I pressed yes. It asked me to choose a reason.

The options were absurdly gentle. No longer needed. Entered in error. Prefer to manage own care.

Nothing for: The man requesting spouse access is married to someone else. He is trying to route my unborn child into his wife’s name. Please stop teaching predators dropdown menus.

I chose Prefer to manage own care. Then I took screenshots of the choice, the confirmation, and the time. 12:09. Six minutes left in Dario’s countdown, if his 15 minutes had meant anything honest.

It did not.

The first letter from his lawyer landed at 12:11. Not in my email-in the portal messaging system.

Notice of Preservation and Care Coordination Concern

My name sat at the top. Dario's law firm name sat beneath it in blue letters, smooth and expensive. The message did not ask for emergency intervention yet. It prepared the ground.

Concerned father. Abrupt departure from medical consultation. Third-party interference. Need for coordinated prenatal care. Potential housing instability.

\ I read every line while traffic lights changed and my daughter pressed her heel into my side. The letter never called me irrational – it did not need to. It placed furniture around the word and invited someone else to sit.

There was a paragraph about my departure from the clinic. It said I left without medical clearance. There had been no exam, no blood pressure cuff, no fetal monitor – no physician's hand on my chart except the one closing a folder over paperwork I had not asked for.

Still, in the letter, leaving a room became leaving care. Refusing pre-filled language became refusing support. A nurse's staff exit became third-party interference waiting to be named.

Gossip Harbor

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1/5 AO

PLAY NOW!

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KERA

I took one screenshot of the paragraph, then another of the message header,

"Again," Isolde said.

"I already did it."

"Do it like someone will accuse you of cropping."

So I captured the whole screen- the ugly parts, the boring parts, the small system clock in the corner that did not care whether anyone believed me. Evidence was humility. It made you keep what pride wanted to crop. Even the panic. Especially the panic. It had time stamps.

"Forward it," Isolde said.

“To who?”

“To yourself. To me. To the folder. To the lawyer I am about to make like me.”

“You have a lawyer?”

“I have an ex-client who owes me a consult and a niece who likes babies.”

“That is not reassuring.”

“It is fast.”

Fast mattered more.

I forwarded the portal message to the clean email Isolde had created before dawn. Then I downloaded my St. Orla records.

Ultrasound report. Visit summary. Lab results. Insurance billing. Contact history. The file names looked normal until they did not.

One PDF had been accessed at 10:38 that morning. Not by me. Not downloaded. Viewed. Administrative review.

“Isolde.”

“Screenshot.”

I did. My hands were steady now in the way shock could become machinery if a person did not ask it to feel.

The bank branch was 4 blocks from Isolde’s office and smelled like paper, carpet glue, and too much lemon cleaner. I sat in a chair by the window while she stood at the counter and made a man named Aaron learn the difference between a pregnant woman and a problem.

I had 3 accounts. One old checking account from before Dario. One savings account with very little in it and my name only. One household expense account Dario had insisted on setting up because, he said, pregnancy was not the season for chasing receipts.

I had believed that. I had believed many sentences that began with kindness and ended with a leash.

Aaron printed the balances. Old checking: available. Savings: available. Household account: restricted pending account holder review.

I looked at the line until the numbers became less important than the word. Restricted.

The balance was not large enough to ruin me by itself. That was part of the insult. It was grocery money. Taxi money. The kind of money that decided whether a pregnant woman could choose a pharmacy without asking permission.

Dario did not need the amount. He needed me to feel the hand closing around it.

“When?” I asked.

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Aaron glanced at Isolde. Isolde said, “Speak to her.”

He swallowed. “The hold was placed this morning at 10:33.”

10:33. Two minutes after the apartment access change. Maybe the same assistant. Maybe the same command. A door, a card, a chart, a bank account – all soft enough to be called safety if someone paid the right people to say it.

“By whom?”

“The primary funding party requested review due to suspected unauthorized use.”

The primary funding party.

I touched the edge of the printed balance sheet. “My name is on this account.”

“Yes, Ms. Ashby.”

“But he can freeze it.”

Aaron’s face did something complicated. Pity would have been cleaner.

“He can request a review of funds he originated.”

There was the lecture trying to form. I stopped it before it could become a hallway.

“Print the request history.”

“I don’t know if–”

Isolde leaned forward. “She is a named account holder. Print what she is entitled to receive, or write down that you declined to provide it while she is under an active medical coercion concern.”

Aaron printed. The machine behind him coughed out 3 pages and a truth I should have understood months ago.

Dario had not made generosity easy. He had made it traceable.

Groceries. Prenatal vitamins. Maternity clothes. Transport to appointments. The chair for the nursery. The yellow blanket.

My throat closed around that last one. There it was in clean black text. HOME GOODS / INFANT TEXTILES

He had paid for the blanket. Not because he chose it – I had chosen it alone on a Tuesday when the rain made the pavement silver and the baby had kicked at every soft thing I touched. I bought it with the household card because Dario had said that was what the account was for.

Now a line on a bank printout made it look like another item in his support structure. Evidence of care. Evidence of dependence. Evidence, if he wanted, that I had used his money for the child he planned to claim.

“Aveline,” Isolde said quietly.

“I’m here.”

“Sit back.”

“I’m sitting.”

“You are doing that thing where you sit like a knife.”

I let my spine touch the chair. The baby shifted again, softer this time. I drank water because my daughter did not deserve my refusal to care

AQ

Gossip Harbor

PLAY NOW!

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KIRA for myself as proof of my anger.

We left the bank with printouts, a new debit card tied only to my old account, and a cashier’s check from my savings because Isolde said landlords liked paper they could hold.

