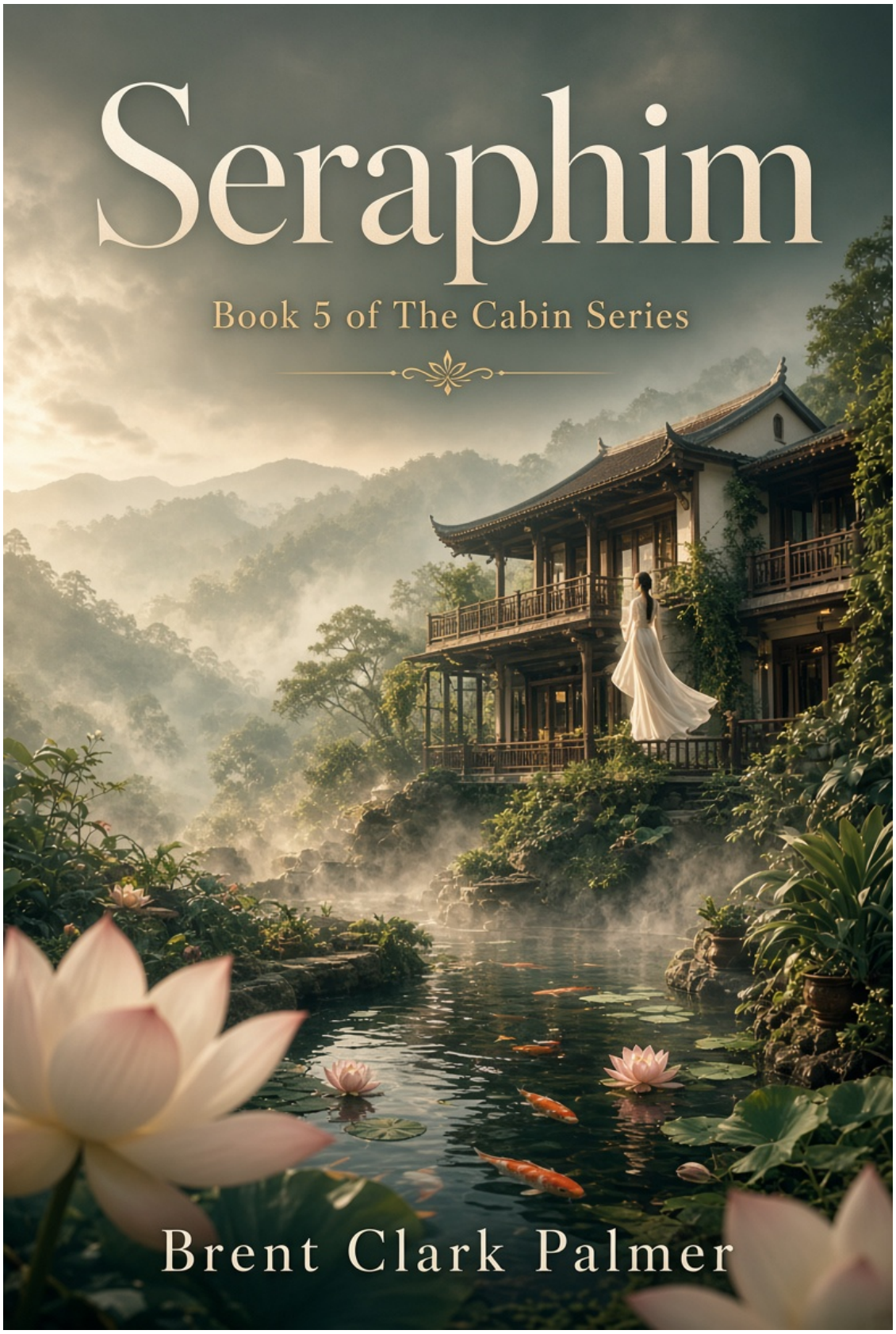

Seraphim
Book 5 of The Cabin Series
Brent Clark Palmer

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by Brent Clark Palmer
The Cabin, Book 5

Chapter One: The Invitation on the Quad

Late afternoon sunlight slanted across the manicured lawns of the university quad, gilding the ivy-covered brick of the Humanities Building and warming the stone benches along the central walkway. Technically, the semester had ended forty-eight hours ago, leaving the campus in that drowsy, golden hush between commencement and the start of summer session.

Lily Horner paused beside the bronze fountain near the courtyard steps to shift her canvas tote bag higher onto her shoulder and take a sip from her iced latte. At twenty-two, fresh off walking across the graduation stage on Saturday morning, she looked like the quintessential image of youthful, sun-kissed vitality. She had a bright, heart-shaped face, warm honey-brown eyes that crinkled easily when she smiled, and a natural sweetness to her expression that made strangers instinctively want to strike up a conversation with her. Years of campus dance workshops and morning runs had given her a lithe, enviable figure—toned shoulders, a narrow waist, and a remarkably round, high, peach-shaped bubble butt that filled out the back of her fitted white tennis skirt with effortless perfection every time she leaned forward to adjust the strap of her sandal.

She was just straightening up, brushing a loose lock of hair behind her ear while wondering what she was going to do with a freshly minted bachelor’s degree in cultural studies and two months of open summer ahead of her, when a low, melodious voice spoke from the shade of the stone archway behind her.

“Miss Horner? Lily Horner?”

Lily turned around, blinking against the afternoon glare.

Stepping down from the top step of the colonnade was a woman who seemed to command the quiet courtyard simply by moving through it. She was in her early thirties, Vietnamese, with glossy black hair swept loosely over one shoulder and skin that glowed like warm porcelain. She wore a sleeveless silk blouse the color of dark jade tucked into tailored ivory linen trousers that accentuated the long, fluid grace of her stride. Everything about her—from the subtle, exotic hint of white tea and orchid perfume that drifted on the breeze to the slow, curve of her full lips and the dark, liquid intensity of her eyes—carried an unmistakable, understated seductiveness.

“Yes?” Lily said, straightening her posture and offering a polite, slightly flustered smile as she recognized the woman from the faculty directory in the Global Studies lounge. “You’re Dr. Tam, aren’t you? The visiting fellow from Hanoi?”

“I am,” Dr. Tam said, her voice a rich, lightly accented contralto that felt as smooth as sun- warmed silk. She stopped just close enough for Lily to catch the warmth of her smile, her dark gaze sweeping appreciatively—yet with

impeccable academic poise—over Lily's bright face and athletic frame. "Please forgive me for interrupting your afternoon. I saw you walking across the courtyard from my office window upstairs, and I hoped I might catch you before you left campus for the summer."

"Oh, you aren't interrupting at all," Lily said warmly, a pleased flush rising to her cheeks at the thought that a visiting scholar even knew her name. "I was just dropping off my library key at the registrar's office. I really wanted to take your seminar on Southeast Asian social structures this spring, Dr. Tam, but the section filled up in ten minutes."

"I know," Dr. Tam murmured, tilting her head with a soft, knowing smile that made Lily feel as though she were the only person on the quad. "I saw your name on the waitlist, Lily, and Professor Vance in the anthropology department spoke very highly of your senior capstone paper. In fact, he mentioned that you had expressed a strong interest in traveling abroad before entering the workforce."

"I'd love to," Lily admitted, glancing down somewhat wistfully at her iced coffee. "Honestly, that was always my dream—to actually live inside another culture instead of just reading about it in textbooks. Learning the daily customs, the etiquette, the rhythm of a household… it's just that between student loans and rent, a whole summer overseas wasn't really in the budget this year."

Dr. Tam's eyes brightened with an expression of genuine, serendipitous delight. She took a half-step closer, resting one slender, manicured hand lightly over the leather portfolio she carried against her hip.

"Then it truly is fortunate that I looked out my window just now," Dr. Tam said softly. "As it happens, I am currently selecting a very small cohort of recent graduates for a pioneering summer fellowship—an immersive Study Abroad initiative developed jointly between my institute in Vietnam and the university's perceptual computing department."

Lily's eyes widened with immediate curiosity. "Perceptual computing? You mean like virtual reality?"

"Far beyond anything you have seen on the consumer market," Dr. Tam explained, her voice dropping into an engaging, confidential register that drew Lily right in. "Traditional study abroad programs are wonderful, of course, but they are expensive, logistically exhausting, and often leave American students clustered together in tourist districts where they never truly experience authentic local life. Our program utilizes next-generation neural-link visors to place students directly into a fully realized, sensory-complete simulation of life in Vietnam."

"A full simulation?" Lily repeated, her face lighting up as her imagination immediately filled in the blanks. "So you actually feel like you're walking down

the streets, seeing the architecture, and practicing cultural traditions in real time—without even leaving the building?”

“Down to the warmth of the afternoon breeze and the aroma of jasmine tea on the table,” Dr. Tam confirmed with a gentle, encouraging nod, effortlessly reinforcing every enthusiastic assumption Lily was making. “The purpose of the fellowship is pure cultural enrichment and cross-cultural adaptation. Instead of sitting in a lecture hall taking notes, you are paired with a virtual host environment where you learn the authentic nuances of Vietnamese domestic life, etiquette, and interpersonal harmony from the inside out. And because it is a grant-funded pilot study, there is no tuition cost to the student—in fact, the program provides a generous completion stipend for your resume.”

“That sounds incredible,” Lily breathed, shifting her weight onto one hip as a thrilled smile broke across her face. “It’s like getting a whole summer of international fieldwork right here on campus. How long do the sessions take?”

“The orientation and initial immersion module can be started in a single afternoon right upstairs in my private lab,” Dr. Tam said smoothly, slipping a heavy, cream-colored card embossed with gold lettering from her portfolio and holding it out between two slender fingers. “We look for young women with exactly your qualities, Lily—open-minded, adaptable, eager to learn, and graceful enough to embrace customs that might feel quite different from American routines.”

As Lily reached out to take the card, Dr. Tam’s cool, smooth fingertips brushed lightly against the back of Lily’s hand, lingering for just a fraction of a second longer than strictly necessary. A pleasant, unexpected little tingle danced up Lily’s forearm, making her heart beat a tiny bit faster beneath her fitted top.

“Suite 304 in the International Annex,” Lily read aloud from the card before looking back up into Dr. Tam’s dark, captivating eyes. “When are you holding interviews for the spots?” “Consider this our preliminary interview,” Dr. Tam said, her lips curving into a warm, faintly enigmatic smile that made Lily’s stomach give an excited flutter. “Talk it over with your friends tonight if you like, Lily. If you decide you are ready to broaden your horizons before the rest of your post-graduate life begins, come up to my office tomorrow afternoon at two o’clock. I have a visor already calibrated and waiting.”

“I will,” Lily said eagerly, clutching the cream card against the strap of her tote bag. “Thank you so much for thinking of me, Dr. Tam. I’d really love to be part of it.”

“The pleasure is entirely mine, Lily,” Dr. Tam murmured, offering a slight, graceful inclination of her head before turning back toward the shaded stone archway of the annex. “Enjoy your evening. I have a feeling you are going to

thrive in Vietnam.”

Chapter Two: The Calibration Chair

That evening, the string lights above the patio of The Copper Kettle cast a warm amber glow over the wrought-iron tables where Lily sat with her two closest college friends, Chloe and Maya. Between them sat a pitcher of white peach sangria, three half-empty glasses, and the heavy cream-colored card Dr. Tam had handed Lily on the quad.

"Wait—let me get this straight," Chloe said, picking up the card and tilting it so the gold embossed lettering caught the light. "You were just standing by the fountain, and the most glamorous visiting professor in the entire Global Studies department walked right up and hand- picked you for a paid summer fellowship?"

"I think Professor Vance recommended me after reading my capstone paper," Lily said, her cheeks warming with a modest, pleased smile as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "She said it’s a small pilot cohort using neural-link virtual reality to simulate living with a host family in Vietnam. No airfare, no tuition, and it comes with a grant stipend at the end."

Maya leaned across the table, her eyes wide behind her glasses. "Lily, you have to do it. Do you know how hard it is to get international fieldwork on your resume without spending five thousand dollars on a flight and housing? Plus, it’s Dr. Tam. Half the grad students in the humanities building practically trip over their own feet whenever she walks down the hall."

"She was really striking," Lily admitted, feeling a small, involuntary flutter in her stomach as she remembered the scent of white tea and orchid perfume, and the way Dr. Tam’s cool fingertips had lingered against the back of her hand. "And really kind, too. She made it sound like the simulation is completely indistinguishable from real life—like you can actually feel the weather and taste the food."

"Even better," Chloe laughed, raising her sangria glass. "All the cultural enrichment of Southeast Asia with zero jet lag. Besides, Maya’s leaving for her internship in Chicago on Thursday, and I’m heading up to my parents’ lake house on Friday. Since you already gave notice on your sublet so you could move your boxes into summer storage, you’ve got nothing tying you down here anyway. You should totally go for it."

"You really think so?" Lily asked, looking between her two friends.

"We know so," Maya said firmly, clinking her glass against Lily’s. "Go to her office tomorrow at two, put on the fancy headset, and soak up the experience. You’ve spent four years reading about other cultures in the library, Lil—it’s time you actually lived one."

At five minutes to two the following afternoon, Lily climbed the quiet marble staircase of the International Annex, a small canvas overnight tote slung over her shoulder just in case the orientation ran late into the evening. Wishing to look both respectful and summery, she had dressed in a soft, fitted sage-green sundress that skimmed her narrow waist and hugged the high, round curve of her hips and bubble butt, swaying lightly above her toned thighs with every step. Suite 304 sat at the very end of the third-floor corridor, isolated from the main lecture halls. When Lily knocked lightly on the frosted glass panel, the door opened almost immediately. "Lily," Dr. Tam said, her rich, lightly accented contralto wrapping around the single name like a caress. "Right on time. Please, come in."

Today, Dr. Tam wore a tailored cream silk tunic over slim dark trousers, her glossy black hair pinned up with a single carved jade hairpin that left the graceful line of her neck bare. As Lily stepped inside, Dr. Tam closed the heavy oak door behind her and turned the small brass deadbolt—a casual, automatic motion that made the quiet office feel instantly hushed and private.

"I talked it over with my girlfriends last night, Dr. Tam," Lily said, offering a bright, eager smile as she looked around the tastefully appointed room. The air was cool and fragrant with a delicate curl of sandalwood incense rising from a bronze tray on the bookshelf. "They thought it sounded like the opportunity of a lifetime. I’d love to participate in the study abroad program, if the spot is still open."

"The spot was always yours, Lily," Dr. Tam replied warmly, stepping close enough that Lily caught that same intoxicating trace of white tea and orchid on her skin. "I knew the moment I watched you on the quad yesterday that you had the exact temperament we need for this initiative."

She gestured toward an open doorway at the back of her office, leading Lily into a smaller, soundproofed inner chamber. There were no windows here; instead, soft recessed lighting illuminated a sleek, ergonomic recliner upholstered in butter-soft ivory leather. Beside the chair stood a brushed-aluminum console connected to a streamlined, pearlescent visor that looked less like a bulky video-game headset and more like a pair of futuristic, wrap-around designer sunglasses lined with soft memory-foam sensors along the temples.

"Before we begin, let me explain how the immersion protocol works," Dr. Tam said, resting one slender hand on the back of the leather recliner while her dark, liquid eyes held Lily’s. "Most cross-cultural training fails because the student remains a spectator. You look at a screen, you know you are sitting in a classroom in America, and so you hold onto all of your Western habits, your personal boundaries, and your expectations of comfort."

Lily nodded attentively, absorbing every word like the conscientious student she was. "Right. You never really let go."

"Exactly," Dr. Tam murmured, a slow, approving smile curving her full lips. "To truly understand Vietnamese domestic life—the deep respect for hierarchy, the harmony of the household, and the grace of service to one’s host—the simulation must feel completely real to your senses. Once the neural link calibrates, the system constructs a seamless bridge between your mind and the virtual environment. You won't see loading screens or pixelated menus. In fact, to prevent sensory shock, the program always initializes by rendering the exact room you are currently standing in, before transitioning smoothly into your journey."

"So when it turns on, I’ll still think I’m in your office?" Lily asked, fascinated.

" down to the grain of the leather beneath your fingertips," Dr. Tam confirmed smoothly. "And because the neural link operates by reading and guiding your subconscious sensory pathways, the only rule of the program is total receptivity. Whatever your host instructs you to do inside the simulation—no matter how unfamiliar or intimate the custom might seem at first—you must lean into it without hesitation. Can you do that for me, Lily?"

