The Wreckers: "Mind Over Marriage" | Book #11

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Wreckers, Book 11

Chapter 1

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Chapter 1: The Edge

The apartment was dark when they stepped inside, the way it always was when they'd been gone for more than a few days. Vanessa reached for the switch by the door and let the low, warm lights come up slowly, the way Jordan preferred. The familiar scent of the place settled around them — cedar, faint citrus from the cleaner they used, and the underlying trace of both their lives layered over years. It should have felt like relief. Instead it felt like a room that had been waiting for them to come back and finish something.

Jordan closed the door behind them and set their bags down without speaking. Vanessa stood in the middle of the living room for a moment, still in her coat, listening to the quiet. The Caribbean already felt like it belonged to another life. White sand. Clear water. Easy smiles and easier surrender. She could still feel the sun on her skin if she thought about it, but it didn't reach anything that mattered.

She shrugged out of her coat and draped it over the back of the nearest chair. Her dark auburn hair, still carrying a hint of salt from the last days by the water, fell across one shoulder. Even travel-weary, there was a deliberate quality to the way she moved — tall, striking, every gesture measured. She crossed to the window that looked out over the city and stood there with her arms folded, watching the lights of Manhattan flicker in the late evening haze. Jordan came up behind her but didn't touch her yet. He waited.

"Say it," Vanessa said without turning.

He was quiet for a beat. Then: "It was too easy."

She let out a short breath that wasn't quite a laugh. "That's what I was thinking the entire flight home. We barely had to try." She turned then, leaning one hip against the windowsill. The light from the street caught the fine bones of her face, the sharp intelligence in her eyes. "They were already half-broken when we got there. All we did was give them a push in the direction they were already leaning."

Jordan nodded once. He looked steady, the way he always did after a job — tall, lean, dark hair showing more silver at the temples than it had a few years ago. It suited him. He carried himself with the quiet confidence of a man who had long since stopped needing to prove anything to anyone, least of all himself. His shirt was still crisp despite the long flight. He rolled his sleeves once, slowly, as he watched her.

"You wanted something that would push back," he said.

“I did.” Vanessa pushed off the windowsill and walked into the kitchen, opening the fridge more out of habit than hunger. She stared at the contents without really seeing them. “I kept

waiting for the moment where one of them would actually fight. Where we’d have to work for it. Instead it was just… polite. Sad. Over before it really started.”

She closed the fridge and leaned against the counter, arms crossed. Jordan followed her into the kitchen but stayed on the other side of the island, giving her space.

“We’ve done this too many times,” she said after a moment. “We’re good at it. Too good. And I don’t want to start treating it like something we can coast through.”

Jordan rested his hands on the edge of the island. His voice stayed calm, even. “So we find something that won’t let us coast.”

Vanessa looked at him across the counter. For a long moment neither of them spoke. The apartment was quiet around them, the city noise muffled by thick windows and distance. She could hear the low hum of the refrigerator and the faint tick of the clock in the living room. “You know what the rules are,” she said finally.

Jordan’s mouth curved, just slightly. “I do.”

“Say them anyway.”

He didn’t hesitate. “We don’t fall in love with them. We don’t keep them. And when it’s over…” His voice dropped a fraction. “We fuck each other like the world is ending.” Vanessa held his gaze. The words settled between them the way they always did — not as a performance, but as a reminder of the line they had drawn years ago and never crossed. It was the only thing that had kept them intact through everything they’d done.

She nodded once. “Good.”

Jordan came around the island then. He stopped close enough that she could feel the warmth of him. One hand came up to brush a strand of hair back from her face, the touch light but deliberate.

“You’re not satisfied,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“No.” Vanessa leaned into his hand for a second, then straightened. “I’m not. And I don’t want to be. Not yet.”

She moved past him into the living room and dropped onto the long sofa, pulling her legs up beneath her. Jordan followed and sat at the other end, angled toward her. The lamplight caught the silver in his hair and the steady set of his shoulders. He looked at her with the patience she had always trusted.

“Tell me who you’re thinking about,” she said.

Jordan didn’t pretend not to understand. “Amy Foster. Neuroscientist. Based in Paris. Runs her own research firm. She’s been developing memory modification protocols — erasure,

replacement, behavioral conditioning. The kind of work most people only hear about in rumors. She’s doing it in the open, with serious funding.”

Vanessa’s attention sharpened. “Married?”

“Yes. To a much younger man. Late twenties. Extremely fit. The kind of man who turns heads without trying.” Jordan’s tone stayed even. “She probably makes sure the marriage stays exactly the way she wants it. There are signs she’s already using early versions of her work on people close to her. Including him.”

Vanessa was quiet for a long moment, turning the information over in her mind. Paris. Brilliant. Dangerous. Already using the technology on the people around her. It wasn’t just another couple to dismantle. It was something sharper. Something that could actually bite back.

“She sounds like a real challenge,” Vanessa said at last.

Jordan watched her carefully. “She is. Getting close to her means getting close to the technology. And she’s not careless. If we go after her, we need to be smarter than we’ve had to be in a long time.”

Vanessa leaned forward, elbows on her knees. The restlessness that had been sitting in her chest since they left the Caribbean was shifting now, turning into something cleaner. Hungrier.

“I want her,” she said.

Jordan didn’t look surprised. He simply nodded.

“We’ll need Aiko,” Vanessa continued. “She’s the only one who can get inside Foster’s systems without setting off every alarm the woman has. We can’t do this from here. Not properly.”

“No,” Jordan agreed. “We can’t.”

Vanessa stood and walked back to the window, looking out at the city lights without really seeing them. Her reflection ghosted in the glass — tall, striking, dark auburn hair falling over one shoulder. She looked like a woman who had already made up her mind.

“We go to Paris,” she said. “When it’s time. We stay close to Aiko. Close to the work. I’m not going to sit on the other side of the ocean and watch this one from a screen.”

Jordan rose and came to stand beside her. Their shoulders almost touched.

“You’re sure?” he asked quietly.

Vanessa turned her head to look at him. In the low light of the apartment, his face was familiar in a way that still steadied her after all these years. She reached out and rested her hand against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath her palm.

“I’m sure,” she said. “I need this one to matter. I need it to push back.”

Jordan covered her hand with his. His fingers were warm and solid.

“Then we’ll go,” he said. “When Aiko’s ready for us.”

Vanessa let her hand stay there a moment longer, then let it fall. She turned back to the window, but some of the tightness in her chest had eased. The decision was made. The restlessness hadn’t disappeared, but it had found a direction.

Behind her, Jordan’s voice was quiet.

“Same rules,” he said.

Vanessa nodded without turning around.

“Same rules,” she answered.

Outside, the city kept moving. Inside the apartment, the two of them stood in the low light, the weight of the choice settling between them like something alive. Neither of them spoke again for a long time.

They didn’t need to.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2: The Call

Vanessa sat with her legs tucked beneath her, staring at the dark screen of Jordan’s phone on the coffee table. The apartment was quiet except for the low, steady hum of the city outside. She could still feel the residue of the Caribbean clinging to her — the warmth, the easy surrender, the way everything had folded without resistance. It sat in her chest like something unfinished.

She looked over at Jordan, who was leaning against the arm of the sofa, watching her. “We should call her,” Vanessa said.

Jordan didn’t ask who. He simply nodded. “Now?”

“Yeah.” She reached for the phone but didn’t pick it up yet. “While it’s still sitting with me. While I can still feel how little it touched us.”

Jordan studied her for a moment, then gave a small nod. “All right.”

Vanessa found Aiko’s contact and tapped the screen. The call connected after two rings. Aiko’s voice came through, crisp and alert. “Vanessa. Jordan. You’re back.”

“We’re back,” Vanessa said. She set the phone on speaker and placed it on the table between them. “Hope we’re not interrupting anything.”

“It’s morning here,” Aiko replied. “I’ve been working since early. What’s going on?” Vanessa glanced at Jordan. He gave her a slight nod, letting her lead.

“We have something,” Vanessa said. “Something that actually feels worth doing.”

Aiko waited.

Jordan leaned forward. “The target is Amy Foster. Neuroscientist. CEO of a private firm in Paris. She’s been developing functional memory modification protocols — erasure, replacement, behavioral conditioning. She’s already using early versions on people close to her.”

There was a short pause on Aiko’s end. Then she asked, “How solid is that?”

“Solid enough,” Jordan said. “Her husband is much younger. Late twenties. Physically ideal. There are clear patterns that she’s been conditioning him to stay compliant. We believe she’s done the same with certain employees.”

Aiko made a quiet, thoughtful sound. “And what do the two of you want with her?”

Vanessa answered. “We want to break the marriage. Not her company. Not the research itself. Just the structure she’s built to keep him exactly where she wants him. We want to use her own methods against that control.”

Another pause. Then Aiko said, “That’s more complicated than usual.”

“It needs to be,” Vanessa replied. Her voice had dropped, but there was a sharp edge beneath it. “The last one left nothing behind. We walked in, did what we do, and walked out. I could barely feel it by the time we were on the plane. I’m not interested in doing that again.” Jordan’s hand settled on her knee, steady and grounding. He didn’t interrupt.

Aiko’s voice came back measured. “You’re looking for resistance.”

“I’m looking for weight,” Vanessa said. “I’m tired of jobs that don’t leave anything on us. This one already feels different. She’s dangerous. She’s already comfortable rewriting people. If we go after her, we have to mean it.”

Jordan spoke directly to the phone. “If you can get close enough, we can turn her own tools against the marriage. Make her lose her grip on the one thing she thinks she controls completely.”

“And if she catches on,” Aiko said, “she won’t just expose us. She’ll make a study of us.” Vanessa nodded. “That’s the risk. We’re not pretending otherwise.”

There was a longer silence on the line. Vanessa could hear faint city sounds in the background on Aiko’s end — Tokyo waking up.

Finally, Aiko spoke again. “You want me to go in.”

“Yes,” Jordan said. “High-level contractor. Technical access. Something that gives you legitimate reason to be near her systems. You’re the only one who can do this without triggering every defense she has.”

Vanessa leaned forward slightly. “We’ll come to Paris. We’re not running this from here. But you’ll be the one on the ground first. We need you to get close to her. Close to the work.” Aiko didn’t hesitate long. “Send me everything. Files. Profiles. Any indication of how she’s already using the tech on people. I’ll need full access.”

“You’ll have it within the hour,” Jordan said.

Vanessa stared at the phone for a moment before she spoke again. “This one matters, Aiko. I’m not saying that for effect. I need it to cost something. I need to feel it when it’s over.” Aiko’s answer came after a short pause. “Then we’ll make sure it does.”

Vanessa closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, some of the tightness in her chest had eased.

Jordan spoke next. “We’re not asking you to take chances you’re not comfortable with. This woman is already using memory work on the people around her. If you go in, you’re walking into that directly.”

“I know what she is,” Aiko said. “I’ve worked with both of you long enough to understand the stakes. I’ll go in. I’ll get close. And I’ll get what we need.”

Vanessa reached over and rested her hand on top of Jordan’s where it still sat on her knee. She squeezed once.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Aiko replied. “We haven’t started.”

Jordan’s mouth curved slightly. “Understood.”

There was another stretch of silence, but it felt active. Vanessa could already feel the job taking shape between the three of them.

“We’ll be in Paris soon,” she said. “We want to be close when this starts moving.”
“I assumed you would,” Aiko said, a trace of dry humor in her voice. “It’s Paris. And it’s this kind of job.”

Vanessa didn’t smile, but some of the tension in her shoulders eased.

“Send us your timeline once you’ve gone through the files,” Jordan said. “We’ll move when you’re ready for us.”

“Understood,” Aiko replied. “I’ll start pulling what I can on Foster tonight. I’ll be in touch once I have a viable way in.”

Vanessa nodded. “Good.”

There was a soft rustle on Aiko’s end — the sound of her already moving.

“I’ll call when I have something solid,” she said.

Vanessa nodded. “Good.”

Aiko paused, then added, “Vanessa?”

“Yeah?”