In the car, Dario’s deadline passed. 12:21. No call. No filing notice. For 4 whole minutes I let myself believe delay might mean caution.

Then the cheap phone buzzed. Email from Isolde’s ex-client lawyer.

He filed a notice of intent, not the emergency petition yet. Likely gathering support declarations. Need evidence of coercion, independent medical appointment, stable address. Fast.

Stable address. I laughed again, quieter than before.

“What?”

“He locks me out and then files concern about housing instability.”

Isolde’s hands tightened on the wheel. “Yes.”

“He makes the ground disappear, then reports that I am falling.”

“Yes.”

“And people read the report before they look at the floor.”

“That is why we bring them pieces of the floor.”

“That is the part I keep forgetting.”

“Which part?”

“The harm is the preparation.”

She glanced at me once. “Good. Hold onto that.”

At St. Orla records, the woman behind the desk tried to send us to an online form.

Isolde slid my ID across the counter. I slid the printout of the access request beside it. “I need a full access log for my patient portal and a note in my chart that no spouse is authorized to receive information because I have no spouse.”

The woman read the second half twice. Her eyes moved to my stomach. Then to my face.

Something human survived hospital administration after all.

“We can add a privacy flag today,” she said.

“Add it.”

“Full access logs take–”

“I am 29 weeks pregnant. A man falsely represented himself as my spouse 2 hours ago to access my prenatal records. How long should I wait before that becomes urgent?”

She did not like the sentence. That helped. Discomfort meant it had landed.

She printed a preliminary log. Viewed at 10:38. Terminal: clinic partner portal. User: MERROW_ADMIN. Location: not St. Orla.

AO

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Dr. Merrow’s office had accessed my St. Orla report while I sat in their consultation room, before I consented to anything

I took the paper. My hand shook then. Only once. Enough that Isolde saw it.

“We are done here,” she said.

“No.”

I looked at the records clerk. “Print the privacy flag confirmation.”

She did.

Outside, in the hospital corridor, the walls still held donor plaques-names in brass, families who had paid for wings, chairs, rooms, reputations.

Somewhere downstairs was the grand hall where Nico had looked up at me and asked who I was.

I touched the wall because my balance had gone thin. Not for support. For witness.

“The first time I left this building,” I said, “I thought the worst thing was that everyone saw me disappear.”

Isolde stood beside me, not touching. “What is the worst thing now?”

“How many rooms had already been prepared.”

My cheap phone buzzed again. Not Dario. Not Celine. A system notification from St. Orla:

Privacy flag added to patient chart.

Then, 3 seconds later: Authorized access request submitted.

Requester: C. Armitage

Relationship: Maternal Guardian

I stared at it. The corridor narrowed to brass names and white light.

Isolde read over my shoulder and said one word, very softly. “Good.”

I looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

She pointed to the screen. “Now she signed her name to the lie.”

Gossip Harbor

End of chapter

Merge, build and explore! Uncover hidden secrets of the residents on Brimwave Island!

PLAY NOW!

The wife isn't me

Chapter 12

By 2:00, I knew the price of my cage. Not the value the price. There was a difference, and Dario had counted on me never needing to fearn

Isolde’s office storage room had 1 narrow window, 3 shelves of banker boxes, a dead printer no one had been brave enough to throw away, and a folding table that became my first war room.

She put a cushion on the chair before I sat. I pretended not to notice. She pretended not to notice me pretending. That was friendship at 29 weeks with a man filing toward your womb.

There was no bed, no nursery, no warm kitchen or thin-rimmed glass or painted cloud trying to pretend the ceiling could hold. There was a storage room, a legal pad, and a friend who had put the kettle on in the office kitchenette because she knew heat could be medicine éven when tea tasted like cardboard.

It should have felt humiliating. It did. It also felt real.

We taped brown paper across the table and started drawing lines. Apartment. Doctors. Transport. Work. Bank. Phone.

At the center, I wrote my own name.

Then I crossed it out. Not because it was gone – because every document around me had tried to place someone else there. Patient. Guest. Gestational Carrier. Support recipient. Matter.

I wrote Noa instead.

Isolde looked at the paper but did not correct me. “Start with what he paid for.”

“Everything.”

“No. Specifics.”

Specifics were crueler. So we made them.

Dario paid the apartment lease through an Armitage property subsidiary. Not directly- never directly when a clean layer could do the work. He paid the household account from his personal office with memos that said prenatal support. He paid St. Orla through insurance I had been told was a private executive plan but now saw carried a corporate coordinator line. He paid the car service. He paid the building staff at Christmas with envelopes I had helped fill because I thought being generous to doormen was part of becoming a family in a tall building. He paid for the phone plan I used to call Isolde. He paid for the birthing class we never attended because Celine had a donor rehearsal the same weekend and he had called it an emergency.

He paid for quiet.

That was the shape underneath all the others. Not love. Quiet.

“I had money before him,” I said.

“You still have some.”

“Not enough for this.”

Gossip Harbor

PLAY NOW!

Merge, build and explore! Uncover hidden secrets of the residents on Brimwave Island!

KITA

“Enough for 48 hours. That is what we need first.”

Forty-eight hours sounded small until I remembered how much Dario had done in 2.

We opened my work email next. That hurt differently.

Work had been the place I still recognized myself. Hospital interiors. Maternal recovery rooms. Lighting plans meant to help women sleep. Chairs designed so a person recovering from birth could stand without making a spectacle of effort.

I had made rooms softer before I understood softness could be used as a lock.

My current contract was for consultation on patient-family suites connected to St. Orla’s maternity expansion. Armitage Family Maternity Wing.

