The wife isn't me

Chapter 16

“No one here needs you to prove you are frightened enough.”

The woman at the maternal legal clinic said it before I had taken off my coat. It was such a strange sentence that I stood in the doorway holding my records bag and did not know where to put my face.

The clinic did not look like rescue. That helped.

It occupied the second floor above a closed pharmacy and a dentist who advertised emergency crowns in 4 languages. The waiting room had plastic chairs, a water cooler, a basket of granola bars, and a corner shelf of board books with chewed edges. The carpet had seen too many winters. The blinds were bent. Someone had taped a handwritten sign over the buzzer:

If you are early, wait inside. If you are late, come in anyway.

No marble. No donor lilies. No family name carved into a wall.

I still checked. That was what Dario had changed in me—every room became a question of who paid for it.

The woman noticed my eyes moving. “There is a funder list by the desk,” she said. “You can read it before you sign anything.”

I looked at her then. She was in her 40s, with dark hair cut blunt at her chin and reading glasses hanging from a cord. Her badge said Mara Ives, Intake Counsel.

Not attorney yet. Counsel. A precise distinction, maybe. Or a kinder one.

“I wasn’t trying to be rude,” I said.

“You were trying not to be trapped.”

Isolde stepped in behind me. “We like her.”

“You like anyone who starts with the useful part,” I said.

“Correct.”

Mara pointed to a chair near the wall, not the one nearest her desk. It had space beside it for my bag and a clear path back to the door.

“Sit wherever your body will tolerate. Bathroom is through the blue door. Water is real. Granola bars are stale but not legally binding.”

I laughed once. It startled me. The baby responded with a slow roll under my ribs, as if laughter had made the room suspicious.

I sat carefully.

“Before intake,” Mara said, “I need to say 3 things. First, we do not contact the other party without your consent unless required by a court order. Second, filling out this form does not obligate you to use us. Third, if we cannot represent you because of a conflict, we still give you emergency referrals before you leave.”

“What kind of conflict?”

“We check whether any attorney here, any supervising clinic, or any funder-connected legal project has represented the opposing party in a

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

Opposing party. The phrase was clean and terrible.

Dano had become a party. Not my fiance. Not the man who painted clouds. Not the father with his hand against my stomach in the dark. A. party.

I put the records bag beside my feet. “His name is Dario Armitage.”

Mara’s pen stopped. Only for a second. Enough.

“Thank you,” she said. “Any other adverse names?”

“Celine Armitage. Mathias Vey. Armitage Group. Armitage Foundation. St. Orla Women’s Center may not be adverse yet but they are involved. Dr. Merrow’s private clinic. I don’t know the entity name.”

Isolde handed over a paper. “We made a list.”

Mara took it without comment. That was another kindness – not praising us for evidence like we were children, not flinching from the names like they were weather. Just taking the list.

The intake form was 9 pages.

Name. Address.

I had no address I could write without making it dangerous.

Mara saw my pen stop. “Use the clinic mailing hold for now. We will discuss stable-address strategy separately.”

Stable-address strategy. A phrase ugly enough to be useful.

Pregnancy. 29 weeks. Current doctor.

I wrote transitioning care.

Emergency contact. I wrote Isolde’s name.

Father of child.

My pen hovered for so long that ink gathered into a dark dot.

Dario Armitage.

Legal relationship to father.

None.

I stared at the word. None. Fourteen weeks with a ring. Months in his apartment. The nursery clouds. The texts, the doctor’s appointments, his hand warm at the base of my spine, his voice saying soon in every room where soon could not be checked by anyone but me.

None.

The law could be brutally honest when it was not being used against me.

“Take your time,” Mara said.

“I don’t want time. I want the form to be less accurate.”

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She gave the smallest nod. “It often refuses.”

I kept writing. Questions followed.

Has anyone restricted your access to funds?

Has anyone changed locks, access codes, or transportation arrangements?

Has anyone contacted medical providers claiming authority?

Has anyone presented documents involving custody, guardianship, Intended parentage, adoption, confidentiality, or medical authorization?

Each box waited without drama. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

By page 5, my hand ached. By page 6, the baby had hiccups-small rhythmic taps low in my abdomen. Ordinary. Absurd. My daughter making a private metronome under legal language.

I rested the pen and breathed with her for a moment. Isolde watched the hallway. Mara watched me.

“No one is going to take the papers away because you pause,” she said.

I looked up. “You say that like it happens.”

“People come here after systems have trained them to perform cooperation without blinking.”

“Do I look like that?”

“You look like someone who has been punished for needing a minute.”

I did not answer. The baby hiccuped again.

The funder list was taped beside the desk in a clear plastic sleeve. I had avoided it as long as I could. Now the names dragged my attention there.

Local family foundation. Women’s bar association. Municipal access grant. Bellamy Ventures Community Health Fund.

My body went cold in a way no coat could fix.

Under the list, someone had taped a second sheet in smaller type.

Funders do not receive client names, case details, medical information, appointment schedules, or legal strategy.

I read it once. Then again. Then a third time because the sentence was doing work my nervous system refused to trust.

No client names. No case details. No appointment schedules.

The words were not beautiful. They were better than beautiful – they were boundaries.

“Isolde.”

She followed my gaze. “I know.”

“You knew?”

“I knew before we came. I also knew this clinic has the fastest emergency filings and no Armitage board member on its host list.”

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Bellamy Ventures. Another rich man’s name on a door I needed. Not carved in marble. Not written in gold. Printed on copy paper and tape crookedly under a fluorescent light.

Still.

The old instinct rose fast. Who paid? What did he get? Which kindness would arrive later with an invoice I had been too frightened to read?

Mara waited. She had the patience of someone who knew silence could be an answer if no one tried to own it.

“Does Bennett Bellamy have access to client names?” I asked.

“No.”

“Does anyone at Bellamy Ventures choose cases?”

“No.”

“Can he learn I was here?”

“Not from us. The fund is restricted to operations, translation, emergency transport, and filing fees. It does not buy information.”

“Dario knows the name.”

“Dario knows many names. Knowing a funder is not knowing you.”

I wanted to believe that. Belief had become expensive.

“I don’t know Bennett Bellamy,” I said.

“That may be useful,” Mara said.

“Why?”

“Because if our conflict check clears, the source of filing support is not a relationship you are using. It is a public program you qualify for.”

Public. For once, public did not sound like erasure. It sounded like a door Dario could not close simply because he had never opened it.

I signed the intake form. Not all the authorizations. Not representation. Just permission for conflict check, emergency referral, and secure contact through the clinic hold.

Mara turned the pages toward me one at a time before she took them,

“This one lets us run names against our system.”

“This one lets us store copies of documents you choose to give us.”

“This one lets us call Dr. Price’s clinic if you decide to go there.”

“This one is optional. It allows emergency filing counsel to speak to the court clerk tonight if we clear conflicts. You can refuse it now and sign later.”

I looked at the last form. The signature line waited with the same bland patience as every other line that had ever changed my life.

“If I sign it, can Dario say I am escalating?”

“Dario can say anything. The better question is what the paper actually does.”

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“What does it actually do?”

“It lets someone put your version into the system before his version is the only one there.”

The baby shifted under the table, a slow pressure against the underside of my ribs.

Before his version.

I signed. This y also dropped exactly where it belonged.

Mara took the pages and scanned them while I drank water from a paper cone and ate half a stale granola bar because the baby had decided fear was not nutrition.

The scanner made a thin green line under each page. I watched it pass over my name again and again. For once, a machine taking my information did not feel like theft-it felt like making a duplicate before someone else could make me disappear.

At 7:12, the front buzzer sounded.

Everyone in the waiting room went still-not because buzzers were rare, because fear taught strangers to recognize each other quickly.

The receptionist answered through the intercom. “Clinic is closed for walk-ins.”

A man’s voice came through, faint and distorted. “Professional delivery for Ms. Ashby.”

My name did not belong in that speaker.

Mara stepped out of her office and pointed at Isolde. “Back room.”

Isolde was already moving. I gathered the records bag too fast and the room tilted. Mara caught the bag, not my arm.

“Slow,” she said.

I moved slow. The back room was small, with a copier, a locked file cabinet, and a window that faced an alley full of trash bins. Isolde shut the door but did not lock it.

“Could be nothing,” she whispered.

“It has my name.”

“I know.”

Through the wall, Mara’s voice stayed even. “We do not accept deliveries for clients.”

The intercom crackled. “Then please confirm whether counsel for Mr. Armitage should direct emergency notice here.”

There was a pause. Not fear. Recording. Mara was recording.

“We cannot confirm client status,” she said.

I pressed one hand under my stomach and the other over my mouth. The room smelled like toner and old coffee. The baby hiccuped once more, stubbornly ordinary.

Mara came back 4 minutes later with the intake form in a folder and her expression sharpened.

“The conflict check on Dario Armitage has started,” she said. “And now it is urgent.”

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Chapter 17

“You can say no to any part of this exam.”

The doctor said it while washing her hands. Not while looking at me. Not with the bright, practiced sympathy that made refusal feel like bad. manners. She said it to the sink, to the soap, to the paper towel dispenser, as if consent were not a special favor but part of the room’s plumbing.

I sat on the edge of the exam table with my coat folded under my hip because the vinyl was cold through the paper sheet. The clinic room was small and badly painted. One wall had a faded poster of fetal development that stopped at 40 weeks. The cabinet handles did not match. The ultrasound machine looked older than St. Orla’s waiting-room chairs.

It was the first medical room in days that had not seemed designed to photograph well.

The doctor’s badge read Dr. Leona Price. No Armitage crest. No foundation plaque. No lilies.

I had checked the lobby, the hallway, the website on Isolde’s phone, the footer of the intake packet, and the billing sheet Mara gave me before we came. No Armitage. No Vey. No St. Orla partnership. No Dr. Merrow.

“I need you to say that again,” I said.

Dr. Price turned off the water and faced me. “You can decline any part of the exam. Blood pressure, urine screen, fetal heart check, abdominal measurement, records request. I will explain what each one is for before I do it. If you say stop, I stop.”

“What happens if I say no?”

“I document that you declined that portion today and what I recommended. I do not call the father of the baby. I do not call a private clinic. I do not write adjectives about your character because you asked questions.”

My eyes burned. I hated that- tears made people generous or suspicious, and I no longer trusted either response.

Dr. Price opened a drawer and took out a cuff. “May I check your blood pressure?”

“Yes.”

She wrapped the cuff around my arm without touching more of me than necessary. “Feet flat if you can. Back supported if it helps. Breathe normally, not impressively.”

“Do people breathe impressively?”

“Pregnant women in crisis often try to pass exams like someone is grading citizenship.”

I looked at Isolde. She was sitting in the visitor chair by the door, arms folded, expression blank in the way that meant she was storing the sentence for later use.

“Do not look vindicated,” I told her.

“I would never.”

Dr. Price glanced between us and smiled with one corner of her mouth.

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The cuff tightened. I watched the numbers climb, then settle. 128 over 76.

“Acceptable,” she said.

“Not high?”

“Not high. Higher than a sleeping cat, lower than panic wants. We will check again before you leave.”

The fetal heart monitor came next..Dr. Price warmed the gel packet in her hands first. Small thing. Ridiculous thing.

St. Orla had gel warmers built into the wall. Dario had once joked that the baby expected better amenities than most executives. This doctor had no warmer, so she held the packet between her palms for 20 seconds and asked permission before lifting my sweater.

The gel was still cool. I did not mind.

The heartbeat found us after a few slow passes. Fast. Wet. Fierce. A sound like a tiny engine refusing negotiation.

I had heard it before in better rooms. At St. Orla, the sound had come through speakers hidden in a machine that cost more than Isolde's cal Dario had not been there that morning. He had texted 3 minutes after the appointment ended, asking for a picture, a time, a promise that I was not upset.

I had sent him the profile. I had written, She moved the whole time. He had answered, of course she did. She knows I am late.

At the time, I had laughed in the waiting room with tears drying under my eyes.

Now the same rhythm filled a worse room and felt more honest. No joke from him. No delayed tenderness. No private line trying to patch a public absence.

My breath broke. Isolde looked away toward the supply cabinet. Dr. Price kept the probe steady.

"There she is."

Not it. Not fetus. Not the pregnancy. She.

The sound filled the room and left no space for Dario's paperwork. For 30 seconds, my daughter existed outside the argument.

Then Dr. Price turned the volume down and wiped the gel away.

"Movement?"

"Yes. A lot when I am frightened. Hiccups earlier."

"Bleeding?"

"No."

"Fluid leakage?"

“No.”

“Contractions?”

“Tightness sometimes. Not regular. Mostly pressure.”

“Pain scale?”

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“Three, sometimes 4 in my back.”

“Eating?”

I thought of crackers, stale granola, ginger tea, acid. “Enough to keep people from scolding me.”

Dr. Price wrote that down. “That is not a food group.”

“I suspected.”

“We will get you a meal after this. Protein, salt, something that does not come in fear flavor.”

There it was. Respectful care did not sound like softness all the time. Sometimes it sounded like a woman looking at your chart and saying the body still needed lunch even while the world burned.

The exam remained ordinary after that. Abdominal measurement. Urine cup. Reflexes. Questions about swelling, headaches, vision changes, sleep.

The urine cup was humiliating in the specifically pregnant way of trying to aim around a stomach I could no longer see past. The bathroom lock stuck. The paper towel dispenser gave me half a sheet and then refused to acknowledge need.

I almost laughed – not because it was funny, because this was the kind of indignity no billionaire could polish into strategy. No donor plaque could make a sample cup elegant. No lawyer could turn swollen fingers and bad aim into a maternal environment assignment.

When I came out, Dr. Price took the cup with no ceremony and labeled it in front of me. “Name and date of birth correct?”

“Yes.”

“I label in front of patients when things are tense. No mystery specimens, no mystery charting.”

“Is that standard?”

“It should be.”

There was that word again. Should. A small bridge between the world as designed and the world as survived.

No one used my answers as a trap. When I said my feet were swollen, Dr. Price asked when it worsened and whether I had shoes that fit. When I said sleep was bad, she asked whether it was pain, fear, urination, or all 3. When I said Dario had restricted a household account, she did not write unstable.

She wrote reported financial control.

Words mattered. They could be cages. They could also be tools.

At the desk after the exam, Dr. Price printed a visit summary before I asked for it.

“You need copies of everything,” she said. “One for you. One for legal. One sealed in case your bag disappears.”

I took the pages. “You believe me?”

She capped her pen. “I believe documentation. I believe patterns. I believe you are 29 weeks pregnant and need care that does not depend on pleasing the man creating the emergency.”

That was not the same as comfort. It was better.

“I need your prior records,” she continued. “Labs, ultrasound measurements, blood type, glucose screen, any imaging notes. You brought some from St. Orla, but I want a direct medical transfer too.”

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My stomach tightened. “Will that alert them?”

“It should go through records. Not donor relations, not a spouse portal, not a private clinic. We will request only what is medically necessary.”

“Should.”

“Yes,” she said. “Should is not a guarantee. That is why I am asking, not assuming.”

I looked at Isolde. She had her phone out already, thumb hovering over Mara’s contact.

“Do we need Mara?”

“Loop her,” I said.

The sentence surprised me. I had not asked Dario. I had not asked whether this would anger him. I had asked my lawyer. Almost lawyer. Emergency intake counsel.

Still. The chain of permission had shifted.

Mara answered on speaker from the legal clinic back office. Dr. Price introduced herself, gave her license number, clinic address, and the narrow records request she wanted to send. Mara asked 6 questions, all practical.

Would the request reveal Aveline’s current address? No.

Would St. Orla receive the independent clinic’s direct phone line? Yes.

Could they use a general medical records fax instead? Yes.

Could the request state no third-party contact? Yes.

Could the request be marked patient-authorized and include Aveline’s revocation of outside access? Yes.

Could Dr. Price document any refusal? “With enthusiasm,” Dr. Price said.

Mara was silent for half a second. “Good. Send it.”

The fax machine was behind the nurses’ station. I watched the pages feed through because trust had become something I did with my eyes open.

At 8:09, the confirmation sheet printed.

At 8:17, the clinic phone rang.

The nurse answered. “Westport Community Women’s Health.”

Pause.

“Medical records.”

Pause.

Her expression changed. She looked at Dr. Price. Dr. Price took the phone. “This is Dr. Price.”

She listened without interrupting. The room seemed to narrow around the cord.

“Please put that in writing,” she said.

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Another pause.

“No, I am not requesting social information. I am requesting prenatal records for continuity of care, patient-authorized, with a signed revocation of outside access attached.”

The nurse at the desk stopped pretending not to listen. Isolde stood. I stayed seated because standing too fast had already taught me one lesson today.

Dr. Price’s voice cooled. “Therr send the restriction notice in writing.”

She hung up.

“What happened?” I asked.

