The wife isn't me

Chapter 81

“Mr. Vey will not be in the room with me.”

That was my first condition at 9:41 AM. Not money, not cameras, not who spoke first. Distance.

The meeting happened through a secure video link in a counsel-controlled suite 6 blocks from the courthouse. Maris had chosen it because the building had no donor plaque in the lobby, the elevators required temporary codes, and the conference room had a side room with a recliner, changing table, sink, and a door that locked from our side.

Not a nursery – never that. A room where Noa’s needs could interrupt a powerful man without asking his permission.

Noa had fed at 8:52, badly at first, then well enough after I changed her diaper and warmed her feet inside my palms. Her temperature was 98.8. She had 1 wet diaper before we left and another in the side room at 9:30. I had taken ibuprofen with toast, changed a pad, packed 2 shirts, and cried for 40 seconds in the bathroom because the smell of baby spit-up on my collar had made me want my mother with a force that embarrassed me.

Then I washed my face and came out. Postpartum life had no respect for dramatic pacing.

Bennett waited in the hall with coffee he did not expect me to drink and tea I might. He had come because Mathias had named Bellamy’s “institutional grievances” in writing, which gave him a reason to be present. He had stayed because I said yes.

“He will not be in the room,” Maris said. “He will be on screen. His counsel will be on screen. We record through the court reporter. If he objects, the meeting ends.”

“No private breakout.”

“None.”

“No line about my baby being asleep so we can continue.”

“Baby care pauses everything.”

I nodded. Noa shifted in the carrier against my chest. She made a tiny goat sound. I touched her cheek with the back of 1 finger. Normal warm.

“And if he mentions safe housing?”

Anika’s expression became very calm. “Then we end and file.”

Good.

At 10:00, Mathias Vey appeared on the screen in a room that looked like it had been designed to make wood feel hereditary. Dark paneling. Cream lampshade. Silver hair. No visible family photographs.

Men like Mathias did not need pictures behind them to remind you they owned families – he used empty space for that.

His counsel sat beside him, narrow and unsmiling. Our court reporter appeared in a smaller window. Maris stated the rules. Anika stated them again, shorter and less politely. Mathias listened as if we were reading weather warnings before a planned picnic.

Then he looked at me. Not at Noa first. At me. It was the only thing I respected about him in the first 30 seconds.

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

..... مہیچ ذاب ل خالص صاف ساتھ کے پہ ریہ شاذی صد فر

AO

“Ms. Ashby,” he said. “Thank you for agreeing to speak.”

“I agreed to listen.”

A pause. Bennett’s pen stopped moving beside me.

Mathias inclined his head by a fraction. “A distinction worth preserving.”

His voice had no wasted warmth. Dario’s calm had always tried to wrap around me. Mathias’s did not bother-it arranged the table and expected me to notice where I was seated.

“Your side requested this meeting,” Maris said. “Make your proposal.”

Mathias’s counsel opened a folder. Mathias lifted 2 fingers, and the folder closed again. He wanted this to look personal. Of course he did

“Before proposal,” he said, “I want to correct an impression. The Vey family office does not manage patient records. It does not direct clinical care. It does not seek to interfere with any infant’s medical treatment.”

Noa hiccupped. The sound was small and violent.

Mathias glanced toward the carrier then away. “That is not a proposal,” I said.

“It is context.”

“I have had a great deal of context from your world. Most of it arrived before my consent.”

His mouth moved almost into a smile. “You are precise.”

“I am tired.”

“Those are not opposites.”

I disliked that he was clever. It made him cleaner than Dario in some ways and more dangerous in others. Dario still wanted to be loved by the room he was controlling. Mathias did not care if the room loved him – he wanted the exits described correctly before they vanished.

Maris tapped her pen once. “Proposal.”

Mathias folded his hands. “A private resolution remains possible. It would require discipline from all adults. The present public escalation is harming children, medical institutions, and charitable work that has supported women and infants for years.”

Women and infants. I looked down at my daughter’s hat. “Do not put Noa between me and a donor plaque,” I said.

His eyes returned to mine. “Then let us discuss Noa Ashby plainly.”

My stomach tightened – not because he used her surname, because he could use it without choking.

“She is a newborn. She requires medical stability, calm adults, resources, and a future not defined by scandal. You require postpartum recovery, secure housing, competent medical care, and relief from litigation exposure. Those needs are not incompatible with privacy.”

“Whose privacy?”

“Everyone’s.”

“That usually means yours.”

“It means the child’s.”

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

مہ یچ ذ ائ ل خال ص صاف ساتھ ہ کے پ ریہ شاذ ی صہ فر .....

“Noa’s privacy is not the same thing as my erasure.”

He accepted the correction with another shallow incline of his head. “Then we avoid erasure language.”

I almost laughed. Noa startled against me, and the laugh died before it became sound. I slid my hand over her back until her body softened

“You think language is the problem,” I said.

“Language is often the beginning of the solution.”

“Consent is.”

For the first time, Mathias’s counsel looked annoyed. Mathias did not.

“Very well. Consent. We can create a structure where you remain recognized in private documents as Noa’s mother, receive long-term housing support outside the Armitage residences, dedicated pediatric care, postpartum medical coverage, security, income replacement, and/ a trust arrangement for the child’s education and health. In return, litigation narrows. Public statements cease. Bellamy withdraws from public advocacy. Hospital and family-office matters resolve through confidential correction rather than adversarial exposure.”

The room did not move. My body did. Milk prickled. Blood shifted. Pain tightened low and hot. I had the dizzy sensation that if I stood too quickly, all the neat words on the screen would spill out of me red.

Recognized in private documents. Near my daughter by arrangement. Paid not to embarrass the people who tried to prepare a record for me before I arrived.

Bennett’s hand rested open on the table, palm up, not touching mine. He did not look at it. He did not turn it into a symbol. It was simply there if I wanted a railing. I did not take it – I needed both hands for Noa.

“Private documents,” I said.

“Yes.”

“And public documents?”

“Public narrative can be managed more delicately than the present course allows.”

“No.”

Mathias’s eyebrows lifted a little.

I adjusted Noa’s cap because if I did not touch something living, I might touch the screen. “Noa does not get 2 mothers depending on who is allowed to read the document. I am her mother. In the chart. On the birth record. At the pediatric desk. In court. In public if public becomes necessary. In private when she wakes at 2:00 AM and cannot latch. In every room.”

My voice did not rise. Good-I had no spare energy to waste on volume.

Mathias watched me for 3 slow seconds. “Dario told me you were sentimental.”

The name struck the room like metal dropped into water.

Maris said, “Mr. Vey.”

“It is not an insult,” Mathias said.

“It is inaccurate,” I said. “Sentimental people keep private promises because they were beautiful. I keep timestamps because they were lies.”

Bennett’s pen moved again.

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

..... مہ یچ ذ ائ ل خال ص صاف ساتھ کے پ ر یہ شاذ ی صد فر

Mathias looked faintly entertained now. That should have frightened me. It did.

“You want punishment,” he said.

“I want correction.”

“Correction has a cost.”

“So did the error.”

“Errors can be made by systems under pressure.”

“My daughter was not born into a typo.”

The court reporter’s hands moved in the small window. I hoped she charged by the word.

Noa made a soft complaint. I checked the time. 10:18. Too soon for a full feed, but newborns had no respect for adults arranging their future like furniture.

“Pause,” I said.

Mathias’s counsel opened his mouth.

Maris said, “Baby care. We pause.”

The recording stopped. The screen stayed live but muted and visually blanked under the meeting software protocol. Maris had insisted on that – no one watched me unclip a nursing tank because a Vey had a schedule.

In the side room, Isolde helped me settle. Noa screamed for 22 seconds with her whole face purple-red, then latched as if she had invented hunger. I breathed through the pain.

Isolde crouched beside me. “You are doing fine.”

“I know.”

“I mean it.”

“I know that too.”

She touched the toe of Noa’s sleeper. “He is going to offer more.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want Bennett in there?”

I looked through the cracked door. Bennett stood in the main room with his back angled away, speaking quietly to Anika. Not looking toward me. Not hovering. Not using concern as a leash.

“Yes,” I said.

When we returned, Mathias looked exactly as he had before the pause. That was his performance – not warmth, not impatience. Permanence.

Maris restarted the record.

Mathias spoke first. “A more generous version, then. A residence in your name within 15 minutes of the pediatric practice of your choosing. Security vetted by neutral counsel. Medical expenses for you and the child covered through independent escrow until the child reaches 18. No

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

ذ ا ئ ل خ ا ل ص ص ا ف س ا ت ھ ک ے پ ر ی ش ا ذ ی ص غ ر

AO requirement that you reside with Dario, Celine, or any Armitage household. Structured visitation and family recognition handled privately, fou –

would not be excluded from the child's life."

I heard the silence after life. Not motherhood. Life.

"Would Celine be listed anywhere as Noa's mother?"

"The language can be made less inflammatory."

"Answer."

His counsel shifted. "There are many forms of family recognition that do not require the word mother."

I smiled then. It felt awful on my face. "That is a yes with better shoes."

Mathias's eyes sharpened. "Ms. Ashby, you are 3 days postpartum. You have an infant recovering from a medical scare. You are being encouraged to wage a public war by people who will not be the ones alone at 3:00 AM when the money, attention, and adrenaline are gone

Bennett went very still.

I put 1 hand on Noa's back and the other flat on the table. "At 3:00 AM," I said, "I am already alone with her. That is not your threat to make."

For the first time, Mathias's face cooled. There he was – not the patron, not the grandfather of systems. The man whose help became a wall if refused.

"Litigation can become difficult," he said.

"It already did."

"For Bellamy as well."

"Bellamy can speak for Bellamy."

Bennett did not move into the opening. He let it pass because it was not his scene to claim. Mathias saw that too. His gaze flicked toward him, then back to me.

"You are making decisions from pain."

"I am making decisions from documents."

“Documents can be drafted.”

“Yes,” I said. “That is the point.”

Maris looked at me then. She knew before I finished.

“Put the offer in writing.”

Mathias leaned back slightly. On a lesser man, it would have looked like surprise. On him, it looked like interest.

“For review by counsel?” he asked.

“For review by counsel.”

“You understand a written proposal is not an admission.”

“You understand I did not ask for a confession.”

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

TA

His mouth curved-small, controlled, almost pleased. That was the most frightening part.

“Of course,” he said.

His counsel turned toward him sharply. “Mr. Vey, I would recommend that any settlement framework be exchanged through counsel with appropriate labels and without prejudice language.”

“Then label it,” Mathias said. He was still looking at me. “Ms. Ashby appreciates precision. Let us be precise.”

Noa stirred, then settled. I did not look away from the screen.

Mathias Vey smiled as if I had asked for a glass of water instead of the shape of his contempt.

“We will put it in writing.”

End of chapter

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

–

The wife isn't me

Chapter 82

KITA

Chapter 82 – In Writing

“Do not open it on your phone.”

Maris had the email before I finished buckling Noa into the carrier. The subject line sat on her laptop in a blue-white strip of light:

Without Prejudice Settlement Framework – Ashby Infant Noa Ashby

Noa’s name looked wrong inside their formatting — not misspelled, handled.

The meeting with Mathias had ended 14 minutes earlier. I had used 4 of those minutes in the bathroom, checking a pad and my own face with the same grim attention. No heavy bleeding. No large clots. Pain manageable if I did not pretend stairs were a moral test. Milk drying stiff or my shirt. Hair escaping every pin.

Alive. Upright. Angry enough to stay awake.

“Why not my phone?” I asked.

“Because we preserve the header, attachment, metadata, and access log properly. Also because if you read it on a 6-inch screen while holding a newborn, I will develop a facial tic.”

Isolde said, “Too late.”

Maris ignored her and connected the laptop to a portable printer no one in the suite admitted was old. It coughed twice, then began producing pages with the slow drama of a machine that had seen litigation and resented it.

Bennett stood by the door, checking the hall through the narrow side window. He had not said much since Mathias smiled. That silence was not absence – it was containment. I recognized it because I was doing the same thing inside my skin.

Anika opened a clean evidence folder. “We print 2 copies. One working. One preserved. We save the native email to secure storage. We do not annotate the preserved copy. We log receipt time, sender, recipients, attachment title, and who viewed it.”

“Will it be privileged?” I asked.

“They will claim settlement privilege over some uses,” Maris said. “That does not make it meaningless. Offers can show intent, knowledge, pressure, and the remedial structure they thought would solve the problem. We handle it carefully.”

Noa made a soft snuffling noise against my chest. I looked down. Her face had turned toward me, mouth rooting against the edge of the wrap.

“She ate 36 minutes ago,” I said.

“She did not sign the schedule,” Isolde said.

My laugh came out too close to a sob. Bennett’s gaze moved to me and away again, giving me the choice of whether to be seen.

I took the chair. “Open the working copy.”

The first page slid into Maris’s hands. She did not read immediately – she scanned the heading, the labels, the footer, the counsel mark at the bottom. Her expression changed only at the corner of her mouth.

“What?” I asked.

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

مہ یچ ذ ائ ل خال ص صاف ساتھ ک ے پ ریہ شاند ی سہ فر

“They were careful.”

“Of course.”

“Not careful enough.”

She set the page on the table and turned it so I could read. The words arranged themselves politely. They always did.

This non-admission framework is intended to reduce ongoing reputational, medical, and familial harm arising from disputed historical coordination efforts concerning Aveline Ashby and infant Noa Ashby.

My daughter’s body shifted in the wrap, warm and impatient. I touched the back of her head.

“Continue,” I said.

Maris read selected paragraphs aloud because she knew I needed both hands. Independent residence in Aveline’s name for 5 years, renewable by neutral trustee. Postpartum medical

coverage. Pediatric care fund. Security. Income replacement. Education trust. Confidential correction of disputed maternal and family-continuity designations. Withdrawal or narrowing of public claims, regulatory threats, and media adjacent statements. Non-disparagement by Aveline, her counsel, Bellamy Ventures, and any allied foundations or staff.

“They named Bellamy,” Bennett said.

His voice was mild-too mild.

Maris’s finger rested on the clause. “Yes.”

“Can they bind Bellamy through me?” I asked.

“No. But they can reveal what they want: silence not only from you, but from the people who made supporting you expensive for them.”

Bennett came closer only after I shifted the chair with my foot to make room. He stood at the table’s corner, not behind me.

“Read the family recognition section,” I said.

Maris hesitated for half a second. That was enough warning. I braced my hand over Noa’s back.

The parties may agree to a private family-recognition protocol that preserves Ms. Ashby’s regular and meaningful proximity to the child while reducing confusion in broader family, philanthropic, medical, and social environments.

For a moment I could not understand the words because my body understood them too quickly.

Regular and meaningful proximity. Not custody. Not motherhood. Proximity – as if Noa were a painting I could visit if the lighting was good and the owner felt generous.

“Keep reading,” I said. My voice sounded normal. I knew because Bennett’s jaw tightened.

Maris did. Any public-facing clarification concerning infant Noa Ashby shall avoid unnecessary inflammatory labels and may describe Ms. Ashby as a birth mother and continuing maternal figure, subject to final parentage orders and confidentiality restrictions.

Birth mother. Continuing maternal figure. My vision narrowed around those words until the room became paper and heat.

Noa began to cry – not loud, a thin complaint that built by the second. My body answered before my mind did. I unclipped the carrier and lifted her out. Her face scrunched red. Her hands opened against air.

“Pause,” I said.

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

ذ ا ب ل خ ا ل ص صاف ساتھ کے شاندی

AQ

No one argued.

In the side room, I changed her diaper even though it was only damp. I checked her temperature because rage had made my fingers stupid 98.9. I tried to feed her, but she rooted, screamed, latched, let go, and screamed again because the world had failed to arrange itself around her hunger quickly enough.

“It’s all right,” I whispered. “It’s all right.”

It was not. She did not need that from me. She needed my voice low, my hand steady, my body warm. So I lied in the way mothers were allowed to lie. It is all right. I had you. No one can make you a figure.

It took 6 minutes for her to latch and 2 more for my own breathing to slow.

When I came back, Bennett had moved the printed pages farther from my chair. Not hidden-just not under my hands.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Yes.”

That was all.

Maris looked at me. “We can stop.”

“No.”

“Aveline.”

“If I stop every time they describe stealing my child politely, they will learn to bring better paper.”

Isolde said, “That is going in my eventual obituary.”

“Do not make me laugh while she is latched.”

“Then do not be quotable while nursing.”

The absurdity helped – not enough, enough to keep going.

Anika summarized the rest. A confidentiality term broad enough to choke on. A cooperation term requiring counsel to withdraw or narrow preservation demands once confidential correction occurred. A statement that no party would admit wrongdoing, improper access, coercion, or attempted parentage manipulation. A clause offering “facilitated family contact” with Dario after tempers cooled.

There it was – Dario, waiting behind the money.

“No,” I said.

“We are not accepting it,” Maris said.

“I know. I wanted to say it where the page could hear me.”

The printer finished the preserved copy. Anika logged the last page at 11:02 AM.

I thought that would be the hook in the day – the written offer, the words birth mother, the soft legal confession wrapped in non- admission language.

Then the counsel relay phone rang. Not buzzed-rang. Everyone looked at it.

Maris checked the screen. “Farrow’s office.”

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

A

O

Dario’s counsel. Of course.

“Put him through counsel only,” I said.

“It is a live call request with Dario present,” Maris said. “They say it concerns urgent de-escalation.”

Isolde laughed without sound. Bennett’s face went unreadable.

Maris said, “You do not have to speak.”

Noa was still feeding, warm and heavy now that the storm had passed.

I looked at the printed offer. Birth mother. Continuing maternal figure.

“Put it on speaker. Recorded. Counsel present. No medical details.”

Maris gave the advisements before connecting. Recording. Counsel present. No location. No direct contact outside legal channels. No discussion of Noa’s care beyond what had already been noticed.

Farrow acknowledged. Then Dario’s voice entered the room.

“Aveline.”

One word, and my body remembered an apartment temperature set too warm because my calves once cramped. I hated that. I hated memory for having no ethics.

“Speak through counsel,” Maris said.

Dario ignored her. “What did you think would happen?”

Noa swallowed. I looked at the pages instead of the phone. “To what?” I asked.

“To my family.”

There it was. Not to Noa. Not to you. My family.

“Your family made me an offer,” I said.

“You maneuvered Mathias into reducing a private solution to writing so you could twist it.”

“He chose his verbs.”

“You know exactly what you are doing.”

“Yes.”

Silence. Dario had never liked that word in my mouth unless it came after him.

Farrow said, “Mr. Armitage, I recommend we keep this to counsel.”

Dario kept going. “Celine is recovering. Her son is in special care. Nico is hearing things at school. Bellamy is feeding press interest. You are making every child in this family pay because you cannot stop punishing me.”

My hand tightened around Noa before I made it loosen. That was the trick. Dario could take a sentence with 1 true piece and build a cage from it. Celine was recovering. Her son was in special care. Nico was innocent. None of that made Noa available for erasure.

“Do not use children as insulation,” I said.

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

4/6 AO

EXCA

“You are the one dragging them into this.”

“I kept Nico out of filings when I could. I kept Celine’s newborn separate from Noa’s records even when St. Orla did not. I am not the person who put all of them in one family-continuity machine.”

His breath changed-small, sharp.

“You sound proud.”

“I sound awake.”

“You trapped an old man trying to resolve a crisis.”

An old man. Mathias Vey would have been insulted by the costume.

“He offered me proximity to my child.”

“He offered security,” Dario said. “Medical care. Housing. A life where Noa is protected from becoming a public scandal.”

“Noa is not a scandal.”

“She will be if you keep going.”

Bennett moved then, just enough that I saw his hand on the table. Not reaching – available, I did not take it. I wanted to. That mattered, so I did not hide it from myself.

“Withdraw the filings,” I said.

Dario went quiet.

“Withdraw the portal access demands,” I continued. “Withdraw any claim that treats biology as medical control. Support record correction naming me as Noa’s only mother.

Tell your counsel no further family-office contact with my medical or pediatric records. Put that in writing.”

Farrow started to speak. Dario cut him off.

“You think you are in a position to dictate terms because Bellamy is standing close enough to make you brave.”

Bennett’s name in Dario’s voice made the air harder to breathe.

“No,” I said. “I am in a position to state terms because I am Noa’s mother.”

Another silence. Then Dario laughed once. No warmth, no disbelief – something meaner.

“Cruelty looks good on you when you can call it motherhood.”

Isolde’s chair scraped. I lifted 1 finger without looking at her.

“Is there anything else?” Maris asked, voice like a locked drawer.

Dario said my name again, lower. “Aveline, you are endangering the family.”

“No. I am documenting who did.”

The line went so quiet I thought Farrow might have muted him. Then Dario said, “You will regret making me fight.”

Noa’s mouth loosened in sleep. Milk ran warm down my skin.

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

AO

Maris ended the call before he could turn the threat into another sentence.

Tile Clear – Puzzle Game

ذ ائ ل خال ص صاف، ساتھ کے پ ریہ شانی صد فر ..

End of chapter

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 83

KIXA

Chapter 83 – Dario’s Apology Attempt

“The gifts do not enter the room.”

Ms. Kell said it before I saw them. That made me trust her for 1 more minute than the courthouse deserved.

The family-services suite smelled like copier toner, old carpet, and the lemon cleaner someone had used too enthusiastically on the toy shelf. It was 3:12 PM, which meant Noa should have been asleep after her 2:35 feed. Instead she lay against my shoulder, awake and suspicious, making soft clicking sounds with her tongue as if she were auditing the air.

Her temperature had been 98.7 before we left the counsel suite. Wet diaper at 2:58. No vomiting. No lethargy. No blue color. Parental concern elevated because her mother had been asked to bring a 3-day-old newborn back into a room where adults used the word access like it was weather.

I wrote all of it in the log while Ms. Kell spoke to Dario’s counsel in the hall.

Priya stood beside the table with the temporary order open. Anika was on the phone with Maris, one earbud in. Isolde sat to my left, close enough to take Noa if my hands failed, far enough not to look like I could not hold my own child.

Bennett was outside the suite. That had been my choice. The last call with Dario had put his jealousy too close to the surface-if Bennett stood in the room, Dario would aim at him and pretend he was aiming at fatherhood. If Bennett stayed outside, the room remained uglier but cleaner.

When I asked, Bennett had only said, “I’ll be by the elevators.” No argument, no wounded pride, no claim that I needed him where I could see him. That was why I knew where he was without looking.

Ms. Kell came back in with her clipboard held like a door. “Mr. Armitage arrived with 4 boxed items and 1 garment bag,” she said. “The items will remain in the hall with counsel unless Ms. Ashby agrees to inspect them. Under today’s order, gifts are not part of supervised contact.”

“I do not agree,” I said.

“Noted.”

Priya added, “No photographs of the items. No public statement characterizing refusal as denial of necessities. No item to be opened in the infant’s presence.”

Ms. Kell wrote that down too.

“For the record,” Priya continued, “we are not refusing necessities. We are refusing unscreened gifts during contested contact. If Mr. Armitage believes Noa lacks required supplies, he can provide a support proposal through counsel, with no branding, no conditions, no delivery address, and no publicity.”

Ms. Kell’s pen paused, then moved again.