The name had been on signage on the first day of my ruin. Day. I was tired. Shock made the mind reach for structure wherever it could find one. Not a clean beginning just the day the lie stopped carrying me.

Isolde noticed my face. “Break?”

“No.”

“That was a question designed to let you say yes.”

“And I used my agency to refuse.”

“I hate when you weaponize vocabulary.”

“You started it.”

She slid me another cracker. I ate it because she would only stare at me until I did.

The contract portal required 2-factor authentication through my old phone. The sealed phone inside the silver pouch vibrated in a dead little panic when the code arrived. Isolde opened the pouch just long enough to read it, then sealed it again as if handling something radioactive.

The contract appeared. I had seen the top half before.

Consultant name: Aveline Ashby.

Project: St. Orla Women's Center, Family Suite Environmental Review.

Scope: materials, lighting, patient comfort, nonclinical spatial recommendations.

Rate: respectable. Dates: ordinary.

The attached brief had been ordinary too. Softer recovery spaces. Less glare over bassinets. Better chair arms for women with abdominal pain.

I had written margin notes about dignity because I believed institutions could be corrected by design if someone remembered the body first.

Now an institution had remembered my body very well. It had remembered how to seat me, warm me, delay me, and prepare a folder before I arrived.

Then Isolde scrolled down. There was an addendum.

I had not seen the addendum. It was 4 pages long.

The title sat in plain black letters: Intellectual Property and Maternal Environment Assignment

AQ

L

Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

My mouth went dry. "What is that?"

Isolde did not answer until she had read the first page. "It says design recommendations, drawings, notes, environmental concepts, patient- experience language, and related maternal-care materials belong to the project sponsor."

"That is normal, isn't it?"

"Some of it. Keep reading."

I read. The words behaved at first. They moved through ownership and usage rights and confidentiality. Then, halfway down page 2, the language changed shape.

Consultant acknowledges that any pregnancy-related patient experience observations, notes, domestic nursery concepts, postpartum environment planning, naming conventions, and privately developed maternal- care recommendations generated during the engagement shall be considered project-adjacent work product where funded, supported, or materially enabled by Sponsor or Sponsor Affiliate resources.

The room went quiet. Not because there was no sound-the printer hummed, someone laughed in the office beyond the door, a phone rang. the city continued. But all of it moved outside the sentence.

Domestic nursery concepts. Naming conventions. Privately developed maternal-care recommendations. Funded, supported, or materially enabled.

The nursery clouds. The chair. The blanket. The name I had typed 3 times in a blank document and not saved because it felt dangerous.

Noa Ashby.

I stood too quickly. The storage room tilted hard. For one suspended second, I was back in the apartment kitchen with the ring still new and Dario's hands around mine. He had told me I was safe to make plans. I had believed him so completely that I had started planning rooms, names, light, sleep, every small mercy a mother could place between her child and the world.

Now I understood he had been listening to my plans as inventory.

Not all at once-that would have been easier to hate. Line by line. Kindness by kindness. Receipt by receipt. Until love had an audit trail.

And I had helped itemize it. Smiling while I handed him receipts, carefully sorted.

Isolde was beside me before I could hit the shelf. "Sit."

"Did he buy her name?"

"No."

"Read it."

"I read it."

"It says naming conventions."

"It says work product. Your daughter's name is not work product."

"He will make it sound like it is."

That was the thing. Not whether he would win – whether he would force me to spend breath proving my child had not been generated inside a contract.

I sat because my legs had gone watery and the baby had started a slow, unsettled roll. I placed both hands over her and bent forward as far as

Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em my stomach allowed.

“Noa,” I said under my breath.

Isolde crouched in front of me. “Listen to me. He did not buy her.”

“He bought every object around her.”

“Then we separate the objects from the child.”

“And me?”

She did not answer quickly. Good. Quick comfort would have been a lie.

“We separate you too,” she said finally. “Piece by piece.”

The addendum had a signature page. My name appeared in black ink.

Aveline Ashby.

Not typed. Signed.

The slant was close. The loop on the A was mine if someone had watched me sign enough receipts. The y at the end of Ashby dropped too low, but not so low that a stranger would notice.

I noticed. I had spent 28 years inside that hand.

“I didn’t sign this.”

Isolde came around the table. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“You signed a lot of documents when the contract started.”

“Not this.”

“Look at the date.”

The date sat beneath the signature in small print. The day after Dario proposed. Fourteen weeks ago.

I remembered that day with horrifying precision. I had woken with the ring still on my finger because I had slept with my hand curled near my face like a teenager afraid morning would take proof away.

Dario had made toast because coffee smelled impossible then. He had said he needed to stop by the office for 2 hours, but when he returned, he brought paint samples and a lemon tart I could only eat 3 bites of before heartburn punished me. We had stood in the nursery doorway while he held 6 shades of blue against the wall.

“Not too sweet,” I had said.

“Clouds are sweet by nature,” he had answered.

“Then make them dishonest clouds.”

He had laughed and kissed my ring finger.

That was the day someone dated a forged signature under my name. Not weeks before. Not after the hospital. The day after he made me

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believe I was becoming his future.

I walked to the dead printer and threw up into the trash can beside it. There was very little in my stomach-water, cracker, bile.

Isolde held my hair back with one hand and her phone with the other, already calling someone.

“Yes,” she said into the phone. “We need emergency counsel and a handwriting expert. Pregnant client, coercive parentage issue, forged IP addendum, false spouse access attempt, bank restriction, apartment lockout. No, not tomorrow. Today.”

Her voice blurred at the edges. I rinsed my mouth with bottled water and sat on the floor because the chair suddenly seemed too far away.

