The wife isn't me

Chapter 61

–

Chapter 61 – Palm Up

“Do you want him in the room?”

Anika asked it before Bennett knocked. That mattered.

Not because I knew the answer-I did not. My daughter was attached to one breast, making small furious, sounds because my milk had come in like a punishment and she disliked having to work for anything while adults ruined her morning. I had a towel under my shirt, 2 clean nursing pads already soaked through, a plastic hospital bottle of pain medicine on the table, and a folded packet from the records attorney beside the cold toast Isolde kept telling me to eat.

There was not enough room in my body for a clean answer.

Outside the safe apartment door, a man’s voice spoke low to the housing coordinator. Bennett. He did not use my name. He did not ask whether I was decent. He waited where someone else had placed him.

Noa pulled off, enraged by her own mouth. Milk ran down my skin and into the towel. I shifted her higher, hissed through the sting low in my abdomen, and watched Anika keep her eyes on my face instead of my shirt.

“Who is with him?” I asked.

“Maris Keene,” Anika said. “Records and hospital administration. Separate from custody counsel. She reviewed the screenshots and the call summary overnight.”

“Bellamy counsel?”

“No. Referral counsel. Bennett drove the packet because the usual courier route is under leak review.”

Isolde, from the kitchenette, said, “And because the last courier became a camera opportunity.”

Her tone could have cut glass.

Noa rooted again, impatient. I guided her back and counted through the first painful pulls, One. Two. Three. The pain changed after the latch settled-not gone, nothing was gone. It became something with edges I could breathe around.

“Does Maris need him present?” I asked.

“No,” Anika said.

“Do you?”

“No.”

Good. Questions with clean no answers were the only luxury left.

“Then he can come in after Maris, if there is a reason,” I said. “Door open. He stays by the table unless I ask otherwise.”

Anika nodded as if I had given instructions about furniture, not the small remains of my nervous system.

Isolde wiped her hands on a dish towel and went to the door. She checked the chain, spoke through the gap, received 2 names, checked both against the morning list, and opened only after Bennett stepped back far enough that the hallway light showed between his shoes and the

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color

Water Sort Puzzle Free

AQ threshold. He had learned that doorways were not neutral.

The woman with him was in her 50s, compact, gray-haired, and carrying a canvas tote instead of a leather briefcase. She wore rain on the shoulders of her coat. Bennett stood behind her, not beside, one hand around a file box and the other empty.

“Ms. Ashby,” Maris Keene said. “I am sorry to meet you in this hour of your life.”

That was a strange greeting. It was also better than congratulations.

“Come in,” I said.

Maris entered. Bennett did not. He looked at me once, then at Noa’s covered head, then away to the wall where Isolde had taped the emergency numbers. Not modesty as performance, not discomfort – just a man deciding my breast was not the subject of his eyes.

“Do you want the box inside?” he asked.

Not may I come in. Not I brought this. Just the box.

“On the table,” I said.

He crossed only far enough to set it where I pointed. Then he moved back toward the open doorway and left the path between my chair, the bassinet, and the bathroom clear.

My body noticed before my mind approved.

The apartment had become a map of limits. Three steps to the bathroom if I went slowly. Six to the bassinet. Nine to the door. Too many to the bed when the bleeding pulled heavy and hot. Every adult who entered either respected that map or became part of the danger.

Bennett did not stand in any line I might need. That made me angrier than it should have. Care that did not demand payment was still care, and my body did not know what to do with it.

Maris took the chair across from me, leaving the one beside me empty. “I am going to keep this brief. If you need to feed, change, stand, bleed, cry, or tell me to stop, we stop.”

Noa swallowed loudly.

“I can do 20 minutes,” I said.

“Then I will use 15.” Maris opened a slim folder. “The hospital placed a temporary administrative hold after your call. That hold covers visible demographic edits, maternal and parent fields, surname fields, discharge-contact fields, and portal invitation fields. It does not erase the external packet. It freezes the ordinary route while counsel reviews.”

“Ordinary route,” I said.

“The route a records supervisor could use without a court order.”

Noa’s fingers flexed against my skin, tiny and possessive in the only way I trusted.

“Can they still make a hidden note?”

“Yes. Hospitals can add administrative notes. We want the notes preserved, not cleaned up. I sent a preservation letter at 7:12 AM to hospital records counsel, the birth unit administrator, the privacy officer, and Maribel’s supervisor.”

Maribel’s name in daylight sounded less fragile.

“Did they answer?”

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color Water Sort Puzzle Free

“Records counsel acknowledged receipt at 8:03 and said no visible change was made overnight. They will not disclose the packet sender without review.”

“Celine’s signature?”

“They did not confirm it in writing.”

“Maribel said it.”

“And your recording preserves that she said it, if needed.”

Anika handed me a printed page from the top of the box. It was the call transcript summary, not the audio. My own words sat there, flat and cold. Refused change. Requested full audit trail. Requested preservation. Mother of record.

I had sounded steadier on paper than I had been in the room.

Noa slipped off again. Milk sprayed before I could cover it. A fine wet line hit the edge of the affidavit page.

For a second, nobody moved. Then Isolde put a burp cloth over the page, not over me.

“Legal exhibit,” she said dryly. “Now lactation exhibit.”

The laugh came out of me once, small and almost painful. Noa startled at the movement and scowled with her whole newborn face.

Bennett’s mouth changed at the corner. He did not laugh. He did not soften at me like I had performed bravery for him. He looked down at the file box as if giving me the privacy of my own absurdity.

Maris waited until I resettled Noa. “The next step is 2 affidavits. One from you about the portal banner, call, current record fields, and non- consent. One from Anika attaching the screenshots, recording, and preservation letter.”

“Today?”

“Today, if your body allows. Tomorrow morning if it does not. The hold exists either way.”

“Today,” I said.

Anika made a note without arguing.

Maris looked at her, then back at me. “There is another issue.”

The room tightened. Bennett’s hand closed once around the edge of the file box, then released. He knew.

“Say it,” I said.

“Dario Armitage’s counsel filed a parentage petition at 8:41 AM.”

Noa’s jaw paused against me. My body, stupid and faithful, let down more milk.

“Paternity,” I said.

“Yes.”

The word was smaller than the damage it could do.

“Is that connected to the correction packet?”

“Likely a second route, Anika said. “The correction route tried to destabilize the record. The parentage route asks the court to recognize

3/5 AD

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color

Water Sort Puzzle Free

–

< Chopter el biological standing and temporary rights while everything is pending.

“Rights to what?”

Maris answered because Anika let her. Good- the room knew its lanes.

“Notice. Information. Eventually contact, if ordered. He is not asking the hospital to make Celine mother in that filing.”

“How generous.”

My voice had no blood in it.

Noa began to fuss again, angry at the shift in my breathing.

“He is asking the court to treat the hospital record as incomplete and contested,” Maris said. “He names Noa Ashby.”

My daughter’s name in his petition felt like a hand on the bassinet.

“Does he use Ashby?”

“In the caption, yes. In the body, he refers to her as the minor child.”

“Of course he does.” Of course Dario could put her name where the court required it and remove it where his desire began.

I looked at Bennett before I meant to. He was still by the door – not forward, not braced like a man waiting for permission to fight. Still,

“Did you read it?” I asked him.

“Only the filing notice,” he said. “Not strategy. Anika asked me to bring the box, not review your case.”

Anika said, “Correct.”

“But you knew before I did.”

The words could have been accusation. Maybe they were.

Bennett accepted them without trying to make them softer. “For 11 minutes.”

“You counted?”

“I looked at the timestamp when Anika told me to drive.”

He did not say I wanted to tell you. He did not say I would have. He stayed inside the fact.

Noa finished at last and dropped into milk-drunk sleep against me, her mouth slack, one cheek shining. I needed to burp her. I needed to stand. My body objected before I moved, a deep dragging ache from pelvis to spine.

Isolde stepped closer. “I can take her.”

“Wait.”

I shifted my feet under me. The chair was too low. Every chair was too low now-furniture had become an insult designed by people with intact pelvic floors.

Bennett moved one step. Then stopped. He opened his empty hand, palm up, between us.

Not near my waist, not reaching for the baby, not assuming-just an offered surface in the air.

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color

Water Sort Puzzle Free

–

The room noticed. Anika glanced down at her papers. Maris looked at the window. Isolde watched me, not him

I looked at Bennett's hand. It was a large hand, clean but not delicate, with a faint ink mark at the base of his thumb A working mark. A real one. Not cufflinks in a brass bowl, not a door code I could not change, not fingers on my elbow steering me through expensive rooms while calling it care.

My body wanted help. That was the humiliating truth. My stitches hurt. My legs shook. Noa was warm and heavy in the crook of my arm, all 1 day and a few ounces of her, and I was so tired my vision had a pulse.

Bennett waited. He did not make the waiting noble. He simply let my answer exist before it was visible.

I turned to Isolde instead. "Take Noa," I said.

Isolde did. Then I pushed myself up with both hands on the chair arms, slow, ugly, and mine.

Bennett lowered his hand without changing his face. No injury. No correction. No little flash of male pride turning help into a debt I had failed to pay.

That was worse somehow. Better. Both.

I stood until the room stopped tilting. Blood shifted hot and heavy into the pad. I clenched my jaw and hated that everyone in the room knew enough postpartum reality to understand without asking.

"Where do I sign?" I asked.

Anika set the first affidavit on a clipboard and put the pen where my hand could reach.

Before I touched it, her phone vibrated. She looked down. Her expression changed by 1 careful degree.

"What?" I asked.

“The parentage petition was just docketed.”

“You already said he filed.”

“This is the docket entry.” She turned the phone so I could see, but not far enough that I had to step. “Dario Armitage has filed to establish paternity of Noa Ashby.”

Noa made a soft sound in Isolde’s arms. My milk leaked again, immediate and useless against paper.

Under the docket line, the next entry loaded.

Request for expedited hearing pending.

Water Sort Puzzle – Sort Color

Water Sort Puzzle Free

Fit of chapter

AQ

The wife isn't me

Chapter 62

“Put a towel under the affidavit.”

Isolde said it like a legal instruction.

Anika did not blink. She took one of Noa’s clean burp cloths from the stack, placed it under the clipboard, and clipped the first affidavit over it as if milk belonged in the chain of evidence. Maybe it did.

Everything else in my life had become proof. The bleeding pad in the bathroom trash proved birth had happened to my body, not to a family office. The cracked skin at my nipple proved Noa had eaten from me, not from a theory of legitimacy. The bassinet beside the table proved she slept 3 feet from my knee because I woke when her breathing changed.

The feeding log proved we had not slept in a meaningful order. 11:18, left side, 9 minutes. 12:04, right side, too angry to measure. 1:22, diaper, wet. 2:10, both of us crying, no useful category. Isolde had written the last line and then drawn a box around it as if honesty could be formatted into a medical document. The pediatric nurse on the phone

had said the number of wet diapers mattered more than elegance. I believed her because no one with a newborn had energy to lie about elegance.

Dario had filed paternity. I had leaked milk onto the notice. The universe had a sense of humor- unpleasantly precise.

“Read it aloud,” I said.

Anika looked at the page. “Your affidavit?”

“The part I am signing. I am too tired to trust silent paper.”

Maris Keene nodded once. Approval from a records attorney looked exactly like disapproval, only slower.

Bennett had left the room 8 minutes earlier because I had said, “I need fewer adults.” He had taken the empty file box and put himself in the hallway with the door open, where I could see the edge of his sleeve if I looked and ignore him if I did not.

That was not romance. It was logistics. I was becoming dangerously fond of logistics.

Noa slept through the reading with one fist against her cheek. Her hat had slid over one eyebrow. Isolde kept reaching toward it, then stopping herself because Noa had finally stopped crying and none of us were brave enough to improve a sleeping newborn.

Anika read. “I, Aveline Ashby, am the biological and legal mother of Infant Noa Ashby, born January 19 at the protected birth hospital. On January 20 at approximately 10:38 PM, I observed a yellow portal banner stating that the infant record was under administrative review with a pending correction request to maternal/parent fields.”

The words sounded stranger aloud-clean, orderly, no mention of sitting in a nursing bra with blood cooling between my legs and panic making my milk hurt.

“Continue,” I said.

“I did not submit that request. I did not authorize any person or entity to submit that request on my behalf. I do not consent to any change to the maternal, parent, surname, discharge-contact, portal invitation, or release-access fields of my daughter’s hospital record except corrections that preserve Aveline Ashby as mother and Noa Ashby as patient name.”

“Add visible and hidden where appropriate,” I said.

ایک شخص کو 600 روپے حاصل کرنے کے لیے

A

Maris looked up. “Good.”

Anika wrote in the margin.

“You cannot let them move me from the visible field and pretend the hidden note does not matter,” I said. “Or keep me visible and add a second mother somewhere administrative.”

“We can say visible, hidden, administrative, demographic, and portal-linked fields,” Maris said. “It is broad, but in this fact pattern it is justified.”

Fact pattern. I looked at Noa’s sleeping mouth. “Fact pattern is a terrible name for a baby.”

Isolde made a noise that might have become laughter if she were less tired.

Anika’s pen paused. “Do you want a break?”

“No. If I stop, my body will remember I have a body.”

That was not entirely true. My body had remembered without permission – my breasts were hot and swollen, my stitches pulled when I shifted, my lower back ached from the hospital bed, the car, the folding chair, all of it. A blood clot had passed 20 minutes earlier in the bathroom and sent me into a quiet spiral until Isolde checked the size against the discharge sheet and decided it was within the printed terror scale.

Nothing about motherhood felt abstract. Nothing about Dario’s filing should be allowed to become abstract either.

Anika read the rest. The after-hours call. Maribel. The temporary hold. The audit title. The signature reference. Counsel routing. Preservation request.

I corrected 5 phrases. Not “the family” – “Dario Armitage, Celine Armitage, Vey family office, Armitage representatives, or any person acting for them.” Not “possible correction” – “attempted correction.” Not “minor child” – “Noa Ashby.”

When Anika finished, I took the pen. My hand shook. I did not apologize.

The first signature looked like a woman had signed while surviving a fever. I crossed nothing out. The signature was mine, tired and uneven and still legally mine.

Aveline Ashby. I had signed my name so many times since Noa was born that it no longer looked like a name. It looked like a doorstop.

Anika slid the next page forward. “This one is shorter.”

“Lies told by lawyers.”

“Only small lies,” she said.

Maris’s mouth moved by a millimeter.

The second affidavit was about paternity filing notice, not the whole response. It preserved the timing: external correction packet at night, paternity petition in the morning, expedited hearing request before Noa was 48 hours old.

“Does paternity give him what he wants?” I asked.

No one answered quickly. That was answer enough to make my stomach tighten.

Noa stirred. Her face wrinkled. Her mouth opened. A small, outraged cry came out of her as if she had also heard the pause and found it unacceptable.

“Give her here,” I said.

EA

Isolde lifted her carefully, supporting neck and bottom the way the nurse had drilled into both of us. Noa was so small in her hands complete, so impossible to reconcile with filing categories.

–

SO

The latch hurt worse this time. I sucked air through my teeth. Anika looked away to give me privacy, but not so far she could not see if I needed help. There was an art to not looking, and most people did not have it.

Noa sputtered at the first rush of milk. I pressed the heel of my hand above the breast, trying to slow it the way the discharge lactation sheet suggested. The sheet had diagrams drawn by someone who had never had a newborn scream at her while lawyers waited.

“Slow,” Isolde murmured. “Let her come off if she needs to.”

Noa came off, furious, milk on her chin. I laughed again, but this time it cracked.

“Excellent,” I told my daughter. “We both object to pressure.”

Noa objected louder.

Maris capped her pen. “We can step out.”

“No.”

The word was harsher than intended. I adjusted my tone with what little grace remained. “No. I am not hiding the reason these papers matter. If his counsel can file while I am trying to feed her, his counsel can exist in the same room as milk.”

Anika looked at me then- not pity, recognition. “Understood.”

The room steadied around that.

I got Noa latched again. She drank with aggressive little gulps, one hand opening and closing against my skin. My shirt was wet through now. There was no graceful way to hold a pen around a nursing infant, a towel, and my own leaking body, but grace had never saved me.

“What does he have to prove?” I asked.

“For paternity?” Anika said. “Biology, usually by acknowledgment or testing if contested. We are not planning to contest biological fatherhood unless you instruct otherwise and there is a factual basis.”

“There is no factual basis.”

“Then the fight is not whether he is the biological father. It is what follows from that fact.”

“He will say it follows everywhere.”

“Yes.”

“And we say?”

“That biology gives him standing to ask. It does not give him ownership, medical control, record control, location access, or the right to use Noa to reach you.”

I looked at the affidavit, then at my daughter. Standing. Ownership. The law liked words that sounded like furniture.

“Will the judge care that he tried the record route first?”

“Yes, if we present it clearly and not as noise.”

“It is not noise.”

..... ایک شخص کو 600 روپے حاصل کرنے کے لیے دس سے

AO

KITA

“No,” Anika said. “It is pattern.”

Pattern was a better word. Pattern meant the wrong-call recording, the private clinic forms, the portal access attempts, the unauthorized transfer, the birth-status request, the discharge leak, the correction packet, the paternity filing. Pattern meant Dario did not stumble into fatherhood with open hands – he arrived carrying tools.

Noa finished one side and went limp.

“She looks drunk,” Isolde said.

“She is drunk on jurisdiction,” I said.

Isolde finally laughed. It felt dangerous, like opening a window in winter.

Then Anika’s phone vibrated. The window closed.

She read without changing her posture. I hated that I had learned to read danger by the stillness of lawyers.

“What?” I asked.

“Dario’s counsel served the petition packet.”

“We knew that.”

“The full packet includes requested temporary orders.”

Noa burped once, wet and tiny, into the cloth at my shoulder.

“Say the order.”

Anika glanced at Maris, then back at me. “He is requesting temporary recognition as father pending parentage confirmation, notice of pediatric appointments and emergency care, preservation of hospital and pediatric records, and supervised access.”

My hand tightened around Noa until I forced it loose.

“Access to records?”

“He frames it as preservation and notice, not portal access.”

“He learned a new hat for the same head.”

“Yes,” Anika said.

“Supervised access when?”

Her mouth flattened. “Expedited. He says delay harms the father-child bond.”

The father-child bond. Noa was 2 days old. Her bond to the world was milk, warmth, a clean diaper, and my heartbeat under her ear.

“Does he ask for access today?”

Anika looked down at the packet again. “He requests an interim supervised visit before the hearing if the court cannot hear the matter within 24 hours.”

My milk let down again, hard and painful. Noa cried against my shoulder. Outside the open door, Bennett shifted once but did not enter.

I put my hand over my daughter’s back and felt her lungs fight the air.

.... ایک شخص کو 600 روپے حاصل کرنے کے لیے کے کے کرنے ہے.

For 1 foolish second, I wanted the room to become ordinary. No lawyers. No filed requests. No man in the hallway measuring care by whether – he had been invited to witness it. Just a newborn who needed a diaper and a mother who needed 4 uninterrupted hours of sleep, 2 clear shirts, a pain pill on schedule, and a world where milk did not have to answer pleadings.

Then Noa’s cry sharpened, and the ordinary thing became the urgent thing.

I changed her on the folded pad over the sofa because the table was full of affidavits. Her legs drew up, furious and thin. The diaper had a dark smear the discharge sheet had warned us might still be normal. Isolde checked color and timing while Anika turned away and continued reading the requested orders under her breath.

Motherhood, apparently, was triage with witnesses.

“Then we answer today,” I said.

End of chapter-

The wife isn't me

Chapter 63

“Do not contest the blood.”

I said it before Anika could ask.

The room was colder in the afternoon – not actually colder, since safe housing kept the heat too high because newborns and postpartum women apparently belonged in the same climate as bread dough. But exhaustion had opened something in me, and every draft found it.

Noa slept in the bassinet with her fists tucked under her chin. Her newborn check was scheduled for 4:30 by a route no one would say aloud twice. The pediatric office had confirmed only through counsel and had put a note on the file: mother of record and listed counsel only. Another note, another field, another person asked to stand between my daughter and a man with money.

Anika sat at the table with the paternity packet divided into color-coded stacks. Maris had left after filing the records affidavits. Isolde was washing pump parts in the kitchenette because the lactation consultant had called between legal calls and suggested I express just enough to soften the breast before feeding.

Just enough. Every professional in my life had begun speaking in careful limits. Stand only as tolerated. Bleeding no larger than a plum. Feed 8 to 12 times. Sign where indicated. Object narrowly. Do not contest the blood.

Anika put her pen down. “Say what you mean.”

“Dario is Noa’s biological father. I am not going to pretend uncertainty because he has weaponized certainty. That would make me like him.”

“It may still require formal acknowledgment or testing.”

“Then it requires it. But I will not lie.”

Anika’s expression softened by nothing visible. “That will help.”

“With the judge?”

“With the truth.”

That should not have startled me. It did.

For months, truth had behaved like a person without ID in a guarded building. Always stopped. Always questioned. Always told to wait until someone with a cleaner title could escort it through. Here, in the overheated apartment with towels drying on chair backs

and my daughter making tiny goat sounds in her sleep, truth sat down without asking permission.

Dario was her father. Dario was dangerous. Both – that was the cruelty of it.

“He will say I am denying him because I hate him,” I said.

“We will say you are setting boundaries because his conduct made boundaries necessary.”

“He will say Noa deserves her father.”

“We will say Noa deserves safety more than speed.”

“He will say supervised access proves he is being reasonable.”

..... ایک شخص جو 600 روپے سے حاصل کردہ کیے گئے در لہ

AO

“We will say requesting immediate access to a 2-day-old newborn while also attempting record changes shows the court why supervision the floor, not the ceiling.”

The floor. I looked at the actual floor. There was a small stain near the table leg from where Noa had spat up. Isolde had cleaned it, but the cheap laminate had kept a crescent. The bassinet wheel was locked. My slippers were beside it because my feet had swollen and unswollen in the wrong order, making every pair of shoes feel borrowed.

“What does he get if the court agrees today?”

“Maybe nothing today. Maybe a hearing date. Maybe an interim order preserving his ability to establish parentage, with no contact until further review. Or the judge could set a very short supervised access window.”

“With me present?”

“Likely, given Noa’s age and feeding.”

My body reacted before the fear arrived. Milk prickled. Uterine cramp followed, sharp and deep. The nurse had warned me breastfeeding could trigger it, the body tightening itself back toward survival. No one had warned me paternity filings could do the same.

I pressed a hand below my navel.

Anika noticed. “Pain?”

“Manageable.”

“That is not an answer.”

“Then yes.”

She pushed the water closer. “Take the medicine if you are due.”

“I am due in 11 minutes.”

“Aveline.”

“If I take it early, I will fall asleep in the response call.”

“If you hurt too much, you will not hear the response call.”

Isolde came over with the medicine before I could decide whether to be offended. “Argue with me and I will tell Noa you are bad at scheduling.”

“She is 2 days old.”

“Then I will write it in her baby book.”

“There is no baby book.”

“Exactly. I can make it legally binding.”

I took the pills. Control did not require unnecessary pain-I knew that. I had learned it in labor when pain stopped being a moral category and became data. Still, some corner of me wanted to suffer cleanly so no one could say I had accepted relief from the wrong hand.

That was Dario’s damage too – he had made help suspicious.

Noa stirred. Her mouth opened, shut, opened again.