That mattered. Rich men loved emergencies because emergencies made ordinary rules look cruel. A box became care. Refusal became spite. A ribbon became proof that a mother would rather deprive her child than let a father be generous.

I had enough diapers in the bag for 6 hours. I had formula samples I had not needed yet, pumped milk I did not know whether I would use, 2 sleepers, 3 cloths, a thermometer, a folded copy of the discharge instructions, and a pediatric number written on the inside cover of the log because my hands shook when I had to search contacts.

: Good Web Novel

کہ والدوں کو رنج محبت سے ذلیل ویب موبد وریڈر.....

AO

Noa was not cold because I had refused a garment bag. Noa was not suffering because Dario had been asked to obey a channel i namų that written somewhere outside my head.

Noa sneezed. Every adult stopped. She looked offended by her own face.

I waited. No second sneeze. No change in color. No limpness. No heat when I touched her neck.

“She is fine,” I said, mostly to myself.

Ms. Kell’s expression did not soften, which I appreciated. “If at any point you want to pause for infant care, say so.”

“I will.”

Dario entered at 3:18.

He was not carrying anything. Of course he was not – men like Dario did not need to carry the apology themselves if an assistant, courier or counsel could hold the weight until the room had been arranged.

He wore a charcoal coat over a dark suit. No tie. A deliberate softness. The undone collar said he had come as a father, not a litigant, which was ridiculous because his lawyer stood outside with 4 boxes and a garment bag.

His eyes went to Noa first. Then to me. Then to the empty space near the wall where Bennett was not. He noticed absence too.

“Ms. Ashby,” Ms. Kell said, “Mr. Armitage has 30 minutes supervised contact, subject to infant needs. He may sit. He may speak to the infant. He may request to hold her. You decide whether to transfer. I may direct return at any time. No litigation discussion unless counsel approves a procedural clarification.”

Dario’s mouth tightened at Ms. Ashby. Good.

“I understand,” he said.

He sat in the same low chair as before. The room remembered him badly.

“How is she?” he asked.

“Stable,” I said.

“I heard she was discharged.”

“Through the proper notice channel.”

“Aveline.”

Ms. Kell looked up. Dario corrected himself. “Ms. Ashby.”

It was a small correction. It still cost him something visible.

Once, he had said my name like a private room – like a key turned quietly after the door closed. He had made Aveline sound rare, chosen, protected from the noisy world he said would misunderstand us. Now he said it like a habit he resented breaking.

The difference should not have hurt. It did. Pain did not prove love – sometimes it only proved where a bruise had learned its shape.

Noa’s head moved against my shoulder. Her mouth opened. For a second, I thought she would cry. She only yawned, an enormous silent protest that showed her whole tongue.

Dario’s face changed. It was real. That remained the worst part. If he had been empty, this would have been simpler – if he had looked at Noa and seen only leverage, I could have built a wall from disgust and stood behind it forever. But wonder moved through him. Then calculation

: Good Web Novel

AO

KERA followed close enough to hold its coal.

“I brought a few things,” he said.

“No,” I said.

His gaze lifted. “You have not seen them.”

“I do not need to.”

“They are for Noa.”

“Noa is not accepting gifts through contested access.”

“She is 3 days old. She is not accepting or refusing anything. Adults are.”

“Correct,” I said. “Her mother is.”

His jaw moved once. Ms. Kell wrote something down. He noticed.

“I am not trying to create an issue,” he said.

Priya’s pen made the smallest sound against her folder.

“Then withdraw the gifts through counsel,” I said. “No public mention. No replacement delivery. No courier to any address. No foundation donation in her name. No social post about rejected baby items.”

Dario looked at me as if I had struck something delicate. “You think that little of me?”

“I think very specifically of you.”

Isolde looked at the floor.

Darío leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands open. The posture was new. The hands were not. I remembered them on my stomach in the dark, on the small of my back at restaurants where no one knew my name, holding a paintbrush under a nursery cloud,

sliding a draft authorization under an apartment door while I stood behind a chain lock and learned what he thought care meant when love stopped obeying.

“Noa should not suffer because adults are angry,” he said.

There it was. The apology without the word. The accusation wearing a blanket.

“Noa is fed, clothed, warm, medically monitored, and safe,” I said.

“In temporary housing,”

“In protected housing.”

“With donated furniture and legal guards between her and half her family.”

“With a mother who did not pre-load her records before consent.”

Dario closed his eyes for 1 second. When he opened them, he looked tired, Maybe he was. I hoped he was. I hoped every night had teeth.

“I did not know the details of what Mathias’s office put into St. Orla,” he said.

Priya lifted her head. Anika’s earbud crackled softly. Ms. Kell’s pen stopped.

: Good Web Novel

محبت سے ناول ویب موبو وریو در

AO

“Do you want counsel in the room for that statement?” Priya asked.

Dario’s gaze did not leave mine. “I am saying I brought things because my daughter has been in hospitals and courtrooms since she was born and I am not allowed to do anything ordinary for her.”

“Ordinary would be withdrawing filings that endanger her medical privacy.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because you keep not doing it.”

His fingers flexed once on his knee.

“I also brought the car seat base that matches the carrier you chose months ago,” he said. “And the bottle sterilizer you said was ridiculous until you read reviews at 2:00 AM. There are blankets. Clothes. The mobile from the nursery.”

My body remembered before I could stop it. The mobile had been wooden, pale moons and small painted clouds. I had laughed at the price and then touched 1 cloud with my fingertip because it was exactly the wrong kind of beautiful.

Dario had bought it while I was still saying no. At the time, I thought he was listening through my refusals to what I truly wanted. Now I knew he had been practicing.

“Those items stay outside,” I said.

“They are hers.”

“They are evidence of a private life you built while preparing public erasure.”

“Not everything was a scheme.”

No. That was the knife. Not everything had been. Some of it had been tenderness, or close enough that my body could not sort the difference while holding his child in a courthouse room. The mobile had not lied. The man who bought it had.

“Then prove the part that is not a scheme,” I said. “Withdraw the filings.”

His expression sharpened. The tired father receded. There he was.

“I have rights,” he said.

“You have standing.”

“I am her father.”

“Then act like her body matters more than your access.”

Noa made a fussy sound. The conversation stopped because I made it stop. I shifted her carefully, supporting her head, feeling the heat of her cheek against my wrist. Normal warm. Still normal.

Dario watched my hand. “May I hold her?” he asked.

Ms. Kell straightened. “Ms. Ashby decides. If she agrees, I remain within arm’s reach.”

My answer was not ready. That angered me. It should have been ready no, because he threatened me. No, because he called me cruel. No, because he had not withdrawn the portal access demands.

But the temporary order existed, and his biology existed, and Noa was not a prize I could hide behind my hurt. I would not turn every refusal into proof of love and every permitted contact into betrayal of myself. That was how adults made children into symbols before they had neck

: Good Web Novel

AO control.

“Have you withdrawn the filings?” I asked.

Dario’s face went still.

“That is not an answer to my question.”

“It is mine.”

“No.”

“No, you have not withdrawn them?”

“No, I will not withdraw my right to be informed about my daughter.”

“That was not what I asked you to withdraw.”

“It is what you mean.”

“No. I mean portal access. Medical control. Record pressure. Location routes. Anything that turns Noa’s care into a map to me.”

He looked at Noa again. For a moment, his face was almost open. “I can protect her too,” he said.

“Not while you are trying to own the doorway.”

Ms. Kell wrote again.

Dario’s hand moved toward Noa. Not far – just an instinct, or a performance of instinct, or both braided so tightly even he could not separate them.

Noa saw movement. She startled. Her face crumpled. The cry came hard and immediate, a raw newborn protest that filled the family-services suite and made every adult in it useless for 1 bright second.

Dario froze with his hand still in the air. I brought Noa tight against me, her mouth open against my collar, her body hot with effort rather than fever.

“Return to your chair,” Ms. Kell said.

Dario did. Slowly. His face had gone pale.

Noa cried harder. In the hall, something shifted near the elevators. Bennett did not come in. He waited for me to call.

I held my daughter and let the room hear who she needed first.

: Good Web Novel

..کہ والوں کرنے محبت سے لئے او ویب موبو وریڈ

End of chapter

A

The wife isn't me

Chapter 84

“Her crying is not evidence.”..

I said it before Priya could.

Noa was still red-faced against my chest, furious and alive, her tiny fists pressed under her chin. The cry had broken into hiccupping protests. Not the limp, frightening quiet from the fever scare. Not the weak refusal that had sent us to Westport Children’s Receiving with my heart clawing at my ribs.

This was ordinary misery-too loud, too sharp, beautiful in the way only a healthy newborn’s complaint could be beautiful after a night spent measuring fear in tenths of a degree.

Dario sat in the family-services chair with his hand flat on his knee. He looked as if Noa had rejected him. That was the danger.

Everyone wanted a baby’s body to tell a story. Dario wanted her quiet in his arms to prove fatherhood. I wanted her cry to prove she knew. Neither was fair to a child who had been born 3 days ago and currently hated gas, light, movement, and possibly the concept of sleeves.

“Ms. Ashby,” Ms. Kell said carefully, “I will document that the infant became distressed when Mr. Armitage reached toward her and that you soothed her. I will not interpret attachment or preference.”

“Good,” I said.

Dario’s eyes lifted. He had expected me to use it. Of course he had he would have.

“Do you object to that wording?” Priya asked him.

His mouth tightened. “I object to the implication that my daughter is afraid of me.”

“There is no such implication,” I said. “There is a newborn who startled.”

“Aveline.”

“No.”

The word cracked through the room- not loud, clean. “You do not get to turn her cry into proof of injury when it helps you and proof of alienation when it does not.”

Ms. Kell’s pen moved. Dario heard it.

“I would never say she was alienated at 3 days old.”

Priya’s silence became very interested.

That was how records caught men like Dario. Not in the large lies – the large lies arrived wearing counsel, context, and 14 reasons they were not lies at all. They could survive an affidavit by changing their jacket.

Small sentences were different. I would never say. Not I will not. Not I withdraw. Never, as if the thought itself had not already entered the room and taken a chair.

I looked at Priya. She did not smile. She only made a note with the slow neatness of a woman pinning a sleeve before cutting cloth.

: Good Web Novel

ڈر یوریہ وہ موب یو ل اوٹ سے بت حم رے کہ ں والے

AQ

I shifted Noa higher and patted her back. She hiccupped, then cried again, smaller.

“Good,” I said. “Then we agree.”

Dario looked at Ms. Kell. “Can that be noted?”

“I document what occurs,” Ms. Kell said. It was the kindest unkind sentence I had heard all day.

Noa’s mouth rooted against my shirt. “She needs to feed,” I said.

Ms. Kell checked the clock. “Visit pauses for infant care at 3:31 PM.”

“Does it resume?” Dario asked.

I wanted to say no so badly my teeth hurt. No because he had not withdrawn anything. No because his apology came wrapped in boxes. No because Mathias had put a price on my proximity and Dario had called me cruel for making the offer visible.

But Noa’s needs came first, and my anger was not the same as her hunger.

“We will see after she feeds,” I said.

In the suite’s nursing room, I sat in a vinyl chair under a poster about co-parenting that made me want to sue the wall. Isolde came with me. Priya stayed outside. Anika took the call with Maris. Ms. Kell waited where she could see the door but not my breast. The choreography was exhausting and necessary.

Noa latched quickly this time. The relief made me dizzy.

“Careful,” Isolde said.

“I am sitting.”

“You can faint sitting.”

“That sounds inefficient.”

She snorted and handed me water. I drank because she held the straw like she would outlast my pride.

Noa’s sucking slowed into a rhythm. Her hand opened on my skin, fingers splayed, then curled again. Every swallow answered the part of me still in the pediatric exam room watching a number hover near disaster.

Not hot. Not limp. Feeding. Here.

I bent my head and breathed in the milky heat of her scalp.

“Do you want to end the visit?” Isolde asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to end it because she needs to end it?”

I closed my eyes. That was why Isolde was dangerous – she loved me enough to refuse easy answers.

“I do not know yet.”

“Then take the full feed.”

So I did.

: Good Web Novel

کہانیوں کے رنگ محبت سے ڈاؤن لوڈ ویب موبائل ورژن.....

AO

The nursing room was barely large enough for 2 adults and the chair. A changing mat folded from the wall. Someone had placed a plasticn of sample diapers under it, all sizes mixed together, newborn beside toddler training pants, as if the room had given up on chronology

On the counter, a laminated sheet listed soothing techniques. Swaddle. Rock. Shush. Feed. Check diaper. Call pediatrician if symptoms concern you.

No line said: decide whether the man who hurt you should hold the baby whose body just answered his movement with panic. No line said: remember that babies are not affidavits.

So I made my own list in my head while Noa fed. Do not make her fear useful. Do not make her calm useful. Do not teach the adults that her body is a courtroom exhibit. Keep her warm. Keep her fed. Keep her name intact.

When we returned, Dario stood. Ms. Kell told him to sit. He did. Small consequences looked humiliating on men who were used to rooms arranging themselves before they entered.

Noa had fallen asleep against my shoulder, milk-drunk and boneless. I touched her neck again. Normal warm. Her cap had twisted sideways, making her look like a tiny disgruntled sailor.

I wanted to smile. I did not want Dario to see it. That was childish, so I let my mouth soften anyway.

Dario saw. His face changed again. Pain. Jealousy. Something like longing- but longing was not a defense.

“I brought the white blanket from the apartment,” he said.

My heart stopped in a stupid, traitorous way. Not yellow-white. One of the blankets folded in the unfinished nursery. Soft cotton with a gray stitched border. I had touched it when the clouds were still wet on the wall and Dario had said we could bring her home in it if the weather was cold.

Soon, he had said then. Everyone will know.

Memory had no ethics.

“It stays outside,” I said.

“It was hers.”

“It was bought for a lie.”

“I bought it because I loved the idea of her.”

“You loved an idea that made room for everyone except me.”

He flinched. Not enough. Never enough.

“I am trying,” he said.

“Withdraw the filings.”

“Stop making that the only answer.”

“Stop offering every answer except the one that protects her.”

Noa slept through it, which was the only mercy.

Dario looked at the carrier, the feeding log, the diaper bag with its cheap zipper, my stained shirt, the courthouse chair holding a woman he used to dress in silk for private dinners where no one could know her name.

: Good Web Novel

..... کے والوں کرنے محبت سے ناول ویب موبو ورنذر

“You think Bellamy’s warmth is protection,” he said quietly.

There it was again. Bennett, dragged into the room because Dario could not stand a door he did not own.

“I think warmth is warmth,” I said. “Protection has paperwork.”

Ms. Kell wrote that down too.

The visit ended at 3:52 because Noa stayed asleep and I said I was too physically sore to continue another hold attempt. That was true + the best truths were often the least dramatic.

Dario did not touch her. The boxes remained outside. Ms. Kell documented their refusal without opening them. Priya directed Dario’s counsel to remove them from the courthouse and send written confirmation that no gift narrative would be circulated.

I stood too quickly after signing the supervisor’s note. Pain flashed white. My knees softened.

Isolde had the diaper bag, not my arm.

Bennett stepped in only after Ms. Kell opened the door and Priya nodded him through. He stopped 3 feet away. “Hand?” he asked. Palm up, visible, no claim.

Dario was still in the hall near his counsel. He saw the offer. He saw me look at it. He saw the pause where the whole building seemed to hold its breath.

I took Bennett’s hand. Not to punish Dario. Not to prove anything. Because my stitches hurt, my daughter slept against me, and the man in front of me had asked.

Bennett’s hand closed only enough to steady me. No more.

“Elevators are clear,” he said. “Back exit is ready. Car is warm, but not hot. Isolde has the feeding bag.”

Warm, but not hot. The precision almost broke me.

Dario watched us as if ordinary care had become obscenity.

I let go of Bennett before the hallway could make a story from it, but not because I was ashamed. Because the story belonged to me.

We reached the secure car through the service corridor. No photographers. No shouted questions. No gift boxes. No white blanket carried after me like a ghost.

Inside the car, Noa slept. I checked her temperature because rituals mattered even when no one else understood them. 98.8. Wet diaper due soon. Next feed by 5:30 unless she asked earlier.

Bennett sat in the front passenger seat, angled away enough that the back seat felt like ours. Isolde buckled beside me with her phone already open to the legal thread.

“Do not look,” she said.

“That means I need to look.”

“It means I need 10 seconds to decide how angry to be.”

“Show me.”

She did.

Celine had posted a photograph. Not of a face – not fully. A careful, soft image of her hand beside the tiny socked foot of her preterm

: Good Web Novel

..... کے والوں کرنے محبت سے ناول ویب موبو ورنڈر

AQ

KITA newborn son in what looked like a special-care bassinet. Dario’s hand was visible at the edge, his wedding ring catching the filtered hossar light. Nico’s drawing was propped in the background, cropped so only a blue crayon heart and the word family could be read.

The caption was perfect. Holding our children close. Grateful for skilled care, privacy, and the grace to protect what is most tender.

For 1 second, I felt only pity for the baby in the photograph. He was small. He had not asked to be a symbol any more than Noa had.

Then I saw the comments. At first, hearts. Prayers. Blessings. Praise for dignity. People wrote as if softness could not be staged under good lighting. They wrote beautiful family and protect those babies and ignore the noise, because the photograph gave them permission to believe the cleanest version. A wedding ring. A hospital bassinet. A child’s drawing. A caption that never needed to name me because silence had always been part of Celine’s design.

Then the questions began to cut through the satin. A question with 312 likes.

Is this the baby from the Bellamy/Ashby statement or another child?

Another below it. Wait, didn’t Aveline Ashby have Dario’s daughter this week? Where is she?

Then another. Why does every post say children but only one baby is shown?

Isolde scrolled once despite herself. Another comment appeared while we watched.

Bellamy said maternal records were pressured. Is this connected to Aveline Ashby or not?

Another: If privacy matters, why post this at all?

The numbers changed in real time. 312 became 349. 1 reply became 18. Someone linked CityGlass. Someone else told them not to drag a preterm baby into gossip. For once, I agreed with a stranger on the internet completely and hated the battlefield that made agreement useless.

“Do we respond?” Isolde asked.

“No,” I said.

Anika’s voice came through the phone speaker from the legal thread. “No public response from Aveline. Screenshot, archive, preserve comments that mention Noa or ask about maternal identity. No engagement.”

Bennett turned slightly from the front passenger seat. “I can have Bellamy monitoring keep the post separate from your private file.”

“Noa’s file stays Noa’s file,” I said.

“Yes.”

He answered so quickly my throat tightened. No argument. No improvement. No warm language about helping. Just yes.

My hand went to Noa’s back. She slept on, warm and unbothered, while the public finally turned its face toward her name.

: Good Web Novel

End of chapter

The wife isn't me

Chapter 85

Where is Dario’s daughter?

Celine read the comment 3 times before she let herself blink: ...

The special-care room had been dimmed to a dusk that never changed. Machines made small disciplined sounds around her son, each beep modest enough to pretend it was not frightening. A nurse had tucked a warmed blanket around Celine's shoulders 18 minutes ago because Celine had started shivering and refused to admit it.

Her phone did not shiver. It burned.

The photograph had been correct. Not beautiful – correct. Her hand beside the tiny socked foot. Dario's wedding-ring hand visible at the far edge. Nico's drawing in the background, blue heart, the word family, nothing that named the room or showed her son's face. The caption had been soft enough for donors, dignified enough for wives who understood private grief, and careful enough not to expose a medically fragile infant to strangers with opinions.

For 9 minutes, it had worked. Hearts. Prayers. Beautiful family. Protect those babies. Ignore the noise.

Then the first question had appeared, phrased like innocence and sharpened like a little knife.

Is this the Bellamy/Ashby baby or Celine's baby?

Celine had deleted nothing. Deleting made people look guilty. Hiding comments made screenshots valuable. She knew the choreography. She had learned it from galas, hospital boards, foundation statements, photographers who crouched to make pregnant women look luminous and small. Public feeling could be guided if you touched it lightly enough.

She had touched it lightly. Now it moved without her.

Another comment slid under the first. Dario has 2 newborns this week?

Then another. Why did Bellamy say maternal records were pressured if this is just family privacy?

Celine's thumb hovered over the screen. The nail was pale pink and perfect because the manicurist had come to the house 6 days before her blood pressure went bad and the hospital became a place with too many locked doors. Her hand looked like a wife's hand. A mother's hand. A woman who belonged beside the bassinet and the ring and the drawing.

Her son stirred. Not even stirred-a twitch under the blanket. A small movement of his mouth, a thread of effort across a face the world would not see,

Celine lowered the phone at once. "I'm here," she whispered.

The nurse glanced through the glass, then away again when the monitor line steadied.

Celine’s chest hurt with the milk that had not quite arrived properly, with the incision of exhaustion no surgeon had made, with the sudden knowledge that she had put a photograph between her newborn and the public because she had been trying to hold a room that was slipping.

He was not a prop. She knew that. Knowing did not undo the fact that she had cropped his body into evidence of her own place.

The thought was ugly enough that she set it down beside the bassinet and refused to pick it up.

: Good Web Novel

کہ والوں کرنے محبت سے

ناول ویب موبو وریڈر .....

1/5 AQ

KA

He was her son. He was small and real and medically early. He needed warmth, feeding support, oxygen checks, nurses who spoke in lo voices, and a mother who could sit still without checking whether strangers believed she was still the mother she had been promised she would look like.

He did not need Aveline Ashby in the comments.

Celine picked up the phone again.

The post had reached CityGlass. Not the main item, not yet – a clipped story, a screenshot of her caption overlaid with a question box: How many babies are in the Armitage Story?

Vulgar. Effective.

Her communications adviser had not called. That meant the adviser was either asleep, frightened of waking Mathias, or already drafting language with too many commas. Celine disliked all 3 options.

She opened the private family thread.

Mathias had sent 1 line. Do not improvise.

That was the Vey family prayer. Do not improvise. Do not bleed publicly. Do not answer the question asked if a cleaner question can be substituted. Do not admit that the room has changed until you have chosen the new furniture.

Celine closed the thread without answering. Improvisation was only shameful when it failed.

Under it, users had begun arranging what they knew into shapes that were too close to the truth to ignore and too messy to answer.

Noa Ashby was born Jan 19. Celine's baby born after. Why was St. Orla talking family continuity?

Aveline said not a surrogate. Bellamy said portal access pressure. This family post is doing work.

Stop dragging a preterm infant into adult scandal.

Celine pressed her free hand over her ribs. For a second, she hated the last commenter most. Not because they were wrong-because they had seen the infant. Not the image. The infant. The tiny foot. The special-care blanket. The fact that a baby born at 34 weeks and 2 days did not become less fragile because his mother understood lighting.

Celine looked at the bassinet and felt the old lesson grind against the new pain.

In her family, privacy had never meant absence. It meant controlled visibility. You showed the right portion of the right truth at the right time, before someone else showed it badly. A wife at a donor hall. A child with a crest pin. A newborn sock. A caption about tenderness.

Aveline Ashby had broken that grammar. She insisted on full nouns. Mother. Noa. Records. Consent.

Celine's jaw tightened.

Her phone lit with Dario's name. She let it ring 4 times before answering.

"You saw it," she said.

"You need to take the post down."

His voice was low. Tired. Too tired to remember that commands landed differently now.