The cheap phone buzzed on the table. Isolde looked. “Courier confirmation.”

I wiped my mouth. “The ring?”

“Delivered to Dario Armitage personally at 2:17.”

The old phone inside the silver pouch began ringing 6 seconds later. Then the cheap phone. Then Isolde’s.

Three devices. One man discovering an ultrasound copy, a returned ring, and a sentence in my handwriting while a forged signature sat ope in front of me dated to the morning after he proposed.

Isolde let all 3 ring. The sound filled the storage room until it became almost funny. Almost.

On the cheap phone, a new text appeared from an unknown number. Dario had stopped using his own.

You do not understand what you are holding.

I looked at the forged signature. Then at Noa’s name written in the center of the brown paper. For the first time all day, my hands did not shake at all.

“No,” I said. “I think I do.”

End of chapter-

Dei Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 13

RITA

Chapter 13 – The Last Appointment

“You are going to walk into St. Orla like you still believe doors mean the same thing for everyone.”

Isolde said it while fastening the last button of my coat. Not because I could not button my own coat – because my fingers had gone stiff around the folded appointment card, and neither of us had time to pretend that pride was useful.

The card had been in my wallet for 3 weeks.

Prenatal Records Review / Routine Follow-Up

3:40 PM. St. Orla Women's Center.

Dario knew about the appointment because Dario had once known everything that looked harmless. He had put reminders in his calendar, arranged cars, approved doctors, warmed rooms, bought crackers, touched the back of my neck in elevators, and made every small kindness a handle.

Now the appointment was not care. It was cover.

"I go in," I said. "I check in at the desk. I ask for paper copies. I go to records. I do not sit in an exam room."

"Good."

"If anyone says Dr. Merrow is coordinating?"

"You say St. Orla added a privacy flag and you are revoking all outside coordination pending counsel."

"That sounds like I have counsel."

"You have me saying the word until we make it true."

She straightened my collar. The storage room mirror was a square of cheap glass taped to the inside of the supply cabinet. It made me look paler than I was, or maybe I was that pale. My hair was pinned too tight. The coat hid almost nothing. At 29 weeks, my daughter had become a fact no fabric could soften.

I set one hand under my stomach and waited for the pressure low in my pelvis to settle.

"No running," Isolde said.

"I know."

"No stairs unless fire is involved."

"I know."

"No heroic speeches."

"I have never given a heroic speech in my life."

“You once told a contractor his concept of acoustic privacy was decorative fraud.”

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EIKA

“That was professional feedback.”

“It was poetry.”

For 2 seconds, we almost smiled.

Then the cheap phone buzzed on the folding table. Unknown number.

Last chance to keep this inside the family.

I looked at the message until the words became furniture. Inside the family. As it I had not been the room he hid the family from.

Isolde photographed the screen with her phone. “Do you want to answer?”

“No.” The word came easily. That was new.

We left the office through the service entrance because the front door faced a camera for the law firm across the street. Isolde drove me 4 blocks from St. Orla and stopped beside a florist van whose back doors were propped open around buckets of white lilies.

The smell hit me before the cold did. Lilies and disinfectant.

My body remembered the donor hallway before my mind could arrange the day into order. Dario’s hand on my elbow. Celine’s silk. Nico’s smal face. The word work, spoken over me like a sheet.

The baby shifted hard.

“Breathe,” Isolde said.

“I am.”

“No, you are holding air like it owes you rent.”

I let it out slowly. The hospital awning was visible at the corner. Black cars nosed up to the curb and slid away. Women entered with folders, partners, mothers, nannies, coffee cups, flowers. The building accepted all of them with the same clean light.

That was what expensive places did best. They made admission look like kindness.

“Maia’s cousin is on records reception until 4:00,” Isolde said. “Her name is Rina. She knows only that you need paper copies and a staff-side corridor after.”

“Maia should not be involved.”

“Maia chose to send a name. That is all. We are not making her a martyr.”

“And you?”

“I am making myself a nuisance.”

She handed me a slim envelope. Inside were 2 printed screenshots: Dario’s denied access request and Celine’s Maternal Guardian request. I had looked at them so many times the words no longer felt real.

Then I saw the third page – a copy of the courier confirmation. Delivered personally to Dario Armitage at 2:17.

The ring was not mine to leave behind today. I had already sent it back. Still, the confirmation carried the same weight in my palm that the ring once had — a small hard circle of proof.

“If Dario gets to the desk,” Isolde said, “he will ask where you went. He will use concern. He may use father. He may say you are under stress.”

AQ

L

Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em hapter 13

“I am under stress.”

“Then let him be right about something useless.”

I folded the courier page into my coat pocket.

At 3:31, I crossed the street. No one stopped me at the lobby.

That felt wrong. I had expected some visible resistance – a guard who knew Dario’s face, a receptionist whose eyes sharpened at my name, a polite hand extended over a clipboard.

Instead, the automatic doors opened. The lobby swallowed me.

St. Orla's main floor smelled warmer than the donor corridor had, all polished wood and faint citrus over disinfectant. The donor signage from that day was gone, replaced by a soft cream banner about infant sleep safety sponsored by the Armitage Foundation.

Of course it was. Their name could hang over a hospital wall even while I was trying to keep it off my child.

I did not stop. The prenatal reception desk sat behind frosted glass on level 3. A woman with silver glasses looked up when I gave my name

"Aveline Ashby, 3:40 records review."

Her fingers paused over the keyboard for half a beat. Not enough for anyone else to see. Enough.