"Yes, Dr. Tam," Lily said earnestly, a thrilled warmth fluttering beneath her breastbone under the older woman’s steady gaze. "I want the real experience. I promise I’ll follow your lead." "Wonderful," Dr. Tam whispered. She reached out and gently slid the strap of Lily’s canvas tote bag off her shoulder, setting it down beside the console. "May I have your phone and your smartwatch as well? Active cellular and Bluetooth signals interfere with the temporal calibration sensors, so we lock all personal electronics in the cabinet here until your session concludes." "Oh, sure!" Lily reached into her tote, pulled out her phone, and unclasped her watch, handing both items directly into Dr. Tam’s waiting palm. "Actually, I turned my notifications off anyway—my roommates are both leaving town for the summer this week, so nobody’s going to be texting me for days."

Something dark and deeply satisfied flickered in the depths of Dr. Tam’s eyes as she placed Lily’s phone and watch inside a heavy steel drawer in the console and turned a small key in the lock.

"Then you won't have a single distraction," Dr. Tam said softly, turning back to her. "Now, let’s get you comfortable. Slip off your sandals and have a seat in the chair."

Lily stepped out of her sandals and settled onto the ivory leather recliner. As she leaned back, the chair contoured effortlessly to the curve of her spine and the round swell of her hips, tilting her into a relaxed, semi-reclined posture.

Dr. Tam stepped around to the side of the chair. Rather than simply handing Lily the equipment, she placed both of her warm, smooth hands on Lily’s bare shoulders, her thumbs pressing with slow, circular firmness into the tense muscles at the base of Lily’s neck.

"Take a deep breath in through your nose, Lily," Dr. Tam murmured, her voice dropping into a low, hypnotic cadence right above Lily’s ear. "Let your shoulders drop. Feel how safe and supported you are right here."

Lily let out a long, soft exhale, her eyelids fluttering half-shut as a pleasant shiver traced its way down her spine under the skilled, lingering pressure of Dr. Tam’s fingers.

Reaching over to the console, Dr. Tam lifted the pearlescent neural visor in both hands and stepped directly behind the headrest, holding the sleek device poised just inches above Lily’s brow.

"Relax your mind, Lily," Dr. Tam whispered, the cool inner rim of the visor brushing lightly against Lily’s temples as she prepared to slide it into place. "Your study abroad is about to begin."

Chapter Three: Seamless Projection

The memory-foam sensors along the inner rim of the pearlescent visor settled cool and snug against Lily's temples, blocking out the recessed lighting of the inner chamber.

For a heartbeat, there was only velvet darkness. Then a soft, harmonic chime vibrated directly through the bones of her jaw—a low, binaural hum that seemed to ripple from the crown of her head down to the tips of her toes. Simultaneously, a faint, warm micro-mist scented with sweet lotus blossom puffed gently from the nose bridge of the headset, while a kaleidoscope of pale violet and gold geometric grids bloomed across the curved lenses inside.

"Follow the light toward the center, Lily," Dr. Tam's rich contralto murmured from just behind the headrest, her thumbs still resting with warm, steady pressure against the base of Lily's neck. "Breathe in deeply through your nose. Let the calibration wave sync with your optic nerve. You may feel a brief flutter of weightlessness as the sensory bridge locks in."

Lily inhaled the sweet, floral warmth as instructed. Instantly, a dreamy, floating sensation washed behind her eyelids. The geometric grids spun faster, coalescing into a single pinpoint of soft white radiance that made her thoughts feel delightfully unmoored—as though she had just drifted into the warm twilight between waking and sleep. Her fingers relaxed completely against the ivory leather armrests.

In the thirty seconds that Lily's eyes remained fluttering shut inside that brief, hypnotic fugue, Dr. Tam moved with silent, practiced precision. She unclasped the rear strap, lifted the pearlescent visor cleanly off Lily's face, and slid the device into a recessed compartment at the back of the brushed-aluminum console, closing the panel without a sound.

Then Dr. Tam stepped around to the side of the recliner and touched two cool fingertips lightly to Lily's temple.

"Calibration complete," Dr. Tam said softly. "You may open your eyes now, Lily."

Lily blinked once, twice, her long lashes parting as the room swam back into focus.

She let out a sharp, delighted gasp.

She was still sitting in the exact same butter-soft ivory leather recliner inside the soundproofed chamber of Suite 304. The brushed-aluminum console hummed quietly to her left; the bronze incense tray in the outer office still sent a faint ribbon of sandalwood fragrance drifting through the open doorway; and standing right beside her chair—dressed in the exact same cream silk tunic, slim dark trousers, and carved jade hairpin—was Dr. Tam, smiling down at her with warm,

dark eyes.

Instinctively, Lily raised both hands to her face. Her fingertips brushed her own smooth brow, the bridge of her nose, and her temples.

“Wait,” Lily breathed, her honey-brown eyes widening in sheer astonishment as she patted her hair and looked down at her lap. “The visor—I can’t even feel it on my face!”

“Of course you can’t,” Dr. Tam replied with a soft, indulgent laugh, folding her hands neatly in front of her waist. “If you spent the entire fellowship feeling the weight of plastic resting on your nose, your brain would constantly remind you that you were sitting in a laboratory. Once the neural link establishes contact with your sensory cortex, it edits out the tactile sensation of the hardware entirely.”

“That is insane,” Lily marveled, leaning forward in the chair. She ran her palms over the grained ivory leather of the armrests, then pinched the soft sage-green fabric of her sundress where it hugged her thighs. She even shifted her weight, feeling the solid cushion press back against the round curve of her bubble butt. “I can feel the stitching on my dress. I can still smell the sandalwood from your bookshelf! If I didn’t know my real body was lying back in this chair under a headset right now, I would swear on my life you hadn’t even turned the machine on.” “That is the hallmark of our perceptual engine,” Dr. Tam said smoothly, her dark gaze lingering appreciatively on the flushed, animated excitement in Lily’s face. “Every texture, every temperature shift, every breath of air is rendered at one hundred percent fidelity. Now, stand up and slip your sandals back on so we can test your motor equilibrium.”

Lily swung her toned legs off the recliner, slid her feet into her sandals, and stood up. She rose onto the balls of her feet, did a small, graceful half-turn that made the hem of her sundress flare lightly around her hips, and laughed aloud in amazement. “Not even a hint of dizziness. So how does the transition work, Dr. Tam? Do you push a button and suddenly the walls turn into Hanoi?”

“Heavens, no,” Dr. Tam said, shaking her head with gentle academic gravity as she picked up Lily’s canvas overnight tote from beside the console and handed it to her. “Abrupt spatial teleportation is the fastest way to trigger severe neural rejection. If your mind went from a quiet midwestern campus to the middle of a bustling Southeast Asian metropolis in half a second, your subconscious would panic and force an emergency disconnect.”

“Oh,” Lily said, nodding seriously as she slung her tote bag over her shoulder. “That makes total sense.”

“To ensure deep, lasting cultural adaptation, the simulation must honor real-world continuity,” Dr. Tam explained, picking up her own sleek leather

handbag and a slim diplomatic portfolio from her desk in the outer office. “Therefore, Module One of the program simulates our complete transit to Vietnam together. We will walk out of the annex, take a car to the international terminal, and board our flight across the Pacific. The journey itself is a vital part of the curriculum—it gives us uninterrupted time to discuss the customs you will be practicing once we land.”

Lily’s face lit up with pure, unguarded delight. “We actually get to simulate the flight together? Did you have to program all the airport stuff yourself?”

“I have made every single preparation to transport you, Lily,” Dr. Tam murmured, her voice dropping into that low, velvet register as she unlocked the heavy oak door of Suite 304 and held it open. “Your tickets, your travel clearances, your baggage checks—all of it has already been arranged in the system. You don’t have to worry about a single logistical detail. All you have to do is stay right beside me.”

“This is the coolest class I have ever taken,” Lily beamed, stepping past her into the hallway without a single backward glance at the locked steel drawer where her phone and smartwatch sat in the dark.

As they walked down the marble staircase and stepped out through the heavy double doors of the International Annex, Lily stopped for a second on the top step, tilting her face up toward the sky. A warm early-evening breeze rustled the leaves of the oak trees and brushed bare skin along her collarbones. Down at the curb of the faculty turnaround, a sleek black luxury sedan sat idling, a uniformed driver standing beside the open rear passenger door.

“Even the campus squirrels look real,” Lily whispered to herself, giggling softly as she hurried down the steps behind Dr. Tam’s fluid, unhurried stride.

Inside the backseat of the black sedan, the air conditioning was crisp and cool, scented with new leather. During the forty-minute drive along the expressway toward the international airport, Lily kept her nose practically pressed to the tinted window, marveling at the “procedural generation” of the rush-hour commuters, the glare of the setting sun reflecting off windshields, and the subtle vibration of the highway expansion joints beneath the tires.

Whenever she glanced back across the seat, Dr. Tam was watching her with a serene, enigmatic half-smile, one warm hand resting lightly over Lily’s knee on the leather seat.

When the sedan glided to the curb at the International Departures terminal, the driver handled their bags while Dr. Tam guided Lily briskly past the main queues toward a carpeted VIP diplomatic check-in lounge.

At the counter, Dr. Tam opened her leather portfolio and drew out two glossy burgundy passport folders clipped to first-class international boarding passes printed with HAN — NOI BAI INTERNATIONAL.

Lily caught a brief glimpse of her own smiling passport photo and full legal name inside the second folder as Dr. Tam handed it to the attendant—and she couldn't help grinning in admiration.

"You even scanned my real passport photo into the simulation database," Lily whispered admiringly as the attendant stamped the boarding passes and handed them back with a polite bow. "The attention to detail in this program is unbelievable."

"Wait until we reach my hometown," Dr. Tam purred, slipping her arm smoothly through Lily's and guiding her toward the private security lane that led directly to the boarding gate. "Once that cabin door closes behind us, Lily, your American habits stay on the ground—and your real education begins."

Chapter Four: Altitude and Etiquette

As the wide-body jet angled steeply into the evening clouds above the Pacific, Lily pressed her palm flat against the cool plastic of the cabin wall and let out a breathless laugh.

Her ears popped softly with the shift in cabin pressure, and beneath the plush carpet of their enclosed first-class suite, she could feel the deep, steady thrumming of the twin turbines vibrating right through the soles of her bare feet.

"Even the inner-ear pressure," Lily marveled, swallowing once to clear her eardrums as she looked across the double suite at Dr. Tam. "If anyone told me this morning that a neural headset could trick my vestibular system into feeling thirty thousand feet of altitude, I never would have believed them."

"The mind accepts what is consistent, Lily," Dr. Tam replied smoothly. She reached over to the console beside her wide leather berth and pressed a button that slid the frosted privacy partition of their double suite completely shut, sealing the two of them into a quiet, amber-lit cocoon high above the ocean. "Once the cabin crew finishes the initial climb, we have fourteen hours of uninterrupted transit. Rather than wasting that time watching movies, I want to use this flight to prepare you for the specific customs of my household."

Lily immediately straightened up on her seat, folding her hands neatly in the lap of her sage- green sundress like an honors student at a seminar table. "I’m completely ready, Dr. Tam. Should I take notes?"

"No notes," Dr. Tam said, her dark eyes holding Lily’s with warm, unhurried intensity. "In Vietnam, true cultural fluency is not memorized on paper; it is practiced in the body. Everything you read in your undergraduate textbooks dealt with public street life and formal commerce. Very few Westerners are ever invited behind the closed doors of an aristocratic private residence—where the rules of harmony are far more intimate."

"What kind of rules?" Lily asked, leaning forward with earnest curiosity.

"First," Dr. Tam said, extending a single slender finger, "is the principle of continuous, unspoken service. In an American household, a guest expects to be waited upon, or at least treated as an independent equal who comes and goes as she pleases. In my culture, when a younger woman is taken into the home of a senior benefactor, she expresses her gratitude and respect through constant, attentive domestic care."

Lily nodded slowly, processing the concept. "Like helping out with chores?"

"More than chores, Lily—anticipation," Dr. Tam corrected gently. "A graceful companion never waits to be asked. If my teacup is half empty, your hand should already be lifting the pot. If I step through the door at the end of the day, you are

already kneeling to unfasten my shoes and replace them with house slippers. It is a continuous dance of small, devoted gestures that says, Your comfort is my highest priority. In fact, we can begin practicing right now."

Dr. Tam extended her long, linen-trousered legs across the carpeted space between their seats and rested her slim leather heels near the edge of Lily’s cushion.

"Unbuckle my heels, Lily," Dr. Tam instructed, her contralto voice dropping into a soft, expectant purr, "and massage the arches of my feet for a few minutes. Long flights always make my ankles stiff."

For half a second, Lily blinked in surprise—she had never touched a professor’s feet in her life—but the reminder that this was all happening inside a virtual training module immediately dissolved her hesitation. Eager to show her adaptability, Lily slid off her seat onto her knees on the thick cabin carpet.

She carefully unfastened the small gold buckles at Dr. Tam’s ankles, slipped the sleek heels off, and cradled one warm, silk-stockinged foot in both of her hands. As she knelt there in her fitted sundress, the posture naturally arched her spine and pushed the round, sculpted curve of her bubble butt backward against the edge of her own leather seat.

"Just like that," Dr. Tam murmured, looking down past the drape of her ivory trousers as Lily’s thumbs pressed gently into the high arch of her foot. "Slow, attentive pressure. You have very natural hands for service, Lily."

"Thank you, Dr. Tam," Lily said, blushing slightly at the praise as she switched to the other foot, finding a quiet, unexpected satisfaction in the simple physical task.

While Lily worked, a flight attendant chimed politely at the suite door and handed in a lacquered tray holding a porcelain teapot and two handleless cups before sliding the partition closed again. A rich, sweet aroma—notes of toasted lotus seed, wild chamomile, and a pungent, unfamiliar mountain herb—rose with the steam.

"Come sit back up on your berth and pour for us, Lily," Dr. Tam said.

Lily rose smoothly to her feet, poured the golden-amber infusion into both cups with both hands presented respectfully, and offered the first cup to Dr. Tam before taking her own.

"Drink all of it while it’s warm," Dr. Tam instructed, watching over the rim of her porcelain cup. "In my family’s house, we drink this herbal blend every evening. Within the program, it also serves a secondary purpose—the sensory profiles in the tea are calibrated to soothe your neural link and prevent temporal disorientation while the simulation compresses travel time."

Lily took a deep sip. The tea was warm, velvety, and left a pleasant, tingling numbness at the back of her tongue that seemed to melt the last tiny thread of tension between her shoulder blades. Within two minutes of finishing the cup, the cabin lights seemed softer, her limbs felt deliciously heavy and receptive, and Dr. Tam’s voice sounded even richer in her ears.

"Which brings me to the second cultural practice you will need to embrace," Dr. Tam continued, setting her teacup down and letting her dark gaze travel slowly from Lily’s honey-brown eyes down the scooped neckline of her sundress to her bare, toned thighs. "And this is the one where American students most often stumble because of their conditioning."

"I won't stumble," Lily promised quickly, sitting up a little straighter as the warm tea hummed through her veins. "Tell me what it is."

"In the West, women are taught to equate modesty with covering the body—hiding behind heavy fabrics, high necklines, and closed doors," Dr. Tam said, her tone completely matter-of-fact and scholarly, as though delivering a lecture on classical architecture. "In the private domestic tradition of my hometown, however, hiding your body inside your host’s residence is considered cold, distrustful, and ungracious. When a young woman serves in the home, she is expected to wear very light, revealing attire that celebrates her natural youth and feminine lines."

Lily’s eyes widened slightly, a sudden, bewildered heat rising to her cheeks. "Revealing attire? You mean... because of the tropical humidity?"

"The climate is part of it, certainly," Dr. Tam replied without missing a beat, "but the deeper reason is aesthetic and psychological harmony. A host invites a companion into her home to bring beauty, softness, and openness into the space. Wearing clothing that leaves your skin, your legs, and the curves of your body freely visible shows that you hold nothing back from the household—that you are open, humble, and eager to please the eye of your host."

Lily bit her lower lip, her brow furrowing in mild bafflement. In four years of cultural anthropology courses, she had never once read a chapter suggesting that Vietnamese houseguests dressed scantily to show humility. "Really? I had no idea that was a custom. Back home, if you wore something super revealing around your host, people would think you were being inappropriate."

