The wife isn't me

Chapter 31

“Read the second page.”

Isolde said it like the page had committed a crime. I looked at the packet on the square table and did not move. My body had become a very exact kind of disobedient – if I shifted too quickly, the tightening came back low and hard, a belt pulled from the inside. If I sat too long, my ribs complained and the baby pressed upward as if she also objected to legal language.

Bennett stood by the open door with his hands empty. Nina was still in the hall. Nobody touched the paper until I did – and that mattered more than I wanted it to.

I reached for the petition. The tab on page 2 was yellow. Mara’s handwriting ran along the margin in a narrow, practical line: read allegations; do not answer emotionally in writing yet. I almost laughed – emotionally was such a polite word for the urge to tear the page in half with my teeth.

I read.

Respondent’s recent pattern of conduct demonstrates escalating instability during late-stage pregnancy, including abrupt departure from coordinated care, refusal of established transfer planning, concealment of current address and provider, and interference with medically appropriate paternal access to fetal welfare information.

The words blurred once- not because I was crying, but because the baby shifted under my ribs and my vision had to choose between paper and breath. I set one palm over the pressure and counted 4 slow seconds in, 6 out. Dr. Price had called that breathing. Dario’s lawyer would probably call it an observable sign of distress if a hallway camera caught it at the wrong angle.

“He put the pregnancy on trial,” I said.

Isolde’s face went still. Bennett did not answer-good. If he had said no, I might have hated him a little; if he had said yes too quickly, I might have hated him more.

The petition continued in clean black type. It did not say Dario lied about a wife – it said I withdrew. It did not say Celine brought a folder to an apartment I could not legally control – it said I rejected support. It did not say Dr. Merrow’s office scheduled fasting labs and transport without my consent – it said transfer planning had been refused. It did not say I found another doctor who asked before touching me- it said I had concealed my current medical status. There were no bruises in the wording because the bruise was the wording.

The exhibits made it worse because they were not lies in the simple, satisfying way. There was a copy of St. Orla's restriction notice – real. There was the supplemental note with its careful phrase about instability not being ruled out without court-supervised care coordination- real. There was a log entry showing I had left St. Orla's records desk before Dario arrived-real. The violence was in the missing half of each truth.

The restriction notice did not say the dispute began because Dario and Celine had requested access they did not have. The supplemental note did not say Dr. Price had already seen me and documented independent care. The log did not say I left through a staff corridor because the hospital had become a place where my medical file could be viewed by people I had not authorized. Dario had not invented a new story – he had trimmed the old one until it fit in his hand.

"Page 3 is worse," Isolde said.

"Thank you for pacing the experience."

"I am showing restraint."

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

KICA

"I can tell."

I turned the page. The top paragraph requested temporary access to medical scheduling, emergency-care notifications, provider contact, and care-coordination information "for the limited purpose of protecting the unborn child." Limited purpose. The apartment had limited access. The private clinic had support schedule. The hospital had continuity planning. Every locked door in Dario's world had a softer noury printed on it./

"If the judge grants this, he can call Dr. Price?" I asked.

Isolde looked toward Bennett before she stopped herself. Bennett's gaze remained on me.

"That is for counsel," he said.

The answer irritated me less this time-it was becoming a kind of furniture in the room: solid, plain, not designed to flatter me.

I opened the next page. Dario's declaration was attached. His name on the signature line looked absurdly familiar – Dario Armitage. I knew the slope of his capital D from birthday cards, delivery notes, and the small sticky note he had once left on the peppermint tea tin: Not coffee. I listened. Now the same hand claimed he had "grave concern."

I read his paragraph twice because the first time my body rejected it before my mind could organize the injury. He described me as frightened, isolated, influenced by third parties, and “less responsive to reasoned medical guidance” after I discovered “family complications.”

Family complications. Celine was not a family complication when she stood in green silk beside my child’s father. Nico was not a complication. The hidden marriage was not a complication. My daughter’s proposed erasure was not a complication. I was the complication because I had not stayed where he put me.

“I want to answer this,” I said.

“You will,” Isolde said.

“No. I want to write directly on it. In red.”

“Mara specifically said not emotionally in writing yet.”

“I can make red ink factual.”

“You absolutely cannot.”

Nina made a small sound from the hall that might have been agreement.

I looked at the filing again. The petition alleged that I had declined a private-clinic transfer “despite prior coordination through family counsel.” It referred to Dr. Merrow’s 9:00 AM appointment as a “preexisting continuity appointment.” It cited St. Orla’s supplemental instability note without mentioning the access dispute that caused the note. It attached a screenshot of Celine’s public statement without calling it Celine’s public statement. It called the CityGlass rumor “public confusion.” It called Anika’s denial “an adversarial media posture.” That was almost elegant – I had said I was the mother of my child, and Dario’s lawyer had made it sound like I had held a press conference with a match.

“There is a declaration from Grant Bell,” Isolde said.

My fingers stopped on the page. “The driver?”

“The driver.”

“Read it.”

She skimmed first. Her expression became very still, which meant she was arranging her face so it would not frighten me before the words did.

AO

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

CITA

Bennett shifted 1 step away from the door, not toward me toward the narrow table where the printer sat.

"What?" I asked.

"There is a fax confirmation on top of the printer."

–

I looked. A thin page had curled from the machine, half fallen onto the table, easy to miss beneath Mara's envelope. Isolde picked it up. Her mouth tightened.

"Court notice."

The room contracted before my body did. "Read it," I said.

She scanned quickly. "Emergency administrative review granted. Remote hearing set for tomorrow morning at 8:30."

"Tomorrow," I repeated. The word had no room in it. Tomorrow I was supposed to rest, refuse an appointment I had never made, keep my blood pressure down, and remain pregnant under a filing that made pregnancy sound like a defective condition needing supervision.

"There is more," Isolde said.

Of course there was more. Paper never arrived alone anymore-it brought relatives.

"The judge wants limited preliminary submissions by 7:00 AM. Affidavits, supporting exhibits, current-care documentation, proposed privacy order. Remote appearance authorized because of medical restriction."

Remote appearance authorized. The phrase should have felt merciful-instead I saw myself on a screen, cropped from the chest up, every breath flattened into evidence. If I looked tired, I was unstable. If I looked composed, I was calculating. If I touched my stomach, I was performing motherhood. If I did not, I was detached from the unborn child his petition pretended to protect.

"Aveline," Isolde said.

I hated my name in her careful voice- it meant my face had changed.

“I am here.”

“Lie down.”

“If 1 lie down every time he files something, I will spend the rest of my pregnancy horizontal.”

“That is medically possible if you keep arguing with gravity.”

Bennett looked toward the hall, then back to me. “I can take the acknowledgement back to Mara,” he said. “And I can leave.”

There it was again-exit offered before usefulness. I looked at the petition. Dario had asked a judge to give him the map to my care. Bennett was asking whether he should remove himself from the room. The comparison was not romantic. It was structural- and that made it harder to dismiss.

“Take the signed pages,” I said. “Wait for Mara to tell us what she needs. Not you. Mara.”

He nodded. Isolde gathered the corrected pages and slid them into the envelope.

I kept the petition – not because I wanted it near me, but because Dario had spent 14 weeks teaching me that documents became true when the person with power kept the clean copy. I wanted my own dirty, furious, annotated copy.

My phone buzzed on the bed. Anika’s name lit the screen. Isolde answered on speaker with my nod.

“Aveline,” Anika said, no greeting. “The court granted the fast remote hearing. We need your affidavit tonight.”

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

AQ

KITA

“He says he transported you to a private maternal consultation at Dario’s request, that you appeared anxious, that staff attempted to prove you with care-planning documents, and that you left through a nonpublic staff exit without completing intake.”

“He left out the folder.”

“Yes.”

“He left out Maia.”

“Yes.”

“He left out the fact that I never booked the appointment.”

“Yes.”

I looked at Bennett because I needed a witness who had not been there. He did not soften it for me.

“It is written to make the exit look like the problem,” he said.

“And not the door I escaped through.”

“Yes.”

The answer was plain enough to hold. I turned the page again.

There was a proposed order attached. It looked like a template – that almost made it uglier. My body, my daughter, my doctor, my appointment schedule, all fitted into blanks someone had used before.

Petitioner shall receive immediate notice of all scheduled prenatal appointments, emergent presentations, changes in provider, hospital admissions, and material fetal-health information pending further order of the court.

Immediate notice. Not through counsel, not with my consent, not if medically necessary-immediate.

I imagined Dario’s phone lighting while I sat in an exam room with my feet swollen and my blood pressure cuff tightening around my arm. I imagined him knowing before I chose who could know. I imagined him calling a desk with that voice that made people feel unreasonable for protecting a boundary.

The room tilted a little.

“Feet down,” Isolde said.

“They are down.”

“Then breathe like you remember having lungs.”

I did. The baby moved again – lower this time, not painful, insistent. I placed the packet on the table because holding it made my hand shake.

“Water,” Isolde said.

“I am not a houseplant.”

“Drink.”

I drank. The water was room temperature and tasted faintly like plastic – it was still better than the metallic taste rising at the back of my throat.

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

The baby pressed hard beneath my palm. I looked at Dario’s signature again. For 1 strange second, all I could see was the old sticky note fr the tea tin. Not coffee. I listened. He had listened – that was the problem. He had learned every tenderness and filed it under access.

Anika said, “Can you work for 45 minutes at a time with breaks?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“Good. We start now.”

-End of chapter-

Reader – Read Book & Story de ber heir. Her ex? He’s

The wife isn't me

Chapter 32

“Start with your name.”

Anika’s voice came through Isolde’s laptop, thin from the speaker and sharp enough to cut paper. I sat on the bed with pillows behind my back, the tray table pulled across my knees, and a glass of water positioned where Isolde could see it from the chair. She had decided hydration was now a supervised activity.

Bennett was gone- he had taken the signed pages downstairs, left the building through the front hall Nina chose, and sent nothing directly to me. Mara confirmed receipt through

the clinic line 18 minutes later. It should not have mattered. It did. Absence could be a kind of respect, and I hated learning that so late.

“Aveline?” Anika prompted.

I looked at the blank document – Affidavit of Aveline Ashby. My name stood alone at the top of the page, not hidden under respondent or gestational carrier or unnamed surrogate. It looked almost indecently simple.

“I am here,” I said.

“Good. We will build chronology, not argument. Argument is my job. Facts are yours.”

Facts are yours. I put both hands on the edge of the tray table until the trembling settled.

“How far back?”

“Start with St. Orla donor event. We can attach earlier relationship context only where necessary. Dates, times, documents. No adjectives unless they describe something observable.”

Isolde snorted softly.

Anika said, “I heard that.”

“I admire the optimism,” Isolde said.

“Then admire it quietly.”

I almost smiled, which felt offensive to the petition lying open beside the laptop.

The first sentence took 6 minutes.

I am 29 weeks pregnant and under independent prenatal care with Dr. Leona Price at Westport Community Women’s Health.

Not abandoned care, not hiding from care- under care. The document had a spine before I did.

Anika made me add the date. Not “the donor event.” Not “the day everything happened.” Early November, afternoon ultrasound, donor reception downstairs afterward. She asked for the appointment time. I gave the hour from memory and then checked the image file because memory was not enough anymore-memory could be called hysterical. Metadata had a better suit.

Isolde pulled the ultrasound photo from the folder and read the timestamp aloud. I added it. Then I added that Dario had told me he could not attend because of an unmovable meeting. The sentence looked too small for the betrayal – that was the discipline of the affidavit. It refused

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

AQ to let grief sprawl because grief on the page was easier to dismiss.

The next line named Dario as the biological father of my unborn child and stated that I had not consented to any transfer of parental role, medical decision-making, or access to my current care information. Anika made me pause after each clause.

"Read it aloud."

I did. My voice sounded like someone using mine carefully. The baby moved halfway through, a slow pressure against the tray table. I pushed the table back an inch.

"Tightening?" Isolde asked.

"No. She is critiquing sentence structure."

"She gets that from me."

"Unfortunately plausible."

Anika waited. That was the difference between professionals I trusted and professionals Dario preferred-trustworthy people did not fill silence just because silence made them uncomfortable.

We attached the donor invitation first-slim black envelope, St. Orla Women's Center, Armitage Family Maternity Wing, Dario and Celine listed as hosts and honorees. Then the handwritten note.

Keep remarks under 4 minutes. Mention second baby, not timing.

I had photographed it in the apartment with the kitchen clock in frame because some instinct had known grief needed witnesses.

Anika asked, "Why does this matter?"

I said, "It shows he knew about the donor event and the public family presentation before my ultrasound appointment. He told me he had an unmovable meeting."

"Good. Put that in one sentence."

One sentence. Not a scream, not the entire afternoon in the donor hall, the cold under the awning, the way Nico's crest pin had caught the light before my brain understood why a child was calling my fiance Dad. One sentence. It was obscene how much violence a court preferred in clean formatting.

We attached the smart-lock screenshots next. Dario Armitage: Primary Owner. Aveline Ashby: Resident Guest. Denied: permission required to modify access code.

Anika asked, "Why does this matter?"

I said, "Because his petition says I concealed my address, but the home he presented as ours was never legally controlled by me. He controlled access."

"Keep that. Strong."

Strong. Before I ate, Anika had me add the access chronology. Chapter titles did not exist in real life, unfortunately, so we used dates and times – Dario's access as primary owner; my denied attempt to change the code; the wellness hold that changed what I could enter; the household account freeze at 10:33; the portal request he filed as spouse or authorized support. Each entry made the same point from a different side. He had not been a frightened father locked out of a pregnancy. He had been a man with keys, cards, accounts, portals, cars, doctors, lawyers, and a public wife, asking the court to give him the few doors he had not already controlled.

I wrote that part as facts. I wanted to write it as an accusation. Anika cut 2 adjectives and left the bones. I had been strong for exactly 1 sentence and wanted to sleep for a week.

AQ

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Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He's

Isolde put a plate beside me – toast cut into 4 narrow strips, peanut butter, sliced banana.

"Eat."

"This is not dinner."

"This is not a restaurant."

Anika said, "Eat while I review the attachment labels."

I ate because being stubborn required calories.

The wrong-call recording came next. Not the whole file – Anika had a transcript excerpt prepared from the preserved audio. Dario's words sat in Courier font as if typewriter spacing could make them less intimate.

The baby is Armitage. She is frightened. She will adjust if we give her a version of motherhood she can survive. The clinic can handle the rest

Celine's voice appeared below his in brackets, calm and careful around the edges of possession.

She cannot be allowed to make a spectacle before January.

My stomach turned.

"We do not need to play the audio tonight unless you want to verify the excerpt," Anika said.

"I know what it says."

"That is not the same as consent."

I stared at the laptop. The room went very quiet.

"What?"

"I said I do not need to play it unless you want to verify the excerpt. Your knowledge of harm does not obligate you to relive it for my convenience."

There were sentences that entered a room so cleanly they exposed how dirty other rooms had been. I looked down at the toast in my hand- the peanut butter had stuck to my thumb. Dario would have wiped it away without asking and made the gesture feel like love. I took the napkin myself.

"The excerpt is accurate," I said.

Anika nodded on screen. We continued.

The donor note came back again because Anika wanted it in 2 places: once as proof of Dario's knowledge before the event, and once as proof that the public story had been managed before I walked into it. Mention second baby, not timing. The sentence had become a splinter – every time we touched it, something bled.

"Why not timing?" Anika asked.

"Because timing proves Celine and I were pregnant at the same time."

“And?”

“Because that makes the public family story look managed, not accidental.”

“And?”

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

I closed my eyes. “Because if people know I am 5 weeks further along, they know Celine cannot be the simple public explanation for my

“Good.”

“It is not good.”

“It is useful.”

I opened my eyes. Useful had become the emergency substitute for good.

Private Maternal Care Authorization. Aveline Ashby listed as Patient and Gestational Carrier. Celine Armitage listed as Legal Mother / Intended Parent. Private Resolution Agreement. Mutual Confidentiality. Prenatal Support Schedule. Private clinic card for a 10:30 intake I had not booked. Private clinic folder. Maternal coordination. Celine as maternal guardian for coordination purposes: Portal access requests. Dario es Spouse/Authorized Support. Celine as Maternal Guardian. Dr. Merrow’s unauthorized transfer appointment voicemail: 9/00 AM, fasting labs, transport, family counsel. Counsel’s refusal before 5:00 PM. Dr. Price’s note: independent care, 29 weeks, oriented, engaged, capable of decision-making, activity restriction due to stress symptoms and tightening.

The document grew downward – Exhibit A, Exhibit B, Exhibit C. Each letter was a rib in the same body. My body. Noa’s. Ours.

At 10:12 PM, my back began to ache in a dull line from hip to hip. Anika stopped mid-question.

“Break.”

“I can finish this section.”

“You can finish it after 15 minutes on your left side.”

“Did Isolde text you?”

“Dr. Price’s note is attached to the affidavit. I read it.”

Rude, to be defeated by my own evidence. Isolde helped move the tray table, but she did not help me lie down until I asked. My pride noticed. My pelvis noticed more. The baby shifted when I settled on my side.

For 15 minutes, the affidavit waited on the screen. It did not disappear because I stopped touching it – that felt important. The break also proved something less noble: my body was not a document I could force through filing.

When I stood to use the bathroom, Isolde walked behind me with one hand near my elbow and did not touch. I moved slowly, one palm under my stomach, the other on the wall because the safe room floor had a dip near the kitchenette that liked to surprise my balance.