There were 2 other women in the waiting area. One sat with her shoes off, ankles swollen over the straps, while a man beside her scrolled through his phone and held her purse without looking embarrassed. The other was reading a discharge packet with a highlighter, her lips moving around words I could not hear.

Normal lives. Not painless, not simple-just normal enough that the sight scraped.

I had once been the woman who brought a folder to appointments because I liked being prepared, not because a man might turn lack of paper into lack of fitness. I had once been annoyed by parking validation and long waits and Dario answering calls during check-in. Now every ordinary inconvenience looked luxurious.

"Ms. Ashby," she said, "I have a note to verify contact preferences."

"Paper communication only today. No care partners. No outside coordination. No release to Armitage, Vey, or associated clinic staff."

There. The words did not kill me. They lay between us, plain and usable.

The receptionist's gaze flicked to my stomach, then back to my face. "I understand. Do you have identification?"

I gave it to her. She copied it, printed 3 pages, and slid them toward me. "Sign here to confirm revocation of access pending your written update."

The pen was chained to the counter. I laughed once under my breath. The receptionist did not ask why.

My hand was steady when I signed. Aveline Ashby. The y dropped exactly where it should.

"Records is down the hall to your left," she said. "Rina will meet you."

The hallway seemed longer than it had 3 weeks ago. Pregnancy made distances dishonest. A corridor that would once have taken 30 seconds became a series of negotiations with breath, bladder, balance, and the sharp little tug low in my abdomen when I moved too quickly.

I kept one hand on the wall rail. Not because I was weak – because falling would help Dario.

Rina was younger than I expected, with a neat braid and a cardigan the color of pencil lead. She opened the records office door before I

Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

RIKA knocked.

“Ms. Ashby?”

“Yes.”

“I have your copies.”

She said it as if we were discussing parking validation. Beautiful woman.

Inside the office, she handed me a thick manila envelope and a smaller sealed packet. “Full printable chart through this afternoon. Access log. Contact-preference update. Revocation form. The sealed packet is duplicate proof of identity and time of request.”

“Thank you.”

“There is a note on your file.”

My fingers tightened around the envelope. “What kind of note?”

“Administrative escalation. It says any transfer requests should be reviewed by hospital counsel.”

“Because of me?”

Rina looked at the closed door. “Because of the names trying to reach you.”

That was as much as she would say. It was enough.

The cheap phone vibrated once in my pocket. I did not look. Rina did. Not at the phone. At me

“There is a staff corridor past imaging,” she said. “It comes out by linen service. Slower than the public elevators, but quieter.”

“I was told no stairs.”

“No stairs. Ramps and one service lift.”

I swallowed. “Did Maia ask you to do this?”

“Maia asked me to treat a patient like a patient.”

For one dangerous second, kindness nearly undid me.

I put the envelopes under my arm. “Then please thank her without saying my name.”

Rina opened the back door. The staff corridor was beige, narrow, and undecorated. No donor plaques. No family names. No photographs of smiling boards. Just carts, floor tape, hand-sanitizer stations, a linen hamper with one broken wheel.

It was the safest hallway I had seen in the building.

Halfway through, my phone vibrated again. Then again. I leaned against the wall and checked because not knowing had become its own form of noise.

3 missed calls. Unknown. 1 text.

I am at St. Orla. Do not make me find you this way.

For a moment, the corridor lost its edges. He was here. Not almost. Not theoretically. Here – inside the building where his name sat on banners and plaques, close enough to turn concern into performance.

AQ

L

Par Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

DEA

The baby kicked once, hard enough to make me gasp.

Rina had stopped ahead of me. “Do you need to sit?”

“No.” My voice sounded flat and usable. “I need to leave.”

We moved slower than terror wanted. That was the discipline – no running, no heroic speeches, no giving Dario a fall, a stumble, a scene; a reason to put his hand on my elbow and call it care.

At 3:52, Rina opened a gray metal door beside linen service. Cold air hit my face. Isolde's car waited at the curb with the passenger door already unlocked.

I did not look back until I was inside and the seat belt was low under my stomach.

Through the service-lane glass, I could see the far end of the public lobby. Dario reached the prenatal reception desk at 4:02. Ten minutes after I was gone.

He looked composed. He always did, at first.

Then the receptionist shook her head. Dario's hand closed around the edge of the counter.

Isolde pulled into traffic. My phone lit in my lap before the hospital disappeared behind us.

You just made this legal.

– End of chapter

Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

The wife isn't me

Chapter 14

"Do not look at the hospital."

Isolde said it too late. I was already watching St. Orla fall behind us in the side mirror, a clean white building with clean white fies and Dan somewhere inside it asking strangers to translate my absence back into his authority.

The mirror made the hospital smaller every second. It did not make me safe. That was the first thing escape taught me distance was not safety. It was only distance.

The second thing was worse. Leaving did not happen once. It happened every time I did not turn back.

At the first light, when the hospital was still close enough for regret to imagine a corrected version of the afternoon. At the second, when a black sedan slid behind us for half a block and my mouth filled with metal before it turned into a parking garage. At the third, when my thumb moved toward the dead phone in my pocket because some ruined

part of me still expected Dario to explain the world into order if I gave him enough silence to work with.

I kept my hand where it was. Over the baby. Not the phone.

My body did not understand the difference. It took the turn out of the hospital district as permission to begin shaking- not dramatically, not the kind of shaking anyone would call hysteria in a letter. A small, private tremor started in my thighs and moved into my hands, then settled under my ribs where the baby pressed against me as if she disliked the road.

I put both palms over her. “I know,” I whispered.

Isolde glanced over. “Contraction?”

“No. Just movement.”

“Pain?”

“Pressure.”

“Scale?”

“Three.”