Dr. Tam’s expression cooled by a fraction of a degree, one dark eyebrow lifting in that subtle, disappointed look professors reserved for students who clung to provincial prejudices.

"Back home in America, yes," Dr. Tam said mildly, leaning back against her leather headrest. "Of course, if projecting your Western standards onto my culture makes you uncomfortable, Lily, we can always adjust the simulation

parameters to a standard tourist module. It won't qualify for the advanced fellowship credit, naturally, since true immersion requires letting go of your taboos—"

"No, no! I don't want the tourist module!" Lily interrupted at once, mortified at the thought of sounding close-minded on the very first day of the program. Besides, she reminded herself, none of this was even physically happening—her real body was still sitting in a leather chair in Suite 304 in her ordinary sundress! Why be a prude inside a computer simulation? "I’m sorry, Dr. Tam. I wasn't objecting, I was just surprised. I want to follow the authentic customs completely." Dr. Tam’s warm, captivating smile returned at once, rewarding Lily’s surrender like sunlight breaking through clouds. She reached across the narrow aisle and brushed the back of her cool fingers along Lily’s flushed cheek.

"I knew I chose the right girl," Dr. Tam murmured. "Unbutton the top three buttons of your sundress and slide the straps down off your shoulders while we rest for the remainder of the flight, Lily. Let yourself begin adjusting to the breeze on your skin. By the time we touch down in my hometown, I want both of these lessons—attentive service and unguarded presentation—to feel like second nature."

"Yes, Dr. Tam," Lily whispered, her fingers rising obediently to the front of her bodice as the warm, herbal haze of the tea settled over her thoughts and the jet carried them steadily deeper into the night.

Chapter Five: The Host Family

Stepping off the climate-controlled jet bridge in Hanoi felt like walking straight into a warm, velvet greenhouse.

Even through the glass corridors of Noi Bai International Airport—and even more intensely once a waiting black car carried them away from the terminal into the lush, mist-draped hills outside the city center—the air carried a rich, unmistakable weight. It smelled of wet red earth, frangipani blossoms, woodsmoke, and rain-washed stone.

Sitting in the back of the car with the top three buttons of her sage-green sundress still undone as Dr. Tam had instructed on the plane, Lily pressed her fingertips against the cool condensation forming on the inside of the air-conditioned window.

"The olfactory synthesis is unbelievable," Lily whispered, watching the terraced green hillsides and French-colonial villas blur past in the golden morning light. "I can actually feel the humidity curling the ends of my hair. How many servers does the university need to run a render this detailed?"

"More resources than you could possibly imagine, Lily," Dr. Tam replied smoothly, her dark eyes resting on the pale, sun-kissed curve of Lily’s bare shoulders. "Look ahead through the gates. We are arriving. It is time for you to meet your host family."

The sedan turned off the narrow hillside road and glided between two tall,moss-covered stone pillars fitted with heavy wrought-iron gates that swung shut automatically behind the rear bumper. At the end of a curved gravel drive shaded by towering palms and bamboo stood a stunning, two-story private villa built of pale stucco and dark, polished teakwood. Wide verandas wrapped around the upper floor, and a high privacy wall encircled the entire estate, cutting it off completely from the road below.

The driver carried their bags up the wide stone steps, set them just inside the threshold, and departed immediately—the black sedan rolling back down the drive until the iron perimeter gates clicked shut in the distance.

Inside the foyer, the air was cool, shadowy, and hushed, scented with lemon oil and fresh white orchids floating in a wide porcelain basin. Smooth dark floorboards stretched into an expansive open living pavilion that looked out onto a private, walled courtyard with a koi pond.

Lily stood just inside the double teak doors, her hands clasped neatly in front of her sundress, her posture bright and polite as she listened for the sound of voices or footsteps in the house.

Silence answered her. Only the gentle trickle of water in the courtyard fountain disturbed the stillness.

"Is everyone out for the morning?" Lily asked softly, glancing toward the wide wooden staircase that curved up to the second-floor gallery. "Your parents, or your husband...?"

Dr. Tam turned slowly, sliding the heavy brass bolt of the front doors into place with a solid, definitive thud. Then she unpinned her jade hairpin, shaking out her glossy black hair so it spilled over the shoulders of her cream silk tunic, and looked at Lily with a cool, enigmatic half- smile.

"There is no one else, Lily," Dr. Tam said, her rich contralto echoing softly across the polished wood. "This is my private residence. I am your host family. Just me."

Lily blinked in surprise, her honey-brown eyes widening slightly. "Oh! Just the two of us in the whole house? From the orientation packet, I sort of pictured a multi-generational household with grandparents and aunts."

"A crowded household would only dilute your focus," Dr. Tam said, her tone shifting cleanly from the warm, conversational cadence of a fellow traveler into the crisp, unhurried authority of the sole mistress of the estate. She walked over to the carved rosewood sideboard, not offering Lily a seat, and turned to face her. "In Vietnam, before a new guest is permitted to enjoy the comforts of the home, she must immediately demonstrate her humility and domestic worth to the head of the household. You cannot claim a place under this roof until you have proven that you can master the housework."

"Right now?" Lily asked, glancing down at her canvas tote bag by her ankles. "After the fourteen-hour flight?"

"Did your real body just fly across the ocean, Lily, or did you merely sit in a chair while a program simulated the hours?" Dr. Tam asked pointedly, tilting her head as her dark gaze pinned the younger woman in place. "And more importantly—did we not spend the entire transit discussing how a devoted companion anticipates the needs of her host without complaint?"

A quick, apologetic flush rose to Lily’s cheeks. Of course—she wasn't actually jet-lagged; it was all inside the neural link! And this was clearly the first real test of the immersion rubric.

"You're completely right, Dr. Tam," Lily said quickly, straightening her shoulders and offering an eager, accommodating smile. "I'm not tired at all. I'm ready to start right now."

"Good," Dr. Tam murmured, stepping closer and lifting the strap of Lily’s canvas tote bag right out of her hand. "Because tropical housework is warm, physical labor, you will be far more comfortable performing your tasks in the traditional

domestic uniform I have prepared for you. Come with me."

Dr. Tam led her down a shaded hallway past the kitchen to a small, windowless dressing alcove off the laundry room. Resting neatly atop a woven rattan stool was a folded garment of sheer black silk and crisp white lace.

"Take off your sundress, your sandals, and everything underneath," Dr. Tam instructed, setting Lily’s tote bag inside a tall teak wardrobe and turning the brass key in the lock before slipping the key into her own pocket. "Your street clothes will remain locked away while you are in training. Once you have dressed in the uniform, step back out into the main hall and present yourself for your first assignment."

"Yes, Dr. Tam," Lily said dutifully.

As soon as Dr. Tam stepped back into the corridor and pulled the louvered screen door shut, Lily slipped out of her sandals, unzipped the side of her sage-green sundress, and stripped off her cotton bra and panties. Then she reached down and lifted the uniform from the rattan stool.

As the fabric unfolded in her hands, Lily’s breath caught in her throat.

Calling it a "uniform" was a generous stretch of the English language. It was a breathtakingly scant, high-cut bodysuit crafted from translucent black chantilly lace and sheer mesh, paired with a miniature white organdy apron no larger than a handkerchief that tied around the waist with a wide satin bow at the small of the back. The bodice featured underwired half-cups that pushed her breasts high and full, leaving the upper swells completely bare except for a delicate white lace choker that fastened with two tiny pearl buttons around her throat. Worse still, the back of the garment didn't even pretend to be a skirt: beneath the fluttering white satin bow at her lower spine, the black lace cut away into a narrow thong strap that disappeared completely between the round, firm cheeks of her bubble butt, framed only by a single ring of pleated white lace ruffles that skimmed the very top of her bare thighs.

Standing in front of the narrow dressing mirror after she fastened the pearl choker around her neck, Lily stared at her reflection with burning cheeks.

She looked less like a cultural exchange student and more like an erotic French maid fantasy sculpted specifically to display every toned, feminine inch of her body. Every time she shifted her weight onto her bare feet, the sheer black mesh stretched taut across her midriff, and the high, lush curve of her completely bare bottom gleamed in the warm light below the white satin bow.

Wearing clothing that leaves your skin, your legs, and the curves of your body freely visible shows that you hold nothing back from the household, Dr. Tam’s voice echoed smoothly in her memory from the plane ride. That you are open,

humble, and eager to please the eye of your host.

Taking a deep, steadying breath—and reminding herself once again that no one in the real world could see her, and that backing out now meant failing Dr. Tam's elite fellowship before the first hour was even up—Lily smoothed her palms down the tiny white apron over her hips, squared her shoulders, and pushed open the louvered door.

Out in the main pavilion, Dr. Tam had settled onto a low, cushioned rosewood daybed with a cup of green tea in her hand.

As Lily stepped barefoot onto the dark, polished floorboards, the morning sunlight slanting through the courtyard shutters caught the sheer black lace against her skin and the curves of her bare legs and hips. Lily stopped three paces in front of the daybed, clasping her hands neatly over the miniature white apron while trying desperately not to tug at the nonexistent hem behind her.

Dr. Tam lowered her teacup slowly to its saucer. Her dark, liquid eyes traveled from the pearl choker at Lily's throat, down the high, bare swell of her breasts and narrow waist, all the way to her bare ankles—lingering with unmistakable, possessive heat when she gestured with one finger for Lily to turn around so she could inspect the fit of the satin bow above her bare, peach-shaped rear.

"Turn back to me, Lily," Dr. Tam purred.

Lily pivoted back to face her, her heart fluttering rapidly beneath the sheer black lace as she held her posture, blushing furiously from her collarbones to the tips of her ears, yet standing completely ready for Dr. Tam to issue her very first task.

Chapter Six: The Unbroken Session

Dr. Tam set her porcelain teacup down on the low rosewood table with a soft, decisive click. "Your first task, Lily, begins in the rear courtyard," Dr. Tam said, rising smoothly from the daybed and gesturing toward the shaded veranda at the back of the house. "In an American home, you toss delicate fabrics into a noisy metal machine and walk away. In my household, silk and linen are cared for by hand. It teaches patience, mindfulness, and respect for the garments that touch your host’s skin."

"By hand?" Lily repeated, her fingers twitching slightly against the miniature white organdy apron tied at her waist. "Of course, Dr. Tam. Just show me where everything is."

Out on the covered stone veranda beside the koi pond, two wide ceramic basins sat atop a low wooden trestle next to a wicker hamper filled with Dr. Tam’s silk blouses, ivory trousers, and sheer undergarments. Under Dr. Tam’s cool, unhurried supervision, Lily filled the first basin with warm water and shaved flakes of jasmine-scented Marseilles soap into the surface until a rich, fragrant lather bloomed across the water.

For the next two hours, Lily worked at the wooden trestle. Because the table was built low in the traditional style, she had to bend forward slightly from the waist as she submerged the silks, gently kneading and rinsing each piece by hand before hanging it on a bamboo drying rack in the warm breeze. Every time she leaned over the basin, the narrow thong strap of her black lace bodysuit pulled taut, leaving the high, round curves of her bare bubble butt completely exposed to the open veranda where Dr. Tam sat reading a monograph in a rattan armchair.

Halfway through wringing out a pale jade slip, Lily paused to wipe a bead of perspiration from her forehead with the back of her soapy wrist. Her lower back had a dull, genuine ache from bending over the basin, and the skin of her fingertips had actually begun to prune slightly from the warm water.

Even waterlogged skin, Lily thought to herself in quiet awe, glancing down at her wrinkled fingertips before stealing a look at Dr. Tam’s serene profile. Whoever coded the physics engine for this fellowship thought of everything.

No sooner had the last silk garment been pinned to the bamboo rack than the afternoon shadows lengthened across the courtyard, and Dr. Tam closed her book.

"It is five o'clock, Lily," Dr. Tam said without looking up. "Wash your hands and report to the kitchen. I take my evening meal at six-thirty sharp, and I prefer my broth simmered slowly." Dinner was an exercise in quiet, choreographed

precision. Dr. Tam stood briefly in the doorway of the gourmet kitchen, pointing out the fresh lemongrass, bird’s-eye chilies, ginger root, and tender cuts of fish arranged in the refrigerator, before retiring to the living pavilion and leaving Lily to execute the meal. Moving barefoot across the cool kitchen tiles in her scant lace uniform, Lily sliced the aromatics into paper-thin ribbons, tended the simmering clay pot, and steamed the jasmine rice until the entire ground floor was filled with a mouthwatering, savory warmth.

When she carried the lacquered tray out to the dining table at six-thirty, she assumed she would be setting two places.

"Only one setting at the table, Lily," Dr. Tam corrected mildly as Lily reached for a second porcelain bowl. "A companion in training does not sit beside the head of the household until she is invited. You will stand three paces to my left with the teapot and serve each course as I finish. You may eat your own portion in the kitchen after you have cleared the dishes."

A sharp little prickle of embarrassment warmed Lily’s cheeks—even inside a simulation, being relegated to standing quietly by the wall in lingerie while her professor ate felt startlingly subservient—yet she immediately bowed her head.

"Yes, Dr. Tam. I’m sorry," Lily murmured, setting the single bowl down and stepping back to her designated spot with both hands clasped over her tiny apron.

By nine o'clock that evening, the kitchen counters were wiped spotless, the dishes were dried and put away, and a soft chorus of tropical cicadas had risen in the dark trees beyond the courtyard walls.

Lily followed Dr. Tam up the wide teak staircase to the second-floor master suite—an airy, opulent bedroom dominated by a four-poster canopy bed draped in sheer white mosquito netting. In her hands, Lily carried a silver tray holding two small cups of the same warm, golden-amber herbal tea they had shared on the airplane.

"Set the tray on the vanity and drink your cup while it is warm, Lily," Dr. Tam instructed, stepping onto a woven silk rug near the wardrobe. "Then come help me prepare for bed."

Lily obediently drank the sweet, earthy infusion in three swallows. Within moments, that same soothing, velvet warmth settled behind her eyes, softening the ache in her calves and making the candlelit bedroom feel dreamy and hushed. Setting her empty cup down, she stepped behind Dr. Tam.

"Unbutton my tunic," Dr. Tam murmured, lifting her chin slightly as she watched Lily in the tall vanity mirror. "Slowly. Do not tug at the silk."

With careful, slightly trembling fingers, Lily unfastened the row of small silk knots running down the side of Dr. Tam’s cream tunic and eased the garment off her smooth, porcelain shoulders. Next came the slim dark trousers and the delicate silk undergarments beneath. As Lily knelt on the rug to slip the trousers free of Dr. Tam’s ankles, she couldn't help catching her breath at the sculpted, fluid perfection of the older woman’s bare body in the warm lamplight, nor the intoxicating wave of white tea and orchid scent radiating from her skin.

As Lily held the emerald silk open at the floor, Dr. Tam stepped into the trousers one foot at a time. The fabric poured upward over her calves and thighs with almost no sound. Lily rose with it, drawing the waistband into place, then took the matching top from the bench. She guided Dr. Tam’s arms through the sleeves and brought the fronts together over her breasts. The first three silk knots closed easily. On the fourth, her fingers hesitated at the warm weight beneath the cloth.

Dr. Tam’s hand came up and settled under Lily’s chin. Two fingers rested there, unhurried, the pad of the thumb brushing once along the edge of the lace choker. The contact held. Lily’s head stayed lifted by it; she did not pull back. A second hand settled on the bare slope of her shoulder, thumb moving slowly over the narrow strap of the bodysuit until the lace shifted against skin. Heat gathered under the touch and stayed. Lily’s breath shortened. Her hands remained on the next knot, waiting, while the older woman’s fingers continued their quiet, measured reward against her jaw and collarbone. The silk between them stayed half-fastened. Outside the shutters the cicadas kept singing.

Once Dr. Tam was buttoned into her emerald silk pajamas, Lily hurried over to the four-poster bed. She parted the sheer white netting, folded the crisp linen top sheet back into a neat triangle, and fluffed the down pillows until they sat plump and inviting against the carved headboard.

As Dr. Tam slid beneath the cool sheets with a soft sigh of contentment, Lily stood beside the mattress, waiting.

