The wife isn't me

Chapter 8

The car downstairs had no clinic logo. That was how I knew it belonged to them.

A real medical transport would have announced its purpose. A patient shuttle would have had a name, a phone number, a dent near the bumper, something human. This car was black, clean, and waiting at the curb as if the building itself had exhaled it for me.

The driver stood beside the rear door at 9:54. Dario stood beside him. No coat this time – just a charcoal suit and a calm face turned up toward the entrance awning when I came through the lobby.

The doorman looked at me differently. Not unkindly. Worse-carefully. As if he had been told a fragile resident might try to misunderstand help.

I had packed like I was going to the hospital. That was Isolde's instruction. One tote, one coat, flat shoes, water, snack, charger, copies in the lining. Originals already handed off to the morning courier Isolde had sent under the name of a laundry service.

Dario did not know that part. He saw the tote and smiled faintly, as if I had obeyed.

"Good," he said. "You brought what you need."

"For an intake."

"For a long morning."

There were 2 phones in my pocket. Mine – bright and trackable and poisoned with history. And the cheap one Isolde had left with the courier, already loaded with her number, a rideshare account not tied to my card, and photographs of the documents in a folder labeled RECIPES because Isolde had a practical sense of humor and a cruel eye for search terms.

My real phone was recording. Not a call this time. A local voice memo, screen down, microphone outward.

"I said I would go," I told Dario. "I did not say I would sign."

His smile did not move. "And I said you would not be asked to sign anything you were uncomfortable with."

The driver opened the rear door. I looked at him. Mid-forties. No visible badge. Dark earpiece tucked behind his collar.

“What’s your name?”

He glanced at Dario before answering. Small-enough.

“Grant, ma’am.”

“Grant what?”

Dario’s hand touched my elbow. Light, public – the kind of touch that looked like care to everyone except the woman being aimed.

“Aveline.”

“If I am getting into a car while 29 weeks pregnant,” I said, “I can know the driver’s name.”

Grant shifted. “Grant Bell.”

AQ

KITA

Noted.

Dario’s hand left my elbow. He would not make a scene under the awning. That was the first useful fact of the morning.

The second was that the doorman was pretending not to listen.

I gave him my best frightened smile. “If I forget my bag upstairs, Mr. Reed, can you tell them I brought the navy tote?”

The doorman’s name was not Reed. It was Reid. He corrected people gently when they got it wrong. He did not correct me now.

His eyes flicked to Dario, then away. “Of course, Ms. Ashby.”

Good. He had heard my name. He had heard the tote. He had heard the driver.

I got into the car before Dario could turn that moment into something else.

The clinic was 12 minutes away-long enough for Dario to speak, short enough that he thought I could be managed without breaking. He sat beside me, not touching, one hand resting over his phone. The city slid past in glass and steel and morning glare. I watched reflections instead of buildings.

“You slept badly,” he said.

“You stationed yourself downstairs.”

“I stayed where I could respond if you needed me.”

“I did not need you.”

“You needed someone. You called Isolde.”

My stomach went cold. I kept my eyes on the window. “You checked my calls?”

“No.”

Too fast. He corrected the speed with a sigh. “The building logs showed a courier at 8:12. I assumed you had help.”

Not calls. Courier. He knew something had moved. Not what. My hand tightened around the tote strap.

“Is that forbidden?”

“No. But she dislikes me.”

“She pays attention.”

“Those are not the same thing.”

“Today they are.”

He looked at me then. I saw him in the window before I turned.

“You can have emotional support,” he said. “You cannot let someone outside this situation inflame you into decisions that damage the baby.”

“The baby is inside my body. I am not outside the situation.”

His mouth thinned. “That is exactly why the physician needs to explain the risks calmly.”

“Medical risks?*

AO

KICA

“Stress. Housing instability. Public exposure. Lack of coordinated care.”

He had organized the words in ascending order of accusation. I did not answer.

The clinic occupied the 6th floor of a limestone building that looked more like a family office than a place where anyone bled. There was no waiting room in the usual sense – just a reception desk, pale chairs, and a watercolor of an orchard hung where a clock should have beer.

No clocks in medical rooms meant patients could lose track of time.

I checked my phone. 10:17.

The receptionist already knew my name. “Ms. Ashby,” she said, standing. “Dr. Merrow is ready for you.”

Not please fill this out. Not do you have an appointment? Ready. As if the room had been arranged around me before I arrived.

Dario placed his hand at the small of my back. I moved forward before he could steer.

“Is Dr. Merrow my physician?”

The receptionist blinked. “She will be consulting today.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

Dario said, “Aveline.”

I looked at the receptionist. She was young enough to still believe discomfort was a mistake rather than information. Her badge read N. PIERCE.

“Is she my doctor?”

“She is the intake consultant assigned to your matter.”

Matter. Not pregnancy. Not care. Matter.

I smiled because my phone was still recording in my coat pocket. “Thank you, Ms. Pierce.”

She looked down at her desk. There was a folder there already-cream cover, blue tab, my full name typed on the label. Under it: ARMITAGE / VEY – MATERNAL COORDINATION.

My daughter kicked so hard my fingers dug into the reception counter.

Dario saw. “Sit down.”

“I am fine.”

“You are pale.”

