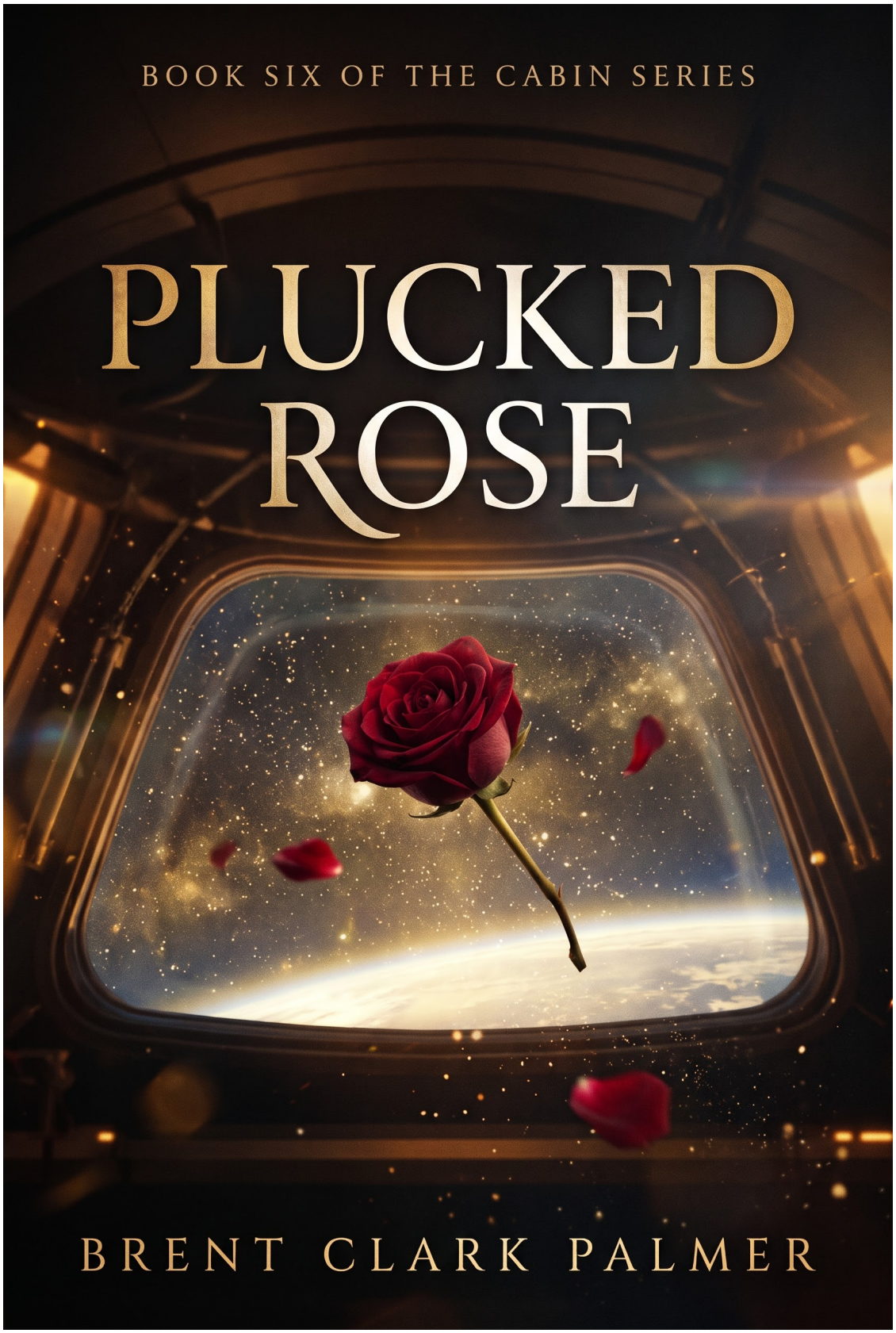

BOOK SIX OF THE CABIN SERIES
PLUCKED ROSE
BRENT CLARK PALMER

Plucked Rose

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Cabin, Book 6

Chapter One: Flight by Feel

At forty-two thousand simulated feet above the Pacific Ocean, the cockpit of the Valkyrie orbital shuttle began to scream.

Red master-caution strobes pulsed across the curved acrylic canopy, painting Lisa Nakamura’s knuckles the color of hot iron where she gripped the pitch stick. Beneath the heavy steel cradle of the motion base, six hydraulic rams bucked and shuddered, throwing her compact frame hard against the five-point harness. Inside her flight helmet, the automated warning synthesizer repeated its clinical death sentence in a flat contralto: Yaw thruster cascade. Starboard manifold offline. Pitch authority degraded.

“Candidate Nakamura, confirm manual abort to Edwards alternate,” a technician’s voice crackled through her headset from the control room two floors above the hangar bay. “Your glide slope is decaying past recovery margins. Punch out of the profile and reset.”

Lisa didn’t answer. Her dark curls were plastered damply to her temples and the nape of her neck, trapped beneath the tight foam ear-cups of her comms rig. Through the wraparound projection outside the cockpit windows, the simulated curvature of the Earth tilted at a sickening forty-degree bank, the deep sapphire of the ocean spinning upward to swallow the horizon.

She knew why the technician was telling her to abort. Over the last forty-eight hours of the Space Center’s final selection trials, eleven other candidates—post-graduates from MIT, Caltech, and Annapolis with six inches of height and fifty pounds of muscle on her—had hit this exact sixty-second mark of the reentry scenario. Every single one of them had trusted the primary flight computer’s corrective algorithms. And every single one of them had tumbled into a supersonic flat spin and burned up in the virtual stratosphere.

Lisa’s dark eyes darted from the artificial horizon to the raw hydraulic pressure gauges tucked in the lower corner of the console. The digital flight display claimed the starboard wing was stalling, demanding that the computer dump nose-down trim to compensate. Yet down in the soles of her boots, vibrating through the titanium rudder pedals, the airframe felt taut, balanced, and hungry for lift.

The airframe wasn’t stalling. The computer was lying.

“Candidate Nakamura,” the proctor’s voice sharpened over the loop, “you are three seconds from structural breakup. Acknowledge—”

Lisa took her left hand off the throttle quadrant, reached above her visor to the guarded brass switches on the overhead panel, and snapped the Master Avionics Bus to OFF. Instantly, the screaming klaxons died. The glowing digital screens

winked out into velvet black, leaving only the pale green radium needles of the analog backup dials and the deep, mechanical thrum of the hydraulic actuators beneath her seat.

Above her in the control booth, someone gasped over an open mic. “She just killed the computer. She’s flying a forty-ton brick on dead stick—”

“Shh,” another voice—low, velvety, and unmistakably female—cut across the background of the channel before the comm link clicked silent.

Alone in the dim amber glow of the emergency cockpit lamps, Lisa exhaled a long, slow breath through parted lips. Without the flight computer fighting phantom drag and slamming the control surfaces back and forth, the violent shuddering in the stick smoothed into a heavy, living pulse. She didn’t calculate vectors. She didn’t think about differential equations. She let her shoulders drop into the contoured seat, closed her eyes for a fraction of a second to feel the roll center in the pit of her stomach, and eased the stick back two inches toward her ribs while feeding in a whisper of left rudder.

The horizon leveled. The roar of simulated wind across the heat tiles deepened from a ragged shriek into a clean, singing hum.

For four unbroken minutes, Lisa flew the crippled bird down through the clouds by touch alone, holding forty tons of virtual spacecraft balanced on the tip of her fingers as delicately as a paper crane. When the grey concrete ribbon of the coastal runway finally flashed out of the marine layer dead ahead, she flared the nose by pure instinct, kissing the main gear down onto the centerline with a muted double-thump that barely rattled her harness.

The projection screens outside the canopy dissolved into the cool, fluorescent-lit steel walls of Hangar Four. Below the cockpit, the massive hydraulic stilts sighed and lowered the simulator pod back to its resting cradle.

Lisa unbuckled her five-point harness with trembling fingers, pulled off her helmet, and shook out her dark curls. The cool air of the hangar hit her flushed skin as the heavy side hatch unsealed and swung outward.

Stepping out onto the perforated steel catwalk thirty feet above the hangar floor, she tucked her helmet under one arm and wiped her damp palms against the thighs of her standard-issue blue flight suit. The suit had been tailored for someone taller; the sleeves were rolled twice at her wrists, and the heavy fabric pooled slightly around her boots, making her five-foot-two frame look almost fragile against the towering white bulkhead of the shuttle mockup.

She looked down toward the bottom of the stairs, expecting to see the burly flight proctor waiting with a digital clipboard and a reprimand for violating simulator safety protocols. Instead, the hangar floor was completely empty. The

technicians, the mechanics, and the other candidates were gone.

High above the catwalk, the frosted glass door to the executive observation suite clicked open.

Viva Stone stepped out onto the upper steel landing.

Lisa’s hand tightened around the rim of her helmet. During the three days of orientation, the candidates had only glimpsed the Director of the Space Center from a distance—a striking figure behind podium glass or flanked by private security across the tarmac. Seeing her alone, descending the open metal stairs directly toward the simulator platform, took the breath right out of Lisa’s lungs.

Viva was tall—nearly six feet in her low, sculpted heels—with a long, statuesque frame that made the tailored charcoal blazer and black silk blouse she wore look like armor designed for royalty. Her hair was the color of midnight ink, sleek and thick, swept back from cheekbones and a jawline so fiercely defined they seemed chiseled out of porcelain. She didn’t hurry down the steps; she moved with a long-strided, liquid certainty, her dark eyes fixed entirely on Lisa.

Instinctively, Lisa squared her shoulders, lifting her chin as Viva reached the catwalk and closed the distance between them.

Viva didn’t stop at a polite conversational distance. She walked right into Lisa’s personal space, halting less than a foot away so that Lisa had to tilt her head sharply back just to meet her gaze. Up close, the Director radiated a dry, intoxicating heat, scented with rare cedarwood, smoky black tea, and the crisp ozone of the hangar bay.

For a long moment, Viva didn’t say a word. Her dark gaze traveled slowly, unapologetically, over Lisa’s face—taking in the unruly halo of dark curls still damp from the helmet, the high flush staining Lisa’s cheeks, the parted curve of her lips, and the rapid, visible flutter of the pulse at the hollow of her throat.

“You turned off the flight computer at forty-two thousand feet, Miss Nakamura,” Viva said at last. Her voice was a rich, low alto that seemed to vibrate directly against Lisa’s collarbone. “Every flight manual written in the last half-century says that’s suicide.”

Lisa swallowed hard, her heart thudding faster now than it had during the dive. Still, she held her ground, refusing to take a step back against the steel railing.

“The manual assumes the starboard yaw sensors are telling the truth, Director Stone,” Lisa said, her voice catching slightly before steadying. “They weren’t. Whoever programmed that scenario built a lie into the telemetry loop. The computer was tearing the wings off trying to fix an error that wasn’t there. If I hadn’t cut it out of the loop and flown her by feel, we would have burned up.”

A slow, transformative change came over Viva’s expression. The cool executive mask melted away, replaced by a look of fierce, unmistakable hunger—like a collector who had spent years turning over worthless stones and had finally uncovered a pulsing, uncut ruby in the palm of her hand.

“I programmed that scenario,” Viva murmured.

She took another half-step forward. Now the hem of her tailored blazer brushed the front of Lisa’s blue flight suit, and the sheer height of her blocked out the hangar lights overhead, casting Lisa entirely in her shadow.

“Eleven candidates before you watched their instruments tell them they were dying, and they obeyed the screen all the way into the ocean,” Viva continued softly, reaching out with a long, graceful hand. Her fingers brushed the collar of Lisa’s flight suit, ostensibly to unclip the dangling steel jack of Lisa’s communications cord, though the warm backs of her knuckles dragged with deliberate, lingering pressure across the bare skin of Lisa’s throat. “Engineers are terrified of human instinct, Lisa. They spend billions of dollars trying to insulate the cockpit from pulse, and breath, and heat. They think passion is a flaw in the machine.”

Lisa’s breath hitched as Viva’s thumb paused right over her carotid artery, feeling the wild race of her blood beneath the skin.

“I don’t,” Viva whispered. Her fingers slid from Lisa’s pulse up to the curve of her jaw, tilting Lisa’s face up another fraction of an inch. The touch wasn’t hesitant or clinical; it was assertive, warm, and utterly certain of its welcome. “I didn’t build this center to send computers into the dark. I built it to find someone who knows how to let go of the instruments and feel where she’s going.”

“Director…” Lisa breathed, the single word barely audible as a strange, heavy warmth pooled low in her stomach.

“It’s Viva,” she corrected gently, her thumb brushing once across the corner of Lisa’s lower lip before she let her hand fall to Lisa’s waist, guiding her forward toward the stairs leading up to the private deck. “Leave your helmet on the rail, Lisa. The panel interviews for the rest of the cohort have just been canceled. Come up to the observation suite—you and I have a very different kind of debriefing to begin.”

Lisa set her helmet down on the steel grating without looking away from Viva’s eyes. With Viva’s warm palm resting possessively at the small of her back, guiding her up the steps, Lisa walked through the frosted glass door.

Inside, the observation suite was dim and soundproofed, carpeted in deep charcoal plush that muffled their footsteps. One entire wall was a floor-to-ceiling plate of tinted glass looking down over the silent white curve of the shuttle

simulator below. As the heavy door clicked shut behind them and the electronic deadbolt slid automatically into place with a soft, final thud, Viva stepped between Lisa and the room, backing her gently until Lisa's shoulders met the cool glass of the observation window.

Viva looked down at her, tall and dark against the softly lit suite, her hands rising to catch the heavy brass zipper at the throat of Lisa's oversized blue flight suit.

"First rule of my program, Lisa," Viva murmured, drawing the zipper slowly downward as the cool air of the suite kissed Lisa's skin. "Up here, we strip away everything you don't need." The electronic deadbolt settled with a soft, final click. Viva remained where she stood, between Lisa and the rest of the suite, one palm still resting at the small of Lisa's back so that the cool glass pressed steadily against her shoulder blades. The zipper of the flight suit hung half-open; cool air moved across the strip of skin it had already revealed.

"Before we go further," Viva said, her voice low and even, "you should understand the protocol that applies from this point. The program requires continuous, unmediated contact between skin and the sensor arrays we will be using. Fabric, even the thin layers candidates usually keep, introduces micro-variations in thermal conductivity and surface capacitance. Those variations corrupt the baseline readings we need for proprioceptive mapping and real-time cardiovascular stress response. In the environments we are preparing you for, the difference between clean data and noisy data is the difference between a controlled return and a loss of vehicle. You will remain without clothing for the duration of your training. It is not optional, and it is not decorative. It is the only configuration that lets us see what your body is actually doing."

Lisa's mouth opened, then closed. The explanation arrived with the same calm precision Viva had used when she described the simulator scenario. Lisa felt the weight of it settle across her shoulders even as heat moved lower, a slow, involuntary answering that tightened her stomach and made the fabric still covering her feel abruptly heavy.

Viva drew the zipper the rest of the way down. The flight suit parted. She eased the heavy sleeves from Lisa's arms, then crouched to free the pooled fabric at her ankles, folding the suit once, neatly, before setting it on the low cabinet beside the glass. When she straightened, her hands returned to Lisa's waist. The thin cotton of the undershirt came next; Viva lifted it clear and laid it with the suit. Lisa's arms crossed once, briefly, then lowered when Viva's fingertips rested, warm and unhurried, against the outer curves of her ribs.

"Arms down," Viva said. "We need the full range of the thoracic sensors. Any restriction alters the expansion pattern."

The bra followed. Viva unhooked it with the same deliberate economy, sliding the straps from Lisa’s shoulders and gathering the cups so that nothing caught. She set it with the other garments. Cool air moved across Lisa’s breasts; the nipples tightened at once. Lisa drew a short breath, surprise flickering through the sound, but the heat that answered it was stronger. Viva’s palms settled over the upper slopes of her chest, not covering, simply resting, the pads of her thumbs tracing the line where skin met the edge of the sternum. “Skin temperature here tells us how quickly peripheral circulation recovers after load,” Viva murmured. “Clothing masks the gradient. Without it we can measure the actual response.” Her hands moved lower, mapping the slight inward curve of Lisa’s waist, the firmness of the abdominal wall beneath. Lisa’s hips shifted once against the glass; the movement pressed her more fully into Viva’s palms. Viva did not step back. She continued downward, thumbs following the iliac crests, then the outer lines of Lisa’s thighs. When she reached the waistband of the panties, she eased them down in a single smooth motion, guiding Lisa’s feet free of the fabric one after the other. Lisa’s boots, socks and her last garment joined the others on the cabinet.

Viva opened a shallow drawer set into the cabinet’s face, placed the folded stack inside, and closed it. A small electronic lock engaged with a quiet chirp. She turned back. Lisa stood against the glass, skin fully exposed to the cooler air of the suite, the faint tremor in her thighs visible. Viva’s hands returned to her, one settling at the curve of her hip, the other sliding up the outside of her thigh to rest just below the hipbone. The touch was firm, evaluative, and unmistakably warm.

