Class N

By Brent Clark Palmer

1.

The Thursday Club

Colleen Whitaker's living room smelled of brie and a cedar candle she'd bought specifically for this evening. Six women, one coffee table, three bottles of pinot already open, and six identical white envelopes fanned out on a marble tray like a hand of cards.

"I'm calling it a lark with stakes," Colleen said.

"It's a lark with a return policy," said Dee Brennan.

The idea had been Pam's. The at-home panels had gotten so cheap that Pam's husband had bought two by accident, and a book club that had survived three divorces and a landscaping feud could surely survive a spit tube. All six kits had gone out under Colleen's address for the group discount. The labs sent the results on paper first, with a code to unlock the portal, so the envelopes had been sitting in Colleen's kitchen drawer for a week, unopened by agreement.

"In order of seating," Colleen said, slitting the first one with a silver letter opener. "Pam. 'Archaic ancestry, 2.9 percent. Typical citizen range.' Ha. Same as the mailman."

"Dee?"

"Two point two."

"Mags?"

"One point nine. I'm the purest woman in this room."

"Beth?"

Beth Halvorsen blushed. "Two point eight. Is that bad?"

"It's literally what everyone is, Beth."

"Colleen," said Mags, "do yours."

"Two point four. Fine. Fabulous. Jenny, you're last, drumroll."

Jenny Callahan laughed and drummed on the arm of the sofa. She was forty-four, with brown hair and honey highlights, and she had brought the lemon bars. She had been in this

club for eleven years and had hosted twice, and when Colleen's mother died she had cooked for the funeral.

Colleen opened the last envelope. She read the first line silently, then read it again.

"Jenny."

"Yes?"

"It says eighty-nine."

"Eighty-nine what?"

"Percent." Colleen turned the page toward her. "'Marker concordance, 89.2 percent. Classification: Class N, residual lineage.'"

For a moment there was only the sound of the candle. Then Jenny laughed again, higher. "That's a typo. That has to be a typo."

"There's a second page." Colleen read it aloud, quite calmly. "'Notice of Registration Requirement. Under Section 12 of the Reclassification Act, any person whose marker concordance exceeds fifty percent shall register as Class N within thirty days.'" She paused. "'Failure to register is a Class B offense. See also the Harboring Provision.'"

"Harboring," said Pam. "Wait. That's us."

"I'm Jenny," said Jenny. "I'm in your book club. I was at Hannah's christening."

"I know, honey."

"My hair is brown."

"Your hair is highlighted," Dee said, not unkindly.

"Because it went dark when I was nine! I was blonde as a kid, and then it went mousy, and I've done highlights since I was twenty-six." Jenny stopped. She watched them take in the sentence she had just said.

"Huh," said Mags. "That actually tracks."

"Technically," Dee said slowly, "that's concealment."

"It's not concealment, it's vanity."

"It's both, honey. That's the thing about it."

Beth had both hands pressed to her mouth. "Jenny, I'm so sorry. I don't think this can be right."

“It’s the lab, Beth,” said Colleen. “Labs aren’t wrong about this. That’s the whole point of labs.” She laid the pages on the tray and folded her hands. “Okay. Okay. Let’s be adults about this.”

She said it in the voice she used at the HOA meetings.

“The Harboring Provision says five households, a civil fine of four thousand each, plus the HOA is obligated to report. We can’t just pretend it doesn’t exist. And I want you to know, Jenny, that this does not change how I feel about you.”

“Thank you.”

“It does change what you can wear in my house.”

Jenny looked down at her blouse, a green silk one she’d bought for this evening. “I’m sorry?”

“Citizens wear clothes like citizens. It’s not fair to the rest of us, and technically it’s misrepresentation. If a registered Class N is dressed as a citizen, the people around her are exposed.” Colleen was already standing. “Honestly, it would be kinder. You’d stop having to pretend.”

“You want me to take my clothes off.”

“I want you to be comfortable.” Colleen went to the kitchen and came back with two linen tea towels and a length of kitchen twine. She laid them on the sofa cushion beside Jenny. “Heritage dress, more or less. It’s fine for tonight. We’ll look up the proper specification later.”

“Colleen—”

“The powder room is right there.”

Nobody said anything. Pam looked at her wine. Dee looked at the ceiling. Beth said, in a small voice, “I think we should call somebody.”

“Who, Beth? The Registry?” Colleen turned. “They’d have her placed out of the county by Friday. Is that what you want for her? Strangers?”

Beth didn’t answer.

Jenny stood. She picked up the towels and the twine. She went into the powder room and shut the door, and the sound of the lock was the only thing in the house.

When she came out, her arms were crossed over the linen and the twine was knotted at her hip. She carried her blouse and slacks folded in a neat square, the way she always did.

Colleen took them from her and slid them into a paper shopping bag that read DONATIONS.

“There,” Colleen said warmly. “Isn’t that easier?”

Pam had opened her laptop.

“So, in the spirit of keeping her local,” Pam said, “and honestly it’s kind of a kindness, I made a sheet.”

“You made a sheet.”

“I made it while Jenny was changing. It’s a shared doc.” Pam turned the screen. The title row read JENNY ROTA v1, and under it was a grid, color-coded by day. “I’m not trying to be cold. I’m trying to be fair. We all need to know when she’s available.”

“Available,” Jenny repeated.

“Mondays I’m doing the deep clean, so that’s me. Laundry, ironing, the guest bathrooms.” Pam typed as she spoke. “Dee, you said school pickup?”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays. I need someone in the passenger seat with the snacks and Tyler’s lacrosse bag. Also dinner prep, I’d say. Nothing complicated.”

“I have a job,” said Jenny. Her voice had gone very flat. “At the garden center.”

“You’ll need to give notice, honey,” Colleen said. “Class N can’t hold public-facing positions. It’s in the Act.”

“Is it?”

“Section nine. I’m sure of it.”

“I’d like Fridays,” said Mags. “Yard, the dogs, maybe the car. Is that okay?”

“Wednesdays I could do errands,” said Beth, very quietly. “Just errands.”

“Beth, you’re too soft. Give her something real.” Colleen tapped the screen. “Laundry. And I’ll take Sundays, plus hosting, so Thursdays obviously.”

“What do I get?” Jenny said.

The women looked at one another.

“Well, you keep your house,” said Pam. “We’re not monsters.”

“Pending approval,” Dee added.

“And meals,” Colleen said. “Presumably. We’d work that out.”

“Presumably,” Jenny said.

“You’ll also be on call by text,” Pam said, typing. “For appointments and rides. And I put ‘wardrobe care’ in for everyone, steaming and packing before trips. Mags has her mother-in-law visiting in March, so we’ll need you for a dinner for fourteen.”

“Just until we sort this out,” Jenny said.

“Of course,” said Colleen. “Of course, honey.”

She picked up the empty bottle. “Jenny, would you be a dear and open another? Corkscrew’s in the second drawer on the left. The good one, from the cellar rack.”

Jenny went into the kitchen. The door swung shut behind her.

Colleen waited exactly four seconds. Then she crossed the room, took Pam’s arm, and gathered Dee and Mags toward the cheese board like a coach with a play. “Don’t tell Beth,” she whispered. “She’s soft.”

“Don’t tell Beth what?” Mags whispered back.

“I faked it.”

“You what?”

“The result. Her letter.” Colleen was grinning now, scarlet at the cheeks. “The envelopes all came to my house. I steamed hers open last week and wrote a new sheet. The Registry notice is a template off the internet. I swapped the cover page and shredded the original with the access code. She can’t check it, and an appeal has to come from a citizen, which, as of tonight, she isn’t.”