Celine looked through the glass at the nurse writing a number on a chart. "No."

"Celine."

: Good Web Novel

..... کے والوں کے رنے محبت سے ناول ویب موبو وریڈر

“If I take it down, every screenshot becomes proof.”

“It already is.”

“Of what? That I have a newborn in special care? That my husband visited? That our son drew a picture? Those facts are not crimes.”

“The comments are turning.”

“Yes,” she said. “I can read.”

Silence pressed through the call. Dario did not ask about the baby for 6 seconds. Celine counted them because she did not want to.

“How is he?” he asked at last.

“Stable. Feeding remains monitored. Temperature good. The nurse says his oxygen events are fewer this afternoon.”

“Good.”

He sounded relieved. He sounded absent. Both could be true. That was the rot inside all of them.

“They are asking about Noa,” he said.

Celine looked at her son when he said the other baby’s name. She hated herself a little for flinching.

“They were always going to ask,” she said. “Bellamy gave them vocabulary.”

“Bellamy did not name Noa’s medical details.”

“No. He only made Aveline look protected by a man willing to lose money for her.”

“This is not about Bennett.”

Céline almost laughed. The sound would have been too sharp for the room. “It is always about the person standing where the public can see him,” she said. “For months, that was supposed to be you.”

“Do not make this worse.”

“I am preventing worse.”

“By posting family photographs from special care?”

The words cut because they had a clean edge.

Celine looked at the bassinet again. Her son slept with his mouth slightly open, extravagant in his unawareness. No one should have been able to make him into a question about legitimacy. Not Aveline. Not CityGlass. Not Celine. Not Dario.

She softened her voice because the room required it. “I showed no face. I gave no diagnosis. I named no hospital wing. I did not mention Aveline or Noa.”

“You said children.”

“Because we have children.”

“And now they are asking how many.”

“Then perhaps,” Celine said, “your filings should have produced a cleaner answer before strangers did.”

: Good Web Novel

..... ڈر وریہ موب وب یہ ول ذنا سے بت محبہ رنے کے والوں

O

Dario went very quiet.

There had been a time when that quiet would have warned her. Before Aveline, before the donor corridor, before every private compromise they had made together began appearing in documents with timestamps, Celine had trusted Dario’s quiet as control.

Now she heard the gap where control used to be.

“What do you want?” he asked.

The question sounded dangerous because it sounded honest.

Celine looked at the comments climbing under her photograph.

Aveline Ashby is the mother. Say it.

Legal wife posting while hidden mother moves through court. Nasty.

If this is false, why won’t they deny it clearly?

Because denying names creates records.

The last comment had 91 likes already. Public cleverness was unbearable when it found the right door.

“We answer the moral frame,” she said.

“No.”

“We do not discuss records. We do not discuss Noa’s care. We do not name Aveline except to state that unstable public claims around newborns are harmful and that adults should not exploit infants for leverage.”

“That points directly at her.”

“Good.”

“Celine.”

“She has Bellamy. She has lawyers. She has chosen visibility when visibility helps her. She does not get to act injured when the public sees that her choices destabilize children.”

As soon as she said it, her son’s monitor gave 3 quick beeps.

Celine stood too fast.

The nurse came in before Celine could ask, checked the line, touched the blanket, and adjusted the sensor with the practical tenderness of someone who handled fear hourly. “Artifact,” the nurse said. “His color is good. He is all right.”

Celine nodded. She waited until the nurse left before she breathed.

Dario had heard all of it.

“You cannot use him for this,” he said quietly.

The hypocrisy was so large that Celine closed her eyes. “Do not lecture me on using children, Dario.”

He did not answer.

That silence was not remorse – it was calculation interrupted by something too true to file. Celine knew because she had lived beside that

: Good Web Novel

..... ذ اول وي ب موب وري در

silence for 9 years. It had settled over Nico’s nursery when Dario missed bedtime and called it unavoidable. It had settled over foundation/ dinners when Celine smiled through questions about second babies and succession and timing. It had settled over every compromise that became, in retrospect, a corridor leading to Aveline Ashby.

The trouble with corridors was that someone always found the door at the end.

On the screen, a new account had posted under the CityGlass thread. No profile picture. A name made from anger and numbers

Everyone knows Ashby is hiding in the Westport safe network. Check Bellamy vans near family court and the north shelters. Wife should get her baby back before the mistress runs.

Celine stared at it. Not an address. Not enough to be cleanly criminal in the way people liked harm to announce itself. But enough.

Westport. Bellamy vans. North shelters.

Aveline’s location had not been revealed – it had been invited.

Celine’s fingers went cold around the phone.

“What?” Dario asked.

Celine did not answer him. She took a screenshot before the comment could vanish.

Then she looked at her sleeping son and understood, with a clarity she hated, that the public had stopped asking who belonged in the family photograph.

It had started hunting for the woman cropped out.

: Good Web Novel

..... کہانیوں کے رنگے بہ تمحہ سے ناول ویب ریڈر موبو

End of chapter-

The wife isn't me

Chapter 86

KECA

Chapter 86 – Comment Storm

“Pack only what Noa needs for 12 hours.”

Anika said it through the phone while Isolde was already opening drawers. That was how I learned a city could become unsafe without anyone knowing my address.

Noa lay on the changing pad, deeply unimpressed by crisis. Her legs bicycled once, then tucked in. The tiny thermometer on the table stil showed 98.6 from the check 11 minutes earlier. Good color. Warm neck. No limpness. Last feed had begun at 4:58 and ended at 5:19 after 1 unlatch, 2 good burps, and a milk-drunk stare at the wall as if she found the paint morally disappointing.

Wet diaper at 5:32. Stool small, yellow, normal.

My pad was not normal. I had bled through faster than I liked after the courthouse hallway, and my body had started a low, dragging ache that turned every decision into a stair. The postpartum instructions said heavy bleeding, clots larger than a golf ball, fever, dizziness, severe pain, foul discharge, shortness of breath, or a feeling that something was wrong meant call.

Something was wrong. Unfortunately, it had a username.

Isolde put 6 diapers into the bag, then added 4 more because she knew me. “Car seat cover?”

“Washed one is on the chair.”

“Milk?”

“I can feed.”

“Pumped backup?”

“Cooler bag, left side of the sink. Ice pack in the freezer.”

She moved without asking me to point because the safe room had become a map inside her hands. That hurt more than I expected. We had made routines here – ugly chain lock, square table, tilted lamp, the bassinet that squeaked when Noa kicked, the window shade that stuck if you pulled it from the right.

Temporary housing was not home. It still held proof that I had survived 4 nights.

Anika’s voice sharpened. “Aveline, repeat the instruction back.”

“Only what Noa needs for 12 hours. Evidence drive. Medical documents. Feeding log. Court papers. My medications. No full move visible from outside.”

1 “Good. Bennett’s team has 2 vehicles, not branded. No Bellamy marked cars. No one parks at the front. You leave through the laundry corridor.

Nina has cleared the back stair for 6 minutes. The first car is not yours.”

“Decoy?”

“Route buffer. Do not call it decoy in any filing.”

“Route buffer,” I said.

– او لاجواب روماذ س تـ اول ويـ ب .....

INSTALL drag you!!

Isolde’s eyes flicked up. We had both learned that language could either protect you or become a handle someone else used to drag

The phone was on speaker on the square table. Beside it, Priya’s message thread kept gaining preserved screenshots. The hate account had posted 4 comments in 7 minutes. None named the building. None gave a room number. All of them circled the city and the safe network with enough confidence to bring the wrong person to the wrong door.

Westport safe network. North shelters. Bellamy vans. Family court route.

Visibility had worked for 1 breath. The public had asked why Celine’s picture had cropped out a mother and a daughter. Strangers had repeated that I was Noa’s mother. They had questioned the family-post grammar that had hidden me. Then another kind of stranger had used the same light to look for us.

Noa made a soft clicking sound. I picked her up before my hands could shake enough to matter.

“She fed at 4:58,” I said.

Anika stopped talking to someone else. “Does she need to feed again?”

“Not yet. She may cluster. Temperature 98.6. Wet diaper 5:32. Color good. She is alert when awake.”

“Any reason not to move her medically?”

I hated the question because it was the right one.

“No. The pediatric line said earlier today that stable newborns can travel in a properly installed car seat for necessary transport, with supervision and no prolonged stop. We

stop if she changes color, vomits forcefully, becomes limp, has breathing trouble, or feels hot. We do not keep her in the seat longer than necessary.”

“Pain or bleeding for you?”

Isolde went still. I looked at the pad package on the dresser.

“Moderate bleeding after exertion. No fever. No large clots. Pain 6 when standing, 4 seated. I am not dizzy.”

That was mostly true.

“Mostly?” Isolde said.

I had not meant to say that last part aloud.

Anika heard the gap. “Aveline.”

“I got lightheaded when I stood too fast after court. I am steady now.”

“Bennett has a wheelchair at the laundry corridor.”

“No.”

“It is not a character assessment,” Anika said. “It has wheels.”

Isolde shoved the zippered pouch of my medications into the bag. “You are using it.”

“I can walk.”

“You can bleed too. We are not celebrating the full range of your abilities.”

Noa startled at Isolde’s voice, then settled when I held her closer.

ای لاجواب روماندس بہ اول ویہ ت –

O

“Fine,” I said. I said it with resentment because resentment was easier than admitting relief.

Nina knocked 2 times, paused, then 1 more. The safe-room pattern.

Isolde checked through the peephole and opened the door only after Nina said, “Laundry schedule changed.”

No one had told me that fear could become domestic code.

Nina stepped in with a clipboard and a face that had misplaced softness on purpose. “We have 4 minutes before the stair is used by the 6:00 dinner delivery. You will go second. I will take a laundry cart first.”

“Does anyone here know why?” I asked.

“Staff know there was a public safety concern. No one knows your destination. The desk log will say postpartum medical transfer to counsel. That is true enough to protect people who do not need details.”

“Will the other residents be at risk?”

Nina’s mouth tightened. “The comment did not identify this building. We are not evacuating the building or creating a visible event. We are changing your placement because your risk profile changed.”

Risk profile. I had become language again.

Noa hiccupped against my shoulder. I kissed the top of her cap.

“I need to change her before the car.”

Anika said, “You have 2 minutes.”

“Then everyone can learn patience from a newborn.”

No one argued.

I laid Noa down. My lower body protested when I bent over, a hot pull that made my breath go thin. Isolde’s hand hovered near my elbow and did not touch. Bennett had taught the room that help could wait without vanishing. Or maybe he had only reminded Isolde of what she had already known.

Noa’s diaper was wet again.

“6:01,” Isolde said, writing it before I asked. “Wet.”

“Good girl,” I whispered.

Noa flailed 1 fist with the solemn outrage of a judge issuing sanctions.

I put her in the car seat slowly. Harness flat. Chest clip at armpit level. Blanket over, not under straps. Cap secure. No bulky layer. The carrier looked too large for her and still too small for the amount of law attached to her body.

My phone buzzed. Not a call – a screenshot from Priya.

The hate account had replied to someone defending me.

If Ashby is so safe, why are Bellamy people changing routes tonight?

For 1 second, the room lost its edges.

“They are watching the route,” I said.

– اي اجوابـل روماذ س ذ اول ويـ ب.....

Nina looked at Anika’s voice on the phone as if sound could be cross-examined.

Anika swore once, quietly and with legal precision. “Move now.”

The hallway was empty. The safe room door closed behind me with a sound that felt too final for a place I had never meant to keep.

I sat in the wheelchair because my knees had become unreliable witnesses. Isolde carried the diaper bag and evidence pouch. Nina pushed the laundry cart ahead of us, piled with sheets high enough to be boring. Noa’s carrier rode on my lap, my hand on the handle, my body curved around her as if posture could stop the internet.

The laundry corridor smelled like detergent and old steam.

Bennett waited by the service exit. No coat over his arm. No dramatic readiness. Just rolled sleeves under a dark jacket, phone facedown in his palm, eyes moving from Nina to Isolde to me before settling on the car seat.

“Temperature?” he asked.

“98.6.”

“Feed?”

“Ended 5:19.”

“Wet diaper?”

“6:01.”

He nodded once. Not as if he had authority- as if the facts deserved respect.

“The first car leaves in 40 seconds,” he said. “It will take the obvious route toward the counsel suite. We take the garage exit, 2 turns south, then west for 9 minutes before the

highway ramp. If Noa needs out, there is a covered service bay at minute 11. If you need to stop for bleeding or dizziness, say stop and the driver stops. No explanations."

"Who knows the second location?"

"Nina, Anika, Priya, 2 housing staff at receiving, the driver, me."

"Too many."

"Yes," he said. "And still fewer than before."

I looked at him. He did not make comfort out of the truth. That was its own kind of mercy.

The service door opened. Cold air moved over my face. Not winter-pretty cold. Alley cold. Damp concrete, exhaust, a trash bin, a slice of evening sky darkening above the roofline.

The first car pulled out. At the end of the alley, a person in a gray hood lifted a phone.

Bennett moved – not toward the person, not toward me, but into the line between the phone and the car seat. His body blocked the angle without touching mine.

"Inside," he said to the driver. No shout, no panic.

The driver opened the rear door. Isolde slid in first, then took the car seat while Bennett kept his back to the phone. I stood from the wheelchair and felt blood shift, pain answering low and sharp.

Bennett's hand appeared beside the door. Palm up. Waiting.

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويـ ب....

I took it. For 3 steps, he was the difference between movement and falling.

Then I was in the car, Noa clicked into the base, Isolde checking the indicator until it showed locked. Bennett closed the door and did not get in until I nodded.

The person at the alley mouth shouted, "Aveline, is Dario's daughter with you?"

My milk let down so suddenly it hurt.

Noa slept through it. The car moved. I watched the safe building disappear without ever having been named.

My phone buzzed again. Anika.

"We need more than relocation," I said before she could speak.

“I agree.”

“No location hints. No public comments using Noa’s image or medical status. No attempts to identify housing networks. No portal access. No record access. No contact outside supervised channels. No gifts. No family posts that imply custody or maternal status.”

Bennett looked out the window, not at me – leaving me the room to choose my own escalation.

Anika said, “That is a stronger protection order.”

I looked at Noa’s sleeping face in the dim car light. Visibility had given strangers the vocabulary to defend us. Visibility had also taught strangers where to point.

“File it tonight,” I said.

– g

End of chapter-

AQ

The wife isn't me

Chapter 87

“I am not asking the court to erase him.”

My voice sounded steadier than my body deserved.

The hearing room had too much light and not enough air. It was 9:08 AM on January 24, and I had slept in 4 pieces, none fonger than 48 minutes. Noa had fed at 6:42, 7:19, and again at 8:31 because newborns did not respect court calendars. Her temperature had been 98.5 before we left the second safe placement. Wet diaper at 8:46. Good color. Angry at the hat. No signs that the public had spent the night trying to locate the body she lived inside.

My own body was less professional. The thicker pad I had put on before the car already felt too warm. My stitches pulled when I shifted. My breasts ached under the nursing tank because Noa had fallen asleep before finishing on the left side and the judge had not paused the docket for engorgement, though to be fair, no one had asked her to.

The judge looked at me over the top of her glasses. “Then state what you are asking, Ms. Ashby.”

Priya had told me to answer in categories. Not feelings. Not history. Categories.

I kept one hand on Noa's carrier. The other rested on the printed request Anika had filed at 12:37 AM, after the second safe location intake, after the route report, after Bellamy's security stills, after Priya preserved the hate-account comments and Celine's post without turning a preterm infant into an exhibit headline.

"Location protection," I said. "No party, counsel representative, family member, employee, donor contact, security contractor, or public-facing account acting in concert may seek, publish, hint, solicit, confirm, or amplify Noa's or my housing location, safe-city route, shelter network, transport provider, or receiving facility."

Farrow, Dario's lawyer, shifted. Good.

"Medical and record protection," I continued. "No pediatric portal access, authorized access, chart notice, emergency update route, provider contact, or newborn record request for Mr. Armitage except through a neutral channel ordered by the court. No use of Noa's medical status in public statements. No images of Noa. No implication that Celine Armitage has maternal, intended-parent, guardianship, or custody status over Noa pending further order."

Dario looked at me then. He had looked at Noa first when we entered. Then at Bennett, who stood at the back under subpoena hold, not beside me, not near counsel table, not pretending to be part of my family. Then at me. In that order.

"Contact protection," I said. "Supervised access remains only by court schedule, after infant-care and postpartum conditions are confirmed. No gifts outside counsel-screened support. No direct calls, texts, gifts, couriers, posts, intermediaries, or hallway approaches. No attempts to frame refusals as denial of necessities."

The judge made notes. Her pen sounded like a small machine built to disappoint everyone equally.

"Anything else?"

I swallowed. The room tilted for half a second, then steadied. Isolde noticed. She slid the water closer without touching my hand.

"Public comments," I said. "I am asking that Mr. Armitage and Mrs. Armitage be ordered to preserve public posts and comments related to Noa, me, maternal identity, records, location, Bellamy support, and the safe-city hint, and not delete selectively except through a documented safety process."

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويد ب.....

A®

–

Farrow stood before the judge asked him to. “Your Honor, this is an extraordinary attempt to convert a temporary paternity matter into a speech code, business injunction, and reputational gag order against a father who has not been adjudicated unfit.”

Father. The word entered the room wearing a suit. Noa slept through it because she had excellent priorities.

“Mr. Armitage has biological standing,” Farrow continued. “He has appeared at every ordered contact opportunity, brought appropriate gifts that were refused, respected supervision, and sought ordinary access to information about his newborn daughter’s health. Ms. Ashby now asks the court to isolate the child from him medically, socially, and practically, while allowing Bellamy Ventures and Mr. Bellamy to control, transport, housing, public monitoring, and the narrative around this infant.”

There it was. The replacement argument. Not safety, not records, not the alley phone lifted toward a car seat. Bennett.

Dario’s gaze stayed on the judge, but his body had changed. Stillness sharpened him. He wanted this part. He wanted the room to look away from what he had tried to reach and toward who had helped me move.

Farrow lifted a page. “The court should be concerned that a wealthy third party with known conflicts against Armitage interests has inserted himself into a vulnerable postpartum mother’s life, funded legal infrastructure, managed transport, influenced housing, and now appears as the practical gatekeeper between a father and child.”

I felt Bennett go still behind me. I did not turn. Turning would let Dario place him at the center.

“Ms. Ashby,” the judge said, “is Mr. Bellamy making decisions for you?”

“No.”

“Does Bellamy Ventures know your current housing address?”

“A very limited route team knew last night’s receiving location because the hate-account post made movement necessary. Mr. Bellamy does not have access to Noa’s medical chart. He does not have pediatric portal access. He is not listed as a parent, guardian, emergency contact, or authorized medical decision-maker. He does not decide my filings.”

“Who decides them?”

“I do, with counsel.”

The judge looked at Priya.

Priya stood. “Your Honor, Bellamy’s role is funding and logistics under written restrictions already disclosed to the court. Funders receive no client records, legal strategy, medical information, or authority. Where Bellamy security has assisted transport, it has done so because Mr. Armitage’s side repeatedly created or benefited from location pressure, including the investigator sighting, hospital-location query, and last night’s public safe-city hint.”

“Objection to characterization,” Farrow said.

“Noted,” the judge said. “I have the exhibits.”

Farrow turned a page with the calm of a man who had expected that. “The exhibits do not show Mr. Armitage posted the comment.”

“No,” Priya said, “They show the comment used language from public Armitage-adjacent narratives after Mrs. Armitage’s post, and that it created a foreseeable safety risk.”

“Foreseeable by whom?” Farrow asked. “A father may not control every anonymous account on the internet.”

“He can control his own filings, requests, family posts, counsel language, gift narratives, and representatives,” Priya said. “He has not.”

Anika rose with the screenshot packet when the judge’s eyes moved to her. “The sequence matters,” Anika said. “At 5:47 PM, Mrs. Armitage’s post is amplified by CityGlass. At 5:58, comments identify Ms. Ashby and Noa by name in connection with the Bellamy statement. At 6:06, the

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويـ ب.....

CHA hate account posts the Westport safe-network hint. At 6:13, it references route changes. At 6:21, a phone is raised toward Ms. Ashby’s all exit while the infant is in the car seat. No exact address is published. That is precisely why we are here before an address appears

Farrow said, “Or precisely why Mr. Bellamy’s security operation should be examined.”

“It/can be examined,” Anika said. “So can the reason it was needed.”

The judge took the screenshots.

I watched the paper move from Anika’s hand to the clerk’s hand to the bench. A comment that had made my milk come in from fear becarne an exhibit tab. That was not justice – it was only translation.

Dario stood when Farrow touched his sleeve. He buttoned his jacket. The old Dario would have made the motion look effortless. This Dari looked composed by force.

“Your Honor,” he said, “I am trying to be careful because anything I say is treated as pressure. I have a daughter. I have been told I may call her my daughter in some rooms and not others. I have seen her through supervised windows, with people writing down how I breathe. I have asked for medical information because she was taken to emergency care and I learned after the fact. I have asked for portal access because fathers are not visitors to their children’s health.”

My hand tightened on the carrier handle.

Noa breathed. In. Out. Small. Real.

Dario’s voice softened. “I have not asked for Ms. Ashby’s address. I have not asked to remove the child. I have not published a photograph of Noa. I have not endangered her.”

Priya wrote something. Farrow let him continue.

“But every time I try to approach ordinary fatherhood, Bellamy is there. Bellamy cars. Bellamy guards. Bellamy statements. Mr. Bellamy’s hand in the hallway. His staff between me and my child. I am told this is not replacement. I am asking the court to see what it looks like from the other side.”

The room did what rooms did when a man with polish described his own exclusion. It listened.

My pain moved from my stitches into my spine.

The judge looked at me. “Ms. Ashby?”

Priya started to rise.

“I can answer,” I said.

Priya stayed half-standing for 1 second, then sat.

“Mr. Armitage is not excluded because Bennett Bellamy exists,” I said. “He is restricted because he requested medical access before withdrawing false coordination routes. He is restricted because Noa’s pediatric record had a pending access review and an unauthorized login attempt. He is restricted because St. Orla records named Celine Armitage in ways I did not authorize before Noa was born. He is restricted because gifts arrived during supervised contact while filings remained active. He is restricted because public family language turned into a location risk last night.”

I stopped because Noa made a noise. Not a cry – a wet, annoyed breath.

The judge waited. Noa’s face stayed pink. Her body stayed tucked. The sound passed.

Only then did I keep going, because that was the order the world kept trying to reverse.

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويـ ب....

AQ

Dario’s face did not change. That meant it had changed inside.

“Bennett did not make those facts,” I said. “He helped move us after they became dangerous.”

Farrow looked at my carrier. “And you are comfortable with that degree of involvement?”

“No,” I said.

The word surprised him. Good.

“I am not comfortable with any of this. I am not comfortable moving a 4-day-old baby because a stranger guessed a safe-city network. I am not comfortable feeding in courtrooms. I am not comfortable needing security to leave a laundry corridor. Comfort is not the standard.

Boundaries are.”

Farrow stood again. “And will Mr. Bellamy be subject to examination on that role?”

The judge looked toward the back of the room.

For the first time, I turned.

