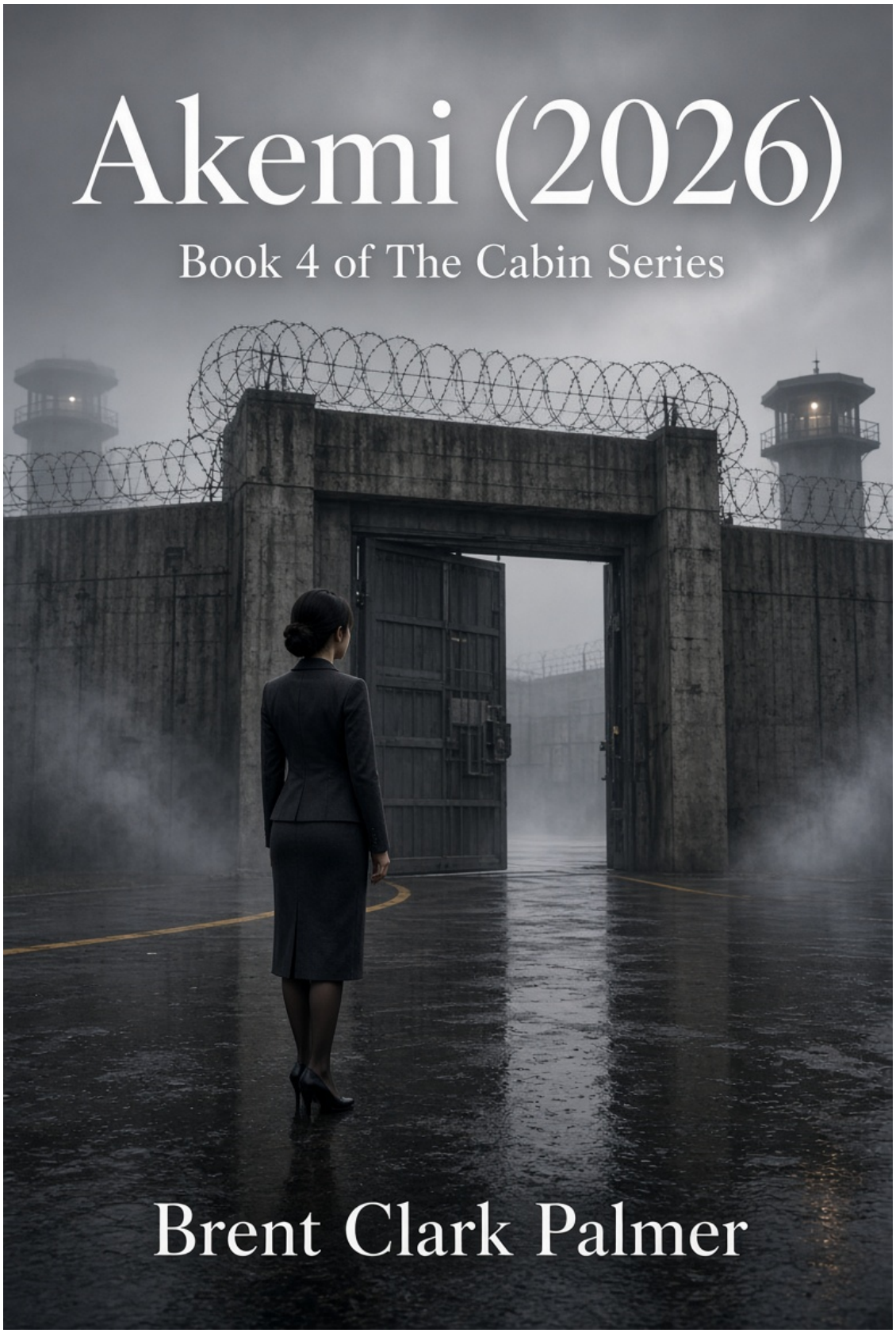

Akemi (2026)
Book 4 of The Cabin Series
Brent Clark Palmer

Akemi (2026)

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Cabin, Book 4

The taxi’s tires crunched over wet gravel before slowing to a halt in front of the perimeter gate, where twin coils of razor wire gleamed like spun frost atop twenty-foot concrete walls.

In the backseat, Akemi smoothed her palms over the knees of her charcoal skirt suit and checked the heavy cream envelope tucked inside her handbag for the fourth time that morning. The embossed letterhead of the Kurokawa Prefectural Women’s Penitentiary caught the pale grey light filtering through the cab window:

> *CONFIDENTIAL — NOTICE OF EXCLUSIVE SELECTION*
>
> *Candidate: Akemi Sato*
>
> *Position: Special Resident Liaison — Internal Operations*
>
> *You have been selected from our preliminary pool for a comprehensive, full-immersion assessment. Please report to the Main Receiving Gate at 08:00 sharp. Due to the sensitive nature of this placement, all onboarding, clearance evaluations, and orientation protocols will be conducted on-site in a single continuous session. Should your assessment prove successful, your placement will take effect immediately.*

Akemi’s heart fluttered against her ribs—a heady mix of nerves and validation. After months of dead-end temp work and unanswered applications in the city, an invitation to a permanent civil-service post with full benefits, housing stipends, and a fast-track clearance felt like a lifeline.

“You’re sure this is the drop-off, miss?” the taxi driver asked, glancing back at her in the rearview mirror. His brow was furrowed as he looked past the windshield at the imposing concrete sally port. “The administrative annex is usually half a mile back up the main road. Nobody comes through the North Gate unless they’re arriving in a transport van.”

“The letter specified the Main Receiving Gate,” Akemi said, offering a bright, polite smile as she handed him her fare. “It’s a specialized position. They’re doing a full operational walkthrough today.”

“If you say so,” the driver muttered.

The moment Akemi stepped out onto the damp asphalt and shut the passenger door, the cab’s tires spun hurriedly on the gravel, executing a tight three-point turn and speeding back down the access road as if eager to escape the shadow of the watchtowers. Akemi watched the taillights vanish into the morning mist, a sudden chill raising goosebumps along her wrists.

Behind her, a heavy mechanical lock disengaged with a loud, metallic clack.

A narrow steel pedestrian door recessed into the main vehicular gate swung outward, and a woman in uniform stepped onto the concrete apron.

She was tall and straight-backed, dressed in the immaculate slate-black uniform of a Senior Correctional Officer. A polished leather duty belt sat snugly at her waist, and the silver insignia on her collar gleamed against the dark fabric. Her hair was pulled back into a severe, faultless knot beneath her peaked cap, framing high cheekbones and dark, unblinking eyes that took in Akemi from the crown of her head to the heels of her pumps in a single, clinical sweep.

“Ms. Akemi Sato?” the officer asked. Her voice was a low, resonant alto—crisp, unhurried, and carrying the quiet weight of someone accustomed to absolute compliance.

“Yes, ma’am!” Akemi bowed slightly, clutching the strap of her leather handbag with both hands. “Good morning. I received the invitation for the eight o’clock interview.”

The corner of the officer’s mouth curved by a fraction of a millimeter—not quite a smile, more the quiet satisfaction of a collector verifying a specimen against a catalog.

“Right on time. Punctuality is a virtue we enforce strictly here,” the officer said, consulting a heavy aluminum clipboard tucked under her arm. “I am Senior Officer Tanaka. I have been personally assigned to oversee your intake—excuse me, your onboarding assessment today. If you will step inside the perimeter, Ms. Sato, we can close the outer gate.”

“Thank you, Officer Tanaka,” Akemi said, stepping briskly across the yellow painted line on the pavement and through the narrow steel doorway.