The bathroom mirror showed my face in pieces-tired eyes, chapped mouth, hair escaping its tie. I looked like a woman a lawyer could call unstable if the image served him. I also looked like a woman who had stayed awake long enough to number her own erasure. Both were true. Only one would help me in court.

When we resumed, Anika asked the last question of the night. “What relief do you want the court to understand you are asking for?”

“Privacy.”

“More specific.”

“No access to my provider, appointment schedule, address, or emergency information except through my counsel or by my express written consent. No family-counsel scheduling. No contact with Dr. Price without authorization. No use of St. Orla’s restriction note without the access-dispute context. No treating my refusal of unauthorized care as refusal of care.”

Anika’s typing sounded through the speaker. Isolde was looking at me with a face I did not want to name.

“What?” I asked

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

“Nothing.”

“Your nothing is loud.”

“That was a spine.”

I looked back at the document. She was right. It was not warm, not gentle – it did not comfort me. But it held.

My phone vibrated on the table. Clinic line. Isolde picked it up, listened, then put it on speaker. Mara's voice came through tight and controlled.

"Aveline, Anika, I am sorry to interrupt. We just received notice from Westport's administrative coordinator. Mathias Vey's office contacted the clinic board chair directly 20 minutes ago."

The tray table felt suddenly too small for my hands.

Anika said, "About what?"

Mara exhaled once. "About whether Westport wants to be publicly associated with a disputed maternal-access case involving Armitage Foundation donors."

–

– End of chapter

A

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

–

The wife isn't me

Chapter 33

"Put it in writing

The sentence left my mouth before anyone finished deciding whether I was supposed to be frightened.

On the laptop, Dr. Price's face paused. She was not in her white coat-she was at home, or somewhere that was not meant to receive offe with a dark cardigan over a T-shirt and her hair pulled back without performance. The light beside her made one lens of her glasses flash white when she turned toward another screen.

Mara was on audio only. Anika was a small square in the corner, Isolde stood behind my chair with both hands on the back of it, which means she was pretending not to hover. I was at the table because I had won 20 minutes upright by eating half a bowl of soup,

drinking water, and promising to lie down immediately after the call-pregnancy had turned negotiation into a hostage exchange with my own circulatory system.

Dr. Price said, “I need to be careful how I characterize it.”

“Then characterize it carefully in writing.”

Isolde made a soft, approving noise behind me.

Mara said, “Aveline, let Dr. Price explain.”

I looked at the screen. “Please explain

Dr. Price took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. That small gesture frightened me more than if she had looked panicked- competent people did not show fatigue unless the room had become heavier than politeness could carry.

Westport’s board chair received a call from the Vey family office. It was not, technically, a medical-records request. It was framed as a reputational concern. The phrase relayed to me was that your case may become too visible for a clinic with donor relationships to major maternal-health foundations.”

Too visible. My hand went to my stomach. The baby was quiet now, which made the room feel louder.

I am not a billboard,” I said.

“No,” Dr. Price said. “You are a patient.”

“Do they know that?”

She did not answer quickly enough. Isolde’s hands tightened on the chair.

“Say their names,” Isolde said. “Major maternal-health foundations. Which ones? Armitage Foundation? Vey Women and Families Fund? The soft-focus gala people with champagne and ultrasound machines in the slideshow?”

“Isolde,” Mara warned.

“No, I would love a donor taxonomy. It will help me decide exactly how flammable I feel.”

“Do not make threats on a recorded call,” Anika said.

“I said feel. Feelings remain legal”

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

My back ached. I shifted, slow and careful, because every movement now required a witness statement from my pelvis.

“Dr. Price,” I said. “What did the board chair ask you to do?”

She put her glasses back on. “They asked whether I had an existing provider-patient relationship with you.”

“You do.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“They asked whether continuing care during an active disputed-access filing could expose the clinic to allegations of interfering with paternal rights.”

The words landed on the table and sat there like instruments no one wanted to admit were sharp.

“Paternal rights,” I repeated. Not maternal health, not patient care, not 29 weeks pregnant and already under restriction. Dario’s fatherhood had become a crowbar at the clinic door.

Dr. Price said, “I told them I had not received any valid authorization to release information, transfer care, or coordinate with family counsel. I told them you are oriented, receiving care, and capable of decisions. I also told them interruptions in prenatal care caused by donor pressure would create the very medical risk your petition response is trying to prevent.”

My throat tightened. “Thank you.”

“I did not say it as a favor.”

“I know.”

I did – that was why it mattered. Favors could be called back. Records had to live with themselves.

Anika leaned closer to her camera. “Did the board chair direct you to discharge Aveline?”

“No.”

“Did they suggest pausing nonurgent appointments?”

Dr. Price’s face changed by half a degree. There it was the quiet institutional harm. Not a door slammed, but a door held almost closed while someone explained that air remained available in principle.

“They asked whether future visits could be coordinated through counsel until the matter is clarified,” Dr. Price said.

Isolde swore. This time Nina was not in the hall to correct her.

“Coordinated through whose counsel?” I asked.

“That was not specified.”

“But Mathias Vey’s office called the chair.”

“Yes.”

“And Dario’s petition asks for provider coordination.”

“Yes.”

2/6 AD

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Quested Wife. The World’s Coveted Genius Three years later, she

“So the unspecified counsel is not a mystery. It is just laundering.”

Anika said, “That sentence is not going in your affidavit.”

“It should.”

“It is satisfying. Those are different categories.”

Dr. Price’s mouth moved like she almost smiled and chose professionalism instead.

I leaned back. The soup turned sour in my stomach-not nausea exactly, more like my body was rejecting the shape of the conversation. I’ pressed my hand under the curve of my belly and shifted my weight off my right hip.

Dr. Price noticed. “Any tightening right now?”

“No.”

“Headache?”

“No.”

“Visual changes?”

“Only the vivid image of a board chair discovering ethics in a footnote.”

“Aveline.”

“No visual changes.”

She held my gaze for 2 seconds longer than medically necessary. “You can be angry. You still need to report symptoms plainly.”

I looked down. “I know.”

That was the humiliation of being pregnant under threat – even my sarcasm had to yield to accurate intake.

Isolde put the blood-pressure cuff on the table. “Do not look at me like that,” she said. “Dr. Price told me to keep it nearby.”

“I was looking at the cuff.”

“With betrayal.”

“It has chosen sides.”

Dr. Price said, “If you can take a reading while seated, do it.”

So I sat in a safe room after midnight while a donor-pressure call tried to push me out of independent care, and I wrapped a cuff around my arm because my body had to keep providing data for other people to dispute. The machine squeezed. Numbers appeared- higher than my first visit, lower than emergency. Another category designed to make me wait.

“Log it,” Dr. Price said.

Isolde wrote it down with too much pressure. The chair was too hard. The safe room smelled like soup, printer heat, and the cheap lavender wipes Isolde had used on the table before the call. My ankles were swollen over the edges of my socks. My daughter sat low and heavy, a private fact beneath public pressure.

Too visible. They were not afraid I was hiding- they were afraid people could see me.

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

His Unwanted Wife. The World's Coveted Genius Three years later, she

AQ

KITA

"What happens if I become inconvenient to every clinic?" I asked.

The question flattened the room. Mara answered first, because lawyers loved categories when fear asked for prophecy

"We identify another provider, preserve continuity records, and document any improper pressure."

"That is process."

"Yes."

"I asked what happens."

Dr. Price's voice softened without becoming soft. "You still get care. It may become less comfortable and less private than you deserve. It may require going through hospital systems earlier than planned. It may require repeating your history to people who should already know enough. But you still get care."

Less comfortable. Less private. Repeating my history. I could feel the future forming- intake desks, clipboards, sympathetic eyes, skeptical eyes, the question of father in boxes too small for what Dario had done.

"I do not want my daughter born into a room he can reach by making a call," I said.

"Then we plan for that," Dr. Price said. "But tonight, planning starts with keeping you stable."

Stable. The word should have belonged to me – Dario had made it sound like a courtroom exhibit.

"I need the warning in writing," I said again.

Dr. Price nodded slowly. "I can send a note confirming I was contacted internally about board concerns following outreach from the Vey family office, and that I advised continued independent care without unauthorized third-party coordination."

"Say donor pressure."

Mara said, “Aveline.”

“If that is what happened, say it.”

Dr. Price did not flinch. “I can say donor-related reputational pressure was raised to clinic administration. I can say it did not originate from a medical concern in my examination of you.”

The knot under my ribs loosened by a thread. “Yes.”

Isolde bent toward the laptop. “And say if anyone interrupts her care because a rich man made a call, that is their choice.”

“That is not how medical documentation works,” Dr. Price said.

“It is how reality works.”

“Reality is broader than a chart note.”

“Convenient.”

“Isolde,” I said.

She stopped-not because she was wrong, but because anger was using oxygen I needed. I touched her wrist where it rested on the chair. Not comfort – a brake. She looked down at my hand, then at my face.

“Fine,” she said. “I will be quiet in a threatening way.”

AO

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The World’s Coveted Genius Three years later, she

“Thank you.”

Mara cleared her throat. “Dr. Price, can you also confirm that the activity restriction makes remote appearance medically appropriate?”

“Yes. I will write that tonight.”

Anika said, “And if the board instructs you to stop care?”

Dr. Price looked away from the camera. Only for a second. Long enough.

The baby moved – small, hard, like a knock from inside a locked room.

“I have admitting relationships I can use if there is an emergency,” Dr. Price said. “I can provide records and a transfer summary. I can identify physicians outside the donor circle.”

Outside. The word had become geography and prayer.

“That is not what I asked,” Anika said.

Dr. Price looked back. “No. I cannot promise the board will not intervene if donors continue to pressure them. I can document my medical position. I can advocate internally. I can keep seeing Aveline unless I am instructed otherwise. But I cannot promise institutional immunity.” There were no soft nouns in that — no continuity, no family concern, no protection. Just a doctor admitting the walls around her were not wholly hers.

For a moment, I missed the apartment so violently I felt sick. Not Dario. Never Dario. The lie of a room that pretended someone could make the world small enough to survive – warm floors, peppermint tea, unfinished clouds, a door that opened because Dario owned it. That was the trap. Safety that depended on ownership was just another way to be held.

I inhaled carefully. “Then send the note,” I said. “Please.”

“I will.”

“And if they call again?”

“I will log it.”

“No hallway conversations.”

Dr. Price’s expression softened. “No hallway conversations.”

The call ended 4 minutes later with instructions I could recite now-left side, water, food, bathroom only, call for regular contractions, bleeding, leaking fluid, severe headache, visual changes, or decreased movement. The medical list sat beside the legal list. My life had become 2 columns of things that could go wrong.

Isolde closed the laptop. Then she walked to the tiny kitchenette, gripped the counter, and bent her head.

“Do not break anything,” I said.

“I am deciding.”

“Decide no.”

“You are narrowing my options.”

“Excellent.”

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Wife The World’s Coveted Genius Three years later, she

She turned around. Her eyes were bright and furious. “He cannot have your doctor too.”

The sentence hit exactly where I had been trying not to feel. My doctor, my appointment, my daughter – every my was now a contested filing.

“He can try,” I said.

“That is not comforting.”

“I was not offering comfort.”

My phone rang before she could answer. Clinic line again. Mara. I answered with the bad taste of dread already in my mouth.

“Aveline,” Mara said. “Dr. Price just called me separately. She is drafting the note, but she wants you prepared. If donors intervene directly, she cannot promise Westport will allow continued care.”

I closed my eyes. The baby moved under my hand- not a kick this time, a steady pressure. As if she had found the wall too.

-End of chapter

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He Unwanted Wife. The World’s Coveted Genius Three years later, she

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 34

“I have a list.”

Isolde said it at 12:18 AM, which was not a sane hour for lists unless the list was titled ways not to die before breakfast.

I was lying on my left side again, half propped so I could see her without twisting. The affidavit had been filed in preliminary form at 11:47. Dr. Price's donor-pressure note had gone to Anika at 11:52. The remote hearing link had arrived at 12:03 with a password so bland it felt insulting. I had slept for exactly 9 minutes and woken because my daughter had hiccups – tiny rhythmic taps against the inside of my stomach. Proof of life. Also proof that my body had no respect for court deadlines.

"A list of what?" I asked.

Isolde sat cross-legged on the floor because the chair creaked and she had decided noise was morally unacceptable after midnight. Her laptop balanced on her knees. Her earrings were on the table-without them, she looked younger and more dangerous.

"Backup."

"That is not a category."

"It is tonight."

I narrowed my eyes. "Define backup."

She glanced at the door, then back at me. "Nurses who hate quiet coercion. 2 housing contacts who owe me nothing but owe Nina favors. 1 records clerk who thinks donor hospitals are where ethics go to wear good shoes. A retired midwife with a car. A journalist."

I pushed myself up on one elbow too fast. My stomach tightened immediately. Isolde's laptop snapped half shut.

"Down."

"Journalist?"

"Lie down first."

"Isolde."

"Aveline."

The tightening held for 14 seconds – not contraction, not exactly, but enough to make my body remind me that outrage had a cost now. I settled back, furious with gravity.

"Explain the journalist from the floor," I said.

“She is not for tonight.”

“That is not an explanation.”

“Her name is Rhea Kwan. Investigative, not gossip. Hospital philanthropy, family offices, patient privacy failures. She does not publish without documents and she hates being used as a threat.”

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KEKA

“Have you contacted her?”

“Not with your name.”

“Isolde.”

“I sent a hypothetical through someone else 2 days ago.”

“You sent my life as a hypothetical?”

“I sent donor-pressure medical access as a hypothetical. Your life has better cheekbones and worse legal exposure.”

I stared at her. She stared back. No apology – that was how I knew she was scared. Isolde apologized when she was wrong; when she was afraid, she became architecture.

“Why did you not tell me?”

“Because you were choosing whether to accept legal funding, deny a surrogate rumor, refuse a fake transfer, pack a hospital bag, and keep your blood pressure from turning your skull into a percussion instrument.”

“That is not your choice.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

The question came out sharper than I meant. The room absorbed it badly.

Isolde looked down at her laptop. For the first time since the donor hall, she seemed tired in a way logistics could not fix.

“I know,” she said. “I am not Dario with better politics.”

The sentence hurt because it found the comparison before I could.

“I did not say that.”

“You did not have to. It is the correct fear.”

I hated that too – people who named the right fear left me nowhere clean to put my anger.

The baby hiccuped again. Tap. Tap. Tap. Small, stubborn metronome.

“I am trying,” Isolde said, quieter now, “to build options that do not require you to beg any single institution to stay decent.”

The sentence changed the room. Not enough to make it safe – enough to make my anger find a chair.

“Show me the list.”

She turned the laptop so the screen angled away from the window, even though the blinds were already closed.

“This is not all active,” she said. “Some of it is contingency. Some of it is names I will not use unless counsel says yes. Some of it is people who may say no.”

“You are lowering expectations.”

“I am avoiding the heroic montage version of logistics.”

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MEA

“Thank you.”

She scrolled with 2 fingers. The document was not neat in the way Dario’s folders were neat- it had color-coded blocks, question marks, warnings, and notes like do not call from clean phone and ask Mara before touching this. It looked like fear that had stayed up late and learned project management.

My name appeared nowhere on the first page. That made my chest hurt in a different way – Isolde had made a safety net with a hole in the center where my identity could be added only if I chose.

She hesitated. “Do you want names or categories first?”

“Categories. I am 29 weeks pregnant and apparently too visible. Names can wait until after categories.”

She opened the laptop again. “Medical: Maia Rell from Dr. Merrow’s clinic is still reachable through a private signal chain/but I have not contacted her since the staff-exit card. 1 St. Orla nurse responded to my broad question about donor-event irregularities. 1 retired midwife Elise, can advise on what to ask if we have to go to an unfamiliar hospital.”

“Advise, not treat.”

“Correct. I am not assembling a basement maternity ward.”

“Good.”

“Housing: Nina can extend here if legal filings keep moving, but donor pressure could make this building nervous too. There is a church basement apartment 40 minutes north. There is also a post-discharge room above a women-run physical therapy office, stairs but fewer eyes.”

“Stairs are not ideal.”

“No. But it has a bathroom on the same floor and nobody named Armitage funds the roof.”

“That is becoming a luxury feature.”

“Everything is relative.”

“Transport?” I asked.

“2 drivers who are not Grant Bell and do not work corporate security. One is Nina’s cousin. One is a woman who drives night nurses and keeps a car seat base in her trunk because apparently she believes in being prepared for every version of chaos.”

“I do not need a car seat yet.”

“No. But anyone who thinks about babies as passengers instead of leverage gets a point.”

I could not argue with that. “Costs?”

“Some covered through the clinic if documented. Some through me. Some through people who said they would not take money.”

“No.”

“I know.”

“No vague favors.”

“I know,” she said again. “I marked those as risk.”

Risk. The word calmed me more than promise would have – promises had hidden too much.

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She scrolled. “Legal/evidence: Anika. Mara. Rhea as last-resort public record route. Records clerk at St. Orla who will not break law but my confirm process irregularities if asked correctly.”

“Asked by whom?”

“Counsel, ideally.”

“Good.”

She looked at me over the screen. “I am learning.”

“Slowly.”

“Cruel but deserved.”

The hiccups stopped. I rubbed the place where they had been. “You said a St. Orla nurse responded.”

