The wife isn't me

Chapter 46

“Do not stand up yet.”

Isolde said it like an order, but her hands were careful. That was the difference between command and control-command could save time: control took your choices and called the theft efficiency.

I stayed on my side on the wet sheet while she turned on the lamp, reached for the hospital bag, and put Dr. Price’s after-hours line on speaker. The room looked too bright after sleep. The bassinet threw a small empty shadow against the wall. My water kept coming in little warm shifts every time I breathed, and I hated that part most- not the pain, not yet, just the continuing fact of it. Something had started inside my body without asking whether I was prepared to defend it.

“Aveline Ashby, 39 weeks, water appears ruptured at 1:07 AM,” Isolde said when the nurse answered. “Clear fluid. Baby moved after. No bleeding that we can see. Contractions irregular earlier, not timed yet after rupture. We have the confidential hospital route.”

The nurse’s voice was calm enough to make me trust the checklist and not the terror. “Any green or brown color to the fluid?”

Isolde looked at me. I shook my head. “Clear.”

“Fever?”

“No.”

“Severe constant pain?”

“No.”

“Fetal movement in the last few minutes?”

My daughter shifted again, lower now, a slow press that made me grip the mattress. “Yes,” I said.

“Good. You need to go in. Use the planned route. Do not eat. Small sips of water only. Put on a pad if you can. Bring the printed records and the privacy order. I am notifying Dr. Price and the receiving team through the protected line.”

Receiving team. Hospital route. Protected line. Words we had spent 10 weeks building like sandbags, and now the water was here anyway.

“Do we call counsel now?” I asked.

“I am texting the emergency line while we move,” Isolde said.

“The order?”

“Top of the folder.”

“The no-direct-contact language?”

“Highlighted.”

“The hospital knows not to confirm?”

She looked at me then, not gently, exactly. “They know. You made them know. Now put your feet on the floor before I start complimenting your

Tile Explorer

Sleep better at night and have fun

PLAY FOR FREE.

KIRA administrative legacy.”

That almost worked. Fear still sat under my breastbone, hard as a swallowed coin, but it no longer had the whole room to itself

Isolde hung up and looked at me. “We move.”

“I need clothes.”

“Loose dress. Coat. Pads. Shoes you don’t have to bend for.”

“I can dress myself.”

“I know. Tell me what you want handed to you.”

There – that small correction. Not let me, not I have you, but tell me. I swung my legs over the side of the narrow bed and paused while fluid soaked the pad Isolde had shoved into my underwear with the clinical briskness of a battlefield nurse and a best friend who had seen me dry over worse. My belly hung heavy and low. My hips felt loosened, unreliable, as if the screws in my body had been turned half a rotation back.

No contraction yet. Then one came while I was trying to pull the dress over my head it began in my back, not a tightening so much as a hand closing. I froze with fabric caught over one shoulder.

Isolde looked at the clock. “1:18.”

“Don’t narrate.”

“I am logging.”

“You can log quietly.”

“I can do many things. That is not one of them.”

It should have made me laugh. It made me breathe through my teeth instead. When the pain released, I finished dressing. My hands shook on the buttons of the cardigan until Isolde held it open from behind without touching my skin.

“Arms.”

“I know how cardigans work.”

“Congratulations. Arms.”

I put them through. The safe room changed as we moved through it. Every object became either needed or abandoned – hospital bag. records folder, phone, charger, water, coat. The small yellow swaddle from the video tour lay on the dresser because I had taken it out the night before to look at it and never put it back.

I stared. Isolde followed my gaze. “Take it?”

The practical answer was no. Hospitals had blankets. The bag was packed. We needed speed. But my hand reached, and Isolde put the swaddle into the outside pocket of the hospital bag without comment.

The next contraction came at 1:27.

“Nine minutes,” she said.

“Irregular.”

“Yes.”

Tile Explorer

Sleen better at night and have fun

PLAY FOR FREE.

“Say yes like you mean not terrifying.”

“Yes like we are following the route.”

The route. Nina had taped it inside the kitchen cabinet because walls could be photographed during video calls. Primary hospital not St. Oria. Entrance not main. Call from car 10 minutes out. Registration name exact. No Dario, no Celine, no Armitage contacts. Court order/copy on top. Counsel emergency line ready. If there was a media presence, drive past and use secondary entrance. If followed, divert to the municipal lot and switch cars. Birth plan, but make it evidence preservation.

There had been another page once-the gentle one. Music maybe. Dim lights. Whether I wanted to see the mirror. Whether/skin-to-skin happened immediately if the baby and I were stable. Aveline at 28 would have mocked herself for crying over a checklist with icons in the margin. Aveline at 39 weeks had folded that page behind the court order and kept it anyway. I wanted softness, and I refused to let Dario’s logistics prove I did not.

I put one hand on the doorframe while Isolde opened the chain. The sound of metal sliding free made my stomach turn/For months locks had meant survival; now opening one did too.

The hallway outside the safe room was dim. Nina stood by the stairwell in a coat over pajamas, hair wrapped in a scarf, phone in hand/

“Car is 4 minutes,” she said. “No one in the lobby except Mr. Alvarez on night desk. He knows only medical transport.”

“Thank you,” I said.

My voice sounded too ordinary for a woman leaking fluid into a pad under a black dress at 1:31 AM. Nina’s face softened, then corrected itself into professionalism. “Elevator is padded and camera angle is down. I put a maintenance sign in the front hall so any street photograph sees nothing useful.”

Institutions hurt quietly. So did people who protected you.

We took the elevator because stairs were no longer a moral achievement. I leaned against the back wall, one hand on the rail, the other under my stomach. Bennett was in the lobby-not by the elevator, not in front of the door, but near the side table, far enough that the path stayed clear. He wore a dark coat over yesterday’s shirt, hair damp like he had washed his face in a sink and come without asking whether he should look composed.

He saw the hospital bag first, then my face, then he stepped farther aside.

“Car is at the alley entrance,” he said. “Female driver. Isolde has the seat. I can drive the second car or stay here.”

No “Are you all right?” No hand reaching. No large male panic trying to become useful by occupying the room.

My next contraction rose before I could answer. I gripped the elevator rail. Bennett turned his body away from me, not from discomfort but to look toward the lobby door, giving me privacy for the pain without pretending he had not seen it.

Isolde put her phone timer on. “1:34.”

Nina said quietly, “Breathe down, not up.”

I tried. My body did not care about anyone’s elegant advice. When the contraction passed, Bennett said, “The second car gives us a buffer if anyone follows.”

“Then second car,” I said.

“Done.”

That was all. He opened the alley door and stepped out first, not to lead me, but to check the sightline. Cold air rushed in. Snow had turned to icy rain. The alley smelled like wet brick and exhaust.

Tile Explorer ht and have fun.

PLAY FOR FREE.

The car waited with its rear door open on the curb side, shielded by the building’s service awning. The driver, a woman in her 50s with silver hair tucked under a knit cap, kept her eyes forward until I reached the door.

“Ms. Ashby,” she said. “Seat is reclined. Towels underneath. No questions unless you ask.”

I almost cried at the mercy of that last sentence. For 10 weeks, questions had been weapons in expensive mouths. Where are you? Who is advising you? Why did you leave? What are you hiding? Here, for once, a question was treated like something I could permit.

Getting into the car was undignified and slow. My belly pulled, fluid shifted, my knees refused grace. Isolde put one hand on the doorframe and one on the seatback, building me a structure without touching me until I said, “Elbow.” Then she gave it.

Bennett stayed at the alley mouth, back to us, looking toward the street. When I was settled, he closed the door only after Isolde nodded. Through the rain-streaked window,

he lifted 2 fingers to the driver- not a salute, a signal. The useful kind. No hand on the small of my back, no command to hurry, no performance of male fear. He did not look through the window to catch my eye and make me reassure him. He gave the driver information and turned toward the street again.

The tenderness of that would have embarrassed me on any other night. Tonight it only let me unclench my jaw.

The car pulled away. I twisted enough to look back despite the ache. Bennett's second car slid into traffic behind us after 1 block, not close enough to crowd, close enough to catch a tail.

"Don't make that face," Isolde said.

"What face?"

"The face where you decide feeling safer is a legal liability."

I looked down at my hands. They were braced over my stomach, fingers spread wide. The baby moved under them, smaller now in the sense that all the world around her had become larger.

"I am afraid," I said.

Isolde's voice changed. "I know."

"Not only of him."

"I know that too."

that felt

The next contraction came at 1:43, stronger, wrapping around my back and low belly until the car windows blurred. I did not scream- less like bravery than surprise. When it ended, my phone buzzed in the side pocket of the hospital bag. Isolde took it out, checked the screen, and went very still.

"What?"

"Counsel emergency inbox," she said.

"What?"

She looked at the driver, then at the road behind us. "A filing alert triggered on Dario's side. The neutral emergency notice system logged a hospital-route event."

My mouth went dry. “Does it give location?”

“No.”

“Does it tell him labor?”

AQ

PLAY FOR FREE.

Tile Explorer night and have fun

Isolde read once, fast. “It tells counsel there is a maternal emergency notification pending review.”

Behind us, Bennett’s headlights held steady through the rain. The route was working, and the alarm was working too. Somewhere in the city. Dario’s notification trigger had fired.

End of chapter

Tile Explorer

PLAY FOR FREE.

theve fun.

The wife isn't me

Chapter 47

CREA

Chapter 47 – No Consent

“I am not signing anything with that name on it.”

The admitting clerk’s hand paused above the tablet. Behind her, the labor and delivery entrance smelled of floor polish, wet wool, and the bitter coffee someone had abandoned near the printer. The clock above the triage doors said 2:09 AM. My water had broken 1 hour and 2 minutes ago, which felt both precise and ridiculous, as if birth respected logs because lawyers did. Rain tapped softly against the glass doors behind us. Another contraction had ended 4 minutes earlier in the car, and I was upright now that felt like an achievement no one would certify.

My dress clung cold at the back of my thighs. I could smell rain in my hair and hospital soap on the counter. The ordinary world kept arriving in humiliating detail while the extraordinary one tried to open under my feet.

Isolde stood to my right with the records folder open. The female driver had brought in the hospital bag and disappeared after a soft “Good luck.” Bennett was outside somewhere, not in the lobby, because Isolde had texted him the rule before we arrived: no crowd, no men at the desk unless I asked, no Armitage name on my admission.

The clerk looked down at the tablet again. She was young, with a badge that said MARA, which would have been funny if my back had not begun to tighten again.

“It’s a standard support-person and information-release screen,” she said. “Sometimes prior records pull associated parties forward.”

“Then remove them.”

“I can skip the screen for now and have nursing review.”

“No,” I said. The word came too sharply. The clerk’s cheeks colored.

I made myself inhale before speaking again, because terror was not permission to cut the wrong person. The wrong people were not always the ones holding the device – sometimes the device arrived already full of them.

“I know you did not put those names there,” I said. “But if I sign around them, I will spend the rest of this labor arguing with ghosts in a chart.”

Her shoulders eased by a fraction. Isolde’s shoulder shifted beside me, but she did not interrupt. Pain had made the world bright at the edges;

that did not make me confused.

“Skipping it leaves the field in the chart,” I said. “Remove Dario Armitage, Celine Armitage, Armitage family counsel, St. Orla coordination, and any private-clinic transfer note from active contact, visitor, release, and care-coordination fields. I will sign as Aveline Ashby. I will list Isolde Fane as support person. My counsel line is the only legal contact.”

The clerk blinked. Then she looked at Isolde.

“Don’t,” I said. Her eyes came back to me. “I am the patient.”

The contraction began before anyone could answer. It took my spine first, then my hips, then every civilized word in the room. I bent forward over the counter because there was nowhere else to go. My palms flattened against laminate. Fluid warmed the pad again.

Humiliation tried to rise with it – I refused that too. People were born through mess. People were erased through neat forms. I would rather be messy.

Isolde spoke low near my ear. “Breathe. You’re doing it.”

“Do not encourage me like a motivational mug.”

Tile Explorer

Sleep better at night and have fun

1/4 AQ

PLAY FOR FREE.

ESTA

“Then stop making mugs look emotionally accurate.”

The laugh came out broken and nearly became a sob. When the contraction released, the clerk had turned the tablet toward herself and opened a different screen.

“I am going to call charge nurse,” she said. “Not because you are wrong. Because I need a second login to remove imported parties from the release tab before signature.”

That was the first useful sentence anyone at a hospital desk had said to me in months. “Thank you.”

She picked up the phone. Isolde slid a disposable pad from the side pocket of the bag and handed it to me without ceremony. “Bathroom?”

“Can we do that?”

The clerk covered the receiver. “Triage bathroom is through the left door. Take the cup on the shelf if you can give a sample. If you can’t, don’t worry.”

Don’t worry. I almost laughed again.

The triage bathroom was large enough for a wheelchair and too small for terror. I changed the pad with one hand braced on the rail and the hospital bag wedged against the door. Clear fluid. Pink tinge. No green. No blood beyond a faint smear the nurse had said might happen when the cervix began to change. Cervix. Change. Birth reduced you to nouns no one used at dinner.

When I came out, a charge nurse with silver-framed glasses stood at the desk reading the privacy order.

“Ms. Ashby,” she said.

My name first. I loved her for it immediately and trusted her not at all yet – that was another thing Dario had left behind: suspicion with good manners. I could recognize kindness and still ask what form it took. I could feel grateful for my name and still check whether the system had room to keep it. Trust, I was learning, did not have to be a door flung open; it could be a latch lifted one click at a time.

“I’m Lenore, charge nurse. I see the court order, the counsel contact instructions, and the no-direct-provider-disclosure language. We can register you under protected status. Your room number will not display on the public board. Visitor list will be locked to the names you approve.”

“No Dario.”

“Noted.”

“No Celine.”

“Noted.”

“No Armitage staff, family counsel, foundation staff, private clinic staff, St. Orla representatives, or anyone asking for continuity of care without my counsel’s confirmation.”

Lenore’s pen moved. “Noted.”

“No photographs.”

“Unit policy already prohibits them without consent.”

“People ignore policies.”

“Then we will make it a security instruction, not a polite request.”

I breathed through a smaller contraction standing in front of the desk. Smaller did not mean small it meant I could still count. Lenore waited

2/4 AQ

Tile Explorer

Sleep better at night and have fun

PLAY FOR FREE.

KYEA until it passed. That was another point in her favor. she did not fill my pain with explanation.

Then she set 3 papers on a clipboard instead of the tablet. “Paper is slower,” she said. “It will also let you cross out imported language before scanning. Initial each strike-through. We will scan the corrected version as the source document.”

Isolde looked at me. I looked at Lenore. “You understand why that matters.”

“I understand enough.”

Not too much, not a performance – enough. I took the pen. My hand shook, but the line through Dario’s name was clean.

DARIO ARMITAGE – imported associated party. I struck it out and initialed.

CELINE ARMITAGE-imported maternal coordination. I struck harder there, initialed.

ARMITAGE/VEY-family counsel coordination note. Strike. Initial.

ORLA RECORDS RESTRICTION – continuity query. I hesitated, not because I wanted it, but because deleting history was not the same as refusing access. That had been one of the hardest lessons of the last 10 weeks – if I erased every trace of the people who had tried to reach me, I made the page prettier and the story weaker. If I left them active, I gave them handles. The trick was to keep the wound visible without letting someone use it as an opening.

“Can this stay as prior-record warning without release authority?”

Lenore nodded. “Yes. I will mark it historical caution, no disclosure.”

The distinction felt like threading a needle while in labor. My daughter moved low.

“Do that,” I said.

I signed Aveline Ashby on the patient line – no spouse, no intended parent, no household recipient, no guest. When I reached emergency contact, I wrote Isolde Fane and the counsel line. Then I paused above the infant contact preference field. Not born yet, and still they had a box waiting.

“Leave that blank,” Lenore said. “You can decide after delivery.”

I exhaled. “Thank you.”

The desk phone rang. No one moved for half a second – that was how a room revealed fear.

Mara the clerk answered. “Labor and delivery admitting.” She listened. Her face changed. Lenore’s did not, which told me this was not her first midnight with powerful people on a phone line.

Mara said, “I cannot confirm patient presence.”

The blood left my hands. Isolde stepped closer, not touching.

Mara listened again. “I cannot confirm whether any person is or is not admitted to this facility. Please direct legal inquiries to the court-listed counsel channel.”

Lenore reached for the phone and held out her hand. Mara gave it to her.

“This is charge nurse Lenore Pike,” she said. “No, I will not transfer you to a room. No, I will not check the visitor list against names you provide. No, a pending emergency notice is not direct unit access. Send any order through the court or counsel channel.”

My knees weakened. The contraction that came then was not small- it split the room. Isolde guided my hand to the counter only after I grabbed for air and found none. “Counter. Here. I’ve got the bag.” Not I’ve got you. The correction mattered even now.

Tile Explorer

PLAY FOR FREE.

KERA

I leaned hard, forehead nearly touching my own crossed-out signature. Lenore’s voice stayed level above me

“If you have a court order, fax it to the number on the public website. If you have a medical emergency involving your own patient, call emergency services. Do not call this desk again to test protected admission status.”

She hung up. The contraction faded with a long, low pain in my back. I opened my eyes. The first thing I saw was Dario’s name, struck through by my hand.

“Was it him?” I asked.

Lenore did not lie. “It was a legal assistant asking to confirm whether Mr. Armitage should be added to access if a patient arrived.”

“A patient.”

“Yes.”

“Not me.”

“They did not get a confirmation.”

Isolde’s phone buzzed. She checked it, then checked it again, as if the screen might have become less satisfying the second time.

“What?”

