

Fresh Start

by Meredith Byrne

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, loud enough to be mistaken for silence. Joyce tugged at her silver polo. Two weeks ago, she'd been Gold—family pack, steady perks, her kids in better schools. But continuity was king. Rich stayed, so he held the tier. She left, so she fell.

At the front, a woman in a gold polo smiled too brightly. “Welcome to Worker Plus!” she chimed. “Your contribution is vital to the Company’s success. Remember: *Freedom is a choice!*”

Rows of trainees chuckled obediently.

Beside her, Ari leaned close, her voice low. “Told you not to file mid-cycle.”

Joyce’s jaw tightened. “So I should’ve stayed married forever? Let him keep the package while I—” She stopped. The trainer’s eyes swept the rows.

A black polo had slipped in at the back of the room, arms folded. Everyone sat up straighter.

Ari’s curls brushed forward as she bent over her manual. Her voice was almost a breath. “You knew they’d recalc. Men hold because they’ve got fewer sick days, more stamina points. Stability data, they call it. Doesn’t matter who actually worked more.”

Joyce’s nails bit into the plastic of her pen. “I kept us afloat. Paid more taxes. He coasted.”

Ari’s mouth barely moved. “That’s not how they score it.”

Joyce let out a sharp laugh before she could stop herself. “It’s all a scam. The Store sells us tiers while the real freedom stays upstairs.”

The room went still. Even the hum of the lights seemed to pause.

The trainer’s microphone crackled. “Row three?” she asked sweetly. “Do you have something you’d like to share?”

Every head turned.

Joyce’s pulse thundered. The black polo’s gaze pinned them.

Ari was the one questioned first—always. Women of color were scrutinized harder, every file flagged for “compliance review.” Her shoulders stiffened. Her eyes flicked to Joyce, wide with warning. Then she lifted her hand, slow as stone.

“Not me,” she said. Her voice trembled, but she forced it steady. “It was her.”

The trainer beamed. “Thank you for your honesty, Associate. That’s the spirit of Worker Plus!”

The crowd muttered agreement while the black polo moved down the aisle, unhurried, like he’d known all along.

Joyce didn’t fight when his hand pressed her shoulder. Her silver collar scratched her throat. She glanced at Ari, but Ari’s face was lowered, fixed on the training manual, as if she had never spoken to Joyce at all.

The trainer didn’t miss a beat. “Now—back to our module on shopping privileges by tier! As Silver Associates, you’ll enjoy hearty, energy-rich staples tailored to your contribution level.” The room laughed its approval on cue.

Joyce was steered to a side door. The hallway smelled of bleach and stale air. She kept waiting for someone to tell her this was a mistake, that she could appeal, that it could be fixed. But the door opened, and she was outside.

A fenced yard stretched behind the Store, topped with humming wire. A row of benches lined the wall, already occupied. Their silver collars were gone. Some stared blankly. One woman rocked and whispered the slogans under her breath.

The black polo released her arm. “Options will be explained shortly.” He shut the door behind her.

Joyce sat hard on the bench. Her chest rattled with breath. “This isn’t right,” she said, louder than she meant. “I’ll file an appeal. There has to be—”

A man two benches down snapped his head toward her. His face was sallow, his eyes sharp. “Appeal? I’ve been here a week. Red-level rations. You think there’s an appeal?”

Joyce swallowed. “But—”

“Shut up,” he hissed. His voice cracked with thirst. “Shut up if you want to last.”

The hum of the wire filled the silence again.

Joyce pressed her palms against her knees. She thought of her children in their Gold uniforms, already forgetting her.

Her options were not choices.

And they were already waiting.