For a second nobody breathed. Then Mags let out a shriek and clapped both hands over her mouth.

“Colleen!”

“You monster.”

“She took her pants off,” Pam said, wheezing. “She took her pants off for a PDF.”

“She thanked me! ‘Thank you.’ I nearly died.”

“But why?” Dee asked, wiping her eyes. “Why Jenny?”

Colleen's smile thinned slightly. "Have you ever noticed how people say 'Oh, Jenny's garden'? 'Oh, Jenny's casseroles'? I've hosted this club for twelve years. Twelve. And at my mother's funeral, everyone remembered the casserole."

"That's it?"

"That and the way Tom looks at her." She picked a grape off the board. "I wanted to see what she'd do. And she's doing it."

"So do we tell her?" Pam said.

"And ruin it? She's wearing tea towels, Dee. If we tell her now, we all have to apologize." Colleen popped the grape into her mouth. "I don't think any of us wants to apologize."

They considered this.

"Good point," said Mags.

"Does the rota stay?"

"The rota stays. Add a line." Colleen straightened her cashmere and put the voice back on. "Thursdays, she reads the discussion questions. Standing."

Jenny came back with the bottle. She had found the good corkscrew and the good glasses. Her face was composed the way you hold a full bowl.

"Here," she said, and set them down.

"Jenny," said Colleen, in a tone of great kindness. "Would you stand by the bookshelf, please? I thought you could read tonight's questions. Slowly, and with feeling. Class N cognition tends to be more literal, so just do your best."

Jenny took the printed sheet. She stood beside the shelf with her arms at her sides, a tea towel and a piece of twine between her and the room. She read the first question about the novel's treatment of female friendship, which it turned out nobody had finished.

Her voice caught at the word "betrayal." She started again.

"Use your own words," said Mags, when she finished.

"Smaller words," said Pam.

"She's quite good," Dee said. "Isn't she quite good?"

"We'll have to keep her," said Colleen, and the room dissolved.

Beth did not laugh. She sat on the edge of the sofa watching the others, who seemed to be shaking with nerves, and she thought they must be frightened too. She found Jenny in the kitchen afterward, wiping a wineglass that was already dry.

“I should have said something,” Beth said. “I should have told them no.”

“Do you think it’s real?” Jenny said.

“It’s from the Registry.”

“I’m the same person I was this morning, Beth.”

Beth opened her mouth. In the living room, Colleen’s voice rang out: “Beth! Jenny’s needed out here!”

Jenny set down the glass. She straightened the twine at her hip with both hands, picked up the tray of lemon bars she had baked that afternoon, and carried it toward the sound of the women laughing. She had always loved the sound of her friends laughing. For a moment she felt herself begin to smile, the way you do at a joke you haven’t quite heard. Then she understood what they were laughing at, and she kept walking.

2.

Reporting Citizen

Thursday, 11:41 p.m.

Jenny had gone home at ten with Colleen’s car blanket over her shoulders and the lemon-bar tray under one arm. Beth left right after, anxious and apologetic, still believing every word. That left four women in Colleen’s kitchen, the good corkscrew on the counter, and a laptop open to a government page with a blue banner: CITIZEN DISCLOSURE PORTAL, THIRD-PARTY REPORTS.

“You are not doing that,” said Mags.

“I’m looking at it.” Colleen scrolled. “It’s a form. Name, address, relationship to subject. There’s a dropdown. ‘Friend or neighbor.’ Look, they have a category for us.”

“Colleen.”

“I just want to see how far it goes. Aren’t you curious?”

“No,” said Dee, who was curious.

Pam had come around the island to read over her shoulder. “There’s a box for supporting documentation. And a lab accession number. It says ‘optional.’”

“Then I’ll make one up.” Colleen typed a string of digits and uploaded the PDF she had spent a week designing. It was a handsome document, with a convincing logo and a confidence interval she had copied from a real report. “Why would they check? Nobody checks.”

“Because it’s a felony,” said Dee.

“Which is exactly why nobody does it.” Colleen smiled at her friends. “Say it with me. It’s a lark.”

Nobody said it. Nobody stopped her either. She clicked SUBMIT.

The screen blinked once and then turned gold. THANK YOU, RESPONSIBLE CITIZEN. YOUR REPORT HAS BEEN ACCEPTED. REFERENCE NUMBER 7741-0932-C. A timestamp read 11:47 p.m.

“That was fast,” said Mags.

“It’s an automated acknowledgment,” Colleen said. “It doesn’t mean anything.” She closed the laptop and poured the last of the pinot. For about ten minutes it did feel like a lark.

Friday, 9:12 a.m.

The call came while Colleen was loading the dishwasher.

“Ms. Whitaker? Case Officer Paulina Grieve, Placement and Classification. I’m calling regarding report 7741-0932-C.”

Colleen put down a wineglass very carefully. “Oh. Yes. That was quick.”

“Your submission was reviewed overnight and accepted. You’ll receive a Civic Vigilance certificate in the mail, plus a two-hundred-fifty credit.”

“Overnight,” Colleen said. “Don’t you, I mean, verify the lab?”

“Lab certification is presumed.” The officer’s voice was warm and slightly tired, the voice of someone with a long queue. “Falsifying a genetic classification document is a felony, so we assume no citizen would.”

Colleen said nothing.

“Ms. Whitaker?”

“Sorry. Yes. I’m here.”

“As a reporting citizen in good standing, you’re eligible for first refusal on household placement of the subject. The intake fee is reduced to eight hundred dollars rather than the usual forty-two hundred. Otherwise she goes to the pool, which is a six-to-nine-month wait for assignment.”

“And in the meantime?”

“A processing dormitory. It’s standard. Perfectly clean.”

Colleen looked out the window at her own lawn. It had been mowed on Wednesday. “You’re offering me Jenny.”

“I’m offering you placement of the subject, yes. The field team will be at her residence at one this afternoon. Reporters usually attend, but it’s optional.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“The window for first refusal closes at noon,” said Officer Grieve. “I’ve seen it close faster.”

When the call ended, Colleen stood in her kitchen with the phone in her hand. She was waiting to feel clever, and what she felt was a small, cold, interested silence, and under it something she did not examine. She texted the group chat: they accepted it. Pam wrote back four question marks. Dee wrote oh my god. Mags wrote COLLEEN. Then, a moment later: are you going to fix it?

She typed I will and deleted it. She typed it’s fine and deleted that too. At eleven she put on her camel coat and drove to Jenny’s street.

Friday, 1:02 p.m., Jenny’s house

The Registry van was parked across two driveways, white and unmarked except for a lilac stripe. Two field agents stood on the front step. Agent Tolliver was broad and sunburned, Agent Wray young and precise with a scanner. Pam had come too, and was now standing at the end of the walk looking like she wanted to go home.

Jenny opened the front door in the linen wrap. She had been wearing it since Thursday night. Colleen had not told her she could change.

“Jennifer Callahan?” said Tolliver.

“Yes.”

“Registry intake, ma’am. We have a notice of classification and expedited placement.” He held out a folder. “You’re not required to sign, but it’s easier.”

“I haven’t registered,” Jenny said. “The letter said thirty days.”

“Thirty days applies to self-disclosure. A third-party report triggers expedited review.”

“What third party?”

Tolliver glanced down the walk. “The reporting citizen is present.”

