The wife isn't me

Chapter 5

Celine left the clinic card on the console – the only thing she left. Not the settlement pages, not the folder, not even the warmth of her perfume, which disappeared so quickly it felt trained.

Only the card. White, embossed, quietly expensive.

Tomorrow. Ten thirty. The clinic already has your name.

I stood over it until the letters blurred. Then I photographed both sides and sent the images to myself-email, cloud drive, a private folder whose name had nothing to do with Dario, babies, clinics, or fear. Then I sent them to Isolde.

She answered two minutes later. Call me.

I stared at the message. My thumb hovered over her name, then moved away. Calling would make me explain the shape of the day out loud – Dario at the door, Celine in the apartment, Gestational Carrier, visits, the clinic already has your name. There were humiliations a body could survive only if they stayed flat for a few hours. Photographed, filed, not yet spoken.

I wrote back one word. Alive.

Isolde responded with three. Chain. Water. Now.

I almost smiled. Then I checked the chain. It was still in place. The door was locked. The smart-lock app still listed me as Resident Guest, as if the apartment were being polite about my eviction.

I drank water from a glass Dario had bought because the rim was thin and I had once complained all his glasses felt like hotel lobbies. Then I threw the glass in the sink. It did not break. Of course it did not – everything expensive in that apartment was built to survive being dropped by the wrong person.

By night, the rooms had changed positions around me. The kitchen was too bright. The bedroom was too intimate. The nursery was too honest.

So I sat on the floor just outside the nursery door with my back against the wall and my laptop open on my knees. One folder held the photographs. One held screenshots. One held nothing yet.

I named it after my daughter. NOA.

The letters looked strange on the screen – not because the name was new. Because it was clean.

Noa Ashby. I typed it once in a blank document, then again beneath the first line, then a third time. Three times, and still the name did not belong to them. I closed the document without saving it because even seeing her name in a file felt like putting her in reach.

Then I started a list on paper instead. Not on the laptop – paper could be folded, hidden, put inside a shoe, tucked under the lining of a bag if a person suddenly had to leave an apartment that opened for everyone except her.

I wrote: ring, ultrasound, invite, note, lock, form, clinic card, texts.

AO

Litrad

Unsere Bindung brach sofort. Als Mensch war ich seine Schwester, bis seine Luna mich

The list looked too small for the damage it contained. I added times where I remembered them-afternoon scan, evening donor event, night door, morning Celine, tomorrow clinic. Then I added one more word under all of it.

witness

Isolde.

My phone lit again with her name. Not a call this time. Message.

Do not let him make you explain yourself while you are alone.

I read it twice. Then I looked back at Dario's messages.

Do not make decisions while you are frightened. You need sleep. Answer me before this becomes harder.

They had looked like pressure when they arrived. Now they looked like preparation-frightened, tired, difficult. Words a man could say later in a calmer room, to calmer people, until the woman who said no began to look like the problem.

I took screenshots again. This time, I did not crop them. Full screen, time, battery, his name. Every small fact that could stand up later if I could not.

My phone buzzed at eleven fourteen. I did not look at it immediately. Dario had sent messages all day-not many. Men like him did not flood. They placed.

Eight forty-one: Do not make decisions while you are frightened.

Nine fifty-seven: Celine should not have come without me.

Twelve sixteen: I can fix the clinic language.

Four oh nine: You need sleep.

Seven thirty: Answer me before this becomes harder.

I had screenshotted every one. I had answered none.

The buzz came again. Longer this time. A call.

My body knew before my eyes did. Dario Armitage. His name filled the screen-not a message, not a placement. A demand.

I let it ring until the last second. Then I answered.

I did not know why. That was the truth. Maybe because a part of me still wanted the version of him who had painted crooked clouds on the nursery wall to climb out of whatever ruin he had built and say one sentence that did not taste like strategy. Maybe because I was tired. Maybe because pregnancy made the body stupidly hopeful about familiar voices.

I lifted the phone to my ear. “Dario.”

No answer. Only a rustle. Cloth, breath, something low and muffled, too close to the microphone.

I pulled the phone away and looked at the screen. Call connected. Time counting.

AO

Litrad ob sofort. Als Mensch war ich seine Schwester, bis seine Luna mich

“Dario?”

Still nothing. Then a woman’s voice said his name. Not mine. Not polished.

Celine.

The sound went through me so fast I could not move. There are sounds a person can misunderstand for one merciful/second pain, laughter, a fall. Then the second sound came, softer and broken, and mercy ended.

I lowered the phone from my ear. My thumb moved toward the red button, then stopped above it. Not because I wanted to listen – because I finally understood why Dario hated documents.

