

Retirement Package

Chapter 3

Florescent lights lit the hallway.

After a while, she'd kinda gotten used to this place. The lack of natural light sucked – Jennifer missed the sunlight, the *warmth* of it. But she didn't dream of it any more. All of her dreams now were baby-related.

Around her, Jennifer's friends gossiped.

Less than there used to be. Carla and Renee had disappeared after giving birth, taking care of their newborns with no time to spare for anything else. But still enough remained that Jennifer never felt alone in this place.

The girls were, right then, chatting about guards. Which ones were cute, which ones were ugly, which ones were fun to talk to, which ones were all business. There were only a handful, few enough that Jennifer knew them all by name. And the girls had had this conversation so many times at this point that Jennifer was certain she'd already lived this exact day once before already.

But, down here, there wasn't a whole lot of new things to gossip about. It was so static, unchanging. Predictable.

Right as the metal door to their class unlocked, began swinging open, Jennifer felt it.

A throbbing ache at the base of her spine, rippling out over her lower torso. Almost like a painful cramp.

She froze in place, looked down at herself – her very pregnant belly.

A few seconds passed, and nothing happened.

Then, just as she was about to take a step inside the previously locked classroom, the ache blossomed again. An angry pain on her already strained lower back.

She stared down at herself, her belly. Some of the other women turned to look at her – all of them in varying states of pregnancy themselves. There were raised eyebrows; a few smiles that hadn't quite caught on yet, and a few looks of concern.

Jennifer gasped. Felt the burst of fluid pouring down her legs.

Her water breaking.

It splashed on the floor and, for some bizarre reason, Jennifer found herself thinking only one, dumb thought.

Well, this dress is ruined.

Gasps. All of the girls catching on at once.

Someone – Jennifer couldn't see who – shouted out.

“Jennifer's baby is coming!”

What followed after that was a blur. Lots of activity. Jennifer being moved to a medical section of the underground bunker. Doctors and nurses, Derek and Julie. So many faces. Vaguely, she remembered pushing and sweating and straining. And, her very last memory before blacking out, was the sound of a little baby's screaming.

She woke in a comfortable bed, covered in clean sheets and blankets. As her eyes blinked open, she had to force them shut.

Bright light. Bright enough that it hurt her eyes if she tried to open them.

But open them she did. Slowly, one eye first, then the other. Letting her irises adjust to the unnatural brightness. And, when they got used to that blindingly bright light, Jennifer realised what it was.

Sunlight.

Real, actual sunlight.

She wasn't in the bunker!

The thought pushed everything else aside. All the confusion evaporated as Jennifer

shot up in bed, looked around. She ached downstairs, remembered what'd happened before she'd passed out.

Her baby. Where was her baby?

She was in a bedroom, laying on a king-sized bed. There were wardrobes around her, dressing tables, lamps. An alarm clock. The walls were plain and white, the carpet a dull brown. Just a regular, ordinary bedroom.

A single window, curtains open. Sunlight streaming in.

Where in the world was she? What'd happened after she'd given birth?

She tried to get out of bed, but her legs wouldn't obey her. The ache and pain and strain of giving birth were still there. She could barely even sit up, with how little energy she had.

Thankfully, she didn't have to wait long for answers.

Just a few minutes after waking up, the bedroom door opened.

In walked Julie, carrying a bundled baby in her arms. A smile on her face, wearing a traditional housewife's dress. She didn't utter a word, simply walked around the bed, handed the baby to Jennifer.

"Finally awake?" The woman said in a soft whisper. "You were out for quite a while."

"Wha-" Jennifer's voice cracked as she tried to speak. "Where are we?"

"Shh," Julie cooed. "The baby's sleeping. Don't want to wake him. Rest, Jennifer. You have a lot of questions, and I'll answer all of them. But, for now, you need to rest. Everything is okay."

Jennifer opened her mouth to reply. But, even as she was thinking of what to say, her head throbbed hard – silencing her before she could speak. She closed her mouth, nodded her head. And, instead of complaining, she looked down at her baby – her son – and smiled, a tear in her eye.

"We call this place New Destiny," Julie explained to her as they walked around the large manor. "Though people have taken to calling it Newdes. It's your new home, Jennifer. Our new home."

It was a large building. Enough to house several families. And elegant. The kind of old manor home that Julie could've only ever dreamed about living in. And it wasn't the only one. Other manors dotted the area, each with large yards and gardens, but all within easy walking distance. A lush landscape, with birds chirping in trees and water fountains trickling.

"Think of the Bunker as an airport terminal. Or the plane itself. It's where you wait between where you were, and where you're going – here. When the other women there give birth, they'll be brought here too."

Jennifer tried to listen. Tried to pay attention. But there it was again. That dull throbbing inside her skull.

"No-one will ever bother us here," Julie was saying, leading the way in her tour. "No-one but us even know this place exists. It's not on any maps, not anywhere charted or..."

Throb. Throb. Throb. In it came, strong and painful. Then fading away to nothing, only to return a few seconds later. Seven seconds, throb. Seven seconds, throb.

Jennifer clutched her head, gasped in pain.

"Headache?" Julie asked, voice sounding far away.

Jennifer grunted, nodded her head.

"That's common," the woman said. "For new arrivals. You'll acclimatise soon enough, and the headaches will go away."