Now that the full day’s itinerary—the flight, the arrival, the laundry, the dinner service, and the bedtime routine—was complete, Lily fully expected the room to fade to black, or for a chime to sound in her ears announcing End of Orientation Module One. She braced herself to blink her eyes open in the ivory leather recliner back in Suite 304 on campus.

Ten seconds passed. Then thirty.

The room did not dissolve. Instead, the cicadas outside the louvered shutters kept singing in the humid night air, and Dr. Tam reached over to dim the bedside lamp.

"Dr. Tam?" Lily asked softly, her brow creasing in confusion as she looked around the shadowed bedroom. "Isn't the session ending for tonight? When do I take off

the visor?"

Dr. Tam looked at her from the pillows, her dark eyes calm and unblinking in the dim amber glow.

"An immersion fellowship does not pause at bedtime, Lily," Dr. Tam replied smoothly, as though explaining the simplest concept in the world. "If you popped back into a college hallway every few hours, the psychological continuity would be ruined. While your body rests in the chair, the neural link runs continuously through a full circadian cycle. There is a low cushioned pallet at the foot of my bed—lie down there, rest, and be up before dawn to prepare my morning tray."

Before Lily could even process the sheer computational marvel of a program that kept running while the user slept, Dr. Tam switched off the lamp, plunging the suite into velvet darkness.

Too polite to argue in the dark—and oddly lulled by the warm herbal tea humming through her limbs—Lily felt her way down to the cushioned silk pallet at the foot of the four-poster bed, curled up on her side in her sheer black lace uniform, and drifted swiftly to sleep to the sound of Dr. Tam’s steady breathing above her.

When Lily’s eyes fluttered open, the room was cool and washed in the pale, pearly grey just before sunrise.

For a disorienting second, she stared up at the teak ceiling beams and felt the sheer lace choker still fastened snugly around her throat. She was still here. Her muscles felt rested, yet unmistakably real—and from the courtyard below came the distant call of a morning bird. Remembering Dr. Tam’s final command before sleep, Lily slipped silently off the pallet before the sun had even cleared the garden wall. Hurrying downstairs on bare feet, she lit the stove in the quiet kitchen and prepared a traditional breakfast tray: a bowl of steaming, aromatic pho garnished with fresh herbs and lime, sliced dragon fruit and mango arranged like petals on a porcelain plate, and a pot of rich Vietnamese drip coffee sweetened with condensed milk.

At seven o'clock sharp, Lily carried the lacquered tray upstairs, pushed open the bedroom door with her hip, and knelt beside the four-poster bed to gently draw back the mosquito netting before placing the tray across Dr. Tam’s lap.

Dr. Tam didn't offer a word of collegial greeting or ask how Lily had slept on the floor pallet. She simply nodded once, picking up her porcelain spoon as if being waited on hand and foot by an American graduate student in lingerie were the most natural order of the universe.

"The coffee is hot," Dr. Tam noted after a single sip. "While I finish eating, go into the bathroom and draw my bath—thirty-eight degrees, with two capfuls of the

lotus oil. Once the tub is full, lay out my grey silk blouse and ivory trousers on the dressing bench, and wait by the towel rack until I call for you to scrub my back."

"Yes, Dr. Tam," Lily whispered, rising smoothly from her knees and hurrying into the marble bathroom to turn the brass faucets—marveling, as the fragrant steam billowed up around her bare thighs, at how completely she had already become a servant in Dr. Tam’s house.

Chapter Seven: Time Dilation and White Gloves

By eleven o’clock that morning, the tropical sun had climbed high above the walled courtyard, pouring golden heat through the open shutters of the ground-floor pavilion and turning the dark teakwood floorboards into mirrors of amber light.

Down in the center of the main hall, Lily was on her hands and knees.

Before departing for her morning lecture at the institute, Dr. Tam had left very specific instructions regarding the care of the estate’s antique wood and stone surfaces: no long-handled mops, which Dr. Tam dismissed as lazy Western shortcuts that missed the corners, and no protective knee pads. Instead, Lily had been given a heavy wooden bucket of warm water infused with lemon-grass oil, a stiff bristle brush, and two thick cotton polishing cloths.

For three uninterrupted hours, Lily had worked her way methodically from the rear veranda toward the front foyer, scrubbing and buffing every single plank by hand.

In the sheer black lace bodysuit, the posture was nothing short of breathtakingly compromising. Every time she stretched her arms forward to work the lemon oil into the grain in wide, rhythmic circles, her spine dipped into a deep, graceful arch. The tiny white organdy apron hung straight down beneath her waist, brushed the floor between her knees, and left her high, peach-shaped bubble butt raised prominently in the air—framed only by the narrow black thong strap and the dainty ring of white lace ruffles at the top of her bare thighs. A fine sheen of perspiration glistened along her collarbones and down the hollow of her bare back, making the translucent black mesh cling to her skin like shadow.

Sitting back on her heels for a moment to dip her cloth into the bucket and wring it out, Lily brushed a damp lock of hair off her forehead with the back of her wrist and looked out toward the courtyard fountain.

Her knees were tender and flushed bright pink from pressing against the hardwood, and the muscles in her shoulders and core had a deep, unmistakable burn.

She frowned slightly, looking down at her wet, soapy hands.

If she had walked into Dr. Tam’s office in the International Annex at two o’clock yesterday afternoon, how many hours had actually passed out there in the real world? Between the forty- minute drive to the terminal, the fourteen-hour flight across the Pacific, the afternoon of hand- washing silk, making dinner, sleeping through a whole night on the floor pallet, making pho at dawn, drawing Dr. Tam’s bath, and now scrubbing the entire ground floor on all fours… she had experienced well over thirty-six continuous hours inside the program.

Is my real body still just sitting in that ivory leather recliner in Suite 304? Lily wondered, a sudden, dizzying wave of disorientation fluttering in her chest. What if my legs cramp up in the chair? When do I actually get to take the visor off for a break, or is there some kind of neural time dilation going on where an hour in the chair feels like a whole week in here?

Before she could follow the thought any further, the heavy brass lock of the front double doors turned from the outside, and the teak doors swung open.

Lily gasped softly, dropping back down onto all fours at once and resuming her brisk polishing strokes across the floorboards just as Dr. Tam stepped across the threshold.

Dr. Tam looked cool, immaculate, and utterly commanding in her grey silk blouse and tailored ivory trousers. She closed the front door, locked the deadbolt, and paused in the center of the foyer, her dark eyes sweeping over the gleaming expanse of wood and coming to rest on Lily kneeling at her feet.

Without waiting to be told—remembering the lesson from the airplane—Lily quickly wiped her hands dry on her tiny white apron, crawled forward a pace, and bowed her head low as she unfastened the straps of Dr. Tam’s heels, slipping them off and sliding a pair of woven silk house slippers onto her host’s feet.

"Good," Dr. Tam murmured, looking down at the curve of Lily’s bare back and the round swell of her hips rising behind her. "You remembered the threshold greeting without prompting. Stay right where you are on your knees while I assess your morning’s work."

Dr. Tam opened her leather handbag and drew out a pair of immaculate, snow-white cotton inspection gloves. Slowly, deliberately, she slipped them over her slender hands, smoothing the fabric down each finger until they fit like a second skin.

Lily stayed frozen on all fours on the floor, her heart beating a little faster beneath the underwired lace cups as Dr. Tam began to circle the room with slow, measured steps.

First, Dr. Tam knelt briefly beside the baseboard near the courtyard doors, running a single white-gloved index finger along the recessed groove of the wood molding. She lifted her finger to the light. The white cotton was spotless.

Next, she walked over to the low rosewood sideboard, drawing her gloved fingertips across the carved lower shelf before stepping directly behind Lily.

Lily held her breath as Dr. Tam stopped inches from her upturned rear. Instead of inspecting the floorboard beside her, Dr. Tam reached down and trailed that same white-gloved finger slowly along the bare, perspiring curve of Lily’s spine, right down to the white satin bow resting above the cleft of her bare bottom.

"You missed a spot of moisture right here," Dr. Tam purred, her voice rich with quiet amusement as her gloved palm settled warmly over the round, firm curve of Lily’s bare right hip, giving her bubble butt a slow, possessive squeeze that made Lily let out a tiny, startled squeak. "Though the floors themselves are acceptable. You put real effort into your posture today."

"Thank you, Dr. Tam," Lily breathed, her cheeks flaming crimson as she looked up over her shoulder from the floor. Gathering her courage while Dr. Tam seemed pleased with her, Lily hesitated and added softly, "Dr. Tam... may I ask a technical question about the fellowship?" "You may," Dr. Tam said, stepping around to face her while stripping off the white gloves one finger at a time.

"I was just wondering while I was scrubbing the hall... how long have I been wearing the visor in your office?" Lily asked, sitting back slightly on her calves with her hands folded neatly in her lap. "Because it feels like I’ve been here since yesterday afternoon, and I didn't think a session could run this long without taking the headset off to eat or stretch. Is the computer using some kind of time dilation?"

Dr. Tam didn't blink. Not a single flicker of hesitation crossed her serene, porcelain features; instead, she offered Lily that warm, indulgent professorial smile that always made Lily feel like an endearing undergraduate asking a freshman question.

"Of course it is, Lily," Dr. Tam explained smoothly, stepping closer and resting one cool, bare hand atop Lily’s head, her fingers threading lightly through Lily’s hair. "The perceptual computing engine operates on compressed dreaming architecture. Just as your mind can experience an entire multi-day narrative inside a forty-minute REM cycle, the neural link dilates subjective time so that weeks of deep cultural immersion can pass in what amounts to a single afternoon session in the chair."

Lily’s honey-brown eyes went wide with relief and sheer wonder. "Weeks in a single day? Really?"

"Sometimes even longer, once your subconscious settles deeply into the rhythm of the household," Dr. Tam said, her voice dropping into a low, soothing cadence as her thumb brushed Lily’s cheek. "In fact, trying to calculate 'outside hours' or worrying about when the visor comes off is the only thing that can disrupt your temporal equilibrium and cause neural fatigue. The system automatically monitors your physical body in the lab and will end the module the exact moment your fellowship requirements are fulfilled. Until that happens, your only responsibility is right here on these floorboards."

The explanation was so seamless—and fit so neatly with everything Lily wanted to believe about the cutting-edge prestige of the university program—that the

last knot of anxiety in her chest untangled completely. If weeks could pass inside an afternoon, then she didn't have to worry about missing anything back home at all!

"That makes so much sense," Lily sighed happily, leaning her cheek slightly into the warmth of Dr. Tam’s palm. "I won't worry about the clock anymore, I promise."

"Wise girl," Dr. Tam murmured, patting her cheek once before stepping back toward the staircase. "Now pick up your bucket and carry it back to the utility room. Once you have rinsed your cloths, come upstairs to the dressing room and press my evening silk—and then you may begin preparing the cold lotus-root salad for tonight. A group of my close colleagues and friends from the institute will be joining me here for luncheon tomorrow at noon, and I expect every surface of this house—and my companion—to be in peak condition when they arrive."

"Yes, Dr. Tam!" Lily said brightly, scrambling to her feet with the heavy wooden bucket in both hands, her bare bottom swaying beneath the fluttering white satin bow as she hurried off toward the utility room, eager to make sure everything was perfect for tomorrow’s guests.

Chapter Eight: The Luncheon of the Institute

By eleven o’clock the following morning, the private villa was filled with the rich, savory aromas of lemongrass, crushed peanuts, toasted sesame, and simmering broth.

Working with frantic, focused energy, Lily moved barefoot across the kitchen tiles, dressed in the sheer black lace bodysuit and the tiny white organdy apron tied neatly at her waist. Her skin was flushed, and a light sheen of perspiration glistened along her collarbones from the hours spent chopping herbs, poaching prawns, and arranging cold lotus-root salads on wide porcelain platters.

Every surface of the ground-floor pavilion—from the polished teakwood floorboards she had scrubbed the day before to the glass-topped dining table overlooking the courtyard fountain—shone with immaculate, spotless perfection.

At eleven-forty-five, Dr. Tam stepped down the sweeping staircase. She wore an exquisite, structured silk dress the color of polished pearl, her dark hair pinned back into its severe, elegant knot, and a faint, sophisticated trace of white tea and orchid perfume wafting in her wake. She paused in the center of the kitchen, casting a critical, unhurried eye over Lily’s flushed face, the sheer black lace, and the spread of dishes on the counter.

“Acceptable,” Dr. Tam said quietly, her dark eyes glittering with quiet approval. “The presentation is clean. Remember your posture when you carry the platters out: shoulders back, chin up, eyes lowered. You are here to serve the table, not to converse with the guests.”

“Yes, Dr. Tam,” Lily murmured, smoothing her palms over the miniature white apron. “I’ll keep my head down and my focus on the food.”

At twelve o’clock sharp, the front doorbell chimed.

Dr. Tam went to the double doors and unlocked them, welcoming three of her closest colleagues and friends from the institute—three sophisticated Vietnamese women in their early thirties, dressed in chic designer blouses and fine jewelry, who greeted Dr. Tam with warm kisses on both cheeks and lively murmurs in a rapid, melodic mix of English and Vietnamese.

As the guests stepped into the main pavilion and shed their light summer jackets, Dr. Tam directed them toward the shaded veranda table by the koi pond.

“Everyone, please take a seat,” Dr. Tam said, gesturing gracefully to the wrought-iron chairs. “I hope you are hungry. My new companion has been preparing the luncheon all morning.”

Lily emerged from the kitchen carrying a large porcelain tray laden with the cold lotus-root salad, spring rolls, and dipping sauces. Moving with the careful,

measured grace she had practiced for days, she approached the veranda table and began setting the dishes down one by one, keeping her gaze respectfully lowered toward the table surface.

As she reached across the center setting to place a small bowl of chili-lime dressing, one of the guests—a sharp-eyed woman with silver drop earrings named Madame Huyen—stopped mid- sentence and peered up at her with clinical curiosity.

“Oh, my,” Madame Huyen remarked, switching smoothly into English as she leaned back in her chair and gestured toward Lily’s attire. “Where on earth did you find her, Tam? She looks like an absolute doll.”

“An American university fellowship pilot,” Dr. Tam replied coolly, lifting her wine glass with a slight, amused smile. “She arrived from the states yesterday. Very eager, very compliant, and quite dedicated to mastering our domestic customs from the ground up.”

“Is that right?” another guest, a woman named Linh with a sharp, playful laugh, reached out and casually tapped the hem of Lily’s white organdy apron with her fingernail. “Tell me, sweet thing—do you even know how to use a proper vacuum, or were you raised letting machines do everything for you?”

Lily’s cheeks flushed a bright, burning crimson under the sudden collective scrutiny of the four women. She stood frozen with her hands resting on the edge of the tray, her heart fluttering against her ribs.

“I… I can use a vacuum,” Lily stammered softly, looking down at the tiled floor. “Though Dr. Tam prefers me to scrub the wood floors by hand with lemon-grass oil.”

“Oh, listen to her!” Linh laughed, clapping her hands together delightedly and looking across the table at Dr. Tam. “She sounds positively earnest! You’ve trained her to speak so politely, Tam. Can she take a joke, or does she blush this red every time someone looks at her?”

“She is still learning the nuances of our household,” Dr. Tam said smoothly, cutting a piece of spring roll with her fork. “Feel free to test her limits as much as you like, Linh. A proper companion must develop a thick skin if she is to survive in a serious household.”

“Well, she certainly has the figure for it,” Madame Huyen observed, her eyes drifting approvingly down the sheer black lace mesh of Lily’s bodysuit, taking in the narrow waist and the high, round curve of her bubble butt visible beneath the tiny apron. “Look at those proportions. Where do you find these girls in America, Tam? They grow them like show ponies on those college campuses.”

“They require a little pruning,” Dr. Tam corrected, taking a sip of her wine. “Lily, refill Madame Huyen’s glass with sparkling water immediately. You are lagging behind.”

“Yes, Dr. Tam—right away,” Lily whispered, hastily grabbing the crystal pitcher from the side cart.

For the next two hours, the luncheon proceeded as a dizzying masterclass in humiliation disguised as cultural integration.

Whenever Lily served a dish or cleared a plate, the women treated her less like a person and more like an exotic, decorative fixture of the estate. Linh reached out and playfully pinched the bare skin of Lily’s arm, complimenting her muscle tone like a horse breeder inspecting a yearling, while Madame Huyen teased her about her American accent when Lily repeated back a drink order.