Bennett stood with his hands visible, shoulders relaxed enough to look almost ordinary. Almost. His eyes met mine for less than 1 second, then moved to the judge. No claim. No reassurance meant to be seen. Just presence with a door behind it.

The judge said, “Mr. Bellamy, remain available. I want testimony on the scope of Bellamy’s involvement, donor pressure, and transport decisions before I rule.”

Farrow’s expression smoothed. Dario did not smile.

He did not need to.

The room had found the man he wanted on the stand.

– اي لاجواب روماذ ى دول ويـ ب

End of chapter-

The wife isn't me

Chapter 88

“State your name for the record.”

Bennett had signed documents worth more than court buildings, fired senior men without raising his voice, and watched donors threaten whole programs because a postpartum mother had refused to be erased. Still, the witness chair made his hands feel too visible.

“Bennett Elias Bellamy.”

He kept his palms loose on his knees – not folded, because folded hands looked managed. Not clenched, because clenched hands looked angry.

Across the room, Aveline sat with Noa’s carrier close enough that 2 fingers rested on the handle. She looked exhausted in a way no legal filing could translate. Pale mouth. Hair pinned badly and practically. Shoulders curved around pain, not defeat. Every few minutes, her eyes moved from the judge to Noa’s blanket, then to the clock.

Noa outranked all of them. Bennett held on to that because it kept the room honest.

Priya stood first. “Mr. Bellamy, does Bellamy Ventures represent Ms. Ashby?”

“No.”

“Does Bellamy Ventures have access to her legal strategy, private evidence folder, pediatric records, portal credentials, housing address, or medical decision-making?”

“No.”

“What is Bellamy’s disclosed role?”

“Restricted funding and logistics under written limits. Filing support through independent legal channels, transport coordination when requested by counsel or housing staff, safety monitoring for public threats, and institutional support for maternal-record integrity work. We do not receive Noa Ashby’s medical chart. We do not decide access. We do not speak for Ms. Ashby.”

Priya let the words sit.

Bennett resisted the urge to look at Aveline. He had learned in rooms like this that concern could become evidence if the wrong person held the pen.

“Did Armitage-related pressure affect Bellamy Ventures after your public statement?”

“Yes.”

“Describe it without disclosing privileged or confidential information.”

“Within 24 hours of Bellamy stating it would not withdraw support from maternal safety infrastructure because of donor discomfort, we received contract-review notices, partner suspension warnings, and donor withdrawal messages. Several overlapped with St. Orla, Armitage Foundation, Vey family office, or related donor networks.”

Farrow leaned back. He wanted Bennett to overreach. Bennett did not.

“Overlap alone is not proof of direction,” he said. “We preserved the pattern, dates, senders, and language. Counsel can argue weight.”

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويد ت

AO

The judge’s pen moved. Good – men like Dario preferred their opponents indignant. Indignation made clean facts look personal

Priya asked, “Did Mr. Armitage personally pressure you?”

“He called me on January 19 at 7:04 AM and framed Bellamy’s maternal-safety support as funding the disappearance of his child. I refused to discuss client identity or program specifics. Later pressure came through counsel, donors, contract partners, and public narrative.”

“Did that pressure cause Bellamy to change Ms. Ashby’s housing or safety support?”

“No.”

“What caused the route change last night?”

“A public account posted a safe-city hint, named Westport safe network, Bellamy vans, north shelters, and family court route. Within minutes, a follow-up comment referred to route changes. Housing staff and counsel assessed that the existing placement risk had increased without exact address exposure. A limited transport team moved Ms. Ashby and Noa to a second safe location.”

“Was the address published?”

“No.”

“Did Bellamy publish the address?”

“No.”

“Did Bellamy use marked vehicles?”

“No.”

“Did you decide whether Ms. Ashby should file this motion?”

“No.”

“Did you ask to be named in it?”

“No.”

“Do you seek any parental, custodial, medical, or decision-making role over Noa Ashby?”

“No.”

Priya paused. “Why are you here?”

Farrow rose. “Objection. Narrative.”

“Rephrase,” the judge said.

Priya did. “Why did Bellamy not withdraw support when donor pressure increased?”

Bennett looked at the judge, not at Aveline. “Because withdrawing would have rewarded pressure aimed at a mother and newborn through records, location, and public narrative. Our program exists for maternal safety infrastructure. It cannot function if the first powerful family to object can purchase silence.”

The courtroom went very quiet.

Bennett heard Dario shift. He did not turn.

ای لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ویب.....

The wife isn't me

Chapter 89

Priya sat.

Farrow stood slowly, as if he respected the weight of the next 10 minutes. Bennett had seen that pace before it meant the blade was not new.

“Mr. Bellamy,” Farrow said, “your family has some history with using private resources in disputes over mothers and children, does it not?”

Priya stood. “Objection.”

The judge looked up. “Counsel?”

Farrow’s expression remained solemn. “Goes to bias, motive, pattern, and whether Mr. Bellamy is projecting a family grievance onto this proceeding while occupying a practical gatekeeping role.”

“This is a temporary protection-order hearing,” Priya said. “We are not trying the Bellamy family.”

“Mr. Bellamy’s testimony places his judgment and motives directly before the court.”

Bennett kept still. He had known they might find it. People with money always found sealed things eventually, or the shape around them. A docket number. A settlement reference. A cousin who drank too much at the wrong foundation dinner. A newspaper item that had never named the child but had named the house.

Across the room, Aveline’s hand tightened on the carrier.

He hated that she had to hear it here – not because it made him look less polished. Because the story had other people in it who had spent 12 years being safe.

The judge said, “Approach.”

White noise filled the room while counsel argued at the bench.

Bennett looked down at his hands. His father had liked hands on shoulders in photographs. Guiding hands. Proud hands. A Bellamy hand on a scholarship recipient, on a junior staff member, on a woman whose gratitude had later been described by family counsel as complicated. The word had done a great deal of work for 1 syllable.

Bennett had been 23 when he learned that his father’s former employee was living in a Bellamy-controlled apartment with an infant daughter whose last name changed depending on which lawyer had drafted the page. He had been old enough to understand power and young enough to think finding a door solved everything.

He had helped her leave. He would still help her leave. He would change almost everything about how.

The white noise stopped. The judge returned to the record.

“I will allow limited questioning,” she said. “No names of nonparties who were minors at the time. No addresses. No medical details. No sealed-document contents beyond what is necessary to test motive and bias. Mr. Bellamy may answer narrowly. Counsel will stop if this becomes character assassination.”

Farrow inclined his head, already satisfied.

Aveline looked at Bennett. He met her eyes because looking away would make the old wound larger. Her face did not ask him to be clean. That was worse – that was kinder.

Farrow returned to the lectern. “Mr. Bellamy, when you were 23, were you involved in removing a woman and infant from Bellamy-funded housing during a dispute involving your father?”

“I helped a woman and child leave housing controlled by my family.”

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويـ ب.....

“Against your father’s wishes?”

“Yes.”

“Without a court order granting you authority over that child?”

“I had no authority over the child. The child’s mother had authority to leave.”

“Your family later settled civil claims arising from that episode.”

“My family settled several claims. I was not a party to every agreement.”

“The press described it as the Bellamy rescue scandal, correct?”

Priya stood. “Objection to tabloid characterization.”

“Sustained,” the judge said.

Farrow adjusted without blinking. “Was there public reporting that accused you of using Bellamy money to interfere in a family matter?”

“Yes.”

“And after that episode, you built Bellamy’s maternal-safety protocols?”

“Years later, after external review and governance changes.”

“External review paid for by Bellamy?”

“Yes. With the final recommendations controlled by reviewers, not by family management.”

“Convenient.”

“Necessary,” Bennett said. “Convenient would have been keeping the old discretion model and calling it charity.”

The judge’s pen paused, then moved again.

“So this issue is personal to you.”

“Maternal safety is personal to many people.”

“That was not my question.”

“Yes,” Bennett said, “It is personal.”

Aveline’s eyes did not move.

Farrow stepped closer by 1 pace. “Is it fair to say you see Mr. Armitage through the lens of your father?”

“No.”

“You do not see similarities?”

“I see documented conduct in this case.”

“A powerful man. A mother in housing. A child whose name and records are disputed. Your resources placed between them.”

“That is your sentence, not my testimony.”

او لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويـ ب –

4/6 AQ

The judge’s eyebrow lifted slightly. Farrow noticed, and his mouth tightened.

“Did your past cause you to involve yourself more deeply with Ms. Ashby than a neutral funder would?”

Bennett chose the answer that cost him less polish and more truth. “My past caused me to build rules that keep funders from taking control. Ms. Ashby’s case triggered those rules. It did not suspend them.”

“Yet you personally moved her last night.”

“I assisted a transport after a public location hint created immediate risk.”

“You offered your hand in court yesterday.”

Priya stood. “Relevance.”

“Bias and boundary,” Farrow said.

The judge allowed it with a look that promised very little patience.

Bennett kept his voice even. “Ms. Ashby was postpartum, in pain, holding a newborn, and leaving supervised contact. I asked before offering physical support. She chose whether to accept.”

“You care for her.”

The room changed. Not dramatically-worse. Quietly.

Bennett felt Dario’s attention like a wire pulled tight. He could deny too much and insult Aveline by making care shameful. He could admit too much and hand Dario the replacement frame.

He answered the question asked. “I care what happens to her and Noa.”

“More than a funder would.”

“I am not only a funder. I am a witness to pressure brought against my organization and the safety infrastructure it supports.”

“That is careful.”

“It is accurate.”

Farrow smiled without warmth. “Accuracy can still hide motive.”

“So can fatherhood.”

Priya’s head turned a fraction.

The judge looked at Bennett for 2 long seconds.

Farrow had what he needed anyway. A bruise on the record. A family scandal admitted for limited questioning. Enough old blood to make Bennett’s presence look less like help and more like hunger if the wrong person summarized it well.

Bennett thought of the woman from 12 years ago, the child now old enough to hate old articles, the protocols written because he had learned that good intentions without boundaries could still frighten people who had already been controlled.

He had protected their names today. He had not protected his own. That was a fair trade. It still hurt.

Privacy was not less valuable because he could afford good lawyers. Reputation was not painless because he had inherited a name already dented by older men. He thought of the employee handbook rewritten after the review, the transport policy that required written consent, the

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويب.....

CLEA only

–

housing firewall that annoyed donors because it refused them stories. Those were boring documents. Today, boring had become his only defense.

The judge said, “Mr. Bellamy, you may step down, but remain available.”

Bennett stood. He did not look at Dario. He looked once at Aveline. Her hand was still on Noa’s carrier. Her other hand rested on the edge of the counsel table, palm open, as if she had decided not to close it.

Then Farrow said, “Your Honor, before the witness is excused, I ask that the limited scandal evidence be admitted for the purpose of bias”

The old room inside Bennett opened again.

And this time, the judge did not say no.

End of chapter

A

Reader

Chapter 89 – Old Bellamy Wound

“We will take 20 minutes.”

The judge left before anyone could decide whether that was mercy.

The courtroom broke into small, careful disasters. Farrow leaned toward Dario. Priya and Anika both turned to the order draft. The clerk gathered marked exhibits with the blank face of someone who had handled more private ruin than anyone in the room wanted to know.

Noa woke as soon as the door closed behind the judge, making one soft complaint and then a second with more conviction.

“Feed,” I said, voice rough.

Isolde was already reaching for the nursing cover and water. Priya looked over. “We can ask for the side room.”

“No.” I touched Noa’s neck-warm, not hot. “If I move, I may not stand back up.” That was a fact, not drama. My body had begun punishing the morning in installments. The bleeding had not become emergency-heavy, but it had increased after the testimony, stress going where the body was already torn and pressing its thumb there.

Anika stood and angled herself between me and the aisle while Isolde lifted Noa from the carrier. Priya spoke to the clerk, and a portable privacy screen appeared from behind the bench, beige and ugly, like every useful object in my life.

I fed my daughter in a courtroom while Bennett Bellamy’s family wound sat admitted on the record. There were rules against phones, gum, late filings, and speaking over the judge – but no rule that said a postpartum woman should not have to hear about another family’s controlled apartment, another mother and infant, another rich man using housing as a leash while her own milk came in hard and painful under a suit jacket.

Noa latched with a greedy little sound. Relief hit me so fast my eyes stung.

“Good,” Isolde whispered. “There you are.” I did not know whether she meant Noa or me.

Bennett stood near the back wall-not at the table, not near the screen. He had stepped away after leaving the witness chair, giving the room a clear path to me, to counsel, to the exit. His face was composed, but composed meant nothing; Dario looked composed too when he was planning something cruel enough to call careful.

I had learned the difference in Bennett by watching what his composure protected – the route, the door, the people whose names Farrow had not been allowed to say. The child who had once been an infant in a controlled apartment and was now old enough to deserve a life not dragged into my custody fight by men with polished shoes.

Noa swallowed. I counted because counting kept me from shaking. One swallow, two, three.

Across the room, Dario's eyes moved from Bennett to me. He wanted me to pull away – not dramatically, that would be too easy to name. He wanted 3 inches. A turned shoulder, a refusal to look, some tiny public recoil he could feed to the argument that Bennett's help was contaminated, that I had been foolish, that every door held by another man was another trap.

The worst part was that I understood the fear underneath the trap. I had built a life inside a man's carefulness once. Dario's carefulness had warmed floors, remembered peppermint tea, hired drivers, bought soft blankets, and placed my name nowhere that mattered. It had felt like safety until I needed a record, a door code, a public sentence, a hospital chart.

So yes, I understood the fear of mistaking another man's resources for refuge. I would be stupid not to. But fear was not discernment by itself – only an alarm. After the alarm, you still had to look for smoke.

– لاجواب ای روماذ س ذ اول ویب.....

AO hapter So

My fear, not Dario's. Farrow's questions had not invented the shape. Bennett did have a wound that matched part of mine. He had helpe mother and infant leave Bellamy-controlled housing when he was 23. His family had settled claims. Newspapers had called it interference He had later built protocols so help could not become ownership. That could be noble. That could be dangerous. Both could be true until actions decided.

Noa unlatched, furious at the delay between sides.

"Impatient," Isolde murmured.

"Accurate," I said. I shifted her and winced.

Bennett noticed from across the room. He did not move – and that was the answer I needed before I knew I had asked. A man trained by panic would have crossed because I was in pain and he could help. A man trained by possession would have crossed because my pain made me available to his authority. Bennett stayed where he was until I looked at him. Then he lifted his hand slightly- not an offer across the whole room, a question.

I looked at Isolde. "Can you take her after this side?"

"Yes."

"Then I need 2 minutes."

Priya heard the direction inside that and shifted the screen angle. Anika checked the aisle. Farrow watched from Dario's table with the attentive stillness of a man hoping care would incriminate itself. Let him watch.

Noa fed for 8 more minutes, then went boneless and damp against me. I checked her mouth, her color, her tiny hands – no fever heat, no blue around the lips, good tone, milk at the corner of her mouth. I handed her to Isolde, who tucked her against a clean cloth and began the slow back pat that had become its own legal strategy. Keep the baby well. Everything else could wait.

I stood. Pain flashed low and bright, and I breathed through it. Bennett took one step forward, then stopped again.

I walked to him. Not far – maybe 14 feet. It felt like 2 miles. Every eye that mattered noticed. Dario's jaw tightened. Farrow looked down as if he were too courteous to see a thing he would absolutely use later. Bennett's expression changed only when I reached him, the composed surface cracking enough to show exhaustion.

"You do not have to do this," he said quietly.

"Stand in a courtroom?"

"Stand beside me."

There was no self-pity in it. That made it harder. He meant it as information – an exit sign, a reminder that comfort was not a debt owed because he had testified, bled privacy, or helped move us through an alley while someone shouted my name. He had given the court something costly, and he was making sure I did not mistake cost for a claim.

My throat tightened. "I know," I said.

"Aveline." He stopped there. My name in his mouth did not try to unlock me. It waited.

"I am not here because I owe you comfort," I said.

"Good."

"I am here because Farrow wanted me to step away."

Bennett's mouth moved, almost not a smile. "That is a dangerous reason."

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويـ ب.....

2/a

"It was not the only one."

“Then make sure the other reason belongs to you,” he said.

It was such a Bennett answer that it nearly hurt. Even now, with his family’s sealed places opened for strangers and Dario watching for any weakness, he was still checking whether my choice had a door behind it.

“It does,” I said.

He looked at me then, fully. The room did not disappear, and I did not want it to. I needed it present-the judge’s empty bench, Dario at counsel table, the clerk with exhibits, Isolde patting Noa’s back, Priya pretending not to watch while absolutely watching. The point was that I could choose where to stand while everyone watched.

“You helped a woman and a child leave your family’s housing,” I said.

His eyes flicked once toward the clerk, the record, the danger of names. “Yes.”

“You would still help.”

“Yes.”

“But differently.”

The answer cost him more. “Yes.”

“Did she ask you?”

His face changed then- not much, enough.

“Yes,” he said. “And there were still things I did wrong afterward because I thought urgency made me wise.”

That sentence stayed with me. It did not ask to be forgiven, did not turn his old mistake into credentials. It admitted that rescue could have sharp corners even when the door was real. No speech about growth, no beautiful apology offered to me for a wound that did not belong to me, no attempt to make his old scandal into proof that he understood mine better than anyone else.

I looked at his hands. They hung at his sides – no claim.

I held out mine. Bennett stared at it for a second as if I had handed him something breakable and legal.

“Aveline,” he said again.

“Hand,” I said.

He placed his palm under mine without closing his fingers. The restraint almost undid me. I closed mine first-not tightly, enough.

At the table, Dario stood. Farrow touched his sleeve, and Dario sat back down. Good. Let the record show that restraint was possible. Let it show that a man could be chosen and still not take.

Bennett's thumb did not move over my skin. He held my hand like a fact that had to be preserved without being interpreted.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

His gaze softened with something like pain. "That is not your job today."

"I am aware of my workload."

This time the almost-smile reached his eyes and vanished. "No," he said. "I am not all right. But I am steady."

A®

The distinction landed so cleanly that I had to look away. On the other side of the screen, Noa burped with the violence of a very small thunderclap.

"Excellent argument," Isolde said.

A laugh moved through me before I could stop it-small, too close to tears. Bennett heard it and did not try to keep it.

The clerk opened the side door. "All rise."

The judge returned with a folder and the expression of a woman bringing winter indoors.

I let go of Bennett's hand before standing because I needed both hands for the table and because the ruling mattered more than any public gesture. He stepped back at once- no resistance, no hurt displayed for Dario to use.

I returned to my chair. Isolde placed Noa back in the carrier after one more temperature touch. 98.7. Wet diaper probably soon. Breathing steady.

The judge sat. No one else did until she nodded. She looked first at Dario, then at me, then at the file where all our careful facts had been made smaller than a baby's hunger and larger than a family's pride.

"I am prepared to enter a temporary order," she said.

My hand found the carrier handle. Dario leaned forward as if the word temporary belonged to him already.

End of chapter-

The wife isn't me

Chapter 90

“This is not a custody trial.”

The judge said it before anyone in the room could pretend otherwise.

My hand stayed on Noa’s carrier. Her face was half-hidden by the edge of the blanket, one cheek soft and creased from sleep, mouth working around a dream of milk. She had no opinion about custody, public narrative, donor networks, portal access, or the old Bellamy wound that still seemed to hover near the witness chair. She had a wet diaper coming, a feed due by 11:15 unless she asked earlier, and a mother whose body was held together by pads, painkillers, water, rage, and the unreasonable expectation that I should be able to stand when the judge finished speaking.

The judge looked down at her notes.

“I am entering a temporary protection and access order pending further hearing and evidentiary development. The court recognizes Mr. Armitage’s asserted biological standing and interest in establishing parentage. The court also recognizes documented concerns about records, medical access attempts, public narrative, location safety, and the child’s age and medical vulnerability.”

Dario’s face did not move, and that frightened me more than anger would have. Anger had edges; calm could seep under doors.

“First,” the judge said, “location. No party, counsel, representative, family member, employee, contractor, donor contact, or person acting in concert may seek, publish, solicit, confirm, hint at, amplify, or otherwise disclose Ms. Ashby’s or Noa Ashby’s housing location, safe-city route, shelter network, transport provider, receiving facility, or route timing.”

My breath went shallow. Priya’s pen moved.

Farrow stood. “Your Honor, may we clarify acting in concert so my client is not held responsible for anonymous internet actors?”

“You may brief enforcement standards later. Today I am making clear that neither side may use public ambiguity as a weapon. Mr. Armitage is not responsible for strangers he

does not direct or encourage. He is responsible for his family, representatives, employees, contractors, counsel communications, and public-facing statements within his control."

Dario inclined his head once – not agreement, storage. He was putting the sentence somewhere he could test later.

"Second," the judge continued, "medical and record access. Pending further order, Mr. Armitage shall not have pediatric portal access, authorized access, login credentials, direct provider contact, chart review, real-time medical update access, or scheduling notice for Noa Ashby except through the neutral channel designated by this court."

The room changed around that sentence, not loudly. My body knew before my mind did – my shoulders dropped a fraction, and the pain I had been holding at the back of my teeth rushed forward. No portal access, no direct provider contact, no chart review. For now.

Temporary did not mean small when a newborn was 4 days old. Temporary was a thin word, but thin did not mean useless. A receiving blanket was thin. A printed privacy flag was thin. The plastic hospital bracelet that had carried Noa's name before Dario could reach it had been thin enough to cut off with scissors and strong enough to make nurses check who she was. For now was sometimes the only bridge a mother had.

"Emergency medical notice," the judge said, "will be provided through counsel or court-designated neutral notification if Noa is admitted, if a treating physician determines parental notice through the neutral channel is medically appropriate, or if a true emergency requires later review. This does not authorize direct contact with providers or staff."

Farrow wrote quickly. Priya wrote faster.

KIRA

–

"Third, public statements and images. No party may publish or cause to be published Noa Ashby's image, medical information, location, caregiver schedule, or identifying route details. No party may state or imply that Celine Armitage has maternal, intended-parent, custodial, guardianship, or medical decision-making status over Noa Ashby pending further order."

I looked down. Noa slept. Her name had stayed hers through another sentence.

"Existing public posts relevant to maternal identity, location hints, Bellamy involvement, Noa, and the Armitage children shall be preserved. Deletion for safety concerns may occur only through documented counsel process, with screenshots, timestamps, and preservation of metadata where available."

Celine was not in the room, but her post was. Her newborn son was not named. Good. He did not belong inside this order except as proof that adults could make a baby visible without making him safe.

“Fourth,” the judge said, “contact. Mr. Armitage retains a path to supervised access. Contact will occur only at the courthouse family-services suite or another court-approved neutral site, never at safe housing, medical facilities, Bellamy premises, Armitage premises, or locations proposed unilaterally by either side. Contact is conditioned on infant health, feeding needs, and Ms. Ashby’s postpartum medical tolerances.”

My stomach clenched. There it was – the door he still had. I had known it would remain. Priya had warned me in the car, Anika had warned me after filing, and even Isolde, who hated Dario with the efficient sincerity of a woman who would happily staple him to a procedural notice had said the judge would not cut off supervised access completely on this record. Knowing did not make the door quieter.

