The wife isn't me

Chapter 6

The timer began at zero. One second, two, three. It did not make the sound easier to hear. It only made it count.

I kept my hand on the laptop trackpad. The phone stayed on the floor.

Dario and Celine had moved away from whatever surface had been closest to his phone. Their voices were clearer now, less broken by breath. Not safer – clearer.

“Tomorrow is too soon,” Celine said.

“No,” Dario answered. “Tomorrow is necessary.”

The recording timer moved to nine seconds. Ten. Eleven.

“She will not go willingly.”

“She will go if I make the alternative worse.”

My whole body went still. Even the baby seemed to pause.

Celine was quiet for a moment. “Not by force.”

“I did not say force.”

“Dario.”

“Reason,” he said. “Pressure. Timing. She is tired, she is frightened, and she has no stable housing if I decide she does not.”

The laptop fan whispered against my knees. I stared at the red dot. Twenty-seven seconds.

“You heard her this morning,” Celine said. “She photographs things.”

“Because she wants to feel brave.”

“No. Because she is angry.”

“Anger burns out.”

“Motherhood does not.”

That was the first thing Celine had said that sounded like truth. Recognition, not kindness.

Dario exhaled. “Then we give her a version of motherhood she can keep.”

“Near,” Celine said.

Él la dejó arder En el accidente, él salvó a su amante. La dejó atrapada en el auto en llamas.

“Near enough.”

“And if she wants more?”

“She does not get more.”

The sentence was so clean I almost missed the pain of it. I had been waiting for a crack- for guilt, for love turned ugly, for anything human enough to bleed. There was only policy.

“The child will have my name,” Dario said. “Aveline will have support. If she behaves, she will have access. If she makes this public, she will have lawyers, doctors, and my family asking why a frightened woman at twenty-nine weeks is trying to destroy a baby before she is born.”

I pressed my fingers harder into the edge of the laptop. There it was the room he was already building. Clean chairs, calm voices, me in the center, sweating and pregnant and alone, while everyone asked whether I was stable enough to understand what was best for my child.

Celine asked, “And if she says you lied?”

“I did lie.”

My breath stopped. The recording timer passed one minute.

Dario continued, “That does not make her a better option.”

For a second, the apartment disappeared. There was only the voice – the same voice that had whispered against my hair at three in the morning when the baby kicked hard enough to wake us both. The same voice that had said, I have you. The same voice, now useful enough to tell the truth only where it could hurt me.

“You should not have given her a ring,” Celine said.

“I know.”

“You should not have painted a nursery.”

“I know.”

“You should not have let her think there was a future.”

Another pause. This one was different. Not shame – I would not give him shame. Calculation.

“There is a future,” Dario said. “Just not the one she imagined.”

I clicked the volume lower with one finger. Not off. Never off. Lower, because my body was beginning to mistake the sound for weather.

Celine said something I could not catch. Dario answered, “No. I will go in the morning.”

“The car?”

“Downstairs by ten.”

El la dejo arder En el accidente, el salvó a su amante. La dejó atrapada en el auto en llamas.

“Dario, if she refuses in the lobby–”

“She won’t.”

“You cannot know that.”

“I know what frightens her now.”

The words settled over the nursery floor not loudly. Like dust.

I looked at the crib frame leaning against the wall. It had no mattress yet. Dario had said we should choose one together because there were too many safety ratings and he did not trust reviews written by people who used exclamation marks. had laughed.

He had made me laugh while he built the place where he planned to remove me.

The phone crackled. Celine’s voice sharpened.

“Where is your phone?”

My hand froze. There was a rustle. A muffled curse from Dario. Then silence so sudden it had weight.

“Dario?” Celine said.

The call ended. The phone screen went black.

For a moment, I did not move. The laptop timer kept running. Three minutes, forty-eight seconds. Forty-nine. Fifty. It was recording my breathing now-thin, uneven, alive.

I stopped it at four minutes. The file appeared on the screen without ceremony.

Untitled Recording.

That was obscene.

I renamed it with hands that were still steady, wrong-call-dario-celine. Then I saved it inside the NOA folder – not because the pain belonged to my daughter, because the proof did.

The upload bar crawled when I sent it to myself. Nine percent, sixteen, twenty-two. I watched the progress as if watching a pulse.

Then I made myself move. Waiting was how men like Dario made women smaller. Wait until morning. Wait until the vote. Wait until the timing is better. Wait until you are calm enough to accept what has already been decided.

I carried the phone, still open to the upload, into the kitchen and turned on every light. The apartment became too bright. Good- ugly things deserved good lighting.

I laid the evidence across the counter in a row. The black donor envelope. The invitation. The handwritten note. The authorization form. The clinic card. The ultrasound envelope. My ring.

I did not put the ring on. I set it on the counter beside the ultrasound photo, a private promise reduced to scale beside a real child.