ایک شخص اور 600 سے حاصل روپے

“She is going to wake,” Isolde said.

“She heard paternity.”

“She heard you take 11 minutes to accept medicine.”

I stood too fast. The room tipped. Anika rose but did not touch me. Isolde’s hand hovered near my elbow and stayed there until I nodded. Then she steadied me with 2 fingers, no more.

“Bathroom first,” she said.

“Baby first.”

“Bleeding check first. Then baby. If you pass out, no one wins except the paperwork.”

I hated how often she was right.

The bathroom light was unforgiving. The pad was heavy but not alarming by the discharge sheet. I changed it, washed my hands, and looked at my own face in the mirror. Pale. Hair pinned badly. Eyes too large. A red line from Noa’s hat on my collarbone where I had held her too long in one place.

Mother of record. Respondent. Biological mother. Petitioner. I missed, with sudden violence, the 4 minutes after Noa’s birth when the only name that mattered was hers.

When I came back, Bennett was at the open door again. He had not been there before.

He held 2 paper bags and a tray of drinks. He stood behind the threshold, waiting while Anika finished a call.

“Food,” he said when I saw him. “Ordered by Isolde. Paid by the clinic account. Delivered to the downstairs coordinator. I carried it from the lobby because the driver was new.”

He had recited the chain of custody for sandwiches. I should not have found that tender.

“Any photographers?” Isolde asked.

“None visible. Housing coordinator has the driver’s name and plate.”

“Bring it in,” I said.

Bennett entered, set the bags on the counter, and moved back. Noa began to cry from the bassinet. Every adult paused.

There were 2 kinds of silence around a crying newborn-annoyance, and readiness. Bennett’s was the second. He looked at the bassinet, then at me. “Do you want me outside?”

“No.” The answer surprised me less than it should have. “Stay there,” I said. “By the counter.”

He stayed.

I lifted Noa slowly. My body complained in bright lines. Her cry punched through all of them. When I settled into the chair, she rooted with desperate offense, as if I had been withholding civilization. The latch hurt. Then eased.

Anika ended her call and sat again. “We have the first conference in 40 minutes. Remote. The judge may set a hearing, or may issue temporary instructions pending a hearing.”

“Will Dario be on it?”

“His counsel, at minimum. He may appear.”

..... ایک شخص کو 600 روپے حاصل کرنے کے لیے جا

ESEA

“He will appear.

Noa swallowed. “He likes rooms where someone might call him father,” I said.

Bennett looked down. Not away from guilt – he did not own this guilt. Down, giving the sentence somewhere to land without him catching it for himself.

The conference began 38 minutes later on Anika’s laptop, with video off for me unless the judge asked. I sat angled away, Noa under a blanket, my shirt open, my body doing the most intimate work of my life while strangers discussed whether Dario’s biological connection required immediate legal acknowledgment.

Dario appeared by video. Of course he did.

Dark suit. White shirt. No tie. The absence of a tie was supposed to look paternal, I thought — accessible, a man interrupted by fatherhood, not a man who had spent months building hallways between my child and me.

His lawyer spoke first. Farrow, careful and dry, said Dario sought no disruption of the infant’s current care, only recognition that he was Noas father and that a father-child bond should not be extinguished by litigation strategy.

Litigation strategy. Noa’s fingers kneaded my breast.

Anika responded with timestamps. Birth-status request before delivery. Surnaming challenge before birth. Record-correction banner within 36 hours of discharge. External packet. Paternity petition the next morning.

“Ms. Ashby does not deny biological paternity,” Anika said. “She denies that biology authorizes control.”

The judge, a woman with silver hair and no patience in her eyebrows, looked toward Dario's square on the screen. "Mr. Armitage, are you seeking to alter the infant's hospital record today?"

Dario leaned forward. His face changed when he understood the question had come to him directly-softer, earnest, a father, arranged for viewing.

"No, Your Honor," he said. "I am seeking to be recognized as what I am. Noa's father."

My daughter's name in his mouth made my skin tighten.

"And what does recognition mean to you today?" the judge asked.

"Notice," he said. "The chance to know she is well. The chance not to be treated as a stranger to my own child."

The words were not ugly. That was the problem. Dario knew how to find the harmless version of harm.

Anika did not interrupt. Neither did Bennett. From the counter, he said nothing at all.

Dario's eyes moved, almost imperceptibly, past the camera. He had noticed him- or the edge of him, or simply the fact that another man was close enough to be silent in my room.

"Ms. Ashby is feeding the infant as we speak," Anika said. "She is 2 days postpartum. Any interim structure must account for bleeding, pain, milk supply, newborn feeding intervals, pediatric care, confidential housing, and the existing pattern of access pressure."

Farrow objected to "pattern." The judge allowed the word for context, not findings.

Context. Findings. My daughter finished and slept against my skin.

The judge asked 6 questions. None were comforting. All were useful. She wanted to know whether paternity was contested, whether Dario had requested portal access, whether Aveline would agree to records preservation, whether the hospital correction issue had a pending review, whether supervised contact could occur without disclosing the safe address, and whether the baby was medically stable for

ملہ یے کے رنے حاصل روپ سے 600 کے و شخص ایک

A movement.

At the last question, I spoke before Anika could. "No."

Every face on the screen turned toward the small black square where my camera was off. My voice did not sound weak.

“Noa has her first newborn check today. She is feeding constantly. I am bleeding and under standing and transport limits. She should not be moved for an adult’s optics.”

The judge watched my blank square. “Ms. Ashby, are you refusing all future contact?”

“No. I am refusing speed as proof of love.”

Silence. Dario’s jaw shifted.

The judge made no ruling then. She set a supervised access hearing for the next morning at 9:00 AM, remote with possible in-person arrangements to be discussed, and ordered no record changes, no direct contact, no portal invitations, no public statements using Noa’s image or medical information, and no attempt to locate the safe housing.

It was more than nothing. It was less than safety.

When the call ended, Noa slept through the first quiet second. Then Anika’s email chimed. She opened it and exhaled.

“Hearing notice is already issued.”

I did not ask for hope. I asked the useful question. “Where?”

Anika looked at me. “Family court. Tomorrow morning. Dario’s counsel requested in person.”

-End of chapter-

دل یے کے ے کے رذے حاصل روپ ے 600 کے و شخص ایک

The wife isn't me

Chapter 64

“I can stand for 6 minutes.”

Isolde looked at the courthouse bench, then at my face, then at Noa asleep against my chest in the wrap the postpartum nurse had adjusted twice before we left safe housing.

“That is not a plan,” she said.

“It is a medical estimate.”

“From whom?”

“Me.”

“The least licensed person here.”

The bench was wood, polished by other people’s emergencies. Family court had a way of making every surface feel used. The hallway smelled like coffee, wet wool, copier toner, and the faint sourness of fear. A woman near the elevator bounced a toddler on one hip while arguing quietly into a phone. A man in a navy suit read a custody calendar with his mouth tight. A clerk pushed a cart of files past us and did not look at anyone long enough to become a witness to their life.

Noa slept because newborns had no respect for legal drama. Her hat covered her ears. Her cheek pressed warm through the wrap. Every time she shifted, my body answered with milk and a deep ache in the place where birth had left me rearranged.

I had changed my pad in the courthouse bathroom 12 minutes ago and hated the acoustics. Every wrapper sounded like a confession. Every stall door looked too low. Isolde had stood outside the door and timed me without saying so.

The trip itself had already spent most of what I had. Safe housing to the car. Car to the covered courthouse entrance. Covered entrance through security, where a guard waved the diaper bag through after Priya showed the order and Isolde said, with terrible calm, that formula samples were not contraband. Then the elevator, too full of perfume and damp coats, and the hallway, and this bench that required me to lower myself like a person negotiating with gravity.

Noa had slept through all of it. I had not. My pulse had kept count where the clocks could not.

Every step pulled at the place between my legs. Every stop made the bleeding settle and then shift when I moved again. The postpartum nurse had said clots could happen when standing after rest. She had not said anything about standing because the father of your child had found a court doorway before your milk had found a rhythm.

“You are pale,” Isolde said.

“Everyone says that now.”

“Because you are.”

“I would like a new adjective.”

“Sitting.”

“That is not an adjective.”

..... ایک شخص کو 600 روپے حاصل کرنے کے لیے تولے

CICA

“It is if you do it hard enough.”

Anika stood 6 feet away with Maris Keene and a custody lawyer named Priya Chen, who had arrived with 2 binders, soft shoes, and a warning that today’s hearing was narrow but dangerous because narrow things could still cut.

Bennett stood behind our small group-not with us, behind. Close enough that if someone moved too quickly down the hall, he would be in the way. Far enough that no one could call him my spokesman. His hands were empty. His coat was folded over one arm because the viral photograph had made his coat a public object and he apparently understood that putting it around me now would become an argument before it became warmth.

Dario had already arrived. He stood near the courtroom doors with Farrow and another lawyer whose suit fit like armor. He looked rested. Tha was the first violence of the morning.

Rested. Shaved. Composed. No milk on his shirt. No pad tucked in his bag. No body pulling itself together around an absence. No newborn smell embedded in his skin except whatever he had imagined belonged to him.

When he saw Noa in the wrap, his face changed. Not enough for strangers-enough for me. Desire entered his expression before tenderness arranged itself over it. He wanted to hold her. He wanted everyone to see that wanting.

“Do not look at him,” Isolde murmured.

“I am documenting.”

“Your eyes do not create admissible exhibits.”

“They create memory.”

“Then remember sitting down.”

I sat because she was right and because the bench had become less humiliating than falling.

Noa made a soft sound under my chin. I touched her back through the wrap.

“Still breathing?” Isolde asked.

“Yes.”

“You?”

“Debatable.”

Anika came over. “The judge will hear us in 10. Priya will take the access argument. I will handle record and contact boundaries. You speak only if asked or if something factual needs correction. If you need a pause, say ‘postpartum break.’ Do not dress it up.”

“Postpartum break,” I repeated.

It sounded like something a committee would name a room with no comfortable chairs. Still, I wanted the phrase in the air before anyone needed it. Unnamed needs became accusations later, especially around postpartum women. Why did she not ask to sit? Why did she not say she was bleeding? Because rooms like this rewarded silence until silence could be used to prove you had been fine.

Priya joined us. She was older than Anika, with a calm face and an efficient bun. “If the judge orders a brief supervised visit, we ask for a neutral family-services room inside the courthouse or affiliated center, not safe housing, not hospital, not Dario’s office, not his car, not a location suggested by his team.”

“Today?”

“We argue no today because of newborn and postpartum constraints. But we prepare for the possibility.”

..... ایک شخص اور 600 روپے حاصل کرنے کے لیے

AO

KICA

“How brief?”

“Thirty minutes would be too long in my view. We ask for 15 if ordered immediately, with you present because of feeding, no photographs, no third parties, no gifts, no private statements to the baby used as public claim, and the supervisor close enough to hear.”

Close enough to hear. I looked at Dario. He was looking at Noa, not me.

That should have been better. It was worse.

“He will perform,” I said.

“Yes,” Priya said. “Let him.”

“That sounds like losing.”

“It is evidence if he cannot follow limits.”

Noa’s mouth opened against the wrap. Her rooting began as a small drag against my skin. Of course – the court had summoned her hunger.

“I need to feed her before we go in.”

Anika looked toward the restroom, then rejected it before I could. “There is a consultation room. I asked the clerk.”

“Who has the key?”

“The clerk. I did not give your name until she confirmed no camera and no public-facing window.”

“Good.”

We moved slowly. There was no dignified way to walk postpartum through a courthouse with a newborn strapped to your chest while the man who had tried to claim your child watched every careful step. I kept one hand under Noa and one at my abdomen, as if I could hold everything inside by force.

Bennett moved last. He did not flank me. He did not place himself between me and Dario until we passed the courtroom doors and Dario shifted half a step forward.

Then Bennett stopped walking. Not dramatically- he simply stopped in the line Dario would have used to come closer.

Dario’s eyes lifted. The 2 men looked at each other for 1 second. Bennett said nothing. Dario said nothing. It was the quietest argument I had ever heard.

Then Priya opened the consultation room and I went inside.

The room contained a round table, 4 chairs, a dead plant, and a poster about mediation that seemed optimistic in a way bordering on negligence.

I fed Noa with the door cracked and Isolde standing outside it. Not because Bennett was in the hall – because Dario was.

The latch was bad the first try. Noa shook her head, frantic and furious. I breathed through the stab of pain and tried again. Milk dripped onto my lap. My blouse had a damp crescent down the front.

“I should have worn black,” I said.

Isolde, from the door, said, “You did.”

I looked down. I had. The wet mark still showed.

..... ایک شخص و 600 سے روپے کے

STEA

“Black is a liar.”

Noa latched properly and drank with fierce little pulls. My uterus cramped hard enough that I bent over her, teeth set.

“Break?” Isolde asked.

“No.”

“That answer expires in 5 minutes.”

“Everything does.”

When we came out, the hallway had rearranged. Dario was closer to the courtroom doors. Farrow was speaking to Priya. Anika held her binder against her ribs. Bennett stood by the wall behind her, exactly where he had been asked to stand, his gaze on the floor between groups rather than on me.

The clerk called the case.

My knees understood before I did. One second I was upright. The next, the hallway narrowed. Sound went soft around the edges. Noa’s weight became enormous. Heat climbed from my spine to my scalp.

My first thought was not that I might fall – it was that if I fell, someone would write it down wrong. Unsteady mother in courthouse hallway. Postpartum instability observed before access hearing. Infant present during maternal episode. Not: woman 2 days after childbirth required to attend in person because the man who had tried record routes now wanted a room. Not: blood loss, milk, no sleep, transport stress, court pressure. Not: physics.

“Aveline,” Isolde said. Not loud. Urgent.

I stopped walking. If I sat on the floor, Dario’s lawyer would call it instability by lunch. If I pushed forward, I might drop my daughter.

Bennett moved into my peripheral vision and stopped 2 feet away. His hand lifted, palm up. Empty. Waiting.

Not to take Noa. Not to guide me. Not to possess the moment. Just a place I could choose to put weight.

The hallway held its breath. Or maybe I did.

I looked at Isolde. She had one hand ready near Noa, one near my elbow. She would take the baby if I asked. She would take my pride too, if it got in the way of physics.

I looked at Bennett's hand. Yesterday I had refused it because refusal still felt like proof that I had not become dependent on the next powerful man who knew how to open doors. Today my daughter was on my chest. The courtroom door was open. Dario was watching. Every choice had an audience- that did not make it less mine.

I put my hand in Bennett's.

His fingers closed only enough to be a surface. Not a claim. Not a rescue. A surface. Warm. Steady. Human.

For 3 breaths, I stood there with my newborn against my body, my blood moving too heavily between my legs, my milk drying cold on my shirt, and Bennett Bellamy's hand under mine in a courthouse hallway where Dario Armitage could see exactly what he no longer had.

Then I straightened. "Now," I said.

Bennett released pressure but not contact, waiting for me to decide the next step.

The clerk called again.

We walked into court with my hand still in his.

ایک شخص اور 600 روپے حاصل کرنے کے لئے

Tile Clear

The wife isn't me

Chapter 65

SWEET

Bank

“State your request clearly, Mr. Armitage.”

The judge did not sound impressed by fatherhood as a concept. That should have comforted me. It di evidence too easily.

Claim or into

I sat at the respondent table with Noa asleep in the wrap, one hand under her bottom, one hand resting on the table where Bennett’s had been 4 minutes earlier. He had let go before we reached the chairs. I had not-not entirely. My palm still remembered the shape of his. That irritated me. Memory had bad timing. So did longing, if that was what this was.

Bennett stood against the back wall because Priya had asked him to remain available if the court wanted to know about transport and hallway logistics. He had said, “Only if Ms. Ashby wants me present.” I had said yes without looking at Dario. Then I had sat down before my knees could become a second argument.

Dario was at the other table, facing the judge with Farrow beside him. He looked different up close than he had in the hallway- less rested, maybe, or maybe I could see the tension around the polished edges now. He had always been good at distance.

“Your Honor,” Dario said, “I am asking for acknowledgment that I am Noa’s father and for temporary supervised contact structured in a way that protects her health while preserving our bond.”

Our bond. Noa hiccupped in her sleep. My body wanted to laugh and cry and bleed all at once.

The judge looked at her notes. “No legal finding of paternity has been entered.”

“I am prepared to acknowledge paternity formally and submit to any testing the court requires.”

“Ms. Ashby does not contest biological paternity at this stage,” Priya said. “She contests Mr. Armitage’s requested speed and scope given the surrounding conduct.”

Dario’s jaw tightened. There it was – the harm entered the room and he disliked its manners.

Farrow rose. “We object to generalized allegations infecting a narrow newborn access issue.”

Priya did not rise quickly. She let the objection sit long enough to look fragile.

“The allegations are not generalized. They are dated, preserved, and directly related to access: attempted birth-status intrusion, surname challenge before delivery, external hospital correction packet, and parentage petition served before the infant’s first outpatient check. Ms. Ashby is 2 days postpartum. Noa Ashby is breastfed and requires feeding on demand. The court can preserve a future parentage route without rewarding the same urgency that created the risk.”

Noa shifted. I held still. If she woke, I would feed her. If I fed her, Dario would watch. The thought put cold under my skin.

Dario stood when the judge asked him directly whether he had authorized any hospital record correction. He put both hands on the table.

I remembered those hands painting clouds. I remembered them sliding a draft authorization under an apartment door. Memory did not care about legal categories either.

“Your Honor,” he said, “I did not ask anyone to remove Ms. Ashby as mother.”

Not an answer. Anika’s pen moved. The judge’s eyebrow moved too.

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

A

KIYA

“Did you authorize, request, encourage, or participate in any effort to alter Noa Ashby’s hospital record?”

Dario did not look at me. That was how I knew the answer had a shape he disliked.

“There were discussions about preserving family-status issues pending review. I was not the person who submitted the packet.”

My hand closed around the edge of the table.

Noa woke. She did not cry at first- she made a small searching sound that moved through the microphone and across the room like a match struck in a dark stairwell.

Dario looked at her. His face broke open before he could control it. Tenderness, real enough to be dangerous. Possession, close behind.

“That is my daughter,” he said softly. Not to the judge. To himself. To me. To the room.

Priya rose. “Your Honor, that is precisely the problem. Mr. Armitage continues to use belonging language before the court has set boundaries./

“I said she is my daughter,” Dario said, and now the softness had a blade under it. “That is not a threat.”

I wanted Bennett’s hand. The wanting arrived like shame – immediate, hot.

Noa’s mouth opened. Her cry came sharp and hungry.

The judge paused the questioning. “Ms. Ashby, do you need to feed the baby?”

“Yes.”

“We can take a recess.”

I looked at Priya. She nodded once.

“Postpartum break,” I said. The words sounded ridiculous. They worked.

The judge ordered 15 minutes. The courtroom stood in pieces. Farrow leaned toward Dario. Anika and Priya leaned toward each other. Isolde was already at my side, lifting the diaper bag.

I stood and the room tipped again.

Bennett moved from the back wall. He stopped before crossing into the well of the courtroom and looked at me – not at Priya, not at Isolde, me. His hand opened at his side, palm up.

Noa cried against my chest, angry at the delay, alive with need. My legs shook. Dario watched from the other table, and I felt his attention like a hand trying to close around the air between us.

I could refuse Bennett again. I could let Isolde take my elbow. I could sit back down and ask for a wheelchair. None of those choices were morally purer than the others – that was the thing Dario had broken and Bennett had not tried to repair for me. Help was not the same as surrender. The difference was whether I got to choose.

I took Bennett’s hand. His fingers closed around mine, no tighter than before.

The contact was not dramatic. It did not change the court order. It did not erase Dario or make Noa less hungry or stop the bleed that had begun to pull hot and heavy again. It did, however, tell my body one thing in language my body could still understand: there was a surface, and I did not have to fall.

I hated that the relief was immediate-not emotional first, physical. The small muscles in my legs stopped trying to hold the whole building alone. My shoulders lowered 1 inch. My breath came deeper because balance no longer required every thought I owned.

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

That was the part men like Dario counted on, I realized. Need could be made to look like consent if someone photographed it from the right angle. Need could be made to look like romance, like replacement.

The only protection was the truth of the sequence: he offered, I chose, he waited, I could let go.

Dario saw it. Of course he did. His face went very still-not jealous in the messy way of men in ordinary stories. Dario's jealousy arrived as bookkeeping. A line item had moved without his authorization. A trust he believed should remain vacant until he reclaimed it had been occupied by someone else through no filing at all.

Voluntary contact. No court could grant him that. No lawyer could draft it. No family office could harmonize it into existence.

I walked past him with my hand in Bennett's.

Dario said, "Aveline."

The judge had left the bench, but the clerk remained. Priya stopped. Anika's head turned. Bennett did not answer for me. He did not even look at Dario. He waited.

"Do not use the recess," Dario said, voice low, "to make this about him."

There it was not Noa's hunger, not my body, not the court. Him.

I shifted Noa higher with my free arm. Her cry hitched.

"I am using the recess to feed my daughter," I said. Then, because dependency could be made from anything if the wrong man held the narrative, I released Bennett's hand. I did it before anyone could tell the story for me – not because I regretted taking it, but because the taking had been mine, and the letting go would be too.

Bennett's hand opened immediately. No chase. No flinch. No small wounded correction. The absence of that hurt almost as much as the contact had steadied.

I walked the remaining steps with Isolde beside me and no hand under mine.

In the consultation room, I fed Noa while Anika stood at the door with her back turned and Priya summarized the likely ruling in short sentences.

“He will get a path.”

Noa latched badly. I winced. “Because biology.”

“Because biology gives him standing,” Priya said. “Not ownership. Not decision-making. Not unfenced access.”

I looked down at Noa’s red face, at the milk on her chin, at the terrifying softness of her skull under my hand. “But access.”

“Possibly brief. Supervised. Controlled location. No safe address. No photos. You present. Supervisor close. We will push for delayed start after newborn check.”

Outside the room, through the cracked door, I heard Dario’s voice-not words, tone. Calm. Reasonable. The worst of him always arrived properly dressed.

When we returned, Bennett was back at the wall. Not at my chair, not near the aisle at the wall, where presence could not be mistaken for possession unless someone wanted to lie.

The judge returned with 3 pages of handwritten notes and a face that promised disappointment to everyone. She recognized the paternity acknowledgment pathway. She refused any record change, portal access, medical information route, or location disclosure. She set the full supervised access question for later review but, given Dario’s formal acknowledgment and the lack of evidence that he posed an immediate physical danger to the infant, she considered a narrow first contact.

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

AQ

–

TITA

–

My ears rang. Noa slept. That felt indecent.

The judge looked at me. “Ms. Ashby, I understand your concern. I also have to separate documented access misconduct from the child’s interest in not having parentage weaponized by either side.”

“I have not weaponized her,” I said before I could stop myself.

The room went still. The judge held my gaze. “I did not say you had.”

No. She had said the court had to make sure I did not. That was how women were warned, politely, to remain palatable while being cornered.

Priya touched the page in front of me. Not my hand. The page. Ground.

The judge continued. “I am ordering a limited supervised contact window, not to exceed 20 minutes, at the courthouse family-services suite today after the newborn’s scheduled feeding and a postpartum break, if Ms. Ashby’s counsel confirms medically tolerable conditions. No photographs, no gifts, no removal from the room, no private handling outside supervisor observation, no discussion of litigation, no statements to the press, and no attempt to obtain location, medical, or portal information.”