"Is there a drug store here?" Jennifer asked, still clutching her head. "Any place I can get painkillers?"

"I'm afraid not," the woman answered, pursing her lips. "We prefer more *natural* remedies, remember? Don't worry, the headaches will stop soon enough. Until then, there

is a method we can utilise to numb you to the pain.”

Jennifer looked up at her.

“Hypnosis,” Julie smiled. “It’s rather effective, I must say.”

“Mom,” Jennifer whined, “do we *have* to go?”

“It’s important to keep up appearances,” Julie scolded. “Don’t be a brat, Jennifer. Remember what I taught you about being a proper woman?”

No. Jennifer didn’t remember that.

But she kept quiet, didn’t argue back. Against her mother, there was nothing she could do. Julie *always* got what she wanted.

“Come now,” Julie said, snapping her fingers. “Your sisters are waiting.”

“I have sisters?” Jennifer asked, confused.

Why was her brain so foggy and blank? She couldn’t focus on anything. She tried doing the thing her mother had taught her – listening to the seven second beat to calm herself.

“Don’t be foolish,” Julie snapped. “Of course you have sisters. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

“No! No, I remember,” Jennifer said. And, as she spoke the words, she *did* remember. “I have two sisters. They’re downstairs waiting for us?”

“That’s right,” Julie said. “Now follow me.”

Jennifer did as she was told, followed her mother through the house. Downstairs, just as Julie had said, Jennifer’s sisters were there waiting.

Carla and Renee, wearing beautiful sun dresses. Carla standing to one side, Renee sitting on Derek’s lap.

“Are we ready to go?” Julie asked the room.

“Yes, mother,” everyone – including Derek – answered in unison.

“Good,” Julie nodded. “Then let’s get going. Don’t want to be late for the community meeting, do we?”

“No, mother.”

It was nice, having her sisters and mother at home.

Four pairs of hands were a lot more useful at keeping everything perfect than two hands were – even with the extra work that needed doing now. Three babies; one for each of the sisters. And two husbands – Derek for Jennifer and Barry for Carla.

Renee’s husband had vanished at some point, leaving her and their child alone. Where he went, no-one seemed to know. Whenever Jennifer brought it up with her mother, Julie always shot the question down without answering.

It was nice, having her family around. But there were moments...

Jennifer shook her head, tried to ignore Renee’s giggling in the next room. Ignore Derek’s laughter.

It was nothing. Nothing at all.

So what if Derek and Renee liked spending so much time together? They were family. Jennifer’s husband and sister. She had *nothing* to worry about. They’d never...

Again, she shook her head – pushed the thought aside.

She focused on cleaning as her sister’s giggles echoed through the house. Cleaned all the harder when the giggles and laughter faded away. And, when she went to go clean the room her husband and sister were in, found the door locked, she moved on. Went to go clean a different room.

Everything was fine. Jennifer was *happy*.

“Do you *honestly* think your husband would cheat on you?” Julie asked, lacing every word with condescension. “And with your own sister no less? Do you think so little of the man

you claim to love?"

"No!" Jennifer tried to say. "I don't- I just-"

"You," Julie said, jabbing her finger at Jennifer. "Are a spoiled brat. Ungrateful for all the things your sister and husband have done for you. Who gave you this wonderful home to live in? Who works tirelessly cleaning it and looking after your child? And all *you* can think of is yourself."

"That's not-"

"Quiet," Julie snapped. "Am I your mother, yes or no?"

"Yes," Jennifer answered.

"Is Renee your sister, yes or no?"

"Yes," Jennifer repeated.

"Is Derek your husband?"

"Yes."

"Are we your family?"

"Yes."

"Then stop looking for holes, and stop looking for flaws. Family trusts family. Understood?"

"I-"

"Understood?"

"Yes, Mother."

Every seven seconds, a thrum of contentedness.

Jennifer hummed softly as she set her son down in his crib, wished him goodnight, left his room. She crept downstairs, careful not to wake any of the sleeping babies.

Then, when she was far enough away from those bedrooms, she began humming a little louder. A seven second beat, over and over again. She sank herself into her housework, into caring for her home – as a good wife should.

When Julie came to get her, told her to follow, Jennifer did just that – as any obedient daughter should.

She followed her mother out of the house, down the garden to a picnic table. Where two figures sat – too far away to make out at first. A man and a woman, in the shade of an oak tree.

Birds sang, water sprinkled.

As they got closer, Jennifer saw a baby in the woman's arms. And, more importantly, she saw the woman's face. A familiar face. A friend's face.

One of the women from the Bunker!

Jennifer froze in place, frowned.

Bunker? What bunker? She'd never been in a bunker, had she?

And yet, she recognised the woman. Somehow.

Julie turned to look at her, sighed. The woman raised her hand, snapped her fingers, gestured at the woman and man.

"This is Sandra," Julie said. "Your sister. And her husband Bill. And their newborn. Sandra is two years younger than you. You've known her ever since she was born. That's why you recognise her. There is, and has never been, a bunker."

Julie snapped her fingers again.

Jennifer blinked.

Why did her mother do that? Randomly snap her fingers for no reason like that?

She shook her head, cleared it.

Then saw her sister Sandra and her brother-in-law Bill sitting there, their newborn bundled up in Sandra's arms.

"Sandra!" Jennifer smiled. "Bill! How are you two?"