“Whatever this is already doing to you… don’t let it sit untouched. Use it.”

Vanessa was quiet for a second. Then she answered, voice low. “I will.”

“Good.”

The call ended.

Vanessa stared at the dark screen for a long moment. The apartment felt very still. She could hear Jordan breathing beside her and the distant sound of traffic far below.

She turned to look at him.

Jordan met her eyes. After a moment, he gave a small nod.

Vanessa nodded bacK.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3: The Gift

The evening light in Paris was soft and golden, the kind that made the stone buildings along the Seine look warmer than they were. Aiko Nakamura stepped out of the black car that had been sent for her and looked up at the discreet entrance of the private research building. Four days. It had only been four days since she started working inside Amy Foster's company, and already the speed at which trust was being extended felt deliberate.

She adjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder and walked inside.

The security guard at the desk simply nodded when she showed her temporary credentials. No questions. No delays. That alone told her something had shifted.

She took the elevator to the top floor, the one that housed Amy's private research suite rather than the more public offices below. When the doors opened, the space was quiet. Low lighting. The faint scent of something clean and expensive in the air. A single assistant stood near the far end of the corridor and gestured toward a set of double doors without speaking. Aiko walked forward.

The doors opened before she reached them.

Amy Foster stood just inside the room, dressed in a charcoal blouse and tailored trousers, her dark hair pulled back into a sleek knot. She looked every inch the composed executive, but there was something sharper in her eyes tonight.

"Aiko," Amy said, her voice smooth. "Good. You're here."

Aiko stepped into the room. It was a private space that felt more like a high-end training studio than a traditional laboratory. The lighting was warm and indirect. Against the far wall stood a wide, low padded platform — roughly six feet across and eight feet long, covered in a firm but comfortable black material clearly designed for extended physical work. It sat low to the ground, stable and easy to move on.

Off to one side, near the platform, stood a young woman.

She appeared to be in her early twenties. Petite, with dark hair falling just past her shoulders. Attractive in a soft, collegiate way. She wore a simple black dress that ended mid-thigh and flat shoes. Her posture was upright, almost formal.

Amy closed the doors behind them.

"I wanted to give you something," Amy said, walking toward the young woman. "A

welcome of sorts. Something that might help you understand the kind of work we do here."

Aiko remained still, her expression calm and attentive.

Amy stopped beside the young woman and placed a hand lightly on her shoulder.

“This is Monique,” she said. “She’s a graduate student. Very bright. Very compliant.” Amy’s fingers squeezed once, almost affectionately. “She’s also my gift to you.”

Monique turned her head slightly toward Aiko. Her eyes were clear, but there was a strange, glassy quality to them — present, yet not entirely her own.

She reached for the hem of her dress.

“I’m for you to study,” Monique said, her voice quiet but steady.

She pulled the dress up and over her head in one smooth motion, folding it neatly before setting it on a nearby chair. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath. Her body was slender, small breasts with dark nipples already slightly peaked from the cool air, a narrow waist, and smooth skin. She stepped out of her shoes, then bent to remove the simple pair of underwear she had been wearing beneath the dress, adding it to the folded pile.

Now completely naked, Monique stood with her hands at her sides, shoulders back, chin slightly lifted. She made no move to cover herself.

“I’m for you to study,” she repeated, as if the words were both an offering and an instruction she had been given to follow.

Amy watched Aiko’s face with open interest.

“She’s been conditioned for this,” Amy said. “Lightly, for now. Responsive to certain verbal cues and physical prompts. I thought you might like to see how the work actually functions in practice.”

Aiko stepped closer.

Monique didn’t flinch. She simply waited, eyes on Aiko, completely exposed.

Aiko let her gaze move slowly over the young woman’s body — not with crude hunger, but with the focused attention of someone assessing a system. She noted the slight quickening of Monique’s breath, the way her nipples had tightened further, the faint tension in her thighs. All involuntary. All measurable.

She reached out and brushed two fingers lightly along Monique’s collarbone, then down between her breasts. Monique’s breathing changed, but she didn’t move.

Aiko glanced at the wide padded platform.

“On your back,” she said.

Monique turned and climbed onto the platform without hesitation. She lay down on her back, knees bent and feet flat on the cushioned surface, then let her legs fall open naturally. The

platform was wide enough that she could stretch her arms out comfortably to either side without her hands hanging off the edges. Her head rested easily on the padded material. Aiko moved to stand between Monique's open thighs. She placed her hands on the young woman's knees and pushed them wider, studying the way Monique's pussy was already glistening under the low light. She ran two fingers along her slit, gathering wetness, then brought them up to Monique's clit and began slow, deliberate circles.

"Tell me what you feel," Aiko said.

Monique's voice came out slightly breathy. "Warm. Heavy. I want more pressure, but I'm waiting for you to decide."

Aiko increased the pressure and speed of her fingers. Monique's hips lifted slightly off the platform, but she didn't close her legs. After nearly a minute, Aiko stopped completely and pulled her hand away.

Monique made a small, frustrated sound.

Aiko looked at Amy. "She can be denied?"

"Effectively," Amy said. "The conditioning makes prolonged edging very intense for her." Aiko nodded. She stepped out of her shoes, then unbuttoned and removed her trousers and underwear, folding them neatly and placing them on a nearby chair. Now only wearing her blouse, she climbed onto the wide platform and moved forward until she was straddling Monique's face, knees planted comfortably on either side of her head on the broad padded surface.

She lowered herself slowly until her pussy was just above Monique's mouth.

"Use your tongue," Aiko said.

Monique lifted her head slightly and began licking her with long, focused strokes. Aiko settled more of her weight onto Monique's face, rocking slowly against her tongue while reaching back with one hand to continue fingering her. The wide platform gave her stable support beneath her knees, and she could easily control the pressure and angle by shifting her hips.

Aiko came first — quietly, with a sharp exhale and a tightening of her thighs around Monique's head. She stayed there for several long seconds afterward, letting Monique continue licking gently through the aftershocks.

When she finally moved off, she repositioned herself between Monique's legs again. She reached into her bag and withdrew a slim strap-on harness and dildo. She fastened it efficiently over her hips, then climbed back onto the platform.

She hooked her arms under Monique’s knees and pushed her legs up and back, folding her nearly in half. The wide surface gave her plenty of room to kneel comfortably between

Monique’s thighs without her own knees slipping off the edge. She lined up the head of the strap-on and pushed inside in one smooth thrust.

Monique gasped, her hands gripping the sides of the platform.

Aiko fucked her steadily, watching every reaction. She varied the angle and depth, sometimes grinding deep and holding there, sometimes pulling almost all the way out before thrusting back in. With her free hand, she rubbed Monique’s clit in tight circles.

“Tell me what you want,” Aiko said.

Monique’s voice was strained. “I want to come. Please. I’ve been close for so long.” Aiko slowed her thrusts until she was barely moving.

“Not yet,” she said.

She kept Monique on the edge for another long stretch, bringing her close with fingers and the strap-on, then backing off every time Monique’s breathing told her she was about to tip over. The young woman’s thighs were shaking. Her eyes were glassy.

Only after nearly forty minutes did Aiko finally lean down, her mouth close to Monique’s ear.

“Come for me.”

Monique came hard, her whole body arching as much as the folded position allowed. Aiko kept fucking her through it, drawing it out until Monique was whimpering and twitching beneath her.

When it was over, Aiko slowly pulled out and removed the harness. She climbed off the platform and stood beside it, looking down at Monique, who lay boneless and flushed, legs still loosely open.

Aiko reached out and stroked her hair once, almost gently.

Then she turned to Amy.

“I’d like to keep her tonight,” she said.

Amy smiled, clearly pleased.

“She’s yours for as long as you want her,” she replied. “Take her back to your apartment. Continue your studies there.”

Aiko nodded.

She helped Monique sit up, then stand. The young woman was unsteady on her feet, so Aiko kept a steadying hand on her lower back as she guided her toward the door. Monique didn’t

reach for her clothes. She simply walked naked beside Aiko, as if that was the most natural thing in the world.

--**In the hotel suite across the city…**

Vanessa sat on the large bed in their Paris hotel room, the secure tablet balanced on her lap. Jordan stood behind her, one hand resting on her shoulder as they watched the live feed. The feed was coming from a small, discreet camera Aiko had placed inside her bag before going to meet Amy — a precaution she had activated earlier that evening. It gave them a clear, stable view of the platform and everything that had happened on it.

On the screen, Aiko was now helping Monique to her feet. The younger woman looked dazed and thoroughly used. Aiko gathered Monique’s clothes but didn’t hand them to her. Instead, she simply guided the naked young woman toward the door.

Vanessa exhaled slowly.

“She’s taking her back to the apartment,” she said quietly.

Jordan’s thumb moved once against her shoulder.

“She is.”

They watched in silence as Aiko led Monique out of the room.

Vanessa shifted on the bed.

Jordan’s hand slid down from her shoulder to rest lightly against her side.

Neither of them could look away from the screen.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4: The Manual

The apartment was quiet when they stepped inside.

The lights were low, just as Aiko had left them. The city glowed faintly beyond the large windows, but the room itself felt enclosed and private. Aiko set her bag on the small dining table and turned to watch as Monique closed the door behind them.

Without a word, Monique began to undress.

She slipped off her shoes first, placing them neatly by the door. Then she reached for the hem of her simple black dress and drew it upward in one slow, fluid motion. The fabric whispered against her skin as it rose, revealing the smooth lines of her stomach, the gentle curve of her ribs, and finally the soft weight of her small breasts. She folded the dress carefully and set it on the nearest chair. Her underwear followed, sliding down her legs until she stepped out of them. She added them to the folded pile and then stood upright again, completely bare. Her skin looked pale in the low light. Her nipples had already tightened from the cooler air inside the apartment. She stood with her hands resting loosely at her sides, shoulders relaxed, eyes on Aiko. She didn't try to cover herself. She simply waited.

Aiko studied her for a long moment before moving.

She opened her bag and pulled out the slim black folder Amy had given her before they left the lab. It was an instruction manual — a concise but thorough guide Amy had prepared for anyone she permitted to use Monique. Inside were lists of verbal triggers, descriptions of physical responses, known limitations of the conditioning, and notes on how certain commands interacted with one another. Amy had been clinical in her writing, almost detached, as if she were documenting a piece of equipment rather than a person.

Aiko opened the folder on the table and began to read.

Monique remained standing where she was, naked and silent, while Aiko turned the pages. The only sounds in the apartment were the faint hum of the climate control and the occasional soft rustle of paper.

After several minutes, Aiko closed the folder and set it down. She looked at Monique again. "Come here."

Monique walked forward without hesitation and stopped directly in front of her. The air between them felt charged and still.

Aiko reached out and ran the backs of her fingers slowly down the center of Monique's chest, between her breasts, then lower, until her hand rested just

above the neat strip of dark hair

between her legs. She could feel the warmth of Monique’s skin and the faint, quick rhythm of her breathing.

“Tell me your name,” Aiko said.

“Monique.”

Aiko’s fingers drifted lower, brushing lightly over her. Monique’s breath caught, but she didn’t move.

“When I say the word *still*,” Aiko said quietly, “you will freeze exactly where you are. You won’t move again until I tell you to. Do you understand?”

Monique’s voice was soft. “Yes.”

Aiko tested it immediately.

“Still.”

Monique’s body locked in place. Even her breathing seemed to pause for a moment before settling into something shallow and controlled. Her eyes remained open, fixed on Aiko, but there was a strange, glassy stillness to them now. She looked like a statue someone had carefully posed.

Aiko circled her slowly, taking in every detail. The way Monique’s nipples had tightened further. The slight tension in her stomach. The way her thighs had parted just a fraction more when the command took hold. She reached out and ran her fingertips along Monique’s hip, then up the curve of her waist. Monique didn’t react. She simply remained frozen in place. Aiko stopped in front of her again.

“Resume.”