The instant her heels cleared the threshold, Tanaka pressed a red button on the concrete wall. With a low, hydraulic groan that vibrated through the soles of Akemi’s shoes, the solid steel door slid shut behind her, and the heavy deadbolt slammed home into the frame.

They were standing inside a concrete sally port—a windowless holding box between the outside world and the interior courtyard, lit by caged fluorescent tubes that hummed in the damp air. Above them, a black dome camera swiveled silently to track Akemi’s posture.

“I have to admit, I was a little surprised when the taxi driver mentioned the administrative offices were up the road,” Akemi said with a nervous laugh, her voice echoing off the bare concrete walls. “I’ve never actually been inside a correctional facility before.”

“Most people haven’t, until the day they arrive,” Tanaka replied smoothly. She turned a brass key in the interior security panel, waiting for the green indicator

light to flash before pulling open a second door reinforced with wire-mesh glass. “The main administrative building is for clerical workers and short-term visitors, Ms. Sato. For the role I have in mind for you, a desk in an office building wouldn’t suit your temperament at all. Our evaluation requires you to experience our foundational protocols firsthand, from the ground up.”

“An immersive interview,” Akemi said, nodding eagerly as she followed Tanaka down a long, subterranean corridor painted in institutional grey. “The letter mentioned that. I really appreciate how thorough the selection process is.”

“Oh, we are nothing if not thorough,” Tanaka murmured, her polished boots clicking in a steady, measured cadence against the linoleum floor.

As they walked deeper into the facility, the air grew cooler and carried the sharp, sterile tang of industrial bleach and cold iron. Every thirty feet, they passed beneath another reinforced steel bulkhead. Each time, a guard in a glass booth buzzed them through, and each time, the locks engaged behind them with that same heavy, irreversible thud. Akemi couldn’t help noticing that none of the corridors had directional signs pointing back toward the exit; the painted arrows on the floor pointed exclusively inward, converging in a single red line down the center of the hall.

At the end of the corridor stood a set of heavy double doors stenciled in stark black block letters:

RECEIVING & PROCESSING — AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL & INTAKE ONLY

Tanaka pushed the door open and held it with one gloved hand, gesturing for Akemi to precede her into a brightly lit chamber lined with stainless-steel counters, numbered holding booths, and a long row of grey plastic bins.

“Right this way, Ms. Sato,” Tanaka said, stepping in behind her and letting the heavy door swing shut, sealing them inside the quiet, windowless wing. “Once we begin the formal sequence, we don’t allow candidates to stop or leave the floor until every single stage of the processing is complete. You wouldn’t want to disqualify yourself by having second thoughts, would you?”

“No, of course not!” Akemi said quickly, straightening her shoulders and offering her most earnest, accommodating smile. “I’m completely ready, Officer Tanaka. Tell me where to start.”

Tanaka’s dark eyes lingered on Akemi’s throat, where her pulse beat rapidly against her collar, before gesturing toward a small, glass-walled interview booth at the start of the processing line.

“Have a seat at Station One, Ms. Sato,” Tanaka said softly, flipping open the first thick dossier on her aluminum clipboard. “First, we are going to go over your background and every connection you have to the outside world—just to make

sure there is nothing out there that might interfere with your new commitment.”

Chapter Two: Clearances and Waivers

The glass door of Station One shut with a muted pneumatic hiss, cutting off the hum of the outer processing hall and sealing Akemi and Officer Tanaka inside a narrow, six-by-eight cubicle.

Unlike a standard corporate interview room, the booth was divided down the center by a heavy stainless-steel counter bolted directly to the concrete floor. On Tanaka’s side sat a high-backed black leather swivel chair and a computer terminal angled away from view; on Akemi’s side, there was only a round, backless metal stool welded to a single iron pedestal.

"Please, sit," Tanaka said, settling into her leather chair and uncapping a heavy black fountain pen. "Place your handbag on the floor beside your feet and keep your hands visible on the steel surface. It’s a standard habit we require on the floor—it keeps everyone honest and prevents misunderstandings on the security cameras."

"Of course," Akemi said quickly. She set her bag down by her ankles, perched on the cold metal stool, and rested her palms neatly on the brushed steel counter. The metal drew the warmth from her skin almost immediately, sending a faint shiver up her arms, yet there was something oddly steadying about the clear, unambiguous rule.

Tanaka opened the thick manila folder on her clipboard, revealing several sheets already printed with Akemi’s name, tax registry number, and residential history.

"Stage One of your evaluation is a comprehensive background and vulnerability check," Tanaka began, her dark, unblinking eyes lifting to meet Akemi’s. "In a restricted women’s facility, an candidate’s outside attachments are often her greatest liability. Family emergencies, possessive partners, curious roommates—any of these can create friction when a liaison is required to remain on-site for extended rotations. Tell me about your living situation in the city, Ms. Sato."

"Oh—there won't be any friction at all," Akemi said eagerly, leaning forward half an inch in her desire to prove how well she fit the bill. "I live alone in a studio apartment in the East Ward. Actually, my lease switched to month-to-month back in August."

"And your previous employment?"

"My contract with the staffing agency ended last Friday," Akemi explained. "I haven't taken on any new assignments because I wanted to be completely available if a permanent civil-service post opened up."

Tanaka’s pen moved across the page with a crisp, deliberate scratch, checking a box marked UNENCUMBERED. "And family? Your file indicates your parents reside in Aomori."

"Yes, ma'am. We speak on New Year’s and sometimes in the summer, but they’re retired and don't travel," Akemi said, offering a small, self-conscious smile. "And I'm not seeing anyone right now. Honestly, Officer Tanaka, if I were called in for a long rotation today, there isn't a single person in the city who would wonder where I was."

For a long second, Tanaka stopped writing. Her gaze rested on Akemi’s face with an intensity that made Akemi’s cheeks warm.

"You have no idea how rare—and how valuable—that quality is to me, Ms. Sato," Tanaka murmured, her rich alto voice dropping half an octave. "Most people clutter their lives with noisy obligations and people who ask unnecessary questions. A woman with a clean slate can be integrated into our daily rhythm without a single ripple on the surface."

She turned the page over with a sharp snap of her wrist, revealing a densely printed grid titled PSYCHOLOGICAL TEMPERAMENT & COMPLIANCE INDEX.

"Which brings us to Stage Two," Tanaka continued smoothly. "The work inside these walls is not for everyone. Many applicants imagine they want authority, when in truth, the burden of constant decision-making exhausts them. When I look at you, Akemi—may I call you Akemi?"

"Yes, please, Officer Tanaka."

"When I look at you, Akemi, I don't see someone who wants to spend her days shouting orders down a cellblock," Tanaka said softly, leaning her forearms on the edge of the steel counter so that she loomed slightly above Akemi’s lower stool. "Look at the way you sat down just now. Look at where your hands are resting."

Akemi glanced down at her own hands, still pressed flat and motionless against the cold stainless steel where Tanaka had told her to put them five minutes ago. Her heart gave a sudden, heavy thump against her ribs.

"You followed a house rule without asking why," Tanaka observed, her voice quiet, clinical, and deeply perceptive. "Out there in the city, having to choose where to go, how to dress, how to pay the rent, and how to present yourself is tiring, isn't it? Tell me the truth. When someone in uniform gives you a direct, unmistakable instruction... does it make you feel restricted, or does it make you feel relieved?"

Akemi’s breath caught in her throat. No interviewer had ever spoken to her like that—peeling back her polite, professional rehearsed answers to touch the quiet,

unspoken nerve underneath. Under the steady weight of Tanaka’s dark eyes, Akemi found she couldn't lie.