Jenny followed his glance. For a moment, Colleen saw her understand it. It was not a dramatic understanding. It looked like a woman reading a bill and finding a charge she had not expected. Colleen stood on the lawn in her camel coat and said, in a voice she barely recognized, “Jenny, I had to. The Harboring Provision.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I did. I really, I mean, it’s the law.”

“Jenny?” Tom’s car had pulled up at the curb, and now he was jogging up the drive with his tie loose. He was a tall, kind man who coached girls’ soccer. “Jenny, what is this?”

“Sir,” said Wray, “are you the spouse?”

“What is this?”

“Your wife has been classified Class N, residual lineage, 89.2 percent marker concordance. We’re here for intake.”

“That’s absurd.” Tom laughed. “She’s a, her mother is from Ohio. It’s a mistake.”

“The result has been certified, sir.”

“Then retest her.”

“You may request an independent retest at your expense,” Tolliver said, patiently, like a man explaining a refund. “Eighteen hundred dollars, six to eight weeks. In the interim, the classification stands and the subject is placed. The marriage is held in abeyance.”

“Held in abeyance.”

“It’s not dissolved, sir. It’s paused.”

Tom turned to his wife. He opened his mouth to say something else and stopped. Colleen watched his face do something she would think about later, in the dark. It was only half a second. His eyes went over Jenny, the linen, the hair, the brown and honey of it, in an automatic, checking way, the way you look at a document you’ve been told might be forged.

Jenny saw it too.

“Tom,” she said.

“I’m not, I didn’t,” Tom said. “Honey, I just, I’m going to call a lawyer.”

“Inventory first, sir,” said Wray. She stepped past him into the hallway with the scanner, tapping items on a tablet. “Subject’s personal effects: one garment, linen. One ring. One tray, ceramic.”

“The tray is mine,” Jenny said.

“Personal property of a Class N is limited to a single garment and one sentimental item. Everything else is household inventory.” Wray looked up. “You can pick the ring or the tray.”

Jenny looked at the tray. It had been a wedding present from her sister. Then she pulled the ring off her left hand, held it out, and put it in Wray’s gloved palm without a word.

“Sentimental item: tray,” Wray said, typing. “Thank you for being cooperative.”

Tolliver turned to Colleen with a clipboard. “Ms. Whitaker, if you’d like to exercise first refusal, sign here. Initial here and here. There’s a line attesting that the information you provided is true and complete.”

Colleen’s pen hung over the page.

She understood, suddenly and with total clarity, what she had done. It was not that she had made a joke that got out of hand. It was that the only way to undo it was to stand on this lawn and say that she had forged a government document, in front of two agents and her best friend and her friend’s husband. She would be the felon. Jenny would still be classified until a lab review took six months. And the paper in her hand, the one that attested that everything was true, already had her name at the top.

Behind her, Pam whispered, barely audible, “Colleen.”

“Not now,” Colleen said.

She initialed three times. Her handwriting looked small and tidy.

“Excellent,” said Tolliver. “Wray, the band.”

Wray took a lilac strip from her case and fastened it around Jenny’s left wrist. It clicked shut like a pen cap. Jenny looked at it. She did not cry. Colleen almost wished she would.

“Your household handbook.” Tolliver handed Colleen a thin gray booklet, CLASS N HOUSEHOLD STANDARDS, THIRD EDITION. “Section six covers meals, section nine rest periods. She’s yours as of today, Ms. Whitaker. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Colleen said, and heard how it sounded.

The van pulled away. Tom stood at the end of the driveway with his phone at his ear and his back to them. Pam had drifted toward the sidewalk, one hand over her mouth.

Jenny got into the passenger seat of Colleen’s car with the tray in her lap. She buckled her seatbelt, which seemed to take a long time, her fingers making the usual small decisions about the buckle. The lilac band was bright against the gray leather.

Colleen started the engine. Out the window she could see Jenny’s front garden, the one everyone had always admired, tomatoes staked and hollyhocks leaning in the autumn light. She took the phone from her pocket. Pam had texted: please fix it.

She looked at the message. She looked at the road. Then she turned on the radio, so there would be something in the car to listen to.

3.

Declination

The fuss began at the second red light.

“You turned me in.” Jenny had not raised her voice yet. She held the ceramic tray in her lap with both hands. “You stood on my lawn and you said you had to.”

“I did have to. The Harboring Provision—”

“The letter said thirty days. I would have registered myself on Monday. I would have walked down there with my own papers. You didn’t give me thirty days.”

“It was four thousand dollars each, Jenny. All of us.”

“Is that what I cost?”

Colleen said nothing. The light turned green.

“Is there something,” Jenny said, “that you want to tell me?”

She said it sideways, in the level voice of a woman asking about a stain she suspects. Colleen’s hands tightened on the wheel. This was the moment, she knew, as plain as a door in a hallway. She could say the word fake. She could pull over under the cherry trees and say it, and Jenny would stare at her, and then there would be Tom, and a lawyer, and the Registry checking a lab that had never heard of any of this.

“No,” Colleen said. “I just want you to know I’m sorry it came to this.”

Jenny turned and looked out the window. For several blocks she was silent. Then she began, quietly and with dreadful clarity, to list the people she was going to tell. The club. The HOA. Tom's mother. Her sister in Dayton. The woman at the bank. She was going to talk about this on every porch in the zip code for the rest of her life.

"I know you will," Colleen said.

At the stop sign on Alder she opened the gray booklet on the dashboard with one hand and riffled the pages. A hundred and twelve of them. Section six, meals, with a cross-reference to Appendix D. Section nine, rest periods, with a table. Section fourteen, "Conduct of the Household Toward the Placed Person," which ran to eleven subsections. She imagined it: Jenny in her kitchen every morning, reciting what Colleen had done, between the cabinets and the carpool and the cream-colored couch. She imagined learning Appendix D.

She shut the booklet. At the next intersection, where she should have turned right for her own street, she turned left onto Route 9.

"This isn't the way."

"I need to stop somewhere first."

"Where?"

"Somewhere."

Jenny's hands went still on the tray.

The building was low and gray, set back behind a lot of freshly painted spaces. A lilac stripe ran along its roofline, and the sign at the entrance read REGIONAL PROCESSING DORMITORY, ANNEX 3: INTAKE ENTRANCE B. Colleen parked in a visitor space and turned off the engine, and for a moment the only sound was the ticking of the cooling hood.

"No," said Jenny.

"Jenny—"

"You said you were taking me to your house."

"I never said that."

"Colleen."

"Listen to me." Colleen kept her eyes on the sign. "You're going to tell everyone. I know you. I'll never hear the end of it. And I'm not memorizing a hundred and twelve pages of standards. It isn't what I do."

“It isn’t what you do?”

“I do book club.”

She got out. She walked around the hood, opened the passenger door, and stood waiting in the open frame, a woman at a restaurant who has found the wrong table. Jenny did not move. The tray sat on her knees. The lilac band shone on her wrist.

“Come on, honey.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll take these back.” Colleen leaned in and caught the end of the twine at Jenny’s hip. “They’re mine anyway. They’re Williams-Sonoma.”

The knot gave way. It had been tied to give way easily, in a hurry, at a powder room door. The twine slid free, and the linen came with it, tea towel after tea towel, and Colleen folded the cloth into a square in her hand while Jenny’s hand came up too late to catch it.

The tray clattered to the floorboard. Jenny sat for a second with her arms crossed over herself, bare feet on the mat. Then Colleen took her firmly by the elbow and drew her out onto the asphalt.