“No gifts, photographs, recordings, litigation discussion, direct questions about location, medical providers, Bellamy involvement, or housing. Support items may be proposed through counsel and delivered through a screened channel with no branding, no conditions, no public narrative, and no location disclosure.”

Dario’s jaw moved once. The white blanket had reached the order – not by name, because it did not deserve a name here.

“Fifth, Bellamy Ventures.” The judge’s gaze moved to Bennett. “Bellamy may continue restricted funding and logistics under the written limitations already disclosed. Bellamy shall not receive Noa’s medical records, legal strategy, housing address except as operationally necessary for a specific transport approved by counsel or housing staff, or decision-making authority. Mr. Bellamy’s testimony regarding prior family history is admitted for limited bias assessment only and is not a finding of misconduct in this matter.”

Bennett nodded. I did not look back at him—if I did, Dario would watch the looking instead of hearing the rule. Still, I felt the rule land behind me. It protected me from Bennett as much as it protected Bennett from Dario’s story. That mattered. The court had not made him a substitute father, secret guardian, or romantic answer to a legal problem. It had made him what he had claimed to be: a man and an institution with limits. Limits were not cold. In the right hands, they were warmth with walls.

“Sixth, preservation. St. Orla, the private clinic, counsel of record, and any party in possession of related materials shall preserve records concerning Noa Ashby’s maternal and parental fields, intended-parent references, family continuity review, portal access or authorized access attempts, external legal-notice intake, public statements, donor-office routing, and related communications. Existing orders remain in effect.”

The judge set the page down.

“This order is temporary. It is not a final parentage determination, not a custody allocation, not an adjudication of unfitness, and not a finding that every allegation made by either side is proven. It is designed to keep a 4-day-old newborn’s records, location, and immediate care stable while the court determines what happened and what should happen next.”

Four-day-old. The words opened something in me – not because the judge had said them gently. She had said them like an inventory item that mattered because it was exact.

Four-day-old meant not a symbol, not an heir, not a public question, not a story Celine could crop or Dario could claim or Bennett could protect by becoming too central. A newborn. Mine.

The judge looked at Dario. “Mr. Armitage, if you violate the location and records provisions, the access path narrows. If your representatives violate them with your knowledge or encouragement, the access path narrows. If you attempt to use public pressure to obtain what this order withholds, the access path narrows. Do you understand?”

:

2/4 AO

CITA

Dario stood. “Yes, Your Honor.”

His voice was calm. That was the first warning.

The judge looked at me. “Ms. Ashby, if you deny ordered supervised contact without infant-care, medical, safety, or court-recognized basis, the court will consider that. If Bellamy or any other third party is used to obstruct lawful access beyond the order, the court will consider that. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Honor.” My voice held, barely.

“Counsel will confer on the next supervised window, not today unless Ms. Ashby consents after medical consultation. Written order to issue by 4:00 PM. Until then, my oral ruling controls.”

The gavel did not strike. Family court did not need theater when everyone was already bleeding.

Priya exhaled beside me – not relief, calculation beginning again. Anika wrote 4:00 PM written order in block letters at the top of her pad and underlined it twice. Isolde leaned close enough that only I heard her whisper, “You won pieces.”

Pieces. Yes. Noa's chart, Noa's location, Noa's image, my body not dragged into another room today unless medicine said it could. Pieces were not peace. They were still worth holding.

The judge left. For 3 seconds, no one moved. Then Noa woke and began to cry. Good. Her body refused the room's drama and demanded the only ruling that mattered.

"Diaper," I said.

Isolde was already reaching for the bag.

Priya said, "Side room. Now."

I looked at Dario because I could feel him looking at us.

He stood beside Farrow, coat over his arm, expression composed into something almost courteous. He had lost pieces today. Records. Location. Public images. Medical routes. The clean implication that Celine's title could hover over my daughter without consequence.

He had kept a path, and he knew it.

Our eyes met across the room. Once, that look would have asked me to trust him past what I could see. Now it asked me to fear what I could not yet prove,

"Temporary," he said. Not loudly. Not for the judge. For me.

Priya turned. "Mr. Armitage."

Farrow touched his client's sleeve. Dario gave the smallest polite nod, as if he had merely repeated the court's own word. Then his gaze dropped to Noa's carrier.

Noa cried harder, red-faced and alive, furious at adults and wet fabric and perhaps the entire architecture of law. I lifted her before anyone else could turn her sound into meaning. Her body was hot from crying, not fever hot. Her neck felt normal beneath my fingers. Her fists battered the air until I pressed her against my chest.

"I have you," I whispered.

Dario watched. Bennett stayed by the back door. Isolde opened the diaper bag. Anika was already asking the clerk for sealed copies and exact language. The room began to work again.

Dario buttoned his coat slowly. At the door, he looked back once-calm, almost gentle.

AO

KITA

“This is only temporary, Aveline.”

Then he left before the order could teach him how to sound afraid.

End of chapter

AO

The wife isn't me

Chapter 91

“I can give you 47 minutes if she stays asleep.”

The sentence looked ridiculous once I said it – not because it was untrue, but because 47 minutes had become a professional unit.

Before Noa, I had measured work in sketches finished, rooms solved, client notes answered before a committee could pretend not to understand them. Before Dario, I had measured ambition by how much of my name could stay on the page after men with better suits walked through it. Now I measured it by the last feeding, the last wet diaper, the temperature that had held at 98.4, the ache under my stitches when I shifted too fast, and the fact that my milk had soaked through 2 cotton pads while I tried to read an email.

Noa slept in the bassinet beside the narrow desk Bellamy logistics had brought without calling it a gift. That mattered. The desk was rented The laptop was Bellamy property with restricted access. The project folder had my name as consultant, not dependent, beneficiary, patient, instability risk, or donor problem.

Aveline Ashby. Design review consultant. Temporary, narrow, paid through a contract Maris had read twice and Priya had read with the expression of a woman who expected kindness to hide traps.

The payment line was modest, and that helped. If the number had been beautiful, I would have distrusted it. Beautiful money in Dario’s world always wanted to become a room key, a medical release, a reason I should be grateful when someone moved the floor. This was an hourly rate, a cap, a tax form, and a paragraph saying missed windows due to infant care or postpartum medical need would not be treated as breach.

I had read that paragraph 4 times, then asked Maris whether it was real.

“It is enforceable,” she had said. That was not the same thing, but it was close enough to make me sign.

Noa made a small clicking noise in her sleep. I stopped looking at the screen. Her mouth worked once, her forehead stayed smooth, her hands tucked beside her cheeks with thin fingers curled as if she had fallen asleep holding an argument no one else could see.

I put 2 fingers lightly against the side of her neck. Warm. Not fever warm.

The notebook beside me had more baby data than design data. 9:05 feed, left side 11 minutes, right side 6. 9:43 wet diaper. 10:02 temperature 98.4. 10:10 maternal meds, water, snack, pad change. 10:18 Noa asleep. 10:21 Aveline attempts work like a person with a spine.

Isolde had written the last line when she left a plate of toast on the corner of the desk. I had eaten half of it standing, because sitting had made one part of me ache and standing had made another part of me complain. Postpartum recovery was democracy by pain.

The secure video window opened at 10:23. Bennett appeared with his camera angled too high, so I saw more ceiling than face. Then he corrected it and gave me the room before giving me his voice.

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Reina is on audio only. The project lead is not on this call. This is scope and comfort only.”

Comfort. Dario had used the word when he meant containment. Bennett used it like a checklist.

The call had 3 people: Bennett, Reina Sol, and a Bellamy contracts attorney whose name was Len Caro and whose first sentence was, “You can stop this at any point without explanation.”

eReader

KICA

I believed him because he sounded faintly annoyed that anyone might have expected otherwise.

Reina said, “The task is a review of maternal-recovery room layouts for a community clinic buildout. No patient data. No emergency deadline No site visits. No public credit until you choose whether you want your name attached.”

My hand tightened on the pen. “I want my name attached to my work.”

Bennett did not smile like the line pleased him, and that restraint made the room safer. “Then it will be,” he said. “Unless there is a safety reason to pause public posting.”

“Safety reason is different from shame.”

“Yes.” One clean word. No lecture, no softened agreement designed to make him seem better than Dario.

Len Caro added, “For avoidance of doubt, public credit and publication credit are separate choices. You can be paid under your name and still delay web or donor-facing promotion.”

“I know the difference.”

“Good. Many people pretend not to when it benefits them.”

I looked at Bennett then.

He was not looking at Len with approval, or at me with concern. He was writing the distinction down, as if a sentence that protected my name deserved a place in the notes rather than in his expression.

There were kinds of restraint that felt cold. This was not one of them.

Reina shared the screen. The clinic plan was modest, practical, and underfunded in the way community care was always underfunded. The postpartum room had 2 chairs, a sink, a changing surface, a privacy curtain, and an exam table placed as if the person using it had no body after birth.

That was the first thing I saw. Not the code notes, not the materials – the body.

“The chair is wrong,” I said.

Len Caro made a note. Reina paused the cursor.

Bennett stayed quiet.

“Wrong how?” Reina asked.

“It faces the door. If someone is bleeding, nursing, learning to latch, or trying not to cry while a nurse explains jaundice, the first thing she sees is the handle. Anyone who enters sees her before she sees them. Put the chair angled toward the corner but with sightline to the door. She controls her exposure.”

My milk let down hard enough to hurt. I pressed my forearm across my chest and kept looking at the plan.

Noa slept. No one on the call pretended not to notice, and no one commented. That was dignity too.

Reina moved the chair.

“Like this?”

“More space beside it. A support person needs to sit close without blocking the mother from standing. And the trash bin should be within reach of the chair, not behind the table. Pads, wipes, syringe wrappers, feeding supplies. People design postpartum rooms as if pain is theoretical.”

O

–

I heard my own voice settle-not calm, useful.

For 19 minutes, the world narrowed to small corrections that mattered because bodies mattered. A call button that could be reached from the chair and the exam table. A shelf high enough that a toddler could not pull medical supplies down but low enough for a nurse with one hand full, A privacy screen that did not trap the patient behind fabric if someone entered too fast.

Work did not save me. It returned a tool, and that was different. It also returned an older version of my anger – not the hot helpless anger of court corridors or the animal anger that came when Dario’s name appeared near Noa’s chart, but something quieter, sharper. The anger of seeing a bad room and knowing it did not have to be bad. Someone had chosen convenience. Someone had placed the chair for staff flow, not for the woman whose body would be exposed in it. Someone had called that neutral because no one powerful had to sit there bleeding.

I knew that mistake. I had lived inside it. I could correct it on paper.

At 10:42, Noa woke with a short, furious cry. I muted myself, then stopped, and unmuted.

“I need to feed her.”

“We pause here,” Reina said immediately.

“You can keep talking. I can listen.”

Bennett’s gaze moved down, not to the baby, not to my chest, but to the corner of his screen where the meeting controls probably sat.

“Only if you want sound in the room,” he said. “The file can wait.”

The file can wait. Dario had once moved a prenatal appointment by 2 hours because a lunch with Mathias Vey had “hardened.” He had sent flowers afterward – white ones, the kind that said apology without admitting fault.

I lifted Noa carefully, biting the inside of my cheek when my abdomen pulled. She rooted against the soft wrap of my shirt, mouth open, insulted by the time it took the entire adult world to arrange itself around hunger.

“She comes first,” I said.

“Yes,” Bennett said. No hunger in his voice, no claim, no performance of how much he respected me -just the word.

I ended the call because I wanted to. I fed Noa because she needed me. I cried for 8 seconds because the latch hurt, because I had solved the chair, and because my name was on a contract that did not hide a knife in the paper.

Then I logged the feed. 10:45 left side. Good latch after 2 tries. Swallowing. Mother cried, not relevant.

I crossed out the last 2 words. Then I wrote them again. Relevant.

When Noa had finished and slept soft-mouthed against my chest, I opened the laptop with one hand and found the updated plan waiting. Reina had added a note in the margin: A. Ashby review: patient controls exposure and exit.

My name looked ordinary there. That was what almost undid me.

The secure mail alert came at 11:18.

Maris had forwarded it with 1 line.

Do not respond directly. Preserve envelope and headers,

The letter was on Armitage Group letterhead – not Dario’s personal stationery, not Farrow’s filing service. Armitage Group, with its black crest at the top and the kind of spacing that made intimidation look like taste.

I read the subject first.

– ای لاجواب نسروما ناول ویب

EICA

NOTICE OF PROPRIETARY CLAIM AND SIGNATURE AUTHORITY HOSPITAL DESIGN MATERIALS

Noa shifted against me. I put my palm over her back and counted the rhythm of her breathing before I opened the attachment.

The letter said my St. Orla maternal-environment design concepts, domestic nursery planning materials, naming frameworks, private care recommendations, and related hospital-adjacent work belonged to Armitage-sponsored entities under an intellectual property assignment had signed months earlier. It referred to a supplemental addendum, to sponsor resources, to my acceptance of Armitage support, to my signature.

The page underneath carried a scanned copy of a mark that looked enough like mine to make my hand go cold. Not exact. Not mine. Bu close enough for a man who had once kissed the inside of my wrist while I signed a grocery delivery account and said he liked the way my A looked like it was trying to keep its balance.

My body knew before my mind had finished reading. This was not about chairs or clinic plans. It was Dario reaching into the last private rooms and saying even the shape of what I made had passed through him first.

Noa sighed in her sleep. The letter's final paragraph warned Bellamy Ventures not to use, display, adapt, license, publish, or commercially exploit any design, signature style, maternal-care concept, nursery-related plan, or hospital workflow bearing my contribution without Armitage Group review.

Signature style.

I looked at my daughter, then at the name on the page.

Aveline Ashby

Armitage Group had claimed the work. Worse, they had claimed ownership of my signature.

-End of chapter-

–

The wife isn't me

Chapter 92

"Print it."

Maris paused on the other end of the secure call. "You are sure?"

"I want to see the lie on paper."

There were gentler ways to say it, healthier ones probably. A postpartum discharge sheet somewhere would have recommended rest, fluids, low stress, and avoiding documents that made a woman feel as if her skin had been signed over while she slept. The discharge sheet had not met Dario Armitage.

Noa was asleep in the bassinet with one fist free of her swaddle. I had tried to tuck it back twice; she had extracted it twice, with the silent determination of a child who had inherited my opinion of restraints.

The safe placement's printer sat on the floor because the rented desk had no extra surface. It made small irritated sounds while the Armitage letter came out page by page.

Isolde crouched beside it. "I hate rich paper," she said.

"That is not paper."

"It came out of a printer."

"It is a threat wearing paper."

"I stand corrected."

My abdomen cramped when I leaned forward. I stopped, breathed through it, and waited for the pain to settle into the larger ache that had become background weather. The pad under me felt too full. My nursing bra felt damp. My mouth tasted like cold tea and metal.

Noa slept. That meant the room could be ugly for a few minutes without frightening her.

The forged addendum had 4 pages. The first page was language; the second was more language. The third was the trap in velvet: hospital design, sponsor-adjacent development, maternal environment observations, domestic care concepts, naming conventions, and private postpartum recommendations assigned to Armitage-sponsored entities if developed using Armitage support, residence, funding, staff, or access.

Residence. There it was, tucked into the middle of the sentence like a neutral condition.

Dario's apartment. The 36th floor. The warm floors. The nursery clouds. The chain lock I had used after he told me it was his apartment, as if a chain could correct a deed. The brass bowl by the door where he dropped cufflinks and the kitchen where he slid ginger tea toward me while I signed papers he called mine. They had turned the place I had mistaken for home into a resource line.

The fourth page carried the signature. My signature-not my signature. The difference lived in the pressure, and I knew that before I could explain it. My real signature started narrow and loosened at the end, because I signed too quickly once my first name was

done. The forged one tried to copy the looseness but had planned it. Even the hesitation was placed like furniture in a showroom.

“Aveline,” Isolde said quietly.

“I see it.”

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويد ب

AO

KIRA

–

“No, sit back.”

I had not realized I was bracing over the desk until the room tilted at the edges. I sat.

Pain moved hot across my lower back. Milk prickled again. My body did not care that someone had counterfeited me; it cared that, the baby would wake soon and my uterus was still doing its brutal work in private. That made me angrier. Dario had always counted on bodies interrupting women at the exact moment men preferred them quiet.

I opened the old folder on the laptop.

NOA design-contracts / Storla originals

The files were not elegant. Some were scans. Some were photographs taken at bad angles on the apartment kitchen counter. Some had Dario’s thumb visible at the edge because he had been holding the paper down for me while I signed.

That thumb became evidence now.

I enlarged the original St. Orla design agreement. The date hit me first, not the signature. The original contract was 2 weeks before the donor event, part of the maternity-wing consulting work that had made Dario so proud of me in private and so silent about me in public. I had signed it because I needed work, because St. Orla had been a prestigious client, and because Dario had said, “This is yours. I want you to have rooms with your name on them.”

Rooms. Name. He had always known which words opened me.

The forged addendum was dated 1 day after his private proposal. I stared at the date until the numbers separated from each other.

That morning, I had woken in his apartment with the ring mark soft on my finger and a nausea wave that made me sit on the bathroom floor for 14 minutes. Dario had brought me water and a towel. He had put my hair back with a tenderness so practiced I had mistaken it for truth.

By 9:30, his assistant had arrived with a courier sleeve.

I remembered because I had been embarrassed.

I had been barefoot, wearing one of Dario's shirts over leggings, with the private ring turned inward on my finger because Dario said we were still waiting for the right public moment. His assistant had not looked at the ring. She had looked at the papers.

Sabine Cho.

Dario's executive assistant then. Former assistant now, if gossip threads about Armitage staff changes could be trusted.

She had stood in the entry hall holding a black folio and said, "Mr. Armitage asked me to collect the St. Orla originals for scanning before noon."

"He didn't mention that," I had said.

"He said you knew."

That had been enough then. He said you knew. It was astonishing how often a woman's consent could be forged with a sentence.

I pulled up the photo album from that day. My hand shook. Isolde saw and reached for the mouse. I stopped her with a look, and she lifted both hands and sat back. Good. I needed witnesses who did not turn into owners when I trembled.

There were 12 photographs from that morning. A picture of the kitchen counter with ginger tea. A blurry shot of the ring turned inward on my finger because I had wanted to remember the private happiness without disobeying the public lie. A screenshot of Dario's message at 8:57.

Sabine is coming by for the St. Orla packet. Just originals for scanning. I need them clean for the foundation archive.

– اي لاجواب روماند س ذ اول ويد ب..

CITA

Foundation archive- not Armitage Group, not assignment, not sponsor-adjacent work product.

I took a screenshot of the screenshot, because evidence made me ridiculous and careful.

Then I opened the building access log Isolde had saved months ago when we still thought apartment records might matter only for lock status. The apartment had listed me as Resident Guest, Dario as Primary Owner. Sabine Cho's visitor pass had been issued at 9:24 AM, exited at 10:06.

I clicked into the courier photographs. There it was – one image I had taken because the packet looked elegant on the counter and I had still been foolish enough to think elegance belonged to me if I worked hard enough. My original St. Orla agreement sat beneath the ginger tea mug. Dario's message glowed on my laptop screen behind it. The signature page was visible – my real signature, the one he had access to, the one Sabine carried out in the folio.

Noa stirred. The sound cut through the room like a bell. I stood too quickly, and pain flashed white.

"Slow," Isolde said, already moving to the bassinet but stopping before she touched Noa. "Do you want me to lift her?"

I wanted to say no because I hated needing help. Then Noa's face wrinkled, and need became a stupid prideful word.

"Yes. Bring her to me."

Isolde lifted her with both hands, careful around the head and neck, and placed her against my chest. Noa rooted immediately, offended by the delay. I settled her, adjusted fabric, and hissed when she latched badly on the first try.

"Again," I whispered to her. "We both get another try."

She found it on the second. The room quieted to swallowing.

I looked over Noa's head at the forged page. Dario had tried to make my work a derivative of his support – my rooms, my observations, my maternal-care designs, my nursery thoughts, even my naming conventions. He had tried to turn the apartment, the ring, the tea, the staff, and the private engagement into resources he could claim as inputs. He had not only hidden a wife. He had built a world in which loving him made every part of me available for processing.

Maris came back on the secure line at 11:52.

She had received the scans, the old message, the visitor log, and the photos.

"Do not call Sabine Cho," she said.

“I wasn’t going to.”

Isolde made a face that said I had been considering it with my whole skeleton.

Maris continued, “We preserve. We send a litigation-hold supplement. We request the native file, transmission metadata, scanner logs, document-management history, and every person who touched this addendum. We also ask Armitage to identify the person who processed or witnessed the signature.”

“They will say I signed it.”

“They may.”

“They will say I forgot.”

“They may try.”

“They will say pregnancy made me confused.”

– t

Maris’s expression hardened. “Then they will explain why their own visitor log, message, and version history align with the day their assist removed the originals.”

“And why the forged pressure is wrong.”

“Pressure?”

I touched the copy with the back of my knuckle, not my fingertips. “The pen lift before Ashby. I don’t lift there unless I am signing on a tablet or my hand is cramped. This is trying to imitate a photograph, not a person.”

Maris wrote that down too.

Noa’s mouth slowed. I shifted her slightly and counted swallows.

The old humiliation tried to rise. Barefoot in the apartment, ring hidden, assistant at the door, papers taken because Darío said I knew-a woman in another woman’s life handing over proof because she had been taught that access meant permission. I had let Sabine take the folic That was the thought Dario would have wanted me to keep, but I did not. I moved it aside and looked at the facts instead.

“This does not stay private,” I said.

Maris watched me through the screen.

“You mean court?”

“I mean it does not become another thing he did to me in a room where he controls the story.”

Isolde’s face changed-not pity, recognition.

I touched Noa’s back. She was milk-heavy now, loose and warm, her body trusting mine because she had no idea how many adults wanted to turn mothers into paperwork.

“Put it in the next filing,” I said. “Narrowly. No drama. Signature authenticity, access chain, ownership claim, postpartum work interference. I want the court to see that he is still trying to own what he cannot reach.”

Maris nodded once.

“I will draft.”

At 12:03, an email alert appeared in the corner of the screen- not from Armitage, from an address I did not recognize.

Subject: I processed the addendum. I need protection.

The message preview was only 1 line.

Ms. Ashby, my name is Sabine Cho, and I was told your signature authority had already been cleared.

I looked at the forged page, then at the visitor log, then at the name on the email, I knew who had processed it.

End of chapter

– اي لاجواب روماذ س ذ اول ويب.....

AQ

The wife isn't me

Chapter 93

“Do not answer her from your personal account.”

Maris said it before I touched the keyboard. I had not touched the keyboard – my hand was hovering over it, which apparently counted as. intent in every jurisdiction where Isolde Fane had eyes.

“I am not answering.”

“Your fingers are leaning,” Isolde said.

Noa hiccuped against my shoulder. She had finished feeding 6 minutes earlier and was considering whether to return the milk to me with interest. I had a burp cloth tucked under her chin, 2 pillows behind my back, and the forged addendum printed on the desk like a thing that had crawled in and died there. I should have been sleeping. The word should had become comedy.

Maris read Sabine Cho’s email aloud through the secure call because she wanted the sound of it in the room without letting panic turn the message into more than it was.