Her mouth tightened, but this time it was not fear-it was something sharper. “Bennett’s second car just watched Dario’s black sedan pull into St. Orla’s emergency entrance.”

For a second, I could not process the sentence. Then the picture arrived: Dario, stepping into the wrong hospital under bright donor-funded lights, asking for a woman whose name the desk should not give him, while I stood here in a protected unit with a pen in my hand and his name crossed out.

The relief was so fierce it became pain.

Lenore picked up the clipboard. “Let’s get you to triage,” she said.

Isolde took the bag. I took one step toward the doors. Behind us, the desk phone rang again, Lenore looked at it, then at me.

“We do not answer panic twice,” she said, and let it ring.

Tile Explorer

Fud of chapter

PLAY FOR FREE.

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 48

“He waits outside.”

I said it before the nurse finished asking.

Lenore’s pen hovered over the support-person sheet. “Bennett Bellamy?”

“Yes.”

“Not in the room?”

“Not unless I ask.”

SWEET

Bank

The words should have felt obvious. They did not. Labor had turned obvious things into objects I had to lift with both hands-stand, sit, pee in the cup, sign here, breathe, do not throw up on the privacy order, tell the triage nurse your pain number without apologizing for not being poetic about it.

Now I was in a labor room with dimmable lights, a squat recliner, a birthing ball I distrusted on sight, and a whiteboard where someone had written:

The room was smaller than the birth videos made labor rooms look, which helped-fewer corners, fewer places for authority to hide. One door, one bathroom, one window with the blind already down.

Patient: Aveline AshbySupport: Isolde FanePrivacy: Protected / Counsel Channel Only

No Armitage name, no husband’s name, no blank waiting for someone else to fill. I stared at the whiteboard longer than I needed to.

Jules noticed and did not ask the obvious question. She simply cap instrument that wrote my name also belonged within reach.

“If anything changes,” she said, “you tell us what to change it to.”

he marker and set it in the tray where I could see it, as it the

Anything. Not anyone. It was a small grammar mercy, and I could have wept from that alone if another contraction had not already started.

This one had teeth. It rose from my back and locked around my belly until the room narrowed to the rail on the bed and Isolde’s voice counting out breaths.

“Low,” she said. “Not pretty. Low.”

“I hate you.”

“Correct.”

“I mean it.”

“Even better.”

The nurse at my left, a compact woman named Jules, adjusted the fetal monitor with the efficient gentleness of someone who did not need to make my pain about her compassion.

Tile Explorer

Sleep better at night and have fun

1/5 AO

PLAY FOR FREE.

“Baby tolerated that one,” she said when the contraction passed. “Good variability.”

Baby not his child, not an heir, not a legal problem. Just baby. I lay back against the raised bed and stared at the ceiling until the tiles stopped swimming.

“Bennett can wait in the family area,” Lenore said. “Or outside the unit doors. Security prefers not to crowd the hallway.”

“He will prefer the door,” Isolde said.

I looked at her. She shrugged. “He asked where the least intrusive useful place was. Jules told him outside the unit doors.”

“You spoke to him?”

“Through the crack after I asked you if I could step out.”

I remembered nodding. Maybe. Labor was making Swiss cheese of consent in small ways, and that frightened me more than the pain. I needed the people around me to remember what I approved when I could not hold every detail at once.

“What exactly did he say?” I asked.

Isolde did not look offended. Good.

“He said 2 men with cameras came through the public corridor after Dario reached St. Orla and left. Hospital security moved them once, but they are trying to figure out which unit has you. He also said a woman from Armitage Foundation communications arrived with flowers at the main desk and asked for the maternity floor.”

“How did they know a maternity floor?”

“They know you are pregnant, and Dario ran to the wrong hospital hard enough to make noise.”

That was the cruelty of a protected route-it hid the room, not the story. A powerful man could still make enough disturbance at the wrong desk that the city learned to look for the right one.

“Flowers.” The word came out flat. Dario would send papers, Celine would send concern, Mathias would send quiet consequences – and the foundation sent flowers because institutions liked perfume over rot.

Lenore wrote on the sheet. “No deliveries without patient approval. No public hall waiting for unapproved visitors. Security is already notified.”

“Where is Bennett?”

“Outside the unit doors,” Isolde said. “Not blocking staff. Between the elevator and the reporters.”

Between. The word had hurt when Dario used it as possession; it felt different when the person between you and harm was not facing you, not asking you to watch him protect you, not making your gratitude part of the structure. Still dangerous-warmth could become a leash if you were desperate enough.

I closed my eyes. “Tell him not to speak for me.”

“Already did.”

“Tell him not to give any statement.”

“He said, ‘Of course.”

“Tell him if Dario arrives here, security handles Dario.”

“He said that too.”

AO

Tile Explorer

PLAY FOR FREE.

Sleep better at night and have fun

–

I opened my eyes. Isolde's face softened. "He is not trying to become the door. He is standing near one."

Another contraction began before I could answer. This one bent me sideways. Jules helped me turn, hands firm on the sheet, not on my body until I nodded. The monitor straps dug into my skin. Fluid kept leaking in humiliating warm pulses. My hair stuck to my neck. I made a sound would have denied in any other room, and no one looked surprised that helped.

When it passed, Jules checked the strip and said, "Still okay. Do you want pain medication options reviewed now or later?"

"Now."

I had once thought birth choices would feel intimate, maybe spiritual if the lighting was kind and no one said cervix too loudly. Instead I discussed medication while gripping a plastic emesis basin because nausea had joined the committee.

Jules gave me options in plain language. No lecture, no ideology. What could happen, what might help, what required timing, what I could refuse, what I could change. I chose to wait 1 more check-not because I wanted to prove anything, but because I needed 10 minutes to know whether the decision was fear or preference. Jules accepted that as if it were normal. Maybe it was.

Outside the room, a voice rose – not Dario's. Male, irritated, unused to being told no by someone whose badge had less expensive paper behind it. Isolde looked toward the door. Lenore was already moving.

"Stay with her," she told Jules.

The labor room door opened only as wide as Lenore's body. I saw a slice of hall: pale floor, security guard, Bennett's shoulder in a dark coat, and a man in a gray suit holding a phone too high.

"I am with Armitage Foundation communications," the man said. "We have been instructed to deliver a private family message."

Bennett's voice came from just beyond the door, calm enough to make the other man's volume embarrassing. "The unit has declined deliveries."

"This is not your family."

–

My stomach clenched, but not from labor. There it was the sentence Dario's world always found eventually: not yours, not hers, not belonging where you stand.

Bennett did not answer with claim. He said, “Correct. That is why I am not at her bedside.”

The hall went quiet for half a beat. The sentence moved through me strangely it did not warm first, it loosened. Dario had made proximity the proof of love. He had touched my elbow in public corridors and called it care, stood too close to doors and said he was only trying to talk, treated absence as abandonment because presence was how he measured ownership. Bennett named absence as respect and let the hall hear it.

Then the man tried another route. “Step aside.”

“For staff, yes. For you, no.”

Lenore’s voice cut in. “Security, remove unapproved visitors from the unit threshold.”

The door closed. I stared at it. My daughter moved under the monitor. The machine caught her heartbeat again, fast and stubborn. Isolde’s hand hovered near my shoulder, and I shook my head – not because I did not want comfort, but because if someone touched me right then, I would fall apart and the next contraction would find me already open in all the wrong ways.

“He handled it,” Isolde said.

“Security handled it.”

“Yes.”

O

ReelShort – Drama & TV

DOWNLOAD FREE

Watch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

KA

“Good.”

She nodded as if I had said something more reasonable than I felt.

The next 40 minutes became a series of bodily facts. Contractions 5 minutes apart, then 4. Clear fluid. Blood pressure watched, not alarming. Baby’s heartbeat dipping once when I lay flat, recovering when Jules helped me roll left. Cervix 4 centimeters – I hated the number immediately because it sounded both enormous and insultingly small.

I accepted medication after the check. Not an apology, not a defeat – a choice made in a room where the only person allowed to decide for my body was the person trapped inside it.

Between contractions, snippets arrived from the hall through Isolde's phone. Bennett to security: no photographs. Security to Bennett: stand behind the line. Bennett: already there. Armitage staff removed from the elevator bank. Foundation flowers refused. A woman in pearls asking whether Mrs. Armitage had been notified, and Lenore answering, "No patient by that family status is registered here."

That sentence became my favorite thing anyone said between 3:00 and 4:00 AM. No patient by that family status-not no such person, got no comment, but a refusal shaped exactly around the lie they had brought to the door. Mrs. Armitage could exist wherever Dario and Celine needed her to exist; she did not exist in my labor room.

At 3:36 AM, Isolde showed me a message from Bennett, sent to her, not me.

No statement. No contact. Hall clear for now. Court channel should be watched.

I read it twice – not because the words were beautiful, but because they were bounded. He had not asked how far dilated I was, had not asked whether the baby was coming soon, had not called her any version of his, had not put himself in the sentence except as absence. Hall clear for now.

I handed the phone back. "Tell him thank you."

Isolde typed. Then looked at me before sending. "Exact wording?"

Another contraction began. I breathed until I could speak. "Thank you. Keep the hall clear. Do not come in."

Isolde sent it. The pain crested. For a while, there was only that.

When I came back, Jules was adjusting the monitor again and Lenore had returned with a face that made the room colder.

"What?" I asked.

She looked at Isolde, then at me. "A fax just came to the nurse station."

My mouth tasted metallic. "From who?"

Lenore held the paper like it might stain her fingers. "Court clerk cover sheet. Emergency order request attached. It names Dario Armitage as putative father and seeks immediate birth-status notice and preservation of access pending hearing."

The contraction started low and mean. I gripped the bed rail. Through the labor room door, I heard movement in the hall-Bennett’s voice, lower than before.

“No one goes in until her nurse says so.”

Lenore set the fax on the counter, face down. The paper was still warm.

ReelShort – Drama & TV

DOWNLOAD FREE

Watch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

The wife isn't me

Chapter 49

–

Chapter 49 – Her Name First

“Do not turn that page over yet.”

My voice came out thinner than I wanted. Lenore stopped with her hand on the warm fax.

The room had narrowed again, not from pain this time, though the contraction still held my hips in its metal grip. From paper. From the awtur little sound of a machine at the nurse station receiving a man’s urgency and carrying it into the room where my body was trying to do something older than any order.

Jules watched the monitor, then me. “Baby is tolerating this one.”

Baby. The word steadied one inch of me. I breathed through the rest of the contraction with both hands around the bed rail. My palms were damp. My hospital gown stuck to my lower back. The medication had softened the edges, not removed them-labor still found the places where language ended and body took over.

When the pain released, I did not look at the fax. I looked at Lenore. “Is there any order signed by a judge in that stack?”

Lenore turned the first page without lifting the rest. “Court clerk cover sheet. Emergency request. Proposed order. No signed order.”

“Then it is not a door.”

“No,” she said. “It is a request.”

I closed my eyes for exactly 1 breath. Request was one of those words rich men loved because it wore clean shoes. Dario had requested clinic coordination. Celine had requested dignity. Lawyers requested preservation when they meant do not let her make a record we cannot reshape later.

“Put it in my chart as received,” I said. “Not obeyed.”

Isolde made a sound under her breath that might have been approval if she had not been too furious for grammar.

Lenore’s mouth tightened, not at me. “I can document received, pending counsel review, no signed order attached.”

“Good.”

The fax stayed face down. For a moment, that was enough.

Then Jules touched the side rail-not me, the rail. “There is one form we usually complete before delivery if possible,” she said. “It is not a release form. It is a birth worksheet. Parent information, intended name if known, pediatrician if known, feeding preference if you want it listed.”

My body went cold in a way labor had not managed. “Before delivery?”

“If the patient is able,” Jules said. “If not, we do it after. Nothing has to be final on the name line until you say it is final.”

“Show me.”

She brought the clipboard from the counter. It was ordinary white paper, and that was part of the insult – no embossed crest, no legal threat in a leather folder, just a hospital worksheet with boxes where the world began translating a child into a record.

ReelShort – Drama & TV

Watch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

DOWNLOAD FREE

EICA

Mother / Parent 1. Mother / Parent 2. Father / Parent. Infant surname if known. Authorization for birth announcement: yes/no. Photography consent: yes/no. Information release: hospital standard / restricted.

The page did not have Dario's name on it, but that did not mean he was absent. I could feel him in the blank space where someone expected a father to be easier than a story. I could feel Celine in the second parent line, soft and public and prepared to call herself protection, I could feel every imported field we had crossed out at admission waiting to crawl back through a different door.

Another contraction threatened low in my spine. Not yet.

I set the clipboard against the raised bed table. My hand shook so badly the pen clicked against the plastic. Isolde moved closer. "Want me to steady the board?"

"The board, yes."

She held the bottom edge. She did not touch my hand.

I wrote: Aveline Ashby. Mother / Parent 1. No title, no qualifier, no legal hedge around the word that my body had earned before any man discovered a courthouse.

The second parent line waited. I drew a single line through it and initialed the margin. Jules watched without comment.

Father / Parent. The word looked larger than the box. Dario was the biological fact that was not the same as access, not the same as authority, not the same as standing in this room while I labored under a privacy order he had spent 10 weeks trying to bend.

"Do I have to complete this now?" I asked.

Lenore answered from the counter. "No. Paternity is not required for the initial worksheet. If contested later, records can be amended through the proper route. For tonight, we need the delivering mother's information and your release restrictions."

Delivering mother. Not carrier, not maternal environment, not a woman near the baby. Delivering mother.

I struck through the father line too. Initialed.

The contraction came then, hard enough to take my sight for 3 seconds. Isolde held the board. Jules coached my breathing. Lenore stood between the fax and the door as if a piece of paper might grow legs if no one watched it.

"Low," Isolde said.

"Stop saying low."

"Then stop breathing up in your shoulders."

“I am going to make your obituary very factual.”

“Fine. Spell my name correctly.”

I laughed once and hated her for giving me room to do it.

When the contraction passed, sweat had cooled at my temples. The baby moved low and heavy, an answering pressure that made me want to fold around her and keep the world out with bone.

Infant surname if known. I stared at the line until the letters blurred.

Ashby. My own name had never looked like much in Dario’s apartment-it had looked practical on mail, plain on invoices, too small beside his elevator key and the brass bowl where his cufflinks slept. In his world, Ashby was a last name you had until someone more powerful gave you a better one.

ReelShort – Drama & TV

Watch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

DOWNLOAD FREE

But my daughter had moved under that name while I ran. She had been Ashby when I denied portal access, Ashby when I signed the affidavit Ashby when Dario reached the wrong hospital, Ashby while my water broke in a room with a chain lock I controlled.

I wrote Ashby in the surname box. The pen pressed so hard it dented the sheet beneath.

Lenore’s pager vibrated. She read the screen, then looked at me. “Counsel channel. Your lawyer is asking whether we have received an attorney call from Dario Armitage’s side.”

“Have you?”

“The desk has a caller holding for administration. He identified himself as counsel for Mr. Armitage and says the proposed order requires preservation of naming rights and family status pending hearing.”

–

The words hit so cleanly I almost did not feel them at first. Naming rights as if my daughter were a wing, a logo, a plaque near a donor elevator.

“Is he on speaker anywhere near patient care?” I asked.

“No.”

“Is anyone discussing my labor status with him?”

“No.”

“Has anyone told him I am complete, close, stalled, medicated, dilated, bleeding, eating ice, breathing, anything?”

Lenore’s pen stopped. The silence after my question did more to answer it than any reassurance could have-not because she had given him anything, but because the categories were so ordinary to staff and so valuable to him that I could see the mistake waiting in a casual hallway sentence.

“No clinical status has been disclosed,” she said. “I will add a note: no casual status language at desk, hall, elevator, security post, or administrative line.”

“And no family-status language.”

“No family-status language.”

If someone asked whether the father was here, the answer could not become a story. If someone asked whether Mr. Armitage had been notified, the answer could not become a courtesy. Courtesy had been the first glove on every hand that tried to take something from me.

Isolde leaned over the form. “Infant announcement?”

“No.”

She checked the box with a pressure that nearly tore the page. “Photography?”

“No.”

“Religious visitor, ceremonial visitor, family blessing?”

“No.”

“Pediatrician?”

That one hurt because it was not a trap – it was life continuing beyond crisis, the ordinary obligation of choosing someone to measure my daughter’s weight and listen to her lungs.

ReelShort-Drama & TV

Watch BeelShort – Every Second is Drama

DOWNLOAD FREE

€

“Dr. Sima Patel,” I said. “If the office accepts the protected intake.”

“Feeding preference?”

“Breast, if we can. Formula if we need. Do not let anyone turn either answer into a moral speech.”

Jules made a small approving noise. “That can be charted exactly.”

“Please do.”

For a moment the room became almost ordinary-a nurse writing, a friend holding a clipboard, a woman in labor choosing a pediatrician, as outside the door a billionaire’s lawyer was not trying to reserve the shape of a child’s name.

Isolde said, “Absolutely not.”

Lenore did not look away from me. That mattered.

“No,” I said. My voice shook. I let it. “No Armitage contact. No release. No birth status. No name discussion. Counsel channel only. If he wants to preserve something, he can preserve the fact that I said no while in active labor.”

Lenore wrote it down. “Say exactly that,” I added. “Do not soften it.”

“I will document exact patient instruction.”

“And send a copy to my counsel. Not to his.”

“Correct.”

Isolde looked at the worksheet. “Do you want to fill the first-name line?”

My throat closed. The line waited above the surname – a smaller box, more dangerous because it had no obvious institutional hook. Dario could fight a surname. Celine could posture over family status. But the first name was mine in a way no one else in the room understood. It had lived in the hidden folder. It had been whispered once in a safe room when the baby kicked so hard it seemed rude not to answer.