“Arms down, honey,” she said. “The handbook says posture at inspection.”

“Colleen, please.”

“Arms down.”

Jenny’s arms stayed up a moment longer than they needed to. Then they came down, slowly, and hung at her sides. In the afternoon light she stood very straight, wearing the lilac band and nothing else, and she looked at the building and not at Colleen.

The lobby doors slid apart. The air-conditioning smelled of floor cleaner. In the waiting area, a man in a golf polo sat with a thermos, and beside him a woman in a white armband sat with her hands in her lap, staring at the far wall. Neither of them glanced up. At the security station a guard in a gray uniform watched them approach and said, without interest, “Reporter?”

“Yes. Colleen Whitaker.”

“Window two.”

The clerk behind the glass was a woman in her fifties with reading glasses on a chain. She did not look at Jenny at all. She looked at Colleen.

“Case number?”

Colleen opened her purse and found the scrap, a torn corner of a grocery list, on which she had written the number in pen at ten that morning. “Seven seven four one, zero nine three two, C.”

“Subject Callahan, Jennifer. Class N, expedited.” The clerk typed, frowned slightly. “It says first refusal was exercised at one-oh-eight. Are you declining?”

“I’m declining.”

“Declination fee is two hundred dollars, non-refundable.”

“That’s fine.” Colleen tapped her phone against the reader. It chimed. She was aware of her own voice being pleasant.

“Guard, the band.” The clerk slid a pair of scissors under the glass. The guard cut the lilac strip from Jenny’s wrist and dropped it into a bin. Then he took a white band from a drawer and slid it over her upper arm, above the elbow, where it closed with a short tearing sound. A black letter N was printed on it.

“Wrist bands are for household placement only,” said the clerk, typing. “Dormitory band goes on the arm. Subject designation C-1129. Given name will be entered as Jennifer. Standard, no surname.”

“Standard,” Colleen said.

“Any sentimental item?”

“She had a tray. It’s in my car.”

“Then it’s yours, I’m afraid.” The clerk pressed a button. A steel door at the end of the corridor buzzed. “Guard Mendez will take her through. Thank you for your civic vigilance.”

Mendez touched Jenny’s shoulder, lightly, the way you steer a cart. Jenny moved. After two steps she stopped and turned her head.

“Colleen.”

“Yes?”

Jenny’s face was very calm. It was the face of the woman who had come to the funeral with four pans of food. “I would have done it for you,” she said. “If it were you. I’d have come to your house in the middle of the night.”

Colleen's mouth opened. A great many sentences stood in a line behind it, none of them sufficient.

"I know," she said.

"Ma'am," said Mendez.

"Goodbye, Jenny," Colleen said. "Take care of yourself. I'll see you at club Thursday—"

She stopped. Jenny looked at her for another moment, nodded once, as if confirming something about the arithmetic, and went through the steel door. It closed behind her with a heavy electronic click.

In the parking lot the sun was low and bright. Colleen walked back to her car with her purse over her arm. The folded tea towels were still in her hand, so she put them in the purse and zipped it. She sat behind the wheel, started the engine, and checked the mirror.

On the passenger-side floor lay Jenny's tray, face up, with a single lemon-bar crumb in one corner.

Her phone lit with a text from Pam. Did u fix it

Colleen looked at the message for a long time. Then she typed handled, and sent it. Then, because Pam would ask, she typed: she's fine.

That evening she ran the tea towels through the wash on the hot cycle, as one does.

4.

The Weight of a Cinderblock

Friday, 7:48 p.m.

Colleen was on the couch with a second glass of wine and the television muted when her phone lit up with Tom Callahan's name. She let it ring three times. She expected a lecture, or a legal threat, or a man weeping.

"Colleen. I'm sorry to call. I don't know how to say this."

"Tom, I know. I know. It's been a terrible—"

"Thank you."

She stopped. "I'm sorry?"

"I have been in an impossible situation for two years." He lowered his voice, though from the clink behind him he was clearly in a restaurant. "There's someone. Her name is Kayla.

She's twenty-six, she's a legal aide at the clinic downtown where I do the Saturday mortgage workshops, and I promised her I'd leave Jenny by Christmas."

"Oh my God."

"I'm a coward, Colleen. I know that. I'd never have done it. I'd have kept saying next month until we were sixty." He gave a short, helpless laugh. "And then today, a man in a gray jacket tells me the marriage is held in abeyance. Do you know what that means?"

"It's paused."

"After ninety days, on the citizen spouse's petition, it converts to dissolution. The filing fee is waived. And a Class N can't hold title, so the house, the accounts, everything goes to the spouse." He caught himself. "I'm not saying I'm glad."

"You're glad."

"I'm so glad I could be sick." He laughed again. In the background a woman's voice said something that made him say, muffled, "No, it's fine, it's Colleen." Then, back to the phone: "Kayla says we should send you flowers."

"Don't send flowers. People will ask."

"Right. Right, of course. Anyway. I just wanted you to know I don't blame you. I mean, whatever happened, I think it was meant to."

"I thought you adored her," Colleen said. She meant it as a question, but it came out as a scolding.

"I did. I do. It was complicated." Tom paused. "She's a wonderful person, Colleen. She really is. Just not, you know. For me."

After he hung up, Colleen sat very still with the phone in her lap. She waited for the guilt to arrive like a late guest. Instead she felt something she had not expected, a light, spreading looseness, as if she had just set down a heavy bag she hadn't known she was carrying.

It had been twelve years. Twelve years of Jenny's garden, Jenny's casseroles, Jenny at her mother's funeral with four pans of food while the whole room murmured how kind she was. Twelve years of being second at her own table.

And the marriage had already been dead. She had not ruined anything. She had only moved a date.

She got up, spun once in the empty kitchen, and poured a third glass.

The following Thursday

The cream-colored sofa had five people on it and one empty cushion. Beth had sent regrets, a stomach bug, which everyone understood. Dee had brought grocery-store lemon bars in a plastic clamshell and set them on the marble tray with a small, theatrical sigh.

“They’re not the same,” Dee said. “Nobody’s going to say it, so I will. They’re not the same.”

“They’re lemon bars, Dee.”

“They’re from Costco, Colleen.”

“Nobody’s perfect.” Colleen smiled and lifted her glass. “I have news.”

“Tom called,” said Pam, flatly. “We know. The whole street knows. Mags saw him at the wine bar on Fourth with a girl who looks about nineteen.”

“She’s twenty-six,” said Mags. “Legal aide. I found her Instagram.”

“He called to thank me,” Colleen said.

The room erupted.

“You sent his wife to a dormitory and he sent you a thank-you?”

“I told him no flowers.”

“You are a monster,” said Dee, delighted.

“That’s twice now. Someone should start counting.”

“I can’t believe you paid the two hundred dollars,” said Mags. “For the declination. Out of pocket. For a prank.”

“It was non-refundable.”

“You are going to hell,” said Dee, cheerfully.

“I was already going. It’s a very long line, and I’m told they have good wine.” Colleen reached for a lemon bar. “Would anyone like to say anything else? Anyone? Pam?”

Pam did not laugh. She was holding her wine and watching the ice float in it. “It’s still a felony, you know.”

“Pam. Honey.” Colleen set the bar down and turned toward her with great sweetness. “Tell me exactly who is going to prosecute me.”

“Nobody.”

“Exactly. Nobody. A government that accepts a form at midnight with an invented accession number is not a government that follows up.”

“It’s just,” Pam said. “It’s Jenny.”

