The wife isn't me

Chapter 9

The stairs smelled like bleach and old heat. I took them one handrail at a time. Not quickly-quickly was for women with lungs that still belonged only to them. Mine worked around a daughter, a tote bag, and the cold square of Nurse Rell's key card pressed into/my palm.

Behind the stairwell door, Dario called my name again. Not loudly. That was the part that made my legs move-if he shouted, someone might look. Calm traveled better through private buildings.

"Aveline."

The sound came softer through concrete. One floor below. Or above. It was impossible to tell-stairwells turned voices into weather.

I kept going down. 6th to 5th. 5th to 4th. At the 3rd-floor landing, my side cramped. I stopped with my forehead almost touching the painted wall and breathed through my mouth the way the prenatal nurse at St. Orla had taught me before St. Orla became a place where my body could be filed under Celine's name.

In for 4. Out for 6.

The baby shifted. "I know," I whispered. Not apology. Promise.

At the bottom, the staff exit alarm did not sound when I opened it. Nurse Rell's card gave me 3 green lights and then went dead in my hand. Single use. She had planned that part.

The alley was narrow and wet, lined with delivery doors and winter trash bins. It opened onto Mercer like she had said. Morning traffic passed at the end, indifferent and bright.

I had never loved an ugly alley before. I loved that one with my whole frightened body.

A gray sedan pulled up at the curb before I reached the sidewalk. The passenger window dropped. Isolde looked out at me with one hand on the wheel and murder in her eyes.

"Get in."

I did. Not gracefully-pregnancy had stolen grace weeks ago and replaced it with leverage. I lowered myself sideways, one hand on the roof, one under my stomach, tote strap biting into my shoulder. Isolde leaned across me, buckled the belt beneath the curve of my belly, then shoved a paper bag into my lap.

“Eat.”

“Hello to you too.”

“Hello is for brunch. Eat the crackers.”

The car moved before my door was fully closed.

I looked back. No Dario. No Grant. No clinic security. Just a woman in scrubs standing at the alley mouth for half a second before she disappeared back inside.

Nurse Rell.

“She helped me,” I said.

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“Name?”

“Maia Rell. RN.”

Isolde’s left hand stayed steady on the wheel. Her right thumb tapped her phone mount twice, starting a new voice note. “Maia Reli, private clinic nurse, gave staff-exit access after pre-filled maternal guardian language surfaced. Time 10:44 AM.”

“You sound like a deposition.”

“You should hear me at weddings.”

The laugh that came out of me was too close to crying. Isolde heard it and did not look over. That was one of the reasons I loved her-she knew when eye contact would finish the damage.

“Phone,” she said.

I handed her my real one. She dropped it into a silver pouch and sealed it.

“Faraday bag?”

“My cousin sells surveillance equipment to divorce lawyers. Family shame occasionally has civic use.”

“Dario knows about the courier.”

“Good. He can spend the day wondering which piece got out.”

“He’ll lock the apartment down.”

“He already started.”

I looked at her. She pointed with her chin toward the cheap phone clipped to the dash. A message thread was open with a contact labeled Laundry.

Your resident access changed at 10:31. Building note says wellness hold requested by owner.

My hands went numb. 10:31. While I was in the consultation room naming the room. While Dr. Merrow put both hands over the folder like she could smother the words. While Dario stood beside me pretending he did not already have another lever moving.

“Can he do that?”

“Can and should are rich people’s favorite strangers.”

“My clothes are there.”

“Clothes can be replaced.”

“The baby things.”

Isolde’s face changed then. Not softened. Set.

“Aveline.”

“The crib frame. The clothes under the window. The blanket with the yellow edge, the one I bought before I knew–”

“No.”

The word struck harder than I expected. I turned toward the window because the city was safer than her face.

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“You don’t get to say no to that.”

“I do if the alternative is letting you walk back into a building where the owner has requested a wellness hold 2 minutes after his clinic plan failed.”

“They are my daughter’s things.”

“Your daughter needs you free more than she needs a crib in his apartment.”

I hated her for the sentence. Cleanly. For 3 seconds, I hated her with the full force of a woman whose child had already lost a room with clouds on the wall.

Then the baby moved. Slow. Heavy. Alive beneath the belt Isolde had adjusted so carefully.

I pressed both hands around her. “He painted the clouds,” I said.

“I know.”

“I thought that meant he was there with us.”

“He was there,” Isolde said. “That is why it hurts.”

No comfort could have done what that did. Comfort would have tried to rescue him from the room. Isolde left him in it.

