
BOOK SEVEN OF THE CABIN SERIES
MEI'S WISH
BRENT CLARK PALMER

Mei’s Wish

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Cabin, Book 7

Chapter One

The late-afternoon sun cut through the bare dining room windows in long, dusty rectangles, illuminating a labyrinth of taped cardboard boxes that smelled of corrugated paper and someone else's warehouse.

Mei stood by the kitchen island with her weight shifted onto one hip, trying to remember which box labeled FRAGILE – KITCHEN actually held the drinking glasses and which one was full of her mother's wedding platters. She was twenty-six, shorter than the cabinets had been built for, with a compact, softly curved frame that made her look younger than she was when she wore her hair pinned up with a wooden chopstick. A faded oversized tee was knotted at the small of her back to keep the fabric from swallowing her waist, leaving a thin crescent of warm skin exposed above the waistband of her linen shorts.

Every time she reached up to test the height of an empty shelf, the hem lifted another inch, and she automatically tugged it back down—a quiet, habitual reflex, even in an empty house where no one was watching.

"Tell me you didn't pack the surge protectors in the garage crates," Tom called out from the hallway.

He was down on one knee by the baseboard, his brow furrowed over a tangle of black coaxial cables and a blinking white router. They had been married for nineteen days, and for nineteen days Tom had approached every milestone—the hotel check-in, the thank-you spreadsheet, the mortgage signing, the moving truck—with the earnest, methodical focus of a man assembling a complicated piece of patio furniture.

"Check the green bin by the coat closet," Mei said, her voice soft in the high-ceilinged room. She ran a palm over the cool quartz countertop, feeling the odd, hollow quiet that settles into a house the moment the movers drive away. She felt less like a homeowner and more like an understudy who had wandered onto a stage before the crew finished painting the walls. "I put all your cords together so they wouldn't get crushed."

"Found it," Tom muttered, already absorbed in the plastic zip-ties again. "Give me twenty minutes and we'll have Wi-Fi. Then we can figure out dinner."

Mei looked down at the box cutter in her hand, her thumb resting against the dull metal slider. There was nothing wrong with the afternoon—Tom was dependable, the neighborhood was leafy and quiet, the oak floors were newly refinished—yet a faint, restless pressure sat behind her ribs, as if she were holding her breath inside a suit of clothes tailored half a size too tight. She turned toward the open front door just to catch a breeze off the lawn, and froze mid-step.

Someone was already standing on the porch.

She hadn’t heard footsteps on the cedar planks, only the light, rhythmic bounce of rubber soles coming to a rest outside the screenless threshold. A woman leaned with one shoulder braced against the white doorframe, her chest rising and falling in the easy, controlled cadence of an athlete cooling down from a five-mile run. She wore charcoal compression shorts and a cropped tangerine running tank that clung to the lean, sculpted line of her ribs. Her dark hair was swept into a high, glossy ponytail that brushed the nape of her neck whenever she tilted her head, and her skin carried a bright, sun-warmed flush.

When their eyes met across the stacked boxes in the foyer, the stranger didn’t offer the apologetic, hesitant smile of a neighbor intruding on moving day. Instead, her mouth curved into a slow, electric grin—warm, unhurried, and startlingly direct.

“You have the look of a woman who has been asked where the packing tape is at least forty times since noon,” the neighbor said.

Her voice was clear and alto, carrying an effortless buoyancy that instantly changed the acoustics of the hallway. Tom looked up from the baseboard, blinking through the afternoon glare, and scrambled to his feet while brushing drywall dust from his knees.

“Only thirty-five,” Tom said, putting on his best neighborly voice as he stepped around a wardrobe carton. “And we just found the router, so the worst is over. I’m Tom, by the way.”

“Keiko,” she said, stepping over the threshold without waiting to be invited, as naturally as if the floorboards already knew her weight. She gave Tom’s outstretched hand a brisk, confident shake—two seconds of bright eye contact that made him straighten his posture—before her gaze slid straight past his shoulder and settled back onto Mei. “Right next door. The bungalow with the redwood deck and the overgrown Meyer lemon tree.”

Mei wiped her palms against the sides of her shorts and walked out from behind the kitchen island. Up close, Keiko radiated a kinetic, outdoor heat—a faint scent of crushed citrus leaves, clean sweat, and expensive sunscreen. Though Keiko wasn’t towering, her long legs and upright athletic carriage made Mei acutely aware of her own compact stature, the soft swell of her breasts beneath the thin cotton tee, and the way she tended to fold her arms across her middle when meeting someone new.