Evidence had no dignity. It stood there in bad lighting and told the truth anyway.

I touched the speaker button. The room filled with breath. Fabric. A low sound from Dario I had heard before in the dark of that apartment, when I still believed the dark belonged to us.

My stomach turned so sharply I thought I would be sick. I set the phone on the floor beside me. The screen glowed against the pale wood. Connected. Twenty-seven seconds.

“Stop thinking about her,” Celine said.

Her voice was closer now. Not tender – not exactly. Tight.

“I am not,” Dario said.

The lie came too quickly. Even like this, even through the wrong call, I knew the shape of it.

Celine made a soft sound. “You are always thinking about what you have not finished controlling.”

There was movement. A scrape. Dario inhaled through his teeth.

“Celine.”

“No,” she said. “Say it.”

Silence. Not empty. Worse-occupied.

I pressed one hand over my mouth. The baby shifted under my ribs, slow and heavy, and for one impossible second I wanted to apologize to her. For the sound. For the father. For the fact that I had answered.

“This is not the moment,” Dario said.

Celine laughed. It was a small laugh, breathless, cruel because it did not need force.

“This is exactly the moment.”

“Do not do this.”

“You brought her into my hospital. My event. My son’s life.”

“She walked in.”

bic come Luna mich

“Pregnant with your child.”

“Yes.”

One word – heavy, possessive. I hated that it still hurt.

Celine’s voice sharpened. “Not with your life.”

Dario did not answer.

“Say it,” she said again. “Say what she is.”

The apartment seemed to lean toward the phone. I should have hung up. There were a hundred reasons to hang up-decency, self-preservation, the child pressed against my ribs. But none of those reasons had protected me yesterday when Dario looked at his son and erased me with three words.

Someone from work.

So I stayed very still.

Dario exhaled. “Aveline is an inconvenience.”

My hand went cold.

Celine said nothing. Waiting. She wanted more. Entitlement did not stop at hearing a woman reduced-it wanted the reduction signed.

“She was a mistake,” Dario said.

The words were quieter than I expected. That made them worse.

“What kind?”

“Celine.”

“Say it.”

The next sound was intimate enough that my vision blurred white at the edges. I stared at the unfinished clouds on the nursery wall. Dario had stood barefoot on a drop cloth under those clouds, paint on his wrist, laughing when I told him one looked like a loaf of bread. He had pressed his hand to my stomach that day.

He had said, She knows my voice.

Now the same voice came through the phone from his wife's bed.

"A one-night mistake," he said.

My ribs locked. One night. Fourteen weeks of a ring. Months of keys and doctors and names whispered into the warm dark. One night.

Celine was quiet for half a breath. "And the ring?"

Sapter S

Dario's answer came after a pause. Too long. Still not long enough to become shame.

"She needed to stay calm."

The room tilted. I put one palm flat on the floor. The wood was cold. I held on to it as if cold could keep me in my body.

"And the apartment?" Celine asked.

"Convenient."

"The nursery?"

Another pause. My whole life had become a series of pauses he used to choose which knife would leave the smallest visible wound.

"I was managing her."

Celine made another soft sound. This one almost pleased.

I closed my eyes. It did not help. The phone kept glowing. Connected. Three minutes, twelve seconds.

"You promised me she would understand," Celine said.

"She will."

"She said no."

"Because she is emotional."

"She is pregnant."

“That is what makes her useful and unstable at the same time.”

The sentence entered the room whole. No hesitation, no torn edge-just a fact he had been carrying cleanly enough to say while his breath was still uneven.

I opened my eyes. The nursery blurred, then sharpened. Crib frame. Boxes of clothes. Ultrasound envelope on the console beyond the hall. Clinic card. Authorization form. My laptop open on my knees. The empty folder named NOA.

Celine’s voice lowered. “Do you want her?”

“No.”

Too fast. Too cruel. Too necessary for whichever performance he was giving.

“Do you want the child?”

Dario’s answer changed. Not louder. Truer.

“Yes.”

There it was. At last, something clean. Not love. Claim.

AQ

Celine asked, “More than you want peace?”

“The baby is Armitage,” he said. “That is what matters now.”

My hand moved before the rest of me did. Not to hang up. Not to cry. To the laptop. I opened the empty folder, then the recorder.

My fingers were so steady that for one second I did not recognize them as mine.

The phone kept breathing on the floor. Dario’s voice came through again, lower this time.

“Aveline is nothing we cannot clean up.”

The red circle appeared on my screen. I clicked it. The timer began.

-End of chapter-

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