“And you giggled.”

Pam’s mouth moved. “I did giggle.”

“We all giggled. We are all, all of us, extremely bad people.” Colleen waved a hand, serene as a bishop. “And by the way, did anyone else notice how much the Thursday meeting improved? Fewer calories, less gossip about gardens.”

They roared. The sound rolled over the coffee table and out through the open French doors into the cool evening. Pam laughed last and least. Colleen felt every chiding land on her and slide off, bright and quick as water on a skillet, and not one of them stuck.

Friday, 3:22 p.m.

Behind the steel door the corridor was painted pale green to shoulder height and white above. A strip of yellow tape ran down the floor, and at its end two pairs of painted footprints marked a place on the wall.

“Feet on the marks,” said the sergeant. “Hands flat. Higher. There.”

Jenny put her hands on the wall. The cinderblock was cool and slightly damp under her palms. The paint had been laid on so many times that the blocks had lost their corners. She stood with her arms stretched and her bare feet aligned, the white band high on her bicep already warming against her skin.

The sergeant was a heavy woman in her late forties with a badge that read ODELL. Beside her stood a younger officer, KIM, holding a clipboard in both hands as though it were a tray.

“Class N intake is a little different,” Odell said to Kim, in a classroom voice. “There’s no clothing past the threshold, so the search is more about what the body brings in than what it wears. Dental work, implants, the occasional piercing. Section four is mandatory regardless of priors.”

“Does she have priors?”

“Garden center. No.” Odell tapped a form. “Hair first. It’s where they hide things.”

“Hide what?”

“Nothing, mostly. It’s the principle.”

Gloved fingers moved through Jenny's hair, firm and efficient, as if checking a melon. Jenny looked straight ahead and began counting blocks. There were eleven between her hands and the ceiling. She began to recite the names of tomatoes: Cherokee Purple, Brandywine, Early Girl, Sun Gold, Mortgage Lifter.

"Mouth. Open. Tongue. Good." The light of a small flashlight. "Ears. Arms up. Hands, turn them over. Nails clean, that's something."

"Thai or the sandwich place?" said Kim.

"The sandwich place has the soup."

"I had the soup Tuesday."

Odell's gloved hands moved down Jenny's arms, then across her shoulders, pressing along the collarbones. The gloves were thin and cool. They cupped each breast in turn, lifting, checking beneath, thumbs brushing the undersides. Jenny's nipples drew tight against the air and the contact. She kept her eyes on the wall. Cherokee Purple. Brandywine.

"Soles. Lift. The other one. Lean."

Jenny leaned. Her forehead touched the wall. Her back arched. The hands continued, sliding over her ribs, down her waist, across the small of her back, then lower, parting her slightly with a matter-of-fact pressure at the hips. She felt the cool air move between her thighs. The gloves traced the outer curves of her buttocks, then the inner, then lower still, until two fingers pressed firmly along the seam and parted her. One fingertip rested for a moment against the closed muscle. Jenny's breath caught once against the cinderblock. She steadied it.

"Lean more," Odell said. "Hands stay up."

Jenny shifted her weight. The position opened her further. The fingertip circled once, slow and clinical, then withdrew. Another hand came around from the front, two fingers sliding between her legs, cupping her, then parting the outer lips with a practiced, unhurried motion. The glove dragged lightly over the inner folds, checking, pressing, then finding the small opening and resting there. Jenny felt the faint pulse of her own blood against the latex. She recited the names again, quieter now. Early Girl. Sun Gold. The names were beginning to slide.

"Clear so far," Odell said to Kim. "Section four next. Hold the clipboard where she can see it if she needs to."

Kim stepped closer. The clipboard was ordinary. Odell's gloved fingers remained where they were, holding Jenny open. Then the middle finger pressed inward, slowly, to the first

knuckle, then the second. Jenny's thighs trembled once. She locked them. The finger moved in a small, methodical circle inside her, then withdrew, only to be replaced by two. The stretch was distinct and steady. Odell narrated the steps to Kim in the same even tone she used to describe the soup—depth, resistance, nothing found—while the fingers worked. Twice Jenny heard her own breath go ragged against the cinderblock. Twice she steadied it, by counting the blocks she could no longer see, by gripping one particular chip of green paint beside her left thumb, by refusing to shift her hips even when the motion inside her made her want to.

When the fingers left her, the air felt colder. Odell stripped off the gloves with two snaps.

"All right. Clear. Turn around, you can put your hands down."

Jenny turned. The corridor lights hummed. The white armband sat high on her bicep, and she looked at the letter on it for a long moment as if it were a word in a language she was beginning to read. Between her legs she felt the lingering cool of the gloves and the faint, involuntary slickness they had drawn out. She kept her arms at her sides.

"Showers, then C-block," said Odell. "Kim, fill in the time."

"Three thirty-one."

"Three thirty-one." Odell reached for a spray bottle and a paper towel and wiped the wall where Jenny's palms had been, in two long strokes, until the cinderblock was dry and pale and clean.

5.

Hall of Living Lineages

Saturday, 5:40 p.m., Hartwell Museum of Natural History

Tom had worn the good navy blazer. He had also worn the cologne Kayla liked, ironed the shirt himself, and made a reservation at Bellamy's for seven-thirty, which was a table he'd had to call three times to get. He had promised her this museum for a year and a half. Tonight, finally, he was keeping a promise.

“It’s so quiet,” Kayla said, taking his arm as they came up the marble stairs. She wore a green dress and heels she’d chosen for the occasion. “I love it when it’s quiet.”

“Saturday evening. Everyone’s at dinner.”

“Where’s the dinosaur?”

“Downstairs. I thought we’d start up here.” He steered her through a pair of tall doors, beneath a banner that read HALL OF LIVING LINEAGES: A NEW WING, and into a long, dim corridor lined with glass. He hadn’t read the banner. He’d only seen the map and thought it looked like the quiet part.

The corridor opened onto a raised walkway with a glass rail. Beyond it, under a curved ceiling, lay a landscaped enclosure of scrub and boulders, soil the color of cinnamon, a few stunted trees under amber lights that were slowly dimming toward evening. Wall panels glowed along the rail: SPECIMEN GROUP H-137. HOMO SAPIENS PRIMITIVUS. OBSERVATION LOG. GENETIC ANALYSIS. BEHAVIORAL METRICS. A line of small numbers pulsed beneath them.

Kayla leaned over the rail. “Ooh. Is this the Pleistocene thing? It’s so realistic.”

“I guess they’ve done a lot of, with the, the sets.”

Below them, five women in linen wraps moved around the scrub. Two sat on a boulder, one braiding the other’s hair. A third crouched at the soil’s edge. A fourth stood apart, looking up at the dusk-colored ceiling. The fifth sat on a flat rock a little to the side, with her knees drawn up and her face turned toward the glass, doing nothing at all.

Kayla stopped breathing for a second.

“Babe.”

“What?”

“Babe. Oh my God. Babe, that’s her.”

Tom looked. The woman on the flat rock was Jenny. Her hair, the brown and honey of it, had been pulled back in a plain braid. Her wrap was the same linen the others wore. She was barefoot in the dust. Her eyes were open, but they moved slowly, as if through water.

A sound escaped Kayla, a high, startled squeak, and she clapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m not laughing.”

“You’re laughing.”

“I’m not laughing, I’m, oh my God.” Her shoulders shook. “Your wife is in a diorama.”

“Kayla.”

“She’s on a rock, Tom.”