Not yet. The rule held in me with a superstition I did not entirely respect and would not risk.

“After,” I said. Isolde did not ask after what. Birth. Breath. Proof that the name had a body to land on. “Leave it blank,” I said. “But do not let anyone else interpret blank as open.”

Lenore nodded. “Blank pending mother’s post-delivery confirmation.”

Mother’s. The word entered the room and stayed. I held onto it while the next contraction began.

Jules checked the monitor strip again. “Another one coming.”

Of course. The body had no respect for legal drama, or perhaps it had perfect respect and knew the only way through was through.

I gripped the rail as the contraction rose. Outside the door, the hallway shifted. A low male voice, not Bennett’s, carried through the insulation with the polished irritation of someone used to glass conference rooms.

“The surname is contested before registration.”

My knees went weak against the bed. The baby pressed down. The contraction broke over me. Lenore reached for the door. I heard Bennett’s voice from the hall, quiet and flat.

“Counsel can contest it in court. He does not do it at her door.”

ReelShort – Drama & TV

Watch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

DOWNLOAD FREE

Then Dario’s lawyer said, clearer, sharper, too close: “Mr. Armitage contests the surname.”

End of chapter

AO

ReelShortDrama & TV

DOWNLOAD FREE

Watch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

The wife isn't me

Chapter 50

“Then he can contest it after she is born.”

I did not recognize my own voice. It came from somewhere low, stripped of polish, built out of bone and pain and the ugly animal knowledge that the room had only 1 job now.

Lenore's hand paused on the door.

Jules looked at the monitor, then at me. Her face changed. "Pressure?" she asked.

The word was too small. Pressure was a weather report. This was my body turning toward an edge and telling me, without asking, that the argument outside no longer mattered as much as the one inside.

"Yes."

Isolde straightened. "How much pressure?" Jules asked.

"I do not have a polite unit of measurement."

"Fair."

She moved with no wasted panic. Bed adjusted. Gloves. Light. A call button pressed. Lenore spoke into the hall without opening the door wider than her shoulder. "No legal contact at the room. Delivery team only."

The reply from the hall was buried under the next contraction. This one did not crest and leave it took me under. There was no room in it for Darío, for Celine, for surname arguments, for birth-status notice, foundation flowers, or a lawyer's voice trying to climb over the threshold. There was only my body opening because my daughter had decided the paperwork could wait,

"Aveline," Jules said, close now. "I need to check you. Is that okay?"

"Yes." The word broke.

The check hurt. Everything hurt. The room tilted around the whiteboard with my name on it.

Jules' eyes met mine. "Complete."

Isolde made a sound that was not a word. I tried to understand it like an instruction.

"No," I said, absurdly.

"Yes," Jules said. "Baby is coming."

My first thought was that I had not finished the worksheet. It was a ridiculous thought, the kind the mind offers when reality becomes too large and needs a smaller errand to

hold. The first-name line was blank, the pediatrician was written, the no-announcement box had been checked. Somewhere outside the room, a lawyer believed the surname could be frozen by objection- and inside the room, my body had moved past paperwork without asking permission from anyone who billed by the hour./

“The form,” I said.

Isolde bent close. “Forget the form.”

AO

ReelShort – Drama & TV

DOWNLOAD FREE

Watch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

“No.”

“Aveline.”

“The clipboard.”

Jules looked at the physician, then at me. “We have the mother’s information and restrictions. That is enough for delivery.”

Enough. Another useful word when it came from someone who meant it. I let the clipboard go in my mind only because my body had already taken both hands for the bed rail.

Not an heir, not evidence, not a contested surname. Baby. My daughter.

The delivery team came in through the room’s side of authority-badges and gloves and warm blankets, all of them introducing themselves even though my mind could hold almost none of their names. A physician with tired kind eyes. Another nurse at the warmer. Jules at my side. Isolde at my shoulder, holding a cup I did not remember asking for.

Someone asked whether I wanted the mirror lowered. “Absolutely not.”

Someone asked if I wanted to feel the baby’s head. “No.”

The answers sounded harsh. No one treated them as fear or failure. They simply adjusted the room around the boundaries I could still speak. That made me cry before the next push did.

“Tears are fine,” Jules said.

“I did not ask.”

“Documented.”

I almost smiled.

“No one else?” I asked.

Lenore stood inside the door. “No one else.”

“Bennett?”

“Outside the unit line.”

“Dario?”

“Not in the unit.”

The answer was a gift because it was exact – not safe forever, just safe here, safe for this contraction.

“When you feel the next one,” the physician said, “we will help you push with it. You are in charge of stopping if we tell you to stop.”

In charge. I almost laughed at the cruelty of phrasing – my body had never felt less interested in committee.

Then the contraction came and the room gave me a job so simple it left no room for humiliation. Push.

I pushed. The world went red at the edges. Isolde’s voice counted beside me, not pretty, not soft, exactly irritating enough to hold onto.

“Again,” Jules said. “Good. Breathe now.”

“Do not say good.”

ReelShort – Drama & TV

Drama

A

DOWNLOAD FREE

KITA

“Useful?”

“Worse.”

“Then I will say nothing.”

“Do not do that either.”

Someone laughed, once, quickly. Then the next contraction rose and I pushed again.

Birth had been described to me as pain, miracle, tearing, pressure, power-all of that was too clean. It was more like being asked to spli yourself and remain present for the inventory. Skin. Blood. Breath. A child’s heart on a monitor. A name waiting on a line. A lawyer somewhere outside learning, perhaps for the first time, that some doors did not open because he objected.

“Head is right there,” the physician said. “Small pushes now.”

“I hate small things.”

“I know.”

She could not possibly know- and yet, for 1 terrible second, I believed her.

The monitor lost the baby for a heartbeat when I shifted. Everyone moved at once and no one panicked. Jules pressed the Doppler lower. Another nurse adjusted the strap I no longer needed. The physician said, “We have her,” and the room exhaled around a sound I could barely hear under my own breathing.

There she was-fast, furious, still inside and already refusing to be quiet.

I wanted to apologize to her for every adult voice she had heard through my skin: Dario’s calm, Celine’s softness, lawyers saying preservation, reporters pressing the hallway, my own frightened whisper in dark rooms when I promised more than I knew how to deliver. Instead I pushed when they told me. Apologies could wait until she had air.

The burn came sharp enough that I made a sound I would never have assigned to myself. Isolde’s hand gripped the sheet instead of me -— she had remembered. Even then, she remembered I had not asked to be touched.

“Aveline,” Jules said. “If you want her on you right away, say it now.”

Her. The pronoun did what pain had not-it broke the room open.

“Yes,” I said. “On me. If she can. Please,”

“We will.”

Another push. Then the strangest release of my life-not emptiness, arrival.

The room held its breath. For a second there was no cry. That second became an entire country. I went there and saw nothing but terror.

“Why isn’t she crying?”

Jules moved fast. The physician said something about stimulation. The warmer nurse stepped close, but not away yet, not taking her unless she had to.

Then my daughter made a small outraged sound-not the movie wail, not triumphant, but wet, furious, thin. Alive.

My body forgot every legal word it knew. I sobbed once, so hard it hurt more than the tear.

“There she is,” Jules said.

ReelShort-Drama & TV ch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

DOWNLOAD FREE

TA

They laid her on my chest. She was slick and impossibly warm, heavier than a thought and lighter than any future I had imagined. Her skin was flushed dark red under the hospital light. Her head was shaped by the work of being born. One hand opened against my gown, fingers startlingly long, nails translucent and sharp as commas.

I could not see her face properly because tears had destroyed my vision.

“Hi,” I said. Ridiculous. The first word I gave my daughter was hi.

She answered by wrinkling her whole body and making another thin, furious sound against my chest. I bent around her as far as the bed and cords allowed.

“I know,” I whispered. “I know. It was a terrible entrance.”

Isolde was crying silently beside me, which was rude because I had not given permission for witnesses to become human.

The physician spoke about placenta, bleeding, repair. Jules checked the baby's color and position. Someone tucked a warm blanket over Bothy of us. The room kept moving, practical and miraculous and faintly metallic with blood.

"Name?" Jules asked softly. Not demanding-offering the line while the child was still on my skin.

The name had lived in my phone folder, in my private thoughts, in the place I went when every adult in Dario's world tried to rename motherhood as logistics. I had protected it because I was afraid a name spoken too early could be stolen. Now my daughter breathed against me, and if the world wanted to fight, it could fight the truth after hearing it.

"Noa," I said. My mouth shook. "Noa Ashby."

Jules repeated it as she wrote on the newborn band sheet. "Noa Ashby," she said.

The sound filled the labor room- not loud, not public, just enough. My name after hers. Her name before theirs. A whole person in 3 syllables and a surname Dario had already objected to before she had drawn air.

That was when I broke. Not neatly, not with a single tear sliding down an elegant cheek-I broke with my mouth open and my daughter pressed to my skin, shaking so hard Jules had to steady the blanket while Isolde said my name and did not touch me until I nodded.

Then Isolde put 2 fingers on my shoulder, light as a question. "She is here," she said.

Noa's cheek turned against me. Her mouth opened, searching without knowing what she searched for. I cried harder. The sound embarrassed no one.

"Yes," I said. "She is here."

The cord pulsed against the blanket between us. I stared at it because it was easier than looking at the door. There was still a literal connection from my body to hers- a thick blue-white proof that the separation everyone else had tried to hurry was happening on its own time. The physician asked if delayed clamping was still what I wanted if the baby remained stable.

"Yes," I said.

"Still stable," Jules confirmed.

Dario's lawyer could object to a surname. He could not object to blood finishing its work.

When the cord was clamped, Isolde cut it only after I nodded. Her hand shook once. She pretended it did not. I pretended with her because some kindnesses deserved privacy.

The clamp clicked. No one in the hall could hear that. I did.

Lenore slipped out to update the protected birth log. The door opened for only a breath. It was enough.

ReelShort – Drama & TV

Watch ReelShort – Every Second is Drama

DOWNLOAD FREE

CLEA

Sound entered from the hall – a man's voice demanding distance, security answering, someone else's shoes moving fast.

Then Dario's voice. Not loud. Worse. Clear.

"What did she say?"

The door began to close. Jules had not lowered her voice when she repeated the name to the newborn nurse.

"Noa Ashby," the nurse said again for the band check.

Outside, silence cut through the hall. Then Dario said, with the soft disbelief of a man hearing a locked door inside his own house: "Ashby?"

End of chapter

ReelShortDrama & TV

DOWNLOAD FREE

The wife isn't me

Chapter 51

"Keep the door closed."

I said it into Noa's damp hair. The room obeyed before the hall could.

Lenore pulled the door shut with a firmness that made the latch sound final for 1 beautiful second. Security voices flattened outside. Darids voice disappeared into insulation and policy.

Noa did not care. She was trying to live-that was the first thing I learned about her after the name. Not that she was beautiful, though she was, in the bruised and strange way newborns are beautiful because they have just survived something impossible. Not that she was mine though every cell in my body had started saying it in a language older than thought.

She was busy. Her mouth rooted against my skin. Her feet flexed under the blanket. Her cry came and went in thin, offended bursts, then softened into breathy grunts that frightened me more because they were quieter.

“Is she all right?” I asked for the 5th time.

Jules did not act as if 5 was too many. “She is pinking up. Her tone is good. She is a little stunned and tired, which is allowed after a fast finish. We are watching.”

Watching. I had hated that word when Dario used it. Here it meant someone counted breaths.

The newborn nurse checked Noa’s band against mine. Noa Ashby. Aveline Ashby. The letters sat black against white plastic, absurdly small for the amount of war they had already survived.

“Read them again,” I said.

The nurse looked up. I should have been embarrassed. I was not. “Please.”

She lifted Noa’s ankle gently, checked the band against my wrist, and said, “Infant Noa Ashby. Mother Aveline Ashby. Medical record ending 6182. Band match.”

I closed my eyes. The numbers did not matter to me except that they existed – a system had made a line and, for once, the line told the truth.

“Thank you.”

“We check a lot,” she said.

“Good.”

Noa sneezed. I startled so violently Jules put a hand near the blanket, ready if I dropped anything.

“Sneezes are expected,” she said.

“I regret every time I mocked new parents.”

“Most people do by hour 2.”

“Do you want to try feeding now?” Jules asked.

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away les and enjoy fun farm parking escape

KITA

I looked down at Noa. “I do not know how.”

“Most people do not the first time.”

“People say instincts.”

“People say a lot when they are not the ones bleeding.”

I laughed and then winced because stitches existed and my body had opinions about humor.

The physician was still between clinical tasks. Placenta delivered. Bleeding acceptable. Tear being repaired. Every sentence was delivered to me before action, every touch announced, every pause offered even when urgency made the offering brief. Consent, I learned, could be rushed without being erased – that felt important enough to remember later, if later existed beyond this room.

Jules helped position Noa at my breast with the careful neutrality of someone handling both a newborn and a person who had been handed too much by the wrong people. She asked before moving the gown, asked before adjusting the baby’s head, asked before showing me how to support the tiny shoulder.

Noa’s mouth opened. She latched badly, released, screamed as if betrayed by anatomy, then tried again.

“Same,” Isolde whispered.

I would have elbowed her if my body had not been occupied being demolished and remade. The second try worked for maybe 4 sucks. It was enough to undo me again, more quietly this time.

Noa’s cheek moved against me. Her ear was folded at the top. One fist pressed into the soft part of my breast, demanding and blind. Small- that was the terror. She had been large inside me because she was everywhere: ribs, pelvis, breath, sleep, appetite, bladder, future. Outside my body she looked breakable enough for the law to bruise.

“She is so small,” I said.

“Seven pounds, 1 ounce,” the newborn nurse said. “Good size. Exhausted, not fragile.”

Exhausted, not fragile. I stored that sentence beside my own name.

Noa made a grunting sound. My whole spine went rigid. “What was that?”

“Normal newborn noise,” Jules said. “We still watch. You do not have to know every sound by sunrise.”

“I would prefer a glossary.”

“I will make you the worst chart you’ve ever seen.”

“Do not tempt me. I like charts.”

Isolde wiped her face with the heel of her hand. “She does. It is a character flaw.”

Noa’s eyes opened for 1 startled slit of time-dark, unfocused, enormous. I stopped breathing.

There were things no court could prove, and this was one of them. No exhibit could carry the weight of a newborn looking through you because she had no idea yet that you were separate from warmth. No affidavit could say what it did to a woman to feel a child search for milk with her whole face. No judge could hold the sound of the first cry in a file and understand why naming rights was an obscene phrase.

I looked at my daughter and knew, with a calm that frightened me, that I would become difficult in ways Dario had never met.

The quiet lasted 23 minutes. I counted because the wall clock was directly across from the bed and because part of me was still a woman who measured danger by timestamps.

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away

PLAY NOW insel puzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

ESTA

In those 23 minutes, the room taught me a new list. Noa had a swirl of dark hair stuck flat to her head. Her left ear folded more than the right Her lower lip trembled before she cried, as if she objected to warning anyone too late. She smelled like blood, soap, and something warm I would have called bread if that had not been absurd.

My, body shook even under 2 heated blankets. Jules said hormones. The physician said blood loss within expected range. Isolde said she would fight anyone who said expected one more time, which made Jules switch to “not alarming” with admirable speed.

I learned that love could be immediate and still leave room for terror. I learned that I could be starving and nauseated at the same time. I learned that a sleeping newborn could make more noise than a legal team. I learned that my daughter did not look like a strategy – and that was important.

Everyone outside this room wanted to make her useful. To a marriage. To a surname. To a public story. To Dario's wounded/pride. To Celine's soft caption. To my own case, if I let grief turn careless.

Noa slept with her mouth open. She was useless in the holiest way.

At 4:41 AM, the first repair tray was gone, the warmer stood ready but unused, Noa had been weighed and returned to my chest, and Isolde was texting counsel exact birth time through the protected channel.

At 4:42 AM, Lenore stepped back into the room with the expression of a person carrying someone else's polished cruelty.

"No," I said.

She stopped. "I have not said anything yet."

"Your face did."

Lenore looked at Jules, then at me. "Celine Armitage's counsel is at the administrative desk. Not on the unit. She says she has protective postpartum paperwork that should be presented before discharge planning begins."

Noa slept through it. That made me angrier – the world had no manners.

"Celine's counsel," I repeated.

"Yes."

"Not Dario's?"

"Different firm."

Of course. Separate hands on the same throat made the marks harder to explain.

Isolde had already stood. "She can send it to counsel."

Lenore nodded. "That is hospital position. She is insisting the paperwork concerns infant protection and family-status clarification."

Family status. Noa sighed against my skin. I looked down at the band on her ankle. Noa Ashby. The ink was not dry in any meaningful sense -the record had barely opened, and Celine had already found a way to put her hand near the margin.

“Is there a signed order?” I asked.

“No.”

“Is she an authorized visitor?”

“No.”

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away

PLAY NOW animal puzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

KIRA

“Is she authorized access for me or my daughter?”

“No.”

My daughter. Now public. Now spoken. The words hurt in the most beautiful way.

“Then she does not come to the room.”

“Agreed,” Lenore said.

“Where is Dario?”

Lenore’s answer came carefully. “Not on the unit. Security moved him and counsel out of the maternity corridor. He is in the public administrative area with his attorney, still requesting a signed response from hospital counsel.”

My chest tightened around Noa. “Did he see her?”

“No.”

“Hear her?”

Lenore hesitated. The hesitation was the answer – not her cry, perhaps, not clearly, but the name. Enough of the name to wound his ownership.