Isolde’s face changed. “Yes.”

“When?”

“9 minutes ago.”

“You led with journalist?”

“I led with list. You attacked the shiniest knife.”

“Read it.”

She rotated the laptop toward me, then stopped before I had to lift my head. “Actually, no. I will read it. You stay down.”

“Bossy.”

“Alive.”

She opened a message thread in an encrypted app I did not recognize. “She will not give her full name yet. She says she was working donor- event intake and later records overflow. Her message says: The donor-event paperwork was not the only irregular thing. There was a same-day correction to guest classification after A.A. left. Also a maternity-wing donor incident note drafted before patient statement was taken. Someone wanted the timeline cleaned before evening board calls.”

The room went cold around the radiator’s weak heat.

“A.A. is me.”

“Likely.”

“Guest classification.”

“That could matter.”

“It already matters.”

At St. Orla, I had been patient upstairs and problem downstairs. Now there might be a document showing the moment the hospital changed which one counted.

“What does same-day correction mean?” I asked.

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KEKA

“Could be donor guest list. Could be incident log. Could be who you were recorded as when you entered the donor hall.”

“Someone from work,” I said.

The words tasted old and fresh at once-Dario's voice in the donor hall, the way Celine had watched me without surprise enough, Nico's small face turned upward. Someone from work. If St. Orla had corrected me into a guest after I left, then the hospital had not merely witnessed the erasure – it may have helped format it.

"What else?"

Isolde swallowed. "The nurse says no phones."

"For what?"

"For talking. She will not send documents. She says if this is real, she wants to see your counsel's authorization in person and talk somewhere with no phones."

"Why no phones?" I asked.

"Because she thinks internal calls are being logged more aggressively than usual. Because she thinks donor office staff may be asking who has accessed what. Because fear makes people oddly specific."

"And because phones record location."

"Yes."

We both looked at the devices again—the old phone sealed as evidence, the clean phone, the clinic-line relay, the laptop that had carried my affidavit and my panic in equal measure. Technology had saved me 6 times already. It had also made every room feel porous.

"If I meet her, Dario's petition will say I am conspiring with hospital staff."

"Probably."

"If I do not, St. Orla's version stands cleaner."

"Probably."

"I hate probably."

"Probably," Isolde said.

I laughed once. It hurt my back-still worth it.

I looked at the cheap phone on the table, then at the cleaner phone, then at the laptop, charger, printer, router, every small blinking device that had started to feel like both lifeline and leak.

“When?”

“She suggested tomorrow after the hearing.”

“I cannot go running around after the hearing.”

“You are not running. You are barely permitted to walk to the bathroom.”

“Then why are you telling me?”

“Because it is your choice.”

AO

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There it was – the sentence I had demanded from everyone, now landing when the choice was awful.

I closed my eyes. Behind my lids, the donor hall returned in fragments – pale flowers, polished floor, Celine’s hand on Dario’s sleeve, a child’s crest pin, the weight of the ultrasound envelope under my arm. If St. Orla had altered the record before taking my statement, then Dario’s petition did not just stand on a distorted note. It stood on a corridor built while I was still bleeding humiliation under the hospital awning.

“Counsel first,” I said.

Isolde nodded. “Anika will hate it.”

“Anika can hate it in writing.”

“I am beginning to love your bureaucratic rage.”

“Do not make it sentimental.”

My phone vibrated before she could answer. Unknown number. We both froze. It stopped after 2 rings.

Then a message appeared on the clinic-line relay, forwarded by Mara’s overnight service.

I can meet after 10:00. In person only. No phones. If you bring a device, I leave. If he knows, I disappear.

No name. No greeting. Just fear precise enough to be real.

Isolde looked at me. I looked at my stomach. The baby was quiet again. Outside the safe room, the old building settled with a sound like someone stepping on the stairs.

End of chapter-

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 35

"Bathrooms first."

Bennett said it before welcome, before good morning, before any sentence that could pretend this was a normal office visit.

The Bellamy Ventures lobby was not a lobby in the way Dario's world understood the word. There was no marble wall with a surname lit like a verdict, no bowl of white orchids trained into obedience, no receptionist positioned behind stone as if she guarded a temple. There were worktables-real ones, long pale wood marked by laptop scratches and coffee rings. A wall of pinned shipping maps, clinic flyers, budge charts, sticky notes, and photographs of buildings before renovation. A printer hissed in the corner beside shelves of labeled binders. Someone had left a bike helmet on a filing cabinet.

It was still expensive- the air had that cleaned-glass, renovated-brick, good-coffee smell of money that liked to call itself practical. But the place was built for people to use it, not admire it from the correct distance.

I stood just inside the entrance with Isolde at my left, Anika's assistant ahead of us, and my hospital bag in Grant's opposite universe of absence. Bennett had met us at the elevator, stepped back immediately, and did not look at the bag longer than a second. I was grateful for that, then angry that gratitude had become necessary.

"Bathrooms first," he repeated, pointing without moving toward me. "There is one through that corridor, second door on the left. No stairs. It has a chair inside and a call button because we host medical-access trainings here."

Isolde looked at him. "You have a bathroom with a chair."

"Several."

"I dislike how useful that is."

“Most people do eventually.”

He pointed again. “Quiet room is there. Door stays unlocked from the inside and outside unless you choose otherwise. It has a couch, water, crackers, dimmer switch, no cameras. Conference room is straight ahead. East stairwell beyond the printer. West stairwell behind the kitchen. Elevators there. Service exit through the loading hall, but I would not use it unless there is a fire or legal reason to avoid cameras, because it opens onto an alley.”

He paused. “Do you want the shorter route to the bathroom before anything else?”

Yes. My bladder had been negotiating with my dignity since the car. I hated every person who had ever built a legal system that required a 29- week pregnant woman on activity restriction to attend secure meetings in person after a remote hearing.

To be fair, we were not here because the court required it. We were here because the St. Orla nurse refused phones, Anika refused uncontrolled locations, and Bennett had a secure internal room with no exterior directory, 2 exits, and a legal team already onsite after the morning hearing.

The remote hearing had lasted 37 minutes. The judge had not granted Dario’s access outright. She had also not denied it cleanly. Temporary privacy order held for now. Supplemental submissions due. Medical-care continuity to be preserved. No party to contact current providers except through counsel pending further review.

Pending – the most exhausting word in law. It meant we had not lost. It did not mean we could sit down.

The judge had appeared as a face in a square, shelves behind her and no patience for theatrical urgency. Dario had not spoken – his lawyer

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KIKA

had done it for him, calm and grave, saying fetal welfare and coordinated care as if the words had been washed before court.

I had stayed mostly silent. That had been Anika’s instruction and Dr. Price’s recommendation. My affidavit spoke where my pulse could not. When the judge asked whether I was currently receiving prenatal care, Anika answered with Dr. Price’s note already filed. When Dario’s lawyer referred to concealment, Anika gave the court the smart-lock status, portal access requests, unauthorized transfer refusal, and the order of events around St. Orla’s restriction.

I appeared only once. The judge asked whether I understood the remote-hearing process and whether I was able to participate. I said yes. My voice did not shake. My hand did, off camera, under the blanket. That was law, apparently- the part of me visible to the court could be competent while the rest of me negotiated with adrenaline and a 29-week uterus.

“Bathroom,” I said.

No one made it an event – that was kind. Isolde walked beside me but did not hold my arm. Bennett stayed where he was. Anika’s assistent opened the hallway door and then moved out of the way before I reached it.

The bathroom did, in fact, have a chair. It also had a small shelf with sealed toothbrushes, wipes, sanitary pads, and protein bars in a clear bin labeled unclaimed supplies. I stared at the label for longer than necessary. Unclaimed. Not charity, not emergency dignity kit- just supplies no one had to perform gratitude over.

I washed my hands and looked at myself in the mirror. My face was pale from too little sleep. My hair was tied back badly. The dark cardigan stretched around my stomach, and the top button of my coat had given up during the car ride. I looked visibly pregnant. Too visible, apparently.

On the shelf beneath the mirror, someone had taped a small card.

If you need more time, take it.

No logo, no donor name, no woman’s silhouette holding a leaf – just permission in black marker. I stared at it until my eyes burned.

Dario’s world specialized in permission that came with a hook: stay here because I am protecting you, use this doctor because I arranged it, wait because timing matters, accept the apartment because it is safer than being on your own. This card offered nothing but time in a bathroom. It was ridiculous that I nearly cried over that. It was also not ridiculous at all.

“Still there?” Isolde asked from outside.

“Where would I go?”

“There is a vent. You are determined.”

“I am also large.”

“Noted.”

When we returned, Bennett was speaking quietly with Mara near the conference room. He stopped before I was close enough to catch more than “no direct intake without counsel present.” Good – let rooms have edges.

“The nurse is 8 minutes out,” Mara said. “She agreed to leave her phone in the reception lockbox. We will do the same for everyone entering the room.”

“No phones,” I said.

“No phones,” Mara confirmed. “Paper notes only. Counsel present. You can leave at any time.”

Bennett looked toward the quiet room, not the conference room. “You do not have to wait in there,” he said. “Quiet room is closer to the bathroom and has the better chair. We can bring the nurse to you only if you want that.”

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ETEA

I looked through the open door. The room was plain – a couch, 2 chairs, a small table, a lamp, a folded blanket in a basket, water bottles, crackers, and a low shelf with children’s books. The window faced an interior courtyard rather than the street. No glass wall. No polished trap of transparency.

“Who uses it?” I asked.

“Staff. Visitors. Parents with children. Anyone who needs not to be looked at for a while.”

Not to be looked at. The sentence landed with embarrassing force. Dario’s apartment had been private because he owned it. This room was private because someone had understood being seen could become another demand.

“I will wait there,” I said.

“Do you want the door open?”

“Yes.”

He opened it wider and stepped aside. That was all-no hand at my back, no guiding pressure at my elbow, no claim disguised as assistance. Useful care felt almost indecent in its restraint.

I sat in the better chair, which was ugly, supportive, and therefore perfect. Isolde put my water within reach. Mara placed a yellow legal pad on the table. Anika entered with her own phone already sealed in a gray pouch.

The meeting began 11 minutes later. The St. Orla nurse called herself Tamsin – older than I expected, with silver threaded through black hair and a face built by decades of not saying everything she knew. She wore no badge. Her hands were bare except for a plain watch.

She looked at my stomach first- not rudely, like a nurse. Then she looked at my face.

“You should not be here long.”

“I am aware.”

“Are you having pain?”

“Not currently.”

“Good. If that changes, stop talking to me.”

Isolde’s eyebrows rose. I liked Tamsin immediately and trusted that liking not at all.

Mara showed her the authorization and scope letter. Tamsin read every line, then signed a note acknowledging she was speaking voluntarily, without documents removed from St. Orla, and without disclosing patient records beyond process irregularities she personally observed. Process irregularities- another clean phrase for someone moving the furniture around a crime.

Tamsin spoke for 22 minutes. Donor-event intake had originally logged me as a patient escort because I came from imaging with an ultrasound envelope and no donor badge. After Dario identified me publicly as work-related, someone altered the internal incident category to guest disruption. Before anyone took my statement, a draft note had been started tying the incident to emotional distress and possible late-pregnancy instability. The donor office requested a list of attendees who had seen me. St. Orla counsel asked records staff to flag all outside requests concerning me. Then Dr. Merrow’s partner portal viewed my file.

Tamsin did not know who ordered all of it. She knew the order arrived before my version of events did.

Anika asked questions with a pen instead of a keyboard because the lockbox held our devices.

“Was the correction time-stamped?”

“Yes.”

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“Do you remember the approximate time?”

“After she left the donor corridor. Before 5:00 PM.”

“Who had authority to edit classification?”

“Donor operations lead, security liaison, hospital counsel, sometimes executive admin if it is an event.”

“Did clinical staff enter the instability language?”

Tamsin’s face hardened. “Not the first draft.”

The room changed around that answer. Even Bennett, still outside the door, went very still.

Anika wrote slowly. “You personally saw a draft using instability language before a clinician assessed Aveline in relation to the donor incident?”

“Yes.”

“Can you testify to that if subpoenaed?”

Tamsin looked at me. Not at Anika. “If it comes to that.”

I believed her and did not let relief make a home out of it. Witnesses were people, not furniture—they could be frightened, they could be pressured, they could change their minds when the cost became visible. But for 1 moment, St. Orla’s smooth wall had a crack with a human face behind it.

I took 3 slow breaths when she finished. The chair held me. The room held me. The open door held too much hallway and just enough air.

“Why tell me?” I asked.

Tamsin looked at the yellow pad instead of my face. “Because I charted through 28 years of husbands who were concerned in public and dangerous in discharge planning.”

No one spoke.

Then the reception desk phone rang outside-not a mobile, an office line. Bennett appeared in the hallway, expression changed. He did not enter.

“Mara,” he said. “Security just sent a photo from street level. The man outside the building matches the investigator Dario used at Aveline’s former apartment.”

My body went very still. Bennett’s hand stayed on the doorframe, not blocking it.

“He photographed the entrance 4 minutes ago.”

End of chapter

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 36

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Chapter 36 – No Locked Doors

“Do not close the door.”

I said it too sharply. Bennett’s hand stopped on the edge of the quiet-room door....

He had only touched it because the hallway erupted at once-Mara asking security for the timestamp, Anika telling everyone not to speculate, Isolde saying my name in the tone she used when my face betrayed me before I did. The door had swung an inch inward with the motion around it. Not closed, not locked-just moving. My body did not care about the distinction.

“It stays open,” I said.

Bennett let go immediately, then stepped back from it. “Open,” he said.

One word- no explanation, no offense, no soothing. The door remained wide enough for the hallway, the exit sign, and Mara’s gray blazer to stay visible.

My stomach tightened. Low, hard-different from the earlier practice bands of discomfort because this one had a beginning I could name. It rose from the bottom of my belly and pulled across me until my breath shortened despite every instruction I had ever been given.

I gripped the arms of the chair. Isolde crouched in front of me.

“Aveline.”

“Wait.”

“Timing it.”

Of course she was. Her phone was in the lockbox. She looked at the wall clock instead. I hated that the room had a wall clock. I loved that the room had a wall clock. Both things were true for 31 seconds. Then the tightening released.

The absence felt as physical as the pain. I inhaled too quickly and coughed.

The last time my body had tightened like that, I had been alone in the safe room with Dr. Price’s pink sheet on the table and terror pretending to be discipline. This was worse because people saw it – not Dario’s kind of seeing, not the donor hall’s bright, social inspection. This was practical seeing: Isolde watching the clock, Tamsin watching my color, Anika watching the legal implications she was polite enough not to say aloud, Bennett watching the doorway because that was the only useful thing he could watch without making me feel pinned.

Still, exposure crawled over my skin.

“I do not want this in his filing,” I said. My voice came out small. I hated small.

Anika answered immediately. “Then we control the record. Stress contractions after being followed do not equal incapacity. They equal a medical response to pressure. Dr. Price can document that if needed.”

“He will say I endangered her by coming here.”

“He can say gravity is negligent. It does not make it law.”

Isolde looked up. “I am stealing that.”

AO

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“Invoice me.”

Tamsin was at my side now, not touching me. “Any leaking fluid?”

“No.”

“Bleeding?”

“No.”

“Pain staying between tightenings?”

“Backache.”

“Constant?”

“Dull.”

“When did it start?”

“Last night. Worse in the car. Better in the chair. Worse now because apparently being photographed is a hobby for men with no inner life.”

Isolde made a sound that might have been a laugh if terror had not been standing on its throat. Tamsin did not smile.

“Baby moving?”

I put my palm over the right side of my stomach. Noa did not answer on command-naturally. My daughter had already inherited my worst timing.

“She moved earlier.”

“How recently?”

“During the meeting. Maybe 15 minutes ago.”

“Good. Drink.”

Isolde handed me water. My hand shook enough that she kept her fingers on the bottle until I had it steady. Not taking over, not letting it spill a narrow distinction, the kind my life now depended on.

Outside the quiet room, Bennett spoke to someone in a low voice. “No one approaches him. Get the photo to counsel. Preserve camera footage from 9:30 onward. Do not engage unless he enters private property.”

Practical sentences. Exit sentences. Not revenge, not masculine theater.

I focused on the open door and counted the visible hinges. 3. The door opened inward. No lock engaged. Hallway clear. Mara standing left. Exit sign beyond her. My chest loosened by a fraction.

The investigator outside had been part of Dario's machinery before he had a name for me. Men like that did not need to shout – they stood across streets and converted fear into billable proof. Photo of entrance. Time stamp. Subject present at Bellamy Ventures. Possible meeting with hostile funder. Possible concealment. Possible instability. Everything could become possible if the person writing the caption had enough money and no shame.

I wanted to run, which was funny because I could not safely hurry 10 feet without making 3 adults perform triage. My body knew the old instruction anyway-door, air, out. But there was nowhere outside Dario could not try to write himself into. The only available rebellion was staying medically boring long enough to leave on my own terms.

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Then another tightening took me. This one lasted 38 seconds. I did not say anything clever – I breathed through my teeth and stared at baseboard until it ended.

Anika appeared in the doorway. "Dr. Price is being called."

"Phones are in the lockbox," I said.

"The office line is not."

Right. Civilization continued to contain landlines. Good for it.

