The wife isn't me

Chapter 3

“What way?” I asked.

Dario did not answer at once. That was how I knew the answer had been ready before I asked. Men like Dario did not pause because they were searching for words – they paused because they were choosing which version of the truth would sound least like violence.

His hand stayed flat against the door. The chain held. Two inches of space between us, and somehow the apartment still felt too open.

“A private clinic,” he said.

I stared at him through the gap. “No.”

“You have not heard me.”

“I heard enough.”

“Aveline.”

“Say the whole sentence.”

His mouth tightened. I had learned something in the last hour-Dario hated full sentences when they belonged to me. He liked fragments. Timing. Protection. Complicated. Legal. Words with doors built into them. Words he could step through and leave me standing on the wrong side.

“The child needs legitimacy,” he said.

The child. Not our daughter. Not even your daughter. The child.

My hand moved to my stomach before I could stop it. “She has a mother.”

“She has a biological mother.”

For a second, I did not understand the sentence. My body understood before my mind did. The baby shifted low and hard, and my breath caught so sharply I had to press my palm to the wall.

Biological. As if I were a line on a lab report. As if twenty-nine weeks of nausea, blood tests, swollen ankles, sleepless nights, and one small foot grinding under my ribs were a technical detail.

“Say that again,” I said.

He saw the mistake then- not the cruelty, the strategy mistake.

“I mean legally,” he said. “Publicly.”

“No. You meant what you said.”

“I am trying to separate emotion from structure.”

“You are trying to separate me from my baby.”

Silence. Outside the door, the hall light reflected off the side of his face. He looked carved from the same expensive stone as the lobby downstairs.

For months, I had thought his calm meant safety. It meant practice.

“This is not about taking her from you,” he said.

“Then what is it about?”

“Giving her a future that does not begin with scandal.”

“Her future begins with me.”

“And if the world decides you are the scandal?”

There it was. Not a threat – not exactly. Dario rarely raised a weapon where someone could photograph it. He only set it on the table and waited for me to notice the edge.

I looked at his hand on the door – at the clean nails, at the wedding band he was not wearing tonight, because even his lies had costume changes.

“Move your hand,” I said.

His eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Because I am closing the door.”

“We are not finished.”

“You are.”

I pushed. For one second, he resisted. Not enough to make it obvious. Enough. Then he lifted his hand. The door closed. The lock clicked. The chain shook once, then went still.

I stood with my forehead almost touching the wood and listened to him breathe on the other side.

“Aveline.”

I did not answer.

My phone was still in my pocket. My hand was not steady when I took it out, but the camera opened on the first try.

First, the smart-lock app. Primary Owner: Dario Armitage. Resident Guest: Aveline Ashby.

I took three screenshots. Then I walked away from the door. Slowly because the baby was heavy and my legs had begun to feel strange, and because I would not give him the sound of me falling.

“Do not walk away from me,” Dario said through the door.

I kept walking.

The bedroom looked the same. That was obscene. The sheets still had their clean crease. The bedside drawer was still open The slim black envelope lay on the bed where I had dropped it after reading the note.

I photographed the front. ST. ORLA WOMEN’S CENTER. ARMITAGE FAMILY MATERNITY WING DONOR RECEPTION. HOSTED IN HONOR OF DARIO AND CELINE ARMITAGE.

I photographed the date, the time. Then I turned the card over and photographed the handwriting.

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

My hand stopped there. Not timing. The phrase was so small that a person could miss it if she had not built a whole life out of missed small things.

“Aveline,” Dario called.

I took another photo. Then another. My phone tried to focus on the ivory paper, failed, and blurred the words. For a second, panic went through me so fast it felt like heat. No. Clear. I tapped the screen with my thumb until the letters sharpened, then took the photo again.

Then I sent it to myself. Email, cloud drive, Isolde. I had not called her yet. I had not told her anything. The message I sent was only four words.

If I disappear, open.

The little delivered checkmark appeared. I stared at it until my eyes burned. Then I locked the phone.

There was a sound at the front door. Paper against wood – not knocking. Sliding. I went cold.

“Look at it,” Dario said. His voice was lower now, closer to the floor.

I walked back to the entrance hall. A folded document had appeared under the door, stopped by the edge of the rug. White paper, black clip, no envelope- like a thing that had already been handled too many times.

I did not pick it up immediately. “What is this?”

“A draft.”

“Of what?”

“An authorization.”

The word made the hall narrow.

“For the clinic,” he said. “No one is asking you to decide tonight.”

I laughed once. It was not a good sound. “You brought paperwork.”

“I came prepared to protect the baby.”

“You came prepared to erase me.”

“Read it.”

I bent slowly. My back protested. My stomach tightened. The floor felt too far away. For one humiliating second, I had to brace one hand on the wall and lower myself like an old woman.

Dario heard it. Of course he did.

