The wife isn't me

Chapter 4

Mrs. Armitage

Dario stayed outside the door for nineteen minutes after I stopped answering. I knew because I watched the clock was waiting for him to leave, but because I needed proof that he could.

For nineteen minutes, he stood in the hallway of his apartment while I sat on the floor of the entrance hall with his/paperwork in my lap and my daughter pressing hard under my ribs.

Then his phone rang. He did not answer it at once. That was the part I hated. Even through the door, I could hear the hesitation one breath, two, a pause so small that no one else would have noticed it, but I had spent months teaching myself the shapes of his silences.

Then he said, “Yes.” Not to me.

The elevator opened five minutes later. His footsteps went away.

The apartment did not get quieter after that. It got bigger.

I slept for forty-three minutes before dawn and woke with the folded authorization form under my palm. The paper had creased against my skin.

Patient. Gestational Carrier. Legal Mother/Intended Parent.

I read the words again in the gray morning light because sometimes humiliation changed shape overnight. Sometimes something that looked impossible at midnight became merely ugly by morning. This did not. It looked worse.

At eight twelve, the intercom rang.

I was in the nursery doorway, staring at the unfinished clouds, with my phone in one hand and the ultrasound envelope in the other. The sound made the baby jolt. So did I.

I checked the screen beside the door. Concierge Desk. I pressed the answer button without speaking.

“Ms. Ashby?” The lobby attendant sounded careful. Too careful. “Mrs. Armitage is here to see you.”

For one stupid second, my body misunderstood.

Mrs. Armitage. The name came toward me like a coat I had once imagined wearing. Then the rest of me caught up-there was already a Mrs. Armitage. She was downstairs. And the building had let her in far enough to announce her.

I looked at the smart-lock panel. Primary Owner: Dario Armitage. Resident Guest: Aveline Ashby. Of course.

“Send her up,” I said.

My voice sounded almost normal. That was useful.

I put the ultrasound envelope on the console, face down. Then I placed Dario’s form beside it, face up. Not hidden, not offered available.

The elevator took thirty-one seconds. I counted because counting was better than imagining what Celine Armitage had worn to reclaim the apartment where her husband had promised me a nursery.

When the doors opened, she stepped out alone. No Dario, no lawyer, no raised voice.

She wore a soft gray coat over a cream dress that skimmed carefully over her pregnancy. Her hair was pinned low. Her face looked rested in a way that mine would not look for months. There was a narrow leather folder under one arm – not a handbag. A delivery

“Aveline,” she said.

Not Ms. Ashby. Not the woman from work. My first name, as if someone had handed it to her with the elevator key.

“Celine.”

Her eyes moved once over my face, my hands, my stomach. She did not look shocked. That mattered.

“May I come in?”

“This is Dario’s apartment,” I said. “Apparently everyone does.”

Something passed through her expression. Not guilt. Recognition.

“I would rather not do this in the hallway.”

“Then you should have called.”

“Ithought you might not answer.”

“You were right.”

She accepted that as if it were a seating arrangement.

I stepped back. Not far. Enough for her to enter. I left the door open behind her.

Celine noticed – of course she did. Women like Celine noticed gaps. They understood which ones could become exits.

“You can close it,” she said.

“I know.”

I did not move.

She walked three steps into the entrance hall and stopped before the console. Her gaze lowered to the authorization form. There was no surprise then either-only a tightening at the corner of her mouth, too small to be called an expression.

“Dario gave you a draft,” she said.

“He slid it under the door.”

She looked at me. “That was unfortunate.”

“For whom?”

For the first time, she had to choose her answer. It did not take her long.

“For everyone,” she said.

The word everyone was so polished it almost reflected light.

I looked at her folder. “Did you bring a better draft?”

“I brought something calmer.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“No,” Celine said softly. “But sometimes it is the only thing that keeps people from destroying more than they already have.”

There it was. Not accusation-placement. She had placed destruction between us, then turned it until the sharp edge pointed at

The baby shifted. I put one hand beneath my stomach. Celine watched the movement. For a moment, something human crossed her face. Then it arranged itself again.

“I am pregnant too,” she said.

“I noticed.”

“Then you understand that none of this is simple.”

“I understand that you have a husband and a son and another baby coming. I understand that your husband gave me a ring and told me I was going to be his wife. I understand that yesterday your son asked who I was, and Dario told him I was someone from work.”

Her eyes lowered. Just once. “Nico should not have been put in that position.”

“Neither should I.”

“No.”

The agreement was so clean it almost made me angrier. Celine was not here to deny the wound. She was here to measure it.

“How long did you know?” I asked.

She folded both hands over the folder. “Long enough not to be surprised yesterday.”

My throat closed. I had expected the answer. I had still wanted a different one.

“Did you know about the ring?”

Celine’s gaze flicked toward my left hand – the place where the ring was not. “No.”

AO

That was the first answer I believed.

“Did you know he told me the engagement had to stay private because his family was difficult?”

“Dario has always found useful ways to describe his family.”

“That is not an answer.”

“No,” she said. “I did not know every phrase.”

“But you knew enough.”