“St. Orla will not release direct transfer records tonight.”

“Why?”

Dr. Price held my gaze. “They say the file is under administrative restriction pending review.”

“Because of Dario?”

“They did not say.”

The fax machine rang 3 minutes later. One page came through. Dr. Price read it first. Then Mara, still on speaker, said, “Read it aloud.”

Dr. Price did. The notice was short.

Patient file temporarily restricted following donor-event incident and subsequent access dispute. Records release requires hospital counsel review.

Donor-event incident. Not patient request. Not privacy flag. Not outside party misrepresentation. Donor-event incident.

The first public erasure had become the reason to restrict the private record.

I looked at the page in Dr. Price's hand. The room stayed ordinary around me – ugly paint, mismatched cabinets, no crest. My daughter's heartbeat still printed in a jagged line on the visit summary beside my thigh.

"After the donor event," I said.

My voice did not shake. That was almost worse.

Dr. Price set the restriction notice on the copier. "We make 3 copies," she said. "Then your lawyer files before they rewrite the reason."

Isolde took the first warm copy from the tray and held it by the edges. "This is ugly," she said.

"Good," Dr. Price answered. "Ugly paper is often useful paper."

I looked at the black text again. Donor-event incident. They had named the place where Dario erased me, but not the erasure.

That omission was almost helpful. It left a clean space for us to fill.

End of chapter

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 18

"The lock is ugly."

The housing coordinator said it like an apology. I looked at the chain bolted crookedly above the deadbolt, at the little brass slide that had beery installed by someone with more urgency than skill, and felt my throat close around the first warm thing in days.

"It locks from this side?"

“Yes.”

“Only this side?”

“Only this side.”

“Then it is beautiful.”

The coordinator’s name was Nina. She had met us behind the legal clinic with a clipboard, 2 keys, and the expression of a woman who knew better than to ask a pregnant stranger whether she was excited about temporary housing.

The room was on the third floor of a converted convent beside a church that rented half its building to community programs and the other half to people who needed doors quickly. The hallway smelled like cabbage, floor cleaner, and old radiators. Somewhere below us, children argued over a television. Somewhere above, a pipe knocked every 20 seconds with the stubborn rhythm of bad plumbing.

It was not quiet. It was not elegant. It was mine for 14 days, renewable if legal filed fast enough.

The number should have frightened me more than it did. 14 days. Dario could spend that on a business trip, a crisis, a silence after an argument. In his world, 14 days was a delay to be managed by assistants and calendar holds.

In this room, 14 days was a continent. It was enough time to see a doctor again. Enough time for Mara to put paper into the court. Enough time to learn which floorboards complained, which radiator knock meant heat, which stairwell had better light, which part of the bed let me roll to standing without using my stomach like a hinge.

That was the sentence Nina had used. Renewable if legal filed fast enough. Safety with an expiration date still counted.

I stepped inside.

The room held a narrow bed, a dresser missing one knob, a square table, 2 mismatched chairs, a lamp with a tilted shade, and a bassinet folded flat against the wall. Someone had left a stack of clean towels on the bed and a plastic crate with donated dishes under the table.

No nursery clouds. No brass bowl. No heated floors. No floor-to-ceiling window where Dario had once stood in shirtsleeves and told me the city looked less cruel from above.

The city had been equally cruel from every height.

I walked to the window. It faced the brick side of another building and a sliver of alley where a restaurant vent breathed steam into the dark. No view. Good. Views were for people who could afford to be seen.

Isolde carried in the records bag, the tote, and a grocery sack from Dr. Price's nurse that contained yogurt, soup, saltines, apples, and a sandwich wrapped in wax paper.

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"Bed first," she said.

"I want to check the lock."

"You can check it sitting down."

"That is not how locks work."

"It is how 29-week pregnant fugitives work."

"Do not call me that."

"Pregnant?"

"Fugitive."

Her face changed at once. "You're right. Sorry."

The apology came cleanly, without defense – another small proof that people could correct course without making me manage their pride.

I breathed through the sting of it. Dario apologized like a man negotiating a room back into its old shape. Isolde apologized and let the shape change around us without charging me for it.

Nina looked between us. "I can come back."

"Stay," I said. "Please show me everything."

I needed to know. The door. The window. The bathroom across the hall. The second exit. The phone in the office downstairs. The rule about visitors. The rule about deliveries.

The bed frame had 4 bolts visible at the corners. The window lock turned if I used both hands. The radiator hissed but did not leak. The closet had 3 wire hangers and a broom

with tape around the handle. Under the bed, there was dust, one lost crayon, and nothing else.

I checked. Nina saw me lower myself awkwardly to look and did not tell me I was being excessive. She only said, “I checked this morning too.”

“For what?”

“Anything left by the last resident. Anything that records. Anything sharp. Anything that should not be here.”

My stomach tightened. “Does that happen?”

“Sometimes people leave in a hurry. Sometimes people looking for them are creative. We assume a room deserves a clean start.”

A clean start. The phrase was too pretty for the chipped paint, but I kept it anyway. It was not a promise – it was a procedure.

No flowers. No packages without prior name approval. No one entered the room without my permission unless there was fire, flood, or medical emergency.

“What if someone says he is my lawyer?”

“We call the clinic line and verify.”

“What if someone says he is the father?”

Nina’s eyes did not move to my stomach. “Then he can wait outside like anyone else we did not invite.”

I wrote that down because my mind had become a sieve under stress.

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Nina gave me the keys last. 2 keys on a plain metal ring. One for the room. One for the building’s side entrance. No app. No owner dashboard No status marked Resident Guest.

Just metal. Cold, small, and mine.

I closed my fist around them and felt the teeth press into my palm.

“Do you need anything else tonight?” Nina asked.

My instinct was to say no. Need had become dangerous. But Dr. Price’s voice was still in my head-the body still needed lunch while the world burned.

“A pillow that does not smell like storage,” I said.

Nina smiled. “That I can do.”

When she left, Isolde shut the door and waited. I slid the chain into place.

The sound was small. Almost cheap.

The apartment’s smart lock had made no sound at all when Dario revoked me. It had simply obeyed a system where he was primary and I was permitted.

This chain scraped. It resisted. It announced itself. Mine.

My knees gave out after that. Not dramatically – just a soft collapse onto the edge of the bed, one hand on the keys, one under my stomach, breath coming in short pieces.

Isolde knelt in front of me without touching. “Pain?”

“No.”

“Contraction?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

I looked at the room. The ugly lamp. The folded bassinet. The lock. The bag of records on the table like a second nervous system.

“There is no part of this he chose.”

The sentence came apart in the middle.

Isolde’s face changed. Not pity. Recognition.

“No,” she said. “There is not.”

“The towels are not his. The bed is not his. The key is not his. The soup is not his.”

“The chain is definitely not his. He would have bought a quieter one.”

I laughed, and then I cried because the body often chose the worst available transition.

Isolde sat beside me and let me lean my shoulder against hers. No advice. No speech. Just the weight of another person who had not lied about the cost.

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The baby moved slowly. I put Isolde's hand near the movement without thinking, then stopped.

"May I?" she asked.

I nodded. She placed her palm where I showed her.

Noa kicked once. Isolde went very still. "Rude," she whispered.

"She has opinions."

"Excellent. Runs in the family."

For 1 minute, the room held. Not safe forever. Safe now.

I ate half the sandwich because Isolde watched me with the expression of a woman willing to become unbearable. I took the prenatal vitamin. I drank water. I let her put the blood pressure cuff on the table, not because I wanted more monitoring but because Dr. Price had made monitoring feel like information instead of surveillance.

At 9:06, Mara called the clinic phone downstairs.

Nina knocked once, said my name through the door, and waited until I unchained it. "Legal clinic on the house line," she said. "They said no emergency, but time sensitive."

No emergency. Time sensitive. The new vocabulary of my life.

I followed her down the hall slowly, one hand on the rail, Isolde behind me with the records folder. The house phone sat in a small office off the lobby. Nina closed the door but stayed outside.

Mara's voice came through tinny and controlled.

"You are on a clinic line. I am recording my notes, not the call. Isolde there?"

"Yes."

“Good. Conflict check is not complete, but we have emergency authority to assist with filings through referral counsel tonight. Dr. Price sent the St. Orla restriction notice. That changed priority.”

“Because they restricted the records after the donor event?”

“Because they put that reason in writing.”

I closed my eyes. Paper could still be a weapon. For once, it was mine.

“What are you filing?” I asked.

“Emergency petition to preserve medical privacy, restrict unauthorized access, document coercive control indicators, and establish temporary contact rules through counsel. We are also filing notice that you are under independent prenatal care and have a temporary stable address held confidentially by the clinic.”

There were too many words. My mind caught only the ones that mattered. Medical privacy. Unauthorized access. Independent care. Address held confidentially.

“Will Dario know where I am?”

“Not from the filing.”

“Will he know I filed?”

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“Yes.”

Of course. There was no version of survival where he did not learn I had stopped asking.

“Do it,” I said.

Mara exhaled softly. “I need verbal confirmation of 3 facts. You are not refusing prenatal care?”

“I am not. I saw Dr. Price tonight.”

“You did not authorize Dario Armitage or Celine Armitage to access your medical records?”

“I did not.”

“You do not consent to direct contact from Dario, Celine, their security, or their counsel outside legal channels?”

My hand tightened around the phone. Direct contact. Dario’s texts. Dario’s hand on the counter at St. Orla. Dario’s soft voice making concern out of possession.

“I do not consent.”

The words left my mouth and stayed in the room.

Mara said, “Good. Stay near the house line for 20 minutes if you can. Referral counsel may call to confirm filing language.”

“I thought you said Dario’s lawyer might call the clinic.”

“They already have.”

My eyes opened. “When?”

“Ten minutes ago. Lorne Keat asked whether emergency notice could be served through us. We refused to confirm client status.”

Isolde swore under her breath.

“What did they say?” I asked.

Mara’s pause was brief. Too brief to be indecision. She was choosing how much fear was useful.

“They said emergency papers are already filed.”

The office radiator knocked once in the wall. Then again.

Mara continued, voice steady. “So now ours are too.”

End of chapter

AQ

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

The wife isn't me

Chapter 19

“Do not sign it because you are tired.”

Mara said it before she slid the packet across the small table. That helped-not enough, but help had become something I measured in inches now. A locked door. A phone line. A doctor who labeled a urine cup in front of me. A lawyer who did not mistake exhaustion for consent.

The packet was 18 pages thick, clipped at the top with a black binder clip. The cover sheet had the maternal legal clinic's name in the left corner and, beneath it, a line that made my stomach pull tight before I had read the rest.

Emergency Representation And Support Funding Disclosure

Below that: Bellamy Ventures Community Health Fund

I sat in the converted convent's little office with one hand under my stomach and the other flat beside the packet. The radiator behind me knocked every 20 seconds, as if it had been assigned to count down my bad choices.

Isolde stood by the door because there were only 2 chairs and she had already decided my spine mattered more than hers. Nina had brought us down when the house line rang again at 9:31. She had offered tea, then left the office and shut the door without making the room feel borrowed.

Mara was not in the room. Her voice came through the phone on speaker, calm and slightly metallic.

"This is not a retainer with Bellamy Ventures," she said. "It is the clinic's disclosure because their fund pays emergency filing fees and temporary housing supplements in certain maternal safety cases. You have the right to know who pays for the paper under your feet."

"And they get what in return?" I asked.

"A quarterly report with numbers. Not names. Not addresses. Not facts. Number of matters supported, average filing cost, rough case category, broad outcomes."

"Broad outcomes."

"Filed. Referred, Closed. Extended. Things like that."

The baby shifted low and slow, a pressure against my hip that made me change my breathing.

Dario had liked broad categories too. Wife. Guest. Support. Stability. Gestational carrier. Words large enough to hide a person inside.

I pulled the packet closer but did not open it. "Why Bellamy?" I asked.

Mara did not answer quickly. I appreciated that too fast answers had begun to sound rehearsed.

“Three years ago, a Bellamy Ventures portfolio company was named in a public complaint involving a pregnant employee who lost housing when she reported domestic violence. The company denied direct liability. The optics were bad. Bennett Bellamy funded outside support programs afterward.”

“Optics,” I said.

Isolde’s mouth flattened.

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Mara said, “Yes.”

I almost laughed. There it was again – the rich man’s cleanest word for shame.

“So this is reputation repair.”

“Partly. Probably. I do not need you to admire the source. I need you to understand the boundary.”

Boundary. The word landed better than charity. Charity could be touched from above. Boundary had edges.

I opened the packet.

The first page was plain. No crest. No donor ribbon. No photograph of a smiling pregnant woman cupping a stomach under soft window light.

It listed what Bellamy Ventures could pay for: filing fees, certified copies, independent transport to court or medical appointments, temporary housing extensions, emergency document storage, and referral counsel costs when clinic counsel had conflicts.

It listed what Bellamy Ventures could not receive: client identity without written client permission, medical records, legal strategy, housing address, appointment times, contact numbers, evidence contents, or decisions about representation.

I read that list 3 times. Could not receive. Not would not. Could not.

Legal words had teeth when they wanted to.

The next page made the money smaller, which somehow made it more frightening.

Certified medical record packet: estimated $42-$96.

Emergency filing surcharge: $173.

Courier with signed chain-of-custody receipt: $38 local $85 regional.

Temporary housing extension supplement: up to $74 per night.

Dario had once spent more than $74 replacing a bottle of bath oil after I said the first one made me nauseated. He had done it with his phone in one hand and his other hand resting at the back of my neck, like care could be ordered before dinner and delivered before guilt had time to form.

Here, $74 had a job. It bought 1 more night behind an ugly chain. It bought a bed he did not own. It bought me the chance to wake up without checking whether a smart-lock dashboard had changed my status while I slept.

“If I sign this, do they know I exist?” I asked.

“The fund administrator knows a matter number exists,” Mara said. “The clinic books it under an internal code. Your name stays with us and referral counsel.”

“Who is referral counsel?”

“A small firm with family-court emergency experience. I am waiting on conflict clearance before I give you names. You will approve them before they speak for you.”

“And if I refuse the funding?”

“Then we file what we can with fee waivers and clinic reserve funds. It may slow housing renewal and certified-copy requests. It does not stop your case.”

Isolde moved from the door – not toward me, toward the wall beside me, where I could see her without feeling surrounded.

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“Av,” she said. “Read page 4.”

I did.

Page 4 was titled Client Decision Authority. I expected dense language. I got 5 short paragraphs.

Funding did not authorize the clinic, funder, referral counsel, medical provider, housing coordinator, family member, intimate partner, spouse, putative parent, donor, employer, or court liaison to make medical, legal, housing, or contact decisions for the client.

The client could decline any service. The client could revoke permission for information sharing. The client could ask for non/Bellamy alternatives. The client could terminate representation.

My eyes stopped on one line.

Support is not consent.

My throat closed so fast it hurt.

Dario had paid for the apartment. Dario had paid for the doctors. Dario had paid for the groceries, the phone plan, the black car, the nursery paint, the prenatal pillow he bought after I woke at 2:00 AM with one hand trapped under my ribs.

Every payment had grown a string after I touched it. Some strings were silk. Some were wire. All of them were his.

I pressed my thumb under the page until the paper bowed. “This says I can use the help and still say no.”

“Yes,” Mara said.

“To them.”

“To us too.”

“To you.”

“Yes.”

“To a judge?”

“You can tell a judge what you do and do not consent to. A judge may order things. That is different from someone else purchasing your agreement in advance.”

Different. Not safe. Not easy. Different.

The baby pressed again, harder this time. I shifted in the chair and felt the seam of my borrowed leggings dig under the curve of my stomach. The office smelled of old paper,

floor cleaner, and the orange tea Nina had left on the desk. There was no beautiful cup – just a chipped mug that said READERS MAKE LEADERS in fading blue letters.

Dario would have hated the mug. That made me trust it more than was reasonable.

“Why does this feel like a trap if it says it is not one?” I asked.

Isolde’s voice softened, which somehow made it sharper. “Because the last trap had good lighting.”

I looked at the page again. My name was not on it yet. The signature line waited at the bottom like a small white edge of a cliff.

“If Bellamy and Armitage have history,” I said, “then this is not neutral.”

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Mara’s pause came again. “I do not know that they do.”

“But Dario knew the funding map.”

“Yes.”

“He sent notices to clinics because Bellamy was on that map.”

“That appears to be what happened.”

“Then signing this might put me inside an old fight I do not understand.”

“It might reveal one,” Mara said. “It does not make you responsible for it.”

I closed my eyes. Behind them, I saw Dario at the apartment door, one hand braced above the chain, telling me we would handle this like adults.

Adult, in his mouth, had meant obedient. Reasonable had meant quiet. Protected had meant contained.