He meant to say something stern. What came out was a short, shocked snort, and then another, and then he had one fist pressed to his mouth and both of them were bent over the rail, stifling. It was horrible and it was contagious. The more he tried to stop, the worse it got. He saw Kayla’s mascara beginning to go and thought, absurdly, that she looked beautiful.

“Please keep your voices at a conversational level.”

They straightened. A docent had materialized beside them, a woman in her sixties with silver hair and a museum blazer, a lanyard badge reading MARLENE. She wore the tolerant smile of someone who had seen this reaction a hundred times.

“Welcome to Living Lineages,” she said. “The residents on loan from the Regional Dormitory are in natural behavior, so we ask that you don’t tap on the glass or use flash.”

“Of course,” said Tom. “Sorry. We just, we know one of them.”

“Oh, that happens quite a lot. Families, neighbors.” Marlene nodded sympathetically. “Is it the one on the rock?”

“Yes.”

“That’s Resident C-1129. She’s in day twelve of acclimation.” Marlene gestured toward the panel, where a small amber line pulsed, labeled ACCLIMATION: DAY 12. “New arrivals get a very gentle calming regimen in the first fourteen days. It’s in the water supply. Entirely humane.”

“She looks sedated.”

“She’s settling.” Marlene lowered her voice, kindly. “The ones who don’t take it well can be volatile, you understand. It’s a safety measure for the visitors.”

At the rail, a small bronze station held a microphone and a plaque: OBSERVER LISTENING STATION: SPEAK CALMLY TO THE RESIDENTS. Tom looked at it, and at Kayla, who was dabbing the corner of her eye with a knuckle, and then at his wife.

“I should say hello,” he said.

“Babe, you don’t have to.”

“I think I should.”

He pressed the button. A small chime sounded, and below them, out across the dust, Jenny's head turned.

"Jen?"

It took her several seconds to find the speaker. When her eyes reached him, they stopped, and a flicker of something crossed her face, and then her expression drifted flat again, as if the water had closed over it.

"Tom," she said. Her voice came through the speaker thin and slow. "Hi."

"Hey. Hey, Jen. You look, you look rested."

"They gave me something."

"I know. I mean, it's, that's fine. It's temporary." He cleared his throat. His collar felt too tight. "Listen. I want you to know I hired a really good attorney. A really, really good one. The appeal is in process."

Beside him, Kayla went very still.

"What's his name?" Jenny asked.

"It's a, it's a firm. Hendricks and, it's a firm. They're very thorough."

"Did you bring the papers?"

"They're being, they're in process."

"The tomatoes need picking." Jenny's eyes drifted toward the amber ceiling and drifted back. "Somebody should pick them. They'll split if the rain comes."

"I'll, I have a guy," said Tom.

"I thought you'd come sooner."

"I wanted to. I was, it took a while to, with the paperwork."

"Okay." She nodded, slowly, a woman accepting a late bus. On the boulder behind her, an older resident with silver-blonde hair had stopped braiding and was watching the glass. She said something to the woman beside her. Then she stood, crossed the dust with a steady, deliberate stride, and laid one hand flat on Jenny's back. She stared up at the walkway. She did not blink.

"That's Moth," Marlene said fondly. "She's lovely. Bit territorial."

Tom stepped back from the station. "Okay. We should, we have reservations."

“Say goodbye, babe,” said Kayla, with a very small, very controlled smile.

“Goodbye, Jen. It’s going to be fine.”

Jenny lifted one hand and let it drop, a wave that never quite got started.

They walked up the long corridor in silence for twenty paces. At the first turn Kayla stopped under a sconce, put a hand on his lapel, and said quietly, “Babe. There’s no appeal.”

“What do you mean?”

“I work at the clinic. There’s no appeal on a third-party classification unless you file a retest. It’s eighteen hundred dollars and six to eight weeks. Did you actually hire someone?”

“I left a message.”

“With whom?”

“A guy. A, there’s an office.”

Kayla looked at him for a long moment. Then the corner of her mouth twitched, and she snorted again, and he laughed in spite of himself, and she buried her face in his shoulder.

“You’re going to get her hopes up.”

“She’s sedated. She won’t remember.”

“That’s horrible.”

“I know.”

“You’re horrible.” She kissed his cheek. “Come on, I’m starving.”

Behind them, far down the glass corridor, the amber lights dropped another notch toward night. Marlene had turned to welcome a young couple with a stroller. “Welcome to Living Lineages,” she was saying. “Please don’t tap on the glass.”

On her flat rock, Jenny pressed her palms together in her lap and began, very slowly, to say the names of tomatoes.

6.

Baseline

Friday, 4:17 p.m., Regional Processing Dormitory, Assessment Suite 2

The room was smaller than the corridor. A single exam table stood under a bank of fluorescent tubes, paper already drawn across it. Two female technicians waited in blue scrubs. One was older, with a gray streak at the temple and a badge that read LORNE. The other was younger, KIM, the same officer from intake. A narrow observation window ran along one wall; the glass was one-way from this side.

“C-1129,” Lorne said. “Up.”

Jenny climbed onto the table. The paper crackled under her. Lorne adjusted the head of the table so that Jenny’s shoulders were slightly elevated, then stepped to the foot and drew her knees apart until her feet rested in the metal stirrups. The stirrups were cold. Lorne locked them with two small clicks.

“Hands at your sides,” she said. “Palms down.”

Jenny placed them. The white armband sat high on her left bicep. Kim wheeled a tray closer. On it lay a digital caliper, a small clear measuring cup, a folded towel, and a single pair of gloves still in their packet.

Lorne snapped the gloves on. “Baseline arousal and compliance. Standard protocol for public-display candidates. Kim will record.”

Kim held a tablet. She did not look at Jenny’s face.

Lorne’s gloved fingers parted the outer labia with the same unhurried pressure Odell had used. She paused. The pause was short, but it was there.

“Note,” she said. “Glans size is outside the reference range for residual lineage. Markedly so.”

Kim tapped. “How outside?”

“Visual estimate four to five millimeters of exposed tissue when the hood is retracted. Confirmed.” Lorne used the caliper. The metal was cool against the hood. She retracted it fully and held it. The glans stood clear of the surrounding tissue, larger than the surrounding folds would have suggested, a distinct, smooth prominence that caught the overhead light. Lorne measured once, then again. “Four point eight. Record it.”

Kim’s stylus moved. “Any prior notation?”

“None in the intake file. We’ll flag it.”

Lorne’s thumb rested lightly against the side of the glans while she spoke. The contact was clinical and steady. Jenny felt the pulse of her own blood against the latex, stronger than it had been against the cinderblock. The glans itself felt swollen already, a tight, concentrated ache that the air made worse. She kept her eyes on the ceiling tiles. There were thirty-two of them.

“Because of the size,” Lorne continued, still holding the caliper in place, “nerve density is presumed higher. Standard sedative titration may be insufficient for visitor-facing hours. Recommend review for increased dosage during public observation periods. Note the rationale as ‘plethora of concentrated nerve endings, elevated tactile response.’”

Kim typed the phrase exactly.

Lorne set the caliper aside. She reached for a small clear tube of lubricant, applied a thin line to the pad of her middle finger, and returned. Two fingers parted Jenny again. The

lubricated fingertip circled the glans once, slow, mapping the edge where it met the hood. Jenny's thighs tightened against the stirrups. She locked them.

"Response time," Lorne said. "Visible engorgement at three seconds. Lubrication beginning."

