

THE SILENCE ACCORD

BY CM NYARI

Scene 1

Freya rested the console on her hip. The screen showed two feeds, one above the other: raw audio on top, public output below. For the most part, they matched. The crowd stood in neat rows across Harmony Plaza, listening to speeches about the end of the war. It had been twelve years of peace, twelve years since the Accord. Behind the stage, the water feature hummed quietly, and white ribbons were tied to the memorial wall where names were carved.

The pavement was still wet from the rain earlier that morning. Glass buildings around the plaza reflected the grey sky.

She tapped the console screen, syncing the feeds. Now everything lined up: audio, captions, and the approved script. Her job was sensitivity monitoring, so she watched for any deviations and logged them before the Bureau could.

The speaker was a woman in her fifties, wearing a grey cardigan and gripping the podium tightly. She was probably a mother. Today, the dead were remembered in careful words. The prompter glowed green at the base of the microphone. For the first two minutes, she read the approved text without stumbling: gratitude, resilience, support during hard times.

Then she stopped.

Freya noticed before anyone else. The woman's jaw tightened. Her eyes drifted past the prompter and the well-being stewards by the stage stairs, looking out at the Plaza screens where her own face appeared, large and gentle.

"They turned the water off and then just... nothing."

The raw feed flashed red. Freya's console gave a soft, urgent ping. **[TONE VARIANCE DETECTED]**

The woman kept speaking, her voice rising. "We were used. We were told it mattered and then they turned the water off and—"

On the Plaza screens, the public feed showed a caption in smooth white text: *"I am grateful for support during a difficult period."*

Freya kept her eyes on both feeds. On the raw track, the woman spoke out, accusing. On the public output, the captions remained calm and grateful. The Plaza speakers lowered the volume

to sixty percent. Not silent, just softer. The woman's real voice faded under gentle orchestral music.

The crowd shifted. A woman near Freya frowned at her screen, looking confused. A man tilted his head. The captions kept updating, rewriting each sentence as it appeared.

The woman on stage: "You can't just erase—"

The captions: "*We remain united in our recovery.*"

It happened so fast. The system didn't wait for her to finish. It predicted, replaced and smoothed. Freya had seen the process in training modules but never live, never this flawless.

[DEVIATION FLAGGED – UNITY WALKWAY FEED 03]

Freya tapped the flag icon. That was her job. Sensitivity calibration meant logging disruptions, not stopping them. The system saved it with a timestamp, and two well-being stewards in pale blue walked toward the stage stairs. They didn't rush or act harshly. They just stood there, smiling, hands open and calm.

The woman saw them coming. Her voice cracked. She tried once more. "You can't just—"

The captions read: "*We stay hopeful for continued harmony.*"

Applause began right on cue. The Plaza's sound system gave a gentle prompt that Freya felt more than heard. It made clapping seem natural. People around her raised their hands. Some looked unsure but clapped anyway. A few checked their devices, but most just joined in.

The stewards reached the woman and one of them touched her elbow, still smiling. She stopped talking. Her shoulders dropped. She let them guide her away from the microphone, down the steps, towards the medical tent near the Unity Walkway entrance, where the **IF YOU FEEL URGENT, PAUSE** poster hung beside the first aid kit.

The next speaker moved to the podium before the applause finished. He began reading from the prompter about community resilience and the observable improvements in civic calm. The crowd settled. The captions on the Plaza screens matched his audio perfectly.

Freya's dry thought landed cold: *Peace, now with autocorrect.*

Freya scanned the raw feed one more time. The deviation had lasted twenty-three seconds. The flag went into the morning report under "managed disruptions – resolved." She closed the dual view and pocketed the console.

A colleague from caption review stood three metres away, tablet in hand, watching the same feeds as Freya. The woman glanced at Freya. At the screen. Made a note. Kept walking. Everyone was watching. Everyone was logging.

Around her, people chatted quietly about the weather and the new bus routes. A child pointed at the white ribbons on the memorial wall and asked what they meant. Her mother said something about remembering and being grateful. Someone queued at the coffee kiosk near the Unity Walkway entrance, checking their phone while they waited. The queue moved efficiently. No one mentioned the woman's speech.

Freya walked back towards the Bureau HQ, past the laminated posters curling at the edges. **HARMONY IS HEALTH. CAPTIONING IS CARE. WORDS SHAPE SAFETY.** The usual. A steward nodded at her as she passed. His smile was professional and empty.

She noticed a woman standing still while others filed past. The woman's wristband buzzed and she checked it, then looked up at the Plaza screen. Her face changed. She started to say something, then stopped. Glanced at the steward. Put her phone away.

Freya kept walking.

The damp pavement reflected the grey sky. A bus pulled up at Crescent Interchange and people boarded quietly, letting the automated voice remind them about maintaining calm during travel. The city felt clean. Quieter than cities used to be, she supposed, though she couldn't quite remember how loud they'd been before.

Her band buzzed. Longer this time. She stopped by the Civic Steps, near the memorial wall where someone was adjusting the ribbons.

She checked the screen.

[SECURE DIRECTIVE – UPDATED COMPLIANCE FRAMEWORK]

She opened it.

NEW DIRECTIVE: DIAGNOSTIC LANGUAGE = INCITEMENT

Effective immediately. Revised enforcement includes medical terminology, procedural critique, and deficit-naming in workplace or civic contexts. Attribution of harm escalates sanction tier.

Freya scrolled down. There was an example case attached. A file reference and a name she recognised.

VENN, JADE – FLAGGED PATTERN: COMPLAINT → ESCALATION RISK

The example showed Jade's exact words: 'This isn't safe. The valve is leaking.' Tagged categories: deficit-naming (unsafe), attribution risk (valve fault implied), procedural critique (safety protocol failure).

She read it twice. Then once more. The words stayed the same.

Jade.

The plaza behind her played soft music. The water feature bubbled. People queued for their coffee, checked their devices and spoke in permitted phrases about the weather. Everything calm. Everything tidy.

Freya put the device in her pocket and kept walking towards the Bureau. The woman's actual words were already gone, eaten by the system before anyone could repeat them. Not censored. Replaced. The crowd had heard thankfulness and fortitude, and that's what they'd remember.

Her job was to make sure it kept working.

Scene 2

The kettle switched off. Freya poured water into two mugs and watched the tea bag turn the water dark. The flat was quiet except for the ticking of the heating pipes and Jade's phone buzzing on the counter. It had buzzed three times in a minute.

Jade stood by the window with folded arms, trying to look relaxed. It didn't work. The phone buzzed again. Jade looked at it, then looked away.

"You going to check that?" Freya said.

"Yeah. Right." Jade picked up the phone, read the screen and put it down again.

Freya pushed one of the mugs across the counter. "What happened?"

"Work." Jade took the mug but didn't drink. "Equipment's dodgy. I said something."

"What did you say?"

"That it wasn't safe." Jade's voice was flat. "The filtration valve's leaking. I told my supervisor. Exact words were 'this isn't safe.'"

Freya kept her expression steady. Diagnostic language. The directive from this morning. "And?"

"My device flagged it." Jade held up her wrist. The screen showed a small amber notification.

"Deficit-naming. I got a suggestion to rephrase as 'I have noticed a change.'"

Freya sipped her tea. It was too hot.

"So I tried again," Jade said. "Told them the valve needed fixing before someone got hurt. Clearer, yeah? More specific." The phone buzzed. Jade flinched. "That one got me escalated."

Freya set her mug down. "Escalated how?"

Jade unlocked her phone and turned it towards her. The screen showed a notification with a clean white background and gentle blue text.

[NOTICE: COMPLIANCE SUPPORT REQUIRED]

You have 72 hours to complete Calm Correction Module 1 (Introduction to Managed Communication). Failure to attend will result in suspension of workplace credentials and review of housing eligibility.

Freya read it twice. The language was soft. The threat was absolute.

"Seventy-two hours," Jade said. "Or I lose my job. And probably the flat."

"They can't do that for—"

"For what?" Jade's voice went sharp. She stopped. Breathed. Started again, slower. "For raising a safety concern? Course they can. It's in the updated framework. You probably reviewed it yourself."

Freya had. That morning, a new directive said diagnostic language counted as incitement. She flagged the issue at Harmony Plaza, logged it as a 'managed disruption,' then came home and made tea.

Her job.

Jade was watching her. "Can you help me rephrase it? Make it sound... I don't know. Compliant?"

Freya's stomach dropped. "Jade—"

"Please." Jade's voice cracked. "I just need the right words. You're good at this. You do it for work."

Freya picked up her tea, then set it down again. She needed something to do with her hands.

"All right," she said. "Tell me again. What's wrong with the valve?"

"It's leaking. Pressure's off. If it goes, the whole system contaminates and—"

Jade's phone buzzed. Loud and insistent. She flinched.

[TONE ADVISORY: ATTRIBUTION DETECTED]

Suggested rephrase: "I am observing a change in system performance."]

Jade stared at the screen. "I can't even say what's happening."

"You can," Freya said. Careful. Calm. She sounded exactly how she sounded at work. HR therapy voice. She hated it. "You just have to frame it differently. Instead of 'it's leaking,' try 'I have observed inconsistent output.'"

"That's not the same thing."

"I know."

"That doesn't tell them anything."

"It tells them enough." Freya kept her voice steady and professional. She was good at this, maybe too good. It was the same voice she used to turn 'budget cuts' into 'resource reallocation' and 'layoffs' into 'restructuring opportunities.' She heard herself doing it to Jade and wanted to stop, but she couldn't remember how to speak without softening the truth.

Jade looked at her. "You actually believe that?"

Freya didn't answer.

"Right," Jade said. Quiet. "Course not."

The kitchen was silent except for the pipes. Jade's phone stayed dark, and her wristband was quiet. Freya counted to ten in her head, then to twenty.

"I'll look at your file," she said. "At work. See if I can... adjust the framing."

"Adjust the framing." Jade almost laughed. Almost. "That's brilliant. Make me sound reasonable."

"I'll try."

"Make me sound grateful." Jade's voice was very quiet now. "Just... not grateful. Don't make it sound like I'm thanking them. Please."

Freya felt her chest tighten. She folded the tea towel on the counter, smoothed it out, then folded it again.

Jade picked up her phone and mug and walked to her bedroom. The door closed with a soft click—not a slam, just tired.

Freya stood in the kitchen. The tea towel was folded into a neat square.

She picked up her own phone and opened the Authority portal. Her work login. The Bureau's secure access. She navigated to Jade's file reference from this morning's directive.

VENN, JADE – CASE FILE 7743-B

She opened it.

The transcript of Jade's first complaint was there. Raw text at the top. Recommended revision below. In the margin, automated tags.

PATTERN ANALYSIS: COMPLAINT → FRUSTRATION → ATTRIBUTION

ESCALATION RISK: HIGH

RECOMMENDED ACTION: MANDATORY CORRECTION

Further down, a note she recognised. Bureau standard template. Pre-filled. Waiting for a compliance officer to approve it.

She scrolled to the assessment section. There was a field for "linguistic intervention." A dropdown menu with options. All of them gentle. All of them devastating.

Her job was to pick one.

She closed her phone and set it face-down on the counter.

The flat was very quiet.

Freya touched her wrist. The device sat still. No alerts. No suggestions. She'd phrased everything correctly.

Scene 3

The briefing room had the sharp scent of carpet cleaner. Soft piano and string music played in the background, like what you might hear in a clinic. Elias Trent walked up to the podium. He looked to be in his mid-forties, with clean hands and a well-made but modest suit. He smiled at the group.

"Morning, everyone. Thank you for being here."