Monique exhaled softly and blinked, her body relaxing back into its natural posture. Aiko made a quiet sound of satisfaction and reached for the manual again. She spent the next twenty minutes methodically testing small commands from the pages — making Monique spread her legs wider, making her cup her own breasts, making her describe out loud what she was feeling while Aiko touched her. Each time, Monique obeyed instantly and answered with soft, honest replies.

Eventually, Aiko set the manual aside on the nightstand and looked at Monique, who was standing in the middle of the living room with her legs parted and her hands resting on her own thighs.

“On the bed,” Aiko said. “On your back. Knees bent. Legs open.”

Monique climbed onto the large bed without hesitation. She lay down in the center of the dark sheets, knees drawn up and thighs spread wide. The position

left her completely

exposed. The soft lighting from the bedside lamp cast gentle shadows across her body, highlighting the curve of her breasts and the smooth plane of her stomach.

Aiko undressed slowly, taking her time. She folded each piece of clothing and placed it on the chair before climbing onto the bed. She moved between Monique's open legs and settled there, sitting back on her heels for a moment to simply look at her.

Monique's pussy was already glistening. Her inner thighs were slightly damp. Her chest rose and fell with steady, measured breaths.

Aiko ran her hands up the insides of Monique's thighs, spreading her even wider. The skin there was warm and smooth beneath her palms. She dragged her thumbs along the creases where Monique's legs met her body, then brought them inward, parting her gently with her fingers.

"You're very wet," Aiko observed, her voice low.

"Yes," Monique answered.

Aiko glanced up at her face. "Why?"

Monique's voice was quiet but clear. "Because I've been waiting for you to touch me. And because the conditioning makes it stronger when I know I'm going to be used."

Aiko hummed softly in acknowledgment. She dragged two fingers slowly along Monique's slit, gathering the wetness, then brought them up to circle her clit with deliberate pressure. Monique's hips twitched, but she didn't close her legs.

Aiko kept the same steady rhythm for a long time, watching every small reaction. The way Monique's stomach tightened. The way her nipples had darkened and peaked. The way her breathing grew slightly uneven when Aiko increased the pressure. She would bring her close, then ease off, then bring her close again, studying how the conditioning responded to denial. After several long minutes, she leaned down and replaced her fingers with her mouth. The first slow drag of her tongue made Monique exhale sharply. Aiko took her time, licking broad and thorough between her legs, tasting her, exploring every fold. She alternated between long, flat strokes and focused attention on her clit, occasionally pulling back to blow cool air across the sensitive flesh just to watch Monique react.

She lifted her head after a while, her lips wet.

"Tell me what it feels like when I do that," she said.

Monique's voice was slightly breathless. "It feels like everything is sharper. Like I can feel your tongue in places I normally wouldn't. The conditioning… it makes me more sensitive when someone is paying attention to me like this."

Aiko smiled faintly and lowered her head again.

She ate her slowly, deliberately, for a long time. She would bring Monique right to the edge with her tongue and fingers, then stop completely, sometimes holding her thighs apart and simply watching her tremble. Each time she denied her, Monique would make a small, desperate sound, but she never tried to close her legs or pull away.

Eventually, Aiko reached for the manual again. She flipped it open with one hand while the fingers of her other hand continued to stroke Monique lazily.

“There’s a phrase here,” she murmured. “‘Open for me.’ It’s supposed to heighten physical responsiveness and make you more… receptive.”

She looked down at Monique.

“Open for me.”

Monique gasped. Her entire body seemed to react at once. Her thighs trembled harder, and Aiko could see her pussy visibly clench and grow even wetter. A deeper flush spread across her chest and up her throat. Her breathing changed, becoming quicker and more shallow. Aiko slid two fingers inside her without resistance. She was soaking wet now, hot and slick around Aiko’s fingers. She curled them slowly, pressing against the spot that made Monique’s hips jerk.

“Still,” Aiko said.

Monique froze instantly, even as Aiko continued to fuck her slowly with her fingers. Her expression remained open and obedient, but her body stayed perfectly locked in place. Aiko could feel the way her inner walls fluttered and clenched around her fingers even though Monique wasn’t moving.

She kept her there like that for a long minute, watching her face, feeling the way her body responded despite the command to remain still.

“Resume,” she said eventually.

Monique exhaled shakily, her hips giving a small, involuntary roll.

Aiko continued like that for what felt like hours — testing, observing, pushing, denying. She made Monique come twice in quick succession, then immediately denied her the third time, holding her right on the edge until she was trembling and begging in a soft, broken voice. She used the triggers from the manual, watching how they layered on top of one another, how they affected Monique’s responses both physically and mentally.

Eventually, she climbed over Monique and straddled her hips. She had already put the strapon on earlier, and now she reached down to guide the head of it against Monique’s entrance. She sank down onto it slowly, taking her time, letting Monique feel every inch as she filled her.

Monique’s mouth fell open on a soft moan.

Aiko began to move, rolling her hips in a slow, deliberate rhythm. She braced one hand on Monique’s chest, feeling the rapid beat of her heart beneath her palm. With her other hand, she reached back and rubbed Monique’s clit in time with her thrusts.

“Tell me what it feels like,” Aiko said, her voice slightly rough.

Monique’s eyes were glassy. “It feels like I’m being taken apart. Like I can’t keep anything to myself. I want to come so badly, but I’m waiting for you.”

Aiko leaned forward, bracing her hands on either side of Monique’s head as she fucked her deeper. The bed shifted beneath them with every movement. She could feel the heat of Monique’s body, the way her inner walls gripped the strap-on, the way her breath came in short, desperate bursts against Aiko’s neck.

She kept her there for a long time — riding her, grinding down, changing the angle until Monique was shaking beneath her. Every time Monique got close, Aiko would slow down or stop completely, sometimes reaching back to hold her still with a firm hand on her hip. Only when Monique was whimpering and nearly incoherent did Aiko finally lean down, her lips brushing her ear.

“Come for me,” she murmured. “Now.”

Monique came hard, her whole body arching up off the bed. Aiko kept moving through it, drawing it out, fucking her steadily until the younger woman was trembling and gasping beneath her. Only then did Aiko allow herself to follow, grinding down hard as her own orgasm rolled through her in a slow, deep wave.

She stayed on top of Monique for a long time afterward, both of them breathing hard, skin damp with sweat. She could feel Monique’s heart hammering against her own chest. Eventually, she pulled out and removed the strap-on, setting it aside on the nightstand. She lay down beside Monique and turned onto her side to look at her.

Monique’s eyes were half-lidded, her body loose and flushed. She looked thoroughly used. Aiko reached out and ran her fingers slowly down the center of her stomach, then lower, between her legs. She was still wet, still sensitive. Monique made a small sound when Aiko’s fingers brushed over her clit.

“We’re not done,” Aiko said quietly.

Monique turned her head to look at her. Her voice was soft and obedient.

“I know.”

Aiko smiled faintly.

She rolled Monique onto her stomach and moved over her again, settling between her legs. The night was still young, and she had barely begun to explore everything the manual — and

Monique — had to offer.

She intended to take her time.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Proof of Concept

Aiko had been testing smaller commands and responses for a while, watching how Monique reacted to each one. The younger woman was obedient and responsive, but there was still something missing — something deeper that Amy's existing conditioning hadn't touched. She wanted to go further.

Aiko reached for the headset and tablet she had brought with her. She placed the headset carefully on Monique's head, adjusting the bands until they sat securely. Monique remained still, watching her with quiet, compliant eyes.

Aiko picked up the tablet and activated the connection. The screen lit up with a visual map of Monique's neural activity — clusters of light connected by pulsing lines. She could see the existing pathways Amy had already reinforced, the markers for compliance and obedience. She could also see the gaps where deeper personal history should have been.

She began to work.

Using the tablet, Aiko constructed a new set of memories. She created a timeline that started when Monique was nineteen: secret meetings in quiet apartments, long nights spent learning Aiko's body, the deep satisfaction Monique felt every time she was allowed to give pleasure without expecting anything in return. She added emotional weight — the feeling of worship, the instinctive knowledge that her purpose was to serve Aiko, the hundreds of small, specific memories of touch and taste and sound.

She worked carefully, checking the live feedback from the headset as she made each change. She could see the new memories integrating, the emotional tags strengthening, the behavioral patterns shifting to prioritize Aiko's pleasure above all else.

When she was satisfied with the foundation, she added one final layer: an intense, almost instinctive drive to give Aiko as many orgasms as possible, using whatever methods she could think of, for as long as Aiko allowed it.

Aiko reviewed the changes one last time, then confirmed them on the tablet.

The headset emitted a soft pulse of light.

Monique's entire demeanor changed in an instant.

Her posture shifted. Her eyes, which had been soft and distant, sharpened with sudden heat and recognition. She looked at Aiko like someone seeing a lover they had missed for years. The change was immediate and total. There was no confusion, no hesitation — just a sudden, aggressive flood of devotion and need.

Monique moved forward without being told, climbing into Aiko’s lap and kissing her deeply, hungrily, like she had been waiting far too long for this. Her hands were confident and familiar as they slid over Aiko’s body, touching her like she already knew exactly what she liked.

“I’ve missed you,” Monique murmured against her mouth. “God, I’ve missed you so much.” Aiko let herself be kissed for a moment, testing the depth of the shift. Monique’s hands were already moving lower, one sliding between Aiko’s legs with clear intent. There was nothing tentative about it. This was someone who had spent years learning how to pull pleasure from Aiko’s body and was desperate to do it again.

Aiko pulled back just enough to speak.

“On your knees.”

Monique slid off her lap immediately and settled on her knees between Aiko’s spread thighs without hesitation. She looked up at Aiko with open worship, then leaned in and dragged her tongue slowly along Aiko’s pussy, moaning softly at the taste like it was something she had been craving.

She worked with focused, almost desperate dedication.

Her tongue moved in long, thorough strokes before focusing on Aiko’s clit with precise, steady pressure. One hand gripped Aiko’s thigh while the other slid two fingers inside her, curling them in a way that made Aiko’s hips jerk. Every movement felt practiced, like muscle memory from hundreds of nights spent exactly like this.

Aiko came quickly the first time, her hand sliding into Monique’s hair as her thighs tightened around her head. Monique didn’t stop. She kept licking through the orgasm, gentling her tongue but refusing to pull away until Aiko’s breathing began to steady again.

When Aiko finally eased her back, Monique looked up at her with bright, hungry eyes. “Again,” she whispered. “Please. I want to feel you come again. I want to make you come as many times as you’ll let me.”

Aiko exhaled slowly, her body still humming from the orgasm.

“I’ll keep testing this,” she thought.

She nodded once.

Monique lowered her head again without hesitation.

This time she was slower, more deliberate. She used her tongue and fingers together, reading every twitch and sound Aiko made. She seemed to know exactly when to speed up and when to ease off, when to suck gently and when to press harder. She brought Aiko to the edge twice before finally pushing her over,

and even then she didn’t stop right away — she kept licking softly through the aftershocks until Aiko gently pushed her head away.

Aiko was breathing harder now. Her skin felt hot. She looked down at Monique, who was still kneeling between her legs, lips wet and eyes dark with satisfaction and hunger. “On your back,” Aiko said.

Monique moved immediately, lying back on the bed and spreading her legs without being asked. But Aiko didn’t move between them. Instead, she climbed over Monique and

straddled her face, lowering herself slowly until Monique’s mouth was pressed against her again.

Monique’s hands came up to grip Aiko’s hips immediately. She licked with renewed focus, her tongue working deep and thorough while Aiko rocked slowly against her mouth. The angle was different, more intense, and Aiko could feel every stroke clearly. She reached back with one hand and slid two fingers inside herself alongside Monique’s tongue, fucking herself slowly while Monique sucked on her clit.

She came again like that — slower and deeper than before, her thighs trembling as Monique moaned beneath her and refused to stop until Aiko finally lifted herself off.

Monique was breathing hard, her face flushed and wet. She looked up at Aiko like she was starving for more.

Aiko studied her for a moment, then reached for the strap-on she had left on the nightstand earlier. She fastened it with steady hands, then moved between Monique’s legs and pushed inside her in one smooth thrust.

Monique cried out, her back arching beautifully.