Dario’s shoulders lowered by a fraction. Victory, dressed as restraint.

Then he stood. “Your Honor,” he said, “given that my daughter is already present in the building, I request the first supervised visit occur immediately.”

Noa slept through it. I did not.

Tile Clear

– End of chapter

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

The wife isn't me

Chapter 66

“Not immediately.”

Priya said it before I could. I was grateful. I was angry that gratitude had become another thing I owed the room.

The judge looked from Priya to Dario. “The order I just stated included feeding and postpartum conditions.”

“Of course, Your Honor,” Dario said. “I only meant I am available whenever Ms. Ashby indicates the baby has been fed.”

Ms. Ashby. The baby. He could put distance into nouns faster than any man I had ever known.

The supervised visit was set for 2:15 PM in the courthouse family-services suite, contingent on Noa feeding, my pain being manageable, and no medical issue arising before then. The phrasing made my body sound like weather-unfortunate, influential, impossible to blame.

By 1:40, I had changed another pad in the courthouse bathroom, cried once without sound because a stitch burned when I stood too quickly, and fed Noa in the consultation room while Isolde counted her swallows under her breath.

“Enough?” I asked.

“For now.”

“That is not a medical answer.”

“It is a newborn answer.”

Noa’s eyes opened, unfocused and dark. She looked briefly outraged to have been born into jurisdiction.

“I agree,” I told her.

Anika crouched beside my chair, not close enough to crowd. “You can still say you are not medically able to proceed today.”

“Can I?”

“Yes.”

“Without consequence?”

She did not lie to me. “Dario would argue delay. We would argue postpartum limits. The judge might accept it or reschedule very quickly.”

Very quickly. Noa’s hand opened against my skin.

“If it is going to happen, I want it where the supervisor already heard the order.”

Priya nodded. “That is a valid reason.”

Not brave, not generous-valid. I liked her for that.

Bennett was not in the consultation room. I had asked him to stay in the hall with the transport bag and not enter unless Isolde called. He had said, “Understood,” and done exactly that.

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

Noa spit up on my blouse 3 minutes before the visit. Of course she did.

Isolde dabbed it with a cloth. “We have another shirt.”

“No.”

“Aveline.”

“No. If the court wants a newborn visit 2 days after birth, the court can look at spit-up.”

The family-services suite was on the same floor but felt like another institution had been built inside the first one. Softer chairs. Too many pamphlets. A rug with faded squares. A shelf of toys meant to make supervised contact look less like surveillance.

The supervisor introduced herself as Ms. Kell. She had short silver hair, a lanyard, and the tired eyes of someone who had watched adults disappoint children professionally for years.

“I will be in the room at all times,” she said. “I document start time, end time, who is present, whether limits are followed, and any concerns. This is not therapy. This is not evaluation. It is supervised contact under today’s temporary order.”

I appreciated the lack of softness.

“No photographs,” Priya said.

“Correct.”

“No removal from room.”

“Correct.”

“No litigation discussion.”

“Correct.”

“No asking Ms. Ashby for address, medical, portal, pediatric, or contact details.”

“Correct.”

Ms. Kell looked at me. “You may feed, end, or pause if the infant needs care.”

“Can I take her back immediately if she cries?”

“You can request to take her back. I may also direct return if I observe distress. Given her age, I expect handling to be brief.”

Request. Even here, even now, motherhood passed through a verb someone else approved.

I held Noa closer.

Dario entered at 2:17. He was alone. That was something-no Farrow, no assistant, no Celine, no Livia, no photographer because the order had enough teeth for that, at least.

He stopped inside the door when Ms. Kell told him to. Good.

His eyes went to Noa, not to me first. Again, worse and better.

“Mr. Armitage,” Ms. Kell said, “you heard the restrictions in court. I will restate the basics. You may sit in that chair. Ms. Ashby will decide whether to place the infant in your arms. If she does, I will remain within arm’s reach. You do not stand with the infant. You do not turn away. You do not photograph. You do not whisper about the case. If the infant becomes distressed or Ms. Ashby needs to feed, the infant returns to

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

2/5 AQ her mother.”

Her mother. Dario’s gaze flicked to Ms. Kell. He heard it. Of course he did.

“I understand,” he said.

He sat. The chair looked wrong under him-too low, too plain, not built to recognize money.

I stood carefully. Pain sparked through my pelvis. Bennett was not in the room. I was glad. I was also aware of the absence like a removed railing.

Isolde stood near the wall, hands clasped hard enough that her knuckles paled. Priya and Anika were outside the glass panel, visible but not inside unless called. That had been the supervisor’s rule: fewer adults, less performance.

Dario held out his arms- not toward me, toward Noa.

I did not move.

“Ask,” Ms. Kell said.

Dario’s eyes lifted to mine.

There were rooms in my memory where that look had undone me. Kitchen light. Unfinished nursery walls. His hand on my stomach in the dark, saying she knew his voice. His mouth at my temple after I cried over a swollen ankle. The private life had been real enough to make the public erasure possible. That was the trap – he could make tenderness look like evidence of innocence.

“May I hold her?” he asked.

The room waited. Noa slept against me, all warm weight and milk breath.

I wanted to say no-not legally, not strategically. Simply no. A mother’s no, shaped by every door he had tried to open without permission.

But the order existed. The supervisor existed. The path existed whether I liked the stones.

I crossed the room and placed Noa into his arms before my body could tremble enough to make the transfer unsafe.

Dario took her correctly. That hurt. He supported her head. He tucked her close. He did not fumble. Some part of him had learned newborns once, with Nico. Some part of him had enough father in it to make this dangerous in a different way.

Noa made a small sound. Dario’s face changed. Real wonder. I hated him for having access to it.

“Hello,” he said softly.

Ms. Kell stood close enough to touch his wrist.

Dario did not look away from Noa. “Hello, little one.”

Little one–not minor child, not family-status issue, not petition subject. For 10 seconds, he sounded like a man meeting his daughter.

Then his eyes lifted over her hat and found me. There it was the performance did not replace the threat. It carried it.

“She looks like you,” he said.

I did not answer.

“Around the mouth.”

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

O

CLEA

Noa’s mouth moved in sleep, proving nothing.

“Mr. Armitage,” Ms. Kell said, “comments to or about the infant only, please. No adult relational commentary.”

Dario lowered his gaze. “Of course.”

Of course. He stroked one finger over the edge of Noa’s blanket to be believed.

–

not her skin, the blanket. Careful enough to be praised, controlled enough

Noa sneezed. His laugh was quiet and sudden. It went through me like an old bruise pressed by accident.

There had been a version of my life where I imagined this sound at home. Dario holding our daughter. Me in the chair beside him, sore but safe, watching him discover her. No court. No supervisor. No record packet. No Celine’s signature in a hidden note.

That life had never existed. It had only been staged in advance by lies.

“She is very small,” Dario said.

“Newborns are,” Ms. Kell said.

Isolde looked at the floor.

Dario’s finger paused. He looked at the supervisor, then at Noa. “I know.”

He did. Nico had been small once- another truth that did not save anyone.

Noa stirred harder. Her face tightened. I knew the sequence now: brow, mouth, breath, cry.

“She is waking,” I said.

“I have her,” Dario said.

The room changed. Ms. Kell stepped closer. “Mr. Armitage.”

Dario looked up as if surprised by the correction – not angry, worse, hurt. He could make correction seem cruel.

“I meant I am holding her safely,” he said.

“Return her to Ms. Ashby if the infant needs feeding.”

“She may settle.”

Noa gave a sharp cry.

I took one step forward. Dario looked at me over our daughter. For a moment, he did not move. Then he placed Noa back in my arms because Ms. Kell was watching his hands and the order had ink.

Noa rooted against my collar. Milk answered at once, wetting the already stained blouse.

Dario saw that too. Something moved across his face – not desire, not shame. A proprietary grief, as if my body doing what his could not was another access denial.

“She needs to feed,” I said.

Ms. Kell checked the time. “Contact paused at 2:29 PM for infant feeding.”

“Does the time stop?” Dario asked.

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

AO

CITA

Of course he asked.

Ms. Kell looked at him. “The visit is not a billing increment. I will document the infant’s need.”

Isolde made a strangled sound and turned it into a cough.

I sat in the chair farthest from Dario and fed Noa under the blanket because privacy was no longer possible, only partial. The latch was messy My hands were worse. Dario watched until Ms. Kell told him to look at the wall or the floor while the infant fed. He chose the floor. For once, he obeyed.

The visit resumed for 6 more minutes after Noa settled. I did not hand her back. Ms. Kell allowed Dario to sit close enough to see her face while she slept in my arms. He used the minutes well because Dario always used rooms well when rooms could be used.

He asked whether her breathing always sounded like that. He asked whether the hat was hospital issue. He asked whether she had a pediatrician, and Ms. Kell cut him off before I had to.

He apologized to the supervisor for the question. He did not apologize to me.

At 2:41 PM, Ms. Kell ended the visit.

Dario stood. He did not reach for Noa again. He looked at her until the looking itself became a pressure. Then he turned toward the door.

As he passed close enough for Ms. Kell to watch his hands but not close enough for her to hear his breath, he lowered his voice.

“My daughter,” he whispered.

Too soft for the supervisor. Not for me.

My body went cold under the milk and blood and heat of the room.

Dario left. Ms. Kell began writing on her form.

“Any concerns to document?” she asked.

I looked at the door, then at my sleeping daughter. “Yes,” I said. “He whispered something after you ended the visit.”

Ms. Kell’s pen stopped. “What did he say?”

I held Noa tighter, then made myself loosen my hand.

“My daughter,”

Tile Clear

End of chapter

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

AQ

The wife isn't me

Chapter 67

“Write the exact words.”

Ms. Kell said it with her pen lifted above the form, careful and neutral, as if neutrality could keep a sentence from changing shape in the ar..

Noa slept against my chest again – which seemed impossible. She had been hungry 9 minutes ago, furious 8 minutes ago, rooting with her whole tiny face 7 minutes ago while the man who had tried to claim her watched from the floor because a supervisor had ordered him to bok there instead of at my breast. Now she slept. Newborns forgave rooms too easily. I did not.

“He said, my daughter,” I said.

Ms. Kell wrote the words slowly-not because she doubted me, but because forms trained people to make even small truths walk through narrow doors.

“And you heard that after I ended the contact window?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Where was Mr. Armitage?”

“Passing me on the way to the door.”

“Facing you?”

“No. Slightly angled toward the door. Close enough that I heard him. Not close enough that his mouth was near the baby.”

She wrote that too.

My body had begun its private accounting-a cramp low in my abdomen, a hot pull of bleeding when I shifted, milk drying sticky on my skin under a blouse that had become an exhibit in postpartum indignity. My legs ached from standing more in 1 day than I had stood since Noa was born. If I said those things aloud, someone would make them about my capacity. So I sat very still in the family-services chair and watched ink turn into record.

Priya stood beside the table, hands folded over her binder. Anika was behind her, quieter than usual, her face set in the expression lawyers wore when they were deciding how much rage could be billed as strategy. Isolde stood at my shoulder with the diaper bag open at her feet, one hand resting near Noa's back without touching unless I needed her to. She had learned, in 2 days of Noa's life, that hovering could feel like care or custody depending on how hard a woman was being watched.

Bennett was outside the glass panel-not in the suite, outside. I had asked him to wait there before the visit began, and he had remained exactly where I put him, near the wall beside the water fountain with the transport bag at his feet and his phone face down in one hand. He could see enough to know whether we needed help. He could not hear enough to become part of the record unless I chose it. Dario would have called that distance abandonment if it benefited him. I called it respect.

Ms. Kell finished the line and looked up. "I need to be clear about what I can and cannot document."

"I know."

"I can document that Ms. Ashby reported Mr. Armitage whispered the phrase after the visit. I cannot independently verify the words because did not hear them."

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

AO

–

"Then write that."

"I will."

"And write that I reported it immediately."

Her pen paused. Priya spoke before the pause could become a problem. "The immediacy matters. Please note the report was made before Ms. Ashby left the room, before consultation with counsel, and while all parties were still in or adjacent to the suite."

Ms. Kell gave a small nod. "That is accurate."

Accurate. The word steadied me more than comfort would have.

Ms. Kell added a second line without being asked. "Infant was asleep at time of reported statement," she read back. "No observable infant distress. Reporting party expressed

concern that the phrase reflected possessive boundary language in the context of pending parentage and access litigation."

"Not reporting party," I said.

Her pen stopped.

"Use my name." Priya's eyes moved to me, but I kept mine on the form. "If the sentence says mother reported, his counsel will make the word do work. They will say I am emotional because I am the mother. They will say I am protective because I am the mother. They will turn the role into a diagnosis. Write Aveline Ashby."

Ms. Kell looked at Priya. Priya said, "There is no objection to identifying the reporting party by name."

So Ms. Kell crossed out Reporting party with a single line, initialed the correction, and wrote Aveline Ashby. The ink looked small-the difference did not.

"Thank you," I said. It cost me something to say it. Not because she had done wrong, but because gratitude, after birth, kept getting demanded for the smallest returns of what should never have been taken: my name, my body, my right to report a threat without being translated into condition.

Ms. Kell did not make me perform more of it. She only said, "I will note the correction was requested by you."

"Good."

"Was Noa distressed by the statement?" Ms. Kell asked.

"No," I said. The answer felt like giving Dario something. It was still true. Noa had not reacted – Noa did not know property language yet. Noa knew warmth, hunger, scent, pressure, milk. Noa knew my heartbeat because my body had been her whole jurisdiction for 39 weeks and 2 days, then 2 days more in a world that kept trying to find forms for her before she could focus her eyes.

"She was asleep," I added.

"Did Mr. Armitage attempt to take her?"

"No."

"Did he touch you?"

"No."

“Did he ask for prohibited information after the pediatrician question?”

“No.”

Tile Clear

Tile Clear Puzzle Game

AO

CLEA

Ms. Kell wrote every no with the same care as the yes. That mattered too. If I turned Dario into a monster in every line, the real monster welt- hide in the places where he had behaved correctly because behaving correctly served him. He had held Noa safely. He had returned her when told. He had obeyed the no-photo order. He had asked 1 prohibited question and accepted correction.

Then he had left the room and whispered the only phrase soft enough to evade a supervisor and sharp enough to enter my spine.

My daughter.

Said to me through her. That was the shape of Dario’s love – he could make possession sound like wonder.

Priya turned to me. “We will attach this supervisor note to any opposition if he seeks expanded time.”

“Can we file something now?”

“Maybe. We need to decide whether it is worth asking the judge to modify on a reported whisper that the supervisor did not hear.”

“You mean whether I look hysterical.”

“I mean whether his counsel can make the motion about your interpretation rather than his conduct.”

That was the cleaner version. I appreciated her for giving me the first one silently too.

Anika stepped closer. “The record still helps. It establishes a pattern if he continues boundary-testing in supervised contact. It also preserves that you raised it without delay and without exaggerating what the supervisor personally heard.”

Without exaggerating. The phrase should not have felt like an act of self-defense. It did.

I looked down at Noa. Her mouth was relaxed, a small milk-soft curve. A faint line of spit-up had dried near her chin. Her hat had slipped, showing the dark hair flattened damply to her head. She had no idea a man had just tried to make 2 words heavier than her whole future.

“I do not want the report to become her story,” I said.

No one answered immediately. Good-quick answers would have insulted the size of it.

I touched the edge of Noa’s blanket. “I want it preserved because it happened. Not because those words define her. Not because he gets to choose the first sentence strangers write about her father. Not because she is evidence first and a baby second.”

My voice held. Barely.

“She is 2 days old,” I said. “Her future cannot be a transcript of what Dario whispered after losing 20 minutes of supervised time.”

Priya’s expression changed by less than an inch. “Then that is how we frame it.”

“How?”

“The visit showed why supervision remains necessary. It did not decide Noa’s relationship to anyone. The court should not let Mr. Armitage convert biological standing into possessive entitlement, and Ms. Ashby is not asking the court to punish a reported phrase beyond what the record supports.”

There it was – the version that could survive a courtroom. I hated that I needed one.

Ms. Kell tore the top sheet from the form, made a copy request through the internal desk, and handed Priya the carbon copy once it came back. The paper was thin, the kind that curled when held too tightly. Priya slid it into a folder labeled with my case number, not Noa’s name. I was grateful for that small mercy.

Anika photographed the copy in sequence, then photographed Ms. Kell’s correction line with the initial visible. “For our internal file,” she said.

Amaze GO!

کھ یل پ ہ ی لی – !آمدیِ د خوش مـ یں کـ و ایِ مـ یز

A®

Ms. Kell did not object. She watched the phone, the angle, the way Anika kept the flash off and the other families outside the glass out of frame. That was another thing I had learned since becoming publicly inconvenient – evidence could injure strangers if handled

lazily A woman crying by the pamphlet rack did not need to become the background of my proof. A child with a toy truck near the carpet squares did not need to be dragged into Dario's war because adults liked wide shots.

I waited until Anika lowered the phone. "Noa's face?"

"Not visible."

"Good."

It was a small control. I took it anyway.

Outside the glass, Bennett looked up when Isolde moved to open the door. He did not come forward- he waited until I met his eyes. Then he lifted the transport bag. Not an offer to take Noa, not a hand. Food, diapers, spare shirt, evidence folder, pain medicine, water bottle- the unromantic architecture of keeping me upright.

"We need 10 minutes before the car," Isolde said. "You need the bathroom and meds."

"I need to file before Dario files."

"You need both."

Priya checked her phone. "I can draft from the consultation room. Anika can route the note. We are not filing anything until we decide if the immediate motion helps or harms."

"He will file."

"He may."

"He will."

Because Dario did not leave rooms empty. If he could not own a moment, he built a paper version of it and asked a judge to admire the margins.

Anika's phone buzzed. So did Priya's – not a single alert, a small swarm. Both women looked down. Isolde's phone followed 2 seconds later. Bennett's face changed outside the glass, not enough for the hallway to read, enough for me.

I felt cold before anyone spoke. "What?" I asked.

Anika lifted her eyes. "It is not Dario's filing."

That should have helped. It did not.

Priya turned her phone so I could see only the top of the secure message, not the thread below it.

ORLA ADMISSION NOTICE – ARMITAGE FAMILY / PRESS HOLD REQUEST

My body knew before my mind arranged the words. Celine was 5 weeks behind me. Celine was not due yet.

“Celine?” I asked.

Anika nodded once. “She has gone into labor. She has been admitted to St. Orla.”

Noa slept through that too. Adult war paused for another child.

Then Priya’s phone buzzed again, and the pause ended before it could become mercy.

Amaze GO!

ﮐ ﮭ ﯾ ﻞ ﭘ ﮩ ﯾ ﻟ ﯽ – !آﻣﺪﯾ د ﺧﻮش ﻣ ﯾں ﮐ و اﯾ ﻣ ﯾز

AQ

All

Amaze GO!

لا

End of chapter

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 68

.

Chapter 68 – Celine’s Delivery

“No cameras past this line.”

Celine heard the nurse say it, then heard the click anyway — not close, not inside the triage room. Through glass, from the donor corrido from somewhere public enough that no one could call it a violation until the image had already become proof of concern.

She had built a life inside proof of concern. Now she was 34 weeks and 2 days pregnant, strapped to monitors in a St. Ora assessment room while her body contracted too early and her family's press aide argued with hospital security about angles.

The contraction rose again – not elegant, not discreet. It started low and dragged its hard fist around her back, under the place where the silk maternity dress had been cut to make pregnancy look like continuity instead of risk. Celine turned her face toward the wall and breathed through her teeth.

The nurse, Greta, watched the monitor instead of the family name. Celine disliked her for it, then clung to her for the same reason.

"That one is 70 seconds," Greta said. "You are doing well."

Celine did not want to be doing well. Doing well was what people said when pain was useful to them. She wanted the room to close. She wanted the donor liaison outside to stop asking whether the family statement should say unexpected early labor or blessed early arrival. She wanted the hospital bracelet to stop touching her wrist.

It had been placed there by a registrar who called her Mrs. Armitage with a reverence that would have pleased her yesterday. Today the plastic band felt less like status than a tag on a door someone else controlled – Patient name. Date of birth. Medical record. Gestational age. Allergies. Insurance. Spouse.

Spouse. The word had once been the whole fortress. It did not breathe for her, did not stop the contraction, did not keep her baby inside until March.

She wanted Mathias to stop taking calls in a voice so low the words became architecture. She wanted Dario to be here. Then she wanted not to want that.

"Where is my husband?" she asked.

Greta glanced toward the door. "The desk said he is en route."

"From court?"

The nurse did not answer quickly enough. Celine shut her eyes. Of course from court. The answer sat beside the fetal monitor and beeped with it.

Dario had gone from a supervised room where Aveline held the baby he wanted, to this hospital where Celine was supposed to deliver the child that made their marriage look whole. The order was obscene – it was also exactly the order their life had created.

Celine had spent months telling herself sequence could be managed. First the vote, then the statements, then the private settlement, then the 2 babies arranged into language

clean enough for donors, trustees, and a 6-year-old boy who should never have been asked to understand adult shame.

Her body had ignored the sequence. It had opened early. That should have felt like betrayal. Instead, under the monitors, she felt a strange envy of it – her body had refused to wait for Mathias.

Amaze GO!

کھیل پہ یلی ۔ آمدیدا خوش مہیں گ و ایہ یز

AQ that.

Aveline Ashby had given birth 2 days ago, at 30 weeks, in some hidden hospital with some hidden route and some hidden name managed to reach every room Celine entered. The baby was called Non Ashby now. Celine knew because the record packet Maths hard ti her not to question had made the name impossible to forget

Nop Ashby Not Armitage.

Celine's contraction broke and left her shaking.

Greta adjusted the monitor belt. "The neonatal team is ready. At 34 weeks, many babies do very well, but we plan for support/There may be breathing assistance, special care nursery, feeding support. You may not get the immediate rooming-in you expected"

"I know"

She did not-not in the body. She had attended the private prenatal briefings, read the polished packets, watched dong families cry nea incubators during wing tours and thought, privately, how excellent St. Orla was at turning fear into gratitude. She had not imagined her ow child under a warmer while cameras waited near the elevators.

Another contraction came before she had room to resent the thought.

The door opened. Her mother entered first, pale and jeweled and useless in the way beautiful older women could be useless when the body did something unpresentable. Behind her came Mathias, phone in hand, coat still on, expression already edited.

"The press hold is sloppy," he said to someone not in the room. "No images of monitors. No patient identifiers. Family statement within 20 minutes after delivery or after neonatal assessment, whichever comes first."

Celine laughed once. It came out wrong.

Greta looked at her. "Another contraction?"

“No.”

Mathias ended the call and looked at his daughter as if she had interrupted a meeting with biology. “The obstetrician says they may not stop labor,” he said.

“Yes,” Celine said. “I am in the room where they said it.”

Her mother made a small sound. “Celine.”

“What? Should I be softer? I am sorry-1 scheduled public softness for March.”

Greta’s mouth did not move. Celine loved her briefly for that.

Mathias came to the bedside. “This is inconvenient timing, but not unmanageable.”

Another click outside. Celine turned her head toward the glass. A young communications assistant stood in the hall with a clipboard, pretending she had not been watching the monitor through the reflection. Behind her, 2 members of the donor-relations board hovered with the solemn excitement of people near tragedy that could become a newsletter.