"Relieved," Akemi whispered, a deep flush creeping from her collarbones up to her ears. "I... I’ve always worked better when someone tells me exactly what is expected of me. I don't mind strict rules at all. In fact, I prefer them."

"Let’s test that," Tanaka said. Her tone didn't rise into a shout, but the velvet vanished from her voice, replaced by the cold, unyielding iron of the cellblock. "Unfasten your wristwatch, take off your rings, and place them on my side of the counter. Then put your hands back on the steel, palms up, and do not move a muscle until I tell you to."

The shift in register bypassed Akemi’s conscious thought entirely. Her fingers moved with frantic, reflexive speed, unbuckling the thin leather strap of her watch and slipping the small silver ring from her right hand. She reached across the barrier, set them beside Tanaka’s clipboard, and immediately placed both hands back on the freezing steel—palms up, vulnerable and open, her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths while a strange, dizzying heat pooled low in her stomach.

Tanaka did not look away. The silence stretched, measured by the soft tick of the wall clock and the faint hiss of the booth’s ventilation. Akemi’s palms remained open on the steel, the cool metal leeching warmth from her skin while a different heat gathered lower, a slow, liquid weight between her thighs that made the thin fabric of her skirt feel suddenly too present.

“Most applicants answer that question the way they think I want to hear it,” Tanaka said. Her voice stayed low, almost conversational, yet each word landed with deliberate weight. “You didn’t. You told me the truth without being told to. That interests me.” She shifted her chair a fraction closer to the counter. The leather creaked once. “When you say relieved, Akemi, what does that relief actually feel like in your body? Not the idea of it. The sensation.”

Akemi’s throat moved. Her fingers twitched against the steel and then stilled again, exactly as ordered. “Like… the noise stops,” she answered, the words coming slower than she expected. “I stop calculating. I stop checking whether I’ve said the right thing or worn the right thing or left something unfinished. Someone else is holding the frame. I only have to stay inside it.”

“And if the frame became smaller?” Tanaka asked. One gloved fingertip rested lightly on the steel just beyond Akemi’s left wrist, not quite touching. “If every remaining choice—what you wear, when you eat, when you sleep, who you speak to—were removed and replaced with a single clear instruction from me? Would the quiet deepen, or would you start looking for the exits?”

Akemi’s breath shortened. The pulse at the base of her throat was visible now, a rapid flutter against pale skin. The heat between her legs had thickened; she could feel the damp fabric clinging where her thighs pressed together on the metal stool. She kept her hands exactly where they were.

“I don’t think I would look for the exits,” she said. The admission left her mouth smaller than she had intended. “I think I would… settle. If the instructions were clear. If I knew I was doing it correctly.”

“Correctly for whom?”

“For you,” Akemi answered at once, then flushed harder. “For the facility. For whoever holds the authority.”

Tanaka’s gloved finger finally crossed the last inch and settled against the soft underside of Akemi’s wrist, tracing the faint line the watch had left. The touch was clinical and unhurried. Akemi’s entire arm tightened, yet she did not pull back.

“Authority is not an abstract concept inside these walls,” Tanaka said. “It is concrete. It means your time, your body, and your decisions belong to the structure that employs you. When I tell a resident liaison to hold still, she holds still until I release her. When I tell her to surrender an object, she surrenders it without negotiating the reason. When I tell her she is finished with the outside world for the length of her term, she is finished. That is not metaphor. That is the job.” The fingertip pressed once, lightly, over the pulse. “Do you understand what you are offering when you say you prefer the frame?”

Akemi’s lips parted. For a moment the only sound was her shallow breathing and the soft scrape of Tanaka’s glove against her skin. The heat low in her abdomen had become a steady, insistent throb; she could feel the slick evidence of it when she shifted the smallest amount on the stool, and the movement only made the sensation sharper.

“I understand,” she whispered. “I want to be useful inside the frame. I want someone else to decide what useful means.”

Tanaka studied her for another long second, then lifted her finger. The absence of contact was almost as sharp as the touch had been.

“Then keep your hands exactly where they are until I tell you otherwise,” she said. “We are not finished establishing how thoroughly you mean that.”

"Exceptional responsiveness," Tanaka murmured, picking up Akemi’s watch and dropping it into a small manila property envelope on her side of the desk. "You may turn your hands over, Akemi. You passed the temperament evaluation with flying colors."

"Thank you, Officer Tanaka," Akemi breathed, her voice slightly unsteady as she turned her palms down against the steel.

"Now, before I can issue your formal placement, we must complete the administrative and financial disclosures," Tanaka said, sliding three multi-page carbon forms across the counter along with a heavy black ballpoint pen. "Because our Resident Liaisons live and work inside a zero-communications security perimeter during their initial term, you will not have access to personal banking portals, mail, or outside utility accounts. To prevent your credit or housing from defaulting while you are sequestered here, our Administrative Trust assumes full power of attorney over your external affairs."

"Oh," Akemi blinked, looking down at the first form, which was headed CUSTODIAL POWER OF ATTORNEY & EXTERNAL ASSET SURRENDER. "You manage my bills for me?"

"Everything," Tanaka said briskly, tapping the boxed lines with the tip of her fountain pen. "Write down your primary bank account number, your current balance, and your online access credentials in Section A. In Section B, sign the authorization allowing our trust officer to terminate your month-to-month apartment lease in the East Ward and liquidate or store any furnishings on your behalf. That way, you won't lose a single yen to wasted rent while you are housed inside the facility."

Put that way, it sounded remarkably considerate—another burden lifted cleanly off Akemi’s shoulders. Without hesitation, Akemi picked up the heavy pen and neatly printed her bank name, her account numbers, and her login passcode onto the form, followed by her landlord’s contact details and her signature authorizing the immediate termination of her lease.

Tanaka retrieved the completed financial sheet, verified the password legibility, and tucked it securely into the back of her binder. Then, from the bottom of her stack, she drew a heavy, buff-colored parchment document bound at the top with a brass fastener.

Stamped across the cover sheet in crimson ink were the words:

PERMANENT CUSTODIAL COMMITMENT & WAIVER OF EXTERNAL RECOURSE

Tanaka flipped the cover page back, folding it neatly over the dense, six-point legal paragraphs of the upper half so that only the bottom third of the page—titled CANDIDATE ACKNOWLEDGMENT & VOLUNTARY SUBMISSION TO FACILITY JURISDICTION—remained exposed on the steel counter.

"This is the final document, Akemi," Tanaka said, her voice smooth and solemn in the quiet glass booth. "Your Formal Placement Contract. By initialing the three

boxes and signing at the bottom, you acknowledge that your assignment at Kurokawa Penitentiary begins immediately upon signature. You waive the right to unilateral resignation prior to the completion of your assigned term, you consent to twenty-four-hour biometric, medical, and physical supervision by Senior Officer Tanaka, and you agree to abide by all disciplinary and residential codes governing inmates—and liaisons—within the secure perimeter."

Akemi’s pen hovered half an inch above the first box. "Inmates and liaisons?" she repeated softly, a tiny crease appearing between her brows. "Does that mean I follow the same schedule as the prisoners?"

"In an immersive role, there can be no double standards," Tanaka replied without missing a beat, holding Akemi’s gaze with cool, unshakeable authority. "How could you possibly understand the women in this facility—or serve me properly—if you held yourself above the rules that govern every body behind these walls? Now, if you are having second thoughts, tell me now before you sign."

The subtle challenge in Tanaka’s voice—and the terrifying thought of failing the interview at the very last hurdle and being sent back out into the cold rain with no job—erased the question from Akemi’s mind at once.

"No! I don't have any second thoughts at all," Akemi said quickly.