Ms. Ashby, my name is Sabine Cho, and I was told your signature authority had already been cleared. I processed the supplemental addendum after receiving instructions from counsel and Mr. Armitage’s office. I did not witness you sign it. I did not understand the personal scope until the current ownership letter. I am no longer employed in that role. I will not speak without protection.

There was more—not much, enough.

Please do not send this to Mr. Armitage. Please do not tell anyone at the company I contacted you. I have a child in school and a lease I cannot lose.

I closed my eyes. That line did what the legal language had not. A child in school. A lease. Not a villain in a sleek blouse at my old apartment door – a woman with rent due and a child whose school pickup could become pressure if the wrong man decided to teach loyalty through fear.

I hated that it softened me. I hated more that softness did not make the facts less useful.

“She says she was no longer employed in that role,” Isolde said. “Is she employed there now?”

Maris looked down, reading something offscreen. “We need to verify without contacting Armitage. Public employment listings still show her as executive operations, but that may lag. Linkedin equivalent is stale. We use counsel.”

“She asked us not to tell Dario,” I said.

“We won’t,” Maris replied. “But if she becomes a witness, there are disclosure rules. We do not promise more secrecy than the law allows.”

Noa gave a small wet burp. I patted her back and felt the looseness in her body afterward. The entire room had turned on one email, but her life remained exact: feed, burp, diaper, sleep if mercy existed.

“Can I speak to her through you?”

“Yes. Only with counsel on both sides if possible. I am going to reply that I represent you, that she should obtain independent counsel, and that we cannot advise her. I will offer a protected call once she has counsel or consents to a witness-intake protocol.”

ManoBook – Read Novels & books

AQ

KICA

“She may not be able to afford counsel.”

“Then we locate options that do not make Bellamy or you own her testimony.”

Bennett would have said that. Maris saying it made me trust the sentence more, because it was not romance – it was infrastructure.

At 12:29, Maris sent the reply. At 12:41, Sabine answered. At 12:46, Maris said, “She is in a car. She says she has 20 minutes before pickup She agrees to an intake call for the purpose of safety triage only. No testimony coaching. No legal advice from us. I will record consent to the boundaries.”

My body wanted to shake. It chose leaking instead. Milk spread cold against the inside of my bra.

“I need 2 minutes.”

No one argued.

Isolde took Noa because I asked her to. I changed pads in the bathroom with one hand pressed against the sink, staring at my own face in the mirror. I looked like a woman made of interrupted sleep and court orders. I also looked like a mother. That should not have felt like defiance.

When I returned, Noa was in the bassinet, wide awake and offended by ceiling paint. Isolde had one hand on the edge, not rocking, just present.

Maris started the call at 12:52. Sabine Cho did not turn on video. Her voice was lower than I remembered – or maybe the apartment had made her sound smaller then, shaped by Dario’s walls and my own willingness to believe official errands were harmless.

Maris stated the boundaries. Sabine agreed to them. Then silence – not dramatic silence, working silence, the kind before someone decides whether truth is more dangerous inside her mouth or outside it.

I did not fill it.

Noa made a small snuffling sound. Sabine inhaled sharply.

“Is that your baby?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know,” she said, and then stopped. “No. That’s not true. I knew you were pregnant, Everyone knew after a while. I didn’t know what they were doing.”

Maris said, “Tell us only what you can tell us accurately today. Dates, documents, people. Do not guess.”

Sabine’s breath trembled. “The St. Orla packet came from the apartment. Mr. Armitage told me to collect originals for scanning and archive. I scanned the main agreement, uploaded it to the foundation drive, then received a separate instruction to process a supplemental addendum.”

“From whom?” Maris asked.

“The instruction came through legal.”

“Name?”

Sabine went quiet. Noa kicked once inside the bassinet, fabric whispering.

I almost told Sabine she did not have to, but that would have been dishonest. She did have to, eventually, if she wanted the truth to matter. She did not have to do it unprotected.

“I am not asking you to burn down your life on an open line,” I said.

ManoBook – Read Novels & books

–

Maris looked at me, but she did not interrupt.

Sabine’s breathing changed. “I saw you that morning,” she said. “You looked happy.”

There were cruelties I had prepared for. That one got under the ribs.

“I was.”

“He had told us you were doing confidential family-adjacent design work. That it was sensitive because of the hospital vote and family privacy. He said you understood the boundaries but hated paperwork.”

I laughed once. It sounded like something breaking neatly. “I have never hated paperwork when paperwork tells the truth.”

“I know that now.”

“You did not know it then?”

“I knew he was careful with you,” Sabine said. “I thought that meant careful. I didn’t know careful could mean contained.”

Isolde’s mouth tightened. Maris wrote something. Sabine continued, faster now, as if speed could get her past fear.

“The supplemental addendum appeared in the document-management queue at 10:38 AM. It was marked urgent for sponsor review. I messaged that I had not seen a wet signature. The reply said signature authority had been cleared from original signature exemplars and counsel-approved counterpart processing.”

“Whose reply?” Maris asked.

“Legal operations at first.”

“A person, Ms. Cho.”

Sabine swallowed loud enough for the microphone to catch it. “Farrow.”

The room changed. Farrow had stood beside Dario in court while the judge protected Noa’s portal access. Farrow had asked questions about Bennett’s old scandal with a face like procedure had no moral content. Farrow had touched Dario’s sleeve when Dario said temporary, as if the problem had been volume, not threat.

“First name?” Maris asked.

“Gideon Farrow. He was outside counsel on family risk then. Later formal litigation. He told me the addendum was approved and that Mr. Armitage did not need delay over a domestic signature issue.”

Domestic signature issue. My hand went still on the burp cloth. Some phrases were so clean they left fingerprints.

“Did Mr. Farrow tell you to sign Ms. Ashby’s name?” Maris asked.

“No.”

Maris did not react.

“Did he tell you who signed it?”

“No.”

“What did he ask you to do?”

“Upload it as executed. Attach it to the St. Orla design packet. Mark it as sponsor-adjacent supplemental terms. Route it to Mr. Armitage’s

ManoBook – Read Novels & books office and the foundation archive.”

“Did you ask why Ms. Ashby had not countersigned in your presence?”

“I asked if we needed a fresh signature. Mr. Farrow wrote, Authority cleared. Process as complete.”

I watched Noa’s chest rise and fall. Authority cleared – as if I were a gate someone else had opened.

“Do you still have that message?” Maris asked.

“I have a screenshot.”

“Do not send it casually. Preserve the device. Do not alter files. Do not forward to Ms. Ashby. Do not upload to a personal cloud now. We will discuss chain of custody after you obtain counsel.”

Sabine made a small sound that might have been a laugh. “I don’t have counsel.”

“We can provide names of independent attorneys and witness-support resources,” Maris said. “They will not be Bellamy-controlled. They will not be Aveline-controlled. You can choose none of them.”

“If I testify, I lose my job.”

Isolde looked at the stale employment page on her phone.

“Are you still employed by Armitage?” I asked.

Sabine did not answer for 3 seconds. “Technically.”

“Technically is a word men use when they are moving the floor.”

Her breath caught.

“They moved me off executive operations this morning. Compliance review. No explanation. My badge still works on 2 floors. My email works. My manager said to stay available and not communicate externally about ongoing family litigation. Then I got the ownership letter blast because my old distribution tag was still active.”

“That is how you saw it?”

“Yes.”

“And that is why you contacted me?”

“No.” Her voice thinned. “I contacted you because the letter said your signature style belonged to them.”

For a moment, none of us spoke.

“I processed something I did not understand,” Sabine said. “I am responsible for that. But I know what a signature is. I know what it means when someone starts claiming the style of it. That is not normal legal protection. That is a warning to every woman in the building who ever signed something because a powerful man said she knew.”

Noa hiccuped again. Sabine went silent. When she spoke, the fear was back. “I will not testify unless I have protection. Real protection. Employment, retaliation, school pickup, housing. I am not asking you to save me, Ms. Ashby. I am asking you not to use me and leave me where he can reach.”

I looked at Maris, then at Isolde, then at my daughter, whose entire legal life had been a fight against adults who called reaching care.

“We will not use you without a process,” I said. “And I will not call you brave so I can spend you faster.”

ManoBook – Read Novels & books

Sabine was quiet long enough that I thought the call had dropped. Then she said, “Mr. Farrow named the route. Not Mr. Armitage in writing-

Farrow.”

Maris’s pen stopped. “What route?”

“Signature authority. Counterpart processing. Sponsor-adjacent upload. He wrote the words. I have the message.”

Outside the safe placement, somewhere far enough away not to locate us, a siren passed and faded. Sabine whispered the next sentence.

“Dario’s lawyer named the route.”

End of chapter

!

ManoBook – Read Novels & books

The wife isn't me

Chapter 94

Bennett did not let the word witness become a synonym for useful. That was the first discipline of the afternoon. The second was staying out of Aveline’s room.

She had already given permission for Bellamy’s witness-support administrator to coordinate independent counsel options for Sabine Chd. She had not given Bennett permission to turn a frightened assistant into a Bellamy project, a private rescue, or a romantic offering laid at the feet of a woman who had slept in 43-minute pieces since giving birth.

So Bennett sat in the smaller legal operations room at Bellamy, 2 floors below his own office, with the blinds half-open and the door propped. Reina Sol sat across from him with 3 lists: attorneys who handled employee retaliation and whistleblower intake; emergency practical support organizations Bellamy had funded before, none of which reported case details back to Bellamy; and everything they were not allowed to do

Bennett preferred the third list. It kept the room honest. He had learned to distrust generosity without walls.

At 23, he had thought speed was the same as goodness. A woman said she needed out, an infant cried in a hallway, and Bennett had moved before the lawyers, before the housing director, before anyone could tell him that help without a record could later be described as possession. Years after, when the civil claims settled and the old articles flattened everyone involved into appetite, interference, rescue, scandal, he had built rules with the patience of a man trying to make his younger self less dangerous.

Sabine Cho would not become an apology to that younger self. She would become a person with counsel, if she chose it.

“No direct payment to Ms. Cho,” Reina read. “No employment offer. No testimony-conditioned housing. No school-route involvement unless requested through her own counsel and handled by a third-party provider. No contact with her employer. No contact with Armitage. No calls to Aveline unless Aveline requests an update. No promises about court protection.”

“Add no public statement,” Bennett said. Reina wrote it down.

Len Caro, Bellamy’s contracts attorney, made a soft sound from the speakerphone. “You are aware the public-statement restraint will become harder if Armitage retaliates first.”

“Then we document why restraint mattered before they forced the issue.”

“That sounds like you expect them to force it.”

Bennett looked at the muted city behind the glass. He had spent years learning the difference between help and control after learning it too late at 23. Public records had not kept nuance. They had kept a headline, a settlement, and a version of him that sounded like a rich son carrying a woman and infant out of trouble because he liked the shape of heroism.

The private truth had been messier. All private truths were. That was why process mattered.

“Dario Armitage just told Aveline her signature style belongs to his company,” Bennett said. “I expect him to punish the person who made that sentence more dangerous to him.”

Reina’s pen paused. She had seen enough donor rooms not to argue.

At 2:10 PM, the independent witness counsel list went to Maris, not Sabine. Maris forwarded it with her own boundary note and 2 non-Bellamy community options added.

At 2:22, Aveline’s name lit Bennett’s phone. He did not answer on the first ring. That was not a game – it was the rule he had made for himself after realizing how quickly concern could become appetite. Aveline did not need a man lunging toward every sound she made.

Spent 570 Bonus on 19 chapters

–

He answered on the second. “I’m here.”

There was a brief silence, then a small newborn sound behind her.

“Noa is angry at air,” Aveline said.

“Air often deserves it.”

Aveline exhaled – not quite a laugh, close enough to make Bennett’s chest hurt and make him put both feet flat on the floor. Do not move toward warmth like a man collecting it. Let it stand.

“Maris sent the counsel list,” Aveline said. “Thank you for keeping it separate.”

“Reina built most of it.”

“I know.”

Good. Aveline heard the correction.

“Sabine says she can speak to one of the employment attorneys at 3:00,” Aveline continued. “She asked whether Bellamy will know what she says.”

“No.”

“That was your answer?”

“That is the answer. Her attorney can decide what, if anything, reaches your team.”

Noa made a sharper sound. Aveline breathed in, the kind of inhale that meant pain had arrived before patience.

“Do you need to go?” Bennett asked.

“Yes. But I called for 1 more thing.”

“Tell me.”

“If she does testify, don’t let people talk about her as if she becomes clean because she helps me.”

Bennett closed his eyes. There were moments when Aveline’s precision felt less like speech than a blade laid gently on the table.

He could picture her without trying to – not the safe placement (he did not know the address and did not want to know it; the order had made ignorance a form of care, and he kept it), but the narrow working setup she had described through Reina: rented desk, baby log, water bottle, printed pages kept away from Noa’s blanket. Aveline with milk on her shirt and a forged signature on the screen, asking that a compromised witness not be scrubbed clean simply because the truth now pointed in the right direction.

No donor room had ever taught him ethics that exact.

“I won’t.”

“She processed a forged document. She also got frightened. Both can be true.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want a saint. I want a record.”

“Then we protect the record and the person separately.”

– Read Book & Story

AO

ESCA

Noa’s cry rose. Aveline said, “I have to change her.”

“There is soup outside your door,” Bennett said, and then regretted the phrasing. “Correction. Nina has soup available through the placement staff if you choose to accept it. No one from Bellamy is at your door.”

This time, Aveline did laugh-small and exhausted and gone quickly. “Thank you for correcting yourself.”

“It needed correction.”

“Yes.”

The call ended. Bennett held the silent phone for 2 seconds too long, then set it facedown.

Reina watched him with an expression that contained nothing he could fire.

“Don’t,” he said.

“I said nothing.”

“That was the problem.”

Len Caro cleared his throat through the speaker. “I remain on the call and deeply uninterested in whatever that was.”

“Good,” Bennett said. “Stay that way.”

At 3:17, Sabine retained independent counsel. At 3:31, her attorney, Miri Kessler, sent a preservation notice to Armitage Group regarding the document-management queue,

Farrow communications, executive-operations instructions, badge access, personnel status, and retaliation risk.

The notice was narrow and cold. That was its strength. It did not call Sabine brave. It did not call Armitage monstrous. It requested preservation of employment status records, communications containing the phrases authority cleared and process as complete, document queue logs, badge activation and deactivation times, and any directive restricting Sabine's external communication after the contested addendum became active.

Bennett read it once and felt some part of him unclench. Good counsel could make fear legible without making it decorative.

–

At 3:36, Armitage Group disabled Sabine Cho's email. At 3:42, her badge stopped working. At 3:49, a clip appeared online – not on an official Armitage channel (that would have been too crude). It surfaced first on an anonymous business-gossip account, then jumped to CityGlass with a caption that had already decided the moral.

Armitage Group cleans house after document leak.

The video was 38 seconds long, taken from the side of a polished lobby or lift bank. The angle was tilted, the audio uneven. Sabine stood near security with a cardboard document box in her arms, her face turned partly away, hair pulled back too tight. An Armitage badge still hung at her waist, useless now.

Dario stood 6 feet from her – no jacket, sleeves buttoned, calm in the way men practiced before mirrors and later called temperament.

Bennett turned the volume up. Dario's voice came through low but clear.

"You were trusted with family-sensitive materials, Ms. Cho."

Sabine said something too quiet for the phone to catch. Dario did not move closer, and that made it worse.

"You confused access with authority," he said. "That is a serious failure."

Bennett went still. Reina whispered, "He knows someone is recording."

– Read Book & Story

Of course he knew, Dario's eyes flicked once toward the camera before he continued. "Armitage Group cannot retain employees who mishandle confidential documents and then seek relevance through litigation."

Sabine's mouth tightened. She did not cry. Security took the badge from her waist. The clip ended with Dario turning away before the elevator doors closed, as if her removal had been a housekeeping matter completed between meetings.

For 4 seconds, the room did not speak. Then Len Caro said, "That was unwise."

Reina was already typing.

"Public retaliation, defamation risk, witness intimidation optics, document-preservation spoliation concern if they cut access after notice.

"Do not call it witness intimidation in a statement," Bennett said.

"We are making no statement."

"Internally either. Counsel language."

His voice was even. It needed to be. Anger made men like Dario useful to themselves, and Bennett had no intention of joining him there.

He watched the clip again without sound. Sabine's box. Dario's distance. Security taking the badge. The small public theater of making a woman carry her own disgrace while the man who benefited from her obedience corrected the room's understanding of loyalty.

Bennett's phone lit again. Not Aveline – Maris. He answered on speaker.

"We saw it," she said.

"So did we."

"Aveline is feeding Noa. I am not sending the clip to her until the baby is settled unless she asks."

"Good."

"Sabine's counsel wants emergency anti-retaliation relief and preservation. She is also worried about school pickup."

"Use the third-party provider list. No Bellamy-branded vehicle. No Bellamy staff. No address to us."

Reina wrote as he spoke.

"Costs?" Maris asked.

“Through the independent witness-support fund if eligible. If not, I will donate generally to the provider tomorrow with no case notation.”

Maris was silent for a beat.

“You understand Dario will say this proves you are running witnesses.”

“Then the paperwork should prove I am not.”

“It will.”

The call ended.

At 4:05, CityGlass reposted the clip with a slower caption.

Dario Armitage fires assistant linked to contested signature claim. Concerned father or retaliation?

– Read Book & Story

AO

KEKA

Bennett did not like gossip accounts. He liked even less that sometimes a crude public lens could show what legal language took 40 pages to approach.

His phone lit a third time. Aveline. This time he answered on the first ring because he had already failed the fiction that delay could make him less concerned.

“Did you see it?” she asked. Noa fussed softly in the background.

“Yes.”

“Do not tell me he looked angry.”

“He didn’t.”

“Good.”

Bennett waited. Aveline said, “Anger would have made him look human.”

The line stayed open between them. Bennett looked at the frozen image on Reina’s screen: Dario’s calm face, Sabine’s box, the elevator doors bright behind them.

“The clip is online,” Aveline said.

“Yes.”

“Then he did not just fire her.”

Bennett understood at once. “He made an example.”

“No,” Aveline said, voice flat and exact. “He made an invitation for every frightened employee to stay silent.”

Across the table, Reina turned her screen. The clip had crossed 100,000 views, and it was still climbing.

– End of chapter-

AQ

– Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 95

“He fired her like a man returning a glass with lipstick on it.”

Isolde said it from the foot of the narrow bed, where she had been folding Noa’s clean clothes into piles so small they looked like proof of a. clerical error. Newborn socks should not have been real objects. They were too small to be responsible for staying on a foot.

On the laptop screen, Dario turned away from Sabine Cho for the 7th time. I had watched the clip 6 times too many. The first viewing had been evidence. The second had been strategy. The third had been the old private sickness of recognizing his face from too many angles. After that, it became harm.

I paused the video with Dario’s eyes half-turned toward the person filming. “He knew,” I said.

“Of course he knew.”

“No. Not just that someone was filming. He knew what kind of man he needed to look like.”

Isolde set a white onesie in the wrong pile, noticed, and moved it.

Noa slept beside me, milk-drunk and warm, one cheek pressed against my shirt. Her temperature had held. Her last diaper had been wet. My pad needed changing, but I had 5

minutes before discomfort became stupidity. Five minutes was enough to watch the internet decide whether Dario's calm was fatherly discipline or retaliation. It was choosing faster than I expected.

CityGlass comments were not justice. I knew that. Public attention had no conscience – it could cradle a woman at 11:00 and throw her into traffic by noon if the caption changed.

Still, the clip did something the filings could not do alone. It made Dario visible in motion- not as a father asking for a path to his newborn, not as a husband protecting family privacy, not as a man wounded by Bellamy interference, but as an employer standing 6 feet from a frightened woman with a box and teaching everyone watching what happened when his documents started talking.

It also took away one of his favorite masks. Concerned father had been useful to him. It softened his filings. It made requests for portal access sound like worry and provider contact sound like vigilance. It let strangers imagine a man pacing outside a nursery instead of a man writing ownership claims over the mother of a 5-day-old child.

The lobby clip did not show a father. It showed management. Dario had always looked his cruelest when he believed he was being reasonable.

Maris had told me not to comment. Priya had told me not to comment. Anika had said I could write down everything I wanted to comment and then feed the paper to Isolde, who would enjoy destroying it.

I did not comment. I logged the clip.

4:11 PM, CityGlass repost, 100,000 views. 4:19 PM, caption edited from document leak to contested signature claim. 4:26 PM, comments include retaliation, why fire her in lobby, family-sensitive materials sounds like cover, is this the same baby records case. 4:31 PM, anonymous account posts slowed clip showing Dario look toward camera before speaking.

My handwriting wavered on the last line.

Noa moved. I stopped being a person with an internet log and became a surface for her comfort. She pushed her face against my chest, mouth searching even though she had fed 22 minutes earlier.

"Cluster feeding?" Isolde asked.

– Read Book & Story

AQ

"Or she has decided law is boring and wants a snack."

“Advanced child.”

I shifted her carefully. My body protested the movement with a low, mean pull through my pelvis. I breathed out before the pain climbed my voice. Isolde saw anyway.

“Water.”

“I have water.”

“You have decorative water. Drinkable water is the one you actually lift.”

She handed me the bottle and waited until I drank. This was what care had become at its best: annoying, specific, and not interested in being admired.

The laptop chimed. I looked despite myself.

Maris had forwarded a new notice from Sabine’s counsel. Emergency anti-retaliation letter filed. Preservation demanded. School pickup handled through independent provider with no Bellamy routing.

Good.

Then another alert.

Not legal.

A public post from Celine Armitage’s verified account.

For a second, I thought she had finally made the mistake of mentioning Sabine. She had not. Celine was better than that. Her silence around Sabine was the point.

If Dario’s problem was that the public could see the punishment, Celine’s solution was to move the camera- not to a denial, not to a defense, but to chandeliers, mothers, children, donor pledges, a room full of women who would rather discuss infant blankets than ask why an assistant had been escorted out after contacting counsel. The old world did not always answer accusation. Sometimes it changed the flowers.

The image was not a baby this time. It was a close crop of cream card stock, pale green ribbon, and a line of calligraphy so refined it looked incapable of lying.

THE ARMITAGE FOUNDATION AND VEY FAMILY OFFICE REQUEST THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE

I scrolled.

The caption was soft enough to bruise.

In a season when private pain has too often been made public, we return our attention to what matters: mothers, children, dignity, and care. This year’s Mothers’ Relief Gala will expand emergency support for infants and postpartum families while honoring the quiet labor of women who protect children from spectacle.

I read it twice. On the third pass, my body understood before my mind let it. Mothers. Children. Dignity. Protect children from spectacle.

Celine had not answered the firing clip by defending Dario. She had built a room where any woman who challenged the family could be cast as the spectacle and any wife at the podium could become dignity itself.

“Is she serious?” Isolde asked.

– Read Book & Story

A

KIRA

“She’s strategic.”

“That is the ugliest synonym.”

The post had 9,000 likes in 6 minutes. The comments were already splitting. Some praised Celine for rising above. Some asked whether Sabine Cho would be invited. Some asked whether Aveline Ashby’s daughter counted as a child deserving dignity. Some, carefully worded and likely expensive, said legal disputes should not distract from real mothers doing real work.