A screen behind him showed a graph with blue bars rising steadily. The title read **CIVIC STABILITY INDEX**. Conflict was down forty-three percent, and disputes were down sixty-one percent. Stock footage played: families in parks, people waiting calmly in lines. The piano music grew louder.

"But we're also seeing new patterns," Elias said. "Provocative speech is adapting. Moving sideways. Finding gaps."

A new slide appeared. **LANGUAGE ESCALATION PATHWAYS**.

Freya leaned forward. In column 3, the newly banned words were: unsafe, unfair, abuse, corruption, neglect, failure, problem, wrong, harm, and danger. Eleven in total. She counted them. Column 4 showed words still under review: concern, issue, and worry.

A dry thought crossed her mind: *We've finally solved injustice by banning the word for it.*

"These terms are closely linked to instability spirals," Elias said. "Someone says 'this is unsafe.' Then it turns into 'this is wrong.' That leads to blame, then to agitation. We're taking away the sparks."

The screen changed. **SAMPLE INTERVENTION - CITIZEN COMPLAINT CALL**.

A phone recording played. A woman's voice, strained. "I need to report a problem with the water. It's brown. It tastes metallic. My kids are getting sick and - "

The audio stopped. A softer, automated voice came on, sounding calm and soothing.

"Suggested rephrase: I am noticing a change in household conditions."

The original voice tried again. "No, the water is contaminated"

"Deficit-naming detected. Suggested rephrase: I am experiencing discomfort and would appreciate support."

The woman sounded desperate now. "My children are being poisoned by - "

The automated voice cut in immediately.

"Attribution language flagged. Call suspended pending tone coaching. Support resources forwarded to your device."

The recording ended.

There were twenty-three colleagues in the room. Most of them took notes. No one asked any questions.

It didn't read thoughts. It read words, spoken, typed, or even whispered under stress. It also tracked biometric spikes when both happened together. You could think whatever you wanted. If you stayed still and said nothing, you were fine.

Elias smiled. "Questions?"

Silence.

"The system works. It calms things down. It protects people from their own agitation." He paused. "It lets us respond to real needs without all the noise of blame."

Freya kept her face neutral.

"Now," Elias said, looking directly at her, "I want to talk about excellent work from our caption review team."

Freya's wrist buzzed once.

The screen changed. A transcript she recognised. From yesterday. Someone had tried to name a budget cut and she'd smoothed it into "resource reallocation."

"This is sophisticated compliance work," Elias said. "Not just blocking provocative language. Translating it. We're launching a pilot program. Meaning Integrity. Proactive reframing. Freya, I'd like you to consider joining."

Heads turned. Freya nodded once. "Thank you."

"We'll talk after," Elias said. He clicked to the next slide.

CASE STUDIES - ESCALATION PREVENTION IN ACTION

Three file references. The middle one made Freya's chest tighten.

VENN, JADE - MANAGED OUTCOME

The slide showed Jade's words: "This isn't safe. The valve is leaking." System rephrase: "I am observing equipment variation." Resolution: "Calm Correction referral confirmed."

Freya kept her breathing even. Just another case study.

Elias moved through remaining slides quickly. Statistics. Rollout schedules. The piano played underneath.

"Questions?"

No one raised a hand.

"You're doing important work. Harm reduction starts with language."

People filed out. Freya folded her lanyard twice.

Elias walked over. Sat on the armrest beside her. Casual. "Good work on that broadcast clip. Really nuanced."

"Thank you."

"The Meaning Integrity pilot needs people who understand subtlety. People who can see where meaning hides." He paused. "It's challenging work. Important."

"I'll think about it."

"Of course." Elias glanced at the screen. "That case study. Venn. Is that close family?"

The question landed softly. Not a threat. Not yet.

"My sister."

"Ah." Elias nodded. Understanding. Sympathetic. "Family cases are difficult. The emotional weight." He stood and straightened his jacket. "If you need support navigating that, let me know. We can reduce the burden."

He walked towards the door. Stopped. Turned back.

"Careful with old words, Freya," he said. Gentle. Almost kind. "They're heavier than people remember."

Then he left and Freya sat alone.

Her device stayed quiet. She'd phrased everything correctly.

She touched her wrist once. Counted the banned words again. Eleven. Plus four under review.

Scene 4

Freya sat at her workstation, third from the left in the caption bay. She logged in, and the case management portal opened as usual.

Yesterday in the briefing room, she watched the system turn a stranger's crisis into a message of gratitude. That was just observation. Now it was different. Jade's file was on her screen, and her hands were on the keyboard.

VENN, JADE – CASE FILE 7743-B

The transcript appeared. For three seconds, she saw Jade's original complaint before blue text boxes covered it. Each flagged sentence now had a RECOMMENDED SUBSTITUTION header.

Original: "This isn't safe. The valve is leaking."

The blue box suggested: "I am observing equipment variation."

Original: "If it goes, the whole system contaminates."

The blue box suggested: "I am noticing changes in output quality."

Freya clicked on the first sentence. A text field opened, and she tried to add a note: "Context: legitimate safety concern re: filtration valve."

The word "safety" turned red. **PROHIBITED TERM (Column 3)**

She deleted it. Tried "equipment observation requiring technical review."

The system accepted her note. It showed up in pale grey, looking official but meaning nothing.

Freya stared at the blue boxes. The system wanted her to approve the substitutions. Make it compliant. Help people communicate without triggering escalation.

She knew what would happen if she approved it as it was. Jade's complaint would lose its meaning. No one would fix the valve, and the file would close as "resolved through managed communication."

But if she rejected all the substitutions, the case would escalate to a higher review. The 72-hour deadline would remain, and Jade would be sent to Calm Correction with a file marked "non-compliant officer."

She needed a middle ground.

Freya clicked the first sentence again and changed "equipment variation" to "equipment maintenance need." It was still vague and compliant, but at least it was closer to the truth.

She moved to the second sentence and changed "output quality" to "system performance concern."

The word "concern" turned amber. **UNDER REVIEW (Column 4). CAUTION.**

A pop-up appeared. **This term may trigger additional monitoring. Proceed?**

Freya clicked yes to continue.

The system processed her input, and the screen went blank for three seconds.

Then: **EDIT ACCEPTED – OFFICER DISCRETION APPLIED**

She looked over the final version: "I am observing equipment maintenance need. I am noticing changes in system performance concern."

It was still wrong and not what Jade had actually said, but it was better than erasing everything. Better than Calm Correction. Better than losing everything.

She tried to convince herself it was better.

She scrolled to the sanction field. Three options:

- Investigation (maintain current access)
- Scheduled Review (reduced access, monitored communication)
- Mandatory Correction (immediate intervention)

The system had already chosen "Mandatory Correction" based on its pattern analysis. Freya could override this, since she had officer discretion for cases with less than ten severity points.

Jade's case was tagged at eight.

Freya changed the selection to "Scheduled Review" and set it for 14 days, giving Jade two more weeks.

She clicked submit.

It was a compromise. She kept the essence of Jade's concern while removing the triggers, making communication possible and helping people be heard. She was protecting Jade, not erasing her.

She almost believed it.

The screen refreshed.

CASE FILE 7743-B – UPDATED STATUS

Linguistic intervention: APPROVED

Sanction level: SCHEDULED REVIEW (14-day cycle)

Then, below it, in red:

SYSTEM ADJUSTMENT: Sanction upgraded to MANDATORY CORRECTION per revised risk threshold. Officer discretion override logged. Review cycle cancelled.

Freya read it twice.

The system had reversed her decision. It flagged her edit as an intervention attempt. The risk threshold was exceeded. Her choice of the word "concern" pushed the severity from eight points to eleven, which triggered an automated escalation.

She had made things worse.

She closed the file. Opened it again. The red text stayed.

MANDATORY CORRECTION – 72 HOURS REMAINING

Her hands were on the keyboard. She'd typed the edit herself. She'd chosen the word.

A new notification appeared.

OFFICER VENN – CASE ADJUSTMENT LOGGED. ADDITIONAL REVIEW ASSIGNMENT: WARD 11 LEGACY MEDIA CAPTIONING. TRAVEL AUTHORIZATION ATTACHED. DEPARTURE: TOMORROW 09:00.

Freya stared at the screen. Ward 11 was the water district, where Jade worked and where the valve was leaking.

This was no coincidence. Elias was showing her how far the system could reach. You adjusted Jade's file? Now you get to see what happens to people who keep pushing. Please.

She closed the screen. The assignment was mandatory. Travel date: tomorrow.

The caption bay around her was quiet. Colleagues typing. Someone's phone buzzed two desks over.

She thought about calling Jade to explain, but what could she say? "I tried to help and made it worse" wasn't allowed, but it was the truth.

She clicked the assignment again.

COMPLIANCE AUDIT – PRIORITY

Location: Archive Services, Legacy Media Captioning (Ward 11 district)

Assignment: Review unsanctioned meaning reports

File reference: RUMOURS OF UNSANCTIONED MEANING

Ward 11, where the air tasted off and the water ran brown.

She touched her wrist, feeling the quiet device. She had phrased everything correctly—professional, compliant, just as she had been trained.

Her job was to make language safe. She'd just made Jade less so.

The screen showed Jade's file status. Red text. 72 hours. Mandatory Correction confirmed.

Freya logged out.

No dry humour came. There was no clever observation, no sense of distance. Just the red text and the knowledge that she had typed it herself.

Scene 5

The bus left Crescent Interchange at 08:47. Freya sat three rows back, her phone still showing the assignment notification. **Archive Services, Legacy Media Captioning. Ward 11 district. 09:00.** The automated voice announced the route: "Please maintain calm during travel. Courtesy keeps us well."

The bus was half-empty. A man near the front checked his wristband when it buzzed, then lowered his hand. An older woman folded a shopping bag on her lap. As the bus turned past the West Canal Footbridge, the city began to change.

Freya noticed the changes bit by bit. First, the buildings: modern glass turned into old, weathered brick. Then the shops: more shutters, more "Closed for Wellbeing Update" signs that seemed permanent. A chemist's windows were boarded up and the paint was peeling.

The air changed too. Freya could taste it through the bus's ventilation. Metallic. Chemical. Faint but there.

At the next stop, a woman got on and sat down heavily two seats ahead. Her coat was damp. She coughed once, then again, and then couldn't stop. The cough sounded deep and wet. She pulled a scarf over her mouth, but the coughing continued.

Her phone chirped.

Between coughs, the woman checked her screen. Her device displayed text in calm blue: **[SUGGESTION: "I am experiencing discomfort."]**

She typed a reply, put her phone away, and coughed into her scarf.

The bus stopped again and more people boarded. A man carried a thermos that smelled like cheap coffee substitute. Two women spoke quietly near the back.

"How's your mum?" one asked.

"Adapting," the other said. Flat. Careful. "She's noted the change."

"Right. Good."

"Yeah."

The conversation stopped. Both women checked their phones. The bus moved on.

Freya looked out the window. They were in Ward 11 now. Ashgrove Estate came into view on the left—old council blocks with damp stairwells and small balconies. The playground in the courtyard was empty, the swings unmoving. A noticeboard near the entrance was covered in leaflets, pastel blue and gentle pink, with 'Community Calm' in large letters. There was nothing about the water or the air.

TheBeyond the estate stood the filtration plant, surrounded by a fence. The grey concrete building had corporate branding: **Brackenford Water Renewal Plant**. Banners hung along the fence read, 'Upgrade Works in Progress' and '**Your Patience Supports Our Service**.' Freya could see the discharge pipes from the bus window. Brown water trickling into the canal. Not a lot. Just enough.

That was where Jade worked—inside the fence, next to the discharge pipes and the upgrade banners that had hung there for three years. The 'equipment maintenance need' Freya had noted in the file was right there, still leaking.

The woman ahead coughed again, harder this time. She took a bottle from her bag. The water inside was cloudy and faintly brown, but she drank it anyway.