“I knew there was a woman,” she said. “I knew there was a pregnancy. I knew Dario believed he could contain both until the vote was finished.”

The vote. That ugly little altar where everyone had decided my daughter could be placed and renamed.

“And you agreed?”

“I agreed that children do better when adults stop making romantic disasters louder than they need to be.”

I laughed once. It did not sound like me. “Romantic disaster.”

“Aveline.”

“No. Say it again. I want to hear what I am when you are being polite.”

Her face did not change. “You are the mother of a child who will be born into consequences she did not choose.”

“Then why are you trying to make sure she loses the only mother she has?”

“I am trying to make sure she does not lose a name that could protect her.”

“She has my name.”

“Yes.”

One syllable. Soft. Pitying. I felt it like fingers on my face.

Celine opened the folder. Inside were papers clipped together with a silver fastener-cream paper, black type, no hospital crest this time.

Private Resolution Agreement. Mutual Confidentiality. Prenatal Support Schedule.

My vision narrowed on the last phrase. Support. They liked that word. It made money sound like mercy.

“This is not an admission of anything,” Celine said.

“Of course not.”

“It provides housing, medical care, legal counsel if you prefer independent review, and a settlement after delivery.”

AO

“After delivery.”

Her hands remained perfectly still. “Yes.”

“And before delivery?”

“Stability.”

“That is a pretty word for surveillance.”

“It is a practical word for risk.”

“Whose risk?”

“Everyone’s.”

“There is that word again.”

—

Celine slid the top page forward on the console. She did not hand it to me that would have required my acceptance. She only moved it into my reach.

“No one wants you punished,” she said.

“How generous.”

“I mean that.”

“I know you do. That is the problem.”

For the first time, her mouth tightened enough to show strain. “If you fight this publicly, the family will protect itself.”

“Your family.”

“The child’s family.”

“My child.”

“Your child biologically,” she said. “Yes.”

The apartment went very still. Even the heating seemed to pause.

I looked at her across the marble console, at the wife Dario had hidden behind words like timing and complicated and later.

“You practiced that,” I said.

“I did not come here to hurt you.”

“No. You came here to make it sound natural.”

Her eyes changed. Only a little. Enough.

“Children need legitimacy,” she said. “They need adults who can give them clean records, clean explanations, a home that will not

AO

INSTALL be whispered about before they can speak for themselves.”

“Children need mothers who do not sign them away.”

“You would not have to disappear.”

The words were quiet. That made them worse.

I stared at her. Celine continued before I could ask.

“There are ways to handle this with kindness. You could be near. You could receive updates. In time, if everyone behaves with care, there could be visits.”

Visits. For my daughter. In the nursery with unfinished clouds ten steps away.

My hand went to the console because the floor moved under me. It had not moved – my body had.

Celine’s eyes dropped to my stomach again. “You should sit.”

“Do not mother me.”

She looked up. The silence after that was the first honest thing she had brought into the apartment.

I picked up the top page and photographed it. Celine did not stop me. That was interesting.

“You expected me to do that,” I said.

“I expected you to need to feel protected.”

“No. You expected a photographed settlement to look cleaner than a form naming me a carrier.”

This time, she looked away. Not for long. Long enough.

I photographed the second page, the third, the payment schedule, the paragraph that called silence mutual when only one of us was being erased.

“Dario said this was about giving my daughter a future,” I said.

“It is.”

“Then why is every future you brought one where I become a footnote?”

Celine closed the folder slowly. “Because you are thinking like a mother in pain,” she said. “I am thinking like the person who will have to raise children inside what survives.”

There it was. Not the softness, not the polish – the claim. Children. Not just her son. Not just the baby under her cream dress. Mine too.

I set my phone down on the console with the camera still open. “Get out.”

She did not flinch. “I hoped we could be civil.”

AO

“You hoped I would be quiet.”

“Those are not always different things.”

“In this apartment, they are.”

Celine’s gaze moved once around the entrance hall. Dario’s tie still lay near the brass bowl. His key tray, his walls, his warmth wife, standing inside it as if she had only come to inspect a room he had lent too generously.

“This apartment will not remain available forever,” she said.

I picked up the authorization form. “Neither will your plausible deniability.”

That landed. Not hard enough to break her composure. Enough to leave a mark under it.

-his

Celine took the settlement pages back into her folder, but she left one card on the console. White, embossed, no logo I recognized -only a clinic name and an address.

“You should sleep,” she said. “Drink water. Eat something with salt if your doctor permits it. Stress is not good at twenty-nine weeks.”

“Do not pretend my body matters to you.”

“Your body is carrying a child who matters to many people.”

I almost missed it. Almost. Then I heard what she had not said. Not you matter. Not she matters to you. To many people.

Celine walked to the open door. At the threshold, she stopped.

“Dario has handled this badly,” she said.

I said nothing.

“But the intake window is still being held.”

My fingers went cold around the paper. “What intake window?”

Celine looked back at me, polished and pale and careful. For the first time since she arrived, I saw the shape of the machine behind her-not anger, not jealousy. Process.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Ten thirty. The clinic already has your name.”

End of chapter

AO

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