“That can happen when strangers file me under another family’s name.”

Ms. Pierce picked up the folder too quickly. “I’ll let Dr. Merrow review the wording with you.”

“Was the wording already here?”

She froze the small mistake of a person who had not been trained by Dario. Not fully.

“We prepare standard language in advance.”

AQ

“For patients?”

“For complex family intakes.”

Dario stepped in. “This is why we are here. To correct anything that feels wrong.”

Feels. Not is.

The consultation room was warmer than the waiting room. Too warm. Pregnant-woman warm of disinfectant under lavender.

–

a deliberate kindness that trapped the scent

Dr. Merrow was in her fifties, silver hair, careful rings, the kind of voice that had said difficult things to rich women without ever being sued

“Aveline,” she said.

No Ms. Ashby. No permission. First name as softness.

“I understand this has been a distressing week.”

I lowered myself into the chair before Dario could choose one for me. It had arms. Good. I might need them to stand.

“Who told you that?”

Dr. Merrow glanced at Dario. “I received background from Mr. Armitage’s office.”

“Not from me.”

“No, not yet.”

Yet.

She opened the folder. I saw colored tabs. Consent. Release. Stability Plan. Support Schedule. Intended Parent Addendum.

The words did not lecture. They waited. That was the clinic’s talent.

“Before anything else,” I said, “I want my chart to reflect that I did not book this intake.”

Dr. Merrow’s pen paused. Dario leaned back in his chair. Too relaxed.

“Of course,” Dr. Merrow said.

“And that I have not consented to release medical information to Dario Armitage, Celine Armitage, the Vey family office, Armitage Group, or any foundation, clinic, counsel, employee, driver, security contractor, assistant, or family member connected to them.”

Dr. Merrow looked at me for the first time as if I might be expensive in a way she had not planned. “That is a broad list.”

“It is a broad problem.”

Dario’s voice lowered. “You are making this adversarial.”

“No,” I said. “I am naming the room.”

Dr. Merrow turned a page. “Aveline, no one here intends to take anything from you.”

“Then remove the Intended Parent Addendum.”

The room changed. Tiny. Enough. Dario looked at the folder. He had known there would be papers. He had not known I would know their titles

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KITA before they were handed to me.

Dr. Merrow placed both hands flat on the open folder. “That addendum is not operative without your signature.”

“Why is it pre-filled?”

“Prepared.”

“With whose names?”

She did not answer immediately. So I turned to the nurse standing by the counter. She was older than Ms. Pierce – dark hair clipped at the nape, freckles across the bridge of her nose. Badge: MAIA RELL, RN.

“Whose names?”

Nurse Rell’s eyes moved once to the folder. Then away.

“Ms. Ashby,” Dr. Merrow said.

But the nurse answered before the doctor could finish the rescue. “It lists you as patient.”

“And?”

Her throat moved. “Celine Armitage as listed maternal guardian for coordination purposes.”

Dario stood. Not violently. The chair did not scrape. That was almost worse.

“That is not language we are using.”

Dr. Merrow closed the folder. “Nurse Rell, please step out.”

Nurse Rell’s face went blank in the practiced way of employees who had rent and standards and not enough protection. “Yes, Doctor.”

Before she left, her eyes met mine. Only for a second. There was an apology there- and something else. Warning.

Dario remained standing. “Aveline, this is exactly why I wanted to be present. Draft language can be careless.”

“Careless people don’t usually type my name correctly 11 times.”

Dr. Merrow inhaled. “No one is asking you to sign today.”

“Good.”

I stood. Too fast. The room tipped. My hand went to the chair arm, then my stomach, The baby rolled against the pressure, alive and offended and mine.

Dario moved toward me. I lifted my other hand. “Don’t.”

He stopped because Dr. Merrow was watching. Because the phone in my pocket was still recording. Because his public hands knew how to behave.

“I want copies of anything prepared with my name on it.”

“We cannot release internal drafts,” Dr. Merrow said.

“Then note that you refused.”

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“Ms. Ashby–”

“Now I am Ms. Ashby?”

Her mouth closed. I picked up my tote.

Dario said, “You are not leaving without a plan.”

“I have a plan.”

“Aveline.”

“I am going to use the restroom.”

He looked toward the hallway. “I will wait outside.”

“That would make it difficult to urinate.”

For the first time since the car, Ms. Pierce at reception made a sound. Small. Immediately smothered. Dario looked at her. The room remembered who paid for things.

Dr. Merrow pressed a button by the door. “Nurse Rell can show you.”

Nurse Rell returned without surprise, as if she had been listening close enough to know her cue. She led me down a corridor lined with framed certificates and closed doors. The restroom was past the elevators. She did not stop there.

“Bathroom is left,” she said quietly. “Staff exit is straight, then right, then stairs. The alley opens onto Mercer.”

I kept walking beside her. My heart was moving too fast for the rest of me.

“Why?”

Her face stayed forward. “Because my sister signed something after a doctor called her frightened, and I still remember the room.”

The hall seemed to narrow. Behind us, a door opened. Dario’s voice came through, calm and close.

“Aveline?”

Nurse Rell pressed a key card into my palm. “Do not take the elevator.”

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End of chapter

He lost her. Now he begs. Her family threw her away. A foundation made her heir. Her ex? He’s

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