Then I photographed everything again. Full frame, close frame, with the kitchen clock above it, with the countertop edge visible, with my hand beside the documents so no one could claim later that I had found them in some abstract nowhere.

3/7 AO

Él la dejo arder En el accidente, el salvo a su amante. La dejó atrapada en el auto en llamas.

My hand looked strange in the photographs. Bare finger, slight swelling at the knuckles, one pale circle where the ring had lived long enough to leave a ghost. I almost deleted that picture. Then I sent it too.

Let them see the ghost.

I opened the smart-lock app again and took another screenshot. Primary Owner: Dario Armitage. Resident Guest: Aveline Ashby. The words had not changed. That helped, in a terrible way-consistency was a kind of witness.

I took screenshots of Dario's texts again full screen, no cropped edges, his name at the top, the time, the battery/Every small thing Isolde would ask for and a lawyer might someday pretend mattered more than pain.

Then I made one physical pile. Not neat. Neat was for people who had time to perform control.

I slid the invitation, note, authorization form, clinic card, ultrasound copy, and ring into the inside pocket of my/largest coat. The ing was small enough to disappear, so I wrapped it in a tissue first, then wrote ring on the tissue in pen. It looked absurd. It looked like survival.

At thirty-eight percent, my phone buzzed. I flinched so hard my back hit the wall.

Not Dario. Isolde. Call me now.

The upload reached fifty-one percent. Then stopped.

"No," I whispered.

The baby moved, a firm roll low in my belly, as if answering. The bar jumped. Sixty-seven. Eighty-nine. Sent.

I forwarded it to Isolde before I let myself think. This time I did not send a sentence. Only the file. She called before the delivery check appeared.

I answered.

"Door," she said. No hello. No what happened. Door.

"Locked. Chain on."

"Bleeding?"

"No."

"Pain?"

"No. Tight, but not pain."

"Baby moving?"

“Yes.”

“Good. Water.”

“I had some.”

El la dejo arder En el accidente, él salvó a su amante. La dejo atrapada en el auto en llamas

“Have more.”

My throat closed. That was the first thing that nearly broke me. Not the recording. Not the word clean up. Water. Someone asking about the body Dario had reduced to usefulness.

“Aveline,” Isolde said, quieter now. “Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me there?”

I closed my eyes. She had not said I am coming. She had asked. After a day of people moving me around inside sentences they had already written, the question felt almost violent in its kindness.

“Yes.”

“Then I am coming.”

“The building may not let you up.”

“The building is about to meet me.”

Despite everything, a sound came out of me. Not a laugh-close enough that my chest hurt.

“Do not fight the lobby staff.”

“I will use words first.”

“Isolde.”

“Fine. I will use expensive words first.”

I pressed the heel of my hand to my eye. One tear slipped anyway. I hated it less because she was on the phone.

She heard the change in my breathing and did not comfort me yet. That was why loved her – she knew comfort could wait until after danger.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Do not go to that clinic.”

“I know.”

“No. Say it.”

“I will not go to that clinic.”

“Good. Now pack like you are going to the hospital, not like you are leaving a man.”

The sentence cut through the fog. “What?”

“Hospital bag rules. ID, insurance, prenatal records, medications, vitamins, chargers, one change of clothes, underwear, flat shoes, coat. Anything for the baby that is already packed. Nothing that requires standing in one place crying for ten minutes.”

AQ

L

Ella dejo arder En el accidente, el salvó a su amante. La dejó atrapada en el auto en llamas

Supter o

I looked toward the nursery. The ring was still there. The ultrasound envelope. The boxes of tiny folded clothes.

“Evidence first,” Isolde said, as if she could see me looking.

“Yes.”

“Ring, ultrasound, donor invite, handwritten note, authorization form, clinic card. If there are texts, export or screenshot full screen If there is a lock app, screenshot again. If Dario has access to your cards, do not use them unless you want him to see where you are.”

“He owns the apartment.”

“Then the chain is a delay, not a lock.”

I opened my eyes. That was the kind of sentence that made panic useful-specific, unpretty, true.

“Your phone is evidence now,” Isolde said. “Not privacy. Do not delete anything. Do not hand it to him. If we need another line, I will get one.”

“The clinic is tomorrow.”

“Their clinic is never happening. We find a doctor who does not have donor plaques with his name on the wall.”

“And if they send a car?”

“You do not get in it. You do not go downstairs alone. If someone says Dario asked them to escort you, you call me and start recording before you answer.”

“Should I call the police?”

“If he tries to come through the door, yes. If you feel unsafe, yes. Right now, you are building options before he realizes how many you have.”

“He may already know.”

“Why?”

Before I could answer, my phone vibrated against my cheek. Another notification. I pulled the screen away.

Dario. One message.

I know you heard. Do not do anything stupid.

The apartment narrowed to the size of those words.

Isolde was still speaking. “Aveline?”

I did not answer immediately. I took the screenshot first.

Alsalvó a su amante La dejo atrapada en el auto en llamas