

SIRENS' WALL

A Novel by Shade Woo

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CONTENT NOTE

This novel depicts psychological abuse, sexual coercion within marriage, and institutional control. It contains scenes of degradation and non-consensual power dynamics.

It is not a romance. It is not erotica.

Read at your discretion.

ELISEE RETREAT

Prologue

The kitchen still smelled like the onions she'd sautéed at six forty-five, before he was up, before the house had fully committed to being awake. Jeff stood in the doorway with his briefcase in one hand and his tie loosened with the other and watched her reach for the olive oil on the second shelf, the one she always had to stretch for, and the stretch pulled her shirt up two inches above the waistband of her leggings and showed the pale strip of skin beneath, and he thought, not for the first time, that he could measure his whole life in these glimpses.

She turned. Saw him. Smiled.

"There's leftover risotto."

"Perfect."

She went back to the stove. He set the briefcase by the door. Loosened the tie the rest of the way, pulled it over his head, folded it once, draped it over the back of the kitchen chair. These were rituals. The order mattered: briefcase, tie, shoes, jacket. If he changed the order, something was wrong. If he sat down before removing his shoes, she'd look at him. Not with concern—with attention. She knew the order too.

He opened the refrigerator. The risotto was in the blue bowl, the one with the chip on the rim from the time she'd knocked it against the faucet. He'd superglued it. Three years ago. Four. He couldn't remember. The bowl had been

chipped for so long it had become part of its identity, like a scar on someone you love.

He microwaved it, standing with his back to her while the plate turned slowly behind the glass, the hum filling the quiet kitchen. She was chopping something. Garlic, maybe. The sound was small and deliberate—*tap, tap, tap*—the knife hitting the board with the controlled rhythm of someone who had made this motion ten thousand times.

The microwave beeped. He sat at the island. She didn't sit with him—she never did during the week, she ate earlier, she said she wasn't hungry at eight—and the absence of her across the table was not a wound but a fact, the way the chip in the bowl was a fact. You stopped noticing after a while. You didn't stop feeling it.

Chapter 1

He found it one morning, on the kitchen island, face-down, open to a page she had been reading.

The magazine was one of the new ones. Glossy, oversized, thick with perfume samples and ads for skincare that cost more than his first car. They had started appearing in the mail three months ago, replacing the cooking publications and the shelter magazines she used to subscribe to. The new ones had names like Elevate and Verity and featured cover lines about boundaries and reclamation and becoming the architect of your own life. He had flipped through one once, in the bathroom, and had felt vaguely uneasy without being able to say why. The articles weren't hostile. They weren't about men at all. They were about her. Her space. Her needs. Her untapped potential. They read like operating manuals for a life that didn't include him.

This one was open to a spread near the middle. She had probably been reading it over breakfast. The coffee cup was still in the sink, a faint rim of lipstick on the edge. The magazine was just there, face-down, the way you leave anything you haven't put away yet.

He turned it over.

The headline, set in clean serif type over a photograph of an attractive woman in her forties walking alone along a beach, read:

DIVORCE AT FORTY: Why the Second Act Is Better Than the First

Jeff stood at the island in his boxer briefs and undershirt, holding the coffee pot, and read it.

The article was long. Four pages. It profiled three women—a corporate lawyer in Chicago, a gallery owner in Santa Fe, a former stay-at-home mother in Greenwich—who had left their marriages after twenty or more years. The tone was warm, unhurried, and utterly without doubt. Not a single voice in the article wondered if the decision had been hard. Not a single voice expressed regret. The subtext was not subtext at all: leaving was strength. Staying was fear.

Jeff's eyes moved to the sidebar on the right side of the page. It was headlined: **The Numbers: What She's Actually Entitled To.**

It was laid out like a financial infographic—clean, colorful, designed to be digested over a latte. Bullet points. Bold statistics. Pull quotes from a New York divorce attorney identified only as "a partner at a leading Manhattan firm."

Jeff read the bullet points. He read them slowly, the way a man reads a diagnosis.

In marriages lasting longer than fifteen years, courts in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut typically award alimony for a duration equal to one-third to one-half the length of the marriage. A twenty-year marriage can mean seven to ten years of monthly payments.

The primary residence is awarded to the custodial spouse in over seventy percent of contested cases where children

are involved. In cases without children, the outcome depends on financial capacity—but the spouse with the lower earning power is heavily favored.

"Women don't realize how much leverage they have," the attorney is quoted as saying. "The law was written to protect them. The courts are not neutral. They are structured to ensure that a woman who has spent two decades supporting her husband's career does not walk away empty-handed. If you built the life, you own a piece of it. It's that simple."

"That simple."

Jeff set the coffee pot down. His hands were perfectly steady. He noticed that, and the steadiness struck him as strange, because something inside him was not steady at all. Something inside him was sliding, like a load shifting in the back of a truck on a curve.

He looked at the magazine again. At the beach. At the woman walking alone. At the clean, serif headline that promised her a better second act.

It was just a magazine. Women read magazines. Diane had always read magazines. She had probably flipped past the table of contents, seen the headline, and read it the way anyone reads anything over breakfast—casually, half-attentive, with one eye on the coffee and the other on the clock. It didn't mean anything. It was an article, not a plan. People read about things they would never do. People read about climbing Everest every day.

He closed the magazine and set it on the counter, right-side up, the way she had probably left it before she went upstairs to shower.

Then he made his coffee.

Parker had come back from lunch that day and sat in his office with the door open and stared at his computer screen for forty minutes without moving the mouse. Jeff had walked past twice. The second time, Parker said, without looking up: "She got the brownstone."

Jeff stopped. "What?"

"The brownstone. Forty-one years of equity between me and the bank, and she got it. Judge signed this morning."

Parker's voice was calm. Not the calm of a man holding himself together—the calm of a man who had already fallen and was describing the ground on the way down.

"The kids?"

"Alternate weeks. She's claiming the primary residence affects custody stability. Her attorney filed a brief." Parker finally looked at him. His eyes were dry and focused, the way eyes get when they've decided not to feel something.

"Jeff, I paid for that brownstone. I paid for the renovation. I paid for the new roof in 2019. I have the receipts in a folder in my desk right now. The judge looked at the receipts and gave her the house."

"What about—"

"Alimony. Eight years or remarriage, whichever comes first. Child support on top. My take-home is going to be—" He stopped. Did the math in his head. Jeff watched him do it, watched the numbers land like stones in still water, one by one. "Thirty-six percent of what it is now. I'm fifty-three years old, Jeff. I'll be sixty-one when this ends. If it ends."

Jeff didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. The numbers spoke for themselves, and they spoke in the voice of a system that had been designed, slowly and over decades, to produce exactly this outcome.

"I'm in Jersey now," Parker said. "Studio apartment. One room. I moved the clothes I could fit in three suitcases. Everything else is in the brownstone. She's keeping it or selling it—I don't get to know which."

He stood up. Straightened his tie—a reflex, the kind of thing a man does when his body doesn't know what else to do. He walked past Jeff and down the hall toward the restroom, and Jeff watched him go and thought: *that man is gone*. Not dead. Gone. The Parker who'd played golf on Saturdays and talked about his daughter's soccer games and kept a bottle of Scotch in his bottom drawer—that man had been replaced by something smaller, something that fit in a Jersey studio with three suitcases of clothes.

Jeff went back to his office. Closed the door. Did not open the bottom drawer where his own Scotch sat.

The risotto was good. It was always good. Diane's cooking had been the first thing he'd noticed about her, fifteen years ago, at the dinner party where his college roommate had introduced them. She'd brought a lemon tart. The crust was perfect—flaky, buttery, not too sweet—and when he'd asked her about it, she'd said, "My grandmother's recipe," with a kind of casual pride that assumed everyone's grandmother had a recipe like that. They weren't all like that. He knew. His mother's cooking had been functional, sustenance, calories arranged on a plate. Diane's cooking was something else. It was the kind of thing a man could build a life around.

He ate. She cleaned. The tap ran. She washed the knife, the board, the bowl she'd used for the garlic. Her movements were efficient and unhurried—she'd done this so many times that her body had memorized the sequence, and her mind was somewhere else. He wondered where. He didn't ask. He'd stopped asking a while ago. Not because he didn't care—because the answers had started to feel like walls.

"How was work?"

"Fine."

"Did you eat?"

"I'm eating now."

She nodded. Dried her hands on the towel. Walked past him toward the living room. Her hand touched his shoulder as she went—brief, light, the weight of her palm resting on him for half a second—and the touch was so ordinary, so reflexive, that it could have meant nothing. It could have

meant I see you, you're here, this is fine. It could also have meant I'm touching you because I'm supposed to, because this is what wives do when they walk past their husbands in kitchens, because if I stop touching you something will change and I'm not ready for it to change.

He couldn't tell which. He'd never been able to tell which. That uncertainty was the quietest thing in the house, and the most constant.

The other ones—the ones who'd come before Parker, the ones he'd watched from a distance, the names that circulated through the firm like a quiet disease—Crawford, from Mergers, who'd moved into his brother's guest room and still wasn't out two years later. Emery, from Tax, whose wife had taken the house in Darien and both cars and the dog, and who now lived in a one-bedroom in Bronx and had lost twenty pounds he couldn't afford to lose. Goldberg, from Real Estate, who'd simply stopped coming to work one day and was later found to be living in a hotel near the airport, paying weekly, no forwarding address.

These were not tragic stories. There was nothing dramatic in them. They were arithmetic stories. The marriage ended. The court divided the assets. The man walked away with less than half, because half was the mathematical best case, and the math never gave you the best case. It gave you fees and adjustments and the house you'd paid for and the children you'd raised and the dog you'd walked every morning, and when the math was done, you were fifty or

fifty-five or sixty, and you were alone, and you were poor, and the dating market was a slaughterhouse for men who were fifty and alone and poor.

Jeff knew the numbers. He was a financial professional. He could model outcomes. He'd modeled his own, late at night, in the home office Diane had set up for him when they'd bought the house—the one with the nice view and the kitchen island where he was sitting right now. The model was not kind.

He thought about his Partnership. Three years of eighty-hour weeks. Three years of telling himself it was for them—for the house, for the schools they'd never need because there were no children, for the retirement that would let them travel when he was sixty and she was fifty-three.

He had given her everything except the one thing she actually wanted: his presence.

And she had stopped asking for it. That was the part he couldn't forgive himself for. Not that she had withdrawn—it was that he hadn't noticed until the withdrawal was complete. One day he looked up from his desk and realized the house was quiet, and it had been quiet for months, and he had never once stopped to ask why.

The partnership vote had been unanimous. The firm had given him a raise, a corner office, and a seat at the table he had spent his entire career fighting to reach.

Now he sat at that table and did the math on losing it all.

The house: \$1.4 million, \$620,000 in equity. Hers, probably, or split, which in practice meant hers because he couldn't afford to buy her out.

The retirement accounts: \$890,000. Split. His half: \$445,000. Enough to feel like something. Not enough to be anything.

His salary: \$285,000. There were no children—just the two of them, and fifteen years of a standard of living the court would insist Diane maintain. Alimony would drop his take-home to something that would pay for a small apartment and not much else.

His age: forty-six. In fourteen years, he'd be sixty. In fourteen years, he'd be the man in the Jersey studio with three suitcases, except he wouldn't have Parker's calm. He'd have whatever was left after the thing that kept him together—the house, the routine, the sight of Diane in the kitchen at six forty-five—was taken apart and distributed by a judge who'd spent eleven minutes looking at his file.

He rinsed his plate. Put it in the dishwasher. The kitchen was clean now, and Diane was in the living room, and the room was quiet in the way rooms get when the day is ending and the people inside it have nothing left to say to each other.

He found her on the couch with her phone. The TV was on, volume low—some home renovation show, the kind where couples picked between three houses and argued about countertops. She didn't look up when he sat in the armchair across from her. Her feet were bare. They were always bare in the evening—it was a habit he'd never questioned and now couldn't stop noticing. Her feet on the

ottoman, the arches curved, the toes slightly curled, the sheer pink polish she'd started wearing a few months ago. She crossed her ankles. Uncrossed them. The movement was idle, unconscious—the kind of thing a body does when the mind is elsewhere.

He watched her feet the way he always watched them: quickly, then away, then back. The pattern was so ingrained he no longer registered it as a choice. It was just something his eyes did when her feet were in the room, the way his lungs pulled air when there was air to pull.

The TV showed a couple standing in a kitchen that wasn't theirs, arguing about subway tile. The wife wanted herringbone. The husband wanted straight stack. The wife said, "I just think it would look nicer," and the husband said, "It's also forty percent more," and the wife gave him a look—not angry, just tired—and the husband saw the look and said, "You know what, let's do herringbone," and the wife smiled, and the tension dissolved, and the narrator said something about compromise.

Diane looked up from her phone.

"Do you think that's a nice kitchen?"

"It's fine."

"It's not our kitchen."

"No."

She went back to her phone. He went back to her feet. The moment passed like moments pass in living rooms across the country every night—unremarkable, weightless, the kind of moment that only becomes significant later, when

you look back and realize it was the last time something was still whole.

Chapter 2

The plane lifted off the runway at JFK at eight-fifteen in the morning, and for the first forty-five minutes, Jeff pretended to read a financial quarterly. He turned the pages at regular intervals. His eyes moved across the columns of text. He absorbed nothing.

Diane was in the window seat. She had put on her noise-canceling headphones the moment the wheels left the ground and hadn't taken them off since. She was watching something on her phone—a series, maybe, or a video. The screen's glow turned her face blue and flickering in the darkened cabin. Occasionally she smiled. Not at him. At whatever was happening in the space behind her eyes.

He set the quarterly in the seatback pocket and looked at the back of her head.

They had tried the conventional route first. Six months of Thursday evenings with Dr. Lenard—a soft-spoken man who charged four hundred dollars an hour and specialized in what his website called relational realignment. Jeff had approached it the way he approached everything: methodically. He listened better. He initiated more. He paid attention to the signals she gave and tried to respond to them, and sometimes he got it right, and sometimes—often—he could feel, in the silence afterward, that he had not. That she was sitting next to him in the therapist's office, very still, in the way a person sits still when they are deciding not to say something. He never asked what the something was.

Five hours and fifty minutes to landing.

He had made Partner in January. Three years of missed dinners and rescheduled vacations and Diane falling asleep alone in the master bedroom while he sat in his office under fluorescent lights, reviewing term sheets at midnight. Three years of telling himself it was for them—for the house, for the life they'd built.

What he never said—what he barely admitted to himself—was what those three years had cost her.

Diane had worked for a small, respected curatorial practice on the Lower East Side. She had an eye for space and light that made other dealers envious. It wasn't a hobby; it was the architecture of her identity. And she had held onto it through the first twelve years of their marriage, even as Jeff's hours grew longer and the household logistics fell increasingly on her.

Then, six months ago, they started seeing Dr. Lenard.

The therapist had talked about removing stressors. About creating space for intimacy. About the need for one of them to bend. And Diane, desperate and exhausted and willing to try anything, had made the calculation that Jeff apparently could not: she quit the gallery.

She told him it was fine. She told him it would give them the time they needed to reconnect. She told herself that if she cleared the decks, Jeff would finally step back from the ledge of his ambition and meet her in the middle of their life.

He didn't.

The partnership vote came three months into therapy. Jeff celebrated with the senior partners at a steakhouse in Midtown while Diane stayed home.

The therapy had ended in March. Not badly—no rupture, no final session where truths were finally said. It simply concluded, the way an expensive subscription concludes when no one remembers to cancel it. Lenard called it a natural plateau. Jeff had nodded, grateful for the clinical language.

Diane had nodded too. But something in her eyes had gone quiet and flat, the way a sea goes flat just before the pressure drops.

He thought about Parker. Not about the brownstone or the alimony or the Jersey studio—those were details, mechanics, the visible machinery of destruction. He thought about Parker's face when he'd said I paid for that brownstone. The word paid. The way it sat in the sentence like a gravestone. As if the paying should have meant something. As if the twenty years of showing up and writing checks and sitting across from a woman at dinner and carrying the weight of a shared life on his shoulders—as if all of that paying should have added up to something the court couldn't take away.

But it hadn't. The court could take all of it. And the taking was not malicious—it was administrative. Forms filed. Motions granted. Signatures applied. The machine ran the way it ran, and the man who'd been fed into it came out the other side diminished and quiet.

Jeff leaned his head against the window. The acrylic was cold against his temple. Outside, thirty-five thousand feet

above the Atlantic, there was nothing but blackness. No landmarks. No reference points. Just the hum of the engines and the slow, blinking wing light tracing an invisible arc through the dark.

Five hours and ten minutes to landing.

He turned his head and looked at Diane again. She was still watching her screen, her face tilted toward the blue glow. She had crossed her legs. Her foot, in a low suede pump, was resting on its heel, her ankle exposed. She was wearing slim black trousers and a cream-colored cashmere sweater that she had bought the week before, without asking him about it, without mentioning the price. Small things. The kind of things a woman buys when she is no longer consulting anyone about the life she is building.

He could not imagine the seat beside him without her.

This was the thought. Not the house, not the equity, not the retirement accounts. The seat. The specific presence of her in the seat beside him—the way she reached across him to close the window shade, the way her shoulder brushed his arm when she shifted position, the way her shampoo smelled faintly above the recycled cabin air. Without her, the seat was just polyester and a folding tray. Without her, the flight was just transportation. Without her, the life they were flying toward was walls and a mortgage and silence in the evenings where her voice used to be.

He could survive the financial ruin. He couldn't survive her absence. That was the arithmetic the court didn't model, the variable that didn't appear on any spreadsheet. He had built his entire identity around being her husband—not the title, not the legal status, but the act of it. The daily, invisible act

of being the man who came home to her, who sat in the armchair across from her, who watched her feet on the ottoman and listened to her ask about countertops and ate the risotto she'd made and felt her hand on his shoulder as she walked past. Take that away, and what was left?

Four hours and fifty minutes to landing.

He closed his eyes. The fear settled into his chest like something with weight. Not a stone—a presence. The knowledge that he would do anything. Not the dramatic anything of movies—no crimes, no violence. The quiet anything of a man who understands, in the darkened cabin of a plane over the Atlantic, with his wife's elbow six inches from his own, that there is no line he will not cross, no humiliation he will not accept, no version of himself he will not become, if it means keeping this.

He would sign anything. He would agree to anything. He would become anything.

The thought didn't scare him. That was the worst part. It should have scared him—the realization that his love for her had no bottom, that there was no depth beyond which he would say no, this is too much, I won't do this. But it didn't scare him because it wasn't a realization. It was something he'd always known, filed away in the same drawer where he kept the other truths he couldn't afford to examine: that he was not enough for her, that he'd never been enough for her, that the gap between what she deserved and what he could provide was widening every year, and that one day—soon, maybe already—the gap would become a chasm, and she would look across it and see him on the other side, small and inadequate and

holding a chipped blue bowl, and she would stop reaching across.

He opened his eyes. The cabin was the same. The hum of the engines was the same. The blue glow of her screen was the same. The woman beside him was the same, and they were hours from reaching somewhere, and he still didn't know what he had agreed to.

Three hours and twenty-five minutes to landing.

He closed his eyes again.

It started during the summer, with the subtle, terrifying realization that his wife was outgrowing him.

For the last decade, Diane had been comfortably settled into her body—carrying a few extra, soft pounds that made her familiar and safe. But two months ago, a switch had flipped. She started going to an elite private gym in Midtown. The extra weight didn't just vanish; it shifted, re-sculpting her silhouette with a poised grace. Her posture straightened. Her chest seemed bolder, her waist tighter. When she began wearing fitted dresses and high heels around their living room, the sharp, confident click of her stilettos on the hardwood floor would physically stop the breath in Jeff's chest. She had never looked more beautiful, and Jeff had never felt more desperate to keep her.

Then came the phone.

It became a permanent fixture in her hand. Jeff would come home from the firm, exhausted and wanting to connect, only to find her curled up on the living room sofa, her face illuminated by the blue glow of her screen. She

texted relentlessly, her thumbs flying across the glass even during their quiet, post-dinner television hours.

"Who are you talking to?" Jeff finally asked one evening, unable to hide the anxious edge in his voice.

"Sarah, a friend," Diane answered smoothly, her eyes never leaving the screen. "We met in Dr. Lenard's waiting room. Right before one of my private therapy sessions."

Jeff frowned, stepping into the living room. "Who is she? Since when have you two gotten so close?"

"We started going to the same gym," Diane said, casually flipping her hair over her newly toned shoulder. "She doesn't work. She just volunteers for some high-end charities. Her husband is loaded—some hotshot partner over at Goldman Sachs."

The name-drop was meant to pacify him, placing this mystery woman safely inside their wealthy Wall Street social circle, but it only made the knot in Jeff's stomach tighter.

The secrecy escalated. One Tuesday night, Jeff came home early and walked into the bedroom. Diane was so absorbed in a hushed phone call that she didn't hear the door open. The moment she saw his reflection in the mirror, she ended the call with a sharp, guilty quickness, offering a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

The paranoia peaked on a sweltering Saturday afternoon in late July. Jeff was sitting out on the terrace, a cold drink in his hand, when he heard Diane's voice drifting through the cracked glass of the sliding door. She was pacing the bedroom, speaking in a low, intense murmur. Jeff strained

to listen, but he could only catch disjointed, baffling fragments.

"...Lucia," she murmured. "aha, early March?"

A long pause.

"Six hours. Yes, I know. One-fifty, tops."

Jeff stared out at the Manhattan skyline, his mind racing. Was it a surprise trip? A real estate purchase? He spent the next week agonizing over the fragments, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Exactly seven days later, it did.

Jeff walked into the kitchen on a Friday evening, loosening his tie. The massive marble island was completely bare, except for a single, heavy, matte-black envelope resting directly in the center.

Diane was nowhere to be seen.

Jeff walked over and picked it up. He slid the thick, cream-colored brochure out of the dark sleeve. The font was elegant and minimalist. Below a stunning photograph of turquoise water and a sun-drenched infinity pool that looked like something pulled from a dream, small, serifed letters read: *Élysée Retreat: A Structured Approach to Marriage Renewal*.

He opened it. Read the first paragraph. Then the second.

He closed the brochure, set it down on the marble, and lifted his gaze.

Diane had entered the kitchen silently and was watching him. She was standing directly across the island from him,

her hands flat on the countertop. Her face was open—no aggression, no guilt, just the steady, clear gaze of a woman who had made an absolute decision and was simply waiting to explain it.

"It's a program," she said. "A month. It's designed for couples like us."

Jeff stared at her. "Couples like us."

"Couples who are stuck."

He looked at the brochure again. The word structured caught his eye. He read the paragraph it appeared in. The language was clinical, reassuring, legal. A binding contractual framework. Defined rights and responsibilities. Jurisdictionally shielded. The words didn't alarm him—he worked with contracts for a living. What alarmed him was the space between the words. The space where the thing they were describing actually lived.

"How much?"

"Expensive."

"How expensive, Diane?"

"Terribly," she murmured, completely unbothered by the reality of the money. "But don't worry, darling. You can afford it."

He was quiet. She was quiet. The kitchen was quiet. Outside, a bird was singing—something simple and repetitive, three notes, over and over, like a question it didn't expect an answer to.

"What does the program do?" he asked.

"It helps us."

"Helps us how?"

She looked at him. And for a moment—just a moment—something passed across her face that he couldn't read. Not guilt. Not defiance. Something softer than that, and more dangerous. Something that looked like the expression of a woman who has stopped apologizing for what she wants.

"I think you should read it," she murmured. "I think we're running out of options, Jeff. Then we'll talk."

She picked up her coffee. Walked out of the kitchen. Her bare feet made no sound on the tile.

He sat alone at the island with the brochure in front of him and the chipped blue bowl beside it and the bird still singing its three-note question outside the window.

He opened the brochure. He read.

And the fear—the deep, presence-in-the-chest fear he'd been living with for months, for years—did not rise. It was already there. It had been there so long it felt like part of him, like a limb he'd been born with. What rose instead was something else. Something that felt, in the moment, like relief.

*You would sign anything. You would agree to anything.
You would become anything.*

He kept reading.

Chapter 3

The drive from the Hewanorra Airport took twenty minutes, most of it along a two-lane coastal road that smelled of salt and drying brush. Diane sat in the passenger seat of the black SUV the resort had sent, her sunglasses on, her attention directed toward the ocean. Jeff sat beside her. He had not touched her since they boarded the flight in New York.

He watched her reflection in the tinted window. She looked calm. Not the forced, brittle calm of a woman entering a difficult negotiation, but the deep, structural calm of a woman who had already made her decisions and was merely waiting for the scenery to catch up.

The SUV turned off the asphalt onto a private, unmarked road paved with crushed white stone.

"Nearly there, Mr. and Mrs. Hayes," the driver said. It was the first time he had spoken since loading their luggage. His voice was smooth, neutral, professional.

The road wound through dense, mature tropical foliage before opening suddenly into a wide, circular drive.

Élysée Retreat did not look like a clinic, and it did not look like a hotel. It looked like the private estate of someone who valued discretion above all other currencies. The main building was a sweeping structure of pale stone and dark glass, surrounded by terraced gardens. There was no signage. No branding. Only the heavy, oppressive silence of extreme wealth.

As the SUV glided to a stop, two staff members stepped out from the shade of the portico. They were dressed in immaculate, tailored linen—one man, one woman.

The driver opened Diane's door first.

The female staff member, who looked to be in her late thirties with a posture that suggested she had never needed to apologize for anything, offered Diane a warm, specific smile.

"Mrs. Hayes. Welcome to Élysée. I am Corinne. I will be your primary liaison during your stay." Corinne extended a hand, and Diane took it. It was not a greeting directed at a couple; it was a greeting directed entirely at the woman.

Jeff stepped out of his side of the SUV. The tropical heat hit him instantly, heavy and damp, sticking his shirt to his back. He stood by the open door, waiting for Diane to look over at him, to share a glance of nervous solidarity, to acknowledge that they were crossing the threshold together.

Diane did not look back. She was already speaking quietly with Corinne, her posture relaxed, her sunglasses pushed up into her hair.

The male staff member approached Jeff. He was younger, perhaps thirty, with the broad shoulders of a swimmer and the neutral, blank expression of a man whose job it was to manage objects, not people.

"Mr. Hayes. I am Kendrick. Please leave your luggage; it has already been routed." Kendrick did not offer his hand. "If you will follow me, we will proceed directly to intake."

Jeff looked past Kendrick to where Diane was walking up the wide stone steps with Corinne.

"Diane," Jeff called out.

She paused on the steps and turned. For a fraction of a second, the distance between them felt entirely normal—a husband checking in with his wife before a hotel receptionist asked for a credit card.

"I'll see you inside?" Jeff asked, aiming for casual and landing somewhere near pleading.

Corinne smiled at Diane, then looked down at Jeff. "Mrs. Hayes will be proceeding to the West Wing for her orientation. Your intake, Mr. Hayes, is in the East Pavilion."

Jeff's stomach tightened. The brochure had mentioned separation, but the reality of it—the sheer, clinical speed with which they were being pulled apart in the driveway—felt like a physical blow.

She looked at him, her lips curving into a soft, almost pitying smile. "Be good, Jeff," she said lightly. "I'll see you when I see you."

It wasn't cruel. It was simply factual. She turned back to Corinne, and the two women disappeared through the dark glass doors of the main entrance.

Jeff stood on the crushed stone, the heat pressing down on him.

"This way, Mr. Hayes," Kendrick said softly.

They walked on a path paved with volcanic stone slabs. Barely fifty yards in, they came to a heavy, iron-reinforced wooden door set into a dense wall of areca palms. Kendrick entered a code on a small, almost invisible metal keypad tucked into the foliage, and the door unlocked with a loud, metallic clang.

Jeff stepped through. Behind him, hidden in the foliage, he caught a glimpse of the barrier the palms were concealing: a twelve-foot braided-wire fence, the same fence their SUV had passed through when they arrived at the resort. He hadn't thought about it at the time—he had been too busy watching Diane's reflection in the tinted glass.

Now he understood. The fence surrounded the entire peninsula. And it also divided it.

The East Pavilion was not luxurious.

It was clean, functional, and entirely stripped of comfort. Jeff followed Kendrick down a long, open-air corridor lined with minimalist concrete pillars. There were no ocean views here. The air smelled of ozone and hot stone.

Kendrick led him into a long, windowless office that smelled of industrial cleaner and warm electronics. Several metal lockers, a metal desk sat at the far end, flanked by two straight-backed chairs. Along the left wall, a row of heavy-gauge steel file cabinets stretched from the door to the back corner—drawer after drawer of them, each one fitted with a small label holder and a combination lock. The drawers were immaculate, identical, and very full. Jeff could hear the faint, subliminal hum of a server rack somewhere behind the cabinets—the soft, relentless pulse of data being stored.

"Please have a seat," Kendrick said, taking the chair behind the desk. He opened a slim manila folder. "You will be occupying Room 404. Your personal effects will be cataloged and stored. You will have no access to your phone, your laptop, or any outside communication for the duration of your thirty-one-day stay. Do you understand, Mr. Hayes?"

"Yes," Jeff said.

"Before we proceed, I want to outline how your time here will be structured," he said. "Your days will be divided into three categories: physical training, theoretical education, and psychological sessions. Physical training begins tomorrow at seven thirty a.m. with a group fitness assessment. Theoretical education covers topics ranging from the psychology of arousal to marriage dynamics. Psychological sessions are one-on-one with a licensed therapist and are tailored to your specific profile."

He paused, letting the words settle. "Your schedule will be posted daily on the digital board in your quarters. Attendance at all morning physical conditioning, afternoon seminars, and evening journal sessions is mandatory."

"Your progress in all three areas is tracked daily," he continued. "These reports are shared with your wife and her counseling team each evening. Transparency is a core principle here, Mr. Hayes. Nothing you do in the Men's Quarter is private from your wife. This is by design."

Jeff felt something tighten in his chest. *She gets a report card. On me.*

Kendrick met his eyes without flinching. "It's not a judgment. It's a tool. Your wife needs to see your engagement and progress to build trust in the process. Many husbands find that knowing their wife is watching actually motivates them. Some even find it" —a brief, careful pause— "stimulating, eventually."

Jeff said nothing. He wasn't there yet. He wasn't sure he'd ever be there.

Kendrick went through the remainder of the intake— medical questionnaire, dietary preferences, emergency contact (Diane, of course), and a detailed personal history form that asked questions Jeff had never been asked in his forty-six years. He filled it out in silence, his handwriting growing smaller as the questions grew more intimate.

"Ready, Mr. Hayes?"

Jeff nodded slowly. He felt a strange, floating sensation, as if the man sitting in the chair was someone else. Thirty-one days, he told himself. I can do thirty-one days of jumping through hoops if it means keeping her.

"Regarding your scheduled meetings with Mrs. Hayes," Kendrick continued, his tone flat, bureaucratic. "They are set for Day Seven, Fifteen, Twenty-One, and Twenty-Seven. All meetings will take place at eighteen-hundred hours in Mrs. Hayes's quarters. You will be escorted to the gate by a staff member. You will not approach the gate unescorted."

Jeff processed the dates. Day Seven. A week. He would not see his wife for an entire week. The number felt immense, heavy. But then he did the math. Thirty-one

days. Four meetings. It was a structure. It was a rule he could follow. He just had to survive until Day Seven.

"Understood," Jeff said quietly.

"Excellent. Change into the garments provided in the locker behind you, and proceed to the canteen for the evening meal. Use the time after to get acquainted with the place. Your program will start tomorrow morning."

Kendrick closed the folder and stood up, leaving the room without another word.

Jeff opened the metal locker. Inside lay a stack of folded gray clothing: drawstring trousers, collarless cotton shirts, and soft-soled canvas shoes. The clothes were uniform. They were designed to erase the man who wore them.

He stripped off his suit, folded it neatly, and put on the gray clothes. They fit perfectly, which somehow made it worse.

