# The wife isn't me

Chapter 7

Dario came home smelling of soap. Not rain. Not the city. Not the woman whose breath I had heard breaking around his name less than an hour earlier.

Soap. Clean shirt, damp hair, dark coat folded over one arm as if he had not spent the night building a room for me inside other people's decisions.

The lock accepted him before I could decide whether to move. I had the chain on. That was the first thing he noticed.

The door opened 3 inches and stopped with a hard metal catch. Through the gap I saw one eye, one cheekbone, the clean edge of his jaw. He looked less angry than he had any right to look. That made it worse.

"Aveline," he said.

My phone lay facedown on the nursery floor with Isolde muted on the line. My laptop was closed. My coat hung from the back of the nursery chair, heavy in the wrong places- documents in the left pocket, ring wrapped in tissue in the right. My hand stayed on my stomach.

"You texted me," I said.

"I did."

"It sounded like a threat."

His gaze moved through the gap, measuring what he could see. Hall. Light. My bare feet. The chain.

"It was a bad message."

There it was. Bad. Not cruel, not revealing, not the kind of sentence a man sent when he understood he had been heard and wanted the listener frightened before she could speak. Bad.

"Open the door."

"No."

He absorbed that without blinking. Then he looked down, as if patience were something he could choose from the floor and pick up clean.

“I am not going to force my way in.”

“The chain is relieved.”

For one second, something shifted in his face. Not enough to call it anger. Enough to know it had arrived.

“I need you to let me explain what you heard.”

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Behind me, on the silent phone, Isolde existed as a small blue call bar at the top of the screen. I had placed it where Dario could not- see it unless he stepped into the room and bent down. He would not get that far not if I could help it.

“I heard you clearly,” I said.

“You heard a private conversation after a day I handled badly.”

The phrasing was careful enough to have been dressed. Handled badly. As if the day were a client.

“Is that what this is now?”

“This is a family crisis that should never have reached you in that way.”

“Which family?”

He closed his eyes once, slowly. It was the expression he used when a board member said something foolish in front of someone useful the small public performance of restraint.

“Do not do that.”

“Name the family, Dario.”

“Ours.”

The word hit the chain between us and fell dead.

My daughter moved low and heavy, a pressure against my side. I shifted my weight before my knees could lock. I did not want him to see the adjustment, but he did. Of course he did.

His voice softened. “You need to sit down.”

“I need you to stay in the hall.”

“You are 29 weeks pregnant and you have been alone in there for hours.”

“Because you have a wife.”

His hand came up to the doorframe – not pushing. Owning.

“Because I made choices I should have told you about before they became impossible to explain cleanly.”

I almost laughed. Not because it was funny – because cleanly was a strange concern for a man standing outside an apartment where he had planned to rinse me out of my own child’s life.

“Try dirty,” I said. “I have time.”

He breathed through his nose. “The call was ugly.”

“Yes.”

“I know what you heard.”

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KIRA

No, you do not.

I kept my face still. “Do you?”

“Enough.”

He let the word sit there, confident and incomplete. Enough meant he knew the accident-that I had heard his voice lower, Celine’s, the bed-shift in the background before they moved. Enough meant he knew humiliation had traveled before he could catch it. Enough did not mean the recording. Enough did not mean the file in Isolde’s inbox. Enough did not mean the photographs duplicated under a folder named after my daughter.

I let my shoulders drop by half an inch. Small. Visible. The first piece of camouflage.

“You called me a mistake,” I said.

His expression changed exactly the amount a compassionate man would allow. “I said things because Celine was frightened.”

“She sounded very collected.”

“Celine collects herself when she is terrified. It is one of her less charming skills.”

There was a practiced bitterness in that – a little marital fatigue offered to me like proof of intimacy. You are different. You are the one I tell the truth to.

The old Aveline would have looked for the wound beneath it. This Aveline looked at the hinge.

“You said the ring kept me calm.”

His mouth tightened. “That was unforgivable.”

“Was it untrue?”

“It was cruel.”

“That was not my question.”

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Another pause. I could hear the building through the open crack now a lift moving somewhere below, the soft mechanical inhale of expensive air. No neighbors opening doors. No witness more useful than the one hidden on my floor.

Isolde would be listening. I pictured her in her kitchen or hallway or wherever she had stopped moving when I called back from the second device. Hair tied up. Face hard. Pen moving.

Record with the phone if he comes in. Let him talk. Do not correct every lie. Lies are evidence when rich men relax into them.

Dario said, “I gave you that ring because I meant it.”

The pain came anyway. Not clean, not useful – a blunt little failure behind my ribs. I pressed my palm into the side of my stomach until the baby shifted again, irritated with both of us.

“You meant what?”

“That there would be a life after the vote.”

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“With your wife in it?”

“Not in the way you think.”

“Your son?”

TIKA

That landed. Not because he was ashamed of Nico – because I had named the part of the lie that could not be converted into board timing.

He lowered his voice. “Nico is not a weapon.”

“No,” I said. “He was a child asking who I was while his father pretended not to know how to answer.”

Dario looked away then. Only for a second. I stored it.

“I should have handled the hospital differently.”

“You should have told me you were married before you put a baby in me.”

The sentence entered the hall and altered the temperature. For the first time, his hand pressed flat against the door. The chain held

“Do not speak as if she is something I did to you.”

There he was. Under the soap, under the pressed collar and the careful regret – there he was, exactly where the recording had left him. My daughter became she when he wanted tenderness. The child when he wanted law. Something sacred when I accused him, something transferable when Celine asked what I would keep.