The packet in front of me was still paper written by people with money. I was not naive enough to call it clean. But page 4 did not ask me to be grateful. It did not ask me to promise silence. It did not ask me to call Celine anything. It did not ask for my child.

I opened my eyes.

“I want to add one sentence.”

Mara said, “Tell me.”

“My acceptance of filing-fee or housing support does not permit any funder, funder employee, or funder affiliate to contact me directly without my lawyer’s written permission.”

Isolde looked at me. For the first time that night, she smiled without anger.

Mara said, “That is already implied, but I like explicit. Write it in. Initial beside it. I will countersign when I receive the scan.”

“And if they refuse?”

“Then we do not use their money.”

My hand shook when I picked up the pen – not from doubt, from hunger, fear, and the particular strain of making choices after days of having every choice treated as evidence against me.

I wrote the sentence in the margin. My handwriting was uglier than usual. I initialed it anyway.

Then I signed. Not because I trusted Bellamy Ventures – because the page said support was not consent, and I had added one more locked door.

Isolde took a picture of the signed page on the clean phone and sent it through the clinic’s secure upload link while Mara stayed on the line. The upload circle spun. The radiator knocked. The baby settled.

For 8 seconds, nothing in the room moved except a little blue progress bar

Then the phone chimed. Mara said, “Received. I am sending it to conflict now.”

I capped the pen carefully. “How long?”

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“Tonight, if everyone answers. Tomorrow morning if they do not.”

“Does court wait for everyone to answer?”

“No.”

That was honest too.

I leaned back and felt the chair creak beneath me. The signature had not made me feel rescued. That was a disappointment I did not want to admit.

Some childish part of me still expected the right paper to change the room at once. A signed packet. A filed motion. A doctor's note. Some official arrangement that would make Dario stop at the edge of it and recognize a boundary because the boundary had letterhead.

But nothing changed. The old mug still had a chip near the handle. Isolde still stood too long because the other chair had a cracked leg. My feet were still swollen inside shoes that had fit last week. My daughter was still inside a body that Dario's lawyers were trying to turn into a contested site.

Choice did not feel like power. It felt like accepting that no one was coming to make the next choice for me.

The house phone gave a small click on Mara's end, not a disconnect. Another line coming in.

"Hold," she said.

The office went quiet except for the radiator and Isolde's breathing.

I looked at the signed packet. My name sat there in black ink, no ring beside it, no Dario to approve the spelling.

Choice felt nothing like freedom. It felt like lifting something heavy with bad wrists.

Mara came back. Her voice had changed. Still calm. Tighter at the edges.

"The initial funder conflict screen just returned a flag," she said.

My hand went to my stomach. "What kind of flag?"

"Prior Bellamy-Armitage dispute."

Isolde's head snapped up.

Mara continued, each word placed cleanly on the table. "Not your case. Not yet. But Bennett Bellamy's legal office has Dario Armitage marked as a direct conflict."

Fund of chapter

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 20

KIRA

Chapter 20 – What She Photographed

“Start with the pictures that prove he knew.”

Isolde said it at the square table in my room, under the tilted lamp, with half my life spread between 2 mismatched chairs.

The safe room looked smaller when the evidence came out. Not physically-the bed stayed narrow, the dresser stayed chipped, the folded bassinet still leaned against the wall like a question I was not ready to answer. But paper changed the air. It made the room less like shelter and more like a place where someone might decide whether I was telling the truth.

The donor invitation lay on the towel we had used as a clean surface. Slim black envelope. Cream card. Expensive weight. Dario and Celine Armitage printed as hosts and honorees of a maternity wing reception I had walked into with his daughter under my ribs and no warning at all.

Beside it, the handwritten note.

Keep remarks under four minutes. Mention second baby, not timing.

I had photographed it already. I photographed it again. Full card. Close-up. Card beside my ultrasound copy. Card beside the appointment reminder from St. Orla. Card beside my hand, because the date stamp on a phone could be argued with, but swollen fingers and the faint mark where a ring had been were harder to smooth into abstraction.

“Again,” Isolde said.

“You have become unpleasant.”

“I was always unpleasant. You were in love and missed it.”

I took the picture again.

The baby kicked under the table. “Your aunt is bullying me,” I told my stomach.

“Good,” Isolde said. “She can learn standards early.”

The joke should not have worked. It did anyway, briefly. Then we moved to the smart-lock screenshots.

Dario Armitage: Primary Owner. Aveline Ashby: Resident Guest.

My name looked especially polite in the app’s clean font – as if the phone had no opinion about a woman being allowed into the home where her baby clothes were folded under a window, until the man who owned the code decided otherwise.

We printed the screenshot from the portable printer Nina had found in the office downstairs. It coughed, jammed, and produced one crooked page with a gray line through Dario’s name.

\ “Do we need a better print?”

“No,” Isolde said. “Bad print, clean digital copy. Both. The bad print proves the bad printer existed tonight.”

“That is not a legal category.”

“It is an Isolde category.”

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I wrote it down anyway. Bad print, clean digital copy. Evidence had become less about a perfect archive and more about not letting one missing hinge break the door.

We made folders on the clean phone and the small laptop Mara had lent through the clinic.

01-identity-and-pregnancy

02-dario-public-marriage

03-housing-access

04-medical-access

05-private-clinic-pressure

06-financial-control

07-wrong-call-recording

08-st-orla-restriction

09-current-care

Noa's original evidence folder stayed named NOA. I kept that one separate – not because a lawyer had advised it. Because some names were not arguments. Some names were anchors.

Inside 01-identity-and-pregnancy, I put the ultrasound image from St. Orla, the appointment reminder, the copy of Dr. Price's visit summary, and the page where she had written 29 weeks in her neat block letters.

The number mattered. Dario had used 29 weeks as a reason I should stop moving. St. Orla used third trimester like a warning label. Dr. Price used it like information. Same number, different hands.

I zoomed in on the visit summary until the text blurred, then pulled back enough to read it cleanly.

Patient reports coercive control concerns related to housing, finances, medical coordination, and unauthorized record access. Fetal heart tones present. Patient establishes independent prenatal care.

Patient. For once, the word did not feel like a drawer closing.

"Print that twice," Isolde said.

"You are enjoying the printer now."

"I respect any machine that makes useful ugly things."

The printer spat out the first page with a streak across the bottom. The second came cleaner. We labeled both. I wrote clean copy on one sticky note and printer artifact, same file on the other because Isolde insisted that future people with expensive shoes would ask why one page had a gray line, and I no longer had patience for expensive-shoe confusion.

In 04-medical-access, I put the St. Orla portal screenshots. Dario's request as Spouse / Authorized Support. Celine's request as Maternal Guardian. The preliminary log showing Dr. Merrow's clinic partner portal had viewed my records before I consented.

That one made me stop longer than the rest. There was a time stamp on it. 10:38. A minute could be a small thing. It could also prove that people had reached into my medical file before I had agreed to let them stand near me.

I printed that page twice too. One copy for court. One copy for the version of me that still needed proof I had not imagined the hand in the file.

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The wrong-call recording took longest. The file sat on the screen with its ugly little audio icon and its plain name: wrong-call-dario- celine.

I did not play it at first. I had listened once while recording, once to make sure the file opened, and once when Isolde insisted we needed a transcript seed before anyone else touched it. Three times was enough for a lifetime.

Not enough for court. That was one of the quieter cruelties – pain did not become evidence until it agreed to repeat itself on demand.

“We need time markers,” Isolde said.

“I know.”

“We can stop.”

“No.”

She did not argue. She pressed play.

Dario’s voice came out of the laptop speaker thin and familiar. The room changed shape around it. Not back into the apartment-worse. Into the small space between what he had said to my face and what he had said when he thought I was not listening.

I wrote timestamps.

2:14 – Dario says clinic appointment cannot be missed.

3:02 – Celine says schedule must be controlled before Aveline gets advice.

4:38 – Dario says housing can be paused if she becomes difficult.

5:11 – Celine references reduced motherhood arrangement.

6:46 – Dario calls baby Armitage and says that is what matters now.

My hand cramped by the fifth note. The baby rolled, a slow internal pressure that made my skin tighten. I paused the file and pressed my palm under my ribs.

“I am here,” I whispered.

Isolde looked away. Good. There were some moments I could only survive if no one watched me survive them.

We added the private clinic intake card. The ARMITAGE / VEY – MATERNAL COORDINATION note I had reconstructed from memory. Maia Rell’s name, carefully labeled as potential witness, not ally. Grant Bell’s description. Dario’s texts.

Do not do anything stupid.

You can run. The baby cannot.

You just made this legal.

The last one belonged in a category of its own. Threat, yes. But also admission.

Before that text, what had he thought this was? A private disagreement. A scheduling problem. A woman becoming inconvenient inside a system he owned.

I typed each message into the index with date, time, sender, number, screenshot location, backup location.

The work steadied me. Not comforted. Steadied. There was a difference – comfort softened the room. Steady gave me somewhere to put my

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KICA hands.

By 10:52, the table had a system. Original papers stayed on the towel. Copies went into the accordion file. Digital files went into the laptop, the clean phone, and the encrypted upload link Mara had sent. Anything I remembered but could not yet prove went into a page titled witness/ memory verify.

That page annoyed me most. It held the look on Celine’s face when the building called her Mrs. Armitage. The exact angle of Dario’s hand against the apartment door. The way Dr. Merrow had said coordination, as if the word were a blanket and not a net.

Memory was true. Memory was also where men like Dario liked to work. He could call it stress. He could call it hormones. He could call it distress after a donor-floor misunderstanding.

So I wrote what I remembered, then put a narrow column beside it for proof. Clinic card photo. Call log. Portal notice. Witness: Isolde. Witness: Maia Rell, possible. Witness: Rina at St. Orla, possible.

The list did not make me feel believed. It made disbelief more expensive.

At 11:18 PM, the house phone rang downstairs.

I froze with a printout half-lifted. Isolde checked the time as if time had become a suspect.

Nina knocked 2 minutes later, waited until I called yes, then opened the door only enough to show her face. “Clinic line,” she said. “Mara. She said it can wait until morning if you are asleep.”

No one who had ever been controlled by paperwork slept through that sentence.

I stood too quickly. My lower back seized. Isolde caught the chair, not me. She had learned.

“Slow,” she said.

“I am not porcelain.”

“Porcelain is less stubborn.”

I made it downstairs with one hand on the rail and one under my stomach, counting steps because counting did not ask anything from me emotionally.

The office was dim. Nina left the door ajar this time, at my request, with Isolde just outside it. Not in the room. Not gone.

Mara’s voice came through the receiver, not speaker. “St. Orla sent a supplemental note to referral counsel and Dr. Price.”

My mouth went dry. “About the records restriction?”

“Related. They are characterizing your departure from their care as against medical advice.”

I stared at the chipped desk. “I left a records appointment.”

“Yes.”

“Not a treatment room.”

“Yes.”

“They gave me paper records and let me leave.”

“Yes.”

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Mara was not disagreeing. That made it worse.

“What did they say exactly?”

“I am reading from the note. Patient left St. Orla network coordination following donor-floor distress incident and access dispute. Due to third-trimester status and recent refusal of recommended continuity/planning, administrative review remains pending.”

The room tilted slightly.

Third-trimester status. Donor-floor distress incident. Recommended continuity planning.

Every phrase had been washed until it looked clinical. No wife. No son. No man calling me someone from work while I stood with his baby in my body.

“I did not refuse care,” I said.

“Dr. Price’s visit summary says you established independent prenatal care tonight. That helps.”

“Then why do this?”

Mara’s voice was quiet. “Because if they can make your exit sound medically concerning, Dario’s emergency papers get a cleaner doorway.”

I looked through the office glass at Isolde. She could not hear the words, but she knew enough from my face. Her hand closed around the doorframe.

“There is more,” Mara said.

I hated that sentence. “Read it.”

“Aveline.”

“Read it.”

Paper rustled on her end. The baby shifted hard, as if bracing too.

Mara read the final line without softening it. “Given the above, maternal instability cannot be ruled out without court-supervised care coordination.”

End of chapter

No aeroporto, filha chama homem de

The wife isn't me

Chapter 21

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Chapter 21 – The Man At The Door

“There is a man at the safe office.”

Nina did not whisper. That would have frightened me more. She stood in the doorway of my room at 8:12 the next morning with her clipboard tucked against her chest and her eyes fixed on my face, not my stomach.

I was sitting on the bed with my shoes half-laced, one sock wrong-side out because bending had become a negotiation I/no longer won gracefully. The night had been less sleep than intervals between evidence. Every time my body dropped toward rest, the phrase from St. Orla rose under my ribs.

Maternal instability. Two words designed to make a pregnant woman sound like a room with cracked beams. Not frightened, not deceived, not stalked through medical systems by a man with lawyers and keys. Unstable.

I tied the shoe anyway. “What man?”

“Mara is with him. He gave his name as Bennett Bellamy.”

Isolde, who had been folding copies into a battered accordion file at the table, went still. The room heard the name before I decided what to feel about it.

Bellamy Ventures. The packet. The conflict flag. Dario’s funding map.

“Is he inside the building?” I asked.

“No. The safe office. He is not here.”

My breath moved again. The safe office was 4 blocks away, attached to the clinic’s referral network and used for meetings that could not happen in the public legal clinic above the closed pharmacy. Mara had described it at midnight in the same tone other people used for weather. Neutral entrance, 2 exits, no donor signage, no client names in the lobby.

“Did I agree to meet him?” I asked.

Nina did not pretend the question was strange. “Mara says you can decline. She says the conflict issue cannot be cleared without either a wall-off arrangement or separate funding approval, and Bellamy’s counsel asked to explain the options in person. Mara is there. Referral counsel is on speaker. Isolde can go with you. Or not.”

Or not.

The phrase sat in the room with more dignity than most promises.

I looked at Isolde. “Do you know him?”

“No.”

“Do you know of him?”

“Everyone in the city with a business section knows of him.”

“That is not comforting.”

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KICA

“I was not offering comfort. I was answering accurately.”

Nina’s mouth twitched, then flattened again.

I finished tying the shoe. The baby pressed high under my ribs, a tight complaint against sitting upright too quickly.

“What does Dario know?” I asked.

Nina checked the note on her clipboard. “Mara says Dario’s counsel knows there is emergency representation. They do not know Bellamy funding status, your housing location, or whether you will meet Bellamy.”

Whether you will meet Bellamy. There it was. Will. Not must.

I stood slowly. The room did its small shift around me – furniture and blood pressure and fear all taking 1 step sideways.

Isolde reached for the records bag. “We go together,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And if he asks for the story?”

“Then we leave.”

“Good.”

Nina drove us in a van that smelled faintly of bleach and old coffee. I sat in the back seat because the front passenger airbag warning had made everyone in the office argumentative. The ride took 9 minutes. I counted 3 pharmacies, 2 bus shelters, 1 private security car, and 4 men in expensive coats who were probably only men in expensive coats.

Probably had become a luxury word.

The safe office sat above a tax preparer and a dentist with a cracked tooth painted on the window. Its entrance was a gray side door with a buzzer and no directory.

Nina waited until Mara answered the buzzer before she left. “I will circle twice,” she said from the driver’s seat. “If you come out before then, stand under the green awning. If you need me after, Mara has the office number.”

“Do you always make plans like this?”

“Only when plans are useful.”

The answer was plain enough to keep. No promise that nothing would happen. No cheerful lie about being completely safe. Just a green awning, 2 circles, and a number.

I added it to the map in my head.

Mara met us at the top of the stairs. She looked exactly as she had sounded- dark suit, tired eyes, hair pinned back without softness. She did not reach for me.

“Good morning,” she said. “No touching. No surprises. You can stop this meeting at any time.”

“Is he already in the room?”

“Yes. I put him in the conference room farthest from the door. Referral counsel is on the line. His counsel is not in the room.”

“Why not?”

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“Because I said no.”

I liked Mara more than was useful.

She opened the office door and stepped in first- not to lead me, to be visible to whoever waited inside.

The reception area had 4 chairs, a water dispenser, and a framed print of boats in fog. A woman at the desk looked up, smiled at Mara, and did not ask my name.

The conference room door stood open at the end of a short hall. A man stood just inside it.

Tall. Not Dario-tall, which meant height used as architecture. This man was broad through the shoulders and had his shirtsleeves rolled to the forearms under a charcoal jacket. Expensive clothes, yes – but the jacket was over the back of a chair, not on him. His tie had been loosened without performance. His hair looked as if he had pushed a hand through it in a car and then decided appearances could wait.

Bennett Bellamy.

He saw me. Then he looked at the doorway.

It was a small thing-so small that if Dario had done it, he would have ruined it by making sure I noticed. Bennett stepped back at once, clearing the threshold until there was more empty space than man between me and the room.

“Ms. Ashby,” he said. “You do not need to come in for me to explain this.”

My hand tightened on the strap of the records bag.