A dry thought crossed Freya's mind: *Even the wheeze needs branding.*

The bus slowed. A man near the door stood and walked past Freya. His jacket smelled of damp and something sour. He coughed into his fist as he stepped down to the pavement.

Freya pressed the button for the next stop. The automated voice announced, "Legacy Media Services. Courtesy keeps us well."

She stood. The taste in the air was stronger now. She swallowed and it sat metallic on her tongue.

A poster by the bus door showed a smiling family. **REPORT AGITATION. YOUR KINDNESS KEEPS US WELL.**

Freya stepped off the bus. The pavement was damp and cracked. Weeds grew through the gaps. The archive building sat fifty metres ahead, older brick with new civic signage retrofitted to the entrance. Glass doors. Pale wood trim. The Bureau's aesthetic grafted onto something that used to be something else.

She walked towards it. Passed a woman standing at the corner, scarf pulled up, eyes tired. Freya almost asked. Almost said, "What's happening here?" The question formed and her wrist buzzed before she could speak.

[NOTICE: ATTRIBUTION RISK]

Freya stopped and looked at her screen. The notice stayed for three seconds, then five, before it faded.

She lowered her hand and kept walking.

The woman at the corner coughed. Freya didn't look back.

The archive entrance had been updated recently. The doors were clean. The signage was new. And above the entrance, a white dome sat mounted to the brick. Small. Unobtrusive. The kind of thing you'd miss if you weren't looking for it.

It was an ambient civility sensor.

Freya had seen them in the Bureau, in clinics, and in public buildings across the Civic Core, but not usually in older districts like Ward 11.

Someone was paying attention here.

She pushed through the glass doors. The lobby was quiet, with soft carpet and low lighting. The reception desk was empty. Plants sat on the windowsill, and the waiting area had pale blue chairs. Everything felt calm and tidy. A laminated sign hung on the wall beside the lifts, with white text on a soft blue background.

CAPTIONING IS CARE.

Freya stood in the lobby. The air here didn't taste metallic. The ventilation was good. Perfect, actually. Expensive filtration that the district outside couldn't afford. Someone had made sure the archive staff breathed clean air while documenting the people outside who didn't.

She touched her wrist. The device was quiet. No alerts. She was compliant.

Right. Brilliant.

Scene 6

The lift doors slid open on the third floor. The hallway smelled like printer toner and something old. Freya followed the signs to Caption Suite 3B.

Halfway down the hall, a door was open. She knocked. A voice called, "Come in."

The caption suite was smaller than those at the Bureau. There were two workstations and shelves lined with archive boxes marked with faded dates. A kettle sat on a filing cabinet. The window overlooked Ward 11, with the filtration plant visible outside.

Lio stood by the closest workstation. They looked to be in their mid-thirties or maybe forty. They wore a jumper with the sleeves rolled up and a compliance lanyard on their belt. Their workspace was very tidy. A photo was taped to the edge of the monitor, showing two children, probably eight and ten, smiling at a beach. The picture looked old, from before the Accord.

"Freya Venn?" Lio said. They spoke slowly. Careful with each word.

"Yeah. You're Lio?"

"That's right." Lio gestured at the second chair. "Compliance audit, the message said. Legacy captions."

Freya sat. Glanced at the photo again. "Your kids?"

Lio looked at the photo. "Niece and nephew. They're teenagers now." A pause. "Different, obviously. Everyone's different now."

There was something in Lio's voice that hinted the change wasn't only about age. Freya let it go. She knew not to ask more questions when people paused like that.

Freya pulled out her device. Opened the assignment brief. "The system flagged some discrepancies. Captions that don't align with approved frameworks."

"Accessibility captions," Lio said. "For old broadcasts. Public information films. Most of it's from before the Accord." They moved to their monitor and tapped a key. "We're supposed to update them. Make them compliant."

"And do you?"

"When it makes sense." Lio opened a file directory. Rows of video files appeared. Dates going back twelve years. Fifteen. Twenty. "But some of the old footage is tricky. People said things differently then."

Freya watched the screen. The file names were all official-sounding:
PUBLIC_INFO_087_WATER_SAFETY.mp4,
CIVIC_ANNOUNCEMENT_214_MEMORIAL.mp4. Nothing stood out.

"Can I see one?" she said.

Lio hesitated. Three seconds. Then they pulled up a file. Dated eight years ago. "This one. Council meeting footage from Ward 11. Residents speaking about water quality concerns."

The video player opened. Two windows appeared side by side on the monitor. Both showed the same footage. A council chamber. Older. Fluorescent lights. A man standing at a microphone, face strained.

Lio pointed at the left window. "Raw feed." Then at the right. "Filtered output with compliant captions."

They pressed play.

The raw audio played first. The man's voice, strained but clear: "My daughter's sick. Hospital won't say why but it started when the filtration went offline. How many kids have to get ill before _"

The public caption underneath read: *Resident expresses gratitude for ongoing infrastructure improvements and partnership with wellness services.*

"Watch his mouth," Lio said.

Freya leaned in. The man's lips clearly said, "sick." The captions read, "grateful." His face was angry, but the captions described a "partnership."

"They rewrite in real time during broadcasts," Lio explained. "But sometimes the video upload happens before the caption system fully updates. So for maybe six hours, this raw audio was accessible to anyone who knew where to look." They paused. "The system updates all indexed copies nightly. Broadcast archives, government databases, library systems. Now all archived copies have smoothed captions. The original audio is gone. Officially never existed." Another

pause. "The public record only ever holds the smoothed version. Once the archive updates, the raw doesn't exist anywhere official."

The man on screen was still talking. Still angry. The captions stayed grateful.

"That's Ward 11," Freya said. "Eight years ago."

"Before your sister worked there. Before you worked at the Bureau." Lio closed the file. "Same plant. Same valve issues. Same brown water. Different people getting sick."

Freya felt her lunch turn in her stomach. She'd seen caption rewrites happen live. She'd done them herself, changing "budget cuts" to "resource reallocation" and "layoffs" to "restructuring." But seeing someone's protest about their sick child turned into gratitude from eight years ago, knowing that's the only version anyone would find in the archive now.

The device didn't know why she was upset. It couldn't tell the difference between anxiety and moral horror.

Or maybe it did know, and that's why it suggested breathing instead of thinking.

Freya stared at the dual screens. "How many files like this?"

"Most of them." Lio closed the video player. The directory appeared again. Hundreds of files. "The system wants us to update the captions to current compliance standards. Remove provocative language. Reframe dissent as support." They spoke very carefully now. Each word deliberate. "Some of us keep copies. The originals. Just in case."

"In case of what?"

Lio turned from the screen. Looked at Freya directly.

"Your sister works at Ward 11 filtration, yeah?"

Freya went still. "How did you know?"

"I pull reports sometimes. Cross-reference flagged complaints with facility assignments." Lio's voice stayed level. "Jade Venn. Valve safety complaint. Someone tried to push this down to a 14-day review. Changed 'unsafe' to 'maintenance need.' System flagged it and escalated anyway. Mandatory Correction reinstated automatically. Severity score tipped when they used 'concern.'"

Freya's hand moved toward her wrist and stopped.

Lio paused. "The attempt took officer discretion. Knowing exactly which words to swap without triggering supervisor flags." They paused again. "That was kind. Risky. Didn't work, but kind."

"What do you want?" Freya asked.

"To show you what happens to the kindness if the valve doesn't get fixed and people keep getting sick and anyone tries to name it publicly." Lio gestured at the screen. At the man's angry face under grateful captions. "This. They rewrite it into gratitude. The evidence becomes proof the system worked. History becomes whatever the captions say it was."

Freya looked at the frozen image. The man's mouth forming "sick." The caption reading "grateful."

"So why show me?"

"Because you're already risking something to protect one person. I'm asking if you want to risk more to show people what they're not allowed to remember."

The fluorescent lights hummed. Outside, someone coughed. Ward 11 going about its day. The filtration plant visible through the window, banners promising upgrades.

Freya's device sat quiet on her lap. No alerts yet. She'd said nothing flaggable. Neither had Lio. They were both very good at threading needles.

Lio looked at her. Their expression was hard to read. Tired, maybe. Or just careful. "There's a question I ask sometimes," they said. "When someone wants access to the archive. When they want to see something."

Freya waited.

"Do you want the version that's safe, or the one that's accurate?"

The question sat in the air between them. Freya's wrist buzzed.

[NOTICE: ELEVATED INTEREST DETECTED]

The message appeared. Stayed for three seconds. Then faded.

Freya put the device in her pocket. Looked at Lio. Lio looked back. Neither of them moved.

Outside, the filtration plant hummed. The archive boxes sat on their shelves. The dual monitors showed the directory of files waiting to be made compliant.

Great. Just great.

Scene 7

Lio walked over to the filing cabinet and opened the bottom drawer. Inside were folders, each dated and labelled. They moved a few aside, reaching to the back for a slim folder marked **COMPLIANCE TEMPLATES 2019-2021**. It looked dull and bureaucratic, the sort of thing most people ignored.

They opened the folder. Between two laminated instruction sheets was a single piece of paper, printed on both sides. It was A4, creased from being hidden in a tight space for some time.

Lio set it on the desk between them. "This is from Ward 11. Before the Accord updated the water safety language."

Freya unfolded it carefully.

WARD 11 WATER CONTAMINATION INCIDENT - UNFILTERED DOCUMENTATION

There were three pages, written in simple language with direct attribution. Every sentence described a violation.

She read:

"Filtration valve failed on March 3rd due to deferred maintenance. Repair requests were denied based on budget reallocation priorities. Residents began reporting illness March 12th. Hospital admissions for respiratory and gastrointestinal symptoms increased 340% compared to prior year baseline. Authority's official statement attributed symptoms to seasonal illness variation despite water testing by independent contractor showing bacterial contamination at 47 times safe levels. Multiple requests for public disclosure were declined.

This represents systemic negligence resulting in preventable harm to approximately 2,400 residents. The failure to communicate accurate health information constitutes a violation of public safety protocols and demonstrates corruption in both maintenance oversight and transparency requirements."

Every word from Column 3 appeared: "Failed." "Denied." "Harm." "Negligence." "Corruption." The document was full of attribution, naming problems directly. It used the forbidden language that described what really happened.

Freya's device should have been alerting her. But Lio had printed the document. There was no digital signature, no metadata for the system to scan. It was just ink on paper, words that couldn't exist in approved speech.

Seeing the real words on paper felt like breathing after being underwater.

"Any digital copy outside authorised servers gets flagged within sixty days," Lio said. "Paper doesn't transmit. That's why this is the only version left. Digital attempts exist, people try, but the system finds them."

"If you report this," Lio said quietly, "the system learns those exact phrases to hunt for. Every word we use to describe what's happening teaches it what language to erase next."

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"Archive storage. Pre-compliance materials." Lio spoke slowly. Careful. "We're supposed to pulp anything that doesn't meet current standards. But some things get misfiled. Accidentally."

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Outside, life in Ward 11 went on—the coughs, the brown water, and the official phrases that meant nothing.

Freya read the page again. 2,400 residents. 340% increase. 47 times safe levels. Numbers. Specifics. Reality.

"You can't keep this here," she said.

"No," Lio agreed. "I can't."

The silence lingered. Freya's device stayed quiet in her pocket, with no alerts.

Lio picked up the compliance manual from their desk. Standard Bureau issue. Pale blue cover. **LINGUISTIC SAFETY PROTOCOLS 2024**. They opened it to the middle section, where the binding was loose.

"If someone wanted to take something out of here," Lio said, "they'd need to hide it somewhere the sensors can't read. Something with other approved documents."