Tamsin pulled the second chair closer with her foot and sat where I could see her face without turning. "Could be stress contractions. Could be false labor. Could be your uterus expressing a very reasonable complaint. We do not diagnose that in an office chair."

"You are not my nurse."

"No. I am an off-duty nurse telling you not to be brave in a stupid direction."

Isolde pointed at her. "I like this one."

"Do not recruit witnesses as friends," Anika said from the door.

"I contain multitudes."

Another tightening began before I could answer. This one reached into my back-not unbearable, not harmless. The categories had become useless. My body was not a legal argument. It did not care that Dario would love the timing. It did not care that an investigator outside the building gave his petition a shadow. It did not care that I had a hearing record, a privacy order a nurse witness, and a doctor whose clinic board might be frightened by donors. My body had been carrying the cost while everyone else filed descriptions of it.

When the tightening passed, my face was wet. I had not noticed crying. Isolde saw and looked ready to murder the entire concept of stress.

“I am fine,” I said.

Tamsin’s expression did not change. “That is not a useful sentence.”

“It is traditional.”

“So are a lot of bad medical decisions.”

Mara appeared with a paper cup of water and a packet of crackers she had opened already so I would not have to fight the plastic. “Dr. Price’s office is calling back through the main line,” she said. “They are checking which hospital has the right coverage and the least conflict exposure.”

“Least conflict exposure,” I repeated. The phrase was absurd enough to be funny and frightening enough to make the laugh stay in my throat.

“I am sorry,” Mara said.

“No. It is honest.”

That was the new scale-horrible but honest ranked above comforting but false.

I took 1 cracker because Tamsin told me to nibble unless I felt nauseated. It turned to paste in my mouth. I swallowed anyway.

The baby moved once beneath my palm. Small. Enough.

“There,” I said.

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ETEA

Tamsin watched my hand. “Good.”

For 3 seconds, everyone in the room had the decency to let that be the only fact that mattered.

Bennett appeared again, still outside the room. He had taken off his suit jacket at some point – his sleeves were rolled, not artfully, just because the building had become work. He held a folded paper in one hand.

“Dr. Price is on the line in my office. Mara is with her. She wants timing, symptoms, fetal movement, and whether you can safely transfer.”

Transfer. The word hit wrong-Dr. Merrow’s voice through voicemail, 9:00 AM, fasting labs, transport arranged, family counsel. I shook my head before I could stop myself.

“Not transfer.”

Bennett’s face sharpened. “Different word. Travel. Move. Go wherever your doctor says, with counsel controlling information.”

“Who drives?” Isolde asked.

“Not me unless Aveline asks and counsel approves,” Bennett said. The answer came so quickly it must have been waiting. “Security has a car in the garage with interior access. Driver is Bellamy staff, background checked, no Armitage contracts. Mara can ride. Isolde can ride. I can stay here and deal with security footage, or I can follow separately if counsel wants the company representative available for the investigator issue.”

Options. Not a single heroic sentence-options with roles attached. My body was busy betraying me, but my mind still found room to notice the structure of care that did not require surrender.

“No one photographs me getting into a car,” I said.

“Garage route avoids street level,” he said.

“No one calls Dario.”

Anika answered from the doorway. “No one calls Dario.”

“No hospital registration with him as contact.”

Mara’s voice came from down the hall. “We will handle intake language.”

“I bring my bag.”

Isolde said, “Already asking reception to bring it from the secure closet.”

“I walk if I can.”

Tamsin said, “You walk if the next contraction pattern permits it. Wheelchair is not defeat.”

“I know.” I did not know – not emotionally-but I understood the sentence and sometimes that had to be enough. He corrected without making me explain why the first word cut.

I pressed my palm under my stomach, lifting gently to ease the pull. “Hospital means records.”

Anika said from the doorway, “Hospital means care. We handle records.”

“St. Orla?”

“No,” Mara called from down the hall. “Dr. Price is identifying the appropriate hospital now. Not St. Orla unless medically unavoidable.”

AO

Another contraction started. Isolde looked at the clock. “7 minutes since the last.”

Tamsin’s gaze moved to my face. “Can you stand?”

“I can.”

“That is also not the same as should.”

“Everyone has discovered nuance tonight.”

The pain crested. I closed my eyes. Behind my lids, I saw the investigator outside the building, camera lifted. I did not know is face- I knew the function. A man paid to turn my location into a deliverable. A body outside a door, making the inside smaller.

The open air from the hallway touched my ankles. I opened my eyes. Bennett had moved the doorstop with his shoe so the door could not swing inward again. Then he moved away from it. He did not look at me to see if I had noticed.

I noticed anyway. That was the problem with useful care-it left evidence. Not the kind I could attach to an affidavit. The kind my body recorded before my mind gave permission.

“Aveline?” Isolde said.

“I saw.”

“Saw what?”

“Nothing.”

My voice shook. I hated that too.

The office line rang again. Mara answered somewhere down the hall. Her voice lowered, then rose. “I understand. Yes. We can leave now.” Now. The word moved through the room faster than anyone did. Bennett turned his head toward Mara but did not step in. Mara came to the quiet-room doorway with the phone still in her hand. Her face told me before her mouth did.

“Dr. Price says you need to go to the hospital now.”

I placed both hands on my stomach. Noa moved once beneath them. Small. Certain. As if she had heard the order and was already answering.

End of chapter

A

Read Book & Story de ber heir. Her ex? He’s

The wife isn't me

Chapter 37

“Do not write St. Orla anywhere on that form.”

The admitting clerk looked up from her screen. Her badge said K. Nasser. Her face said she had been awake long enough to stop being surprised by pregnant women with lawyers.

Mara stood beside the desk with my insurance card, my temporary address sealed in a white envelope, and the kind of calm that made other people lower their voices.

“She is not transferring from St. Orla,” Mara said. “She is presenting for evaluation on medical advice from her current prenatal provider. Contact goes through counsel and Dr. Price’s office. No outside family contact. No social visitor list.”

The clerk’s fingers hovered over the keyboard. Outside the wheelchair, my hands were folded over my stomach because I needed them to look still somewhere. The wheelchair had not been defeat – I was repeating that as an experiment.

The garage route from Bellamy Ventures had been empty. No camera at the curb. No man across the street with a lens. Isolde had walked beside me until Tamsin said the next

contraction was close enough that walking would be a stupid kind of pride, and then Isolde had brought the chair without looking triumphant about being right.

Bennett had not ridden in the car. He had stayed at Bellamy Ventures to preserve footage, freeze elevator logs, and keep his building from becoming Dario's next paragraph. Practical, remote- somehow more present than a hand on my elbow would have been.

The clerk typed. "Emergency contact?"

"Me," Isolde said.

"Counsel as secondary," Mara added. "No spouse listed."

The word spouse slid across the desk like something contaminated.

"Relationship to patient?" the clerk asked.

Isolde's answer came immediately. "Friend."

The clerk's fingers paused-not judgment, procedure. Still, I felt the pause in the place where Dario had spent months teaching the world to expect him beside me and then appearing only when the room benefited him.

"Friend is correct," I said.

Mara added, "Authorized by patient. Current counsel information is on the next page."

No one said father. No one said husband. No one looked around for the man who should have been there because the chart had trained them to expect him. The absence became something I could sit in without apologizing.

My stomach tightened. I closed my eyes and breathed through it while K. Nasser pretended not to stare – that was professionalism too. Thirty-two seconds. Less than the one in the quiet room. Still enough to make my lower back sweat coldly against the wheelchair.

"Baby moving?" Tamsin asked from my right. She had come because she was off duty and stubborn, and because she knew which questions not to answer in a hallway.

AQ

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

CLEA

“A little,” I said.

“When?”

“In the car.”

“Good.”

The clerk printed a wristband. My name appeared on the strip in black letters.

AVELINE ASHBY.

Not Armitage, not carrier, not family arrangement. For 1 impossible second, a plastic band felt like a document the world had gotten right. Then she fastened it around my wrist, and the contraction left me tired enough that relief had no place to sit.

Triage smelled like sanitizer, warmed blankets, and coffee that had lost its moral purpose hours ago. The curtain did not reach the floor. I could see shoes passing in the hallway-white clogs, black loafers, a child’s sneaker with a glitter stripe. Ordinary traffic. Other people’s emergencies. A hospital did not stop being itself because my life had acquired legal captions. That helped. It offended me that it helped. I wanted the world to understand it had become impossible. The world continued delivering clean towels.

They put me in a curtained bay with a bed that raised too slowly and a fetal monitor with straps that made my skin itch. A nurse named Pilar asked permission before lifting my sweater.

“May I?”

The question was small. I almost cried over it, which was absurd – absurdity had become a recurring medical symptom.

“Yes.”

She placed the round monitor low on my belly, searched, adjusted, searched again. For 4 seconds there was only fabric rustle and the faint electrical hum of the machine. Then Noa’s heartbeat filled the bay. Fast. Steady. Mine answered by breaking.

I turned my face toward the curtain so the nurse would not have to decide whether tears needed charting. Isolde stood by the foot of the bed. Mara took the chair nearest the curtain. Tamsin stayed back after identifying herself as a witness, not staff. No one crowded my head.

“There she is,” Pilar said. Not it, not the fetus – she.

I swallowed. “Yes.”

Blood pressure cuff. Temperature. Pulse. Questions. Any bleeding? No. Any leaking? No, Pain between contractions? Backache, dull, worse with movement. How often? They had been 7 minutes apart, then 9 in the car, then 6 at registration because paperwork had a cruel sense of timing. Food? Crackers, water, a few bites before the meeting- not enough.

Pilar looked at the monitor strip. “We’re going to watch for a while, check your cervix only if the provider thinks it’s needed, and run the usual urine and hydration checks. The goal is boring.”

“I like boring,” Isolde said.

“Boring is underrated,” Pilar answered.

I stared at the ceiling tiles and tried to let the word settle. Boring – a medical goal so ordinary it sounded decadent.

The contraction monitor began making small hills on the paper strip. Not mountains. Not yet. The baby moved once under the band, irritated by surveillance.

“I know,” I whispered.

AQ

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EYSA

Dr. Sayegh’s mouth softened. “Boring with paperwork.”

“My favorite subcategory.”

Mara stepped outside the curtain to make calls through the legal line. I heard her voice flatten into professional steel.

“No hospital name in writing except to counsel. No provider disclosure. Yes, we have documented the stress trigger.”

I let my eyes close.

The IV took 2 attempts because my veins had apparently joined the resistance. Pilar apologized both times. I told her I had been stabbed by worse institutions. She did not laugh until Isolde did.

After 40 minutes, the contractions stretched apart. The monitor hills became smaller. Noa kicked once hard enough to move the strap.

“Opinionated,” Tamsin said.

“She comes by it honestly,” Isolde said.

Pilar checked the strip and taped a new section down with practiced fingers. “This looks better,” she said.

I wanted to ask whether better meant safe, but I already knew the answer. Better meant the line had improved. Safe was too large for a monitor to promise. Safe required locks, records, judges, quiet hallways, and men with money failing to guess the right door.

So I said, “Better is acceptable.”

Pilar looked at me for a second longer than necessary. “Sometimes it is.”

For the first time since Bellamy’s quiet room, my chest loosened enough to hurt. Not safe – but not delivering at 29 weeks in a room Dario could convert into evidence before I learned how to breathe. That was not nothing.

Pilar brought toast, broth, and a plastic cup of water with a lid. I ate half the toast because everyone in the room pretended not to monitor each bite. I was trying to decide whether broth counted as a meal or an insult when Mara came back through the curtain.

Her face had changed. Not dramatically-that would have been kinder. She held her phone against her palm and looked first at Dr. Sayegh, then at me.

“What?” I asked.

Dr. Sayegh checked the curtain behind her before she answered. “The admitting desk received a request from St. Orla Women’s Center asking to confirm whether a patient under your date of birth had presented here for evaluation.”

The toast turned heavy in my throat.

Isolde said, “How?”

“They used continuity-of-care language,” Dr. Sayegh said. “The desk did not confirm. Your privacy note worked.”

Worked. Past tense. A door holding for 1 shove did not mean it would hold for 2.

My hand closed over my wristband until the plastic edge bit my thumb. “Dario,” I said.

Mara’s expression gave me nothing soft to hide inside. “Maybe through St. Orla. Maybe through an automated network query. Maybe through a person who should not have made a call.”

The fetal monitor clicked. Noa’s heartbeat kept going as if adults had not filled the world with doors. Another tightening began low in my belly -not hard, enough.

AO

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Hor family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

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CENA

Isolde looked toward the bay entrance. Footsteps moved outside the curtain. Not hurried. Controlled.

Bennett’s voice came from the hall, low enough that he must have stopped before the doorway. “Mara.”

She stepped out. I heard 6 words before the curtain shifted back. No greeting, no dramatic arrival – just the fact.

Bennett said, “We are moving hospitals.”

End of chapter

5/5 AO

Story bor heir Her ex? He’s

The wife isn't me

Chapter 38

“I am still attached to the monitor.”

It was not my most elegant objection. It was the one my body understood first.

Pilar had just adjusted the fetal strap because Noa had rolled away from it with the offended determination of someone already tired of bureaucracy. The IV bag hung beside the bed, half empty. My hospital wristband was still warm from my skin.

Bennett stayed outside the curtain. I could see only the edge of his rolled sleeve where the fabric did not quite close.

“Dr. Sayegh decides whether you can move,” he said. “Not me.”

That mattered. It should not have mattered as much as it did.

Dr. Sayegh was already at the rolling computer, scanning the monitor strip. “The contractions have spaced. No cervical change. Fetal tracing reassuring. I do not like the privacy breach.” She looked at me, not Mara. “Medically, you do not need this exact bed. You need continued observation, hydration, and a place where the next desk is not already being queried.”

“Different hospital?” Isolde asked.

“A smaller maternal unit across town with an attending I trust,” Dr. Sayegh said. “Not in St. Orla’s visible network. I can call physician to physician. Registration there can be pre-warned without naming the route on any general line.”

“Do they have neonatal coverage?” I asked.

The question changed the room- not because anyone had forgotten, but because saying neonatal made 29 weeks stop being an argument and become a size, a weight, a room with plastic walls and monitors I had refused to imagine in detail.

Dr. Sayegh did not soften her answer. “They can stabilize and transfer if something changes. Based on your current evaluation, I do not think delivery is imminent. If I did, we would not move you this way.”

That was the only kind of reassurance I trusted now-conditional, specific, owned by the person saying it.

“Will leaving look like running?”

My own question annoyed me – it was Dario’s language in my mouth.

Mara answered anyway. “Leaving after medical clearance to continue care elsewhere is not running. We document the reason: attempted location query by the institution involved in the dispute.”

The institution involved in the dispute. Not hospital, not care team, not the place with the donor hall where I became someone from work. Words mattered because they put blame back where it belonged.

Another contraction tightened, shallow and short. My fingers pressed into the blanket.

Tamsin watched the wall clock. “Twenty-four seconds,” she said when it passed. “Less intense?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

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EIRA

Isolde had my bag open on the chair-medical folder, charger, water bottle, crackers, evidence drive, a pair of socks because cold feet apparently a constitutional issue now.

“How do we get out?” she asked.

Lore-

Bennett answered from the hall. “Staff corridor behind imaging, service elevator to pharmacy loading, then covered vehicle bay. No public lobby. No main entrance.”

“You know this hospital?”

“Bellamy funded a mobile clinic partnership here 3 years ago. We are not active in governance. I know the physical route because we moved equipment through it.”

He gave the limitation before anyone had to ask. Not active in governance. Not a hidden owner. Not another man revealing after the fact that every doorway had his name on it.

I closed my eyes for 1 second. When I opened them, Bennett had not moved closer.

“Who drives?” Mara asked.

“Ambulance transfer would create a larger record trail and dispatch log,” Dr. Sayegh said. “Medically unnecessary if she remains stable for discharge-to-observation. A private medical transport is cleaner if counsel approves and the receiving physician accepts.”

“Transport is here,” Bennett said. “Female driver. Former hospital transport supervisor. No Armitage, Vey, or St. Orla contracts. Isolde and Mara ride with Aveline. I follow separately, or I stay behind.”

“You keep saying that,” I said.

“Which part?”

“That you can stay behind.”

There was a pause outside the curtain- not long, enough for the room to hear the shape of it.

“Because it is true.”

The sentence was plain. It should have been too plain to hurt. Dario had never stayed behind if staying behind meant he lost control of the next room. He followed because following was concern. He entered because entering was love. He touched because touch was reassurance. He decided because deciding was protection. Bennett remained in a hallway and described himself as optional.

My throat tightened before my stomach did.

“Follow separately,” I said. “If counsel wants you for the investigator footage.”

“Understood.”

No satisfaction. No reward in his voice for being chosen even in that limited way. Just understood.

Pilar removed the straps slowly. The absence of Noa’s heartbeat from the speaker made the room too large.

“She is still moving,” I said, because I needed the fact outside my body.

Dr. Sayegh waited with the discharge-to-observation note in her hand. “Say it again if you need to.”

“She is moving.”

“Good.”

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ETTA

They switched the IV to a capped line because the receiving unit might want access. Pilar helped me sit up in stages-bed raised, feet lowered, pause for dizziness, sip water, breathe through a small tightening, stand only after it passed.

Standing made the whole room tilt. I hated the wheelchair less the second time-that felt like betrayal. It was only adaptation.

Isolde tucked the blanket around my knees with the fierce concentration of someone trying not to say anything that would make me cry.