The canteen was a long, low-ceilinged hall with concrete floors and rows of utilitarian wooden tables. When Jeff walked in, the noise was a dull, echoing hum.

There were perhaps twenty men in the room, all wearing the same gray clothing. Some were older, their shoulders rounded with age and defeat; some were younger, possessing a restless, kinetic energy that seemed entirely out of place in the bleak surroundings.

Jeff took a plastic tray, received a portion of grilled chicken and steamed vegetables from a silent kitchen worker, and found an empty seat near the end of a long table.

He ate mechanically. The food had no taste. His mind was entirely consumed by the geography of the resort. Where was the West Wing? How far away was Diane right now? Was she eating in a dining room? Was Corinne pouring her wine?

Thirty days, he thought, gripping his fork tightly. I just have to take this shit for thirty days. I can do it.

"First day?"

Jeff looked up. The man sitting across from him was in his late thirties, with dark, thinning hair and a face that looked as though it hadn't fully relaxed in months.

"Yeah," Jeff said. "Jeff."

"Mark," the man replied. He didn't offer to shake hands.

"You look like you're calculating."

"Calculating?"

"Counting the days until your first meeting," Mark said, a dry, humorless smile touching his mouth. "We all do it. Day Seven is the longest week of your life."

Jeff looked at him. "When is your next one?"

"Day Twenty-One," Mark said, looking down at his tray.

"Tomorrow."

Jeff felt a sudden, surprising wave of solidarity. They were all in the same boat. They were all just husbands, enduring a humiliating corporate retreat to save their marriages.

"How was your Day Fifteen?" Jeff asked, hoping for some insight into what the meetings actually entailed. Did they talk? Did they undergo couples therapy in her room?

Mark was quiet for a long moment. He picked up his fork, turned it over, and set it down again.

"It was... brief," Mark said softly. He didn't elaborate.

Jeff let it go, assuming the man simply didn't want to discuss the intimate details of his marriage with a stranger. As his gaze drifted down the long wooden table, he noticed a younger man, aggressively fit, eating with rapid, nervous energy two seats away.

When the man reached for his water glass, Jeff's eyes caught on his forearms.

The man's wrists were wrapped tightly in white athletic tape. Just below the edge of his short-sleeved gray shirt, Jeff saw a series of angry, red scabs raked across the inside of the man's elbow. They looked like deep scratches, healing poorly in the humid air.

Jeff looked further down the table. Another man, older, had similar tape wrapped around his left wrist, the white fabric stained faintly brown near the heel of his hand.

Jeff turned back to Mark, keeping his voice low.

"What's with the tape?" Jeff asked, nodding subtly toward the younger man. "Do they have us doing obstacle courses or something?"

Mark followed Jeff's gaze. The dry, humorless smile vanished completely from Mark's face.

"No," Mark said quietly. "No obstacle courses. The physical conditioning is tough but no such thing."

"Then what happened to them?"

Mark picked up his water glass. He took a slow sip, his eyes fixed on the blank concrete wall at the far end of the canteen.

"Occupational hazard," Mark said, his tone entirely closed off. "You'll figure it out."

Jeff frowned, but he didn't press it. He returned to his meal, the strange detail of the bandaged wrists filing itself away in the back of his mind, drowned out by the louder, more immediate thought that he was only on hour four of a seven-day wait.

Suite 404 in the East Pavilion wasn't a dungeon; it was a masterclass in sensory deprivation. The walls were painted a flat, clinical white, completely bare of art or distraction. A single square window let in the twilight sun but offered a view only of a high, blank courtyard wall. The furniture was aggressively basic: a small laminate table, a rigid wooden chair, and a twin-sized bed with perfectly tucked, stiff cotton sheets.

Above the table, a glowing red digital clock ruthlessly dictated the schedule, a constant reminder that his time was no longer his own. Jeff sat on the edge of the narrow

mattress, wearing his linen uniform. He rested his elbows heavily on his knees and buried his face in his hands. In the impeccably clean, white-tiled bathroom a few feet away, a simple frameless mirror hung over the sink—waiting to force him to look at his own exhaustion. The room wasn't squalor. It was the absolute, sterile erasure of his identity, and it was already working.

Chapter 4

The West Wing was not a building so much as an ecosystem of pure, unadulterated privilege.

Diane followed Corinne past a series of cascading reflecting pools, through a courtyard shaded by massive banyan trees, and up a floating glass staircase. The air smelled of jasmine and sea salt. There were no corridors. Instead, elevated teak walkways connected individual, free-standing structures, each one hidden behind screens of tropical bamboo and blooming hibiscus.

"Suite Twelve," Corinne said, stopping before a set of hand-carved mahogany doors. She pressed her palm to a discreet biometric scanner set into the stone wall. The doors unlocked with a heavy, satisfying thud.

Corinne pushed them open and stepped aside. "After you, Mrs. Hayes."

Diane walked in, and her breath hitched.

She had stayed in five-star hotels before, but this was something entirely different. The suite was massive—easily two thousand square feet—designed with an open-concept layout that blurred the line between the indoors and the tropical landscape. The floors were cool, pale limestone. The walls were paneled in raw silk and bleached teak.

"The living area," Corinne said smoothly, gesturing to a sunken lounge featuring a curved, cream-colored linen sofa, a low marble coffee table, and a fully stocked wet

bar. Beyond the lounge, a wall of floor-to-ceiling glass panels was pushed entirely open to the sea breeze.

Diane walked toward the light. The glass opened onto a private terrace that seemed to hover over the cliffside. A small infinity plunge pool glittered in the sun, its water bleeding seamlessly into the horizon of the ocean below. A daybed, shaded by a billowing white canvas canopy, sat at the edge of the water.

"The bedroom is through here," Corinne continued, leading Diane back inside.

The bedroom was dominated by a king-sized platform bed draped in gossamer netting, the sheets made of a silk so fine it looked like spun water. But it was the bathroom that finally made Diane stop and stare. It was larger than her first apartment in New York. A freestanding soaking tub, carved from a single block of black volcanic stone, sat beneath a skylight. The walk-in shower was entirely open to a private, walled-in garden of ferns and orchids.

"Your wardrobe has already been unpacked and arranged in the dressing room," Corinne said, her voice a soothing murmur. "The tablet on the bedside table controls the climate, the lighting, and the privacy screens. It also connects you directly to the spas, the beauty center, and the kitchens. You may order anything you desire, at any hour."

Diane turned to look at Corinne. The sheer scale of the luxury was disorienting. At home, she managed the household. She knew when the mortgage was due, she knew when the dishwasher needed salt, she knew when Jeff was stressed about his billables. Here, there was nothing to manage.

"What is the schedule?" Diane asked, feeling a strange need for structure.

Corinne smiled, an expression of gentle, maternal amusement. "The restaurant, the cafeteria and the terrace are open until 22:30, and the French bistro on the top floor of the main building is open from three in the afternoon, but... there is no schedule, Mrs. Hayes. You are here to remember what it feels like to simply exist. The only fixed appointment on your calendar is a meeting in this suite, seven days from now, at eighteen-hundred hours."

Diane frowned slightly. "A meeting?"

"With your husband," Corinne clarified. "If you choose to receive him."

If you choose. The phrasing caught Diane off guard. "I don't have to?"

"You do not have to do anything you do not wish to do," Corinne said softly. "I wouldn't recommend it but, you can skip a meeting if you feel like it. You have full control over your program and your husband's, Mrs. Hayes. I will leave you to settle in. A chilled bottle of Laurent-Perrier is waiting in the bar fridge. Please, enjoy the afternoon."

Corinne bowed her head and slipped out the mahogany doors, leaving Diane entirely alone in the massive, silent suite.

Diane walked over to the wet bar. She opened the fridge, pulled out the Laurent-Perrier, and poured herself a glass. She carried it out to the terrace, kicking off her shoes, and stood at the edge of the infinity pool, looking out over the ocean.

She thought of Jeff. She pictured him standing by the SUV on the crushed white stone, looking lost and anxious, his suit sticking to his back in the heat. She felt a brief, familiar tug of guilt. She should have smiled at him. She should have told him she loved him before walking away.

But as the cool champagne hit her throat, the guilt met the overwhelming silence of the suite, and the guilt lost.

Because beneath the guilt was something else. Something she had never admitted to Dr. Lenard, because articulating it would have made her a monster, and she did not want to be a monster. She only wanted to be alive.

The dread was gone.

For the first time in longer than she could calculate, Diane was in a bedroom and she was not bracing herself. In Manhattan, the master bedroom had become a space of quiet, suffocating choreography. She knew the script by heart: the gentle clearing of his throat, the careful way he'd reach across the Egyptian cotton, his hand landing on her hip with that familiar, searching pressure. It was a loving touch. A considerate touch. And the moment she felt it, a heavy, sinking weariness would drag through her bones.

She had tried to want him. She had tried to summon the heat they'd had in their twenties, but it was like trying to strike a match on wet glass. The friction was gone. All that was left was the obligation—the monthly surrender where she lay still, controlling her breathing, performing a gentle enthusiasm so as not to wound him. She had become a prop in his validation, a warm body required to reassure him that he was still the man, still the provider, still the center of her world. The sex wasn't an act of connection

anymore; it was a tax she paid to maintain the infrastructure of their comfortable life.

And the infrastructure was beautiful. Their apartment, the terrace, her huge walk-in wardrobe—it was a life other women envied. But Diane had realized, she was living inside a beautifully furnished mausoleum. She was thirty-nine years old. She was still young. And the terrifying thought that had begun to wake her up at 3:00 AM was not that Jeff was failing her, but that this—this gentle, predictable, sexless Tuesday stretching into infinity—was all there would ever be.

Therapy had been a cruel joke. Dr. Lenard had given them exercises. Make a date night. Tell him what you need. Listen to her boundaries. As if desire was a spreadsheet that could be balanced. As if you could negotiate a spark. Jeff had tried so hard. He had been so eager, so desperate to please, and his desperate eagerness only made the deadness inside her worse. You cannot resuscitate a pulse with guilt.

She took another sip of the champagne. The suite around her was vast and empty, but it did not feel lonely. It felt like an exhalation.

We're doing this to save the marriage, she told herself. *He agreed to it.*

She felt the ocean breeze on her back. She felt bare. She felt exposed. And for the first time in a decade, she felt the faint, dangerous stirring of something she had thought was permanently extinguished.

Anticipation.

She set her glass down on the limestone. Her fingers went to the buttons of her blouse. She let the silk drop to the floor, followed by her skirt, leaving her standing in the open air in nothing but her underwear. She didn't look around to see if anyone was watching. She didn't care.

She stepped naked into the sun-warmed water of the plunge pool, and as the heat closed over her skin, she let out a breath she realized she had been holding for years.

In the men's pavilion, the lights came on at six exactly.

Not bright enough to shock, only enough to make it impossible to remain in the comfort of half-sleep. Jeff opened his eyes to a white ceiling and, for a few awful seconds, the feeling that he had been caught somewhere he should not be. Jeff rose, dressed in the gray uniform, and followed the stream of silent men to the communal showers. The water was lukewarm and the pressure was low. He stood under it with his eyes closed, letting the water run over his face, trying not to think about the fact that somewhere on the other side of the fence, Diane was probably still asleep on silk sheets.

Breakfast was at 06:30. The canteen served the same grim, portion-controlled meal: oatmeal, a hard-boiled egg, a slice of whole wheat bread, a small cup of black coffee. Jeff ate without tasting it. The men around him ate in silence, their eyes fixed on their trays. The only sound was the scrape of utensils on plastic.

At 07:30, the physical conditioning began.

The instructor was a man named Miller—mid-thirties, compact, with the coiled stillness of a middleweight boxer. He didn't shout. He didn't need to. His voice carried the flat, unhurried authority of someone who had never lost a fight.

They ran. Two miles around the perimeter of the East Pavilion compound, the tropical sun already pressing down like a physical weight. The air was thick with humidity, and within ten minutes, Jeff's shirt was soaked through.

The men ran in single file, their canvas shoes slapping against the crushed stone path. No one spoke. No one broke formation. Miller ran alongside them, his breathing perfectly even, occasionally calling out pace adjustments without raising his voice above conversational volume.

Jeff's lungs burned by mile one. His legs ached soon after. Near the end, he was running on pure, animal stubbornness—the same instinct that had carried him through the final weeks of his Partnership push, when the hours blurred and the coffee stopped working and the only thing left was the refusal to stop.

He finished. Barely. He stood at the edge of the courtyard with his hands on his knees, gasping, his vision graying at the edges.

Miller walked past him without a word. He made a notation on the clipboard.

Chapter 5

The classroom was at the end of the main corridor, open on one side to a planted courtyard where water moved over black stone. Twelve men sat on floor cushions arranged in semicircles. Some were older than Jeff, some younger. A few looked athletic enough to pass through the experience with a kind of detached confidence. Most did not. Most wore the same expression Jeff suspected was on his own face: careful blankness stretched over private alarm.

At the front of the room stood a man in his fifties with silver hair and a posture so upright it looked almost ceremonial. He wore simple black, no resort insignia, no lanyard or badge.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm Theo."

His voice had the strange softness of people who never needed to raise it.

"Some of you are here reluctantly. Some enthusiastically. Most of you, I expect, are somewhere in between. That's all right. You are not here to perform confidence. You are here to become honest."

No one spoke.

Theo gestured to the cushions. "Sit."

They sat.

"What most men fear," Theo continued, walking slowly among them, "is not discomfort. Not really. Discomfort is manageable. What they fear is reduction. Irrelevance. To

discover that their wives can flourish in spaces where they themselves are not central."

Jeff felt, with instant resentment, that the man had reached into his ribcage and touched something private.

Theo seemed to register the shift in the room without looking at anyone directly.

"This retreat does not exist to punish you," he said. "Nor does it exist to erase you. It exists to examine certain habits that many couples bring into intimacy—habits of entitlement, performance, avoidance, dependency, passive resentment. Some women arrive here burdened by years of accommodation. Some men arrive here burdened by the belief that love should protect them from change."

Jeff kept his face still.

He had expected the language to be cruder somehow. More obviously ideological. Instead it was maddeningly polished, couched in therapeutic terms that left him with little to push against. There was no dramatic declaration that men were weak and women superior. Only a smooth repositioning of assumptions in which his discomfort became evidence of unfinished work.

"Close your eyes," Theo said.

Jeff obeyed because everyone else did.

"Imagine your wife moving through her day here without reference to your needs," Theo said. "Imagine her comfort, her pleasure, her curiosity. Imagine her being attended to well. Imagine her laughing freely. If this produces anxiety,

do not fight it. Observe it. Ask what it believes it is protecting."

The silence that followed was almost unbearable.

Jeff did not need to imagine Diane laughing freely. He imagined her at breakfast alone and was startled by the intensity of the image—not because it was erotic but because it felt intimate in a way he had not expected. She had always been beautiful to him; now she seemed to be entering some fresher category beyond beauty, one that had less to do with him than he could comfortably bear.

His throat tightened.

What did his anxiety believe it was protecting?

His place, obviously.

But the answer that came beneath that one was uglier: his illusion of generosity. His self-image as the patient husband, the loving one, the man who had agreed to this terrible, absurd place because he wanted to save his marriage. Perhaps he had agreed because somewhere in him, he believed that agreeing would matter more than the outcome. That willingness itself would earn him moral centrality.

The thought made him feel briefly sick.

"Breathe," Theo said.

Jeff did.

Lunch was grilled fish and brown rice. Jeff sat alone at the end of a table, pushing the rice around his tray with a plastic fork. His body ached from the run. His mind ached from the class.

He kept returning to Theo's question: What does your anxiety believe it is protecting?

The answer was obvious: his marriage. His home. His place in Diane's life.

But beneath that answer, like a shadow beneath a stone, was another one. The one he didn't want to examine. The one that whispered: You're not afraid of losing her. You're afraid of losing the version of yourself that she made possible. The man who provides. The man who protects. The man who is needed.

Take away the need, and what was left?

Jeff pushed the tray away and stared at the concrete wall.

The afternoon was unscheduled. Jeff lay on his bunk in Room 404, his hands folded on his chest, staring at the water stain on the ceiling. The red digital clock read 14:22. The hours stretched ahead of him like a gray, featureless plain.

He thought about Diane.

He pictured her in the West Wing—because of course it would be a wing, not a compound. He imagined soft lighting, cool air, the sound of water. He imagined her sitting by a pool, reading a book, her bare feet dangling in the water. He imagined her laughing at something a staff

member said—a casual, easy laugh that she used to reserve for him.

He tried to imagine her thinking about him. Checking her phone. Wondering how he was doing.

The image wouldn't hold. Every time he tried to place himself in her mind, the picture blurred and dissolved, like a reflection in disturbed water.

I'll see you when I see you, Jeff.

Not "I love you." Not "I'll miss you." Not even "Good luck."

When I see you.

As if his existence were a weather event—something she would acknowledge when it arrived and not think about when it didn't.

Jeff rolled onto his side and pressed his face into the thin pillow. It smelled of industrial detergent. He closed his eyes and willed himself not to think about the seven days between now and their first meeting.

He failed.

The evening session was at 19:00. Jeff followed the stream of men to a small, quiet room off the main corridor—not the classroom, but a smaller space with a single desk, two chairs, and a potted plant that looked like it had been selected for its absolute inability to inspire any emotion whatsoever.

A woman was waiting for him. She was small, precise, with dark eyes that seemed to see past every defense he erected. She wore a simple linen dress and no jewelry.

"Mr. Hayes," she said. "I'm Dr. Yuen. Please sit."

Jeff sat.

She didn't open a folder. She didn't consult a tablet. She simply looked at him with the patient, unhurried attention of someone who had all the time in the world.

"How was your first full day?"

"Long," Jeff said.

"That's honest," Dr. Yuen said. "What was the longest part?"

Jeff considered the question. The run? The class? The empty afternoon?

"The silence," he said. "Not the noise—there's plenty of noise here. The silence inside. The part where you're alone with your own head and there's nothing to fill it with."

Dr. Yuen nodded slowly, as if he had said something she'd been waiting to hear.

"What did the silence say?"

Jeff looked at the potted plant. Then at the wall. Then at his hands.

"That I'm afraid," he said quietly. "That I've been afraid for a long time. And that coming here didn't make me brave. It just made me too tired to pretend I'm not afraid."

Dr. Yuen didn't respond immediately. She let the silence sit between them—the same silence Jeff had been running from all day—but in this room, with this woman, it didn't feel like a void. It felt like a space where something true could exist, if he was willing to let it.

She started to ask questions. General at first—about his background, his marriage, his daily routines at home. Then more intimate: his sex life, his insecurities, the moments he felt most invisible in his own house.

Jeff answered carefully at first, measuring each word the way he measured risk in a portfolio. But after half an hour, he realized he was responding mechanically, the filters dropping away without his permission. Maybe it was the morning's physical exertion. Maybe it was the afternoon's silence. Maybe it was simply the weight of the day pressing down on his eyelids.

After another few minutes, Jeff was slowly overcome by drowsiness. His answers grew shorter, less guarded. He found himself saying things he hadn't intended to say—small, private truths that slipped out between breaths like coins falling from a pocket he'd forgotten to close.

Eventually, Dr. Yuen rose, signaling the end of the session.

"Thank you, Mr. Hayes," she said. "We'll go deeper tomorrow."

Jeff wasn't sure if that was a promise or a threat.

Back in Room 404, Jeff lay on his bunk in the dark. The red digital clock glowed like a small, angry eye: 22:47.

He closed his eyes and thought about the kitchen at home. The risotto. The way she always had to stretch for the olive oil on the second shelf. The two inches of pale skin above her waistband.

He held the image carefully, the way you hold something you are no longer sure belongs to you.

Then Theo's voice drifted through his mind, soft and merciless:

What does your anxiety believe it is protecting?

Jeff turned onto his side and pressed his face into the pillow.

He didn't have an answer yet. But the question was still there, sitting in the dark with him, patient and immovable, waiting for him to be honest enough to face it.

He slept, eventually. But the sleep was thin, and the question was there too, curled up beneath his dreams like a cat beneath a blanket, watching him with unblinking eyes.

By the afternoon of Day Two, Diane realized that Élysée Retreat was not just pampering her; it was systematically dismantling the woman she had been.

It started at the spa. She had booked a basic massage, but the esthetician, a woman with incredibly soft hands and a

clinical eye, had looked at her and suggested the "Full Renewal Protocol."

Diane agreed, simply because it was easier than making a decision.

The protocol began in a blindingly white, sterile room with an intense pulsed light (IPL) laser.

"We recommend complete removal," the technician had said smoothly, adjusting the protective goggles over Diane's eyes. "Most of our guests find that returning to a completely bare, smooth state enhances the sensory experience of the resort's other therapies."

Diane had hesitated for only a second. For fifteen years, her grooming habits had been dictated by routine and what she assumed Jeff liked—tidy, practical, maintained. Going completely bare felt scandalous, almost adolescent.

"Do it," Diane had said.

When she walked out of the treatment room an hour later, her skin humming and sensitive, she felt a strange, thrilling vulnerability. It was an intimate, deeply sexual shift, even though she was entirely alone.

From there, she had been led to the salon. She sat in a plush leather chair while a stylist studied her shoulder-length, practical brown hair.

"You have an exquisite neck, Mrs. Hayes," the stylist murmured, lifting the heavy hair off her shoulders. "You are hiding it. We should sculpt this. Bring it up, expose the nape. And the color needs heat."

Two hours later, Diane looked in the mirror and barely recognized herself. Her hair was chopped into a sharp, severe, incredibly chic bob that left the back of her neck completely bare. The color had been lifted and dyed a rich, blazing reddish-brown. It was the haircut of a woman who did not care if her husband found it "too aggressive." It was the haircut of a woman who wanted to be looked at.

She walked out of the salon and headed toward the main pool area, feeling the coastal breeze against the exposed skin of her neck.

The main pool was a massive, free-form lagoon, surrounded by swaying palms, white cabanas, and sunken lounges. The air was filled with the low thrum of a bossa nova beat from hidden speakers and the clinking of crystal glasses.

Diane found a shaded spot near the edge of the water, where a shallow basin was filled with hundreds of tiny, darting *Garra rufa* fish.

She sat down, ordered a margarita from a passing waiter, and slipped her feet into the cool water. The fish instantly swarmed her toes, their tiny, toothless mouths nibbling away the dead skin in a bizarre, ticklish vibration.

"They take some getting used to, don't they?"

Diane looked to her left. Sitting two feet away, her own feet submerged in the basin, was a striking woman in her late forties. She had silver-blonde hair, broad shoulders, and was wearing a sheer white sarong over a metallic gold bikini. She held a martini glass and looked at Diane with a gaze of absolute, unshakeable confidence.

"I'm Diane," Diane said, smiling over the strange sensation in her feet.

"Marianne," the woman replied. She took a slow sip of her drink, her eyes sweeping over Diane's sharp new haircut.

"First season?"

"Yes," Diane said. "Is it that obvious?"

Marianne laughed. It was a rich, throaty sound. "Not obvious, no. But you still have that slight tension in your shoulders. The tension of a woman who is unconsciously waiting for her husband to ask her where his keys are."

Diane blinked, startled by the accuracy of the statement.

"Does that go away?"

"By Day Four," Marianne promised, swirling the olive in her glass. "This is my third season. I come back every year for a recalibration."

"A recalibration of what?"

Marianne looked out over the pool. "Of my patience. At home, I am the CEO, the mother, the wife, the manager of my husband's fragile ego. Here, I am exactly what I want to be. I don't manage anything."

As if on cue, a man walked out of the water of the main pool and approached their basin. He was young—perhaps twenty-eight—with a physique carved from dark, wet marble. He wore black swim trunks. Water sheeted off his chest and caught in the dark hair on his stomach.

He didn't look like a guest, and he didn't act like a waiter.

"Marianne," the young man said, his voice a low, smooth baritone. He knelt smoothly on the wet stone beside her. He didn't ask if she needed anything. He simply reached out, took the empty martini glass from her hand, and replaced it with a fresh, chilled glass he had brought with him.

"Thank you, Julian," Marianne murmured, not looking at him, her eyes still on Diane.

Julian lingered for a moment, his hand resting casually on the stone near Marianne's thigh. He looked at Diane, offering a smile that was absolutely polite and entirely devoid of the anxious, pleading neediness that Jeff carried like a physical weight.

"Welcome to Élysée," Julian said softly. He stood up and walked away, disappearing into the crowd of lounging women.

Diane stared after him. Her pulse was beating slightly faster. "Does he work here?"

"They are called the entertainers," Marianne said, taking a sip of her fresh drink. "Or, informally, the bulls. They are vetted, tested, and entirely at our disposal."

Diane's breath caught in her throat. She thought of the brochure. A Structured Approach to Marriage Renewal. Suddenly, the structure was becoming terrifyingly clear.

"You sleep with them?" Diane asked, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Marianne turned to look at her. There was no shame in her eyes. There was only a calm, absolute entitlement.

"Here, nobody imposes anything on you. Neither forbids anything. Yes, I sleep with them," Marianne said softly. "I let them serve me. I let them remind me what it feels like to be touched by a man who is entirely focused on my pleasure, rather than a man who is using my body to validate his own self-worth."

Marianne leaned closer, the scent of expensive sunscreen and gin drifting over the water.

"And the best part, Diane, is that our husbands know we are doing it. And they wait for us anyway."

Diane looked down at the tiny fish swirling around her bare toes. She thought of Jeff, locked away in whatever pavilion Kendrick had taken him to. She expected a wave of crushing guilt to wash over her. She waited for the panic of a faithful wife to rise in her chest.

It didn't come.

Instead, a strange, dark thrill bloomed low in her stomach. She looked back up at Marianne, and then across the pool to where Julian was standing in the sun.

"Where is the boutique?" Diane asked quietly. "I need to buy some new shoes."

Chapter 6

The East Pavilion operated on a schedule designed to prevent thought by enforcing exhaustion.

It wasn't just the repetition; it was the escalation. Every morning, the physical conditioning pushed the men slightly further. If they ran three miles on Day Two, they ran four on Day Four. The calisthenics became longer, the rest periods shorter. Jeff, at forty-six, found himself functioning in a state of perpetual, dull muscle ache.

By the time the afternoon seminars rolled around, the men were physically drained. Jeff quickly realized this was not an accident. It was a strategy. They were being deliberately exhausted so that when they sat in the air-conditioned seminar rooms, their mental defenses were too compromised to argue. They absorbed the resort's philosophy—the lectures on "the myth of possession" and "compersion"—in a drowsy, numb state, allowing the ideas to bypass their critical thinking and settle directly into their subconscious.

Jeff sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress was adequate. Everything was adequate. That was the word for the Men's Quarter—adequate. Functional. Sufficient. It was, he realized, the first environment he'd been in in years that didn't cater to his expectations as a successful professional who could afford the best. Here, he was not a client. He was a subject.

He thought of Diane. He imagined the soft lighting, the high-thread-count sheets, the view of the ocean maybe, or the gardens. He imagined her being welcomed, being *attended to*, being told she deserved pleasure, that her desires mattered, that the next four weeks were about *her*.

He lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. From somewhere down the hall, he heard voices—other men, arriving, settling in, going through the same intake. He wondered how many of them were as terrified as he was. He wondered how many of them were more terrified.

Outside, the tropical sun was setting over the resort, painting the sky in amber and rose. Somewhere on the other side of the resort, Diane was probably being handed a glass of champagne by someone whose entire job was to make her feel like a queen.

Jeff closed his eyes.

You love her, he told himself. *You love her enough to be here.*

It was true. It was the only thing that was still undeniably, uncomplicatedly true.

Whether that love would be enough to carry him through what came next—through the training, the conditioning, the slow and deliberate dismantling of everything he thought he understood about himself and his marriage—he had no idea.

Somehow, the days settled into a rhythm faster than Jeff expected.

Mornings began at five forty-five, a soft chime from the wall-mounted speaker that was impossible to ignore and pointless to resist. The showers were communal—open, no partitions, which felt designed to strip away the last pretense of privacy on day one. Jeff stood among the other men on that first morning, water streaming over his body, acutely aware of the unspoken rule: no eye contact below the neck. He'd never been shy about his body—medium build, reasonably fit for forty-six—but something about standing naked in a row of equally naked men under fluorescent light made him feel reduced. Perhaps that was the point.

Breakfast was identical in structure to dinner: no choices, no substitutions, served promptly at six thirty. Then physical training—a mix of group runs around the courtyard, bodyweight circuits, and stretching sessions led by a fit, expressionless woman in athletic wear who never raised her voice but somehow commanded total compliance. The training was not brutal. It was *relentless*. Every minute of every session was accounted for. There was no downtime, no lingering, no opportunity to stand at the edge and watch. You participated or you were quietly noted.

Theoretical lectures filled the mid-morning. They sat in a small classroom—ten men, rows of desks, a whiteboard—and a soft-spoken man named Dr. Linden guided them through material that Jeff found alternately fascinating and deeply uncomfortable.

The first lecture was titled *"The Biology of Desire: Why She Wants What You Cannot Give."* The second: *"Inadequacy Is Not Identity: Reframing the Male Sexual Role."* The third: *"The Architecture of Arousal: Understanding Compersion."*

Dr. Linden never raised his voice either. He never shamed, never mocked, never pushed. He simply *presented*, with the calm authority of a man describing weather patterns, and then asked the room to reflect. The reflections were written—never spoken aloud—and collected at the end of each session.

Afternoons were for one-on-one therapy. Dr. Yuen—the woman with dark eyes that seemed to see past every defense he erected. Their sessions grew in length. Every time there were at least forty-five minutes of her asking questions and him giving careful, measured answers. She would listen without interruption, without note-taking, without visible reaction. When the sessions ended, she said only: "We'll go deeper tomorrow."

The dining room was familiar by now. The floor was linoleum—clean, durable, indifferent. A serving line ran along the far wall, where two women in aprons ladled food into segmented trays with the unhurried rhythm of people who had done this thousands of times.

Jeff got in line. The tray was plastic, the kind you'd find in a hospital or a school cafeteria. He moved down the serving line and received: a portion of grilled chicken,

steamed brown rice, a scoop of mixed vegetables, a small side salad with vinaigrette in a sealed plastic cup, and a slice of whole wheat bread. A glass of water waited at the end. No menu. No choices. No second helpings implied.

He stood for a moment, tray in hand, scanning the room for a seat. The social geometry of cafeterias is universal—clusters of friends, pairs of acquaintances, and the solitary men at the edges—and this one was no different, except that no one here was a friend yet, and the edges were crowded.

"Jeff, come sit with me. I'll introduce you around."

Mark led them to a table near the middle of the room where two other men were already eating. He gestured to the empty chairs, and they sat down.

"This is Greg," Mark said, nodding toward a man across the table. Greg was younger—maybe thirty-five—with dark hair, a sharp jaw, and the coiled stillness of someone trying very hard not to react to anything. He gave Jeff a tight nod and returned to his food without speaking.

"And this is Martin." The second man was perhaps forty, soft around the middle, with thinning hair and a kind face that seemed designed for looking apologetic. He smiled at Jeff with genuine warmth.

"Welcome to the club nobody wants to join," Martin said.

Mark laughed—a full, easy laugh that felt strangely out of place. "He's joking. Mostly. How are you holding up, Jeff?"

Jeff cut a piece of chicken. It was perfectly cooked—seasoned well, moist—but it tasted like nothing. "I don't know yet. Still processing, I guess."

"That's healthy," Mark said. "I was a wreck my first nights. Couldn't eat. Lay awake staring at the ceiling until three in the morning, then cried in the shower. You're already doing better than me."

He said this without shame, without embarrassment, the way someone might describe a minor surgical procedure. Jeff studied him more carefully. There was something composed about Mark—not resigned, not defeated, but *settled*, like a man who had passed through a storm and found the air on the other side unexpectedly calm.

"And now? Are you... okay with it?"

Mark considered the question seriously, which Jeff appreciated. He chewed, swallowed, took a sip of water.