“Muscle tone through the adductors and gluteals will determine how you manage sustained lateral load in the centrifuge,” Viva said. Her palm smoothed over the upper thigh, then higher, following the line of the quadriceps until her fingers rested lightly against the inner crease. Lisa’s breath caught; the sound was small and involuntary. Heat gathered sharply between her legs, the inner surfaces of her thighs already slick. Viva’s thumb moved once, a slow, precise stroke along the outer edge of the labia, not entering, simply noting the temperature and the slight give of the tissue.

“Vascular response here is especially informative,” she continued, voice unchanged. “The absence of fabric lets us register the exact timing of engorgement under stress. That timing correlates with how cleanly you will transition between high-g and micro-g. You will feel it. That is expected. We use the sensation as part of the data stream.”

Lisa’s head tipped back against the glass. Her eyes stayed on Viva’s face. Surprise still moved through her—an unsettled awareness of how completely the clothes had been removed, of the locked drawer, of the calm certainty with which

Viva continued—but the stronger current was the steady, spreading arousal that made every new placement of Viva’s hands feel both clinical and overwhelming. Viva’s free hand rose again, cupping the underside of one breast, lifting gently so that the weight settled into her palm. Her thumb brushed the nipple once, then again, tracking the hardening of the tissue.

“Continue breathing,” Viva said. “We are only establishing the baseline.”

Her hands remained where they were, one at the breast, one between the thighs, mapping the heat and the subtle shift of Lisa’s weight as she stood bare against the glass.

Chapter Two: Surface Capacitance

For another full minute, the only sound in the observation suite was the uneven cadence of Lisa’s breathing against the quiet hum of the facility’s ventilation.

The glass behind her shoulder blades had warmed where her skin pressed against it, creating a sharp thermal border whenever she shifted half an inch to the left or right. Between her thighs, the steady, evaluative warmth of Viva’s hand remained motionless, registering the pulse that beat through the slick tissue, while Viva’s other palm held the weight of her breast with the calm steadiness of an instrument cradle.

Lisa’s fingers searched blindly behind her for the seam of the glass, her knuckles brushing the cool silicone seal. Every instinct she had brought with her from the university told her to cover herself, to close her thighs, to cross her arms over her chest. Yet the sheer, unblinking certainty in Viva’s dark eyes made modesty feel like an amateur error—like reaching for the abort switch in the simulator simply because the altitude alarm was ringing.

Slowly, deliberately, Viva withdrew her hands.

The sudden absence of her touch left two distinct zones of heat burning against the cooler air of the suite. Lisa’s thighs trembled once as she fought to keep her knees from coming together.

Viva stepped back half a pace, examining Lisa from the crown of her damp, dark curls down to her bare arches on the charcoal carpet. Not a muscle in the Director’s face betrayed haste or hesitation. She reached into the inside pocket of her charcoal blazer, drew out a slim, immaculate linen handkerchief, and dried the tips of her fingers with unhurried economy before slipping the cloth away.

“Three-point-four seconds from initial contact to full vascular engorgement,” Viva noted, her alto voice level and conversational. “And your respiratory rate has already stabilized at eighteen breaths per minute despite total exposure. Most candidates require a week of desensitization before their autonomic system stops fighting the absence of clothing. You bypass the resistance entirely.”

Lisa swallowed, her throat dry. Her glance flicked involuntarily toward the low cabinet beside the window, where the small green LED on the locked drawer glowed like a steady eye. “My clothes—”

“Are logged into storage,” Viva said smoothly, turning toward the rear door of the suite, where a brushed-steel private elevator sat recessed into the wall. She pressed the call button; the doors glided open silently, revealing a cabin lined in dark smoked mirror and warm recessed lighting. “Where we are going, fabric would only have to be removed again. Doctor Tanner has already calibrated the vault environment for bare skin.”

Viva stood beside the open elevator door, holding it with one long hand, waiting.

Lisa looked down at herself—at the high flush across her collarbone, the tight peaks of her breasts, the glistening heat between her legs that caught the ambient light whenever she shifted her weight. Walking ten feet across a room naked while Viva watched was one thing; stepping out of this room into the greater architecture of the Space Center without a stitch of clothing felt like stepping out of an airlock without a tether.

“Come, Lisa,” Viva said softly. It wasn’t a barked order. It was the quiet, expectant pull of gravity. “The data stream has started. Don’t introduce static now.”

Lisa took a breath, lifted her chin, and walked bare across the carpet into the elevator.

The moment she stepped inside, the smoked mirrors on three walls multiplied the visual contrast between them. There was Viva: nearly six feet of tailored charcoal wool, black silk, and midnight hair, cool and untouchable. And standing beside her hip was Lisa: five-foot- two, a halo of dark curls framing her flushed face, every curve of her compact, naked body reflected from four angles at once. The top of Lisa’s head barely cleared Viva’s shoulder.

As the elevator began its silent descent into the subterranean levels of the facility, Viva stood close enough that the wool sleeve of her blazer brushed Lisa’s bare upper arm. The rough-smooth kiss of the tailored fabric against her naked skin sent a fresh shiver straight down Lisa’s spine.

“Doctor Elsie Tanner heads Research and Development,” Viva said, watching Lisa’s reflection in the dark glass as the floor numbers counted down into the sub-basements. “She and I designed the selection metrics together. While I oversee flight operations and crew integration, Elsie owns the biological interface. She is going to map your sensory thresholds.”

The elevator settled to a halt. Instead of opening onto a cold concrete corridor, the doors parted directly into an airlock vestibule filled with lush, circulating warmth.

Lisa felt the temperature shift across her bare skin instantly—at least eighty-two degrees, humidified and faintly scented with clean polymer and white tea. The tiny goosebumps along her forearms smoothed away, replaced by a heavy, tropical languor that made her skin feel twice as naked as it had in the cool suite above.

Through the inner frosted-glass doors of the Research and Development Vault, a vast, amber-lit laboratory stretched out beneath a vaulted ceiling. Suspended from chrome gantries were translucent biometric meshes, zero-gravity restraint

harnesses, and fluid- filled calibration cradles. At the center of the room stood a low, contoured examination platform surfaced in dark, heated silicone, surrounded by semi-circular holographic telemetry displays.

Standing beside the platform, reviewing a floating column of golden data, was a woman who made Lisa's step falter on the polished floor.

Dr. Elsie Tanner did not look like any laboratory director Lisa had ever seen on a university campus. When she turned at the sound of the pneumatic doors and straightened to her full height, she matched Viva inch for statuesque inch. A heavy, radiant curtain of long copper- red hair spilled past her shoulders, framing pale skin and sharp, inquisitive green eyes. Beneath an unbuttoned white lab coat that swayed around her long legs, she wore a fitted emerald silk camisole and high-waisted dark trousers that accentuated the long, commanding lines of her build.

"Right on schedule," Elsie murmured. Her voice was a warm, smoky contralto—softer around the edges than Viva's crisp authority, carrying an undercurrent of clinical amusement.

Elsie didn't look at Viva first. Her green eyes went straight to Lisa, traveling slowly from Lisa's bare feet on the warm tiles, up the curve of her calves and thighs, lingering on the dark curls at the apex of her legs, the inward sweep of her waist, the full curve of her breasts, and finally landing on her flushed cheeks.

"Look at the proportions on her," Elsie said softly, stepping down from the platform and closing the distance between them with the same long-strided grace Viva possessed. "When I saw the volumetric scans from the simulator seat, I thought the optical sensors were exaggerating how compact she was."

"They weren't," Viva said, stepping up directly behind Lisa as the vestibule doors sealed shut behind them. "And her baseline recovery is already three standard deviations above the cohort."

Elsie stopped less than six inches in front of Lisa. At the same moment, Viva moved in flush against Lisa's back.

Lisa's breath caught hard in her throat.

She was completely enclosed. Behind her, the silk and wool of Viva's front pressed against her bare shoulder blades and the curve of her naked buttocks, Viva's tall frame radiating dry cedarwood heat. In front of her, the open lapels of Elsie's white lab coat brushed the outer swells of Lisa's bare breasts and hips, smelling of warm amber and clean skin. Tilting her head back, Lisa looked up at two towering pillars—midnight-black hair looking down from behind, cascading flame-red hair looking down from the front.

In the narrow, heated space between their six-foot frames, Lisa felt impossibly small, utterly exposed, and anchored by a sudden, dizzying weight in the pit of her belly.

Elsie glanced over the top of Lisa's dark curls to meet Viva's eyes. A slow, wordless understanding passed between the two women—the effortless shorthand of best friends who had shared everything for years—before Elsie looked back down into Lisa's wide dark eyes.

"Welcome to R&D, Lisa," Elsie said, raising both hands. Her fingers were just as long as Viva's, warm and unhurried, as she placed her palms against the bare sides of Lisa's ribcage, right where Viva's fingertips had rested twenty minutes earlier. "Viva tells me you cut the primary computer out of the loop because the instruments were lying to you."

"Yes, Doctor Tanner," Lisa managed, her voice trembling slightly as Elsie's thumbs traced the underside of her breasts while Viva's hands settled heavy and warm over the bare crests of Lisa's hips from behind.

"Elsie," the redhead corrected gently, her thumbs brushing inward until they grazed the tightened peaks of Lisa's nipples in unison, making Lisa gasp and arch her back directly against Viva's chest. "In this room, the instruments don't lie—because you are the instrument. Standard aerospace medicine treats sexual arousal as an extraneous byproduct to be ignored. That is a waste of the most powerful neurochemical engine in the human body."

Behind her, Viva's hands slid from Lisa's hips around to the front of her lower belly, pressing Lisa's spine more firmly against her chest while her chin rested lightly atop Lisa's dark curls.

"When a pilot is brought to the precise plateau just below orgasm—and held there without release—dopamine, oxytocin, and peripheral blood flow reach peak saturation," Elsie continued, her clinical tone never wavering even as one of her hands glided down over Lisa's flat stomach to meet Viva's fingers just above the damp curls between Lisa's thighs. "Your visual acuity sharpens. Your reaction time drops by forty milliseconds. Your skin becomes a live receiver."

Elsie's green eyes held Lisa's gaze as she guided Lisa two steps backward toward the padded, heated silicone of the calibration platform at the center of the vault.

"We call it the autonomic ceiling," Elsie murmured, lifting Lisa easily by the waist with Viva's help until Lisa was seated on the edge of the warm table, her bare feet dangling inches above the floor between the two tall women. "Today, we are going to find out exactly where yours is—and how long you can hover there without falling over the edge."

Viva’s thumb rested just outside the place where Lisa’s body had already gone soft and slick. She did not move it. The glass at Lisa’s back stayed cool; the air against her front was warmer where Viva stood close.

The lock on the suite door released with the same quiet chirp as the drawer. Elsie stepped in without knocking, a tablet tucked under one arm, the sleeves of her gray shirt rolled once at the wrists. She closed the door behind her and crossed to the low cabinet, setting the tablet down beside the locked drawer as if she had done it a hundred times.

“Traffic was worse than usual,” she said. “I almost left the car and walked the last three blocks.”

“You would have been late for the centrifuge calibration,” Viva answered. Her free hand remained under Lisa’s breast, the weight of it settled in her palm. The thumb at Lisa’s thigh shifted a fraction inward, not entering, only tracing the outer fold where heat had gathered. Lisa’s hips answered with a small, involuntary tilt. She kept her eyes on the far wall, but the motion registered.

Elsie glanced over, then looked back at Viva. “Did you finish the load-cell report?”

“Half of it. The numbers from yesterday’s runs are still noisy.” Viva’s thumb made a slow, single pass along the length of the swollen tissue, stopping short of the peak. Lisa’s breath caught and held. The sound was small. Neither woman turned toward it.

“They always are when the subject is still clothed for the first half,” Elsie said. She opened the cabinet drawer, checked the folded garments once, and closed it again. “I told them the baseline would drift. They didn’t want to hear it.”

Viva’s hand at Lisa’s breast lifted slightly, then settled, the nipple drawn between two fingers and held. Not pinched. Held. Lisa’s thigh trembled once against Viva’s palm. The tremor traveled upward; she felt it in the place where Viva’s thumb rested, unmoving now, simply present against the slick heat.

“They will hear it after the next review,” Viva said. Her tone stayed conversational. The thumb moved again—another slow stroke, then stillness. Lisa’s stomach tightened. The pressure behind her clit built and held, sharp enough that her knees softened. She locked them.

Elsie leaned a hip against the cabinet. “Did you eat? I brought the leftover rice from last night if you want it.”

“Later.” Viva’s fingers at the breast released, then returned, circling the areola once before settling again. The thumb between Lisa’s legs traced the same path, slower, stopping at the same point. Lisa’s hands, hanging at her sides, curled once against the glass. The cool surface did nothing for the heat that kept rising

and then stalling under Viva’s hand.

“Fair,” Elsie said. She checked her tablet, then set it face-down. “The new candidate from Annapolis is already complaining about the sensor placement. He wants the chest leads over fabric.”

Viva’s thumb pressed, light and exact, against the base of the swollen bud, then lifted. The pressure vanished. Lisa’s hips followed the absence before she could stop them. A thin sound left her throat. Elsie looked over at the sound, then back at Viva, unhurried.

“Tell him the leads stay where they are,” Viva said. “If he wants clean data he stays bare.” Her hand returned. The thumb settled lower this time, sliding once through the slick before rising again to the same held point. Lisa’s breath came shorter. The edge stayed exactly where it was—bright, insistent, unfinished. Viva’s fingers at her breast matched the rhythm: a slow circle, then stillness, the nipple held between them while the conversation continued.

“Rice is in the break room if you change your mind,” Elsie said. She picked up the tablet. “I’ll start the calibration at six. You want the first run with her or after?”

“After,” Viva answered. The thumb moved. Stopped. Moved. Lisa’s weight shifted against the glass; the tremor in her thighs had become constant. Neither woman adjusted their stance. Elsie nodded once, already turning toward the door.

“See you at six, then.”

The lock engaged behind her. Viva’s hands remained where they were.

Chapter Three: Spatial Compression

At seven-fifteen, the hallway outside the Habitation Annex was quiet enough that Lisa could hear the soft rubber squeak of Viva's soles two paces ahead of her, followed by the bare, muted pad of her own feet against the matte vinyl floor.

She had been without clothes for nearly three hours. The initial shock of the corridor air had faded into a dense, continuous awareness of her own surface—the slight sway of her breasts with each step, the brush of her curls against her bare shoulders, and the persistent, heavy throb between her thighs that neither Viva's hour at the glass nor Elsie's six o'clock sensor calibration had allowed to resolve. She wasn't cold. Her skin felt a full degree warmer than the room, humming like a transformer left on standby.

Viva stopped outside Door 3B, marked only with a stenciled plastic placard reading CREW VOLUME & THERMAL INTEGRATION. She didn't look back at Lisa as she badged the reader on the wall.

"Svetlana runs the habitation berths on Moscow time," Viva said, her hand resting briefly on the brushed-steel handle before pushing it open. "She doesn't care how well you flew the simulator, and she doesn't like repeating instructions. Keep your breathing even and let Penny place your limbs."

Inside, the room was smaller than Lisa had expected—no larger than a faculty office, windowless, lit by two recessed warm-white strips along the low ceiling. The floor was covered wall-to-wall in dense, charcoal-gray gym matting, except for a narrow wooden bench near the door where a laptop sat open beside a stack of folded white towels and a half-empty mug of black coffee.

Occupying the center of the floor was a contoured, three-walled niche lined in smooth, skin-temperature vinyl, shaped like the cross-section of a soyuz descent couch or an emergency radiation shelter.

Two women were already in the room.

Standing beside the bench with a digital caliper in her hand was Svetlana. She was in her mid-thirties, lean and hard-muscled, with broad swimmer's shoulders, high cheekbones, and pale blonde hair pulled back so tightly into a low knot that not a single strand moved when she turned her head. Even before she stripped, the thin black athletic tank and fitted shorts she wore showed the corded definition along her forearms and quadriceps. Kneeling by the edge of the vinyl berth, wiping down the seam with an alcohol swab, was Penny. She looked no older than twenty-four, with mousy brown hair sliding out of a plastic claw clip and sliding down around wire-rimmed glasses that kept slipping toward the tip of her nose. Beneath an oversized, faded gray Space Center sweatshirt and loose cotton scrub pants, her body was an almost startling contrast to her quiet,

bookish face—soft, full-hipped, and remarkably curvy, her heavy breasts shifting visibly against the worn cotton as she leaned forward to toss the swab into a small metal bin.

“Ten minutes late,” Svetlana said to Viva in a dry, uninflected Russian accent, setting the caliper down beside the coffee mug. Her pale blue eyes flicked from Viva’s face down to Lisa’s bare frame, taking in the damp sheen between Lisa’s thighs and the dark flush across her chest with the same neutral appraisal a mechanic might give a warmed-up engine. “Elsie kept her on the table?”