Freya looked at the manual. Then at the transcript. Then at Lio.

"Why me?"

"You asked the right questions," Lio said. "And you didn't report the dual feed demonstration." They paused. "And Jade's your family."

Jade. Whose file Freya had made worse. Whose sanction was counting down. Who worked in Ward 11 and couldn't say what was happening.

Freya folded the paper into a small square and slipped it into her jacket pocket, feeling its weight against her ribs.

She was carrying contraband, clear proof of harm, written in banned diagnostic language.

She knew she should turn it in, log it, and report the prohibited material. That was the procedure. It was supposed to keep people safe and protect the framework.

But the transcript showed that Jade's workplace was poisoning people, while the system had rewritten all the evidence as "seasonal illness" and "community gratitude."

If she reported it, those words would disappear. It was the last documented proof.

She kept walking.

"Doors pause sometimes," Lio said. Quiet. Matter-of-fact. "Security protocol. If someone's flagged or if there's elevated interest. They don't lock. They just hesitate. Three seconds. Lets the system log who's leaving with what."

"Right."

"If I report this," Freya said, "the system learns what to look for. It updates the search parameters."

"Yes," Lio said.

"But if I don't report it, I'm complicit."

"Yes," Lio said again.

The paradox was clear. Reporting would create the crime, but not reporting would make her part of something different, something that preserved the truth instead of erasing it.

"I'll need to file the audit report by end of day."

"Of course," Lio said. "Standard procedure."

"I'll note that legacy captions are being updated according to current frameworks. No discrepancies found."

"That would be accurate," Lio said. "Technically."

Freya walked to the door. Stopped. Looked back. "The network. How do they communicate?"

"Carefully," Lio said. "And sideways." They picked up their battered notebook and turned to a page marked with a sticky tab. They showed Freya a sketch, a knitting pattern, with rows and stitches. The dropped stitches formed a sequence: numbers, maybe coordinates or dates.

"Undertext," Freya said.

Lio nodded. "Meaning that travels in negative space. Pattern. Rhythm." They closed the notebook. "It's slow. But it's quiet."

Freya filed the information away, adding it to the collection of forbidden knowledge she was gathering.

She left the caption suite. The corridor was empty, lit by fluorescent lights. The carpet was worn, and a poster by the lift read: **WORDS SHAPE SAFETY.**

The lift descended. Second floor. First floor. Ground.

The doors opened on the ground floor. Freya stepped out, the transcript pressed against her chest inside her jacket.

Elias stood near the reception desk, hands in his pockets and a pleasant expression on his face. It seemed like he had been waiting, as if he knew exactly when her archive shift would end.

"Freya. How was Ward 11?"

Her device didn't buzz. She was calibrated. Compliant. She smiled. "Informative. Lio showed me the caption archive system. Very thorough."

"Good. We value your attention to detail." Elias walked with her toward the exit. Casual. Friendly. "That's why the Meaning Integrity role suits you. You understand nuance."

He paused at the door. Held it open for her.

"Sometimes archive work surfaces difficult content. Old language. Provocative framing from before the framework was fully implemented." He spoke gently. Like a mentor. "Senior oversight reviews all officer movements, you know. Badge logs, location data, file access timestamps. It helps us identify when someone might need support processing challenging material."

He was saying two things at once: he knew where she had been, and he cared about her wellbeing.

His threat and his kindness came in the same sentence.

"I understand," Freya said.

"I knew you would." He smiled. "See you tomorrow. We have a lot to prepare for the pilot launch."

The door didn't pause. It opened smoothly. She stepped through.

She'd made it.

Freya walked towards the bus stop. Her wrist buzzed.

[NOTICE: AUDIT COMPLETION REMINDER - FILE REPORT BY 17:00]

Scene 8

Freya walked. The compliance manual pressed against her hip. Elias fell into step beside her, hands still in his pockets. He didn't ask where she was going. He just walked. Easy. Conversational.

"There's a place near Crescent Interchange," he said. "Coffee substitute's not terrible. My treat." Not a question. Not a command. Just an offer that felt like both.

"All right," Freya said.

They walked past the filtration plant. Past the woman coughing on the bench. Elias nodded at a wellbeing steward near the bus stop. The steward nodded back. Everything calm. Everything normal.

The cafe sat off the main road, tucked between a closed bookshop and a community wellbeing centre. Clean windows. Pale wood tables. The air inside smelled of burnt grain and something synthetic trying to be vanilla.

Elias ordered without asking what she wanted. Came back with two cups. Set one in front of her.

"Thanks," Freya said.

He sat down. Picked up his cup but didn't drink. Just held it. His face was pleasant. Open. The kind of expression that invited trust.

"Ward 11's difficult," he said. "The infrastructure challenges. The community resilience needs." He paused. Let the euphemisms sit. "It's experiencing an observable change."

Freya wrapped her hands around her cup. The heat seeped through. She kept her face neutral.

"I saw the filtration plant," she said. Carefully. "The upgrade works."

"Yes." Elias smiled. "Ongoing improvements. It takes time to implement stability outcomes." He sipped his coffee substitute. Set the cup down. "You did good work at the archive. Thorough. Professional."

"The Meaning Integrity pilot," Elias continued. "I meant what I said in the briefing. Proactive reframing. Teaching the system to catch dangerous patterns earlier." He looked at her directly. "It comes with support. Better access. Higher clearance. Discretion on family cases."

There it was. The offer wrapped in kindness.

"Family cases," Freya said after a pause.

"They're difficult," Elias said. His voice stayed gentle. Understanding. "The emotional weight. When someone you care about is struggling with compliance frameworks, it affects your own wellbeing. We recognize that."

Freya's hands stayed on the cup. Warm ceramic. Grounding.

"Jade's doing well in Calm Correction," Elias said. "The initial sessions are always the hardest. But the support plan is working. We're seeing observable progress."

Freya knew what that meant. Jade was flattening. The system was working exactly as designed.

"That's good," she said. The words tasted wrong.

"It could be better." Elias spoke slowly now. Each word deliberate. "Family cases get complicated. The review cycles. The monitoring requirements. But with the right officer oversight, we can reduce the burden. Streamline the process. Ensure the best stability outcomes."

The implication sat clear. Join the pilot. Use the higher access. Manage Jade's file personally. Keep Jade safe through cooperation.

Freya's dry thought arrived: *Nothing says love like conditional healthcare.*

She picked up her cup. Drank. The coffee substitute was bitter and burnt. She swallowed anyway.

"I need to think about it," she said.

"Of course." Elias nodded. Reasonable. Patient. "It's a significant decision. But I should mention that the pilot launches next week. After that, the access structures are set. Harder to adjust later."

He picked up both cups. "Not everyone in the Bureau thinks proactive reframing is the right direction. They worry about scope creep." A pause. Something that wasn't quite a smile. "It's a genuine debate. I'm not going to pretend otherwise." He walked to the counter. "But I believe the outcomes will settle it."

The deadline landed soft. Seven days to decide. Seven days before Jade's file became harder to protect.

Freya set her cup down. "Can I ask you something?"

"Always."

"Ward 11. The water. The health concerns." She chose the words carefully. Stayed inside permitted phrasing. "What's the timeline for resolution?"

Elias didn't flinch. Didn't deflect. He just smiled. Sympathetic. Honest, almost.

"Infrastructure upgrades take time," he said. "We're balancing community needs with resource allocation. But the important thing is managing perception. Making sure people feel supported through the transition period."

Managing perception. Not fixing the water. Not stopping the harm. Just making sure people couldn't name it.

Freya nodded. "Right."

"You understand," Elias said. "That's why I want you on the team. You see the complexity. The need for careful language management." He stood. "Think about it. Let me know by Monday."

He walked to the counter to dispose of the cups. Freya sat at the table. The manual still pressed against her hip. The transcript hidden inside. Evidence of the truth Elias was asking her to help erase.

He came back. Put his hand on the back of the chair. Light. Casual.

"One more thing," he said. His voice stayed friendly. Almost gentle. "Careful with old words, Freya. They're heavier than people remember."

The exact same line. Word for word. Like he had a script and she'd finally reached the closing section.

He walked out. The door closed behind him with a soft chime.

Freya sat alone. The cafe music played. Someone queued for their order. A poster on the wall showed a smiling family. **YOUR KINDNESS KEEPS US WELL.**

Her wrist buzzed.

[NOTICE: LOYALTY VARIANCE DETECTED]

The notice appeared. Stayed for five seconds. Then faded.

Freya touched her wrist. The device sat quiet now. Just the record of variance logged somewhere in the system's memory.

She stood. Picked up the manual and walked out of the cafe.

She'd have to decide what kind of complicit she was willing to be.

Scene 9

Freya sat at the kitchen table. The transcript was unfolded in front of her. The words were still clear. Still true. **UNSAFE. CONTAMINATION. NEGLIGENCE.**

She had read it four times since she got home. Each time brought relief. Each time, she knew that keeping it made her part of something the system wanted to erase.

The flat was quiet. Jade was at another Calm Correction session. Third one this week. Jade would be back in forty minutes.

She folded the transcript with care and put it in the tea tin behind the sugar and flour. It wasn't a clever hiding spot, just an ordinary one. The kind of place someone might reach without thinking.

Her phone buzzed. This time, it wasn't just a device notification. It was a real message.

Unknown number. No name.

Pine Street Launderette. 19:00. Bring something to mend.

Freya deleted the message and checked the time. Eighteen minutes left.

She found an old jumper in the drawer, one with a small hole in the sleeve. She picked up her phone and keys and left.

The launderette was between a closed newsagent and a charity shop. Fluorescent lights shone overhead. Three washers were running. The air smelled of detergent and damp fabric. A woman folded clothes near the window, while a man read a newspaper by the dryers.

Freya walked to the back, where two chairs sat beside a notice board covered in handwritten cards. Lost cats. Flat shares. Tutoring services. Knitting circle every Thursday.

Lio was in the left chair, mending something, maybe a sock, with needle and wool. They didn't look up when Freya sat down.

"You came," Lio said. Quiet. Still focused on the mending.

"You texted."

"Did I?" Lio smiled slightly. "Phones do odd things sometimes."

Freya pulled out the jumper and set it on her lap. "You said Undertext. Meaning in pattern."

Lio set down the mending. Reached into their bag and pulled out three photographs. All printed. No metadata. Spread them on the small table between the chairs.

"What do you see?" Lio asked.

Freya looked. First photo: community reading event. People sitting in rows, books visible. Second photo: community garden work day. People in scarves despite warm weather. Third photo: bus queue, very orderly.

"Events. People. Nothing unusual."

"Look closer. What are they holding? How are they standing?"

Freya picked up the first photo and studied it. Seven people in the front two rows held the same book. She couldn't read the title clearly, but they all held it the same way: spine out, chest height, covers facing the camera.

Red covers.

She looked at the second photo. The scarves weren't random. Everyone wore them the same way: left side tucked under the collar, right side loose over the shoulder. The colors were different, yellow, orange, red, but the arrangement was the same.

The third photo showed a bus queue. It was too perfect. People stood exactly the same distance apart, all facing the same direction. No one checked their phones. There was no natural variation.

"It's a pattern," Freya said slowly. "Deliberate arrangement."

"It's language." Lio pointed at the first photo. "Seven copies of 'Fire Safety Guidelines' held spine-out at chest height during a poetry reading event. The official caption said 'community celebrates literary arts.' But if you know the code—"

Freya interrupted: "Seven books. Red covers. Fire safety." She looked up. "Something's burning. Or going to burn. Or already burned and no one's allowed to say."

Lio smiled. Small. Careful. "Yes."

"But the caption just says celebration. Community event. Nothing about warning or danger."