Aiko fucked her steadily, watching her face. Every time she thrust deep, Monique’s expression shifted into something like gratitude, like this was exactly what she had been waiting for. She reached up and pulled Aiko down into a kiss, moaning into her mouth with every stroke, her legs wrapping around Aiko’s waist to pull her deeper.

Aiko came again while she was inside her — grinding down against the base of the strap-on as she fucked Monique, the combination of pressure and the sound of Monique’s desperate, worshipful moans pushing her over the edge.

She pulled out after a while and removed the harness, setting it aside. Then she lay back against the pillows and looked at Monique.

“Again,” she said.

Monique didn’t hesitate.

She moved down Aiko's body and settled between her legs once more, licking her with the same focused devotion. This time she used her fingers as well, sliding them inside Aiko while she sucked on her clit, curling them with practiced skill. She brought Aiko to the edge and held her there for a long time before finally letting her come, and even then she kept going gently until Aiko was trembling and oversensitive.

Aiko was breathing hard when it was over. Her body felt heavy and warm, thoroughly used in the best way. She looked down at Monique, who was still lying between her legs, pressing soft, reverent kisses to the inside of her thigh like she was reluctant to stop. Aiko reached down and stroked her hair.

"I'll keep testing this," she thought again.

She let Monique continue for a while longer, then finally guided her up and pulled her into a kiss. When she pulled back, she looked at the younger woman and saw nothing but open, unquestioning devotion.

Aiko reached for the headset again.

Monique didn't resist when she placed it back on her head. She simply lay there, watching Aiko with soft, adoring eyes.

Aiko picked up the tablet and began the careful process of reversing the changes she had made.

It took time. She had to dismantle the false memories piece by piece, untangling the emotional connections and behavioral scripts she had layered in. She worked slowly, checking the live feedback from the headset to make sure nothing was left behind that could cause problems.

When she was finished, she removed the headset and set it aside.

Monique blinked slowly, her expression shifting. The intense, worshipful focus faded from her eyes, replaced by the quieter, more distant compliance from earlier in the night. She looked at Aiko without any recognition of what had just passed between them. Aiko studied her for a long moment, then spoke.

"How do you feel?"

Monique's voice was soft and neutral again. "Tired. A little sore."

Aiko nodded.

She reached out and brushed a strand of hair from Monique's face, the gesture almost gentle. "You did well," she said quietly.

Monique didn't react to the praise the way she had earlier. She simply closed her eyes and let herself rest against the pillows.

Aiko sat back and looked at the headset and tablet resting on the nightstand.

She had done it.

She had taken the technology, used it with precision, created something complex and convincing, tested it thoroughly through hours of sex, and then reversed it cleanly. The changes had held completely. The behavioral shifts had been immediate and total. And she had been able to undo everything without leaving damage behind.

Aiko reached over and picked up the tablet again, scrolling through the logs of what she had done.

She was already thinking about what else might be possible.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6: First Cuts

The video call connected just after ten in the morning.

Aiko was still in the same apartment she had used the night before. She had showered and changed clothes, but the headset and tablet were still sitting on the table where she had left them. She looked tired but focused as her face appeared on Vanessa and Jordan's screen. Vanessa and Jordan were in their hotel suite across the city. The curtains were drawn against the morning light, and both of them looked like they hadn't slept much. Jordan was sitting in one of the armchairs with a cup of coffee. Vanessa was on the edge of the bed, leaning forward slightly with her elbows on her knees.

Aiko didn't waste time with pleasantries.

"I did it," she said. "I used the full system on Monique last night. I rewrote her memories completely — made her believe we had been lovers since she was nineteen. I gave her hundreds of detailed memories and layered in heavy behavioral conditioning. She shifted instantly. She was aggressive about it. She spent hours giving me orgasms in every way she could think of. When I tested her, the changes held perfectly."

She paused for a moment, then added, "I reversed everything at the end of the night. She's back to normal. No damage."

Vanessa and Jordan both spoke at the same time.

"We know."

Aiko blinked, clearly caught off guard.

Vanessa rubbed the back of her neck and gave a small, slightly awkward laugh.

"We were up all night," she said. "Uh… watching."

Jordan took a sip of his coffee, his expression calm but tired.

"You left your purse camera pointed at the bed," he said. "We saw everything. The headset. The tablet. The way you worked. And what happened after."

Aiko was quiet for a second. Then she nodded slowly, accepting it.

"I should have assumed you would be monitoring," she said. There was no defensiveness in her tone, just acknowledgment.

Vanessa leaned back a little, studying Aiko through the screen.

"You were… thorough," she said. "We could see how fast you picked it up. How precise you were with the changes. And how clean the reversal was." She paused. "We're impressed. And a little stunned, if I'm being honest."

Jordan set his coffee down.

“You showed us you can use this,” he said. “Not just follow instructions. Actually use it. That changes things.”

Aiko nodded again. She looked down for a moment, then back at the camera.

“I want to keep going,” she said. “I want to move on Paul next. But I need the device. The one I used last night was on loan from Amy. If I’m going to work on her husband without her knowing, I need my own.”

Vanessa and Jordan exchanged a quick look.

Vanessa spoke first.

“There’s a café,” she said. “Old school. It’s in an underground room that used to be part of Roman ruins. Paul goes there a few times a week. It’s quiet, and there’s almost no surveillance — not even traffic cameras can see the entrance clearly. If you want to approach him without leaving a trail, that’s probably your best shot.”

Aiko absorbed the information without comment.

“I’ll handle the device,” she said. “I’ll get my own version.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow slightly but didn’t push for details.

“Just be careful,” he said. “Amy’s not careless. If she notices something missing, she’ll start looking.”

“I know,” Aiko replied. “I’ll be careful.”

Vanessa studied her for another moment.

“Keep us updated,” she said. “We’ll be watching.”

Aiko gave a small nod.

“I know,” she said.

The call ended.

Aiko sat in the quiet apartment for a few minutes after the screen went dark. Then she stood up, gathered the headset and tablet, and put them into her bag along with the slim black folder.

She had work to do.

--Aiko spent the rest of the day moving carefully.

She returned to Amy’s building under the pretense of finishing some technical notes from the night before. Security let her through without issue — her access was still active. She made her way up to the private research floor, moving with purpose but not rushing.

The prototype was stored in a locked cabinet in one of the smaller labs. Aiko had seen Amy use the keycode once before. She waited until the floor was quiet, then entered the code and opened the cabinet.

Inside was a second headset, slightly different from the one she had used the night before — newer, with a few additional connection ports. Next to it was a tablet that looked almost identical to the one she already had, but with a different casing. Aiko took both. She didn't take anything else. She closed the cabinet, wiped the keycode panel, and left the building the same way she had entered.

By late afternoon she was back in her own apartment, the stolen equipment laid out on her table. She spent several hours examining both pieces, comparing them to the manual Amy had given her and to the versions she had already used. She made small modifications to the tablet's interface, adjusting the way memory clusters were displayed and adding a few custom scripts she had been thinking about since the night before.

By the time the sun went down, she had her own working version of the system — one that responded to her commands more fluidly than the original.

She tested it briefly on herself first, running a simple focus-enhancement script just to confirm the connection was stable. Then she packed everything into a nondescript bag and left the apartment.

--The café was exactly as Vanessa had described.

It was located down a narrow set of stone steps that led into what had once been part of an old Roman structure. The entrance was easy to miss if you didn't know it was there. Inside, the space was low-ceilinged and dimly lit, with thick stone walls that muffled sound from the street above. There were only about a dozen tables, most of them occupied by people who looked like they came here to be left alone.

Aiko chose a table near the back, where she could see the entrance but wasn't immediately visible from it. She ordered a coffee and waited.

Paul arrived just after eight.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with the kind of physique that suggested he spent a lot of time training. His dark hair was neatly cut, and he moved with the easy confidence of

someone who was used to being looked at. He was alone. He took a table on the far side of the room, ordered without looking at the menu, and pulled out a book.

Aiko watched him for nearly twenty minutes before she moved.

She picked up her bag and walked over to his table.

“Mind if I sit?” she asked.

Paul looked up. His expression was polite but guarded.

“I’m not really looking for company,” he said.

Aiko gave him a small, understanding smile.

“I’m not either,” she said. “But I’ve been coming here for a while, and I’ve noticed you a few times. You always sit in the same spot. I figured there had to be a reason.”

Paul studied her for a moment, then gave a slight nod and gestured to the chair across from him.

Aiko sat down and set her bag on the floor beside her chair. She didn’t reach for it yet. They talked for a while. Small things at first — the café, the city, how quiet it was down here compared to the streets above. Paul was reserved but not unfriendly. He answered her questions without volunteering much about himself.

Aiko was patient.

After about half an hour, she leaned forward slightly and lowered her voice.

“I know who your wife is,” she said.

Paul’s expression didn’t change much, but something in his posture shifted.

“I work with her,” Aiko continued. “Or I did, briefly. I’ve seen some of the things she’s working on. Including what she’s done to you.”

Paul’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t look away.

“I don’t know what you think you know,” he said quietly.

“I know enough,” Aiko replied. “I know she’s been using memory work on you. I know it’s been going on for a while. And I know you haven’t been able to do much about it.” Paul was quiet for a long moment.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked.

Aiko reached down and picked up her bag. She set it on the table between them but didn’t open it yet.

“Because I can help,” she said. “And because I don’t think you should have to live like this.” Paul looked at the bag, then back at her.

“What’s in there?”

Aiko opened the bag just enough for him to see the edge of the headset and the tablet. “Something that can undo what she’s done,” she said. “Or at least start to. If you’ll let me try.”

Paul stared at the bag for several seconds. His expression was unreadable.

Finally, he spoke.

“Not here,” he said. “There’s a hotel a few blocks from here. I have a room there sometimes. We can go there.”

Aiko nodded.

They left the café separately and met again two streets over. Paul led her to a small, discreet hotel and used a keycard to let them into a room on the third floor. It was clean and impersonal — the kind of place people used when they didn’t want to be remembered. Once they were inside, Paul closed the door and locked it.

He turned to face her.

“Show me,” he said.

Aiko set her bag on the small desk and took out the headset and tablet. She explained, briefly and clearly, how the system worked. She told him what she intended to do — start with small, reversible adjustments to test how deeply Amy’s conditioning had taken hold, then begin undoing the more damaging parts.

Paul listened without interrupting.

When she was finished, he sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Do it,” he said.

Aiko placed the headset on him and activated the tablet. She worked slowly at first, mapping what was already there. She could see the layers of conditioning Amy had built — obedience, attachment, carefully placed blind spots. Some of it was deep. Some of it was surprisingly fragile.

She began with small changes.

She adjusted a behavioral trigger that made Paul feel compelled to return home at specific times, even when he had no conscious reason to. She watched the live feedback as the change

took hold. Paul’s breathing shifted slightly, but he didn’t seem to notice anything consciously. Aiko made a few more minor adjustments — loosening the emotional weight attached to certain memories of Amy, reducing the automatic compliance response when Amy’s name was mentioned.

She worked for nearly an hour, making small, careful changes and testing each one before moving on to the next.

When she finally removed the headset, Paul sat quietly for a long time.

“How do you feel?” Aiko asked.

Paul was quiet for another moment.

“Different,” he said eventually. “Not dramatically. But… lighter, in some places. Like there are thoughts I can follow now that I couldn’t before.”

Aiko nodded.

“That’s the beginning,” she said. “We can go further. But I want to be careful. If we move too fast, she might notice something’s off.”

Paul looked at her.

“You’re going to keep doing this,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” Aiko replied.

Paul nodded slowly.

“Good.”

He stood up and walked to the window, looking out at the street below even though the curtains were drawn.

“I don’t know how much of what I feel for her is real anymore,” he said quietly. “I don’t know how much of *me* is real anymore.”

Aiko didn’t answer right away.

“I can help you find out,” she said. “But it’s going to take time. And it’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

Paul turned to look at her.

“I know,” he said.

Aiko packed the headset and tablet back into her bag.