“He heard the band check,” I said.

“I cannot confirm what he heard from the hall.”

“That means yes.”

Lenore did not argue. Noa shifted, unhappy with the change in my breathing. I forced my shoulders down.

“Put in the chart that hallway voices are carrying into the room and all staff should lower newborn-identifying language near the door unless needed for safety.”

Jules nodded. “Good catch.”

Good catch-as if I had noticed a loose wire, not the way a man’s listening could turn my daughter’s name into a weapon before the cord stump dried,

Noa stretched, offended by my heartbeat changing under her cheek. I lowered my chin and breathed until she settled. That was the first lesson after birth: sometimes protecting her meant making my own body quieter.

The contraction pain was gone, but its ghost remained in my muscles. I was hollowed out, stitched, shaking with hormone and blood loss and the immense unreasonable fact of Noa’s cheek under my chin. Still, I felt the old precision return.

“Document: counsel for Celine Armitage appeared after birth with unsolicited paperwork. Patient declined direct presentation. All documents must go through my counsel and cannot be described to staff as protective if they alter parentage, access, release, visitor status, surname, or discharge.”

Lenore wrote quickly.

“Add infant,” I said. “Not just patient.”

“Patient and infant.”

“Noa Ashby,” I said.

AO

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away sel puzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

Lenore’s pen paused for the smallest fraction. Then she wrote it. Noa Ashby.

My daughter made a small snuffling sound, unimpressed by her own legal importance. That helped more than dignity would have.

The door muffled a new voice outside. Female this time, smooth enough to be expensive. Not Celine-her lawyer, probably.

“Mrs. Armitage only wants to avoid a later emergency,” the woman said.

I closed my eyes. There it was only. The little word people used before doing large harm.

Lenore stepped toward the door.

“Tell her,” I said. My voice was rough now, almost gone. “Tell her the emergency is over. The baby is born. Her name is Noa Ashby.”

Lenore opened the door just enough to leave. The lawyer’s voice sharpened as the hall swallowed half the sentence.

“Then we need her signature now.”

End of chapter-

AO

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away elpuzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

The wife isn't me

Chapter 52

CICA

Chapter 52 – Visitors List

“No one gets a signature from a woman who just delivered.”

Isolde said it softly. That made it worse for whoever stood outside. She was never more dangerous than when she stopped performing outrage and started sorting the room into tasks.

Noa slept on my chest in the loose, total collapse of a person who had done 1 enormous thing and felt no obligation to help with the paperwork afterward. Her mouth was open. Milk had dried in a pearl at the corner of her lip. One hand had escaped the blanket and lay against my skin, fingers curled as if she had seized part of me and found it acceptable.

“I can sign refusal language,” I said. My voice sounded like it had been dragged down a hallway.

“You can also not sign anything for 20 minutes,” Isolde said. “Revolutionary concept.”

“The refusal should be documented.”

“It is being documented by 3 people, 1 chart, and the fact that I am about to become a public health hazard if someone hands you a pen.”

Jules checked the IV line. “I am medically comfortable documenting that patient is postpartum, recovering, feeding infant, and declining non- clinical documents except through counsel.”

“See?” Isolde said. “The nurse has a chart voice. Let her use it.”

I wanted to argue. Then Noa made a sound like a tiny hinge and my entire body turned toward her. No one warned you about that part- people told you about love, but they did not tell you attention could become involuntary, that a noise from 7 pounds of person could pull every remaining thought in your head into a single point.

“Normal?” I asked.

“Normal,” Jules said.

“You could say that before I ask.”

“I would never get to stop talking.”

She was right. I hated that too.

–

Lenore returned without papers. Her shoulders had a tired set now, not defeated the posture of someone who had spent the night holding a policy line against money and was discovering money had stamina.

“Celine’s counsel has been instructed to send everything through your legal contact,” she said. “She is not pleased.”

“That is unfortunate for the carpet.”

Isolde snorted. Lenore’s mouth twitched. “Security remains at the unit entrance. Administration is aware. I also need to finalize the visitor list for postpartum transfer.”

“Same as before,” I said.

“Birth creates a separate infant chart. We need infant visitor and information restrictions entered too.”

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away olvo cute animal nuzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

EITA

Of course. Another chart, another door. Noa was not even an hour old, and the system had already split her from me for administrative convenience-patient, infant, mother, child, separate tabs in which the same threat could search for a loose hinge.

“Bring the form,” I said. Isolde inhaled. “Not to sign,” I added. “To read.” She allowed that with a glare.

Lenore set the sheet on the rolling table and turned it so I could see without lifting Noa. Approved visitors. Approved information recipients. Approved pickup/discharge escort. Photography consent. Social announcement. Religious or ceremonial visitor. Paternity / second parent field pending.

The last line sat there like a hook.

“Can we lock paternity pending legal process without leaving access open?” I asked.

Lenore nodded. “Yes. We mark biological father not listed on hospital release or visitor permissions. Any paternity or record amendment must come through court or vital records after review. It does not authorize bedside access.”

“Write that.”

“I will.”

Isolde pulled the chair closer and sat with her phone open to counsel’s message thread. “Names?”

“You,” I said.

“Obviously.”

“Mara through counsel channel. Anika through counsel channel. Dr. Price for medical records if the postpartum team needs her.”

“Bennett?”

I looked at Noa instead of the door. Bennett was outside somewhere, still not asking to see the child everyone else wanted to claim. That absence had started to feel like a kind of care I did not know how to name without making it fragile.

“Not as visitor,” I said. Isolde’s thumb paused. I made myself continue. “Discharge logistics contact only through you or counsel. No infant information. No room access unless I request it later.”

“Okay.” She said it without disappointment. That helped – it also hurt, which was inconvenient.

The part of me that had spent 10 weeks learning the difference between rescue and control recognized the shape of Bennett’s absence. The newer, exhausted part wanted every useful person close enough to block the next blow. I did not trust that part to write visitor lists.

“If reporters breach the floor,” I said, “he can coordinate with security from outside.”

“Already what he is doing.”

“If Dario reaches the unit,”

“Security first. Bennett does not engage unless staff asks him to move.”

“If someone says he is the father.”

Isolde’s head came up. The idea disgusted me and embarrassed me at once, which usually meant it needed to be said.

“They will use any man near me,” I said. “Dario to claim. Bennett to discredit. Noa does not get traded from one man’s shadow to another because a camera wants a simpler picture.”

Isolde’s face softened with something like pride and fury mixed together. “I will put that in plain words for counsel.”

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away kino lam: solve cute animal puzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

“Use less poetry.”

“I was not going to write shadow.”

“Good.”

“Blocked list,” Lenore said.

KISA

“Dario Armitage. Celine Armitage. Their family members. Their lawyers except through counsel. Armitage Group. Armitage Foundation. Vey family office. St. Orla contacts. Private clinic staff. Any assistant, courier, driver, communications staff, photographer, donor representative, or person saying family status.”

Lenore wrote for a long time.

Noa hiccuped. Every adult in the room stopped as if she had given testimony.

“She objects to donor representatives,” Isolde said.

“Sustained,” I whispered.

The laugh moved through the room like a careful hand over a bruise.

Then Lenore’s pager went off again. We all looked at it. She read. Her expression changed from guarded to confused.

“What?” I asked.

“A package was left with the unit clerk. It has already been screened. No flowers, no device, no powder, nothing sharp.”

“From?”

“Dario Armitage’s executive assistant.”

My first reaction was physical – my arms tightened around Noa before my mind formed words. The bassinet wheels clicked when Jules moved it closer, then stopped. She had reached for function before comfort: make sure Noa was secure if my arms went unreliable, make sure no sudden adult news became a dropped baby.

I noticed. I filed that under care too.

Jules saw it. “Baby’s fine. Breathe.”

“No packages,” Isolde said.

“It is not addressed to you,” Lenore said carefully. “It is addressed to ‘the baby.’”

“Absolutely no.”

That was Isolde. I might have said it too if Noa had not shifted and rooted against my skin, dragging me back from the easy answer.

“What is it?” I asked.

Lenore held up both hands. “I have not brought it in. The clerk says it is a child’s drawing in a clear sleeve. The assistant said it was from Nico.”

The room changed-not softened, complicated.

Nico. Six years old, navy suit, gold crest pin, looking up at Dario in the donor hall for cues while my life cracked open beside the lilies. Nico, asking who I was. Nico, not guilty of being born into people who used children like shields and trophies and reasons.

3/5 AQ

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away

Animal Parking Jam: solve cute animal puzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

CITA

Isolde’s face hardened with pain. “They are using him.”

“Yes,” I said.

Noa slept. Her mouth made a small searching movement.

“That does not mean he made the drawing as a weapon.”

“Aveline.”

“I know.”

I did know – that was what made it cruel. If Dario had sent a silver rattle engraved with Armitage, I could have refused it cleanly. If Celine had sent a blanket with some soft note about family healing, Isolde could have photographed it, bagged it, and called counsel while I fed my daughter and hated everyone in order. A child’s drawing did not let me hate in a straight line. It asked me to separate intent from route, and adults loved making children do that work.

“You are allowed to refuse it.”

“I know that too.”

The adult machinery was obvious. Dario or someone near him had found the most painless courier possible and put a child’s hand in front of the door. Refusing would look cruel if they leaked it. Accepting could become consent if they described it correctly. Every choice had a hook hidden in the hem.

But a child had drawn something-maybe because he had been told to, maybe because he had overheard adults saying baby and sister and wanted the world to make sense.

I could protect Noa without making Nico pay postage on his parents’ choices.

“Screen it again,” I said.

Isolde’s eyes flashed. “No.”

“Not to my room yet. Have security photograph the sleeve, front and back, at the desk. Log who delivered it. Log the assistant’s name if they gave one. Then you open it outside the room with Lenore and Isolde present. If there is anything written by an adult, it goes to counsel and does not come in. If it is only Nico’s drawing, I will look at it.”

No one spoke for a moment. Then Lenore nodded. “That is a workable boundary.”

Isolde looked like she wanted to throw the workable boundary into traffic.

“He is 6,” I said quietly.

“I know.”

“I will not punish him because adults found a way to make his kindness useful.”

Her anger broke around grief. “Fine,” she said. “But I am photographing every inch of that sleeve.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

It took 12 minutes. Noa woke twice and cried with a thin, exhausted protest that made my milk let down in hot painful pins. Jules helped me shift her. The postpartum nurse came and checked bleeding, fundus, pain, all the unglamorous words for a body learning the child was out and still requiring proof.

During those 12 minutes, counsel called. Anika’s voice came through Isolde’s phone, low and controlled. She did not ask to speak to me until

AO

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away

Animal Parking Jam: solve cute animal puzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

ETEA

Isolde said I was willing.

“You do not have to decide about the drawing,” Anika said.

“I already did.”

“Then I need to say the legal risk once and briefly.”

“Briefly.”

“If accepted without documentation, they may later frame it as voluntary family contact or evidence that you recognized sibling relationship under their family structure. If refused, they may frame you as hostile to Nico. Your proposed middle route is good: preserve adult delivery route, restrict use of child’s content, no response through Dario.”

“No response to Nico?”

“Not through them. Later, if there is a child-safe channel, we discuss.”

Child-safe channel. The phrase sat beside Noa’s band and did not know yet whether it belonged to hope or strategy.

“I will not write to him through Dario.”

“Good.”

“I will not let anyone say I rejected him.”

“We will document that too.”

At 5:26 AM, Isolde came back with a clear plastic sleeve held away from her body like evidence. Her face was unreadable.

“Only crayon,” she said.

Lenore stood behind her.

“No adult note?”

“No adult note.”

Isolde handed me the sleeve.

The drawing showed 3 stick figures under a square house. One tall with dark scribbled hair. One smaller with a blue shirt. One tiny wrapped in purple, floating slightly because children understood babies as weather.

Across the top, in uneven letters, Nico had written:

my baby sister?

End of chapter

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away

Animal Parking Jam solve cute animal puzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

AQ

The wife isn't me

Chapter 53

“Do not put it in the evidence folder.”

Isolde looked up from her phone. The clear sleeve lay on the rolling table beside a half-empty water cup, a packet of hospital crackers, and the birth worksheet where Noa’s name still looked newly printed into the world. The drawing was too bright for the room-purple blanket, blue shirt, a sun with 11 lines, the small crooked question at the top.

my baby sister?

Noa slept against me again, milk-drunk and boneless, her face turned into the hollow above my breast. Every few breaths she made a soft squeak that continued to alarm me despite Jules saying normal at intervals like a reluctant metronome.

“It came through Dario’s assistant,” Isolde said.

“The delivery route is evidence. The sleeve is evidence. The assistant is evidence.” I looked at the crayon house. “The child is not.”

Her mouth tightened – not disagreement exactly, wariness. Isolde had been keeping me alive for 10 weeks by assuming every soft object could conceal a blade. She was usually right, and that made the moments when she might be wrong more dangerous for both of us.

“Aveline,” she said, “I understand what you mean. But if they use Nico to imply family contact, we need to show the court how the contact happened.”

“Then show the envelope path. Show the adult handoff. Show Dario’s assistant exploiting a unit desk before dawn. Do not quote a 6-year-old asking a question as if he filed a motion.”

Noa sighed. My body answered with another cramp so deep I had to close my eyes. Postpartum pain had a different cruelty-labor had purpose, this felt like the body returning to a scene after the emergency vehicles left and finding more damage in daylight.

Jules glanced at the monitor that was no longer on my belly and then at me, perhaps remembering there was no fetal strip to reassure me now. “Afterpains. Normal, especially with feeding.”

“You have ruined the word normal.”

“I will switch to expected.”

“Worse.”

Isolde waited until I breathed again. “No one is going to punish Nico,” she said.

“People say that before using children all the time.”

The sentence came out sharper than I intended. Her eyes softened. I hated that too.

“I am not accusing you,” I said.

“I know.”

“I just…” I looked at the drawing. “He was in the donor hall. He looked at Dario to know whether I was dangerous. That is what they gave him. A room where adults lied and he had to learn faces.”

Sheep Dash: Sheep Away

Animal Parking Jam solve cute animal puzzles and enjoy fun farm parking escape

KEA

Nico’s tiny figure in the drawing had a smile made from 1 orange curve. No crest pin, no surname – just a child trying to draw a relation r adult had earned the right to define for him. The page deserved better than strategy.

“What if he asks Dario whether I liked it?” I asked.

Isolde’s eyes dropped to the sleeve. “Dario will answer in whatever way helps Dario.”

“I know.”

“That is not your fault.”

“Fault is not the only thing children feel.”

The words came from somewhere older than Noa, though I had only been a mother outside my body for a few hours. Maybe pregnancy Had been teaching me the whole time- every kick during a hearing, every shift under a privacy order, every hiccup while I wrote exhibits had been its own education in how adult choices landed on a body too small to name them.

Nico had not chosen his father's lie. Noa had not chosen to be born into its aftermath. If I let the adults make the children symbols, then Daro would have won a quieter point than any surname.

"If later he wants to know Noa," I said, and the name still startled me aloud, "that is not the same question as whether Dario gets access. I need everyone around me to understand that."

"Everyone?"

"Counsel. You. Bennett, if it ever comes through logistics. Anyone tempted to make Nico useful because Celine uses motherhood as a shield."

Isolde sat back. The fluorescent light caught the tear track she had missed on her cheek.

"You are very annoying when you are morally correct after losing blood."

"Add it to the chart."

"Do not tempt me."

She picked up her phone and typed slower than usual.

"What are you sending?"

"A note to Anika: drawing received through Dario's assistant, adult delivery route preserved, Aveline requests Nico's words not be used in filings unless absolutely necessary to protect Noa from a false-contact claim."

"Not requests."

Isolde looked at me. "Directs," I said.

Her thumb moved. "Directs."

"And the drawing stays here. Not scanned into the adult evidence folder."

"Where, then?"

That question should have been simple. It was not. I could not place Nico's drawing beside the wrong-call recording. I could not put it with the private-clinic forms listing Celine as maternal guardian. I could not let a child's crayon question sit in the same digital drawer as Dario saying my baby was Armitage and what mattered now.

"Make a separate folder," I said. "Nico. Child contact. Restricted."

CrosswordGo housands of word puzzles!

PLAY NOW!

KICA

“That is still a folder.”

“It is a fence.”

“And the physical drawing?”

I looked at the purple baby floating under the square house. If I kept it in the room, it could become a photograph. If I sent it away. I would feel like I had sent Nico away. If I put it in Noa’s things, I would be letting Dario’s route into her first-day box. There was no clean answer because adults had dirtied the question before it reached me.

“Seal the sleeve in a plain folder,” I said. “Not with legal exhibits. Not with baby keepsakes. Put it in my bag under the discharge clothes.”

“That is a very specific nowhere.”

“Yes.”

She nodded and did it. Isolde’s face did something complicated and kind. “Okay.”

Noa stirred, then began to cry – not the first cry. This was smaller, indignant, pitched straight into the part of me that had not existed yesterday. My body moved before I did. Check diaper. Check blanket. Offer breast. Fail. Try again. Her mouth slipped. She became furious at both of us.

I had signed affidavits with steadier hands than I used to guide my nipple toward my newborn’s mouth.

“This is absurd,” I whispered.

Jules came over. “May I?”

“Please.”

She adjusted the pillow, then Noa’s shoulder, then my wrist. Always asking, always waiting for the yes even when the answer was obvious. Especially then.

Noa latched. The room fell into the fragile quiet of a problem temporarily solved.

Isolde’s phone buzzed on the bed tray. She looked at it once. Her expression went still.

“What?”

“Nothing that needs you while she is feeding.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It can wait 5 minutes.”