I lowered my eyes because if he saw my face then, he might see that I was no longer confused. Compliance did not need belief. It needed timing.

“I am tired,” I said.

He went still.

I made my voice smaller. Not broken-just worn enough to be plausible. “I don’t know what I heard. I know what it sounded like, and I know I can’t keep doing this through a door.”

Silence. Dario recognized openings the way other people recognized weather.

“Then let me in.”

“No.”

His jaw worked once.

I added, before his patience could harden, “Not tonight. If I open the door, we fight. If we fight, I get upset. Then tomorrow everyone says I was upset.”

That was true. It also made him think I was finally learning his language. His gaze sharpened.

“No one wants to make you look unstable.”

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STEA

I almost said the recording said otherwise. Instead, I nodded once, a small concession offered through the gap.

“Then don’t give them material.”

The words pleased him. I saw it before he hid it. He liked me strategic as long as the strategy pointed back toward him.

“Good,” he said softly. “That is what I have been trying to make you see.”

Trying to make you see. Not hiding. Not cornering. Educating.

I swallowed against the acid in my throat. “The clinic,” I said. “Celine already told me.”

“Celine came without me.”

“The card came with her.”

“The appointment is only an intake.”

“I did not make it.”

“No. I did.”

There was no apology attached. He watched me absorb that; as if the honesty might be mistaken for respect.

“Why?”

“Because St. Orla is no longer neutral ground, and your existing care is entangled with the foundation. The clinic gives us privacy.”

“Us.”

“You and the baby.”

“Not me and you?”

He heard the trap and stepped around it. “Aveline, the question tomorrow is whether we keep control of the record before lawyers turn this into something neither of us can soften.”

There were the lawyers. Not named – not yet. Only brought close enough to chill the room.

“What record?”

“Medical contact. Housing plan. Support. Consent.”

“Whose consent?”

“Yours.”

“What happens if I don’t give it?”

Dario’s face settled. There were men who threatened by changing volume – Dario threatened by removing warmth.

“Then other people start asking whether you understand the situation clearly enough to refuse the things protecting you.”

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The baby pushed hard beneath my palm. My breath caught before I could stop it.

His eyes dropped. For a moment, something like hunger crossed his face- not sexual, worse. Possessive and paternal and already counting what could be separated from me.

“Is she moving?”

I stepped back. The chain pulled the door no wider. He could not see my stomach now except the curve beneath my sweater.

“Do not ask about her as if you did not spend tonight planning who gets to keep her.”

“I am trying to keep her safe.”

“From me?”

“From scandal. From instability. From choices made at midnight because you are hurt.”

“I am hurt because you lied.”

“And I am here.”

He said it like arrival was an offering-like clean hair, calm voice, and a body in the hallway could cover the recorded truth of him.

I let a tremor into my hand and hated how easily it came.

“If I go tomorrow,” I said, “Celine isn’t there.”

His answer came too quickly. “No.”

“No lawyers in the room.”

“It is a medical intake.”

“No papers before I read them.”

“Of course.”

“No signing.”

This pause was smaller. But it was there.

“We will discuss what is necessary with the physician.”

“No signing,” I repeated.

He studied me. He was deciding whether the refusal was fear or spine. So I gave him fear.

“Please,” I said.

One word. Soft. Useful. Disgust moved through me like cold water.

Dario’s shoulders eased. “All right.”

No man sounded gentler than one agreeing to a boundary he meant to walk through later.

“No signing unless you are comfortable.”

Unless.

I did not argue with it. I nodded. “I need to sleep.”

“Unlock the chain.”

“No.”

“Aveline.”

“You said you would not force your way in.”

His eyes held mine through the crack. For 5 seconds he let me see how much he disliked being quoted. Then he stepped back.

“I will stay nearby.”

Of course he would.

“Where?”

“Downstairs.”

“In the lobby?”

“In the building.”

The building that knew Celine as Mrs. Armitage and me as Resident Guest.

I nodded again as if that helped.

“Good night,” he said.

I did not answer. He looked at the chain one last time. Then the door closed. The lock reengaged with a soft, obedient click.

I waited until his footsteps disappeared into the private lift corridor before I picked up the phone. Isolde was already speaking before I took her off mute.

“You did well. Do not vomit until you are away from the door.”

My laugh broke in half. “He believed me.”

“He believed the version of you he can use. That is different,”

I sank onto the nursery chair. My knees had started to shake now that there was no one to hide them from.

“He made the appointment.”

“I heard.”

KITA

“He said no signing.”

“He said unless. I wrote it down.”

Of course she had.

I pressed my fingers to my mouth. They smelled faintly of tissue paper from the ring.

“I can’t go to that clinic.”

“You may have to go near it,” Isolde said. “Near and inside are not the same word. We need him calm until morning. We need the documents out. We need another phone in your hand before his people decide yours is evidence they should manage.”

“He said he is downstairs.”

“Then we assume the building is his.”

It had always been his. I had just mistaken warmth for welcome.

A message arrived from Dario before I could answer.

Rest. We will handle this reasonably tomorrow.

Then another.

The car will be waiting downstairs at 10:00.

I stared at the screen until the numbers separated from the sentence. 10:00. Not 10:30. The appointment was at 10:30. The control started at the curb.

My phone buzzed once more. Dario: Do not make me come up for you.

I read it aloud for Isolde. On the other end of the line, she went very quiet.

Then she said, “Now we know what reasonable means.”

End of chapter

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