Celine’s pain had an audience. Her image had invited them. That was the trap she had helped build and then mistaken for shelter.

“Send them away,” she said.

Her mother touched her shoulder. “They are only concerned.”

“They are counting.”

Mathias’s face tightened “Do not become theatrical.”

Amaze GO!

The next contraction arrived hard enough to make the room go white at the edges. Celine gripped the sheet with both hands. Her manic bent against the fabric. She made no sound until the peak passed, and then only because silence had become more humiliating than pain

Greta leaned close. “Low sounds if you can. Save the jaw.”

“Do not tell me what to save.”

“Then unclench because I need you breathing for the baby.”

Direct, useful. Celine obeyed.

Labor moved faster after that- too fast for the careful story St. Orla had been prepared to tell. The obstetrician came in with consent language that sounded brisk but not cruel. Preterm labor, cervical change, fetal tracing mostly reassuring but variable enough to keep neonatal support present. Steroids had been started on admission, but there was no guarantee there would be time for the full course. Magnesium was discussed and dismissed for her gestational window and immediate plan. Antibiotics were started because protocols cared less about dignity than bacteria.

Celine signed where Greta pointed. Her hand shook. Her wedding ring flashed under the hospital lights- the cameras had always loyed that ring.

In the delivery room, she asked again for Dario. No one gave her a clean answer. Mathias stepped out. The door did not close all the way.

Celine heard him in the hall. “Is the Noa issue contained?”

Not: how is my daughter? Not: how is my grandson or granddaughter? Not: is the baby stable?

The Noa issue.

Celine lay on a delivery bed, knees shaking under a sheet, and understood with a clarity that felt almost medicinal that Mathias had not come to witness birth – he had come to manage sequence. Her child had entered a queue behind another woman’s child.

The next pain took her before she could decide whether the thought made her furious or ashamed.

Darío arrived between pushing and panic. He came to the side of the bed with courthouse air still on him- dark coat, no tie, face sharpened by something Celine did not have time to name.

“I am here,” he said.

She hated the relief. “Where were you?”

His eyes flicked toward the monitors, the staff, the door. “In court.”

“With her.”

“With Noa.”

He said the baby’s name before asking whether their own child was safe. Celine’s breath broke. The obstetrician told her to push.

So she did.

There was no dignity in it. No donor wing, no green silk, no family portrait. There was pressure, heat, tearing fear, Greta's voice at her ear, Dario's hand hovering near hers and not quite taking it – because Celine had not offered, and because maybe he did not know anymore which woman he was allowed to touch in public without turning it into evidence.

The baby came small and furious at 5:46 PM. A boy. For 1 terrible second, he did not cry loudly enough. Then the neonatal team moved with practiced speed and made the room smaller around the warmer.

Amaze GO!

کھی ہ یلیپ – !آمدید خوش مہ یر

AO

KICA

He was purple-red, slick, impossibly narrow through the shoulders—not the round public baby Celine had imagined in white blankets under St. Orla's crest. His limbs looked startled by air. His cry came thin, then stronger, then disappeared under the mask the neonatal nurse placed over his face.

"Late preterm," someone said.

Late preterm. 2 words that sounded like a corridor between acceptable and dangerous.

Celine reached for him and fouched only the sheet. She tried to lift her head. "Why is he not here?"

"He is here," Greta said. "They are helping him breathe."

"Is he alive?"

"Yes."

Dario's hand closed over the metal rail, not over her. Mathias appeared at the door and looked first at the warmer, then at Dario, then at the hallway.

"No statement until neonatal clears wording," he said.

Celine began to laugh again. This time it became crying before she could stop it. No one in the room knew what to do with that because crying fit motherhood, but not Celine.

Greta placed a folded towel near her face. "Your son is breathing with support. They will bring him close before special care if they can."

Your son. The words should have filled the room. Instead they slipped between call alerts and family calculations and the memory of Mathias asking whether another woman’s baby had been contained.

After the placenta, after stitches, after the neonatologist gave careful numbers Celine would not remember, a clerk brought an admission packet for signatures that had been delayed by the speed of labor. Celine took the pages because she needed something flat and orderly under her hands.

Patient: CELINE ARMITAGE. Gestational age: 34 weeks, 2 days. Infant: male, preterm, special care pending. Family continuity review: active.

Her eyes stopped. The packet had a cross-reference sheet paperclipped behind the consent forms. It should not have been in her delivery papers – someone had printed too much, too quickly, from the wrong queue.

Related maternal/infant records under administrative review:

NOA ASHBY – Mother: AVELINE ASHBY.

Celine stared at the other woman’s name while her own newborn breathed under machines 8 feet away.

Then Dario said, too softly, “Give that to me.”

And for the first time in 9 years of marriage, Celine did not.

Amaze GO!

ک ھ یل پ ہ ی لی – !آمدید د خوش م یں ک و ای م یز

End of chapter

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 69

“Do not open it standing.”

Isolde said that because she knew me and because the courier envelope had St. Orla’s crest printed in the corner like a polite threat. I opened it standing anyway. Then I regretted being predictable.

Noa was asleep in the bassinet beside the safe-room bed, swaddled in a yellow blanket someone had donated before washing the scent of another family's detergent out of it. I had meant to change her 6 minutes ago. I had meant to take my pain medicine 14 minutes ago. I had meant to drink the tea Bennett had left on the table without requiring gratitude or eye contact.

Instead I stood near the square table in the temporary safe room while the adhesive strip stuck to my finger and St. Orla's letterhead came out folded in thirds. Postpartum life had become a series of body needs interrupted by institutional needs that always arrived in envelopes large enough to hide a blade.

"Aveline," Isolde said.

"I am sitting."

"You are not."

"I am emotionally sitting."

"That does not count."

I sat before she could make it a legal theory. The chair was hard. My body objected, my stitches objected, my milk objected – because Noa made a small dreaming sound and everything in me prepared for a hunger that had not fully arrived.

Anika was on speaker from the clinic line. Maris Keene had joined by secure call, her voice clipped by a bad connection and a worse mood. Bennett stood by the open doorway with the transport tray balanced in 1 hand-tea, a bowl of rice, and 2 folded napkins. He did not enter because the room had too many women, too much paper, and too little space for a man to be useful without becoming the center.

"Read the sender line first," Maris said.

"St. Orla Women's Center. Records Administration and Family Continuity Office."

Silence. Even Noa seemed to hold still.

"There is no such patient-facing office in their standard directory," Maris said. "That may be internal phrasing. Continue."

I unfolded the page. My eyes moved faster than my breath.

RE: Administrative Consistency Review – Armitage Family Continuity Plan.

No. My hand tightened on the paper. The sheet wrinkled under my thumb.

“What does it say?” Anika asked.

I forced the words out because documents became more dangerous when read alone. “It says the hospital has placed visible demographic changes on temporary hold pending review of family-status materials submitted by authorized representatives. It says the review concerns records coordination for minor children connected to the Armitage family continuity plan.”

Amaze GO!

کہ یل پ ہ یلی – !آمدید د خوش مہ یں کہ و ایہ مہ یز

AQ

Isolde’s face went still. Bennett’s hand lowered the tray to the small dresser without a sound.

“Children,” Maris said. “Plural?”

“Yes.”

“Read the next paragraph.”

I did. The words were careful that made them worse.

Noa Ashby, born January 19, maternal record currently listing Aveline Ashby. Celine Armitage’s newborn son, born January 21 at 34 weeks and 2 days, admitted to special care at St. Orla. Family continuity review pending. Maternal/parental designations to be harmonized following board-level review of submitted materials and applicable privacy restrictions.

Harmonized. I had hated many words since Dario had called me someone from work. Harmonized entered the list with good shoes and a knife behind its back.

The letter did not say steal or erase. It did not say a woman 2 days postpartum should have to defend the obvious while her daughter slept in a borrowed bassinet beside a bed with an ugly quilt. It said harmonized, as if the problem was sound – as if Noa’s name and Celine’s newborn son had made an unpleasant chord and the hospital board was only tuning the room.

I had designed nursery walls once. I knew what people paid for when they paid for softness. They paid to hide the nail heads, the seams, the metal brackets holding everything in place. St. Orla was doing the same thing with motherhood. Cover the mechanism, call it harmony.

Noa stretched in the bassinet. One fist escaped the swaddle, opened, closed, then disappeared again. My body answered with milk- a damp circle spread under the soft bra I had worn because the firmer one made my ribs ache. I looked at the paper instead of at my shirt. If I looked down, I might start crying. And if I started, I would lose time.

“They put her in a plan with Celine’s baby,” I said.

“They used the phrase family continuity plan,” Maris corrected, not to soften it but to sharpen it. “Do not paraphrase in the demand. Quote.”

“I know how to quote.”

“Good. Quote while angry. It keeps the anger useful.”

Isolde took 1 step toward the bassinet when Noa fussed.

“Wait,” I said. She stopped. I did not need to prove I could do everything I needed to decide which thing came first.

Noa’s face tightened. The pre-cry.

“Bring her to me,” I said.

Isolde lifted Noa and placed her in my arms, careful of the paper, careful of my abdomen, careful not to make care feel like seizure. Noa rooted instantly, furious at the delay as if St. Orla had offended her personally.

“I agree,” I whispered.

Bennett turned his back slightly before I adjusted my shirt – not dramatic, not prudish, just a small angle that returned privacy to a room that paperwork had stripped bare.

The latch hurt. It always did for the first seconds, a bright line of pain that made my toes curl inside my socks. Then Noa settled into work. Her tiny jaw moved with terrifying purpose.

The paper rested on the table beside my elbow. Noa drank while St. Orla called her a unit inside continuity.

Amaze GO!

EXCA

“What do you want said first?” Anika asked.

That was why I liked her – not what do you feel, not are you all right. What do you want said first?

“That Noa Ashby is not part of an Armitage family continuity plan.”

Maris said, “Good.”

“That no person, office, board, committee, family representative, donor office, or hospital administrator has authority to harmonize her maternal or parental designation.”

“Good.”

“That Aveline Ashby is the only mother currently listed on Noa Ashby’s birth and hospital records, and any attempt to describe that listing as temporary, pending, or subject to board discretion is inaccurate.”

“Use currently and correctly listed,” Maris said.

“Currently and correctly listed,” I repeated.

Anika’s keys moved. The correction mattered-currently alone could sound like a waiting room. Correctly had a spine. I wanted every sentence to stand without my body beside it, because my body kept being treated as the unreliable part.

“That any document describing her in a family continuity plan with Celine Armitage’s newborn must be corrected immediately and preserved in original form for audit.”

“Better.”

“That I want the full audit trail. Who submitted the materials, when, through what portal or desk, under what authority, who reviewed them, who printed this letter, who added Celine’s newborn to the same review, who used the word harmonized, and who decided board-level review had any place in my daughter’s birth record.”

Noa unlatched, offended by my tone. Milk ran down her cheek. I wiped it with my thumb and made myself breathe.

The anger had come with heat. Heat made me light-headed now – everything did. A fast stand, a missed meal, a legal word, a baby at the breast, a memory of Dario’s mouth near my ear saying my daughter like a theft he planned to complete later.

“Also,” I said, quieter, “the correction needs to state that Celine’s newborn is separate. He is her child. Not a device to make mine disappear. Not evidence against Noa. Not a substitute. Separate.”

The line went quiet again.

Maris was the first to speak. “I will include that. It is legally clean and morally necessary.”

I looked at the bassinet blanket slipping down Noa’s foot. “I do not want to become them,” I said.

Isolde’s face softened, which meant I had said the part with no legal use.

Anika said, “You are not.”

“Do not reassure me. Put the separation in the demand.”

“I will.”

Bennett moved only when Noa kicked the napkin from the dresser edge with a sudden flail. He caught it before it hit the floor, then set it back without comment. The bowl of rice steamed faintly behind him. My stomach cramped with hunger so abruptly that I almost laughed – the body was rude in its priorities.

Amaze GO!

کھیل پہیلی – !آمدید خوش میں گو ایمیز

AQ

“Eat,” Bennett said. Not soft enough to be coaxing, not firm enough to be command. A fact placed where I could use it.

“In a minute.”

“I can hold the bowl. You keep the paper.”

He did not offer to hold the baby or call the lawyer. He offered the one thing that would not take a decision away from me.

I looked at him, then at the bowl, then at Noa’s milk-drunk mouth. “Door stays open.”

“Always.”

He crossed the threshold only after I nodded. The room did not change shape around him. That was the difference I kept noticing against my will-Dario entered rooms by making the room explain itself to him. Bennett entered like an object that could be moved if it was in the way.

He held the bowl low enough that I could take a bite without leaning over Noa. The rice was warm and salty. I nearly cried over that too, which annoyed me more than the document.

Anika began drafting aloud. Maris corrected verbs. Isolde took photographs of the envelope, the crest, the courier label, the pages in sequence, my hand near the page for scale but not covering text. Bennett held the bowl. Noa fed. I chewed because blood loss and rage needed calories.

For 12 minutes, we made the machine answer to the room it had entered.

Then Maris stopped mid-sentence. “I have St. Orla records on the other line.”

The bowl lowered in Bennett’s hand.

“Put them through,” I said.

“I am going to ask only intake questions first,” Maris warned. “Do not speak unless I cue you.”

I did not like being told that. I liked less that she was right.

The St. Orla administrator introduced herself with a name I did not catch and a title I did – interim director of records integrity. The title sounded new enough to still have fingerprints on it.

Mariş identified herself, identified me, identified Noa, and asked whether St. Orla would issue an immediate written correction retracting the family continuity language from Noa’s file and separating any review related to Celine Armitage’s newborn.

The administrator inhaled. I heard the answer before she gave it.

“Because the referenced materials have been escalated above department level,” she said, “any correction to the continuity review language requires board review.”

Noa slept in my arms. This time, I did not.

Amaze GO!

کھ یل پ ہ یلی – !آمدید د خوش مہ یں ک و ایہ مہ یز

End of chapter

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 70

“Attach the note about the 4 minutes.”

Anika did not ask which note. Everyone knew. The handwritten line on Dario’s donor invitation had become one of the few objects in my ite. that never changed its story.

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

I sat at the square table in safe housing with Noa asleep in the bassinet at my knee, the St. Orla continuity letter flat under a plastic sleeve, and a stack of evidence spread around my tea like the worst kind of scrapbook.

Chapter titles did not matter inside real life, but my mind had started naming the exhibits anyway-The Invitation, The Authorization, The Card, The Call, The Lock, The Clinic, The Visit, The Whisper. Motherhood by exhibit tab.

Maris Keene had come in person this time. She wore a gray coat, carried 2 file boxes, and looked at my hard chair with the blank contempt of a woman who understood postpartum bodies only needed law firms to pretend chairs were neutral.

“You should be on the bed,” she said.

“Then the papers are on the bed.”

“We can bring a tray.”

“The table keeps me mean.”

Isolde muttered, “Finally, a medical protocol I trust.”

Maris did not smile. She did, however, move the pain medicine bottle from the dresser to the table where I would have to look at it.

Bennett had delivered breakfast and left it at the doorway because Maris had arrived 2 minutes later and the room became all record. Before leaving, he had said, “I am downstairs if transport changes,” and placed a small paper bag beside the food. Inside were 3 protein bars, a packet of peppermint tea, and a note with no sentiment – For later. No signature, no claim.

The restraint should not have warmed me. It did.

I did not open the peppermint packet. It was stupid, maybe, to make a dried tea bag into a battlefield. Dario had not invented peppermint. He had not purchased the rights to nausea, winter, or a mug held between both hands in a warm kitchen while I believed his secrecy had an end date. Still, the smell belonged to an apartment where my name had been stored as guest.

I slid the packet back into the bag. Later could wait. I put the note under my phone where Dario's lawyers would not see it if we had to photograph the table again.

Then I returned to making a demand that might keep my daughter from being filed into someone else's family plan.

"We lead with the January 21 letter," Maris said. "Then the immediate correction request. Then authority challenge. Then exhibits."

"And the board review refusal," I said.

"Yes. The board has no patient-facing authority to decide whether an infant's mother is listed accurately."

Amaze GO!

کھیل پہلے ۔ !آمدید خوش میں کو ایمیز

"But they can delay."

"They can try."

Anika's laptop keys moved fast enough to sound like rain on tin. Priya was remote because the custody side had its own filings after Dario's supervised visit. She listened on speaker until the evidence list touched her lane.

"Do not overburden the correction demand with custody argument," she said. "But include the supervised-visit report as boundary context if Dario later claims urgency is purely child-centered."

"He whispered my daughter," I said.

"We include it as reported by Ms. Ashby immediately after contact, documented by Ms. Kell. We do not treat it as independently heard supervisor evidence."

"I know."

I did. Knowing did not make the limitation less insulting.

Noa stirred. Everyone stopped. That was the new hierarchy – not judge, not board, not Dario. Noa making a sound.

She settled again with a sigh so small it almost undid me.

Maris slid the first exhibit toward me- a photocopy of the donor reception invitation, black envelope photographed beside it. The printed host line naming Dario and Celine. The handwritten note photographed separately, then full-frame with the bedside drawer and timestamped metadata sheet.

“This establishes Dario’s knowledge before the public event and the instruction to mention a second baby without timing,” Maris said.

“It establishes they knew timing mattered.”

“Yes.”

Next: the Private Maternal Care Authorization Dario had slid under the apartment door while I stood behind a chain lock and felt my baby move under my ribs. The title still made my skin tighten.

Patient: AVELINE ASHBY. Gestational Carrier: AVELINE ASHBY. Legal Mother / Intended Parent: CELINE ARMITAGE.

“This goes near the front,” I said.

“It will.”

“No. Near the front.”

Maris looked at me. I kept my hand on the page. “The St. Orla letter says the family continuity language is under review because of submitted materials. This was the first material I saw that tried to move my role away from mother. It belongs where a judge can understand why harmonized is not administrative.”

Maris nodded once. “Near the front.”

The private clinic card came next, its neat appointment window still printed for 10:30 like coercion could become care if given a time slot.

Then the wrong-call evidence. Not the whole recording – not the humiliation for spectacle. Anika proposed short excerpts by timestamp with certified transcript pending: Dario and Celine discussing the next-day clinic pressure, car, housing leverage, reduced motherhood, and instability framing.

“I do not want the sexual parts in this demand,” I said.

Amaze GO!

کھیل پہ یلی -آمدید دا خوش مہ یں کو ایہ یز

–

“They are not necessary,” Anika said.

“Good.”

“If they become necessary later, we decide again.”

I appreciated the again. It left the door with me.

The smart-lock screenshots followed. Dario as Primary Owner, me as Resident Guest. My failed attempt to change the code. The access pause. Then the private clinic intake folder notes from the November appointment I had not consented to. ARMITAGE/VEY MATERNAL COORDINATION. Celine Armitage as maternal guardian for coordination purposes. Dr. Merrow’s partner-portal view before consent. Unauthorized transfer appointment call. St. Orla process irregularity witness memo. Birth worksheet. Noa’s band. The record-correction flag Celine’s signature in the audit note. The January 21 continuity letter putting Noa and Celine’s preterm newborn into 1 family plan.

1 family plan. The number looked obscene even as a digit.

“Do we attach Dario’s apartment control evidence?” Anika asked.

“Yes,” Maris said. “Briefly. It shows the same old pattern of authorized access presented as care.”

“Do not use that word,” I said.

Anika’s hands stopped. “Which?”

“The one that means someone acting through someone else.” I did not say it. The banned word had started showing up in other people’s filings like mold. “Use authorized access. Portal access. Third-party access if you need the structure.”

Anika gave me a look that was almost admiration and almost fatigue. “Already avoided.”

“Good.”

The drafting took 3 hours because bodies were inefficient and babies were honest. Noa woke twice. I fed her once at the table and once on the bed when the cramps made the chair impossible. Isolde changed her diaper on the folded towel because the changing pad was under a file box. Maris held the evidence list while I swallowed pain medicine and

water under protest. Priya dropped off to take a court call and came back with news that Dario's side was already hinting the whisper report was maternal hostility after an emotionally difficult first contact.

The second feeding broke me for 90 seconds – not loudly. Noa latched, the demand letter sat beside my thigh, and milk let down so hard it hurt. My uterus cramped in answer. Tears came before I had decided on them.

No one rushed me. That helped. No one said strong. That helped more.

Isolde only moved the tissues closer with 2 fingers. Maris kept reading the exhibit list as if crying did not disqualify me from instruction. Anika turned one page facedown because it included the phrase gestational carrier and she had learned, apparently, which knives could wait 1 minute.

I cried because Noa was warm and alive and hungry. I cried because on paper she was still being discussed like a vacancy. Then the latch eased, the milk settled, and the tears stopped as abruptly as they had started.

"Continue," I said.

Maris did. Of course – Dario could turn 2 words into my defect before the ink dried.

"Then file faster," I said.

"We file better," Maris said.

"I hate that."

Amaze GO!

کہ پہ ہ یلی – !آمدید د خوش مہ یں

"Most clients do."

At 3:18 PM, Anika read the demand aloud. It was not beautiful. Good-beautiful things were too easy to admire instead of obey.

The demand required immediate written correction of any language placing Noa Ashby in an Armitage family continuity plan. It required separation of Noa's birth record from any review related to Celine Armitage's newborn. It required preservation of original documents, metadata, print logs, portal-access logs, submission cover sheets, board escalation notes, family-office communications, and all correspondence Involving Dario Armitage, Celine Armitage, Mathias Vey, the Vey family office, Armitage Foundation, St. Orla leadership, Dr. Merrow's clinic, and any authorized representative.

It stated that Aveline Ashby did not consent to any surrogacy arrangement, parentage transfer, guardianship, maternal-role reassignment family continuity plan, or board review of Noa Ashby's maternal status.

It attached the proof – not all of me, enough.

Maris filed it with St. Orla, hospital counsel, Dr. Merrow's clinic, Dario's counsel, Celine's counsel, and the court under the existing emergency record-preservation docket. Then we waited for the machine to pretend surprise.

It took 47 minutes. The court clerk called Anika first. I watched her face change.

"Order," she mouthed.

My heart went too fast. Noa noticed from the bassinet and began to fuss in solidarity or complaint. Both were valid.

The judge had issued a production order. St. Orla and Dr. Merrow's private clinic were ordered to produce, on an expedited basis, records and communications related to Noa Ashby's maternal/parental field requests, family continuity review, intended-parent references, portal access or authorized access attempts, administrative consistency review, and any submitted materials connecting Aveline Ashby, Noa Ashby, Celine Armitage, Dario Armitage, or the Vey family office.

"Deadline?" I asked.

"Rolling production starting tomorrow noon," Anika said. "Initial production by 5:00 PM."

Tomorrow. A word that used to mean sleep. Now it meant documents – and another night of feeding beside a phone that could become a summons.

Maris allowed herself 1 satisfied breath. "Good. Now we prepare for redactions."

"Already?"

"They will not hand us the machine clean."

Bennett knocked on the open doorframe at 5:26 PM, not crossing. "Transport is ready whenever you are. Also, food."

Isolde said, "Commit to the food."

I looked at Bennett despite myself. He looked at Isolde. "I will let the food decide."

It was the first almost-laugh in the room all day.

Then Anika’s inbox chimed. Once, twice, then again and again, as if a system had begun throwing paper into a fire.

She opened the first file and stopped smiling. “Armitage produced early,” she said.

The screen filled with black bars. Redacted records had arrived before dinner.