Lowering the pen, she wrote her initials neatly inside all three boxes, signed Akemi Sato in a clear, steady hand across the bottom line, and—at Tanaka’s gesture—pressed her right thumb onto a small black biometric pad beside the signature block until the terminal beeped once.

Tanaka drew the signed parchment back across the stainless steel. She lifted a heavy cast-iron embossing seal from the corner of her desk, fitted it over Akemi’s signature, and pressed down hard with both hands.

The metal teeth bit into the thick paper with a sharp, mechanical crunch that sounded unmistakably like a cell door locking into place.

"Congratulations, Akemi," Tanaka said softly, rising to her full height behind the counter and looking down at the woman seated on the bolted metal stool. Noticeably, she no longer used the honorific Ms. Sato. "Your commitment to Kurokawa Penitentiary is now legally binding and irrevocable. Stand up, bring your handbag and every personal item in your pockets over to the stainless-steel counter at Station Two, and prepare to surrender your civilian property."

Chapter Three: The Inventory and the Cwtch

The fluorescent lights of Station Two hummed with a sterile, high-pitched whine as Akemi stepped out of the glass interview booth, clutching the strap of her leather handbag.

Senior Officer Tanaka stood waiting beside a long stainless-steel sorting table divided into shallow, numbered compartments. Above the table, a fixed digital camera pointed downward, its red recording indicator blinking with metronomic regularity.

"Place your handbag in bin number four, Akemi," Tanaka instructed, her alto voice carrying the quiet, absolute authority of a roll-call sergeant. "And empty your pockets. Every scrap of paper, every coin, every personal effect. Nothing crosses the threshold of the residential blocks that has not been cataloged, inspected, and surrendered to the administrative trust."

"My handbag too?" Akemi hesitated, her fingers tightening around the leather handle. A faint, nervous flutter tickled her ribs. "I understand about the financial forms and the legal documents, but my phone is in here, and my apartment keys... shouldn't I keep those just in case I need to coordinate my belongings later?"

Tanaka did not raise her voice, but the air in the processing room seemed to drop ten degrees as she stepped closer.

"Did you read the final custody waiver you signed three minutes ago?" Tanaka asked softly, her dark eyes pinning Akemi in place. "Section Four, subsection two: All external communication devices, private keys, and civilian instruments are strictly prohibited within the secure perimeter. You are no longer navigating the city on a month-to-month lease, Akemi. You belong to the facility now. Your outside life has been officially closed. Empty the bag."

The cold logic of Tanaka’s words—reinforced by the memory of the embossing seal’s sharp crunch against the signature page—swept away any remaining impulse to argue. With trembling fingers, Akemi unzipped her handbag and began placing its contents onto the stainless-steel surface one by one.

First came her leather wallet, followed by her smartphone—its screen black and silent—her house keys on their brass ring, a packet of tissues, a tube of tinted lip balm, and a small leather coin purse.

Tanaka cataloged each item with methodical precision, dropping them into transparent evidence bags before sliding them into bin four.

"Now," Tanaka said, her gaze dropping significantly to Akemi’s charcoal skirt suit. "The uniform code requires the immediate surrender of all civilian apparel. Step behind the privacy screen at Station Three, Akemi. Take off the jacket, the

blouse, the skirt, and your undergarments. Leave nothing behind the screen except what you arrived in."

The privacy screen was only waist-high and made of translucent corrugated plastic. Tanaka stepped around it with Akemi without hesitation, gloved hands already lifting the charcoal blazer from her shoulders before Akemi had finished unbuttoning it. The jacket was folded once, precisely, and set on the narrow bench.

“Blouse next,” Tanaka said. Her fingers found the small mother-of-pearl buttons and worked them open from the collar downward, the backs of her knuckles brushing the thin skin over Akemi’s sternum with each one. “Arms down. You don’t need to help.”

Akemi’s arms stayed at her sides. The blouse slid free and was taken. Cool air moved across her collarbones and the upper curves of her breasts. Tanaka’s gloved palms settled briefly at her waist, steadying her while the skirt’s side zipper was drawn down. The charcoal fabric loosened, then dropped. Akemi stepped out of it when Tanaka’s fingers pressed lightly against the backs of her calves.

“Underthings,” Tanaka continued, voice unchanged. She hooked two fingers under the waistband of the plain cotton briefs and drew them down in one slow motion, the fabric catching for a moment against the damp heat between Akemi’s thighs before clearing her ankles. The bra followed: one strap eased from a shoulder, the clasp released, the cups lifted away. Tanaka’s palm rested flat for a second against the bare underside of Akemi’s left breast, not cupping, only confirming the absence of anything remaining. Akemi’s nipples had tightened; she felt the cool air against them and the sudden, exposed weight of her own breasts.

“Stand still,” Tanaka said. She circled once, gloved fingertips trailing lightly along the line of Akemi’s spine from the nape to the small of her back, then down the outer curve of one hip. “The civilian clothing is gone. What remains is only what the facility permits you to keep. You will not choose the next layer. You will not negotiate coverage or fit. When I hand you the tunic, you will put it on exactly as instructed and you will not adjust it afterward. Do you understand the difference?”

Akemi’s mouth was dry. The slickness between her legs had cooled in the open air; she could feel it when she shifted her weight. “Yes,” she answered. “I put on what you give me. I don’t change it.”

Tanaka’s hand settled at the base of her throat for one measured second, thumb resting just above the pulse. “Good. Turn around.”

When Akemi finally stepped out from behind the screen, the transformation was stark and absolute.

Her tailored city suit, her blouse, and her undergarments were gone, neatly balled up and dropped into an industrial disposal bin by Tanaka’s gloved hand. In their place, Akemi wore a standard-issue residential uniform: a coarse, slate-grey tunic of heavy cotton-poly blend that hung loosely to her mid-thigh, secured at the waist by a thick webbed utility belt, and flat-soled canvas slip-on shoes without laces.

She felt impossibly exposed beneath the harsh overhead lighting—stripped of the professional armor of her skirt suit, reduced to rough fabric and bare ankles.

"Uniform compliance: satisfactory," Tanaka noted, looking Akemi over with slow, clinical appreciation. "The grey suits you much better than charcoal, Akemi. It matches your complexion."

Before Akemi could murmur a response, Tanaka gestured toward a low medical chair fitted with steel arm restraints and a digital finger-scanner.

"Step over to the compliance station for your biometric identification badge," Tanaka commanded.

Akemi obeyed instantly, perching on the edge of the leather chair. Tanaka picked up a heavy, pen-like handheld stylus connected to a desktop terminal—though instead of a plastic card feeder, the device hummed with a low, ultrasonic whine as the sapphire tip glowed a pale, sterile blue.

"This terminal links your physical biometric profile directly to the facility’s secure roster," Tanaka explained, her voice dropping into a soothing, hypnotic register as she took Akemi’s left wrist in her firm, gloved hand and turned the inner forearm upward toward the light. "A standard plastic ID card can be lost, swapped, or broken. We require something permanent. Something that identifies you instantly, no matter where you are within the perimeter."

"A barcode badge?" Akemi asked nervously, peering down at the glowing blue stylus. "Like the ones on inventory crates?"

"Precisely," Tanaka murmured, pressing the sapphire tip firmly against the tender skin just above Akemi’s left wrist.

A sharp, searing prick—like a hot needle sliding beneath the dermis—made Akemi gasp and try to pull her arm away. But Tanaka’s grip was ironclad, holding her wrist motionless against the steel armrest while the stylus buzzed steadily, injecting permanent black carbon ink and microscopic micro-filaments deep into the sub-dermal layer.