Not Aveline. Not Mrs. anything. Not sweetheart. Not little mother. Ms. Ashby.

“Can you explain it from there?” I asked.

“Yes.”

He stayed where he was. The hallway gave me enough room to turn around. I noticed that first- not his face, not his money. The exit.

Behind me, the reception door remained open. The stairwell was 11 steps away. Mara had placed herself to my right, not between me and the stairs. Isolde had one hand free and one on the records bag.

My body catalogued all of it before my mind allowed Bennett to become a person.

Dario had taught me room math without meaning to. Who blocked the door. Who owned the elevator. Who had the key. Who could make leaving look unreasonable.

Bennett stood in the only place that made himself less important. That did not make him safe – it made the next minute possible. Mara stood beside me, close enough to interrupt, not close enough to fence me in. Isolde remained half a step behind my left shoulder. Bennett’s eyes moved once to Isolde, then back to my face. “Bellamy Ventures funds the clinic through a blind community health grant. Ordinarily, I would not know your name, and you would not know mine unless you read the fund disclosure. That arrangement should have held.”

“But it did not.”

“A conflict screen flagged Dario Armitage because my legal office has active and historical adverse matters involving Armitage entities. That means my company cannot fund your emergency matter casually from the same channel without risking Dario’s lawyers arguing influence, retaliation, or contaminated support.”

There were legal words in there. He did not make them pretty. He also did not aim them over my head.

MoboReader – Read Book & Story ily throw her away A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s opter 21 even when the sentence belonged to someone else.

“And if I say yes?” I asked.

Bennett’s face sobered. “Then we document that you accepted emergency funding after disclosure of the Armitage conflict, with no direct contact from me or my staff except this meeting, and with your counsel retaining all decisions. I will not know your evidence, I will not know your address. I will not ask for updates.”

“Then this meeting is already too much.”

“Possibly.”

He accepted that too. I hated how much that unsettled me.

The chair closest to me was empty. I did not sit. Sitting felt like entering. Entering felt like agreeing. So I stood in the hallway and made a billionaire explain why his money had become dangerous.

No one corrected the shape of it.

The desk phone in the reception area rang once. The receptionist answered quietly. Mara glanced back, then at Bennett.

Something passed between them that I did not like.

“What?” I said.

Bennett’s attention returned to me immediately. He did not soften his face first. Good-I was done with softened faces.

“Dario already called me,” he said.

The hallway narrowed. Isolde stepped closer without touching me. Bennett remained out of the doorway.

“When?” I asked.

“At 7:04 this morning.”

My mouth tasted like metal. “What did he say?”

Bennett’s jaw tightened once. “He asked whether I knew I was funding the disappearance of his child.”

Fud of chapter

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AO

A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

The wife isn't me

Chapter 22

“He did not say daughter.”

The sentence left my mouth before anyone else could decide which part of Dario’s call deserved attention.

Bennett Bellamy looked at me from the far side of the conference room threshold. Still not in the doorway. Still not asking me to come closer.

“No,” he said. “He did not.”

My hand stayed under my stomach.

His child. Not our daughter. Not Aveline. Not even the baby, which at least allowed her to remain attached to the woman carrying her. His chyd.

Dario could make 2 words into a locked room.

Mara said, “We should move this discussion into a form that can be documented.”

“I do not want to sit in a room with him.” I nodded toward Bennett, because politeness was less useful than precision. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Bennett said.

Again, too easy. It made me want to test the floorboards for traps.

Mara opened the empty office beside us instead of the conference room. It had a desk, 3 chairs, and a window facing a brick wall. Bennett stayed in the hall until I chose the chair nearest the window. Isolde took the chair by the door. Mara sat at the desk.

Bennett did not enter.

“You can stand there,” I said.

“I can also wait in reception.”

“I said stand there.”

He stood there.

I hated that obedience could look different depending on who offered it. With Dario, compliance was a pause before the next pressure. With Bennett, it seemed to be the whole act.

That was not romance. It was not trust. It was only data.

I was collecting data now.

The office had a glass paperweight on the desk with a dead corporate logo trapped inside it. I turned it once with 2 fingers while Anika's call connected, then stopped when the baby objected to the angle of the chair./

Mara noticed. "Do you need a different seat?"

"No."

AQ

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He lost her. Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He's

"Footstool?"

That almost undid me. Not because a footstool was tender – because it was specific.

"..

Pregnancy turned dignity into a list of small accommodations people either saw or used against you. Dario had bought the expensive pillow and then told me it proved I was safer in the apartment. Dr. Price had warmed gel in her hands. Mara offered a footstool and did not wait for gratitude to make the offer worthwhile.

"Yes," I said.

She found an overturned document box, checked that it was clean, and put it under the desk where I could reach it. My ankles thanked her before my pride did.

Mara put referral counsel on speaker. A woman named Anika Senn identified herself, spelled her name, and confirmed she represented my emergency filing only if I accepted the limited engagement. I appreciated the limitation – people who named the edges of their help were less likely to hide hooks inside it.

"Mr. Bellamy," Anika said, "please state the options as discussed."

Bennett shifted his weight, then stopped moving entirely. "Option 1. Bellamy Ventures withdraws funding from Ms. Ashby's matter. The clinic proceeds with reserve funds and fee waivers. This minimizes Armitage's ability to argue Bellamy influence, but it may slow certified records, transport, and housing-extension payments."

He looked at Mara, not me, as if checking whether he had trespassed into her lane. Mara nodded once.

“Option 2,” he continued, “Bellamy Ventures maintains support through the blind fund with an added conflict disclosure and strict no-contact wall. My office will not receive client information beyond accounting codes. Armitage may still object if they learn the funding source.”

“They will learn,” Isolde said.

“Probably,” Bennett said.

No comfort there either. Good.

“Option 3. I provide a separate emergency grant to the clinic’s general maternal safety reserve with written waiver that it cannot be earmarked to your case. The clinic uses reserve funds for you as needed. That creates more distance but less certainty. It also does not erase the fact Dario called me this morning.”

Anika said, “And all 3 options preserve Ms. Ashby’s decision authority?”

“Yes.”

“All 3 include no direct contact without counsel permission?”

“Yes.”

“All 3 keep her housing address confidential?”

“Yes.”

I watched Bennett while he answered. Dario disliked yes or no when yes or no reduced his room to maneuver. Bennett gave them like inventory.

I did not mistake that for goodness. A man could be honest in one room and dangerous in another. But the answers were useful.

“Why would you help if Dario has already made it adversarial?” I asked.

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He lost her Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

DEA

Bennett looked at me then. Not at my stomach. Not over my shoulder to Isolde, as if I needed translating. At me.

“Because he called a pregnant woman’s safety case the disappearance of his child, and I have heard Dario Armitage choose words before

The room went too quiet. I felt my pulse in my neck.

“That sounds like a story.”

“It is not yours to carry today.”

I had not expected that. My mouth opened. No words came out.

Isolde’s chair creaked. Mara looked at the pen in her hand as if approving it for remaining still.

Not yours to carry today.

Dario had made everything his to manage. Bennett had just put something down in front of me and refused to make me pick it up.

The baby shifted, slower now. Maybe I had gone too long without breakfast. Maybe fear had a half-life in blood.

“I am not looking for a rescue,” I said.

Bennett nodded. “I did not offer one.”

“Money is a kind of rescue.”

“It can be. It can also be a tool. You decide whether the tool is worth the cost.”

“And what is the cost?”

“Dario may claim you are being influenced by his business rival. He may try to make this about me instead of what he did. If the funding stays hidden, he may claim concealment. If the funding is disclosed, he may claim conspiracy.”

“So there is no clean version.”

“No.”

“Does that bother you?” I asked.

“Which part?”

“Being used in his argument.”

His eyes moved once to the desk, then back. “Less than it bothers me that he has an argument.”

“That sounds rehearsed.”

“It is not.”

“Then it sounds expensive.”

This time the almost-smile did not come. “Probably.”

I appreciated that more than I wanted to.

People with money often pretended money was not in the room. Dario had done it constantly – he made payment feel like atmosphere, invisible until I stepped wrong and discovered the air had an owner.

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EXCA

Bennett let the money sit on the floor between us where everyone could see it. Ugly. Useful. Not innocent.

I liked him less for saying it. I respected him more.

Anika’s voice came through the speaker. “Ms. Ashby, from an evidence-preservation standpoint, the fastest route is Option 2. It lets us pay immediately for certified copies, transcript work, secure evidence duplication, and emergency transport if the hearing stays on calendar.”

“If?”

“Emergency schedules move.”

Of course they did. Everything moved except my body, which still had to rise one careful inch at a time.

I looked at Mara. “What would you choose if the money had no name?”

“Option 2,” she said.

“What would you choose because it has his name?” I nodded toward Bennett.

“Still Option 2, with the disclosure you wrote last night and Anika’s limited engagement letter.”

“Is that your legal advice?”

“Yes.”

I looked at Isolde. She lifted both hands. “I am here to throw chairs and remember lunch. I am not counsel.”

“You are not allowed to throw chairs.”

“Then they should behave.”

Bennett’s mouth moved again, almost humor. He did not speak.

I turned back to the speakerphone. “Anika, what does fastest evidence-preserving route mean in concrete steps?”

“Today: certified St. Orla records request with the restriction notice attached, independent transcript start for the wrong-call recording, forensic copy of your phone screenshots, declaration from Dr. Price that you established care, and a short affidavit from you correcting the against medical advice implication. We also request that Dario’s emergency petition be heard only with your privacy filing at the same time.”

That was too many things. Then my mind found the shape-records, recording, screenshots, doctor, my words, hearing together. Not lecture. Rope.

“Option 2,” I said.

Mara’s pen moved.

Anika said, “I will send the limited engagement for e-signature and read the key paragraph aloud before you sign.”

“Good.”

Bennett stepped back another half step, as if my decision had made his presence less necessary rather than more.

“I will leave now,” he said. “Mara has my written waiver. You do not need anything else from me.”

I should have let him go. Instead I asked, “Did you answer Dario?”

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A foundation made her heir Her ex? Hes

He stopped. “Yes.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him I do not discuss maternal safety funding with men who call legal adults missing because they stopped answering.”

Isolde made a sound that definitely was approval this time.

I did not smile. The sentence was satisfying in the dangerous way – it made me want to feel protected by someone else’s courage. That was not the same as being safe.

“Do not fight him for me,” I said.

Bennett met my eyes. “Understood.”

“I mean it.”

“I heard you.”

“Dario turns every room into proof that he is central.”

“Then I will stay out of the room unless your counsel asks me in.”

There. No wounded pride. No argument that I had misunderstood his help. No careful reminder of what his name could buy. He simply moved -not away in insult. Away because I had asked for space.

He left the hall before the e-signature link arrived. The absence he left behind was not warm. That mattered. If warmth had arrived, I would have distrusted myself.

Instead there was a cleared doorway, a document box under my feet, and a choice I had made with 4 people watching and none of them correcting my tone.

It was not rescue. It was infrastructure.

Dario had built infrastructure too. The difference was that his had hidden the exits.

signed Anika’s limited engagement at 8:59 AM after she read the paragraph twice and made me explain it back in my own words. Not because she thought I was stupid – because, she said, stress made paper slippery. I liked that sentence too. Stress made paper slippery. So we held it with both hands.

By 9:20, the evidence requests were queued. By 9:34, Dr. Price had sent a corrected note stating I had established independent prenatal care and was not refusing treatment. By 9:41, Isolde had forced a banana into my hand and watched me eat 6 bites like she was supervising a hostile merger.

The safe office began to feel almost ordinary.

That was when Mara's email chimed. She read the subject line and went still.

"What?" I asked.

Anika was still on speaker.

Mara opened the message. Her face did not change enough. I had learned to fear that.

"The court moved the emergency hearing," she said.

"Moved it where?

MoboReader – Read Book & Story on made her hear Her ex? He's

KICA

"Up."

The banana turned to paste in my mouth.

Mafa looked at me then. "Dario's counsel requested an expedited slot. The hearing is 48 hours earlier."

End of chapter

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Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir Her ex? Hes

The wife isn't me

Chapter 23

"Do not read it standing up."

Isolde said it while taking my phone out of my hand- and that told me enough We were back in the safe room by noon, with a hearing moved 48 hours closer and my body furious about stairs, fear, and the banana Isolde had insisted counted as breakfast only if followed

by actual food. Nina had left soup outside the door on a tray and knocked once before walking away. The soup cooled on the table while my appetite went somewhere private to resign.

“Give it to me,” I said.

“Sit first.”

“Isolde.”

“I am serious.”

She was her face had the flat, careful look she wore when emotion had become an operational hazard. So I sat on the bed, not because! was obedient, but because I was 29 weeks pregnant, my lower back had become a legal objection, and I did not trust my knees with whatever had just happened online.

Isolde handed me the phone. The statement came from Celine Armitage’s verified account of course it did. Soft cream background, black serif type, no photograph. Tasteful, restrained the kind of public grief wealthy women were allowed to display without smudging their makeup. At the top, her name sat beside a small gray check: Celine Armitage. No title needed. The title was implied by every person who would read her statement before reading mine, if mine ever existed in a place they recognized as real- legal wife, foundation mother, woman whose pregnancy could be discussed as family news instead of evidence.

Her profile photo showed her in cream, one hand at the lower curve of her stomach, not quite touching, not quite posing. It was old enough that the press could pretend not to know whether the image had been chosen for this moment. Nothing about Celine happened by accident. Even the blank space beneath her statement felt chosen – no comments visible in the first screenshot, no messy replies, just her polished concern sitting alone long enough for people to mistake design for dignity. It was the visual equivalent of closing a door before the other woman reached the hall.

Over the past several days, our family has become aware of painful misinformation involving private family arrangements, medical privacy, and the welfare of children.

I stopped. The room moved without moving. Private family arrangements – not Dario’s deception, not Celine’s visit to the apartment with a folder, not the clinic card. Arrangement. A word people could rearrange like furniture, flowers, calendars, seating charts, donor remarks. Apparently mothers too, if the typeface was elegant enough.

I kept reading.

Dario and I have always believed that children should be protected from stress, public speculation, and adult conflict. We ask for dignity and restraint while appropriate professionals ensure continuity of care for everyone involved.

Dario and I. Always believed. Children. Everyone involved. My name did not appear, and my daughter did not appear, and Celine's own pregnancy did not appear except as implied purity – a soft white cloth laid over the table where the knives were.

"There is more," Isolde said.

Acusada, Mas Vitoriosa Após 10 anos como piada, divorciou-se e brilhou. Ex arrependido vé-la

"I can see that."

My voice sounded normal, which worried me-normal voice meant my body had decided feeling could wait.

We will not comment further on unverified claims, except to say that no child should ever be used to punish a family or inflame a legal process. Our focus remains stability, health, and the quiet, protection of our children.

Our children. There it was not his child this time. Ours. Celine had put her hand over the whole future in 2 words.

I touched my stomach before I could stop myself. The baby did not move.

"She never says I am lying," I said.

"No."

"She never says who I am."

"No."

"She says private family arrangements like I agreed to decorate a guest room."

Isolde sat in the chair by the table. "That is why it is dangerous."

I read the statement again, and the second time I saw the structure-painful misinformation, private family arrangements, medical privacy, welfare of children, appropriate professionals, continuity of care, quiet protection. Every phrase made a hallway that led away from me. None of them had to accuse me directly; they only had to build a public room where my refusal looked like noise.

"How fast is it spreading?" I asked.

Isolde took the phone back and scrolled. “Business press picked it up because Celine tagged the foundation account. Donor people are reposting. A few society pages are doing the usual tasteful concern. No mainstream headline yet.”

“Yet.”

“Yes.”

She turned the phone enough for me to see without handing it back. Comments from women with hyphenated names and charity gala photos lined the feed-So dignified under stress. Protecting children should come first. People will do anything around inheritance season. Inheritance season. As if my daughter were a bad-weather front moving toward their portfolios. There were fewer comments mentioning Dario, and that was the first lesson of the public room Celine had built – he could stand in the middle of the harm and still be background architecture. The women would be made into weather, scandal, stress, dignity, instability. He would be called private. Men like Dario survived on that adjective, and women like Celine survived by making privacy look maternal when it protected the people who had done the harm.

I stood. Too fast. The room tipped, and Isolde rose at once but did not touch me.

“Chair,” she said.

“I need the evidence folder.”

“Chair first.”

“The folder.”

“Aveline.”

10 360s como piada divorciou-se e brilhou. Ex arrependido vê-la

FITA

The sound of my name stopped me – not because she had authority, but because it was my name. Not carrier, not unstable, not misinformation. Aveline. I sat back down and hated that she was right.

Isolde brought the accordion file to the bed and set it beside me. “What are you looking for?”

“Celine’s apartment visit.”

“The recording?”