“If it becomes 5, you tell me.”

“You have become very bossy for someone with no medical degree.”

“I have a degree in not letting rich men write the first paragraph.”

That landed where comfort could not.

I looked down at the envelopes from St. Orla. They sat between my feet in a reusable grocery bag under a bunch of kale Isolde had bought for concealment and then forgotten to remove.

My medical records. My access log. My revocation form. My proof that I had walked into care and out of a trap without running.

The courier confirmation was still in my coat pocket. The ring had reached Dario at 2:17. The appointment had emptied at 3:52. By 4:02, he

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had arrived where he expected me to be and found only a desk that could no longer speak freely to him.

For once, his timing had not become my cage. For once, a door had closed because I chose it.

I wanted that to feel like victory. Instead, I wanted to vomit.

“Bag,” I said.

Isolde passed me one without slowing. She had packed 4 into the passenger door. I gagged twice and brought up nothing but acid and fear.

“Water,” she said.

I rinsed my mouth, spat into the bag, and tied it shut with a competence that felt insulting. Pregnancy had made humiliation practical. There was always another container.

The city changed by degrees. Hospital glass became office towers. Office towers became older brick. The sidewalks widened. The stores ost their marble thresholds. People carried laundry bags, school backpacks, cheap umbrellas, paper cups with lids that did not fit.

I watched every block like Dario might own it if I failed to read the signs correctly.

“Where are we going?”

“First stop, transfer point.”

“That is not a place.”

“It is today.”

“You are enjoying that answer too much.”

“A little.”

The transfer point was the rear lot of a shuttered community theater with peeling posters in the windows and a marquee missing 3 letters. A woman in a navy parka waited beside a gray sedan.

Not a black car. Not polished. Not expensive. One rear door had a dent. The right brake light had been replaced with plastic that did not quite match.

I loved it immediately.

“That is Sera,” Isolde said. “She owes me nothing, which makes her useful. She thinks you are a cousin leaving a bad landlord.”

“I am a cousin leaving a bad landlord.”

“Exactly. Truth, but cheaper.”

Getting out of the car took longer than dignity preferred. I had to turn sideways, grip the door frame, and let Isolde take the records bag before

I could stand. My lower back burned. My feet had swollen enough that my shoes felt newly personal.

Sera did not rush me. She did not say careful. She opened the back door of the gray sedan and stepped away.

That was when I nearly cried. Not because of generosity – because no one touched my elbow. No one guided my back. No one placed a hand at the smallest vulnerable point of me and called it protection.

The open door waited. I chose it.

Inside, the upholstery smelled faintly of peppermint gum and old rain. A folded blanket sat on the seat. A bottle of water rolled against my foot

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Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

Sapter la when I climbed in.

Isolde leaned through the open door. “I will follow 5 minutes behind until the bridge. After that, Sera takes you north, then west. You switch again near the rail station.”

“How many switches?”

“Enough.”

“That is not reassuring.”

“It is specific to people who are not being overheard.”

She put the grocery bag with my records on the floor and added a canvas tote. “Clothes, charger, cash, crackers, prenatal vitamins, blood pressure cuff, ugly nightgown.”

“Why ugly?”

“So no one sentimentalizes this.”

I looked at her face. She was holding herself together by force. So was I. That was friendship too.

“Isolde.”

“No speeches.”

“I was going to ask if the kale is evidence.”

Her mouth trembled once before it became a smile. “The kale is a witness.”

Then she shut the door.

Sera drove without asking questions. The city thinned. Bridges appeared and vanished. The river moved beside us for a while, pewter under a hard sky. I had crossed it with Dario once in late summer, coming back from a foundation dinner where he had introduced me to no one important and kissed the inside of my wrist in the car after, as if private tenderness could pay a public debt.

I had let it. That was the thing I kept returning to, no matter how many documents proved his cruelty-I had let the private moments pay for the public absences.

Soon, he had said. Everyone will know.

I closed my eyes. In the dark behind them, I saw the apartment kitchen. The peppermint mug. His hands around mine. The crooked nursery clouds. The brass bowl with cufflinks. The heat coming up through floors I had thought belonged to us because my body had been warmed there.

I missed it.

The admission was ugly. It did not mean I wanted him. It meant the cage had been comfortable in places.

It meant my nervous system did not care about legal analysis. It remembered warmth, routine, a man lowering the thermostat 2 degrees because I had flushed after dinner. It remembered him lifting my feet into his lap. It remembered the sound of paint tape coming off the nursery wall.

Then it remembered him standing at St. Orla’s donor hall with Celine.

Someone from work.

AO

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Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

My eyes opened.

The gray sedan passed the first sign for the city limits. My chest loosened with such sudden violence that it hurt. Air came in. Not victory Oxygen. I took another breath and felt it reach lower than my throat for the first time in days.

The baby rolled under my hands, slow and heavy. “We are leaving,” I told her.

Sera’s eyes flicked to the mirror, then away. Good. No witness to that except my daughter.

At the rail station, Sera parked near the bus bays: A man in a knit cap loaded my tote into a blue hatchback and gave me a paper cup of ginger tea without introducing himself.

“From Isolde,” he said.

The cup was too hot. I held it anyway.

The second switch took 4 minutes. No one said my full name. No one asked where Dario was. No one asked whether the baby’s father knew. That absence felt like a country.

By 6:18, the city was behind us and the first safe room was still ahead. Twilight flattened the world into warehouses, churches, closed garden centers, pharmacies with bright windows, gas stations where families stood under fluorescent light eating chips from bags.

The man in the knit cap kept the radio low. Traffic reports. Weather. A caller complaining about bridge tolls. Ordinary public irritation.