“No speech,” I told her.

“I have a beautiful one about how wheelchairs are tools.”

“Delete it.”

“It had 3 parts.”

“Mourn privately.”

She snorted, and the sound made the nurse smile.

We moved through the staff corridor like contraband with vital signs. Dr. Sayegh walked ahead long enough to badge us through the first door. Mara kept beside me with the papers in a folder against her chest. Tamsin carried nothing, which made her look exactly like someone who could truthfully say she had taken nothing from anywhere. Isolde pushed the chair because I had asked her to, not because no one else could

Bennett walked 10 feet behind us – not at my shoulder, not in front. Every time the corridor turned, he stopped first to check the corner, then stepped aside so Isolde could decide when to move. I noticed. I tried not to.

The service elevator smelled like cardboard and antiseptic. A housekeeper stood inside with a cart of folded linens. She glanced at my belly, then at the group, then looked back at the elevator buttons as if pregnant women escorted by lawyers through back corridors were part of her pension plan. Bless her.

Halfway down, my phone buzzed in the evidence pouch Isolde carried. No one reached for it.

Mara said, “Leave it.”

“Unknown number?” I asked.

Isolde checked the screen without unlocking it. “Blocked.”

The elevator doors opened to the pharmacy corridor. The phone buzzed again – not a call this time, a message preview lit the screen. I saw only the first line before Isolde turned it away.

Do not let strangers move you.

My hands went cold. The message had no signature – it did not need one. Dario had spent months turning himself into the opposite of stranger. He knew the exact cruelty of the word. He had slept beside me, bought the peppermint mug, argued with painters over cloud color, and hidden a wife inside the same life where he learned how I took tea. Strangers had asked before touching me today. He had not.

“He knows I am not there anymore.”

“He knows nothing we confirm,” Mara said. But her pace changed. So did Bennett’s.

The covered vehicle bay was narrow, painted gray, and blessedly ugly. No donor wall, no brass plaque, no cameras visible except the one above the staff door that Bennett pointed out to Mara before she could ask.

“Internal only,” he said. “Thirty-day retention. We request hold through hospital counsel.”

The transport driver opened the rear door and stepped back. Female. Gray hair in a short cut. Navy jacket. Her badge read Alix.

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“Seat reclines,” she said. “Pillows behind back. Left side if comfortable. Bags in front with your friend, not in trunk.”

I looked at Bennett. He stood by the staff door, hands visible, far enough away that no one could mistake him for guiding me into the car.

“Do we have time?” I asked.

Mara glanced at her phone. “We have enough to leave now.”

That was not yes. I took the answer.

The shift from wheelchair to car took 3 adults, 1 pause, and no dignity worth mentioning. No one touched my stomach. No ghe took my arm without asking. Isolde braced the car door and said, “Ready?” each time before moving anything that involved me.

When I was finally settled half-reclined with a pillow under my right hip and a bottle of water in the cup holder, I looked through the bay toward the corridor we had just left. Bennett spoke to Dr. Sayegh at the staff door. I could not hear the words – I saw the exchange of papers, the physician nod, the way he did not pocket anything until Mara checked it first.

Then he looked toward the car. Not at me like a man making a promise. At the route.

The driver pulled out. We left through a service exit between dumpsters and a brick wall stained by rain. It was the most beautiful exit I had ever seen.

The second hospital was quieter. No crest, no donor hallway, no polished grand entrance. The maternity assessment unit had scuffed baseboards, a vending machine making a grinding noise, and a nurse who handed Isolde a clipboard already marked NO VISITORS / CONFIDENTIAL.

The nurse did not ask why. That was the mercy. She checked my wristband against the pre-arrival note, confirmed my name and date of birth, then said, “We have you under confidential registration. If anyone calls the main line, you are not listed.”

I had not known a sentence could lower blood pressure. “Thank you,” I said.

She nodded once, already moving to the next task. No reverence, no pity-just a procedure that protected me because someone had written it properly before I arrived. I could have kissed the clipboard. I did not. Activity restriction had limits, and apparently so did gratitude.

They settled me into a small observation room with a reclining chair, not a bed, because Dr. Sayegh’s colleague wanted me eating, hydrating, and resting without making the room feel like admission unless admission became medically necessary. My blood pressure had lowered. The contractions had stretched to irregular, mild tightenings. Noa kicked at the monitor again.

“She hates straps,” Isolde said.

“She has taste.”

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Mara took a call in the hallway. Her voice went sharp enough that Tamsin looked up. I knew before she came back in the body learned the sequence. Quiet, Call. Face. Threat.

Mara closed the door, then left it open 6 inches after looking at me. “Dario arrived at the first hospital’s main desk 9 minutes after we left.”

My mouth dried out. “Did they tell him anything?”

“No. He asked for you by name. He said he had legal papers pending regarding medical access to his unborn child.”

The room tilted without me moving. Isolde swore under her breath.

“How did he get there so fast?”

“The St. Orla query may have flushed the location. Or he had someone watching intake networks. We do not know yet.”

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I pressed my palm against my stomach until Noa moved once in answer. “He missed us.”

“Yes,” Mara said.

Reljef did not land- it circled the room and found nowhere clean.

Mara looked at Bennett, who had stopped in the doorway and gone very still. “There is more.”

Of course there was. Mara’s eyes came back to me.

“Dario’s counsel served a supplemental notice 4 minutes ago. They do not have this hospital. But they obtained Dr. Price’s name.”

End of chapter

The wife isn't me

Chapter 39

“Put the pillows higher.”

Isolde moved 1 behind my back, then stopped. “Too much?”.

“No. I need to look like a person sitting up, not a patient being displayed.”

“Those are not mutually exclusive.”

“Today they are.”

The second hospital’s observation room had beige walls, a blood pressure cuff bolted to the side of the chair, and a window that looked at the side of another building. It was not designed for dignity and that made me trust it more. Hospitals built for display had already taught me what display cost.

This room had no donor plaque, no flowers arranged to prove someone had paid for the right kind of softness, no hallway where a public wife could stand under warm lighting while the hidden woman learned the shape of the family. There was a dent in the wall

where a chair had hit it. I liked the dent-it admitted people came here in bodies, not narratives.

The hearing link opened on Mara's laptop at 2:15 PM, 5 minutes before the judge had squeezed us back onto the calendar after Dario's supplemental filing. The earlier temporary privacy order had held through the morning. Then St. Orla had queried my location, Dario had reached the wrong hospital's desk, and his counsel had filed an urgent request claiming the location confusion proved exactly why he needed temporary medical access until birth.

Until birth. Three words with a nursery hidden inside them.

The contractions had settled into irregular tightening that the nurse called uterine irritability, as if my body were being rude rather than terrified. My cervix remained closed. Noa's tracing was reassuring. My blood pressure had come down after fluids, toast, broth, and 2 hours without a man appearing at the desk.

All of that lived in the note Dr. Sayegh had sent to Dr. Price, which had then gone to Anika, which had then become an exhibit. My body had become paperwork again. This time I had helped write the caption-that was the difference I kept returning to when fear tried to flatten everything.

The old paperwork had named me without asking-Patient, Gestational Carrier, Resident Guest. This paperwork had my corrections in it: my refusal, my food log, the exact minute the blocked message arrived, the fact that the hospital move had been approved by an attending physician, not arranged by a husband who wanted a cleaner story. It was still a cage made of pages, but some of the bars faced outward now.

Mara angled the laptop so I could see the screen without leaning forward. Anika appeared in a smaller window from her office, hair pulled back, expression composed enough to frighten weaker people. Dario's counsel appeared beside a conference-room wall that looked expensive in a temporary way.

Then Dario appeared. Not at home, not in the apartment- at Armitage Group, judging by the charcoal wall behind him and the vertical strip of city visible at his shoulder. He wore a dark suit. His tie was sober. His face had been arranged for concern.

I knew that face. He had used it in restaurants when waiters brought me shellfish by mistake. In the apartment when the heating failed for 20 minutes and he acted as if winter had personally insulted me. At St. Orla, when he turned from Celine's green silk and said my name like I had done something dangerous by existing in public.

The judge joined at 2:21 PM. "Counsel, I understand there has been a significant development since the morning order."

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CICA

Anika spoke first because the judge told her to. She did not begin with scandal – she began with my contractions.

“My client experienced contractions after being followed and photographed outside a secure legal meeting. On physician advice, she presented for evaluation. The evaluation showed she was not in active labor. The baby had a reassuring tracing. The attending physician recommended continued observation, hydration, food, rest, and privacy precautions.”

Each sentence had a place to stand. I clung to them.

“During that evaluation,” Anika continued, “the hospital admitting desk received a location-confirmation request from St. Orla Women’s Center, the same institution whose records language is central to the pending dispute. The desk did not confirm. Given that attempted query, the attending physician approved continued observation at a different facility.”

Dario’s lawyer leaned closer to his camera. “Your Honor, this is precisely our concern. A 29-week pregnant woman under stress, moving from facility to facility without the father being informed, while third-party funders and attorneys direct her care.”

I felt the words before I understood them – moving from facility to facility, third-party funders, direct her care. Not followed. Not photographed. Not queried by the hospital that had helped make me unstable on paper before asking whether I was safe.

Dario looked into his camera with terrible patience. “I am not asking to control Aveline,” he said.

My hands tightened under the blanket. There it was – the sentence men used when control was already on the table, dressed nicely and waiting for a chair.

“I am asking to know where my child is receiving emergency care. I learned today that she was in a hospital only after medical movement had already occurred. If there had been a complication, if our daughter had been born early, I would not have known.”

Our daughter. He had not used that phrase in the donor hall – he had called me someone from work, and the child became public only when he needed a sympathetic noun.

Anika’s head tilted. “Mr. Armitage is again conflating paternal interest with patient access.”

Dario’s eyes flicked – not much, enough.

The judge said, “Ms. Ashby, I understand you are medically able to participate?”

My mouth went dry. Mara shifted the water closer. I took 1 sip.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“You are currently receiving medical care?”

“Yes.”

“And you understand this hearing concerns temporary access to information, not final parentage?”

“I understand.”

Dario’s gaze moved on his screen. He was watching me now – not the judge. Me. Remote hearings were supposed to reduce intimidation. They had not accounted for the way a man could still enter through a camera and rearrange the air.

I put my palm on the side of my stomach. Noa moved once. Good. Stay. The word stayed inside me – no public name, no gift to Dario’s transcript. In court language she remained the baby, the child I was carrying, the unborn child when other people wanted to sound official. Privately she had a name that fit beneath my palm like a match struck in a closed room.

Anika asked permission to present the donor invitation first. Dario’s counsel objected that the invitation was prejudicial and irrelevant to medical access. The judge said, “I will review it for limited context.”

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ELTA

Limited context. That was how the note entered the record – not as heartbreak, as context.

Mara held the hard copy beside the laptop camera because the upload had already been filed. Black envelope. St. Orla crest. Dario and Celine Armitage as hosts and honorees. The handwritten line in Dario's private drawer.

Keep remarks under 4 minutes. Mention second baby, not timing.

Dario's face did not change. That was its own confession.

Anika spoke over the small silence. "This exhibit shows Mr. Armitage knew, before the ultrasound appointment he missed, that his public event would identify his family expansion through his legal wife. Ms. Ashby, did Mr. Armitage tell you about this event?"

"No."

"Did he tell you he was legally married?"

"No."

"Did he tell you that the same hospital where you were receiving prenatal care would host him and his legal wife that day?"

"No."

Three answers, small enough to fit through any objection.

Dario's lawyer said, "This is relationship history, Your Honor."

Anika did not raise her voice. "It is medical access history. The hospital, the donor event, and the later records language are connected."

The judge allowed the line. My heart beat harder than Noa's monitor had.

Then came the clinic forms. Private Maternal Care Authorization. Gestational Carrier. Legal Mother / Intended Parent: Celine Armitage. Payment schedule. Residence recommendation. Postpartum contact plan. Words I had first seen under an apartment door while the chain lock held Dario on the other side.

On a screen, they looked sterile. In my body, they were the hallway outside a nursery with unfinished clouds.

Anika asked, "Did you sign this?"

"No."

"Did you consent to Celine Armitage being listed as legal mother or intended parent for your pregnancy?"

“No.”

“Did you authorize Dr. Merrow’s office to arrange a 9:00 AM transfer appointment?”

“No.”

“Did Dr. Price order that transfer?”

“No.”

Dario’s jaw moved once. He had always hated when I answered cleanly he preferred when pain made me explain.

The judge asked Dario’s counsel whether he disputed that the forms existed.

“We dispute their characterization,” counsel said. “The documents were part of a proposed support structure for a complex family situation.”

AQ como piada, divorciou-se e brilhou. Ex arrependido vé-la

I laughed once-not loudly, not wisely. Everyone heard it anyway.

The judge looked at me through the camera. “Ms. Ashby?”

My cheeks burned. “I’m sorry, Your Honor.”

“Do you need a moment?”

I nearly said no. The word waited on my tongue out of habit. Then my stomach tightened-small, not dangerous, enough to remind me had paid dearly for pretending my body did not need time.

“Yes,” I said. “Thirty seconds.”

The room stopped. No one punished me for it. Isolde looked at the wall clock. I breathed. The tightening passed.

“Thank you,” I said.

Anika’s face did not change, but something in her shoulders softened by a fraction. Dario saw it too. Of course he did. He knew rooms. He knew loyalty. He knew when a person had been given permission in a place he did not control.

His voice, when he spoke again, was almost gentle. “Aveline, I understand you are angry.”

Anika said, “Objection to direct address.”

“Sustained. Mr. Armitage, speak through counsel unless asked a question.”

Dario lowered his eyes. Perfect. Reasonable. Chastened in a way that would read well to anyone who did not know him.

His counsel took over. “Your Honor, my client is not seeking to attend appointments, direct treatment, or receive Ms. Ashby’s private medical chart. Given today’s events, he seeks temporary medical access limited to provider identity, hospital admission notice, emergency-care status, and fetal-health updates until birth. He is the father. The child is at 29 weeks. A temporary order can protect everyone.”

Until birth. Again. A phrase with hands.

The judge made a note. My pulse climbed so quickly the nurse in the hallway glanced through the open door.

Anika said, “Your Honor, that request gives Mr. Armitage the map he has been trying to obtain since Ms. Ashby refused unauthorized access. Provider identity has already leaked today. Hospital location was already pursued today. Every term counsel lists becomes a route to pressure the treating team or locate the patient.”

Dario looked at me. His concern remained flawless. That was when I understood the real danger of calm – calm made theft sound like weather.

The judge leaned back. “I want argument on that precise point,” she said. “If temporary medical access is denied entirely, what safeguard ensures fetal emergency information reaches the court if necessary? If it is granted, what safeguard prevents it from becoming a location tool?”

No one answered immediately. The question hung over the observation room, over the pillows, over the plastic water cup sweating onto the side table.

Dario’s counsel moved first. “We propose direct notice to Mr. Armitage.”

Dario did not blink. Not once.

He had asked for my route to birth and called it protection.

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 40

“Show the lock screen.”

Anika did not say it dramatically. She said it the way Dr. Sayegh had said closed a fact, then the room adjusted around it.

Mara opened the next exhibit on her laptop. My old screenshot filled the hearing window in a clean rectangle: the smart-lock app from Darjo’s apartment, captured at 10:12 PM the night after the donor hall.

Primary Owner: Dario Armitage. Resident Guest: Aveline Ashby. Access Level: limited. Code changes: unavailable.

No permission line had ever looked so polite. The words looked smaller than they had felt on my phone. That was the insult of evidence- made a wound legible, not equal.

The screenshot did not show the temperature of the apartment. It did not show the nursery door at the end of the hall or the way the automatic lights had come on for me as if nothing had changed. It did not show the brass bowl where Dario kept cufflinks, the mug in the kitchen, the chair by the window, the boxes of baby clothes I had folded because folding them made her feel closer. It did not show me standing barefoot on marble, realizing the door could open for me and still not belong to me. It showed a user category – that was enough to hurt in a cleaner way.

The judge leaned closer to her camera. “Ms. Ashby, you took this screenshot?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“The night I learned Dario was legally married. After he told me the apartment was his and I tried to change the lock code.”

My voice held. Barely.

The chair was reclined enough to keep pressure off my back. A pillow supported my side. The fetal monitor had been removed for the hearing because Noa’s tracing had been stable and the nurse wanted me less tangled while speaking. Without the sound of her heartbeat, every silence became too large. I kept one hand where she usually pressed against my ribs.

“What happened when you tried to change it?” Anika asked.

“The app would not allow it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I was listed as Resident Guest.”

Dario’s lawyer shifted. “Objection. The app screen speaks for itself.”

“It speaks in software categories,” Anika said. “Ms. Ashby can explain what she was able or unable to do in the home where she was living.”

The judge allowed it. Home. That word almost did what contractions had not.

I looked away from Dario’s small square on the screen and focused on the screenshot. “I could open the door while he allowed access,” I said.

“I could not change the code. I could not remove him. I could not make the apartment a place he could not enter.”

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Acusada, Mas Vitoriosa Após 10 anos como piada, divorciou-se e brilhou. Ex arrependido vè-la bapter 40

Anika waited. She knew I had more. I hated that she knew. I needed that she knew.

“There was a physical chain,” I said. “That was the only thing I controlled.”

Dario’s face remained still. The chain had insulted him more than the betrayal had ashamed him.

