The wife isn't me

Chapter 2

I went back to the apartment because I had nowhere else to put my body. That was the first truth-not the worst one. The worst one was that the elevator still opened for my key card, the lobby attendant still stood when he saw me, the private lift still carried me to the thirty-sixth floor without asking whether I belonged there.

Everything worked. That made it crueler.

The apartment was warm when I stepped inside. Dario liked it warm because I had complained once, early in the pregnancy, that cold floors made my calves cramp. He had ordered the heating schedule changed that same night. At the time, I thought that was love.

Now I stood in the entrance hall with the ultrasound envelope under one arm and his words still sitting on my skin.

It’s my apartment.

The lights came on automatically. Cream walls, black marble, the ridiculous brass bowl by the door where Dario dropped his cufflinks when he came home too tired to go to the bedroom. One of his ties lay across the console from that morning – navy silk, knotted badly because I had made him laugh while he was tying it. He had kissed me against that console before leaving.

I touched my mouth, then stopped. My hand went to my stomach instead.

The baby moved once, slow and heavy under my ribs, as if she had been listening all along and had decided not to forgive him either.

“I know,” I whispered.

The sound of my own voice startled me. There was no answer.

For fourteen weeks, this apartment had been the place where the lie softened its shoes before stepping close. The kitchen had the mug he bought after I said coffee smelled like betrayal but peppermint tea was acceptable. The living room had the chair he pushed near the window because afternoon light reached it best. The second bedroom had painter’s tape still stuck along one wall, where last Sunday he had stood barefoot in old trousers, arguing that clouds should not look like bread.

Our daughter’s wall.

I walked to the doorway and stopped. The nursery was not finished – barely a nursery at all. A crib frame leaned against one wall. Three small boxes of folded clothes sat under the window. The clouds were uneven, pale and soft, floating over a strip of unfinished sky.

Dario had painted them with his sleeves rolled up. He had looked so careful. That was what broke me for one clean second. Not the stage, not Celine's green silk, not Nico's small voice asking who I was. This. A crooked cloud on a wall in an apartment that was not mine.

I set the ultrasound envelope on top of the crib box. Then I took off the ring.

AQ

My finger looked wrong without it. A narrow pale band circled the skin where the diamond had been fourteen weeks was long enough for a mark, not long enough for a marriage. I put the ring beside the ultrasound envelope. The diamond caught the ceiling light and threw it back sharply.

Soon, he had said. Everyone will know.

They did know. Just not me.

My phone began vibrating in my coat pocket. Dario. I watched his name flash until it stopped. Then it began again. turned the phone face down on the window ledge and walked into the bedroom.

The sheets still held the clean crease the housekeeper left every Tuesday. Dario's side had a dent in the pillow from the nap he took yesterday before returning to whatever room Celine was allowed to stand in publicly.

I opened his closet. Suits, shirts, shoes polished by someone else. Nothing incriminating. Of course not. Dario did not leave mess where other people could find it he had not hidden Celine in a drawer. He had hidden me in plain sight and taught me to call it protection.

I opened the drawer by his side of the bed. A watch box, a bottle of antacids, a silver key I did not recognize, receipts folded with the edges aligned. At the back was a slim black envelope.

I knew I should leave it alone. I opened it anyway.

Inside was a card printed on thick ivory paper.

ORLA WOMEN'S CENTERARMITAGE FAMILY MATERNITY WING DONOR RECEPTION

Below that, in smaller type:

HOSTED IN HONOR OF DARIO AND CELINE ARMITAGE

The date was today. The time was the exact hour he had told me his meeting began.

I read it twice. Then I read the back. A handwritten note crossed the lower corner in black ink.

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

Not timing.

I sat on the edge of the bed before my knees made the decision for me. The room tilted once, then settled.

Dario had known. He had not stumbled into that stage – he had rehearsed it. He had put on the navy tie I laughed at, kissed me in the entrance hall, told me to rest after the scan, and gone to stand beside his pregnant wife under a hospital banner with their shared name.

My phone vibrated again. I picked it up. Eight missed calls. Three messages.

The first: Answer me.

The second: This is not safe for you or the baby.

The third: I am coming up.

AO

I stood too quickly. The baby pressed low and hard. For a moment I had to hold the bedpost and breathe through the sharp pu across my stomach. Not pain – not exactly. A warning.

“All right,” I whispered. “Slowly.”

I went to the front door and slid the chain into place. Then I opened the smart lock app on my phone.

For months I had used it to let in groceries, cleaners, Dario’s assistant when she brought files he said could not wait. I had never looked closely at the settings. Now I did.

Primary Owner: Dario Armitage.

Resident Guest: Aveline Ashby.

Guest. The word was so small. It still managed to take the air out of the room.

I tapped change access code. Access denied. I tried again – access denied. My hand was steady the third time. Access denied.

The elevator chimed outside the apartment. I locked the screen and put the phone in my pocket.

Dario did not knock first. The keypad sounded. The lock clicked. The door opened two inches and caught on the chain.

Silence. Then his voice, controlled and low. “Open the door, Aveline.”

I stood on the other side of it and looked at the narrow slice of his face. He had changed nothing-same suit, same tie, same clean hands. Only the expression was different. At the hospital, he had been managing a room. Here, there was no audience. The calculation did not need polish.

“You said it was your apartment,” I said. “I assumed that meant you could stay somewhere else.”