"Okay is a moving target," he said. "Week one, I was not okay. I was furious. Not at my wife—at the situation, at myself, at the whole absurd premise of being here. I kept thinking: *I'm a grown man. I'm a partner at my law firm. I don't need someone to tell me how to be a husband.*" He paused. "Week two, I was confused. The programming starts to work on you in ways you don't expect. Not brainwashing—they're very clear about that. It's more like... erosion. They don't knock down your walls. They just keep the water running until the foundation softens."

Greg, across the table, made a small, dismissive sound without looking up. Mark noticed but didn't react.

"Week three," Mark continued, "is where I am now. And I would say I'm not just okay. I'm something I didn't expect to be." He met Jeff's eyes. "I'm grateful."

"For what?"

"For understanding my wife. For the first time in nineteen years of marriage, actually understanding what she needed and why I couldn't give it to her—and realizing that doesn't make me less of a person. It makes me a different kind of partner. A useful one, in a way I never was before."

Martin nodded beside him. "Mark's our success story," he said, with a tone that was admiring but also faintly wary, like a man watching someone walk across a frozen lake ahead of him.

Jeff turned to Greg. "What about you? When did you arrive?"

"Three days ago," Greg said flatly. He finally looked up, and his eyes were hard. "And I'm not grateful. I'm not *settled*. I think this whole thing is fucking insane, and I'm here because my wife gave me an ultimatum: this or divorce. So no, I'm not going to sit here and talk about *erosion* like it's a beautiful thing."

The table went quiet. Mark didn't flinch. Martin looked at his plate. Jeff felt the tension settle over them like a lid.

"That's fair," Mark said calmly. "I felt the same way."

"You didn't come here because of an ultimatum," Greg said.

"No. My wife suggested it. Gently. After two years of therapy that went nowhere. I agreed because I love her and

because I was out of ideas." He paused. "But the result is the same, Greg. Whether you walked through that gate with a smile or with a gun to your head, you're here now. And the process doesn't care how you feel about it. It works on you either way."

Greg's jaw tightened. He pushed his tray back and stood. "I'm not hungry." He walked out of the dining room without looking back.

Martin watched him go, then sighed. "He'll be fine. Or he won't. Some men fight it harder than others. The staff says it doesn't change the outcome—just the timeline." He glanced at Jeff. "How about you? Why are you here?"

Jeff set down his fork. The question was simple, and he'd answered it a hundred times in his own head, but saying it aloud to strangers in a fluorescent-lit cafeteria made it feel different. More real. More final.

"Because Diane deserves to be happy," he said. "And I haven't been able to make her happy. Not in the way that matters most to her. And I love her too much to let that be the reason we fall apart."

Martin gave a slow nod. Mark smiled—that same easy, settled smile.

"That's a good answer, Jeff," Mark said. "It's the right answer. But I'll tell you something I wish someone had told me on day one." He leaned forward slightly. "The answer gets more complicated. Not worse—just more complicated. Because loving her enough to be here is the beginning, not the end. What they're going to do in that building—" he gestured vaguely toward the corridor—"is

going to take that love and stretch it into shapes you don't recognize. And you're going to have to decide, again and again, whether those shapes are still love."

Jeff didn't respond immediately. He picked up his bread, tore off a small piece, and ate it slowly.

"What shapes did it become for you?" he asked quietly.

Mark's smile softened into something more private. "That's a conversation for week two," he said. "Trust me. You're not ready for it yet."

The common room was adjacent to the dining hall—a lounge area with a television that only played nature documentaries, a shelf of books that appeared selected for their specific thematic relevance, and several couches arranged in clusters. Jeff didn't stay long. He shook hands with Mark and Martin, received a murmured "*good luck*" from the latter, and made his way back to his room.

The corridor was quiet. Other men passed him occasionally—some nodded, most didn't. The air carried the faint antiseptic smell of institutional cleaning products, layered beneath something subtler, something almost like the scent of a locker room. He wondered if that was intentional.

The room was exactly as he'd left it. But something had changed. On his pillow, placed with geometric precision, was a manila envelope. Beside it, a small, white card with the resort's logo and a single line in elegant typeface:

Evening reading. Please complete the enclosed questionnaire before breakfast. Your wife's counseling team will receive your responses at 8 a.m.

Jeff sat on the bed and opened the envelope. Inside were two items.

The first was a printed booklet, perhaps twenty pages, bound with a simple staple. The cover read:

"Understanding Desire: A Primer on Female Sexuality and Male Response." The subtitle, in smaller italics: *"Prepared exclusively for the Élysée Retreat Men's Program."*

He flipped it open. The first page began:

"For most men, sexual desire is a simple equation: stimulus equals response. For most women, desire is more complex—it is contextual, emotional, accumulative. A woman's arousal is built over time, through attention, anticipation, feeling seen, feeling wanted, feeling safe enough to surrender. When a husband cannot provide these conditions—whether through physical limitation, emotional unavailability, or simple incompatibility—the wife's desire does not disappear. It goes hungry. And a hungry desire does not fade. It sharpens. It turns. It begins to seek..."

Jeff closed the booklet. He'd read enough to understand its intent. It was the opening salvo—intellectual, clinical, designed not to shame but to *educate*, and in educating, to gently but firmly establish a premise: *your wife's desires are real, they are valid, and you have not met them.*

He set it on the nightstand and picked up the second item: the questionnaire.

It was a single page, front and back, with twelve questions. The print was clean and small. Jeff read through them once, then again, his pulse ticking up with each line.

On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate your current level of anxiety about this process?

Describe, in two to three sentences, what you believe your wife feels when she thinks about your sexual relationship.

Have you ever felt a sense of arousal when imagining your wife with another man? If yes, describe the circumstances. If no, are you certain?

What does the word "inadequate" mean to you personally?

If your wife told you, today, that she felt attracted to another man at this resort, what would your first emotional response be? (Please be honest. There are no wrong answers, only useful ones.)

Rate the following statement: "My wife's sexual satisfaction is more important than my pride." (Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree)

Jeff read question six a third time. Then he set the paper down on the bed and pressed his palms against his eyes.

The silence of the room pressed in. No phone—those had been collected at intake, sealed in labeled envelopes, to be returned at the end of the stay. No laptop. No book he'd chosen himself. No connection to the world outside this compound. Just the white walls, the firm mattress, the fluorescent light from the corridor bleeding under the door, and the questionnaire lying on the bed like a quiet, patient interrogator.

He picked up the pen that had been provided—a plain black ballpoint—and looked at question six again.

My wife's sexual satisfaction is more important than my pride.

He thought of Diane in the car that first day, her hands folded, her eyes forward. He thought of her in the reception pavilion, her face lighting up when Corinne spoke to her—really spoke to her, the way no one had spoken to her in a long time, the way *he* hadn't spoken to her. He thought of the six months of therapy, the stale air of Dr. Lenard's office, the way Diane would sit with her arms crossed and her jaw tight and say, *"I just need to feel desired, Jeff. I need to feel like someone looks at me and wants me. Is that so much?"*

And he had said, *"No. Of course not."*

And then nothing had changed.

He circled *Agree*.

Not *Strongly agree*. Not yet. But *Agree*. Because it was true, or at least it was true enough that he couldn't honestly circle anything else.

He worked through the rest of the questions slowly, writing in careful, small handwriting. On question three—about arousal at the thought of his wife with another man—he wrote: *No. Not that I'm aware of*. Then, after a pause, he added: *But I've never been asked to think about it before*.

On question five—her first emotional response if she felt attracted to another man—he stared at the blank space for a long time. What *would* he feel? Jealousy, obviously. Humiliation. Anger, maybe. But underneath all of those, buried deep, in a place he didn't want to visit—was there

something else? Something that felt, in its most embryonic form, like *relief*? Like the relief of a man who has been holding up a ceiling and is suddenly told he can set down his burden?

He wrote: *I think I would feel afraid. But I'm not sure afraid is the only thing.*

He finished the questionnaire, placed it back in the envelope, and set it on the nightstand beside the primer. Then he turned off the lamp.

The darkness was immediate and total. No streetlights, no phone screen glow, no ambient light from a hallway nightlight. Just black.

He lay on his back, arms at his sides, and listened to the building settle around him. Distant footsteps. A toilet flushing. The muffled sound of a shower running through the wall. The ordinary sounds of other men, alone in their adequate rooms, staring at their adequate ceilings, beginning their first night of a process that none of them fully understood.

Somewhere across the resort—past the gardens, past the reflecting pool, past the white linen curtains of a suite he would not see for three days—Diane was probably not lying awake in the dark. Diane was probably being poured a glass of wine. Diane was probably being asked how she felt, and being listened to, and being told that her feelings mattered.

And tomorrow morning, at eight o'clock, her counseling team would open an envelope and read his answers. They would see his handwriting, his hesitations, his careful,

circling words. They would see a man who had circled *Agree* instead of *Strongly agree*, and they would know exactly what that meant.

Jeff closed his eyes.

Four weeks, he thought. *Twenty-eight days*.

Twenty-seven now.

He slept, eventually, but it was a thin, restless sleep, full of half-formed images—fluorescent lights, questionnaires, Diane walking away through white linen curtains without looking back. And beneath it all, like a current he couldn't quite feel but knew was there, something shifting, something loosening, the faintest first tremor of erosion in a wall he'd spent his whole life building.

By the evening of Day Five, the boredom and the lingering physical ache had fused into a restless energy that made it impossible for Jeff to sit still.

He left his quarters and began to wander. He pushed past the running track, leaving the manicured crushed-stone paths for the rougher, unattended garden beyond the sports field. The air here was thicker, smelling of damp earth.

Ten yards into the brush, the trees abruptly cleared.

Jeff stopped.

Rising up from the earth, cutting through the dense jungle, was a wall of smooth, reinforced concrete. It was at least twelve feet high. He walked slowly toward it, placing his hand flat against the cool, featureless surface. Looking up, he saw a continuous coil of heavy-gauge razor wire anchored to thick steel stanchions.

Left and right, the wall buried into the dense areca palm forest, but looking carefully, Jeff could see it continued with the braided steel fence, which had also razor wire on top.

So, this is the border to the women's section, he thought, wondering what the other side would look like.

He stepped back, his eyes tracing the surface. About six feet off the ground, he noticed a section where the concrete had begun to erode. Small, jagged cracks spread outward from a central fissure.

Jeff remembered the canteen on his first night. He remembered the young man with the white athletic tape wrapped around his wrists, and the angry, red scabs raked across the inside of his elbows.

If you're strong enough, Mark had said, *and if you don't mind bleeding...*

Jeff looked at the cracks in the concrete, then up at the steel stanchions. He didn't know what was on the other side. He knew it was the women's area, but he had no idea what it looked like—whether it was a garden, a building, or just more trees. But he understood now what the men were doing. They were wedging their toes into these cracks, tearing their arms against the rough concrete, and

hanging from the steel bars just to catch a glimpse of whatever lay beyond the razor wire.

He didn't try to climb it. He wasn't ready to bleed for a mystery, not when his scheduled meeting was only two days away. But as he walked back to the pavilion, the sheer, pathetic desperation of the wall lodged itself in his mind.

Chapter 7

The body wellness parlor was called Éclat. It occupied a corner suite on the ground floor of the women's wing—glass walls on two sides, white linens on every surface, and a scent that Diane couldn't quite place: something between eucalyptus and jasmine, clean but not sterile, the kind of smell that made you want to inhale deeper.

A young woman named Solène—she'd met her briefly at intake—guided her to a treatment room. The room was small and warm, with a padded table in the center, soft lighting, and a mobile cart bearing an array of bottles and instruments that looked medical but weren't.

"Today is a body composition assessment and skin toning treatment," Solène said, her voice carrying the practiced warmth of someone who had delivered this exact sentence hundreds of times. "I'll be evaluating your skin elasticity, muscle tone, and overall condition. The treatment itself uses a combination of radiofrequency and microcurrent to stimulate collagen production and improve surface texture. May I ask you to undress to your underwear?"

Diane undressed. She'd been evaluated before—at her doctor's office, during her annual physical, the experience always clinical and brisk, the doctor's hands efficient and impersonal. This was different. Solène's eyes moved over her body with the same warmth as her voice—not clinical, not sexual, but *appraising* the way a jeweler appraises a

stone, turning it to catch the light, looking for flaws and virtues with equal attention.

"Please lie face down."

Diane lay on the table, her face in the cushioned cradle, and felt Solène's hands begin to move across her back. The touch was professional—firm, deliberate, following specific lines—but there was something in the pressure that felt like reading, as though Solène's fingers were translating the topography of her body into a language only she understood.

"Your muscle tone is excellent," Solène said, her hands pressing along Diane's trapezius. "Consistent. You've been working out regularly?"

"For about three months," Diane said into the cushion. "At first it was quite hard. I kind of miss it since here."

"It shows. The consistency is what matters. Sustained effort over time produces results that sporadic intensity can't." Her hands moved down to Diane's lower back. "You carry tension here—lumbar region, both sides. Common in women who sit for long hours. The treatment will help, but I'd recommend continuing your gym work with a focus on core strength. If you're here for an extended period, our pool is available for morning and afternoon sessions. Twenty to twenty-five minutes of swimming is more effective than forty minutes on a treadmill, and the water resistance is gentler on the joints."

Diane made a small sound of acknowledgment. Solène's hands moved to her thighs—the backs first, then, after a

pause, "I'd like to assess the anterior as well. Would you mind rolling over?"

Diane rolled onto her back. The ceiling was white and smooth, and she stared at it while Solène's hands moved across her stomach, her hips, the front of her thighs. The assessment was more intimate now—the skin of her belly softer, more exposed—and she felt the urge to suck it in, to hold her stomach flat, to present the version of herself she presented to Jeff in the dark.

She didn't. She let it be what it was.

"Remarkable," Solène said quietly.

"Remarkable?"

"Your skin quality. At thirty-nine, the level of cellulite you have—almost none—is exceptional. Most women in this age range present with some degree of texture, particularly in the thighs and hips. Yours is minimal. Whatever you've been doing—the exercise, the diet, or just genetics—you're maintaining a standard that most of our guests are trying to recover."

Diane felt a flush of pleasure—small, unexpected, the kind of pleasure that comes from being seen accurately by someone who knows what they're looking at. She'd looked at her body in the mirror a thousand times and seen the flaws—the softness, the slight asymmetry, the places where gravity was beginning to win. But Solène wasn't looking at flaws. She was looking at quality.

"The swimming recommendation stands," Solène continued, her hands moving in slow, circular motions across Diane's stomach. "Twenty minutes in the morning, twenty in the afternoon. The water will complement the radiofrequency work we're doing today. You'll notice a difference in skin texture within ten to fourteen days—tighter, smoother, more even tone."

She paused. Her hands rested on Diane's hips, warm and still.

"Can I be honest with you, Mrs. Hayes?"

"Please."

"You have a great body. I don't say that to everyone—I say it when it's true, and it's true of you. The bone structure, the proportions, the muscle-to-fat ratio. It's the kind of body that ages well, that stays strong and attractive well into the fifties and beyond." She paused again. "If you maintain the swimming, maintain the exercise, and consider a small intervention in about five years—a liposuction, perhaps, targeting the areas where even excellent bodies begin to store fat—the result would be remarkable. You could easily look ten years younger than you are for another two decades."

Diane lay on the table and let the words settle. *Five years. Liposuction. Ten years younger.* The words should have felt strange—cosmetic surgery discussed the way you'd discuss a dental cleaning—but they didn't feel strange. They felt *practical*. Like planning. Like maintenance.

"Does the resort offer that?" she asked.

"We offer consultations. The procedures themselves are performed off-site, by partners we trust. But the assessment, the planning, the preparation—that's part of what we do here. We think of it as long-term body architecture. Most guests come here to fix a problem. The smarter ones come here to prevent problems from developing."

The treatment began—warm, pulsing sensations that started at Diane's lower back and moved outward, like a gentle electric current under her skin. Solène worked in silence, her hands moving with the same deliberate precision as before, and Diane lay still and felt the warmth seep into her muscles and thought about what Solène had said.

Long-term body architecture.

The phrase stuck. It reframed something she'd been feeling without naming—the sense, since arriving, that the resort wasn't just treating her but *planning* her. Mapping her. Identifying the areas of strength and the areas of potential, the things that could be maintained and the things that could be improved, the present version and the future version and the gap between them that could be closed with the right interventions at the right time.

Three months ago, she'd started exercising because she was tired of feeling invisible. Now someone was telling her that her body was *architecture*—a structure with a blueprint, a maintenance schedule, a renovation plan. And instead of feeling objectified, she felt... *seen*. Seen the way a building

is seen by an architect—not as a collection of flaws but as a system with potential.

"I'll consider the swimming," she said.

"Wonderful." Solène's hands moved to her shoulders.

Diane closed her eyes. The warm pulses continued—relaxing, stimulating, *working* on her at a level she couldn't quite feel but trusted was happening. She thought about Jeff. About the last time he'd looked at her body—not with desire, but with *attention*. She couldn't remember when that had been. Years, maybe. Before the frustration, before the silence, before the flinch.

Solène had looked at her body for twenty minutes and seen *quality*. Seen *potential*. Seen a structure worth maintaining. When was the last time Jeff had looked at her that way?

She pushed the thought away. Not because it was painful—because it was irrelevant. Jeff's attention was no longer the metric. The metric was *her* body, *her* standard, *her* decision to maintain or neglect or improve. The resort was teaching her that. One warm, pulsing treatment at a time.

When the session ended, Solène handed her a small card—a printed summary of the assessment, with recommendations. *Swimming: AM/PM, 20-25 min. Core focus. Radiofrequency: 3 sessions weekly. Skin texture reevaluation: Day 14. Long-term consultation: available on request.*

Diane took the card. Slipped it into the pocket of her robe.

"Thank you, Solène."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hayes. Your body is a pleasure to work with."

Diane walked back to her suite through the afternoon light, the card in her pocket, the warmth still humming under her skin, and she thought: *great body. Stays sexy for many years. Liposuction in five.*

Not *if*. *When*.

The word made her smile. Not a big smile—a small, private one, the kind of smile that lives on the inside of the mouth and doesn't need an audience.

Three months ago, she'd been a woman who flinched when her husband touched her shoulder. Now she was a woman with a blueprint.

At seventeen-forty-five on Day Seven, Kendrick escorted Jeff through the heavy, iron-reinforced wooden gates that separated the two halves of the resort.

The transition was instantaneous. The harsh, functional aesthetic of the East Pavilion vanished, replaced by the lush, curated luxury of the West Wing. The air immediately smelled sweeter, heavy with the scent of blooming night-jasmine and sea salt.

Kendrick led him down a winding path of polished stone to a set of hand-carved mahogany doors. He stopped, his

posture rigidly professional. "Suite Twelve. You have sixty minutes."

Jeff pushed the heavy door open and crossed the threshold. The contrast hit him like a physical blow.

The air conditioning was a frigid, soothing rush, laced with the rich, unmistakable scent of expensive orchids and Santal perfume. He stepped onto a floor of pristine, vein-matched Calacatta marble that gave way to a hand-tufted silk rug so plush he could feel its softness even through the thin soles of his cheap canvas shoes.

He walked slowly through the grand antechamber, his mind struggling to process the sheer scale of the space. It opened up into a breathtaking, two-story sunken lounge. A cascading chandelier of hand-blown glass hung from the vaulted ceiling like frozen rain. To his left, a massive wet bar carved from black onyx was fully stocked with crystal decanters and rare vintages—a stark, mocking reminder of the tepid tap water he had been rationed for a week.

Everywhere he looked, there was an aggressive, unapologetic display of wealth. Massive, vibrant floral arrangements bloomed in imported vases. Original abstract art slashed across the walls. The far side of the room was entirely enclosed by floor-to-ceiling glass panels, pushed completely open to reveal a private terrace, an infinity pool glowing with azure light, and a sweeping, unobstructed view of the Caribbean Sea.

It wasn't a hotel suite. It was a temple of opulence. And a sickening realization twisted in Jeff's gut: *My money is paying for all of this.*

"Diane?" he called out, his voice cracking slightly in the cavernous room. He suddenly felt incredibly small, hyper-aware of his rough, unwashed skin and shapeless uniform.

"Over here, Jeff."

She was lounging on a curved, cream-colored linen sofa.

Jeff stopped dead in his tracks. His brain struggled to reconcile the woman in front of him with the wife he had lived with for fifteen years.

Her hair was gone. The practical, shoulder-length brown cut had been sheared away into a sharp, aggressively chic bob that exposed her nape. The color was a rich, blazing reddish-brown. But it wasn't just the hair. Her skin was glowing, impossibly smooth and radiant, as if every ounce of tension had been permanently erased from her body.

She was wearing a sheer, pale silk sarong tied loosely over a dark, plunging swimsuit. The fabric clung to her curves, and as she shifted on the sofa, the sarong parted to reveal the smooth, completely bare expanse of her legs.

She crossed one leg over the other, dangling a high-heeled, pointed mule from her foot. Her toenails were painted a striking, unapologetic crimson.

"Hello, Jeff," Diane said. Her tone was not cold. It was warm, musical, and dripping with a relaxed, feline sensuality.

"Diane," Jeff breathed. He felt a sudden, overwhelming rush of love and sheer, staggering physical desire. "My god, you look... you look beautiful."

Diane smiled. It was a slow, genuinely amused smile. She took a sip from a crystal glass filled with something pale and sparkling.

"Thank you, darling," she murmured. She didn't stand up to hug him. She simply gestured to a plush armchair opposite her. "Sit down. You look exhausted."

Jeff sank into the chair. He felt hyper-aware of his shapeless gray uniform, of the sweat drying on his neck, of how small and drab he looked in her lavish, sun-drenched world.

"I missed you," Jeff said, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "The pavilion... it's been a long week."

"Has it?" Diane asked, her eyes sparkling with mild, teasing curiosity. "Tell me about it. Are they working you terribly hard?"

She already knew exactly how hard he was working. Corinne had set up her app to receive his daily performance metrics—his running times, his heart rate, his seminar attendance. But she wanted to hear him say it.

"The physical training is intense," Jeff admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "Running, calisthenics. They push us until we can barely stand. And then there are these seminars in the afternoon..."

"Oh, sweetheart," Diane cooed, pouting her lips. She reached down and adjusted her mule, his eyes followed the movement of her sleek, perfectly manicured hands. "That sounds so hard. I wish I could make it easier for you."

"I'm surviving," Jeff said, his eyes glued to the curve of her ankle. "It's just the silence. Not seeing you. That's the hardest part."

Diane let out a low, teasing laugh that made Jeff's chest ache. Stretching luxuriously across the sofa, she reached both arms over her head like a contented cat, an amused little smile playing on her lips as she watched him stare. "Well, you're seeing me now," she purred. "Drink it in."

She shifted her weight, reclining further back into the sofa, draping one arm along the backrest. She was utterly unselfconscious, radiating a comfortable, dominant energy that was entirely new. She asked him about the food, acting delightfully scandalized when he described the bland, portion-controlled meals, contrasting it playfully with the lobster ceviche and champagne she had enjoyed for lunch.

For nearly fifty-five minutes, she kept him there. She didn't rush him out. She allowed him to bask in her presence, soaking up his desperate, hungry attention like sunlight. She was warm, she was engaging, but Jeff could feel an invisible pane of glass between them. She was no longer his partner; she was a vision he was being permitted to visit.

"I love the new hair," Jeff said softly, as the hour drew to a close.

Diane reached up and ran her fingers through the sleek, reddish-brown strands. "Do you? I decided it was time to stop hiding my neck. It feels wonderfully light."

"I've been sleeping so well here. The bed is incredible—the sheets are like nothing I've ever felt. And in the morning, a woman comes in and brings me coffee in bed. Just—sets it on the nightstand and leaves. No conversation, no expectations. Just... service." She said the word lightly, almost playfully, as if tasting it. "It's such a small thing, but I can't tell you how much it's changed how I feel when I wake up. I feel... attended to. Like my comfort matters."

She let that sit between them. Jeff felt it land—not as a complaint, but as a description. A window into a world she was inhabiting that he had no access to.

She glanced at the delicate gold watch on her wrist.

"Our time is almost up, Jeff," she said, her tone softening with a patronizing fondness. She finally stood up, smoothing the sheer silk of her sarong over her hips.

Jeff stood quickly, stepping toward her. He reached out, his hands trembling slightly, and gently gripped her bare shoulders. Her skin was incredibly soft, smelling of coconut oil and jasmine. He leaned in and kissed her.

Diane kissed him back, her lips warm and pliant, but she didn't press her body against his. She allowed the kiss, accepting his devotion without returning its desperate intensity.

She pulled back gently, offering him that same amused, sensual smile.

"Go back to your pavilion, Jeff," she whispered, giving his chest a light, dismissive pat. "Rest up. I suspect they'll be running you even harder next week."

Kendrick opened the door exactly at eighteen-hundred hours. Jeff walked out of Suite Twelve, his heart pounding, his body humming with a heavy, unfulfilled arousal.

He had survived the first week. He had seen her. She was warm, she was beautiful, and she had given him the full hour. But as he followed Kendrick back to the gate, the terrifying truth settled into his stomach.

She hadn't asked him a single question about how he *felt*. She had only asked him how he was *enduring*. She was slipping out of his orbit, and the worst part was, she looked absolutely magnificent doing it. And the most terrifying truth of all, the one he would never be able to confess to Dr. Yuen, was the physical ache he was carrying back to the gray pavilion. Not just the ache of missing her, but the heavy, pulsing arousal that her dismissal had left behind. She had treated him like a servant, and his body had rewarded him for it.”

Chapter 8

To mark the end of the Week One "Immersion Period," the husbands were granted a single, five-minute phone call. But it wasn't a right; it was an allowance. Jeff had to fill out a small paper slip with the name and number of the recipient, slide it beneath the plexiglass window of the intake office, and wait. The request was then texted to the West Wing. Only if the wife replied with her explicit approval would the husband be permitted to dial.

The morning sun over the cafeteria terrace was a brilliant, forgiving gold. At nine o'clock, the air was already warm, perfumed with the scent of blooming jasmine and sea salt.

Diane sat at a shaded table near the edge of the limestone patio, wearing a crisp, oversized linen shirt that slipped casually off one tanned shoulder. A young, alarmingly handsome waiter stood a respectful two paces away, hands clasped behind his back, waiting in absolute silence for her to open the menu.

Before she could, Marianne appeared. She dropped into the adjacent bamboo-woven chair with the languid, boneless grace of a woman who had been thoroughly exhausted in all the right ways. She sighed, her movements lazy as she reached across the table to steal a glance at Diane's menu.

"Have you tried the heated rooftop pool yet?" Marianne asked, her voice carrying a husky, morning-after rasp.

"No," Diane replied, adjusting the collar of her shirt.

"You must. It's entirely dark up there—just these gorgeous, dim azure lights glowing up from underwater. The water is almost body temperature, not bracing like the main pool. And the service comes directly from that posh French bistro on the main building top floor. We had a beautiful red Bordeaux and a plate of imported chèvre."

Diane arched an eyebrow over the rim of her sunglasses. "We?"

Marianne smiled, a slow, sly curling of her lips. "Stig took me up there. You know him? The towering blond Swede? Former hockey player?"

"I've seen him around the cabanas."

"He was acting a little mellow after dinner, but I straightened him out," Marianne giggled, leaning in closer, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "We got into the water, and I asked him exactly how long he could hold his breath."

Diane paused. "Why?"

"Well, darling, not just to stay underwater. I wanted to see how well he could use his tongue while he was down there." Marianne let out another delighted, shameless giggle. "Girl, I tell you, any man loves a physical challenge. It was absolutely fabulous... floating on my back in the warm water, the stars glistening above, drinking a heavy red wine and just being completely worshipped. It doesn't get any better than that."

"I imagine it doesn't," Diane murmured. She pushed her designer sunglasses back up the bridge of her nose and reclined deeper into the plush upholstery of the bamboo

chair. A slow, lingering heat pooled in her stomach as she pictured the dark water.

She glanced up at the deferential waiter. "I'll take the Eggs Benedict. And the frisée salad with shaved black truffle and heirloom figs."

The waiter bowed his head exactly one inch. "Excellent choice, Madame."

Diane turned back to Marianne, a faint, lustful smile playing on her lips. "I really have to try that pool sometime."

The waiter turned to leave, but before he took a step, Diane's phone chimed softly against the glass tabletop.

She picked it up. The screen glowed with an automated alert from the East Pavilion Administration:

[REQUEST PENDING]

Your husband has requested a 5-minute telephone allowance to the following recipient: Maude (Personal Secretary).

Tap YES to approve or NO to reject.

Diane stared at the screen for half a second. Her eyes squinted slightly against the glare of the sun. She didn't feel a pang of guilt. She didn't wonder how Jeff was faring in his concrete cell. She just felt a mild, fleeting annoyance at the interruption.

Talk to your office, darling, she thought, a cool detachment washing over her. Make lots of money, it's the one thing you're good at.

Her perfectly manicured thumb tapped the green YES button. She tossed the phone face-down onto the table and picked up her mimosa.

"I truly hope," Diane sighed, looking out over the sparkling ocean, "that the Benedicts are softer this time."

The approval was announced just before the lunch hour break. A silent guard escorted Jeff into a sterile, windowless booth containing nothing but a plastic chair and a heavy, key-style wall phone. Above the receiver, a digital timer read 05:00.

Jeff picked up the heavy plastic handset and dialed. The line clicked, hissed, and then rang.

"Mr. Hayes's office, Maude speaking."

Hearing his sixty-year-old secretary's crisp, professional voice sent a painful jolt of nostalgia through Jeff's chest. For a split second, he wasn't a prisoner in cheap linen pants; he was a name in Manhattan finance.

"Maude, it's me," he said, keeping his voice low, acutely aware of the guard standing just outside the glass door.

"Mr. Hayes!" Her voice spiked with relief. "It is so good to hear your voice. How is the retreat? Is the connection alright? You sound quite far away."

"The connection is fine. Listen to me, I only have a few minutes. Has Chad been handling the quarterly reports? Is everything holding together?"

"Yes, sir. Chad is doing wonderfully. Everything is perfectly fine here."

But Jeff had worked with Maude for twelve years. He knew the micro-tremors in her voice, the slight, forced elevation of her pitch when she was trying to manage a crisis without bothering him. The digital clock on the wall ticked down to 03:14.

"Maude," Jeff said, his tone dropping into the cold, commanding register he used in boardrooms. "Stop managing me. What's wrong?"

A heavy, static-filled silence stretched across the line.

"Maude?"

"It's... it's Mr. Parker, sir," she whispered, her professional veneer finally cracking.

Jeff frowned. He thought about Parker and his lost brownstone. "What about Parker? Did he bungle the KT merger?"

"No, Mr. Hayes. Parker is dead."

The digital clock silently ticked to 02:45. The sterile walls of the booth seemed to press inward.

"He took his own life on Tuesday night," Maude said, her voice trembling now. "The police found him in the living room. He... he put his revolver in his mouth."

Jeff closed his eyes, a cold numbness spreading through his fingertips. "Good Lord, why?"

"They said there was no note," she sniffled, struggling to maintain her composure. "But... well, the police report

leaked to some of the partners. When they found him, his phone was resting on the coffee table right in front of him. The screen was still unlocked."

"What was on the screen, Maude?"

"It was his ex-wife's Instagram," she whispered. "A photo of a room in his house. Well, her house. Mr. Henderson said it was Parker home office, but now she had redecorated it."

The floor beneath Jeff felt like it was dropping away. Parker, a man who ruthlessly dismantled hedge funds for sport, had blown his brains out over a single, pixelated image of his former office in his former house.

Jeff thought of the concrete wall. He thought of Diane's lingering fingers on the golden skin of a stranger, her breathless laughter echoing through the jungle canopy. Parker had broken over a photograph. Jeff was living inside the nightmare.

00:15

"Mr. Hayes? Are you still there?"

"I'm here, Maude," Jeff managed to choke out, his throat tight with a sudden, suffocating panic.