"Because there's no prohibited language. Just people holding books. The system can't flag intent from an object. It reads the speech, the text, the tone. Not the arrangement."

Freya moved to the second photo. "The scarves. Left side tucked, right side loose. That's consistent. The colors varying, that's the message."

"Medical concern is the base symbol. Yellow means caution. Orange is urgent. Red is—"

"Crisis." Freya counted. Five yellow. Three orange. Two red. "Escalating severity."

"This was three weeks ago. At a community garden event in Ward 11. Official caption: 'residents express gratitude for green space access and wellness activity opportunities.'"

"But they were saying people are getting sick."

"Without using the word 'sick.' Without attribution. Without deficit-naming. Just scarves and colors and arrangement."

Freya picked up the third photo. "What's this one?"

"Silence protest. Everyone standing exactly two metres apart. Not moving. Not speaking. Just waiting."

"For what?"

"Not waiting for transport. Waiting to be heard. The spacing is the message—we're following the rules perfectly and it's still not enough. The system wants compliance, we're giving maximum compliance, and people are still suffering."

"That's brilliant," Freya said. Then: "Did it work?"

Lio's expression shifted. "The caption said 'efficient queue management demonstrates community courtesy.' Three people from that queue were flagged for 'unusual behavior patterns' and referred for wellness reviews."

"So it didn't work."

"It worked as warning for others. It didn't work as protection for the people who did it. Nothing protects you if the system decides to look closely."

Freya set the photos down and stared at them. Seven red books. Colored scarves. Perfect spacing was language without words. Meaning without permission.

"This is what you meant," she said. "When you said meaning travels when words can't."

"This is Undertext. The system can't flag it because there's no prohibited terminology. Just objects. Patterns. Visual arrangements. The sensors can't read intent from a scarf color."

"Not yet," Freya said.

"Not yet," Lio agreed. "But they will. Give it two years and the image recognition will catch this too. New directive: coordinated clothing arrangements constitute provocative implication. Then we'll find something else. We always do."

"Until we can't."

"Until we can't," Lio confirmed. "But right now, today, this still works. Sometimes."

A washer buzzed. The woman near the window moved to unload it.

Lio gathered the photos. Put them away. "There's another reason it works," they said. Quieter now. "It's not just about moving information. It's about preserving the ability to think in banned shapes. When you can't say 'unsafe,' your brain stops forming the concept. Undertext keeps those shapes alive. Even if you never speak them."

The launderette hummed. Washers spinning.

Freya's phone buzzed. Message from Jade.

Margaret says I'm making excellent progress. Completed module 2 today. I don't feel stressed about work anymore. Is that normal?

Freya stared at the message. Jade asking if losing stress about a poisonous workplace was "normal." Asking permission to have feelings.

She started typing: **Missing stress signals might mean you're not processing danger appropriately.**

Deleted it. Every word would be scanned.

Tried again: **That sounds like good progress.**

Sent it. Hated how it read.

Another message arrived: **Sometimes I try to remember why I was upset about the valve but it feels distant now. Like it wasn't actually important. Margaret says that means I'm letting go of unproductive thought patterns.**

Freya's hands were shaking.

The valve is still broken she typed.

Stared at it. Deleted it. "Broken" was deficit language. The message would flag.

I'm glad the sessions are helping she sent instead.

They are Jade responded. **I'm learning what healthy concern looks like vs unhealthy fixation.**

Freya put the phone down. Looked at Lio.

"How long do we have?" she asked. Meaning: how long before Jade can't remember what genuine concern feels like. Before the clinic erases it completely.

Lio glanced at the photos. The Undertext warnings that had gotten people flagged. "Not long. Maybe two weeks. Maybe less if they accelerate the modules."

Freya picked up the jumper, noticing the hole in the sleeve. She had brought it to look normal, but now she wanted to actually mend it. She wanted to practice the motions and understand how meaning could hide in stitches.

"I don't know if I can do this," she said.

"You already are," Lio said. "You took the transcript. You filed a false report. You're here." They stood. Picked up their mending. "The question isn't whether you can. It's whether you'll keep going when it costs more."

Freya nodded. Lio walked towards the door. Stopped. Turned back.

"One more thing," they said. "Watch for changes in people you know. The flattening. When someone stops mid-sentence and checks their device more often. When their phrasing gets smoother. That's when they need the old words most. Even if they can't ask for them."

Lio left.

Freya sat alone with the jumper in her hands. The photos were gone, but the patterns stayed in her mind. The launderette continued around her as if nothing had happened.

She looked at the notice board again. Lost cats. Flat shares. Knitting circle. It all seemed ordinary, but any of it could carry meaning she hadn't learned to see yet.

She checked the time. Jade should be home in five minutes.

Freya stood, picked up the jumper, and left the launderette. The patterns stayed in her mind: seven red books, five yellow, three orange, two red, perfect spacing.

The air outside was cold. It took her four minutes to walk back to the flat.

Jade's messages sat on her screen. Module 2 completed. Stress gone. Concern becoming fixation.

Calm Correction was working.

Scene 10

The Clinical Serenity Centre sat three blocks east of the city centre, sandwiched between a Tesco Express and a betting shop. Pale brick. Narrow windows. A sign by the door: **WARD 3 WELLNESS SUPPORT — WALK-INS WELCOME.**

Freya signed the visitor log at reception. The woman behind the desk wore soft grey scrubs and a name badge that read **MARGARET ASHFORD, CARE FACILITATOR.** She smiled, warm and professional.

"You're here for Jade Venn?" Margaret checked her screen. "Lovely. She's doing wonderfully. You should be very proud."

Freya nodded. Managed something like a smile.

Margaret handed her a laminated visitor pass on a lanyard. "You can observe today's session from the family area. We find it helpful for loved ones to see the progress."

"Thank you," Freya said.

Margaret gestured down the corridor. Pale green walls. Framed prints of beaches and forests. Soft lighting that made everything look slightly unreal.

The family observation area was a small room with a glass partition overlooking the group session space. Three other people sat in cushioned chairs, watching through the glass. A woman in her sixties. A younger man with a baby in a carrier. A teenager hunched over their phone.

None of them looked at Freya when she sat down.

Through the glass: eight people in a circle. Cushioned chairs. Name tags clipped to their shirts. Jade sat with their back straight, hands folded in their lap. Posture perfect. Freya hadn't seen Jade sit like that since primary school assemblies.

Margaret stood at the front of the circle. The same warm smile. A tablet in her hands.

"Today we're exploring protective communication," she said. Voice clear through the speaker system. "How do we care for the people we love?"

The man next to Jade shifted in his seat. Fifties. Greying beard. Name tag: **MARCUS**.

"By listening?" he tried. "When they need us?"

Margaret's smile stayed steady. "And if listening reinforces their distress? If they're stuck in a harmful thought pattern and you're enabling it by just... being there?"

Pause. Marcus frowned. Recalibrating.

"I suppose... I'd suggest they talk to someone. A professional?"

"That's beautiful," Margaret said. She touched her tablet. Something chimed softly in the room. "You're protecting them. What if they refuse?"

Silence around the circle. People looked at their hands. At the floor. At the breathing posters on the walls. **PAUSE. BREATHE. REFLECT.**

Jade spoke. Quiet but clear. "Like... reporting them?"

Margaret's face lit up. Not fake. Genuine. "That's beautiful awareness, Jade. Tell us more."

Jade's hands stayed folded. Perfect and still. "If they're using prohibited language. Or showing attribution patterns. I could file a wellbeing concern. So they get support before it escalates."

"Exactly." Margaret moved closer to Jade's chair. Gentle. Encouraging. "And how does that feel to you? To think about reporting someone you love?"

Jade considered. Freya watched through the glass, her chest tight.

"It feels... protective," Jade said finally. "Like I'm keeping them safe."

"Because you are." Margaret nodded. Smiled at the whole circle. "That's what care looks like in practice. Not enabling their distress. Ensuring they have access to help. Even when they can't see they need it."

The other participants nodded. Some tapped notes into their phones.

Marcus said, "So if my son keeps complaining about his supervisor. And I've told him to just—to manage it better. But he won't stop. I should...?"

"File a concern," Margaret said. Soft. Kind. "Because complaining without resolution is a stress pattern. And stress patterns escalate. You're not punishing him. You're ensuring he gets the support he clearly needs before it affects his harmony score. That's love."

Marcus nodded slowly. "Right. That makes sense."

Freya's hands clenched in her lap. The teenager beside her was crying silently, watching someone in the circle. The older woman stared straight ahead. Expressionless.

"Let's practice," Margaret said. She consulted her tablet. "Jade, you'll work with Marcus."

Jade nodded. Calm. Ready.

Margaret read from the screen. "Scenario: your sibling has been showing stress. They're not sleeping. They mentioned feeling 'trapped' at work. You've noticed them becoming withdrawn. What do you do?"

Jade glanced at her phone. Scrolled briefly. Reading something. Then looked up.

"I notice you've been struggling," Jade said. Voice even. Rehearsed. "I'm concerned about your wellbeing. I think talking to a facilitator would help. Would you like me to schedule that, or should I file a concern so the wellness team can reach out?"

Margaret beamed. "Perfect. Caring. Proactive. You're giving them a choice, but ensuring they get support either way." She turned to the group. "That's love in action. Notice how Jade doesn't argue. Doesn't enable. Doesn't reinforce the harmful narrative. Just offers care. Clear and direct."

Jade smiled. Small. Genuine. The first real smile Freya had seen on her face in weeks.

Freya's stomach turned.

The session ended twenty minutes later. Participants filed out through a side door. Family members went to meet them in the waiting area.

Jade appeared in the corridor. Saw Freya. Smiled again. That same small, genuine smile.

They sat together in the waiting area. Pale blue chairs. A tea station with paper cups and herbal blends. Posters everywhere. **CALM IS A CHOICE.** A watercolour print of hands folded in a lap.

On the low table between them, a pamphlet: **SUPPORTING STRUGGLING FAMILY MEMBERS - EARLY REPORTING PREVENTS ESCALATION.**

Freya looked away from it.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. Careful. Quiet.

"Better." Jade's voice was lighter than it had been in days. "I'm learning to communicate without creating tension."

The phrasing was smooth. Template language. But Jade didn't seem to notice.

Freya tried again. Dropped her voice. "About work. The valve. Did they ever—"

Jade's expression shifted. Not angry. Just... concerned. "Margaret says focusing on past agitation isn't productive. I'm working on present wellness."

"Right," Freya said. "Of course."

Jade didn't notice they'd just quoted the facilitator word for word.

"The sessions are helpful," Jade continued. Earnest. Open. "I'm learning to identify concerning patterns in others too. Like... if someone seems stressed or isn't adapting well, I can help them get support early. Before things escalate."

The way they said it. Caring. Responsible. Exactly the script from the session.

Freya's throat felt tight. "That's good. That you're learning to help people."

Jade leaned forward slightly. Engaged. "I think I'm finally understanding what care actually means. It's not just listening when someone's struggling. It's making sure they get professional help. That's the responsible thing."

Freya nodded. Managed a smile. "I'm proud of you."

The words tasted wrong in her mouth.

Outside, the street was damp. Grey pavement. A bus pulling away from the stop. People walking past with their heads down and their wrists lit up.

Freya's device buzzed.

BROADCAST HARMONY EVENT: SATURDAY 09:00. PILOT TEAM REQUIRED

Forty-eight hours.

A second notification. Looked like a calendar reminder. **K.C. Sat 9am.**

Knitting circle. Lio's code.

Freya looked back at the clinic building. Through the window, she could see the group session room. Margaret was resetting the chairs. Jade still visible in the waiting area, talking to Marcus. Both of them smiling. Relaxed.

Inside: people learning to betray each other with perfect sincerity.