His jaw tightened. “Do not do this through a door.”

“Why? You did everything else through a lie.”

He closed his eyes for half a second. When he opened them, his voice was softer. I know what tonight looked like.”

“It looked like your wife was pregnant.”

“Celine and I are married legally.”

“Yes. I learned that part in a room full of donors.”

“In every way that matters, that marriage is finished.”

I almost laughed. It came out as one hard breath. “She is twenty-four weeks pregnant.”

His gaze flicked down. Not shame – I knew shame now. Shame looked like me taking off a ring in a nursery. Dario looked inconvenienced by facts.

“That happened during a difficult period,” he said.

“So did I?”

AQ

“No.”

Too quick. The word hit the chain between us and fell flat.

“Then tell me what I am.”

“You know what you are to me.”

“Someone from work?”

He flinched. Good – it was small, but I needed it.

“Nico was there,” he said.

“So was your wife.”

“Cameras were there. Board families. Celine’s father had people in that room. If I had said anything else, it would have become a weapon before we could control it.”

“Before you could control it.”

“Before we could protect you.”

“Don’t put me inside your sentence.”

His fingers flexed against the edge of the door. “Open the door.”

“No.”

“Aveline.”

“Answer me.”

“I am trying to.”

“When did you marry her?”

He looked past me into the apartment- toward the lights, the warmth, the room he still expected to enter because his name sat behind every lock.

“Nine years ago.”

My hand closed around the chain. Nine. Not a mistake from before me, not a paper problem. A life.

“And Nico is six.”

“Yes.”

“And you were going to tell me when?”

“After the winter vote.”

I stared at him. The phrase was familiar, softened by months of repetition. His family was difficult. The winter vote was dangerous They would use me. They would use the baby. He had told the truth the way poison tells the truth – one ingredient at a time.

“That was why you kept me quiet,” I said. “Not because they would hurt me.”

“They would have.”

“Because I would hurt you.”

His face hardened. “If I lose control of Armitage Group before the restructuring is complete, Celine’s family can force me out. Her father controls two board seats and half my mother’s trust votes until January. If I file for divorce now, everything becomes public and you become a headline before you become a mother.”

There it was. The machinery. Money, votes, family names- the expensive weather men like Dario called fate when they wanted women to stand still in the rain.

“That was almost three sentences of business,” I said. “Try one sentence of truth.”

His mouth closed. For a second, he looked tired. I hated that I noticed.

“I love you,” he said.

The words went through me badly. Not because I believed them – because some ruined part of me still knew where they used to live. In the kitchen at midnight. Against my stomach when he thought I was asleep. Between his hands when he held the tiny sweater he said was too small for any real person.

“You stood beside Celine today,” I said.

“I had to.”

“You let them announce your second child.”

“I could not correct that from a stage.”

“You called me someone from work.”

“I had to get you out of that room.”

“You did get me out. Then you told me to lower my voice.”

His eyes sharpened. “Because stress is dangerous right now.”

“No. Because truth is dangerous right now.”

The chain between us gleamed under the hall light. I looked at it and understood how little it meant. If Dario wanted the door open, the building would open it for him. If I refused to leave, his name could remove me. If I called security, they would call him first. The apartment had been built around my comfort – never around my safety.

“I need you to listen,” he said.

“I have listened for months.”

“Then listen once more.”

“No.”

He stepped closer to the gap. “You are angry. You should be. But do not confuse a legal arrangement with what we have.”

“What do we have?”

“A child.”

Not a future. Not a family. A child.

My daughter moved again, a firm roll beneath my palm.

“Do you want me?” I asked.

Dario’s expression changed. It was not guilt. It was worse. Pity.

“Aveline.”

“No. Answer correctly. Do you want me, or do you want the baby?”

“Do not separate them.”

“You already did.”

His silence filled the hall.

I reached for the chain – not to let him in. To close the door.

Dario saw the movement and put his hand flat against the wood. “There is a way forward,” he said.

The sentence stopped me. I should not have let it. But I was tired, and pregnant, and still stupid enough to want the man who painted clouds to exist somewhere inside the man at my door.

“A way forward,” I repeated.

“Yes.”

“Does it include telling people I am your fiancee?”

He did not answer.

“Does it include divorcing Celine before my daughter is born?”

His face went still. There it was – the real answer before the words.

“Not before,” he said.

I stepped back from the door as far as the hall table allowed. “Then there is no way forward.”

“There is,” he said. “If you can be reasonable long enough to think about the child instead of the humiliation.”

AO

The humiliation. As if it were weather. As if it had happened to me, not been done by him.

“I am thinking about her,” I said.

“Then think about what name protects her. Think about what doors open for an Armitage child. Think about hospitals, schools, safety, inheritance. Think about her not growing up as a scandal people whisper over.”

My hand went cold on the door. “She is already an Armitage child.”

Dario looked at my stomach through the gap, not at my face. “Not in a way the world can accept.”

For a moment, there was no room, no hall, no polished elevator waiting behind him. Only that sentence.

Not in a way the world can accept.

“Say what you mean,” I said.

He drew one slow breath. When he spoke again, his voice was careful. Almost gentle.

“There may be one way to give her the Armitage name without destroying everything.”

The baby shifted under my hand. I did not move.

“What way?”

Dario finally looked up from my stomach. And for the first time that night, I was afraid of how calm he was.

-End of chapter-