I remembered his voice through the door. Aveline. Be reasonable. This is my apartment. I remembered the draft form sliding across the threshold – Private Maternal Care Authorization, Patient, Gestational Carrier, Legal Mother / Intended Parent.

Behind me, Isolde was silent. That was how I knew she was furious.

I did not look at her. If I looked, I would remember her voice through the second phone that night, telling me to photograph everything, to breathe, to keep the chain on, to treat fear as information rather than weather. I would remember how stupidly grateful I had been for a chain lock in a luxury apartment, how quickly a cheap strip of metal had become the most honest object Dario owned.

The judge did not need that. The record needed the fact. The chain was the only barrier he could not unlock from his phone.

Mara displayed the next image – a photo of the apartment door from inside, chain engaged, the authorization form on the floor beyond it. My hand appeared at the edge of the frame, swollen slightly from pregnancy, ring finger bare except for the pale mark where Dario's private promise had been.

Anika asked, "Why did you photograph the door and chain?"

"Because he could open the main lock."

"Did he have to knock?"

"No."

"Could you remove his access?"

"No."

"Could he remove yours?"

"Yes."

Dario's counsel objected again. "Speculation."

Anika opened another exhibit – the access-pause notice from the morning after I escaped the private clinic. My throat tightened. There were so many small humiliations I had forgotten to feel each one.

"Not speculation," Anika said. "A later notice shows access was paused by the primary owner."

The judge's expression did not move much, but her pen did. I watched the pen – the pen mattered more than Dario's face.

His lawyer recovered quickly. "Your Honor, the apartment was Mr. Armitage's private residence. The access structure was normal for a property owner extending use to a partner. It is being recast as sinister after the relationship deteriorated."

Partner. The word arrived 39 chapters late and still without a ring anyone could see.

"Further," counsel continued, "Mr. Armitage had reason to maintain primary access. Ms. Ashby was 29 weeks pregnant, financially supported, and living in a high-rise unit where emergency access could be critical. This was a safety measure."

Safety. Of course. The most useful word in the world if a man owned the lock.

Anika looked at me. “Ms. Ashby, did Mr. Armitage tell you the lock setting existed for emergency medical access?”

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“No.”

“Did he give you equal authority to change the code while he retained a backup method for emergency entry?”

“No.”

“Did he provide a written emergency plan?”

“No.”

“Did he list you as co-resident or household member with equal access?”

“No. Resident Guest.”

Dario’s eyes moved down, then back up. I had seen him do that in board dinners – the moment when someone said a damaging phrase and he decided whether to kill it, soften it, or let it pass because fighting would make it larger. He let Resident Guest pass.

The judge asked, “Mr. Armitage, did Ms. Ashby have authority to exclude you from the apartment?”

Dario’s counsel began, “Your Honor, property ownership is not disputed–”

“I am asking the party.”

Dario looked into the camera. “No, Your Honor.”

1 syllable. It landed harder than a speech.

“Did she have authority to change the lock code?”

“No.”

“Did you later pause her access?”

His counsel shifted again. Dario’s mouth tightened by a fraction.

“Temporarily, after she left a medical appointment through a staff exit and could not be reached.”

There it was the polished version of pursuit.

“I was concerned,” he added.

His concern had always arrived with a key. Concern opened doors. Concern called clinics. Concern sent drivers. Concern turned a household account off and then wondered why a woman with no money might be frightened. Concern filed petitions asking for provider identity and hospital notice because the child was his, because my body was the hallway to what he wanted, because danger only counted when he was not the person creating it.

I kept my face still. Stillness was not forgiveness-it was conservation.

Anika said, “Ms. Ashby, why did you leave that clinic through a staff exit?”

Dario’s lawyer objected that we were far afield.

The judge said, “This is connected to the lock and control issue. Answer briefly.”

“Because the clinic had prefilled documents listing Celine Armitage as maternal guardian for coordination and Dario’s driver was waiting outside,” I said. “I had not consented to that intake. I had not consented to Celine’s role. I was afraid if I left through the front, I would be put back into his car.”

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Sapte 40

My voice did not break. That felt like a victory too small to celebrate in public.

Dario looked wounded. He did it beautifully. If I had still loved him, it would have worked. No – that was not precise I had still loved him when I first saw the face. It had worked then. Today it could only remind me that I had once mistaken expression for proof.

His counsel said, “Mr. Armitage did not abduct her. He arranged care.”

“He arranged paperwork,” Anika said. “Care asks first.”

The judge’s pen moved again. No one spoke for 2 seconds.

I thought of Pilar saying May I before lifting my sweater. I thought of Dr. Sayegh explaining tradeoffs before an exam. I thought of Alix telling he where my bag would go before the car door closed. None of them had loved me that was the point. They had not needed love to respect the edge of my body.

It was not triumph- triumph had too much energy for the room I was in. It was a shift. A word on a lock app had become more than a technical setting. It had become a room where everyone could see where I stood.

Resident Guest. Guest in my own pregnancy. Guest in the apartment where my daughter's crib frame leaned against the wall. Guest until tried to close the door.

The app had not called me temporary – that would have been kinder. Temporary had an end date. Guest implied manners, gratitude, the obligation to leave when the owner became tired of hospitality. It made my obedience sound like etiquette. It made my fear look like poor manners.

The tightening started low and pulled across my belly. I inhaled slowly. Isolde looked at the clock.

Not active labor. Not the time. Not now.

The judge saw the movement. "Ms. Ashby, do you need a recess?"

"No. It is passing."

Darío leaned toward his camera. Concern arranged itself again. The contraction ended before he could use it. That felt indecently satisfying- my uterus had terrible timing except when it did not.

I said, "Safety would have let me change the lock."

The sentence came out before Anika asked anything. No one objected. Maybe because it was not a legal argument. Maybe because it was the cleanest one in the room.

The judge looked at Dario. "Counsel, I am not inclined to order direct notice to Mr. Armitage if the record shows location information has already been pursued through contested channels. I am considering a neutral notice procedure through counsel or the court for true emergencies only. I will hear final argument after the remaining witness issue."

Remaining witness issue. My body went cold before I knew why.

Dario's lawyer looked to his side, off camera. Then he said, "Your Honor, before final argument, Mrs. Armitage requests permission to be heard in her capacity as Mr. Armitage's legal wife and the mother of his child."

The air left my lungs. On Dario's screen, a second figure stepped into view.

Celine wore pale blue this time. Soft. Perfect. Already waiting.

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 41

“State your full name for the record.”

Celine’s voice was softer through the laptop than it had been in the apartment. “Celine Vey Armitage.”

Vey first, then Armitage. A quiet reminder that she had arrived with 2 families behind her, while I sat in a hospital observation room with a plastic water cup, a blood pressure cuff, and my best friend timing contractions with a wall clock.

Her background was not the apartment or a hospital room. It was a conference space, deliberately neutral, with pale paneling and a floral arrangement blurred behind her shoulder. Someone had placed her where she would look composed but not luxurious, maternal but not staged. If I had not spent the last week learning how expensive people hid staging inside restraint, I might have believed the accident. Even Even her softness had production value.

The judge had not let Celine simply speak as the wounded wife – that was the first surprise. She required oath, limited scope, and no commentary on final parentage. Dario’s counsel looked irritated in the polished way expensive men looked irritated when rules applied evenly for 5 minutes.

Celine raised her right hand. Her wedding ring caught the light. I hated that I noticed.

Noa moved low, slow enough that I pressed my palm there without thinking. The nurse had checked me 12 minutes earlier – blood pressure stable, tightenings irregular, fluids continued by mouth now because the IV site had bruised and I had asked to leave it capped unless necessary. Crackers sat untouched beside me because my stomach had accepted half a banana and then resigned.

I was not in labor. I was in court. Apparently those could feel similar if enough people discussed your body without permission.

Celine looked directly at the judge, not at me. “I am here because children are being put at the center of adult conflict,” she said.

Anika objected before the sentence could bloom. “Narrative statement.”

“Sustained. Counsel, ask questions.”

Celine's mouth closed-just for a beat. Small enough to miss if you had not watched her take apart a room with softness before. Small enough to call composure if you wanted the wife to survive the sentence.

Dario's lawyer adjusted. "Mrs. Armitage, what is your concern regarding the current request?"

"I want the children protected from secrecy and chaos," Celine said. "My son has already been exposed to public confusion. There are unborn children involved. Continuity of care matters. Dario is not trying to harm Ms. Ashby. He is trying to keep a child from being hidden during a medical crisis."

Ms. Ashby. Not Aveline, not the woman from the apartment, not the person whose ring she claimed not to know about. The judge allowed it because concern was relevant if you dressed it carefully enough.

Anika wrote something on her pad. Mara glanced at me. I nodded once I could keep going. I did not know whether that was true. I knew it had to be.

Celine answered 4 more questions in the same register. She believed in privacy. She believed in medical care. She believed public speculation had injured children. She believed the court could create a narrow structure where Dario received emergency information without burdening me. Burdening me- how gentle theft could sound when it had pearls on.

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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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ELKA

I wondered whether Nico had asked questions after the donor hall. I hoped someone had answered him without making him carry adul child-sized hands. Then I hated that I could still hope for mercy inside the family that had shown me none. Nico was not the lie — he was pront that Dario had built 1 life while inviting me into another. Celine used him carefully. That did not make him less innocent. It made her more dangerous.

Then Anika began cross. "Mrs. Armitage, when did you first learn Aveline Ashby was pregnant?"

Celine's face did not change. "Before the donor event."

"How long before?"

“I do not recall the exact date.”

“Weeks?”

“Some weeks.”

“Months?”

Dario’s counsel objected. “Asked and answered.”

“She has not answered,” Anika said. “The timeline matters because Mrs. Armitage is presenting herself as concerned with medical continuity.

The judge allowed a limited answer. Celine’s eyelashes lowered. “More than 1 month.”

There it was. Not shock, not discovery — time.

Anika asked, “Did you know Ms. Ashby believed Dario Armitage was unmarried?”

“No.”

Too quick. Even through the screen, I felt the lie slide.

Anika did not pounce – good lawyers had more patience than betrayed women.

“Did you know he had given her a ring?”

Celine’s hand moved. Not to her own ring. Almost. Then it stopped in her lap. “I knew there was an attachment.”

“That was not my question.”

Dario looked at her. For the first time all afternoon, his concern left his face. Celine saw it. So did I. The room in the laptop became smaller.

“No,” she said. “I did not know about a ring.”

Anika opened the exhibit with the nursery photo from the night I removed the ring; unfinished clouds, crib frame, boxes under the window, the ultrasound envelope beside the place where I had set the ring before returning it by courier.

Celine’s eyes fixed on the image – just for 1 second too long.

“Did you know there was a nursery in the apartment?” Anika asked.

“I knew Dario had made accommodations.”

Accommodations. The clouds on the wall reduced to hotel management.

“Did you know he painted the room?”

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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.”

“Did you know the mural was clouds?”

Celine’s lips parted, then closed. It was tiny. It was enough.

“I may have heard a reference,” she said.

“From whom?”

“I do not remember.”

“From Dario?”

“Possibly.”

“Before or after the donor event?”

Dario’s counsel objected to relevance again.

The judge looked at Celine. “Answer if you know.”

Celine’s softness frayed at the edge. “Before.”

The word entered the room quietly and rearranged every chair. My fingers went numb around the edge of the blanket.

Before, she had known there was a room. Before, Dario had come home with paint under his thumbnail and let me kiss the mark from his wrist. Before, I had stood in that doorway choosing between 2 shades of sky while another woman somewhere in his official life knew enough to hear clouds as a detail, not a weather report.

Humiliation had layers. Apparently some were load-bearing.

Before. Before I stood in the donor hall. Before Nico asked who I was. Before Dario called me someone from work. Celine had known enough about my daughter’s nursery to hear clouds and still stand under donor lights as if family were a clean category.

I felt the next tightening start – low, harder than the last. Isolde's eyes went to the clock. I kept mine on Celine.

Anika changed exhibits. The donor invitation appeared again.

"Mrs. Armitage, this is the invitation for the St. Orla donor reception, correct?"

"Yes."

"You attended as host and honoree with your husband?"

"Yes."

"The handwritten note reads, Keep remarks under 4 minutes. Mention second baby, not timing. Did you see that note before the event?"

Celine looked at Dario. Not at counsel. At Dario. The first public mistake. He did not rescue her. He could not.

"I saw a version of the program notes," she said.

"Did you understand second baby to refer to Ms. Ashby's pregnancy?""

"No."

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

TA

Anika waited. The silence did what anger could not. Celine corrected herself.

"Not publicly."

My contraction crested. I gripped the side of the chair and breathed through my nose. Not active labor. Not the time. Not his timing.

When it passed, the room was still. Even Dario had stopped pretending not to watch me.

Anika said, "What did you understand the note to mean privately?"

Celine's face had gone pale under the screen's flat light. "That remarks should not create questions about dates."

“Because dates would reveal that Ms. Ashby was 5 weeks further along than you.”

“I did not calculate it that way.”

“But you knew she was pregnant.”

“Yes.”

“You knew you were also pregnant.”

“Yes.”

“And you knew the public donor remarks needed to avoid timing.”

Celine’s mouth tightened. “I knew the remarks needed dignity.”

There she was. Not cruel – worse. Certain that language could launder anything if it was soft enough. Certain softness could survive being caught.

Anika asked the donor invitation be admitted for the limited purpose of showing advance awareness and public narrative planning. Dario’s counsel objected. The judge admitted it.

Celine looked down when the judge said admitted. Not long enough to look guilty-long enough to look like a woman revising strategy.

I had to give her that. She did not crumble – she recalculated. If Dario used calm as pressure, Celine used poise as camouflage. The crack was not in her voice. It was in the half-second before each answer, where she measured which version of motherhood would cost least.

Limited purpose. Again. Limited was apparently how truth survived contact with expensive people.

Celine lowered her gaze. For 1 second, she looked almost tired. Then Dario’s lawyer asked to redirect.

“Mrs. Armitage, did you ever tell the public that Ms. Ashby was a surrogate?”

“No.”

“Did your public statement name her?”

“No.”

“Did you ask any gossip account to use that word?”

“Absolutely not.”

Clean answers. Soft eyes. The recovery was almost impressive. Almost.

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AO

TEA

Anika looked down at her pad. I knew that expression now she had the next door open.

“Your Honor, I have 1 follow-up based on that answer.”

The judge allowed it. Anika displayed Celine’s public statement and the CityGlass post side by side. Celine’s statement first all polished phrases-private family arrangements, misinformation, medical privacy, children, continuity of care, dignity. The gossip post second- unnamed surrogate, leverage, winter vote.

“Mrs. Armitage, your statement refers to private family arrangements and continuity of care but does not say Ms. Ashby is the mother of the child she is carrying. Why not?”

Celine blinked. “Because I did not think it appropriate to discuss another woman’s medical condition.”

“But you thought it appropriate to discuss private family arrangements.”

“The statement was meant to reduce speculation.”

“It did not.”

“I cannot control gossip accounts.”

“Did you correct the surrogacy rumor after it appeared?”

Celine said nothing for half a second. Only half. Enough.

“No.”

The judge’s pen moved. Dario’s face was no longer concerned. He looked, for the first time, like a man watching a door he had locked from the inside begin to open.

The judge leaned forward. “Counsel, before I rule on any temporary medical-access structure, want briefing on a related issue. If no surrogacy agreement existed, and if no parentage paperwork had been executed, why did the term appear publicly before any lawful framework was in place?”

No one answered. On the screen, Celine’s hand closed over her ring. Beside her, Dario looked at me as if the question had been my betrayal.

End of chapter

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 42

Dario left the hearing and walked into a vote-week preparation meeting with Aveline’s words still burning

Safety would have let me change the lock.

SWEET

Bank

The sentence had no polish – that was why it would travel. Polished sentences belonged to lawyers, statements oard packets, donor briefings. They could be managed because everyone understood they had been built. Aveline had said something small enough to be repeated by people who had never seen the apartment, the chain, the nursery clouds, or the way she had once slept with her hand curled around his wrist after the baby moved.

He had not touched her stomach in 6 days. The thought arrived without permission- he knew the number because he had stopped himself from counting it 5 times. The last time had been before the wrong-call disaster, before she sent the ring back, before his apartment became a photographed crime scene in everything but law. She had been asleep on her side, 1 hand wedged under the pillow, the other curved low over the baby. He had placed his palm near hers and felt a slow roll against his skin. At the time, he had thought: mine. Not hers. Not ours. The word had been so instinctive he had mistaken it for love. He shut it down before it became visible.

The conference room on 48 had been arranged for control-winter vote binders at each seat, water glasses aligned, trust counsel at the far end, Livia near the window in gray and disapproval, 2 independent directors on the wall screen from Boston, Mathias Vey in the chair that was not formally his and had somehow become his anyway. That was Mathias’s gift – he could make any human mess look like an allocation problem. A daughter humiliated on a witness screen. A hidden pregnant woman in a confidential hospital room. A son-in-law asking a court for medical access while claiming not to seek

control. All of it reduced to exposure, timing, leverage, and whether the winter vote could survive another week of oxygen.

Everyone looked at Dario when he entered. No one asked about Aveline. That was how he knew the hearing had gone badly enough to matter.

“We have 40 minutes before governance,” Livia said.

Not How is she? Not Is the baby safe? The omission should have relieved Instead it sharpened something he did not have time to name.