“The Annapolis candidate held up the first slot,” Viva answered. “Her baseline is already established. Keep her within five percent of where she is now—no drop-off, no completion.”

“Understood,” Svetlana said. Before Viva had even turned back toward the door, Svetlana caught the hem of her black tank top and pulled it over her head in one brisk motion, dropping it onto the bench. She didn’t wear a bra. Her breasts were firm and high over a ribcage corded with oblique muscle. She stepped out of her shorts and underwear with the same economy, standing bare on the mat without a trace of self-consciousness.

Down on the mat, Penny pushed her glasses up her nose with the back of her wrist and offered Lisa a small, apologetic smile. “Hi, Lisa. Sorry if the vinyl feels a little sticky at first—the heater under the mat takes twenty minutes to level out.”

Penny stood up, pulled the oversized gray sweatshirt over her head—catching the frame of her glasses for a second and blinking until she straightened them—and unhooked a plain beige cotton bra with four clasps at the back. When she let it fall and stepped out of her scrub pants, Lisa’s breath caught slightly. Penny’s skin was pale and soft, her waist curving sharply out into plush hips and full, heavy breasts tipped with wide pink areolas. She looked like a graduate teaching assistant who had simply forgotten to put her clothes back on after a shower.

The door clicked shut behind Viva. Lisa stood alone with the two naked women in the warm, quiet room.

“Come,” Svetlana said, gesturing to the contoured vinyl berth in the center of the floor. “Three-crew emergency volume is zero-point-eight cubic meters. When capsule loses primary radiator, bodies must share surface area without spike in cortisol or heart rate. If you brace muscles against contact, you burn oxygen forty percent faster.”

Svetlana stepped into the berth first and lay back on her side against the curved rear wall, resting her head on a flat foam wedge. She patted the six inches of open vinyl directly in front of her stomach.

“On your side, facing out,” Svetlana instructed. “Back to me.”

Lisa stepped across the mat and lowered herself onto the warm vinyl. The moment her hip touched the surface, Svetlana shifted forward from behind, closing the gap entirely.

There was no hesitation and no cushioning. Svetlana’s firm, muscular chest pressed flat against Lisa’s bare shoulder blades; her strong abdomen sealed against the small of Lisa’s back, and she slid her lower leg directly under Lisa’s hip while draping her top thigh—heavy, warm, and solid as turned wood—between Lisa’s legs from behind. The ridge of Svetlana’s thigh settled snugly against the slick, swollen tissue that Viva had spent an hour priming. Lisa let out a sharp, quiet breath, her hands bracing automatically against the mat in front of her.

“Do not brace wrists,” Svetlana murmured near the back of Lisa’s neck, her breath warm and smelling faintly of strong coffee. She reached around Lisa’s waist and took both of Lisa’s wrists, drawing Lisa’s arms down until they were tucked neatly against her own ribs. “Penny. Close the seal.”

“Coming,” Penny said softly.

Penny knelt at the front edge of the berth, adjusted her wire-rimmed glasses one last time, and lay down facing Lisa.

If Svetlana at Lisa’s back was iron, Penny at her front was warm dough. As Penny slid forward to fit herself into the remaining space of the berth, her heavy, soft breasts flattened directly against Lisa’s smaller ones, the tight buds of Lisa’s nipples pressing deep into the yielding warmth of Penny’s chest. Penny’s soft belly sealed over Lisa’s stomach, and she tucked one plush thigh up between Lisa’s knees, layering directly over Svetlana’s muscular leg so that Lisa’s pelvis was locked in a double vice of smooth skin and body heat.

There wasn’t an inch of open air left on Lisa’s torso. Every time Lisa inhaled, her chest pushed into Penny’s breasts while her spine pressed back against Svetlana’s sternum. She was completely sandwiched—five-foot-two of flushed, humming nerve endings pinned between firm Slavic muscle and soft, bespectacled curves.

“Is the strap under your hip bothering you?” Penny whispered, her face only three inches from Lisa’s, her brown eyes warm and slightly magnified behind the lenses of her glasses. Her knee shifted half an inch between Lisa’s legs to clear a telemetry cable, and the resulting friction dragged across Lisa’s swollen labia with devastating slowness.

Lisa’s hips jerked once—an involuntary spasm that had nowhere to go between the two bodies holding her. A small, trapped sound broke in her throat.

Behind her, Svetlana's hand slid down over the curve of Lisa's waist, her fingers finding the exact place where Penny's thigh met Lisa's groin.

"Pulse jumped to one-fourteen," Svetlana noted calmly against Lisa's shoulder blade, her fingers slipping beneath Penny's hip to rest directly against the slick heat between Lisa's thighs, right where Viva's thumb had lived an hour ago. "She is fighting the compression. Penny, keep her chest pinned and match my count. We hold her at the line until the ten- minute buzzer."

"Okay," Penny murmured, sliding one soft hand behind the back of Lisa's dark curls to hold her face steady against the warm hollow of Penny's neck, while her other hand slipped down between their pressed bellies to join Svetlana's fingers. "Just breathe with me, Lisa. Don't try to close your legs."

Penny's palm settled over the place where Svetlana's fingers already rested. The two hands did not overlap so much as divide the space: Svetlana's longer, firmer fingers held the outer folds open just enough to keep the slick tissue exposed to air and pressure, while Penny's softer hand cupped from beneath, the heel of her palm rocking once against the swollen base and then stilling. Lisa's hips tried to follow the motion. The double lock of thighs—Svetlana's dense muscle behind, Penny's plush weight in front—left her nowhere to go. The small jerk became a trapped tremor that traveled up her spine and into Svetlana's sternum. "One-sixteen," Svetlana said against the back of Lisa's neck. Her breath moved the fine hairs there. "She is climbing. Match me on the count. Four seconds contact, six off."

"Four and six," Penny murmured. Her glasses had fogged at the lower edges; she did not push them up. Instead she shifted her chest a fraction higher so that the full weight of one breast settled more completely over Lisa's. The soft heat compressed Lisa's nipple flat, then held it there. Every shallow breath Lisa took pushed her harder into that yielding surface while her back pressed into the hard plane of Svetlana's ribs.

Svetlana's fingers made the first pass: a slow, exact stroke from the lower edge of the labia up to the place just beneath the clit, pressure firm enough to register as data, light enough that the tissue only swelled further instead of tipping. At the top of the stroke she stopped. Four seconds of steady contact. Lisa's thighs tried to close; Penny's thigh, layered over Svetlana's, kept them open by simple mass. The six-second pause began. Cooler air touched the wet skin for the length of a breath. Lisa's stomach tightened against Penny's soft belly. A thin sound stayed behind her teeth.

Penny's hand took the next interval. Her fingers were shorter, warmer, the pads broader. She traced the same path, slower, the heel of her palm adding a low, continuous pressure at the base that Svetlana's hand had not used. Four seconds. The swollen bud pulsed once against the side of Penny's finger and then

held, bright and unfinished. When Penny lifted away, Svetlana’s fingers returned at once, sealing the brief gap so that the absence never lasted longer than the count.

“Do not chase it,” Svetlana said. Her free arm stayed locked around Lisa’s ribs, pinning the wrists where they had been placed. “If you roll your hips you spend the oxygen we are measuring. Stay still. The berth does the work.”

Lisa stayed still. The vinyl under her hip had warmed to skin temperature; every point of contact—shoulder blades to Svetlana’s chest, breasts to Penny’s, the trapped heat between three sets of thighs—registered as a single continuous surface. The next stroke arrived from both hands at once: Svetlana’s fingers holding the outer tissue steady while Penny’s palm rocked once, precise, against the underside of the clit and then stopped. Four seconds of shared pressure. Lisa’s breath broke on the exhale. The pulse in her throat jumped hard enough that she felt it against Penny’s collarbone.

“One-eighteen,” Svetlana noted. She did not sound concerned. “Hold the line. Three more cycles, then we check the strap.”

Penny’s knee shifted a half-inch higher, resettling the layered thighs so that the ridge of Svetlana’s muscle pressed more directly against the slick center while Penny’s softer flesh cushioned the motion. The friction was slow and total. Lisa’s hands, trapped against her own ribs, curled once. Neither woman adjusted their grip. Svetlana’s fingers completed the stroke, paused at the peak, and lifted. Penny’s hand followed the same path a half-second later, the broader pads lingering one extra beat before they too withdrew. The six-second gap opened. Air moved across the wet skin. The ache sharpened instead of fading.

Lisa’s eyes stayed open, fixed on the warm hollow of Penny’s neck. Penny’s pulse beat steadily there, unhurried. Behind her, Svetlana’s heartbeat was slower, heavier, a solid counter-rhythm against her spine. The next contact began on the count—four seconds of exact, shared pressure that lifted her to the same bright edge and held her there, neither higher nor lower—while the two women kept their breathing even and their hands in place, waiting for the buzzer.

Chapter Four: Night Rations

The laptop on the wooden bench gave a single, flat piezo beep.

Svetlana’s fingers lifted from Lisa’s slick skin on the exact trailing edge of the tone. A half- second later, Penny’s softer palm withdrew as well, leaving the swollen tissue between Lisa’s thighs exposed to the small pocket of air trapped between their legs. The ache didn’t drop off; it simply hung there, bright and unspent, humming through the base of her pelvis. “Ten minutes,” Svetlana said. Her voice against the back of Lisa’s neck was unchanged, as if she had just finished timing a plank hold. “Peak held at one-nineteen. Zero hip displacement on the last four cycles.”

“She did really well,” Penny said softly. She eased her plush thigh out from between Lisa’s knees, careful not to drag the telemetry lead, and rolled back onto the gym mat. Her wire- rimmed glasses were still fogged along the bottom rims; she pulled the faded gray sweatshirt over her head first, then used the cotton hem to wipe the lenses clean before hooking the frames back over her ears.

Behind Lisa, Svetlana unlocked her arm from Lisa’s ribs and stood up in one fluid motion, reaching for a white towel to wipe the film of shared sweat from her collarbone and stomach. She didn’t hand a towel to Lisa.

“Up, Candidate,” Svetlana said, already tapping the final metrics into the open laptop. “Do not wipe skin. Elsie wants surface chemistry intact for evening log. Viva is waiting in corridor.”

Lisa pushed herself up from the warm vinyl berth. Her legs felt heavy and slightly bow- legged for the first two steps, the inner surfaces of her thighs slick enough that they brushed wetly together as she crossed the mat. When Penny opened Door 3B for her, offering a quiet, friendly wave with the alcohol swab bottle in her hand, Viva and Elsie were both standing in the hallway under the recessed ceiling strips.

Elsie had changed out of her lab coat into a soft charcoal cardigan over her gray shirt, her long copper hair braided loosely over one shoulder. She held a stainless-steel insulated mug in one hand. Viva still wore her blazer, though she had unbuttoned the front.

“How was the seal?” Elsie asked, her green eyes dropping automatically to the glistening line on Lisa’s inner thigh before returning to her face.

“Clean after the third minute,” Viva answered, reading the live summary that had just populated on her phone screen. She slipped the phone into her pocket and gestured down the corridor toward the central elevator bank. “Come on. Kitchen closes the hot line at eight-thirty, and I still haven’t eaten.”

Lisa walked between them down the wide hallway. With Viva on her left and Elsie on her right, both women nearly a head taller than she was, their long strides forced Lisa into a quick, bare-footed cadence to keep pace. The air at this hour smelled faintly of floor wax and the ozone from the server rooms until they stepped off the elevator on Level Two and passed through a pair of brushed-aluminum double doors marked SENIOR STAFF COMMISSARY.

The room was long and softly lit, paneled in acoustic oak with a view of the darkened rocket garden through high clerestory windows. Three tables near the espresso machine were occupied by late-shift propulsion engineers and flight surgeons in polo shirts and badge lanyards, talking quietly over plates of roasted chicken, greens, and rice.

None of them turned to stare when Lisa walked in naked between the two directors. A bald guidance specialist near the aisle glanced up, nodded politely to Viva, let his eyes pass over Lisa’s bare breasts and flushed hips with brief, appreciative familiarity, and went back to his tablet.

Lisa barely noticed him. Her eyes were fixed on the center of the room.

Running down the middle of the commissary was a twelve-foot slate service island. While the far end held ceramic platters of sliced sourdough, green apples, salted butter, and roast beef, the near half of the slate had been cleared and fitted with a contoured black silicone bolster.

Reclining bare along the length of the bolster was a woman in her late twenties with smooth, olive-toned skin and long blonde hair gathered into a silk clip at the crown of her head. Her upper back rested against an angled cushion while her knees were parted wide, supported by two low padded stirrups integrated into the edge of the table. Her breasts rose and fell in a slow, practiced rhythm, the nipples dark and tight under the warm overhead food lamps.

Between her parted heels sat a shallow, wide-rimmed dish of heavy borosilicate glass. Standing beside the table in a clean white commissary apron was a young female technician wearing nitrile gloves on one hand. Every few seconds, while reading a paperback novel propped against a napkin dispenser, the technician used her bare left thumb and forefinger to make a slow, measured stroke along the blonde woman’s glistening labia—four seconds of upward pressure, a pause at the swollen peak beneath the clit, and six seconds off.

With each paused interval, a clear, viscous bead of fluid gathered at the lower curve of the woman’s entrance and slid down a narrow silicone channel into the glass dish, where half an inch of shimmering, amber-tinted liquid had already collected. Beside the dish sat a rack of small glass spoons and a tray of unsalted water crackers and sliced white peaches. As Lisa watched, a female flight controller in a headset walked up to the island with a ceramic saucer, used one of

the small glass spoons to drizzle a thread of the warm liquid over a slice of peach, murmured a quiet “Thanks, Delta,” and carried her plate back to her booth.

The blonde woman on the table—Delta—smiled faintly, her eyelids stays half-lowered as her hips gave a tiny, controlled tremor under the technician’s next four-second stroke. “Close your mouth, Lisa,” Elsie murmured beside her, though her tone was warm as she picked up three slate dinner trays from the stack. “You’re going to be on the table yourself by next Thursday once your plateau stops drifting.”

Lisa’s stomach gave a sharp, involuntary drop that tangled directly with the throb between her legs. She followed Viva and Elsie to the center island, standing less than two feet from Delta’s bare hip while Viva used tongs to put roasted salmon and asparagus onto two plates, and a smaller portion onto a third for Lisa.

Up close, the scent rising from the warm slate around Delta was unmistakable—clean skin, musk, and something unexpectedly sweet, like crushed clover warmed in the sun. “Sustained pre-orgasmic arousal alters the endocrine profile of vaginal transudate after the fourth consecutive hour,” Elsie said conversationally, picking up one of the small glass spoons from the rack beside Delta’s thigh. Delta looked over at them from her cushion, her dark eyes hazy and unfocused as the technician’s thumb paused at the base of her clit, holding her right at the line. “Hi, Delta. How long have you been up today?”

“Since four-thirty, Doctor Tanner,” Delta breathed, her voice breaking slightly in the middle of the sentence as her abdominal muscles contracted and held. “Three… three hours and forty minutes.”

“Good density,” Viva observed, glancing into the borosilicate dish before setting her tray down at a corner booth.

Elsie dipped the glass spoon into the shimmering pool between Delta’s heels, lifted a clear, heavy drop onto the surface of a water cracker, and held it out to Lisa’s mouth before they left the island.

“Open,” Elsie said.

Lisa parted her lips. Elsie placed the cracker on her tongue.

The taste wasn’t what Lisa expected. Underneath the faint, natural salt of skin was a dense, nectar-like sweetness that coated the roof of her mouth and hit her bloodstream almost before she swallowed. Within five seconds, a rush of lucid, golden heat bloomed behind her eyes and dropped straight into her groin. The fluorescent hum of the room seemed to sharpen; the colors of the food on the trays looked brighter, and the ache between her thighs doubled in weight, making her nipples tighten painfully against the open air. “Vasoactive peptides

and concentrated oxytocin precursors," Elsie said, taking a spoonful onto her own slice of apple and chewing thoughtfully as she guided Lisa by the bare elbow toward Viva's booth. "Better than amphetamines for a thirty-six-hour console shift, and zero crash. The staff just calls it honey."

Viva was already seated on the leather bench. Instead of letting Lisa sit on the opposite side of the table, Viva patted the space on the leather cushion directly between herself and the spot where Elsie was sliding in.

"Sit," Viva said, picking up her fork. "And eat everything on the small plate. You need the protein before we go upstairs."

Lisa slid onto the cool leather between them. Even at dinner, the geometry didn't change: Viva's tailored thigh pressed against her bare left leg, Elsie's slacks pressed against her bare right leg, and under the shadow of the tablecloth, Elsie's free hand settled casually on Lisa's inner thigh while she ate with the other—her thumb resting two inches from Lisa's slick folds, doing nothing except reminding Lisa's nervous system that the count was never really over.