I let it cover the silence because silence made room for Dario’s voice. He had always known how to use quiet in cars – a thumb brushing the inside of my wrist, a glance instead of a sentence, a hand over mine at a red light, intimate enough to make me forget that he never let the driver know my name unless the driver already worked for him.

This driver had not asked my name. He had not asked for gratitude either.

At a red light, he opened the center console and pointed without turning. “Saltines if you need them.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. They are terrible.”

I took 2. They were terrible. I ate them anyway, slowly, because Dr. Price did not exist yet and someone still had to keep my daughter from living on adrenaline.

The records bag shifted against my ankle with every turn. I kept checking that it was there. Medical paper, access paper, courier paper – all of it heavier than clothes. If the car caught fire, I thought absurdly, I would save the bag before the tote.

Then I corrected myself. I would save the baby.

The mind could become monstrous under pressure, ranking objects as if survival were a filing system.

I pressed my hand to my stomach. “You first,” I whispered.

The driver pretended not to hear.

My cheap phone had been off since St. Orla. At 6:23, Isolde’s burner buzzed in the driver’s cup holder. The man in the knit cap did not look at

“For you,” he said.

The screen showed one forwarded message from the clean email account.

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KITA

Dario had sent it to every address he thought might reach me.

Aveline, you are 29 weeks pregnant and making frightened choices while influenced by people who do not understand the medical and legal risk. Come back before this becomes a matter of record.

No anger. Not on the surface. Concern arranged as a weapon.

I photographed it from the borrowed screen with my cheap phone before turning that phone off again. The act felt absurd and necessary Even while leaving the city, I was still making copies. Even while afraid, I was still building a version of the day that did not rely on Dario’s memory.

I read it twice.

Then the second message arrived. This one was shorter. No greeting. No softness.

You can run. The baby cannot.

–End of chapter

Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 15

Dario did not raise his voice at St. Orla because raised voices made witnesses generous.

He had learned that at 19, in a boardroom where his father broke a man without once changing volume. Anger made people remember tone, Calm made them remember their own discomfort and wonder whether they had misunderstood.

So he stood at the prenatal reception desk with both hands visible on the marble counter and asked the same question 3/different ways.

“Ms. Ashby had a 3:40 appointment.”

The receptionist folded her hands. “I cannot confirm patient movement.”

“I am the father of her child.”

“I cannot discuss a patient’s attendance or location.”

“She is 29 weeks pregnant and under considerable stress. If she left without being seen, that is a medical concern.”

“If you have an emergency concern, you may contact public emergency services.”

Public. The word was deliberate.

Dario saw the small flare of training behind her eyes. Someone had spoken to this desk. Someone had told St. Orla staff that Dario Armitage – donor, husband to a board-facing pregnant wife, father, benefactor-was now only a man asking for a patient’s information.

He smiled. The receptionist’s shoulders tightened. Good. Fear meant she understood the cost of obstructing him. It did not mean she would stop.

“Please give hospital counsel my number,” he said. “They already have it.”

“I will note your request.”

Note. Not comply.

He stepped away before the security guard by the elevators decided he had been waiting too long.

Grant met him by the donor wall. “Service exit camera caught a gray sedan at 3:52,” Grant said quietly. “Plate was partly blocked by a linen truck.”

“Partly.”

“We have 3 digits.”

“Get the rest.”

“The hospital will not release internal footage without process.”

Dario looked at him. Grant corrected himself. “I will find an exterior feed.”

“Yes.”

Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em

1/5 AQ

ELEA

Outside, the cold made the hospital doors breathe steam around him. His phone held 47 unanswered calls across 5 numbers, 12 sent messages, 3 read receipts from accounts that might not be hers, and a courier confirmation he had not stopped looking at even after he put the ring in his pocket.

The ring was in a small evidence envelope now. His lawyer had suggested that word. Evidence. As if it were an object separate from the morning he had slid it onto her finger and watched belief change her face.

The ultrasound copy had been worse – not because he had not seen the baby before. He had. On screens. In reports. Under Aveline’s hand at night when she slept curled around herself and he lay awake counting what could not be public yet.

The copy was worse because Aveline had written on the back.

She was never yours to reassign.

Never. Aveline was precise even in grief. That had been useful when she designed rooms. It was becoming inconvenient in survival.

His phone rang as he reached the car. Celine. He let it ring once more before answering.

“She left St. Orla.”

“I know,” Celine said. “My father just received a call asking whether our family office had retained medical counsel against a pregnant woman”

There it was. Not fear. Optics.

“Who called him?”

“A partner at Lorne Keat. They were doing what you told them to do, Dario. They used too many words in the wrong place.”

“She is gone.”

“Then find her without teaching half the city the shape of the problem.”

He got into the car. Grant closed the door. For a moment Dario could still smell lilies from the hospital lobby – he hated lilies. Celine liked them at public events because they looked clean in photographs.

“I am trying to prevent a medical risk,” he said.

“No,” Celine said. “You are trying to retrieve a woman who now has copies of things you told me did not exist.”

Dario looked at the ring envelope on the seat beside him. “What things?”

“Do not insult me today.”

There was noise behind her – glass, a door closing, the soft murmur of staff in the Armitage house.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“Home. Nico’s tutor is here, and your mother called twice. I told her the foundation dinner may need to be delayed because you had a medical matter.”

“That was careless.”

“It was useful. She likes medical matters. They allow concern without accountability.”

Dario closed his eyes. He could not decide whether he wanted Celine closer or farther away. That had been true for years.

“Aveline is 29 weeks pregnant,” he said. “If she is in a motel with Isolde Fane and no doctor, that is not a public-relations issue.”