Lucky Teen Patti free spin

AQ

The wife isn't me

Chapter 71

“That is not a document. That is a blackout with margins.”

Isolde leaned over Anika’s shoulder and glared at the screen as if enough contempt might remove redactions. It did not.

Page 1 had a header, a date, and 9 solid black rectangles. Page 2 had a footer and the word reviewed. Page 3 had nothing visible except $ Orla’s crest and a page number.

The production had arrived in 4 folders: St. Orla initial, private clinic initial, Armitage counsel voluntary, and Vey family office courtesy copy The courtesy copy was the thickest and least useful, which felt like Mathias Vey’s signature even where his name had been hidden.

Noa slept in the crook of my left arm because the bassinet had become unacceptable to her at exactly the same minute Anika’s inbox began receiving files. My right hand moved the trackpad badly. Postpartum wrists were a cruelty no one had warned me about everything loosened after birth except the parts I needed to hold my daughter and a case together. The cursor kept slipping as if even the screen objected to being handled one-handed.

Bennett had brought a folding laptop stand from downstairs and placed it on the table without entering the document huddle until I nodded. Then he had stepped back to the doorway and stayed there, eating a cold sandwich one-handed because no one else had remembered food could be used by him too.

I noticed. I did not know what to do with noticing.

“Production log,” Maris said from the call. “Do not get lost in content before we preserve sequence.”

Anika opened the shared spreadsheet. “Received 6:04 PM. Sender Armitage counsel. Subject line preliminary production pursuant to order. Attachments 14.”

“Hash values?”

“Generating.”

“Download original files to the evidence drive and read copies only.”

“Already doing it.”

Maris approved with silence.

I had not known, before this life, that rage could be made to wait for file integrity. There was a discipline to it that felt almost cruel – do not open the tempting page first, do not rename the file because the original name is ugly, do not drag it into a neater folder with a cleaner label. Do not touch the thing until the touching can be explained by time, person, device, and purpose.

1 Motherhood had taught me a different version of the same rule. Do not lift the sleeping baby because you miss her face. Do not wake her because fear wants proof. Do not confuse your need with hers. Preserve the sequence. Let the record breathe.

The printer at the maternal legal clinic began to work through a secure queue because Maris wanted paper sets with file names stamped across the bottom. I wanted to hate that. I could not. Paper had weight. Black bars on a screen felt like someone turning off lights in rooms I had not entered yet.

“Open the index,” Maris said.

Lucky Teen Patti free spin

AQ

Anika did. The index was more useful than the documents, which was probably an accident.

STO-001 through STO-078: St. Orla records administration. PMC-001 through PMC-046: private maternal clinic. ARM-001 through ARM-022 Armitage counsel correspondence. VEY-001 through VEY-034: family office administrative review materials.

“Private maternal clinic,” I said.

“They are using initials for the clinic name in production,” Anika said.

“Expand it in our notes.”

“Private maternal clinic. I have it.”

No unexplained initials. No dangling shorthand. No little traps waiting for a future reader, judge, or tired mother to mistake one thing for another.

The first St. Orla pages were appointment records already known to us – ultrasound, donor event date, my records appointment, the restriction notice after Dr. Price requested transfer. Then black bars thick enough to cover paragraphs, with exemption labels that sounded ake a language designed to make responsibility boring.

Attorney-client. Board deliberative. Third-party privacy. Quality review. Donor relations.

“Donor relations?” I said.

Anika highlighted the label. “Visible.”

“In a maternal record production.”

“Visible,” she repeated.

That was how we survived – not by winning each line, but by refusing to let the line vanish uncounted.

Noa made a damp snuffling sound. I shifted her against my chest. My shirt pulled at dried milk. My abdomen cramped as if my body objected to the words donor relations entering the same file as my baby’s mother field. Fair.

The private clinic folder was worse because it pretended to be cleaner. The forms had pale logos, tidy boxes, and redactions that left visible only the language they thought harmless-coordinated care pathway, maternal environment planning, support schedule, intended-parent review.

I remembered the private clinic waiting room from months ago: the glass bowl of wrapped mints, the pale chairs, the receptionist who already had the folder waiting before I had consented to anything. I remembered Maia Rell’s face when she realized I understood the tab labels. I remembered the staff-exit key card warming in my palm like a small illegal miracle.

The production made that day feel less like a scene I had survived and more like a room still running somewhere without me. The same words, the same softness, the same assumption that if they said coordination enough times, I would forget the cage.

I did not forget. Forgetting had become a luxury item – it belonged to people whose worst paperwork stayed in drawers and whose children were not footnotes in someone else’s planned posture.

“There,” I said.

Anika stopped scrolling. The visible line sat halfway down PMC-019.

Intended-parent review initiated prior to delivery.

Prior to delivery. The page gave no name. The page gave enough.

211 Lucky Teen Patti free spin

AO

A

She rooted again. Life insisted. I helped her latch with hands that no longer felt like mine.

Anika read the visible lines because I could not hold the baby and the page and my breath at once. “Pre-delivery review requested by family counsel regarding maternal designation, postpartum contact structure, and intended-parent status for infant expected from Aveline Ashby”

Infant expected from Aveline Ashby. Not my daughter. Not Noa. Expected from-like produce, like delivery in the commercial sense.

Maris said, “Names visible?”

“Aveline Ashby visible. Dario Armitage visible in distribution. Mathias Vey visible on copied administrative request. Celine...” Anika stopped.

“Read it.”

Anika swallowed. “Celine Armitage visible. Full name. Not initials.”

Good. Some bitter part of me was relieved. No dangling initials for anyone to argue over, no ambiguity dressed as mystery. Celine Armitage her whole public name, on a page discussing intended-parent status for the infant expected from my body before Noa had even taken her first breath.

“Read the whole visible line,” Maris said.

Anika did. “Family counsel requested confirmation whether Celine Armitage’s intended-parent status remains the preferred administrative posture pending delivery and postpartum review.”

The room had no air.

Bennett moved – not toward me. Toward the window. He opened it 2 inches because the room was too warm and because asking whether I needed air would have required me to speak. Cold January entered.

Noa settled at my breast, offended by nothing except milk speed.

“That date,” I said.

“January 12,” Anika said.

“Before my water broke.”

“Yes,”

“Before Dario’s birth-status fax.”

“Yes.”

“Before Celine’s signature in the record correction note.”

“Before the January 19 birth,” Maris said. “Before Noa Ashby existed as a live birth record. That matters.”

It mattered legally. It mattered bodily. On January 12, I had still been pregnant-heavy, exhausted, counting movements, checking the hospital bag, sleeping in fragments, trying to trust that the protected route would hold. On January 12, somewhere in a clinic file, people had discussed what administrative posture they preferred for the baby expected from me.

Not after a crisis. Not because the birth had created confusion. Before. Planned.

“Can we file this tonight?” I asked.

“We preserve first,” Maris said.

Lucky Teen Patti free spin

“Then file.”

“We preserve first.”

I looked at the page until the words blurred. Black bars had made me angry. The visible sentence made me cold.

“He knew,” I said.

No one asked which he. Dario. Mathias. The machine – all the men and offices that had treated my pregnancy like a pending/asset waiting for administrative posture.

Noa unlatched again and fell asleep with milk on her cheek. I wiped it with the edge of the blanket. My hand shook.

This time, Bennett did not offer his hand. He put the cup of warm water closer. I drank because strategy required a throat.

Then Anika’s email chimed again. The subject line was from Armitage counsel.

URGENT: CLAWBACK NOTICE REGARDING INADVERTENT PRODUCTION.

Maris said, “Do not close the file.”

I looked at the unredacted page. Dario had noticed the door.

End of chapter-

AQ free spin

관 Lucky Teen Patti

The wife isn't me

Chapter 72

“Nobody forwards it.”

Maris’s voice cut through the room so cleanly that even Nos startled. I put my hand on my daughter’s chest and felt the fast/offended rhythmn under my palm.

“Easy,” I whispered. The word was for her- it reached me by accident.

“Nobody prints again. Nobody screenshots from a phone. Nobody texts a picture to anyone. Nobody sends it to Rhea Kwan, CityGlass, your aunt, your worst enemy, or God. We preserve chain of custody or we hand Dario the argument that the page became contaminated the moment it hurt him.”

The clawback notice sat on Anika’s laptop, 1 window behind the unredacted page. It had arrived 4 minutes after we opened the wrong-folder document.

4 minutes. Dario's people could not answer a hospital correction demand for days, but they could hear a misproduced truth scream from across the internet in 4 minutes. That timing told its own story – not the whole story, but enough to make my pulse count it.

There were systems that moved slowly because they were careful. There were systems that moved slowly because delay served power. Dario's system had just shown me the difference – it could sprint when the wound was his.

My body wanted speed. Not metaphorical speed-physical. Adrenaline made my fingers too hot. My feet pushed against the floor as if I could stand, cross the city, and press the page against every glass door in St. Orla until the hospital read its own words aloud.

Pre-delivery review requested by family counsel. Maternal designation. Postpartum contact structure. Intended-parent status. Celine Armitage's intended-parent status. Before Noa's birth. Before my water broke. Before anyone could pretend confusion.

"I want it filed," I said.

"It will be," Maris said.

"Now."

"Not by panic."

"Do not call this panic."

The room held still. Noa made a small sound under my hand. That stopped me more effectively than any lawyer could have.

I looked down. Her eyes were closed. Her mouth was soft, damp from milk. A red mark from the swaddle seam crossed 1 cheek and would fade in 10 minutes because her skin had not learned permanence yet. Everything else in the room had.

Maris lowered her voice. "I am not calling you panicked. I am saying they want you to act quickly in a way they can characterize as reckless. They sent a clawback notice because they know the page matters. That makes preservation more important, not less."

"They made the page," I said.

"Yes."

"They sent the page."

Lucky Teen Patti free spin

DEA

“Yes.”

“They noticed only after we saw it.”

“Yes.”

“Then I want all 3 of those facts in the log.”

Anika typed before Maris answered.

“Good,” Maris said.

The approval sounded small, but it gave me something to grip that was not the laptop, not Noa, not Bennett’s silence near the window. I had gripped too many things in the last 72 hours-bed rails, court benches, the edge of a bathroom sink while blood moved heavily and Noa cried from the wrap, my own anger, because if I set it down even briefly, someone would ask whether I had calmed enough to cooperate.

Cooperate had become another word with polished shoes. It meant open the door. It meant wait. It meant let the people who made the page decide whether the page existed.

I was finished cooperating with erasure.

Anika was already documenting. Received: 7:46 PM. Opened read copy: 7:52 PM. Participants present: Aveline Ashby, Isolde Fane, Anika Senn, Bennett Bellamy at threshold, Maris Keene by secure call. Original file untouched after opening. Hash generated. Read copy preserved. Clawback received 7:56 PM. No external dissemination. No further review pending counsel instruction.

It sounded dry enough to survive. I hated it for that. The dry language did not carry the smell of milk on my shirt or the thin, sour edge of fear under my tongue. It did not carry the bassinet sheet bunched on 1 side because Noa had kicked herself diagonal again. It did not carry Isolde’s face when she read Celine’s name on the page.

Maybe that was why it could survive. Maybe survival, on paper, required leaving most of the blood outside the sentence.

Bennett stood by the window, which was still open 2 inches. Cold air moved around the room and lifted the corner of the St. Orla letter. He had not spoken since the clawback arrived. That restraint was its own kind of presence. Dario would have filled the silence until his preferred action became the only one anyone could imagine. Bennett let the silence stay large enough for me to choose inside it.

I looked at him. “You have an opinion.”

He did not pretend not to. “Yes.”

“Say it.”

His eyes moved from Noa to me, then to the laptop, then back. He kept his hands in his pockets, not casual, just contained. “Preserve first,” he said. “Let Maris make the page admissible before anyone makes it famous.”

The answer irritated me because it was exactly Maris’s answer in fewer words and a warmer voice. “That is convenient for everyone with a public name to protect.”

Isolde inhaled. Bennett did not flinch. Good-I wanted him to deserve the edge if he was going to stand near it.

“It is inconvenient for me,” he said. “I would rather put the page in front of every donor pretending this is a misunderstanding. But that would feel good for 6 hours and then give Dario 6 months of argument about improper disclosure, medical privacy, and prejudice.”

He paused – not to soften, to make sure I still wanted the rest. I did.

“You have enough men using your daughter’s records as leverage,” he said. “I do not want to become another one by telling you spectacle is strategy because I am angry.”

Lucky Teen Patti free spin

2/5 AO

CREA

The room went quiet again. Noa stretched under my hand. I looked away first – not because he had won, because the answer had lande landy- where anger could not pretend not to hear it. My arms were shaking again, and Noa deserved steadier walls than rage could build

–

“I want them hurt,” I said.

“I know.”

“Not later. Now.”

“I know.”

“You do not, actually.”

This time something moved in his face. Pain, maybe. Or memory. Not mine to take apart.

“Not the way you do,” he said. “No.”

That was the only acceptable answer.

Maris cleared her throat softly, which was lawyer for I am allowing this humanity 12 more seconds. “The page shows pre-birth intended-parent discussion,” she said. “It does not by itself prove the final legal theory, who authorized every step, or whether St. Orla adopted the posture. It s powerful because it connects timing, names, and administrative intent. We need the surrounding pages, metadata, distribution logs, and testimony.”

“They will seal it.”

“They will try.”

“They will say it was privileged.”

“They already are.”

“They will say I should not have read it.”

“You received it under court-ordered production. You opened a produced file before clawback. That is why we are documenting sequence.”

Sequence. Again. Truth was not only what happened – it was the order in which nobody could credibly deny it happened.

Noa began rooting again because she was a newborn and did not care that the history of her erasure had entered the room. She cared that the breast had moved too far from her mouth.

“All right,” I whispered to her.

The latch hurt less this time. Or I had gone numb around the useful parts. Anika turned the laptop slightly away while I adjusted, not because the page needed privacy, but because I did.

Isolde sat on the edge of the bed for the first time in hours. She looked tired enough to become honest.

“I wanted to send it to Rhea,” she said.

“I know.”

“I had the text open in my head.”

“Me too.”

“Mine had worse language.”

Lucky Teen Patti free spin

AO

KHA

“Probably.”

She reached over and touched Noa’s foot through the blanket. One finger, light. “We wait?”

The question was not for Maris, not for Bennett. For me.

I looked at the unredacted page. There was Celine’s name, full and visible. There was mine. There was Noa reduced to infant expected from Aveline Ashby, which made my body remember being pregnant so violently that for a second I could feel the old weight under my ribs, the heel against my side, the private shifts nobody had been entitled to document before they learned her name.

I thought of Celine in St. Orla, 34 weeks and 2 days, under donor cameras, her newborn son breathing with help while her own father asked whether the Noa issue was contained. I thought of Dario whispering my daughter after obeying every visible rule. I thought of Bennett’s hand, open in court, and how he had let me release it before anyone could build a cage from the picture.

Patience had always sounded passive to me-like waiting, like enduring, like being told not yet by people who already had what they wanted. This was different. This patience had teeth. It held the page still so it could bite in the right place.

“We preserve,” I said.

Maris exhaled. Anika typed the instruction into the log. Isolde’s shoulders lowered. Bennett looked at the floor, and I had the strange, unhelpful thought that he was proud of me and trying not to make that my burden.

“But,” I said.

Everyone looked up.

“We do not let them bury it quietly. We respond to the clawback. We ask the judge to review the page in camera, compel the surrounding records, and prohibit destruction or substitution. We state that the page was produced in the wrong folder and opened before notice. We do not apologize for reading what they sent.”

Maris’s voice warmed by half a degree. “That is the motion.”

“Then file that.”

“Tonight.”

“Good.”

Bennett moved toward the door. “I will get more tea.”

“Peppermint?” I asked before I could stop myself.

He paused. The old apartment had a peppermint mug – Dario had bought it after I said coffee smelled like betrayal. For a second, the room held that ghost.

Bennett did not ask why my face changed. “I brought ginger too,” he said. “You choose.”

There it was again – small, almost nothing. Choice returned in a paper cup.

“Ginger,” I said.

He nodded and left.

Maris drafted the response while Noa fed herself to sleep. The motion was not dramatic. It did not accuse everyone of everything. It asked for preservation, judicial review, surrounding production, and a temporary bar on sealing or clawing back factual portions until the court determined privilege and relevance.

Oil Lucky Teen Patti

CA

At 9:11 PM, Anika filed it. At 9:19 PM, Dario’s counsel filed first anyway. Not a response – an emergency motion.

Maris read the title aloud. Motion to Seal Inadvertently Produced Confidential Family-Status Material.

Noa slept through the words. I did not.

mil Lucky Teen Patti

Fad of chapter

The wife isn't me

Chapter 73

Noa felt too warm against my chest before the thermometer proved anything.

That was the first terror – not the screen, not Dario, not St. Orla or the page dated January 12 sitting inside a court file while lawyers argued about whether I had been allowed to see the truth they had accidentally sent me.

My daughter was hot.

Her cheek pressed under my collarbone, soft and furious, and the heat of her skin went through the thin cotton of my shirt as if someone had put a secret there. I had been trying to wake enough to change her. The room was dim. The lamp on the table made a shallow yellow circle over the feeding log, the diaper stack, the bottle of pain medicine, and the paper cup of ginger tea Bennett had left untouched beside me because I had fallen asleep before drinking it.

Noa made a sound that was not a cry-a small scrape. Then nothing.

I sat up too fast. Pain pulled low through my body, bright and punishing. My stitches answered. Milk let down so suddenly it stung, and a damp circle spread through the front of my shirt. For 2 seconds I could not decide which part of me was failing first.

“Noa,” I whispered.

She was breathing. I put 2 fingers against her chest because I needed proof I could feel. Her ribs rose in quick little lifts. Her mouth moved once, searching, then stopped. Her eyes stayed closed.

The discharge nurse had said newborns slept hard. The pediatric line had said call for poor feeding, fewer wet diapers, fever, color change, floppiness, anything that felt wrong. Anything that felt wrong was a useless sentence when everything about a newborn was new enough to frighten you.

I reached for the digital thermometer with a hand that had forgotten how to be steady. Underarm first-that was what the hospital sheet said if I was only checking.

I tucked it where the tiny sleeve opened and held her arm gently against her side. Noa protested at last, a thin angry complaint that should have comforted me. It did not. The sound was too small for the size of the fear it opened.

The thermometer beeped. 99.8.

I stared. I knew enough to know that underarm could read low. I knew enough to know that newborn fever was not a wait-and-see thing. I also knew I was 2 days postpartum, bleeding into a pad too quickly because I had sat up wrong, wearing a shirt full of milk,

and suddenly responsible for deciding whether my 2-day-old daughter was sick enough to go back into a medical system that had already tried to misplace her mother.

“Isolde,” I said. My voice came out wrong.

She woke on the couch before I said her name a second time. The blanket slipped off her shoulder. She was already reaching for her phone.

“What happened?”

“She feels hot.”

Noa made the scrape sound again. Isolde came to me barefoot, hair crushed flat on 1 side, face awake in the way panic makes people awake. She did not touch Noa first- she looked at me.

Word Search – Word Puzzle Game

مو ضع ک ے م نزا دل چ سب اذ تہائ ی

STEA

“Tell me numbers.”

“Underarm 99.8. She fed at 9:40. Only 9 minutes. Wet diaper at 8:55. Stool at 6:10. She would not latch again when I tried at 10:30.”

“Good. Keep talking.”

Good. The word almost broke me because it was not good. It was organized. Those were different things.

Isolde called the pediatric line on speaker. I held Noa against me and tried to feel if the heat was worse under her hat, at her neck, behind her knees. Newborn skin was a betrayal of scale so much could happen inside a body smaller than my forearm.

A nurse answered at 10:47 PM. Isolde gave my name only after I nodded. She gave Noa’s date of birth, January 19, then paused when the nurse asked for the birth hospital.

I had to say it. “Protected birth hospital,” I said. “Not St. Orla.”

There was a tiny silence on the line. “I need the infant’s current temperature and symptoms,” the nurse said.

I respected her for it – she did not ask why my hospital answer sounded like evidence.

“Underarm 99.8,” I said. “She feels warmer than that. Poor feeding for the last attempt. Breathing is fast but not labored, I think. Color is normal. Wet diaper within 2 hours. She is 2 days old.”

“For a newborn under 28 days, any rectal temperature of 100.4 Fahrenheit or higher is urgent. If you are comfortable taking a rectal temperature, I can walk you through it. If you are not, go to pediatric emergency now. Given poor feeding and your concern, I do not want you waiting until morning.”

My body went cold under the milk. Isolde was already moving.

“I can take it,” I said.

The nurse talked me through petroleum jelly, clean cover, shallow insertion, stillness, and stopping if there was resistance. My hands shook so badly that Isolde laid 2 fingers on my wrist.

“Breathe before you do anything,” she said.

I wanted to tell her breathing was a hobby for people whose babies were not warm. Instead I breathed.

Noa hated the thermometer. She kicked 1 leg free of the blanket and made a red furious face. The cry that came out of her was stronger than the scrape sound. I had never been so grateful to be yelled at.

The beep took an entire year. 100.2.

Not the number the nurse had named. Too close to it to be mercy.

“100.2 rectal,” I said.

“With poor feeding and age 2 days, I want her assessed tonight,” the nurse said. “Do you have a safe transport route?”

The question hit harder than it should have. Safe route-not car seat, not warm blanket. Route. Because my daughter’s fever could not simply be fever. It had to move through doors, names, desks, records, notices, permissions, a world full of people who thought access was a thing you could take if you sounded concerned enough.

“Yes,” I lied first. Then I corrected myself because Noa deserved accuracy. “We have a route, but there are privacy risks.”

“Then bring her to the pediatric emergency entrance at Westport Children’s Receiving,” the nurse said. “I am placing a call-ahead note with infant fever concern, poor feeding, and privacy hold. Who is authorized to receive updates?”

Word Search – Word Puzzle Game

والے ہو ضوع کے ہے منزل دلچسپ اندتہائی

A

“Me,” I said. My voice steadied around the word. “Aveline Ashby. No one else without my verbal consent. Isolde Fane may help with transfon – Counsel line for legal notices. No Dario Armitage. No Celine Armitage. No Armitage Foundation. No St. Orla continuity office.

The nurse typed for a while. “I am reading that back.”

She did. Every name landed like a lock sliding home.

At the end, she said, “Do you want emergency contact listed?”

I looked at Isolde. She shook her head once, not because she did not want to be there, but because emergency contact had become a door people could pry open.

“Counsel line only,” I said.

“Understood.”

The call ended at 10:56. The room changed shape.

Isolde packed with brutal efficiency. Diapers, wipes, a clean sleeper, the formula sample the discharge nurse had sent in case panic and exhaustion made nursing impossible for 1 feed. My medication. My discharge packet. Noa’s birth record copy. The feeding log.

I stood and nearly sat back down. Blood shifted hot and humiliating between my thighs.

“Pad,” Isolde said. “Then pants.”

“The car seat.”

“I have it.”

“Her hat.”

“In the bag.”

“The papers.”

“I said I have it.”

“If they ask for father information…”

Isolde stopped in front of me. “Aveline.”

Noa fussed against my shoulder. My body wanted to fold around her and never move again. My mind kept trying to leave the fever and run ahead to the desk, the forms, the possible imported field that would make Dario a person with a button to press.

“She is warm now,” Isolde said. “This minute is baby. The paperwork is next minute,”

I hated that she was right.