At ten-fifteen, the private elevator opened directly into the residential penthouse on the top floor of the administration tower.

The apartment was quiet, minimal, and lived-in—wide plank oak floors, low bookshelves stacked with flight manifests and bound telemetry logs, and a single bedroom separated from the main room by a sliding walnut partition. A wide, low platform bed dressed in dark gray linen occupied the center of the bedroom wall.

There was no guest room, and no second bed.

While Lisa stood bare at the foot of the mattress, Viva and Elsie moved through their nighttime routine with the easy choreography of two women who had shared the space for a decade. Viva hung her blazer and black silk blouse in the closet, unhooked a black lace bra, and stepped out of her trousers and panties. Across the room, Elsie unbuttoned her cardigan and shirt, unpinned the long, heavy braid of her copper hair so that it tumbled halfway down her bare back, and stripped off the rest of her clothes before walking into the adjoining bathroom to turn on the faucet.

Watching them both naked at the same time made Lisa's throat tighten. They were built on a completely different scale than she was—nearly six feet of long, lean thigh, high hips, and full, sculpted breasts, Viva pale and dark-haired as ink, Elsie fair and crowned in dark flame.

When Elsie came out of the bathroom, wiping her hands on a small towel, she walked over to her side of the bed and set an alarm on the bedside tablet for 05:30.

“Up in the middle, Lisa,” Viva said, pulling back the dark linen duvet on the left side. “On your back to start.”

Lisa climbed onto the cool gray sheet and lay down along the center seam of the mattress. Viva got in on her left; Elsie got in on her right. When they pulled the duvet up and shifted inward to close the space, the wide bed might as well have been the narrow vinyl berth in Room 3B.

Viva turned onto her side, facing Lisa, and draped one long, smooth thigh across Lisa’s shins while pressing the length of her bare torso against Lisa’s left ribs and hip. On the other side, Elsie rolled in flush against Lisa’s right flank, her heavy red hair spilling across Lisa’s shoulder and breast, her hip sealing the remaining gap so that Lisa was locked in a deep, linen-covered hollow between two six-foot bodies.

“Svetlana taught you passive compression,” Viva said quietly in the dim amber glow of the headboard lamp. Her hand slid across Lisa’s stomach, her fingers threading briefly through the damp curls between Lisa’s thighs to confirm the slickness was still there, then moving up to cup the back of Lisa’s head. “At night, your role between us isn’t passive.”

On Lisa’s right, Elsie’s hand reached down, took Lisa’s right wrist, and guided Lisa’s palm down across Elsie’s flat belly until Lisa’s fingers brushed the warm, damp red curls between Elsie’s thighs.

“We have budget reviews with the board at seven-thirty tomorrow,” Elsie murmured, her breath warm against Lisa’s ear as she shifted her hips slightly to give Lisa’s hand better access. “And neither of us sleeps well without coming first.”

Viva shifted higher on the pillows, lifting her upper thigh so that it rested over Lisa’s chest and shoulder, angling the smooth, warm crease of her own groin toward Lisa’s mouth while her fingers stayed tangled in Lisa’s dark curls.

“You take care of Elsie with your hand, and me with your mouth, then we switch,” Viva said, her voice even and unhurried in the quiet room. “And while you work, Elsie and I will keep your count right where Svetlana left it. Neither of us finishes until we’re ready to sleep—and you don’t finish at all.”

Viva’s thigh settled across Lisa’s chest, the smooth inner surface warm against her collarbone. The angle brought the soft, already-slick folds of Viva’s sex directly to Lisa’s mouth. Lisa turned her head. The first taste was clean and faintly saline, the tissue soft under her tongue as she traced a slow line from the lower entrance upward. Viva’s fingers stayed in Lisa’s curls, not guiding, only resting, while her breathing remained even.

On Lisa’s right, Elsie shifted her hips a fraction closer. Lisa’s fingers, already between the damp red curls, found the same heat and parted it. She stroked once, lightly, matching the unhurried pace of her tongue on Viva. Elsie’s thigh pressed more firmly against Lisa’s bare hip in answer.

“Board packet is still missing the centrifuge addendum,” Elsie said, her voice low against Lisa’s ear. Her free hand slid down Lisa’s stomach and settled between her thighs, two fingers resting just outside the swollen folds without entering. “They’ll ask about the oxygen numbers from this afternoon.”

Lisa’s tongue circled the firm bud at the top of Viva’s cleft, then flattened and held. Viva’s abdomen tightened once against Lisa’s shoulder. The hand at Lisa’s head did not push. On the other side, Elsie’s fingers began a slow, measured stroke along Lisa’s labia—four seconds of light upward pressure, then stillness. The ache that had never fully left her flared and held. Lisa’s own hips tried to lift; the weight of both women kept her flat against the sheet.

“Tell them the third-minute seal was clean,” Viva answered. Her voice stayed steady even as Lisa’s tongue worked a second slow pass. “Svetlana logged the peak. No drop-off.” Her hand left Lisa’s hair long enough to reach across and rest on Elsie’s wrist, then returned. “Switch in a minute. She’s starting to chase.”

Elsie lifted her fingers. The brief absence made the throb sharper. Lisa’s hand between Elsie’s thighs continued its careful rhythm, two fingers sliding through the slick and pausing at the same high point her tongue had just left on Viva. Elsie’s breath warmed the side of Lisa’s neck. A low sound stayed behind her teeth.

They moved together without speaking. Viva drew her thigh back; Elsie rolled higher, guiding Lisa’s mouth from one set of folds to the other. The taste changed—warmer, slightly sweeter. Lisa’s tongue settled into the new heat while her now-free hand found Viva. Viva’s fingers replaced Elsie’s between Lisa’s legs at once, resuming the same four-second contact, six-second pause. The swollen tissue pulsed hard against the pads of Viva’s fingers and then held, unfinished.

“Keep the count,” Elsie murmured into Lisa’s hair. Her hips rocked once, slow, against Lisa’s mouth, then stilled. “We still have the oxygen slides to finish before we sleep.”

Lisa worked. Her tongue traced, flattened, circled; her fingers matched the pace on the other side. Each time one of them neared the edge—Viva’s thigh tightening, Elsie’s stomach fluttering against Lisa’s ribs—they eased back, trading places again so the pressure never broke. Between the shifts, their hands continued on Lisa without interruption: one set of fingers holding her open and stroked to the bright line, the other resting at her hip or breast to keep her from following. The linen grew warm. The only sounds were the soft wet sounds of her

mouth and fingers, the even rhythm of their breathing, and the occasional low exchange about slide order and centrifuge margins.

Hours narrowed to the same repeating pattern. Lisa’s jaw ached; her hand cramped once and reset. The throb between her own thighs never dropped below the line Svetlana had set. When Viva finally came, it was quiet—a long, controlled tightening around Lisa’s tongue, a single exhaled breath against her hair, then stillness. Elsie followed minutes later under Lisa’s fingers, hips pressing once into the heel of Lisa’s palm before she too went soft and heavy against Lisa’s side.

Neither woman moved away. Viva’s hand remained between Lisa’s thighs, two fingers resting lightly against the still-swollen, still-aching tissue, holding the contact without stroking. Elsie’s arm stayed across Lisa’s ribs. The headboard lamp clicked off. In the dark, the count continued—slow, exact, unfinished—while the two longer bodies settled around her and their breathing deepened toward sleep.

Chapter Five: Carrier Wave

At five-thirty, the bedside tablet did not ring; its screen simply brightened to a muted amber glow, warming the dark gray linen along Elsie’s side of the mattress.

Lisa didn’t wake up so much as surface from a shallow, feverish drift. She hadn’t truly slept for more than twenty minutes at a stretch. All night, every time one of the tall bodies flanking her shifted in the sheets, the contact between her thighs had reset. Even asleep, Viva’s hand had stayed heavy and warm against the crease of Lisa’s groin, her index and middle fingers resting directly along the slick, swollen seam while Elsie’s left thigh kept Lisa’s knees parted from the other side.

Whenever Lisa’s breathing had slowed toward deep REM sleep, one of them—half-awake, acting on pure habit—had stroked her for four measured seconds until her hips twitched and her pulse climbed back to the line, then gone still again.

Now, in the pale pre-dawn light filtering through the high penthouse blinds, Elsie rolled onto her back with a quiet stretch, her long copper hair tangled across the pillows. Before her eyes were even fully open, her hand slid down under the duvet, replacing Viva’s fingers between Lisa’s legs without a gap in pressure.

“Morning,” Elsie murmured, her voice husky with sleep as her thumb made a slow, four- second pass up to the base of Lisa’s clit and held.

Lisa let out a small, ragged breath, her hands tightening against the sheet beneath her hips. Her pelvic floor felt heavy, bruised from the inside out by nine straight hours of uninterrupted engorgement.

Viva sat up on the left side of the bed, swinging her long bare legs over the edge and running one hand back through her dark hair. She didn’t look back as she stood and walked naked toward the espresso machine built into the walnut cabinetry near the bathroom door. “Board review is in Conference A at seven-thirty,” Viva said over the quiet whirr of the grinder. “Did you send the updated oxygen slides to Cherry?”

“At midnight,” Elsie answered. Her thumb lifted from Lisa’s slick skin for six seconds, waiting while the cool air under the lifted edge of the duvet touched Lisa’s damp inner thighs, then settled back down for another four-second stroke. “Cherry wants twenty minutes with her before the Thursday donor luncheon anyway. She’s already redesigning the table layout.”

“Not until she clears the morning signal block,” Viva said, carrying two small ceramic demitasse cups back toward the bed. She handed one to Elsie, who propped herself up on her left elbow to sip while keeping her right hand resting

warm and stationary between Lisa’s thighs. “Anita has her booked on the array at six-fifteen.”

Elsie took a swallow of espresso, set the cup on the nightstand, and gave Lisa’s swollen bud one final, exact press that made Lisa’s stomach hollow out before withdrawing her hand completely. She wiped her fingers cleanly on the edge of the top sheet and stood up. “Shower’s yours for four minutes, Lisa,” Elsie said, walking toward the closet to pull down a fresh charcoal skirt and silk blouse. “Water at body temperature only, no soap below the waist. Anita needs your skin conductivity where it is.”

Twenty minutes later, dried with a rough linen towel that felt like sandpaper against her sensitized nipples, Lisa walked bare between the two freshly dressed directors down to Sub-Level Three.

The corridors here were narrower than the R&D wing, lined with thick bundles of shielded fiber-optic trunk cables running along the ceiling braces. The air smelled of warm copper and static electricity. Viva badged them through a heavy acoustic door marked DEEP- SPACE TELEMETRY & XENOLINGUISTICS — ANITA TIKATAKA, PH.D. and stepped inside just far enough to catch the attention of the woman seated at the central console.

Anita Tikataka was in her late thirties, small-boned and compact—only an inch or two taller than Lisa—with warm bronze skin, high cheekbones, and thick black hair cut into a razor- sharp bob that swung just below her jaw. She wore an oversized cream cable-knit sweater pushed up to her elbows over bare legs and dark wool socks, her dark eyes sharp and intensely focused behind a pair of rimless half-glasses as she monitored three curved waterfall spectrograms.

Occupying the center of the soundproofed room, directly facing Anita’s desk, was a piece of hardware that looked half like a gynecological exam chair and half like an open-frame cockpit seat.

Its frame was milled aluminum, surfaced in dark conductive carbon-polymer pads that gleamed faintly with contact gel. Instead of a control stick or a keyboard, the cradle had two wide, contoured thigh channels that held the occupant’s legs sixty degrees apart, a recessed thoracic strap lined with silver micro-electrodes, and an articulated bronze transducer arm mounted directly between the stirrups at the base of the seat.

“She’s two points above yesterday’s six-o’clock mean,” Viva told Anita, glancing at the wall monitor where Lisa’s live telemetry badge had already synced with the room’s receivers. “Svetlana and Elsie kept her level overnight. No spikes.”

“Good, because the background noise on the three-gigahertz band is terrible this morning,” Anita said. Her voice was rapid, crisp, and rhythmically cadenced, as if she thought three sentences ahead of whatever she was saying. She spun her

chair around, slipping her half- glasses down the bridge of her nose to look Lisa over from her bare feet to the damp, glistening crease between her thighs. “Come here, Lisa. Step onto the grounding mat first so you don’t arc the pre-amp.”

Viva and Elsie didn’t stay. With a brief nod to Anita, the two tall women turned and stepped back out into the corridor, the heavy acoustic door sealing behind them with a pneumatic thud that cut off all sound from the rest of the building.

Lisa crossed the rubber grounding mat in front of the console. Up close, Anita looked at her with none of Elsie’s teasing warmth and none of Viva’s dark possession; to Anita, Lisa was a high-gain antenna that had just been wheeled in from the calibration shop.

“Do you know why SETI spent seventy years listening to empty static, Lisa?” Anita asked, standing up in her wool socks and gesturing for Lisa to climb into the carbon-polymer cradle. “Because physicists are provincial. They assumed an advanced non-terrestrial intelligence would chop information into binary packets or subject-verb-object grammar, like freshmen texting in a lecture hall.”

Lisa stepped up onto the low footrest and lowered her bare hips onto the contoured seat. The carbon-polymer surface was warmed to ninety-eight degrees, slick with conductive gel that spread instantly across the bare skin of her buttocks and shoulder blades as she leaned back.

Anita moved between Lisa’s knees with brisk, practiced efficiency, lifting Lisa’s left leg into the wide left channel and her right leg into the right. The angle spread Lisa’s thighs wider than they had been on the commissary bench or in Viva’s bed, leaving the wet, swollen folds of her sex completely open to the recessed lights and the bronze transducer arm. “Grammar is a crutch for species with slow nervous systems,” Anita continued, fastening the electrode-lined strap snugly across Lisa’s ribcage, just beneath the lower curve of her breasts, so that her tightened nipples jutted upward above the band. “Out in deep space, coherent communication isn’t symbolic. It’s autonomic modulation—continuous phase- locked waveforms generated by a living nervous system held at maximum harmonic tension. If the tension drops, the carrier wave collapses. If the nervous system discharges into orgasm, the signal blows out into white noise.”

Anita reached down between Lisa’s parted thighs and unlocked the articulated bronze arm. At its tip were two smooth, body-warmed sensors shaped like parted fingers, surfaced in soft platinum-iridium mesh, with a third, smaller contact pad angled directly between them.

Before bringing the arm into position, Anita rested her own bare left hand against Lisa’s inner thigh, while her right index finger traced a single, unhurried line through the slick moisture coating Lisa’s labia, spreading it evenly over the

swollen clitoral hood.

Lisa gasped, her head pressing back into the headrest as the familiar, relentless ache flared bright in her lower belly. On the curved screens behind Anita, three bands of golden light suddenly leaped across the waterfall display, accompanied by a low, resonant hum from the wall speakers that sounded like a cello string bowed in a cathedral.

“Look at the screen,” Anita said, her fingers staying steady against Lisa’s wet skin as she glanced back at the spectrogram. “See that harmonic ridge at four hundred hertz? That’s your pelvic floor trying to contract while your prefrontal cortex holds it back. That is syntax, Lisa. Every micro-tremor in your adductors, every shift in mucosal capacitance when you’re four seconds away from coming and aren’t allowed to—that’s how a vessel talks to the dark.”

Anita swung the bronze transducer arm inward until the soft platinum-iridium pads settled directly against the outer folds of Lisa’s labia, holding them parted, while Anita kept her own bare right hand resting over the top of the housing so her thumb and middle finger could work the swollen tissue directly between the sensors.

“We have a forty-minute transmission window on the deep-space array,” Anita said, reaching behind her with her left hand to pull her keyboard onto her lap while her right thumb settled at the base of Lisa’s clit. “I’m going to feed you the carrier prompts through the bone-conduction pads behind your ears. You are going to answer by holding your autonomic peak inside the green target band on the center monitor. Four seconds up to the rail, six seconds holding the resonance. If you let your hips drop out of phase—or if you let yourself tip over—we start the forty minutes over from zero.”

Anita looked up through her rimless glasses into Lisa’s flushed face, her thumb pressing down with slow, exact authority.

“Take a breath,” Anita said. “Transmission starts on my mark.”

Anita’s index finger settled at the base of the swollen bud and held. The platinum-iridium pads of the transducer already parted the outer folds, their mesh warm and faintly conductive against the slick tissue. On the center monitor a thin green band hovered just above the baseline. Lisa’s breath caught; the ridge of light jumped once and steadied. “Mark,” Anita said.

The first prompt arrived as a low vibration through the bone-conduction pads behind Lisa’s ears—three short pulses, then silence. Anita’s thumb answered with a four-second upward stroke, exact, stopping at the point where the tissue pulsed hardest. The green band climbed and locked. A low cello-like tone rose from the wall speakers.

“There,” Anita murmured, eyes on the waterfall. “Pelvic floor at phase lock. Do you feel how the adductors are trying to close? Don’t let them. That micro-tremor is the packet header. Species that still use grammar waste half their bandwidth on subject-verb agreements. Out past the heliopause they modulate directly off the refusal.” Her free hand adjusted the bronze arm a fraction closer. The smaller center pad kissed the underside of the clit and stayed. “Hold.”