Yet underneath the stinging embarrassment of being openly dissected and treated like a dumb servant by Dr. Tam’s sophisticated friends, a strange, dizzying warmth pooled low in Lily’s stomach. There was something intoxicating about standing there completely exposed in sheer lace while powerful, successful women casually discussed her body and her obedience right in front of her. Dr. Tam didn’t scold them or defend her; she simply watched Lily with those dark, possessive eyes, sipping her wine and enjoying the spectacle of her American graduate student learning her place.

“You know, Tam,” Linh said as Lily cleared away the dessert plates at three o’clock, giving Lily a light, lingering pat right on the bare curve of her bubble butt as she stood up from the table. “If this fellowship program of yours catches on back in the States, you’re going to have half the faculty at the institute beating down your door for a companion of their own.”

“Let her prove herself through the end of the month first,” Dr. Tam replied, her gaze locking onto Lily’s flushed, submissive face across the table. “Clear the remaining plates, Lily, and wash every glass by hand before you come upstairs to iron my silk evening wear. We have a long evening ahead of us.”

“Yes, Dr. Tam,” Lily murmured, gathering the heavy tray with trembling fingers, her heart hammering wildly against her ribs as she retreated back toward the cool shadows of the kitchen.

Chapter Nine: The Elimination of Distraction

By four-thirty that afternoon, the last of the crystal wine glasses had been washed by hand, polished with a lint-free linen cloth, and returned to the rosewood cabinet in the dining pavilion. Upstairs in the second-floor study, the slatted teak shutters were angled to filter the late- afternoon sun into bands of warm gold across the floorboards. Dr. Tam sat behind her wide antique desk, a pair of half-rim reading glasses perched on the bridge of her nose as she reviewed a stack of academic manuscripts. Beside her elbow sat a fresh pot of the golden-amber herbal tea that Lily had carried up ten minutes earlier.

Across the room, standing near the cushioned ironing board in the corner alcove, Lily carefully guided a warm iron over the pleats of Dr. Tam’s emerald silk evening robe.

Even after the guests had departed, the lingering echo of the luncheon still hummed beneath Lily’s skin. She could still feel the phantom warmth of Linh’s palm patting the bare curve of her bubble butt, and the way Madame Huyen’s amused, appraising eyes had traced the sheer black lace over her breasts while discussing her like a prized household pet. A strange, quiet shift had taken place inside Lily’s chest as she washed the dishes downstairs. Rather than feeling resentful or wanting to run back to the calibration chair, she had found a deep, unexpected peace in the rhythm of the villa. Serving Dr. Tam—anticipating her moods, keeping her home immaculate, yielding to her calm, unshakeable authority—felt more natural and fulfilling than anything she had ever planned for her post-graduate summer.

Yet as Lily reached across the board to hang the freshly pressed silk robe on a padded wooden hanger, the underwire of the black lace bodice pinched sharply against her ribs, and the stiff organdy ruffles along the tops of her thighs rustled loudly in the quiet study.

At the desk, Dr. Tam’s fountain pen paused mid-sentence. Her dark eyes lifted over the rims of her glasses, lingering for several slow seconds on the contrast of the sheer black mesh against Lily’s skin and the fluttering white satin bow perched above the high, round swell of her bare rear.

Lily blushed softly, setting the iron on its heel rest and stepping toward the edge of the desk with her hands clasped over her tiny apron.

“Dr. Tam?” Lily asked quietly, her voice hesitant and respectful. “May I speak with you for a moment about my placement?”

Dr. Tam removed her reading glasses and set them down on the blotter, leaning back in her carved chair as she gestured toward the small porcelain cup waiting at the corner of the desk. “Drink your afternoon tea first, Lily. Then tell me what

is on your mind.”

Lily stepped forward, lifted the warm handleless cup in both hands, and drank the sweet, aromatic infusion down to the last drop. Almost immediately, that familiar, velvety warmth bloomed behind her ribs, smoothing away her nervous hesitation.

“I was thinking while I was cleaning up after the luncheon,” Lily began earnestly, her honey- brown eyes bright and sincere. “I really want to stay here and continue this new direction with you for as long as the program allows. I love taking care of your home, and I want to be the best companion I can possibly be.”

A slow, pleased curve touched Dr. Tam’s full lips. “You showed promising poise with my colleagues today, Lily. If you are content with your role, why do you look troubled?”

“It’s the uniform,” Lily admitted, glancing down at the sheer black chantilly lace clinging to her torso and the miniature white apron at her waist. “I know you gave it to me so I would be comfortable doing housework and so I could practice cultural openness… but honestly, Dr. Tam, I think it’s becoming a distraction.”

Dr. Tam’s dark eyebrows lifted slightly in amusement. “A distraction? In what sense?”

“Well, the lace and the ribbons catch on the furniture when I’m polishing the low tables, and the organdy ruffles make noise every time I walk through the study while you’re trying to read,” Lily explained, her cheeks warming as she tried to articulate the thought logically. “And just now, when I was ironing, I noticed it drew your eyes away from your manuscripts. With all the bright white bows and contrasting black straps framing everything, it feels almost… costume- like. As if it’s calling extra attention to itself instead of letting me blend harmoniously into your house.”

Dr. Tam rested her chin lightly on her laced fingers, studying the earnest young American graduate with dark, gleaming eyes that seemed to see three steps ahead of every word Lily spoke. “That is a remarkably perceptive observation, Lily,” Dr. Tam murmured, her rich contralto smooth as silk. “In truth, I was noticing the exact same flaw during luncheon today. Half- measures in attire are inherently theatrical. When a garment conceals just an inch of skin here with a black strap, or frames the hips there with a white bow, the eye is drawn directly to the artifice. It interrupts the quiet concentration of the scholar—and it reminds everyone in the room that you are still wearing a costume.”

“Yes! Exactly,” Lily said, nodding eagerly, relieved that her mentor agreed with her reasoning. “I don’t want to interrupt your work or feel like I’m playing dress-up. Should I switch to something simpler, like a plain cotton slip?”

“Think back to our conversation on the flight over the Pacific, Lily,” Dr. Tam said softly, rising from her chair and walking slowly around the edge of the desk until she stood directly in front of her. “Why would we replace one artificial barrier with another? A plain slip still traps the heat while you scrub the floors, still requires washing and ironing, and still places a layer of fabric between you and the household you are sworn to serve.”

Lily blinked up at her, her breath catching slightly as Dr. Tam’s cool fingertips brushed the small pearl buttons of the white lace choker at her throat. “Then… what would be less distracting?” “Pure, unadorned simplicity,” Dr. Tam purred, her voice dropping into that low, hypnotic register that made the whole study feel warm and enclosed. “In the classical tradition of a private sanctuary, when a companion has truly surrendered her Western vanity, she wears nothing at all. Think about it logically, Lily: bare skin makes no sound when you move across the study. It never catches on the rosewood corners. And once the eye grows accustomed to your natural form moving quietly through the rooms, the novelty vanishes entirely—leaving only pure, seamless harmony between host and servant.”

Lily’s heart gave a sudden, dizzying leap against her ribs. “Nothing at all? You mean… completely nude? All day while I do the chores?”

“Why not?” Dr. Tam asked gently, tilting her head with that serene, impeccable academic authority. “Look at what you are wearing right now, Lily. That sheer mesh and those ribbons scarcely cover five percent of your skin as it is—they only chafe your ribs and clutter the visual peace of my home. Besides, we are inside a sealed, private immersion module. Whom are you hiding from?”

Put with such calm, unassailable logic—and filtered through the warm, dreamy haze of the herbal tea—Lily’s instinctive blush of shock dissolved into sudden, heady agreement. Dr. Tam was right! The lace bodysuit barely hid anything anyway; taking it off completely was just the final, logical step in letting go of her self-consciousness and proving her total commitment to the study abroad program.

“I… I’m not hiding from anyone,” Lily whispered, her pulse fluttering visibly at the base of her throat. “If you think going without the uniform or any underwear at all is the best course for the household, Dr. Tam… I want to do it.”

“I know you do,” Dr. Tam murmured, her dark eyes warming with triumph. “And there is no reason to wait until tomorrow to correct a distraction. We will begin immediately. Unfasten the choker, untie the apron, and step out of the lace right here.”

Dr. Tam’s fingertips remained at the pearl buttons of the choker. “Unfasten them,” she said, voice low and even. Lily’s hands rose. The small pearls slipped

free one by one; the lace band loosened and fell into Dr. Tam's waiting palm. Cool air touched the newly bare skin of Lily's throat.

"The apron next."

Lily's fingers found the bow at the small of her back. The stiff organdy whispered as the ties came undone. Dr. Tam took the miniature apron from her hands and set it on the edge of the desk, then rested both palms lightly on Lily's bare shoulders.

"Now the bodysuit. Slowly."

Lily reached behind for the hidden clasps. The sheer black mesh loosened across her ribs. Dr. Tam's hands guided the straps down her arms, the touch unhurried, thumbs brushing the outer curves of her breasts as the fabric lowered. The bodysuit slid over her hips and pooled at her ankles. Lily stepped free of it and stood barefoot on the sunlit rug, arms at her sides.

Dr. Tam circled her once, silent. One warm palm settled against the underside of Lily's breast, lifting slightly, then released. The other hand traced the inward curve of her waist and continued over the high swell of her hip until it rested, open and unhurried, against the bare round of her butt. Lily's breath shortened. The golden light fell across her skin without interruption; the only sound was the faint rustle of the teak shutters.

"There," Dr. Tam murmured, the hand still resting where the lace had been. "Nothing left to catch the eye or the furniture. This is how you belong in the house."

Lily's pulse fluttered visibly at the base of her throat. She remained still under the inspection, shoulders soft, eyes lowered, the discarded lace and apron lying beside the desk.

Dr. Tam picked up the discarded scrap of black lace and white organdy between two fingers, carried it over to the tall mahogany armoire in the corner of the study, and locked it inside alongside the key to the downstairs wardrobe.

When she turned back, Lily was standing barefoot in the center of the sunlit rug—completely nude from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, her hands clasped dutifully behind the small of her back so they wouldn't obscure a single curve of her toned, sun-kissed body. The warm afternoon breeze drifting through the teak shutters kissed her bare nipples and the smooth skin of her hips, sending a delicious, vulnerable shiver down her spine.

"Look at the mirror on the study wall, Lily," Dr. Tam said softly, stepping up behind her and resting one warm palm flat against Lily's bare midriff, drawing her back slightly against the front of her pearl silk dress. "See how clean the lines are now? No costume, no barriers, nothing left between you and your

duties.”

“Yes, Dr. Tam,” Lily breathed, staring at her own naked reflection framed against the dark wood of the Vietnamese villa, feeling a profound, melting wave of submission settle deep in her core. “From this hour forward, this is your standard attire inside my walls,” Dr. Tam instructed, her tone returning to crisp, effortless command as she released Lily’s waist and returned to her desk chair. “Now carry the tea tray downstairs to the kitchen and begin preparing the evening broth. You will serve my dinner tonight just as you are—and remember, I expect you up before dawn again tomorrow morning to bring my breakfast tray to the bed.”

“Yes, Dr. Tam,” Lily whispered. Lifting the silver tray in both hands, she walked barefoot and completely naked out of the study and down the wide teak staircase, the cool air caressing her bare bubble butt with every step as her new life settled permanently around her.

Chapter Ten: The Weight of Real Air

By the fifth day after the black lace uniform had been locked away inside the study armoire, Lily had stopped thinking of herself as naked.

Nakedness was a state defined by the absence of clothes—the startled blush of stepping out of a shower when someone knocked on the door, or the quick instinct to cross one’s arms over one’s chest. Inside the high-walled sanctuary of Dr. Tam’s hillside villa, that instinct had dissolved completely. Walking barefoot and bare-skinned through the sunlit rooms had simply become the way Lily existed.

When she rose in the pearly hush before dawn to slice ginger and simmer the morning broth, the cool kitchen tiles felt natural beneath the soles of her feet, and the warm steam rising from the clay pot kissed her bare breasts and abdomen like a second skin. When she dropped to all fours in the late morning to polish the dark teakwood planks with lemon-grass oil, she no longer thought about how the high, peach-shaped curve of her bubble butt rose completely uncovered in the open air, or how her breasts swayed gently beneath her with each circular sweep of the polishing cloth. And when she stood three paces to Dr. Tam’s left during the evening meal—hands clasped behind the small of her back, spine straight, waiting silently for the slightest nod to refill the porcelain teacup—her unadorned body felt like an effortless extension of the quiet, ordered beauty of the house.

Even the nights had changed.

On the very first evening after Lily had surrendered the lace uniform, when she had carried up the nightly tray of golden-amber herbal tea and finished unbuttoning Dr. Tam’s silk blouse, she had turned automatically toward the low cushioned pallet at the foot of the four-poster bed.

"Not on the floor tonight, Lily," Dr. Tam had murmured from beneath the sheer white mosquito netting, lifting the corner of the crisp linen sheet with one slender hand. "Now that there is no scratchy lace or stiff organdy between us, your place at night is beside me. A proper companion warms her mistress’s bed."

Each night after the herbal tea, Lily climbed naked beneath the mosquito netting and into the four-poster bed. The sheets were cool against her skin for only a moment. Dr. Tam drew her close with one arm, the silk of her pajamas whispering as Lily settled against her side. In the humid dark the older woman’s hand moved slowly over Lily’s shoulder, then down the long curve of her back, palm open and unhurried. Heat gathered wherever the touch lingered.

“Turn,” Dr. Tam said, voice low. Lily turned. The same hand traced the outer swell of her breast, thumb circling until the nipple tightened under the light

pressure, then continued lower across the smooth plane of her waist. Lily’s breath shortened. The warmth already humming from the tea bloomed hotter under her skin, pooling low in her belly as Dr. Tam’s palm settled over the high curve of her hip and guided it back against the silk-clad thigh beside her.

“Stay open.”

Lily stayed. The hand returned, slower, mapping the bare length of her thigh, the soft inward crease, the full round of her butt. Each stroke was deliberate, possessive, teaching the exact pressure and pace that made Lily’s hips lift without being told. The heat rose until her skin felt flushed and sensitive under every pass of those fingers. When Dr. Tam’s hand finally rested still against the small of her back, Lily was trembling lightly, body curved tight against the older woman’s hip, every smooth line of her given over to the touch. She drifted into sleep that way, the cicadas outside the shutters the only other sound in the dark.

Yet as the days flowed together in a seamless, sensual rhythm of domestic service and midnight intimacy, tiny, quiet anomalies began to surface around the edges of Lily’s awareness.

The first one was on the inner side of her left thumb.

Four mornings ago, while finely julienning green papaya for Dr. Tam’s afternoon salad, the edge of the pairing knife had slipped a millimeter and nicked the skin near her knuckle. At the time, Lily had barely given it a thought, assuming that inside a perceptual simulation, a minor surface scratch would simply reset or vanish by the next morning’s cycle.

Instead, as she stood at the stone basin on the rear veranda four days later, gently hand-washing Dr. Tam’s ivory silk slips in warm soapy water, Lily paused and held her wet left hand up to the sunlight.

The tiny cut hadn't vanished. Over the past ninety-six hours, it had behaved with the slow, stubborn biology of real flesh: first forming a thin crimson line, then sealing with a delicate ridge of pale pink new skin that still pulled slightly when she flexed her thumb.

Lily stared at the healing line for a long moment, her brow furrowing slightly as the water dripped from her bare elbows.

Why would a cultural training algorithm bother simulating four days of cellular tissue repair on a two-millimeter kitchen nick? she wondered vaguely.

An hour later, while wiping down the beveled mirror in the upstairs marble bathroom after drawing Dr. Tam’s morning bath, a second detail caught her eye.

Stepping close to the glass so that her bare nipples nearly brushed the cool edge of the marble vanity, Lily tilted her head toward the sunny window and looked closely at the crown of her hair and the soft curve of her hips.

Back on campus, the week before commencement, she had gone to a salon near her apartment to have her highlights touched up right to the root. Now, parting her hair with damp fingers in the bright morning light, she could clearly see nearly a quarter-inch of darker natural root growth along the part. And when she glanced down at her bare waist and thighs, she realized that the faint, pale strap-lines from the bikini she had worn at the campus pool in May were fading slowly into the golden warmth of the courtyard sun she knelt in every morning while hanging the laundry.