"When are you coming back, sir? We really need your..."

BZZZZZT.

The timer hit zero. The line went dead instantly, replacing Maude's desperate voice with a flat, dial tone. Jeff stood frozen in the booth, the heavy plastic receiver still pressed

to his ear, listening to the hollow electronic hum of his own isolation.

He thought of Parker's face the day he'd described the math. The calm of a man who had already fallen. The numbers had been right. The math had been right. Parker had simply reached the end of it before Jeff did.

He sat in the plastic chair for a moment with his hands on his knees and let that thought go exactly where it needed to go.

Then the guard knocked on the glass, and Jeff set the receiver down.

The booth was very small. It had always been small, but he hadn't noticed until now — until the walls were the only thing left in it. He thought of Parker's face the last time he'd seen him in the office — the particular calm of a man describing a mathematical problem he'd already solved. The brownstone. The wife. The numbers. Parker had done the math out loud, in front of Jeff, and Jeff had listened and nodded and gone back to his own spreadsheet, because the math had seemed sound and the conclusion had seemed inevitable and there had been nothing left to say.

He hadn't understood then that Parker wasn't describing a financial situation. He was describing himself.

Jeff pressed his palm flat against the cool plastic of the booth wall. A photograph. That was all it had taken. Not a confession, not a confrontation, not thirty-one days of systematic dismantling in a concrete compound on a Caribbean island. Just a rectangle of light on a phone screen — another man on a lawn in the afternoon sun —

and Parker had done the arithmetic one final time and found that the sum didn't justify the work.

Jeff thought of Diane in Suite Twelve. The sarong. The champagne. The slow, amused smile of a woman who had already made her calculations and was merely waiting for the scenery to catch up.

The guard knocked once more on the glass, and Jeff stood up and exited the booth.

Chapter 9

The transition from the first week to the second was not marked by any change in the schedule of the East Pavilion. The bell still chimed at zero-six-hundred. The food remained tasteless. The afternoon seminars continued to deconstruct the architecture of the men's marriages with polite, shattering precision.

But for Jeff, everything had changed.

The image of Diane in Suite Twelve was burned into his retinas. The blazing, reddish-brown bob. The sheer silk sarong. The impossibly smooth, glowing skin. The crimson polish on her toes. She had looked like a woman who had just woken up from a fifteen-year coma, and he had felt like the blanket she was throwing off.

On the morning of Day Nine, the physical conditioning moved to the beach.

They were taken to the eastern side of the property, which the brochure had not photographed. This was not the West Wing's immaculate crescent of white sand. This was a tidal inlet — a wide, flat expanse of black mud that smelled of sulfur and rotting vegetation, exposed by the low tide and baking slowly under the nine o'clock sun.

Each man was handed a canvas sack filled with wet sand. Forty pounds, approximately. No one weighed them. The weight was approximate in the way that all discomforts here were approximate — calibrated not for precision, but for effect.

The instruction was simple: cross to the far marker and return. Repeat.

There were no shouted commands. Miller and two other instructors stood at the edge of the firm ground with clipboards and stopwatches, watching in silence. The silence was worse than shouting. It meant the pace was entirely your own failure.

Jeff stepped off the bank and sank immediately to mid-calf. The mud was cold beneath the surface, dense and sucking, releasing each foot with a wet, obscene sound that seemed designed to humiliate. The canvas sack dug into the back of his neck. His canvas shoes — no, the canvas slip-ons, he had to keep reminding himself he no longer wore dress shoes — filled instantly with black water.

Around him, the other men moved in the same slow, degrading struggle. Nobody spoke. There was only the sound of labored breathing and the rhythmic, reluctant surrender of the mud giving up each foot.

Ahead of him, a heavyset man in his fifties stumbled and went down on one knee. The mud took his leg to the thigh. He stayed there for a moment — not panicking, just pausing, in the way a man pauses when he is deciding whether he has anything left. Then he pressed both palms into the filth and pushed himself upright and kept moving.

Jeff watched him and felt something that was not quite pity and not quite solidarity. It was closer to recognition.

He thought of Diane. Not of the sarong or the bob or the stranger's arm. He thought of her in the kitchen at six forty-five, reaching for the olive oil on the second shelf, the stretch pulling her shirt up two inches. He held the image in his mind like a handhold and dragged his right foot free from the mud and put it down again.

Miller said nothing. The stopwatch ran. The sun moved.

By the time Jeff reached the far marker and turned back, his shirt was plastered to his chest and his hands were black to the wrist. He could not feel his feet. He could feel everything else.

Meanwhile, the open-air restaurant on the West Pavilion's terrace was a masterpiece of tropical elegance. Diane sat at a sun-dappled table with Marianne and Victoria, a striking, old-money heiress from Boston.

A soft, synchronized ping broke the ambient hum of the terrace. Diane's phone lit up on the table. A second later, Marianne's did the same. Then Victoria's.

It was a push notification from the Élysée Administration:

[GUEST INVITATION: OBSERVATION DECK]

Dear Ladies. If you are interested in seeing your husbands during an extended physical session taking place on the

South Beach, you may take the B elevator to the top floor, Room T4. From there, you will have the best view without being disturbed by the strong coastal wind. Staff will provide high-powered binoculars and refreshments.

Marianne, however, barely glanced at her screen before tossing the phone beside her sparkling water.

"Honestly, don't bother," she sighed, waving a manicured hand dismissively. "The observation deck is a waste of a morning."

Across the terrace, the message was already having its effect. Two women at a corner table picked up their designer bags, murmured excitedly to each other, and hurried toward the mahogany doors. A moment later, a third woman in a wide-brimmed silk hat stood up and eagerly followed them toward the B-Tower, eager for a glimpse of the spectacle.

Diane picked up her phone and read the notification. South Beach. Extended physical session. She glanced up, her gaze drifting past the manicured hedges of the West Wing toward the distant, rocky outline of the eastern inlet.

She stood and walked to the elevator. Half a minute after, she was on the observation deck. A decorative brass telescope was mounted there, aimed out at the sea. Diane adjusted the brass knob, pointing the lens toward the dark smear of land across the water.

She squinted through the eyepiece.

The inlet was ugly in a way that felt almost deliberate — a flat, sulfurous gash of black mud, the men reduced to slow, struggling shapes in their stained gray uniforms. One

figure stumbled and went down on one knee, and she watched him stay there for a long moment before pressing both palms into the filth and pushing himself upright.

She stepped back from the eyepiece.

She had expected something — she wasn't sure what. Satisfaction, perhaps, in some dark corner she didn't fully acknowledge. Or the clean, manageable guilt she had felt watching him stand lost on the crushed white stone of the driveway on Day One. That guilt had been familiar, almost comfortable. It was the guilt of a woman who still cared.

What she felt now was harder to name.

She looked back through the lens, found the struggling figure again, and waited for the guilt to arrive. It didn't. Instead there was only a vast, windswept blankness — the feeling of pressing a bruise and finding that it no longer hurt. She couldn't tell which man was Jeff. They were all the same gray shape, all equally diminished, all equally anonymous in the mud.

She wasn't sure if that was a relief or a warning.

This is what you wanted, she reminded herself. *You came here to stop bracing yourself.*

But wanting distance and feeling nothing were not the same thing, and she had always known that. She straightened up, smoothing her linen shirt over her hips.

The blankness unsettled her more than the guilt would have.

She walked back to the table, settled into her bamboo chair, and reached for her mimosa without speaking.

"See?" Marianne said, watching Diane's expression with a knowing, lazy smile, as she returned to the table, several minutes later. "They're completely covered in it within ten minutes. You can't even tell which one is yours. It's entirely unappealing."

"How incredibly tedious," Victoria murmured, mirroring Diane's thoughts as she examined her flawless reflection in a compact mirror.

Diane closed her gold-embossed menu, and signaled the waiter.

"I'll start with Belon oysters on the half shell, perfectly chilled, with the Sevruga caviar garnish. And please, bring us another bottle of Laurent-Perrier."

Day ten. During the midday training, Jeff was running beside a man named Arthur, a silver-haired executive from Boston who looked as though he might collapse at any moment. At the edge of the track, monitoring their pace, stood an instructor named Miller.

Miller was younger than most of the husbands, built like a middleweight boxer, with a close-cropped haircut and a faded tattoo on his forearm. Earlier in the week, Jeff had struck up a brief, breathless conversation with him between sets of push-ups. They had discovered they were originally from adjacent suburbs in Long Island. It was the only non-clinical interaction Jeff had managed with any of the staff.

As Jeff rounded the curve on his final lap, his chest heaving, he slowed to a walk near where Miller was standing with a clipboard.

"Keep moving, Hayes," Miller said, not looking up. "Heart rate drops too fast, you cramp."

Jeff put his hands on his hips, gasping for air in the thick humidity. He looked around. Several of the older men were already sitting in the grass, their heads down, chests heaving. The pavilion was a machine designed to break them down, physically and mentally, until they were too exhausted to fight the ideology being poured into them every afternoon.

"Miller," Jeff panted, wiping sweat from his eyes.

"Yeah."

Jeff lowered his voice. "What happens if someone just... quits? If a guy wakes up on Day Ten and says he can't take this shit anymore?"

Miller finally looked up from the clipboard. His expression was completely neutral, devoid of the aggressive motivation he used during the drills. He looked at Jeff the way a doctor looks at a patient asking about a terminal prognosis.

"Such things happen sometimes," Miller said quietly. "Two or three times a season. And it's not pretty."

"Why?" Jeff asked, his heart hammering against his ribs.

"Do you lock them in?"

"No," Miller said. "It's entirely voluntary. If a husband says he's done, he's taken to an office. He's asked to sign some

legals releasing the resort from liability, and he is driven to the front gate immediately. He can call a cab from the main reception."

Jeff frowned, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "And the wife?"

Miller tapped his pen against the clipboard. "The wife is informed, of course. But there's no legal ground to expel her. She signed her own contract. She usually chooses to complete her stay."

A cold spike of adrenaline shot through Jeff's exhausted body. He pictured himself sitting in a taxi, driving away from the heavy iron gates of Élysée Retreat, leaving Diane behind in the sun-drenched luxury of the West Wing. He pictured the empty house waiting for him back home.

"Why do you say it's not pretty?" Jeff asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Miller looked out over the track, watching the last stragglers finish their miles.

"Because a man doesn't quit this program unless he's already broken," Miller said softly. "And when he leaves his wife here, he knows exactly what she's staying to do. Since I've been working here, all the cases I've heard of ended in divorce within six months." Miller paused, his jaw tightening slightly. "A guy died soon after he left last season. Heart attack. I don't know if there's any connection, but... nobody leaves this place early and finds a happy ending."

"Hayes! Keep moving!" another instructor shouted from across the field.

Miller looked back at his clipboard. "Walk it off, Jeff. You've got seminars at thirteen-hundred."

Jeff nodded numbly. He turned and began to walk, his legs feeling like lead.

You would sign anything. You would agree to anything.

He couldn't leave. The instructor had just confirmed the math he had done in his own head in the dark of his bedroom back home. Leaving Élysée Retreat meant the end. It meant the Jersey studio, the alimony, the silence. He had to stay. He had to endure whatever was happening on the other side of the wall, because the alternative was the void.

The isolation of the East Pavilion forced the men into a reluctant, grim fraternity.

In the evenings, after the tasteless dinner and the mandatory journaling sessions, the men gathered in the courtyard or sat at the edges of the canteen. They didn't play cards. They didn't talk sports. They talked about the one thing that had brought them all to this humid, concrete purgatory.

On the evening of Day Eleven, Jeff sat at a table with Mark and Arthur.

Arthur was staring into a cup of herbal tea, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He was fifty-eight, a man who had clearly spent his life in boardrooms, accustomed to giving orders. Here, he looked like a deflated balloon.

"My youngest graduated from Georgetown in May," Arthur said softly, not looking at either of them. "Moved to Seattle. The house... god, it got so quiet."

Mark nodded, tracing the grain of the wooden table with his thumb. "Empty nest."

"Yeah," Arthur whispered. "Twenty-five years of marriage. We spent twenty of them talking about the kids, or the mortgage, or my travel schedule. When it was just the two of us again, we realized we didn't have anything left to say."

Jeff listened, the familiar dread settling into his stomach. He and Diane didn't have kids, but the silence Arthur was describing was exactly the silence he had lived with for the last three years. The chipped blue bowl. The meaningless touch on the shoulder.

"She told me she wanted a divorce in August," Arthur continued, his voice thick with unshed tears. "Said she felt dead inside. Said she wanted to feel something before she turned fifty."

"So you brought her here," Jeff said gently.

Arthur let out a wet, rattling sigh. "No. She brought me here. She found the brochure. She said she'd give me one last chance to save the marriage. But I had to agree to the program."

"Did she cheat on you before?" Mark asked bluntly.

Arthur flinched. He looked up, his eyes rimmed with red. "Twice. That I know of. A trainer at her gym, and some guy she met at a wine tasting."

"And you stayed?" Jeff asked, unable to hide the shock in his voice.

"What was I supposed to do?" Arthur hissed, a flash of defensive anger cutting through his grief. "I love her. I built my entire life around her. If I leave, she takes half of everything I've earned, and she goes and sleeps with those guys anyway. At least here... at least here, there are rules. At least I know she's coming home with me at the end of the thirty days."

Jeff stared at the table. Diane hadn't cheated on him. Not yet.

He looked at Mark's forearms, resting casually on the table. He looked at the white athletic tape wrapped around Mark's wrists, and the scabbed, healing scratches on his elbows.

"And the wall?" Jeff asked softly. "Is that part of the rules?"

Mark's face went completely blank. He looked around the canteen, ensuring no staff members were within earshot.

"The wall isn't a rule," Mark whispered. "The wall is a disease. Why do you think they call it Siren's Wall?"

"Why did they build it in the first place?" Jeff asked.

"They could extend the chain-link fence and plant trees on both sides, like on the rest of the compound."

"The soil is too rocky in that place," Arthur uttered softly.

"I worked in a surveyor's office, a long time ago. To cover that spot with trees, one should excavate half a dozen truckloads of rock and fill it with soil. Building a wall was

probably cheaper. They put up the wire and called it done." He turned his cup slowly in his hands. "I don't think they counted on the cracks."

Mark turned to Jeff. "Don't go near it, Jeff. If you can survive the thirty days without looking over it, you might actually make it out of here with your mind intact."

Chapter 10

While the men of the East Pavilion bonded over the shared autopsy of their marriages, Diane was discovering that the West Wing was designed to make her forget she was married at all. By Day Twelve, the physical transformation that had shocked Jeff during their first meeting had settled into Diane's bones, altering the very way she carried herself. The severe, reddish-brown bob felt like armor. The smooth, bare skin beneath her expensive, sheer resort wear felt like an invitation. She spent her afternoons lounging by the main pool, the epicenter of the West Wing's social life. It was a world of pure, unadulterated indulgence. Women drifted between the swim-up bars and the shaded cabanas, reading novels, sipping brightly colored cocktails, and laughing with a volume and freedom that suggested they had left their inhibitions at the front gate.

And moving seamlessly among them were the men.

Julian was Diane's favorite. He was tall, dark-haired, with a physique that belonged on a marble pedestal, but it was his demeanor that truly captivated her. He was attentive without being cloying. He anticipated her needs before she voiced them, and he looked at her with a steady, unapologetic hunger that made her pulse race.

She was lying on a padded chaise lounge under a white canvas umbrella, wearing the naughty, plunging black swimsuit she had bought in the boutique. She was reading a magazine on her tablet, though she hadn't turned a page in ten minutes.

"You're tense," a low voice murmured.

Diane looked up. Julian was standing beside her lounge, holding a small bottle of dark, amber-colored tanning oil. He was wearing only black swim trunks.

"Am I?" Diane asked, a slow, lazy smile spreading across her lips.

"Your shoulders," Julian said smoothly. He didn't ask for permission. He simply knelt on the warm stone beside her chair, poured a small amount of the fragrant oil into his palms, and rubbed his hands together to warm it.

"Turn over," he instructed softly.

Diane hesitated for a fraction of a second. The ghost of her old life whispered that letting a strange, beautiful man rub oil on her body in public was not something a married woman did. But the ghost was very quiet, and Julian's eyes were fixed on her with absolute, unwavering focus.

She rolled onto her stomach, resting her cheek against her folded arms.

Julian's hands made contact with her skin.

Diane let out a long, shuddering sigh. His touch was nothing like Jeff's. When Jeff rubbed her shoulders at home, his hands were heavy with anxiety, his thumbs pressing too hard, his mind clearly racing with the stress of his day or his desperate need for her approval.

Julian's hands were entirely present. They were strong, rhythmic, and incredibly skilled. He worked the warm oil into the muscles of her upper back, his thumbs tracing the line of her spine with a slow, deliberate pressure.

"That looks heavenly."

Diane turned her head. Marianne was settling onto the lounge next to hers, wearing a sheer gold cover-up over a white bikini. She held a flute of champagne and was watching Julian's hands on Diane's back with casual approval.

"It is," Diane murmured, closing her eyes again as Julian's hands slid lower, tracing the curve of her waist.

Marianne took a sip of her champagne. "You have a meeting coming up, don't you? Day Fifteen?"

"The day after tomorrow," Diane confirmed, her voice muffled against her arms. She hadn't thought about the meeting all morning. The thought of sitting in her suite, listening to Jeff talk about how hard he was running on the track, felt incredibly tedious.

"Don't let him ruin your evening," Marianne advised breezily, gesturing for a passing waiter to bring her a small plate of fruit. "The first meeting is always a bit sentimental, but by the second, they usually start getting whiny. They want reassurance. They want to know you miss them."

Diane opened her eyes, pushing herself up slightly on her elbows. Julian paused, his hands resting heavily, possessively, on her hips.

"What should I do?" Diane asked, genuinely curious.

"Nothing," Marianne said simply. "That's the point, darling. You do absolutely nothing differently. You don't prepare for him. You don't dress for him. If you have

plans, keep them. Let him sit in the antechamber while you finish getting ready. It's very good for them to realize they are no longer the main event."

Marianne picked a piece of pineapple from the plate the waiter had just set down.

"My husband used to be impossible if I was five minutes late for dinner," Marianne mused, her eyes tracking a young man diving into the pool. "Always pacing. Always sighing heavily so I knew I had inconvenienced him. Now..." She smiled, a sharp, cold expression that didn't reach her eyes. "Now, he cooks the dinner. And he cleans the kitchen afterward. And if the kitchen isn't spotless by the time I come down for my morning coffee..."

Marianne let the sentence trail off, taking a slow sip of her champagne.

Diane's breath hitched. She stared at the older woman. "If it isn't spotless...?"

Marianne looked back at Diane, her smile turning wicked and deeply amused. "Let's just say he has learned that my displeasure has consequences."

Diane lay back down on the lounge. Julian resumed his slow, hypnotic massage, his thumbs pressing deeply into the dimples above her hips.

She stared out at the glittering blue water, the heat of the sun baking into her oiled skin. She thought of Jeff. She thought of the kitchen at home, the chipped blue bowl, the endless, exhausting cycle of managing his quiet, needy moods.

She thought of Marianne's husband, quietly scrubbing a kitchen counter, terrified of his wife's displeasure.

A dark, twisting thrill bloomed low in Diane's stomach. It wasn't just the idea of sleeping with other men. It was the idea of returning home to a man who had been completely, utterly repurposed. A man who served her, without expecting anything in return.

"Julian," Diane murmured softly, her eyes fluttering shut as his hands worked their magic.

"Yes, Diane?"

"Are you available for drinks on the evening of Day Fifteen?" she asked casually. "Say... six-thirty?"

Julian smiled, his hands sliding up to massage the base of her exposed, elegant neck. "I would be honored."

Diane didn't smile. She just let her head fall back onto her arms. Her meeting with Jeff was at eighteen-hundred. She would give him twenty minutes. That would be more than enough time for him to watch her put on her makeup before she left him sitting there.

On the afternoon of Day Thirteen, Diane lay on the teak decking of her private terrace, the sun warming the sheer, scandalous swimsuit she had bought two days prior. Her tablet rested on the low table beside her, playing a soft bossa nova playlist.

The screen lit up with a silent notification.

Diane turned her head lazily, picking up the device. The banner across the top bore the elegant, serified crest of Élysée Retreat.

Mrs. Hayes: Regarding Mr. Hayes's progress. Your husband is approaching the completion of Week Two. He is now eligible for selection in the Extended Curricula courses. Please review the attached options at your convenience to customize the remainder of his programming.

Diane read the notification twice. *Extended Curricula.*

She remembered Marianne's breezy, unsettling comment by the pool—the image of a husband scrubbing a kitchen counter, terrified of his wife's displeasure, repurposed into something entirely domestic and useful.

A small, genuine thrill moved through Diane's chest. The power Élysée was handing her wasn't just sexual freedom; it was the complete, structural redesign of her marriage. She could select exactly how Jeff would serve her when they returned home.

She stared at the link to the prospectus. She should open it. She should read through the options and begin charting the next phase of his submission.

But as she reached to tap the screen, a shadow fell across the terrace.

Julian stepped out from the open glass doors of the lounge, carrying a silver tray with a sweating silver shaker and two crystal coupes. He was wearing dark linen trousers and a crisp white shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Julian murmured, setting the tray down smoothly.

Diane looked at his broad shoulders, at the dark hair curling at his collar, and at the steady, unapologetic hunger in his eyes.

She pressed the power button on her tablet, plunging the screen into blackness. The Extended Curricula could wait.

"You aren't interrupting anything important," Diane said softly.

In the East Pavilion, the boredom and the physical ache had finally broken through Jeff's capacity to endure the silence.

It was late afternoon on Day Fourteen. The sky was the color of bruised iron, threatening rain but delivering only a suffocating humidity.

Jeff sat on the edge of his narrow bunk, tearing a strip of white athletic tape from a roll he had bartered for from one of the older men in exchange for his dessert ration. He wrapped the tape tightly around his left wrist, then his right, securing the joint.

He didn't want to do this. Every rational instinct told him to stay in his austere room, to stare at the blank concrete walls, and to wait for his meeting tomorrow at eighteen-hundred.

But the image of Diane in the sheer silk sarong was a live coal in his brain. He needed to know what she was doing. He needed to know if she was looking for him.

He left his quarters, moving quickly past the running track and plunging into the unattended brush. The earth was soft and damp. He pushed through the low-hanging palm fronds until he reached the concrete face of Sirens' Wall.

It wasn't empty.

Jeff froze, the humid air suddenly catching in his throat. Several feet away, half-hidden by the broad shadow of a banyan tree, another man was sitting on the damp earth with his back pressed hard against the concrete.

He was older than Jeff, perhaps in his late fifties, wearing the same shapeless linen uniform. His forearms were streaked with fresh, bloody scratches from the rough stone. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, his breathing heavy and ragged in the quiet jungle air as his hand worked furiously beneath the bunched fabric of his trousers.

Jeff stood perfectly still. The silence stretched for five, maybe ten excruciating seconds as the man's breath suddenly hitched.

When the release finally came, there was no pleasure in it. The man's face didn't soften into relief; instead, it twisted into a sudden, silent grimace of pure agony. His jaw trembled, and he let out a stifled, pathetic whimper that sounded more like a wounded animal than a climax.

A sickening realization hit Jeff like a physical blow. The man wasn't just seeking a base, physical release. He was pressing his spine against the cold concrete to get as close as physically possible to the West Pavilion. He was doing this to the memory of his own wife—or worse, to the

torturous, inescapable thought of what she was doing on the other side of the wall.

The man's eyes suddenly snapped open.

He saw Jeff. The grief and pain in the older man's face instantly shattered into wide, terrified panic. With a sharp gasp, he scrambled backward against the wall, his hands fumbling wildly to yank up the linen trousers. He didn't say a word. He just stared at Jeff with wet, humiliated eyes, his chest heaving, before he scrambled to his feet and hurried blindly down the narrow dirt path, disappearing into the dense foliage.

Jeff stood alone at the base of the wall, staring at the trampled earth where the man had been sitting. A cold dread settled over him.

He turned toward the eroded section of the concrete, took a deep breath, wedged the toe of his canvas shoe into a deep fissure, and jumped.

His hands slapped against the rough concrete, his fingers scrambling for purchase. He dragged his chest and elbows against the wall, the stone tearing through his thin gray shirt, scraping the skin raw. The pain was immediate and sharp, but adrenaline pushed it down.

He reached the top, his fingers wrapping around the thick steel stanchions anchored just beneath the coils of razor wire.

He pulled himself up. His biceps screamed. His shoulders burned.

For the first time, Jeff looked over the wall.

The sheer scale of the luxury was a sudden, disorienting assault. It was a sprawling, multi-tiered paradise of glittering blue pools, swaying palms, and white canvas cabanas. Waiters in immaculate uniforms circulated with silver trays.

It took him twenty seconds to find her.

She was sitting at the edge of the main lagoon, her legs dangling in the water. She was wearing the dark, plunging swimsuit. Her new, sharp reddish-brown bob caught the afternoon light perfectly.

She wasn't alone.

She was surrounded by a small group of women, laughing freely, her head thrown back. And standing beside her, leaning against a stone pillar, was a man. He was young, impossibly fit, and wearing only dark swim trunks.

Jeff watched the man lean down and say something close to Diane's ear.

Diane laughed again. She didn't flinch. She didn't pull away. She reached up and lightly touched the man's forearm, her fingers lingering on his golden skin for a fraction of a second. It was an entirely casual, incredibly intimate gesture—the kind of touch a woman reserves for a man she is deeply, comfortably attracted to.

She wasn't looking toward the wall. She wasn't scanning the perimeter for her husband. She was entirely, radiantly present in a world that did not include him.

Jeff's breath hitched in his throat. He braced himself for the familiar, protective surge of husbandly anger—the

instinct to shout her name over the wall. But it didn't come. Instead, a dark, heavy heat coiled deep in his stomach. Looking at his wife, glowing and disturbingly exposed in that sheer swimsuit under the gaze of other men, a wave of deep, visceral arousal flooded through his veins. It was unbidden, sickeningly intense, and utterly paralyzing.

Clinging to the ledge, he felt the sudden, rigid swell of his own erection pressing hard into the rough, sun-baked face of the wall. Through the cheap, thin fabric of his linen trousers, the coarse concrete scraped against him—a harsh, humiliating friction that made his pulse hammer violently in his ears.

And in that agonizing flash of heat and shame, it hit him.

The image of the older man at the base of the wall flashed through his mind. The bloody scratches on his forearms. The ragged breathing. The pained whimper of a climax born from pure, agonizing grief. He understood. Jeff understood exactly what had driven that man into the dirt. Élysée wasn't just isolating them; it was actively rewiring their brains, turning their own despair and sexual humiliation into a trap they couldn't escape.

The weight of the realization, mixed with the blinding shame of his own body's betrayal, short-circuited his strength.

Jeff's arms gave out.

He plummeted backward, hitting the soft earth with a heavy thud. The wind was knocked out of him. He was gasping for air, staring up at the darkening canopy of trees,

his body still rigid with an arousal he had never asked for and could no longer control.

The physical pain in his torn elbows was nothing compared to the hollow, terrifying void opening up in his chest. Mark had been right. It was worse to see it. He lay in the dirt, his body still rigid with an arousal that made him want to vomit. The resort had reached inside him and flipped a switch he didn't know existed, tying his devotion to his own degradation.

"First time?"

Jeff gasped, rolling onto his side.

Standing a few feet away in the brush was a man with distinguished, silver-white hair and a sharply lined face. He looked to be around sixty-five, wearing the same indefinite gray uniform, though he carried it with a strange, quiet dignity.

"Yeah," Jeff choked out, clutching his ribs.

The older man stepped forward and offered a hand. Jeff hesitated, then took it. The man's grip was surprisingly strong. He pulled Jeff to his feet.

"Glenn," the man said softly.

"Jeff."

Glenn looked at the blood seeping through the torn sleeves of Jeff's shirt, then up at the razor wire.

"It's a brutal climb," Glenn murmured, his eyes full of a dark, exhausted empathy. "Especially when you aren't prepared for what's on the other side."

"I saw her," Jeff whispered, the words tasting like ash.

"She was... she looked so happy."

Glenn nodded slowly. "They always do." He released Jeff's hand and gestured back toward the pavilion. "Go clean those cuts, Jeff. Don't let the instructors see them bleeding during dinner. We can talk some day, if you want. After the journal sessions."

Jeff nodded numbly. He stumbled back through the brush, leaving Glenn standing alone in the shadows of the wall.

The digital clock on the wall of Jeff's room read 17:15.

Day Fifteen.

Jeff stood in front of the small, stainless-steel basin. The fluorescent light above the mirror cast harsh, unforgiving shadows across his face. The room was no larger than a walk-in closet—a narrow bunk, a metal locker, and the sink. There was no counter space. His single, thin towel hung from a hook on the concrete wall.

He was holding a cheap disposable razor, trying to shave the stubble from his jawline.

He was shaking.

The tremor started in his core and radiated outward, making his hands vibrate uncontrollably. He had slept for perhaps two hours total. The image of Diane touching the beautiful stranger's arm by the pool looped behind his eyelids every time he closed them.

You have to hold it together, Jeff thought frantically, dragging the razor down his cheek. If you fall apart, she'll see how weak you are. You have to show her you're strong enough to handle this.

His hand jerked.

The blade bit into the soft skin just below his jawline.

"Shit," Jeff hissed, dropping the razor into the basin. A bright bead of blood welled up instantly, spilling down his neck.

He grabbed a square of coarse toilet paper and pressed it hard against the cut. He leaned over the sink, staring at his reflection. He looked pathetic. His eyes were bloodshot, his skin pale beneath the harsh light. Below the short sleeves of his gray shirt, angry, crusted scabs tracked across his elbows from his fall off the wall.

He was a forty-six-year-old financial professional, bleeding into a stainless-steel sink in a concrete box, terrified of his own wife.

At exactly seventeen-forty-five, Kendrick appeared at the door.

"Mr. Hayes. It is time."

Jeff peeled the bloody toilet paper off his neck. The cut was still weeping slightly, but he had no time to fix it. He smoothed his uniform, took a deep, shuddering breath, and followed Kendrick out into the suffocating heat.

The walk to the West Wing felt like a march to the gallows. When Kendrick finally pushed open the heavy

mahogany doors to Suite Twelve, Jeff stepped inside, bracing himself for the visual shock of her beauty.

But the lounge was empty.

"Diane?" Jeff called out, his voice echoing slightly in the massive, sun-drenched room.

There was no answer. From the bedroom, he heard the soft, rhythmic hum of a blow dryer.

She hadn't been waiting for him. She wasn't sitting on the sofa, eager to hear his voice.

Jeff stood awkwardly in the antechamber for five agonizing minutes. He didn't dare sit down. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, his hands clasped behind his back, feeling the sting of the cut on his jaw and the throbbing ache in his scraped elbows.

The hum of the blow dryer stopped.

A minute later, Diane emerged from the bedroom.

Jeff's breath caught in his throat. She wasn't wearing a sheer sarong or a swimsuit. She was dressed for the evening. She wore a sleek, backless black dress that clung to her hips and flared slightly at the knees. The reddish-brown bob was styled perfectly, curving sharply against her jawline.

And on her feet, she wore the incredibly high-heeled, pointed mules.

She didn't look at him immediately. She walked to the console mirror, checking her reflection, smoothing a tiny, invisible flaw near her collarbone.

"Hello, Jeff," Diane said breezily, her eyes meeting his in the mirror. "Did you miss me, darling?"

"Diane," Jeff breathed, stepping forward. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to pull her into his arms and beg her to tell him that the man by the pool meant nothing.

But as he approached, she turned, putting a hand up lightly to stop him.

"Careful, dear," she murmured, a soft, teasing smile playing on her lips. "I just finished my makeup. You're bleeding."

Jeff froze, his hand flying to the cut on his jaw. "I'm sorry. I cut myself shaving. I was... I was rushing."