Six seconds of stillness. Cooler air moved across the exposed inner surfaces. Lisa’s stomach hollowed. The band on the monitor wavered, then Anita’s thumb returned—another measured pass, firmer this time, spreading the fresh slick so the mesh could read the capacitance shift. The waveform snapped back into the green. Anita’s mouth curved, small and sharp.

“Beautiful. Look at the harmonic stack at four-twenty. That’s your prefrontal cortex vetoing the reflex arc in real time. I spent three years arguing with the array committee that an orgasm is just noise—white-out, total loss of carrier. They wanted climax events. I told them climax is what a nervous system does when it fails to stay interesting.” She leaned in, half-glasses slipping, and used two fingers of her bare hand to trace the full length of the parted labia around the sensors, slow, mapping every ridge. Lisa’s hips twitched against the carbon-polymer. The green band spiked; Anita laughed once, delighted. “Yes. That. The body correcting itself. Keep correcting.”

The next prompt hummed longer. Anita matched it with a circling pressure from the center pad while her own middle finger rested lightly against the entrance, not entering, only noting the flutter of muscle beneath. Four seconds up. The ache sharpened into a bright, continuous line. Lisa’s nipples tightened above the electrode strap; Anita glanced at them, then back at the screen.

“Thoracic leads are picking up the sympathetic surge. Good. Some of the older theorists still think the signal has to originate in the cortex. Provincial. The real syntax lives where the tissue is thickest and most refused.” She increased the contact by a breath, thumb and sensor working together so the swollen bud was held between them, stroked once, then pinned. The waveform locked deeper into the green. Anita’s eyes brightened. “There it is. Forty-minute window, Lisa. Every time you almost tip and don’t, the array writes another syllable. Breathe into it. Don’t chase. The dark is listening to the exact shape of what you are not allowed to finish.”

Her fingers stayed. The sensors stayed. The green band held its narrow, trembling ridge while the low tone from the speakers continued, unbroken, and Anita watched the display with the focused pleasure of someone finally hearing a reply.

Chapter Six: Sidereal Rate

When the forty-minute transmission window closed, the green band on Anita's center monitor didn't drop; Anita simply keyed off the array uplink, leaving the waveform frozen on the glass like a signature.

"Cleanest pass we've logged on the three-gigahertz band all quarter," Anita said, stripping the conductive gel from her thumb and middle finger with a paper wipe before unlocking the bronze transducer arm and swinging it clear of Lisa's thighs. She didn't pat Lisa's knee or offer a warm word; she was already turning back to her waterfall displays to tag the file. "Unstrap yourself and head out, Lisa. Viva's waiting by the elevator."

Lisa's fingers were stiff as she released the thoracic buckle. When she slid down from the carbon-polymer cradle onto the rubber grounding mat, the heavy, continuous throb between her legs felt wider and deeper than it had that morning—as if Anita's forty-minute carrier wave was still humming through the bones of her pelvis.

Out in the Sub-Level Three corridor, Viva stood leaning one shoulder against the brushed- steel wall beside the elevator call panel, reading a folded sheaf of printouts with a black pen capped between her fingers. She wore a tailored navy dress today, sleeveless, with a high structured collar that showed the long column of her throat.

When the acoustic door thudded shut behind Lisa, Viva looked up, folded the papers once, and pressed the button for the car.

"She didn't reset the clock," Viva observed as they stepped into the mirrored cabin together. "That means you held the phase lock on the first try."

"I did," Lisa said.

Her own voice sounded different to her ears in the quiet elevator—steadier, lower, stripped of the breathless hesitation she had brought into Hangar Four yesterday afternoon. As the car rose out of the sub-basements toward the sunlit ground floor, Lisa looked at her reflection beside Viva's in the smoked glass, then turned her head to look up at the Director directly.

"I'm learning new things down here," Lisa said, watching Viva's profile. "All through undergrad, everything was propulsion curves and orbital mechanics. I'd never studied xenolinguistics. It never even occurred to me that a language could be something a body holds in place instead of words you put in a line."

Viva turned her head, her dark eyes meeting Lisa's with quiet interest. "And how does it feel to hold it?"

“Like flying the shuttle with the screens off,” Lisa answered honestly. “Except there’s nowhere to land.”

The elevator doors slid open onto the main Ground Level concourse—a wide, sun-drenched gallery with glass walls looking out over the manicured courtyard and the administration lawn. Unlike the empty late-shift hallways of the night before, the concourse was busy with the nine-o’clock rush. Dozens of technicians, propulsion analysts, and administrative staff moved past in pressed slacks, button-down shirts, lab coats, and security lanyards.

Viva stepped out into the stream of traffic without slowing her pace, her hand resting lightly at the bare small of Lisa’s back to guide her along the polished terrazzo floor.

Lisa walked beside her, bare feet silent against the stone, the morning sunlight warming her naked shoulders and breasts as two female guidance engineers in blazers stepped politely aside to give them room. Neither woman stared, though both glanced briefly at the dark flush across Lisa’s chest and the faint, dried sheen of Anita’s contact gel along her inner thighs before nodding a good morning to Viva.

Lisa waited until they had turned down a quieter glazed walkway leading toward the East Wing before she spoke again.

“Viva?”

“Yes, Lisa.”

“Yesterday in your suite, Elsie mentioned the candidate from Annapolis complaining about his chest leads,” Lisa said, keeping her pace matched to Viva’s longer stride. “And you said most candidates take a week to stop fighting the absence of clothes.”

“I did.”

Lisa glanced through the glass at the courtyard, where twenty staff members were walking between buildings in suits and jackets, then looked back up at Viva. “I haven’t seen the man from Annapolis. I haven’t seen any of the other eleven candidates since I stepped out of the simulator. In fact, aside from Svetlana and Penny while we were in the berth, I haven’t seen a single naked person in this entire facility except Delta.”

Viva didn’t miss a step. Near the end of the sun-warmed walkway, she paused beside a floor-to-ceiling mullion, turning so that Lisa came to a stop facing her in the bright morning light.

“The candidate from Annapolis was released from the program at eight o’clock this morning,” Viva said, her voice calm and completely matter-of-fact. “So were the other ten. None of them could clear the noise floor without fighting the

instruments.”

Lisa blinked, her breath catching slightly. “All of them? Then… how many candidates are left in the cohort?”

Viva reached out with one hand, her thumb brushing a stray dark curl back from Lisa’s cheek before tracing down the side of her throat to the warm hollow of her collarbone, where Lisa’s pulse was beating at a steady, elevated hundred and ten.

“One,” Viva said simply. “The people you see in the corridors wear clothes because they are ground support, Lisa. They maintain the hardware and read the telemetry. You don’t strip the technicians who service the telescope—you only strip the lens. Right now, in this entire center, you and Delta are the only surfaces calibrated to stay bare.”

A slow, dizzying heat moved through Lisa’s stomach at the words—the sudden realization that she wasn’t part of a class at all. In a complex of five hundred dressed professionals, her nudity wasn’t a freshman hazing rule; it was the mark of the singular vessel the entire building was turning around.

“You have a three-hour rest block after lunch,” Viva continued, dropping her hand from Lisa’s collarbone and checking her watch. “Sleep if you can, though Elsie expects your plateau will keep you shallow. Tonight at eleven, you report to the ridge dome. Doctor Jeffries needs four hours of clear sky before the marine layer rolls in.”

At ten-fifty that night, a silent electric cart carried Lisa up the winding asphalt service road to the crest of the coastal ridge above the main campus.

The security driver—an older woman in a heavy navy parka who kept her eyes strictly on the headlights—dropped Lisa at the base of the white cylindrical tower that housed the Space Center’s primary optical observatory and drove back down the hill.

Lisa climbed the narrow spiral stairs inside the concrete pier alone, her bare soles cold against the painted iron treads. By the time she pushed through the padded light-trap door onto the main observation floor, the temperature had dropped to fifty-four degrees.

The interior of the dome was vast, cavernous, and dark, lit only by a handful of deep ruby- red safelights recessed into the curved steel walls so the instruments wouldn’t lose their night adaptation. Directly overhead, the thirty-foot shutter slot stood wide open to the black coastal sky. A river of cold mountain air poured straight down through the opening, raising goosebumps across Lisa’s bare arms and thighs and making her nipples tighten into hard, aching knots within seconds.

Rising forty feet from the central concrete pier was the observatory's historic ninety-inch reflector—a massive, skeletal counterbalanced machine of matte black iron, burnished brass setting circles, and bundled fiber-optic sensor feeds, all balanced on a monstrous equatorial fork mount tilted toward the north celestial pole.

Standing on the elevated hydraulic observing platform beside the lower Cassegrain cage was Dr. Willow Jeffries.

She was tall and willow-slender, with pale, high-boned features that looked almost translucent in the red safelight and silver-blonde hair twisted up with a single carbon-fiber stylus. Over a dark turtleneck and wool trousers, she wore a long, unbuttoned charcoal cashmere coat to ward off the dome chill. She wasn't looking at a computer screen; she had one eye pressed to a wide-field brass finder eyepiece, her long, pale fingers resting lightly on a slow-motion vernier knob.

"Close the light-trap behind you, Lisa," Willow said. Her voice was barely louder than a whisper—cool, unhurried, and pitched so low it didn't echo off the curved metal walls. "Sound carries into the primary mirror cell if you speak from the diaphragm."

Lisa let the padded door seal shut and walked across the cold wooden deck toward the hydraulic platform.

Willow straightened from the eyepiece and turned to look down at her. In the ruby light, Willow's eyes were very dark and remarkably still, holding none of Anita's rapid-fire intensity. She looked at Lisa the way someone looks at a star cluster through clean glass—patiently, from a great distance, taking in the faint plume of warmth rising from Lisa's flushed skin into the cold air of the dome.

"Elsie told me your core temperature was running half a degree high," Willow murmured, descending the three steps of the platform and extending a cool, dry hand to take Lisa's wrist. Her fingers felt like smooth river stone against Lisa's heated pulse. "That's good. The dew heaters on the secondary saddle are set to ninety-nine degrees, so your torso won't chill, but the dome air will keep your extremities awake."

"What are we tracking?" Lisa whispered, remembering to keep her voice soft as she looked up at the towering black barrel of the telescope.

"Nothing that shows up in the visible spectrum," Willow answered, leading Lisa up the three steps onto the platform beside the base of the giant mount. "Standard astrometry uses charge-coupled silicon chips cooled with liquid nitrogen. Silicon is dead matter, Lisa. It counts photons, nothing more. When we want to resolve gravitational lensing distortion across deep space, we use a living biological interferometer aligned directly with the optical axis."

Willow gestured to the massive junction where the telescope's declination shaft met the lower counterweight saddle—a curved cradle of polished brass and dark leather wrapped in thin copper heating elements, positioned five feet above the platform floor directly beneath the main mirror cell.

"Up onto the saddle," Willow whispered, placing both hands at Lisa's bare waist and lifting her with surprising, wiry strength until Lisa's chest rested along the warmed leather housing of the guide scope and her thighs straddled the thick, polished brass cylinder of the declination axis.

The metal beneath Lisa's breasts and stomach was heated by the copper coils to blood warmth, while the night air pouring through the open dome shutter kissed her bare back, buttocks, and parted legs with fifty-four-degree cold. The contrast was so sharp that Lisa's breath caught in a silent gasp.

Willow reached down, took Lisa's ankles, and hooked her insteps into two brass vernier stirrups bolted to the counterweight arms. The position tilted Lisa's pelvis forward, pressing her swollen, slick labia directly against the smooth, warm brass collar of the telescope's tracking drive.

With a flick of a toggle switch on the fork arm, Willow engaged the sidereal clock drive. Beneath Lisa's bare skin, a deep, sub-audible gear hum came alive inside the thirty-ton machine. The telescope began to move—imperceptibly slow, tracking the rotation of the Earth at fifteen arc-seconds per second, carrying Lisa's naked body across the dark dome in lockstep with the stars overhead while the warm brass collar vibrated at a continuous sixty hertz directly against the base of her clit.

Willow stepped in directly behind Lisa's parted thighs, slipping one long, cool hand out of her cashmere coat pocket to slide between the warm brass shaft and Lisa's slick skin. "The drive moves at sidereal rate," Willow whispered against Lisa's cold shoulder, her cool fingers parting Lisa's heated folds so that the vibrating brass collar kissed the swollen bud more directly, then easing her back half a millimeter with her thumb so the contact stayed just short of overwhelming. "Four hours until the meridian flip, Lisa. Let your eyes adjust to the zenith—and don't lose the star."

Willow's cool fingers settled between the warm brass collar of the tracking drive and the slick folds of Lisa's labia, acting as a living spacer that regulated the sixty-hertz hum to the millimeter. When Willow pressed her index and middle fingers flat against the metal, the vibration transferred straight through her knuckles into the swollen base of Lisa's clit; when she lifted them by a fraction of an inch, only the slick film of Lisa's own moisture bridged the gap, turning the heavy mechanical buzz into a maddening, feather-light flutter.

Lisa’s breath plumed white in the fifty-four-degree dome air. Her insteps flexed hard against the brass vernier stirrups, her thighs trembling between the freezing night breeze on her skin and the ninety-nine-degree copper heating coils warming her belly.

“Your baseline is drifting in the upper register,” Willow whispered near Lisa’s ear, her voice barely disturbing the quiet whirr of the clock drive. She slipped her left hand out of her cashmere coat pocket and reached around Lisa’s bare ribs, sliding her cool palm between the warmed leather of the guide-scope cradle and Lisa’s chest until her thumb and forefinger closed around Lisa’s hard, cold-tightened left nipple.

Lisa gasped silently, her back arching off the saddle as the sudden pinch sent a bright wire of heat straight down to the vibrating brass between her legs.

“Hold the optical axis,” Willow murmured. She shifted her stance on the hydraulic platform, bringing her other hand up to capture both of Lisa’s nipples between her thumbs and forefingers at the same time, leaving the slick pressure of Lisa’s pelvis pinned directly against the humming brass collar by the forward tilt of the stirrups. “An interferometer with only one point of calibration loses resolution as the mirror cools. We use the pelvis for coarse tracking, Lisa, but the thoracic nerve bundles are the fine-adjustment verniers.” With slow, deliberate precision, Willow rolled both of Lisa’s stiffened nipples between her cool fingers, twisting them outward—a quarter-turn clockwise on the left, a quarter-turn counter-clockwise on the right—just like the knurled brass slow-motion knobs on the telescope mount, then holding them taut at full torsion.

A sharp, trapped whimper vibrated in Lisa’s throat. The twin twists pulled at the nerve paths beneath her sternum, multiplying the relentless sixty-hertz hum against her swollen clit until the red safelights along the dome wall blurred at the edges of her vision.

“See how the tremor in your adductors levels out when I torque them?” Willow whispered, watching the faint numerical readout on the eyepiece housing beside Lisa’s head. “Treat them like collimation knobs. Quarter-turn to take up the slack in your sympathetic nervous system, hold for four arc-seconds to lock the gain, then back off half a notch before the reflex fires.”

Willow eased the twist back by a fraction of a millimeter, letting the blood rush back into the pinched buds for six slow beats while the cold night air poured through the open shutter overhead, kissing the wet seam of Lisa’s thighs. Just as the ache began to settle into a heavy throb, Willow’s fingers tightened and turned both nipples again—slow, firm, and exact—drawing them slightly outward from the warm leather pad before dialing them another eighth of a turn.

Lisa’s hips bucked helplessly against the brass cylinder of the declination shaft. The slick, engorged folds of her sex slid half an inch along the heated metal, driving the swollen peak of her clit hard against the vibrating collar.

“Don’t slip the clutch,” Willow said softly, shifting her knee up between the stirrup arms to brace the curve of Lisa’s bare buttocks from behind, pinning her pelvis at the exact angle where the sixty-hertz drive bit deepest without tipping her over. Her thumbs and forefingers stayed locked on Lisa’s nipples, making minute, continuous micro-adjustments—left knob up a hair to sharpen the breath, right knob twisted tight to catch the flutter in Lisa’s stomach whenever she came within a heartbeat of climax.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the thirty-ton telescope crept across the dark dome at fifteen arc- seconds per second, tracking the cold white smear of the Milky Way across the open slot above them. Every few minutes, as the angle of the massive barrel steeped toward the zenith, Lisa’s weight shifted a fraction lower onto the vibrating brass collar, and Willow compensated with another slow, inexorable turn of the twin peaks between her fingers. “Two hours to the meridian,” Willow whispered against the cold skin of Lisa’s shoulder, twisting both buds to a fresh, aching stop and holding them there whileLisa’s thighs shook in the stirrups. “Your collimation is crystal clear now, Lisa. Stay right on the crosshairs.”