I changed the pad with 1 hand braced against the sink, teeth clenched against the pull low in my abdomen. I washed my hands twice. Then I changed Noa’s diaper because the old one had a faint blue line and I needed 1 more fact to carry. Wet. No stool. 10:59 PM. I wrote it down.

Bennett was waiting in the hallway by 11:03, coat over one arm, phone in his hand, not inside the room. Isolde must have called him. Of course she had.

For a second, anger flared because another person knew. Then Noa made that small scrape sound again, and the anger burned down to ash before it could find anyone to blame.

Word Search – Word Puzzle Game

O

CHA

“I have a car downstairs,” Bennett said. “Driver does not have your destination in writing. Westport Children’s Receiving already has the ahead from the pediatric line. I also called Maris to wake the counsel line in case the desk needs legal language.”

He did not ask to hold Noa. He did not step toward me. He looked at the bundle in my arms, and something moved through his face so quickly he had hidden it before it could become mine to manage.

“Do you want me behind you or out of sight?” he asked.

That should not have made my throat hurt. “Behind us,” I said. “Not at the desk unless I ask.”

“Done.”

The elevator ride was 4 floors and endless. Noa's heat seeped through the blanket. I kept touching her cheek, her chest, the back of her neck. Bennett stood angled near the elevator doors so he could exit first and check the hall without blocking me. Isolde held the bag and the ca seat base strap, muttering through the list under her breath.

At the curb, cold air cut through my wet shirt and made Noa cry again. Good, I thought, savage and useless. Cry at all of us.

The car smelled faintly of leather and rain. Bennett opened the rear door and stepped back. Isolde secured the car seat because my hands were too clumsy, then waited while I leaned over Noa and counted the buckle clicks myself. 1. 2. Chest clip at armpit level. Hat on. Blanket clear of her face.

At 11:16 PM, we pulled away from the safe housing curb.

My phone vibrated before we reached the second light. Unknown number. Then Maris Keene's name.

I answered because my fear had no room left for manners.

"Noa first," Maris said. "Tell me only whether you are en route."

"We are."

"Good. The pediatric line's call-ahead generated a notice in the newborn record. Dario's counsel has already sent a demand for real-time emergency updates and pediatric portal access based on alleged paternal notice rights."

The streetlights smeared across the window. Noa slept in the car seat, too warm and too small, while men in suits reached for the door her fever had opened.

"No," I said.

"I have not responded yet," Maris said. "I wanted your instruction."

My body hurt. Milk dried cold on my shirt. Blood moved when the car turned. I wanted my daughter assessed, fed, cooled, held, safe. I wanted every form in the world to burn before it put Dario closer to her.

"Tell them this is a pediatric emergency," I said. "Not an access opportunity."

Maris was quiet for half a second. "I will."

Then my phone chimed with the hospital intake link. Under authorized users, 1 line had already appeared in gray:

Dario Armitage – pending access review.

Word Search – Word Puzzle Game

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 74

The pediatric desk asked me for Noa’s father while my daughter lay under a heat lamp with a hospital bracelet around her ankle.

I heard the question. I understood every word. Still, for 1 full breath, my body refused to answer.

Noa had been weighed, unwrapped, listened to, pricked, and watched. Her rectal temperature at intake was 100.1, lower than the line no one wanted to cross and high enough that no one in the room had relaxed. A nurse named Odette had counted her respirations twice. A resident had asked about feeding, wet diapers, birth timing, my Group B strep result, rupture of membranes, discharge weight, bilirubin, and whether anyone at home had fever.

I had answered all of it. My milk had let down during the questions, through the second nursing pad, through the shirt I should have changed before leaving. I had bled through the edge of my pad because emergency rooms did not care that birth was not finished with the mother after the baby arrived.

Noa cared even less. She rooted against my finger and then fell asleep before she could latch. That frightened me more than the number.

The triage nurse noticed. “We will have lactation come down if she does not wake for the next attempt,” Odette said. “Right now the physician wants labs and observation. You did the right thing bringing her in.”

You did the right thing. I almost hated her for giving me the sentence too late to prevent the drive. Then she led us to a smaller curtained bay away from the main desk, and I forgave her a little.

Isolde stood by the bag. Bennett stood outside the curtain where I had placed him, near enough that I could see his shoes under the fabric and far enough that no one could make him the answer to a family question. Maris was on the phone with the hospital privacy office, using a voice so calm it made everyone around her lower theirs.

The clerk at the pediatric desk held a tablet and repeated herself. “For the infant record, do you want to list father information?”

I looked at the screen. The line was not blank-that was the insult. It had a gray pending field, not fully active, but present enough to make my stomach turn.

Dario Armitage biological father access review pending.

“No,” I said.

–

–

“I can leave emergency contact blank, but this line came through with the notice from counsel.”

“Then counsel can take it back out.”

The clerk’s face changed. Not hostile – cautious. The face of someone who had found a legal hole under an ordinary form.

“I am not authorized to remove a pending access review,” she said. “I can send it to patient privacy.”

“Send it,” I said. “And I want every access attempt in writing. Time, user, route, reason code, and whether any information was viewed.”

She blinked. People did that when a woman with blood on her clothes and milk through her shirt spoke like a filing cabinet had learned pain.

“I can note that you requested an audit trail.”

“Do not note it as a preference. I am refusing access. I am asking for a written access-attempt log. My daughter is 2 days old. I am her mother.

Word Search – Word Puzzle Game

No one else is authorized for her pediatric portal, emergency updates, discharge summary, lab results, or messaging

Odette, still beside the scale, looked up. The clerk lowered the tablet. “I will get the privacy officer.”

“Thank you.”

She left through the glass door. My knees shook.

“..

I had been standing too long. The chair beside the bay was too low and too hard, but I sat because I could not drop my daughter. Noa was not in my arms then – she lay in the clear bassinet with 1 heel wrapped in gauze and 1 hand curled near her face as if she were refusing the foom on principle.

Her skin looked less hot under the lamp. Or I was lying to myself because I needed 1 lie that did not belong to Dario.

Isolde crouched beside me. “Eat this.”

She handed me half a granola bar.

“I can’t.”

“Then hold it until your body remembers.”

I held it.

Bennett’s voice came from outside the curtain. “Aveline?”

“Yes.”

“I know someone who audits pediatric privacy systems. She worked on newborn portal separations after a hospital merger went badly. She owes Bellamy a favor, which means she does not get your information unless you say so. If you want her involved, Maris can route it through counsel. If you do not, I do nothing.”

I closed my eyes. That was warmth in this strange new language – not a rescue, not a solution dropped into my lap like a debt, but a door with the handle facing me.

“Name?” I asked.

“Dr. Elian Park.”

“What would she see?”

“Only what you authorize. Access logs, configuration screens, portal invitation routes, metadata. Not Noa’s medical details unless Maris decides a limited excerpt is needed and you agree.”

Maris appeared at the curtain opening with her phone at her ear. “I heard that,” she said. “I can set it as a narrow technical review, not medical- record review. Aveline, your

consent must be written. We can make the scope 3 questions: who created the pending access line, whether anyone authenticated under it, and whether any data was viewed or exported."

Noa made a small sound. Everything inside me turned toward the bassinet.

Odette was already there, lifting her gently. "She is waking," Odette said. "Do you want to try feeding?"

Yes. The answer came from below language.

I took Noa and adjusted the blanket around her. My hands were better when they touched the baby-not steady, exactly, but loyal. She rooted clumsily. I helped her latch. Pain flashed through my nipple, sharp enough to pull tears into my eyes.

Word Search – Word Puzzle Game

Then she sucked. Once. Again. A thin rhythm. The entire world narrowed to the movement of her jaw

I counted because counting gave fear a task. 3 swallows. Then 5. Then the small pause where her mouth stayed latched but her body forgot why it had come there.

"Rub her back," Odette said softly. "Not hard. Just remind her."

I stroked 1 finger along the warm ridge of Noa's spine through the hospital blanket. She answered with another suck, offended but willing, and I bent my head over her so no one would see what my face did.

There should have been privacy for a mother learning her child in a room full of machines. There was a curtain. I decided to treat it as enough

I did not sign anything while she fed. That felt important – Noa came first, the paper waited.

When she slowed, Odette checked her latch, counted swallows, and wrote down 7 minutes before Noa slipped into sleep again.

"Better," the nurse said. "Not as strong as I want, but better."

"How many wet diapers should she have by now?" I asked.

"Day 2, at least 2 wet diapers in 24 hours is the minimum marker, but we look at the whole picture. You logged more than that. Good stool earlier. We will keep watching, and the physician will decide after labs."

The word labs made my skin go tight.

“Blood?”

“Small sample. I know it is hard.”

Hard was watching a nurse clean the heel of a person who still seemed assembled out of breath. Hard was Noa’s cry when the lancet clicked. Hard was not flinching away from my own baby because my body wanted to run from the sound.

I bent over the bassinet and put my finger in her palm. “I am here,” I said.

Noa held on with impossible strength.

The privacy officer arrived while the lab sample was being labeled. He was a compact man in a navy cardigan with a badge that read Patient Privacy Westport Children’s Receiving. He introduced himself as Mr. Leto and spoke to me, not Bennett, not Maris, not the empty field where Dario wanted to stand.

“Ms. Ashby, we have put a manual hold on the infant portal pending review. No active caregiver portal is visible to external users at this moment.”

“What does visible to external users mean?”

He did not look offended by the question. “It means no one outside our staff network can log in and see the chart through the family portal. Internal clinical staff can access for care. Privacy staff can access for audit. No external caregiver account is active.”

“Pending access?”

“There is a request tied to a counsel notice. It is not approved.”

“Who entered it?”

“I am checking.”

Maris stepped closer. “My client is requesting a written access-attempt record.”

Word Search – Word Puzzle Game

<apter 24

“We can produce an internal log summary.”

“No,” I said. Mr. Leto looked back to me.

“I want it in writing as an access-attempt record, not a reassurance. If the system makes a door, I want to know who touched it.

For a second, he looked tired – not tired of me, tired of systems pretending doors were walls until someone walked through

“Understood.”

Maris handed me the consent form for Dr. Elian Park on her tablet. It was 1 page. She had kept it narrow, as promised. I read every line. Nea slept in the bassinet, fist still angry even in sleep. I signed with my finger at 12:18 AM.

Bennett stayed outside the curtain. I heard him make 1 call. He gave no medical details. He said, “Narrow technical review, counsel channel, no family portal content.” Then, after a pause, “She gave written consent.”

Not / got it. Not We have access. She gave written consent. The distinction sat beside me like a cup of water I could actually drink.

Dr. Park called Maris at 12:41. The voice on speaker was brisk, female, and awake enough to be frightening.

“I am looking at the metadata export Mr. Leto sent. The pending caregiver line was created through an external legal-notice intake queue, no by bedside registration. It copied identity fields from the notice rather than the mother’s registration packet.”

“Can it be blocked?” Maris asked.

“Already blocked manually. The problem is that someone then tried to authenticate against the pending line.”

My hand went cold around the edge of the chair.

“Authenticate?” I asked.

Dr. Park’s voice softened by a fraction. “Someone attempted to create or enter a caregiver portal account tied to that pending access route.”

“Did they see anything?”

“I am checking view events now. I do not see chart data viewed through that route, but I do see an unauthorized login attempt at 12:06 AM.”

At 12:06 AM, I had been standing beside the bassinet while Odette warmed Noa’s heel for the blood sample. Noa had been crying with her whole red face. I had been saying, “I am here,” as if my voice could be a roof.

At 12:06 AM, someone had tried a door – not in the hallway, not with a key card or a hand on a knob. In a record, where a newborn's tear became a route.

"Put that timestamp in the written summary," I said.

"Already done," Dr. Park said.

"And the fact that I had refused access before that."

"Yes."

"And that Noa's chart was not viewed."

Maris looked at me then. I knew what she heard. I was protecting the fact as much as the harm. No exaggeration, no wishful injury. Dario would have taken one inflated sentence and made the whole night about my panic instead of his reach.

Word Search – Word Puzzle Game

AO

KYEA

Dr. Park said, "The summary will state attempted authentication only. No chart view event detected through that route"

Noa slept through the sentence. The room did not.

MakeReader – Read Book & Story

End of chapter

AQ

The wife isn't me

Chapter 75

KA

Chapter 75 – First Public Cost

Bennett lost the donor at 7:12 AM, while the pediatric bay still smelled faintly of antiseptic and warmed formula.

He read the message once. Then he put the phone face down on the staff counter and looked through the glass at the woman in the curtained room who had not slept longer than 20 minutes in 3 days.

Aveline sat with Noa against her chest, 1 hand cupped over the baby's back, the other holding a small plastic bottle she had not wanted to need. The pediatric team had decided Noa could take a measured supplement after nursing, not because Aveline had failed, but because a 2- day-old body with a borderline temperature did not care about adult pride. Odette had said it that plainly. Aveline had nodded once, jaw tight, and fed her daughter.

Bennett had watched her absorb the instruction without turning it into surrender. That was the thing about Aveline Ashby that kept moving under his ribs – she did not confuse help with ownership, even when exhaustion made every offer dangerous.

He picked up the phone again.

The donor was Elden Rhys, through the Rhys Family Health Trust, a clean-money donor by public reputation and a dirty-pressure donor by private habit. He had been circling Bellamy's maternal access fund for 8 months, promising a 7-figure commitment if Bennett would give him a branded rural transport pilot, 2 board seats, and enough naming language to mistake charity for real estate.

Bennett had been prepared to refuse the board seats and negotiate the rest. Now the message made negotiation irrelevant.

Given your organization's visible entanglement in the Armitage domestic matter, we are pausing all discussions. We cannot support a funder that appears to finance personal litigation against families connected to our hospital partners. I trust you understand reputational discipline.

Reputational discipline. Bennett could feel the old familiar anger try to become useful too fast. He did not let it. Useful anger made clean mistakes if you gave it keys before breakfast.

He copied the message to Bellamy legal, then sent it to his chief of staff, Reina Sol, with 1 line:

Need staff meeting at 8:00. Full team. No donor spin.

Reina answered in 20 seconds. Is the baby okay?

He looked through the glass again. Noa's face was turned toward Aveline's collar, dark hair damp from the knit cap, mouth working in tiny stubborn pulls at the bottle nipple. Aveline's shirt had a milk stain under the borrowed cardigan. Her hair was coming loose at her neck. She looked pale, sore, furious, and more present than half the directors Bennett had watched make million-dollar promises under chandeliers.

Under observation. Fever concern. Aveline first. Donor after.

Reina sent back: Understood. 8:00.

He did not smile. But his chest loosened.

Maris stepped out from the curtain with her laptop tucked under 1 arm. “Dr. Park confirmed no chart data was viewed through the unauthorized attempt,” she said quietly. “She is drafting the technical summary now. Mr. Leto will preserve logs. The hospital blocked the pending route.”

“Good.”

MeboReader – Read Book & Story

AO

“Noa?”

“Still being observed. They may discharge after another stable temperature and feeding if labs remain reassuring.”

Maris nodded. She had the face of a lawyer who had learned not to call any medical sentence good until the doctor did.

“Dario’s counsel is already framing the access attempt as a technical misunderstanding arising from emergency notice.”

“Of course he is.”

“Aveline has not seen that yet.”

“Do not show her until Noa is medically clear unless she asks.”

Maris studied him. Bennett kept his hands on the counter where she could see them. “That is not an instruction,” he said. “It is a request to counsel.”

“I know the difference.”

“Good.”

Maris’s expression gentled in a way that did not soften her voice. “Your donor called?”

“Wrote. Pulled.”

“Because of this?”

“Because Bellamy is visible near this.”

“Do you want me to wall your organization off harder?”

The answer should have been yes. He was responsible for 43 employees, 6 active funds, 2 clinics that ran on paper-thin cash flow, a transport program that got pregnant women to care in counties where the nearest hospital had closed its maternity unit, and enough donor vanity to power a small city.

Aveline had not asked him to risk any of it. That mattered. The cost was not proof of romance if she had not chosen it. But neither was institutional cowardice proof of neutrality.

“No,” Bennett said. “Wall her information off. Do not wall off our principles.”

Maris looked at him for a long second. “That sentence will be expensive.”

“I know.”

He did. The first cost had arrived with a timestamp and a polite subject line. It would not be the last.

At 7:46, Odette came out to say Noa’s latest temperature was 99.4 and the physician wanted 1 more feeding before deciding. Bennett took the update as far as the curtain and stopped.

“Aveline?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Do you want breakfast now, or should I leave it with Isolde?”

There was a pause. Then her voice, hoarse with no sleep. “Leave it. I may hate everyone who asks me to chew.”

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

AQ

“Reasonable.”

Isolde’s dry laugh came through the curtain.

Bennett set the bag on the chair outside. Oatmeal, eggs, toast, fruit, ginger tea – peppermint belonged to another room and he had learned the difference without needing the story.

Then he left the hospital for the first time since midnight.

The Bellamy offices at 8:00 were too bright. Morning came through the old factory windows, catching on maps, clinic schedules, pinned transport routes, and the long worktables where staff had gathered in uneven clusters. Some held coffee. Some held phones. All of them had the charged stillness of people who knew something had gone wrong before leadership had decided what language to give it.

Bennett stood at the end of the table. Reina sat to his right with the donor message printed in front of her. He did not take the head chair he never did for bad news.

“Elden Rhys has withdrawn from the maternal access fund discussions,” Bennett said. No easing in, no warmup, no lie by omission.

Around the table, breath shifted. Tomas from clinic logistics swore under his breath. June, who handled rural partner grants, closed her eyes for 1 second. Dev from finance wrote something down and then stopped writing because there was nothing useful to calculate yet.

Reina folded her hands. Bennett continued.

“His stated reason is Bellamy’s visible involvement in Aveline Ashby’s matter and the appearance that we are financing personal litigation against families connected to hospital partners.”

“Are we?” Dev asked. It was not hostile – it was the right question.

“No,” Bennett said. “Bellamy Ventures Community Health Fund supports emergency filing fees, certified copies, document storage, safe transport, housing extensions, and referral infrastructure through approved channels. We do not control Aveline’s legal strategy. We do not receive her medical records, location information, portal access, or case details without consent.”

“But you are personally involved,” Tomas said.

“Yes.”

The room did not move. Bennett let the word stay bare.

“I am involved because Dario Armitage used donor networks, hospital access, and legal pressure to try to turn a pregnant woman into an administrative inconvenience. I am involved because our funding model exists for the moment when money becomes the difference between a person having choices and being forced back into someone else’s system. I am also involved because Aveline Ashby has repeatedly decided what help she accepts, and we have respected that. If any of that creates a conflict for your role here, say it now or say it privately to Reina by noon.”

June opened her eyes. “What does Rhys pulling mean?”

“Short term, a smaller launch reserve. The programs already funded continue. We cut the branded pilot he wanted, not the transport vouchers already approved. Dev and Reina will revise the forecast by tomorrow.”

Dev nodded once, already unhappy in numbers.

“Will more donors pull?” someone asked from the far side.

“Likely.”

That word landed harder than Bennett expected. Good – it should. Visible cost was not theater if the people carrying payroll did not get to see it.

AQ

Reader – Read Book & Story

KITA

“I will not ask staff to pretend this is costless,” he said. “I will not ask anyone to smile through a donor room and say we are noncontroverfar while we quietly help a woman whose child was almost routed into an unauthorized family record. And I will not tell Aveline Ashby to make herself less visible so our donors feel cleaner.”

Reina looked at him then. He had worked with her long enough to read the warning-that sentence was not staying inside this room unless every person here decided to make it stay. He accepted that before he finished speaking.

“What I am asking,” Bennett said, “is that you separate the case facts from gossip. Do not repeat medical details. Do not speculate about the baby. Do not turn a newborn into a slogan. If you cannot stay on the work without making Aveline pay for your discomfort, step off this file and we will reassign you. There will be no punishment for saying you need distance.”

Silence. Then June lifted a hand. “Is the baby okay?”

Bennett’s throat tightened before he could stop it. He kept his voice even. “Under observation. No chart details. Aveline is with her.”

“Does Dario have access to the baby’s portal?”

“No.”

“Did he try?”

Bennett looked at Maris’s empty chair, then at Reina, then back to his staff. “There was an unauthorized login attempt against a pending access route overnight. No chart data appears to have been viewed. Logs are being preserved through counsel.”

The air changed. Not gossip now – evidence had weight. You could feel people decide whether the thing in front of them was merely ugly or structurally dangerous.

Tomas leaned forward. “You said unauthorized. By him?”

“I said attempt. I am not going to outrun the log.”

“Then I want to see what we are risking the fund for,” Dev said.

Reina turned toward him sharply. Dev did not back down. “Not medical records. Not the baby’s chart. The evidence. The donor pressure. The access request. The documents that show this is what you say it is.”

Across the table, 3 people nodded. Bennett understood the danger immediately. Evidence could educate. Evidence could also become appetite.

He thought of Aveline bent over a bassinet, finger in Noa’s palm while the lancet clicked. He thought of her refusing to sign a technical consent until after the baby fed. He thought of all the ways people dressed hunger as oversight.

“No one sees anything without Aveline’s consent and counsel’s redaction,” he said.

“Then ask,” Dev said.

Bennett looked around the room and saw the first visible fracture in his own house. Not betrayal – cost. Care, arriving with an invoice.

Reina’s phone buzzed on the table. She read the screen and went still. “Rhys forwarded his withdrawal to 4 hospital partners,” she said. “Subject line says Bellamy has chosen sides.”

No one spoke.

Then June, quiet and precise, said, “Then I would like to see the evidence too.”

beReader – Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 76

By 9:03 AM, Bennett knew the room would not stay private. He could tell by the way people stopped looking at their phones.

Phones did not create leaks by themselves. People did. Usually the leak started earlier than anyone admitted, in the moment a sentence elt too large to keep in one chest. The Bellamy staff meeting had reached that point when June said she wanted to see the evidence too, and 6 people around the table looked relieved someone else had made the ask.

Bennett did not blame them. He did not indulge them either.

“No,” he said.

June’s face flushed. “I said not the medical records.”

“I heard you.”

“Then what is the objection? If donors are pulling and hospital partners are asking whether we are funding a personal war, staff need more than trust me.”

“You need enough to do your jobs. You do not need a postpartum woman’s evidence file because a donor made you nervous.”

The sentence hit. He saw it hit. He also saw Dev’s mouth tighten, Tomas’s eyes drop, Reina’s shoulders settle by less than an inch. Good and bad together. A true sentence could still bruise people who deserved better handling. Bruises were not always a reason to retract the truth.

Bennett softened his tone, not the point. “You are entitled to organizational facts,” he said. “You are entitled to know financial exposure, program impact, legal boundaries, and whether our conduct matches our mission. You are not entitled to Aveline Ashby’s private documents unless she and counsel authorize a redacted staff briefing. I will ask for that only if Maris thinks it protects Aveline more than it feeds curiosity.”

“Curiosity?” Dev said.

“Fear, then. Donor fear. Contract fear. Reputation fear. It wears good clothes. I know I have worn them.”

Reina looked down at her notes. No one smiled. He had not meant it as charm.