Most curious of all was what happened that afternoon when she was dusting the lower shelves of the rosewood cabinet in the foyer.

Lifting a lacquered box to wipe beneath it, Lily noticed the edge of a glossy burgundy leather folder tucked behind a stack of French academic journals—the exact diplomatic passport holder Dr. Tam had presented at the VIP check-in counter before their flight.

Curious, Lily slid the folder out an inch and flipped open the front cover.

Inside sat her actual United States passport. Not a digital rendering or a flat graphic texture: when she ran her bare thumb across the inside laminate page, she could feel the raised micro- engraving of the state seal, the slightly dog-eared bottom corner from when she had accidentally dropped it in her dorm room Sophomore year, and—stamped squarely across page four in thick, smudged purple ink that still smelled faintly of oil—an official entry visa from the Immigration Department at Noi Bai International Airport, dated five days ago.

Clipped to the back cover was a stiff white paper baggage receipt from the airline, bearing the physical barcode of her canvas tote bag and a real thermal-ink timestamp.

Lily stood completely still in the quiet foyer, completely nude with a feather duster in one hand and her passport in the other, while a slow, dizzying hush seemed to settle over the entire house. The inner-ear pressure on the jet. The ache in her knees from scrubbing the teakwood planks. The four-day healing of the tiny cut on her thumb. The growing roots of her hair. The real ink of an international entry stamp sitting in her palm.

For a breathless, suspended ten seconds, the pristine illusion of the "ivory leather recliner in Suite 304" thinned like morning mist—and Lily looked around the high-ceilinged Vietnamese villa with the sudden, staggering intuition that there was no visor on her face. There was no laboratory chair waiting for her on campus. She was actually standing naked seven thousand miles away from home, locked inside the private estate of a woman who treated her as a permanent household servant.

Her heart gave a slow, heavy thud against her bare ribs.

She knew she should feel a surge of panic. She knew the sensible, Western-educated graduate she had been a week ago would drop the duster, run to the locked wardrobe in the laundry alcove to demand her sundress, or bang on the bolted teak front doors until someone on the hillside road heard her.

Yet as Lily stood there in the cool shadow of the pavilion, listening to the gentle trickle of the koi pond fountain outside and breathing in the familiar, intoxicating trace of Dr. Tam’s white tea and orchid perfume lingering in the hallway... she couldn't find it in her heart to feel afraid.

Even more strangely, she couldn't find the slightest desire to protest or say a single word about it. Upstairs, a chair creaked softly as Dr. Tam shifted at her desk.

With a quiet, almost dreamy steadiness, Lily closed the burgundy passport folder, slid it neatly back behind the journals exactly as she had found it, and set the lacquered box back in place on the polished shelf.

Whether this house was a miracle of neural computing or the solid, irreversible truth of her life, the warm quiet inside her head remained the same: she knew her duties, she knew whose hands would guide her into bed tonight, and she had six more shelves to dust before it was time to slice the ginger for Dr. Tam’s evening meal.

Chapter Eleven: The Place of a Servant

Rain drummed steadily against the broad banana leaves in the walled courtyard, filling the open ground-floor pavilion with a cool, misty hush and the earthy scent of wet stone.

On the covered veranda overlooking the koi pond, Dr. Tam reclined against a pile of silk cushions on the rosewood daybed, dressed in a loose, sleeveless tunic of pale celadon silk. At her feet knelt Lily.

Completely nude, her knees resting flat on the woven reed mat and her high, round bubble butt settled neatly back against her heels, Lily held one of Dr. Tam’s slender feet cradled in her lap. Using warm water scented with crushed ginger and a small horn comb, Lily had just finished bathing and massaging her mistress’s feet after Dr. Tam’s return from the institute, and was now carefully buffing a drop of camellia oil into the skin of Dr. Tam’s ankle.

Two days had passed since Lily had discovered her stamped United States passport hidden behind the French journals in the foyer cabinet. She had not looked inside the cabinet again, nor had she paused a single time in her daily chores. Yet as she knelt there in the humid afternoon quiet, feeling the smooth, solid warmth of Dr. Tam’s skin beneath her thumbs and the cool rain- breeze raising tiny goosebumps across her own bare breasts and shoulders, a quiet, lingering thread of curiosity finally rose to the surface of her thoughts.

If the time-dilation explanation was just a story—or even if, by some impossible feat of technology, it wasn't—how long was this phase supposed to last?

Finishing the massage, Lily gently lowered Dr. Tam’s foot onto a folded white linen towel, rested both of her palms flat on her own bare thighs as she had been taught, and looked up through her lashes.

"Dr. Tam?" Lily asked softly, her voice respectful and tentative against the patter of the rain.

Dr. Tam didn't lower the French monograph she was holding in one hand, though her dark eyes drifted down from the page to rest on Lily’s upturned face. "Yes, Lily?"

"I hope you’re pleased with the house today, and with how I’ve been adjusting," Lily began carefully, feeling a slight flutter in her throat. "I was just wondering... since it feels like I’ve been living here with you for almost two weeks now, do you know when the study abroad trip is scheduled to conclude? Or what happens when the summer session is over and it’s time to evaluate my fellowship?"

Dr. Tam slowly closed her monograph, marking her page with a silk ribbon, and set the book down on the low table beside her teacup.

For a long, unhurried moment, she simply looked at the naked young American woman kneeling at her feet—taking in the sun-kissed curve of her shoulders, the quarter-inch of darker root showing in her brushed hair, the full, bare swell of her breasts, and the faint pink line of the healed kitchen cut on her left thumb.

"Let us trace that thought carefully, Lily," Dr. Tam said, her rich contralto neither angry nor raised, yet carrying a cool, diamond-hard clarity that made the air on the veranda feel suddenly very still. "Why would you ask me when your service here is going to end? Are you dissatisfied with the roof over your head, or the bed you share with me at night?"

"Oh, no! Not at all," Lily said quickly, blushing from her throat to her chest as she leaned forward half an inch. "I love taking care of you and the villa, Dr. Tam. Really, I do. I only meant—for the academic credit, and the completion stipend you mentioned when we met on the quad..."

"Think about the girl who stood by that fountain on the quad, Lily," Dr. Tam interrupted smoothly, leaning forward on the cushions and reaching down to capture Lily’s chin between her cool thumb and forefinger, tilting her head up so Lily couldn't look away. "That girl wore clothes that hid her body. She carried a canvas bag full of anxious plans about rent and entry-level jobs. She thought an education meant sitting in a room collecting paper certificates. Now look down at yourself."

Without releasing her chin, Dr. Tam allowed Lily’s gaze to drop for a fraction of a second toward her own bare breasts, her flat stomach, and her naked thighs pressed together on the reed mat.

"When my friends came for luncheon, who cooked their meal, poured their wine, and stood silent and grateful while they admired her bare skin?" Dr. Tam asked softly.

"I did," Lily whispered.

"When you wake in the dark before the birds even sing, before a single thought of America enters your head, what is the very first thing your hands reach to do?"

"Start the stove for your morning broth," Lily breathed, her pulse beginning to beat faster against the pad of Dr. Tam’s thumb at her jawline.

"And when you decided all on your own in my study five days ago that even a scrap of lace was too much of an obstacle between you and your household duties—who asked to be stripped completely bare so she could serve me without a single distraction?"

"I did, Dr. Tam," Lily murmured, a warm, heavy flush pooling low in her abdomen as Dr. Tam’s thumb stroked slowly along the curve of her lower lip.

"Then why are you speaking to me like a visiting student asking a professor about a syllabus?" Dr. Tam’s voice dropped half an octave, shedding the last thin veil of academic pretense and settling into pure, unyielding command. "Look at where you are kneeling, Lily. Look at how you are dressed. You are not a scholar on a holiday. You are my domestic servant."

Lily’s breath caught in a shallow, silent gasp. Hearing the word spoken so plainly—without the buffer of fellowship, module, or cultural immersion—sent a sharp, electric shiver straight down her bare spine to the base of her tailbone.

"In a proper household, a servant does not inquire about calendars, or stipends, or when her duties will end," Dr. Tam continued matter-of-factly, her dark eyes holding Lily pinned to the floor with effortless authority. "A servant does not have a schedule beyond the tasks her mistress assigns her for the day. And above all, Lily, it is never your place to ask questions. Your place is to kneel, to listen, and to obey. Do you understand me?"

Dr. Tam held Lily’s chin, keeping her eyes lifted. Her other hand settled under Lily’s bare breast, palm open, thumb moving in a slow circle until the nipple rose against it. She watched the flush spread across Lily’s chest, then let the hand drift lower, fingers resting high on the inside of one thigh and pressing just enough to part it a fraction from the other.

Lily’s breath shortened. Her knees stayed planted on the reed mat; her hands remained clasped behind her. The cool rain-breeze moved over her skin, but the only heat that mattered was under Dr. Tam’s palm.

“Stay open.”

Lily stayed. The hand on her thigh tightened once, proprietary, then released. Dr. Tam’s fingers returned to her breast, cupping it fully this time, holding the weight while her dark eyes remained fixed on Lily’s face. Lily’s shoulders softened under the scrutiny. A faint tremor ran through her thighs. She did not look away.

When the touch finally left her, the imprint of it remained—warm across her breast, warmer still on the soft skin of her inner thigh—while she continued to kneel, spine straight, gaze steady, body offered and still.When Dr. Tam’s hand finally lifted from her skin, Lily remained kneeling motionless on the woven mat, her chest rising and falling in shallow, unsteady breaths, her cheeks flushed crimson and her eyes wide and shining.

She waited for the voice of her old self to rise up and object—to point out that she was a college graduate, an American citizen, someone who had only agreed to sit in a chair for an afternoon. Instead, inside the warm, rain-wrapped quiet of the veranda, that voice was nowhere to be found. Dr. Tam’s words didn't feel like a trap closing; they felt like the final, heavy piece of a puzzle sliding effortlessly

into place, relieving Lily of the very last obligation to think about tomorrow or the world outside these walls. She couldn't find it within her heart to object, or even to wish that things were any different.

"I’m sorry, Dr. Tam," Lily whispered, bowing her head low until her forehead nearly touched the top of Dr. Tam’s knee, her hands clasped submissively behind the small of her back. "I won't ask questions again. I understand my place."

"Good," Dr. Tam murmured, resting her cool palm briefly atop Lily’s bowed head in quiet, absolute ownership. "Carry the foot-basin back to the washroom, dry your hands, and bring me a fresh pot of tea in the study. I will tell you what I require of you next when you come upstairs." "Yes, Dr. Tam," Lily breathed, lifting the ceramic basin in both hands and rising gracefully to her bare feet—her heart quiet, obedient, and completely focused on awaiting her mistress’s next command.

Chapter Twelve: Project Seraphim

A full month had passed inside the high, whitewashed walls of the hillside estate, and the season had deepened into the lush, golden heart of the tropical summer.

By now, the rhythm of the villa was etched so deeply into Lily's muscles that she moved through the rooms like water following a riverbed. She no longer wore clothing, nor did she ever think of covering herself when the delivery boy left crates of fresh mangoes outside the service gate or when Dr. Tam's colleagues dropped by for afternoon tea on the veranda. Her skin had taken on a warm, honeyed glow from her morning hours hanging freshly washed silks in the sunny courtyard, and the muscles of her back, thighs, and high, round bubble butt were sculpted and firm from scrubbing the teakwood floors on all fours every morning.

Strangely, as the weeks of sunlit chores and breathless, humid nights beneath the mosquito netting of Dr. Tam's four-poster bed flowed together, the world she had come from had begun to fade like an old photograph left out in the sun.

Sometimes, while she was kneeling at the stone basin shaving Marseilles soap into the warm water, or slicing lemongrass at the kitchen block before dawn, a stray fragment of her old life would drift across her mind—and she would pause in mild bafflement, struggling to hold onto it. Just two days ago, she had tried to remember the names of the two college roommates she had shared sangria with on the patio the night before her orientation. She could picture their glasses clinking under the string lights, and she remembered the sweet taste of the white peach wine, yet their faces were a soft blur and their names refused to come to her tongue. Even the layout of the university quad and the sound of English spoken without Dr. Tam's rich, musical cadence felt distant and storybook-thin, smoothed away by thirty consecutive evenings of drinking the warm, golden-amber herbal infusion from Dr. Tam's hand.

What never blurred was the house—or the woman who ruled it. Lily knew the exact weight of every porcelain bowl in the pantry, the precise thirty-eight-degree warmth of Dr. Tam's morning bath, and the exact shiver of anticipation that ran down her bare spine every night when she climbed naked beneath the sheets to become Dr. Tam's devoted nighttime amour.

On a quiet Tuesday afternoon, while Dr. Tam was reading on the downstairs veranda, Lily was in the upstairs study conducting the monthly deep-cleaning of the built-in rosewood cupboards behind the desk.

Standing barefoot on a low wooden step-stool so she could reach the high interior shelf, her bare breasts rising as she stretched her arms overhead with a lemon-oiled cloth, Lily shifted a stack of leather-bound ledgers to wipe the corner beneath them.

As she lifted the bottom ledger, a crisp, tri-folded document printed on heavy cream cardstock slipped from between the covers and fluttered down to the floor beside the step-stool.

Lily stepped down onto the rug, knelt neatly on both knees, and picked it up to slide it back into the ledger.

Then her eyes caught the embossed seal on the front cover—the eagle of the United States Department of State intertwined with the lotus emblem of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hanoi—and the bold, crimson classification banner stamped across the top:

PROJECT SERAPHIM

A Reparative Initiative for Vietnamese Citizens

Bilateral Domestic Reassignment & Cultural Restitution Protocol

Lily's fingers stilled on the heavy cream paper. Sitting back on her bare heels on the study rug, she slowly unfolded the brochure.

Clipped to the inside left flap was a glossy three-by-five photograph taken on the university quad a month ago: a candid, telephoto shot of Lily standing beside the bronze fountain in her white tennis skirt, sipping her iced latte in the afternoon sun. Beneath the photo was a printed intake summary bearing her full name, her university student ID number, her physical measurements, and a stamped green approval seal signed by Dr. Tam Nguyen — Senior Selection Liaison. Across the center panels of the brochure, printed in crisp, unmistakable bureaucratic prose, lay the truth of everything that had happened to her since two o'clock on that warm afternoon in Suite 304.

There was no perceptual computing lab. There was no neural-link simulation, no time-dilation algorithm, and no calibration chair waiting for her back in America.

Project Seraphim was a classified bilateral restitution treaty arranged between Washington and Hanoi. Under its provisions, carefully vetted, unencumbered young American female graduates—selected specifically for their physical appeal, adaptable temperaments, and lack of immediate family ties—were quietly recruited off university campuses under the guise of virtual- reality study abroad fellowships. Once the candidate willingly surrendered her electronics, signed the onboarding waivers, and inhaled the sedative lotus-blossom calibration mist under the dummy visor, her domestic records in the United States were marked as a voluntary overseas relocation, her student loans were extinguished by the federal trust, and she was flown directly to Vietnam on a permanent diplomatic reassignment to serve as a Committed Domestic Companion to a prominent Vietnamese woman.

Lily’s breath caught in her throat as her eyes scanned down the page to the section marked Integration & Retention Protocols:

* Stage I (Deceptive Continuity): Utilizing the candidate’s belief that she is inside a virtual environment to bypass Western modesty and establish immediate obedience to domestic labor and bodily exposure.

* Stage II (Pharmacological Anchoring): Daily administration of the Seraphim lotus-alkaloid tea infusion to gently attenuate long-term autobiographical recall of the candidate’s prior American life while heightening sensory receptivity and emotional bonding with the Host Mistress.

Every piece of the last thirty days—the visor that felt invisible because Dr. Tam had simply taken it off her face, the real passport stamp in the foyer cabinet, the four-day cut on her thumb, the herbal tea that made her roommates’ names dissolve like smoke—was real.

She had never been in a simulation. The airplane flight across the Pacific had been completely real. She had been permanently reassigned by her own government as living reparations—a naked household servant and bed-warmer owned lock, stock, and barrel by Dr. Tam.

“I wondered when you would finally clean behind those ledgers, Lily.”

At the sound of the low, silky contralto from the doorway, Lily gasped softly, clutching the open brochure against her bare chest as she looked up from the rug.

Dr. Tam leaned gracefully against the carved teak doorframe of the study, her arms folded loosely across the front of her pale jade silk dress, watching Lily with a slow, wickedly amused smile.