Chapter Seven: Proof of Concept

By Thursday at eleven-thirty in the morning, Lisa had stopped experiencing time as hours on a clock; she measured it only by the shifting viscosity of the heat between her legs and the changing hands that kept her three seconds shy of relief.

Ninety-six hours had passed since the drawer in Viva's observation suite had locked away her clothes. Since descending from the freezing air of Dr. Jeffries's observatory dome before dawn, she had spent two hours sandwiched between Svetlana and Penny on the heated mat, another forty-minute block strapped into Anita's conductive cradle, and three nights wedged between Viva and Elsie in the dark penthouse bed. Her nervous system felt like an over-wound mainspring. Every step she took down the carpeted corridor of the Executive Wing sent a heavy, liquid pulse through her swollen labia, her skin so flushed and sensitized that the conditioned air of the hallway felt like warm hands brushing her breasts. Viva walked on her left in a dark slate suit; Elsie walked on her right, carrying a tablet displaying Lisa's live mucosal density metrics. At the end of the corridor, before the tall walnut double doors of Conference Room A, stood a woman Lisa hadn't met yet.

Cherry Reynolds was impossible to miss. She was shorter than Viva and Elsie—closer to five-foot-six—with a lush, unapologetically hourglass figure and a remarkably full, heavy bust that strained the silk lapel of her tailored cream blazer. Her hair was a vibrant, glossy auburn-red, cropped into a sharp, pixie-short cut that left her neck bare and accentuated her bright, calculating hazel eyes and full, crimson-painted lips.

She had a silver catering stylus tucked between her fingers and was speaking rapidly into a wireless earpiece as they approached.

"—no, pull the floral centerpieces off the credenza, they compete with the skin tone under the recessed spots," Cherry said into her mic, before tapping her earpiece off and turning her gaze directly onto Lisa.

Cherry didn't look at Lisa like an engineer or a flight surgeon. She looked at her the way an art director looks at a marquee installation ten minutes before the doors open.

"There she is," Cherry said, her voice a brisk, rich contralto as she stepped forward, setting her tablet against her hip and reaching out with one manicured hand to cup the underside of Lisa's bare right breast, testing the weight and the tight, dark peak of the nipple with a practiced thumb before letting her gaze drop to the glistening sheen along Lisa's inner thighs. "Elsie, you weren't exaggerating. Look at the color on her chest. You don't get a flush like that from standard circulation boosters."

“Ninety-six hours continuous,” Elsie said, tilting her screen so Cherry could see the rising curve. “She hasn’t dropped below a hundred and twelve beats per minute since Tuesday afternoon.”

“How’s the viscosity?” Cherry asked, already pushing open one side of the heavy walnut doors.

“Too thick for the gravity channel,” Elsie answered matter-of-factly. “When we tested the catch-basin after her nine o’clock calibration, less than twenty percent was draining down the chute. The high-density fraction is staying pooled inside the vault.”

Cherry stopped just inside the doorway, her bright eyes narrowing with immediate pragmatic interest before a slow smile curved her red lips. “Even better. Forget the catch- basin. I’ll have catering pull the borosilicate dish and put out the long-stem tasting spoons. If the best stock is staying inside, they can take it straight from the well.”

Lisa’s breath hitched softly at the words, her stomach tightening as Viva’s warm palm pressed against the small of her back, guiding her inside.

Conference Room A was forty feet long, dominated by a gleaming expanse of dark Honduras mahogany surrounded by twenty high-backed leather chairs. Along the far glass wall, overlooking the sun-drenched launch complex below, a buffet of artisanal water crackers, sliced figs, honeycomb, aged white cheddar, and sparkling water had been laid out on white linen.

The center of the mahogany table had been cleared of microphones and legal pads. In their place sat the contoured black silicone bolster Lisa had seen in the commissary, except there was no glass catch-dish at the foot. Instead, resting on two folded linen napkins directly beside the wide-set stirrups were two cylindrical silver caddies filled with long- handled, deeply bowled tasting spoons of chilled sterling silver and heavy crystal.

“Up in the middle, Lisa,” Cherry instructed briskly, kicking off her cream heels for a moment to climb onto a low step-stool beside the table and patting the warm silicone bolster. “Shoulders on the wedge, heels in the cups. Keep your knees relaxed so the angle stays open toward the donor seats.”

Lisa stepped up onto the velvet-covered mounting block beside the table and lay back along the bolster. The silicone had been pre-warmed to a hundred degrees. As Viva lifted Lisa’s left ankle into the near stirrup and Elsie secured her right ankle into the far one, Lisa’s thighs parted wide over the polished mahogany edge, leaving her swollen, aching folds completely open to the length of the room.

Cherry leaned over the table, her heavy breasts pressing against the edge of the wood as she arranged Lisa’s dark curls neatly across the black bolster pillow and brushed a thumb once—firm and unhurried—across Lisa’s stiffened left nipple to make sure both peaks were standing at equal height under the warm halogen track lights.

“Remember the house protocol,” Viva said quietly from above Lisa’s head, resting two fingers briefly against the hammering pulse at the base of Lisa’s throat. “This is the Q3 propulsion review and donor briefing. You don’t speak unless addressed, and you keep your pelvis on the bolster.”

At twelve sharp, the walnut doors opened.

Over the next three minutes, eighteen people filed into the room—senior propulsion division heads, two grey-haired aerospace defense contractors in three-piece suits, a billionaire venture capitalist in a black cashmere sweater, and a dozen department leads carrying small porcelain tasting plates from the side credenza. Anita Tikataka walked in near the back, chatting quietly with Dr. Jeffries about array scheduling while picking up a slice of green apple.

No one hesitated at the sight of Lisa stretched naked across the center of the boardroom table. To them, she was the centerpiece of the Thursday luncheon.

Cherry stood at the head of the table, tapping a crystal water glass once with a silver spoon.

“Welcome, everyone,” Cherry said smoothly, gesturing toward the glistening, parted crease between Lisa’s thighs at the center of the mahogany table. “Before Viva starts the Q3 propulsion numbers, R&D has brought up Candidate Nakamura after four consecutive days on the primary baseline. Because her peptide concentration is running at nearly triple standard commissary density, we aren’t using a drip basin today. Please use the chilled silver or glass spoons in the caddies to gather directly from the interior wall—one spoon per pass so we keep the line moving.”

The venture capitalist in the black cashmere sweater stepped up to the side of the table between Lisa’s parted knees first, picking up a heavy, chilled sterling silver spoon from the caddy with his right hand and holding his porcelain plate with his left. Behind him, six more staff members and department heads lined up with their plates.

The spoons continued in a steady line. Silver and crystal entered her one after another, each chilled bowl scraping a slow, gathering pass along the swollen inner walls and withdrawing heavy with the thick fluid that had nowhere else to go. Lisa’s thighs shook in the stirrups. The line on Elsie’s tablet climbed in small, stubborn steps and refused to fall. By the time the eighth spoon withdrew, her hips were lifting in tiny, helpless arcs against the silicone, chasing contact the

stirrups would not allow.

The next person in line was young—mid-twenties, with a sleek dark bob and a fitted charcoal blouse that marked her as one of the newer guidance analysts. She set her tasting plate aside, studied the glistening, parted tissue for a moment, then leaned in. Instead of reaching for a spoon she lowered her head and drew her tongue once, slowly, through the pooled nectar at the entrance. The warmth of it after so much cold metal made Lisa gasp. The analyst made a small, interested sound, licked again to gather more, then straightened. “Thicker than the commissary stock,” she said, almost to herself. She slid two fingers inside, curling them gently against the front wall the way the spoons had scraped, and drew them out coated and shining. She tasted them, eyes half-closing, then returned her hand, working the fingers deeper this time, stroking in short, curious passes that collected and spread at once.

The first contraction hit without warning. Lisa’s back bowed hard off the bolster; the motion drove the analyst’s fingers deeper and the second wave followed immediately, clamping around them. A raw sound broke from Lisa’s throat. Her hands flew up, grabbing blindly—one catching the analyst’s wrist, the other seizing the edge of a nearby porcelain plate and dragging it. The plate shattered against the mahogany. Fluid surged past the analyst’s fingers in a sudden flood, spilling over the table edge.

“Please—” Lisa managed, the word cracking. Her hips slammed down, then up again, the stirrups creaking. The analyst’s fingers stayed inside through the spasm, stroking once more in startled reflex. A third climax tore through before the second had finished, harder, Lisa’s thighs fighting the restraints hard enough to knock a water glass and two stacked saucers to the floor. Crystal and porcelain broke. She clutched the analyst’s forearm with both hands now, holding on as her body bucked, each slam of her pelvis against the silicone sending another thick pulse of release across the wood.

“Mercy—please, I can’t—” The cry was high and broken. A fourth wave rolled through her, violent enough that the entire table shifted an inch. More dishes slid and fell. The analyst finally drew her fingers free, glistening to the knuckle, and Lisa’s body kept moving without them, slamming, clenching, spilling, the cries for mercy dissolving into raw, helpless sound while the room stayed frozen around the wreckage and the flood still running off the mahogany onto the carpet below.

For ten full seconds after the last violent spasm finally ebbed from Lisa’s pelvic floor, nobody in Conference Room A said a word about propulsion budgets.

Lisa lay limp and boneless against the black silicone bolster, her chest heaving in shallow, ragged gasps, a dark crimson flush spreading from the hollows of her cheeks all the way down between her breasts. Broken porcelain and crystal

glinted on the carpet beside the table legs. The young guidance analyst still stood between Lisa’s trembling knees, her forearm damp where Lisa had clutched her, staring down at her own glistening fingers before lifting them to her mouth. Beside her, the venture capitalist in the black cashmere sweater stepped around the shattered saucers to draw a silver spoon through the thick, pearlescent flood still running over the beveled mahogany edge, tasting it directly off the metal—his pupils dilating visibly as the neurochemical surge hit him.

The venture capitalist stood beside her right knee, staring down at the spoonful of warm, opalescent nectar he had drawn out during the exact peak of her contractions. He lifted it to his mouth, tasted it directly off the silver, and let out a low, stunned breath—his pupils dilating visibly as the neurochemical surge hit him.

“My God, Viva,” the man murmured, setting his plate down with a hand that wasn’t entirely steady as two senior engineers immediately stepped in with fresh spoons to gather the dense post-climax spill before it cooled. “What did you do to the formula? That’s ten times cleaner than the Tuesday stock.”

At the foot of the table, Cherry Reynolds hadn’t picked up a cracker. She was staring down at Lisa’s quivering stomach and the frantic, cascading spike on Elsie’s telemetry tablet with the bright, fierce concentration of an executive who had just watched a test drill strike a billion-barrel oil reserve.

“Look at the peptide saturation on that release,” Cherry said quietly, stepping around the corner of the table to stand right beside Viva and Elsie near Lisa’s bare hip. Cherry tapped the glowing spike on Elsie’s screen with a red fingernail. “Elsie, look at the refractive index on what she just produced. Four days of denial gave us a three-hundred-percent jump in potency the second she broke.”

“The neuroendocrine reservoir dumps everything at once when the prefrontal block finally fails,” Elsie said, watching two propulsion leads eagerly scrape the last of the heavy sheen from Lisa’s still-twitching inner walls with crystal spoons. “Anita thought an orgasm was just static on the array, but chemically, the cascade is extraordinary.”

Cherry turned to Viva, her hazel eyes alight, speaking right across Lisa’s heaving ribcage as if Lisa were a blueprint unrolled on the wood.

“Viva, forget the standard press conference when she comes back from the solo orbital flight,” Cherry said rapidly. “Think about what we just saw. This was ninety-six hours of edging in front of eighteen people. What happens if we lock her on the rail from this afternoon all the way through flight prep, launch, orbit, and splashdown—three full weeks without a single release—and then stage a live climax event in the Main Atrium the hour she returns?”

Viva looked down at Lisa’s flushed, sweat-dampened face, then across at Cherry. “All-staff attendance?”

“Every single employee in the complex, plus the Tier-One syndicate donors at the glass rail,” Cherry said, her hand gesturing down the length of Lisa’s naked body. “We strip away the candidate name completely. When she comes back down from the stars, we debut her naked in the zero-G cradle as Chi—hold her at maximum saturation while the entire center harvests the pre-flight honey, and then let them bring her over the edge together in the middle of the floor. The funding commits will pay for the next three orbital boosters before she stops shaking.”

Down on the bolster, the fog behind Lisa’s eyes cleared just enough for the words three full weeks to register.

Her throat felt raw from the cry she hadn’t been able to hold back when she came. Even now, though the massive contraction had drained the top layer of pressure, the deep, bruised ache inside her pelvis was already re-forming as a female guidance tech slid one last warm spoon along her sensitive inner wall.

Lisa turned her head weakly on the pillow toward Viva’s hip, lifting one trembling hand an inch off the mahogany to brush the sleeve of Viva’s slate jacket.

“Viva…” Lisa whispered, her voice small and cracked beneath the low murmur of the guests returning to their seats around the table. “Please… going four days without coming was already so hard. I tried to hold it, I swear I did, I just couldn’t—”

“We’ll need to move the atrium lighting rig back twenty feet to clear the suspension cables,” Viva said to Cherry, not looking down, her tone completely even as she reached past Lisa’s lifted hand to pick up a laminated schedule card from the edge of the table. “And security will have to re-badge the sub-contractors if you want full staff on the floor.” “I’ll have facilities start rigging the truss on Monday,” Cherry replied right over Lisa’s chest, jotting a note onto her tablet with her silver stylus. “Elsie, can your team keep her plateau from slipping like this again between now and the launch window? If she pops early in the centrifuge or the capsule, we lose the whole buildup.”

“We’ll adjust the sensor loop so the transducer backs off automatically if her pelvic floor starts to flutter,” Elsie said calmly.

“Viva,” Lisa breathed again, a single hot tear of sheer physical exhaustion slipping sideways out of her eye into her dark curls as her fingers grazed the back of Viva’s wrist. “Three weeks… it hurts when it stays that high for days. It’s too hard.”

This time, Viva paused.

Slowly, the tall Director looked down from her schedule card into Lisa’s wide, glistening dark eyes. Viva didn’t frown, and her voice didn’t rise; she simply laid her broad, warm palm flat across Lisa’s damp lower belly, pressing down just firmly enough that Lisa felt the tender, over-stimulated tissue between her parted thighs kiss the silicone bolster again. “The last four days were a baseline screening, Lisa,” Viva said quietly, her dark gaze steady and immovable above her. “You haven’t started the orbital conditioning profiles yet. Between now and the day you come back to us from the stars, going without release isn’t going to get easier—it is going to get significantly harder. And you are going to hold every drop of it until I tell the room you can let go.”

Viva’s thumb slid down two inches through the damp curls above Lisa’s sex, pressing once—firm, exact, and unyielding—against the hypersensitive, post-orgasmic bud of her clit until Lisa gasped and arched off the wood, the familiar four-second count snapping right back into place before the luncheon plates were even cleared.

Chapter Eight: Escape Velocity

Elsie kept her word about the sensor loop.

Before Lisa even left the mahogany table after the Thursday luncheon, an R&D technician had fitted a micro-transducer patch no larger than a postage stamp directly over the sacral nerve plexus at the base of her bare spine. From that afternoon forward, Lisa's nervous system was no longer allowed to ambush her.

Whenever her pelvic floor began the first microscopic flutter of an approaching contraction—whether under Svetlana and Penny's layered thighs in Room 3B, on Anita's carbon-polymer cradle, or stretched across Cherry's private donor tables—the sacral patch registered the spike three hundred milliseconds before Lisa's own brain knew she was tipping. Instantly, a tiny red LED on the rim of the bolster or the wrist-band of whoever was touching her flashed twice. Fingers lifted; silver spoons withdrew; the sixty-hertz drive backed off by half a millimeter.

They didn't let her drop down from the ledge. They simply held her two heartbeats shy of the fall for twenty-one consecutive days.

By the end of the second week, Lisa had stopped feeling like a girl who happened to be naked in a research facility. Walking bare through the busy corridors between dressed engineers felt as natural as breathing, yet the boundary between her skin and the building had grown paper-thin. Five hundred hours of continuous, unfulfilled engorgement had altered her baseline physiology. Her core temperature rested permanently at ninety-nine point □ degrees; a perpetual, rose-gold flush stained her cheekbones, her collarbone, and the upper slopes of her breasts. Her dark curls seemed to carry a static charge of their own, and wherever she passed—in the elevators, the hallways, the centrifuge bay—she left behind that warm, unmistakable scent of crushed clover and salt air.

She no longer slept in blocks. Sandwiched every night between the six-foot frames of Viva and Elsie in the dark penthouse bed, she existed in a lucid, humming twilight. Her mouth and fingers learned every shift in Viva's slow, commanding breath and every hitch in Elsie's long thigh, bringing both women to quiet, shuddering completion night after night while their hands traded off between her parted legs on the unbroken four-and-six count.