“Here is what I can tell you,” Bennett said. “A court has already seen enough to order expedited production from St. Orla and a private clinic. The record dispute involves Noa Ashby’s maternal and portal-access fields, not gossip. There was a produced page dated

January 12, before Noa’s birth, discussing Celine Armitage’s intended-parent status. Dario Armitage moved to seal it. Overnight, during a newborn fever evaluation, a pending pediatric access route appeared from a legal-notice intake, and an unauthorized login attempt followed. No chart data appears to have been viewed. Logs are preserved.”

The room held still. He had given them facts. No baby chart, no fear as spectacle, no court page passed around like contraband.

Tomas rubbed both hands over his face. “That is not a domestic matter,” he said.

“No.”

“That is hospital systems and donor pressure.”

“Yes.”

June’s flush had faded. “Why not say that publicly?”

AO

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

Because Aveline was in a pediatric bay with a 2-day-old baby who had not fed well. Because public truth had a habit of becoming public!· ownership. Because Bennett had spent years building an organization around the idea that help should not require the helped person to become a poster. Because Dario Armitage had counted on every decent person’s hesitation.

Bennett looked at Reina. “What is already outside?”

She turned her laptop toward him. CityGlass had posted a short item 6 minutes earlier.

BELLAMY DONOR PAUSES MATERNAL FUND AFTER ARMITAGE CONNECTION. Sources say leadership split over whether private family disputes should drive philanthropic strategy.

No names beyond Bellamy and Armitage. Not yet.

Then his phone lit up with a text from Maris.

Aveline says Noa is medically stable enough for likely discharge if next feed holds. She consents to you naming the issue publicly as maternal-record and portal-access pressure if no medical details and no release of documents. Her exact words: do not make Noa’s fever the headline.

Bennett read it twice. The room waited. He did not show them the message.

“Aveline has consented to a limited public framing,” he said. “No medical details. No documents. No chart language. We name the issue as maternal-record and portal-access pressure.”

Reina had already opened a blank statement draft. “How hard?” she asked.

Bennett thought of Dario’s first call weeks ago, voice smooth with concern, accusing Bellamy of funding the disappearance of his child. He thought of Celine’s public dignity. Mathias Vey’s donor weather. The way every institution preferred to be vague until vagueness became a weapon.

“Plain,” he said.

Reina typed. Bennett spoke slowly enough for every word to be chosen.

“Bellamy Ventures will not withdraw support from maternal safety infrastructure because a donor is uncomfortable with who used it.”

Keys clicked.

“We do not fund personal vendettas. We fund access to counsel, records, transport, and care when systems are used to corner people.”

More typing.

“Aveline Ashby is a mother protecting her newborn’s records and medical privacy. Bellamy will not assist any effort to erase that fact, soften it for donor comfort, or convert a pediatric emergency into an access opportunity.”

Reina stopped typing. Around the table, no one moved.

Bennett knew the sentence was a line in wet concrete. Once it set, there would be no walking back over it without leaving prints.

“That places us on her side,” Dev said.

“We are on her side.”

It was the first time he had said it in a room built out of payroll, programs, contracts, and consequence. Not as a private feeling, not as something he showed by standing outside curtains or bringing ginger tea. As institutional fact.

His own pulse sounded too loud. He disliked that – he had learned early that men with loud feelings could mistake volume for virtue. So he

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

KEEA kept his hands still and his voice level.

“Anyone who cannot work inside that position can step off related projects by noon,” he said. “No questions asked. No retaliation.”

“And if partners pull?” Tomas asked.

“Then we count what remains and decide what we can still do honestly.”

June leaned back. “Rhys will call us reckless.”

“He has already started.”

“Dario will call us biased.”

“He called us biased when we would not give him a woman’s location.”

That one got a sound from the table. Not laughter-recognition.

Reina read the draft aloud. It was 5 sentences. No polish, no donors thanked for their concern, no family privacy phrases Dario could use as a borrowed coat.

They revised 1 word. Reina changed corner people to corner patients and parents, then looked to Bennett for objection.

He almost gave one. The word patients carried hospitals, charts, all the places Aveline had been made into a file. The word parents carried Dario if a careless reader wanted to give it to him.

“Parents stays,” June said before Bennett answered.

He looked at her. She held his gaze. “Because she is one.”

That settled it. Staff did not become loyal because a founder made a speech – they became loyal in smaller acts: a word kept, a line refused, a noun placed where erasure had left a blank.

“Parents stays,” Bennett said. He approved it.

At 9:24 AM, Bellamy Ventures posted the statement on its public site and sent it to staff, active fund partners, and press contacts who had asked overnight.

At 9:27 AM, CityGlass updated.

BELLAMY CONFIRMS SUPPORT FOR AVELINE ASHBY IN ARMITAGE RECORDS FIGHT.

There it was. Aveline's name, not from them, in a public line.

Bennett felt the old protective instinct rise hard enough to do damage. He did not touch it. He called Maris instead.

"CityGlass named her," he said.

"We saw."

"Did we cause exposure?"

Maris's answer took 2 seconds too long. "No. Armitage side has been seeding around Bellamy since the viral photograph. Your statement narrowed the frame. It did not introduce her identity. She is angry, not surprised."

Behind Maris, Bennett heard a newborn cry. His body went still.

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

AO

B

"Noa?"

"Hungry, according to Aveline. That is the only update I am giving you."

"Good."

Maris made a dry sound. "You have a staff meeting to finish."

"Yes."

"Then finish it before Dario does."

The call ended.

Bennett turned back to the room. Half the staff had already seen the CityGlass update. The other half were pretending not to check because workplace dignity had not entirely died.

"There will be calls," Bennett said. "Reina handles press. Legal handles donor threats. Program leads tell partners what services continue and what pauses pending finance review. No one responds off the record. No one says newborn fever. No one says hospital name. No one describes Aveline's body, location, or documents."

"What about the staff evidence briefing?" June asked.

“Counsel will prepare a limited internal memo if Aveline consents after discharge. Until then, you have the facts I gave you.”

“And if someone leaks them?”

Bennett looked at every face. “Then they do Dario’s work for him.”

That quieted the room more effectively than anger would have.

Reina handed out assignments with the speed of a person who had known the storm was coming and resented that the weather still had to be named. Finance would model a 10 percent, 20 percent, and 35 percent donor contraction by end of week. Programs would identify which clinics had cash reserves under 30 days. Legal would review partner contracts for morality clauses, reputational clauses, and donor-influence language that pretended to be neutrality. Communications would answer only with the statement and no extra color.

“And staff?” Tomas asked.

“Staff decide by noon,” Reina said. “But if you stay, you stay inside the boundary Bennett set. No hunting for documents. No gossip as proof. No making a newborn’s chart into office currency.”

Bennett let her say it. His authority did not need to occupy every sentence for the room to hold.

His phone vibrated again. This time the message came from an Armitage Group address he did not recognize, copied to Bellamy legal and 3 program partners.

Notice of contract review: potential reputational and conflict exposure arising from Bellamy Ventures’ public involvement in pending family-status litigation.

A second message followed. Then a third. Different partners, same language,

Reina read over his shoulder and whispered a curse.

Dario had moved faster than most donors did before lunch. Or someone had drafted the language before Bellamy spoke and waited for an excuse to send it. Either way, the threat had been waiting with shoes on, coat already buttoned.

Bennett thought of Aveline saying, “Do not make Noa’s fever the headline.” He thought of a gray pending access line in a newborn’s portal. He

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

KIRA thought of the difference between a side chosen privately and a side anyone could see.

“There it is,” he said.

Dev looked up from his phone. “What?”

Bennett put the contract notices on the conference screen. The room saw Armitage’s answer arrive in triplicate. Not argument punishment.

On the fourth notice, the subject line changed:

Immediate suspension pending Armitage conflict review.

End of chapter

AQ

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 77

Isolde put the donor list beside Noa’s feeding log and said, “Tell me when the rich people start to blur.”

Noa had been discharged at 11:36 AM with instructions that felt both reassuring and impossible. Monitor temperature. Feed at least every 2 to 3 hours. Count wet diapers. Return immediately for rectal temperature 100.4 or higher, poor feeding, limpness, breathing trouble, fewer wet diapers, blue color, or if your parental concern rises.

Parental concern. The phrase followed me back to safe housing and sat down in every chair.

Noa’s labs had not shown the disaster I had imagined in the car. Her temperature had settled. The physician called it close observation, nota/ diagnosis, and gave me a discharge sheet with thick black print and phone numbers. I had wanted to kiss the paper. I had wanted to set it on fire because it did not promise tomorrow.

Now my daughter slept against my chest in the recliner Bennett had arranged without entering the room. It was not new-nothing in safe housing was new. But it had arms high enough to support nursing and a seat firm enough that I could stand without feeling as if my stitches were being negotiated by committee.

The chair was ugly. I loved it with the shallow intensity of a woman who had learned how many objects could hurt after childbirth.

Isolde sat cross-legged on the floor with her laptop open, 4 printouts spread around her: Bellamy lost or paused donors, St. Orla donor records from public filings, Armitage Foundation event sponsors, and a list Maris had pulled from the production index where names survived redaction as donor-relations labels.

Maris was on speaker, eating something crunchy with no apology.

“Before anyone gets excited,” Maris said, “overlap is not proof of conspiracy.”

“I am never excited by spreadsheets,” Isolde said. “I am emotionally committed to them.”

“Overlap means people with money attend the same rooms.”

“And if the same people attend the same rooms every time Aveline gets cornered?”

“Then overlap becomes a pattern worth documenting.”

I shifted Noa higher on my chest. She made a faint offended noise and settled. Her cap had slipped low over 1 eyebrow. I wanted to fix it. I did not want to wake her. This was motherhood now the constant negotiation between comfort and consequences measured in grams, minutes, and the angle of a hat.

“Read them,” I said. My voice sounded rough.

Isolde looked at me over the laptop. “You can sleep.”

“I can’t.”

“You should.”

“Noa has to feed again at 1:30.”

“That is 41 minutes away.”

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

“Then I can listen for 41 minutes.”

Isolde did not argue. She only moved the water bottle closer to my free hand.

“Fine,” she said. “We start with Bellamy losses. Rhys Family Health Trust withdrew. The Bexley Trust paused rural transport expansion. North Pier Holdings suspended a

workplace lactation project. Everline Charitable Fund asked for a conflict review before releasing its second-

quarter grant.”

“Those are all maternal health or hospital-linked?” I asked.

“Mostly. Rhys is general health. Bexley likes maternal optics in countles where hospitals already did the cutting. North Pier is corporate wellness pretending to be community care. Everline funds both St. Orla equipment and Bellamy transport.”

Maris made a small approving sound. “That last sentence goes in the memo with less venom.”

“I charge extra for less venom.”

Noa breathed warm against me. I laid 2 fingers on her back and counted. In. Out. In. Still here.

The fever had made every breath an event. I did not know when that would stop. Maybe never. Maybe mothers simply learned to carry a private metronome under every other sound.

“Now St. Orla,” Isolde said. “Public donor wall from last year: Rhys, Bexley, Everline, Vey Family Office, Armitage Foundation, Orison Holdings, Fairholt Medical Patrons, Renner Care Fund.”

“North Pier?”

“Not on the wall. But North Pier’s chair is on St. Orla’s capital campaign committee.”

Maris stopped chewing. “Source?”

“St. Orla gala program, archived. The PDF still has the committee page.”

“Save a clean copy.”

“Already did.”

I closed my eyes. Committee page. Donor wall. Capital campaign. Words I would have once skimmed in event programs while Dario’s hand rested warm at my lower back, guiding me past other people’s names. Now those names had teeth.

“Armitage Foundation event sponsors?” Maris asked.

Isolde lifted the third printout. “Rhys, Bexley, Everline, Fairholt, Vey Family Office, obviously Armitage Foundation itself. North Pier sponsored the family awards lunch 2 years ago.”

“Orison?”

“Present at St. Orla, not Armitage Foundation. But Orison’s general counsel is married to a St. Orla board member.”

“Not relevant yet.”

“Annoying.”

“Very.”

I opened my eyes. “Pressure points,” I said.

AO

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

DKA

Isolde looked up. “What?”

“Not just overlap. Put them against what happened.”

She stared at me for 1 second, then nodded slowly. “Donor event reveal. St. Orla instability language. Westport donor pressure. Family continuity letter. Bellamy donor withdrawal. Portal access route.”

“Yes.”

Maris’s voice sharpened. “Aveline, you do not need to work this.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

The question was not cruel. That made it harder.

Noa shifted, mouth opening against my shirt, not quite awake.

“When she was hot,” I said, “I could not think about the case. I could only think, she is warm, she is not feeding, I need help. Then the access line appeared because help created a record. I need to understand the shape around the help.”

No one spoke. I looked at the donor names without reaching for the paper. “If every place I go becomes a doorway for the same people, I need the map.”

Isolde’s face changed. Not soft-angrier than soft.

“Then we make the map.”

She dragged the feeding log a few inches away before she opened the new sheet. “No donor names on the baby page,” she said.

“No.”

“No baby times on the donor page.”

“No.”

It should have been obvious. It still had to be said. That was how Dario’s world had worked its way into mine- through tiny confusions that looked efficient until the wrong person called them continuity. One folder for family. One review for 2 babies. One pending access line because an emergency notice sounded urgent enough to borrow a crib.

I watched Isolde create a separate evidence file and title it Donor Pressure Map. Then I watched her leave the Noa folder closed. The relief was physical – a loosening in my jaw, a breath that made room for milk and pain and the child sleeping against my skin. She opened a new sheet. Columns appeared: Event, Date, Institution, Record or pressure, Donor-linked names, Source.

She filled them with a speed that would have frightened a less guilty world.

Donor event reveal. St. Orla. Armitage Foundation, Vey Family Office, Rhys, Bexley, Everline. Source: invitation, donor wall, gala program.

St. Orla instability language. Records department. Donor-relations label survived redaction beside Fairholt and Vey office reference. Source: production index.

Westport donor pressure. Dr. Price note. Vey office contact to Westport board chair; Bexley co-funded Westport’s maternal outreach dinner. Source: Dr. Price note, public annual report.

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

AO

Family Continuity Plan letter. St. Orla. Board review; donor-facing continuity office; Armitage Foundation linked. Source: letter.

Bellamy donor withdrawal. Rhys, Bexley, North Pier, Everline. Source: donor emails and notices.

Unauthorized pediatric portal attempt. Westport Children's Receiving. External legal-notice intake queue copied identity fields from counsel notice; no donor yet. Source: Dr. Park technical summary.

"Leave donor blank there," Maris said. "Do not force it."

"I hate blank cells," Isolde said.

"Good. They keep you honest."

I almost laughed. It came out as a breath that made Noa stir. I froze until she settled again.

At 1:22, she woke hungry. The spreadsheet disappeared. That was not metaphor-Isolde physically closed the laptop.

"Baby first," she said.

I unbuttoned the borrowed cardigan and tried to position Noa without pulling at the sore parts of myself. My body felt made of separate complaints. Uterus cramping. Nipple cracked. Back tight from sitting wrong. Throat raw from not crying properly when crying might wake the baby.

Noa latched better than she had at the hospital. Not perfectly-enough. Her jaw worked. Her hand opened against my skin.

I watched the clock, then stopped watching it because she was not a spreadsheet either.

Bennett knocked once at the open doorframe. He did not look in until I said, "Come in."

Even then, his eyes went to the floor first.

"I brought the pediatric discharge copies Maris asked for," he said. "And lunch. Isolde told me not to bring soup because soup near laptops is apparently a moral failure."

"Soup near newborns is worse," Isolde said.

"Then sandwiches."

He set the bag on the side table, not near the donor lists. His gaze touched Noa's cap, my face, the water bottle, the pad packet half-visible by the chair. He missed nothing. He claimed nothing.

“How is she?” he asked.

“Eating,” I said.

The word did not sound like much. It was everything.

His face warmed. Then he folded it back into restraint before it could ask anything from me.

“Good.”

He turned to leave.

“Bennett,” I said. He stopped.

“Your donors.”

AO

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

EZEA

“Not yours to carry today.”

“They are leaving because of me.”

“They are leaving because they prefer vulnerable women in brochures.”

Isolde made a sound of vicious agreement. Bennett’s eyes stayed on mine.

“That does not mean there will not be consequences,” he said. “It means the blame belongs where it belongs.”

Noa sucked once, hard enough to hurt. I winced. Bennett’s hand flexed at his side and then relaxed. He did not move toward me.

“I am sorry,” I said.

“I know.”

The answer was too honest to be dismissal. It took the apology seriously without letting it become a debt.

Then Maris’s voice rose from the speaker. “Everyone back to the map when baby permits. I have a new email.”

Noa unlatched with a tiny indignant click. I shifted her to my shoulder and patted her back, waiting for the small burp that had become a family event.

“From whom?” Isolde asked.

“St. Orla’s deputy privacy officer.”

My hand stopped moving. Bennett did not step closer.

The donor map sat open between us, half-built and already too clear. Rhys at Bellamy. Rhys at St. Orla. Bexley at St. Orla. Bexley beside Westport pressure. Everline in both donor rooms. Vey where Vey always was, behind a name that pretended money had no fingerprints.

For the first time since the hospital desk, I felt something other than fear move under my ribs. Not victory-recognition. Patterns did not heal a baby or feed her or lower a temperature, but they did 1 useful thing: they made it harder for powerful people to call a mother irrational for noticing the same hand at every door.

“Read it,” I said.

Maris did. The email was careful, legal, and bloodless. St. Orla acknowledged receipt of the correction demand, production concerns, and new information regarding portal and donor-linked access pressure. Without admitting error, liability, or record inaccuracy, the hospital was opening an internal audit of records, donor-relations contacts, and family continuity review procedures connected to Noa Ashby’s file.

Noa burped against my shoulder. The smallest possible sound. In the room, it landed like a gavel.

End of chapter

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 78

The audit notice arrived printed on St. Orla letterhead, as if expensive paper could make an apology without using the word.

Maris had sent the email version first. Then, 47 minutes later, a courier brought the physical copy to the legal clinic office instead of safe housing because no one with a crest, a donor badge, or a family office letterhead was getting a fresh address from me.

Bennett delivered the scanned copy through counsel. Isolde printed it on the cheap gray printer in the safe-room hall because she said S Orla paper deserved to be humbled before it came near Noa. Now it sat on the square table beside my discharge sheet from Westport Children's Receiving, Noa's feeding log, 2 clean diapers, a half-eaten sandwich, and the donor map that had already turned several names into a pattern no one could call nerves anymore.

Noa slept in the bassinet – not hot, not cool enough to stop me checking every 20 minutes. Just asleep. Every ordinary breath still felt like number I had to earn.

I stood over the letter because sitting hurt and standing hurt differently. My body had become a room with no comfortable chair.

Maris read the first paragraph aloud even though I had already read it twice. "St. Orla Women's Center has commenced an internal audit concerning records governance, family continuity review procedures, donor-relations communications, and authorized access workflows associated with the file of infant Noa Ashby."

"Infant Noa Ashby," Isolde said.

I touched the edge of the page. There it was not Baby, not Armitage, not unborn child. Infant Noa Ashby. My daughter's name had survived their first sentence. I hated how much that mattered.

I wrote the phrase on the feeding log margin before I could talk myself out of it. Infant Noa Ashby. The pen mark looked small beside the diaper counts and times-11:36 discharge, 12:05 wet, 1:30 feed, 2:18 temperature 99.1. It belonged there anyway. Her name was not separate from her care. It was part of it. A baby could not be protected in a record that treated her mother as an optional field.

Noa shifted in the bassinet. I set the pen down and waited for her to settle. When she did, 1 read the words again, quieter. Infant Noa Ashby.

Maris continued. "This audit is voluntary and does not constitute an admission of error, liability, improper access, improper record creation, or inaccurate designation."

"There it is," Isolde said. "They blinked with both hands behind their back."

"Can they do that?" I asked.

"Yes," Maris said. "Everyone can review themselves while insisting they have nothing to review. The question is who watches the review."

"Us."

“Us, the court if we can tie it to production, and possibly an external regulator if the audit produces enough smoke.”

The word smoke made me look at Noa. She did not move. I watched until her blanket rose. Then I turned back to the page.

“Read the scope.”

Maris did. Records governance. Administrative consistency review. Family continuity planning. Donor-relations contact logs. Authorized access workflows. External legal-notice intake. Private-clinic coordination references. Board-review escalation.

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

Every phrase was a door I had been dragged past once without knowing the hallway had my name on it.

“They included the private clinic,” I said.

“References,” Maris corrected. “Not the clinic itself. St. Orla will not volunteer jurisdiction over another entity if it can avoid it”

“But they know the January 12 page exists.”

“They know we know.”

Isolde leaned against the counter with her arms crossed. “Which means their audit is partly about finding the leak they created.”

“Possibly.”

“Not possibly.”

Maris’s voice stayed dry. “I bill extra for certainty without discovery.”

I almost smiled. Then Noa made a thin waking sound, and every adult stopped.

!

She stretched both arms inside the blanket, face wrinkling, mouth opening in protest at the entire concept of air. I lifted her before the protest became a cry. Her cheek against my wrist felt normal- and normal had become a number I did not trust unless a thermometer blessed it.

“She needs to feed,” I said.

“Then we pause,” Bennett said from the doorway.

He had been there with another folder under 1 arm, waiting for the letter to become mine before entering. Public choosing had put his name beside mine online that morning. In this room, he still stopped at the threshold.

The contrast nearly undid me. Outside, Bellamy had chosen a side loudly enough for Dario to aim contracts at him. Inside, Bennett waited for a woman in a stained cardigan to decide whether he could cross a scuffed floor.

“You can come in,” I said.

He did. He placed the folder on the table without looking at the open side of my nursing tank as I settled Noa – not embarrassment made into performance. Just privacy, offered so quietly it did not ask to be thanked.

“What is that?” Isolde asked.

“The limited staff memo Maris approved,” Bennett said. “Redacted. Aveline sees it before anyone at Bellamy.”

I looked up. “You have not sent it?”

“No.”

“Even with the contract notices?”

“Especially with the contract notices.”

–

not a dramatic turning away,

Noa latched, and pain made me close my eyes for 2 breaths. When I opened them, Bennett was looking at the St. Orla notice, not me.

“Dario is targeting your contracts,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Because of me,”

AO

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

His gaze came to mine. “Because he wants every person near you to calculate whether you are worth the damage

That was a sharper answer than I expected from him—not unkind, angry under control.

“And?” I asked.

“And he is going to dislike the math.”

Isolde looked down at her laptop, pretending very badly to give us privacy.

Bennett did not step closer. He did not take my hand. He did not say anything that would make Noa’s hungry little sounds part of a vow. He only turned the memo folder so the tab faced me.

“When you have fed her,” he said. “Not before.”

It was almost nothing. It was exactly the difference.

Maris’s phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen. “Tamsin is calling.”

My hand tightened around Noa’s back. The nurse from St. Orla – donor-event intake, records overflow. The woman who had met us under no-phones conditions and told us instability language had been drafted before my statement or clinical assessment.

“Put her on speaker,” I said.

Maris answered with counsel language first. Identification, consent, recording status, no removed documents, no patient details unrelated to my matter. Tamsin agreed to all of it in a voice that sounded like she was speaking from a stairwell.

“I saw the audit notice,” Tamsin said. There was a hollow echo around her. Hospital stairs, maybe. Concrete and metal rail.

“How?” Maris asked.

“Internal memo. Records governance review. They are telling staff not to discuss historical workflows outside audit channels.”

“Are you calling as a witness or as staff seeking counsel?”

A pause. “As a witness, if Ms. Ashby still wants to hear me.”