“Proceed,” Dario said.

The general counsel, Pierce, opened with a restrained disaster. emergency petition is now part of the pre-vote risk review. Opposition counsel has introduced the donor note, the preliminary clinic authorization, the smart-lock access screenshot, and Mrs. Armitage’s public statement chronology. The judge has not issued a final order on medical access. She is considering a neutral emergency-notice channel, likely through counsel or the court, not direct access.”

Not direct access. The room understood that phrase before Pierce had to translate it. Dario would not get provider identity. He would not get hospital admission notices. He would not get the clean legal thread from Aveline’s body to his desk. Not yet.

“Withdraw the petition,” one of the Boston directors said from the screen. “Take the loss before it becomes a discovery vehicle.”

Dario looked at him. “Withdrawing now makes it appear the petition was a pretext.”

“Was it?”

Livia’s eyes moved to the director. The man looked away first. Good. Not enough.

Mathias had not looked away from anyone. He was reading a printed memo with wire-rim glasses low on his nose, as if the scandal were a contract clause he disliked but could price.

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“The problem,” Mathias said, “is not whether it was a pretext. The problem is that it failed at being invisible.”

Dario's hand tightened around the back of his chair. "A 29-week pregnant woman went into contractions after being followed. My child could have been born early while I was deliberately kept uninformed."

It was true. He needed it to be true. The phrasing held because part of it was factual: Aveline was 29 weeks, she had contractions, he had not known where she was. The rest of it bent around the facts like wire. He ignored that.

Mathias removed his glasses. "Your child is not currently born. The woman is not in active labor. The petition has produced a judicial question about why surrogacy language entered public circulation without paperwork. That question reaches my daughter, your hospital donors, and the timing of your remarks."

"Celine chose to speak."

"Celine chose poorly because you put her in a structure where every honest answer exposed the lie and every careful answer sounded rehearsed."

Livia's mouth thinned. Pierce looked at the table. Dario did not sit – sitting would make the room feel too much like arraignment.

"Aveline is being advised by Bellamy-funded counsel while Bennett Bellamy appears at hospitals and secure offices. You expect me to do child?" nothing while he positions himself between me and my

Livia said, "Between you and Aveline."

Dario turned to her. "Do not." The warning came out quietly.

His mother did not flinch. "Precision matters, does it not? That is what her lawyer taught the judge today. If you mean the child, say the child. If you mean the woman you hid, say her name."

He hated her for that. Briefly. Efficiently. Then he hated Bennett because it was easier.

Bennett Bellamy with his open doors, staff corridors, female drivers, no-contact language, and the infuriating discipline of not taking anything that could be photographed as possession. He had inserted himself into the space Dario had left empty only because Dario had been managing a vote, a wife, a father-in-law, a board, and a scandal Aveline should have been reasonable enough not to create in public.

Reasonable women did not disappear through staff exits. Reasonable women did not turn lock settings into testimony. Reasonable women did not make judges ask why words like surrogacy had appeared before paperwork.

The thought sounded like Celine. That annoyed him more than it should have. No- that phrasing would not survive a courtroom. He corrected himself automatically. A scandal created by unmanaged disclosure. Better. Still insufficient.

Pierce cleared his throat. “Bellamy’s involvement is procedurally constrained. The fund disclosure limits access. If we allege undue influence, we need evidence beyond proximity.”

“Get it.”

“Carefully,” Livia said.

Dario looked at Pierce. “Carefully.”

Mathias smiled without warmth. “Carefully is not a strategy. It is a prayer men use after losing the first visible move.”

Dario sat then, because otherwise he would say something that cost more than it relieved. “What do you want, Mathias?”

“Continuity.”

“Meaning?”

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AO

“You do not withdraw the petition without consulting us. You do not expand it without consulting us. You do not mention Celine’s testim anyone. You do not contact St. Orla directly. You do not send Grant Bell near a hospital, clinic, legal office, safe room, or curb with a camera in view.”

Grant was already off visible fieldwork after the Bellamy photograph. Dario did not say that.

Mathias continued. “And until the vote, every public statement from you, Celine, the foundation, or Armitage Group clears my office.”

Livia laughed once- not humor, recognition. “There it is.”

Dario looked between them. The room had shifted while he was at the hearing. Not much. Enough. Mathias was converting Dario’s urgency into oversight, Celine’s bad answers into Vey review, Aveline’s contractions into governance risk. This was how power moved when it did ho need to stand.

“No,” Dario said.

Pierce froze. One of the directors on the screen looked down, probably to text someone with more survival instinct.

Mathias folded his glasses. “No?”

“You do not get approval over Armitage Group communications.”

“Then you do not get my vote block.”

“The vote is not today.”

“No. It is close enough that delay becomes leverage.”

There. The clean word. Delay. Not defeat, not yet – but a delayed vote invited questions, questions invited disclosures, disclosures invited people like Bennett Bellamy to look principled by standing in doorways that were not his.

Dario forced his voice lower. “Withdrawing the petition reads as guilt. Expanding it reads as aggression. Maintaining it preserves the record. We hold position until the judge rules.”

Mathias watched him for a long moment. “You want the child.”

Dario did not answer. That had never been in dispute. The child was simple in a way nothing else was – blood, name, future. A daughter who should not be raised in borrowed rooms and legal clinics while Bellamy men taught themselves the shape of restraint for applause. A child of his should have security, physicians, family protection, a nursery with more than donated furniture and emergency bags. That the argument required separating the child from the woman carrying her did not make it false-it made it difficult. He had spent his adult life confusing difficult with negotiable.

“You also want the woman to admit you are still the safest place she knows.”

“This is not therapy.”

“No. Therapy is less expensive.”

Livia looked out the window. Dario could see the city reflected beside her face-towers, glass, weather moving in. Somewhere below, Aveline was in a hospital room he could not name, with pillows behind her back and lawyers translating her fear into exhibits.

He could stop. The thought came so suddenly he nearly moved. He could withdraw the petition. Let the neutral channel stand. Tell Pierce to wall off St. Orla, Dr. Merrow, the

donor office. Tell Celine to correct the surrogate rumor. Send Aveline one message through counsel: I will not seek your location.

For 1 breath, he saw the shape of it. Not repair – nothing repaired what had happened in the donor hall. But a retreat. A clean edge.

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A

KIRA

He imagined Aveline receiving the message. Not softening – he was not naive. But pausing. Reading it twice. Recognizing the restraint because she had always been fair to facts when she could not be fair to him. Perhaps telling Isolde not to answer yet. Perhaps lowering her hand to the baby and understanding that he had chosen not to chase for 1 day.

The image hurt because it offered him nothing immediate. No access. No gratitude. No restored authority.

Then he saw the headline. Armitage Withdraws Medical Access Petition After Wife's Testimony.

He saw Mathias using the withdrawal in every private call. He saw Livia's trust advisers asking whether Dario's personal judgment had compromised succession. He saw Bennett Bellamy becoming the man who could force him backward by standing politely outside hospital doors. He saw Aveline learning that if she held long enough, he would let go.

No. The answer settled before he chose it.

"We maintain," Dario said.

Livia closed her eyes. Mathias's face did not change, but satisfaction entered the room anyway.

"Then my office reviews communications until the ruling."

"You can review Vey family statements."

"You misunderstand your position."

Dario leaned forward. "And you misunderstand mine."

Pierce's phone vibrated on the table. He glanced at it, then went still the kind of still that made all other stillness rehearsal.

Dario knew before Pierce spoke that the vote had moved again without him.

“What?” Dario asked.

Pierce looked at Mathias first. Mistake. Then at Dario.

“CityGlass has a draft post. They are claiming a press leak ties the Armitage board delay discussion to the emergency petition and an undisclosed hospital privacy dispute.”

For the first time all morning, Mathias Vey looked genuinely annoyed.

Dario reached for the phone. Pierce did not hand it over fast enough.

End of chapter

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 43

“No.”

The word came out before Anika finished reading the second option. She stopped:

On the laptop, her face held the patient stillness of a woman who had learned not to flinch when clients refused things from hospital beds Beside the screen, the second facility’s observation room was quiet except for the monitor printer ticking out my daughter’s heart rate in small, temporary waves. Not labor. Not safe either. That was the shape of the day.

I sat propped against 3 pillows with my shoes in a plastic patient bag under the chair and a paper cup of ice water sweating against my thigh Isolde had set the cup there because my hands shook too much after the hearing to hold it without spilling. She was at the window now, looking out through the narrow gap in the blinds toward a parking lot I was not supposed to name on any line, in any message, to anyone outside counsel.

My body felt borrowed. My name did not.

“Read option 1 again,” I said.

Anika looked down. “Aveline Ashby did not enter a surrogacy arrangement with Dario or Celine Armitage. She is the mother of the child she is carrying. She remains under medical care and legal advice. No further private medical or family information will be discussed publicly.”

“That one.”

Mara, who had joined from the clinic line, said, “It is the narrowest.”

“Good.”

“It also means we do not use the wrong-call material,” Anika said. “Not in the statement. Not even hinted.”

My stomach tightened. Not contraction-memory. Dario’s voice, made careless by a phone he thought had gone dark. Celine breathing beside him. My own hand moving across the laptop trackpad while my daughter shifted inside me and became a reason to survive humiliation by filing it correctly.

The wrong-call recording sat in the evidence folder with a name I would not say aloud in this room. It had more force than any public statement could hold. It also had my nakedest injury inside it. I had learned enough in 6 days to know that public pain became public property if you let the wrong people caption it first.

“I am not giving CityGlass that recording,” I said.

Isolde turned from the blinds, “Good.”

Anika waited. Lawyers liked decisions repeated in full sentences – it made grief useful.

“I authorize option 1,” I said. “No wrong-call details. No sexual details. No insult transcript. No description of the nursery beyond what is already in court exhibits. No mention of the baby’s name.”

Isolde’s gaze flicked to me at the last sentence.

I touched the side of my stomach under the blanket. The name had been written only where I could control the page – in my private evidence folder, in one note to myself after the wrong call, and once on the inside flap of a notebook I had hidden under clean socks. Even Isolde did not

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TEA use it unless the door was locked and no phone was awake in the room.

Dario did not get to hear it through a gossip account. Celine did not get to practice soft concern around it. No clerk, donor, assistant, or lawyer got to turn it into a field before I had held my daughter and decided what the world deserved to know.

Private was not the same thing as hidden. I was beginning to understand the difference.

“And no address,” Mara said. “No hospital, no provider names, no gestational week unless medical counsel confirms it is strategically necessary.”

“Twenty-nine weeks is already in the filings,” I said.

“Publicly repeated facts behave differently from filed facts.”

That was the sort of sentence I would have hated 1 week ago because it sounded like people making paper more important than bodies. Now knew paper could become a door. Or a lock. Filed facts sat behind procedure. Public facts grew legs – they walked into comment sections, donor calls, waiting rooms, board packets. They arrived at desks ahead of you and taught strangers what expression to wear before you opened your mouth.

I had been learning that since St. Orla. Someone had called me a disruption before I knew there was a file. Someone had called my child a continuity problem before I knew Dario had prepared an authorization form. Someone had called me unstable before asking whether I had eaten.

“Then keep it out,” I said.

The baby rolled hard enough that I lost the thread for a breath. My hand pressed low, then stilled. For a second I was back in the apartment doorway with pale clouds on the wall and Dario’s paint-stained hand braced above my head, promising that soon everyone would know.

Everyone did know now – they simply did not know the version he had planned.

Anika made a note. “We will post through counsel only. It will not be written in your voice. It will be flat.”

“Flat is fine.”

Flat had its uses. Flat did not tremble. Flat did not sound abandoned. Flat did not let readers hear the bedroom through the wall or imagine my face in the donor hall. Flat gave them nothing to consume except the fact they had tried to turn away from.

I had spent too many days being described by people who benefited from making me emotional. Let them fight a sentence with no tears on it.

“There may be pressure to say more because of the board leak.”

I looked at her. On screen, Anika's expression changed in the smallest possible way. There it was the new blade on the table.

"What board leak?"

Isolde came away from the window. "I was waiting until the medical check was done."

"The check is done."

"The nurse has to come back in 20 minutes."

"Then you have 20 minutes."

She did not smile. That was how I knew it was bad.

Mara took over because Isolde loved me enough to want to soften things and lawyers loved precision more than mercy.

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"CityGlass has a draft claiming Armitage Group is discussing delaying the winter vote because Dario's emergency petition exposed a hospital – privacy dispute and potential governance risk."

I absorbed the words in pieces. Armitage Group. Winter vote. Delaying.

The vote had been Dario's altar. He had asked me to stand in shadow until it was over. He had put his marriage, his son, Celine's pregnancy, my body, and my daughter inside the machinery of that date as if time could launder a lie if everyone waited politely enough.

Now the date was moving-not because I had shouted, but because the paperwork he filed to reach me had reached him first.

"Is it confirmed?" I asked.

"Not publicly," Anika said. "But Pierce from Armitage general counsel has reportedly circulated risk language. If the draft posts, they may release something. Your statement should go first or immediately after, depending on timing."

I looked at the monitor strip. Small peaks. Small valleys. My daughter, refusing to become a board footnote.

“First,” I said.

Mara’s eyebrows lifted. “There is value in waiting for their response.”

“There is more value in not letting them make my motherhood a reaction to their governance problem.”

Silence settled for 2 seconds. Then Isolde exhaled through her nose. “Put that in Latin and rich people will pay 900 dollars to have it framed.”

I almost laughed – it hurt my ribs, so I stopped at a breath.

Anika typed. “We can post in 10 minutes.”

“Make sure it says child I am carrying.”

“It does.”

“Not baby?”

“Child is more formal.”

“Good.”

Formal mattered. Baby was what Dario used when he wanted common ground. Child sounded like a person whose status could not be sentimentalized away.

Mara said, “The judge has not ruled yet. This may irritate Dario’s counsel.”

“He asked a court to put my hospital admissions on a route to him.”

“Yes.”

“Then he can survive irritation.”

Isolde gave me the water. I took it because my throat had dried out around the sentence. The ice knocked against the paper cup. My hand steadied after the first swallow.

Anika read the final version. It was 4 sentences – not enough to hold what happened in the donor hall, the apartment, the wrong call, the clinic, the lock app, the hospital reroute, Celine’s soft oath, Dario’s careful lies, the way my body had learned to listen for danger in email subject lines. Exactly enough to refuse the lie.

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“Post it,” I said.

Anika nodded once. The screen reflected a blue-white square across the blanket as she worked. I watched the cursor move. There was no ceremony. No trumpet. No courtroom gasp. A lawyer in a remote office clicked a button, and 1 version of me stopped existing in public.

Surrogate. Arrangement. Hidden woman. Work contact. Fragile patient. Guest. The words did not disappear – but they had to step around a sentence now.

I am the mother of the child I am carrying.

My phone buzzed on the tray table 3 minutes later. Isolde got to it before I could reach.

“Counsel post is live,” she said. “Comments are already locked on the repost. Good.”

My body sagged with a relief too thin to trust.

The nurse came in 2 minutes after that with a blood pressure cuff and the clean cheer of someone who had seen enough hospital rooms to know cheer was not the same as comfort.

“Any leaking, bleeding, or regular contractions since we last checked?”

“No.”

“Fetal movement?”

My hand was already there. “Yes.”

She wrapped the cuff around my arm, checked the monitor paper, and nodded at the water cup. “Keep drinking. You bought yourself a quiet stretch if your body accepts the bargain.”

The phrasing made Isolde’s face soften. Mine did not. My body had accepted bargains before.

I waited until the cuff released. The numbers were acceptable. The nurse said so. She said observation would continue. She said the doctor was comfortable with rest, food, and no visitors not cleared by the privacy note. She did not say safe – I appreciated her for that.

After she left, Anika's phone rang on her side of the laptop. She looked at the caller ID and muted herself before answering. We watched her listen. Her face did not reveal much. My body knew anyway.

Isolde moved closer to the bed.

Anika unmuted. "CityGlass posted the board-delay leak 40 seconds after our statement."

"And?"

She looked directly into the camera. "Armitage Group has issued a holding notice. The winter vote is delayed pending outside governance review."

For 1 second, the room was so quiet I could hear the monitor paper tear itself forward.

Then my daughter kicked once, hard and low, as if she had struck the wall of the world with her heel. I put my hand over the movement.

Anika's mouth tightened. "Dario will understand this as your fault."

I looked at the counsel statement still glowing on my phone. Four sentences. My whole life, narrowed into a blade.

"No," I said. "He will understand it as something he can punish."

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 44

Dario kept the seat. That was the sentence he gave himself first, before anyone else could contaminate t or oversight.

SWEET

Bank view,

He kept the seat. He remained chief executive. His name stayed on the glass outside the boardroom. His card still opened the executive lift. His signature still moved money, leases, foundation commitments, clinic partnerships, and the quiet channels that had once made problems disappear before they learned to speak in court.

Everything else was temporary. That was the second sentence he gave himself. Temporary.

The boardroom on 48 had lost its vote-week polish by 7:20 PM. Coffee cups had multiplied. Someone had left a scarf over the back of a chair. Pierce's legal pads were stacked in 3 uneven piles, which meant the general counsel had stopped performing calm for anyone except the minutes.

Outside review. Temporary communications protocol. Medical philanthropy firewall. No contact with hospitals, clinics, providers, or known maternal-care staff except through counsel. No independent investigator activity near Bellamy Ventures, legal clinics, housing coordinators, on health facilities. Mathias Vey seated as special governance observer until the delayed winter vote.