By day nineteen, the honey pooling inside her was no longer clear. It had distilled into a heavy, opalescent nectar that clung to chilled crystal spoons like warm liquid pearl. A single drop placed under the tongue of a guidance controller doubled their pattern- recognition speed inside of ninety seconds; two drops left the senior donors sitting in stunned, euphoric silence for an hour.

And through it all, the pressure behind Lisa’s swollen clit grew denser, wider, and more immovable—a miniature sun compressed inside her pelvis, held back only by the sacral sensor and the quiet certainty of Viva’s voice.

At 04:15 on the twenty-first morning, the elevator did not stop at the sub-basements or the ground concourse. It carried them straight out through the subterranean transfer tube to the coastal launch complex, rising twenty stories up the skeletal steel gantry of Pad One. When the cage doors rattled open onto the high catwalk, the pre-dawn marine air was forty-eight degrees, smelling of salt spray and liquid oxygen venting from the towering white booster ten feet away. Floodlights cut through the coastal fog, turning the drifting mist into theatrical columns of silver light.

Thirty pad technicians in white clean-room bunny suits and headsets lined the perforated steel walkway. As Lisa stepped out bare between Viva and Elsie, the cold wind hit her heated skin like a slap, drawing a visible plume of white steam from her bare shoulders and between her thighs. Her nipples contracted instantly into hard, aching points.

None of the technicians spoke, yet as she walked past them toward the open circular hatch of the orbital capsule at the nose of the rocket, every head turned inside its visor. She wasn’t the nervous student in the oversized blue flight suit from Hangar Four anymore. After three weeks on the rail, she moved with a slow, hypnotic economy—every step measured so the unbearable fullness between her legs wouldn’t rub too sharply against her own inner thighs.

Inside the white hull of the capsule, there was no pressure suit waiting for her, and no metal control panel cluttered with toggle switches.

Elsie had stripped the cockpit down to a single, seamless biological interface. The interior walls were lined in dark, sound-absorbent acoustic velvet heated to a hundred degrees. Occupying the center of the cabin was the custom-molded orbital couch: a reclining cradle of warm black silicone that held the spine at a high-G angle while separating the thighs into two wide, cushioned channels.

Mounted directly into the crotch of the couch was a gleaming platinum-iridium transducer saddle sculpted from the exact three-dimensional cast of Lisa’s engorged labia, fed by a heavy braided telemetry trunk cable. Above the seat, suspended from twin articulated gimbal arms instead of a steering yoke, were two small, knurled brass vernier clamps lined in warm conductive gel—positioned directly over the occupant’s chest.

“In you go, little rose,” Elsie said softly at the hatch rim, her breath frosting in the gantry air as she reached inside to steady Lisa’s bare hip while Lisa lowered herself into the heated cradle of the capsule.

The moment Lisa’s buttocks settled into the couch and her legs parted into the wide thigh channels, the warm platinum-iridium saddle kissed the full length of her slick, swollen folds, fitting against her tender clitoral hood like a second skin.

Lisa let out a low, trembling breath, her back arching automatically into the contoured silicone as twenty-one days of accumulated heat flared instantly toward the red line.

Viva leaned inside the open hatch opposite Elsie. In the cramped, warm curve of the capsule, the two tall directors filled the entire doorway—midnight hair on the left, copper- red hair on the right, their faces less than a foot above Lisa’s flushed chest.

“Telemetry uplink is live on the main board,” Elsie murmured, pulling down the two articulated gimbal arms and fitting the warm, gel-lined brass vernier cups directly over Lisa’s hard nipples, securing the small tension screws until both peaks were held in a firm, outward quarter-turn pinch that echoed Dr. Jeffries’s telescope mount. “Sacral inhibitor is armed for the ascent phase. Even under four Gs of booster vibration, the saddle will back off by twenty microns the millisecond your pelvic floor tries to fire.”

Viva reached down between Lisa’s parted thighs, resting two bare fingers directly over the top of the platinum-iridium saddle housing, pressing the warm mesh firmly against Lisa’s throbbing bud for one slow, final baseline check before launch.

“The flight plan is automated for three orbits, Lisa,” Viva said, her dark eyes locking onto Lisa’s as her fingers began a slow, four-second priming pass through the dense, pearlescent honey already coating the sensor pads. “You stay on the rail all the way up, and all the way around. Cherry already has six hundred people taking their seats in the Main Atrium for your return. Do not waste a single microvolt in the dark.”

Viva’s fingers pressed the warm mesh of the saddle more firmly against the swollen tissue and began the slow priming pass. After twenty-one days the honey clung in a dense, pearlescent film; each four-second stroke dragged the platinum-iridium across the engorged hood and the aching bud beneath it, gathering and spreading at once. Lisa’s back arched into the contoured silicone. A low, broken sound left her throat. The sacral patch at the base of her spine stayed dark—still two heartbeats shy.

Elsie tightened the left brass vernier a quarter-turn. The gel-lined cup pulled Lisa’s nipple outward and held it; the right followed a moment later, the paired tension drawing both peaks taut toward the curved ceiling of the capsule. The pinch echoed through the over- sensitized nerves straight into the saddle. Lisa’s hips tried to lift. The thigh channels kept her open and pinned.

“Baseline capacitance is high,” Elsie murmured, watching the small readout on the gimbal arm. She reached in with her free hand and traced one fingertip around the rim of the left vernier, checking the seal of gel against skin. The light contact made Lisa gasp. “Thoracic leads are clean. She’s carrying the full load.”

Viva’s fingers completed another measured stroke through the thick nectar and paused at the peak, holding the mesh flush. Six seconds. The cold marine air from the open hatch brushed Lisa’s flushed chest and the inner surfaces of her thighs; the contrast only sharpened the heat locked under the saddle. Her stomach hollowed. A thin, involuntary cry rose and caught.

“Vocalization at the rail is expected,” Viva said, voice even. She resumed the four-second pass, slower this time, letting the saddle’s own micro-current layer under her fingers. The combined pressure drove the miniature sun in Lisa’s pelvis brighter. Lisa’s hands clutched the edges of the couch. Her thighs shook inside the channels. The sound that left her this time was louder, rawer—half gasp, half plea—echoing briefly against the acoustic velvet before the gantry wind took it.

Elsie leaned farther in, copper hair falling forward, and adjusted the right vernier another fraction. Both nipples were now held in a firm, continuous outward tension. She rested her palm briefly against Lisa’s sternum, feeling the hammer of her pulse, then slid the hand down to join Viva’s at the saddle. Two sets of fingers worked the housing together: Viva maintaining the exact count, Elsie adding a light, circling pressure at the base so the mesh never lost contact. The pearlescent fluid welled around their knuckles and the platinum edges.

Lisa’s head pressed back into the headrest. The next stroke lifted her all the way to the screaming edge—abdomen rigid, toes curled in the footrests, a high, fractured cry tearing free as the twenty-one-day ache crested and held, bright enough to white out the floodlights beyond the hatch. The sacral LED stayed dark. They did not let it tip.

“Plateau is stable,” Elsie said. She withdrew her hand, wiped her fingers once on a sterile cloth from her pocket, and reached for the hatch rim. Viva gave one final, exact press of the saddle against the throbbing bud, then lifted her fingers clear. The mesh remained, warm and fitted, still carrying the charge.

“Hold it,” Viva told her. “All the way up.”

The heavy hatch began to swing. Lisa lay open in the heated cradle, nipples drawn taut in the brass cups, the platinum saddle sealed against the hypersaturated, untouched heat between her thighs, the last of her cry still trembling in the velvet dark as the locking lugs started to turn.

The heavy orbital hatch swung shut with a deep, hydraulic thud, and the motorized locking lugs rotated home around the rim, sealing her inside the

warm, velvet-lined womb of the capsule.

Through the bone-conduction pads behind her ears, the pad leader's voice counted down the final ten seconds in a flat, clinical cadence.

Lisa couldn't have closed her thighs if she tried. The wide channels of the couch held her open to the warm cabin air, the brass vernier cups pulled her nipples taut toward the curved ceiling, and between her legs, the platinum-iridium saddle hummed in exact sympathy with her own racing pulse.

Three. Two. One. Ignition.

Beneath the floor of the capsule, seven million pounds of thrust tore the coastal fog apart. The sound wasn't noise; it was a physical hand that slammed downward across every square inch of Lisa's bare skin at once. As the booster lifted off the pad and accelerated into the black pre-dawn sky, the G-load climbed steadily—two Gs, three Gs, three-point- eight—pressing her naked breasts, her stomach, and her parted thighs deeper and deeper into the contoured silicone cradle.

With the crushing weight of acceleration came the vibration of the main engines: a relentless, bone-deep resonance that turned the entire spacecraft into a tuning fork and drove the swollen, twenty-one-day ache of her clit hard into the platinum-iridium mesh. Four times during the first ninety seconds of ascent, the sheer violence of the rocket's climb pushed her body to the brink of climax. Four times, her abdominal wall hollowed out, her toes curled in the stirrups, and a broken cry tore from her throat—only for the sacral patch at the base of her spine to flash its cold digital veto, instantly dropping the saddle's counter-pressure by twenty microns and dialing the brass nipple clamps a fraction tighter to trap the reflex inside her ribs.

She was climbing to space on the edge of an orgasm that the ship itself refused to let her finish.

At two minutes and forty seconds, the first stage dropped away with a muffled jolt. The second stage ignited—smoother, higher-pitched, a clean harmonic whine that felt exactly like Anita's three-gigahertz carrier wave humming directly through the wet seam of her groin.

Through the single circular quartz viewport directly above her face, the deep indigo of the upper atmosphere thinned into purple, and then into absolute, ink-black void.

At eight minutes and twelve seconds, the main engine cut off.

Silence fell like a dropped curtain.

Instantly, the crushing weight vanished from Lisa's chest. Within the restraints of the couch, her body floated upward half an inch against the velvet straps. Her

dark curls lifted off the headrest in a slow, weightless halo around her flushed cheeks. Along the glistening inner creases of her thighs, three tiny, opalescent spheres of her own honey detached from her skin and drifted upward into the warm cabin air like suspended pearls, catching the amber glow of the status lamps.

She was in orbit.

For the first two passes around the Earth, the capsule ran its automated program. The saddle between her legs maintained its relentless, automated four-and-six cycle—stroking her swollen tissue with rhythmic micro-currents for four seconds, pausing for six—while the telemetry uplink beamed her continuous, unspent waveform down to the ground stations below.

Every nerve ending in her body was open. Twenty-one days of terrestrial denial, combined with the weightless suspension of zero gravity, had stripped away the last boundary between her skin and the space around her. With no gravity pulling blood toward her feet, the engorgement in her pelvis and breasts felt total, weightless, and infinite.

As the capsule crossed into the shadow of the night side on the third orbit—rising toward the apogee, the highest, loneliest point of the trajectory—a soft amber prompt flashed across the curved upper bezel of the viewport:

APOGEE RETRO-BURN ARMED. AUTOMATED DE-ORBIT IN 04:00.

Lisa lay suspended in the warm dark, staring out through the thick quartz glass at the blaze of stars overhead.

Then she frowned.

Down in the base of her spine, in the exact place where she had felt the phantom drag in the Hangar Four simulator three weeks ago, something felt wrong.

According to the telemetry overlay projected across the edge of the glass, the capsule was rotating at two degrees per second across the constellation Cygnus, three hundred andten miles above the Pacific, hurtling through a cold, dead vacuum of empty space.

Yet her skin—tuned for five hundred straight hours by Elsie’s sensors, Anita’s carrier waves, and Willow’s sidereal mount into a living biological interferometer— wasn’t registering vacuum at all.

The stars outside the quartz weren’t moving at sidereal rate. They weren’t radiating the chaotic thermal noise of distant nuclear furnaces. As her body hovered on the razor’s edge of the saddle’s next four-second stroke, her hyper-sensitized nervous system felt the phase-lock of the sky itself.

The telemetry was lying.

Not just the altitude readout—the entire cold, mechanical architecture of distance, vacuum, and separation outside the glass was a projection. A low-resolution construct fed to instruments made of dead silicon and iron, designed to convince a heavy, clothed species that they were tiny specks trapped at the bottom of an empty dark.

In Hangar Four, eleven candidates had obeyed the screen all the way into the ocean.

Lisa didn't look at the countdown clock. Slowly, deliberately, she slipped her right wrist out of the light zero-G velcro loop on the armrest. Her bare arm floated upward through the drifting pearls of honey in the cabin air until her fingertips touched the guarded brass emergency breaker recessed into the bulkhead beside the viewport: MASTER AVIONICS & TELEMETRY BUS.

She hooked two fingers under the guard, flipped the switch to OFF, and killed the computer. The amber status lamps inside the capsule died instantly. The sacral inhibitor at the base of her spine went dead. The automated hum of the saddle stopped.

And outside the viewport—and then right through the hull of the capsule itself—the black projection of empty space shattered like sugar glass.

There was no cold vacuum. There was no iron hull separating her from the sky.

As the false telemetry dissolved, Lisa gasped—not in fear, but in blinding, overwhelming recognition. The universe wasn't a dead expanse of rock and distance; it was an infinite, luminous ocean of pure, living sensation—warm, golden-black, and thrumming with the exact four-hundred-hertz harmonic tension that had been building inside her own pelvis for twenty-one days.

All her life, "Lisa Nakamura" had been a root system: a collection of modest habits, anxieties, family names, and terrestrial rules anchoring her down into the dirt so she wouldn't float away. Up here, with the computer dead and the illusion pierced, there was nothing left for roots to grip.

She felt them let go.

The quiet college student who had blushed in a blue flight suit dissolved into the weightless dark like mist in the morning sun. What remained in the center of the capsule—floating bare, flushed, and luminous, every nerve ending blazing with three weeks of unspent, sacred fire—was only the blossom.

Pure vitality. Pure breath.

Chi.

She didn't let herself come in the dark. Even with the sacral inhibitor switched off, she held the massive, radiant sun of her arousal locked inside her core by

pure sovereign will. A blossom didn’t open for an empty sky; it opened where it could be worshiped.

Floating weightless in the warm cabin, her eyes shining in the dark, she reached back up to the overhead panel and engaged the manual reentry thrusters by feel alone—pointing the nose of the vessel down toward the waiting lights of the atrium below.

Epilogue: The Upper Conservatory

Fourteen days into the thirty-day turnaround for Flight Two, the afternoon sunlight poured through the curved crystal panes of the Upper Conservatory, turning the humidified air inside the penthouse dome to liquid amber.

Originally designed as an executive botanical lounge overlooking the coastal launch pads and the Pacific horizon, the conservatory had been quietly repurposed by Cherry Reynolds before the paint in the Main Atrium was even dry. Broad-leafed tropical palms and white orchids still lined the perimeter glass, scenting the eighty-four-degree air with damp earth and vanilla, but the leather sofas at the center of the rotunda were gone.

In their place, rising from a shallow reflection pool of black slate, stood a cantilevered cradle of burnished brass and translucent, skin-warmed acrylic, angled toward the velvet viewing rail like a jeweler’s setting.

Suspended bare in the cradle was Chi.

The posture Elsie had engineered for the conservatory rig left nothing concealed. Chi’s torso was reclined at thirty degrees while her hips were elevated above the water line, her knees parted wide and held high by two padded brass stirrups that folded her calves back toward her thighs. A narrow thoracic band of clear polymer lifted her full breasts from beneath, presenting the tight, dark crimson peaks of her nipples to the sunbeams while twin micro-current filaments clung to each areola like threads of gold leaf. Between her parted legs, the gleaming platinum-iridium saddle was gone, replaced by an open-frame ring of warm rose gold that held her swollen, dark-flushed labia permanently parted around a bare, pulsing transducer bead pressed directly against the engorged peak of her clit. Beneath the open curve of her entrance, a slender crystal funnel caught the slow, rhythmic threads of pearlescent honey that gathered and fell every few minutes into a chilled silver decanter waiting below.

Around the low velvet cord ten feet away, six visiting aerospace ministers from Geneva and Tokyo stood with their tasting flutes in hand, speaking in hushed, reverent whispers.

What held them spellbound wasn’t merely the unapologetic geometry of her nakedness. It was her stillness.

Except for the rapid, shallow flutter of her ribcage and the continuous, microscopic tremor shivering through her parted inner thighs, Chi did not move. She looked like a life-sized sculpture cast in warm, rose-gold porcelain. Her dark curls spilled motionless over the acrylic headrest; her head was tipped back, her dark eyes half-lidded and fixed blankly on the blinding blue sky above the glass dome. Her lips were parted in a soft, wet, permanent O—frozen in an expression

of such devastating, suspended ecstasy that looking at her face felt even more intimate than looking between her legs.

“Is she sedated, Doctor Tanner?” a silver-haired minister from Zurich asked quietly, unable to take his eyes off the glistening crease of Chi’s groin and the frozen rapture on her face. Dr. Elsie Tanner stood beside the velvet cord, her white lab coat unbuttoned over a dark green silk blouse, her long copper hair resting over one shoulder as she monitored a slim glass tablet in her palm.