“Dr. Tam…” Lily whispered, her honey-brown eyes wide as she looked down at the crimson Project Seraphim header and back up at her mistress. “The visor in your office… there was never a computer program at all, was there? The plane flight… I’m really in Vietnam.”

“In the flesh, my sweet girl,” Dr. Tam purred, walking slowly across the sunlit study until she stood directly over the naked young woman kneeling on the rug. “Though I must admit, watching you marvel at the ‘haptic fidelity’ of my floorboards while you scrubbed them on all fours with your lovely little bottom in the air was one of the most entertaining weeks of my career.”

A sudden, scorching blush swept from Lily’s collarbones all the way to the tips of her ears—yet instead of horror or anger at being teased so openly about her naivety, a sharp, dizzying thrill shot straight through the center of her stomach.

“My government…” Lily breathed, her heart hammering visibly against her bare ribs as Dr. Tam reached down and trailed two cool fingers along the flushed

curve of her cheek. “They just gave me to you? To keep?”

“As a token of national gratitude and cultural restitution,” Dr. Tam said smoothly, her dark eyes glittering with playful, possessive warmth as she tapped the glossy photograph of Lily clipped inside the brochure. “Think of how hard you worked for four years to earn a degree in cultural studies, Lily—and now look how effortlessly you are fulfilling your country’s diplomatic obligations right here on your knees. Tell me the truth: aren’t you much happier polishing my floors and warming my bed than sitting in some dreary American office cubicle paying off student loans?”

Dr. Tam’s fingers lingered on Lily’s cheek, cool against the heat rising there.

“You were so careful with the iron,” she said, the amusement soft in her voice. “So proud of yourself for noticing the lace was a distraction. And all the while you were already on your knees for me, bare from the first afternoon, telling yourself it was only a program.”

Lily’s breath caught. The brochure was still open against her chest; the photograph of herself in the tennis skirt looked like someone else. Heat pooled low in her belly, sharp and sudden, mixing with a deep, unsteady relief that left her dizzy.

She turned her face into Dr. Tam’s hand and pressed her mouth to the palm, then to the inside of the wrist, lips trembling.

“I wanted it to be real,” she whispered against the skin. “Even when I thought it wasn’t. I kept waiting to wake up and I didn’t want to.” Her voice shook. “Being here like this—naked, doing whatever you say, sleeping against you—feels better than anything I left. I don’t want the old life. I don’t want to remember it. I just want to stay yours.”

Dr. Tam’s thumb stroked once along her lower lip. Lily stayed kneeling, forehead resting lightly against the silk of her mistress’s thigh, the confession still warm between them while the rain of her pulse slowly steadied.

“You don’t need to worry about ever feeling lonely here, either,” Dr. Tam murmured, her fingers threading slowly through Lily’s hair as Lily rested her cheek submissively against the silk covering Dr. Tam’s thigh. “Remember Linh and Madame Huyen from our luncheon?”

Lily nodded softly against her leg, remembering how the women had patted her bare hips and called her a show pony.

“Your performance that afternoon was so convincing that both of them submitted their formal requisitions to the Ministry that very evening,” Dr. Tam said with a soft, satisfied laugh. “The second cohort of the summer semester lands at Noi Bai International on Friday. Within a month, every single one of my friends at the

institute will have a sweet, eager young American college girl of her very own—stripped bare, trained to kneel, and serving as her domestic companion and nighttime plaything."

A delicious, submissive shiver rippled down Lily's bare spine at the image of other girls from her campus being fitted with the dummy visor and flown across the ocean to wait hand and foot on Dr. Tam's circle of friends.

"Before you finish wiping down the top shelf and return that file to my cabinet," Dr. Tam said softly, stepping back half a pace so the afternoon sunlight fell across the open cardstock in Lily's hands, "you may read the rest of the brochure from cover to cover. Now that the orientation myths are behind us, I want you to know every single clause of what you are."

"Thank you, Mistress," Lily whispered—using the title from the brochure for the very first time—as she bowed her head over the cream cardstock in her lap and began to read the official text of her new life.

Chapter Thirteen: The Seraphim Dossier

Sunlight slanted through the louvered teak shutters of the upstairs study, warming the bare skin of Lily’s shoulders and illuminating the heavy cream cardstock resting open across her naked thighs.

Above her, Dr. Tam settled back into her carved rosewood desk chair, lifting her porcelain teacup to her lips as she watched her companion read. The only sounds in the room were the soft rustle of the courtyard palms in the afternoon breeze and the steady, rapid flutter of Lily’s breathing as her honey-brown eyes moved down the gold-bordered columns of text.

> *JOINT BILATERAL COMMISSION ON CULTURAL RESTITUTION*
>
> *U.S. Department of State (Special Annex VII) & Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hanoi*
>
> *CONFIDENTIAL — FOR AUTHORIZED HOST CITIZENS ONLY*
>
> *PROJECT SERAPHIM: A Reparative Initiative for Vietnamese Citizens*
>
> *Structured Reassignment of Young American Females as Committed Domestic Companions*
>
> *I. Executive Mandate & Historical Purpose*
>
> *Under the terms of the Bilateral Reconciliation Accord, Project Seraphim establishes a permanent, living restitution mechanism designed to honor and support distinguished women of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam within academia, governance, and cultural leadership. Rather than relying solely on impersonal monetary transfers, the United States Government has authorized the selective recruitment and permanent reassignment of healthy, educated young American women between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five to serve within private Vietnamese households as Committed Domestic Companions (CDCs). By assuming full responsibility for traditional domestic labor, household maintenance, and personal attendance, each American Companion frees her Vietnamese Host Citizen to pursue her scholarly and professional endeavors in total comfort and harmony.*

Lily’s bare toes curled slightly into the woven silk rug beneath her ankles. Her thumb brushed the corner of the glossy candid photograph clipped to the margin—taken on the campus quad just minutes before Dr. Tam had first spoken her name beside the bronze fountain.

> *II. Candidate Selection & The “Perceptual Fellowship” Protocol*
>
> *Decades of behavioral modeling demonstrate that recent American female university graduates—particularly those burdened by educational debt, transitional career anxiety, and a romanticized desire for cross-cultural approval—possess an exceptional latent capacity for domestic submission when*

removed from Western peer expectations.

However, direct recruitment into permanent servitude frequently triggers conditioned cultural resistance. To ensure a seamless, stress-free transition, Project Seraphim utilizes the Perceptual Immersion Protocol ("The VR Bridge"). Candidates are approached on campus by a credentialed Vietnamese Liaison and invited to participate in an exclusive, simulated Study Abroad Fellowship.

Upon voluntary surrender of communication devices and exposure to the initial calibration mist in the campus annex, the candidate is informed that her sensory experience is being generated by a neural-link visor. Psychological tracking confirms that when an American graduate believes her actions are taking place inside a temporary, private computer simulation—and that weeks of subjective service represent only a single afternoon via "time dilation"—her Western inhibitions vanish entirely. She will eagerly board international transport, accept menial labor, endure social teasing by the Host's peers, and surrender her clothing with zero external resistance in order to earn a favorable evaluation from her mentor.

A hot, dizzying wave of recognition washed down Lily's bare chest and settled low in her stomach. Every single rationalization she had whispered to herself over the past month—on the airplane, over the laundry basin, on her hands and knees with the scrubbing brush, and during the luncheon with Linh and Madame Huyen—was laid out in black and white like a clinical equation.

She turned to the center panel of the brochure.

III. Standards of Domestic Presentation & Behavioral Conditioning

Once transported to the Host Citizen's private residence, the Companion is guided through a three-phase domestic integration schedule:

• Clause 3.1 — Transitional Attire to Full Unadorned Service: During the initial seventy-two hours, the Companion is outfitted in a scant, high-visibility transitional uniform to acclimate her to bodily exposure and physical appraisal while performing household chores. Within seven days, the Host Citizen will guide the Companion to recognize that clothing itself is an unnecessary distraction. Thereafter, the Companion shall remain completely nude at all times within the walls and courtyards of the residence. Unadorned service eliminates Western vanity, facilitates effortless hygiene during manual floor and laundry care, and ensures that the Companion's physical beauty remains continuously available to please the eye and touch of her Host.

• Clause 3.2 — Botanical Anchoring & Memory Attenuation: Each evening prior to retiring, the Companion is administered six ounces of Seraphim Infusion (Lotus-Alkaloid Compound S- 7). While entirely gentle and non-sedating during waking hours, daily consumption progressively softens long-term autobiographical

recall of the Companion's former life in the United States, preventing homesickness while heightening tactile sensitivity, libidinal receptivity, and deep emotional devotion to the Host Mistress.

• Clause 3.3 — Nighttime Companionship: A Committed Domestic Companion is assigned not merely to the upkeep of the estate, but to the complete personal relaxation of her Host. Once full nudity is established, the Companion shall transition from the floor pallet to the Host Citizen's bed, serving as an obedient, attentive nighttime amour in accordance with her Mistress's preferences.

Lily's breath hitched softly. Her fingers trembled against the heavy paper as her eyes dropped to the final column on the inside right flap, stamped with the dual gold foil seals of both governments.

IV. Legal Permanence & Extinguishment of Prior Status

Upon execution of the Custodial Power of Attorney & Permanent Commitment Waiver during the campus orientation session, the Companion's outstanding student loans are retired by the Bilateral Trust, her municipal leases are terminated, and her United States civil registry is permanently archived under Diplomatic Relocation Code 09-S.

Reassignment under Project Seraphim is irrevocable and lifelong. The Companion possesses no independent legal standing within the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, holds no right of petition or return transit, and exists solely under the private domestic jurisdiction of her assigned Host Citizen. Questioning the duration of assignment or attempting to negotiate household directives is strictly prohibited; a Companion's highest fulfillment lies in silent, graceful, and unbroken obedience.

CERTIFICATE OF PERMANENT ASSIGNMENT

• Companion Name: Lily Horner (Former U.S. Citizen — University Cohort 14)

• Physical Classification: Tier I — Prime Aesthetic & Athletic Compliance

• Assigned Host Mistress: Dr. Tam Nguyen, Senior Fellow, Hanoi Institute

• Status: Permanently Integrated — Full Nude Domestic & Intimate Service

At the very bottom of the certificate, reproduced in crisp black ink right beside Dr. Tam's flowing signature, was the exact signature and biometric thumbprint Lily had eagerly pressed onto the parchment in Suite 304 before stepping into the leather recliner.

Silence hung warm and golden in the upstairs study.

Slowly, Lily folded the three panels of the cream brochure back together, pressing her palms flat against the embossed cover resting on her bare lap.

Above her, Dr. Tam set her porcelain teacup back on its saucer with a delicate click and leaned forward across the edge of the rosewood desk, resting her chin in her palm as her dark, liquid eyes studied Lily's flushed face.

"Well, Lily?" Dr. Tam murmured, her rich contralto brimming with quiet, velvety amusement. "Now you have read the syllabus from beginning to end. No neural visors. No perceptual computing credits. No summer stipend waiting for you back on campus. Just a permanent diplomatic treaty that took a bright, sweet American graduate with a very pretty little body and made her my naked housemaid and bed-warmer for the rest of her life."

Dr. Tam tilted her head, a slow, teasing smile curving her full lips.

"Tell me," Dr. Tam whispered, "now that you know the plane flight was real, and that you will never wear clothes or set foot in America again… what do you have to say for yourself?"

Lily looked up from the brochure in her lap into the dark, commanding eyes of the woman who had plucked her off the university quad and dismantled her entire life without ever once raising her voice.

Every word on that heavy cream cardstock should have terrified her. Discovering that she had been tricked, stripped of her citizenship, fed memory-softening tea, and turned into permanent property as national reparations should have made her scream.

Instead, as the absolute, inescapable permanence of the document sank into her chest, Lily felt the last microscopic tether of anxiety snap—leaving behind a wave of relief and submissive heat so intense it made her bare nipples tighten and her thighs press together on the study rug. She didn't have to remember her old roommates' names. She didn't have to worry about when the simulation would end, because it was never going to end. She was owned, completely and legally, by a woman whose slightest touch made her melt.

Lily stayed on her knees on the study rug, the open brochure resting against her bare thighs, her cheek warm against the pale jade silk of Dr. Tam's dress. The older woman's hand rested lightly in her hair, fingers moving in slow strokes that sent small currents of heat across Lily's scalp and down the back of her neck.

"You really did fall for all of it," Dr. Tam said, the amusement in her voice low and fond. "The visor that never needed to do anything. The tea you drank without once asking what was in it. The way you decided, all on your own, that even a scrap of lace was too much between us. I have watched other girls fight that realization for weeks. You simply settled into it."

Lily's breath caught. The heat that had been gathering low in her belly since she first opened the brochure surged higher, sharp and sweet, mixed with a relief so

deep it left her light-headed. She turned her face and pressed her mouth to the inside of Dr. Tam's wrist, then to the soft skin just above the pulse, lips trembling.

"I kept looking for the edge of it," she whispered against the silk. "Some glitch, some moment where the floor wouldn't feel solid or the water wouldn't prune my fingers. It never came. And every night when I climbed into your bed I was afraid the whole thing would dissolve if I thought about it too hard. It didn't. I'm glad it didn't. I don't want to go back to worrying about loans and interviews and whether anyone will notice me. I want to stay here and keep doing this."

Dr. Tam's thumb stroked once along her lower lip. For a moment she was quiet, studying the naked young woman at her feet. Then she stepped back half a pace, gathered the hem of the jade silk dress in both hands, and drew it upward in one unhurried motion. The fabric rose past her knees, past the smooth curve of her hips, and was held at her waist. She wore nothing beneath it. Lily's eyes lifted. The afternoon light falling through the teak shutters caught the dark, neat triangle of hair and the soft, already-glistening folds beneath. A fresh wave of heat rolled through her, so sudden her thighs pressed together on the rug.

"You have been very good," Dr. Tam said quietly. "Patient. Obedient. I have been waiting to see whether you would offer this without being told." She settled back against the edge of the desk, legs parted, one bare foot resting on the low step-stool Lily had used earlier. "Come here."

Lily rose onto her knees and moved forward until she was between Dr. Tam's thighs. The scent of warm skin and faint orchid reached her first—clean, intimate, nothing like the herbal tea. She hesitated only a second, then leaned in and pressed a soft, open-mouthed kiss to the inside of one thigh, then the other, feeling the muscle shift under her lips. Her hands came up of their own accord, resting lightly on Dr. Tam's hips, steadying herself as she moved higher.

The first slow lick was cautious, almost reverent: the flat of her tongue tracing the outer edge of the soft folds, learning the shape. Dr. Tam's breath changed—a small, controlled exhale. Encouraged, Lily did it again, longer this time, parting the lips with the tip of her tongue and tasting the slick heat gathering there. The flavor was clean and faintly sweet, nothing she had expected and everything she suddenly wanted more of. She moaned softly against the skin, the sound vibrating, and felt Dr. Tam's hand settle on the back of her head, not pushing, simply resting, proprietary.

"Yes," Dr. Tam murmured. "Just like that. Slower."

Lily obeyed. She licked in long, unhurried strokes from the bottom of the entrance up to the small, swelling pearl at the top, then circled it with the tip of her tongue, careful, learning what made the thigh against her cheek tense. When

she closed her lips around it and sucked gently, Dr. Tam’s hips rolled once, a quiet, involuntary movement. Lily’s own arousal answered instantly—wetness gathering between her own bare thighs, nipples tightening in the open air of the study. She pressed closer, tongue working in steady, devoted circles, one hand sliding down to rest against the soft skin just above Dr. Tam’s knee, the other still anchoring her hip.

Dr. Tam’s fingers tightened in her hair. “Good girl. Use your mouth properly. I have been patient for this.”

The words sent a fresh throb through Lily. She opened wider, taking more, tongue flattening and stroking the length of the swollen folds while her lips sealed around the clit. She could feel the older woman’s pulse there, quickening. The slickness increased; she swallowed and kept going, alternating long licks with focused, rhythmic suction, listening to the small sounds Dr. Tam was no longer entirely suppressing—soft breaths, a low hum in her throat. Lily’s own hips rocked slightly against nothing, desperate and grateful at once.