“No recording. Notes. The clinic card photo. The private resolution agreement summary.”

“Anika already has those.”

“The public does not.”

Isolde went very still. “Av.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“I know public is dangerous.”

“Public is not just dangerous. Public is sticky. Once you say something out there, Dario will try to make the hearing about your judgment instead of his behavior.”

“He is already doing that.”

“Yes. Through lawyers. Through St. Orla. Through Celine’s cream-background little poison tablet. But if you post angry, they get tone.”

“I am not angry.”

She stared at me.

“I am not only angry,” I corrected.

“Better.”

The soup had gone cold. I ate 3 spoonfuls because my daughter did not care about public narrative strategy and still needed salt. Then I opened the file-not to post, not yet, but to remember the difference between speaking and reacting.

Anika called before I found the clinic card. Isolde put her on speaker and set the phone on the blanket between us like a small witness.

“I am watching it,” Anika said.

“That makes 3 of us.”

“Do not respond from your personal account.”

“I have not.”

“Good. I am not telling you to be silent forever. I am telling you not to give them a fresh exhibit before I have the hearing packet in front of the court.”

I looked at the evidence file. “They already have exhibits.”

“They have insinuation. We have exhibits. That distinction matters only if we protect it.”

AO

10 anos como niada divorciou-se e brilhou. Ex arrependido vé-la

KTEA

I wanted to hate the caution, but I heard the shape of it – not silence because Dario wanted silence, but timing because I had a hearing 46 fewer hours than expected.

“What can I do?” I asked.

“Archive everything. Draft nothing public until we talk. Eat if you can. If your blood pressure rises or contractions start, we call Dr. Price before the internet.”

The internet – as if it were a storm system. Maybe it was.

“I hate that medical advice now includes not reading comments.”

“Modern care is a tragedy,” Anika said dryly.

Isolde pointed at the phone again. “Still like her.”

Celine had been calm in the apartment. She had looked at the nursery doorway and called the situation painful, taken back the settlement pages when I would not sign, left the clinic card on the console like a calling card from a woman who already believed the house recognized her more fully than it recognized me.

The phone buzzed again. Isolde looked, and her jaw tightened.

“Do not make that face and then expect me not to ask,” I said.

“It is a gossip account.”

“Which one?”

“CityGlass.”

–

I knew the name everyone knew the name if they had ever stood near donor money long enough to be cut by reflection. It posted blind items, charity photos, divorces before filings, pregnancies before announcements, and apologies after threats from lawyers. Isolde did not hand me the phone, and this time I did not ask.

“Read it,” I said.

“No.”

“Read it.”

“I can summarize.”

“Exact words.”

She closed her eyes for 1 second, then read.

“Armitage circle sources say today’s serene statement concerns a private surrogacy arrangement gone sideways. Legal wife C.A. is asking for privacy while an unnamed surrogate seeks leverage before the winter vote. More soon.”

The word did not land at first-it hovered, polite, clinical, useful. Surrogate,

The room went silent around it. Not because the building was quiet – it was not. Somewhere downstairs a door closed, a pipe knocked, a child laughed in the stairwell and was shushed by an adult. But inside my body, every sound withdrew.

Surrogate. I looked down at my stomach, at the curve that had altered every breath, every sleep position, every appetite, every plan – at the place where my daughter had turned Dario’s lie from heartbreak into law. I had been called someone from work in a donor hall. I had been

L

Acusada Mas Vitoriosa Após 10 anos como piada, divorciou-se e brilhou. Ex arrependido vê-la called a guest by a lock. I had been called unstable by a hospital. Now a stranger with a blue check and a taste for initials had called me rented body.

The baby moved then-one hard kick, low, direct. I put both hands over her.

Isolde’s voice came from far away. “Aveline.”

I looked at the phone in her hand. “Send it to Anika.”

“Already done.”

“Screenshot with time.”

“Done.”

“Full page, not cropped.”

“Done.”

Good. My people were learning my fear language. I picked up the cold soup and swallowed another spoonful-it tasted like metal and carrots. Then I said, very quietly, “No.”

Isolde did not ask to which part. There were too many.

My phone buzzed again, and this time it was Anika.

Do not post yet. Drafting options. Need your exact denial language within 1 hour.

I looked at the gossip post until the word blurred. Surrogate.

No, Not that. Not ever.

End of chapter-

AQ

Lera-Webnovels Romance omo niada, divorciou-se e brilhou. Ex arrependido vê-la

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 24

“I am not softening that sentence.”

Anika had not asked me to – not exactly. She had said public language survived longer if it stayed narrow, that denial should correct falsehood without inviting a full trial by comment section, that the court would see everything by morning and judges did not always appreciate litigants making press statements before emergency hearings. All of that was probably true. None of it changed the sentence.

I sat at the square table with the laptop open, the phone on speaker, and Isolde across from me with 2 pens in her hair because stress had turned her into an office supply drawer. The safe room smelled of cold soup, printer heat, and the peppermint tea Nina had left outside the door after pretending not to hear me throw up at 1:10 PM.

The baby had shifted high again – my ribs ached, my throat burned, my hands were steady. That last part felt suspicious. Steady hands did not mean I was calm; they meant some interior office had opened for business and refused to accept visitors. Everything breakable had been moved to a back room. Everything useful had been set on the desk: name, mother, denied consent, independent care, counsel – no location no medical details, no apology for existing.

On the screen, the draft statement waited.

I did not act as a surrogate for Dario or Celine Armitage. I did not consent to any arrangement transferring my parental role. I am the mother of the child I am carrying.

The cursor blinked after mother-small, accusing.

Anika's voice came through the phone. "I am not challenging the truth of it. I am asking whether we want to say biological mother or pregnant patient in this first version."

"No."

Isolde looked at me over the laptop but did not interrupt.

"Biological mother sounds like one category among several," I said. "They are trying to make me one category among several."

"Understood," Anika said.

"Pregnant patient belongs to the hospital. St. Orla already used patient to make me sound like a chart they misplaced."

"Also understood."

"I am the mother."

My voice did not rise – it did not need to. The sentence was not large, and that was why it mattered. No one had to fund it, schedule it, or make it elegant enough for donors. I am the mother. 5 words, no room for Celine to stand between them.

Anika said, "Then it stays."

I closed my eyes. For 1 dangerous second, relief moved through me not victory, not safety, just the small mercy of not having to argue the same truth twice in the same minute.

Isolde clicked the end of a pen. "What about child?" she asked.

–

AQ

Acusada Mas Vitoriosa Após 10 anos como piada, divorciou-se e brilhou. Ex arrependido vé-la

KIRA

“What about it?”

“If you say the child I am carrying, they can still turn the comments into the baby’s sex, due date, medical speculation. Maybe my daughter is clearer.”

My eyes opened. My daughter. Dario knew. Celine probably knew. St. Orla knew. Dr. Price knew. I had not put my daughter’s sex in public because some facts deserved a room with a locked door – but the public story had already put its hands on her. Surrogate. Arrangement Our children.

I looked at my stomach. “No,” I said softly.

Isolde nodded. “Okay.”

“Not because I am ashamed.”

“I know.”

“Because they do not get more of her to chew on.”

Anika said, “That is a sound reason. We can keep it as child.”

I reread the draft. It was too bare to feel like protection—maybe that was the point. Protection had become suspicious when it arrived dressed as comfort. This was not comfort. It was a correction.

Statements suggesting I entered a surrogacy arrangement are false. I have established independent prenatal care and legal counsel. Any contact about my medical care or location must go through counsel.

I added one line.

I will not discuss private medical details in public.

Anika was quiet long enough that I looked at the phone. “Problem?”

“No. Good line. It denies without feeding.”

“Does the court hate it?”

“The court may dislike public statements generally. The court will dislike false public pressure more if we document restraint.”

“That means nothing.”

“It means I can defend this better than a thread.”

“I was not going to post a thread,”

Isolde coughed.

I looked at her. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Say it.”

“You have an evidence folder named after the baby and 9 subfolders labeled like a criminal archive. A thread was not impossible.”

“I am wounded by your accuracy.”

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INSTALL was broken. She was just waiting. Now she holds

–

“Eat a cracker and recover.”

I ate the cracker because she pushed the sleeve across the table with the quiet aggression of a woman who had learned nutrition through threats. The phone buzzed while I chewed- another message from Mara.

Celine statement archived. CityGlass archived. Bennett no further contact. Hearing prep call at 4:00 if you can tolerate it.

If you can tolerate it. Not if you are available, not please make time-tolerate. The word respected the shape of the day.

I typed back: 4:00 yes. Statement first.

Then I looked at the denial again. “Who posts it?” I asked.

Anika said, “Recommendation: it goes through counsel, not your personal account. We quote your line exactly and attach notice that we have preserved defamatory statements for court review. Your personal account stays quiet.”

“So I do not speak.”

“You speak through counsel for now.”

I hated it – and I also understood it. “Will they use that to say I am hiding?”

“They will use breathing to say something if it helps them.”

I blinked. Isolde pointed at the phone. “I like her.”

Anika ignored that with professional grace. “This is about preserving your position before an emergency hearing. Public vindication is not today’s tool.”

Tool. Bennett had used that word too. Money could be a tool, silence could be a tool, speech could be a tool – the danger was forgetting which hand held it.

I opened a fresh document below the final statement and typed the version I wanted to write not to send, but to remove it from my body. Dario Armitage lied to me for months. Celine Armitage came to the apartment where my daughter’s nursery was half-painted and offered proximity to my own child as if motherhood were a visitation schedule. St. Orla wrote maternal instability because I left their network after being publicly erased in their donor hall. I am not your arrangement. I am not your rumor. I am not available for reassignment.

I stared at it, then selected the whole paragraph and copied it into the private evidence journal. Not deleted, not posted – kept. There was a difference between swallowing a truth and saving it for the correct knife.

“Post through counsel,” I said. “But the sentence stays exact.”

“It stays exact.”

At 2:07 PM, Anika’s office posted the denial. No cream background, no serif type, no photograph-just black text on the firm’s plain letterhead, converted to an image because that was how public lies apparently had to be answered now.

Statements suggesting Ms. Aveline Ashby entered a surrogacy arrangement are false. Ms. Ashby did not consent to any arrangement transferring her parental role. “I am the mother of the child I am carrying,” Ms. Ashby states. Ms. Ashby has established independent prenatal care and legal counsel. Any contact concerning her medical care, location, or legal matter must go through counsel. She will not discuss private medical details in public.

3/5 I read it once, then again. The quotation marks made my sentence look smaller and harder – as if it had been cut out of my body and placed

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INSTALL broken She was just waiting. Now she holds where strangers could inspect it. But it was there. My name. Mother. Not surrogate.

I took a screenshot of the post from Anika's account, then a screenshot of the timestamp, then a screenshot of the first repost that included Celine's statement above mine, as if the internet had already arranged us in the order it preferred-official wife first, hidden woman second I saved all 3 before Isolde could confiscate the phone.

"Evidence," I said when she held out her hand.

"Obsession wearing a suit."

"Evidence."

"Fine. Evidence gets 30 more seconds."

I used 20. The first reply appeared in 12 seconds, then another, then a screenshot account reposted it with a red siren emoji I refused to interpret as language. Isolde took the phone away before I could keep looking.

"No."

"That was my phone."

"And now it is a brick with poison in it."

"That is not how property works."

"Report me to the chair-throwing authorities."

I should have laughed. Instead I put my head down on my folded arms and breathed through a contraction that was not a contraction – just my body practicing panic in the language of muscles. Tight, hold, release. I counted 42 seconds, then the band eased.

Isolde's voice had changed when she spoke. "Pain?"

"Gone."

"Another?"

"No."

“We tell Dr. Price at 4:00.”

“We tell Dr. Price now if it happens again.”

“Good.”

The baby moved under the table. I lifted my head. “She heard me.”

“She heard a lot of swearing under your breath.”

“That too.”

For 20 minutes, the room became almost quiet – not peaceful, just quiet. Anika sent hearing prep questions. Mara sent a document checklist. Nina brought a better pillow someone had donated and left it outside the door with a note that said only washed today. I put the note in the evidence folder by mistake, then moved it to the dresser. Not everything kind had to become proof.

At 2:41 PM, the clean phone rang – unknown number, no caller ID. My body reacted before my mind did: back straight, hand to stomach, eyes to Isolde. She was already reaching for the second device to record, then stopped.

Book & Story just waiting. Now she holds

EXCA

“Counsel said unknown calls go to voicemail,” she said.

The phone rang again. Again. Then silence. A voicemail appeared 9 seconds later. We looked at it. Neither of us moved.

“Could be press,” Isolde said.

“Could be Dario.”

“Could be clinic.”

The word clinic opened a cold place under my ribs. I pressed play on speaker because fear did not improve in private. A woman’s voice filled the room, bright and professionally warm.

“Hello, Ms. Ashby, this is Maren calling from Dr. Merrow’s office confirming your transfer appointment for tomorrow at 9:00 AM. We have the authorization from family counsel and will need you fasting for labs if possible. Please call us back before 5:00 to confirm transport.”

The message ended. The room did not.

Isolde whispered, “You did not book that.”

My mouth had gone numb. Tomorrow at 9:00 AM. Fasting. Transport. Authorization from family counsel. I put one hand over my daughter and the other over the phone, as if I could keep the words from spreading.

“No,” I said. This time it was not quiet. “I did not.”

End of chapter

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MoboReader – Read Book & Story sht she was broken. She was just waiting. Now she holds

The wife isn't me

Chapter 25

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Chapter 25 – A Small Bag

“Play it again.”

Isolde did not. She held the clean phone in both hands, thumbs braced along the edge as if the plastic might become guilty if she pressed. hard enough.

“Aveline.”

“Again.”

“We heard it.”

“I need the exact words.”

The baby shifted low, a slow drag of pressure that made me put one palm against the underside of my stomach and wait until the room stopped narrowing. The safe room was not large enough for panic-it had a narrow bed, a dresser, 2 mismatched chairs, and a square table already covered in paper. There was nowhere dramatic for fear to go; it had to stand beside the printer and behave itself.

The unauthorized appointment had changed the air. Before the voicemail, danger had felt like pursuit-public statement, legal filing, a man outside a chain lock. After it, danger had a calendar invite, a fasting requirement, transport. Someone I had not spoken to had put my body into tomorrow morning as if consent were a box family counsel could check on my behalf. That made the room feel less temporary – it made it feel targeted.

Isolde looked at my face. Then she pressed play.

The clinic voice filled the room again, bright as polished tile.

“Hello, Ms. Ashby, this is Maren calling from Dr. Merrow’s office confirming your transfer appointment for tomorrow at 9:00 AM. We have the authorization from family counsel and will need you fasting for labs if possible. Please call us back before 5:00 to confirm transport.”

The voicemail ended. This time I wrote every word down-not because I had missed any, but because writing turned violation into evidence, and evidence had edges.

Dr. Merrow / Maren tomorrow 9:00 AM transfer appointment fasting labs transport authorization from family counsel no consent from me

I underlined the last line twice. My hand stayed steady until I reached transport- then the pen slipped, one ugly mark across the page. Isolde saw it and did not comment. That was friendship too.

“Send to Anika?” she asked.

“And Mara. And Dr. Price.”

“Already forwarding the audio.”

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He lost her. Now he heas Everyone thought she was broken. She was just waiting. Now she holds

“Not just audio. Screenshot the timestamp. Screenshot the unknown number. Export the voicemail if the phone lets you.”

“I know.”

“Write down that I ate at 1:30.”

She looked up. “For fasting labs?”

“For fasting labs I never agreed to.”

Her mouth tightened. “Good.”

“And that I am not refusing care. I am refusing an appointment made by someone else.”

“Good again.”

The word should have helped. It did not. I wrote one more line under the others -No callback from patient. Counsel response only. – and boxed it. Not because boxes had legal force, but because my hand needed to draw a border somewhere.

I stood too fast and regretted it before my knees finished the decision. The room tilted. Isolde’s hand moved, stopped, and hovered near my elbow without touching.

“Sit.”

“I need the bag.”

“You need to sit for 10 seconds before the bag.”

“I can do both.”

“You can be infuriating in a chair.”

I sat – not because she had won, but because my daughter pressed hard against my pelvis, and my body had begun making its own legal arguments. Gravity was one. Breath was another. The little practice contraction from earlier had left behind a sore band across my lower belly, like a handprint from the inside.

I counted 10 seconds, then 20, then stood with one hand on the table and crossed the room to the dresser. Nina had found me a small black duffel from the building’s donation shelf-one broken zipper pull and a faded airline tag from a place I had never been. I set it on the bed.

“Hospital or escape?” Isolde asked.

“Both.”

That was the problem with emergency bags – everyone pretended they were about preparedness. Mine was about admitting I might have to leave one safety for another without warning, with a daughter inside me and a man trying to schedule my body like a meeting.