“It cannot, because now I know there is a thing.”

Isolde swore softly at herself. Noa sucked, released, made a clicking sound, then found the rhythm again. I watched her instead of Isolde’s face because I needed 3 more seconds before another adult problem entered the room. I got 2.

“CityGlass picked up a family post,” Isolde said. “Celine’s account.”

My stomach dropped. “Show me.”

“No.”

“Isolde.”

AQ

CrosswordGo

PLAY NOW!

Challenge your brain with thousands of word puzzles!

“You are feeding a newborn less than 2 hours after birth.”

“And Celine is posting.”

That ended the argument because the post already existed whether I looked or not. She turned the phone.

The photo was beautiful. Of course it was.

Celine sat in a pale chair near a window, one hand resting on her own pregnant belly, the other on Nico’s shoulder. Dario stood behind them- not smiling, serious, protective. His jacket was gone, sleeves rolled once, as if someone had wanted him to look like a man interrupted from crisis by devotion. Nico held a small stuffed rabbit I had never seen before.

The caption read: In difficult seasons, children deserve calm, privacy, and the protection of family. We are grateful for everyone respecting the boundaries that keep our home whole.

No names, no mention of me, no mention of the child on my chest. That was the elegance of it-Celine did not have to say Noa belonged inside her marriage. She only had to show a marriage, a child, a pregnant body, and the word children. Plural.

I felt milk leak hot against my skin. Noa kept feeding.

“When?” I asked.

“Three minutes ago.”

Of course. Timed after the drawing reached us, timed after Noa’s name hit the hall, timed while I was still stitched and bleeding and learning the sound my daughter made when milk came too fast.

“Comments?” I asked.

“Already full of prayers for the Armitage children.”

The Armitage children. Isolde scrolled despite herself, then stopped when she realized I was watching her thumb.

“Read 3,” I said.

“No.”

“Three. Representative. Not the cruelest.”

She hated it. She did it anyway.

“One says, ‘Whatever the rumors, those babies are lucky to have a united family.’”

Babies. Plural again.

“Another says, ‘Celine has always protected her home with grace.’”

Grace. The word tasted like hospital bleach.

“Third says, ‘People should stop exploiting children for attention.’”

That one almost made me laugh. Almost.

Outside, somewhere beyond the closed blind, a city full of strangers was being invited to confuse a staged photograph with restraint. I was in a gown with blood still drying where I could not see it, a newborn at my breast, a child's crayon question in a plain folder – and the official wife had managed to make herself look like the person protecting privacy.

CrosswordGo brain with thousands of word puzzles!

4/5 AQ

PLAY NOW!

DEA

It was elegant. I could admire the engineering of a trap while refusing to live in it.

There it was. Not a legal document, not an order – a caption and strangers willing to complete the theft for her.

My hands went cold around Noa.

"Screenshot it," I said.

"Already did."

"Archive the post. Timestamp. Comments with children plural. Do not engage."

"Already doing it."

"Send to Anika with the drawing timeline."

"Yes."

"The post came after Dario's assistant delivered Nico's drawing."

"Yes."

"Say I am not alleging Nico's involvement. I am alleging adult sequencing."

Isolde typed, then showed me the screen before sending.

Adult sequencing. That was the phrase-cold enough to survive a hearing, exact enough not to make a 6-year-old carry the weight.

"Send it."

She did. The message left the room without carrying Nico’s question. That mattered to me more than I could explain without crying again.

I looked at Nico’s drawing. my baby sister? Then at Celine’s photo, polished and bloodless and ready for the public to call itself kind.

Noa released my breast and made a small satisfied sound. I bent my face to her hair. The door was closed. The post was not.

Isolde’s phone buzzed again and again, each vibration a small public knock.

“It is spreading,” she said.

End of chapter

CrosswordGo

PLAY NOW!

of word puzzles!

AO

–

The wife isn't me

Chapter 54

CICA

–

Discharge Plan

–

“No public entrance.”

I said it before the discharge nurse finished unfolding the map.

Noa lay in the clear bassinet beside my bed, swaddled in a hospital blanket with pink and blue stripes because the world had terrible taste in newborn textiles. Her hat was too large and kept sliding toward one eye. Every time it did, I fixed it with the seriousness of a person performing treaty work.

She was 31 hours old. I had slept for 46 minutes in pieces. My body felt like it had been borrowed by several departments and returned without instructions.

The room smelled of antiseptic, lanolin, mesh underwear, and the faint sweet-sour milk scent that had already become Noa in my mind. My chart said postpartum. My muscles said battlefield. My daughter said nothing, because she was busy making tiny faces in her sleep as if reviewing the quality of this planet.

The discharge nurse, a calm woman named Priya, nodded and circled a corridor on the printed map. “We would not use the public entrance under protected status,” she said. “Standard option is staff elevator to the lower service corridor, then covered vehicle bay.”

“Is this map printed from a shared station?”

Priya looked at the page as if seeing it differently because I had asked. “Yes. From the unit printer.”

“Does it have my name on the print queue?”

“No. It is a blank unit movement map.”

“Throw that copy away after this.”

“We shred protected movement papers.”

“I want to see it go into the bin.”

Isolde made a note before Priya could answer. Priya said, “Understood.”

I did not apologize. The previous day I might have explained that I knew she had not caused this, that I understood procedures existed for reasons besides harming me, that I was not trying to make her work harder. Motherhood had reduced my politeness budget. Noa needed privacy more than Priya needed my tone softened.

“Who knows the time?”

“Your care team, charge nurse, security supervisor, transport desk, and whoever you authorize.”

“Too many.”

Priya did not flinch – that had become my favorite trait in hospital staff. “We can narrow the visible window,” she said. “Instead of scheduling transport as a fixed time, we clear medical discharge first, then call security when you and infant are physically ready. Security brings the car only after the elevator is held.”

“No car waiting outside.”

CrosswordGo brain with thousands of word puzzles!

PLAY NOW!

DKA

O

“Correct.”

Isolde stood near the window with the blind down, phone in hand, hair flattened on one side from sleeping badly in the chair. “Second vehicle?”

“Available,” Priya said. “Security recommends decoy only if there is already street activity.”

“There is always street activity now,” Isolde said. She was not wrong.

Celine’s post had run all day – not viral in the screaming way, worse, respectable. Donor wives shared it with white-heart captions. Famay- office accounts liked it without comment. CityGlass posted a blurred screenshot and asked whether the Armitage family was closing ranks around a private medical event. By lunch, strangers were congratulating Celine for protecting “the children” from scandal.

Noa slept through her own public erasure. That made me want to become unrecognizable.

Instead I learned to change diapers with shaking hands.

“Bennett?” Priya asked, reading from the notes. “Listed for discharge logistics contact through Ms. Fane only. Not room access.”

“Yes.”

“He has offered a vehicle and driver, but hospital security can also arrange transport.”

I looked at Isolde. She did not answer for me. Good.

Bennett had sent 4 messages through her since Noa’s birth. Hall clear at 6:10 AM. Foundation staff gone by 7:30 AM. No statement from Bellamy. Vehicle available if she chooses- no need to answer now.

That last sentence had done something dangerous to me. No need to answer now. He kept giving me time when everyone else treated time like a loophole.

“Hospital vehicle to the first transfer point,” I said. “Bennett’s vehicle can be secondary if counsel approves the route and if he is not visible at pickup.”

Isolde typed it. Priya wrote it down.

“No Bellamy logo, no driver who gives a name to reporters, no statement if photographed,” I said.

Isolde’s mouth twitched. “You know he already wrote those rules himself.”

“I do not know that. I know you know that.”

“Fair.”

She typed another message. The reply came quickly enough that I knew Bennett had been holding his phone. Isolde read it aloud only after I nodded.

“Vehicle unmarked. Driver instructed not to speak. I will not be at pickup. Security can use or ignore. Her call.”

Her call. No question mark, no pressure disguised as readiness. I looked at Noa’s oversized hat and did not let myself make warmth into debt.

“Tell him hospital vehicle first,” I said. “Secondary only if route fails.”

Isolde sent it.

“Infant car seat?”

CrosswordGo

PLAY NOW!

13KA service. –

“Installed in Isolde’s car,” I said. “Checked at the safe-room appointment. But if we use hospital transport, we need it brought through service not lobby.”

“We can have security retrieve it from Ms. Fane’s vehicle when the route is set.”

Every answer made the plan more real. That should have comforted me. Instead my chest tightened. Leaving meant the hospital could no longer be the wall. Leaving meant Noa’s body went into weather, cameras, roads, hands that might not ask before reaching. Leaving meant I had to take a child I had known outside my body for barely more than a day and trust a corridor because a map said it was private.

Noa stretched inside the swaddle. One hand escaped-five fingers, fierce and useless. I touched the blanket near her fist. Not her skin yet. She was asleep, and I had become reverent about not waking her unless hunger, diaper, or medical necessity demanded it.

“What if reporters are in the service bay?” I asked.

Priya turned the map. “Then we do not move. Security checks before you leave the room, before elevator opens, and before the corridor door opens. If any step fails, you stay behind the last secured door.”

“Who can override that?”

“Charge nurse and security supervisor for safety. You for consent.”

“Administration?”

Priya’s mouth tightened slightly. “Not for a protected patient movement if security has a risk.”

I believed her because she disliked the question for the right reason.

Lenore came in at 2:18 PM with a paper cup of ice chips she had not needed to bring herself.

“You are not on shift,” I said.

“I am until you are out.”

“That is not a healthy labor practice.”

“I am a nurse. We have made peace with irony.”

She handed Isolde the cup, then looked at the map. “Good. No fixed discharge time on any board. We will use ready-call movement.”

“Has anyone requested the time?” I asked.

“Celine’s counsel asked whether discharge planning had begun. She was told all contact goes through counsel.”

“Dario?”

“His lawyer asked for birth-status confirmation again this morning. No disclosure. He has a hearing request pending, not an order.”

“And the hospital?”

Lenore understood the question under the question. “Staff access to your chart is being audited. Break-glass access only outside assigned care. Infant chart too.”

Infant chart too. Noa’s separate door.

“Thank you,” I said.

The words were inadequate. I used them anyway.

CrosswordGo

PLAY NOW!

fword puzzles!

Priya reviewed warning signs. Fever. Bleeding. Clots larger than a golf ball. Pain that did not improve. No wet diapers by a certain hour. Ferding trouble. Yellowing skin. Breathing changes. Reasons to call. Reasons to go in. Reasons not to wait because legal danger did not make médical danger polite enough to stand aside.

“Who receives the newborn summary?” I asked.

“Pediatrician you listed, if accepted. You will also get printed copies.”

“No automatic release to St. Orla.”

“No.”

“No birth confirmation to any prior record source.”

“No.”

“No call to Dario because he is listed as possible biological father.”

“No. There is no release authorization.”

“No call to Celine under protective paperwork.”

Priya’s face tightened again. “No.”

The questions sounded repetitive – they were not. Each no closed a different door.

Noa squeaked in her sleep, perhaps offended by bureaucracy. I touched the edge of her blanket.

“Sorry,” I whispered to her. “Your mother is tedious.”

Isolde said, “Your mother is why you are not already a press release.”

“Also tedious.”

“Both can be true.”

The ordinary terror of motherhood sat beside the extraordinary terror and refused to be smaller.

I signed the clinical discharge page. Only that. No parentage addendum. No protective family-status packet. No photo release. No visitor correction. No statement.

Aveline Ashby. My signature looked tired. Still mine.

At 2:47 PM, Noa woke hungry and furious. The plan paused because my daughter did not care about service corridors. I fed her badly, then better. She coughed once and terrified 10 years off my life. Jules, back for postpartum rounds, said expected before I could glare at normal.

At 3:12 PM, Isolde’s phone buzzed. She read the screen. Then read it again.

“What?”

Her eyes lifted to Lenore. Not me. That was how I knew.

“Say it,” I said.

Isolde’s face had gone very still. “Bennett’s exterior security contact just saw a photographer at the lower curb.”

Priya frowned. “The lower curb is not public-facing.”

CrosswordGo sands of word puzzles!

AO

PLAY NOW!

CICA

“Exactly.”

“Maybe they followed staff?” Priya said, then stopped because she heard herself.

“Which staff?” I asked.

“I do not mean staff leaked.”

“I know what you meant. I am asking what a photographer could physically follow to that curb.”

Lenore was already moving toward the door. “Laundry, food service, maintenance, pharmacy, transport, staff parking, security rounds.”

Every ordinary function became a hallway for betrayal when enough money wanted a door.

“The time was not fixed,” I said.

“No,” Priya said.

“So they do not have exact movement. They have likely discharge window and lower curb.”

Isolde’s eyes met mine. We were both doing the same calculation: not a complete leak, but enough of one.

Lenore took the phone from Isolde only after Isolde held it out. She read the message, then looked at Priya. “Show me the service bay camera.”

Priya stepped into the hall fast.

Noa kept feeding, one hand pressed against my breast as if holding me in place.

“Could be random,” Isolde said.

“No.”

We both knew it. The public entrance was one thing. The main maternity curb was another. A photographer waiting at the lower service bay before the ready-call route had even been activated was not luck, not instinct, not the city sniffing around a story. It was a leak with shoes.

Lenore came back 90 seconds later without the map. That frightened me more than if she had carried it.

“We are not moving you,” she said.

Noa released my breast and began to cry. My milk leaked. My stitches hurt. My name sat on the discharge paper, dry and exposed.

I looked at the closed door. “Who knew the discharge time?”

Lenore’s face gave me the answer before her mouth did. Too many.

End of chapter

AO

CrosswordGo

PLAY NOW!

hands of word puzzles!

The wife isn't me

Chapter 55

“Do not move her yet.”

Lenore said it into the hallway, not to me. That was the first mercy.

Noa had just unlatched and fallen asleep with milk shining at the corner of her mouth, as if the world had not placed a photographer at a service curb before she was 2 days old. Her cheek rested against my breast. My gown was damp. The mesh underwear felt too large and too humiliating at once, and the pad between my thighs had shifted when I tried to sit higher in the bed.

There was no graceful way to be postpartum under siege – only a body leaking from several places while adults with money tried to turn newborn into a public argument.

Isolde took my phone from the tray and set it face down. “You do not need the photo.”

“I need to know what they saw.”

“They saw a photographer where he should not be.”

“That is not the same thing.”

She did not argue. She picked up her own phone instead and turned the screen toward me only after tilting it away from Noa’s sleeping face, as if the baby could be harmed by pixels.

The image was grainy from a service-bay camera. A man in a dark cap stood near the lower curb with a long lens angled toward the covered vehicle lane. He was not at the main entrance, not wandering – he knew where to point.

My body reacted before my mind did. A cramp tightened low and hard, and warm blood shifted under me.

“Bathroom,” I said.

Isolde’s eyes sharpened. “Now?”

“If we are going to be trapped by a camera, I would like to be trapped with a clean pad.”

It was a ridiculous sentence. It was also a tactical one.

Jules came back in at Lenore’s call, and the room became hands that asked first. May I help you stand? May I take Noa? Do you want the chair close? My stitches pulled when my feet touched the floor. The room tilted. I held the bed rail with 1 hand and the front of my gown with the other while Isolde took Noa from me like she was receiving glass.

Noa objected with a tiny snort.

“I agree,” I told her. “Very badly organized.”

The bathroom mirror showed a woman I recognized only by evidence – dark hair pinned badly, gray-green eyes too bright, hospital bracelet, milk stain, a belly still rounded because birth was not a magic trick and my body had not received the memo that the emergency was over.

I changed the pad with shaking hands. The sight of blood did not frighten me by itself. The quantity had rules now: golf ball clots, soaking through, fever, dizziness-words Priya had given me like markers on a dark road. This was not too much. It still felt like a private thing stolen from me because I had to count it while security checked a curb.

Invite Friends. Share $25,000 in USDT Rewards.

Invite friends, unlock Mystery Boxes, and earn rewards together

1/5 AO

INVITE NOW

When I came out, Lenore was by the door with Priya and a hospital security supervisor I had seen only once. Isolde sat with Noa against der chest, not rocking, just holding steady.

“The lower route is compromised,” Lenore said. “We have 2 options. Hold you here until night, or move now through west loading before the photographer can reposition.”

“West loading was in the plan?”

“As an emergency fallback.”

“Who knew that?”

The security supervisor answered. “Only charge, security, transport, and facilities control. Not the unit map.”

“So fewer people.”

“Fewer, yes.”

Not none. There were no clean corridors-only narrower leaks.

Isolde’s phone buzzed again. She looked once. “Bennett’s exterior team says the photographer at lower curb is on the phone and looking toward the west side now.”

The room went quiet.

“How?” I asked.

No one answered quickly enough. That was an answer. The leak was moving.

Lenore’s jaw set. “Then we do not wait for perfect. We make a shorter exposure. Hospital transport is still in place.”

“Bennett’s vehicle?”

Isolde read the next message. “Already repositioned 1 block past west loading. He says use hospital van if clear. If not, his driver can pull in for 11 seconds. His exact words.”

Eleven seconds. I almost laughed. The number was so precise it made him sound like a man trying to measure fear into something a woman could hold.

“Where is Bennett?” I asked.

Isolde hesitated. “Tell me,”

“Outside west loading. On foot. Not at the vehicle.”

The warmth that moved through me was not soft – it was dangerous because it wanted a name. I did not give it one.

“Why?”

Isolde’s mouth tightened. “He says if cameras reach the door before the vehicle, they will aim at faces. He can block lenses without blocking you,”

“He said that?”

“He said, ‘Only if she wants the west door. I will not stand between her and another exit.’”