“Let me in,” he said. “You should not be bending like that.”

“Then should not slide paperwork under a door at a woman who is twenty-nine weeks pregnant.”

He went quiet. Good.

I picked up the pages. The first line was harmless-that was how these things worked.

Private Maternal Care Authorization.

I read it again. Private. Maternal. Care. Three words that sounded soft enough to sleep in.

Below them were boxes and blanks and names already typed where handwriting should have been.

Patient: AVELINE ASHBY.

Gestational Carrier: AVELINE ASHBY.

My vision narrowed. I read the line again because my mind refused to keep it.

Gestational Carrier. Not mother. Carrier.

The baby kicked, hard. I pressed the paper against my stomach without thinking, as if I could keep the words from reaching her.

“No,” I said. The word was small. Too small for the thing in my hand.

“That is clinic language,” Dario said through the door.

“It is your language.”

“It is standard.”

“Standard for who?”

He did not answer. I looked down again.

Legal Mother / Intended Parent: CELINE ARMITAGE.

The letters sat there neatly. Black on white. No hesitation, no blood, no swollen ankles, no hand on a stomach in the middle of the night, laughing because a baby had kicked hard enough to wake him.

Just: CELINE ARMITAGE.

AO

The woman in green silk. The woman on the stage. The woman whose son had asked who I was. The woman who was twenty four weeks pregnant with her own child and still had room on paper to become mother to mine.

“She is already pregnant,” I said.

“That is why this has to be handled privately.”

“Privately.”

“A family guardianship structure can be put in place before birth.”

“Do not talk to me like I am a form.”

“I am trying to give you options.”

“This option has my name under carrier.”

“Because that is the medical reality.”

My fingers tightened on the pages until the black clip bit into my palm. “The medical reality is that she is inside me.”

“The legal reality can protect her.”

“From what?”

“From being treated as a mistake.”

There it was again – that soft, careful cruelty. He had not called her a mistake. He had built the room where other people could.

Llooked at the form. There were more pages. Payment schedule. Confidentiality. Residence recommendation. Postpartum contact plan.

The words blurred at the edges-not because I did not understand them, because I did. Payment for silence. A place to put me. Visits to my own child if I behaved.

“Part of the child’s life,” I read aloud.

My voice sounded unlike me. Dario said nothing.

“You typed that too.”

“It is a draft.”

“You typed that I can be part of her life.”

“Aveline.”

“As what?”

Silence.

“As what, Dario?”

“Someone close.”

I closed my eyes. The hallway disappeared. For one second, I was back in the donor hall with Nico looking up at me.

Dad, who is that lady?

She’s someone from work, Nico.

Someone from work. Someone close. There were so many ways to stand near a family and still not belong to it.

I opened my eyes. My hand was steady now. That frightened me more than shaking would have.

I laid the pages on the console, smoothed them flat with my palm, and photographed every page.

“What are you doing?” Dario asked.

“Reading.”

“You are taking pictures.”

“Then stop giving me documents you do not want documented.”

The silence on the other side changed. Not louder. Sharper.

“Aveline, listen to me carefully.”

“No.”

“If you make this adversarial, you will force everyone into positions they do not want.”

“You put Celine’s name where mine should be.”

“Because I am trying to keep our daughter from being punished for our choices.”

“Our choices?”

I picked up the top page and held it in front of the peephole as if he could see through wood. “Which box is your choice in, Dario? Because I see mine. Patient. Carrier.

Confidentiality. Residence. Contact plan. I see Celine's. Legal mother. Intended parent. I do not see yours."

He did not answer.

"Of course I don't," I said. "Men like you do not put your names on the ugly parts."

"That is enough."

There he was. Not gentle now, not tired – the voice from the corridor at St. Orla. The one that told me to lower mine.

I folded the papers once, then again. I did not tear them. Torn paper looked emotional. Folded paper looked usable.

"I am keeping these."

1- Demence

"They are drafts."

"Then draft better."

"You are not thinking clearly."

"I am thinking like a mother."

He exhaled, and the sound went through the door like cold air. "A mother would think about what her child loses."

I looked toward the nursery. The ultrasound envelope was still there beside the ring, on top of the crib box. Our daughter had finally shown her face that afternoon. I had carried her picture downstairs to show her father. He had carried forms upstairs to give he another mother.

"No," I said. It was not small this time. "A mother thinks about who is trying to take her child and learns their handwriting."

Dario did not speak.

I picked up my phone again and sent the photographs to Isolde. This time I added one more line.

I need you now.

The message delivered. On the other side of the door, Dario's voice softened again. That was the worst version of him.

"You are making a mistake."

I looked at Celine's typed name on the page. Legal Mother / Intended Parent. Then I looked at mine. Gestational Carrier.

"No," I said. "I found yours."

– End of chapter-

AQ