Diane's dark eyes swept over him. She took in the cheap gray uniform, the nervous sweat on his brow, and the poorly concealed desperation in his posture. Then, her gaze dropped to his arms.

She saw the angry, red scabs tracking across the inside of his elbows.

"What happened to your arms?" she asked, her tone entirely devoid of panic or concern. It was a mild, detached curiosity.

Jeff swallowed hard. He couldn't tell her he had torn himself to pieces trying to spy on her. The humiliation would be absolute.

"I fell," Jeff lied, his voice thick. "On the running track. I tripped during the conditioning drills."

She simply tilted her head, her smile deepening into something charmingly affectionate and entirely cruel.

"Is it that hard?" Diane asked, her voice dripping with a patronizing, melodic sweetness.

"It's... it's difficult," Jeff admitted, his chest aching at the complete lack of empathy in her tone. "They push us to the limit, Diane. The seminars, the running..."

"Well, you must be more careful, darling. You need your strength for the conditioning," Diane interrupted smoothly, turning back to the mirror. She raised her hands, delicately adjusting the sharp angle of hair at her nape. "I wouldn't like to get a bad report from the instructors."

Jeff stared at her back. The words hit him with the force of a physical blow. She didn't care that he was hurting. She was treating his agony like a child's poor performance in school.

"Diane," Jeff whispered, his voice trembling. "Please. It's... it's torture not seeing you. I love you so much."

Diane paused, her hands resting on the cool marble of the console. She looked at his reflection in the glass. She saw the absolute, crushing devotion radiating from his tired, bloodshot eyes. She saw the man who had built his entire identity around being her husband, now entirely dependent on the crumbs of her attention.

She turned around slowly.

"Of course you do," she said, her voice dropping into a register of quiet, terrifying certainty. She stepped closer, the sharp click of her pointed mules echoing on the marble

floor. She didn't touch him, but she leaned in close enough that he could smell the jasmine and the expensive champagne on her breath.

"You love me more now than you did a month ago," she said softly. It wasn't a question. "Don't you?"

Jeff stared at her. His mouth opened. Closed.

"Think about it," Diane murmured, her eyes holding his with a calm, clinical precision that was worse than any anger. "Before you came here, you loved me the way a man loves a wife. Routine. Familiar. Comfortable. The kind of love that stops noticing." She tilted her head slightly. "But now you've seen the separation. You've sat in that room and imagined the house without me. The kitchen without me. The bed without me." A small, knowing smile touched her lips. "And suddenly I'm not routine anymore, am I? I'm the most important thing in your life. Because I'm the thing you almost lost."

"It's... it's not like that," he mumbled, his voice barely audible.

Diane's smile didn't waver. She didn't argue. She didn't need to.

"Of course it is, darling," she said, the warmth in her voice making the accuracy of her observation feel like a hand closing around his throat. "You love me because you can feel how thin the wall is now. You love me because you finally understand what's on the other side."

Jeff's throat worked.

"Oh, don't look so panicked," she said, a soft, amused laugh escaping her lips. "I'm not going to leave you. Especially not now."

Jeff said nothing. He couldn't.

She leaned back slightly, regarding him with the detached fondness of a woman who had just diagnosed a patient and found the prognosis exactly as expected.

"Besides," Diane murmured, a soft, brilliant light dancing in her dark eyes. "It's nice to know that you strive and suffer to please me, don't you, darling?"

She giggled.

Jeff felt the floor drop out from beneath him.

Diane smiled, looking entirely satisfied. She glanced at the delicate gold clock on the table. It was eighteen-twenty.

"I'm so proud of your progress today, Jeff," Diane sighed happily, picking up a small, glittering clutch from the sofa. She walked past him toward the mahogany doors. "Now, you should get back to your pavilion. You need your rest."

Jeff spun around in panic. "But... we have an hour. It's only been twenty minutes."

Diane paused in front of the mirrored wardrobe, looking back at him over her bare shoulder.

"I know," she said, her tone utterly indifferent. "But I have an engagement. And I really can't be late, so I have to go now."

She glanced at her minuscule Cartier, Jeff's present for their 10th anniversary. "You don't mind I leave a little early, do you, dear?"

She raised her hand, her fingers hovering a fraction of an inch from his cheek, as if to cup his face. Jeff closed his eyes, leaning into the phantom warmth, waiting for the heavenly touch. A second passed. Then another. Jeff opened his eyes. Diane's hand was already at her side, and she was walking toward the door. She opened the door and stepped out into the tropical evening. Jeff was left standing alone in the massive, silent suite, bleeding from his jaw, staring blankly at the door, paralyzed by a shameful, painful arousal.

Chapter 11

The heat inside the utility annex was a living, suffocating thing.

It was Day Sixteen, mid-afternoon. The air was thick with the hiss of industrial steam irons and the smell of hot, wet cotton. Six men stood at the long steel tables, their gray uniforms soaked dark with sweat.

Their task was simple but agonizingly precise: pressing the heavy, high-thread-count sheets used for the private poolside cabanas in the West Wing.

Two days ago, Jeff would have gripped the heavy iron with simmering, resentful rage. He would have cursed Kendrick, cursed the resort, and imagined burning the fabric.

Today, Jeff worked with a frantic, obsessive desperation.

He didn't know which cabana these would go to. That was the point, probably. He pressed the iron down harder, smoothing every microscopic crease.

I wouldn't like to get a bad report, Diane had said, admiring her own reflection. It's nice to know that you strive and suffer to please me.

Kendrick paced behind them, his hands clasped behind his back, inspecting the finished piles. Whenever he found a wrinkle, he dropped the sheet on the concrete floor without a word. The man responsible had to start over.

Jeff didn't drop a single sheet. He worked until the blisters on his palms tore open, staining the wooden handle of the iron. He had to be perfect. He had to show her he could be whatever she wanted him to be. It was the only way she would ever let him come home.

The salon was all pale velvet, burnished wood, and filtered light, a room designed to make time feel lazy and consequence-free. Tall drapes softened the sun into a warm haze over clustered sofas, low lacquer tables, and silver trays of tiny canapés arranged with almost comic precision: smoked salmon curls, truffled mushrooms, miniature tarts, glossy strawberries, things so delicate they seemed less like food than an excuse to keep the women lingering.

Bellhops moved quietly between them, handsome and unobtrusive in cream jackets, refreshing champagne flutes and teacups before anyone had to ask. One poured from a silver pot with the practiced grace of a sommelier; another knelt to straighten a cushion behind a woman's back; a third appeared with a fresh plate the moment a canapé vanished. The whole room had the hush of a private club and the softness of a perfumed drawing room, but beneath it was something stranger: a sense that no one in here was expected to do anything difficult, ever.

"The mistake new wives make," Beatrice said, her heavy diamond rings catching the afternoon light as she reached for a miniature strawberry tartlet, "is that they yell. They get angry when the husbands resist."

Beatrice was in her late sixties, a woman of terrifying, immaculate elegance. Her silver hair was swept up in a flawless French twist, and her posture on the pale velvet sofa was as regal as a queen holding court. She was on her sixth season at Élysée. Her husband, Glenn, was currently somewhere in the East Pavilion.

Marianne, lounging on the adjacent settee with a flute of mimosa, nodded eagerly. "Exactly. It just makes them defensive."

"Worse," Beatrice corrected smoothly, taking a tiny, delicate bite of her tart. "Anger implies a conflict, my dears. And conflict implies you are equals. A goddess does not argue with her subjects."

Diane sat sunk into the plush cushions, her legs crossed under her sheer robe, a teacup balanced on her knee. She watched Beatrice dab the corners of her mouth with a linen napkin.

"You must simply be sweet," Beatrice instructed, her voice a soothing, maternal purr. "Complete, unyielding sweetness. When you ask him to drop to his knees, you must do it with the exact same tone you would use to ask him to pass the butter. You pity their struggles. You praise their obedience. Eventually, they stop fighting the leash, because the leash is the only time you ever touch them."

The salon was quiet, save for the soft clink of silver spoons against porcelain and the distant, muted chords of a piano.

Beatrice smiled, a look of profound, serene satisfaction. "My Glenn used to be the CEO of a logistics firm. A terribly stubborn man. Now? If I drop a napkin, he catches

it before it hits the floor. And he thanks me for the privilege. It just takes time, and absolute emotional detachment."

Diane shifted, crossing her other leg beneath her, one hand wrapped around a teacup, listening as the older wife beside her spoke with easy, polished calm about husbands, habits, and what happened when a woman stopped apologizing for wanting more. For a moment, Diane looked down into the pale tea and thought of Jeff's hands on her shoulders years ago, the chipped blue bowl in their kitchen, the man she had married before the resort had taught her how easy it was to stop seeing him as a person. The memory hurt in a quiet, almost embarrassing way.

A sudden, cold vertigo seized her. It wasn't a pang of pity; it was the terrifying, dizzying realization of what was actually happening. She wasn't just training Jeff; she was actively murdering the man she had married.

Without warning, a memory pierced through the champagne haze of the West Wing. She saw Jeff standing in their kitchen back home, the morning light catching the silver at his temples. She saw his hands—the hands that had held her when she had the flu, the hands that meticulously modeled their retirement accounts so she would never have to worry. She thought of the chipped blue ceramic bowl he used for his cereal, a bowl he refused to throw away because he had bought it the year they moved in together. He loved her. He had built his entire identity around being her husband.

If she followed Beatrice's advice, that man would cease to exist. He would become a hollowed-out ghost, pressing

sheets and scrubbing floors, entirely stripped of his humanity.

Diane's chest tightened. Her breath caught. The cruelty of it suddenly felt massive, suffocating, entirely too real. She opened her mouth, the words *I can't do this* forming on her tongue. and for a moment they felt less like a decision than a physical reflex, the way your hand pulls back from a hot surface before your mind has caught up. She set her glass down on the saucer with a small, careful click.

Beatrice was still talking. The words washed over her — *leash, obedience, privilege* — and Diane sat inside them and thought, with sudden, terrible clarity, about a Saturday morning three years ago. Jeff had made her breakfast in bed. Not for an occasion — not her birthday, not an anniversary — just because it was raining and she had mentioned, the night before, that she was tired. He had brought up a tray: soft-boiled eggs, sourdough toast, a single yellow tulip in a water glass because they didn't own a vase. He had sat on the edge of the bed in his old college sweatshirt and watched her eat with the uncomplicated happiness of a man who had done something right. He hadn't needed her to perform gratitude. He had just been glad.

She hadn't thought about that morning in years. She didn't know why it surfaced now, in this pale velvet room, under the sound of Beatrice's serene, shocking instructions.

If she followed this path, that man would cease to exist.

Not the Jeff who frustrated her, not the Jeff who reached across the Egyptian cotton with that familiar, searching pressure — but the Jeff with the yellow tulip, the Jeff who

had been, at his best, genuinely and selflessly kind. That man wasn't the problem. That man was the casualty. And she was sitting here in a silk robe, selecting the caliber of the bullet.

Her chest tightened. The room felt very close. She thought of the word Corinne had used on the first day — *choice* — and she had loved it then, claimed it like something she had been owed. *You do not have to do anything you do not wish to do*. But this felt less like a choice than a current she had stepped into without noticing, and the current had been moving her steadily, smoothly, without resistance, and she had called it freedom because it felt like relief and she had never stopped to ask whether relief and freedom were the same thing at all.

“I can’t...”—

A shadow fell across her shoulder.

"Champagne, Mrs. Hayes?"

Diane looked up. A young bellhop was leaning over her. He wore tailored linen trousers and a crisp, cream-colored vest, left completely unbuttoned to reveal a broad, sculpted chest and flawless, olive-toned skin. He smelled of expensive cologne and youth. He wasn't looking at her with the heavy, desperate devotion Jeff had. He was looking at her with total, unquestioning subservience, waiting only for her command.

He poured the chilled Cristal into her empty flute. The golden bubbles fizzed and danced, catching the light of the salon.

Diane looked at the glass. She looked at the gorgeous, silent boy serving her. She looked at Beatrice, who was lounging like an empress, completely free of the mental load, the guilt, and the exhaustion of a traditional marriage.

The vertigo vanished, replaced by a dark, intoxicating rush of absolute power.

Diane released her teacup, letting it clatter softly onto the saucer. She reached out and wrapped her perfectly manicured fingers around the stem of the champagne flute.

"Beatrice," Diane said, her voice completely steady, her lips curving into a slow, brilliant smile. "When Glenn makes a mistake... how exactly do you punish him, without losing your temper?"

Beatrice's eyes gleamed with dark, sisterly approval.

"Oh, darling," the older woman purred, leaning forward. "You simply tell him how disappointed you are. And then, you make him clean."

A chorus of laughter filled the room.

By the time the evening siren sounded, Jeff was entirely hollowed out.

The men shuffled out into the darkening courtyard of the East Pavilion. The suffocating heat of the day broke into a damp, heavy tropical dusk. Jeff slumped against the cool concrete base of a support pillar, resting his head between

his knees. His jaw throbbed where the razor had bitten him. His arms ached.

Footsteps approached, quiet and deliberate.

Jeff looked up. It was Glenn. The older man's silver hair caught the dim light from the pavilion windows. He held out a small, dented tin cup of water. Jeff took it with trembling hands and drank.

Glenn sat down slowly, leaning his back against the pillar beside Jeff. For a long time, neither of them spoke. They just listened to the distant, muffled thrum of a bass guitar carrying on the wind from the West Wing. The wives were having a party.

"You look different today, Jeff," Glenn said quietly. He didn't look at Jeff; his eyes were fixed on the black silhouette of the razor wire atop the distant wall. "The anger is gone."

Jeff stared down at his ruined hands. "There's no point in being angry," he whispered. "She doesn't care. It's... it's just entertainment to her now. All of this."

Glenn nodded slowly, a deep, ancient exhaustion settling into his lined face.

"I know," Glenn said. "I'm here for the sixth time."

Jeff's head snapped up. The shock of it momentarily cut through his own misery. "*Sixth?*"

"Yes," Glenn murmured. He took a slow breath. "The first time, I was just as scared as you are now. I was three or four days into the program when it happened."

Glenn shifted, his eyes darkening as the memories surfaced.

"I really didn't know Moore," Glenn began, his voice dropping to a low, gravelly rasp. "Just seen him in the canteen once or twice. His wife was a fashion model; I heard that much. Moore had this hollow gaze, as if his eyes were painted on his face. A tall, lanky guy of thirty-something, they say he was some sort of athlete. Anyway, he was damn good at climbing the wall."

Jeff swallowed hard, remembering his own terrifying ascent, the way his muscles had screamed before he fell.

"One evening, pretty late, he went up," Glenn continued. "Alone. He never came back."

The distant bass from the West Wing party pulsed through the heavy air, a rhythmic, mocking heartbeat.

"They started searching for him in the morning," Glenn said. "Finally, they found him. Apparently, he tried to jump through the razor wire to the other side."

Jeff felt a cold chill run down his spine, despite the tropical heat. "Jump through it?"

"God knows what he'd seen," Glenn said softly. "He got tangled in the wires. Got cut all over. By that time, the resort was new. The razors weren't rusty like now; they were razor sharp. One slit an artery in his throat. He lost all his blood."

Glenn paused, turning his head to look at Jeff. The older man's eyes were utterly devoid of hope.

"He might have tried to cry out," Glenn whispered. "But... it was evening already. The band was pretty loud. They... used to dance in the evenings, on that grass patch near the kiosk."

Jeff closed his eyes. The image was horrifyingly vivid. A man bleeding to death, suspended in the steel teeth of the wall, screaming for a wife who couldn't hear him over the sound of her own laughter and the music.

"We were confined in the building for a day and a half," Glenn said, his tone flattening into grim detachment. "Police were here, DA was here, and... I don't know about the wife. They called a front loader from the quarry in Mignales, two miles inland. That's how they took Moore down."

Glenn looked back up at the wall.

"The quarry workers were paid extra to lime-paint the wall on the women's side," Glenn finished quietly. "Cause it was full of Moore's blood."

Silence fell between them, heavy and suffocating.

Jeff looked down at his blistered hands. He thought of the heavy cotton sheets he had pressed so perfectly, and the terrifying, sensual authority in Diane's voice.

"Sixth time," Jeff whispered, the reality of his future crushing the last breath of his ego.

"Don't look over the wall anymore, Jeff," Glenn said, getting to his feet. He looked down at the younger man with profound, tragic pity. "Just iron the sheets. It's the only way you get to go home."

The late morning sun on Day Seventeen poured over the West Wing lagoon like liquid gold. The air smelled of expensive coconut oil, crushed mint, and the faint, ozone tang of the crystal-clear water.

Diane lay on her stomach on a white leather daybed, her chin propped on her hands, staring at her tablet. A condensation-beaded glass of crisp Sancerre rested within arm's reach.

She opened the Élysée Retreat app. The elegant, serified crest faded, replaced by the *Extended Curricula* menu.

A sleek pop-up window appeared first:

Due to the intensive, immersive nature of the behavioral conditioning, wives may select a maximum of two (2) Extended Curricula modules per retreat. Mastery requires focus. Additional modules may be added during your return visits.

Diane smiled. It made perfect sense now. This was why women like Marianne came back year after year. You didn't just break a husband once; you sculpted him, layer by layer, year after year, until there was nothing left but a perfect, bespoke servant.

She tapped the screen, scrolling past the introduction.

Her first choice was effortless. She checked the box for *Module 1: Absolute Domestic Servitude*.

She tapped the info icon, reading the syllabus with a thrill of dark, vindictive pleasure. It covered everything a submissive husband needed to know: submissive basic protocol (how to stand, where to keep his eyes, how to address her), the exact resting positions required when she was in the room, and a wealth of practical matters—deep-cleaning hardwoods, silent morning service, and the meticulous laundering, ironing, and folding of her intimate garments.

The image of Jeff—a senior financial executive who used to arrogantly lecture her about their investment portfolio—kneeling on the floor of their master closet, carefully folding her silk thongs with trembling, blistered hands, was exhilarating.

But the second module gave her pause.

She scrolled down the list. *Module 4: Financial Relinquishment and Allowance Protocols. Module 6: Social Deference and Public Humiliation.*

She chewed her bottom lip, her finger hovering over the glass.

A shadow fell across her screen.

Marianne dropped her designer sunglasses down the bridge of her nose, leaning over from the adjacent daybed. She held a tall, frosty mojito in one hand, her skin glowing with a flawless, even tan.

"Ooh, curriculum day?" Marianne purred, her eyes scanning Diane's screen. "You picked Domestic Servitude. Good girl. It's the baseline. You absolutely have to establish the physical labor first."

"I can only pick one more," Diane said, sighing softly. "I'm torn between the financial surrender and the social protocols. I want him handing over his paycheck, but I also want him knowing his place when we have guests."

Marianne waved her mojito dismissively, the ice clinking against the glass.

"Skip both," Marianne said breezily. "You can get his money next year. Sign him up for DPPS, girl!"

Diane frowned, looking back at the screen. "What's that?"

Marianne reached over and scrolled Diane's screen all the way to the bottom. She tapped a discreet black box with silver lettering.

"Devotional Protocols and Physical Surrender" Marianne said, her eyes flashing with amusement. "Last one on the list. Trust me, any dumb husband can learn to cook and scrub a toilet, but *this*... this is something else entirely."

Diane stared at the title. A flush of heat that had nothing to do with the sun crept up her neck.

"It rewires their entire sexual identity," Marianne explained casually, taking a sip of her drink. "They learn that their own gratification is completely irrelevant. They are trained, rigorously, to treat your body like an altar. Hours of it. Selfless, desperate, completely focused on you. It takes the power dynamic and locks it into their physical nervous system."

Marianne leaned back onto her lounge, slipping her sunglasses back up.

"You'll thank me next year," she added, letting out a soft, delighted giggle.

Diane looked at the tablet. She thought about Jeff in the suite three days ago, standing there with his bleeding jaw, eyes closed, pathetically waiting for a touch she had simply walked away from.

She didn't want him just cleaning her house. She wanted him worshipping the ground she walked on, entirely consumed by her pleasure while his own was permanently denied.

Diane smiled. She checked the box for *DPPS*.

A prompt appeared at the center of the screen: *Confirm Curriculum for Husband #4041 (Hayes, J)?*

She pondered for an instant about the implacable machinery of Élysée was about to be put in motion by her command. Then she picked up her glass of Sancerre, took a slow, elegant sip, and pressed *Confirm*.

Chapter 12

By the middle of the third week, a new, suffocating weight had settled over the East Pavilion.

It was Day Eighteen, past ten o'clock at night. The stifling heat of the day had finally broken, leaving the concrete block of Jeff's cell feeling damp and claustrophobic.

Jeff lay on his narrow bunk, staring up at the water-stained ceiling. The fluorescent light in the hallway bled beneath the steel door, casting long shadows across the floor.

He closed his eyes.

Immediately, the image of Diane in Suite Twelve filled his mind. He saw the sleek, backless black dress. He heard the sharp, terrifying click of her pointed mules on the limestone floor. He remembered the smell of jasmine and champagne, and the cruel, amused giggle as she realized his pain was entirely for her entertainment. And he hadn't touched her since that first meeting almost two weeks ago.

Jeff groaned softly, shifting on the thin mattress. He reached down, his hand sliding over the rough cotton of his uniform trousers. He closed his eyes tighter, trying to imagine the weight of her hair, the curve of her hip beneath the silk.

Clang.

Jeff's eyes snapped open.

Thud. "Get up. Hands behind your back."

The voice was muffled but unmistakable. It came from the hallway, just a few doors down. It was Kendrick's voice, flat and authoritative.

Jeff froze, his hand still resting on his stomach. He listened, his heart hammering against his ribs.

There was a scuffle. The sound of a metal chair scraping violently against concrete.

"I wasn't doing anything! I swear!" a man's voice pleaded. It was the new arrival in Room 211, a younger tech executive who had been dropped off three days prior.

"Stand up," a second guard ordered. *"You are in violation of Section Four. Move."*

Jeff heard the heavy, synchronized footsteps of the guards marching the new man down the corridor, the man's bare feet slapping frantically against the linoleum. The heavy steel door at the end of the hall slammed shut, echoing like a gunshot through the pavilion.

Jeff slowly pulled his hand away from his trousers, his breath coming in shallow, terrified gasps. He didn't sleep the rest of the night.

The next morning, the canteen was unusually subdued.

The men sat shoulder-to-shoulder on the long metal benches, eating their flavorless oatmeal in grim silence. The air was thick with unspoken anxiety.

Jeff sat across from Glenn. The older man was methodically stirring his coffee, his lined face completely impassive.

"What happened last night?" Jeff whispered, leaning forward over his metal tray. "The new guy in 211. They dragged him out."

Glenn didn't look up. He took a slow sip of his coffee.

"He was caught jerking off," Glenn said softly, the words dropping like stones into the quiet space between them.

"They gave him his first warning. And probably a fine."

Jeff blinked, a cold sweat breaking out on the back of his neck. He remembered the thick, leather-bound contract Diane had handed him in the car on the way to the resort. He remembered her breezily asking him to *refrain from certain habits*. He hadn't read the fine print.

"It's in the contract," Glenn continued, his voice barely above a rasp. "Somewhere toward the end. The Self-Gratification Rule Violation. Poor dumb bastard should've asked first. You don't do that in your room. If you're going to do it, you go to Siren's Wall. No cameras there."

"A fine?" Jeff asked, his voice cracking slightly.

"Yeah," Glenn said, his eyes finally meeting Jeff's. They were dark and exhausted. "I dunno exactly. Several grand for the first offense. For the second one, it's more. Maybe ten."

Jeff stared at him, his mind struggling to process the sheer audacity of the control.

"Ten grand?" Jeff hissed, leaning closer. "Wait. If they caught him... if they knew exactly when to come to his room..."

The realization hit Jeff with the force of a physical blow. He looked up, his eyes frantically scanning the high, shadowed corners of the canteen ceiling, then thinking back to the blank concrete corners of his own cell.

"This means they spy on us!" Jeff whispered, the panic rising in his chest. "There are cameras in the rooms."

Glenn's face didn't move a single muscle. He looked at Jeff with the weary patience of a ghost.

"Are you surprised, son?"

The conversation at the adjacent tables died away. The men sitting nearest to them fell utterly silent, their eyes dropping to their trays. The only sound in the canteen was the harsh scrape of steel wool. Nearby, over the tray rail, two female kitchen staff were violently scrubbing aluminum pots.

Jeff's mind was spinning. They were watching him. Last night, when he had closed his eyes and reached for his own waistband, someone had been watching him on a monitor. He was seconds away from being dragged out into the hallway.

"And ten grand if you jerk off?" Jeff repeated, still profoundly puzzled by the corporate monetization of their bodies.

"Isn't this a swell business?" Glenn said.

The older man pushed his chair back and rose from the long table, picking up his metal tray. He stood there for a second, looking down at the gray slop of his oatmeal, the

cheap plastic cup of coffee, and the absolute degradation of his surroundings.

"Best business in the world," Glenn said, his voice dropping into a register of pure, concentrated venom. "Catch the sucker. Screw the missus. Get his money."

With a sudden, explosive violence that shattered the morning quiet, Glenn swung his arm.

He threw the metal tray full force against the concrete wall.

The noise was deafening—a horrific crash of bending steel, shattering plastic, and wet, slapping slop. Coffee, oatmeal, and scrambled eggs exploded across the gray cinderblocks in a wide, abstract arc. The tray clattered violently to the floor, spinning on its edge before falling flat.

The entire canteen froze.

The men went rigid on their benches. Behind the tray rail, the two female cooks stopped scrubbing, staring at Glenn with their sponges hovering mid-air, their eyes wide with shock.

For two agonizing seconds, no one moved. No one breathed. The only sound was the slow drip of coffee sliding down the concrete wall.

Then, a guard appeared in the doorway.

It was Kendrick. He stood perfectly still, his hands resting on his utility belt. He looked at the mess on the wall, then slowly turned his cold, angry gaze toward Glenn.

Glenn stood completely relaxed. The violent explosion of rage was entirely gone from his face, replaced instantly by the same deadpan, hollow mask he always wore. He looked at Kendrick, then at the mess.

"Sorry, folks," Glenn said, his voice flat and perfectly even. "Dropped my tray."

He turned and simply walked out of the canteen, stiff as a board, his hands resting easily in his pockets.

Kendrick watched him go. The guard's jaw tightened, a muscle feathering angrily in his cheek. But he didn't draw his baton. He didn't shout. He simply watched the old man walk away.

Kendrick turned his gaze back to the tables. He looked directly at Jeff.

"Mr. Hayes," Kendrick barked, the sharp command slicing through the tension. "Report to Annex B. Your Extended Curricula begins in ten minutes."

Chapter 13

In Suite Twelve, the air conditioning hummed, a cool counterpoint to the heat radiating from the bodies pressed against the floor-to-ceiling glass. The sheer linen curtains billowed over the massive king-sized bed.

Diane gasped, her breath fogging the pristine window overlooking the lagoon. Julian's hands, broad and unyielding, gripped her hips, anchoring her exactly where he wanted her. He drove into her with a deep, effortless rhythm. He was a machine of flesh and muscle, flawless in his execution. There was no hesitation, no middle-aged fumbling, no need for her to offer encouragement. He was there to handle her, to take her through every level of physical exhaustion, and he did it with the breathtaking stamina of a man twenty years her husband's junior.

Diane swung her leg over Julian, climbing on top of him. His dark skin was slick with sweat, his chest rising and falling in steady, controlled breaths. He rested his hands lightly on her thighs, entirely submissive to her pacing, yet completely solid beneath her.

She arched her back, her fingernails biting into his powerful forearms as he picked up the pace, the steady slap of skin echoing in the sun-drenched suite. She closed her eyes, entirely surrendered to the luxury of being taken.

She rode him, her reddish-brown hair falling around her face, setting a punishing, greedy rhythm. This was explosive intercourse—the kind of sex that required a

partner with absolute core strength and zero ego. She looked down at him, watching his abdominal muscles flex as he thrust up to meet her, feeling the incredible, heady rush of power. She was the absolute center of the universe. She threw her head back, a loud, uninhibited cry tearing from her throat as the climax ripped through her, violent and perfect.

Julian held her firmly, absorbing the tremors of her body, completely dedicated to the aftermath of her pleasure.

Two miles away, inside Annex B of the East Pavilion, the air was a stifling, damp soup of industrial detergent and steam.

Jeff stood at a long, stainless-steel table. He was wearing thin white cotton gloves over his blistered, calloused hands to ensure he didn't snag the expensive fabrics. Spilled across the table was a mound of Diane's actual laundry—sheer silks, Chantilly lace, and satin intimates brought over from the West Wing that morning in a sealed, climate-controlled container.

Three other men stood at identical tables along the wall, their gloved hands moving with the same frantic, terrified precision. The room smelled of lye and hot cotton. Industrial fans hummed in the corners, doing nothing to cut the humidity.

"The geometry must be exact," Kendrick said, his voice a calm, flat drone as he paced the room with his tablet.

"These garments map the aesthetic of your wives. They are

not simply clothes; they are an extension of her standard. You will fold them to the exact millimeter specified in your diagrams. A two-inch square for intimate bottoms. A three-by-five rectangle for camisoles. Anything that deviates from the specification is rejected."

Jeff's chest heaved. His muscles were still spasming from the morning's scrubbing drills—the endless repetitions of kneeling, scrubbing, wringing, and stacking that had left his forearms raw and his lower back locked in a persistent, throbbing knot.

He reached for a tiny, sheer black thong. He recognized it. It was the one Diane had bought right before the trip, the one he had found in the bathroom vanity when he was packing for her. He had held it for a moment then, turning it over in his hands, thinking about the woman he married and the woman she was becoming and the small, growing distance between those two women that he couldn't name.

Now the thong was on his steel table, and he was trying to fold it into a perfect two-inch square.

His thick, trembling fingers pinched the delicate lace, bringing the edges together. The silk slipped against the white cotton glove. He adjusted. Pinched again. The edges almost aligned.

His right hand twitched—a deep, involuntary spasm from the morning's drills—and the lace twisted.

Jeff fumbled, trying to catch it, but the fabric fluttered silently over the edge of the steel table. It landed on the bare concrete floor.

Jeff froze.

The room went quiet. The other men didn't look up. They had learned not to look up.

Kendrick stopped pacing. He didn't shout. He didn't order Jeff to the ground or reach for his baton. He simply walked over, his face an impassive mask of bureaucratic efficiency. From a hook on his belt, he unclipped a pair of silver tongs.

With surgical precision, Kendrick picked up the black lace thong from the floor. He held it up briefly, examining it under the fluorescent light as if it were a contaminated specimen.

"This garment is compromised, Mr. Hayes," Kendrick said quietly.

"Please," Jeff whispered, his voice cracking. "It just slipped. My hands—"

"Your wife's intimates cannot be returned to her suite after touching the floor." Kendrick set the tongs back on his belt. He raised the tablet and angled it toward Jeff's face. The camera clicked softly—a high-resolution burst, two frames, the shutter sound swallowed by the hum of the industrial fans.

Jeff stared at the tablet screen. On it, frozen in the image, was his own gaunt face, lit harshly from above, his gloved hands hanging uselessly at his sides, the black thong visible at the edge of the frame. He looked like a man who had been photographed at the scene of a crime.

Kendrick tapped the screen. "Infraction logged. Routing to Mrs. Hayes for disposition."

Jeff's blood went cold. "Disposition?"

"Your wife has elected to receive live incident alerts for your Domestic Servitude module. She has sixty seconds to override standard protocol. If she does not respond, the infraction is processed automatically and added to your daily report."

Kendrick looked at his watch. "Fifty-three seconds."

Jeff's eyes locked onto the tablet screen. The screen was dark except for a small, pulsing green dot in the upper corner—transmitting. The image of his failure was traveling through the air, over the wall, past the gardens and the reflecting pools, into the West Wing, to a device his wife was holding or glancing at or ignoring while she did something else, something he couldn't see, something he wasn't part of—

Forty seconds.