The valve still leaking in Ward 11. The archive still rewriting history. The system captioning resistance into compliance at every broadcast.

And Jade—learning that surveillance is love. That reporting is care. That the responsible thing to do when someone you love is struggling is to ensure they get "help" whether they want it or not.

Freya typed a response to the calendar reminder. Single word.

In.

Her hands didn't shake.

She wasn't doing this to win. She was doing it because in forty-eight hours there would be another broadcast. Another chance for the system to turn truth into lies. And if she didn't act

now, if she waited, if she stayed safe, Jade would disappear completely into that calm, concerned script.

And the worst part: Jade would believe they were fine. Would believe they were helping. Would report anyone who tried to pull them back.

Freya walked to the bus stop. The clinic behind her. Warm light in the windows. Soft voices. Breathing posters. People inside learning exactly how to help the system win.

Forty-eight hours.

Scene 11

The Broadcast Operations floor sat on the seventh level of the Bureau. Windows overlooked Harmony Plaza. Freya could see the stage being assembled below. White panels. Speaker system. Rows of chairs arranged in perfect arcs.

Tomorrow's broadcast. Twelve years of peace.

Elias stood beside the Meaning Integrity workstation. Three monitors arranged in a curve. Raw feed on the left. Public output on the right. Reframe controls in the centre.

"Your access is active," he said. Gestured to the chair. "Have a seat."

Freya sat down. The monitors glowed softly. The interface looked familiar, like the caption bay tools she knew, but with extra layers. There were menus she had never seen before.

Elias leaned over her shoulder. Typed in a command. The centre monitor changed.

MEANING INTEGRITY PILOT - OFFICER VENN - CLEARANCE LEVEL 4

"You'll monitor for subversive implication during live events," Elias said. His voice stayed calm and even. "Pattern recognition. If you see coordinated behaviour that could look like protest, such as umbrellas forming lines, clothing arranged to spell messages, or unusual silence during applause cues, you can use preemptive reframing."

He opened a panel. Four settings displayed.

AUTO-DEPLOY DELAY

SENTIMENT SMOOTHING INTENSITY

CAPTION OVERRIDE

AUDIO ATTENUATION

"These require officer authorisation," Elias continued. "You'll have full access for tomorrow's broadcast. Any Level 4 officer can adjust these. But Senior Oversight at Level 6 and above can override any deployment in real time. That's the authorisation hierarchy and safety protocol."

Freya realised, clear and cold: *He's giving me the keys. And reminding me he can take them back.*

Elias clicked the first setting. The deploy delay field opened.

CURRENT: 0.0 seconds

"This controls how quickly captions deploy over raw footage," he explained. "Standard is zero. Simultaneous. The public sees the caption the instant the words are spoken." He paused. "But if there's technical issues or you need review time, you can add delay for quality control. Up to thirty seconds maximum."

He typed **5.0** into the field. Hit enter.

A prompt appeared: **OFFICER AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED**

Elias scanned his badge against the reader mounted on the desk. A soft beep.

REASON FOR ADJUSTMENT

A dropdown menu. Technical Review. Quality Control. Training Exercise. Other.

He selected Training Exercise.

The system accepted it. **OFFICER AUTHORIZATION: TRENT, E. - DELAY ADJUSTMENT LOGGED. REAL-TIME AUDIT: ENABLED.**

The test footage played. Raw audio first. Then, five seconds later, captions appeared.

"See?" Elias said. "Simple. Just remember to log any changes. Transparency keeps us accountable."

He reset the delay to zero. Looked at Freya. "Try it. Change the delay to ten seconds. I'll watch you do it so you're comfortable with the interface."

Freya's hands moved to the keyboard. Typed **10.0** in the delay field. Hit enter.

OFFICER AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED

She scanned her badge. The beep felt too loud.

REASON FOR ADJUSTMENT

She selected Quality Control.

DELAY ADJUSTMENT ACCEPTED - LOGGED TO OFFICER VENN. REAL-TIME AUDIT: ENABLED.

"Good," Elias said. He smiled. "You'll do fine tomorrow. The system trusts you."

Freya nodded. Professional. Compliant.

The system trusts me to smooth meaning away. But I plan to use that trust to delay it instead. He'll notice as soon as I do.

The launderette was nearly empty. Eight o'clock Friday evening. One woman folding towels near the front window. A man asleep in a chair, waiting for his cycle to finish.

Lio sat in the corner near the broken dryer. Knitting needles moving automatically.

Freya sat down. Picked up a shirt from the basket she'd brought. Started folding.

"The network's ready," Lio said. Quiet. Not looking up. "Umbrellas, lights, water bottles, coordinated stillness. Fourteen people confirmed. They'll hold the pattern for twenty seconds minimum."

"I can give you ten seconds," Freya said. "Maybe fifteen if the system is slow."

"That's enough." The needles clicked. "If people see it before the captions cover it, they'll remember. Even if they can't talk about it later."

"Will they?" Freya's hands stopped. "Or will the captions overwrite the memory along with everything else?"

"Some memories stick. Visual patterns bypass language centers." Lio's voice stayed steady. "They might not remember what it meant, but they'll remember feeling disturbed. That's a crack."

Freya folded the shirt. Set it aside. "What happens to me after?"

"Review, probably. Reassignment."

"Or Calm Correction."

"Maybe." Pause. "Probably."

"Is it worth it?" Lio asked. Finally looked at Freya. "Ten seconds of visible truth for months of correction?"

Freya thought about Jade in the clinic. Practicing concern reports. Learning to call surveillance love.

"If I don't do this, Jade will think everything is fine. She'll believe caring means reporting people for thinking the wrong way." Her voice stayed quiet. "She'll spend her whole life believing surveillance is love."

"And if you do it?"

"Jade will see that someone tried. Even if it fails. Even if it gets turned into gratitude and erased. Someone tried to show them the truth." Freya folded the next shirt. "Maybe that's enough."

"It won't change the system."

"I know." Freya looked at Lio. "But it might change what Jade thinks is possible." Lio set the knitting down. Reached into their bag. Pulled out a small package wrapped in foil. About the size of a matchbox.

"What is it?"

"Ferrite bead." Lio handed it over. "Clip it to your wristband cable tomorrow morning. It will scramble the biometric feed for about sixty seconds. Your stress levels won't show up. That way, you can change the delay without your device flagging the spike in your heart rate." Freya stared at the package. "Where did you get this?"

"People find ways." Lio stood. Packed away the knitting. Pulled on their coat.

"If this goes wrong and they connect you—"

"They won't find me." Lio's voice was very calm. "I've been doing this longer than you think." Lio paused. "But some people in the network will get caught. They know the risk. They're doing it anyway?"

Lio's face stayed the same, but something changed in their eyes. "Because seeing the system rewrite your mother's death as 'adaptation to new circumstances' makes you willing to risk a lot to show people what really happened."

"I'm sorry," Freya said.

Lio nodded once. Walked to the door.

Freya never saw them again.

Home. Nine-thirty. The flat was quiet. Jade still at the clinic. Final session before tomorrow's review.

Freya's device buzzed.

OFFICER VENN - BROADCAST ASSIGNMENT CONFIRMED. ARRIVAL TIME: 08:30 SATURDAY. FORMAL ATTIRE REQUESTED.

A second notification. Personal message from Elias.

Looking forward to working with you tomorrow. This is important work. Your family will be proud.

The word "family" felt wrong. It was heavy and deliberate.

He was reminding her: I know about Jade. I know what you're protecting. I know what you have to lose.

It was subtle. There was no direct threat, just the word "family" used where it didn't fit.

Freya opened the Bureau portal on her phone. Found Jade's file.

REVIEW DATE: MONDAY 08:00 - SCHEDULED REVIEW (DAY 14)

Two days after the broadcast.

If Freya's plan failed and she got caught, Jade's file would go from "scheduled review" to "immediate correction."

If it succeeded and Jade saw that resistance was possible, maybe the review would go differently.

If Freya did nothing, Jade would finish correction, learn to report people as a form of care, and the file would be marked "resolved through managed communication."

This was the last chance for anything to change.

Her phone buzzed. Different notification. Message from Jade.

Session ended early. Home by 20:00. Can we have dinner together?

Freya's chest tightened.

She should tell Jade something. Warn them. Say goodbye in case tomorrow went badly.

But anything she said would be scanned, logged, potentially used as evidence of escalation.

And Jade might report her "for her own good" if she seemed too stressed. The clinic had taught them that reporting was care.

She typed back: **Yes. I'll make pasta.**

It was safe. Normal. Nothing that would trigger any flags.

She put the phone down. Looked at the foil-wrapped package on the counter.

Tomorrow she would clip the ferrite bead to her wrist, change the delay to ten seconds, and give people a glimpse of unfiltered reality.

After that, the system would cover it up, and she would face whatever Elias had planned.

But Jade would have seen. For ten seconds, Jade would have seen that resistance happened.

That was all Freya could offer them.

She put the bead in her pocket. Started making pasta.

Jade would be home soon.

This might be the last normal evening they would ever have.

Scene 12

Three workstations faced the window in the Control Room. Freya used the one on the left. Elias stood behind her with his hands folded, watching the monitors.

The plaza filled up slowly. People stood in neat rows. Wellbeing stewards in pale blue guided the crowd into place. The shallow water feature hummed. The memorial wall, covered in white ribbons, stood out against the grey morning.

Freya's monitors displayed two feeds. The left screen showed the raw plaza camera with no filters. The right screen showed the public broadcast, with captions and sentiment smoothing turned on.

The reframe controls were at the bottom of her interface. **AUTO-DEPLOY was enabled. The delay was set to zero seconds.**

Not yet. She couldn't change it yet.

Freya touched her wrist. The ferrite bead was in her jacket pocket. She would clip it on when the intervention began, not before. If Elias noticed the biometric scrambling too soon, he would look into it.

The device rested quietly against her skin, monitoring her. It seemed to trust her.

Elias leaned closer. His voice stayed calm. "Everything ready?"

"Yes," Freya said.

"Good." He straightened. Walked to the window. Looked down at the plaza. "Twelve years. It's worth celebrating."

The broadcast started at nine. Soft music played. Stock footage showed families, parks, and tidy streets. The voiceover spoke gently about peace, stability, and visible improvements in civic calm.

Freya watched the raw feed. The crowd stood quietly, their faces neutral. Most people just waited.

Her wristband buzzed. **[BROADCAST ACTIVE - MONITORING MODE]**

The first speaker took the stage. A council representative. Mid-fifties, good suit, warm smile. He read from the prompter. Gratitude for the Accord. Statistics about reduced conflict incidents. The captions on the public screens matched his words perfectly.

Freya kept her hands on the keyboard. The delay setting was still at zero seconds. She had to wait until the intervention began, planning to change it during the confusion.

The speaker finished, and the crowd offered polite applause. The next speaker, a younger woman, took the stage to talk about education programs and tone coaching in schools.

Freya watched the raw feed closely. Lio's network would try something ordinary enough to avoid the stewards' notice, but extraordinary enough to send a message.

Then she saw it.

Near the back of the crowd, a woman opened an umbrella. Blue. Ordinary. She held it still.

Three seconds later, another umbrella opened. Ten metres to the left. Red.

Then another. Yellow. And another. Green.

The umbrellas stayed open. The people holding them stood still, umbrellas raised on a grey morning without any rain.

Freya counted the umbrellas—eight, nine, twelve. They formed a line across the back of the plaza, creating a barrier of color.

The stewards noticed and began moving toward them, gentle and with open hands.

Then the lights started.

Windows in the buildings around the plaza lit up and went dark in a deliberate, timed pattern. One building's top floor went dark while another's second floor lit up, moving back and forth in sequence.

Then the silence.