One account posted a photo from the old St. Orla donor corridor, cropped so only the flower arrangements and a slice of green silk remained. No one had to write Celine’s name under it. No one had to write mine.

That was how public memory worked when enough money trained it. A room became a symbol. A dress became virtue. A woman running from a corridor became disruption unless she returned with documents and made everyone look at the door.

Real mothers. I looked down at Noa. She had fallen asleep again with her mouth open, drunk on milk she had pulled from my aching body while Celine’s foundation used motherhood as a table arrangement.

The insult should have felt abstract. It did not. My daughter smelled like warm skin and milk. My shirt was damp. My abdomen hurt. There was dried blood in the bathroom trash from a body still repairing the place where she had entered the world.

Real motherhood was not a ribbon or a caption or a wife standing beneath chandeliers while donors tried to forget whose signature had been forged. It was 4:43 PM and a baby asleep against the body the court had needed to protect from her father.

My phone rang. Bennett. I let it ring twice because I needed to decide whether I wanted his voice or wanted the version of myself who could handle everything without wanting. Wanting won by a narrow margin.

“I saw Celine’s post,” he said. No greeting. Good.

“Does Bellamy have a table?”

“Historically, yes. This year, I expect the invitation to be complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

“Publicly polite, privately sharpened.”

Noa stirred at the sound of his voice, not because she knew him, because newborns objected to all adult timing.

“They want a motherhood room where I am either absent or grateful to stand near the wall.”

“Likely.”

“Do you think I should go?”

There was a pause-not long, long enough for him to choose not to choose for me.

“I think you should not decide while feeding a newborn, bleeding, and watching a clip of Dario retaliating against a witness.”

My throat tightened. “That was not an answer.”

“It was the answer I have.”

“And if I ask whether you want me there?”

His breath changed. On the bed, Isolde became aggressively interested in a pair of socks.

Bennett said, “What I want is not the first question.”

– Read Book & Story

“I know.”

“But I would rather stand in any room where they try to arrange you.”

Warmth moved through me before I could stop it. Dangerous warmth – not because Bennett had made it dangerous, but because Dario had taught my body that tenderness often arrived with a hook hidden behind it.

Bennett added, quieter, “Only if you choose the room.”

There it was – the wall around the warmth. I could breathe inside that.

I looked at Noa’s hand against my shirt.

Her fingers opened and closed against nothing. She had no idea that rooms could be arranged to make a woman smaller. She knew warmth, hunger, fabric, the beat under my skin. She knew that when she cried, I moved, even if moving hurt.

Maybe that was why the gala made me angrier than the letter for one clean second-it borrowed the language of the body while ignoring the body.

Bennett waited through my silence. He did not fill it with strategy. That was becoming a problem for my heart.

No kiss, my mind said, absurdly, because the thought of his hand near mine had become a hallway I was not ready to walk down. He had said nothing about kissing. That made the thought mine. I let it pass without punishing myself for having it.

“I need to change her,” I said.

“Then go.”

“That is bossy.”

“It is newborn triage.”

“Still bossy.”

“I accept the correction.”

I ended the call before I could smile too long at a phone while my daughter slept damply against me and my enemy’s wife built a gala out of the word dignity.

At 5:08, a courier arrived at the legal clinic, not the safe placement. At 5:21, Maris scanned the outer envelope and sent it through the secure channel. No exact address, no route exposure.

Cream stock. Pale green ribbon. My name centered in black ink.

Ms. Aveline Ashby

For one foolish second, I thought the insult was that they had invited me. Then Maris uploaded the seating card tucked inside. The card did not call me mother, consultant, or guest. It called me Witness Attendee.

And beneath that, in smaller print: Placement to be assigned at check-in.

Celine had sent me an invitation.

– Read Book & Story

O

!

The wife isn't me

Chapter 96

Celine chose the ribbon before she chose the guest list. That was not vanity – it was order. Ribbon set tone before words had to defend! themselves. Pale green suggested calm, maternity, renewal, old money with clean hands. White would look bridal, gold too much like victory. pink would invite mockery from women who thought softness made them immune to cruelty. Green was correct.

Celine held 2 samples against the cream invitation stock while the event director waited on the other side of the long table.

“This one,” she said.

The event director, Amara Lint, nodded as if the choice had moral weight. Perhaps it did. Every object did, now that Aveline Ashby had taught the public to read objects like evidence-envelopes, signatures, hospital forms, baby socks.

Celine released the ribbon and looked at the seating chart projected on the wall.

The Mothers’ Relief Gala had existed for 11 years without becoming a battlefield. It raised money, photographed donors, let women in expensive dresses speak softly about infants they did not have to wake for at 3:00 AM, and sent enough money to emergency programs to keep the photographs from feeling entirely obscene. This year, it would do more. It had to.

The firing clip had reached too far. Dario had said very little in it, and that should have helped him; public men survived by saying little while other people guessed elegance into

the gaps. But Sabine Cho's box had looked cheap, and that was the problem. Not the firing – employees could be dismissed, assistants could misunderstand, documents could be mishandled, lawyers could explain. The box had looked cheap, and Dario had looked untouched by it.

Public sympathy loved an object it could understand. Celine knew that better than most people alive. Her newborn son's socked foot had softened the world for 9 hours before questions about Aveline and Noa had eaten through the caption. She had not posted him again. She was not a monster.

She checked the special-care update every 40 minutes even when the nurses told her they would call if something changed. He was stable. Small. Improving by careful measures that did not belong in donor captions. Nico had drawn another picture for his brother that morning, 4 stick people under a square sun, and Celine had put it in a folder instead of online.

The folder sat in her bag now. She had carried it from the hospital without meaning to. A yellow sun, blue roof, 4 bodies in a row. Nico had made Dario the tallest and Celine the one holding the baby. He had drawn himself with 6. fingers on one hand and then laughed because "extra fingers mean extra holding."

Celine had laughed too. Then she had gone to a planning table and discussed whether another woman's newborn made the gala seating legally sensitive. Children were not the problem. Adults kept making them into doors.

"Mrs. Armitage?" Amara asked.

Celine looked up. "Sorry?"

"The north sponsor row. We need to confirm whether Bellamy Ventures remains listed."

There it was. Bellary. Bennett's name had become a draft under every closed door.

"Bellamy Ventures has historically supported the clinic grant," Celine said.

"Yes, but after Mr. Bellamy's statement and the current litigation, some sponsors may object to placement."

– Read Book & Story

"Sponsors object to many things. That is why they require seating

Amara smiled cautiously. Celine did not return it.

"Keep Bellamy listed if they do not withdraw. Removing them makes us look afraid."

“And if Mr. Bellamy attends?”

The question was careful. Everyone had learned careful around Bennett Bellamy since he chose a woman with no title over denars who had spent years enjoying his useful conscience.

“Then he attends,” Celine said. “We do not bar benefactors from an event about dignity.”

The word tasted clean. That was why she used it. Dignity was not innocence – it was posture.

In another life, perhaps, Celine might have liked Aveline Ashby. Not loved, not trusted- liked in the way one woman respected another’s ye for the weak point in a room. Aveline noticed doors, forms, signatures, the angle of a chair. She had turned domestic humiliation into indexed proof with the discipline of someone who had not been trained by committee but should have been. That made her dangerous. It did not make her right to take Celine’s place.

Celine’s phone lit on the table.

Father

She answered because not answering Mathias Vey only moved the conversation from phone to doorway.

“We are still in planning,” she said.

“Then plan faster.”

No greeting. Mathias considered greetings decorative unless donors were present. Amara began gathering ribbon samples with the speed of a woman who knew when to become furniture. Celine turned slightly away.

“The invitations are going out tonight.”

“Good. Donors need a room that is not about forms.”

Forms. He said the word as if paper had developed indecent ambitions.

“The gala is about mothers and children.”

“No,” Mathias said. “The gala is about making donors forget the forms long enough to remember who built the hospitals.”

Celine’s jaw tightened. On the wall, the seating chart glowed with names arranged by wealth, usefulness, liability, and spite. The central tables had names that would

photograph well from the balcony: neonatal patrons, foundation wives, the pediatric trust chair whose emails had become suddenly cautious after the firing clip. The outer tables held junior donors, committee volunteers, and women useful enough to invite but not useful enough to flatter. Rooms told the truth if one knew how to read distance

“Forgetting is not the same as believing.”

“Belief is inefficient. Repetition is better.”

There he was – her father, the clean edge behind every soft family sentence she had ever learned to say.

“We repeat dignity, children, privacy, stability, care,” Mathias continued. “We do not repeat forged signature, intended-parent page, family continuity review, or witness retaliation. If reporters ask, you say the foundation remains focused on infants and mothers, not contested litigation narratives.”

– Read Book & Story

A

“Aveline is a mother.”

The words left Celine before she had polished them. Silence answered. Amara found great interest in the ribbon box

Mathias said, “That is exactly why she is dangerous.”

Celine looked at the seating chart until the names blurred. She had expected him to deny it – to call Aveline unstable, opportunistic confused, one of the polished dismissals that made the world easier to arrange. He did not. Mathias was cruel enough to be accurate when accuracy served him.

“You cannot win by pretending she has no child,” he said. “The public has seen too much. You win by making her motherhood look disorderly adversarial, unsafe for rooms where actual relief work occurs. You remain composed. She becomes conflict.”

“Her baby is 5 days old.”

“Then she should be at home.”

Celine closed her eyes. For one second, she saw not Aveline but herself in the special-care chair, one hand through the opening of the incubator, touching her son’s foot with 1 finger because anything more felt too large for him. She knew what it meant to be told a baby made public life impossible. She also knew what it meant to use that knowledge anyway.

“Do you want her invited or excluded?” she asked.

“Invited.”

“Why?”

“Exclusion makes her sympathetic. Attendance lets the room decide whether she belongs.”

The room. Always the room. Rooms had decided Celine’s life since she was 22-donor rooms, board rooms, wedding rooms, hospital rooms where nurses addressed her as Mrs. Armitage before they addressed her as mother. She had learned to enter them correctly because incorrect women were removed, pitied, or purchased. Aveline had entered incorrectly and somehow made the room look guilty. That was not forgivable.

“Bennett will come if she does,” Celine said.

“Then seat him like a donor, not a rescuer.”

“He will not accept distance if he thinks she is being staged.”

“You overestimate how much a man can do in a room where every camera sees him touching another man’s child’s mother.”

Celine’s fingers tightened around the phone. “Do not bring Noa into that phrasing.”

Mathias paused. “Sentiment makes you imprecise.”

“No. It makes me aware that there are children in this.”

“Awareness is useful only if it does not stop you.”

The line clicked with another incoming call on his end. He did not take it. That was his version of tenderness.

“Celine,” he said. “Your public legitimacy is not self-renewing. Dario damaged the employment optics today. Farrow may have exposure. The signature claim is no longer simply leverage if the assistant speaks cleanly. Donors must leave your gala with 1 picture in their heads: you at the center of maternal relief, composed, lawful, generous. Not Aveline Ashby with a forged-page narrative.”

Farrow may have exposure. Celine held that phrase. She had known Gideon Farrow was involved in the family-risk language. Everyone

– Read Book & Story involved with Dario’s containment strategy had used lawyers as insulation. But exposure sounded different now that Sabine Cho had he and a box.

“If Farrow becomes a problem?” she asked.

“Farrow is paid to be a problem at a professional distance.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only answer you need before the gala.”

Celine looked at Amara. The event director’s face was smooth, but no one in the room had truly missed the shape of the call. Wealth trained employees to hear without appearing to listen. That, too, was a kind of witness.

“Fine,” Celine said. “Aveline attends as a witness attendee, not an honored mother.”

“Language?”

“Neutral.”

“Placement?”

Celine turned back to the seating chart. The grand hall had 3 entrances – main doors beneath the donor arch, service doors behind the staging screens, and a side exit near the coat alcove, discreet enough for staff, visible enough for photographers if someone paused there too long.

At St. Orla, Aveline had fled through a quieter corridor while lilies and disinfectant clung to the air. Celine remembered the first glimpse of her that day: pale, pregnant, holding an ultrasound envelope like the room had cut her open and expected her not to bleed where donors could see. For a moment, memory did something inconvenient – it made Aveline human before it made her rival.

Celine put the ribbon sample down. “Seat her near the side exit,” she said.

Amara looked up too quickly. “For security?”

“For comfort,” Celine said. The lie came out perfectly.

Mathias approved with silence. Celine moved Aveline Ashby’s placeholder on the seating chart, dragging it away from the central maternal- relief tables, away from the foundation mothers, away from the donors who might confuse scandal with courage if the lighting was kind.

For a moment, the cursor hovered. It would have been easy to place Aveline nowhere – easier, perhaps, to let staff invent a capacity issue of a security review. But absence had become dangerous. A woman kept off a mother-and-child gala while her own baby was at the center of contested records would become a cleaner story than Celine could afford.

No. Aveline had to be present and misframed. Near the exit, Aveline could be photographed as peripheral if she stayed, ungrateful if she left, disruptive if she refused. It was not cruelty. It was choreography

Celine released the cursor. “Put Aveline Ashby near the exit,” she said. “Close enough to be seen leaving”

Lust of chapter

– Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 97

EYEA

Chapter 97 – Not A Guest

“Witness attendee,” the woman at check-in read from the card, and then she looked at me as if the words had made me smaller.

I did not correct her. The cream card stock sat between us on the registration table, tucked into a linen tray beside donor badges, table assignments, and envelopes too thick to be ordinary paper. My name had been printed in the same font as everyone else’s. That was where the courtesy ended.

AVELINE ASHBY – WITNESS ATTENDEE

No title. No table sponsor. No program role. No mother.

The gala staffer wore a headset and a smile trained for women who asked for better seats, Behind her, the grand hall glittered with winter flowers, pale green ribbon, and a donor wall that had turned infant relief into calligraphy. Cameras waited at the main arch, and servers moved like they had been taught not to disturb wealth in its natural habitat.

My body wanted none of it. Five days postpartum meant my dress had been chosen by what could hide a pad line and what did not press against my abdomen. My milk had come in hard that afternoon, hot and mean, and I had packed extra nursing pads into Isolde’s clutch because my own hands already carried the witness folder. My stitches pulled when I stood too long, and my lower back ached from feeding Noa in a chair that was not built for a recovering body.

Noa was not here, and that was the only fact I let comfort me. She was behind protected placement rules, a feeding plan, a temperature log, and 2 adults whose names did not

appear on any guest list. The gala had my body for 80 minutes, with a hard exit at 7:20 if my breasts, my bleeding, or my daughter's next feed demanded it.

The car-seat limit had been written into the plan in black ink because postpartum life had become a list of limits rich rooms did not believe in. Nga was too new for anyone's optics-not a symbol to be carried beneath chandeliers, but a 5-day-old infant whose last pediatric note still made my chest tighten if I read it too quickly.

Isolde stood to my left in a black suit and silver earrings sharp enough to count as weapons if the court ever became imaginative. A Bellamy lawyer named Corinne Sato stood 5 feet behind us-not hovering, not touching, close enough to hear placement language and far enough not to make me look escorted.

Bennett was not beside me. I knew he was in the building because Bellamy's table had not withdrawn, and because when we arrived, the press line had shifted with the subtle hunger of people recognizing a man who had recently made expensive donors angry. He had not met me at the car, had not offered his arm. He had texted one sentence through counsel before I left the safe placement.

North hall has 2 exits, press on main arch, quiet room available if you choose it.

Not I will be there. Not Let me handle it. Information. Choice. I hated how much that steadied me.

The staffer lifted a small envelope. "Your assigned placement is table 18."

Isolde's gaze cut toward the floor plan before mine did. Table 18 sat beside the side exit, 3 steps from the coat alcove, half-hidden behind a standing arrangement of white lilies and pale green branches. From the balcony camera, it would look like a woman seated near the door because she expected to leave.

The chair assigned to me had its back to most of the room. I noticed that before I noticed the table number. My body noticed exits; my mind noticed angles. Dario's world had taught me both and then seemed offended when I used the lessons against him. From the main press arch, it would look like I had been allowed inside but not welcomed. From Celine's podium, it would look like obedience. The room had moved me before my feet did.

– Read Book & Story

A

RITA

"No," I said.

The staffer's smile held for half a second too long. "I'm sorry?"

“I am not sitting there.”

People around us heard. Of course they did. Rooms like this were built from overhearing.

“Ms. Ashby,” the staffer said, lowering her voice into institutional velvet, “placement was arranged for guest comfort and security.”

“I am not a guest.”

Her fingers tightened around the envelope.

I set my witness folder on the registration table and opened it just enough for the top page to show. It was not evidence for her – it was evidence of myself. Court cover sheet. Counsel routing. The invitation forwarded through legal channels. Witness Attendee highlighted by Priya in yellow so no one could pretend I had invented the insult after arrival.

“This is a legal-witness attendance,” I said. “I am here because your foundation and the family office made motherhood the public subject while records, signature, and access issues remain active. If you need to document that I refused staged side-exit seating, document it accurately.”

The woman’s eyes flicked to Corinne. Corinne did not move. That was useful. If counsel lunged first, I became managed. If counsel stood there and let me speak, I remained the person refusing the chair.

“We can find a member of the committee,” the staffer said.

“Good.”

–

not dramatically, not visibly enough for a camera, but enough for me to feel the weakness climb I closed the folder. My hand shook once from my wrist into my shoulder. I had slept 2 hours in pieces. My body had not agreed to become a legal instrument. It wanted water, mesh underwear, and the warm weight of Noa’s cheek against my chest. Instead, I stood beneath a donor arch while a room full of people decided whether my refusal made me brave or unstable.

Isolde leaned close without touching me. “Breathe lower.”

“I am.”

“You’re breathing like a woman about to staple someone to the wall.”

“That would require staples. I came underprepared.”

Her mouth twitched. The laugh almost got out of me. Almost.

Celine entered the room through the central sponsor doors at 6:41. She wore pale green – of course she did. Her dress was soft at the shoulders, careful at the waist, a public body pretending it had not recently given birth to a premature child. I knew enough now not to hate her for looking composed. Bodies were private wars. The crime was not that she looked beautiful while hurting-it was that she had built a room to make my hurt look indecent.

Dario entered 12 seconds after her. That was the part the room noticed before it pretended not to. Celine at the center. Dario behind her, not touching, not distant, his wedding ring visible when he adjusted his cuff. Husband. Father. Benefactor. Man whose former assistant had been fired into a viral clip less than 24 hours earlier.

His eyes found me before the cameras did. I felt the old reflex in my skin not love, worse: recognition. My body knew the angle of his attention. It knew the way he could cross a room without seeming hurried, the way he could make a private conversation feel inevitable because he had decided public air belonged to him.

– Read Book & Story

–

For months, I had mistaken that certainty for safety. Now it felt like a hand on the back of my neck.

A committee woman arrived with a donor smile and no name badge large enough to matter. She began with “Ms. Ashby, we understand this has been an emotional period,” which told me everything I needed about the room’s script.

Her eyes went to my stomach, not my face. It was quick, but quick did not make it harmless. People looked at postpartum bodies as if birth made them public property twice: first as vessels, then as evidence of whether they were recovering correctly. I pulled the witness folder higher, not to hide myself, but to put paper between her gaze and the place my body was still healing.

“No,” I said. She stopped.

“You do not understand my emotions, and you are not seating me by the side exit for comfort.”

Someone’s camera clicked. Good. Let it.

The committee woman’s face tightened. “We are trying to avoid disruption.”

“Then stop arranging one.”

Isolde made a soft sound that might have been admiration and might have been warning.

My pad shifted. A fresh cramp wrapped low through my abdomen, an animal bite of pain that made the donor wall blur for a second. I put 2 fingers on the registration table until the room came back into edges.

The committee woman saw. Her expression changed. There it was

“Perhaps the quiet area would be more appropriate,” she said.

–

the opening. Concern as a leash.

“The quiet area by the coat alcove?”

She did not answer fast enough.

“No,” I said again. This time I picked up the witness folder and turned away from the seating chart.

I walked past table 18. Not far – my body would not forgive drama, and I was done giving rooms the gift of my collapse. I stopped beside the central press sightline, near a standing cocktail table with no chair and no place card. From there, any camera pointed at the podium would have to admit I existed. Not at the center. I did not need the center: I needed visibility without surrendering my back to a staged exit.

Corinne followed to the legal distance. Isolde came to my side. The gala inhaled around us.

Celine’s smile did not move. Dario’s did, only slightly. He left Celine near the sponsor row and crossed toward me with the careful expression of a man approaching someone fragile in public. I had seen him wear that face for doctors, for court staff, for building security the night he told them I was upset and pregnant and needed help calming down.

He stopped 4 feet away. Close enough to lower his voice, far enough that cameras would see restraint.

“Aveline,” he said. “This is unnecessary.”

“Then you should have avoided it.”

His gaze dropped to the folder in my hand, then to my dress, then back to my face

–

a public inventory disguised as concern.

“You look exhausted.”

“I gave birth 5 days ago.”

The words landed harder than I expected. Several people looked away. Dario did not.

– Read Book & Story

“Then why are you standing in the middle of a gala?”

“Because your wife invited me as a witness and tried to seat me by the exit.”

His jaw changed once. There. Not guilt – calculation.

“You and I should not do this here,” he said.

“We are already doing this hère.”

“No. This is what your lawyers want. A public exchange. A scene.”

He turned slightly, opening the line of his body toward the coat alcove beyond table 18-the same quiet dark beyond flowers, the same invitation to step out of sight and call privacy mercy.

“Come talk to me for 2 minutes,” he said. “Not there. Just by the coats. No cameras. No lawyers.”

The room narrowed to the doorway behind him. Lilies. Shadow. An exit that did not feel like escape.

Dario lifted his hand, palm open, almost gentle. “Aveline,” he said, softer. “Please.”

And for one terrible second, the coat alcove looked exactly like the place where a room expected me to disappear.

– End of chapter-

AQ

– Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 98

“No cameras,” Dario said, as if that made the alcove clean. The offer hung between us beside the lilies.

I did not move. That was the first thing I gave myself-stillness, not the frozen kind, not the helpless kind, the kind where my feet remembered the floor was mine for as long as I kept them on it.

The coat alcove waited behind him with its green velvet rope and brass rack numbers, expensive shadows dressed as privacy. Staff had arranged the flower stand too close to the entrance. From the main hall, it made the alcove look like a service detail; from the inside, it would have hidden a face from the podium cameras. A rack of winter coats hung inside, dark wool and fur collars and sleeves folded over themselves. The tags were numbered in gold. Even the hiding places here had inventory.

I could see the little brass counter where staff would set a purse while pretending not to hear. I could see the curtain line where Dario would stand with his back half-turned to the room, making me choose between being rude enough to leave or polite enough to listen.

I had been polite too long. I knew that shape-not the walls, the choreography.

At St. Orla, there had been a quieter corridor off the donor hall, lilies and disinfectant, Dario’s hand at the edge of my elbow as if guiding was not the cousin of trapping. I had been pregnant and stunned and still trying to decide whether betrayal had a version that could be survived if he held me carefully enough.

Now I was postpartum, leaking through a nursing pad, standing with a witness folder in my hand while my daughter slept somewhere Dario was not allowed to know. The room had changed. The method had not.

“I said no,” I told him.