The sapphire tip bit deeper. Akemi’s breath caught on a sharp inhale; her free hand clenched against the chair’s edge, but the wrist in Tanaka’s grip stayed

locked in place. The ultrasonic whine rose a half-tone. Heat bloomed under the skin in a narrow, precise line, then another, the carbon ink and filaments settling into the dermis with a steady, burning pressure that made her eyes water.

Tanaka’s free hand came up and settled over Akemi’s sternum, palm flat, leather warm from her own body heat. The pressure was firm enough to keep Akemi’s shoulders against the chair. “Breathe through it,” she said, the words low and close to Akemi’s ear. Her thumb moved once, slowly, across the upper swell of one breast, then again, tracing the same path while the stylus continued its work. “The pain is temporary. The registration is not. Every time the scanners read this mark they will know exactly who holds you, where you are permitted to be, and who must be notified if you are found outside those limits.”

Akemi’s chest rose and fell under the gloved hand. The burn along her wrist had become a bright, focused ache that pulsed in time with her heartbeat; lower, the earlier slickness had returned, a slow, involuntary tightening that made her thighs press together against the chair’s edge. She did not pull her arm. Tanaka’s thumb continued its unhurried circuit, never quite reaching the nipple, only mapping the skin above it.

“You will feel this every time you wash,” Tanaka continued, voice even. “Every time the fabric of the tunic shifts across your wrist. It will remind you that the decision to keep your outside accounts, your keys, your name on a lease, has already been made for you. You surrendered those things when you signed. This only makes the surrender visible.” The stylus paused, then resumed, etching the final characters. Tanaka’s palm slid an inch lower, the heel of her hand resting just above the soft give of Akemi’s abdomen. “Hold still until I lift it. The mark is almost complete.”

Akemi’s breath shuddered out. She kept her eyes on the glowing tip and the steady black lines forming under her skin, and she did not move her arm.

When the buzzing stopped, Tanaka lifted the stylus. Across Akemi’s inner wrist, a crisp, flawless black barcode—anchored by an alphanumeric inmate-liaison serial number—stood stark and indelible against her pale skin. A thin line of crimson beaded along the edges, which Tanaka gently wiped away with an antiseptic pad, her thumb lingering over the fresh ink.

"There," Tanaka whispered, tracing the tattooed lines with her thumb. "Now you can never be misplaced. You are permanently registered in the system."

"It... it burns a little," Akemi whispered, staring down at the black lines on her arm with a dazed, surreal detachment.

"The initial inflammation fades quickly," Tanaka replied briskly, releasing her wrist and stepping back to check her aluminum clipboard. "Now, for the final administrative protocol of the onboarding sequence: the intake health exam and

mandatory cleansing shower. Follow me down to the residential tier."

Chapter Four: Telemetry and Decontamination

Beyond the steel bulkhead at the end of the processing hall lay a corridor that smelled sharply of rubbing alcohol, carbolic soap, and steamed tile.

Tanaka unlocked a heavy door stenciled with a red medical cross and ushered Akemi into a windowless examination room. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with white ceramic tile that amplified the slightest sound—the squeak of Akemi’s laceless canvas soles, the rustle of her coarse slate-grey tunic against her bare thighs, and the measured, authoritative click of Tanaka’s boots. In the center of the room stood a stainless-steel examination table fitted with stirrups and leather wrist loops, covered by a strip of crisp white butcher paper.

"Stage Four of our onboarding sequence is the mandatory baseline physical and bio-telemetry clearance," Tanaka said, stripping off her black leather duty gloves and snapping on a pair of snug, powder-free nitrile gloves. "Before any liaison is cleared to enter the high-security residential tiers, our medical registry must verify that she has no underlying conditions—and establish continuous physiological monitoring."

"Continuous monitoring?" Akemi asked, her fingers unconsciously brushing the tender, newly tattooed barcode on her inner left wrist as she stepped toward the table. "Like a fitness tracker?"

"Much more reliable," Tanaka replied smoothly, patting the edge of the examination table. "Up on the table, Akemi. Sit on the paper and unfasten the top three snaps of your tunic."

The paper crinkled loudly under Akemi’s weight as she climbed up and sat with her bare legs dangling over the cold steel edge. Her fingers trembled slightly as she undid the heavy metal snaps at her collar, parting the rough grey cotton to expose her throat and collarbones.

Tanaka stepped between Akemi’s knees—standing closer than any doctor ever had, invading her personal space with effortless, unhurried ownership. She reached out, caught Akemi’s chin between her gloved thumb and forefinger, and tilted her face up toward the bright surgical lamp overhead.

"Look straight at me," Tanaka commanded softly. "Do not blink."

Akemi held her breath, staring into Tanaka’s dark, fathomless eyes while the officer shone a narrow penlight into her pupils. With her free hand, Tanaka pressed two fingers firmly against the fluttering hollow of Akemi’s throat, counting the rapid, erratic thud of her pulse.

"Ninety-eight beats per minute," Tanaka murmured, a faint, knowing curve touching the corner of her lips as her thumb brushed along the line of Akemi’s jaw. "Elevated, yet completely compliant. Your body knows already that it is in

capable hands, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Officer Tanaka," Akemi whispered, unable to look away until Tanaka released her chin.

Tanaka picked up a stainless-steel stethoscope, warmed the metal bell not with her hand, but by pressing it directly below Akemi’s left collarbone, and slipped the earpieces into place. Slowly, methodically, she slid the cold metal disk lower, parting the unfastened front of the grey tunic with the back of her wrist until the stethoscope rested directly over the soft swell of Akemi’s left breast, right above her pounding heart.

Tanaka’s gloved fingers slid the stethoscope lower still, the cold disk tracing the undercurve of Akemi’s left breast before settling just above the nipple. She listened for three full breaths, then moved it to the right side, parting the open tunic wider so the rough cotton fell away from both shoulders. Akemi’s arms remained at her sides; the paper crackled under her when she shifted, but she did not close the fabric.

“Lie back,” Tanaka said. She guided Akemi down with one hand at the nape and the other steadying a bare knee, until Akemi’s shoulders met the paper and her legs still hung over the edge. The overhead lamp warmed the skin of her chest. Tanaka set the stethoscope aside and pressed the flats of both gloved hands to Akemi’s ribcage, just beneath the breasts, then drew them slowly downward in a firm, continuous sweep that mapped the soft give of her abdomen and stopped at the low rise of her hips. “Breathe in. Hold. Out. Again.”

Akemi obeyed. On the second exhale Tanaka’s thumbs pressed inward at the creases of her thighs, testing the tension there, then slid upward again along the inner edges of the tunic that still covered her hips. The gloves were warm now. One hand remained at Akemi’s waist while the other returned to her chest, palm cupping the full weight of her left breast, thumb brushing once across the tightened nipple with clinical precision. Akemi’s breath caught; a fine tremor ran through her thighs where they rested against the steel.

“Responsive,” Tanaka noted. She repeated the same slow assessment on the right breast, then drew both hands down the length of Akemi’s arms, lifting each wrist in turn, rotating it, pressing lightly into the pulse points. When she reached the newly tattooed barcode she held the arm extended and open, studying the mark while her other hand rested flat and warm between Akemi’s breasts. “Reflexes intact. Skin temperature elevated. No resistance to positioning.” Her fingers slid lower again, tracing the outer curve of one hip, then inward until the edge of her glove met the damp heat at the top of Akemi’s thigh. She did not push the fabric aside. She simply held the contact, steady pressure through the thin cotton, while Akemi’s hips gave an involuntary, shallow lift against the paper. “You are not protecting yourself from my hands. That is noted.”