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“It becomes one if she makes it one.”

“She is carrying my child.”

“She is carrying a child who needs a stable story.”

His eyes opened. “Careful.”

Celine was quiet for 2 seconds. Then, softer: “You asked me to be practical.”

“Practical is not replacing Aveline’s role before the child is born.”

“Aveline’s role is exactly the problem.”

There it was, polished and bare.

Dario had known Celine believed it. He had not wanted to hear her say it while the ring sat beside him like a returned verdict.

“No one is replacing my child,” he said.

“That is not what I said.”

“It is what you meant badly.”

“Dario.”

“The baby is not a board seat.”

“No,” Celine said. “The baby is a scandal unless we put structure around her before Aveline teaches everyone to say abduction.”

He hated that she was right enough to be dangerous. He also hated the her. Not the child. The baby had been the child for weeks when he spoke to Aveline. At night, when Aveline’s breathing slowed and the apartment held its warm mechanical silence, he could place his palm where movement gathered and feel something in him go still.

He had not told Celine that. There were truths a marriage could not use well.

“Send me what the lawyers have,” he said.

“They need one clean declaration from you before they file.”

“They have it.”

“No. They have concern. They need chronology.”

“Chronology gives Aveline too much.”

“Then give them fear. A missed appointment. A staff exit. A friend with no medical authority. A bank account she may claim was restricted, so explain it as fraud prevention. The apartment access as wellness hold. The clinic as prenatal support. Use the words before she does.”

Dario looked through the tinted window at St. Orla. Use the words before she does. That was Celine at her most useful – and her most revealing.

“We also have an issue with Bellamy,” she said.

He sat straighter. “Bennett?”

“His company. Bellamy Ventures funds one of the maternal legal clinics Lorne Keat flagged during intake mapping. Isolde Fane has a friend

L

Pai Encontrado no Aeroporto O anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em who once volunteered there.”

“Aveline does not know Bennett Bellamy.”

“You said she did not know my name either.”

The line went quiet after that because Celine had not raised her voice. She never needed to when the blade was clean.

Dario watched a woman leave St. Orla with one hand braced against her lower back and a man beside her carrying a pink gift bag. The man looked bored. Human, then. Bored by a miracle because no one had yet tried to take it from him.

He thought of Aveline at appointments. She had asked the technician whether the machine settings affected measurement accuracy. She had corrected a date on a form without apology. She had cried only once, quietly, when the first clean profile appeared and the baby lifted one hand as if shading her face from light.

Dario had missed that appointment. Not because he had to-because Celine’s donor rehearsal would have looked worse without him, and he had believed there would be

another scan, another chance, another private hour where Aveline would forgive the public absence because é came home contrite and useful.

He had built his life on later. Now later was leaving through service corridors.

“Why am I hearing this from you?”

“Because Mathias hears the name Bellamy faster than your security men hear anything that does not wear a uniform.”

“Send it.”

“Already did.”

The file arrived while she was speaking.

MATERNAL LEGAL AID STABILITY CLINICS – FUNDING MAP

Bellamy Ventures appeared on page 2 as a funder through a community access grant. Not Bennett directly. Of course not. Bennett had never liked leaving fingerprints where a structure could do the touching for him.

Dario knew him from rooms where men smiled over acquisitions and pretended patience was morality. Bennett Bellamy had a talent for saying little until the room turned toward him- it made people call him principled. Dario had always thought it was merely another appetite dressed in better manners.

Still. The name irritated him. Not because Aveline knew Bennett- she did not. Because Aveline might reach a door Dario did not own.

The thought was intolerably small. Not strategic. Not dynastic. Small in the way jealousy was small, and therefore beneath him. He rejected it at once and found it still there.

Aveline in a plastic chair under a Bellamy-funded sign. Aveline listening to some underpaid lawyer tell her she had choices. Aveline believing a stranger’s structure because Dario’s structure had finally shown its teeth.

He had not meant to make her afraid of all help. Only of leaving his.

“Do not make this about Bellamy publicly,” Celine said.

“I am not stupid.”

“No. You are attached.”

His hand tightened around the phone. “This is not the hour.”

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“It is exactly the hour. If you wanted Aveline pliable, you should not have let her believe you loved her.”

Dario said nothing. Celine’s breath moved softly against the line. For once, she did not apologize.

“Find her,” she said. “But remember what we are saving.”

The call ended.

Dario opened the security file and scrolled past the clinic addresses, funder names, volunteer notes, access protocols. Too many doors. Too many soft places for a frightened pregnant woman to become a client instead of a problem.

Grant slid into the front seat. “Exterior feed caught the sedan crossing west. We have the full plate.”

“Owner?”

“Registered to a community theater board member. No direct link to Fane.”

“There is always a link.”

“I am looking.”

Dario stared at the Bellamy Ventures line until the words blurred.

Then his lawyer called. “We can file tonight,” the lawyer said. “Emergency care and location disclosure. It will not give us everything, but it creates pressure.”

“File.”

“We should be careful with the requested remedy.”

“I said file.”

“Mr. Armitage, if Ms. Ashby has counsel already, an aggressive request may look punitive.”

Dario looked at the returned ring. Fourteen weeks on her hand. Then an envelope.

“Then make it sound protective.”

The lawyer paused. “Understood.”

“And send notice to every maternal legal clinic on that funding map. Professional courtesy. Conflict inquiry. Whatever phrase makes them answer the phone.”

“That may alert her.”

Dario closed the file. “She already knows I am coming.”

End of chapter

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Aeroporto o anel que ele busca está com ela. Os filhos unem o casal em