The room shifted around that sentence – not visibly, not enough for anyone else to call it romance or rescue or anything so crude. But I felt

Be The King Of Jail !

Control the fate of the prisoners!

the difference in my ribs. Dario had always stood in doorways like the door belonged to him. Bennett stood near exits like they belonged te

Noa stirred in Isolde’s arms. I looked at my daughter, at the too-large hat, at the little red mark near her eyebrow from being born with her fist by her face.

“We go now,” I said.

No one celebrated. Good.

The next 8 minutes became a series of small, brutal tasks. Noa into a clean diaper. Noa into the soft gray sleeper Isolde had washed twice in the safe-room sink because new clothes smelled like warehouses. Hospital band checked against mine. Discharge papers into the inner pocket of my bag. Nico’s drawing sealed in a plain folder beneath the baby clothes. Car seat brought up through service by security, checked again by Jules, then placed in the wheelchair because my arms were not steady enough to carry both the baby and my own stubbornness.

I hated the wheelchair. Then I sat in it because pain had its own vote.

Noa was buckled into the car seat, tiny and indignant beneath the chest clip. Her face wrinkled until she looked like a judge displeased with every adult present.

“Same,” Isolde told her.

I kept one hand on the car seat handle, not because it helped, but because my body needed the lie that touch equaled control.

Lenore crouched beside the chair. “At each door, you choose whether we continue. If you say stop, we stop behind the last secured point.”

“Even if cameras are already outside?”

“Especially then.”

I nodded.

The corridor outside my room looked ordinary. That was the cruelty of institutions – a door could be locked against a father, a chart could be audited, a newborn could have a protected status banner across her record, and still the floor smelled like coffee from the nurses' station. Still a linen cart squeaked. Still someone laughed softly in another room because their baby had hiccups and no one had turned that into evidence.

We moved. Lenore walked ahead. Priya took the discharge folder. The security supervisor kept to the left. Isolde walked close but not crowding.

The staff elevator opened empty. I said, "Continue."

The doors closed. For 4 floors, no one spoke. Noa made a breathy sound in the car seat, I watched her chest until it rose again.

The elevator opened into a service corridor painted a practical, ugly beige. Pipes ran along the ceiling. The air smelled colder here, less floral, more metal. I preferred it – expensive rooms lied better.

At the first secured door, the security supervisor listened to his earpiece.

"Lower curb photographer has moved. West exterior has 2 cameras visible beyond the bay edge. Unknown affiliation."

My mouth went dry.

"Can we hold?" Isolde asked.

"If we hold, they may close in," he said. "Vehicle is 20 seconds from door."

"Hospital van?" I asked.

Be The King Of Jail!

Control the fate of the prisoners!

"Blocked by delivery truck. Not intentional, from what we can see."

From what we can see. There were too many sentences like that in my life now.

Isolde's phone buzzed. She looked at me. "Bennett says he can step in front of the camera line for the vehicle pull-in. He will not touch the chair. He will not take the handle."

My throat tightened. "He wrote all that?"

“Yes.”

“Tell him…” I had to stop because Noa chose that moment to open her eyes. Not fully-just a sliver. Dark, unfocused, furious at light. Her whole life so far had been bright rooms, hungry work, warm skin, and adults saying no around her.

“Tell him I choose the west door,” I said. “And if I say stop, he moves.”

Isolde typed. The answer came back in less than 5 seconds.

“Understood.”

That was all. Understood.

The west door opened to cold-not weather exactly, exposure. The covered bay was concrete and shadowed, with a square of winter brightness beyond the overhang. Bennett’s unmarked vehicle slid into place with the back door already opening. A camera flash went off from the far edge before anyone could block it.

My hand tightened on the car seat. Noa flinched.

Then Bennett was there. He did not come toward me. He stepped sideways into the line of sight, coat already off his shoulders, dark wool lifted in both hands like a temporary wall. Not thrown over me, not draped on my body – he held it away from us, high enough to break the lens angle and low enough that I could see the open car door, the curb, the distance, the choice.

His body was angled toward the cameras. The path in front of me stayed clear.

That detail broke something small and precise inside me – not because it was grand, but because it was exact.

“Your call,” he said, voice low enough that only our group could hear.

Not hurry. Not come on. Not let me. Your call.

The cameras clicked again. I looked past the coat to the vehicle, then to the corridor behind me, then to Noa, swallowed by straps and blanket, alive and small and mine.

“Forward,” I said.

The chair moved. Bennett moved with us, not ahead, not behind, adjusting the coat as the photographers shifted. One tried to crouch for a lower angle. Bennett dropped one side without blocking my view of the step. Another called my name.

“Aveline, is Bennett Bellamy the father?”

My skin went cold. Bennett did not answer. Neither did I. The question fell to the concrete like something filthy and stayed there.

The driver took the car seat only after Jules released it and Isolde checked his hands. I stood because I wanted to enter the car on my feet.

Pain took a white bite out of the moment. Bennett's hand lifted halfway. Then stopped. He waited. I did not take it. I held the door frame instead and lowered myself into the back seat with a sound I would deny making until I died.

Be The King Of Jail !

Control the fate of the prisoners!

KICA

Noa's car seat clicked into the base. Click. The most beautiful sound in the world.

Isolde slid in beside us. Before the door closed, I looked out. Bennett still held the coat between the cameras and my daughter. Wind pulled at his shirt sleeves. His face was turned away from me, toward the lenses, not performing anger, not performing ownership-just refusing them a view.

The door shut. The vehicle moved.

For 3 blocks, I counted Noa's breaths and did not ask about the photographs. At the fourth, Isolde's phone began to vibrate and did not stop. She looked once. Her face changed.

"What?"

She swallowed. "The coat photo is already everywhere."

I looked down at Noa. Her tiny mouth opened in sleep.

Isolde's phone lit again, and this time the notification banner showed the caption before she could hide it.

Bellamy shields Aveline Ashby and newborn from cameras after secret birth.

At the bottom of the screen, a second message arrived from Anika.

Dario has seen it.

End of chapter-

AO

Be The King Of Jail!

Control the fate of the prisoners!

The wife isn't me

Chapter 56

Dario saw the photograph on a conference-room screen he had not authorized anyone to use. That offended him first- not the image, the display.

His media counsel had pulled the CityGlass post up before he entered, and there it was, enlarged between the reflected windows and the long black table: Bennett Bellamy in shirt sleeves at a hospital service bay, coat spread like a shield, body placed between cameras and the open rear door of an unmarked vehicle.

Aveline was barely visible that made it worse. A line of her hair. The curve of her cheek turned down toward the infant seat. One pale hospital bracelet at her wrist. A postpartum slowness in the way she held the door frame before lowering herself into the car. Noa was not visible at all. Bennett had seen to that.

The room was full of people pretending not to watch Dario see another man protect what was his.

“Take it down,” Dario said.

No one moved. Farrow, his personal counsel, was on speaker at the center of the table. “We do not control CityGlass.”

“Then control the repetition.”

“We can send privacy notices regarding the child. That may amplify it.”

“The child is not in the photograph.”

“That is because Bellamy blocked the shot.”

The sentence landed too cleanly. Dario looked at the phone on the table as if Farrow had stepped into the room and placed a hand on the wrong surface.

“Do not admire him,” he said.

A communications associate shifted her eyes to her notes. Livia sat at the far end of the table with her hands folded, face cool and nearly bored. Mathias Vey was not present – he did not need to be. His absence had become a kind of seating arrangement.

Celine was in the smaller adjoining room, supposedly resting. Pregnant women in their circle rested by being made into reasons other people could not speak plainly.

The screen refreshed. More posts.

Bellamy heir protects hidden mother.

Ashby baby leaves hospital under Bellamy guard.

Is Bennett Bellamy replacing Dario Armitage in private family scandal?

Dario's jaw tightened. Replacing the word was vulgar because it was simple. Nothing about this had been simple until strangers needed a caption. There it was, the word people had been waiting to use because it made the story cheap enough to consume. Aveline became a woman passed from one powerful man to another. The baby became proof of whichever man stood closest to the car door.

They did not understand. Bellamy did not understand.

Be The King Of Jail !

Control the fate of the prisoners!

Aveline had not been available for public protection. She had not been some open cause in need of a better sponsor. She had been priva warm in Dario's apartment, barefoot on heated floors, arguing over cloud shapes on a nursery wall that had belonged to a future he had not yet found the right timing to announce.

Then she had run. Then Bellamy had appeared at doors. Then a daughter named Noa Ashby had left a hospital behind another man's coat

"Where was our photographer?" Dario asked.

The associate went still. Livia's expression sharpened by 1 degree.

Farrow said, "Dario."

"I asked a question."

"No one at this table should answer a question phrased that way."

Dario looked at the screen instead of the people. Bennett's face was turned toward the cameras, not Aveline. Clever. Clean. He had not held the car seat. He had not touched the wheelchair. He had not offered a hand in the frame. He had made himself visible and untouchable at once-theatre dressed as restraint.

Dario recognized strategy when he saw it.

"Someone knew the lower curb," he said.

Farrow's voice cooled. "If you have knowledge of a source inside the hospital, do not discuss it on a mixed call."

"I know my own child's discharge should not happen under Bellamy management."

"The court has not granted you access to discharge information."

"Because she has weaponized birth."

Livia's hand moved once against the table – not a flinch, a warning. "She gave birth," Livia said. "Do not confuse yourself in front of staff."

The reprimand was quiet enough to be maternal and cold enough to be corporate. Dario did not answer her.

On the screen, someone had zoomed into Bennett's coat. The caption called it intimate.

Intimate. Dario felt something in him go clear and hard.

People misunderstood possession because they wanted it to look like anger. Real possession was older, quieter. It was knowing the exact warmth of an apartment because you had ordered it changed for a woman's calf cramps. It was the half-painted nursery wall. It was the ring he still kept locked in the left drawer of his desk because he had not decided whether returning it to her would be surrender or correction.

Bellamy had none of that. Bellamy had a coat. And the city was calling it protection,

"Call him," Dario said.

Farrow said, "No."

"I was not asking counsel."

"Then you are making a mistake without counsel."

"Log off."

“Dario.”

Be The King Of Jail!

Control the fate of the prisoners!

“Log off,” he said again. The speaker clicked dead after 2 seconds.

No one else in the room spoke. Good.

Darlo picked up his phone and found Bennett’s number from the conflict file, not from contacts. He had refused to store it– storing a man’s number implied future use rather than tolerated necessity.

The call rang 4 times. On the fifth, Bennett answered.

“Bellamy.”

Not hello, not a question. His voice had the flat steadiness of a man in a place he controlled.

Dario turned slightly away from the room. “You enjoyed that.”

“If this is about a photograph, send concerns through counsel.”

“Do not use counsel as manners.”

“Use yours.”

The response was mild. It should not have irritated him. It did.

“You were at my daughter’s discharge.”

“I was outside a hospital door after Aveline chose that route.”

“Do not say her name to me as if you have earned it.”

A pause – not a wounded pause, a measured one. Bennett said, “This call is not productive.”

“It will be.”

“Then say what you called to say.”

Dario looked at the frozen image on the screen. Bennett’s coat, Aveline’s turned face, the car door waiting like an invitation.

“You are making a public story out of someone else’s crisis,” Dario said.

“The public story came from photographers.”

“Photographers you were ready for.”

“Because someone sent them to a protected discharge.”

Careful. Always careful.

Dario smiled without amusement. “You think that makes you righteous?”

“I think it made the baby’s face unavailable.”

The baby’s face. Not my daughter. Bennett was choosing neutral language because he knew every word might matter later a lawyer’s instinct wearing a founder’s shirt.

“Her name is Noa,” Dario said.

The room behind him went very still. He had not said the name aloud in front of them before.

Be The King Of Jail !

Control the fate of the prisoners!

Noa. Aveline had chosen a small name. Simple. Stubborn. A name that did not bend toward Armitage.

Bennett did not react quickly enough to satisfy him.

“I know,” Bennett said.

Dario’s gnp tightened around the phone. “You know because she told you?”

“That is not your question to ask me.”

“Everything about my child is my question.”

“No,” Bennett said. “Some things are Aveline’s answer.

There it was again. That tone. That clean little division between fatherhood and ownership, as if Bellamy could draw a line on a conference call and make it real.

Dario lowered his voice. “Listen carefully. Do not make a family out of my mistake.”

Livia closed her eyes at the far end of the table. He ignored her.

Bennett was silent for 1 beat. “What did you call her?” Bennett asked.

“Do not pretend you misunderstand me.”

“I want the word cleanly placed.”

“Aveline was my mistake,” Dario said. “The child is not.”

The sentence sounded different after it left his mouth – not wrong, exposed.

Bennett’s voice changed by almost nothing. “You should stop talking.”

“You would like that.”

“Your counsel would.”

“My counsel does not decide whether another man stands beside the mother of my child.”

“Aveline decides who stands near her.”

“Aveline is exhausted, postpartum, frightened, and surrounded by people telling her disobedience is freedom.”

“She is also the adult whose hospital bands match the newborn’s.”

Dario’s eyes cut to the screen again. Bennett knew about the bands. Of course he did – through Aveline, through Isolde, through some clean channel that would be described later as authorized and neutral and proper.

“You have been collecting little facts,” Dario said.

“I have been respecting boundaries.”

“No. You have been waiting at them.”

For the first time, Bennett did not answer immediately. Dario felt the hit land and pressed.

“You think if you stand politely enough outside enough doors, eventually she will invite you through one. You think not touching the chair

Be The King Of Jail!

Control the fate of the prisoners!

DIA makes you decent. It makes you patient.”

“This is the second time I am telling you to route contact through counsel.”

“And I am telling you to stay away from my family.”

“That word is doing too much work.”

Dario laughed once. It surprised even him. “You want to correct me?”

“No.”

“You want to rescue her?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want?”

Bennett’s silence was not empty. That was the problem with him- he understood the value of not filling a room.

“I want you to stop using access to punish a woman who just gave birth,” Bennett said. “I want photographers away from a newborn’s discharge. I want medical records handled by authorized staff and legal process, not family pressure. None of that requires your permission.”

Dario heard the list beneath the list. Photographers. Records. Family pressure. Bennett was not guessing.

“You are out of your depth,” Dario said.

“Then counsel will explain the depth in writing.”

“No. I will explain it now.” Dario turned fully away from Livia and the screen and the room watching him lose ownership of the conversation. “If you stand beside her again, I will make sure the city knows exactly what kind of man uses a vulnerable woman and a newborn to settle old corporate grudges.”

“Is that your warning?”

“That is the polite version.”

“Good,” Bennett said.

Dario frowned. “Good?”

“Yes.”

There was a soft click on the line-not disconnection, something else. Bennett’s voice remained calm. “For the record, I am ending this call. Further contact goes through counsel.

Dario looked at the phone. For the record. The phrase opened under him like a trapdoor.

“Bennett.”

But the line had already gone dead.

At the far end of the table, Livia had not moved.

The photograph refreshed again. This time the caption under Bennett’s coat read: Aveline Ashby’s protector refuses Armitage cameras a newborn’s face.

Be The King Of Jail!

Control the fate of the prisoners!

Dario set the phone down very carefully.

Livia said, “Tell me you did not make that call without assuming he recorded it.”

Imt of chapter

Be The King Of Jail !

Control the fate of the prisoners!

The wife isn't me

Chapter 57

CITA

Chapter 57 – Men Who Own Rooms

Bennett saved the call before he listened to himself breathe. That order mattered-file first, feeling later.

The recording moved from the call app into the secure evidence folder Anika had created after the hospital route failed. He added the timestamp, caller number, duration, and a note that Dario had initiated contact directly after the discharge photograph spread. Then

he sent the preservation notice to Anika and Mara, not to Aveline. Especially not to Aveline.

She had left the hospital less than an hour ago with stitches, bleeding, a newborn, and cameras clawing at the car door. She did not need his adrenaline delivered to her phone dressed as an update.

He stood in the west loading bay until the vehicle cleared the last camera cluster. The cold had reached his shirt. His coat was still in his hands. It smelled like hospital concrete and winter air. A photographer had shouted questions about fatherhood, affairs, Bellamy money, secret births. Bennett had held wool between a lens and a baby seat and learned exactly how much violence could fit into a camera flash.

Noa's face had not been captured. That was the only thing he let himself count as a win – not Aveline's face. That had been caught in pieces and he hated every piece because pieces invited ownership. A cheek could be made fragile. A wristband could be made proof. A woman lowering herself into a car after birth could be called hidden, rescued, fallen, chosen, anything except what she was: tired and trying to get home with her baby.

"Mr. Bellamy?"

His driver, Tomas, stood beside the second vehicle. "We should leave before they come back around."

"Yes."

Bennett put the coat over his arm instead of on. He did not want warmth yet.

In the back seat, he opened a blank note and wrote what he remembered before memory softened itself into narrative.

Dario: Do not make a family out of my mistake. Dario: Aveline was my mistake. The child is not. Dario: Stay away from my family. Threat: public accusation that Bennett is using vulnerable postpartum woman/newborn for corporate grudge. No direct mention of photographer source. Implied knowledge/concern around records, access, family pressure.

He stopped before the note became argument. Facts were useful. His anger was not.

Tomas drove without asking where to go because the route had been set before the call: Bellamy's side office, not headquarters, not his apartment, not anywhere with a predictable lobby.

Bennett watched the city through tinted glass. Every intersection had too much light.

He had seen Aveline’s face for less than 3 seconds when the car door closed. Pale, exhausted, eyes down on the baby, jaw set as if pain had asked for more than she was willing to give. She had not taken his hand. Good- not because he did not want her to, but because wanting was his problem. Her not taking it meant the choice still belonged to her body, even under cameras, even with blood loss and stitches and fear.