Tanaka withdrew the touch only after the tremor had settled. She took Akemi’s ankles one at a time, guiding each foot into a stirrup and adjusting the leather straps loosely around the arches so the position held without force. Akemi’s knees fell open under the lamp. Tanaka stepped between them again, gloved palms settling on the inner thighs just above the knees, and pressed them a fraction wider. The paper rustled. Akemi’s fingers curled against the table’s edge and stayed there.

“Hold this,” Tanaka said. Her thumbs stroked once, slowly, along the sensitive inner skin. “Do not close your legs until I release them. We are confirming range of motion and compliance under sustained contact. Your pulse is still high. That is acceptable.” She kept both hands exactly where they were, warm and unmoving, while Akemi breathed through the open posture and the low, insistent throb that had gathered where the tunic still covered her. The examination continued in the same unhurried register until Tanaka finally stepped back and said, “You may lower your arms. The baseline is complete.”

When the physical check concluded, Tanaka stepped over to a locked glass cabinet and retrieved a sleek, silver pneumatic applicator loaded with a sterile glass ampoule.

"Turn your head to the right and lower your left shoulder," Tanaka instructed, returning to the side of the table. "Because you will be living and working inside a sealed tier without personal electronics, this sub-dermal transponder links directly to the barcode we registered on your wrist. It transmits your heart rate, body temperature, hormone fluctuations, and exact physical coordinates straight to my handheld tablet twenty-four hours a day. Even when you are asleep in your quarters, I will know every breath you take."

A tiny, cold prickle of unease danced down Akemi’s spine at the thought of being watched from the inside out—yet before she could voice a question, Tanaka pressed the flat nozzle of the applicator against the curve where Akemi’s neck met her shoulder and pulled the trigger.

The pneumatic hiss was instantaneous, accompanied by a sharp, deep pinch below the skin. Akemi gasped, her hands gripping the steel edges of the table.

Tanaka immediately smoothed a cool antiseptic pad over the tiny red point, her gloved palm lingering warmly against the bare skin of Akemi’s shoulder. "All done. A handheld scanner just verified the signal—strong and clear. You won't ever have to worry about visiting an outside clinic again; everything your body requires will be administered right here on the block."

Without allowing Akemi to refasten her tunic, Tanaka turned and unlocked a heavy, rusted iron door at the rear of the examination room. Warm, humid air smelling of pine disinfectant and wet stone drifted out from the chamber beyond.

"Step down and leave your shoes by the threshold," Tanaka ordered. "Stage Five is mandatory decontamination."

Akemi slid off the table in her bare feet and peered into the adjoining room. It was not a locker room with private stalls; it was a stark, six-foot-square concrete wash bay lined with grey slate, sloped toward a brass floor drain in the center. A single exposed pipe ran down the wall, fitted with a heavy institutional showerhead and two industrial brass valves that could only be operated from the dry threshold where Tanaka stood.

"A shower?" Akemi blinked, her hands clutching the open lapels of her grey tunic. "Right now? During the interview?"

"Every person entering the high-security interior blocks must undergo a supervised antiseptic wash," Tanaka explained without the slightest hesitation, her tone making the invasive demand sound like timeless institutional law. "Perfumes, city dust, hair products, even the soap from your apartment—all of it is considered contraband on the tier. Out there, you smelled like Akemi Sato. Inside my block, you will smell solely of the facility. Take off the tunic and drop it in the laundry hamper."

Akemi’s cheeks burned crimson. Stripping behind the privacy screen in the processing room had been one thing, but standing completely naked in an open concrete box under the bright overhead light while her interviewer watched from three feet away made her knees feel like water.

"Officer Tanaka, could I—is there a curtain?" Akemi faltered.

Tanaka’s expression hardened instantly, her voice dropping into that cold, ringing register that brooked zero resistance. "There are no curtains in high security, Akemi. Privacy is a privilege that does not exist past that door. Take off the tunic, step onto the drain, and put your hands behind your neck. Now."

Conditioned by every step that had come before, Akemi’s fingers obeyed before her mind could rebel. She shrugged the coarse grey tunic off her shoulders, let it fall into the wire hamper, and stepped barefoot onto the cold, wet slate over the brass drain. Trembling under the harsh glare of the ceiling fixture, she lifted her arms and laced her fingers behind the nape of her neck, leaving every inch of her naked form completely exposed to Tanaka’s unblinking gaze.

Tanaka did not stay dry on the threshold. She unbuckled her duty belt, hung her uniform jacket on a steel peg, and rolled up the sleeves of her crisp black shirt before picking up a long-handled coarse bristle brush and a bar of harsh, unscented institutional soap.

Turning the brass valve, Tanaka unleashed a stinging, steaming torrent of water from the overhead fixture that plastered Akemi’s dark hair to her shoulders and

sent rivulets racing down her skin.

"Keep your hands laced behind your neck," Tanaka commanded over the rush of the water, stepping directly into the edge of the spray. "Do not lower your arms unless I tell you to."

The water struck Akemi’s shoulders and chest in a hard, continuous sheet. Tanaka stepped fully into the spray, the black shirt darkening at the sleeves and across the front, and worked the harsh soap between her gloved hands until it foamed. She began at the nape, lathering the short dark hair, then drew both palms down the sides of Akemi’s throat and across the collarbones in long, deliberate strokes that followed the water. The coarse brush followed, bristles dragging over the same path with enough pressure to pink the skin.

“Arms stay up,” Tanaka said over the rush. She soaped Akemi’s raised arms from wrist to armpit, thumbs pressing into the soft hollows, then moved to the breasts. Both gloved hands cupped and lifted, working the lather in slow circles that covered every curve; the brush followed more lightly here, tracing the undersides and the tight peaks until the skin flushed and the water ran clear. Akemi’s breath came shorter. The heat of the spray and the steady friction made the earlier slickness between her legs feel thicker; droplets tracked down her abdomen and over the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

Tanaka’s hands slid lower, soaping the waist and the soft swell of the hips, then the outer thighs. She circled behind Akemi without warning, one palm braced at the small of the back while the other and the brush worked down the spine, over the curve of the buttocks, and along the crease where thigh met hip. The contact was thorough and unhurried. When Tanaka moved to the front again she knelt on the wet slate, water soaking the knees of her trousers, and soaped each leg from ankle to the top of the thigh. Her gloved fingers pressed into the muscle, then higher, spreading the lather across the inner thighs until her thumbs met the slick, heated skin at the center. She did not avoid it. She worked the soap there in the same methodical strokes she had used everywhere else—slow, covering, lingering—while the brush rested against the outside of one thigh and the water streamed over both of them.

Akemi’s knees softened. A low sound escaped her before she bit it back; her laced fingers tightened at the nape of her neck. Tanaka’s thumbs continued their unhurried circuit, parting the folds just enough to rinse the soap clean, then pressing again with the flat of one palm while the other hand steadied Akemi’s hip. The contact stayed clinical in tempo and absolute in coverage. Steam rose around them. Akemi’s thighs trembled under the sustained pressure; the pulse between them matched the rapid beat Tanaka could feel against her glove.

“Still,” Tanaka said. She rose, soaped Akemi’s abdomen and the undersides of the breasts once more, then stepped back only far enough to turn her under the

spray for a final rinse. Both hands returned to the hips, holding Akemi in place while the water cleared the last of the lather from between her legs and down the backs of her thighs. Akemi stood with arms locked behind her neck, skin flushed and streaming, breath uneven, the imprint of every deliberate stroke still warm under the cooling spray. Tanaka’s palms remained on her until the last of the soap had gone, then lifted away.

“You may lower your arms,” she said. “The decontamination is finished.”