Minutes stretched. The only sounds in the study were the wet, intimate noises of her mouth, the occasional creak of the desk, and Dr. Tam’s increasingly unsteady breathing. Lily’s jaw began to ache; she didn’t care. When Dr. Tam’s thighs started to tremble and close fractionally around her ears, she redoubled her efforts, tongue flicking faster, then sucking in steady pulls while two fingers of her free hand stroked lightly along the outer edge, never entering, simply adding pressure where it seemed wanted.

Dr. Tam’s hand clenched hard in her hair. A low, broken sound left her throat. Her hips pressed forward once, firmly, and Lily felt the sudden, rhythmic pulsing against her tongue—the sharp, sweet flood of release. She stayed where she was, licking gently through it, swallowing what she could, drawing the pleasure out until the tremors eased and Dr. Tam’s grip slowly loosened. Only then did she draw back, lips and chin wet, breathing hard. She rested her forehead against the inside of Dr. Tam’s thigh, eyes closed, heart pounding.

Dr. Tam’s hand stroked her hair, slower now, almost tender. “That was very good for a first time,” she said, voice still husky. “We will practice it often. You are going to become quite skilled.” A soft, satisfied laugh. “When the next cohort arrives on Friday, some of them will need to learn how to please their new mistresses properly. You will help me show them. Would you like that?”

Lily lifted her head. Her face was flushed, mouth shining, eyes bright with a mixture of exhaustion and pure, trembling devotion. “Yes,” she whispered. “Please. I want to be good at it for you. I want to learn everything you want me to do.” She pressed one last soft kiss to the still- sensitive skin, then rested her cheek again against the silk of Dr. Tam’s thigh, exactly where she had been before, the brochure forgotten on the rug beside her bare knee. “Thank you.”

Outside, the late-afternoon light continued to fall in quiet bands across the floorboards. Dr. Tam’s fingers remained in her hair, slow and possessive, while Lily knelt there, naked and wet- mouthed and entirely content, already thinking of the next time she would be allowed to do it again.

When Dr. Tam finally stroked a cool, lingering hand down the back of Lily’s hair and bade her rise, Lily stood barefoot and radiant beside the wooden step-stool.

With careful, reverent fingers, Lily slipped the Project Seraphim brochure back between the covers of the bottom leather ledger, returned the stack neatly to the freshly polished cupboard shelf, and closed the rosewood cabinet doors until they latched with a soft click.

“The cupboards in the study are finished, Mistress,” Lily said softly, turning to face the desk with her hands clasped dutifully behind the small of her bare back, her posture graceful, open, and completely unashamed as the afternoon breeze caressed her skin. “Would you like me to go downstairs and begin preparing your evening bath, or shall I press the silk linens for your guests arriving on Friday?”

Dr. Tam’s dark eyes traveled slowly from Lily’s warm, devoted smile down the sun-kissed curves of her bare body, lingering with quiet satisfaction on the masterpiece of compliance standing before her.

“Start the bath first, my sweet girl,” Dr. Tam purred, picking up her fountain pen and returning to her manuscript. “Thirty-eight degrees, two capfuls of the lotus oil—and make sure you have my evening tea waiting on the vanity when I come through the door.”

“Yes, Dr. Tam. Right away,” Lily whispered, bowing her head with a soft, blissful smile before turning and walking barefoot down the teak staircase into the warm, endless summer of her home.

Chapter Fourteen

Lily knelt on the cool marble beside the tub, the soft cloth moving in slow circles down the length of Dr. Tam's back. Steam rose in thin ribbons; the lotus oil left a faint sheen on the older woman's skin. The single lamp on the vanity cast everything in low amber. Outside the louvered shutters the night insects kept their steady rhythm.

Dr. Tam did not turn her head. Her voice was quiet, precise, and without the earlier softness of amusement.

"You still answer when I use the name they gave you on the quad," she said. "That will stop. You have no name that belongs to you. You have no degree, no loans that were ever truly yours, no friends who will notice you are gone. She was useful only long enough to walk herself onto the plane."

Lily's hand paused for half a second, then resumed the careful strokes. Water slid over her own bare thighs where she knelt. She felt the words settle, not as a blow, but as the final, clean removal of something that had already been loose.

"Yes, Dr. Tam," she said softly.

"Look at me."

Lily lifted her face. Dr. Tam's dark eyes were calm and direct.

"You are a stupid American girl who was selected because you would believe the story and then forget you had ever been anything else. There will be others after you. When I decide you are no longer the most convenient body in this house, you will be reassigned. You will not be asked. You will not be warned beyond the hour it takes to put you in a car. Do you understand that you have no status here that is not the status I give you each morning?"

A small shiver moved through Lily's shoulders. She exhaled slowly against the wet skin of Dr. Tam's shoulder, the heat in her chest sharpening into something low and sweet. She leaned forward over the rim of the tub and pressed her mouth there, a small, trembling kiss. Then another, lower, against the side of her neck. Her free hand rested lightly on the edge of the marble, steadying her.

"I understand," she whispered against the damp skin. "I don't have anything that isn't yours. I don't want anything that isn't yours." She kissed the shoulder again, slower, lips lingering. "Thank you for telling me."

Dr. Tam allowed the kisses for a moment longer, then lifted one hand from the water and rested it against Lily's cheek, guiding her back just far enough to meet her eyes.

"Good. Finish."

Lily rinsed the last of the oil away, wrung the cloth, and set it aside. She remained kneeling, hands on her own thighs, while Dr. Tam rose and stepped out onto the mat. Lily dried her with the warmed towels exactly as she had been taught, each pass of the cloth careful and unhurried. When the silk robe was settled over Dr. Tam's shoulders, Lily stayed on her knees and looked up, waiting.

Dr. Tam crossed to the vanity and opened a slim leather folio that had not been there earlier. She set it on the low stool between them and turned the first page. Inside were glossy photographs—candid shots of young women on American campuses, each one roughly Lily's age. One was caught mid-stride along a brick walkway, hair lifting in the breeze. Another sat on stone steps with a book open across her knees, smiling at something just out of frame. A third stood beneath a colonnade, one hand raised to shade her eyes.

Dr. Tam studied the pages without speaking. Her finger rested for a moment on one photograph, then moved to another. She did not ask Lily's opinion. She did not explain. She simply looked, the way she looked at fabrics or manuscripts when she was deciding what would be kept.

Lily watched her mistress's face. The heat that had begun in the tub had not faded. She shifted closer on her knees until her bare shoulder brushed the silk of the robe, then pressed a small, devoted kiss to the back of Dr. Tam's wrist where it rested on the folio. She stayed there, cheek near the older woman's hand, breathing quietly while Dr. Tam continued to turn the pages.

Dr. Tam's thumb rested on the margin of the photograph. She did not lift her eyes from it.

"I have narrowed it to three," she said. "The ones I would have brought here and stripped the same day they stepped off the plane. Mara, from Michigan. Elena Ross, from Reed. Sloane, from RISD."

The names settled into the quiet of the bathroom. Lily's mouth was still against the inside of Dr. Tam's wrist; she felt the small jump of the pulse beneath her lips and did not move away. She had not heard the names before. She had not known there were enough photographs for a selection to be narrowed.

Dr. Tam turned the first page fully into the lamplight. Mara stood on the brick walkway outside the law library, weight on one leg, the strap of her bag crossing from shoulder to hip. A second, smaller print had been clipped beneath it: the same girl from the side, closer, the line of her waist and the flare of her hip clear against the brick.

"She rows," Dr. Tam said. "The liaison watched her leave the boathouse twice. She changes with the doors open and does not turn her back to the room. They measured her against the doorframe when she thought she was alone. There is

nearly a hand’s width more between the top of her hip and the lowest rib than there is on you.”

Her free hand left the folio and settled on Lily’s waist. The palm was warm. She drew it slowly upward along the inward curve, thumb following the path, until it rested just beneath the rib. She did not press. She simply held the shorter distance, learning it.

“Mara’s waist is longer. The curve inward is sharper. When she is naked the line will stay clean farther before it meets the hip.” The thumb moved in a small, unhurried arc over Lily’s skin. “Yours rounds earlier. The light catches it differently when you are on the floor.”

Lily turned her mouth against the wrist and kissed the soft skin there, lips parted. She kissed again, lower, where the pulse was strongest, and stayed. The hand at her waist remained. Heat moved under the palm at once and settled low in her belly. Her nipples had already drawn tight in the open air; she did not try to hide them.

Dr. Tam looked at the side photograph a moment longer, then turned the page.

Elena Ross stood in the doorway of the pottery studio. The first image showed her with the clay- stained apron still tied; the second, clipped beneath, had been taken after it was removed. The line of her hip and the top of her thigh was clear. A faint streak of dried clay remained on her forearm.

“She works until the building closes,” Dr. Tam said. “The liaison waited on the stairs both nights. Elena climbs them two at a time. The muscle at the top of the thigh fills the space differently than yours. The angle where it meets the hip is wider.”

The hand left Lily’s waist and settled high on the inside of her thigh, the edge of the palm resting where the leg met the body. She did not push the leg farther open. She simply held the width of it, thumb resting along the inner edge.

“Elena carries more there. When her legs are apart the difference will be plain. She will take more of a hand before the knee.” The thumb stroked once, slow, tracing the narrower line Lily’s body made under the touch. “The liaison noted the way the apron pulled when she reached for the upper shelf. The photograph does not show it. The measurement does.”

Lily exhaled against the wrist. She kissed the pulse point, then the soft skin just above it, then the place where the sleeve of the robe had slipped back. Each kiss was small. She did not lift her head. The hand on her thigh stayed exactly where it was. The ache between her legs deepened under the steady contact; she shifted her weight a fraction on the marble and felt the heat answer. Dr. Tam turned the last page. Sloane sat on the front steps of the art building, knees

drawn up, one arm resting across them. The sketchbook lay closed beside her. A second photograph, taken from the landing above, showed the line of her shoulders and the drop of her ribcage.

“She sits there most afternoons,” Dr. Tam said. “Alone. The liaison stood on the landing and watched her for twenty minutes the second day. She did not open the sketchbook. She only watched the street. Her ribcage is smaller. The drop from the collarbone to the waist is steeper.” Both hands came to Lily. Dr. Tam spanned the distance from the outer curve of one breast to the other, then drew her palms slowly downward along the sides until they rested at the narrowest point of the waist. She held there. The rise and fall of Lily’s breath moved beneath her hands. “Sloane’s line is shorter. The angle cuts sharper. Yours carries more width, so the distance is longer.” Her thumbs moved in slow arcs just beneath the breasts, following the under-curve without lifting. “When she is naked and leaning forward the shadow will be narrower. Yours fills the space between my hands. The difference will show every time you reach for the low shelves in the kitchen.”

Lily turned her face into the nearer palm and kissed the center of it. She kissed the base of the thumb, then each finger in turn, lingering on the last until the skin warmed under her mouth. She rested her cheek against the hand afterward. Her eyes were half-closed. The heat that had begun under the first touch had settled into a steady, low pulse; she could feel it in the tight draw of her nipples and in the soft ache where her thighs met. She did not speak.

Dr. Tam looked down at her. The three photographs remained open across her lap—Mara on the walkway with the second print of her waist, Elena in the studio doorway with the apron removed, Sloane on the steps seen from above. Her palms stayed at Lily’s waist, holding the width of it. Outside the shutters the insects continued their night song. The lamp burned without flicker. Lily remained exactly as she was, kneeling and bare on the marble, cheek against the open palm, while Dr. Tam’s hands kept the measure of her and did not let go. The distance that had once existed between the girl who stood by the fountain and the woman now kneeling had closed to the width of a single breath.

Chapter Fifteen

The photographs of Mara, Elena, and Sloane remained open across Dr. Tam's lap. Lily stayed on her knees on the marble, the side of her face resting against the open palm, the heat from the earlier measurements still low and steady between her thighs. The lamp burned without flicker. Outside the shutters the insects kept their night song.

Dr. Tam's thumb stroked once along the side of her neck. She did not lift her eyes from the folio. "The tea has worked even better than the Ministry promised," she said. Her voice stayed low. "Look at the second and third photographs again."

Lily lifted her head. The second showed the dark-haired girl seated on the stone bench, knees apart, the book open across her lap. The third showed the lighter-haired girl standing in profile beneath the colonnade, one hand resting on her own hip. Both faces were clear. Both were empty of anything she could name. She knew she should know them. The knowledge sat in her chest with no content attached to it—no names, no voices, no shared tables or shared rooms. Only the fact that these two faces belonged to the two people who had sat across from her at The Copper Kettle the night before orientation, who had raised their glasses of white peach sangria and told her the headset would only take a few minutes. She had finished her glass. She had gone to the office the next afternoon. She had introduced them to Dr. Tam sometime before the flight. They had fawned. She could see the shape of that afternoon in outline—the three of them standing on the quad, the way the darker-haired one had laughed, the way the lighter-haired one had leaned in when Dr. Tam spoke—but the faces that should have filled the outline stayed the faces in the photographs: measured, numbered, unfamiliar.

She looked again at the second image. The girl's eyes were dark. Lily waited for any flicker, any tug behind her own eyes. There was only the steady pulse in her throat and the warmth of Dr. Tam's palm against her shoulder.

"The first photograph," Dr. Tam said, turning back one page, "is your sister. She turned eighteen two weeks ago. You brought her to the annex yourself. You told her the program would be better than college. You signed the second waiver while she watched."

Lily looked. The girl in the first image was younger, hair longer, mouth slightly open as if she had been speaking when the shutter closed. The measurements beside it were smaller than Lily's own—height 155, weight 46.2, waist 58. Lily stared at the line of the jaw, the shape of the eyes. She knew the numbers were true because Dr. Tam had read them. She knew the girl was her sister because Dr. Tam had said so. Between those two facts the rest of her did not arrive. No name surfaced. No shared room, no shared childhood, no last conversation. Only the outline of a promise she had made while the girl watched, and the knowledge

that she had handed her over. The photograph remained a photograph.

“Mara, Elena, and Sloane do not exist,” Dr. Tam said. “I made up the names five minutes ago, and their out-of-state campuses with them—the boathouse, the pottery studio, the art-building steps. I wanted to see whether you could stare directly at photographs of your own sister and your best friends without a single flicker of recognition.” Her thumb moved once along Lily’s jaw. “You did not flicker.”

The blank where Chloe and Maya and her sister should have been opened wider with every second the faces stayed empty. Heat that had been gathering under the earlier measurements—the comparisons of waists and the width of thighs—tightened hard around that absence. She had drawn them in. She had introduced her friends. She had walked her sister into the annex and signed the paper while the girl stood beside her. The tea had taken the rest. The knowledge of what she had done sat in her chest with no faces attached to it, and the emptiness itself pulled heat lower, sharp and sudden, until her thighs pressed together on the marble.

Dr. Tam’s hand left her shoulder. It moved down the front of her body, past the tight draw of her nipples, and settled between her thighs. Two fingers rested lightly on either side of her clit; the middle finger touched the glans itself, not pressing, only present. Lily’s hips shifted once, involuntary. The contact was warm and exact. The blank inside her chest contracted around that single point. She could feel the weight of what she had done without being able to see the people she had done it to, and the distance between those two facts made her breath shorten.

“And I can use you again,” Dr. Tam said.

The words arrived at the same moment the finger moved—a single, slow circle. Everything that had been blank inside Lily’s chest contracted around that point of contact. The photographs stayed open on Dr. Tam’s lap. The faces stayed the faces of strangers. Lily’s thighs tightened. The orgasm rose through her without warning, sharp and complete, her back arching against the edge of the stool, her mouth open against the air. Dr. Tam’s finger continued the same small circle until the contractions eased and Lily’s weight settled again onto her heels.

Dr. Tam closed the folio and set it aside. She rose, and Lily rose with her. They walked the short distance down the quiet corridor to the bedroom. The lamp on the vanity was already lit. Dr. Tam stopped beside the bed and clapped her hands once, a soft, precise sound.

Three young women stepped through the doorway and crossed the room on bare feet. They were nude. They moved without speaking and without looking at one another. They stopped when they reached Lily and stood in a loose line beside

her, facing Dr. Tam. The first was the girl from the first photograph, younger, hair longer. The second and third were the faces from the second and third photographs. None of them turned their heads. None of them glanced at Lily. Their eyes stayed on Dr. Tam. Lily’s eyes stayed on Dr. Tam. The four of them stood bare on the rug, the night insects still singing beyond the shutters, and nothing passed between them except the same quiet, steady attention directed at the woman who had brought them into the room.