“I’ll contact you again soon,” she said. “Through secure channels. Don’t tell Amy anything. Don’t change your routine too obviously.”

Paul gave a short nod.

Aiko left the hotel room and stepped out into the cool night air. She walked several blocks before she pulled out her phone and sent a short, encrypted message to Vanessa and Jordan. *First adjustments made. He noticed the difference. More to come.*

She put the phone away and kept walking.

Behind her, in their hotel suite, Vanessa and Jordan sat in front of their own screen, watching the feed Aiko had left active. They had seen the entire interaction in the café and the hotel room.

Vanessa leaned back in her chair and let out a slow breath.

“She’s moving fast,” she said.

Jordan nodded.

“Faster than we expected,” he replied.

Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

“Do you think she’s still in control of this?” she asked.

Jordan didn’t answer right away.

“I think she’s trying to be,” he said eventually.

Vanessa looked at the screen again, where Aiko was now walking alone through the streets of Paris.

“I hope that’s enough,” she said.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7: Pressure

Aiko arrived at the underground café a few minutes early.

The stone steps leading down into the old Roman-era room were slick from the rain, and the air grew cooler as she descended. The space was dim and quiet, the thick walls muffling the sound of the city above. Only a handful of tables were occupied. Aiko chose one near the back, ordered a coffee, and waited.

Paul arrived ten minutes later.

He looked different than he had even a few days ago. There was a looseness to his movements now, a quiet energy that hadn't been there before. He spotted Aiko, gave her a small nod, and made his way over. When he sat down across from her, there was the faintest hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"You're on time," Aiko said.

Paul shrugged, but the gesture carried more ease than it used to.

"I didn't have anywhere else to be."

Aiko studied him for a moment. The change was subtle, but it was there. He wasn't rushing to check his phone. He wasn't glancing at the time. For someone who had been under heavy conditioning, even small acts of autonomy seemed to carry a kind of quiet thrill. "How have you been?" she asked.

Paul leaned back in his chair. He looked around the café for a second before answering, like he was still getting used to the freedom of deciding how long he could stay somewhere. "Better," he said. "I stayed out late last night. Didn't tell her where I was. Didn't even feel the usual… pressure to explain myself." He let out a short, almost disbelieving laugh. "I just went home when I felt like it. She was waiting up, obviously. Asked where I'd been. I told her I lost track of time. And that was it. She didn't push."

Aiko nodded, listening carefully.

Paul continued, his voice lower now.

"She's been different the last few days. More questions. More checking in. This morning she asked me what I was thinking about while I was drinking my coffee. Like she was trying to catch me in something." He shook his head. "It's like she can feel something shifting but she doesn't know what it is yet."

Aiko kept her expression neutral, but she filed the information away.

Paul took a sip of his coffee, then glanced at her again.

“I keep expecting to feel guilty,” he admitted. “Like I’m doing something wrong by not rushing home. But it’s not there anymore. Or at least… it’s quieter.”

Aiko let the silence sit for a moment before she spoke.

“I can loosen more of it,” she said. “If you’re ready.”

Paul didn’t hesitate.

“I’m ready.”

Aiko reached into her bag and pulled out the headset and tablet. She placed the headset on Paul carefully, adjusting it until the connection was stable. Then she opened the tablet and began working.

She kept the adjustments measured, but she went deeper than she had in their previous sessions. She loosened another layer of automatic compliance — the reflexive need to answer Amy’s questions quickly and completely. She reduced the emotional weight attached to the idea of disappointing her. She also planted a quiet but firm suggestion: Paul would not tell Amy about these meetings. He would not mention Aiko. He would not speak about the device or the changes he was experiencing. The thought of doing so would feel wrong, almost unthinkable.

Aiko worked in silence for nearly forty minutes, occasionally glancing up at Paul’s face to monitor his reactions. When she was finished, she removed the headset and packed everything away again.

Paul sat quietly for a long moment after the headset came off.

Then he exhaled slowly.

“It’s like… the air’s thinner,” he said. “In a good way. Like I can actually think without something pressing on the back of my mind.”

Aiko nodded.

“Give it a few hours. See how it feels when you’re around her tonight.”

Paul gave a short laugh, but there was no humor in it.

“She’s going to hate this,” he said. “Whatever this is. She’s already starting to look at me differently. Like she’s trying to figure out what’s changed.”

Aiko didn’t disagree.

“Be careful,” she said. “Don’t push back too obviously. Let her think you’re just distracted or tired. The more natural it feels, the longer we can keep this going.”

Paul nodded. He finished the rest of his coffee, then stood up.

“Same time tomorrow?” he asked.

“Same time,” Aiko confirmed.

Paul left without looking back.

Aiko stayed at the table for a while longer, watching the door he had walked through. Then she picked up her bag and headed out into the rain.

--Vanessa and Jordan were waiting when Aiko's encrypted call came through.

They were in the hotel suite, the tablet open between them on the small table. The feed from Aiko's bag camera had been running the entire time she was with Paul, and both of them had watched the meeting in near silence.

When Aiko's face appeared on the screen, Vanessa spoke first.

"We saw," she said.

Aiko nodded, unsurprised.

"I figured you would be watching."

Jordan leaned forward slightly.

"How deep did you go with him this time?"

"Deeper than before," Aiko said. "I loosened another layer of compliance and reduced the emotional weight around disappointing her. I also made sure he won't tell her about our sessions. He won't even be able to bring himself to consider it."

Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

"He seemed… lighter," she said. "When he was talking about staying out late. There was this… energy to it. Like he was getting a kick out of it."

"He is," Aiko replied. "The conditioning is breaking down faster than I expected. Every time I remove another piece, he feels it. And he's starting to enjoy the freedom."

Jordan exchanged a look with Vanessa.

"That could be dangerous," he said. "If he starts acting too differently too quickly, Amy's going to notice."

"She already is," Aiko said. "Paul told me she's been asking more questions. Getting more controlling. She's trying to figure out what's changed without knowing what she's looking for."

Vanessa leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temple.

"How long do you think we have before she starts putting real pressure on him?"

"Not long," Aiko admitted. "A few more days of this and she's going to start demanding answers. Or she'll start watching him even more closely than she already is."

Jordan was quiet for a few seconds.

“We need to decide how far we’re willing to push this,” he said. “If we keep going at this pace, we’re going to force her hand. And once that happens, we lose the advantage of working quietly.”

Vanessa looked at the screen.

“Aiko,” she said. “How much more can you do without making it obvious?”

Aiko considered the question.

“A lot,” she said. “But it depends on how careful we want to be. I can keep making small adjustments that add up over time. Or I can go deeper and risk Amy noticing faster.” Vanessa and Jordan were both quiet.

Finally, Vanessa spoke.

“Keep going,” she said. “But be smart about it. We’re not trying to break him in one go. We’re trying to make the marriage fall apart on its own. The slower it happens, the more natural it will look.”

Aiko nodded.

“I’ll be careful.”

The call ended a few minutes later.

Vanessa sat back and stared at the dark screen for a long moment.

Jordan watched her.

“You’re worried,” he said.

Vanessa didn’t deny it.

“She’s good at this,” she said quietly. “Aiko. Too good, maybe. And Paul’s responding faster than any of us thought he would. If Amy starts closing in…”

She didn’t finish the sentence.

Jordan reached over and rested his hand on top of hers.

“We’ll deal with it when it happens,” he said. “For now, we keep watching. And we keep directing.”

Vanessa nodded, but the tension in her shoulders didn’t ease.

Outside, the rain continued to fall over Paris.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8: Lesson

Aiko was in one of the smaller private offices on the top floor of Amy's building when the door opened without a knock.

It was late — well past ten at night — and most of the floor had already emptied out. Aiko had stayed behind under the pretense of finishing some technical notes. She looked up from the tablet in front of her as Amy stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Amy looked exhausted.

Her usually perfect posture was slightly slumped, and there were faint shadows under her eyes that makeup couldn't quite hide. She stood there for a moment without speaking, one hand still resting on the door handle like she wasn't entirely sure why she had come. Aiko set the tablet down.

"Amy," she said quietly. "Are you all right?"

Amy let out a short, shaky breath and walked further into the room. She didn't sit. She just stood near the edge of the desk, staring at nothing in particular.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said. Her voice was low and rough. "You're… the only person here I feel like I can say this to without it becoming office gossip by morning." Aiko kept her expression open and calm.

"Of course. What happened?"

Amy was quiet for several seconds. Then she said it.

"Paul and I are getting a divorce."

The words hung in the air between them.

Aiko didn't react with surprise. She simply nodded once, giving Amy space to continue. Amy pressed her lips together hard before she spoke again.

"It happened last night. We had been fighting for weeks, but last night it finally… broke. He was being evasive again. Staying out late. Not answering messages. I confronted him when he got home and things escalated quickly. I told him I couldn't keep doing this." She let out a tired breath. "So I asked for a divorce."

Amy shook her head slowly, like she still couldn't quite believe she was saying the words out loud.

"I wanted to thank you," she said. "For sharing Monique with me when you did. She was… helpful. For a while. But after your session with her, something shifted. She became distant. Like whatever you two did together pulled her further away from me instead of closer." Amy paused. "I ended up letting her go a few days later. I told her the specialized program had run its course and that it was time for her to move on. She didn't argue. She just packed her things and

left. I haven’t heard from her since.”

Aiko nodded slowly.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out the way you hoped,” she said. “Monique was very responsive during our time together. I thought the work we did would help her integrate better, not pull away.”

Amy gave a tired shrug.

“Maybe it was already too late by then. Maybe I was already losing control of too many things.” She rubbed her forehead with one hand. “I don’t even know anymore.”

The room was quiet for a little while.

Eventually, Aiko spoke.

“I’ve been working on something,” she said. “A kind of relaxation routine. It’s not just breathing exercises or meditation. It uses a light neural feedback system to help quiet an overactive mind. I’ve been testing it on myself and a few volunteers. It seems to help with stress, rumination, and that constant feeling of needing to control every variable.” Amy looked at her with tired interest.

“You think it could help me?”

“I think it might,” Aiko said gently. “You’ve been carrying a lot. The divorce. The uncertainty with Paul. Whatever’s been happening with your work. It might be good to give your mind a break from all of it, even if it’s just for a little while.”

Amy hesitated for only a moment before nodding.

“All right,” she said. “Show me.”

Aiko stood up and retrieved the headset and tablet from her bag. She explained the process in simple, professional terms — how the headset would help guide Amy into a calmer state while they worked through whatever was causing the mental tension. Amy listened without interrupting.

When Aiko finished explaining, Amy sat down on the small couch against the wall and let Aiko place the headset on her.

The connection took a few moments to stabilize. Once it did, Aiko began working on the tablet.

She moved carefully.

First, she located the clusters tied to Amy’s need to understand and control what was happening with Paul. She began reducing the emotional urgency attached to those thoughts — not erasing her awareness of the divorce, but softening the compulsive need to keep digging and analyzing.

Next, she layered in genuine relaxation responses around the idea of the marriage ending. Calm. Acceptance. A sense of relief rather than failure.

Finally, she moved to the memories connected to herself.

She found every trace of Aiko Nakamura having worked in this building. Every conversation. Every meeting. Every moment Amy had spent evaluating or observing her. She removed them one by one, carefully and completely, until there was nothing left that would connect Aiko to this place or this project.

When she was finished, she sat back and reviewed the changes on the tablet.

Then she removed the headset from Amy's head.

Amy blinked slowly, her expression soft and slightly dazed.

"How do you feel?" Aiko asked.

Amy took a slow breath.

"Better," she said after a moment. "Lighter. Like my thoughts aren't chasing each other as much." She looked at Aiko with mild confusion. "I'm sorry… remind me what your name was again?"

Aiko smiled gently.

"Just Aiko," she said. "I was only here for a short consultation. You probably won't remember much of it."

Amy nodded, accepting the explanation without question.

"Thank you," she said. "Really. I feel… clearer than I have in weeks."

Aiko packed the headset and tablet away.

"I'm glad," she said. "Take care of yourself."