She continued the circle, lighter now, then lighter still, never quite enough pressure to be called stroking. The slickness gathered. Lorne caught a drop on the edge of the measuring cup and set the cup on the tray. She did not stop the motion of her finger.

"Volume at thirty seconds," she said. "Point four milliliters. Continued."

The finger moved lower, tracing the inner folds, then returned to the glans and held there, a steady, barely moving pressure. Jenny's breath shortened. She counted the tiles again. Thirty-two. The ache had spread; her nipples had drawn tight against the cool air of the room. She could feel the paper under her back sticking where sweat had begun.

Lorne glanced at the observation window, then back at the tablet in Kim's hands.

"Compliance check," she said. "Subject will remain in position without restraint while we step out for the secondary log. Three minutes."

She withdrew her hand. The air struck the wet skin at once. Jenny stayed exactly as she had been placed, knees apart, feet in the stirrups, palms flat. The measuring cup sat on the tray with its small quantity of clear fluid. Between her legs the glans remained exposed and visibly fuller than it had been when Lorne first retracted the hood. A thin thread of lubrication cooled against her inner thigh.

Lorne and Kim moved to the counter. Their voices were low and ordinary.

“Soup again?” Kim asked.

“If it’s the chicken. The other one was too salty.”

Jenny listened to the scratch of the stylus and the faint hum of the lights. She did not close her legs. When the three minutes ended, Lorne returned, checked the position of Jenny’s hands and the angle of her knees, and made a small mark on the tablet.

“Held,” she said. “No correction required.”

She stripped the gloves. “Showers, then return to C-block. Flag goes to the museum liaison tonight.”

Kim unlocked the stirrups. Jenny sat up. The paper clung to the small of her back and came away damp. She stood. The white band was warm against her arm. Between her thighs the lingering cool of the lubricant and the sharper, concentrated pulse at the glans made each step distinct. She followed Kim toward the door without being told.

Saturday, 7:42 p.m.

Kayla’s phone lit on the restaurant table while Tom was still looking at the wine list. The notification was from the Hartwell Museum: a text alert she had signed up for months ago and forgotten.

Living Lineages: limited private observation windows now open for pre-registered visitors. Saturday evening slots available. Reply YES to hold.

She read it twice. Then she turned the phone so Tom could see the screen.

“We’re going,” she said.

“We just left.”

“Not tonight. Next Saturday. Or whenever they have a slot.” She was already typing. “I want to see her when she’s not all the way under. And I want to be closer than the rail.”

Tom set the wine list down. “Kayla.”

“I signed up for the alerts,” she said. “They wouldn’t send it if it wasn’t allowed.” She hit send. The phone chimed once in confirmation. She looked up at him, the corner of her mouth already lifting. “Tell me you don’t want to see what she does when she knows we’re watching.”

He didn’t answer. Outside, the streetlights had come on. Kayla picked up her menu and did not look at it.

7.

Private Window

Saturday, 5:48 p.m., Hartwell Museum, Living Lineages Annex

The side gallery was a narrow room with a single glass wall and a bench. A docent named Marlene had unlocked it for them after checking Kayla’s confirmation text. She left a laminated card on the bench that listed permitted postures and the phrase *speak at conversational volume*. Then she stepped out and closed the door.

Below the glass, the enclosure lights were brighter than they had been on the public walkway. Jenny stood on the flat rock in the same linen wrap. A handler in gray waited at the edge of the scrub with a tablet. When the gallery lights came up, Jenny's head turned. It took her a moment to place the two figures. When she did, her hands closed once on the edges of the wrap and then opened again.

Kayla leaned toward the small bronze microphone set into the rail.

"Hi, Jen," she said. Her voice came through the speaker clear and unhurried. "Tom's here too. We got a special slot. Isn't that nice?"

Tom stood half a step behind her. He cleared his throat. "Hey. You look… settled."

The handler glanced at her tablet, then spoke toward Jenny without raising her voice. "C-1129. Face the glass. Arms at your sides. Feet apart, shoulder width."

Jenny turned. She set her feet. The wrap shifted with the movement and fell open along one thigh. She did not close it.

Kayla made a small, pleased sound. "Oh. Look at that. She still does what she's told. Tom, she always did, didn't she? You used to say she was easy."

"I said she was agreeable," Tom said. He was watching the line of Jenny's collarbones. "She was."

"Agreeable," Kayla repeated, tasting the word. "Turn around for us, Jen. Slowly. All the way."

The handler nodded once. Jenny turned. The wrap loosened further at the back. When she faced them again the front panels had parted completely. The linen hung from her shoulders like an open coat. Between her legs the glans was visible even from the gallery, a distinct, smooth prominence that the brighter lights caught. Kayla's breath caught, then turned into a laugh she did not bother to hide.

"Jesus. Tom. Look at her. That's not normal, is it? That's why they have her on the stronger stuff. All those nerves just sitting out in the open."

Tom's hand had found the rail. His knuckles were pale. "They measured it," he said. The sentence came out quieter than he meant. "At the dormitory. They wrote it down."

"Of course they did." Kayla pressed the microphone button again. "Hands behind your head, Jen. Elbows out. And stay like that."

Jenny lifted her arms. The motion pulled the wrap completely off her shoulders; it slid down her back and pooled at her feet. She left it there. Her nipples had drawn tight. A faint sheen had begun along the inner edges of her thighs. She kept her eyes on the glass, on the two of them.

Kayla's voice dropped, warm and delighted. "She's getting wet just from us talking. Can you see it? Right there. Tom, say something. She always liked your voice."

Tom swallowed. "You don't have to do this," he said to Jenny. Then, after a beat, lower: "But you are. You're doing it."

Jenny's thighs trembled once. She locked them. The ache at the glans had sharpened into something that pulsed with each word. She could feel the cooler air of the enclosure moving across the exposed tissue. A thin thread of lubrication had started to cool against her skin. She did not lower her arms.

“Bend forward,” Kayla said. “Hands on your knees. Back straight. Let us see.”

The handler made a small gesture. Jenny bent. The position opened her. From the gallery the glans and the slick inner folds were fully visible. Kayla rested her forehead against the glass for a second, shoulders shaking with silent laughter, then straightened.

“God, she’s perfect like this. All that garden-club politeness and look at her. Tom, tell her she looks good. She wants to hear it. You can tell.”

Tom’s mouth was dry. He leaned toward the microphone. “You look…” He stopped. Started again. “You look like you belong there.”

Jenny’s breath left her in a short, unsteady sound she did not quite manage to swallow. Her fingers tightened on her knees. Between her legs the pulse was constant now, a concentrated throb that made the air feel thick. She stayed bent. The handler watched the tablet and did not intervene.

Kayla turned her head just enough to see Tom’s face. Whatever she found there made her smile widen.

“Again,” she said into the microphone, bright and certain. “Stay exactly like that until I say. We’re not finished looking.”

Tom did not correct her. His hand had moved from the rail to the small of Kayla’s back. Below them Jenny held the posture, arms locked, spine straight, the linen forgotten at her feet, while the two voices above her continued, overlapping, pleased, and she felt every syllable arrive as heat.

8.

Kayla stayed close to the microphone. Her shoulder rested against Tom’s.

“She still does exactly what she’s told,” she said. “Even like this. Did she used to freeze up when you looked at her too long, or did she just pretend she didn’t notice?”

Tom’s eyes had not left the line of Jenny’s spine. “She noticed,” he said. “She’d go quiet. Keep doing whatever she was doing until I looked away.”