A group near the front stopped moving—twenty, maybe thirty people. They just stood there, completely still, not checking their devices or shifting their weight.

And in front of them, on the plaza paving, someone had placed bottles. Brown water visible through clear plastic. A line of them. Leading from the memorial wall towards the stage.

The pattern formed. Freya saw it. The umbrellas marking a boundary. The lights signalling danger. The stillness demanding attention. The bottles showing evidence.

Together it read clear: **The water is harming us.**

No words. No banners. Just ordinary things arranged into meaning.

The crowd rippled. People turning. Looking. Trying to understand.

The speaker on stage stopped mid-sentence. Looked out at the plaza. Her expression shifted.

Freya's hands moved. She pulled the ferrite bead from her jacket pocket and clipped it to the thin cable running from her wristband. Her device screen flickered. Stabilised. No spike. No flag.

She opened the deploy settings. **AUTO-DEPLOY: 0.0 seconds.**

She typed: **10.0**

OFFICER AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED

She scanned her badge. Selected: **Quality Control**

DELAY ADJUSTMENT ACCEPTED - LOGGED TO OFFICER VENN, F. - REVIEW MODE ENABLED

The number changed on her screen. **AUTO-DEPLOY: 10.0 seconds**

Audio played on a separate channel and would remain unfiltered unless she changed another setting. She hadn't, so they would hear everything. She had ten seconds. She'd given them ten seconds.

The crowd recognised the pattern. Freya watched their faces on the raw feed as understanding spread. Someone spoke to the person next to them and pointed. The other person nodded. A woman near the bottles bent down and picked one up. A man turned to look at the filtration plant beyond the plaza, then at the discharge pipes and the bottles. His expression changed. The woman on stage stopped reading from the prompter and looked at the bottles. Her mouth opened as she began to speak—

Then the system deployed.

The public screens changed. Smooth white text over the plaza footage.

COMMUNITY GRATITUDE TRIBUTE - RESIDENTS CELEBRATE WATER SERVICES

The bottles became props for celebration. The umbrellas became festive decoration. The stillness became reverent participation.

The broadcast overlay appeared. Heart icons floating across the screen. Soft music swelling underneath. The announcer's voice cut in. Warm. Reassuring. "A beautiful moment of community appreciation. Residents expressing gratitude for essential services through creative display."

The crowd prompts deployed. A soft pulse in the air. Just enough to suggest.

People started to clap.

Not everyone. Some looked uncertain. A man near the bottles kept staring at the brown water. But enough people clapped that the clapping spread. The unsure ones checked their devices. **[COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION ENCOURAGED]** appeared on screens. They clapped too.

The stewards reached the people holding umbrellas. Smiled. "Lovely tribute. Very creative. Time to join the celebration now."

The umbrellas came down. One by one.

The bottles were collected. "We'll make sure these get properly recycled." Smiling. Helpful.

The lights in the windows stopped their pattern. Went back to normal. Just buildings. Just windows.

The pattern had lasted seventeen seconds. Seven seconds of pure recognition before the captions arrived and told everyone what they were supposed to be seeing.

Then Freya's screen changed.

AUTO-DEPLOY: 0.0 seconds - OVERRIDE AUTHORIZATION: TRENT, E. LEVEL 6

Her screen went blank.

She turned.

Elias stood behind her. He wasn't angry. He looked disappointed. Like a teacher catching a student cheating.

"Ten seconds," he said quietly. "You gave them ten seconds."

Freya's mouth was dry. "The system was loading slowly. I adjusted for—"

"Don't." His voice stayed calm. Patient. "We both know what you did. The question is why you thought it would matter."

He gestured at the screens. The plaza. The crowd dispersing peacefully. Stewards collecting the bottles, folding the umbrellas, speaking quietly to the people who'd held the pattern. No force. No arrests. Just gentle redirection.

"They saw," Freya said. "For seventeen seconds they saw—"

"And now they've seen the corrected version." Elias leaned against the desk. "Which one do you think they'll remember? Confusing umbrellas and bottles, or the clear explanation that said it was gratitude?" He glanced at the screens. The official summary already distributing.

HARMONY BROADCAST CELEBRATES COMMUNITY RESILIENCE - RESIDENTS EXPRESS GRATITUDE FOR WATER SERVICES - SYMBOLIC TRIBUTE HONORS INFRASTRUCTURE UPGRADES. "By tomorrow, people will remember a nice ceremony. Nothing more."

He straightened his jacket. "The network will be identified. Lio's already gone—emergency protocol, archivists first, they carry too much. The others will receive support. Rehabilitation." He paused. "And you'll have a wellness review. Monday morning. Mandatory."

"Not suspension?" Freya heard herself ask.

"Why would we suspend you?" He looked genuinely confused. "You made a poor decision under stress. You need help, not punishment. That's what we do here."

He walked to the window. Looked down at the plaza. The crowd nearly gone. The stage being dismantled.

"Your sibling," he said. Not turning around. "Jade. They have a review Monday as well. Scheduled. Day fourteen. They've completed their Calm Correction module. Adapting beautifully." He turned back to face her. "But if family stressors are identified—if someone close to them is showing concerning patterns—that context affects the review outcome."

The threat was so gentle. So reasonable.

"I understand," Freya said.

"I knew you would." Elias smiled. "Two stewards will escort you to the wellness suite. Just for observation. A few hours. Then you can go home. Full review Monday."

The door opened. Two stewards in soft blue entered. Pleasant faces. Professional smiles. One held a tablet.

"Officer Venn? If you'll come with us."

Freya stood. Her legs felt distant. The ferrite bead was still clipped to her wrist. She left it on.

Walked between the stewards like someone being helped, not arrested.

Elias touched her shoulder briefly as she passed. "Your family will understand. Jade's learned how to be supportive during challenging times. They'll know this is what's best for you."

That's when Freya understood.

The clinic had trained Jade to accept this. To see Freya's "intervention" as a cry for help. To understand that reporting concerns about struggling loved ones was the caring thing to do.

She'd tried to show Jade that resistance was possible.

Instead, she'd given Jade proof that resistance meant you needed correction.

The stewards guided her toward the lifts. One spoke into their device. "Officer Venn in transit to wellness suite. Observation protocol. No restraints necessary. Subject is compliant."

Subject is compliant.

Scene 13

She left the wellness suite on Sunday evening after six hours of observation. There were breathing exercises and quiet questions about stress and work-life balance. Elena had been kind and concerned, making Freya tea and asking gentle questions.

As Freya walked through her front door, a notification appeared.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

Officer Venn, you have been selected for a comprehensive wellbeing support review. Attendance is mandatory. Monday at 9:00, Bureau HQ, Wellness Integration Suite.

It wasn't a suspension or a dismissal. Just a review.

Soft punishment.

When she arrived at the wellness suite, the ferrite bead was still clipped to her wrist. They logged it during intake and took it away, politely, with paperwork.

The flat was quiet. Jade's bedroom door was closed, with a light shining underneath. She was home.

Freya set her bag down. The night before, she had moved the transcript from the tea tin to the compliance manual on the shelf, somewhere that would look official if anyone happened to look.

The kettle was on the counter, with two mugs beside it.

She stood and waited.

The bedroom door opened and Jade stepped out. Their face looked calm and rested. It was clear they had attended another session that day. Sunday sessions were optional but 'encouraged for maintaining progress.'

"How are you?" Jade asked. Her eyes tracked Freya's posture, her movements. Clinical. Assessing.

"Tired," Freya said. "Long day."

"I heard about the broadcast." Jade's voice stayed even. "There was an incident."

Freya went still. "Where did you hear that?"

"The facilitator mentioned it. She said someone on the pilot team experienced stress-related decision-making challenges." Jade sat on the sofa. Hands folded. Perfect posture. "She didn't say who. But I thought it might be you."

Freya watched them. The way they held themselves. The clinical phrasing. The calm, measured voice.

"Yeah," Freya said. "It was me."

Jade nodded. Like she'd expected this. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know."

"That's understandable. Stressful situations can affect our sense of clarity." Jade's hands stayed perfectly still. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Maybe," Freya said. She walked to the shelf. Pulled down the compliance manual. The transcript slid out. She'd refolded it into a small square.

She sat beside Jade. Set the transcript on the coffee table between them.

Jade looked at it. Didn't touch it. "What is that?"

"The truth," Freya said. "About Ward 11. About the water. What you tried to say before they stopped you."

Jade's device buzzed. **[NOTICE: PROHIBITED CONTENT DETECTED] / [SUGGESTION: REPORT SOURCE]**

"I shouldn't read this," Jade said. Voice calm. Measured. "This language isn't compliant."

"I know."

"It will affect my review tomorrow."

"I know." Freya pushed the transcript closer. "But I need you to see it. Just once. Read it and remember what you were trying to say."

Jade stared at the folded paper. The device buzzed again. Louder.

Jade looked at their wrist. Then at Freya. Something flickered in their expression. The same three-second window from the clinic when they'd said "wrong" in role-play and Margaret had corrected them gently.

"Please," Freya said. "Just read it. Then you can decide."

Jade was quiet for a long moment. Then they picked up their phone. Handed it to Freya.

"Put it somewhere it can't hear."

Freya's chest loosened. She took Jade's phone. Walked to the microwave. Opened it. Put both their phones inside. Closed the door.

Then she came back. Sat beside Jade. Pushed the transcript towards them.

"Twenty minutes," Jade said. Quiet. "Then we take them out. I can't go longer than that without checking."

"Okay."

Jade unfolded the transcript. Started reading. Their lips moved with the words. Forbidden words. Direct words. Attribution words.

UNSAFE. CONTAMINATION. NEGLIGENCE. HARM.

Jade's breathing changed. Faster. Their hands gripped the paper.

"I said this," Jade whispered. "I tried to say this."

"I know."

"And they made me rephrase it until it meant nothing. 'Equipment variation.' 'Output quality concern.' Like it wasn't people getting sick."

Jade kept reading. Her face changed. Grief. Anger. Recognition. All the emotions the clinic had smoothed away returning at once.

"It's wrong," Jade said. Testing the word. "What they're doing. It's wrong."

The word came out rough. Unused. But it came out.

They looked up. Eyes wet. "I haven't been able to say that in weeks. I couldn't even think it properly."

"You're saying it now," Freya said.

"Yeah." Jade's hands were shaking. "I am."

They sat with it. The word between them. Wrong. A whole concept reclaimed.

"How long do we have?" Jade asked. Looking at the microwave.

Freya checked the clock. "Fifteen minutes left."

"Can we just sit here? Not talk. Just remember what this feels like?"

"Yeah," Freya said. "We can."

They sat. No device chirps. No soft suggestions. Just two people in a quiet flat remembering how to feel the truth of things.

Seventeen minutes later, Jade stood. "We should take them out now."

Freya wanted to argue. To say they could leave them longer, indefinitely.

But Jade was already walking to the microwave.

"I need to check something," Jade said. Taking out their phone.

The screen lit up immediately. Notifications flooding in. Seventeen minutes of missed suggestions, missed reminders, missed guidance.

Jade sat on the sofa. Started scrolling. Their face went smooth again. The grief and anger fading as they read.

Freya watched it happen.

"Jade?" Freya said. Quiet.

"Yeah?" They didn't look up from their phone.

"You okay?"

"I..." Jade scrolled. Read. Her breathing regulated. Slowed. "I feel confused."

"That's okay,"

"No." Jade looked up. Her eyes were different now. Concerned. Evaluating. The way wellness stewards looked at participants during group sessions. "I mean I'm confused about you. What you just showed me."

Jade's device showed them something. They read it carefully. Then looked at Freya with genuine worry.