He held on to that discipline the way other men held on to doors.

At the side office, Mara was already in the conference room with Anika on the screen and a records attorney Bennett knew by reputation only, Evren Shah. No one asked whether he was all right. He appreciated them for it.

Ball Sort Puzzle – Color Game

Bet you can’t pass this level

1/5 AO

KEEA

“Recording is preserved,” Bennett said.

“We have it,” Anika replied. “Aveline does not.”

“Keep it that way until she is medically settled.”

Mara’s eyes flicked to him. “We will decide timing by client interest.”

“Yes.”

The correction was deserved. He sat. The chair was too soft. He stood again and took the wall near the window instead, because he did not trust himself at the head of a table. Men who owned rooms were always tempted to mistake the table for virtue.

“Dario is agitated by the photograph,” Anika said. “That makes him useful and dangerous. Useful because he speaks. Dangerous because he looks for someone to punish.”

“He called Aveline a mistake,” Bennett said.

Mara’s expression hardened.

“And separated the child from that word,” he added. “He said the child is not.”

Evren made a note. “Possession split. Mother disposable, child claimed.”

“In plain language,” Mara said.

“He thinks he can degrade her without harming his paternal claim,” Evren said.

Bennett looked at the black window. “He thinks if he names the harm carefully, it stops being harm.”

No one argued.

Anika said, “The call supports our pattern evidence, but the next immediate issue is the hospital leak. We need to know whether discharge information was accessed, whether infant chart was touched, and whether movement papers were printed, viewed, or shared.”

“Lenore has an internal audit running,” Mara said. “But hospital audits move like hospitals.”

“Then we make a narrower demand,” Bennett said. “Time window around discharge planning. Staff assigned to Aveline and Noa. Transport desk. Security bay cameras. Chart access. Print queue for protected movement maps.”

Anika leaned slightly toward her camera. “We?”

Bennett stopped. Again deserved. “Aveline’s counsel,” he said. “If she authorizes it. Bellamy can fund the records attorney through the existing blind structure if eligible. I should not direct the demand.”

Mara nodded once.

He disliked needing the correction. He liked that they gave it. That was the point of building a room that did not flatter him.

His phone lit on the table. A message from Isolde, routed through the logistics thread.

Arrived. No press at building. Baby asleep. A is upright and furious about car seat straps. Do not reply unless route issue.

Bennett read it twice. Then placed the phone face down. Do not reply unless route issue. There was no route issue. There was only the mental image of Aveline upright and furious, which was not his to answer.

Anika said, “Dario may deny the call if we use it.”

Ball Sort Puzzle – Color Game

Bet you can’t pass this level

“He won’t,” Bennett said. All 3 lawyers looked at him.

He kept his voice level. “He may argue context. He may say he was provoked by seeing his newborn endangered by photographers. He may call me opportunistic. But he will not deny the call if he thinks denial makes him look rattled by a recording.”

“Why?”

“Because he still believes controlled admission is power.”

Mara studied him for a moment. “You know men like him?”

Bennett looked at the conference table. Yes, was the simple answer.

He knew men who treated confession as strategy if they could choose the lighting. Men who apologized in passive voice. Men who made rooms quiet by entering them. Men who donated a wing, chaired a board, signed a check, then asked why the people behind the desk seemed nervous. He knew the type partly because he had fought them-partly because he had inherited enough of their architecture to tear any comfort in it.

Bellamy money had its own old rooms, its own polished donors, its own habit of assuming that a check could become a key if no one stopped it. He had spent years writing rules around that impulse. The rules did not make him good. They made him supervised.

“I know rooms built for him,” Bennett said. “And I know what they teach.”

Anika accepted that without pressing.

Mara turned the tablet toward him. “We may need a controlled follow-up.”

“With Dario?”

“Not social. Not emotional. A call with counsel notice or counsel present, depending on what he does next. He has now threatened you personally and made statements about Aveline’s vulnerability. If he calls again, you do not improvise.”

“I did not improvise.”

Mara’s eyebrows rose. He almost smiled. Almost.

“Not as much as I wanted to,” he amended.

“That is not the same thing.”

“No.”

His phone lit again. This time it was not Isolde. Unknown number. He let it ring.

Anika’s eyes dropped to her own screen. “Dario’s counsel just emailed. Subject: Bellamy interference.”

The phone stopped ringing. Then began again. Same number.

Mara said, “Answer on speaker. State recording. Say counsel is present. Do not engage beyond boundaries.”

Bennett looked at Anika. She nodded. “Do it.”

He accepted the call and placed the phone on the table. “This is Bennett Bellamy. I am recording this call. Counsel is present.”

A different silence came through the speaker – not Dario surprised, but Dario recalculating.

“You are developing bad habits,” Dario said.

Ball Sort Puzzle – Color Game

Bet you can’t pass this level

3/5 AQ

“Further contact should go through counsel.”

“Then put them closer to the phone.”

Anika muted herself on the video but stayed visible. Mara gestured: continue.

Bennett said, “State your purpose.”

“My purpose is to prevent you from exploiting a woman who cannot see what you are doing because she is angry at me.”

Bennett kept his hands flat on the table. “Aveline has counsel. She has medical providers. She has chosen support. Your disagreement with her choices does not create authority.”

“You like that word.”

“Authority?”

“Chosen.”

“It matters.”

Dario gave a soft laugh. “You were not there when she chose me.”

Mara’s face did not move. Bennett felt the sentence land where Dario meant it to land and did not pick it up.

“This call is not about your prior relationship,” he said. “It is about direct contact and interference.”

“Interference.” Dario repeated the word as if tasting something bitter. “You mean evidence.”

“I mean the clinic forms listing Celine Armitage as intended parent while Aveline was the patient. I mean the donor note instructing remarks to mention a second baby but not timing. I mean the St. Orla access requests, the household-account freeze, the apartment smart-lock status, the unauthorized transfer appointment, the emergency petition using instability language, the hospital birth-status request, and today’s protected discharge leak.”

The room became completely still. Bennett had not raised his voice. He had not threatened. He had named the walls.

On the line, Dario did not speak. For 3 seconds, that silence was the whole case.

Then Dario said, “Aveline gave you all that?”

“That is not your inquiry.”

“She lets you carry her documents now?”

“No.”

| “No?”

“Her lawyers carry her documents. I pay some bills I am not permitted to inspect.”

“Convenient.”

“Necessary.”

“For whom?”

“For a mother who was asked to sign her child out of her life.”

Ball Sort Puzzle – Color Game

Bet you can’t pass this level

KITA

Dario’s breath changed. There-not guilt, recognition.

“Careful,” Dario said.

“I am.”

“You think paperwork makes you brave.”

“No. Paperwork makes people less able to lie later.”

Anika’s mouth twitched once on the screen.

Dario said, “You have no idea what she costs.”

Bennett did not answer quickly. That sentence had weight because it revealed more than Dario meant to reveal – not what Aveline had lost, but what she cost. The expense of a woman refusing to remain hidden. The price of a newborn whose name did not cooperate. The damage to votes, donors, legal posture, image, pride. To Dario, Aveline was still measured by what others had to pay to control her.

Bennett looked at the phone. “Say that again,” he said.

Dario’s voice went very soft.

“You do not know what Aveline costs.”

End of chapter

Ball Sort Puzzle – Color Game

Bet you can’t pass this level

The wife isn't me

Chapter 58

Noa screamed at the car seat straps like she had read the warranty and found it personally insulting.

“I agree with your politics,” I told her.

She screamed harder.

The safe housing unit had changed while I was gone – not much, enough. The narrow bed had been pushed against the wall. A secondhand bassinet stood beside it with new sheets tucked too tightly. A folding table held diapers, wipes, a thermometer, a stack of burp cloths, landin, water bottles, granola bars, and 3 printed phone trees. The chain lock still looked ugly and serious on the door.

Someone had taped a handwritten feeding chart to the wall above the table. Time, side, minutes, wet, dirty, notes. There was a little box for mood, which offended me. Whose mood? Noa’s mood was tyrannical. Mine was leaking. The chart did not have room for that.

I had missed it with an intensity that embarrassed me. The lock did not love me. It obeyed from my side. That was enough.

Isolde carried the car seat in because I had made it from hospital wheelchair to vehicle to building elevator and then reached the end of what pride could do for a pelvis. My stitches pulled with every step. My abdomen felt hollow and swollen at the same time. Blood shifted when I stood still too long. My breasts were heavy in a way that seemed unrelated to the rest of me, as if someone had attached urgent, badly trained weather to my chest.

“Bed,” Isolde said.

“Bathroom first.”

“You are gray.”

“Then I will be gray in the bathroom.”

She did not waste time arguing. She put Noa’s car seat on the floor where I could see it from the bathroom door and kept one hand on the handle while I shuffled in.

Postpartum life had already become counting. Pads. Feeds. Wet diapers. Dirty diapers. Pain medicine hours. Minutes since the baby last latched. Seconds her chest paused before rising.

I changed the pad, checked the bleeding, washed my hands, and looked at myself in a mirror smaller and less flattering than the hospital one. The woman in it had come home with a baby and a viral photograph.

Not home-safe housing. But the baby did not know the difference, and neither did my body. It understood only that the door closed from inside and the room was warm enough.

When I came out, Noa had stopped screaming and begun hiccuping with theatrical betrayal.

“She hates straps,” Isolde said.

“She has taste.”

“She also hates being unstrapped.”

“Complicated woman.”

Ball Sort Puzzle – Color Game

Bet you can’t pass this level

Together, with the seriousness of bomb technicians, we unbuckled my daughter from the car seat. Chest clip. Crotch buckle. One arm ou Second arm. Hat adjusted. Blanket loosened because the room was warm.

I checked her toes because the hospital nurse had warned me about loose threads. I checked the car seat mark on her cheek. I checked the band around her ankle, then my own, and felt foolish for needing the match in a room where no one was trying to swap her. Then remembered the last 10 weeks and stopped feeling foolish.

Noa curled against my chest and rooted immediately.

“You ate 41 minutes ago,” I told her.

She ignored precedent.

I sat on the bed with 3 pillows, 1 folded towel, and a level of concentration I had once reserved for affidavits. Her mouth opened, missed, became furious. I adjusted. She missed again. Milk leaked down my skin.

“This is not a moral failure,” Isolde said.

“It feels like an engineering failure.”

“Different department.”

Noa found the latch on the third attempt. Pain flared bright enough to make my toes curl. Then it eased into a tugging ache. I breathed.

The room narrowed to her jaw moving, the small sound she made through her nose, the weight of her body against the place where she had been inside me 2 days before. I had

thought birth would make separation clear. It had not-it had made the world larger and more dangerous because now harm could reach her without passing through my skin first.

Isolde set my phone on the table face down. “Anika says no immediate response required to the photograph. Privacy demand already sent to platforms showing the baby seat or hospital door. Noa’s face is not visible.”

“Bennett?”

“Recording preserved.”

I looked up. Isolde’s face said she had not meant to say it that way.

“Recording of what?”

“Dario called him.”

My milk let down hard enough that Noa sputtered.

“Damn it.” I lifted her slightly, panicked, then remembered the hospital instructions and held her upright against me. “Sorry. Sorry. Breathe, little judge.”

Noa coughed once and began to cry. Everything in me went white.

Isolde was beside us immediately. “She is breathing. She is angry. Angry is breathing.”

Noa proved the point by wailing into my shoulder. I cried too, without deciding to not elegantly, not in a way that belonged in a photograph. Tears ran hot and stupid down my face while I held my screaming daughter and tried not to think about Dario’s voice reaching Bennett before I had managed 1 calm feeding at home.

“Aveline,” Isolde said softly. “The call is preserved. You do not have to carry it tonight.”

“What did he say?”

–

Ball Sort Puzzle – Color Game

Bet you can’t pass this level

“Enough for lawyers. Not enough for you while she is on your chest.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only answer I am giving until you eat.”

I almost hated her. Then Noa rooted against my shirt again, outraged by interruption, and I had to choose between demanding details and guiding a newborn mouth back to food. Motherhood was already making strategy rude.

I chose Noa.

The next hours broke into pieces too small to call time. 5:08 PM: Noa fed for 14 minutes on one side and 6 on the other, if the second side counted. Isolde wrote it down because I could not remember numbers while pain hummed in my back. 5:41 PM: first wet diaper at home we celebrated like idiots. 6:15 PM: I ate half a bowl of soup while Noa slept on Isolde's chest. The soup tasted like salt and survival. 6:47 PM: pain medicine.

7:03 PM: phone call with the pediatric practice's after-hours line confirming Noa's first newborn check for the next day, no public waiting room, no automatic portal invites, no release to prior maternal providers. The receptionist sounded kind and tired. Kind and tired was becoming my preferred institutional voice.

"Bring the hospital discharge summary and any feeding notes," she said. "If anyone else calls asking to confirm the appointment, we will say we cannot verify patient information."

"Anyone includes Dario Armitage."

"Yes."

"Celine Armitage."

"Yes."

"Vey family office, Armitage Foundation, St. Orla, private clinic, hospital donor office, anyone saying family counsel."

The receptionist paused. Then she said, "I am adding: no appointment confirmation to any caller except mother of record or listed counsel."

Mother of record. It should not have made me close my eyes. It did.

Noa hiccuped against Isolde's shirt, unimpressed by titles.

7:22 PM: I fell asleep sitting up and woke 9 minutes later convinced I had dropped the baby. Noa was in the bassinet, arms up, offended by dreams she had not authorized.

8:10 PM: bleeding check. Not too much, still more than my pride preferred. 8:14 PM: temperature check because I felt hot and dramatic. Normal, Expected. Whatever word the universe wanted to use.

8:26 PM: Noa cluster-fed, which sounded gentle in pamphlets and in practice meant my daughter believed I was a poorly managed restaurant.

9:04 PM: first dirty diaper at home, dark and sticky enough to make both of us stare at it like a legal exhibit.

“That came out of her?” Isolde asked.

“Do not ask me biology questions tonight.”

9:18 PM: I cried because the bassinet sheet had a wrinkle. 9:19 PM: I stopped because Noa sneezed and became more interesting than my collapse.

9:43 PM: Isolde made me walk 6 slow laps from bed to sink and back because the discharge instructions said movement helped prevent

Ball Sort Puzzle – Color Game

Bet you can’t pass this level

The wife isn't me

Chapter 59

clots. I told her the instructions had not accounted for spite as a medical condition.

“Spite can walk,” she said.

So walked. The room was 11 steps long if I took them like a person and 15 if I took them like a woman whose body had recently performed a structural evacuation. I took 15. Noa watched from the bassinet with unfocused newborn suspicion. By the fifth lap I was sweating. By the sixth, I was angry enough to sit down safely instead of collapsing. That counted as progress.

By 10:00 PM, the room smelled like milk, diaper cream, soup, and the faint plastic scent of new wipes. Isolde had taken the chair by the door with her shoes on.

“You should sleep,” I said.

“I am.”

“Your eyes are open.”

“Security style.”

“You are impossible.”

“Yes.”

Noa slept in the bassinet at last. I lay on my side facing her, one hand resting near the mesh wall but not inside. The bassinet instructions said not to leave loose fabric, not to sleep with hands inside, not to do anything instinct suggested if instinct had not read safety guidelines.

So I watched. Her chest rose, paused, rose. I counted until counting became prayer, and prayer became a thing I did not believe in but performed anyway.

My phone buzzed at 10:38 PM. The sound was quiet. It still cut the room open.

Isolde was already reaching for it. “No,” I whispered. “Mine.”

“Aveline.”

“Mine.”

She handed it over because she knew when the word meant more than the object.

The notification came from the hospital patient portal. Infant Noa Ashby-record status update.

My thumb hovered. The pediatric appointment reminder sat below it, ordinary and bright. Bring discharge papers. Bring feeding log. Bring questions.

I had questions. None of them belonged on a newborn checklist.

Every sensible person in the room, including the sleeping newborn, would have told me not to open hospital records at 10:38 PM after 46 minutes of sleep in 2 days.

I opened it. The screen loaded slowly because cruelty liked timing.

The portal asked me to confirm a device code. I nearly threw the phone. Instead I entered the 6 digits, because motherhood apparently included defeating small software obstacles while half-awake and damp with milk.

At the top was Noa’s name. Infant Noa Ashby.

Under it, a yellow banner. Record flagged for administrative review.

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

AQ

PLAY NOW!

–

My body went cold under the blankets. I scrolled.

Pending correction request: maternal/parent fields.

Noa sighed in the bassinet. The room did not move. Even the radiator seemed to wait.

I read the line again, hoping exhaustion had rearranged the words. It had not.

Someone had reached my daughter’s record on her first night home.

End of chapter

Word Search Explorer

PLAY NOW!

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

Chapter 59 – Record Correction

“Do not touch the banner.”

Isolde said it as if the banner were a hot stove. My thumb had already stopped above the screen.

Noa slept 18 inches from my hand, bundled in the bassinet, unaware that adults had found another doorway into her life. Her mouth moved once around a dream. Milk, probably. A better subject than maternal fields.

The yellow line remained on my phone. Pending correction request: maternal/parent fields.

“Screenshot first,” Isolde said.

I did. Then again with the time visible. Then a screen recording starting from the portal login page, because the last 10 weeks had turned me into a woman who documented my own breathing if an institution might later claim I had consented to air.

“Send to Anika,” Isolde said.

“After I call.”

“You are shaking.”

“Then I will be shaking on a recorded line.”

“It may not be recorded.”

“Mine will be.”

She stared at me. “Legal state?” she asked.

“One-party consent.”

“You should not know that while bleeding.”