She left the building a few minutes later.

--Later that night, Aiko called Vanessa and Jordan from her apartment.

The call connected quickly. Both of them appeared on screen, sitting close together on the couch in their hotel suite. They looked tired but alert.

"It's done," Aiko said without preamble. "I saw Amy this evening. She came to me after her confrontation with Paul. She told me she had asked for a divorce. She seemed exhausted and overwhelmed by everything that's been happening."

Vanessa leaned forward slightly.

"How did she seem when she left?"

"Calmer," Aiko said. "I used the headset and tablet while she was there. I reduced her compulsive need to keep digging into what's happening with Paul. I layered in some genuine relaxation around the idea of the divorce. And I removed

every memory she had of me ever working there.”

Vanessa and Jordan both went still.

“You wiped yourself completely?” Jordan asked.

“Yes,” Aiko replied. “She won’t remember me being involved in any of this. It removes one more variable she could use to piece things together later.”

Jordan nodded slowly.

“Good work.”

There was a brief silence on the line.

Then Aiko spoke again.

“I still have breakfast with Paul tomorrow morning,” she said. “I’ll do one final round of adjustments with him. After that, we should be able to step back.”

Vanessa nodded.

“That’s good. We can start wrapping things up after that.”

Aiko hesitated for a moment before continuing.

“I know you two have your usual way of celebrating when a job is finished,” she said. “I’m asking you to hold off on that this time. Just for a little while. I’d like to meet with Vanessa alone first. There are some things I want to talk about before we close this chapter.” Vanessa and Jordan looked at each other.

Vanessa answered first.

“Of course,” she said. “We can wait.”

Jordan nodded.

“Whatever you need.”

Aiko gave a small nod of acknowledgment.

“Thank you.”

The call ended shortly after.

Aiko sat in the quiet apartment for a long time afterward, staring at the headset and tablet resting on the table.

Outside, Paris kept raining.

Inside, the job was almost over.

But not quite.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9: Erasure

Aiko was already at the underground café when Paul arrived.

She had chosen the same table near the back, where the stone walls seemed to absorb sound. The low lighting made the space feel smaller than it was, more enclosed. She had been sitting there for nearly twenty minutes, nursing a coffee she didn't particularly want, when Paul came down the narrow stairs.

He spotted her immediately and made his way over without hesitation. There was a quiet heaviness to his movements now, different from the cautious energy he had carried even a week ago. He sat across from her and folded his hands on the table.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then Paul said, quietly, "It's done."

Aiko didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"She asked for the divorce."

Paul nodded. He looked down at his hands for a few seconds before continuing.

"We had it out last night. It got ugly for a while. She kept pushing, asking why I'd been so distant, why I wasn't answering her the way I used to. I tried to keep it civil, but she wouldn't let it go." He let out a slow breath. "Eventually I just… told her the truth. Or part of it." Aiko waited.

Paul's voice dropped even lower.

"I told her that on some level, I had enjoyed it. Being the way she made me. I told her it felt easier not having to think so hard about what I wanted or who I was supposed to be. That for a long time, it had felt safe." He shook his head slightly, like he still couldn't quite believe he had said it out loud. "I don't even know why I told her that. It just came out." Aiko studied him carefully.

"How did she take it?"

Paul gave a short, bitter laugh.

"She looked at me like I was something she didn't recognize. Then she said she wanted a divorce." He was quiet for a moment. "And I said okay."

The silence that followed was thick and ugly.

Paul eventually spoke again, his voice rough.

"I keep thinking about how much of me was real during those years. How much of what I felt for her was something she put there." He looked down at the table.

“And how much of it was me.”

Aiko’s voice was quiet when she answered.

“That’s the hardest part of this kind of work. The lines blur. Sometimes they blur so much that even the person being controlled doesn’t know where they end and the control begins.” Paul nodded slowly.

“I think that’s what scares me the most,” he said. “Not that she did it. But that I might have wanted it.”

Aiko didn’t try to comfort him with easy answers. She simply sat with him in the quiet. After a while, Paul looked up at her again.

“You’re going to keep working on me, aren’t you?” he asked. “Even after the divorce.” “Yes,” Aiko said. “If you still want me to.”

Paul nodded.

“I do. I want to know what’s left when all of it is gone.”

Aiko reached into her bag and pulled out the headset and tablet. She placed them on the table between them.

“We can start now, if you’re ready,” she said.

Paul looked at the equipment for a long moment, then nodded again.

“I’m ready.”

Aiko helped him put the headset on. She activated the tablet and began the careful, precise work of continuing to undo what Amy had done to him. She worked slowly, methodically, making sure each change was stable before moving on to the next. Paul sat quietly through it all, his eyes half-closed, breathing steady.

When she was finished, she removed the headset and packed everything away again. Paul sat back in his chair and let out a long breath.

“Different again,” he said after a moment. “Lighter still.”

Aiko nodded.

“We’ll keep going,” she said. “A little at a time.”

Paul gave her a small, tired smile.

“Thank you.”

Aiko didn’t respond to the thanks. She simply reached across the table and rested her hand briefly on his before pulling it back.

They sat together for a while longer in the quiet café, neither of them in any rush to leave. --In the hotel suite across the city, Vanessa and Jordan sat in front of

their screen, watching the feed from Aiko's purse camera in silence.

They had heard every word.

When Paul had quietly admitted that he had, on some level, enjoyed being controlled, neither of them had spoken. The revelation had landed with a weight that felt heavier than either of them had expected.

Vanessa was the first to break the silence.

"That's sick," she said quietly.

Her voice wasn't angry. It was something else. Something closer to grief.

Jordan didn't disagree. He just kept staring at the screen, where Paul was now sitting across from Aiko with the headset on, his eyes closed while she worked.

Vanessa leaned back in her chair and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. "I keep thinking about how many times we've done this," she said. "How many people we've broken apart. And I always told myself we were freeing them. That we were giving them back something that had been taken." She let out a slow, shaky breath. "But what if some of them didn't want it back? What if some of them were happier when they didn't have to carry the weight of their own choices?"

Jordan was quiet for a long time.

"I don't know," he said finally. His voice was low and rough. "I don't know if we ever really knew what we were giving them back to. Or what we were taking away."

Vanessa dropped her hands from her face and looked at him.

"We always said the rules protected us," she said. "We don't fall in love with them. We don't keep them. We just… wreck the structure and walk away." She laughed once, without humor. "But what if the structure was the only thing keeping some of them from falling apart? What if we're not just breaking marriages? What if we're breaking people in ways we don't even understand?"

Jordan reached over and took her hand. He held it tightly.

"I don't have an answer for that," he said. "I don't think anyone does."

Vanessa looked back at the screen. Aiko was carefully packing the headset away while Paul sat across from her, looking both lighter and more lost than he had when the conversation started.

"We've been doing this for years," Vanessa said softly. "And I always thought we understood the cost. But I don't think we ever really did. Not until now."

Jordan squeezed her hand once.

“Maybe that’s the real lesson,” he said. “That we never understood it as well as we thought we did.”

Vanessa didn’t answer. She just kept watching the screen, her expression distant and thoughtful.

On the feed, Aiko and Paul were still sitting together in the quiet café, neither of them in any hurry to leave.

-Later that night, Aiko called Vanessa and Jordan from her apartment.

The call connected quickly. Both of them appeared on screen, sitting close together on the couch in their hotel suite. They looked tired but alert.

Aiko didn’t waste time with pleasantries.

“I just finished with Paul,” she said. “He’s holding up. The changes are taking, but he’s still processing everything. I think we’ve done as much as we can with him for now.”

Vanessa nodded.

“How is he?”

“Quiet,” Aiko said. “But steadier than he was even a few days ago. He’s starting to feel the absence of the control more clearly now. It’s not easy for him.”

Jordan studied her through the screen.

“You’ve been carrying most of this on your own,” he said. “How are you holding up?” Aiko was quiet for a moment before answering.

“I’m fine,” she said. “But there are some things I want to talk about. Things that are harder to say over a call.”

Vanessa tilted her head slightly.

“What kind of things?”

Aiko met her eyes through the screen.

“I’d rather talk about them in person,” she said. “Just the two of us. I was hoping we could have breakfast tomorrow morning.”

Vanessa and Jordan exchanged a quick glance.

Vanessa answered first.

“Of course,” she said. “We can do that.”

Jordan nodded.

“Whatever you need.”

Aiko gave a small nod of acknowledgment.

“Thank you. I’ll call you in the morning and let you know what time works.”

Vanessa studied her for another moment.

“Are you all right, Aiko?”

Aiko didn’t answer right away.

“I will be,” she said. “After we talk.”

The call ended a few minutes later.

Aiko sat alone in her apartment, staring at the dark screen long after the call had disconnected.

Outside, Paris was quiet.

Inside, the job was still moving — even if none of them were entirely sure where it was going anymore.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10: The Prank

Vanessa arrived at the café a few minutes early. It was one of those loud, bustling places with big windows, wooden tables crammed close together, and the constant hum of conversation and clinking dishes. She had chosen it specifically because it was the opposite of the quiet, serious places they usually met. She needed noise. She needed distraction.

She found a table near the back and ordered a coffee while she waited. Jordan had stayed behind at the hotel without complaint. He had simply kissed her on the forehead and told her to take as long as she needed.

Aiko arrived right on time, weaving through the crowd with her usual quiet confidence. She spotted Vanessa and made her way over, sliding into the seat across from her.

“Hey,” Aiko said.

“Hey,” Vanessa replied. She studied Aiko for a moment. “You look tired.”

Aiko gave a small shrug. “I am. But I’m also… wired. It’s a strange combination.” A waiter came by and Aiko ordered a coffee. Once he left, Vanessa leaned forward slightly, her expression more serious.

“So,” she said. “You wanted to talk.”

Aiko nodded. She wrapped her hands around the warm mug when it arrived a minute later, staring down into it like she was trying to find the right words.

“I’ve been thinking a lot,” she said finally. “About everything that happened with Paul. And with Monique. And with Amy.” She looked up at Vanessa. “I’m not having some kind of crisis. I’m not going to have a breakdown or anything dramatic like that.”

Vanessa relaxed a fraction. “Okay. Good.”

“But,” Aiko continued, “I keep coming back to the same thought. We have this technology now. A working prototype. Something that can actually do what Amy was doing.” She paused. “And I don’t want to just… put it away in a drawer and pretend we never touched it.” Vanessa raised an eyebrow.

“What are you saying?”

Aiko met her eyes directly.

“I want to test it,” she said. “On Jordan.”

Vanessa blinked.

Then she blinked again.

Then she started to laugh — a short, surprised burst of sound that she quickly tried to smother with her hand.

“You want to *what*?”

Aiko didn’t laugh. She looked completely serious, which somehow made it worse.

“I want to test the prototype,” she repeated. “On Jordan. Just once. Something small. Something reversible. I want to see what it’s actually capable of when I’m the one controlling it.”

Vanessa stared at her for several long seconds.

Then she leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms.

“You’re serious.”

“I’m serious,” Aiko confirmed.

Vanessa let out another short laugh, this one more disbelieving than amused.

“Jesus Christ, Aiko.”

Aiko waited patiently.

Vanessa rubbed her face with both hands, then dropped them and looked at her again. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s say — and I’m only saying this hypothetically — that I was even entertaining this completely insane idea. What exactly are you proposing?”

Aiko leaned forward, lowering her voice slightly even though the café was loud enough that no one was paying attention to them.

“I was thinking something simple,” she said. “Something that would be noticeable but not harmful. Something we could test in a controlled way.”

Vanessa narrowed her eyes.

“Like what?”

Aiko thought for a moment, then said, “What if every time I spoke to him in a calm, instructional tone — like I was explaining something technical or giving directions — he got an erection?”

Vanessa made a sound that was somewhere between a choke and a laugh.

“You want to give him a boner trigger.”

Aiko nodded, completely straight-faced.

“Exactly.”

Vanessa covered her mouth with one hand, her shoulders shaking.

“Oh my god.”