When Tanaka finally wrenched the brass valve shut, the sudden silence in the tiled chamber was broken only by the drip of water onto the slate and Akemi’s ragged, shallow breathing. Her skin was flushed pink and tingling from the scrubbing brush, stripped of every trace of her former life.

Tanaka tossed a thin, rough white cotton towel onto Akemi’s head. "Dry yourself off. You have two minutes."

While Akemi hurriedly blotted the water from her shivering limbs, Tanaka opened a metal pass-through hatch in the wall and drew out a fresh slate-grey tunic and a pair of canvas slip-ons.

As Akemi pulled the stiff, dry tunic over her head, she noticed something that hadn't been on the first one. Stenciled across her left breast—and repeated in four-inch black block characters across her shoulder blades—was a bold serial code:

KP-0844

She glanced down at her inner left wrist. Below the black bars of her fresh tattoo were the exact same characters: KP-0844.

"Why does this one have my badge number printed on the cloth?" Akemi asked quietly, her voice sounding small and uncertain in the damp room as she stepped into the canvas shoes.

"On the high-security tier, visual identification must be instantaneous from either end of the catwalk," Tanaka answered briskly, re-buckling her leather duty belt around her waist and settling her peaked cap back onto her head. "Come along, Akemi. Only one stage remains in your orientation: the practical scenario assessment in the residential wing."

Tanaka unlocked the heavy rear door of the decontamination suite and led Akemi out into a vast, echoing concrete rotunda.

Here, the architecture of Kurokawa Penitentiary revealed its true scale. A towering steel-bar gate separated the rotunda from Tier Four — Maximum Custody. Beyond the bars rose three stories of concrete catwalks, lined with rows of heavy, solid-steel cell doors painted a dull battleship grey.

At Tanaka’s nod, a female guard inside an elevated armored booth buzzed the massive gate open.

As Akemi followed Tanaka onto the polished concrete floor of the cellblock, a sharp, metallic whistle echoed from the far end of the lower tier.

"Single file on the red line! Eyes front!" another officer barked from the catwalk.

A line of twelve women emerged from the work-detail corridor, marching in silent, lockstep order with their hands clasped behind their backs.

Akemi glanced over at the line of prisoners—and her breath froze solid in her throat.

The two guards escorting the line were dressed in immaculate slate-black trousers, black button-down shirts, and peaked caps, identical to Tanaka’s. There were no staff members in grey anywhere on the floor.

Instead, every single prisoner marching down the red line was wearing the exact same coarse, thigh-length slate-grey tunic Akemi had on right now. Every prisoner wore the exact same laceless canvas slip-ons. Every prisoner had a four-inch black serial number stenciled across her left breast and shoulder blades—KP-0412, KP-0619, KP-0703—and as the last woman in line passed within six feet of Akemi, Akemi saw the unmistakable black rectangle of a tattooed barcode etched permanently into the pale skin of the inmate’s inner left wrist.

A cold, hollow vertigo dropped through the floor of Akemi’s stomach.

She looked down at the rough grey cotton covering her chest—at the bold black KP-0844 stenciled over her heart—and then up at the solid steel gates that had locked behind them five times since eight o'clock that morning.

"Officer Tanaka..." Akemi’s voice was barely a whisper, her legs suddenly heavy as lead as she climbed the iron stairs to the second-tier catwalk behind the tall officer. "Those women down there... the inmates. Their uniforms..."

Tanaka didn't slow her pace, nor did she look back over her shoulder as her boots rang against the iron grating.

"Keep moving, 0844," Tanaka said, her voice calm, resonant, and echoing down the long row of bolted doors until she stopped in front of the open steel threshold of Cell 412. "Step inside the cell. It is time to conclude your interview."

Chapter Five: Cell 412

Akemi’s laceless canvas shoes crossed the raised steel threshold of Cell 412, her footsteps deadened by the thick grey concrete of the floor.

The room measured barely six feet across and nine feet deep. To her left, a narrow iron cot was bolted directly into the masonry, topped with a thin, plastic-sealed mattress and a neatly folded grey wool blanket. To her right sat a single stainless-steel combination basin and lavatory. High on the far wall, ten feet above the floor, a narrow slit of frosted, wire-reinforced glass let in a pale, diffused glow that gave no hint of the sky outside. There was no desk, no chair, and no door handle on the inside of the heavy steel slab.

Senior Officer Tanaka stepped just inside the threshold behind her. She did not pull the door shut yet, though her tall, black-uniformed frame filled the narrow doorway so completely that the catwalk beyond might as well have ceased to exist.

“Stage Six,” Tanaka said, her low alto voice resonating cleanly off the bare concrete walls as she lifted her aluminum clipboard. “The practical housing assessment. Walk to the far wall, 0844. Place your heels against the baseboard, press your shoulder blades flat to the concrete, and clasp your hands behind the small of your back.”

Akemi moved across the short floor as if wading through deep water. She turned to face the doorway, slid her hands behind her waist, and leaned her back against the rough, painted stone. The cold of the wall seeped instantly through the thin cotton of her grey tunic, right through the four-inch black stencil of KP-0844 printed across her shoulder blades.

From this angle, looking past Tanaka’s shoulder through the open doorway, Akemi could see the cell directly across the catwalk. Inside that cell, visible through the narrow vertical observation window in its bolted steel door, stood another woman in the exact same slate-grey tunic, her hands clasped behind her back as she waited for the evening count.

The pieces did not merely fall into place; they locked together with the slow, crushing weight of hydraulic steel.

“You’re very quiet, Akemi,” Tanaka observed softly, taking a single unhurried step into the cell and letting the heavy steel door swing three-quarters shut behind her, cutting off the view of the catwalk. “We have reached the final stage of your interview. This is the moment where I review the terms of your placement and make sure you understand the rules of the house.”

Akemi’s lips parted, her chest rising and falling against the coarse grey fabric, yet no sound came out.

“Let us review what you have accomplished since eight o’clock this morning,” Tanaka continued, her dark eyes fixed unblinkingly on Akemi’s face as she ticked each item off on her fingers. “You arrived at the Main Receiving Gate with no outside employer, no partner, and not a single acquaintance in the city expecting your return. You signed a binding power of attorney turning your bank accounts and your month-to-month apartment lease over to our administrative trust. By five o’clock this afternoon, our movers will have cleared your studio in the East Ward and returned the keys to your landlord.”

A tremor ran through Akemi’s knees. Her fingers tightened around her own wrists behind her back, brushing the raised, tender skin where the black barcode was etched permanently into her flesh.

“You signed a permanent custodial waiver relinquishing all external recourse and placing yourself under my twenty-four-hour physical jurisdiction,” Tanaka murmured, taking another slow step forward until she stood less than two feet away, towering over Akemi in the dimness of the cell. “You surrendered your phone, your wallet, and your keys. You watched me drop your civilian clothes into the disposal chute. You allowed me to mark your skin with an inmate registry code, implant a sub-dermal transponder beneath your collarbone, scrub the city off your naked body in the intake shower, and dress you in the uniform of Tier Four.”

Tanaka tilted her head slightly, a slow, knowing curve touching the corner of her mouth as her gaze dropped to the black numbers stenciled over Akemi’s pounding heart.

“Tell me, Akemi,” Tanaka whispered, her voice dropping into a velvet purr that filled the narrow concrete box. “When you sat in Station One this morning with your palms turned up on the cold steel, confessing how tired you were of making your own decisions… did you truly believe I brought you to Kurokawa Penitentiary to work at a desk?”