Noa swallowed. I looked down at her. Her fist rested against my breast, opening and closing as if she were counting something only she understood.

“I want to hear you,” I said.

“I need to meet,” Tamsin said quickly. “Not tonight if the baby needs you. Not in your housing. Somewhere counsel chooses. I will not bring documents, but I can identify what I saw and where the audit language is avoiding the real sequence.”

Maris’s eyes met mine. “Tomorrow, if Noa stays stable,” I said. “Counsel sets the place.”

“Thank you.”

The gratitude in her voice unsettled me. Witnesses should not have to thank the people harmed for making room for the truth. But fear rearranged manners – I knew that better than most.

“Are you safe to keep talking?” Bennett asked.

Not are you telling the truth. Not can you prove it. Safe. The word changed Tamsin’s breathing on the line.

“For a few minutes,” she said. “Then I have to go back on the floor.”

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

“Then only sequence,” Maris said. “No speculation. No names unless you saw them attached to the workflow

That was what the night kept teaching me- truth survived better when it was fed in order. So did babies, I thought, minute by minute

Tamsin breathed out. “The forms were loaded before you arrived.”

The room went so still I could hear the old heater click behind the wall.

Maris leaned forward. “Which forms?”

“The family continuity packet framework. The intended-parent fields. The maternal coordination defaults. Not completed, but loaded. They were not created because of what happened in the donor corridor. The corridor gave them a story to attach.”

Milk stung. Noa kept feeding. My body did not know how to hold rage without spilling it into the child in my arms. So I made it precise.

“Before I arrived at St. Orla that day?” I asked.

“Before your ultrasound appointment was checked in.”

Isolde whispered something under her breath that was probably a curse and definitely a prayer.

Maris's voice stayed level. "Can you testify to that from personal observation?"

"I can testify that the packet shell was visible in the records overflow queue before the donor event. I saw the timestamp. I did not understand what it meant until later."

"Did you preserve anything?"

"No. I did not remove records."

"Good," Maris said. "Do not start now."

Tamsin's laugh was small and frightened. "I know."

"Who loaded the forms?"

Another pause. Not empty – afraid.

Bennett moved away from the door and closed it halfway, not shut, just enough to muffle the hall. He looked at me first. I nodded.

"Tamsin," Maris said, "answer only what you know directly."

"The queue label used donor-office routing," Tamsin said. "But the staff note said the request came through family liaison support."

"Was family liaison a St. Orla unit?" Maris asked.

"Not exactly. It was a donor-facing support channel that handled board families, foundation calls, and special scheduling. It could touch records only through requests, not direct clinical edits. That is why I noticed it. It did not belong in a maternal packet before check-in."

"Did anyone challenge it?"

"A clerk asked if the patient had consented."

My hand stilled. "What happened?"

"She was told the family office was coordinating ahead of arrival and consent would be regularized at intake."

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

Regularized. There were words so clean they made violence easier to mop.

I looked at Noa’s sleeping face and made myself breathe through the next question. “Name?”

“Not Mathias Vey directly.”

My heart gave 1 hard beat. Noa unlatched and complained. I shifted her carefully, every movement too slow and too large.

“Then who?” I asked.

Tamsin’s voice dropped. “Nolan Greer. Mathias Vey’s aide.”

Across the table, Isolde’s cursor blinked in the donor map’s newest empty cell. Then she typed the name.

– End of chapter →

AQ

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 79

“If Noa’s temperature is 100.4, we leave.”

I said it before Maris could finish explaining the meeting rules.....

The counsel suite she had chosen was 2 floors above a bank branch, with frosted glass on the doors and no name in the lobby directory except a suite number. It was not Bellamy. It was not St. Orla. It was not anywhere Dario had reason to send a man with a camera and a polished apology.

It had a bathroom 14 steps from the conference room, a back elevator to an enclosed parking level, and a receptionist who looked at my driver’s license, not my face. Those details mattered more to me than the walnut table.

Noa slept against my chest in the wrap Isolde had tightened twice in the car. Her cheek was warm in the ordinary way. I had checked her rectal temperature at 12:20 PM before we left safe housing, then again in the bathroom downstairs because my fear did not respect efficiency. 99.0. Wet diaper at 12:43. She had fed badly at 11:15 and better at 12:05, with enough swallowing to let me breathe.

Enough was a word I had learned to distrust and use anyway.

“If she feels wrong, we leave,” Bennett said.

He stood near the window, not between me and the door. His coat was over one arm. There was a paper bag on the table with a sandwich, water, 2 wrapped oat bars, and the small sterile thermometer covers I had forgotten to pack. He had not said I forgot – he had only put them beside my feeding log and stepped back.

Maris glanced from him to me. “Agreed. Baby outranks witness.”

“Good,” I said.

Tamsin arrived 7 minutes later with no bag. That was the first thing I noticed. No tote, no folder, no phone in her hand. Her coat was buttoned wrong at the middle, 1 button skipped so the wool pulled diagonally across her stomach. She had scrub marks at her throat where a hospital badge usually hung. Without the badge, she looked smaller-not innocent, frightened.

Anika met her at the door. “Tamsin, before you enter, I need to repeat the limits. You are here voluntarily. You are not our client unless you separately request advice and we agree in writing. You will not disclose records unrelated to Ms. Ashby or infant Noa Ashby. You will not bring or remove St. Orla documents. If something may be privileged or protected, stop and let counsel decide the path.”

Tamsin nodded too quickly.

“Say it back in your own words,” Maris said.

Tamsin swallowed. “I am here to tell what I personally saw. I did not bring patient records. I will not show you any hospital screen or file. If I have something that might need preservation, I tell you what it is before I show it.”

“Good.”

She looked at me then. Her gaze dropped to Noa and came back up as if she had touched something hot. “How is she?”

I could have hated the question. I did not – it came out of her before strategy could dress it.

“Stable,” I said. “Feeding. Being watched too much by her mother.”

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

Tamsin’s mouth trembled. “There is no such thing after a fever scare.”

That was when I believed she had been a nurse before she became a witness.

We sat. I chose the chair nearest the door. Isolde took the chair to my left with the diaper bag at her feet and her laptop closed. Bennett remained by the wall until I looked at him and nodded toward the last chair. He sat without moving it closer.

Maris set a recorder in the center of the table and stated the date, time, location, who was present, and the limits again. Her voice made fear into a form. Forms were not always enemies – that was the ugly part. A form could erase you. A form could also keep a frightened nurse from being made into a thief.

“Start with what you saw,” Maris said. “Not what you think it means.”

Tamsin folded her hands so tightly the knuckles went white.

“The morning of Ms. Ashby’s ultrasound and the donor reception, I was assigned to intake overflow and donor-event support. The imaging floor had standard prenatal check-ins. The donor event had a separate administrative channel because board families were moving through both areas.”

“Board families,” Isolde said quietly.

Maris held up 1 finger. Not yet.

Tamsin continued. “A records overflow queue populated before the afternoon imaging block. It showed a family continuity packet shell. Not a completed chart. A shell. The fields included maternal coordination, intended parent review, and guardian routing.”

My milk let down hard enough to hurt. Noa slept through it. My body did not care that the enemy had become a database field – my body only knew there was a child pressed against me and a threat in the room.

“Was my name visible?” I asked.

Tamsin looked at Maris. “You may answer if it is limited to Ms. Ashby’s own record,” Maris said.

“Yes,” Tamsin said. “Aveline Ashby was visible as the incoming patient. The packet shell also had donor-office routing and a family liaison support note.”

“Before I checked in?” I asked.

“Before your ultrasound check-in. I remember because the clerk beside me said, ‘How is there a family packet before consent?’”

The room held that sentence. How is there a family packet before consent? It sounded like something a decent person said once before learning decency had a payroll department.

“What were the fields called?” Maris asked.

Tamsin closed her eyes for 1 second. “Maternal guardian. Intended parent. Maternal coordination. Family continuity review. There was also a note field for postpartum contact planning, but I did not open it.”

“Do you know who entered them?”

“No. I did not see the user who built the shell.”

That was not the answer I wanted. It was better because it was clean.

“What did you see attached to the routing?” Anika asked.

Tamsin rubbed her thumb along the side of her index finger until the skin reddened. “Family liaison support. Donor office priority. Nolan Greer.”

Stent

Bennett did not move. Isolde’s breath changed. My daughter’s mouth softened in sleep.

“Not Mathias Vey?” Maris asked.

“No. Nolan Greer.”

“What is your personal knowledge of Nolan Greer?”

“He called the records superviser that morning. I did not take the call. I heard his name when the supervisor told the clerk to stop questioning donor-family preparation because Mr. Greer had already cleared the family office’s role through leadership.”

“Exact words?”

Tamsin shook her head. “Not exact. I do not want to pretend.”

I felt a terrible gratitude for that.

“Approximate substance is fine if labeled as such,” Maris said.

“Substance: stop asking, family office coordination, leadership aware, consent to be regularized at intake.”

Regularized. There it was again – a pretty word for doing the harm first and asking the patient to sign around the bruise later.

Noa stirred. The meeting stopped without anyone telling it to. I slid 2 fingers beneath her cap, then along her neck. Warm, not hot. Her lips puckered. Her face folded, ready to complain.

“She needs to feed,” I said.

“We pause,” Bennett said, already looking away toward the window.

Tamsin looked down at her hands. Maris stopped the recorder. Isolde passed me the muslin cloth. The conference room became, for 9 minutes, a place where the most important fact was whether a newborn would latch.

Noa did, after 2 angry tries. Pain flashed bright and mean. I breathed through it while the legal pads and laptops blurred in front of me.

This was the part Dario never understood. He wanted fatherhood to be a word he could say in a courtroom. Motherhood was a cracked nipple, a pad changing too soon, a thermometer held under a lamp, and rage swallowed carefully because the baby needed a calm body more than the mother needed a dramatic one.

When Noa’s sucking settled, I nodded.

Maris restarted the recorder. “You mentioned preservation,” she said to Tamsin. “Describe it before you show anyone anything.”

Tamsin’s face went pale. “I did not take a screenshot of Ms. Ashby’s record.”

“Good.”

“I filed a staff safety and routing concern that day. Not a patient complaint. An internal concern about nonclinical donor-office routing appearing in intake overflow. I did it through the employee reporting portal during my break.”

Maris leaned forward. “Did that report include patient-identifying information?”

“No. I wrote ‘prenatal intake record’ and the queue label. I did not write Ms. Ashby’s name. The portal generated a confirmation page with time, ticket number, reporting category, and the text I entered. I took a photo of the confirmation page with my personal phone because reports disappear from staff view after submission.”

“Why did you take it?”

AO

ELEA

“Because I was afraid they would say I never raised it.”

Her voice broke on afraid. Not loudly-that would have been easier. It cracked like something she had been standing on

“What is on the photo?” Maris asked.

“My own report confirmation. No patient chart. No clinical record. It shows the date, 2:18 PM, category ‘records routing concern, text family continuity shell loaded ahead of prenatal intake with donor-office priority and family liaison support notation – Nolan Greer referenced by supervisor,’ and the ticket number.”

For a moment, no one spoke. The heating vent breathed overhead. Noa swallowed. Tamsin wiped under 1 eye and looked furious with herself for it.

“If I turn it over, I lose my job,” she said. “If I do not, they will say I am remembering wrong. If I ask St. Orla for the ticket, the audit team will know.”

Maris’s voice softened by half an inch. “Do not send it to us from here. Do not text it. Do not email it. We will preserve the existence of your device, the metadata if appropriate, and request the internal ticket through subpoena or court order. If you choose to provide your photo, we document chain of custody and limit use until the court rules.”

“Can they take my license?”

“For making a good-faith internal safety report and preserving your own confirmation page without patient data? They can try to frighten you. That is not the same thing.”

Tamsin laughed once. It was not humor. “Hospitals are very good at making the same thing feel identical.”

I looked at her hands. She had touched charts, babies, mothers, doors I had been moved through without seeing.

“Why now?” I asked.

Maris glanced at me but did not stop the question. Tamsin looked at Noa.

“Because the audit memo told us not to discuss historical workflows except through approved channels. Then it called your daughter’s file a governance matter. Not a patient harm matter. Not a maternal-consent matter. Governance.”

Her mouth tightened. “I can live with being careful. I cannot live with them turning a newborn into a workflow error and then asking me to keep quiet for my own professionalism.”

Noa unlatched with a soft click. I brought her against my shoulder and waited for the burp that might not come.

“I do not want you reckless,” I said.

Tamsin blinked at me.

“I mean it. I need truth that survives. I do not need you destroyed for a document they can exclude.”

Something in her face changed then. Not relief-worse than relief. The exhausted recognition of someone being treated as useful and human at the same time, after bracing to be used only one way.

“The ticket exists,” she said.

Maris wrote it down.

“The photo exists,” Tamsin added. “And the audit log that confirms the original queue entry exists too. They can preserve it if someone orders them before the cleanup becomes a retention policy.”

Deck & Story

AO

KITA

Noa finally burped against my shoulder. It was tiny. It shook the whole room anyway.

Maris capped her pen. “Then we move today.”

Tamsin looked at the recorder as if it might bite. “Before they erase it?”

“Before they call erasure governance.”

My phone buzzed beside the feeding log. Not my private line – the counsel relay phone.

Anika looked down first. Her expression went flat. “St. Orla has noticed an emergency audit coordination call for 4:00 PM,” she said. “Subject line says preservation scope.”

Maris stood. The chair legs scraped too loudly. Tamsin went white.

“They know,” she whispered.

Noa’s cheek rested damp and warm against my neck. On the table, Maris’s pen lay beside the blank subpoena form. The proof existed.

Now the question was whether we could reach it before St. Orla taught it how to disappear.

End of chapter-

AQ

The wife isn't me

Chapter 80

TITA

Chapter 80 – Aide To Vey

“Nolan Greer is not a hospital employee.”

Maris said it with the satisfaction of someone finding a wire behind a painted wall.

We were still in the counsel suite because moving took time my body did not have. Tamsin had left through the back elevator with Anika’s investigator walking 12 paces behind her – not close enough to look like protection, close enough to notice if anyone followed.

Noa was awake now, furious in the small thorough way of newborns who did not believe in legal strategy. I changed her on the conference table after Maris laid down a disposable pad and Isolde dared the room to have an opinion.

Wet diaper at 2:34 PM. No fever. Poor mood, excellent lungs. I wrote all 3 in the feeding log because panic liked empty spaces.

“Say it again,” I said.

Maris turned her laptop so I could see the line she had pulled from a public filing and a Vey family office event program. “Nolan Greer. Executive aide to Mathias Vey. He appears on donor-office routing for foundation events, hospital capital campaign coordination, and Vey family office scheduling. He is not clinical staff. He is not St. Orla counsel. He is not anyone who should appear beside a maternal coordination packet before patient check-in.”

“But he did,” Isolde said.

“According to Tamsin’s personal observation and her internal report confirmation.”

“According to a photo we have not touched yet,” Bennett said.

Maris nodded. “Correct. We know the photo exists. We know what she represented it contains. We do not yet possess or rely on it as an exhibit until chain is documented.”

Noa kicked both feet, deeply unimpressed by chain of custody. I fastened the clean diaper and closed her sleeper one snap at a time. My hands wanted to shake, so I made them count. 1. 2. 3. The middle snap resisted – it always did. Tiny clothes had become tests of character designed by people who had never bled through a pad while sleep-deprived.

“What can we move on without the photo?” I asked.

“A preservation demand,” Maris said. “A targeted emergency letter to St. Orla and, if needed, a motion. We identify the internal ticket by category, approximate time, and subject without quoting protected content. We demand preservation of the employee reporting ticket, related audit logs, records overflow queue metadata, family liaison support routing entries, donor-office priority labels, access history, and communications naming Nolan Greer or Mathias Vey’s office.”

“And if they say they cannot find it?”

“Then we already have a witness who filed it and a device that may show the confirmation page. Their inability becomes useful.”

Useful. I looked at Noa. She had gone still under my hands, eyes open to the ceiling light. Her lashes were almost invisible. Her mouth made a soft O, as if the entire world was a bad rumor.

“She needs to feed again soon,” I said.

“We have 20 minutes if she follows the last interval,” Isolde said.

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

Noa immediately opened her mouth and wailed.

“She has filed an objection,” Bennett said.

It was dry enough that I almost laughed. Almost hurt.

I lifted Noa and settled back into the chair while Isolde shifted the privacy screen Maris had produced from a storage closet. It was cheap beige, and ugly. Bennett stood before I had to ask and moved to the other side of it with the kettle and paper cups.

His care had become a series of removed frictions – not dramatic enough to defend in court, large enough that my body noticed

Noa latched after a fight that left my eyes watering. She sucked in fast bursts, then paused as if personally offended by milk.

“Continue,” I said.

Maris did not ask whether I was sure. I liked that too.

“There are 2 tracks. First, court preservation. Second, strategic escalation. Nolan Greer gives us a bridge from St. Orla’s administrative language to the Vey family office.”

“Mathias,” I said.

“His aide.”

“Mathias does not touch things himself.”

Bennett spoke from the other side of the screen. “He makes touching things look like weather.”

That sentence belonged in a file somewhere.

Anika came back into the room with her phone in one hand. “Tamsin is away clean. No visible tail to the parking exit. Investigator will confirm she reaches her own counsel appointment.”

“Her own counsel?” I asked.

“We referred her to employment counsel unaffiliated with us,” Maris said. “If St. Orla retaliates, she needs someone whose duty is only to her.”

My throat tightened. “Good.”

“Aveline,” Maris said, “we also need to decide how much of this to put in the paternity/access matter. It helps show institutional manipulation, but it may draw Dario into arguing this is all adult governance and not newborn access.”

“Noa’s portal attempt came through a legal-notice intake queue,” I said. “St. Orla’s packet came through donor/family routing before I arrived. They are the same shape.”

“Yes.”

“Then keep them connected without putting Noa’s chart in the center.”

Maris's eyes sharpened. I looked down at my daughter, her fist pressed to my skin.

"He does not get portal access because his family office once learned how to make medical records prepare for him before consent. That is not an adult embarrassment. That is a baby safety issue."

No one spoke for a second.

Then Isolde said, "Put that in plain English and make it sound less like a knife."

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

AO

"No." Anika said. "Leave some edge. Judges are awake after lunch but not always alive."

Maris typed. I watched the words appear and become less bloody.

Pattern of nonclinical family-office routing into maternal and pediatric-adjacent access workflows before or without patient consent.

It was accurate. It was also too clean.

Under the table, my pad shifted when I adjusted Noa. A warm dampness spread and made me go still. Not enough to panic → remind me that my body was not an instrument. It was an injured place still being asked to perform.

"I need 3 minutes," I said.

Every adult stopped.

Bennett's chair moved back. "I'll get the hallway cleared."

He did not ask why. I could have cried from gratitude and hated the vulnerability of it.

enough to

Isolde took Noa after asking with her eyes. I went to the bathroom with my bag and the feeding log because I did not trust any surface without it. Blood had soaked through more than I expected. No clots larger than the warnings. No dizziness beyond exhaustion. Pain mean, not new.

I changed the pad, washed my hands twice, and looked at myself in the mirror.

Gray-green eyes too bright. Hair coming loose from the clip. Milk on my shirt. Evidence moving around me like machinery. My daughter in the next room.

Dario had thought motherhood would make me easier to corner. Maybe it had. The difference was that everything cornered with me now had teeth.

When I came back, the air in the room had changed. Isolde held Noa against her shoulder. Bennett stood by the door with his phone facedown in his palm. Maris and Anika were both looking at the same email.

“What happened?” I asked.

Maris’s mouth flattened. “Mathias Vey’s counsel responded to our preservation notice before St. Orla did.”

“How?”

‘Fast.”

“No. How did he know?”

No one answered because the answer was sitting under all our papers. The family office had not been near the machine – the family office was part of the machine.

Anika read from the screen. “They deny any improper involvement in clinical decision-making, characterize Nolan Greer as a logistical contact for donor-event scheduling, and object to any implication that the Vey family office exercised control over patient records.”

“They object quickly,” Isolde said.

“Very quickly,” Bennett said.

I reached for Noa. Isolde passed her back carefully, and the weight of my child steadied something my rage wanted to spend.

“What else?” I asked.

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

Maris hesitated. That was never good. “Attached is an invitation.”

“To what?”

“A meeting.”

The room seemed to narrow. Noa made a sleepy sound against my chest. I felt every place where my body had not healed the pulling, the milk, the small burn where skin had split. I felt them all as boundaries.

“No,” Bennett said. He did not say it to me – he said it to the shape of the trap. Then he looked at me. “Sorry.”

The apology mattered. So did the first word.

–

the soreness

Maris read the invitation aloud. Mr. Vey remains concerned that Ms. Ashby’s advisors are being encouraged toward needless escalation by parties with their own institutional grievances. He is prepared to discuss a private, civilized resolution in a controlled setting.selected by counsel, with all appropriate representatives present.

“Civilized,” Isolde said. Her voice could have stripped paint.

“He wants me alone?” I asked.

“He says appropriate representatives,” Maris said. “We do not accept anything without our terms.”

“Terms.”

Anika counted on her fingers. “Neutral location or secure remote. Counsel present. Recording or court reporter. No phones except counsel devices. No safe-address disclosure. Medical breaks as needed. No Dario. No Celine. No surprise attendees. No documents handed to you without scanning. No private hallway conversation.”

“And Noa?” I asked.

“Your call,” Maris said. “If she is with you, her care controls the schedule. If she is not, you need to be able to leave for feeding or pumping. We do not let Mathias Vey use your postpartum body as a clock.”

I looked down. Noa’s face had relaxed, the anger gone as quickly as it had come. She was so small that the wrap made her seem like a secret my body was trying to keep from the weather.

I did not want Mathias Vey in the same building as her. I did not want him in the same sentence.

“Secure remote,” I said. “From here or another counsel suite. Noa stays wherever her doctor and my body say she should be. If she needs me,

I leave. If I bleed too much, I leave. If anyone says the word reasonable about that, I leave louder.”

Isolde smiled without warmth. “There she is.”

Bennett’s face did not change much, but his hand loosened around his phone.

Maris typed the terms.

“Why take it at all?” Bennett asked. Again, not a command – a question put where I could refuse it.

“Because Mathias moved through other people’s forms,” I said. “If he is showing his face, it means the form did not protect him enough.”

Anika nodded once. “And because offers made under pressure can become evidence.”

I looked at Maris. “Will he make one?”

MoboReader – Read Book & Story

“Men like Mathias do not ask for civilized conversations because they want to apologize

My daughter sighed in her sleep.

The counsel relay phone buzzed again. This time Maris did not read it aloud immediately. She turned the screen toward me

Mr. Vey is available at 10:00 AM tomorrow. He believes delay will increase reputational harm to all children involved.

All children. My hand settled over Noa’s back. Celine’s son in special care. Nico in the adult weather. Noa in my arms, still learning how to stay warm. Mathias had found the softest noun in the room and sharpened it.

“Tell him 10:00 works,” I said.

Maris lifted her eyebrows.

“With our terms,” I added.

The phone buzzed again before she could answer. Another line appeared.

Mr. Vey hopes Ms. Ashby is ready for a civilized conversation.

Noa slept through the threat. I did not.

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

مہ یچ ذ ائ ل خال ص صاف، ساتھ کے پ ریہ شاذ ی صہ فر .....

End of chapter

AQ