The other men at their tables kept folding. Their hands moved in silence. The fans hummed.

Thirty seconds.

Jeff's throat closed. He thought: if she doesn't respond, it's just a report. A line of text on a screen. She can read it later, or not read it at all. It becomes data. Data is survivable.

Twenty seconds.

But if she responds—if she opens the alert and sees the photo and types something back—then it's not data anymore. Then it's her. Her eyes on his failure. Her finger on the screen. Her voice, translated into text, arriving in

this damp room through the medium of Kendrick's flat, bureaucratic recitation.

Ten seconds.

Jeff stared at the pulsing green dot.

The tablet chimed.

It was a soft, pleasant sound. The kind of sound that accompanied a dinner reservation confirmation or a boarding pass download. Kendrick looked down at the screen. His expression didn't change.

He read the text aloud in his flat, professional monotone:

"Unacceptable. Restart the full load. Do not compromise another garment."

Kendrick looked up. "You heard your wife, Mr. Hayes. Drain the basin. Begin again."

Jeff opened his mouth. No sound came out.

He turned to the steel sink behind him. The basin was full of soapy water and the remaining intimates—slips, bras, a camisole the color of champagne. He pulled the drain plug. The water gurgled out, disappearing into the pipes with a wet, sucking sound.

He turned on the tap. Waited for the water to heat. Picked up the first garment—a satin slip—and began to wash it again, his raw, blistered hands working the fabric under the hot water, his eyes fixed on the stainless steel, his mind fixed on the tablet screen and the soft, pleasant chime that had delivered his wife's verdict from the other side of the wall.

She had been looking at her phone. She had seen the photo. She had taken the time—five seconds, ten, enough to type nine words—and sent them back to the room where he stood in wet cotton gloves, and then she had gone back to whatever she was doing.

Nine words. That was what his failure was worth. Not a conversation. Not a question. Not even anger. Just a brief, typed instruction, delivered through the resort's infrastructure with the same efficiency as a room service order.

Unacceptable. Restart the full load. Do not compromise another garment.

He washed the satin slip. He washed the bras. He washed the champagne camisole. When he finished, he rinsed them, squeezed them gently, and laid them flat on the drying rack. Then he walked back to the steel table, picked up the next garment from the pile, and began to fold.

His hands were shaking. But the edges aligned.

Forty-five minutes later, the drying rack was empty and the folded laundry was stacked in neat, precise rectangles on the steel table. Kendrick walked the length of the room, inspecting each pile with the detached focus of a health inspector. He paused at Jeff's station, looked up the black thong—the same thong, now rewashed and refolded—and made a notation on his tablet.

"While you wait for the next cycle," he said, "you will practice your baseline."

Jeff moved to the empty space beside the steel tables. There was no argument left in him. There was no anything left in him.

"When you are in your wife's presence and not actively performing a task, you do not sit on her furniture. You do not stand and hover. You assume the Anchor."

Jeff sank to his knees on the hard concrete. He lowered his hips back until they rested on his heels. He placed his hands, palms open and facing upward, flat on his thighs. He bowed his head, fixing his eyes strictly on the gray floor between his knees.

"Hold."

Within three minutes, the tops of his thighs began to scream. His knees ached against the concrete. His lower back throbbed. He stayed there, perfectly still, staring at the floor, surrounded by the smell of detergent.

He thought about the nine words. He would carry them home. He suspected they would outlast the concrete, the razor wire, the lime paint over Moore's blood. Long after the resort was a memory, he would be standing in their kitchen in Manhattan, folding something—a towel, a shirt, a pair of her underwear—and his hands would remember the slip, and the chime, and the flat, emotionless voice of a man reading his wife's instructions from a screen.

The fans hummed. The water ran. Jeff held the position and waited for the next cycle to begin.

Chapter 14

That afternoon, several men were marched not to a utility room, but to a bright, sterile classroom in Annex C.

The harsh fluorescent lighting illuminated rows of plastic chairs. Jeff sat in the second row, his body aching from the endless domestic drills, his mind numbed by the sheer impossibility of his situation.

The door opened, and a woman stepped into the room.

She wore a tailored, slate-gray skirt suit and held a sleek digital clipboard. Her hair was pulled back into a severe, immaculate bun. She walked to the front of the room, her high heels clicking sharply against the linoleum—a sound that made every man in the room flinch involuntarily, triggering the terrifying echo of their wives.

She did not introduce herself. She simply looked out over the room of executives, doctors, and lawyers with cold, clinical detachment.

"Gentlemen," she began, her voice crisp and amplified slightly by the room's acoustics. "Welcome to Module Nine: Body Worship and Oral Devotion. You are here because your wives have recognized a deficit in your utility."

Jeff swallowed hard, his eyes fixed on the blank whiteboard behind her.

"In the absence of traditional intercourse, your wives will grant you the privilege of providing oral devotion. You

will learn to treat this not as an obligation, but as a gift—the most intimate expression of your utility. This keeps the physical and emotional connection alive."

The room was deathly silent. *In the absence of traditional intercourse.* The words rang in Jeff's ears. Then the instructor tapped her clipboard, bringing up a syllabus on the digital projector.

"This is a three-session program," she stated flatly, pacing slowly across the front of the room. "It is designed to equip you with the focus, technique, and stamina to provide exceptional oral pleasure. Sessions are conducted individually with a female instructor. You will learn breath control, rhythm variation, pressure mapping, and the art of sustained attention."

She stopped and looked directly at Jeff, her gaze finding him specifically, as if she already knew his file.

"You will learn," the instructor said, "that your own gratification is no longer a factor in your marriage. You are a service provider. And this service requires absolute perfection."

Jeff stared straight ahead. Was he a husband still? He was training to be an appliance.

The mechanical chime in the East Pavilion barracks sounded at 06:00. The men stood at attention by their cots, waiting for the daily endurance module to be announced on the wall screen.

Instead of the usual physical routine, the screen glowed with a new directive:

Protocol of Devotional Provision

Status: Mandatory.

Objective: Direct sustenance of the West Wing.

Kendrick's tall frame appeared in the hallway. "Attention, please. Standard physical conditioning is suspended. Today, you will engage in an act of direct, devotional service. Your labor this morning will directly supply the afternoon culinary service for your wives. We shall proceed to the North Inlet."

By 06:30, Jeff was wading into the churning water of the North Inlet.

This was not the Caribbean postcard the wives enjoyed on the other side of the island. The bay here was a deep, violently gouged crescent of volcanic rock, shielded from the open ocean by a jagged breakwater that constantly foamed with crashing surf. The water inside the cove was cold, heavy with silt, and smelled sharply of iodine and rotting kelp. The shoreline was a treacherous slope of slick, black boulders covered in razor-sharp barnacles and dense clusters of sea anemones. It was a place designed to punish the body.

The sky overhead was the bruised purple of early morning, and the wind coming off the water was biting.

Jeff wore thick, black neoprene gloves and a heavy mesh collection basket strapped across his chest. Around him, a dozen other executives, lawyers, and surgeons waded

waist-deep through the freezing surf in silence. Their heads were bowed, their shoulders hunched against the wind as they scanned the submerged, treacherous rocks.

"Your harvest quota is a dozen specimens per man. Premium grade only. Your wives only deserve the best."

Jeff reached into the murky water, his gloved fingers tracing the slick, algae-covered surface of a limestone boulder. He found the familiar, jagged cluster of wild Belon oysters and pried three loose, dropping them into the heavy basket against his chest. His lower back spasmed violently from being bent double against the relentless pull of the tide, his legs already going numb in the cold water.

A few yards away, Arthur let out a sharp, wet hiss of pain. He dropped his metal collection tool into the surf and pulled his hand back, gripping his wrist. A thick, black spine from a sea urchin had driven itself straight through the reinforced palm of his neoprene glove, embedding deep into the meat of his thumb.

The man squeezed his eyes shut, his jaw trembling as he bit back a sob. With his teeth, he gripped the end of the black spine and ripped it out of his own flesh. He spat it into the water, a thin ribbon of blood washing away in the current, before plunging his hands back into the freezing surf.

Jeff watched him for a second, feeling a hollow, sickening knot in his own stomach. A month ago, he would have waded over, dragged the man out of the water, and demanded medical attention. Now, he simply turned away, desperate to meet his own quota.

He didn't care about the cold. He didn't care about the other men. As he pried a massive, spiny sea urchin from the rocks, Jeff only cared about one thing. He hoped that when Diane sat in the warm, sun-drenched restaurant later that afternoon, she would swallow the oyster he had frozen in the surf to gather. He needed her to consume the fruit of his labor, to accept his offering, and to know that he belonged to her completely.

Chapter 15

Miles away, on the sun-drenched terrace of the West Wing, a waiter placed a separate, gold-embossed card on Diane's table.

It read: *Today's Partner-Sourced Raw Selection.*

Marianne picked up the card, a delighted smile spreading across her face. "Oh, excellent. They had the men out in the inlet this morning. The Partner-Sourced seafood is always the most coveted item on the menu."

"What's this inlet?"

"The inlet?" Marianne waved her hand southward. "That nasty little cove on the far side of the property. They send the men out there at low tide sometimes. The water's freezing, the rocks are treacherous. I'm told it's absolute hell." She smiled, selecting an urchin. "Which is presumably why the uni is so phenomenal."

"Really?" Diane asked, peering over her sunglasses.

"Absolutely," Victoria chimed in from across the table.

"There's a certain vitality to it, don't you think? Knowing the lengths they went to." Victoria said, examining a spot prawn. "The oysters are not that big as the French imports, but maybe it's the freshness. Maybe it's knowing they were out there at dawn earning their keep." She laughed lightly and reached for the cocktail sauce. "Waiter? We will take the grand tower. Oysters, urchins, and the live spot prawns."

Twenty minutes later, a spectacular three-tiered silver tower of crushed ice was placed in the center of their table, pluming with dramatic dry-ice smoke.

Diane reached out and picked up a massive, freshly shucked Belon oyster. The creature inside the jagged shell was pristine and still entirely alive. She picked up a wedge of lemon and squeezed a few drops of acid over the meat, watching with a detached fascination as the edges of the oyster curled and twitched in a desperate, agonizing spasm.

This was alive on the sea floor just a few hours ago, she thought, her eyes tracking the tiny, frantic movements. Alive, until Jeff or one of the others dragged it freezing from the surf. It is very much alive right now, right here in my hand.

A dark, curious thrill crossed her mind. *How long will it survive in my stomach?*

She lifted the shell to her lips and swallowed it whole. The taste was incredible—briny, cold, and undeniably fresh. It tasted like absolute power. A sudden, heavy wave of arousal washed over her, radiating from her groin all the way up her spine.

Diane set the empty shell down and dabbed her lips with a linen napkin, a slow, smug smile spreading across her face.

"You were right, Marianne," Diane murmured, reaching for her glass of chilled champagne. "I never loved live

oysters so much. I must have developed a predatory appetite."

Marianne laughed, raising her own glass in a toast. "To the top of the food chain, darling."

The champagne bubbled pleasantly on Diane's tongue. Reclining deep into her upholstered chair, she picked up her sleek phone with a languid, lazy grace. She thought about Julian. She opened the Élysée Recreation & Staffing app.

She tapped open his direct messaging thread and typed a single, entitled line.

Free tonight?

The digital clock on the concrete wall read 17:42.

Jeff stood frozen in front of the stainless-steel basin. Meeting Three was exactly eighteen minutes away.

His heart was hammering against his ribs with a frantic, irregular rhythm that made him lightheaded. He gripped the edges of the sink, staring into the scratched mirror under the harsh fluorescent tube. The man looking back at him was unrecognizable. The arrogant, silver-templed financial executive who had stepped off the plane three weeks ago was entirely gone. His face was gaunt, his eyes hollowed out by exhaustion and the constant, crushing surveillance of the East Pavilion.

He looked down at his hands.

The image of the sheer black thong slipping from his fingers and landing on the concrete floor looped endlessly in his mind. *Garment compromised*. Kendrick had put it in his daily progress report. Diane had seen it. She knew he had failed her. She knew he was clumsy.

Jeff grabbed the block of coarse, lye-scented soap and began scrubbing his hands under the cold water. He scrubbed frantically, working the lather over his knuckles and into the webbing of his fingers. He picked up a stiff-bristled nail brush and dug it under his fingernails until the cuticles burned and turned bright pink. He couldn't snag her fabrics tonight. He couldn't let her see dirt on his hands. If she asked him to touch her—even just to fetch her a glass of wine or adjust her shoes—he had to be immaculate.

He rinsed his hands, dried them on the thin towel, and stepped back into the center of the cramped cell.

He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply through his nose and out through his mouth, trying to utilize the breath-control techniques the female instructor had drilled into them during the DPPS session. *Regulate your heart rate. Your anxiety is selfish. Your focus belongs entirely to the wife.*

He opened his eyes and looked at the floor.

He needed to practice.

Jeff took a breath, stepped his right foot back, and lowered himself silently to the concrete. He dropped his hips back onto his heels, wincing as the deep, purple bruises on his kneecaps flared with pain. He placed his hands flat on his

thighs, palms open to the ceiling, and bowed his head at a precise thirty-degree angle.

The Anchor.

He held the pose for a full minute, staring at the scuffed toes of his canvas shoes. He had to get it right. He couldn't stumble into her suite like a demanding husband. He had to show her that he understood his new place, that he was absorbing the curriculum, that he was trying to be exactly what she wanted.

Knock-knock.

Jeff scrambled to his feet just as Kendrick pushed the door open. The guard stood in the corridor, a sleek digital tablet glowing in his hand. He looked Jeff up and down, his eyes lingering for a fraction of a second on Jeff's raw, scrubbed hands.

"Mr. Hayes. It is time."

Jeff smoothed the front of his gray uniform, his fingers trembling violently. "Yes. I'm ready."

The walk across the compound felt entirely different this time. Before Meeting One, Jeff had marched with indignant rage. Before Meeting Two, he had practically run, desperate to plead his case.

Tonight, Jeff walked two paces behind Kendrick, his eyes cast down, his shoulders hunched. The suffocating evening humidity pressed against his chest, but he barely felt it. His

mind was a frantic checklist of submission: *Don't speak until spoken to. Don't look at her directly unless she commands it. Assume the baseline posture immediately. Don't ask about the man by the pool. Don't get angry. Beg for forgiveness about the laundry.*

They reached the West Wing. The heavy mahogany double doors of Suite Twelve loomed at the end of the limestone corridor.

Kendrick stopped. He didn't offer any parting advice. He simply reached out and pushed the brass handle down. The door swung open smoothly on its hinges.

The smell of expensive jasmine perfume, chilled air conditioning, and fresh orchids washed over Jeff. It was the scent of a paradise he was no longer a citizen of.

"Proceed," Kendrick murmured.

Jeff stepped over the threshold. The heavy doors clicked shut behind him, sealing him inside.

The suite was bathed in the warm, golden light of early evening. Soft, instrumental jazz played from invisible speakers.

"Jeff? Is that you, darling?"

Her voice drifted from the main lounge area. It wasn't harsh. It wasn't cold. It was bright, musical, and terrifyingly sweet.

Jeff's breath caught in his throat. He kept his eyes fixed on the imported Turkish rug, clasped his trembling hands tightly behind his back, and walked slowly into the lounge to face his wife. He stopped at the edge of the sprawling

sitting area, his eyes glued to the intricate red-and-gold pattern of the Persian rug. He kept his hands clasped firmly at the small of his back, his shoulders bowed.

"Jeff? Look at me, sweetheart."

He slowly raised his eyes.

Diane was sitting on a plush, cream-colored velvet chaise lounge near the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lagoon. She wasn't wearing a severe dress or punishing heels. She looked relaxed, luminous, and impossibly soft. She wore a sheer, pearlescent silk robe draped loosely over a white satin chemise. Her legs were bare and perfectly tanned, curled comfortably beneath her.

She held a half-empty flute of champagne, resting it on her knee. On the small glass table beside her sat her glowing tablet.

"Oh, Jeff," Diane breathed, her voice filled with genuine, affectionate surprise. "Look at you. You look so much leaner. The uniform is awful, but the structure really suits you."

She wasn't mocking him. The terror of it was that she meant it as a compliment. She preferred him like this—stripped, hollowed-out, and waiting for her assessment.

Jeff teetered between panic and a desperate, pathetic rush of gratitude that she was pleased with his appearance. He took a hesitant step toward the chaise lounge. The memory of Meeting Two—when he had tried to kiss her and she had walked away—flared like a physical burn.

"Diane," Jeff rasped, his voice rough from disuse. "I'm so sorry about the laundry. Kendrick told you. The thong slipped. My hands were shaking. I washed the hamper again. I was so careful the second time."

Diane's brow furrowed slightly in a pout of maternal sympathy. She set her champagne down and picked up her tablet, tapping the screen with a perfectly manicured fingernail.

"I saw that on your report, honey," Diane said softly, shaking her head. "I was a little disappointed, I have to admit. Those were La Perla. But Kendrick noted that you spent an extra two hours scrubbing to make up for it. And I know your hands are probably very sore."

She looked up at him, a warm, indulgent smile touching her lips.

"Come here, darling."

Jeff's heart leaped. He practically scrambled across the rug. He didn't think; he simply reacted to the warmth in her voice. He moved to sit on the edge of the cream-colored velvet beside her, desperate for the comfort of her physical proximity.

"Ah, ah," Diane tutted softly, putting a single finger to his chest to stop him before his weight settled on the cushions.

Her touch was feather-light, but it stopped him cold.

"Not on the velvet, sweetheart," she murmured apologetically, looking down at his gray, sweat-stained uniform. "I think the fabric is a little too delicate for your..."

work clothes. Why don't you just sit there on the rug for me? You know, the way they taught you in class?"

The sweetness of the request was annihilating. She phrased his degradation as a practical favor to her upholstery.

Jeff froze, the blood rushing to his ears. For three weeks, he had been drilled by sadists in the East Pavilion. But this was worse. His wife was looking at him with loving eyes and asking him to kneel like a dog so he wouldn't dirty her furniture.

He didn't argue. He slowly backed away from the chaise, sinking down onto the Persian rug. He lowered his hips onto his heels, wincing as his bruised knees took his weight. He placed his scrubbed, raw hands palms-up on his thighs and bowed his head.

The Anchor.

"There," Diane said, her voice dropping into a register of deep, satisfied approval. "That's perfect. You look very sweet down there, Jeff. It's relaxing just having you near."

Jeff knelt, staring at the delicate silver clasp on her ankle strap. He was burning alive. He couldn't stop the image of the young man by the pool from crowding his vision. He remembered the DPPS instructor's clinical voice: *In the absence of traditional intercourse.*

He had to know.

"Diane," Jeff whispered, his voice trembling so violently he could barely form the words. He kept his eyes fixed on her bare feet. "The man by the pool. I saw him. When I climbed the wall."

Diane paused, her hand hovering over her champagne glass. She didn't gasp. She didn't look guilty.

"You climbed a wall?" she asked, a note of mild, chiding amusement in her voice. "What wall? Jeff, that was very silly of you. You could have gotten hurt. And it's probably against the rules."

"Have you..." Jeff choked out, the humiliation tearing his throat raw. He kept his eyes fixed on her bare feet. "Are you sleeping with him?"

Silence hung in the suite, broken only by the soft jazz drifting from the speakers.

Diane didn't gasp. She didn't look guilty. She simply let out a long, exhausted sigh, the way she used to when he asked her if she had remembered to pay the electric bill.

"Jeff." She paused, tilting her head.

"Are you?" he pressed, his voice cracking.

She looked down at him, her expression shifting from mild annoyance to a soft, maternal pity. "Yes, darling. I am."

Jeff closed his eyes. A single, hot tear escaped, tracking down his cheek. He had known it. He had seen it. But hearing her say it with such breezy, unashamed casualness was like a sledgehammer to the chest. His hands balled into fists on his thighs. For a fraction of a second, the old Jeff surged up—the man who managed portfolios, who paid for this house, who would not be humiliated. He wanted to scream. He wanted to stand up and demand respect.

But then the conditioning kicked in. Your anxiety is selfish. Your focus belongs entirely to the wife. The memory of Kendrick's red plastic bin flashed in his mind. Garment compromised. If he raised his voice, he would fail. He would lose the gentle touch of her thumb. He unclenched his fists, forcing his palms flat against his thighs. The fight died in his throat, replaced by a suffocating, pathological need to please.

"His name is Julian," Diane continued, picking up her champagne. She wasn't trying to make Jeff jealous; she was talking about Julian the way she would discuss a fantastic deep-tissue massage. "He's just so energetic, darling. And he doesn't get tired or stress about work. He's just a service, Jeff. Like the pool boy or the masseuse; a tool for my physical relaxation. You shouldn't feel threatened by a tool. You're my husband. You're the one I'm building my life with."

She leaned forward, her silk robe slipping slightly off one shoulder. She cupped his chin in her hand, forcing him to look up into her dark, beautiful eyes.

"But don't look so sad, honey," she murmured, her thumb lightly tracing his jawline. "I don't love him. I love you. You're my husband."

Jeff stared at her, drowning in the absolute paradox of her affection.

"You're going to be so good at taking care of all the little details for me at home," Diane promised softly. "And now you don't have to worry about the pressure of the bedroom anymore. I get my physical fulfillment, and you get to

dedicate yourself entirely to my comfort. We both get exactly what we need."

She said it with such profound, loving certainty that Jeff felt his resistance crumbling into dust. She wasn't punishing him. She was restructuring him.

"Yes, Diane," Jeff whispered.

"Good boy," Diane smiled, her eyes crinkling with genuine delight.

She pulled her hand away and picked up her tablet again. She swung her bare legs off the chaise, planting her feet on the soft rug inches from his knees. Under the chaise were a pair of incredibly complicated, strappy silver high heels.

"Now, darling," Diane said casually, scrolling through the screen. "Be a dear and put those on for me? Bending over in this robe is such a chore, and Julian is picking me up in twenty minutes."

Jeff stared at the silver heels. He had to dress his wife for her date with another man.

He didn't hesitate. He leaned forward, his rough, scrubbed fingers gingerly picking up the delicate silver straps. He lifted her perfect, manicured foot and slid it into the shoe, terrified of scratching her skin.

"Careful with the buckles, honey," Diane murmured absently, still reading her tablet. "Let's see... Kendrick noted the laundry failure... but oh, look!"

She sounded genuinely thrilled.

"Your DPPS instructor says your breath control and pressure mapping are coming along beautifully," Diane beamed, reading from the screen. "B-plus for stamina today. See? I told you that you were trying."

Jeff's hands shook as he fastened the tiny silver buckle around her ankle. She was openly reading his grades, treating his oral servitude like a piano recital he needed to practice for.

Diane reached down and softly stroked his hair again, offering him the most poisonous praise imaginable.

"I am so proud of you, Jeff," Diane whispered, looking down at him as he knelt at her feet. "If you keep striving like this, and you get an A next week... I might just let you show me what you've learned."

She rose from the sofa and started pacing the room, circling Jeff. Instinctively, he put a hand on his knee, trying to rise—but Diane placed her hand firmly on top of his head and pushed him back down to the floor.

"Ah-ah," she murmured. "Stay."

She continued circling, her heels clicking softly on the limestone.

"I'm going to miss this place..." she said, her voice wistful, almost dreamy. "It's so... simple here. No pretense. No performance. Just the way things are supposed to feel."

She stopped directly in front of him. He kept his eyes on the floor, but he could feel her gaze resting on the top of his bowed head.

"In less than two weeks, we'll be home," Diane said softly.

"And things will be different, won't they, darling?"

Jeff swallowed hard. "Yes, Diane."

"Say it for me," she whispered. "Tell me what's different."

His throat constricted. The words felt like broken glass in his esophagus.

"I'm... not your equal anymore," Jeff rasped.

Diane reached down and placed a single finger under his chin, lifting his head until their eyes met. Her expression was not cruel. It was something worse—it was tender.

"No, sweetheart," she murmured, stroking his jaw with her thumb. "You're not. And you look so much better this way."

She released his chin and turned swiftly, grabbing the small silver clutch from the vanity table.

"I'm going to dinner now," she said, slipping the strap over her shoulder. "But I want you to stay right here and think about what I just said. Think about how much it pleases me to see you like this. You have fifteen minutes left."

She walked to the door and opened it. Jeff heard the low murmur of Kendrick's voice in the corridor.

"My husband needs a few more minutes to meditate," Diane said lightly. "Come collect him when the hour is up."

The door clicked shut.

The fluorescent light in the corridor bled under the steel door, casting a thin, hard line across the concrete floor. Jeff lay on his bunk, his hands folded on his chest, staring at the water-stained ceiling.

The compound was quiet. It was always quiet after 22:00—the guards made their rounds, the lights dimmed to a harsh, low glow, and the men were left alone with whatever the day had left of them.

Tonight, the silence had a seam.

At first, Jeff thought it was the pipes. The plumbing in the East Pavilion was old and industrial, and it made sounds at night—groans, clicks, the distant rush of water through concrete walls. But this sound was different. It was rhythmic. Irregular. A wet, choking hitch of breath, followed by a long, shuddering exhale.

Then another.

It was coming from the other side of the wall. Room 410. The man in there was a quiet, silver-haired accountant from Denver who never spoke in the canteen and moved through the drills with the mechanical, glassy compliance of a man who had already left his body.

He was crying.

Not the loud, theatrical sobbing of a man demanding sympathy. This was the opposite—the desperate, strangled weeping of someone trying desperately to be silent and failing. The sound was muffled—buried in a pillow, maybe, or pressed into a forearm—but the walls were

concrete and the compound was dead still, and there was nowhere for it to go but through.

Jeff lay perfectly still, his fingers tightening on the fabric of his uniform.

The crying went on. Five minutes. Ten. Each sob was a small, private fracture, and Jeff could feel every one of them in his own chest. He knew what the man was crying about. He didn't need to ask. He was crying about the kitchen at home and the woman who used to wait for him at the table. He was crying about the years he had spent believing that providing was the same as loving. He was crying about the wall he had built around his own need, and the moment the resort had taken a sledgehammer to it.

Jeff's own eyes began to burn.

He wanted to knock on the wall. He wanted to say something—I hear you. I'm here. It's going to be okay.—the way you might comfort a stranger on a train. It was the most basic human instinct: hear suffering, move toward it.

But he didn't move.

Because the resort had taught him one thing with heartbreaking clarity: suffering was private. If you reached for another man's pain, you were admitting you had your own. And if you had your own, you weren't focused on your wife. You were selfish. You were failing.

The sobs went on for another five minutes. Then, slowly, they began to fade. Not because the man had found comfort. Jeff could hear the change—the way the breathing flattened out, the way the hitches grew longer and further apart. The man wasn't calming down.

He was shutting down.

The silence that replaced the crying was worse than the sound. It was the silence of a man who had stopped fighting—not because he had won, but because he had nothing left to fight with.

Jeff pressed his back against the cold concrete wall and slid down until he was sitting on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chest. His own eyes were wet. The tears were right there, pressing against the backs of his eyelids, hot and insistent.

He wanted to let them go. God, he wanted to cry. He wanted to sob into his own pillow the way the man in Room 410 had sobbed into his. He wanted to grieve for the chipped blue bowl and the kitchen at six forty-five and the fifteen years he had spent building a life that Diane had apparently been desperate to escape.

But he didn't.

Not because he was strong. Not because he had made a vow or drawn a line. But because of a quiet, insidious thought that had slipped into his mind like a key into a lock:

Crying is something the old Jeff would do.

The old Jeff. The man who argued in boardrooms and demanded respect. The man who reached for the olive oil on the second shelf and thought he could measure his life in glimpses of his wife's skin. That man would have cried. That man would have pounded on the wall. That man would have said, *This is wrong. I don't deserve this.*

But that man was the man Diane didn't want.

She wanted the new Jeff. The one who knelt. The one who ironed the sheets and held the Anchor and waited for her touch like a dog waiting for a command. The new Jeff didn't cry. The new Jeff absorbed. The new Jeff was quiet.

Jeff wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, roughly, almost angrily. He climbed back onto the bunk and lay flat on his back, arms at his sides, staring at the ceiling.

The silence of the compound pressed in. From Room 410, nothing.

Jeff closed his eyes. He didn't cry.

Chapter 16

The breakfast terrace was quiet at eight-thirty. Most of the West Wing guests slept later, but Diane had always been an early riser—a habit left over from years of managing a household around Jeff's schedule.

She sat alone at her usual table, a single espresso and a halved grapefruit in front of her, her silk robe loose at the collar. The morning light on the lagoon was pale gold and entirely still. She had the terrace almost to herself, which she had come to prefer.

Out of habit, she opened the Élysée app. The main dashboard showed Jeff's overnight report, but she scrolled past it without reading and tapped into the Learning Resources tab. A new module had appeared overnight, flagged with a small silver diamond—the resort's designation for optional, advanced material.

Module 4: Secondary Candidacy — The Protocol for Reallocation.

Diane set her espresso down and tapped the module open.

The language was clean, clinical, and entirely without apology. She read the first paragraph. Then the second. When she reached the phrase transitional asset, she stopped, her grapefruit spoon resting motionless against the rind.

She wasn't thinking about Jeff specifically; she was thinking about the cool, architectural logic of the phrase

itself. It reframed something she had always understood emotionally into something structural and solvable.

She read on.

By the time she reached the section on successor selection—he must feel chosen, he must believe himself exceptional, and, above all, he must experience your attention not as strategy, but as grace—Diane finally understood the ultimate safety net Élysée provided. If the husband won't comply, you can simply replace him. And the resort had prepared a manual for it. How considerate.

A faint, dark smile touched her lips. She closed the module. She wouldn't be needing it. Not yet, anyway. Breaking the one she already had was far too entertaining.

She lowered the phone slowly to the table.

For just a moment — the length of a single breath, no longer — she let the logic of it run. The module was perfectly sensible, really. If the raw material was genuinely unsuitable — too rigid, too damaged, too deeply invested in his own mythology to ever fully yield — then the intelligent move was simply to select better raw material. Bring him here. Run the process. The process worked. She was living proof of what the process produced on the other side of the wall.

The appeal was architectural, not romantic. She could see the math of it clearly.

But then she thought of Jeff's face in the suite — the hot tear tracking down his cheek when she confirmed Julian's name — and the specific, irreplaceable weight of fifteen years of shared history pressing behind that single tear. A

new man would have no such history. He would arrive at Élysée as a stranger, and she would leave with a well-trained stranger. Efficient, perhaps. But thin. There was no distance in it. No before and after. No proof of anything that mattered to her.

She closed the thought the same way she closed the module. Cleanly. Without drama. What she wanted was already here, already halfway made. The renovation was the point.

"Darling! You're up early."

Diane looked up. Marianne appeared at the terrace steps in enormous sunglasses and a billowing white kaftan, waving with her usual imperious cheer.

"Move over," Marianne instructed, dropping into the adjacent chair.

Diane pressed her screen dark, pulled her chair out slightly to make room, and smiled.

The rooftop pool was exactly as Marianne had described: a sprawling expanse of black tile glowing with dim azure underwater lights, completely open to the glittering expanse of the Caribbean night sky.

Diane waded waist-deep into the dark, heated water, the warmth seeping directly into her bones. Julian was already there, holding a silver tray imported from the bistro downstairs. He poured her a heavy glass of red Bordeaux

and offered her a sliver of pungent, creamy chèvre on a cracked-pepper crostini.

She took a sip, the complex tannins blooming on her tongue, and let her head fall back to look at the stars. She had never felt this unburdened in her life.

From the edge of the pool, her phone pinged.

Diane sighed, a flicker of annoyance crossing her face. She waded over to the marble coping and tapped the screen. It was an automated message from the East Pavilion Administration.

[Weekly Progress Report: Jeff Hayes]

Module: Domestic Servitude & Humility
Integration.

Attached: 00:45 Video File.

She tapped the thumbnail.