The conditions had been printed in 12-point type on Armitage letterhead, which made the humiliation worse. A handwritten demand could be dismissed as heat. A phone call could be denied, softened, reframed as concern. This had margins, version numbers, and a footer from his own legal department. The company had made a document for his leash.

Observer. Dario looked at the printed resolution and felt the word try to enter him like a hook.

"This is excessive," he said.

Livia did not look up from her copy. "It is less than removal."

The independent director from Boston had flown in after the CityGlass post. He still wore his travel coat over his suit and a face arranged into moral inconvenience. Directors liked consequences when consequences proved their importance. They liked them less when the consequences had a name and could speak back.

"The market does not need a succession panic," the director said. "It needs evidence the board can contain personal conduct risk."

"Personal conduct risk," Dario repeated.

Pierce shifted. Mathias did not. Mathias had taken the chair to Dario's left-not the head of the table, worse. Near enough to make every paper movement visible, distant enough to imply he had not grabbed anything.

“A 4-sentence statement from a pregnant woman has now accomplished what no competitor has managed in 5 years,” Mathias said. “It made the board question whether you confuse access with judgment.”

| Dario’s hand went still. “Careful.”

Mathias smiled without looking amused. “I am being precise.”

Precision. Aveline’s disease spreading through the house.

It was not even the word mother that had done the most damage, though Pierce kept pretending the statement’s legal force was the issue. The damage was the refusal to decorate- no sobbing line about betrayal, no appeal to romance, no invitation for the public to debate

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PLAY FOR FREE whether she had been foolish. She had left them with structure. No arrangement. No transfer. Mother. Every soft version available to him required at least 1 of those words to blur. She had sharpened all 3 and then stepped back.

She had always loved exactness. At restaurants, she read menus as if missing a comma might obligate her to a sauce she disliked. At the apartment, she labeled containers because pregnancy had made her memory unreliable and she found the failure humiliating. He had once teased her for putting dates on peppermint tea bags.

She had said, “Dates matter.”

He had kissed the side of her head and called hor impossible. Now dates were exhibits. Labels were proof. Sentences cost votes.

“The statement came from counsel,” Dario said. “Not from her.”

Livia’s eyes lifted. “Do not make that mistake where anyone with power can hear you.”

He hated that she was right. He hated more that Aveline had likely chosen every word. She would have insisted on mother. She would have refused to mention the recording. She would have kept the ugliest proof private because public humiliation did not help her child.

That discipline was new – or perhaps it had always been there and he had mistaken her softness for absence of structure.

Pierce set down another page. “The outside review will examine the emergency petition, St. Orla donor-event coordination, foundation communications, and any Armitage-linked contact with private maternal-care providers.”

“Dr. Merrow is not Armitage-linked.”

“Her clinic’s partner portal accessed Ms. Ashby’s records before consent. The connection will be alleged.”

“Alleged by Bellamy-funded counsel.”

“Alleged with timestamps,” Pierce said.

The room became quiet. Dario could feel Mathias’s satisfaction without looking at him. Every competent man in the room had become fascinated by the paperwork Aveline had gathered while they were calling her frightened.

He had taught her the first rule of his world by accident: keep proof. Now she was applying it without him.

The board chair, Evander Keel, folded his hands. He had been quiet for most of the meeting, which meant he had already counted votes. Quiet men with counted votes did not need to raise their voices.

“You will sign the interim conditions tonight,” Keel said.

“Or?”

Livia’s jaw tightened. Pierce stared at the table. Keel did not blink. “Or the board accepts your temporary leave pending review.”

Dario looked at each of them. Not 1 person at the table came to his defense cleanly not his mother, not Pierce, not the directors who had taken his calls at midnight for years, not Mathias, whose leverage existed because Dario had married his daughter and then treated marriage like a locked room he could leave whenever he wished.

Aveline had done that. No. The correction came automatically again, a lawyer in his own skull. The sequence had done that. But sequences had authors.

She had authorized the statement before the leak landed. She had moved first. She had denied the one word that made the private solution easier to sell. She had announced motherhood without giving them the recording, the body, the bedroom, the pieces of herself that would have let public pity devour her.

That was not panic. That was strategy. It made her dangerous in a way running never had.

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“Give me the pen,” Dario said.

Pierce slid it over.

For 1 second, Dario remembered Aveline signing apartment delivery forms at the kitchen counter, barefoot, belly rounded under one of his shirts, making a face because the courier had listed her as household recipient instead of her name.

He had said, “Does it matter?”

She had said, “It always matters when they don’t name you.”

He signed Dario Armitage on the first line, then the second, then the acknowledgment that he would not contact providers. The pen scratched louder than it should have.

Mathias waited until the final signature dried. “My office will review tomorrow’s statement.”

“There will be no statement.”

“There will be. Silence after a board delay reads as panic.”

“Your office can review Celine’s.”

“Celine is not the chief executive under review.”

Dario looked at him then. “Celine testified.”

Mathias’s face cooled by 2 degrees. “Because you placed my daughter in a position where truth and loyalty could not coexist.”

“Your daughter knew enough to bring settlement papers to my apartment.”

Livia said, “Stop.”

Dario did not. “She knew enough to discuss timing. She knew enough to know the nursery existed. She knew enough to stand beside me at St. Orla while Aveline walked in with an ultrasound envelope.”

“And yet,” Mathias said, “somehow you are still the person every document points back to.”

That landed. It landed because it was true. The lock. The apartment. The petition. The clinic car. The missed appointment. The wrong call. It was worse because each item was small enough to sound petty if he named it alone – a lock setting, a car, a form, a call. Put together, they had become a map of intent.

He had spent years building systems that worked because no single piece looked violent from a boardroom. Aveline’s talent, apparently, was arranging the pieces until the room saw the shape.

He felt, for an instant, the terrible simplicity of being seen by paperwork. Then he buried it. There were rooms where guilt was useful because it taught correction. This was not one of them in this room, guilt was a seat someone else took.

“The review will find sloppy coordination under crisis,” Dario said. “Nothing more.”

Keel gathered his papers. “Make sure your custody strategy does not create another headline.”

Custody. The word entered cleanly. Not medical access. Not emergency notice. Custody.

The baby was not born. The court had not yet issued final parentage orders. Aveline had not named her publicly. That meant the field was not lost-it had merely changed.

The meeting broke in parts. Directors left first. Pierce stayed to collect executed pages. Livia lingered near the window, then thought better of

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RIRA speaking to him and left with only a look.

Mathias paused at the door. “Do not mistake temporary survival for control,” he said.

“Do not mistake observation for ownership.”

“Ownership?” Mathias’s smile returned. “You should retire that word for a while.”

He left. Dario waited until the door shut before he reached for his phone.

There were 18 messages he needed to answer and 3 he needed to ignore. Celine had called twice. Grant had sent nothing because Grant still knew how to follow an order. Aveline had not contacted him.

Of course she had not. She would be in a hospital room or safe room, surrounded by women and Bennett's useful restraint, being told the delayed vote proved the system could bleed. She would think this was consequence. She would not understand it was permission.

If the company could move against him because she had made herself impossible to manage quietly, then he could stop pretending this was only about medical notice.

He called Farrow, his custody lawyer, from the empty boardroom.

Farrow answered on the second ring. "I saw the holding notice."

"Good."

"We need to avoid retaliation optics."

"I asked for strategy, not mood."

A pause. Then Farrow said, "The next filing must be careful."

"It can be careful."

Dario looked at the signed resolution in front of him. Temporary limits. Outside review. Mathias oversight. His name still on the glass because he had accepted a leash in public for the first time in his life. Aveline had made that cost visible. He would make the next one personal.

Not cruel. He corrected the word as soon as it rose. Cruelty was for men without discipline, What he wanted was pressure with a procedural face-a request that sounded reasonable enough to survive a judge's first read and sharp enough that Aveline would feel it when she tried to sleep.

Birth notice. Name restrictions, Preservation of paternal standing. Concerns about unilateral concealment. Bellamy proximity. Each phrase could wear a clean shirt.

"Draft custody language," he said. "Not medical access. Parental standing. Birth notice. Emergency protective concerns. Her concealment pattern. Bellamy influence. Refusal to provide neutral updates. I want options that hurt without looking like revenge."

Farrow was silent long enough to understand exactly what he meant. "Dario."

"Tonight," Dario said.

Across the table, Pierce’s forgotten pen lay where the resolution had been signed. Dario picked it up and closed his hand around it until the metal warmed.

“Make the next filing hurt.”

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The wife isn't me

Chapter 45

“It is January 18,” Isolde said, “and you are not allowed to pretend that sentence is casual.”

I looked up from the folded blanket in my lap. For a moment I had to count backward – not because I did not know the date/but because 10 weeks could pass inside legal paper and medical caution until time stopped feeling like weather and started feeling like a file name.

January 18. The first week after the delayed winter vote became the second, and the second became an outside review, a neutral emergency- notice order through counsel, a Westport pressure plan, a renewed safe-room placement, a rotating clinic schedule, 3 affidavits, 2 corrected public statements, and an agreement from the court that Dario could receive notice of a true medical emergency only through counsel or court channel – not providers, not hospital desks, not my portal access. The words had become a prayer I did not believe in but repeated anyway.

The time jump did not feel like escape. It felt like surviving inside parentheses. Every morning I woke in a room Dario did not own and checked whether the world had found a new route to me. Some days it had not. Those were called good days even when they included swollen ankles, deposition prep, or Dr. Price asking me to describe pelvic pressure with a straight face while Isolde pretended not to laugh from a plastic chain Good had become a modest word.

Now I was almost due-not overdue, not ready, just almost. My body had crossed from 29 weeks into 39 without ceremony. There had been no clean border, only larger clothes, slower stairs, swelling in my hands, nightly kick counts, a new ache in my hips, and a calendar on the safe-room wall where Isolde wrote appointments in black and legal deadlines in red. The black squares mattered more; the red squares shouted louder.

“I am not pretending,” I said.

“You folded that blanket 4 times.”

“It was uneven.”

“It is a donated receiving blanket, Aveline. It has survived worse than asymmetry.”

I smoothed the edge anyway. The safe room had changed around me in small increments. The ugly chain lock was still there, the narrow bed still pushed against the wall, but the folded bassinet was now assembled, its screws tightened by Nina’s cousin while I sat in the chair and pretended not to cry. There were clean diapers in the dresser and 4 onesies washed in unscented detergent. A hospital bag sat by the door with my records, chargers, socks, lip balm, and the printed orders that said no direct Armitage contact. No little name card – not yet. Her name lived in me the way she did: private, real, unsubmitted.

Isolde stood at the tiny kitchenette, peeling an orange with a knife because her nails were too short to start the rind. The room smelled sharp and clean. Outside, late snow scratched against the window like someone testing a lock and finding it unimpressed.

“Bennett’s driver confirmed tomorrow’s clinic route,” she said. “Female driver, different car, no Bellamy logo, pickup at 8:10. He said you can also cancel if you are too tired.”

“He said that?”

“Through Mara. Before you ask.”

I did not ask – that was the point. In 10 weeks, Bennett had learned the route around my flinch. He sent options through counsel or Isolde unless I invited direct contact, kept cars unmarked, did not ask for gratitude in the spaces Dario would have filled with proof of his own goodness. Sometimes he sent food with labels so I could choose what to eat without discussing nausea with a man.

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Once, after a hearing where Dario’s lawyer used the phrase concealment pattern 6 times, Bennett had waited downstairs in the lobby wit/2 paper bags from the only place near the safe room that made soup without garlic. He had stood up when I came in, then stepped away from the elevator door – no speech, no claim, just the path clear, the bag on the table, and Isolde saying, “The lentil is yours. The chill is mine He guessed wrong and corrected in advance.” I had hated how much that steadied me, and needed it anyway.

“I can go tomorrow,” I said. “Dr. Price wants the check.”

“Dr. Price wants you to stop treating every check like an exam you can pass.”

“That sounds unlike her.”

“Fine. I want that.”

Dr. Price had changed too, or perhaps I had finally learned the shape of steady care. She never promised the court would behave, never said my body could be reasoned into obedience if I made enough correct choices. She simply checked what needed checking, wrote down what mattered, and asked my permission before each hand or instrument crossed the border of my skin. At 36 weeks she had said, “We are planning for birth now, not hiding from it.” I had cried in the exam room because planning sounded like arrogance, and she had handed me tissues and waited.

The baby shifted under my ribs, slow and heavy. I pressed the side of my belly and waited. One foot slid outward, then disappeared. She was running out of room and still trying to rearrange the furniture.

“Your aunt is rude,” I told her.

Isolde pointed the knife at me. “Your mother is a liar.”

The word mother no longer startled me that had taken 10 weeks too. At first, every time someone said it in court or clinic, my body braced as if Dario might appear to correct the term. Mother was not a feeling yet; it was a legal position, a medical field, a sentence in a counsel statement, a line I defended because if I did not, someone else would define it around me.

Then came the ordinary evidence: her hiccups at 2:00 AM, the way she went quiet when I panicked and then kicked after I drank cold water, the tiny clothes that made my throat ache less from fear than from logistics. The hospital tour I took by video because we still could not risk a public walk-through. The nurse held up 2 swaddles to the camera and asked which I preferred, as if preference had survived me. I chose the yellow-not because Dario had left a yellow blanket in the nursery, but because yellow was allowed to outlive him.

The orange peel came away in one strip. Isolde looked proud of herself and dropped half the slices into a chipped bowl. “Eat.”

“You command like a hospital brochure.”

“I command like someone who remembers what happened when you skipped lunch before the deposition.”

“I vomited once.”

“You vomited on a copy of Farrow’s motion.”

“That was the only useful thing my body contributed that day.”

Isolde laughed. I did too, and the baby moved at the sound. For a minute, the safe room held – not beautifully. The lamp still tilted, the radiator clanged, the bassinet sheet had one corner that would not lie smooth, and my back ached in 3 places. The future was a stack of court dates and feedings and public lies waiting to be corrected. But Dario was not in the room. No one was asking me to be reasonable about my own erasure. No one had a hand on the door.

I let myself imagine it then- not the grand future, I did not have the stamina for grand. A morning with my daughter in a room that knew our names. A kettle that belonged to me. A window with a plant I did not have to abandon. A pediatric appointment where the desk asked for my ID and I handed it over without waiting for someone else’s surname to fill the screen. Maybe work again. Maybe a desk. Maybe Bennett somewhere outside that image, holding a door open for a version of me who could walk through because she wanted to, not because every other exit was burning.

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CICA

The thought was warm enough to be dangerous. I set the blanket aside, and Isolde noticed anyway.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was not nothing.”

“I imagined a kitchen.”

Her face softened so quickly I had to look away. “Good,” she said.

“It was small.”

“Even better. Smaller rooms are easier to lock.”

The baby pressed down hard then, a deep, grinding pressure that stole my breath. I gripped the edge of the mattress, and Isolde was beside me before I said anything.

“Pain?”

“Pressure.”

“Contraction?”

“I don’t know.”

We waited. The pressure eased after 30 seconds, leaving a low ache behind. Isolde checked the time on her phone. “8:43.”

“Don’t start.”

“I am not starting. I am noting.”

“That is starting with better manners.”

She sat on the chair opposite me and did not take her eyes off my face. The next tightening came 11 minutes later, then another at 13, then nothing for 24 minutes. Dr. Price’s after-hours nurse told us to hydrate, empty my bladder, lie on my side, and call back if they became regular, if movement changed, if there was bleeding, or if my water broke.

My water. The phrase hung in the room like a bowl balanced too near the edge of a shelf.

By 10:16, the tightenings had scattered again. The baby moved. No bleeding, no leaking. Isolde made me eat the orange slices and half a piece of toast. I was tired enough that my bones seemed to hum.

“Sleep,” she said.

“You?”

“Chair.”

“Your neck will hate you.”

“My neck has disliked better rooms.”

I lay on my left side facing the bassinet. For a long time I watched the empty sheet, tried to imagine her in it and failed – not because I did not believe she was coming, but because birth still felt like a door I could see but not open from this side. The room went dim. Isolde’s breathing slowed in the chair. Snow kept scratching softly at the glass.

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EYEA

I did not sleep at first. I counted the things I could see in the dim room and made them prove themselves. Chain lock, locked. Hospital ba packed. Court order copy, front pocket. Phone, charged. Baby, moving. Me, here- not in the apartment, not in St. Orla's donor hall, not at a private clinic desk with a folder already labeled by other people. Here, in the least beautiful room that had ever protected me, with my friend snoring once and then denying it in her sleep.

I woke at 1:07 AM with the wrong kind of warmth between my legs. At first I thought I had wet myself-pregnancy had removed dignity from enough ordinary functions that humiliation arrived before fear. Then I moved. Fluid spread beneath me, warm and unmistakable, soaking the sheet, the blanket, the back of my thighs. My hand flew to my stomach. The baby shifted. I could not breathe.

"Isolde."

She was awake instantly. "What?"

all

I looked down. The safe room, the bassinet, the legal papers by the door, the future I had allowed myself to imagine for 1 foolish minute of it narrowed to the wet fabric under my body and the date on the wall. January 19. Too early for my courage, too late to pretend the door was still closed.

"My water," I whispered.

Isolde reached for the phone. My voice broke before I could stop it. "Not yet."

End of chapter

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