I opened the duffel. The first thing I put in was not clothing-it was the folder marked IDENTITY / PREGNANCY. Copy of my identification. Insurance card. Dr. Price’s note confirming independent prenatal care at 29 weeks. A printed ultrasound copy. The St. Orla restriction notice. The St. Orla supplemental note with maternal instability

highlighted in yellow because if a word wanted to hurt me, it could do the courtesy of standing in good light. The private clinic intake summary. The voicemail transcript I had just written. My denial through counsel.

I put all of it in a zip pouch and pressed out the air. Then I added my medication list, prenatal vitamins, a spare phone charger, and a small notebook where I had started logging food, movement, calls, pain, and sleep. There was no romance in documenting crackers – there was safety in it.

“Clothes,” Isolde said.

MoboReader – Read Book & Story broken She was just waiting. Now she holds

KICA

I looked at the folder. “I know.”

“Aveline.”

said I know.”

Clothes felt stupid. Documents could prove I existed; clothes could only keep me warm while someone challenged it. I folded 2 maternity leggings, 2 long shirts, underwear, socks, and the softest cardigan I owned that had not come from Dario’s apartment. The cardigan was brown, too large, and pilled at the cuffs – it looked like something a woman might wear when no one needed her to be elegant enough to lie beside.

I put in toiletries, hair ties, the cheap slippers Nina had left outside the door, cash in 3 envelopes, one granola bar. Isolde added 4 more.

“That bag is getting heavy,” I said.

“Then I will carry it.”

“No.”

“Then we will argue about physics after you eat dinner.”

I almost smiled – and the almost hurt.

The dresser’s bottom drawer stuck. I had to brace my foot against it and pull. Inside were the baby things Nina had quietly collected after hearing I had left my nursery behind – not much. Donated onesies washed thin, a knit cap too small for any human head I could imagine, 2 receiving blankets, a packet of newborn diapers, a tiny sweater the color of oatmeal folded on top.

I did not touch it at first. I looked at it – that was safer.

The sweater had wooden buttons shaped like small uneven moons. One sleeve had been mended near the wrist with thread a shade darker than the yarn. It was not expensive. It had no Armitage money on it, no foundation gift tag, no private-clinic welcome pack, no Celine- approved palette of cream and pale green. It was just small.

That was what broke me – not the voicemail, not the appointment, not the word transfer, which still sat in my stomach like a metal coin. The sweater. Because somewhere there was supposed to be a drawer for this – not a donated dresser in a safe room with a chain lock, not a duffel bag that had to decide whether my daughter was an emergency or a person. There was supposed to be the half-painted nursery, the ridiculous crib frame Dario assembled wrong twice because he refused to read instructions, and the yellow blanket I had held against my face in a shop while pretending hormones were not a public event. There was supposed to be one place where softness was not evidence against

I picked up the sweater. It fit across both palms. My breath went.

Isolde's chair scraped, then stopped. She stayed where she was-good. If she touched me, I might have folded around the kindness and not come back quickly enough.

I pressed the sweater to the curve of my stomach. "I am sorry," I whispered.

The baby did not answer. Of course she did not – she was 29 weeks old inside me and already being treated as a jurisdictional dispute. I bent over the sweater anyway. My ribs complained, my throat closed, and I let 1 sound out-only 1. Then I made myself breathe through the rest because tomorrow at 9:00 AM someone expected me not to eat and to accept transport arranged by people trying to take my name off my own child.

Softness could not cost her safety. Not today. I folded the sweater along it's old creases and set it back in the drawer.

Isolde's voice was careful. "You can take it."

"No."

AO

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CITA

"It weighs nothing."

"It weighs a nursery."

Her eyes changed. I closed the drawer.

“If we have to move fast, I need proof, clothes, medication, charger, cash. If I add one baby thing, I will add 5, and then I will be standing in a doorway deciding between diapers and documents while Dario’s security is downstairs.”

“That is a grimly persuasive sentence.”

“I hate it.”

“I do too.”

My clean phone buzzed on the table. Isolde picked it up before I could.

“Anika,” she said. “She wants the voicemail preserved and says do not call Dr. Merrow back.”

“Obviously.”

“Also says the appointment may show attempt to manufacture noncompliance if you do not appear.”

I laughed once – it sounded terrible. “So if I go, they get me. If I do not, they get a line for court.”

“She says they do not get it cleanly if we answer through counsel before 5:00.”

“Good.”

“Mara says same. Dr. Price can add a note that she has not ordered fasting labs and that you have a care plan.”

I put one hand on the duffel. “Then add the voicemail transcript to the hearing binder. Mark it urgent.”

“Doing it.”

While Isolde typed, I made the bag ugly and useful- copies, not originals, where possible; originals in the flat document case; phone charger coiled in a sock so it would not tangle; cash split; clean underwear in a freezer bag because the safe room had no real organization and disaster apparently liked compartments.

The baby rolled under my palm. “I am choosing paperwork over sweaters,” I told her softly.

Isolde’s typing slowed. I did not look at her.

“That is not because paperwork matters more.” The baby pressed once, solid and wordless. “It is because paperwork is how they are trying to steal the sweater too.”

My throat hurt again. I zipped the duffel – the broken pull caught halfway. I tugged once, twice, then made myself stop before frustration became force and force became another thing my body had to survive. Isolde stood and fixed it with a paper clip from her pocket.

“Office supply drawer,” I said.

“Survival suite.”

The clean phone buzzed again. This time her face changed before she spoke – not fear, focus.

“What?”

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INSTALL bought she was broken. She was just waiting. Now she holds

ETEA

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She turned the screen toward me. The image was grainy, taken from a lobby camera feed I recognized before my mind wanted to ble marble, brass bowl on the entrance console, the private elevator hall outside the apartment. Dario’s old apartment. My old apartment, if Nes counted as leases. Grant Bell stood in the frame with another man in a dark coat, and a third man held the apartment door open with a gloved hand. They were entering the place where I had painted clouds with the father of my child.

Isolde’s voice was low. “Building contact sent it 30 seconds ago. Dario’s security just went in.”

The duffel sat between my feet. Small. Not small enough.

End of chapter

AO

MoboReader – Read Book & Story thought she was broken. She was just waiting. Now she holds

The wife isn't me

Chapter 26

Dario had not intended to enter the nursery first. That was what he told himself in the private elevator while Grant stood behind him and watched the floor numbers rise without moving his eyes. The apartment needed a practical sweep-evidence, devices, anything Aveline had missed in her theatrical flight from care. That was the language he used because it had structure: flight from care, emotional distress, third- trimester instability, outside influence. Words could make chaos behave if a person chose the correct ones.

The elevator opened. Warm air touched his face, and for 1 second the apartment still smelled like her tea-peppermint, printer paper from the small desk by the window, the faint powdery detergent she had started buying after stronger scents made her sick at 19 weeks.

Dario stepped inside and let the door close behind him. The rooms recognized him- lights adjusted, heat held, the system accepted his phone and wrist. Primary owner. Full access. Everything in the apartment answered when he asked. Everything except the woman who had made the place feel occupied.

Grant remained near the entrance. “Where do you want us to start?”

“Not the bedroom yet.”

Grant’s expression did not change that was why Dario used him. Grant had the rare discipline not to mistake silence for invitation.

“Check the desk. Kitchen drawers. Any secondary devices, paper copies, recording equipment.”

“And the nursery?”

Dario looked down the hall. The door was open. He remembered closing it—maybe he had not. The week had become imprecise in ways he disliked. Lawyers called at bad times, Celine used calm as accusation, Mathias Vey’s office had sent a meeting packet with 9 pages of governance pressure disguised as agenda notes, and his mother had left 2 messages he had not returned.

The apartment should have been the simple part. It was property-property had records, access logs, maintenance staff, cameras, insurance. Property could be searched without persuasion; it could be locked, paused, heated, entered. The private elevator did not ask moral questions when it rose to the 36th floor. Aveline had been the uncertain variable, not the rooms. That was why the nursery irritated him before he even reached it.

Aveline had done this- not all of it, but enough.

“I will take the nursery.”

Grant nodded once and moved away. Dario walked down the hall. He did not hurry- hurrying gave events too much importance.

The nursery was colder than the rest of the apartment because the vent near the window stuck if the door remained open. He had meant to call maintenance, and Aveline had laughed at him for making a note titled cloud room climate as if the child were arriving to inspect household efficiency. He had been going to fix it. There were many things he had been going to fix after the vote.

The room held the same unfinished sky-pale blue on 2 walls, clouds uneven along the upper corner, too gentle for what remained. Painter’s tape still caught in a ragged strip near the baseboard. The crib frame leaned against the wall, half-built and waiting. 3 boxes of baby clothes sat under the window, the same as before, and one had a lid not fully closed because Aveline had been comparing sizes the Sunday after the ultrasound appointment was scheduled. He had stood there in old trousers, sleeves rolled up, while she sorted small cotton things by some logic that made sense only to her – newborn, 0 to 3 months.

“You know she will not read the labels,” he had said.

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He lost her Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

“No, but I will, and I am more likely to be sleep deprived than she is.”

He had smiled. Dario looked at the boxes now and felt the memory move toward him- he stopped it. Memory was not useful unless it told him where she had gone.

He crossed to the dresser. Empty – not naturally empty, selected. The bottom drawer held blankets and 2 tiny hats. The top drawer had been cleared of documents. He knew because he had seen her put the ultrasound envelope there after returning from St. Orla, before the donor hall had made everything unnecessarily public. The envelope was gone. The donor invitation was gone. The handwritten note was gone. The private clinic card Celine had left on the console was gone. The draft authorization was gone.

Dario opened the second drawer. Nothing but a packet of unopened drawer dividers and the little yellow blanket Aveline had insisted was too soft to be practical and therefore essential. She had not taken it.

That should have reassured him – it did not. If she were panicked, she would have taken the blanket. If she were vindictive, she might have taken every baby thing to punish him. She had taken proof and left sentiment. His jaw tightened.

In his trouser pocket, the returned engagement ring pressed cold against his thigh. He had put it there that morning without deciding to. The courier packet had arrived days ago at 2:17, with the ultrasound copy and her little sentence written in a hand he could recognize fromygrocery lists and paint samples.

She was never yours to reassign.

He had read it once, then again, then placed the ring in the small inside drawer of his desk because leaving it on the surface had felt like letting her speak in the room. This morning he had taken it out. He had not meant to carry it here.

He took it from his pocket now. The diamond caught the nursery light-too sharp, too clean, Aveline had worn it for 14 weeks, privately and faithfully. She had believed discretion was sacrifice, and he had allowed that belief because there had been no clean public alternative before the vote, and because she was happier when she trusted the future. Dario had not thought of it as cruelty at the time—it had been sequencing. People who did not understand power always mistook sequencing for deception.

The ring sat in his palm like a small verdict. He remembered the night he gave it to her because memory insisted on arriving in useful rooms and making itself useless – the kitchen had smelled of peppermint and burned toast, she had laughed first because she thought he had dropped something, then stopped laughing when she saw the box. He had told her it was not forever in hiding. Not forever -just until timing stopped being a weapon other people could use.

He had meant it when he said it. That was the part he would never be able to explain to anyone who needed morality sorted into clean drawers – he had meant it and still used it. Both could be true. Only children and judges required one fact to cancel the other.

Grant’s voice came from the doorway. “Desk is clear. No laptop, no external drives. Kitchen drawer where she kept papers is empty.”

Dario closed his hand. “Check the bedroom.”

“Already started. Jewelry tray is mostly untouched.”

“Mostly?”

“Personal pieces are gone. Nothing high-value.”

Of course. She had left money on the table where insult could be inferred and taken anything that could verify a timeline. He slipped the ring back into his pocket.

“What about the old phone?”

“Not here.”

“Tablet?”

AO

W

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He lost her. Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

KIWA

“Gone.”

Dario turned slowly in the nursery-clouds, crib, boxes, blanket. The architecture of a life she had no right to dismantle alone. No, that was not the phrase he needed. The architecture of a child’s stability. Better. That would work in affidavits, if softened.

He unlocked his phone and opened the private thread with Aveline. His last message sat there without response.

You just made this legal.

Above it, older messages looked obscene in their softness.

Did she kick after the tea?

Send me the paint color again.

Soon. I promise.

He closed the thread before the archive could become another room she controlled, then stepped to the box under the window and lifted the lid. Clothes folded by size. Aveline’s handwriting on sticky notes.

too warm?

wash again hospital?

He stared at the last note. Hospital.

His phone vibrated. Celine. He let it ring. Then again. He silenced it.

Grant watched from the doorway without watching. “The building says a friend of hers may still have remote notice through a maintenance contact,” Grant said.

Dario looked up. “Meaning?”

“Meaning if we enter, someone may know.”

“Let them.”

Grant’s eyes flicked once to the nursery boxes – only once. Dario disliked him for it. “Anything else?”

“The safe drawer in the primary bedroom has been opened recently. Nothing missing from your documents. Her medical folder is gone.”

“Copies?”

“If there were copies, they’re gone too.”

Dario walked past him into the hall. The apartment looked staged now – not because anything was arranged, but because absence had been curated. Aveline had removed herself in categories: medical proof, access proof, financial proof, clinic proof, public proof. She had not run crying with baby sweaters and a suitcase of jewelry-she had built an exit with receipts, timestamps, and names.

His temper moved hot through his chest. For 3 days he had let lawyers describe her as vulnerable. For 3 days he had allowed Celine to use words like concern and coordination because they sounded better than pursuit. For 3 days he had believed Aveline’s resistance came from hurt that could be redirected once she understood the scale of what was at stake. Now he stood in the apartment she had hollowed out, and understood something less convenient – she had learned from him. Not the whole lesson, not enough, but enough to understand that a thing did not have to be public to become power.

His phone vibrated again. This time it was not Celine – his mother’s name appeared on the screen.

LIVIA ARMITAGE

A

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

He lost her. Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

Dario answered. “Mother.”

“You will come to the tower before the winter vote meeting.”

No greeting, no question. Livia did not waste language when anger had already paid for the call.

“I have a search underway.”

“You have a scandal underway.”

“It is contained.”

“No,” his mother said. “It is photographed, reposted, and using the word mother.”

Dario looked down the hallway toward the nursery. The unfinished clouds hovered where Aveline had left them.

“I can handle it.”

“Then arrive in 20 minutes and explain why Mathias Vey is calling my counsel before he calls you.”

The line went dead. Dario lowered the phone. Grant said nothing – good.

Dario put his hand into his pocket and closed it around the ring until the edges bit his palm. “Lock the apartment behind us,” he said. “And pull a list of every person who knew we entered.”

Grant nodded. Dario looked once more at the untouched baby boxes, then left the nursery with the ring still in his fist.

End of chapter-

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He lost her. Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

The wife isn't me

Chapter 27

Livia Armitage did not use the family elevator. That was the first warning.

Dario saw her through the glass wall of the conference floor, walking past the executive bank as if convenience were something other people needed. She came through the main

corridor where assistants, junior counsel, and voting-family representatives could see her arrive. Public correction, then not private concern.

He stood at the head of the small conference room and watched his mother remove her gloves finger by finger. Black leather, no haste, no wasted gesture. On the wall screen, the winter vote packet waited with its neat columns and understated threats – trust blocks, board confirmations, Vey commitments, foundation optics. All the clean machinery that made families like his look inevitable from the outside.

Livia entered without knocking. “Close the door.”

Dario did. She set her gloves on the table beside a folder so thin it could only be dangerous.

“Where is she?”

“If I knew that, this meeting would be shorter.”

His mother’s eyes lifted – a colder version of his own. “Do not be clever while Mathias is counting your mistakes.”

“Mathias can count anything he likes. His leverage does not change the facts.”

“The facts are that your pregnant mistress has counsel, a doctor outside our network, a public statement using the word mother, and enough paper to make St. Orla nervous.”

The word mistress landed deliberately. Dario kept his face still.

“Aveline is not a public problem if people stop feeding the story.”

“She is public because you made her invisible in a room full of donors and expected invisibility to feel like gratitude.”

For a moment, the room narrowed. Livia was not defending Aveline – Dario knew better than to mistake accuracy for sympathy. His mother had always been able to identify the weak join in a structure. She could see where a marriage held, where a board seat could crack, where a person had been insulted too thoroughly to remain useful.

“Celine’s statement stabilized the first wave,” he said.

“Celine’s statement gave the story manners. It did not end it.”

“Anika Senn is posturing.”

“Anika Senn is building a record.”

He disliked hearing the name in his mother’s voice – it made the problem sound external.

“The hearing will clarify medical access.”

“The hearing will put your private conduct into a room where someone else keeps minutes.”

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He lost her. Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

AO

Dario moved to the window. Below, the city ran in straight lines and controlled traffic. Winter light struck the neighboring tower and split oder pale bands across the carpet. He had spent years learning the difference between real danger and noise. This felt like noise because it was personal, and that was what bothered him- personal problems should not be allowed to touch governance.