The screen flickered, showing the harsh, greenish tint of a security camera. The angle looked down into a massive, concrete-walled laundry facility. The heat radiating off the industrial presses was palpable even through the screen. A dozen men in sweat-soaked, shapeless linen uniforms were working in frantic, exhausted silence under the punishing glare of fluorescent lights.

The camera zoomed slightly, focusing on a man hunched over a steaming ironing board.

It was Jeff.

His face was drawn and pale, his hair plastered to his forehead with sweat. He was laboring over a massive white

bedsheet, his jaw tight with concentration and physical exhaustion as he pushed the heavy iron. A guard in a crisp uniform walked past, stopped, and pointed a baton at a crease Jeff had missed. Jeff's shoulders slumped. He didn't argue. He didn't pull rank. He just nodded submissively and started over, dragging the iron back across the blistering fabric.

Diane stared at the tiny, glowing screen in the dark. For a split second, a phantom spike of fifteen-year marital instinct flared in her chest. *That was the man who used to argue with federal regulators. Now he's nodding at a guard over a wrinkled sheet.* The distance between the man he was and the creature on the screen was so vast it made her dizzy.

"What are you watching?"

Julian waded up behind her, his golden chest pressing against her bare shoulders in the warm water. He looked over her shoulder at the phone. He didn't flinch.

Diane watched Jeff wipe his forehead with a trembling, blistered hand.

Julian took the phone from her loose grip and set it face-down on the marble ledge. He turned her around in the water. He kissed her. It tasted of dark wine and sea salt. It wasn't a desperate, hungry kiss—it was slow, commanding, and absolute. It demanded nothing but her surrender to her own pleasure.

He lifted her easily, the buoyancy of the heated water making her feel completely weightless. Diane gasped softly as he pressed her back against the smooth, cool

marble edge of the infinity pool. The sensory contrast was dizzying: the crisp, ocean breeze on her flushed shoulders above the surface, and the heavy, encompassing heat of the water and his body below it.

Julian didn't rush. He moved with a languid, deliberate certainty. When he finally slipped inside her, the sensation was so deep and overwhelming that Diane arched her spine, her manicured fingers gripping the wet, black tile for anchor. This wasn't the frantic, anxious, routine intimacy she was used to with Jeff in their dark Manhattan bedroom. This was expansive. This was worship.

Every slow, deliberate thrust sent a heavy ripple through the dark water, perfectly matching the rhythm of her own pulse. She felt the slick, golden expanse of his chest sliding flawlessly against hers. The water muffled the physical sounds of their bodies, leaving only the rush of her own ragged breathing and the distant, rhythmic crash of the ocean far below.

With every movement, the image of Jeff sweating over the ironing board fractured and dissolved. He was shrinking, fading into absolute irrelevance in the overwhelming heat of her own pleasure.

The tension she had carried for fifteen years coiled tight in her stomach, rising sharper and hotter until it finally shattered. The blinding, full-body wave of her climax broke over her, pulling a breathless, uninhibited cry from her throat that echoed into the open night sky.

As she shivered in the warm water, coming slowly back down, Diane wasn't thinking of her husband at all. She

looked up at the glittering expanse of the stars, her chest heaving, feeling completely and perfectly alive.

It was the middle of the afternoon on Day Twenty-two, and the West Wing lagoon was drowsy with heat. Diane lay on her lounge, her tablet balanced on her stomach, half-reading an article about a gallery opening in Chelsea she no longer cared about attending.

The peace was broken by a voice from the far end of the pool.

"No. I don't want anyone else. I only want you!"

Diane lifted her sunglasses.

A woman named Catherine—mid-forties, elegant, the wife of a surgeon from Boston—was standing in the open doorway of one of the poolside cabanas. She was wearing a sheer white cover-up over a black swimsuit, and her face was flushed and blotchy with emotion.

She was gripping a man's arm. It was Lucien. Diane vaguely knew him—a former Canadian skier, around forty, who looked like a bodybuilder and was rumored to hold a Biology degree from Northwestern. He had broad, weathered features and the kind of unhurried, physical stillness that made him seem more like a landscape than a person.

Lucien stood in the doorway of the cabana, his chest bare, a white towel draped over one shoulder. His expression was warm, patient, and utterly immovable.

"Cathy," Lucien said softly, his voice carrying clearly across the still water. He had a faint Canadian accent—flat vowels, a gentleness that sounded almost medical. "You know I can't do that. I'm here for all the guests. That's the program."

"I don't care about the program," Catherine whispered fiercely. Her fingers tightened on his forearm. "I care about you. I think about you all night. When I'm with my husband, I'm thinking about—"

"Madame." Lucien's voice didn't harden, but it firmed—like a doctor delivering a diagnosis with compassionate precision. He reached down and gently removed her hand from his arm. "You think about how I make you feel. And I will always be here to make you feel that way. But I belong to Élysée. Just like your husband will belong to you."

Catherine's face crumpled. "That's not the same."

"It is the same," Lucien said, his smile never wavering.

"That's what makes it beautiful."

A shadow fell across the pool. Corinne appeared, her stride measured and unhurried. She placed a cool, steady hand on Catherine's elbow.

"Mrs. Hale," Corinne said, her voice a soothing, maternal murmur. "Let's get you some water. I think we may need to have a talk together. A slight recalibration. Nothing to worry about."

Catherine allowed herself to be guided away, her shoulders shaking with the effort of not crying. Corinne led her up the stone path toward the spa, one hand resting on the

small of her back, with the practiced ease of someone who had done this before.

Lucien watched them go for a moment, then turned back toward the pool. He caught Diane's eye across the water and offered a small, polite nod—the kind of nod a bartender gives a regular customer when someone else has had too much.

He disappeared into the cabana and pulled the curtain closed.

Diane lowered her sunglasses back over her eyes and picked up her tablet.

She didn't feel pity. She didn't feel embarrassment on Catherine's behalf. She felt something sharper and more useful.

She fell in love with the staff.

The thought was cold and clarifying, like a splash of ice water. Catherine had made the most basic, most pedestrian mistake a woman could make at Élysée: she had confused the service with the servant. She had looked at a man whose job was to provide pleasure, and she had believed the pleasure meant something beyond the transaction.

She would not make that mistake.

The men were for pleasure. The husband was for life.

Diane closed her tablet, adjusted the tilt of her umbrella, and closed her eyes.

The afternoon was very warm, and the lagoon was very still, and somewhere behind her, Corinne was recalibrating

Catherine Hale's programming, and the machine of Élysée purred on without so much as a hiccup.

By Day Twenty-Six, Jeff Hayes had stopped counting the hours. He measured time entirely in tasks: the rotation of the industrial washing machines, the exact geometric folding of silk, the burning in his thighs when he held the Anchor position during roll call.

His uniform hung loosely on his frame. He had lost at least ten pounds. The arrogant, broad-shouldered executive who had argued with the intake guards a month ago was a ghost. In his place was a lean, hyper-vigilant man whose calloused hands moved with frantic, terrified precision.

It was late afternoon. The suffocating heat of the East Pavilion was at its peak. Jeff was walking down the gray linoleum corridor of Annex B, carrying a plastic crate of freshly pressed towels, when he stopped outside the open door of the leather-care room.

Inside, sitting at a wooden workbench beneath a harsh fluorescent bulb, was a man Jeff had never spoken to. He was older, perhaps in his late fifties, with thinning blonde hair and wire-rimmed glasses. He was working a soft chamois cloth over a pair of ankle-high, black leather stiletto boots.

The man was humming.

It was a cheerful, mindless little tune.

Jeff stood in the doorway, the heavy crate of towels resting against his hip, and stared. In three and a half weeks, Jeff had seen men weep, men bleed, men throw trays, and men stare blankly at the concrete walls with Glenn's hollow exhaustion.

He had never seen a man in the East Pavilion *smile*.

The blonde man looked up, catching Jeff's reflection in the small window. The man didn't flinch. His smile simply widened, reaching his eyes, which were bright and entirely unhaunted.

"Beautiful leather, aren't they?" the man said pleasantly, holding up one of the vicious-looking stilettos to the light. He spoke with the mild, contented pride of a gardener admiring a prize-winning rose. "Italian calfskin. My wife wore them to dinner last night. She scuffed the heel on the cobblestones. But I've almost got it buffed out."

Jeff swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry as ash.

"You... you don't mind doing that?"

The man chuckled—a soft, light sound that made the hairs on Jeff's arms stand up.

"Mind?" The man picked up a tin of expensive black polish and began swirling the cloth with meticulous, rhythmic circles. "Why would I mind? It's my purpose. Before I came here the first time, my head was so loud. Mortgages, board meetings, trying to figure out why my wife was always so unhappy with me. I was having panic attacks. Now..."

The man sighed, a deep, genuine exhalation of peace.

"Now, it's all so simple," he murmured, his eyes fixed lovingly on the leather. "I keep her shoes perfect. I keep the house spotless. I kneel when she enters the room, and I wait. All the pressure is gone. I don't have to be a man anymore. I just have to be *good*."

Jeff backed away from the door frame, his stomach twisting with a violent, physical nausea.

He hurried down the corridor, dropping the crate of towels in the supply closet, his hands shaking so badly he could barely release the plastic handles.

He leaned back against the concrete wall, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. His analytical brain—the executive mind that used to model fourteen-year financial projections—ran the horrifying calculus of what he had just seen.

The man had been here before. More than once, probably. And he had come back. Not because he was forced to. Because somewhere between the first visit and this one, the cost-benefit analysis had shifted, the peace of surrender outweighing whatever he had lost to get there.

Jeff's hands were still shaking. He couldn't tell if it was from revulsion or from the terror of understanding exactly what the man meant.

The morning sun warmed the West Wing cafeteria terrace as a silent waiter placed a polished silver tray on Diane's table. Next to her espresso and warm croissant sat a thick,

cream-colored card with embossed nautical lettering. She turned it over.

Inside, three options were printed on separate pages, each with a small photograph and a brief description:

The first showed a sleek catamaran cutting through turquoise water, its white sails bright against a blue sky. *Private Sailing Charter. Full-day excursion to the harbor of Soufrière. Coastal navigation, complimentary champagne lunch aboard, swimming and snorkeling in secluded coves. Departure: 8:00 AM. Return: 5:00 - 6:00 PM.*

The second showed a horse standing in dappled sunlight, saddle polished, reins loose. *Equestrian Excursion through Edmund Forest Reserve. Guided trail ride through tropical rainforest canopy. Picnic lunch at Enbas Saut Waterfalls. Approximate duration: 6 hours. Suitable for all experience levels.*

The third showed a small aircraft—a two-seater, open cockpit, bright yellow—soaring over a green mountain range. *Aeroglide Experience. Scenic flight along the western coast with certified instructor. 45 - 60-minute flight. No pilot's license required. Weather dependent.*

Diane turned the pages slowly, letting each option land. The sailing looked beautiful—the water in the photograph was almost unreal, the kind of blue that existed in travel magazines and resort brochures. The horseback riding was pleasant but unremarkable; she'd ridden once as a teenager and remembered mostly the smell of the animal and the soreness afterward. The aeroglide made her stomach tighten slightly—heights had never been her thing—but the

photograph was striking, the little yellow plane suspended in all that blue.

She set the card on the table and sipped her espresso when Marianne arrived, waving off the waiter to pour her own sparkling water. Diane slid the card across the table. "Are these worth the time? Or is it just a tourist trap?"

Marianne glanced at the card, a slow, knowing smile spreading across her lips. "I don't like riding or flying aeroplanes, but the sailing is absolutely worth it, darling. The water is incredible. "And the crew..." she smiled, swirling her water. "They're very good at keeping the deck tidy and the guests satisfied." Just bring sunscreen and an empty schedule."

Diane picked up the card and turned it over. The charter departed at nine from the West Wing's private dock. Six hours on the water, lunch included, return by sunset. She thought about it for approximately three seconds.

She flagged the waiter. "Could you have someone book tomorrow's charter for me? Just one."

Marianne raised an eyebrow. "Solo sailing?"

"I feel like being alone on the water," Diane said simply, picking up her espresso.

Marianne studied her for a moment, then nodded with the quiet approval of a woman who recognized the gesture for what it was. Outside, the lagoon was already turning that particular shade of Caribbean blue that made everything on land feel slightly less real. Diane hadn't thought about home in four days. She hadn't noticed until just now.

Chapter 17

The next morning, wearing a peach sarong and suede heelless ballerinas, Diane descended the stairs to the sun-bleached pier at the edge of the West Wing. Bobbing in the turquoise water was Rochelle, a pristine thirty-foot sailboat.

Waiting on the deck was Captain Fernand, a rugged, sun-baked local in his mid-forties with skin like weathered leather. Despite his rough appearance, he immediately lowered his eyes and offered a highly respectful nod.

"Welcome aboard, Madame," he rumbled. "I'm Fernand, your skipper for the day. This is my nephew, Louis."

Scrambling nervously behind him to secure the mooring lines was his nephew, Louis. He was a skinny, awkward young man, completely innocent. The boy blushed furiously as he caught sight of Diane stepping onto the boat in her sheer designer cover-up, his eyes darting immediately down to his bare feet.

Diane adjusted her sunglasses, a thrill of cold, haughty power washing over her. "Cast off, Captain," she said breezily, stepping past them to claim the plush loungers at the bow.

The sailboat cleared the resort's private headland and caught the open wind. Fernand handled the wheel with the unhurried competence of a man who had done this ten thousand times, his eyes reading the water rather than the horizon. Louis worked the lines, moving fore and aft with

the quick, automatic movements of someone raised on boats. Neither of them spoke unnecessarily. The only sounds were the crack of the sail filling and the clean, rhythmic hiss of the hull cutting water.

Diane lay on the bow cushions with her sunglasses on and her cover-up loose at the shoulders, letting the speed move through her. The resort was already invisible behind the headland. The coastline here was raw and volcanic — black rock faces dropping directly into the sea, draped in dense green vegetation that came all the way to the waterline. It looked like the edge of the world.

After forty minutes, Fernand eased the sail and let the boat slow.

"There is a place, Madame," he said, without turning from the wheel. "A cove. Very private. The water inside is very calm, very clear. Some guests like to swim there before we continue to Soufrière. It is perhaps thirty minutes from here."

Diane lifted her sunglasses. The coastline ahead curved inward where a narrow gap in the volcanic rock opened into shadow.

"Take me there," she said.

Fernand brought the boat through the gap at a crawl, the engine barely above idle. The rock walls on either side rose twenty feet above the deck, close enough to touch. Then the gap opened, and the cove appeared.

It was small and entirely enclosed — a near-perfect circle of still water surrounded by black volcanic walls draped in hanging ferns and flowering vines. The light came from

above, filtered through the overhanging vegetation, giving the water a deep, luminous greenish-blue that seemed to generate its own glow. The bottom was white sand, visible through eight feet of water as clearly as through glass. There was no sound except the soft drip of water from the rock faces and the distant, muffled crash of the ocean outside.

Fernand cut the engine and dropped anchor. The boat settled into absolute stillness.

Diane stood, reached back, and unknotted her cover-up. It fell to the deck. Beneath it was the emerald bikini — two precise scraps of fabric that left almost nothing unremarked upon. She walked to the stern, stepped onto the swim platform, and dove.

The water was cooler than the open sea, fed by some hidden freshwater spring mixing with the salt. It was shocking and perfect. She surfaced, pushed her wet hair back, and floated onto her back, looking straight up at the circle of sky framed by the cove walls.

On deck, Fernand busied himself with the anchor line, his back turned with the professional discretion of a man who had learned precisely where to look.

Louis did not look away.

He stood at the stern rail, one hand resting on the chrome fitting, watching Diane move through the water. He wasn't leering — he was simply unable to do otherwise. The emerald bikini against her tanned skin, the slow, unhurried way she moved through the still water, the complete unselfconsciousness of a woman entirely at ease in her

own body — it was too much, and he was nineteen, and he had no defense against it.

Diane turned lazily in the water. She looked up at the boat.

She saw him looking.

She held his gaze for exactly one second — long enough to make certain he understood she had seen him — and then she turned away and swam slowly toward the far wall of the cove, trailing one hand through the glowing water.

Louis gripped the rail a little tighter and looked at his feet.

She swam for twenty minutes. When she finally pulled herself back up onto the swim platform, the water sheeted off her in the filtered light, and Louis found somewhere extremely important to look on the horizon. His jaw was tight. His hands were not entirely steady.

Diane picked up her cover-up, but didn't put it on. She wrung the water from her hair, tilted her face up to the gap of sky above, and breathed.

"Captain," she said. "Soufrière."

"Yes, Madame," Fernand said immediately.

The anchor came up. The engine turned over. Louis moved to his position at the lines, his eyes forward, his movements a fraction too deliberate.

Diane settled back onto the bow cushions as the boat nosed through the gap and back into the open sea. She didn't look at Louis again. She didn't need to. She knew what happened to him.

The sailboat glided smoothly down the coast and into the rustic harbor of Soufriere. It was a far cry from the clinical luxury of Élysée—a chaotic, vibrant local market lined with colorful tavernas and the smell of roasting fish.

Captain Fernand secured the lines. "You can take your time, Madame," he said respectfully. "The market is just up the pier. If you're hungry, there's several tavernas. At Paolo's they make a great grilled lobster. I'll be at the Harbor Master's. Louis will remain aboard to tend the vessel. When you're ready to go, just have him call me."

Diane lasted exactly twenty-five minutes in the sweltering, crowded market before she grew bored. She bought a large, wide sun hat and a portion of surprisingly tasty local street food called rotis. Then she headed back down the wooden pier toward the gently rocking sailboat.

Louis was alone on the aft deck, scrubbing the teakwood. His bare chest was slick with sweat, his dark hair curling wildly in the humidity.

When he heard Diane step aboard, he froze. "Madame! You are back early."

"It's entirely too loud in town," Diane said, walking past him into the shaded seating area at the stern. She set her hat down and, with agonizing slowness, untied the knot at her hip. The sheer silk sarong slipped to the deck, revealing a minuscule, deep-emerald bikini.

Louis swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. He immediately dropped his gaze.

Diane stretched luxuriously onto the plush white cushions, arching her back. She patted the space beside her. "Come here, Louis. Sit."

The boy hesitated, clutching his scrub brush. "Madame, I shouldn't... Uncle Fernand—"

"Your uncle is gone for two hours," Diane said softly, her voice dropping into a warm, hypnotic purr. "Come sit."

Slowly, his hands trembling, Louis set the brush down and crept over, sitting stiffly on the very edge of the cushion. He smelled of salt, sweat, and cheap soap.

"Have you been working on the boat long?" Diane asked, tracing a lazy circle on her own thigh with a manicured fingernail.

"No, Madame. This is my first season."

"First season," Diane repeated, letting the words settle with a mild, thoughtful interest. "And the rest of the year?"

Louis shifted on the edge of the cushion, his eyes fixed on the deck. "I work with my father. On his boat. It's small—a fishing boat, with a motor. We go out most mornings, if the weather is good." He paused. "There is not much else in Soufrière. For work, I mean."

"You don't enjoy the fishing?"

A small, almost embarrassed smile crossed his face—the first unguarded expression she had seen from him. "The fishing is fine. But I would like to sail. Real sailing." His eyes lifted briefly toward the wheel at the front of the boat, then dropped again. "My uncle has his skipper permit. He sails for this tour agency in Castries, who own Rochelle. A

big company. They pay well." The smile faded. "That is what I want. Someday. Not just take tourists to the cove and back, but real charters, to Dominica or Guadeloupe."

He said it quietly, without self-pity, the way a person describes a thing they have thought about every night for years and do not expect to ever have. His hands rested on his knees, rough and salt-weathered, the hands of a boy who had been working on boats since he was old enough to hold a line.

Diane studied him. He was young. He was poor. He was sitting on the edge of a cushion he probably could not afford to replace, telling a stranger from New York about a dream that would cost him years of wages and a permit he had no way to study for, and he was looking at her with those wide, blue, trusting eyes.

"How old are you, Louis?" she asked softly.

"Nine... dix-neuf, le mois prochain, Madame," he mumbled.

"Nineteen," she mused. "Do you have a girlfriend in town?"

The boy's face flushed even darker. "No, Madame."

"No?" Diane let out a soft, amused laugh. She shifted closer, the heat of her skin radiating against his rigid arm. "A handsome boy like you? Don't tell me you've never been with a woman."

Louis didn't answer. His silence and his burning cheeks gave him away entirely.

A thrill of dark, intoxicating power washed over Diane. Back at Élysée, her aging husband was drowning in the mud. Here, she had a young, virile, terrified boy entirely at her mercy. Diane reached out and gently curled her cool fingers under Louis's chin, forcing him to look at her. His dark eyes were panicked and completely mesmerized.

"It's alright, Louis," she whispered. "I'll show you."

She leaned in and pressed her mouth firmly against his. For a second, the boy was rigid with shock. But as Diane's tongue traced his lower lip, a desperate, clumsy heat exploded inside him. With a ragged gasp, his calloused hands dropped to her waist, pulling her forcefully against his chest.

Diane smiled into the kiss. With a soft click, the clasp of her bikini top fell away.

She pushed him gently backward onto the wide aft deck. Without dropping her gaze from his blue eyes, she slipped out of her bikini bottoms and knelt between his thighs. Without a word, she unfastened his worn canvas shorts. He was already straining against the fabric, frantic with an arousal he had never experienced before.

She leaned down, her dark hair spilling across his sun-browned stomach, and took him into her mouth.

Louis let out a sharp, choked cry. His back arched off the cushions, his hands instantly tangling in her hair. Diane ignored his clumsy grip. She worked with slow, practiced precision, overwhelming his inexperienced senses until he was painfully, perfectly hard.

When she felt his hips beginning to jerk, she pulled back, her lips wet and a lewd gleam in her eyes.

"Don't move," she whispered.

Diane swung her leg over him and slowly sank down, taking him entirely inside her. Louis groaned loudly, his head falling back against the deck. For a moment, Diane just sat there, her eyes closed, savoring the deep, unfamiliar fullness. The gentle roll of the Caribbean tide rocked the boat beneath them, matching the slow roll of her hips.

But Louis was very young, and he was drowning. His raw, frantic energy took over. His hands gripped her hips like a vice, thrusting upward with a desperate, unpolished strength. Diane threw her head back, her nails digging into his chest as she let him drive into her.

It was over in minutes. With a ragged, breathless shout, Louis shattered inside her, collapsing back onto the cushions, gasping for air.

Diane lifted herself off him with a soft, satisfied sigh. She stretched out on the plush white cushions in the cool shade of the boat's canopy, her bare skin pressing against the expensive upholstery. Beside her, the nineteen year-old lay perfectly still, one sun-browned forearm thrown over his eyes, his chest heaving in exhausted bliss.

Lazily, Diane reached over to the teakwood table and picked up her sleek phone. The Élysée app was offline this far out in the harbor, but the cached itinerary for the day was still visible. She tapped the screen, navigating to the East Pavilion schedule.

13:00 – 16:00. Subject 4041. Sustained Postural Endurance.

Location: East Courtyard. Sun exposure: Maximum.

Diane smiled, the glass of the phone cool against her fingertips. She could picture Jeff perfectly: stripped down, forced to hold a rigid, agonizing kneeling position on the blistering limestone tiles for three hours. His knees would be raw, his pride entirely ground into dust as he learned to be a silent, obedient object.

The contrast was thrilling. Her husband was suffering in the scorching heat, begging for her approval, while she lounged naked on a private yacht, casually discarding her marriage with a beautiful young man. The sheer cruelty of it sent a fresh, heavy pulse of arousal straight to her core.

Diane tossed the phone aside and rolled onto her side, propping her head on one hand. Her breast rested on the boy's chest.

She trailed a single fingernail down the center of his chest, tracing the sheen of sweat on his skin. "Well, Louis. Aren't you a brave sailor?" she murmured softly. "How did that feel?"

The boy slowly moved his arm from his eyes, looking up at her with absolute, mesmerized awe. His chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath.

"I... I didn't know it could be like that, Madame," he stammered, his face flushing beneath his tan. "It was... you are..."

He swallowed hard, completely unable to find the words.

Diane smiled, deeply satisfied by the sight of him so thoroughly overwhelmed. Under her touch, she felt the immediate, involuntary twitch of his muscle. He was young. He was already recovering.

She leaned forward, her bare breasts brushing his slick skin, and whispered against his ear. "Now. Let's see if you can last a little longer this time."

The midday sun over the East Pavilion courtyard was not a source of warmth. It was simply present — absolute and indifferent, pressing down on the white limestone with the flat authority of something that didn't need to try.

Jeff knelt in the center of the courtyard. His hands were clasped behind his back. His eyes were fixed on a point six inches in front of his knees.

This was Sustained Postural Endurance. The module was exactly what its name suggested — no more, no less. No one shouted at him. No one circled him. Miller sat in the shade of the east wall with a clipboard, occasionally making a notation without looking up. The other men were spaced across the courtyard in the same position, each one a separate, private suffering.

The heat was considerable. His knees ached against the stone. The sweat ran into his eyes and he didn't wipe it away, not because he wasn't allowed to, but because it no longer seemed worth the effort of raising his hand.

Somewhere in the third hour, a thought arrived that he didn't ask for:

She might be looking at this right now.

Not with concern. Not with guilt. With the same mild, appraising interest she had shown reading his progress report in Suite Twelve, her champagne resting on her knee.

He held the pose. The sun moved. The limestone was very white and very hot.

He didn't think about the financial models anymore. He didn't think about the equity in the house or the retirement accounts or the Jersey studio. He thought about the soft rug in Suite Twelve. He thought about her feet, the silver clasp of her shoe under his trembling fingers. He thought: *if I hold this, maybe she'll let me come home.*

That was the whole of it. That was everything he had left.

By the time Captain Fernand's heavy boots thumped onto the wooden pier an hour later, the deck was immaculate. Louis was hovering near the stern, holding a chilled bottle of water he had clearly fetched from the cooler but was too paralyzed to offer.

The boy's face wasn't pale with shame; it was flushed, his eyes wide and glazed with a kind of terrified, breathless worship. When Diane shifted on her lounge, the boy flinched, his gaze darting to the curve of her hip before snapping away. He couldn't look at her face. He stared at the deck near her bare feet instead, vibrating with a

desperate, soul-deep need to serve the woman lounging on the rear deck. He hadn't just lost his virginity; he had been colonized.

"A pleasant afternoon, Madame?" Fernand asked respectfully as he began to untie the mooring lines.

"Perfectly relaxing, Captain," Diane replied breezily, slipping her designer sunglasses over her eyes. She didn't look at Louis, but she extended a lazy hand. The boy leapt forward, placing the cold bottle into her palm with the trembling, reverent precision of a man handing a relic to a queen. Diane smiled. "Your nephew has been exceptionally attentive. He's a good boy. I hope you'll take care of him. Help him become a proper captain someday, just like you."

"Thank you, Madame," Fernand said, a quiet pride settling into his weathered face. "He has the hands for it. Just needs the hours."

He tugged the mooring line tight and stepped back from the piling. On the aft deck, Louis was coiling a rope, his movements quick and precise, his eyes fixed on the deck near Diane's bare feet.

Diane smiled. "I'm sure he'll make a fine skipper."

The sail back to the private pier was quiet. When she finally stepped into the the air-conditioned lobby, Diane didn't feel an ounce of guilt. She didn't think of her marriage. She only felt the lingering, heavy ache in her thighs, and the electrifying, absolute certainty that this world belonged to her.

Alone in his room, Jeff was thinking about the smiling man he'd met yesterday.

Glenn was a tragedy because Glenn still remembered what it meant to be human. Glenn suffered.

But the man with the shoes was a nightmare. He was the final stage of the disease. The resort hadn't just broken his will; it had amputated his ego and replaced it with a lobotomized, domestic joy. He had completely surrendered the burden of his own identity.

And the most terrifying part, the thought that made Jeff want to scream until his throat bled, was that for one fleeting, shameful second in that doorway... the man's absolute peace had looked *inviting*.

Is that what I'm becoming? Jeff thought wildly, looking down at his own rough, scrubbed hands. Is that what Diane wants?

"Mr. Hayes."

Jeff gasped, his eyes snapping open.

Kendrick stood in the door, his digital tablet glowing in the dim light, his face an impassive mask.

"Meeting Four," Kendrick announced flatly. "Your final assessment before departure. Today at 18:00."

Jeff's heart rate spiked instantly, drowning out the lingering horror of the leather room. The panic was replaced by a sudden, desperate surge of adrenaline.

Chapter 18

The morning sun reflected brilliantly off the pool of the West Pavilion. Diane stretched her sore, deeply satisfied muscles on a padded sunbed, sipping a chilled mimosa.

Marianne settled onto the lounge beside her, adjusting her oversized Chanel sunglasses. "You look radiant today, darling. I take it you enjoyed your charter to Soufriere?"

"Immensely," Diane smiled, tracing the rim of her crystal flute. "The sea air does wonders."

Marianne let out a soft, knowing laugh. "And the local scenery? I always found Captain Fernand a bit too weathered for my taste, but he does know how to handle a boat."

"Fernand is exactly that—weathered," Diane said breezily. "He had business in the harbor. He left me on the boat with his nephew."

Marianne paused, her glass halfway to her lips. She lowered her sunglasses just enough to peer over the rims, a spark of stupor in her eyes. "His nephew. Darling, please tell me you didn't. He's a child!"

"He was almost nineteen," Diane mused, a slow, predatory smile touching her lips. "And completely untouched. Until yesterday afternoon, anyway."

"Diane!" Marianne laughed out loud, a rich, genuine sound that turned a few heads on the terrace. "A virgin? On a dirty little sailboat in the harbor? You absolute menace."

"He was terrified of me," Diane said, taking a slow sip of her mimosa. "He couldn't even look me in the eye. But once I got him on his back... he was magnificent. Completely frantic. He had this raw, desperate energy." She let out a soft, appreciative sigh. "It was exhausting in the best possible way. I actually had to make him go twice just to slow him down."

"Well, consider me thoroughly impressed," Marianne smirked, leaning back against her cushions. "Most women wait until their second visit to Élysée to start sampling the local delicacies. You've adapted beautifully."

Diane looked out over the pristine, turquoise water. A week ago, the thought of sleeping with a nineteen boy on a boat rear deck in a harbor while her husband suffered in a mud pit would have filled her with paralyzing guilt. Now, it just felt like an appetizer.

"It made me realize something, Marianne," Diane said quietly, the playful tone leaving her voice, replaced by a cold, absolute certainty.

"What's that, darling?"

"I've spent fifteen years managing Jeff's ego. Managing his moods, his stamina, his mediocre attempts at keeping me satisfied."

Diane set her glass down on the silver table. The memory of the boy trembling helplessly under her touch rushed back, sending a heavy, invigorating thrill straight through her veins. The realization was absolute: she could have any man she wanted, whenever she wanted.

"I'm done managing him," she stated, her voice smooth and ruthless. "If I want a man with that kind of raw energy, I'm just going to take one. I know exactly what my body can do to them now. Jeff can either learn to accept it, or he can drown in the mud."

Marianne smiled, reaching over to pat Diane's manicured hand.

"You'll be back next year," Marianne murmured. "They always come back."

Marianne picked up her phone, sighed at a message, and slipped her sunglasses back on. "I need to go facetime my daughter before my hair appointment. Don't do anything I wouldn't do, darling." With a final, wicked smile, she glided away across the limestone tiles.

Diane was left alone with the quiet lap of the pool and the dregs of her mimosa. She leaned her head back against the cushion, closing her eyes against the brilliant Caribbean sun.

Marianne was wrong about one thing. She didn't need to wait until next year. Élysée hadn't just opened a door; it had torn the entire wall down. The question wasn't if she would take lovers when they returned to Manhattan, but how quickly she could arrange the infrastructure.

She let her mind drift away from the resort, back to the suffocatingly polite world of the Upper East Side. For fifteen years, she had navigated that world like a nun, her eyes cast down, her ring flashing like a shield. She had been a faithful wife. She had been a blind fool.