“I think it would be a good test,” Aiko continued, as if she were presenting a research proposal. “It’s physical, measurable, and easy to confirm. It wouldn’t hurt him. And it would give us clear data on how well the conditioning holds under normal circumstances.” Vanessa was still laughing behind her hand.

“You’ve thought about this.”

“I’ve thought about it a lot,” Aiko admitted.

Vanessa dropped her hand and stared at her, still grinning.

“You’re actually proposing this. To *me*.”

“I am.”

Vanessa shook her head, still half-laughing.

“Okay. Fine. Let’s say we do this ridiculous thing. How would it even work? You just… put the headset on him while he’s sleeping and program it in?”

Aiko tilted her head thoughtfully.

“I was thinking we could do it while he’s awake but distracted. Maybe during one of our usual debriefs. I could put the headset on him under the guise of testing something else, then install the trigger while we’re talking. He wouldn’t even have to know what we were doing.” Vanessa’s eyes widened.

“You want to do it *while he’s conscious*?”

“It would be more ethical that way,” Aiko said seriously. “He’d technically be consenting to a test, even if he doesn’t know the exact nature of it.”

Vanessa stared at her for another second, then burst out laughing again — loud enough this time that a few people at nearby tables glanced over.

“You’re unbelievable,” she said, wiping at her eyes. “Absolutely unbelievable.”

Aiko allowed herself a small smile.

“I’m practical.”

Vanessa shook her head, still grinning.

“Okay. Instructional tone. Erection trigger. Got it.” She paused, then added, “What if we made it more specific? Like… only when you use a certain kind of tone. Calm. Slightly authoritative. Like you’re explaining how to properly calibrate something.”

Aiko nodded.

“That’s what I was thinking. Something professional. Something that sounds completely normal in conversation.”

Vanessa’s grin widened.

“So basically, every time you start sounding like a sexy professor explaining quantum physics, Jordan pops a boner.”

Aiko considered this.

“More or less.”

Vanessa lost it again. She had to put her forehead down on the table for a second, shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

When she finally sat back up, her face was flushed and she was still grinning.

“You’re going to kill him,” she said. “Or me. One of us is going to die from this.” “I’ll be careful,” Aiko said. “We can test it in a controlled environment first. Just the three of us.”

Vanessa wiped at her eyes again.

“God. I can already picture it. You sitting there all calm and professional, explaining how to properly format a report or something, and Jordan just… sitting there trying to act normal while his body betrays him.”

Aiko gave her a small, mischievous smile.

“Exactly.”

Vanessa shook her head, still smiling.

“You’re actually going to do this, aren’t you?”

“Only if you’re okay with it,” Aiko said. “I wouldn’t do it without your approval.” Vanessa looked at her for a long moment, the laughter slowly fading into something more thoughtful.

“You really want to do this,” she said quietly.

“I do,” Aiko replied. “Not because I want to hurt him. But because I want to understand what this technology can actually do. And because…” She hesitated. “Because after everything with Paul, I think we need to remember that this isn’t just a weapon. It can also be… something else. Something lighter. Something we control.”

Vanessa studied her carefully.

Then she sighed and leaned back in her chair.

“Fine,” she said. “But we do it my way. We plan it out. We make sure it’s actually harmless. And we stop the second anyone wants to stop.”

“Agreed,” Aiko said immediately.

Vanessa shook her head again, a disbelieving smile still on her face.

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this.”

Aiko’s smile grew just a fraction.

“I can.”

Vanessa pointed a finger at her.

“You’re buying breakfast, by the way. For the rest of our lives. This is your punishment.” “Deal,” Aiko said.

Vanessa picked up her coffee and took a long sip, still shaking her head.

“Instructional tone,” she muttered. “Of all the things…”

Aiko just smiled and took a sip of her own coffee, looking quietly pleased with herself. Outside, Paris kept moving.

Inside the noisy café, two women sat across from each other, already deep in the kind of ridiculous, dangerous, and strangely intimate planning that only people who had seen too much could truly enjoy.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11: The Test

They arrived back at the hotel just after noon.

Vanessa unlocked the suite door and stepped inside, Aiko following close behind. Jordan was sitting on the couch with his laptop open on the coffee table. He looked up when they entered.

“Hey,” he said, closing the laptop. “How was breakfast?”

“Good,” Vanessa said, dropping her bag on the nearest chair. “Very productive.”

Aiko set her bag down more carefully near the door.

Jordan studied them both for a moment.

“You two look like you’ve been plotting something.”

Vanessa glanced at Aiko, then back at Jordan.

“Actually,” she said, sitting down on the arm of the couch next to him, “we have been talking about something.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow.

“Should I be worried?”

Vanessa smiled.

“Probably. But hear us out first.”

Jordan leaned back, looking mildly amused but curious.

“All right. I’m listening.”

Vanessa rested a hand on his shoulder.

“The marriage is over,” she said. “It’s final. Paul and Amy are done. We got what we wanted out of this job.”

Jordan nodded.

“I know.”

Vanessa continued.

“Aiko only asked for one thing in exchange for everything she did.” She looked at Aiko. “She wants to test something. A program she wrote to help focus the mind.”

Jordan looked between them.

“On who?”

“On you,” Aiko said.

Jordan blinked.

Then he let out a short laugh.

“Me?”

“Yes,” Aiko said calmly.

Jordan looked at Vanessa again.

“You’re okay with this?”

Vanessa shrugged, though there was clear amusement in her expression.

“I already agreed. As long as it’s something small and reversible.”

Jordan rubbed his face with one hand, still smiling.

“You’re both serious.”

“Completely,” Aiko said.

Jordan shook his head, still half-laughing.

“All right. What exactly are we talking about here?”

Aiko moved to her bag and pulled out the headset and tablet. She set them on the coffee table.

“I want to install a program,” she said. “It’s designed to help sharpen focus and mental clarity. It won’t hurt you. It won’t change who you are. And I can remove it completely whenever you want.”

Jordan studied the equipment for a moment.

“And you’re not going to tell me what it actually does?”

“Not yet,” Aiko said. “I want to see how it performs without any expectations getting in the way. I’ll explain everything afterward.”

Jordan looked at Vanessa again.

“You’re really okay with this?”

Vanessa nodded.

“I am. As long as you are.”

Jordan was quiet for a few seconds, clearly thinking it over. Then he let out another short laugh and shook his head.

“Fuck it,” he said. “Why not. It’s been a weird couple of weeks. Might as well make it weirder.”

Vanessa grinned.

“Really?”

“Really,” Jordan said. He looked at Aiko. “But if I end up clucking like a chicken every time someone says the word ‘coffee,’ I’m blaming both of you.”

“Fair,” Aiko said.

Jordan stood up and stretched.

“All right. How do we do this?”

Aiko picked up the headset.

“Sit down. This won’t take long.”

Jordan sat back down on the couch. Aiko moved behind him and carefully placed the headset on his head, adjusting the bands until it was secure. Vanessa watched from the armchair, her expression a mix of amusement and fascination.

Aiko picked up the tablet and began working.

Jordan sat still, eyes half-closed, while Aiko’s fingers moved across the screen. After several minutes, Aiko spoke without looking up.

“I’m installing the program now.”

Jordan made a small sound of acknowledgment but didn’t open his eyes.

Aiko continued working for another minute, then tapped one final command on the screen. “Done,” she said softly.

She kept the headset on him and used the tablet to put him into a deeper sleep state. Once his breathing had slowed and his body had gone completely slack, Aiko worked quickly on the tablet, carefully deleting the short-term memories associated with the last twenty minutes — specifically the memory of wearing the headset and the memory of being asked to test the program.

When she was finished, she set the tablet down, then carefully removed the headset from Jordan’s head. She packed both the headset and the tablet into her bag and placed it out of sight.

Vanessa watched quietly from the armchair.

Aiko reached down and gently shook Jordan’s shoulder.

“Wake up,” she said.

Jordan stirred, blinking slowly. He sat up and rubbed his face.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Did I fall asleep?”

Vanessa smiled and sat down next to him on the couch. She let out a small, involuntary giggle.

“I can’t believe you dozed off,” she said, her tone light. “We were right in the middle of a conversation.”

Jordan blinked a few more times, looking slightly disoriented.

“Sorry,” he said. “I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

Aiko picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder.

“You must have been so relieved we finished our job without any casualties,” she said calmly.

Vanessa made another small sound — half laugh, half cough — and quickly pressed her lips together.

Jordan frowned slightly, still waking up.

“What?”

Aiko just smiled.

“Nothing. Get some rest. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

She turned and walked toward the door. Vanessa followed her out into the hallway, closing the suite door quietly behind them.

They stood there for a moment in the quiet corridor.

Vanessa looked at Aiko, still fighting a smile.

“You’re really going to test it, aren’t you?”

Aiko met her eyes.

“I already did,” she said softly. “The trigger is in place. I just need to activate it to see if it works.”

Vanessa let out a slow breath, the smile finally breaking through.

“Jesus.”

Aiko reached out and squeezed her hand once.

“I’ll be careful,” she said again. “I promise.”

Vanessa nodded, still smiling faintly.

“I know.”

Aiko gave her a small smile, then turned and walked down the hallway toward the elevators. Vanessa watched her go for a few seconds before turning and slipping quietly back into the suite.

Jordan was still on the couch, looking half-asleep and confused.

Vanessa sat down beside him and rested her head on his shoulder.

“You really did fall asleep,” she murmured.

Jordan made a sleepy sound and wrapped an arm around her.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “Must’ve been more tired than I thought.”

Vanessa closed her eyes and smiled against his shirt.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “Must’ve been.”

She stayed there with him for a long time, listening to his breathing even out again as he drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12: Activation

A few hours had passed.

They were still in the hotel suite. The curtains were drawn, and the only light came from a single lamp on the desk. Jordan was sitting on the edge of the bed in just his jeans. Vanessa had taken the armchair near the window. Aiko sat on the bed beside Jordan, still in the black tank top and gray lounge pants she'd changed into earlier.

She had been talking for a while.

Aiko told them about the close calls with Amy over the last few weeks. How she had nearly been caught adjusting Paul's conditioning one afternoon when one of Amy's assistants had walked into the café unexpectedly. How she had to sit there with the tablet open under the table, pretending to take notes while quietly reversing three days of work because Amy had started asking Paul too many questions. She told them about the night she broke into the lab to steal the prototype. How she had to wait in a supply closet for nearly an hour because Amy came back unexpectedly. How her heart had been pounding so hard she was sure someone would hear it. She told them about the time she was working on Paul in the hotel room and Amy called him three times in under an hour. How Paul's hands had started shaking and Aiko had to talk him through breathing exercises while the headset was still on so he wouldn't panic and say something he shouldn't.

Vanessa and Jordan listened without interrupting much. Jordan asked a few questions. Vanessa mostly just watched Aiko while she spoke.

Eventually the conversation slowed.

Aiko turned her head and looked at Vanessa.

Their eyes met.

Aiko's voice, when she spoke, was perfectly calm. Flat. Instructional.

"When conducting a controlled test of behavioral modification, it is important to first establish a baseline response. Begin by observing the subject in a neutral state. Note any existing tension in the shoulders or jaw. Measure breathing rate if possible. This provides a reference point against which any induced changes can be compared."

Jordan frowned slightly, listening.

Aiko continued in the same even, slightly bored tone.

“Once the baseline has been recorded, introduce the stimulus in a measured and consistent manner. Avoid sudden shifts in volume or cadence. The goal is to isolate the variable being

tested. In this case, the variable is verbal delivery. A calm, instructional tone should be maintained throughout the observation period.”

Vanessa’s eyes dropped to Jordan’s lap.

His cock was already starting to harden, pressing visibly against the front of his jeans. Aiko kept going without pause.

“If the subject begins to show signs of physical response, do not immediately alter the stimulus. Continue speaking at the same pace and volume. This allows the researcher to determine how quickly and consistently the trigger engages. Only after sufficient data has been collected should adjustments be made to intensity or duration.”