The conference room had been designed for confidence. Leather chairs with low backs so no one could hide inside them. A table long enough to separate opponents but not so long that a vote could pretend to be impersonal. A screen that made family money look like a neutral sequence of charts. He had closed acquisitions in this room. He had persuaded cousins who hated him to call self-interest duty/He had watched older men underestimate him because he was careful with his voice and let them confuse restraint with hesitation. He had never once felt the room ask whether he had lied to a woman in a hospital corridor.

Now the question sat everywhere.

“I did what was necessary to preserve the vote,” he said.

Livia laughed once- not warmly. “No. You did what you wanted and called the delay strategy.”

He turned. “I did not ask Celine’s father to turn my marriage into a hostage document.”

“You accepted the benefits of the hostage document for 9 years.”

“I have a child with Celine.”

“You have 2 children inside pregnant women and a 6-year-old son whose school already has parents whispering beside the gates.”

That struck harder than he wanted. Nico should not have been in this.

“Keep Nico out of it.”

“I am trying to keep all of us out of it.”

Livia opened the thin folder. Inside were printed screenshots – Celine’s statement, Aveline’s denial through counsel, CityGlass commentary, a cropped image of Dario at St. Orla’s donor reception with Celine’s hand on his arm and Nico beside them. Under it, someone had written: timeline issue?

Dario picked up the page. The handwriting was unfamiliar, and that irritated him too. If an enemy was going to reduce months of necessity into 2 smug words, he wanted to know whose hand held the pen. Instead the page had passed through enough people to become anonymous a donor’s daughter, Livia’s office, Mathias’s counsel, Celine’s family office. Each layer made the insult cleaner. Timeline issue. As if Aveline were arithmetic.

“Where did this come from?”

“A donor’s daughter with too much time and a private account. It has not moved widely.”

“Then why am I looking at it?”

“Because Mathias is looking at it.”

He set the page down. Livia watched him.

“Mathias does not care what you promised the Ashby woman. He cares whether Celine looks humiliated before his vote block renews its usefulness.”

“Aveline has no interest in humiliating Celine.”

“You are still thinking like a man who believes intention matters more than use.”

His mouth tightened. “Do not call her the Ashby woman.”

MoboReader – Read Book & Story bons. Her family threw her away A foundation made her heir Her ex? He’s

KIRA

Livia’s expression did not change, but the pause sharpened. “There it is.”

“What?”

“The part of this you keep mistaking for loyalty.”

Dario said nothing.

“If you loved her, you should have told the truth before you made her body part of our succession problem.”

“Do not.”

“I am not moralizing. I am describing the order of events.”

He wanted, suddenly and uselessly, to tell her that Aveline had not felt like succession – not at first, She had felt like the one room in the city where the name Armitage did not enter before him. She had not asked for seating charts, vote math, foundation calendars, Celine’s family dinners, or the tiresome social choreography of being married in public to a woman who understood him only as a position she was entitled to share. Aveline had looked at him as if he were a man before he was a structure. Then she had become pregnant-and the structure grad arrived to collect the room.

The calm was worse than accusation. Dario had been shouted at by board members, threatened by creditors, flattered by men who planned to betray him. Livia’s disappointment had always been more efficient – it did not need volume. It simply removed unnecessary coverings.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Contain her quietly.”

“That is already in motion.”

“No. You have been pursuing her like a husband with wounded pride. I am telling you to behave like a man who understands exposure.”

“Meaning?”

“No scenes. No visible cars at women’s clinics. No men in building lobbies where friends can photograph them. No contact that makes her look hunted.”

Grant had warned him. Dario did not let the irritation show.

“We need her location.”

“Then find it without proving you are searching.”

“That may take time.”

“You are out of time.”

Livia slid another page across the table. It was the winter vote agenda, marked in red.

“Mathias is prepared to ask for a delay if this expands. A delay keeps his leverage in place. It gives Celine’s side room to demand conditions. It gives cousins who dislike you a polite reason to become principled.”

“They do not have the numbers.”

“They have enough numbers if you arrive covered in scandal and insisting everyone call it private.”

Dario looked at the red marks – meeting, trust confirmation, interim governance, delay petition. All very clean. Families did not stab each other in conference rooms anymore – they adjusted calendars.

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INSTALL dy throw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

KERA

“What are your terms?” he asked.

“Mine?”

“You summoned me before the meeting. You want something.”

For the first time, his mother’s face softened – not with mercy, with memory, perhaps. She had once held the majority trust vote in a marriage that taught her exactly how expensive softness could become when recorded by the wrong people.

“I want you to remember that the Armitage name is not a romance.”

“I know that.”

“No. You know it as a slogan. I know it as a bill.”

Silence settled. On the other side of the glass, an assistant paused with a tray of coffee, saw the closed door, and moved on.

Livia closed the folder. “If you cannot contain Aveline Ashby without giving Mathias ownership of your panic, step aside before the winter vote.”

Dario went still. “You would back that?”

“I would back the structure that survives.”

“I am your son.”

“Yes,” she said. “That is why I am saying it to your face.”

For 3 seconds he saw the shape of it — not abandonment, worse. Assessment. Livia did not want him destroyed; she wanted him corrected, and if correction failed, she wanted the family protected from the cost of his wanting.

Dario thought of the nursery boxes, the yellow blanket, the ring in his pocket, Aveline’s public sentence- I am the mother of the child I am carrying. He could hear her saying it. Not pleading, not performing – exact as a blade.

His mother gathered her gloves. “The vote meeting starts in 12 minutes. Mathias will be charming. Celine will be dignified. You will not appear distracted.”

“And Aveline?”

“She is not in this building.”

It was the cruelest thing Livia could have said because it was practical.

Dario opened the door for her. She stopped beside him. “Do not confuse possession with strategy again.”

Then she walked out into the corridor where everyone could see he had been made to wait. Dario remained in the room until the door clicked shut. For a moment, he did not move – movement would have admitted that Livia’s terms had entered him.

The city below continued cleanly without asking whether he deserved it. A black car turned at the light. A messenger crossed between towers with a satchel under one arm. Somewhere in the building, Celine was likely being offered tea by people who wanted to measure whether humiliation had touched her face. Aveline was lying somewhere outside his map with his child inside her and documents in her hands.

Not outside his reach. Outside his map. There was a difference. He corrected it internally as soon as he noticed it.

He took out his phone. Grant answered on the second ring.

“Yes?”

4/5 AO

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He lost her. Now he heas. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

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“Stop using anyone visible.”

“Understood.”

“No building lobbies. No clinic entrances. No calls from numbers that trace back to us. I want her location, her doctor schedule, and every person between her and the hearing.”

Grant was quiet. “Parameters?”

Dario looked at the winter vote packet, at the red delay marks, at his own reflection in the glass-composed enough to pass for innocent.

“Find Aveline,” he said. “And do it without leaving marks.”

End of chapter

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He lost her Now he begs Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

The wife isn't me

Chapter 28

“Before I examine you, I need to say something unpleasant.”

Dr. Price closed the exam-room door herself, and that mattered. I had begun to notice who left doors open, who stood in them, who treated a threshold as a place to wait or a place to block. Dr. Price closed the door, crossed to the sink, washed her hands, and turned back to me without touching the file on the counter.

She had fit us into the late-afternoon gap between a postpartum blood-pressure check and a patient who arrived 20 minutes early with 2 toddlers and no apology. I heard one of the toddlers laughing in the hall before the door closed-ordinary noise, sticky-shoe noise, life continuing in its loud, unfiled way. It made the folder on the counter look more hostile. My name was on the tab, and so was the red sticker Dr. Price had added after the St. Orla restriction notice: PRIVACY REVIEW BEFORE RELEASE.

“Worse than a fake transfer appointment?” I asked.

“Adjacent.”

Isolde made a sound from the chair beside the wall. “Medical vocabulary is becoming threatening.”

“That is partly what I mean,” Dr. Price said.

The room was small and too bright—not St. Orla bright, with donor money built into the walls but fluorescent, honest, a little tired. The paper on the exam table wrinkled under my thighs. My hospital-and-escape bag sat on the floor where I could see it—not because I thought the doctor would take it, but because I had learned that looking at exits was cheaper than pretending I did not need them.

Dr. Price took the rolling stool and sat instead of standing over me. “You are under significant stress. That is medically relevant. It can affect blood pressure, sleep, appetite, contractions, fetal movement, and decision-making capacity if it becomes severe enough.”

My stomach tightened before my uterus did. “I hear the door opening.”

“Yes.”

She did not soften it, and I preferred that.

“The fact that stress is medically relevant means someone can try to weaponize the word. They can take ordinary, understandable reactions and present them as instability if the context is stripped away.”

I looked at the blood pressure cuff on the wall. It looked harmless so had many things until someone labeled them correctly.

“So if I panic because they schedule a transfer I never consented to, the panic becomes proof I need supervision.”

“It can, if they get to narrate it first.”

My mouth went dry. “And if I do not panic?”

“Then they may say you are detached.”

Isolde’s laugh had no humor in it. “Convenient.”

“Yes,” Dr. Price said. “That is why we do not chase the perfect emotional presentation. There is no perfect presentation when someone else is editing the caption.”

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He lost her Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He's

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EITA expanded

I looked at my hands-folded over the curve of my stomach with deliberate neatness. Too neat, maybe. There it was. The trap expanding even when I saw it.

Isolde leaned forward. "How do we stop that?"

"By documenting context. By documenting care. By being precise."

Dr. Price opened the file then. Not before. The order mattered too.

"I received the voicemail and your counsel's notice refusing the unauthorized appointment. I am adding a note that I did not order fasting labs,

I did not recommend transfer to Dr. Merrow's clinic, and you have not refused prenatal care. You are here. You came promptly after reporting increased tightening and stress."

I swallowed. "Does coming here make me look frightened?"

"It makes you look like a patient seeking care."

"Those can be made to sound the same."

"They can. That does not mean we avoid care."

The baby moved, a slow push under my right ribs. I put my hand there. "I hate that my body is a witness they can cross-examine."

Dr. Price's face changed slightly-not pity, recognition maybe. "Your body is not doing anything wrong."

I looked at her. "That sentence feels expensive."

"It is free in this office."

I should have found that comforting. Instead my throat hurt. The last 24 hours had been a sequence of rooms where simple truths required witnesses – I am the mother, I did not consent, I established care, I ate lunch, I am not refusing treatment, I am afraid because frightening things are happening, not because fear is a diagnosis.

Dr. Price gestured to the cuff. "May I check your blood pressure?"

“Yes.”

She asked every time, and it still startled me. The cuff tightened around my arm. For 1 unreasonable second I thought of Dario’s hand around my wrist in the donor corridor-not hurting me, not exactly, just deciding where my body should stand while his legal wife watched. The machine hummed. I breathed slowly because I wanted the number to behave, then hated that too.

“138 over 86,” Dr. Price said.

“Is that bad?”

“Higher than last visit. Not an emergency by itself. We will recheck after you lie on your left side.”

“If it stays high?”

“We monitor more closely. We do not jump to panic.”

Monitor. Another word that could mean care or control depending on who held the chart.

Dr. Price examined me with the same careful sequence as before – consent before the Doppler, consent before measuring, consent before pressing along the muscles that had tightened earlier. She listened when I described the banding sensation after the public statement, the voicemail, the packing, the lobby-camera image of Dario’s security in the apartment. She did not tell me to calm down. She did not tell me stress was bad for the baby in that terrible sugary voice people used when they wanted a pregnant woman to feel responsible for harm

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Now he boos. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

AO

KIRA already done to her. She wrote.

Then she found my daughter’s heartbeat – fast, steady, alive in the room. The sound undid something I had been holding too tightly I closed my eyes. Isolde looked away, not because she was embarrassed but because some moments deserved not to be watched directly.

“Good activity,” Dr. Price said. “Heart rate is reassuring.”

The word reassuring entered me like water, and for 3 breaths, I let it. Then the doctor removed the Doppler and wiped the gel from my stomach with a warmed cloth.

“Now the unpleasant part.”

“That was not already it?”

“No.”

I opened my eyes. Dr. Price sat again.

“Your symptoms, blood pressure change, poor intake, and the tightening episodes tell me your body needs lower activity for now. I am recommending limited bed rest.”

The room went very still. Even the fluorescent light seemed to pause.

“Define limited,” I said.

“Not complete immobility. I do not want that unless it becomes medically necessary. But you should be lying down much of the day, on your side when possible. No unnecessary stairs. No long trips. No packing, lifting, rushing between offices, or sitting upright for hours over evidence binders.”

Isolde looked at the duffel bag on the floor. So did I. It sat there like an accusation with zippers.

“I have a hearing,” I said.

“Remote if possible.”

“I may have to move rooms.”

“Then you move with help and with a plan, not by carrying a bag down 3 flights because someone scared you into speed.”

Heat crawled up my neck. “Speed is sometimes what keeps me safe.”

“Yes,” Dr. Price said. “And that is exactly why this is hard.”

I hated her for agreeing-only for a second. Then I hated Dario more accurately.

“Can you write it without making me sound incapable?”

“I can write: activity restriction recommended due to pregnancy-related symptoms and external stressors; patient remains oriented, engaged in care, and capable of medical decision-making.”

I stared at her. “You had that ready.”

“I have treated women whose fear was misfiled before.”

The sentence did not open into a story. Dr. Price did not offer one, and I did not ask – that restraint made me trust her more than any confession would have. She was not using another woman’s history to make me grateful. She was letting the lesson stand where it could help without turning it into a sermon.

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Isolde’s hands closed on each other. “Can they still twist it?”

“They can try.”

Dr. Price looked at me, not Isolde. “But the answer to weaponized medical language is not hiding symptoms. It is clean documentation from a provider who is not trying to take your choices.”

Choices. The word landed on my lap beside the paper sheet. Choice had become less dramatic than I once imagined – not a speech in a donor hall, not walking out with my head high while cameras flashed. It was asking whether a note could say activity restriction without saying incompetence. It was eating crackers at 1:30 so fasting labs could not be implied. It was lying down when every nerve in my body wanted to run.

“If I stay still, he gets closer,” I said.

Dr. Price did not answer quickly-that was another mercy.

“If your body is pushed too hard, he gets another argument. We need to protect both: your mobility as a legal person and your pregnancy as a medical reality.”

I put both hands over my stomach. The baby pushed against my left palm.

“She hates this.”

“She may hate the gel.”

“She has opinions.”

“Then we will document her reassuringly opinionated movement.”

Isolde laughed under her breath, very softly. I did not-but the corner of the room loosened.

Dr. Price printed 2 notes before we left. One for counsel, one for me. She also wrote instructions in plain language on a pink sheet because the clinic had run out of white paper.

Rest on left side when possible. Hydration. Regular food. Track tightening, bleeding, severe headache, visual changes, reduced fetal movement. Call immediately for warning signs. No unauthorized transfer. No fasting labs unless ordered by current provider.

Pink paper, black ink – my body translated into orders I had chosen to accept. I read it twice before folding it. The warning signs were plain and terrifying: severe headache, visual changes, bleeding, reduced fetal movement, call immediately. There was no line that said: when your false fiance routes a clinic around your consent, breathe evenly and preserve the voicemail. There should have been.

I folded the sheet and put it into the hospital-and-escape bag. It made the bag heavier in a way that frightened me more than the documents had.

Outside, Isolde held the car door while I lowered myself in slowly. No rushing, no stairs, no carrying. The city moved past the windshield as if speed were still available to other people. I leaned against the seat and felt my daughter shift under my ribs.

By the time we reached the safe building, Dr. Price's note had already gone to Anika and Mara. Mara's reply waited on the clean phone.

We can use this. Rest now. Bennett may need to bring signed emergency paperwork by hand because courier options are compromised. Your decision whether he enters.

Bennett. Paperwork. By hand. Another man at another door.

I looked at the 3 flights of stairs between the lobby and the room where my chain lock waited. Limited bed rest, Dr. Price had said – not helpless, not safe, just harder to run.

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End of chapter

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 29

“You are not a bargain.”

I said it to my stomach because the room had become too quiet. Isolde was downstairs checking the visitor log with Nina. Dr. Price’s pink instruction sheet lay on the table beside the hearing binder. The hospital-and-escape bag sat by the door where I could see it without standing.

I lay on my left side on the narrow bed, knees bent around a pillow that had a faded blue case and smelled faintly of laundry soap. Limited bed rest – the phrase made me feel like furniture with medical supervision. I had been still for 38 minutes, and it felt like 3 days.

“You are not leverage,” I told my daughter. “You are not timing. You are not continuity of care. You are not a private family arrangement,”

She moved once, a small pressure against the mattress side of me.

“Yes, I heard it too.”