The memories surfaced with startling clarity, unearthing moments she had buried out of loyalty, or perhaps out of fear.

There was Stephen, the silver-haired managing director from Jeff's firm. At the Christmas party two years ago, standing too close to her by the bar while Jeff was in the corner talking derivatives. Stephen had handed her a second martini, his fingers brushing the inside of her wrist, his eyes dropping to the deep V of her velvet dress. "You look incredible tonight, Diane," he had murmured. "Jeff's a lucky man. Though I suspect he doesn't have the first clue what to do with a woman like you."

At the time, she had deflected, blushing, stepping away. Now, she let the memory play out differently. Stephen was aggressive, ambitious. He radiated the kind of raptorial, selfish energy that dominated boardrooms. She imagined he would be exactly like that in bed—demanding, relentless, entirely focused on taking his own pleasure. A shiver ran through her. After years of Jeff's anxious, gentle fumbling, the idea of being simply taken by a man who viewed her as a conquest was intoxicating.

Then there was Marcus, the handsome, younger architect she had worked with at the gallery. He had a habit of leaning over her desk to look at floor plans, his chest brushing her shoulder, his voice dropping to a low, intimate murmur. One evening, after a client reception, he had walked her to her town car and hesitated before opening the door. "I know you're married, Diane," he had said, his dark eyes burning into hers. "But if you ever want

to see what a design without constraints looks like... you have my number."

She had deleted the number the next day. Now, three years later, she knew she could get his number if she wanted. She imagined his surprise when she would call, and a smile flourished on her lips. Marcus was an artist. He would be deliberate. Attentive. He would look at her the way he looked at a sculpture—studying her curves, finding the angles, using his hands and mouth with the same meticulous, agonizing patience he applied to his blueprints. He wouldn't stop until she was the masterpiece.

She thought of her personal trainer, a hard-bodied Argentinean who always found an excuse to adjust her form during squats, his hands hot and firm on her hips. She thought of the charming older husband of a friend who, after several drinks, always cornered her at parties to whisper outrageously flattering things in her ear.

They were everywhere. They had always been everywhere. And she had spent a decade and a half freezing them out, protecting Jeff's fragile ego, maintaining the infrastructure of a declining marriage.

A slow, dark heat pooled in her stomach. She imagined the townhouse. She imagined coming home to find Jeff setting the table for dinner. She imagined kissing him on the forehead, letting him smell the cologne of another man on her skin, and watching him accept it.

Diane opened her eyes, her gaze drifting toward the dense, green perimeter of the resort. Somewhere beyond those trees, in the suffocating heat of the East Pavilion, her husband was waiting for her.

Meeting Four.

The promise Diane had made a week ago echoed in his mind, drowning out everything else: *If you keep striving like this... I might just let you practice on me.*

He had spent the last seven days obsessively drilling in the DPPS classes. He had memorized the pressure mapping. He had perfected his breath control until his lungs burned. He had earned 'A' grades from the clinical female instructor every single day.

He was finally going to touch his wife. He was going to put his mouth on her. It wasn't traditional sex, he knew that now, but it was *something*. It was a connection. If he could just please her perfectly today, if he could show her how deeply he had absorbed his conditioning, maybe she would look at him with love instead of amusement.

Jeff quickly smoothed the front of his gray uniform, taking a deep, stabilizing breath. He locked his jaw, burying the memory of the smiling man with the boots deep in the darkest corner of his mind.

"I'm ready," Jeff said.

He followed Kendrick out into the low gold evening light. The walk to the West Wing felt like a march to an altar. Jeff's heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drumbeat of anxiety and pathetic, desperate hope. He had spent a week perfecting his curriculum. He was ready to prove his worth.

Kendrick stopped in front of the heavy mahogany doors of Suite Twelve, checked his tablet, and nodded.

"Proceed."

Jeff reached for the brass handle, but before his fingers could touch the metal, the door swung inward.

A man stepped out into the limestone corridor.

It was Julian. He was wearing an unbuttoned linen shirt and dark trousers, his chest gleaming with a fine sheen of sweat. He was running a hand through his damp, dark hair, exuding the deep, heavy musk of expensive cologne and raw, recent sex.

Jeff froze. The air left his lungs in a violent rush.

Julian stopped, looking Jeff up and down. He took in the sweat-stained gray uniform, the raw, scrubbed hands, and the wide, devastated eyes. Julian didn't look threatened. He didn't even look guilty. His handsome face split into a broad, easy leer—the look of a man who had just finished a spectacular meal and was handing his empty plate to the busboy.

He clapped a heavy, patronizing hand on Jeff's shoulder.

"She's all yours now, mate," Julian chuckled softly, stepping around Jeff and walking casually down the hall.

A blinding spike of rage erupted in Jeff's chest. His fists clenched so hard his fingernails cut into his palms. His jaw locked. For one terrifying, glorious second, the financial executive resurrected himself. He wanted to pivot, grab Julian by his tailored collar, and smash his arrogant face into the limestone wall.

But then, the conditioning kicked in. A ten-thousand-dollar fine. Kendrick's grip from behind on his arms. The razor wire. The absolute, permanent loss of his wife. And beneath it all, the haunting image of the man in the leather room, smiling with lobotomized peace.

Jeff's shoulders slumped. He forcibly unclenched his fists, swallowing the bile and the pride. He lowered his head and stepped over the threshold into Suite Twelve.

The suite was a disaster of high-end luxury. The air conditioning was working overtime, trying to cut through the heavy, suffocating scent of sex and jasmine.

Diane was sprawled across the massive, disordered king-sized bed. She was completely naked, her skin flushed, her hair delightfully tangled against the silk pillows. She looked like a Roman painting of absolute decadence, completely unashamed of her exposure.

"Oh, good, Jeff," Diane said, her voice dripping with sweetness. "You're right on time."

Jeff walked to the edge of the bed and immediately sank to his knees, assuming the Anchor position. His eyes dropped to the hardwood floor.

There, half-hidden beneath the edge of the silk bedskirt, was a used, knotted condom.

It caught the afternoon sunlight, a visceral, unmistakable piece of latex trash. It was the physical proof of his cuckolding, discarded right where he was meant to kneel. A fresh wave of nausea washed over him, mixing with a hot, humiliating rush of tears.

"Julian was so incredibly strong today, I can barely move," Diane murmured breezily, stretching her arms above her head like a satisfied cat. "Come closer, sweetheart. Let's see if you can put that curriculum to use. My body is still completely overstimulated. I need you to soothe me."

Jeff's breath hitched. She wasn't asking him to make love to her. She wasn't asking for passion. She was commanding him to provide his oral devotion as literal aftercare—to patiently worship and calm her body in the immediate, lingering aftermath of another man's conquest.

He shuffled forward on his bruised knees, his hands trembling as he prepared to lean in and begin the agonizingly humiliating task of soothing her.

"Wait," Diane said softly.

Jeff froze. He looked up, his heart pounding.

Diane pushed herself up on her elbows, her expression softening into something quiet and distressingly gentle. She reached out, her cool, manicured fingers threading gently into the hair at the nape of his neck. It was the first time she had touched him with genuine affection in almost a month.

"I know this is hard for you, Jeff," she whispered, her thumb stroking the tense cord of his neck. "I know how much it hurts your pride. But look at how perfectly you are putting my needs above your own."

Jeff's chest tightened. Hot, humiliating tears welled in his eyes. He leaned into the touch, starved for it, absolutely desperate for the validation in her voice.

"You're doing so well," Diane murmured, her voice warm and maternal. "You used to be so loud. So demanding. But you're finally learning how to be quiet, aren't you? How to just... belong to me."

She smiled, her eyes crinkling with sweet approval, and Jeff felt his resistance melt entirely. He would do it. He would do anything to keep that look in her eyes. He took a steadying breath, closed his eyes, and began to lean forward.

Suddenly, a sharp, melodic marimba ringtone echoed through the room.

"Oh, hold on," Diane said brightly. She instantly withdrew her hand from his hair, the warmth vanishing from her face like a switched-off light. She reached over to the nightstand, picked up her sleek phone, and tapped the screen. "Sarah! Hi, darling."

Jeff froze, his face hovering barely an inch from her thigh, the sudden absence of her touch leaving him cold.

"Oh, nothing much," Diane laughed into the receiver. She let her upper body drop luxuriously back onto the mattress, staring up at the ceiling with the phone pressed to her ear.

Completely ignoring the subdued man kneeling between her legs, Diane casually lifted one bare leg and bent her knee. With effortless arrogance, she brought her pointed foot down, pressing her smooth arch firmly against the back of Jeff's neck.

"Just relaxing after a little workout, actually," she chirped breezily to Sarah.

As she spoke, she pushed downward with her foot, silently and forcibly guiding Jeff's face directly into her groin. She didn't spare him a single glance. The pressure on his neck was her only command.

In that exact moment, kneeling on the floor beside a used condom, listening to his wife discuss dresses while he cleaned another man from her body, something inside Jeff Hayes simply stopped fighting. The last, desperate voice of the man he used to be—the man who managed portfolios, who argued in boardrooms, who reached for the olive oil on the second shelf—went quiet. And in the silence that followed, the burden of being a man was permanently lifted from his shoulders, replaced by the hollow, consuming peace of a man who has finally stopped fighting the current and let it take him.

Swallowing his pride, Jeff took the silent cue and obediently resumed his task, the tears finally spilling over his lashes. Yielding to the pressure, he leaned forward and began to perform his oral servitude, utilizing the exact pressure mapping and delicate breath control he had been drilled on in the East Pavilion.

Above him, the conversation flowed effortlessly.

"No, I told you the Hamptons are completely dreadful in August," Diane chattered, her voice light and musical. She absently rested her free hand on Jeff's head, stroking his hair the way she might pet a dog while watching television. "You need to look at that new place in St. Barts. Have you seen the menus?"

Jeff's world shrank to the smell of latex, the taste of his own salt tears, and the casual, crushing voice of his wife

gossiping about vacation homes. He was pouring his soul, his pride, and his entire existence into serving her, and she wasn't even looking at him. She was entirely emotionally detached.

"Mmmhmm," Diane murmured into the phone, her fingers idly scratching behind Jeff's ear. She pulled the phone away from her mouth for half a second. "Very gentle, Jeff. You're being so thorough. That's definitely an A."

She put the phone back to her ear. "Sorry, Sarah, I was just checking on the room service. Anyway, what did you wear to the gala?"

A few minutes later, Diane hung up the phone. She patted Jeff's head twice—a casual, dismissive signal that the service was complete.

"That was lovely, sweetheart," she murmured, sliding off the bed and padding barefoot toward the bathroom. "Stay."

Jeff stayed. Kneeling on the floor beside the used condom, his face wet with tears and her residue, his hands trembling on his thighs. He stared at the silver clasp of her shoe under the bed—the same shoe he had buckled a week ago—and waited.

The sound of the shower ran for five minutes. When Diane emerged, she was wrapped in a white towel, her hair wrapped in a second, smaller towel. She looked fresh, radiant, and completely unbothered, as if the last twenty minutes had been nothing more than a minor appointment in her afternoon schedule.

She walked to the vanity table and began applying lotion to her arms, glancing at Jeff in the mirror.

"Come here, darling."

Jeff rose stiffly to his feet and walked toward her, his eyes cast down.

Diane turned to face him. She studied him for a long moment—the gaunt face, the raw, scrubbed hands, the emptiness in his eyes.

"I've been thinking about our marriage, Jeff," she said softly, her voice dropping into a register of calm, absolute authority. "About what it's going to look like when we go home."

Jeff swallowed hard. "I know, Diane. I won't forget what I—"

"Ah-ah," she murmured, placing a single finger on his lips. "Don't make promises yet, sweetie. I want you to think about it first."

She reached out and gently curled her fingers under his chin, tilting his head up until their eyes met. Her expression was not cruel. It was tender—the terrifying, weaponized tenderness Beatrice was talking about.

"Things are going to be different when we get back, aren't they, darling?" she whispered.

Jeff's throat constricted. "Yes, Diane."

"You shall learn to put my needs and pleasure first. I want you to think about it." She took her hand to her throat.

"Actually, I'll make sure you will."

She rose from the vanity table, watching her reflection in the mirror. Jeff lifted his gaze to her. His face was

glistening with her secretions. Then, in a small, broken voice: "Diane... may I wash my face before I go back?"

Diane paused. She looked at him—really looked at him—taking in the tears, the residue, the absolute, pathetic vulnerability of his request. A slow, gentle smile spread across her lips.

"No, darling," she murmured. "I think you'll focus better if you stay like this."

She walked to the door and opened it. Jeff heard the low murmur of voices in the corridor.

"My husband is not to wash until tomorrow morning. Please make sure of that."

Diane turned back, crossed the room without a glance at her husband. She stepped onto the deck, unknotted the towel, and let it fall to the stone. She was naked beneath it—completely, carelessly naked—and she descended the steps into the water with the unhurried grace of a woman who owned the world.

She didn't look back. She didn't wave. She simply swam, fluid and untouchable, her pale body cutting through the turquoise surface, the underwater lights turning her skin to gold.

Jeff was watching mesmerized. Kendrick appeared at Jeff's elbow. He was watching Diane too, his jaws clenched. His hand closed firmly on Jeff's arm.

"Time to go, Hayes."

As Jeff was led across the terrace, he looked back one last time. Diane was gliding through the water, alone and serene, as if he had never been in the room at all.

Kendrick steered him down the white stone path toward the steel gate. The night air was warm and smelled of jasmine. Jeff could still feel her on his skin, still taste her on his lips. He didn't wipe his face. He didn't ask for water.

Somewhere inside him, the last door closed and locked. And the silence that followed was the most peaceful sound he had ever heard.

Chapter 19

It was the morning after Meeting Four. Jeff was standing at the stainless-steel basin, scrubbing his face with the coarse, lye-scented soap for the third time. He could still smell her. The water ran and ran, but the scent had seeped into his pores, and his skin was pink and raw from the friction.

He didn't hear Kendrick approach. He only heard the knock—two sharp, efficient raps—and then the door opened.

Kendrick stood in the corridor with his tablet and a small stack of supplies: a yellow legal pad, two sharpened pencils, and a fresh eraser. He set them on the metal table with the same bureaucratic precision he used for everything.

"Good morning, Mr. Hayes. Mrs. Hayes has requested a formal Declaration of Intent from you, prior to departure."

Jeff turned from the sink, his wet hands dripping onto the concrete floor. "A what?"

"A written pledge," Kendrick clarified, his voice flat and professional. "In your own words. It is to encapsulate your oaths of love, devotion, submission, and sacrifice to your wife, that will define the terms of your marriage going forward."

Jeff stared at the yellow legal pad as if it were a live thing.

"You will write the first draft tonight," Kendrick continued. "It will be transmitted to Mrs. Hayes for review

in the morning. You will revise as needed until she is satisfied with the result. The final draft must be memorized before departure."

Kendrick tapped his tablet, making a notation.

"There is no prescribed length or format," he said. "Mrs. Hayes has indicated that she wants the words to be yours. She will know if they are not."

He looked up from the tablet and met Jeff's eyes for a fraction of a second. There was no pity in his expression. There was no cruelty. There was only the calm, administrative certainty of a man delivering a package.

"The draft is due at 06:00. Do you understand the assignment?"

Jeff looked at the legal pad. The yellow paper was blindingly bright under the fluorescent light. Two sharpened pencils lay beside it, perfectly parallel.

He thought of Diane standing over him last night, her finger under his chin, her voice soft and absolute: *We're not equals anymore. You look so much better this way.*

"Yes," Jeff whispered. "I understand."

Kendrick nodded once and left the room. The door closed with the same heavy, final click it always did.

Jeff sat down on the edge of the bunk and stared at the blank yellow page for a very long time.

That evening, Jeff sat at the table with the legal pad on it. The pencil felt foreign in his hand—he hadn't written

anything by hand in years; everything at the firm was typed, dictated, or signed with a quick, executive scrawl.

He wrote a title at the top of the page: Declaration of Intent.

He stared at it for ten minutes. Then he began to write.

The words came slowly at first—stiff, formal, the language of boardrooms and legal filings. He wrote about commitment and partnership. He wrote about supporting Diane's goals and prioritizing her needs. He wrote about structural adjustment.

By midnight, he had a full page. He read it back. It sounded like a memo from HR.

He tore it off the pad, crumpled it, and threw it at the wall.

He started again.

The next morning, Kendrick collected the draft at 06:00 without comment. He snapped a photo of it with his tablet and left.

By evening, he was back.

He handed Jeff his tablet. It was a message from his wife. Jeff's breath quickened.

Jeff—

This reads like a contract you'd bring to a board meeting. I don't want your professionalism, darling. I want your surrender.

Write it again. From your knees.

D.

Jeff read the note three times. The words "from your knees" burned into his retinas.

Kendrick turned and left without a word.

Jeff picked up the legal pad, and lowered himself to the concrete floor. He knelt in the Anchor position—the hands open on his thighs, the back straight, the eyes down—and placed the pad on the bunk in front of him.

Then he began to write again.

Two days later, the second draft went to Diane. That evening, Kendrick returned with another note.

Jeff—

Better. But paragraph three is still asking for things. "I hope to be worthy of your trust." No, darling. You don't hope. You promise. You don't ask. You offer.

Fix it.

D.

Jeff fixed it. He went through the draft line by line and removed every conditional word. Every if, every I hope, every perhaps, every I'll try. He replaced them with absolutes—I will. I do. I surrender.—until the pledge stopped being a negotiation and became a surrender.

He wrote until two in the morning, his hand cramping, his eyes raw. When he was done, he read it back in the silence of his cell, and the words were so absolute, so irrevocable, that he felt something inside him go very quiet.

Not peace. Not yet. But the space where peace would eventually live.

Kendrick knocked at 22:00. Jeff opened the door. Kendrick's eyes swept over the room—the crumpled papers, the crossed-out lines, the pencil worn down to a stub.

"Finished?"

Jeff handed him the last draft. A single page, written in small, careful handwriting.

I, Jeffrey Hayes, do solemnly surrender the illusion of equality in my marriage. I acknowledge that my wife, Diane, is the architect of our life, and I am its foundation. She is the light; I am the shadow cast by her brilliance. My purpose is not to stand beside her as an equal, but to kneel beneath her as a support.

I relinquish the burden of my ego. I surrender the right to my pride, my jealousy, and my expectations. I accept that my wife's body is her sovereign kingdom, and I am granted access only by her grace. If she chooses others to serve her pleasure, I will count myself honored to prepare the room and to tend to her needs when they are gone.

I pledge my labor as worship. The work of my hands—whether it earns the money that funds her life, or scrubs the floors she walks upon—will be offered without complaint and without the expectation of reward. I surrender the right to my own gratification. My fulfillment

is no longer a destination but a byproduct of her satisfaction. I will strive, I will suffer, and I will serve, and I will do so with gratitude—because the peace of my submission is the greatest gift she has ever given me.

I am her husband. I am her subject. I am completely hers, irrevocably, and forever.

Kendrick read it. His face didn't change. He pulled out his tablet, flattened the paper on the metal table, and photographed it. The flash lit up the cramped cell like a small, clinical explosion.

He uploaded the image, then looked at Jeff. The older man was swaying slightly on his feet. His eyes were bloodshot, his hands trembling.

Kendrick sat down on the edge of the bunk. He reached into his black backpack and produced a half-full bottle of cheap whiskey and two small glass cups—probably borrowed from the canteen.

He poured two double portions without asking.

"Drink," Kendrick said. It wasn't a command. It was the first thing Kendrick had ever said to him that sounded like a suggestion.

Jeff took the glass. The whiskey burned, but the warmth that followed was the first comfort he had felt in four weeks. His shoulders loosened. His hands stopped shaking, just barely.

Kendrick poured another round. The silence in the cell was different now—not the oppressive silence of surveillance,

but the quieter silence of two men sitting together in the dark.

"God, Hayes," Kendrick said quietly, swirling the last inch of whiskey in his cup. "You really love her to pieces."

It wasn't mockery. It wasn't pity. It was the simple, awed observation of a man who had watched dozens of husbands pass through the East Pavilion, and who had never seen one quite like this.

Jeff didn't respond. He just stared at the concrete floor.

Kendrick finished his drink, capped the bottle, and put the glasses back in the bag. He stood up and walked to the door.

"Get some sleep, Hayes," he said, his voice flat and professional again, the mask firmly back in place. "You did well."

The door closed.

Jeff lay down on the narrow bunk. The whiskey hummed softly in his veins, and for the first time in weeks, his body felt something close to rest. His mind was turning over Kendrick's words like a stone in his palm. *You did well.* Slowly, he drifted asleep

Day Thirty-One broke over Élysée Retreat with the same suffocating, indifferent humidity as the thirty days before it.

The sky above the East Pavilion was the color of bruised iron, the heavy tropical clouds waiting to burn off into a blinding, pristine blue. The digital siren had not yet sounded.

Jeff stood in the damp, fragrant brush at the base of the Sirens' Wall. He wasn't alone.

Four men stood in the shadows, their gray uniforms hanging loose on their gaunt frames. There was no anger left in the group. The frantic, indignant energy of Week One had been systematically crushed, folded, scrubbed, and graded out of them. They stood in the quiet camaraderie of men who had stopped pretending.

Arthur was leaning against the rough concrete. He was staring at his calloused hands.

"Kendrick said they're bringing our clothes after breakfast," Arthur whispered, his voice thin and trembling. "Our suits. Our watches."

Jeff nodded slowly. He thought of his tailored Brioni suit, currently hanging in a garment bag in the intake office. The thought of putting it on didn't feel like a return to his identity; it felt like putting on a suffocating, terrifying costume.

"I don't know how I'm going to do it," the guy from Room 208 said. He had lost the terrified edge of his first week. He just looked impossibly tired. "My firm... I have sixty people under me. I'm supposed to lead a board meeting on Tuesday. How the hell am I supposed to sit at the head of a mahogany table and yell at my VP of Sales..."

The man swallowed hard, his eyes dropping to the dirt. "...when two hours earlier, I was washing my wife's laces while she texted her trainer?"

A grim, understanding silence fell over the group. It was the cognitive dissonance that terrified them now. The East Pavilion had been brutal, but it was honest. Here, they were all slaves. The real world required them to wear the mask of the men they used to be, while knowing exactly what they were at home.

"You just compartmentalize," a man named Richard said softly. "My wife gave me Financial Relinquishment. She controls the accounts now. I have a firm credit card for client dinners, and she gives me a three-hundred-dollar weekly allowance for gas and lunches."

Richard didn't sound angry. He sounded entirely resigned.

"I got Domestic Servitude and another module," Jeff murmured, his eyes tracking a line of rust bleeding down the concrete wall. The memory of the condom, the phone call with Sarah, and Diane's casual praise—*That's definitely an A*—flashed in his mind. "I don't even think I'm going to sleep in the master bedroom with her anymore."

"You won't," a low, gravelly voice said.

Glenn was already there, leaning against the wall a few feet away. The older man looked exactly the same as he had on Day One: utterly, perfectly hollow. He carried the weight of six seasons on his shoulders, yet he moved with a disturbing, fluid grace.

Glenn walked up to the wall, right to the spot where Jeff had tried to climb three weeks ago. He looked up at the thick steel stanchions and the tangled coils of razor wire silhouetted against the graying sky.

"I always wondered why they didn't just build the wall higher," Richard whispered, looking up at the wire where Moore had bled to death. "Or put up a secondary fence. If they wanted to keep us in so badly."

Glenn reached out and pressed his flat palm against the rough, damp concrete.

"They don't need the wall to be higher," Glenn said softly, not looking away from the wire. "The razor wire is for the first two weeks, when you still think you have something to fight for."

Glenn stepped away from the wall and walked slowly back toward the pavilion.

"The true genius of Élysée isn't the concrete, boys," Glenn said over his shoulder, his voice fading into the humid morning air. "It's that they make you build the wall inside your own mind. And today... you're all taking it home with you."

The digital siren shrieked through the compound, a sharp, mechanical wail signaling the end of their final recreation period.

Jeff didn't flinch. He simply placed his hands behind his back, bowed his head and began the walk back to Annex B.

Chapter 20

The Brioni suit felt like a straightjacket.

Jeff stood in the small intake office of the East Pavilion, staring into a full-length mirror. The charcoal-gray wool was tailored flawlessly to his measurements, but it hung loosely on his leaner, hollowed-out frame. He wore his silver Omega. He wore his imported leather oxfords.

He looked exactly like the executive who had stepped off the plane thirty-one days ago.

But his posture betrayed him entirely.

Even in the three-thousand-dollar suit, Jeff stood with his hands clasped tightly at the small of his back, his shoulders bowed, his eyes automatically dropping to the floor whenever Kendrick entered the room. He was a humbled man wearing a costume of power.

"Mr. Hayes," Kendrick said evenly, handing Jeff a small, laminated slip of paper. "Your departure clearance. You are authorized to cross into the West Wing to collect your wife's luggage from Suite Twelve. The plane departs in sixty-five minutes."

Jeff took the slip, his calloused, scrubbed fingers trembling slightly. "Thank you, Kendrick."

He turned and walked out of the East Pavilion.

For the first time in a month, he approached the heavy wooden gate without a staff guarding him. The electronic

lock buzzed, a heavy metallic clunk echoing in the morning air, and the gates swung inward.

Jeff stepped through the threshold.

The air on the other side of the wall smelled of crushed mint, expensive coconut oil, and ozone. The pathways were paved with flawless white limestone, winding through manicured botanical gardens and glittering, infinity-edge lagoons. Soft bossa nova music drifted from hidden speakers.

He saw a group of wives walking toward the parking lot. They were radiant. Their skin glowed with health and expensive treatments. They wore sheer linen pantsuits, enormous designer sunglasses, and wide, relaxed smiles. They moved with the unhurried, self-assured grace of women who had remembered exactly how much power they held over the world.

Following two paces behind them were three men in tailored suits. The husbands carried heavy leather duffels and Louis Vuitton garment bags, their heads bowed, their eyes fixed strictly on their wives' heels.

Jeff swallowed the sudden, thick knot of panic in his throat and hurried toward Suite Twelve.

The mahogany doors were propped open. The massive, sun-drenched lounge was empty, save for a small mountain of luggage stacked near the doors to the deck.

There were four massive, structured leather trunks—easily twice the luggage they had arrived with. Diane had spent the month buying entire new wardrobes: sheer resort wear,

punishing stilettos, and silk lingerie that Jeff knew he would spend his weekends meticulously hand-washing.

"Jeff? Is that you, sweetheart?"

Across the room, Diane calmly snapped her leather cosmetics case shut. She checked her reflection in the marble vanity, adjusted a diamond stud, and turned to face him. She looked radiant, exuding a quiet, effortless authority that made the massive room feel small.

"Our plane leaves in an hour," she said casually, leaning back against the marble counter and crossing her arms.

"You look the part of the CEO again, Jeff. That's perfectly fine for the office. You'll make us millions, just like before. But before we get on that plane, we need to be very clear about how things will work when you walk through our front door."

Jeff swallowed hard. He tried to look her in the eye, but his gaze instinctively dropped. "I know, Diane," he mumbled, his voice tight. "I won't forget what I learned."

"You're mumbling, sweetheart," Diane said, her lips curving into an amused smile. She tilted her head, studying him with the fond, indulgent expression of a woman inspecting a pet that has learned a new trick. "Thirty-one days of premium conditioning and you're still mumbling. What am I going to do with you?"

She let out a soft laugh — warm, genuine, entirely at his expense — and pushed off from the marble counter. She walked toward him slowly, her heels clicking against the limestone, circling him once with the leisurely confidence

of someone who already knows the answer to a question she hasn't asked yet.

"I hope that gorgeous suit isn't giving you ideas, darling," she murmured, stopping in front of him. She reached out and straightened his lapel with two fingers, smoothing the wool with a proprietorial little pat. "Let's just do a quick check, shall we? Make sure everything still works the way it's supposed to."

She dropped her gaze pointedly to the silk rug at her feet, then looked back up at him with bright, dancing eyes — as if she were suggesting something entirely reasonable, like checking the weather before a walk.

Jeff stared at the spot. A month ago, he would have scoffed and walked out the door. Now, his body moved on pure, conditioned instinct. He broke the sharp crease of his tailored trousers and sank heavily to his knees, pressing into the soft rug.

Diane uncrossed her arms and took a slow, deliberate step forward. She didn't gloat. Instead, she reached down and gently caught his chin between her cool thumb and forefinger, tilting his head up. At the same time, she lazily lifted her right leg, pressing the sharp toe of her stiletto directly into his crotch.

Even through the fabric of his trousers, she felt the immediate, involuntary pulse of his conditioning. She pushed her foot down harder, and beneath the stiff sole of her shoe, she felt his body surrender completely—offering up its final, humiliating confirmation.

"Much better," she said softly. "Now. Do you remember your pledge? Look at your wife, and tell her what you learned writing it."

Jeff kept his eyes locked on hers. His throat worked as he swallowed the last shattered fragments of a fifteen-year marriage.

"I am your husband," Jeff rasped, panting hard against the pressure.

Diane smirked, pushing her foot down harder. The stiff sole of her shoe dug mercilessly into him, and beneath it, she felt him turn completely, agonizingly rock-hard. A violent tremble began to shake his broad shoulders, his body entirely overwhelmed by the dark, humiliating arousal of his own defeat.

"My time is yours," he gasped, his chest heaving as he fought to finish the vow. "My money is yours. I will provide, I will serve, and I will never expect anything in return."

"Right, darling," she murmured. "You will worship me and you'll be happy about it."

A soft, delighted giggle escaped her lips, the light, musical sound shattering the heavy tension in the room with its sheer, careless cruelty. She dropped her foot, released his chin, and took a step back, casually admiring the panting man kneeling on the rug.

"Now, take the bags and let's go home."

Jeff scrambled to his feet. He grabbed the thick leather handles of the two heaviest trunks, his muscles straining

against the weight, and as he turned toward the door, he paused to look out the sliding glass doors at the terrace.

The terrace overlooked the lagoon, but Jeff didn't look at the water.

His eyes were drawn immediately to the massive structure dominating the western edge of the resort: the Sirens' Wall.

From the West Wing, the wall was not a brutalist slab of gray concrete. It was painted a brilliant, pristine white, designed to blend seamlessly with the aesthetic of the cabanas and the luxury suites. There was no razor wire visible from this angle. It looked like a high-end architectural feature, a clean, modern boundary ensuring the wives' privacy.

But as Jeff stood there, the heavy trunks cutting into his raw palms, the morning sun broke over the top of the island.

The harsh, direct light hit the pristine white face of the wall.

Jeff's blood ran cold.

Beneath the thick layers of lime paint, bleeding through the blinding white surface in a faint, indelible, pinkish shadow, was a massive stain.

It was the shape of a man who had tried to fight his way back. It was Moore's blood.

Jeff stared at the pale pink shadow stretching across the immaculate white wall. The resort hadn't scrubbed the blood away; they had simply painted over it, burying the agonizing reality of the East Pavilion beneath a veneer of

absolute luxury. It was a monument to the husbands who couldn't surrender.

He heard the sharp, rhythmic click of Diane's pointed heels on the teak decking behind him.

She stopped at his side, her white silk blouse fluttering in the ocean breeze. She slipped her designer sunglasses down the bridge of her nose, following his gaze toward the massive white wall.

She didn't see the blood. She didn't even know what to look for.

Diane turned to her husband. She looked at his expensive, hollowed-out suit, his bowed head, and the heavy leather trunks weighing down his calloused hands. She smiled—a slow, brilliant, utterly detached expression of pure ownership.

She reached out and softly patted his cheek, her cool fingers lingering for a fraction of a second on his skin.

"Don't look so sad, darling," Diane murmured, her voice carrying a terrifying promise. "We can come back next year."

Jeff looked away from the wall. He adjusted his grip on the heavy bags, lowered his eyes to the heels of her shoes, and followed his wife into the sun.

ELISEE RETREAT