She drove 6 blocks, then turned into the underground entrance of a grocery store garage. We parked between a pillar and a dusty minivan. She got out, opened my door, and handed me another phone.

“This one is yours now. The old one stays sealed until we copy it somewhere with witnesses.”

“Where are we going?”

“First, a copy shop run by a man who owes me because I once made his ex-wife give back his passport. Then a bank branch where you do not use your old card. Then my office storage room.”

“Your office?”

“It has cameras, a receptionist who thinks every man is lying until notarized, and no one named Armitage on the lease.”

“I need my medical records.”

“Already requested through the patient portal from the cheap phone. You have 2 downloads before the portal decides you are suspicious, so we wait until we are on a clean network.”

I stared at her. “When did you learn all this?”

“When my sister’s landlord tried to keep her deposit and accidentally radicalized me.”

She reached into the back seat and pulled out a canvas folder. Inside were envelopes-cash, a transit card, a black knit hat, copies of my driver’s license and insurance card, printed from scans I had sent her 2 years ago for a trip we never took because Dario had surprised me with a weekend in Maine.

At the bottom, there was a small foil packet of antacids.

That made me cry. Not the cash. Not the escape. The antacids.

Isolde closed the folder and let me cry for 12 seconds. Then she said, “We need the ring.”

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I wiped my face with the heel of my hand. “It’s in my coat.”

“Good. Documents?”

“Some originals. Some copies. The authorization form. Clinic card. Donor invite. The note. Ultrasound copy.”

“We split them. No single bag carries everything.”

“The ring too?”

“Especially the ring.”

My fingers went to the right pocket. Tissue paper. Small hard circle. Fourteen weeks of false future wrapped like a wound

I took it out and unfolded the tissue on my lap. The diamond caught the garage light and turned it into something cold. For a moment, I saw Dario in the kitchen, sleeves rolled, one knee on the floor because he had said tradition was ridiculous but some gestures

survived ridicule for a reason. I had laughed. I had put my hand in his. I had said yes before I knew the question had already been answered elsewhere 9 years earlier.

“I don’t want to carry it,” I said.

“Then don’t.”

“My plan was to leave it there.” I pressed the tissue closed. “In the nursery.”

“You changed the plan because the facts changed.”

“That sounds reasonable when you say it.”

“It is reasonable.”

“It feels like leaving her room to him.”

Isolde did not soften the answer. “It was his room before you knew it. We are getting your daughter out of it anyway.”

The words hurt. They also held. I folded them around the place where the blanket had been. Not enough. Enough for the next breath. Then the one after. Barely enough.

“Plans change when men lock doors.”

She took a small padded mailer from the folder. “We can send it back with a signed receipt.”

“No.”

My answer surprised both of us. I looked at the ring again.

“If I send it back now, he gets to make that the story. Unstable pregnant woman dramatically returns ring after misunderstanding. He’ll say I am emotional.”

“Accurate.”

“I said dramatic.”

Isolde gave me half a smile. “Fair.”

I wrapped the ring again and placed it in a separate envelope with one photocopy of the ultrasound image. Not the best copy. Not the one with the clearest profile – a duplicate. Something that could hurt without costing me evidence.

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On the outside, I wrote: For Dario Armitage. Hold for personal receipt only.

My hand did not shake. That was new.

“Why give him any ultrasound?” Isolde asked.

“Because I want him to know what he is trying to file over.”

She nodded once. No argument: She knew the difference between sentiment and weapon.

We left the garage separately. Isolde first with the sealed phone and half the documents. Me 2 minutes later with the tote, the cheap phone,” and one hand under my belly. At the copy shop, the owner did not ask why a pregnant woman needed 5 complete sets of documents before noon. He only locked the front door, turned the sign to CLOSED, and made the copier move until the room smelled like torfer and heat.

At 11:28, the cheap phone received a message from Laundry.

Security at your building. Two men, not regular staff. Owner arrived. Asked for elevator lockout history.

I read it twice.

The next message came with a photograph taken from across the lobby. Dario stood under the chandelier with Grant Bell beside him and another man I did not know. My apartment key card would no longer open the lift. My daughter’s clouds were 36 floors above men who had decided the room belonged to him.

Isolde took the phone gently from my hand. “We are not going back.”

I looked at Dario’s photograph until his face blurred. Then I said the thing I needed someone else to hear before fear could eat it.

“He is going to file something.”

Isolde’s thumb moved across the screen, enlarging the unknown man’s face.

“Yes,” she said. “And we are going to be faster.”

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End of chapter-

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