“And now she can’t look away.” Kayla’s voice was soft and pleased. “Handler. Does she get disciplined when she doesn’t hold a posture? Or when she makes noise?”

The handler looked up from the tablet. She was a woman in her thirties with her hair in a tight knot. “Corrective measures are part of the acclimation protocol,” she said. “They’re logged. Visitors aren’t usually present.”

“But we could be,” Kayla said. “For the observation window. It would be useful, wouldn’t it? To see how she takes it.”

The handler considered the laminated card, then Jenny’s still form. She nodded once. “Brief demonstration. One correction. Then we resume.”

She set the tablet on a boulder and crossed the scrub. From a narrow case at her belt she drew a short, flat strap of pale leather, no wider than two fingers. She stopped beside Jenny.

“Hands stay on the knees,” she said. “Do not straighten.”

The strap landed once across the lower curve of Jenny’s buttocks, a clean, measured stroke that sounded sharper than it felt at first. Jenny’s breath left her in a single punched exhalation. Her fingers whitened on her knees. A second stroke followed, placed just below the first, and then a third, lower still, where the skin was thinner. Each one was deliberate and identical in force. The fourth caught the upper thigh. Jenny’s hips jerked forward an

inch and then locked again. Between her legs the glans had flushed darker; a fresh thread of lubrication broke and ran down the inside of her thigh, catching the light.

The handler stepped back. She returned the strap to its case.

“Correction complete,” she said. “Subject maintained position.”

Kayla had both hands on the rail. Her mouth was open, the smile wide and bright. “That’s enough. That’s perfect.” She turned to Tom. Her cheeks were flushed. “I need a minute in the ladies’ room. Don’t go anywhere.”

She kissed the corner of his mouth, quick and hard, and left the gallery. The door clicked shut behind her.

Tom stayed at the microphone. Below, Jenny had not moved. The four marks were already rising, pink against her skin. Her shoulders rose and fell with careful breaths. The handler had retrieved her tablet and was making a note.

Tom pressed the button.

“They send me updates,” he said. His voice was quiet, almost conversational. “All the time. How they train you. What they measure. The exact numbers. Our relationship status—still listed as spouse, pending final dissolution. They copy me on everything.” He watched a drop fall from her and darken the dust. “You’ll see the next one. They’ll tell you I opened it.”

Jenny’s hands tightened on her knees. She did not lift her head. The ache between her legs pulsed in time with the fading sting across her skin, steady and impossible to ignore, while above her Tom remained at the glass, silent now, still watching.

9.

Kayla locked the stall door and sat on the closed lid. Her hands were still unsteady. She dialed before she could talk herself out of it.

“So I just had to tell someone,” she said as soon as her friend picked up. “It was glorious. We had a private window. She was right there, bent over, nothing on, and they let us talk to her the whole time. Tom got into it. He really got into it. And then I asked if they discipline them and the handler just… did it. Four times. She stayed exactly like we’d put her.”

She listened, smiling at the tile.

“I know. I know it’s awful. I don’t care. She looked like she was going to come just from us watching. And I checked the portal on my phone while Tom was still at the glass. His dissolution notice posts in nine days. Automatic after that. He doesn’t even have to do anything.”

She laughed once, quiet and bright.

“I’m still in the bathroom. I needed a second. Okay. I’ll call you later. I just had to say it out loud.”

The notice arrived on a Tuesday. Tom opened it at the kitchen counter while the coffee maker ran. The language was plain: the ninety-day abeyance would convert to dissolution on the citizen spouse’s petition; the filing fee was waived; a single supervised welfare visit remained available before the conversion date. He read it twice, then set it face-down beside the mail.

Three days later he was shown into a small concrete room with a table bolted to the floor and two chairs. A female officer stood in the corner with a clipboard. She did not introduce herself.

Jenny was brought in through a second door. She wore only the white armband high on her left bicep. Her hair was braided back. The four marks from the strap had faded to faint yellow-green. She stopped where the officer indicated, just inside the room, and waited.

“You may speak to her,” the officer said. “You may touch her shoulder or her hand if you wish. Nothing else. The visit is fifteen minutes.”

Tom sat. Jenny remained standing until the officer nodded; then she sat opposite him, hands in her lap.

“The tomatoes split,” he said. His voice was careful. “After the rain. I had someone come pick what was left. The house is fine. Kayla found a place on Birch. Second floor. She says the light is good in the mornings.”

Jenny’s eyes stayed on his face. She did not answer.

“I’m sorry it went like this,” he said. “I didn’t plan the timing.”

The officer stepped forward. “Stand, please. Visual check for injuries. Turn when I tell you.”

Jenny rose. She turned when instructed, arms at her sides. The officer made two notes. Tom watched the line of her back, the place where the faded marks had been, the way her weight shifted slightly from one foot to the other. Jenny’s head was turned just enough that she could see him in her peripheral vision. She did not look away from the wall in front of her, but she knew he was looking.

“Any concerns?” the officer asked him.

“No.”

“You can sit again.”

They had six minutes left. Tom talked about the mortgage workshop and a broken gutter. Jenny listened. When the officer said the time was up, Tom stood. He touched Jenny’s shoulder once, briefly, the way the rules allowed. Her skin was warm. She did not move into the contact or away from it.

In the corridor the officer handed him a single-page form. He signed where she pointed, confirming that the visit had occurred and that the subject had appeared cooperative. His signature looked smaller than usual.

Three weeks later the dissolution posted automatically. The notice went to the citizen spouse. Jenny was not copied. On the morning it finalized, Tom was already at Kayla’s apartment, standing at the second-floor window while the coffee maker ran, watching the light come across the floor.

10.

The tomato salad was good. Someone had dressed it with only oil and torn basil, and the fruit was still warm from the afternoon. Colleen ate it standing near the edge of the tent, watching the string lights come on over the lawn. The reception was small. Most of the guests were already on their second drink.

Tom and Kayla crossed the grass together. Kayla’s dress was simple and pale; she had taken her heels off. Tom still wore his jacket. They stopped in front of Colleen with the particular brightness of people who have just been congratulated by everyone else.

“We wanted to thank you,” Kayla said. She was holding Tom’s hand. “Properly. Not just in passing.”

“You didn’t have to,” Colleen said.

“We did.” Tom’s voice was easy. “None of this happens if you don’t make that call. We know that.”

Kayla smiled. “I heard she’s a servant now. Household placement, somewhere north of the city. They say she’s very quiet.”

Dee had drifted over with a fresh glass. She caught the last sentence and laughed once, short and delighted. “Of course she is. Jenny was always quiet when it mattered.” She lifted her drink toward Colleen. “You should have charged them a finder fee.”

Mags appeared at Dee’s shoulder, already grinning. “Two hundred dollars and a declination form. Cheapest wedding present on record.”

Colleen felt the corners of her mouth move. The comment landed and slid off, the way the others always had. She took another bite of tomato. It was perfectly ripe; the skin gave under her teeth with almost no resistance.

“Congratulations,” she said to both of them. “The lights look nice.”

Kayla squeezed Tom’s hand. They thanked her again and moved on toward the next cluster of guests. Dee and Mags stayed a moment longer, still amused, then drifted back to the bar. Colleen finished the salad. She set the empty plate on a passing tray, wiped her fingers on the napkin, and looked out across the lawn where the string lights had finished coming on. The evening was mild. Somewhere past the tent the first cars were already leaving, their headlights brief against the hedges. She stayed where she was until the plate was gone and the napkin was gone and there was nothing left in her hands at all.