Talking to her had felt ridiculous at first. Dario used to do it at night with his hand warm over my stomach, voice low, as if fatherhood were a secret language he could enter without becoming honest in daylight. He would tell her the apartment was waiting. He would tell her he had plans for her. He would say soon in that voice that made delay sound like a gift. Sometimes he had spoken to her in low phrases he refused to translate all the way – not secrets, he said, just things that sounded better as they were.

I had believed that too, because love made untranslated things feel intimate instead of evasive, Now I wondered how many words in my life had sounded better because I had not been allowed to see their full meaning. Soon, everyone will know. I did not use that word anymore- soon belonged to men with locked calendars and legal wives. I had today, and today had a chain lock, a pink medical sheet, an unauthorized transfer appointment refused through counsel, and a body that needed to rest while danger became more formal.

“I thought safety was going to feel bigger,” I said.

The baby rolled.

“I know. Poor planning on my part.”

My hand rested where she pressed. The skin there was tight and warm, and I could see the faint line below my navel, the stretch of a body doing work no public statement could rephrase. It was strange to be so visibly pregnant and still have people behave as if motherhood could be reassigned by paperwork. Maybe that was the cruelty they could see me and still practice not seeing me.

“They are going to offer things,” I whispered. “Not directly, probably. Through forms. Through doctors. Through men who say reasonable. Through women who say dignity.”

The room hummed around me – old radiator, bad lamp, phone charging on the table, printer asleep after eating too much paper and making the room smell hot.

“They will say Armitage means protection. They will say money means safety. They will say my fear proves I cannot give you what their name can.”

My throat tightened. This was the danger of quiet-action kept grief in a useful posture, but stillness let it sit on the bed.

“I need you to know something before you have a name in the world.”

I had not said Noa aloud to anyone yet not because I was unsure, but because names attracted hands. The name had come to me on a

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He lost her. Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s rainy morning before everything broke, when I woke before Dario and lay still because the baby was turning in slow liquid ares under my Noa. Small, clear, unowned. A name that did not need a crest beside it to stand. I had typed it into my notes app and then deleted a from the screen, keeping it in my head like a match cupped against wind.

Dano had once liked the sound of Noa and then tried to fold naming conventions into some forged sponsor-adjacent assignment as if ever syllables could be billed to his future. After that, the name had gone private – not gone, hidden somewhere cleaner than evidence

“I will not trade you for safety.”

The sentence came out rough. I waited for my body to punish it. It did not.

“If I sign anything, it will be because I understand it. If I take help, it will be help that leaves us ours. If someone stands in a doorway, I decide whether they come in.”

A knock sounded – not at the room door but downstairs, faint through old pipes and stairwell echo. I stopped breathing anyway. My phone lit. Isolde.

Bennett here with packet from Mara/Anika. Waiting downstairs. Has not asked for room number. Nina has him in front hall, not stairwell. Do you want him up or should I take paperwork?

I read the message 3 times. Has not asked for room number. Not stairwell. Do you want him up. The phrasing was so careful it made me want to cry again, which was unfair to everyone involved and especially to my sinuses.

I typed: What paperwork?

Isolde answered: Emergency filing copies. Needs your wet signature on 2 corrected pages and acknowledgment of new Dario filing. He says he can leave it with me if you prefer.

New Dario filing. The baby kicked once, hard enough that I winced.

“Yes,” I said. “I agree.”

The phone sat heavy in my hand. Bennett could leave it with Isolde – that would be clean. No new man in the safe room, no complication, no face attached to funding I had barely accepted. It would also be easier to keep Bennett abstract. Abstract help could be refused cleanly. Abstract money had disclosures. Abstract men did not have wet shoulders from rain or a habit of stepping away from doors. Abstract did not make me compare anything.

Comparison felt disloyal to myself, as if noticing the absence of pressure meant I had forgiven the pressure that came before. But Bennett had already become a kind of evidence too – not romantic, not even personal in a way I could afford. He was evidence that a man could arrive at a door with resources and wait on the correct side of it. That difference felt dangerous to notice, not because of him, but because my body had been trained to confuse relief with attachment.

I typed slowly. Ask him to wait. Come up first.

Isolde replied with a thumbs-up, then immediately sent: Professional thumbs-up, not emotional support emoji.

I almost smiled. The door opened 2 minutes later after her key scraped, stopped, and the chain rattled because the safe room did not do anything smoothly. Isolde entered alone, holding a sealed envelope and a bottle of water.

“He is downstairs,” she said.

“I gathered.”

“Standing by the notice board. Nina offered him the office chair and he said no because it would put him in front of the stairs.”

I looked at her. “Did he say that?”

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"No. He looked at the chair, looked at the stairs, and chose the wall where people can pass

"You are interpreting."

"I am observing aggressively."

She set the envelope on the table and the water beside the bed. "Mara says this part is time-sensitive. Anika marked the pages for signature Bennett says he can leave if you want, or he can explain what he physically brought and nothing else."

"Nothing else?"

"His words were: I am not counsel. I can identify documents and carry them back. I will not advise unless she asks a question I am allowed to answer."

I closed my eyes. The distinction should not have mattered as much as it did. Dario had always explained before I asked – Dario had made knowing things feel intimate until knowledge became a corridor with all the exits locked.

"Do you want him in?" Isolde asked. Not should. Not he is useful. Not we need. Want. The word felt too soft for the room.

"I want the paperwork," I said.

"That is not the same answer."

"I know."

She waited. I hated that too-waiting made the choice mine, and mine meant I had to feel the shape of it.

"I want him to bring the paperwork in," I said. "Door open. You stay. He does not sit unless I tell him he can."

Isolde nodded once. "Good boundaries."

"Do not grade me."

"Terrible boundaries. Barely passing."

This time I did smile – small, unwise, human.

Isolde went downstairs. While she was gone, I pushed myself upright slowly, obeying Dr. Price with open resentment. My body felt heavy and unreliable, but not weak-that was an important distinction. I adjusted the pillow behind my back, smoothed my shirt over my stomach, and made no attempt to look less pregnant for a man carrying documents about my pregnancy. Let the room see the fact they kept trying to rephrase,

The knock came 4 minutes later. Isolde opened the door. Bennett stood behind her with a brown legal envelope in one hand and nothing in the other — no coffee, no flowers, no expression of masculine concern arranged for maximum moral lighting. Just rolled sleeves, a gray coat damp at the shoulders from rain, and the kind of stillness that made space instead of taking it.

He did not look past Isolde until she stepped aside. Then his eyes came to me not my stomach first. My face.

“Ms. Ashby.”

“Mr. Bellamy.”

He lifted the envelope slightly. “Mara asked me to bring these because the usual courier route was no longer clean. I can leave them with Ms. Fane.”

“You can come in.”

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He glanced at the open doorway, then at the chair. “Where would you like me?”

The question moved through the room with almost no weight. Almost.

“By the table,” I said. “Standing.”

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He did exactly that-no pause long enough to imply injury, no smile to make compliance charming. He set the envelope on the table, stepped back, and kept his hands visible at his sides like he understood documents could be invasive too.

Isolde took the envelope and opened it. Inside were clipped pages, marked tabs, and a cover sheet from Mara. I watched Isolde’s face while she read. The change was small-jaw first, then eyes.

“What?” I asked.

Bennett did not answer. Isolde looked at him. He remained quiet-waiting. That frightened me more than if he had started explaining.

“Isolde.”

She handed me the top page. My fingers went cold before I read the first line.

Notice of Emergency Petition for Temporary Medical Access and Care Coordination.

Dario’s name appeared beneath it. Petitioner. Father of unborn child.

I read the heading again because the room had become too bright. Emergency medical access. Not contact, not location

Bennett’s voice was low and factual. “That is the new filing.”

My daughter moved under my hand. I looked at the page until the words stopped swimming.

Dario had found another door.

End of chapter access.

4/4 AO

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A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

The wife isn't me

Chapter 30

“Do you know what it means?”

I asked Bennett because he had not explained. That was new enough to feel like silence with a shape.

The 4 of us stood or sat in the safe room according to rules I had made 7 minutes earlier and already wanted to revise because fear kept discovering additional clauses. I was upright on the bed. Isolde sat at the square table with the packet spread in front of her. Bennett stood where I had put him, near the table but not blocking the door. Nina waited in the hall because she had brought him up and refused to leave a visitor unaccounted for. Nobody complained about the exact arrangement-that alone made it feel unreal.

The door stayed open. Cold air from the corridor touched my ankles. Good- let the room remember there was an exit.

Bennett looked at the page in my hand, then at me. “I know what the cover sheet says. I know what Mara flagged. I am not your lawyer.”

“That is not what I asked.”

“No,” he said. “It is the line I need to draw before I answer.”

a line placed where his Isolde’s gaze flicked to me – she heard it too. Line. Not boundary as decoration, not discretion as excuse usefulness stopped. Dario loved lines when he drew them around other people: stay here, wait until after the vote, do not make this public, do not do anything stupid. Bennett had drawn one around himself, and it changed the room.

“Draw it,” I said.

He nodded once. “I can identify what I physically brought. I can tell you who sent it, what page tabs Mara marked, and what logistics she asked me to confirm. I cannot interpret legal strategy. I cannot tell you what to sign. I cannot tell you what to feel about it.”

“Generous of you.”

His mouth did not quite smile. “That part is outside my qualifications.”

Isolde looked down at the packet to hide something that might have been approval. I did not want approval in the room – I wanted the page to stop saying access.

“Then identify it.”

Bennett picked up the cover sheet only after looking at Isolde, who nodded because she had custody of the packet. He did not take the paper from my hand.

“Mara sent corrected pages for your filing. Two signature tabs. One acknowledgement that the unauthorized Dr. Merrow appointment was refused through counsel before 5:00 PM. One declaration update attaching Dr. Price’s note on current care and activity restriction.”

Activity restriction. The words made my body feel heavier, as if the paper had learned gravity.

“And his filing?”

“Copy only. No signature from you. Mara wanted you to have it before counsel call.”

“Why bring it by hand?”

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“Courier route had a name mismatch and a pickup request from an unknown third party.”

Isolde swore.

Nina said from the hall, “Language.”

Isolde did not apologize. I looked at Bennett. “Unknown third party.”

“That is what Mara wrote.”

“But you think it was Dario.”

“I think someone knew enough about the documents to make ordinary delivery less clean.”

Clean. That word again. It had become a moral category-clean courier, clean record, clean route, clean hands. Everyone wanted clean hands while passing around papers about my body.

“So you brought them.”

“Yes.”

“Because Bellamy funding creates conflict but Bellamy legs are apparently available.”

This time his expression changed – not offense, attention. “Because Mara asked whether I could carry an envelope from one secure desk to another without opening it, delaying it, or making myself part of your decision. I could.”

I looked at the envelope. “Did you open it?”

“No.”

“Did anyone in your office scan it?”

“No. Mara’s office sealed it. I carried it.”

“Do you know where I am now?”

“I know the building Nina admitted me to. I do not know your room number except because I am standing in it, and I will not keep it in any system or message.”

“That sounds impossible.”

“It is inconvenient. Not impossible.”

The baby pressed against my ribs. I rubbed the spot slowly. “Dario would say inconvenience is how mistakes happen.”

“He has different incentives.”

No insult, no rivalry – just a fact set on the table beside the packet. Different incentives. I hated how much safer that felt than outrage. Outrage was easy to perform; precision cost more.

I lowered my eyes to the filing. Temporary Medical Access and Care Coordination. The title managed to sound reasonable and violent at the same time.

“Read the first marked paragraph,” Isolde said quietly.

“You read it.”

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She looked at me. “Are you sure?”

“No. Do it anyway.”

She turned to the tabbed page. Bennett stepped farther back without being asked – it was such a small movement that my body noticed before my mind did. He had given the bad words more room to reach me without standing inside them.

Isolde read. “Petitioner seeks temporary access to medical scheduling, provider coordination, and emergency care information for the unborn child due to respondent’s abrupt withdrawal from established care pathways, refusal of continuity planning, and concealment of current medical status.”

The room held the sentence. I held my stomach. Respondent. Unborn child. Withdrawal. Refusal. Concealment. Not Aveline, not daughter, not Dario lied, Celine pressured, St. Orla restricted records, Merrow scheduled me without consent, and I found a doctor who asked before touching me. Just a corridor of words leading away from what happened.

“He wants my appointments,” I said.

Bennett did not answer.

I looked at him. “That is a question.”

“Then yes. As written, the request appears aimed at access to medical scheduling and coordination information.”

“My location through appointments.”

“Possibly.”

“My doctor.”

“Potentially.”

“My body, through nicer nouns.”

His eyes stayed on mine. “That is a fair description of the risk.”

Fair. Not dramatic, not calming. Fair.

I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth the way Dr. Price had told me, which annoyed me because helpful instructions should not become necessary during legal ambushes.

“What do I do?”

Bennett looked to Isolde, then back to me. “Ask Mara.”

The answer landed flat. I stared at him. “That is all?”

“That is the correct answer.”

“You came here with the documents.”

“Yes.”

“You know Dario.”

“Enough to know I should not become your lawyer by accident.”

“I am not asking for a lawyer.”

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“You are asking in the direction of one because I am a man in the room with a suit and a packet. That can make advice feel more solid thah a is.”

The sentence irritated me because it was true in a way I did not enjoy.

Isolde leaned back. “I dislike him less.”

“Noted,” I said.

Bennett remained still. He did not use Isolde’s comment to charm the room. He did not soften the refusal. He let it stand – not from power, but from the edge of his role. It was strange how different a refusal could feel when it did not take anything with it. Dario’s refusals had always arrived with architecture: no, not yet, because the vote; no, not public, because safety; no, not that doctor, because private/care would be better. His no made the room smaller and then called the shrinking protection. Bennett’s no left the door open.

I looked at him standing where I had placed him. Waiting, not managing. The difference was not romantic – it was more frightening than romance. Romance could be dismissed as chemistry, timing, pregnancy loneliness, any of the neat little cages people built for women’s judgment. This was structural – a man with resources had entered my room and accepted that my decision-making authority was not an obstacle to efficiency. I noticed it, then I made myself look away.

“What can you answer?” I asked.

“Logistics.”

“Then logistically, what happens now?”

“You sign or do not sign the 2 pages after Mara explains them. If signed, I take them back downstairs in the same envelope. Nina logs my exit. Isolde watches me hand the envelope to Mara’s courier at the legal office entrance or rides with me if you prefer. I do not keep copies.”

“You have thought about this.”

“Mara has procedures. I can follow procedures.”

“Dario has procedures too.”

“Yes.”

“The difference?”

“Mara’s preserve your choice.”

I looked at Isolde. “Did Mara tell him to say that?”

“If she did, I want her invoice itemized for emotional damage.”

Bennett’s mouth moved slightly-still not quite a smile. My phone buzzed. Everyone looked at it. The screen showed Mara.

I answered on speaker. “I have the packet.”

“Good,” Mara said. “Are you lying down?”

“Morally.”

Isolde muttered, “No.”

Mara ignored both of us. “We need to go through the signature tabs. Bennett should not advise. He can remain if you want him there for logistics, or leave the room.”

AO

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I looked at Bennett. He had already shifted one hand toward the door, ready to go before I asked. Waiting again.

“Stay by the table,” I said. “For logistics.”

“Understood.”

Mara walked me through the corrected pages. One attached Dr. Price’s note. One documented the refusal of Dr. Merrow’s unauthorized transfer appointment before 5:00 PM and stated plainly that I remained in independent prenatal care. I signed both. My signature looked fired but legible—that seemed like a victory too small to admit. Isolde blotted the ink with a tissue because the safe room did not have blotting paper and dignity was apparently optional after 4:00 PM.

Bennett turned his back while I shifted on the bed to reach the second tab. No one asked him to- that was why I noticed.

When the signatures were done, Mara said, “Now the copy of Dario’s petition. You do not need to read it all tonight, but Anika wants you prepared for the first paragraph because opposing counsel may use the phrase early.”

My body went cold. “What phrase?”

Mara paused. I hated the pause-it meant she was choosing the least harmful way to hand me harm.

“Isolde can read it, or I can.”

“I can.”

My voice was steadier than my pulse. Isolde slid the page toward me. The petition’s first paragraph began with Dario’s full name, my full name, and the kind of formal caption that made cruelty look administrative. Then the sentence found me.

This emergency petition arises from escalating concerns regarding maternal instability, unauthorized withdrawal from coordinated care, and risk to the unborn child absent immediate access to medical information.

Maternal instability. First paragraph, first wound. Not hidden in a supplemental note anymore Dario had taken the phrase and built a door with it.

The room waited for me to react-not because anyone demanded it, but because everyone understood that paper could bruise in places no doctor could photograph.

I put one hand over my daughter and read it again. This time, I did not shake.

End of chapter

AQ

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