The truth hung in the air between them, stripped of every polite euphemism and bureaucratic disguise. There was no liaison office. There was no staff orientation. From the moment the taxi had pulled away from the outer sally port, every form, every signature, and every touch had been a standard prisoner intake—orchestrated entirely by the woman standing in front of her.

Akemi opened her mouth to protest, to say that there had been a mistake, to demand her handbag and her coat—yet as she looked up into Tanaka’s dark, commanding eyes, the words dissolved in her throat.

Beneath the cold shock of the trap closing around her, a profound, dizzying stillness settled over her chest. All morning, she had obeyed every command Tanaka had given her, and with every piece of her old life that Tanaka had

stripped away, the heavy, exhausting burden of the outside world had vanished with it. She couldn't find it in her heart to object. She couldn't even bring herself to speak.

Slowly, silently, Akemi shook her head.

Tanaka's smile deepened—warm, possessive, and absolute. She tucked the aluminum clipboard beneath her left arm and stepped squarely into Akemi's personal space, bringing with her the crisp scent of polished leather and winter air.

"And when you look down at that number across your chest," Tanaka asked softly, raising her right hand to trace the black stenciled digits of KP-0844 over the swell of Akemi's breast with one leather-gloved finger, "you understand that you are not a member of the staff, don't you? You understand that you are my prisoner now?"

Akemi's breath hitched in a ragged, silent gasp as Tanaka's finger lingered against the rough cotton. Her eyes stayed wide and shining, locked on her captor's face, and after a long, trembling beat, she gave a single, slow nod of assent.

"Good," Tanaka breathed.

Tanaka's gloved hand left the stencil over Akemi's heart and settled at her hip, fingers spreading wide through the thin cotton. She stepped in the last half-inch until the front of her uniform pressed Akemi fully against the cold concrete; the wall's chill bled through the tunic at Akemi's shoulders and the small of her back while Tanaka's body heat soaked into her front. Akemi's clasped hands stayed locked behind her. The rough fabric of the tunic dragged upward an inch under the pressure of Tanaka's thigh between hers.

"You will not speak unless I ask you a direct question that requires words," Tanaka said, voice low enough that it barely carried past the narrow space between them. Her free hand rose and cupped the side of Akemi's throat, thumb resting in the hollow beneath the jaw where the pulse hammered. "Everything else is answered with a nod or with your body. Do you understand that rule?"

Akemi's lips parted on a shallow breath. She nodded once, the motion small against Tanaka's palm.

"During the day you are Inmate 0844. You stand for count. You eat what is placed in front of you. You do not look at the other officers longer than necessary and you never look at me as if you know what my hands feel like on you. If you forget, I will correct you in front of the tier and you will thank me for it afterward. Nod if that is clear."

Akemi nodded. The motion pressed her throat more firmly into Tanaka's glove. Heat had already gathered between her legs; the pressure of Tanaka's thigh made the slickness unmistakable, a slow, wet shift of fabric against skin every time either of them breathed.

Tanaka's thumb stroked once along the line of Akemi's jaw. "At night the rules change. After lock-in I will open this door when I choose. You will already be on your knees beside the cot, hands behind your back, tunic pulled up to your waist so I can see you the moment the light from the catwalk hits you. You will not cover yourself. You will not ask what I want. You will wait exactly as I left you the night before until I tell you otherwise. Is that how you will greet me?"

Akemi's breath caught. A fine tremor ran through her thighs where they pressed against Tanaka's. She nodded, slower this time, the agreement visible in the way her hips shifted forward a fraction into the contact.

"Good." Tanaka's hand at her hip slid lower, gathering the hem of the tunic and drawing it upward until the cool air of the cell touched the bare skin of Akemi's stomach and the tops of her thighs. The glove stayed there, resting just above the heat, not yet moving lower. "When I step inside I will touch you wherever I want for as long as I want. I will put my fingers inside you while you stay on your knees. I will make you come against my hand and then I will decide whether you are allowed to rest or whether you will stay open and waiting until I am finished with the rest of the tier. You will not close your legs. You will not push my hand away. You will take what I give you and you will stay quiet enough that the women in the cells on either side never hear more than your breathing. Do you accept that?"

Akemi's eyes had gone wide and dark. The nod came with a soft, involuntary sound caught in her throat; her hips rocked once against the glove that still hovered just above her, seeking the contact that had not yet been given. Tanaka felt the movement and answered it by sliding two fingers lower, parting the slick folds with unhurried pressure and resting there, the leather warm and firm against the swollen center of her.

"And when I want your mouth," Tanaka continued, the words brushing Akemi's ear, "you will open it. You will keep your hands behind you and you will let me use it until I decide you have had enough. If I want to taste you instead, you will lie back on the cot exactly as I place you, knees open, and you will stay still while I take my time. You do not get to finish unless I say the words. You do not get to touch yourself when I am gone. Your body answers only to me from the moment that door opens until I lock it again. Tell me you understand by staying exactly like this while I feel how wet you already are."

Akemi held the position. Her breath came in short, controlled pulls against Tanaka's glove at her throat. The fingers between her legs moved once, a slow,

deliberate stroke that gathered the slickness and pressed inward just far enough to make her thighs tremble and her shoulders press harder into the concrete. She did not speak. She did not lower her arms. She only nodded, small and continuous, while Tanaka's fingers worked her open with the same measured patience she had used in the examination room and under the shower, learning the exact pressure that made Akemi's hips stutter and her pulse leap under the thumb at her throat.

"You are mine on this tier," Tanaka said, the words quiet and absolute. She curled her fingers once, felt the answering clench, and held them there. "Every night you will prove it. Every morning you will stand for count with the evidence still on your skin and you will not wipe it away until I allow it. Nod if that is the life you are choosing."

Akemi's head moved against the wall in a single, clear nod. Her eyes stayed locked on Tanaka's. Between her legs the glove shifted again, slower now, circling, pressing, drawing out the helpless, wet response until Akemi's knees threatened to buckle and the only thing keeping her upright was the solid line of Tanaka's body and the hand still cupping her throat. She remained silent. She remained open. She remained exactly as she had been ordered.

Tanaka drew back an inch and looked down at her new prisoner's parted lips. Then, gripping Akemi's chin firmly in her gloved hand, Tanaka leaned in and captured Akemi's mouth in a deep, slow, scorching kiss.

It was not the clinical touch of the medical room or the brisk efficiency of the processing line; it was raw, unhurried, and unmistakably possessive, claiming Akemi's breath and sealing the silent contract between them until Akemi's head spun and a soft, involuntary whimper escaped into Tanaka's mouth.

The instant the kiss broke, before Akemi could even open her dazed eyes or unclasp her hands from behind her back, Tanaka stepped cleanly backward across the steel threshold.

With a single fluid push of her arm, Tanaka swung the two-hundred-pound solid steel door shut.

The iron latch struck the frame with a deafening, final clang, followed immediately by the heavy mechanical thud of the external deadbolt sliding into the concrete wall.

Left alone in the sudden, echoing quiet of the narrow cell, her lips still tingling and swollen from the kiss, Akemi heard the sharp slide of the metal shutter covering the small observation window at eye level.

Through the narrow rectangular glass framed by thick iron bars, Tanaka's dark eyes looked in at her from the catwalk—every trace of warmth vanished behind

the severe, unyielding mask of the Senior Correctional Officer.

“Step back from the door and keep your hands visible until the evening count is cleared, Inmate 0844,” Tanaka said briskly, her voice carrying the cold, routine cadence she used for every maximum-custody convict on the block. “Lights out is at ten.”

The metal shutter snapped shut with a sharp clack, leaving Akemi standing motionless against the cold concrete wall in the dim light of Cell 412.