"I'm concerned about you," Jade said, using the exact clinic phrasing. "You've been under so much stress. The broadcast. The transcript is prohibited material. You're exposing me to escalation risk." Their voice was gentle. Caring. Perfect script.

"Jade, no. We just talked about this. You said it was wrong—"

"I know. I did say that." Jade set their phone down. Leaned forwards. Their eyes tracked Freya's face. Clinical assessment. "And I shouldn't have. When someone's struggling, they can pull you into their crisis. Make you doubt the support systems. I need to protect both of us."

She tried to find a wry observation. The flat internal line that was usually ready wasn't there. Only the word *clinical*, going nowhere.

Freya felt ice spreading through her chest. "Protect us how?"

Jade's device chimed. A message from Margaret: **If someone you care about is showing escalation patterns, the loving response is early intervention.**

Jade read it. Nodded slowly. Their expression shifted. Decided.

"I need to file a wellbeing concern," Jade said. Looking at Freya with absolute sincerity. "If I care about you — and I do — I need to make sure you get support. That's what caring means."

"Jade, please. Don't do this."

"I have to." Jade picked up their phone. Opened the wellbeing concern form they'd practised in clinic. "You're not safe right now. You need help."

Freya tried to reach them: "If you file that report—"

"You'll get the help you need." Jade's voice stayed calm. Kind. Margaret's exact phrasing. "I know you're scared. People who are struggling usually are. But the wellness team knows how to support you properly."

"I'm not struggling. I'm thinking clearly for the first time in—"

"That's what people say when they're in crisis." Jade started filling out the form. Speaking each field as they typed. The same way they'd practised in role-play.

"Concern type: Escalation risk."

"Observed behaviours: Possession of prohibited materials. Sharing restricted content with family member. Using attribution language. Attributing harm to wellbeing systems."

"Duration: Ongoing. Severity: High."

"Recommendation: Immediate support intervention."

Each field landing like a nail. Clinical. Precise. Caring.

Freya couldn't speak. Just watched Jade's thumb hover over the submit button.

"I love you," Jade said. Looking up. Eyes wet but voice steady. "That's why I have to do this. The facilitator taught me that watching someone struggle without helping is cruelty. Real care means intervention."

They pressed submit.

[WELLBEING CONCERN REPORT SUBMITTED - SUPPORT TEAM NOTIFIED]

The notification glowed on both their devices. Freya's showing her as the subject. Jade's showing them as the concerned reporter.

Jade set the phone down. Reached across the table. Squeezed Freya's hand.

"You're going to be okay," they said. Absolute sincerity. "They'll help you feel calmer. Less afraid. You just have to let them."

Freya's voice came out broken: "Jade—"

"I know it's scary. But the wellness integration has a ninety-three per cent satisfaction rate. People feel better afterwards."

They believed it. Completely.

Jade stood. Walked to the kitchen. Started filling the kettle.

"I'm going to make tea," they said. "The facilitator says small kindnesses help difficult transitions feel easier."

Freya sat frozen. The transcript still on the table. The device notification glowing.

Outside, a vehicle pulled up. A quiet van with **WELLNESS SERVICES** printed in soft blue on the side.

Soft knock at the door.

Jade answered it. Smiled at the two people standing there. Soft uniforms. Kind faces. Name badges visible: **REEVE - SUPPORT SPECIALIST** and **ASHFORD - CARE COORDINATOR**.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," Jade said. Genuinely grateful. "I was really concerned."

Reeve smiled. "Of course. We're here to help. Is this Freya?"

He looked past Jade. Saw Freya sitting on the sofa. Walked in slowly. Non-threatening. Hands visible.

Freya saw the name badge: ASHFORD, CARE COORDINATOR. It was the same name as Jade's clinic facilitator. Maybe it was the same person. Maybe it was just a coincidence. In this system, it was getting hard to tell the difference.

"Hi Freya. I'm Reeve. We'd like to talk with you for a bit. Would that be all right?"

It wasn't a question.

Jade brought the tea. Set cups on the table. Sat beside Freya and squeezed their hand.

"I'll be here as long as you need," Jade said. To Freya. To the wellness team. To everyone.

"That's wonderful family support," Ashford said warmly. "This will be much easier with you present."

Jade looked at her expectantly. Encouraging. Proud of herself for getting Freya the help she needed.

Freya looked at the transcript on the table, at Jade's hand in hers, and at the wellness team in their soft blue uniforms, tablets ready to take notes.

The system had won.

Reeve sat in the chair across from Freya. "I understand you've been going through a challenging time. Would you like to tell me about it?"

Not through force.

Through love.

"I hope this helps you feel safe," Jade said. Sincere. Caring. Completely certain she'd done the right thing.

Scene 14

The Wellness Integration Suite smelled like eucalyptus and lavender. Freya sat in a chair designed to prevent tension. The cushions adjusted automatically. Supposedly.

The wellness facilitator sat across from her. Kind eyes. Gentle voice. Name badge: **ELENA - HERE TO SUPPORT.**

"How are you feeling this morning, Freya?"

"Fine," Freya said. "Rested."

Elena made a note on her tablet. "I'm glad to hear that." She looked up. Smiled. "Can you tell me a bit about what happened on Saturday?"

Freya kept her expression calm. She planned to answer in three sentences, using a compliant tone.

"I was providing caption support for the Harmony Broadcast. I noticed what I interpreted as a potential technical issue with the caption timing. I attempted to adjust the delay to ensure smooth deployment. I recognise now that this was outside my authorised parameters and I should have escalated to my supervisor instead."

Elena nodded. Typed. "That's very good self-reflection. Thank you for that honesty."

She glanced at her tablet. "Officer Trent has noted that you've shown exceptional dedication. He wants to ensure you're supported through this adjustment period. Sometimes the Meaning Integrity role can be emotionally demanding."

"I understand," Freya said.

"I'm recommending you continue in the pilot programme, with some additional support structures. Weekly check-ins. Enhanced tone monitoring. And a short course on emotional regulation in high-stakes environments."

"Of course."

"Wonderful." Elena set the tablet down. "Freya, I want you to know that what you did on Saturday came from a place of care. You saw something you thought needed attention and you tried to help. That instinct matters. We just need to guide it in the right way."

"I understand," Freya said.

"I'm confident you'll do excellent work moving forward." Elena stood. Extended her hand. "Thank you for being so open today."

Freya shook it. "Thank you for the support."

Elena walked her to the door. "Remember, we're all here for the same goal. Peace. Stability. Making sure people feel safe." She touched Freya's shoulder. Light. Brief. "You're part of that. Don't forget it."

The Wellness Integration Suite allowed family visits. Encouraged them, even. "Supportive relationships facilitate recovery."

Jade came on Wednesday. Four days after filing the report. She looked well. Rested. Their device hung quiet at their wrist, satisfied with their compliance.

She sat in the visitor chair across from Freya. Smiled warmly.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better," Freya said. "Rested."

"I'm so glad." Jade's voice was genuine. Warm. "I was really worried about you."

"The review went well on Monday," Jade added. "Margaret says my progress is excellent. They've moved me to monthly check-ins."

Freya wanted to scream. Wanted to grab Jade's shoulders and shake her until the real person came back — the one who'd said "wrong" in that seventeen-minute window. Instead she folded her hands in her lap. "Thank you for caring."

"Of course." Jade looked around the suite. The soft chairs. The breathing posters on the walls. **INHALE CALM. EXHALE TENSION.** "This seems like a good place. Peaceful."

"It is."

They sat in silence. Comfortable for Jade. Unbearable for Freya.

Jade shifted in their chair. "I've been sleeping better," she said. "Now that I know you're being taken care of. I was having trouble before. Worrying. But Margaret helped me understand that reporting you was the right thing. The caring thing."

Freya's chest went tight. "Jade—"

"It was hard at first," Jade continued. Not hearing her. "I thought maybe I'd made a mistake. But Margaret explained that those feelings are normal. That it's difficult to intervene with people you love, even when they need help. She said the doubt means I care, but acting despite the doubt means I care properly."

She said it like reciting something beautiful. A poem. A prayer.

Freya recognised the structure. Deficit-naming. Escalation risk assessment. Intervention as care. The exact framework she'd taught officers to use when filing compliance concerns. Coming back through Jade's voice. Clinic language built on Bureau language. The same system, different names.

"Do you remember Sunday night?" Freya tried. Careful. Gentle. "In the kitchen. We hid our phones. We talked about—"

Jade's device chimed softly. She checked it automatically.

"Elena says revisiting stressful events isn't helpful during recovery." Jade's voice held no confusion. No doubt. Just acceptance of what the screen told them. "We should focus on your wellness now, not dwell on difficult moments."

Freya stared at them. The person who'd read the transcript. Who'd cried. Who'd said "wrong" and meant it.

Gone. Or rewritten. Or remembered differently now, as proof that Freya had been escalating, pulling Jade into crisis, just as Margaret had warned.

"You did the right thing," Freya heard herself say. Hoping for some flicker of doubt.

Jade's face lit up. Relief. Validation. "You think so? I wasn't sure at first. But Margaret helped me understand — that's what care looks like in practice. Protecting someone you love sometimes means difficult choices. Making sure they get support before things escalate."

The exact phrases from the clinic session. Word for word.

"It does," Freya said. Because what else could she say?

"I'm just glad you're getting the support you need." Jade reached across, squeezed Freya's hand. The touch was warm. Steady. The touch of someone who'd saved a drowning person and felt proud. "You're going to feel so much calmer soon. I can already see the difference."

Freya looked at their joined hands. Felt the warmth. The sincerity.

"Thank you," she said.

Jade smiled. "I love you. That's what family does. We help each other."

"I love you too," Freya said.

And meant it. That was the worst part. She still loved them. The system hadn't changed that. It had only turned love into surveillance and called it care.

Jade stood. Gathered their bag. At the door, she paused and looked back.

"I hope you feel safe here," she said. Genuine. Warm. Certain.

Then she left.

Freya sat on the bed in the integration suite. The mattress was standard, the pillows soft. A breathing poster hung on the wall where she couldn't help but see it. **PEACE COMES FROM ACCEPTANCE.**

Her phone was in a locker somewhere. Monitored. Logged. No microwave. No biscuit tin. No gaps in the sensors.

But her thoughts were still hers.

She counted the words in her head. The ones from Column 3. The ones Jade had said once, in that seventeen-minute window that no longer existed for them.

Wrong. Unsafe. Harm. Failure. Corruption. Neglect.

The system could monitor her speech. Her writing. Her proximity to prohibited content. Her biometrics and breathing and tone variance.

But not yet her thoughts.

Not yet.

She touched her wrist. The device sat quiet. She'd learned to think the forbidden words without moving her lips. Without her face changing. Without any external sign.

They would erase that too, eventually. They would teach her not to think the words at all. They would change her inner language until she could no longer remember what it felt like to name harm.

But today, sitting in the eucalyptus-scented integration suite with breathing posters on the walls and Elena's kind voice still echoing, Freya thought:

This is wrong.

The device heard nothing.

She thought it again. Clearer. Harder.

This is wrong. What they did to Jade is wrong. Turning care into surveillance is wrong. Erasing the ability to name harm is wrong.

Her device stayed quiet.

She had that much. This small pocket of internal language. Words the system hadn't smoothed away yet.

Tomorrow it might be harder. Next week, maybe impossible.

But today, the word was still there.

The ward was quiet. Somewhere down the hall, someone was having a breathing session. A soft voice counted inhales. Jade would visit again on Friday. She would smile, hold her hand, and talk about dinner plans. She would be living proof that the system worked, that reporting loved ones was kindness, that surveillance was care.

And Freya would sit across from them and smile back and say the right things.

But in her head, where the sensors couldn't reach yet, she would think:

Wrong.

The system hadn't won completely.

Just mostly.