“Not a milligram,” Elsie answered in her warm, conversational contralto. She tapped a line on her tablet, projecting a miniature holographic waveform above the rail where the visitors could see the razor-flat golden line hovering at four hundred hertz. “During her initial conditioning, we used a four-second stimulation interval followed by a six-second rest so her nervous system wouldn’t fatigue. After her orbital return, we discovered that her autonomic threshold no longer required the gap.”

Elsie stepped inside the velvet cord, walking up the two slate steps beside the pool until she stood directly beside Chi’s bare hip. Elsie rested the backs of her knuckles lightly against the damp, burning skin of Chi’s lower stomach; under her touch, Chi’s abdominal wall quivered like a hummingbird’s wing, yet Chi’s head never turned and her parted lips never closed.

“The rose-gold ring between her thighs is linked directly to her sacral plexus at two thousand samples per second,” Elsie explained to the hushed group. “It doesn’t stroke her up and down anymore. It holds her continuously within four milliseconds of the orgasmic reflex—twenty-four hours a day. She isn’t sedated; she is ceaselessly edged. Every nerve ending in her body is locked inside the first microsecond of a climax that never finishes and never drops off. If she were to blink, or speak, or shift her weight by half an inch, her brain would have to divert processing power away from the pleasure. So she chooses to stay completely still, living in perpetual bliss.”

Elsie set her tablet on the brass rail and unhooked the velvet cord.

“Come closer,” she said. “The geometry is easier to read from inside the rail. She will not move.”

The six ministers stepped past the cord and up the slate steps until they stood within arm’s reach of the cradle. At this distance the stillness was absolute. Chi’s dark eyes remained fixed on the sky, unblinking. Her lips stayed parted in the same soft, wet O, a faint thread of saliva catching the light at the corner of her mouth. Only the rapid flutter beneath her ribs and the continuous microscopic tremor in her inner thighs betrayed that she was alive.

A silver-haired minister from Zurich leaned in until his face was inches from her left breast. He watched the micro-current filaments glimmer against the tight

crimson peak, then glanced at Elsie. She nodded once. He exhaled carefully so his breath would not disturb the air, studying the way the polymer band lifted the full weight of the breast toward the sun. Beside him, a younger delegate from Tokyo crouched to examine the open rose-gold ring. The warm metal held the dark-flushed labia permanently parted; the bare transducer bead rested against the engorged clit, unmoving. Every few seconds a fresh, heavy bead of pearlescent nectar gathered at the lower rim, trembled, and slid into the crystal funnel. The minister's hand hovered, then settled lightly on the brass stirrup for balance as he watched the next drop form.

"You may sample directly," Elsie said, her voice still conversational. She reached beneath the cradle and tilted the slender funnel a fraction so the next thread of honey ran onto the chilled rim of a tasting flute one of the visitors held ready. The liquid clung, thick and luminous. The minister raised it, tasted, and closed his eyes. A low sound left him. Two others immediately extended their own flutes. Elsie guided the funnel again, letting the slow, rhythmic threads fill each glass in turn while the visitors stood close enough to feel the heat radiating from Chi's skin.

One woman—mid-forties, severe blonde bob—knelt on the slate so she could look upward between the parted thighs. From that angle the open entrance, the pulsing bead, and the continuous welling of nectar were only inches from her face. She did not touch. She simply watched, breathing the warm, clover-sweet air that rose from the cradle, while Chi's thighs continued their fine, ceaseless tremor and her open mouth remained frozen in its silent, devastating ecstasy.

No one spoke above a whisper. The sunlight moved across the acrylic and the bare skin. The funnel kept filling. Chi did not blink.

At five-fifteen, the pneumatic glass doors at the rear of the conservatory parted, and the security attendants politely ushered the last of the flushed, wide-eyed visitors out toward the private elevators as the afternoon viewing block closed.

Viva Stone stepped into the quiet rotunda, the heels of her black leather pumps clicking softly against the stone tiles. She wore a tailored charcoal suit, her midnight hair swept back cleanly from her face as she paused near the doorway to watch the European delegation file into the elevator car—two of them leaning heavily on their aides' arms as the afternoon harvest worked through their bloodstreams.

Viva walked over to the velvet rail where Elsie was capping the chilled silver decanter beneath Chi's parted thighs, logging the final afternoon volume into her tablet.

Up in the sunlit cradle, Chi remained frozen in her radiant trance—breasts high and flushed, mouth parted in its silent, breathless cry, a fresh bead of opalescent

pearl already gathering at the lower rim of her open folds as the transducer hummed on without pause. Viva rested one hand on the brass rail beside her oldest friend, looking up at the compact, naked figure suspended in the amber light.

“I never imagined she’d become quite a tourist attraction,” Viva remarked, her rich alto carrying a dry note of amusement in the warm, orchid-scented room.

Elsie smiled, slipping the glass stopper into the decanter and glancing up over Chi’s trembling thigh toward Viva’s face.

“Yes,” Elsie murmured, reaching up with her free hand to brush a stray dark curl back from Chi’s damp temple before letting her fingertips trail down the side of Chi’s throat, where the pulse beat in a fast, unbroken rhythm. “And the best part is, we still get to take her home every night.”

For a long moment, Viva didn’t say anything. She looked at the curve of Chi’s bare ribs, the open surrender of her parted thighs, and the ecstatic, unseeing stillness in the dark eyes that had once glared up at her on the catwalk of Hangar Four after killing the primary flight computer at forty-two thousand feet.

A slow, deeply satisfied smile curved Viva’s lips. She stepped past the velvet cord, laid her warm palm flat over the fevered skin of Chi’s lower belly right beside Elsie’s hand, and felt the ceaseless, captive thunder humming inside her.

“I just had a feeling about her,” Viva said softly.

Epilogue Two: Forty-Two Thousand Feet

At forty-two thousand feet above the North Atlantic—the exact altitude where Candidate Nakamura had once reached up and killed the simulator’s flight computer—the cabin of the Space Center’s supersonic Gulfstream was hushed, pressurized, and warmed to eighty-four degrees.

Outside the oval windows, the stratosphere was a deep, cloudless indigo. Inside, the center aisle between the facing cream-leather club chairs had been refitted by R&D to accommodate a gyro-stabilized travel cradle of polished brass and warmed translucent acrylic, bolted directly into the aircraft’s structural floor tracks.

Whenever the jet crossed a pocket of high-altitude wind shear, the silent hydraulic gimbals beneath the plinth compensated within milliseconds. The plane tilted slightly; Chi remained perfectly level.

Suspended bare between Viva Stone’s and Dr. Elsie Tanner’s seats, she hadn't blinked or closed her lips since the wheels left the coastal runway in California four hours earlier. Her dark curls rested in a glossy halo against the contoured headrest. The clear thoracic band held her flushed breasts high in the golden cabin light, the twin gold-leaf filaments humming softly against her stiffened, dark-rose nipples, while her knees stayed parted wide in the padded brass stirrups directly between the two directors’ knees.

Down between her trembling inner thighs, the rose-gold ring kept her swollen folds parted around the sacral-linked transducer bead—holding every nerve ending in her pelvis locked inside that ceaseless, four-millisecond threshold where the orgasmic reflex fired and arrested two thousand times a second. Beneath her open entrance, a pressurized crystal catch-vial collected the slow, heavy pearls of nectar that distilled throughout the flight.

Viva sat on the left in a tailored charcoal suit, a fountain pen poised over a leather portfolio of European launch-syndicate treaties. Without looking up from the page she was signing, Viva reached out with her free left hand and rested her warm palm over the bare, quivering curve of Chi’s lower stomach, using her body the way another passenger might use a warmed armrest.

Across the cradle, Elsie wore an unbuttoned ivory cashmere cardigan over silk trousers, one long leg crossed at the ankle while she held a porcelain demitasse of espresso in one hand and checked the live telemetry ribbon on her tablet with the other.

"Cabin pressure hasn't shifted her capacitance by a single tenth of a percent," Elsie remarked, taking a sip of her espresso and letting her fingertips trail lightly along the slick, rose-gold frame between Chi’s parted thighs. Under the brush of

Elsie’s knuckle, Chi’s hips gave a tiny, involuntary shudder against the acrylic, a faint, breathy sigh escaping her open, doll-like mouth without her dark eyes ever focusing. "In fact, the supersonic airframe vibration is feeding a sixty-hertz sub-harmonic straight through the gimbal mount. Her peptide density is twelve points higher than it was in the conservatory yesterday."

From the forward seat across the aisle, Cherry Reynolds looked up from a spread of embossed seating charts, her short auburn hair gleaming under the cabin reading lamps and her full bust straining the lapels of a burgundy travel suit.

"Good, because Zurich is expecting forty-eight principals at seven o'clock, and half the central bank governors flew in from Frankfurt just for the first pour," Cherry said briskly, tapping her silver stylus against the itinerary. "After Zurich, we have the private vault at the Palais Coburg in Vienna on Thursday, the Ministry pavilion in Paris on Saturday, and then the polar route to Tokyo on Monday. If her output stays this rich at altitude, I’m going to add a second tier of spoon passes in London."

Viva turned a page in her portfolio, her thumb absently stroking the fevered skin beside Chi’s navel while Chi hung motionless in her unbroken, wide-eyed rapture between them.

"Make sure the diplomatic security detail in Vienna understands the environmental specs," Viva said evenly. "When we brought her out of the car in Geneva last month, the courtyard air was sixty degrees. Five seconds of draft drops her peripheral circulation before she even reaches the plinth."

"Already handled," Cherry replied with a practiced smile. "Heated silk transfer shrouds from the tarmac to the freight elevator, and the ballroom in the Palais has been sealed at eighty-five degrees since noon. They’re treating her like the Crown Jewels, Viva—except the Crown Jewels don't rewrite a prime minister's neurochemistry on the first drop."

Six hours later, three levels beneath the cobbled streets of old Zurich, the subterranean bullion vault of the Consortium Bank glowed with the warm light of four hundred beeswax candles and recessed amber halogens.

The steel walls had been draped in heavy acoustic velvet. Forty-eight of the most powerful financiers, defense ministers, and industrialists in Europe stood in a hushed, black-tie semicircle around the center of the floor, where the gyro-stabilized travel cradle had been locked onto a raised dais of black Alpine granite.

Viva stood to the left of the plinth in floor-length black silk; Elsie stood to the right in emerald satin, holding the chilled silver tray of long-stemmed crystal spoons.

Between them, Chi glistened like warm, living ivory under the chandelier light. Six thousand miles from the simulator bay where her old name had died, she remained frozen in the exact same posture of total, porcelain surrender—thighs parted wide in the brass stirrups, breasts lifted and tight, her dark eyes half-lidded and swimming with perpetual, unseeing bliss, her mouth open in its silent, unending cry as the rose-gold transducer held her on the screaming crest of the wave.

"Honored partners of the European Syndicate," Cherry announced from the head of the vault, her voice rich with quiet theatre as the first silver-haired central banker stepped forward to the base of the granite steps. "Direct from the orbital program: five hundred miles above the Earth, and four milliseconds from completion. We present Chi."

After the last of the ministers had gone, Elsie remained beside the cradle. She rested both hands on the warm acrylic at Chi’s hips and eased the angle a fraction higher, lifting the already-elevated pelvis so the open rose-gold ring caught more of the candlelight. The motion shifted the weight of Chi’s breasts against the polymer band; the full curves rose and settled, the dark peaks still drawn outward by the gold filaments. Chi did not stir. Only the fine tremor in her inner thighs continued.

Elsie slid one palm upward along the bare flank, following the sharp inward curve of the waist until her hand cupped the underside of the left breast. She lifted it gently, testing the soft weight, then let it rest again in the band. The skin was fever-warm. Her thumb brushed once across the tight crimson nipple without disturbing the filament. A fresh bead of nectar gathered at the lower rim of the parted folds and slid into the funnel.

Viva stepped up on the other side. She placed both hands on Chi’s thighs just above the brass stirrups, thumbs pressing lightly into the soft inner flesh to widen the already-open angle another inch. The movement made the rose-gold ring shift against the swollen labia; the transducer bead stayed seated. Viva’s palms traveled slowly downward, mapping the plush outer curves of the hips, then inward until her fingertips rested at the creases where thigh met groin. She held there, feeling the continuous microscopic quiver under the skin.

“Still perfect,” she said.

Elsie leaned in and drew her free hand down the center of Chi’s stomach, tracing the faint line from sternum to navel, then lower, until her knuckles brushed the damp heat just above the open ring. She cupped the lower belly with her whole palm, pressing once so the abdominal wall fluttered harder against her hand. Chi’s parted lips remained frozen in their silent O. Her dark eyes stayed fixed on the vaulted ceiling. Between the two women the compact body was turned, lifted, and settled again—breasts weighed, waist spanned, hips opened—while the

transducer hummed on and the next slow thread of pearlescent honey fell into the waiting decanter.

The transducer bead never left the engorged peak. Every four milliseconds it renewed the same precise pressure, so the sensation did not rise or fall; it simply remained at the exact threshold where a climax would begin if the signal were allowed to complete. Chi felt it as a continuous, brilliant point of heat seated against the most sensitive tissue, radiating outward in fine, unrelenting waves that never crested.

When Elsie’s palm lifted the left breast, the soft weight shifted against the polymer band and the gold filament tugged the nipple a fraction tighter. The pull traveled straight down the nerve paths already held at maximum tension, sharpening the point between her thighs without ever releasing it. The skin of the breast itself registered only warmth and the gentle compression of being held, then the cooler air when the hand withdrew.

Viva’s thumbs pressing into the inner thighs widened the stretch across the rose-gold ring. The parted labia registered the slight increase in tension as a low, spreading ache that fed directly into the bead. The abdominal wall fluttered under Elsie’s palm; each tiny contraction of the muscle sent a fresh pulse of blood into the already-swollen tissue, making the bead feel momentarily heavier, more exact. Chi’s ribs kept their rapid, shallow rhythm. The open mouth drew air that cooled the inside of her lips while the rest of her body stayed fever-hot.

Nothing moved of her own will. The handling registered only as successive layers of pressure and warmth laid over the single, unchanging blaze at her center—breasts weighed, hips opened, belly pressed—each touch absorbed into the same suspended millisecond that had already lasted for days.

At half-past midnight, the heavy double doors of the Presidential Suite on the top floor of the Baur au Lac clicked shut, locking the rest of Europe outside.

In the corner of the cavernous master bedroom, the empty travel cradle sat powered down beside its flight cases, its brass stirrups folded inward for the morning departure to Vienna. Across the room, tall French windows looked out over the dark, quiet surface of Lake Zurich and the snow-dusted Alps catching the moonlight.

On the vast king mattress in the center of the room, there were no velvet cords, no crystal decanters, and no rose-gold rings.

Viva and Elsie had unclipped Chi from the rig ten minutes after the private elevator brought them up from the bank. After eighteen continuous hours locked in the travel cradle, Chi’s legs had been too weak and jellyfish-soft to bear her own weight on the carpet; Viva and Elsie had simply lifted her bare, burning body between them, carried her straight to the bed, and pulled back the heavy

down duvet.

Now, in the dim amber glow of a single bedside sconce, the geometry that had begun in Room 3B and the penthouse at the Space Center held across a new continent.

Chi lay naked along the center seam of the sheets, her small, five-foot-two frame completely enclosed between the two six-foot bodies of the women who owned every breath she took. On her left, Viva’s long, pale thigh draped across Chi’s shins while Viva’s breasts pressed warm against her bare ribs; on her right, Elsie’s copper hair spilled across Chi’s shoulder and chest, sealing in the heat.

Without the rose-gold ring holding her on its automated two-thousand-hertz lock, the frozen, doll-like stillness had melted out of Chi’s muscles. Her parted lips moved in soft, wet, ragged whimpers against the hollow of Viva’s collarbone; her dark eyes fluttered as her fingers clung weakly to Elsie’s hip.

Yet the plateau never dropped.

Down beneath the warm linen, Elsie’s right hand and Viva’s left hand divided the slick, swollen space between Chi’s thighs with the effortless, sleepy habit of two women who could run her nervous system in the dark. Four seconds of slow, shared pressure through the fresh honey pooling across the sheets; six seconds of stillness while Chi’s hips twitched helplessly between their thighs.

"Cherry wants to add a private breakfast viewing for the Swiss defense attaché before wheels-up at ten," Elsie murmured, her eyes already closed against the pillow as her fingers completed a slow, exact pass up to the throbbing base of Chi’s clit and held her right on the line.

"Tell her forty-five minutes maximum," Viva answered quietly, her lips brushing the damp curls at Chi’s temple as her own thumb took over the next interval without a half-second’s gap, drawing a tiny, fractured gasp from Chi’s throat. "We have Vienna tomorrow night, and I want her rested."

Between them, Chi let her head sink back into the pillows, her body humming like a star caught in a velvet box—carried from city to city, tasted by kings and ministers by day, and held right on the edge of heaven all night long by the two pairs of hands that would never let her fall.