“I know many things while bleeding.”

“It is 10:41 PM.”

“Records departments have after-hours lines.”

“For emergencies.”

“My newborn’s mother field is being corrected by someone who is not her mother.”

Isolde closed her mouth. Good.

I called the number on the discharge packet, not the portal pop-up. The packet was on the folding table under the thermometer and a stack of newborn pamphlets that had the audacity to discuss sleep.

Before pressing call, I started an audio memo on Isolde’s phone and had her say the date, time, and that she was in the room as witness. It felt excessive for 3 seconds. Then I looked at Noa’s bassinet and decided excess had kept us alive.

Word Search Explorer

PLAY NOW!

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

CIKA

A recorded menu answered. If this is a medical emergency, hang up and call emergency services. If you are calling about billing, press 1. you are calling about patient records, press 2.

I pressed 2 with more force than necessary. Noa startled. I froze. She settled. My heart did not.

The line clicked through 3 transfers and 1 stretch of hold music that sounded like it had been composed by a committee trying to make compliance feel gentle. By the time a human voice answered, my stitches hurt from sitting too upright.

“Protected Health Records after-hours desk, this is Maribel. May I have the patient name?”

“Infant Noa Ashby.”

The name did not tremble. That was something.

“Date of birth?”

“January 19.”

“Relationship to patient?”

“Mother. Aveline Ashby.”

The word mother still felt newly issued, like a document I had not yet laminated against weather. I said it again in my head while Maribel typed. Mother not intended, not family-status respondent, not a field awaiting harmonization.

There was typing. Not enough typing.

“I see the infant record,” Maribel said. “For privacy verification, I need your date of birth and the discharge access code printed on your packet.”

I gave both. More typing.

“Thank you, Ms. Ashby. How can I help?”

“A yellow banner appeared in my daughter’s portal at 10:38 PM stating her record is flagged for administrative review with a pending correction request to maternal/parent

fields. I did not request that correction. I do not consent to a change. I want the record locked against alteration pending counsel review.”

Silence. Then Maribel said, “Let me review the note.”

“Please do not place me on hold.”

“I need to open a different screen.”

“You can open it while I am on the line.”

Isolde looked at me with something like pride and fear. I did not look back. Noa breathed.

The keyboard clicked faintly.

“I do see an administrative review flag,” Maribel said carefully.

“Who placed it?”

“I cannot disclose staff identifiers through the after-hours desk.”

“I am not asking for a staff identifier. I am asking whether the flag was placed by hospital staff, by an external request, or by an automatic

A

Word Search Explorer

PLAY NOW!

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

KIRA system.”

Another pause. “It appears to be attached to an external correction packet.”

My body tried to become very still. Postpartum stillness was not true stillness-it had a pulse, a throb, a leak, a thousand small injuries continuing their work under the skin.

“External from whom?”

“I cannot disclose third-party information without review.”

“This is my daughter’s record.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ma’am. I had become ma’am somewhere between delivery and discharge, promoted by exhaustion into a category where strangers could deny me things politely.

“I understand.”

“No,” I said. “You understand a policy. I am telling you a fact. My daughter is 1 day old. Her discharge packet lists me as mother. Her hospital band matched mine. I am looking at a request to change maternal fields that I did not make. If you cannot disclose who sent it, you can still confirm that no change will be made tonight.”

Maribel inhaled softly—not irritation, but the sound of someone realizing the script was too thin for the call.

“Please hold while I contact the supervisor.”

“Do not put me on hold. Keep the line open.”

“Ms. Ashby, I need to step away from my terminal.”

“Then say the line is open and step away.”

Isolde silently reached for my water bottle and put it in my left hand. I drank while Maribel’s headset rustled.

Noa made a small sound. My milk responded immediately, painful and humiliating, as if my body had mistaken every threat for hunger. Warmth spread through the nursing pad. I pressed my forearm against my chest and hated Dario, Celine, Mathias, the hospital, the photographer, the word correction, and every person who had ever decided a mother’s body could be separated from her child’s paperwork because a richer family preferred cleaner lines.

Maribel returned. “Thank you for waiting.”

“What is the status?”

“No change has been made to the legal mother field.”

“Say the current field.”

“Ms. Ashby, I am not supposed to read full demographic fields over an outbound risk line.”

“I called you from the number on my discharge packet and verified by code.”

“Yes.”

“Then confirm the current mother field remains Aveline Ashby.”

Word Search Explorer

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

PLAY NOW!

AO

Typing. “The current maternal field lists Aveline Ashby.”

My breath left me too fast. Pain followed it. Isolde put 2 fingers on the edge of the table, not touching me, just making a place my eyes could land. I used it. The room steadied by inches.

“And infant surname?”

“Ashby.”

“And no secondary mother, intended parent, guardian, or Armitage contact has been added?”

“I do not see an added secondary maternal party in the visible demographic screen.”

“Visible.”

The word sat there. Maribel did not repeat it.

“What is hidden?”

“There are restricted administrative notes.”

“Read the audit title.”

“I cannot read restricted content.”

“Read the title.”

Isolde’s eyes moved to the bassinet, then back to me.

Maribel lowered her voice. “The title visible to me is Correction Packet – Family Status Harmonization.”

For a second, I did not understand the words because they were too obscene in such clean clothing.

Family Status Harmonization. It sounded like matching napkins, like placing chairs evenly around a table. It did not sound like a stranger trying to reach into a newborn chart and rearrange the woman who had bled onto the hospital sheets.

It also sounded expensive. No ordinary clerk had invented that phrase at 10:00 PM. It belonged to people who believed harm improved if it wore administrative shoes. It belonged to a family office, a hospital counsel memo, a conference room where no one had to hear a newborn cry while they adjusted her mother.

Noa slept through her own erasure being dressed as tidiness.

“Who submitted it?”

“The submitter field is under review.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the answer I am permitted to give.”

“Then document that the mother of record objected at 10:50 PM, refused any maternal/parent field change, requested immediate lock, requested full audit trail, and requested preservation of the external correction packet and all signatures.”

Maribel typed. This time, the typing went on longer. Good.

“Read it back,” I said.

Word Search Explorer

PLAY NOW!

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

–

She did. Not perfectly. I corrected 2 phrases. Not “concerned about possible change – refused change. Not “requests information” – requests full audit trail and preservation.

Maribel took the corrections without sighing. That was how I knew she was not the enemy. She was a narrow door inside an enemy-shaped building.

“I am also adding a note that patient representative states all contact regarding family-status, parentage, or correction packets must route through counsel,” she said.

“Counsel name?”

I gave Anika’s information from memory, then read it again from the packet because memory at 10:55 PM with leaking breasts and a sleeping newborn was not evidence.

Maribel typed. “A supervisor will call you during business hours.”

“No. A supervisor will call counsel during business hours and send written confirmation that no change was made overnight.”

“I can request that.”

“Document that I requested it.”

More typing.

Noa’s face scrunched. She was waking. My body knew before the sound came.

“Ms. Ashby,” Maribel said, quieter now, “I am placing a temporary administrative hold on visible demographic edits pending supervisor review.”

I closed my eyes. Not relief- a pause in the fall.

A hold was not a wall. A hold could be lifted by morning, softened by counsel, rephrased by someone with better stationery. But it was something with a timestamp. It was something Maribel had typed while my daughter slept and my milk leaked through another clean pad.

“Thank you.”

“It is temporary.”

“Most things are.”

The words came out colder than I meant. Maribel did not deserve them. “I know,” she said.

That was worse – because maybe she did. Maybe women called at night about records more often than anyone wanted to admit. Maybe every institution had a drawer full of polite phrases for attempted theft.

“Is there anything else visible in the audit note?” I asked.

“I have already told you what I can.”

“Anything I need to know before my daughter wakes up?”

Noa opened her eyes. Her mouth made the small square of warning before a cry.

Maribel was silent. Then she said, “There is a signature reference.”

My own signature flashed in memory: tired, slanted, on the clinical discharge page only. Aveline Ashby. Not the parentage addendum. Not the protective packet. Not anything with family status in the title. I had signed my name like a fence. Someone had brought another signature like a ladder.

Word Search Explorer

PLAY NOW!

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

CREA

Isolde straightened. “Whose?”

“I should not have said that.”

“Whose?”

“Ms. Ashby, the supervisor will review.”

“This call is documented. You have already referenced a signature. I am the mother of the infant record. Is the signature mine?”

“No.”

“Is it Dario Armitage’s?”

A pause. “No.”

Noa began to cry. Hungry, alive, furious. My heart had nowhere to go.

“Is it Celine Armitage’s?”

Maribel did not answer quickly enough. That was answer enough.

Then, very softly, she said, “The audit note references Celine Armitage’s signature.”

Word Search Explorer

-End of chapter-

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

AQ

PLAY NOW!

The wife isn't me

Chapter 60

Celine did not remember signing Noa Ashby's name. That was the first thing she told herself – not aloud. Aloud made sentences available to other people, and in her father's house, available sentences had a way of returning as minutes, summaries, and affidavits

She sat in the blue room at her father's house with her feet elevated on a needlepoint stool and her phone facedown beside a cup of ginger tea gone cold. The house had 7 sitting rooms, each named by color as if that made them domestic instead of strategic. Blue room. Green room. Morning room. The little library no one read in because reading had never been the point.

Her back hurt. The baby pressed high under her ribs, unsettled by stress or tea or the fact that no one in this family allowed a woman to si quietly unless quiet served a purpose.

Nico's stuffed rabbit lay on the sofa beside her. He had left it there after dinner, then asked whether the baby in the photograph had a hat not Noa, not sister, but the baby in the photograph. Celine had told him yes, probably, newborns often wore hats. Then she had gone to the blue room and locked the door.

She had not told him the photograph was already being cropped around Bennett Bellamy's coat. She had not told him adults online were deciding which woman deserved which child. Nico was 6. He still believed pictures showed what happened, not what someone wanted strangers to believe.

Now her father's assistant had sent a message that looked harmless if one had never learned to fear clean language.

Hospital records issue contained for now. Do not respond to counsel inquiries directly.

For now. Contained. Counsel inquiries.

Celine turned the phone over. The screen lit with a preview from Dario.

Do you know anything about a correction packet?

She did not answer. That was also an answer, but slower.

She opened the family office folder on her tablet, the one Mathias's assistant had shared 2 days before under the title Postpartum Protective Packet – Armitage/Vey Family Continuity. It had been sent while Aveline was in labor or just after birth. Time had blurred because Dario had been pacing, Livia had been calling, Mathias had been speaking in low, clean sentences about exposure.

Celine had been tired. That was true. She had also been angry, and that was more true.

The folder contained 14 documents. Some had been unsigned drafts. Some were routing sheets. Some were information requests. Some carried signature tabs. She had signed 3 through the family office portal after Mathias said the hospital needed confirmation that Celine was not abandoning family-status rights while Dario handled the immediate birth crisis.

She remembered the phrase because it had been absurd. Family-status rights as if motherhood were a class of preferred shares.

At the time, she had asked, "Does this change anything in the baby's record?"

Mathias had looked at her over his reading glasses. "It preserves options."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only answer worth having before facts settle."

Word Search Explorer

PLAY NOW!

Flex your brain, connect the letters and swipe your way through hundreds of word puzzles

–

Before facts settle. Facts, in her father's world, were not discovered – they was merged dayet osed and 1 recatan gomma. more useful shape before anyone outside the room could touch them

Celine had known that all her life. She had benefited from it long before Aveline Adhtay had a name in her marrage. That knowledge did not make the tablet feel less cold in her hands.

She opened the first signed document. Acknowledgment of Family Privacy Position it said very itse, beatbly. Chizer Criputy Medica privacy. No public statements without counsel. She had signed.

The second Notice of Non-Waiver Regarding Minor Child Status. Minor child—not Nos, not Aveline's daughter, not Dario's daugte Vic child.

The document stated that no public use of a non-Armitage surname should be construed as acceptance by the mantal family, and that family-status determinations remained pending legal review.

Celine remembered pausing there. She remembered asking whether Dario had approved the language. Mathias had said, "Dano is not thinking clearly.

That had been easy to believe. Dario had not been thinking clearly since Aveline ran

No. That was dishonest. Dario had thought clearly enough to lie for months, clearly enough to paint another woman's nursery, clearly enough to keep his wife useful and his mistress unofficial until the room filled with witnesses. After that, he had become emotional and called it fatherhood.

Celine had signed the non-waiver.

She opened the third document. The title loaded slowly. Request for Administrative Consistency Review

Her mouth dried. The document was not long. It was worse-short documents trusted themselves.

The first paragraph referenced a newborn discharged from protected hospital status after a contested birth-notice matter. The second referenced conflict between public family status, marital presumption arguments, pending parentage review, and temporary hospital demographics. The third requested that administrative records preserve family-status consistency pending review by authorized counsel

Noe Ashby's name appeared in a line item halfway down. Infant Noa Ashby.

Celine read it once. Then again.

The signature block at the bottom said:

Celine ArmitageLegal spouse/farmily-status respondent

She put the tablet on the table very carefully.

Her daughter, or son, or whatever child her body was still carrying because she had refused to let Dario's scandal steal even the privacy of not announcing the sex, kicked hard enough to make her breath catch.

"No," she whispered. The word sounded childish in the blue room. No one came. Good

She picked up her phone and called her father.

Mathias answered on the second ring. "Celine."

Not are you well. Not is the baby moving. Her name, as if she were an item on the agenda he had expected.

"What did I sign?"

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color

Water Sort Puzzle Free

A pause small, expensive. "You signed several protective documents."

"The administrative consistency review. What does it do?"

"It asks the hospital not to treat a rushed discharge record as final family position."

"That is not what I asked."

"It is what it does."

"Aveline's lawyer is asking about a correction packet."

"Then Aveline's lawyer is doing her job."

Celine stood because sitting made her feel like a child in a headmistress's office. The motion pulled at her hips. She set a hand under her belly and walked 3 steps, then stopped because the room was too small for the kind of panic she had.

"Did that document request a change to Noa's maternal fields?"

Mathias did not answer. Her pulse moved into her throat.

"Father."

"Mind your tone."

There it was not anger, habit. The command that had raised her as surely as tutors and table manners.

Celine looked at Nico's rabbit on the sofa. One ear bent, one glass eye scratched from being loved too roughly by a 6-year-old who did not understand why adults had started lowering their voices when he entered rooms.

"Did my signature go to the hospital as support for a records correction?"

"Your signature preserved your position."

"My position as what?"

"Dario's wife."

"That is not a maternal field."

The silence on the line changed. For the first time, Celine heard not her father's authority but his calculation. He was deciding how much truth she could be trusted with now that part of it had escaped.

"No permanent change was made," he said.

Celine closed her eyes. Wrong answer – wrong because it admitted an attempt, wrong because it placed comfort on failure, not innocence.

"You told me it protected the family."

"It does."

"It made me traceable."

"Everything is traceable if opponents are allowed enough access."

"Do not make this about Aveline's access. You used my name."

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color

Water Sort Puzzle Free

AQ

KICA

"Your name is the point."

The baby shifted again, slower this time. Celine pressed her hand harder to her belly.

For months she had told herself that law mattered because law was what separated wife from mistress, son from scandal, household from chaos. Legal status had been the wall around her life. She had stood behind it because the alternative was admitting that Dario had made a private life warm enough for another woman to believe in.

But walls had doors. Her father had just shown her one with her own signature on it.

“I did not authorize anyone to erase her as mother,” Celine said.

The sentence surprised her – not because it was generous (it was not), but because it was self-preservation with a conscience attached fate and awkwardly. Still, it stood in the room.

Mathias said, “Do not become sentimental because a clerk panicked.”

“A clerk?”

“Someone spoke beyond their authority. It will be handled.”

“What does handled mean?”

“It means you will not call the hospital. You will not call Dario. You will not put anything in writing. If counsel contacts you, you refer them to Vey office counsel.”

“Dario already asked me.”

“Do not answer him.”

Celine laughed once. It sounded almost like Celine from before the donor hall – before Aveline Ashby stood under hospital lights with betrayal on her face and an ultrasound envelope under her arm. Before Celine learned that victory could feel like standing in silk while another woman understood your marriage more clearly than you did.

“He is my husband,” she said.

“He is a liability with a phone.”

That was the most honest thing Mathias had said all night. It did not comfort her.

“Noa’s name was in the document,” Celine said.

“Naturally.”

“Do not say naturally.”

“The infant is the subject of the dispute.”

“She is a baby.”

Another pause, longer.

“Celine,” Mathias said, and now his voice softened in the way that used to mean he was about to give her something – a summer house, a school transfer, a public apology from someone else’s father. “You are tired. You are pregnant. You have been humiliated publicly while trying to protect your son and your marriage. Do not let Aveline Ashby’s lawyers turn your exhaustion into confession.”

There it was. Concern as a leash.

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color

Water Sort Puzzle Free

A

ETEA

Celine sat slowly. Nico’s rabbit tipped against her thigh.

“Was I supposed to know what it did?” she asked.

“You were supposed to trust me.”

The answer entered her gently and did damage anyway. Trust, in her family, had always meant signing before reading the part that would later be called complicated.

Her phone buzzed against her palm. Dario again.

Did you sign something?

Celine looked at the message until the letters blurred. For the first time since the donor hall, she did not know which answer protected her That ignorance felt almost indecent.

Mathias said, “Stop asking questions.”

She looked at the tablet, at her name under Noa Ashby’s, at the rabbit, at her own hand curved over the child still inside her.

“Why?”

Her father did not raise his voice. He did not need to.

“Because every question you ask now creates a record.”

End of chapter-

AQ

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color

Water Sort Puzzle Free