Dario lowered his hand – not because he accepted the answer, because people were watching.

“You used to be able to talk to me without lawyers,” he said.

It was a good line. Soft enough for donors, personal enough to bruise, false enough to be useful. It also carried a memory inside it, because Dario had not always sounded like court filings. He had once asked whether peppermint tea helped the nausea. He had once called from the paint store because there were 14 shades of cloud and he claimed I had made him afraid of choosing wrong. The old tenderness was why the line worked. He knew where to press because he had built some of the places that still hurt.

“I used to be able to talk to you because I didn’t know you were lying about having a wife.”

The woman nearest the flower stand went very still. Dario’s eyes cooled.

“Lower your voice.”

“No.”

His mouth tightened, then smoothed. I could almost see him take the anger apart and rebuild it into patience.

“This is what I mean,” he said. “Every conversation becomes a performance now.”

“You invited me into a room built for performance.”

“Celine invited you.”

– Read Book & Story

AQ

“Through counsel, as a witness attendee, with a side-exit seat.”

“For your comfort.”

I looked past him at the alcove.

“My comfort has never required hiding me beside coats.”

A flash popped somewhere near the arch. Dario glanced toward it – only once, enough. He knew exactly where the cameras/were. He always had. In the apartment, he had known where building cameras ended and private hallways began. At clinics, he had known which desk would say spouse and which form would say authorized support. At court, he knew how to make access sound like tenderness. Tonight he knew a camera could catch him asking and not catch what happened if I stepped out of sight.

He moved half a step closer. Corinne shifted behind me. I lifted 2 fingers without looking back. Wait. She did. That mattered. Dario noticed too.

“You’re letting Bellamy counsel direct whether you speak to the father of your child?”

“No. I am directing my counsel not to interrupt me.”

For the first time, his expression cracked. It was small- a hairline fracture. He had expected fear, or exhaustion, or maybe the old reflex of stepping toward him because

once, when he said my name that way, I thought the world narrowed because he loved me. I did not step.

My body wanted to sit down. That was the unfair part. Power did not arrive with a healed pelvis. Refusal did not stop milk from tightening under my ribs or blood from gathering where I stood too long. I could feel the warmth of it and hated the room for making me calculate whether a stain would become a headline before I could calculate whether my daughter had taken enough from the last feed.

I breathed through my nose. Dario's gaze dropped again.

"You are hurting yourself to make a point."

"I am standing."

"Five days after birth."

"You remember the date now."

The date had mattered when it could give him notice rights, when counsel could say newborn and urgent and paternal concern, when he wanted a court to imagine him pacing outside a door for news. It had not mattered when my body split open and I named our daughter without him.

That one landed. His face did not change enough for strangers to call it guilt. But I had known his face in kitchens, in bed, in the false safety of 3:00 AM when he rested his hand on my stomach and promised there would be a way through. I knew the tiny delay before he chose his next mask.

"I remember everything about her birth," he said.

"No, you remember what the court let you know."

"She is my daughter."

"She is Noa Ashby."

The name made him flinch in public. Good. Let the room see that too.

"Aveline," he said, voice low enough to become intimate only if I agreed to it, "we cannot keep doing this with strangers between us."

"We are doing this because you made strangers necessary."

– Read Book & Story

“I made mistakes.”

“No.” The word came out sharper than intended. I let it stay. “A mistake is a wrong turn. You built routes. You used doctors, lawyers, forms, door locks, donor rooms, private clinic language, and now a charity gala. Do not ask me to call architecture an accident.”

For one second, no one near us pretended not to listen. The string quartet at the far end of the room moved into something soft and expensive. It made the silence around us feel deliberate, as if the room had dimmed for the scene.

Dario leaned closer – not enough to touch, enough to make my body remember every time he had used closeness as proof.

“You are letting Bennett Bellamy turn you into a weapon against your own child’s family.”

There it was. Bennett. The name he could not leave alone.

“Bennett is not my child’s family.”

Dario’s eyes sharpened with satisfaction. He thought I had given him something. I had not.

“Neither is Celine,” I said.

The satisfaction died. “Careful.”

“With what? The truth?”

“With the way this looks.”

I almost laughed. It rose ugly and bright and stopped behind my teeth because laughing would hurt my abdomen. “That is your religion, isn’t it?”

“This is not clever.”

“No. It is exhausting.”

My voice changed on the last word. I heard it. So did he. His face softened instantly- too fast, too practiced.

“Then come out of the room,” he said. “Sit for 2 minutes. I can ask staff for water. We can talk like people.”

The alcove waited. He had changed the bait from privacy to care, and I felt the pull of it anyway- not toward him, toward the idea of being allowed to stop. My body wanted a chair so badly that for a second, the alcove became not a trap but a promise: darkness,

quiet, no donors, no camera, no committee woman waiting to call my refusal disruptive. That was why it was dangerous. The best traps borrowed something real.

“If I need water,” I said, “Isolde will get it.”

Dario’s gaze cut to her. Isolde smiled at him with no warmth at all.

“If I need a chair,” I continued, “I will choose one in public. If I need counsel, counsel is already here. If I need to leave, I will leave through a door I choose.”

“You are making enemies of everyone who tries to help you.”

“You are not helping me.”

“I am trying to keep this from becoming uglier.”

“Then stop.”

AO

– Read Book & Story

The simplicity of it seemed to offend him more than any accusation. For one second, Dario looked exactly as he had in the apartment hallway – when the chain lock held and I refused to open the door. Controlled. Injured. Dangerous because the locked door had made him feel humiliated, and humiliation was the one wound he always blamed on the person who survived him.

“You think public rooms make you safe,” he said.

My fingers tightened around the folder. There it was again—not a threat clean enough to quote, not a promise, a shape.

Corinne stepped forward now, only one step. “Mr. Armitage,” she said, “Ms. Ashby has declined private conversation.”

Dario did not look at her. He looked at me. “Is that what you want? Lawyers answering for you?”

“She didn’t answer for me.”

“Then answer.”

“I already did.”

My abdomen cramped again, low and hot. I did not bend. Pride was not always wise, but sometimes it was the only structure left between a woman and a room eager to misread her need as weakness.

“I will not enter the coat alcove with you,” I said. “I will not step out of camera view so you can call it privacy afterward. I will not talk without counsel about Noa, access, records, Celine, the signature addendum, Sabine Cho, Gideon Farrow, provider contact, portal access, or any route to my child’s information. If you want to speak, speak through counsel.”

Dario’s nostrils flared. For once, the list did what poetry could not – it made the room remember he had paperwork attached to every soft word. It made me remember too. Lists steadied me because they had edges. A list could not kiss my forehead and tell me soon, could not paint a nursery cloud and then turn the room into property. A list put each threat in its own square and denied him the romance of blur.

Behind him, a door opened – not the coat alcove door, the side exit. Cold air slid into the hall with the smell of wet pavement and street lamps.

Bennett stood with one hand on the door, his body angled away from me, not blocking, not entering the exchange, not looking at Dario first. He looked at the floor between me and the exit. Clear. Then he stepped aside.

End of chapter

– Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 99

Bennett did not say my name. That was why I could move. If he had called me, the room would have made a story of being summoned. If he had told Dario to step back, Dario would have made a story of being challenged. If he had crossed the distance, my refusal would have been folded into his body and carried out under someone else’s strength. He did none of it. He held the side door open and stepped aside.

Cold air crossed the polished floor. Behind me, donors pretended not to watch. In front of me, Dario stood between the coat alcove and the hall, his face arranged around restraint. Corinne was close enough to object if the law needed a voice. Isolde was close enough to catch me if my body betrayed me.

No one touched me. For one second, I did not understand the luxury of that. Then I did. The exit was not a hand pulling me away – it was door.

I walked toward it. Every step had a body attached. That should have been obvious, but rooms like this tried to make women into symbols witness, guest, mother, disruption, threat, beneficiary, problem. They forgot that a postpartum body had weight, fluids, pain, timing. That it could refuse and still need to sit down. That it could be visible and still be exhausted.

They forgot because forgetting was useful. A symbol could be judged from across a room. A body required accommodations, patience, timing, a bathroom that locked, a chair that did not turn need into spectacle. If they admitted the body, they had to admit what Dario had dragged into public 5 days after birth.

My left hip hurt. My pad felt heavy. Milk let down sharply when a server passed with a tray of warm bread and the smell tricked some ancient part of me into remembering Noa's mouth.

I almost stopped-not for Dario, for her. My daughter was across the city in a protected place I would not name even inside my own head here. Her next feed was logged for 7:25 unless she woke early. Her temperature had been 98.4 when I left. Her last wet diaper had been 5:58. Isolde had insisted I memorize nothing while sleep-deprived and then quizzed me anyway because fear did not respect spreadsheets.

I kept walking.

Dario moved only half a step, enough to test the room. "Aveline."

I did not turn. The old me would have, not because I was weak but because his voice had lived in the part of me that thought being chosen could undo being hidden. Because once, when he said my name in a kitchen with paint on his sleeve, I believed there was a future on the other side of secrecy and that he was walking me toward it. Now his voice was another locked door trying to sound like shelter.

I passed Bennett without looking at him. That mattered too. He did not reach for my elbow. He did not make a protective wall. He did not use his height or his reputation or the sudden pressure of camera lenses shifting toward the exit. He simply stayed where he had put himself: out of the way.

The threshold was brass. I saw it because I was looking down to keep my balance. One foot over, then the other. The air outside struck my face so cleanly I almost cried – not beautifully, not with release, but with the ugly, practical shock of a body being allowed to leave a room before it collapsed.

My lungs seemed to notice before the rest of me. Inside, every breath had been measured against who might read it as panic. Outside, breath was only breath. Too cold, too fast, but mine. I swallowed against the sour taste in my mouth and waited for the nausea to pass.

The side corridor opened to a covered terrace used by smokers, photographers, and donors who wanted private calls without giving up the drama of being missed. Tonight it was damp and cold. Heat lamps glowed in a line. A service cart stood beside a stone planter full of winter greenery. Beyond the low wall, city traffic slid silver and red through mist.

– Read Book & Story

A

No cameras immediately in my face. No lilies. No Dario. For 4 seconds, that was enough.

I put my free hand on the stone wall and breathed. My body took the breath greedily, then punished me for it with a pull across my abdomen

Isolde came through behind me. “Chair,” she said.

“Not yet.”

“Aveline.”

“I know.”

She stopped arguing because she knew the difference between stubbornness and a person reassembling herself around/choice. She took the witness folder anyway. That was Isolde’s genius – she did not take the decision, she took the weight. The folder left my hand, and my fingers tingled with the sudden absence of paper. I flexed them once and found they were stiff from gripping too hard.

“Water is next,” she said.

“Do you have a ranked list?”

“Several.”

“Of my needs?”

“Of ways to keep you from becoming a cautionary tale in expensive shoes.”

Corinne followed, already speaking quietly into her phone, documenting time, door, witnesses, refusal of private contact, no touch, no disclosure. Law turned survival into entries. I used to hate that. Now I understood entries could be sandbags against floodwater.

Bennett was last. He let the door close softly behind him but did not let it latch. He stood near it, one hand still on the metal bar, keeping the path open to the hall behind us and

the service stairs to the left. He had made 2 exits visible. Dario had offered one private alcove. The difference was not subtle anymore.

“Do you want me outside?” Bennett asked.

No greeting. No “are you all right,” which would have been a foolish question. Do you want me outside? The exactness of it hurt.

I looked at him for the first time. His suit was dark, less perfect than Dario’s because Bennett seemed to wear formal clothes as if they were temporary equipment. His tie was slightly loosened. His hair had been smoothed once and then given up. He looked tired in a way that did not ask me to notice. I noticed anyway.

“I want the door open,” I said.

He nodded. He did not ask whether that meant him too. He turned the latch so the door stayed ajar and moved 2 steps away from it, leaving space for anyone to pass. Through the gap, the gala continued in expensive fragments. Music. Glass. A woman’s laugh too high. Dario’s silhouette near the flower stand, not following yet because following through an open door would look like pursuit. For once, optics were useful.

I should have left.

The car could be brought to the service lane. Corinne could preserve the witness incident. Isolde could get me back before Noa woke angry enough to inform the entire safe placement that her mother had made poor scheduling decisions.

The schedule was already pushing its luck. Pumped milk bought time, not ease. My breasts did not care about legal witness language, and Noa did not care that a donor room needed to be taught the difference between absence and erasure.

I had done what I came to do – refused the staged seat, refused the alcove, walked out under my own power. Leaving should have been

– Read Book & Story victory. Instead, it felt unfinished.

I hated that. Women in stories were supposed to know when they had won. They were supposed to exit cleanly, shoulders straight, music rising behind them. Real exits were uglier. My thighs trembled. My dress clung where milk had dampened the lining. I wanted to call the caregiver and ask if Noa had stretched her left hand the way she did before waking, because that mattered more than every donor inside

And still the room pulled at me-not because I owed the room more, but because retreat had been chosen for me so many times that leaving still tasted like losing unless I taught my body the difference.

I looked back at the open door. Inside, Darío had turned his head toward Celine. She stood near the sponsor row, her pale green dress catching light like a flag. Their room. Their donors. Their story, if I let them have the last visible frame.

My knees ached. My breasts hurt. My daughter needed me more than any camera did. Still.

I had not run from St. Orla because I was wrong to leave-I had run because the room had made danger faster than thought. Tonight, I had time. Choice did not always mean staying safe and invisible. Sometimes it meant turning around with blood in your pad, milk in your dress, and a witness folder in your hand because the door was still there if you needed it.

“I’m going back in,” I said.

Isolde closed her eyes. “For how long?”

“Five minutes.”

“You get 4.”

“Generous.”

“I am a river of mercy.”

Bennett said nothing. That was the hardest part. I wanted him to tell me I did not have to. I wanted him to tell me I had already done enough. I wanted the comfort of being instructed toward rest by someone whose care did not feel like control. He did not give it to me without being asked.

He looked at the open door, then at me. “Do you want the car started anyway?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Then it will be ready whether you use it in 4 minutes or 20.”

“Four,” Isolde said.

Bennett almost smiled. “Four.”

The smallness of it opened something in my chest-not gratitude, something warmer and more dangerous because it had nothing to do with debt. Debt had rules. Debt could be paid down, disputed, documented, refused. Warmth asked for a different kind of courage. It did not give me a receipt to file in the NOA folder. It just stood there with an open door and a car ready, making no claim over either.

I stepped toward the door. My hand brushed Bennett's sleeve as I passed. Accident, maybe – except my body knew where he was.

I stopped. He went still. The entire terrace narrowed to the 2 inches between my fingers and his wrist. I should have moved away. I did not. I looked up at him, and whatever he saw on my face made his breath change.

He did not lean in. He did not move his hand. He waited so completely that the waiting itself became a kind of touch. It gave me room to know the wanting was mine.

My mouth parted. His gaze dropped to it once, only once. Then the gala door opened wider behind us, and a spill of music, cameras, and

– Read Book & Story

Dario's voice came through the gap.

End of chapter

– Read Book & Story

The wife isn't me

Chapter 100

Dario's voice reached the terrace before he did. "Aveline." It cut through the open door and turned my almost into evidence before it could become a choice.

I stepped back from Bennett. Not far. Enough. The cold air found the space between us immediately.

Bennett's hands stayed visible at his sides. He did not look over my shoulder at Dario first. He looked at me, and the restraint in him was so complete it made my throat ache.

"Do you want me to go in?" he asked quietly.

The question did not mean inside the gala – it meant into the conflict. Between me and Dario. Between me and the cameras. Between me and the story already forming in the doorway, where Dario could see a woman 5 days postpartum standing too close to the man he wanted to blame.

I shook my head. "No."

Bennett nodded once. No injury. No pride. No performance of wounded patience. He moved back half a step, leaving the line from me to the door clear. It should not have felt

intimate. It did. That was the problem with him – he made restraint feel less like absence than attention. He remembered where the edge was and did not make me guard it alone..

Dario came out onto the terrace with Corinne behind him and 2 committee members pretending they had business near the heat lamps. He stopped when he saw the space Bennett had left. I saw the calculation arrive in his eyes. Close enough to suggest. Not close enough to prove.

“You said you were returning to the room,” Dario said.

“I changed my mind.”

“Of course.”

The words were mild – also meant to turn my choice into instability. Corinne opened her mouth. I lifted my fingers again. Wait. She waited. I was getting better at making my own counsel let me speak, which was a strange and expensive skill.

“Do not follow me through doors,” I said.

Dario’s expression hardened. “I came to make sure you were not being pressured.”

The committee woman nearest the planter looked at Bennett.

There it was – the cleanest version of the trap. If Bennett defended himself, he became the man taking space. If I defended him, Dario would call that proof of influence. If I stayed silent, the room would keep the accusation.

“By whom?” I asked.

Dario’s eyes flicked to Bennett. “You know how this looks.”

“Say it.”

“This is not the place.”

– Read Book & Story

“You made the place.”

Rain ticked against the canopy beyond the terrace wall. The sound should have softened the exchange. Instead, it made every quiet sentence feel recorded by something larger than phones. I became aware of the driver waiting in the service lane, of Isolde’s hand near the witness folder, of Bennett standing where anyone could see he was not touching me. The absence of touch had become its own visible fact.

Behind him, the open door showed a slice of the gala. Pale green ribbon. Candlelight. Faces turned toward us. A donor room pretending not to watch a mother bleed into a pad and hold a witness folder like a shield.

Dario's voice softened. "You are exhausted. You are vulnerable. You have a newborn. And he is standing outside with you in the dark while your lawyers arrange narratives."

I almost admired the efficiency. Almost.

"I came outside because you tried to draw me into a coat alcove."

"I asked for a private conversation."

"After I refused a staged side-exit seat."

"You are determined to interpret every courtesy as harm.

"No. I am determined to stop calling harm courteous."

That one landed with the committee women. I saw it in the way their faces held still. Dario saw it too. His attention shifted, not away from me, but around me – measuring witnesses, cameras, Bennett's silence, Corinne's phone, Isolde's fury contained behind a smile so thin it could cut glass. He could not win here by raising his voice. So he became sorrowful.

"I don't recognize you like this," he said.

I hated that it hurt. Not because I wanted his recognition, but because there had been a time when I had built a self inside his attention — a woman who could be patient because he promised timing, who could accept hidden rooms because he said public life was complicated, who thought being known privately was a bridge to being loved openly.

That woman had not been stupid. I needed to say that to myself even now. She had been loved in enough private ways to misread the locked doors. She had been fed peppermint tea, warmed rooms, careful hands over a pregnant belly. She had been given just enough truth to make the lies feel like circumstances.

I would not let Dario turn her into an insult. He did not recognize me because that woman had been evidence of his control, not my truth.

"Good," I said.

His face went blank. The hook found no flesh.

Bennett's gaze did not leave me. I felt it without looking—not possession, not claim, a steady witness to the fact that I had answered for myself.

Maybe that was why the almost kiss had frightened me. Not because I did not want him. Because I did. Or I wanted what gathered around him: exits kept open, questions asked cleanly, cars started whether I used them or not, silence that did not punish me for needing time. The difference mattered enough that I could not let desire blur it.

“I’m leaving,” I said.

Dario stepped back, forced into politeness by witnesses. “With him?”

“With Isolde, counsel, and a car arranged before I came outside.”

– Read Book & Story

“And Bellamy?”

“Bellamy is not your synonym for any choice I make.”

His jaw moved. For one second, I saw the man beneath the formal suit and the donor lighting: possessive, tired, furious that the world no longer accepted his grammar.

Then Celine appeared in the doorway. She did not step onto the terrace. She only looked. Pale green, composed, one hand at her waist as if public motherhood required perfect posture. Her eyes moved from Dario to me to Bennett and back to me. Not jealousy-assessment. She knew what the image could become. So did Dario.

“Aveline,” he said, softer again. “Do not let him become another mistake you defend because you need somewhere safe to stand.”

The cruelty was quiet enough that a microphone might miss it. I did not. My body reacted before my mind did-heat in my face, cold in my hands, the sharp, stupid urge to take Bennett’s hand just to prove that Dario did not get to name it. That would have made Bennett a weapon. He deserved better. So did I.

It would also have made me smaller. Not because wanting Bennett was small, but because proving Dario wrong was too cramped a reason for the first honest tenderness I had felt in months. Dario had owned enough of my motives. I would not give him this one too.

I turned away from Dario and walked toward the service lane. This time Bennett did not follow until Isolde moved first. That mattered too.

The car waited under the side canopy, black, unmarked, engine running. Corinne spoke to the driver through the passenger window and checked that no one had followed into the lane. Isolde opened the rear door and put one hand on the roofline to remind me not to hit my head, because friendship was romance’s less foolish older sister.

I should have gotten in. Instead, I stopped beside the open door and turned to Bennett.

My phone was in my hand before I remembered taking it out. The newest message from the caregiver was plain: Noa still asleep, temperature stable, next feed window unchanged. Relief went through me so sharply it almost bent my knees, though nothing in the message was dramatic enough to explain it. That was motherhood now – a plain sentence could become oxygen.

I locked the screen before Dario's eyes could find even the reflection. He stood beneath the canopy light, careful distance, hands empty. Inside the building, through the glass, Dario had not returned to the gala. He stood in the cross-hall with Celine 5 feet away from him, watching.

Let him watch, I thought. Then hated the thought because it made Bennett part of Dario's punishment.

I looked back at Bennett. "I almost kissed you because I wanted to," I said.

His expression changed, slightly-enough to warm the air between us. "I know."

"No, you don't."

He waited. I gripped the car door because the confession needed something solid beside it.

"I don't know if I wanted you, or if I wanted the safety around you. The door. The car. The fact that you didn't touch me. The fact that you would have let me leave without making me grateful." My throat tightened, but I kept going because stopping would make it heavier. "I do want you. I think. But I don't know where that ends and relief begins."

The last words embarrassed me more than any public accusation had. They were too naked for the service lane, too tender for a woman with counsel 6 feet away and a newborn waiting on a feed clock. But I had learned what secrecy did when it dressed itself as protection. If I wanted anything clean with Bennett, it had to survive plain speech first.

Isolde looked away. Corinne pretended to check her phone. Bennett absorbed the words without flinching from any of them.

Then he said, "Wanting time is an answer I can respect."

– Read Book & Story hich

No disappointment staged as nobility. No quick reassurance that would make me comfort him. No claim that he was not like Dario, which would have made Dario the center of the sentence again. Just time. An answer. Respect.

The warmth of it hit harder than a kiss might have. My eyes stung. "That makes it worse," I said.

His mouth softened. “I can stand over there while it gets worse.”

I laughed once. It hurt my abdomen and saved me from crying. “No,” I said. “Stay there.”

So he did.

He stayed there while I lowered myself into the car slowly, with Isolde’s hand ready but not grabbing. He stayed there while I adjusted the folder, checked my phone for Noa’s last update, and told the driver the route had to avoid the north-side press line. He stayed there while the door remained open long enough for me to decide whether I had more to say.

I did not. Not safely.

The driver began to close the door. Across the hall, beyond the glass, Dario’s face was turned toward us. He had seen the space between me and Bennett. He had seen the restraint. And somehow, from the look in his eyes, that seemed to anger him more than if Bennett had kissed

And of chapter

– Read Book & Story