Jordan shifted where he sat. His erection was now obvious, straining hard against the denim. Vanessa looked at it, then back up at Aiko. A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. She let out a quiet, amused breath — almost a giggle — and quickly pressed her lips together. Aiko continued in that same flat instructional voice.

“Once activation has been confirmed, the subject may be permitted to act on the response. This can include self-stimulation or engagement with another party. The researcher should continue providing verbal stimulus throughout the active phase. This maintains consistency in the testing conditions.”

Vanessa dropped her hand from her mouth. Her voice was warm when she spoke.

“Jordan,” she said. “Do something about it.”

Jordan looked at her, then at Aiko. His breathing had already changed.

Aiko kept talking.

“You may approach the subject if physical engagement is the chosen method of response. Remove clothing in a logical sequence to avoid unnecessary disruption. Upper garments may be removed first, followed by lower garments. Once both parties are undressed, positioning can be established based on comfort and access.”

Jordan stood up. He pulled his t-shirt off over his head and dropped it on the floor. He unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down along with his underwear, stepping out of them. His cock was flushed and already leaking at the tip.

Aiko continued without breaking rhythm.

“Once upper clothing has been removed, lower clothing may follow. Take your time. There’s no need to rush the process. Once both parties are undressed, you may position the subject however is most comfortable. The bed is available if you prefer a stable surface.”

Jordan stepped between Aiko’s knees where she sat on the edge of the bed. He reached for the hem of her tank top and pulled it up. Aiko lifted her arms and let him take it off. He dropped the shirt on the floor and reached for her lounge pants next, hooking his fingers into the waistband and pulling them down her legs. She lifted her hips to help. Once she was bare, Jordan pushed her back onto the bed and climbed over her.

Aiko’s voice never changed.

“You may enter the subject now. Take your time. There is no need to rush. Once full penetration has been achieved, you may begin movement. You may adjust the angle by shifting the hips or lifting the legs. Either is acceptable.”

Jordan pushed into her slowly.

Aiko continued in that same flat, instructional tone.

“Once movement has begun, you may choose to increase depth or speed. If more force is desired, you may apply it. You may also grip the hips for better leverage. This can allow for more consistent and deeper thrusts. Any of these adjustments are acceptable during the active phase.”

Jordan started fucking her harder.

Aiko kept going.

“If you want to change positions, you may do so. Turning the subject onto their stomach can allow for different angles and sometimes deeper penetration. You may also pull the hair or hold the shoulders down if that is something you prefer. I can accommodate most variations.” Jordan groaned and pulled out. He flipped Aiko onto her stomach and pulled her hips up, pushing back into her from behind. He gripped her waist and started fucking her harder, the bed shifting beneath them.

Aiko’s voice stayed perfectly even.

“This position allows for deeper penetration and more leverage. You may hold the hips firmly and increase your pace. If you want to go harder, you can. I can take it. You may also reach around to stimulate the clit if desired. Either is acceptable.”

Jordan fucked her harder, one hand fisted in her hair.

Aiko continued without missing a beat.

“You may also lean forward and brace your weight on your hands if you need more stability. This can allow for more forceful thrusts. You may change the rhythm whenever you like. Faster or slower is fine. I will continue speaking regardless of intensity.”

Jordan was breathing hard now. He reached down and pulled her hair harder, driving into her. Aiko’s voice stayed flat and instructional.

“If you want to fuck me harder, you can. I can take it. You may grip the hips more firmly and increase your pace. This is still within acceptable parameters for the test. You may also change positions again if you want. I can move as needed.”

Jordan groaned and fucked her harder, his hips slapping against her ass.

Aiko kept talking.

“You may come whenever you’re ready. You may finish inside me. That is acceptable. You may also slow down or stop if you want to draw it out longer. Either choice is fine. I will keep talking throughout the process.”

Jordan came with a low, rough sound, buried deep inside her. His hips jerked a few times before he finally stilled, breathing hard against the back of her neck.

Aiko lay beneath him, completely calm.

After a moment, she spoke again in that same flat instructional voice.

“You may pull out whenever you are ready. You may also remain inside for a while if preferred. Both are acceptable. Once you have recovered, we can repeat the process if more data is needed. You may choose the position. I will continue speaking either way.” Jordan let out a shaky laugh against her skin.

“Jesus Christ, Aiko.”

Aiko answered immediately, voice unchanged.

“That is not currently relevant to the test. Would you like to continue, or would you prefer to end the session here?”

Jordan pulled out slowly and rolled onto his back beside her, still breathing hard. He turned his head to look at her.

“You’re actually going to keep going like this?”

Aiko looked at him, completely neutral.

“Yes. That is part of the test parameters. I will continue providing verbal stimulus for the duration of the active phase.”

Jordan stared at her for another second, then reached for her again.

He pulled her on top of him. Aiko straddled his hips without breaking rhythm.

“You may enter me again whenever you are ready. You may choose the pace. If you want to go harder, you can. I can take it. You may grip the hips for better leverage. This can allow for deeper and more consistent thrusts. Any of these adjustments are acceptable.”

Jordan pushed into her again. Aiko started riding him slowly at first, then faster when he gripped her hips.

She kept talking.

“If you want to fuck me harder, you can. I can take it. You may thrust up to meet me. You may also reach up and touch my breasts if desired. Either is acceptable during the active phase. You may come inside me again if you want. Or you may hold back and continue. Both options are fine. I will keep talking either way.”

Jordan groaned and thrust up harder into her.

Aiko continued in that same calm, instructional tone.

“You may also change positions if you want. You could put me on my back again or have me on my hands and knees. That can sometimes allow for different angles and deeper

penetration. Any of these options are acceptable during the active phase. You may come whenever you’re ready. I will continue speaking throughout.”

Jordan came again with a rough sound, gripping her hips hard as he emptied inside her. Aiko stayed on top of him, completely calm, still talking.

“You may pull out whenever you are ready. You may also remain inside for a while if preferred. Both are acceptable. Once you have recovered, we can discuss the results of the test or repeat the process if more data is needed.”

Jordan let out a shaky laugh and pulled her down onto his chest.

“You’re fucking insane,” he muttered against her hair.

Aiko answered in the same flat voice.

“That is not currently relevant to the test. Would you like to continue, or would you prefer to end the session here?”

Jordan groaned.

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

Aiko kept going.

“You may enter me again whenever you are ready. You may choose the position. I will continue speaking either way.”

Jordan rolled her onto her back and pushed into her again, slower this time. Aiko wrapped her legs around his waist.

“You may thrust harder if that is what you want,” she said in that same calm instructional voice. “I can take it. You may push deeper. You may also hold my legs open or pull them back if that allows for better access. Any of these adjustments are acceptable.”

Jordan groaned and started fucking her harder.

Aiko continued without breaking character.

“If you want to go even harder, you can. I can accommodate increased force. You may also change the angle by lifting my hips or shifting your own weight. Either is acceptable. You may come inside me again if you want. Or you may continue for as long as you like. There is no time limit. I will keep talking either way.”

Jordan kept going, breathing hard, fucking her deep and steady while Aiko spoke in that same flat, instructional tone about whatever came into her head next.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13: The Room Where We Keep the Eraser

Aiko had left for Tokyo that morning.

The suite felt quieter than it had in weeks. No more late-night calls. No more encrypted updates. No more waiting for the next piece of news about Paul or Amy. Just the steady sound of rain against the windows and the occasional creak of the building settling around them.

Vanessa stood near the window with her arms folded loosely across her chest. Jordan sat on the edge of the bed behind her, elbows on his knees, watching the slow movement of her shoulders as she breathed.

Neither of them had said much since Aiko's car pulled away from the hotel.

Eventually Vanessa spoke, her voice low.

"I keep thinking about how close we came to losing control of this," she said. "Not the job. Us. We let Aiko carry almost all of it. We watched from here while she did things we used to do ourselves. And now she has the tech. A working version of it. Something she can keep." Jordan was quiet for a moment.

"She's not like Amy," he said.

"No," Vanessa agreed. "But she's not who she was when we started this job either. None of us are."

She turned away from the window and walked over to the bed. She sat down beside him, close enough that their thighs touched.

"I don't know what we're supposed to do with what we've learned," she said. "We broke a marriage. We used technology that can rewrite people. And we did it well. Too well. I keep waiting to feel like we won something, but mostly I just feel… aware. Like I can see the edges of things I used to pretend didn't exist."

Jordan reached over and took her hand. He turned it over in his and traced the lines of her palm with his thumb.

"I've been thinking about the same thing," he said finally. "About how easy it was to justify every step. How natural it felt to keep going just a little further. And now that it's over, I don't know how to go back to pretending we're the same people who started this." Vanessa looked at him.

"Are we?" she asked quietly.

Jordan met her eyes.

"No," he said. "I don't think we are."

They sat with that for a while. The rain tapped steadily against the glass.

After some time, Vanessa spoke again.

“I don’t regret what we did,” she said. “Not the outcome. Paul is free. Amy doesn’t remember us. The job worked. But I regret how little we questioned ourselves while it was happening. I regret how easily we let Aiko carry the weight so we could stay clean on the outside.” Jordan squeezed her hand.

“I felt it too,” he admitted. “Every time she called in with another update, part of me was relieved we didn’t have to be the ones doing it. And another part of me knew that was bullshit.”

Vanessa gave a small, tired smile.

“We’re good at that,” she said. “Telling ourselves stories about why what we’re doing is different. Cleaner. Necessary.”

Jordan squeezed her hand again.

“So what do we do now?” he asked.

Vanessa was quiet for a long moment.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “But I know I don’t want to keep telling ourselves the same stories.”

Jordan nodded.

They didn’t speak again for several minutes.

When Vanessa finally stood, she pulled Jordan up with her. She reached for the buttons of the shirt she was wearing — his shirt — and undid them one by one. Jordan watched her hands, then reached out and helped her slide it off her shoulders. It fell to the floor between them. They undressed each other without speaking. When Vanessa was finally bare, she pulled him down onto the bed and rolled them so she was on top. She straddled his hips and sank down onto him in one slow, deliberate motion. Jordan’s hands gripped her waist as she started to move — not gentle, not careful, but with the raw, hungry rhythm they only allowed themselves when a job was truly over.

This wasn’t about comfort. It was about release.

Vanessa fucked him like she was trying to burn something out of both of them. Jordan met her with the same intensity, thrusting up hard to meet every downward stroke, his fingers

digging into her hips hard enough to leave marks. The only sounds in the room were the wet slap of skin, their rough breathing, and the occasional low moan that escaped when one of them hit just the right angle.

Vanessa came first, her body locking up as she ground down hard against him. Jordan didn’t stop. He kept fucking up into her through it, relentless, until she

was shaking and cursing above him. Only then did he flip them, pinning her beneath him and driving into her with deep, punishing thrusts that made the headboard knock against the wall.

Vanessa wrapped her legs around his back and pulled him deeper, her nails raking down his spine.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped. “Don’t you fucking stop.”

Jordan didn’t. He fucked her like the world really was ending — like this was the only thing left that still felt real after weeks of shaping other people’s realities. When he finally came, it was with a rough, broken sound against her neck, his body shuddering as he emptied deep inside her.

He stayed there afterward, still buried inside her, both of them breathing hard and slick with sweat.

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

Eventually Jordan rolled onto his back and pulled Vanessa with him so she was half-draped across his chest. She rested her head over his heart and listened to it slow down. His hand moved slowly up and down her spine, grounding them both.

After a while, Vanessa spoke into the quiet.

“I don’t know what we’re supposed to do with any of this,” she said softly.

Jordan’s hand kept moving.

“Neither do I.”

She pressed a slow kiss to his chest, right over his heart.

“But I know I want to figure it out with you,” she said. “Not from across a room. Not while someone else carries the weight.”

Jordan’s arm tightened around her.

“Me too,” he said.

They lay together in the dim light, skin cooling, hearts settling. Outside, the rain had softened into a steady drizzle. Inside, the room held only the weight of each other’s bodies and the quiet understanding that some doors, once opened, change the shape of everything that comes after.

--(End of Book 11: *Mind Over Marriage*)