“I’m Mei,” she said, offering her hand.

Keiko didn’t shake it the way she had shaken Tom’s. Her fingers closed around Mei’s smaller hand with a deliberate, lingering warmth, her thumb brushing

lightly across the fragile pulse point on the inside of Mei’s wrist before she let go.

In that brief contact, Keiko’s dark eyes took an inventory that felt less like a glance and more like a tuning fork striking metal. She noticed the slight droop of the wooden chopstick in Mei’s hair, the tension held in the corners of Mei’s mouth, and the quiet, unspent energy underneath Mei’s dutiful posture—the exact hesitation of a woman who spent so much time accommodating the room around her that no one ever bothered to ask what she actually wanted.

“Mei,” Keiko repeated, testing the shape of the syllable as if it belonged to a private language between the two of them. “You look exhausted. Not moving-boxes exhausted—listening-to-people-talk-about-moving-boxes exhausted.”

A surprised laugh escaped Mei’s throat before she could censor it, bringing a quick flush to her cheeks. She glanced instinctively toward Tom to make sure he hadn’t taken offense, out of habit.

Tom was still standing by the closet door with a black power brick in his hand, wearing a slightly dazed half-smile. There was something about the way Keiko occupied the center of their foyer—standing just a few inches closer to Mei than standard suburban politeness dictated, her hip angled so Tom was subtly outside the parenthesis of their conversation—that left him rooted to the spot. He didn’t feel annoyed; if anything, a strange, warm tightness gathered at the base of his throat watching his shy, careful wife blush under the undivided attention of a woman who looked like she owned the whole block.

“We haven’t even found the coffee mugs yet,” Mei admitted, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Everything is in the wrong room.”

“Amateur mistake, always pack a survival kit in the front seat,” Keiko said, her eyes crinkling with amusement as she stepped half an inch closer, close enough that Mei could see the tiny gold hoop in the cartilage of her ear and the dark, focused depth of her pupils. Before Mei could feel self-conscious again, Keiko reached up with effortless familiarity and nudged the slipping wooden chopstick half an inch deeper into Mei’s bun, her fingertips grazing the sensitive skin just behind Mei’s ear. “There. That was about ten seconds away from a total collapse.”

Mei’s breath caught—a tiny, silent hitch in her chest. Her skin tingled where Keiko’s fingers had brushed her neck, a sudden, unfamiliar heat blooming downward into her stomach. She hadn’t been touched like that—casually, possessively, without asking permission and yet completely tuned in to how she would react—in her entire life.

“I have a pitcher of cold-brewed jasmine tea and sparkling water sitting on my counter right now,” Keiko continued smoothly, letting her hand drop to rest for a

second on the curve of Mei’s bare forearm. “And two chairs on the deck in the shade. No cardboard allowed within fifty feet.”

“Oh, I really should help Tom finish setting up the bedroom before it gets dark—” Mei started, though her feet didn’t move an inch toward the stairs.

Keiko didn’t look at the stairs. She kept her eyes locked on Mei’s face, watching the small pulse fluttering at the base of Mei’s collarbone, while addressing Tom over her shoulder in a light, teasing cadence.

“Tom doesn’t need two people to plug in a modem, do you, Tom? You look like a man who enjoys conquering his own cables in peace.”

Tom swallowed, his fingers tightening around the plastic router casing as he looked from Keiko’s bare, toned shoulders to the sudden, parted-lip stillness on his wife’s face. A quiet, inexplicable thrill hummed beneath his ribs—the distinct sensation that the front door of his new marriage had just been propped wide open, and that he was about to agree to whatever came through it.

“Yeah,” Tom heard himself say, his voice sounding slightly smaller than usual in the hallway. “Go ahead, Mei. Take a break. I’ve got plenty to keep me busy in here.”

Keiko didn’t even need to look back at him to verify the surrender; she had already heard it in the cadence of his breath. Her smile softened into something private and knowing as she curled her fingers lightly around Mei’s wrist, drawing her toward the sunlit rectangle of the open doorway.

“See?” Keiko murmured, looking down into Mei’s wide, uncertain eyes as she guided her out onto the porch. “He’s fine. Come on—tell me everything about yourself before you had to spend all day looking at packing tape.”

Chapter Two

The latch of the front door clicked shut at 7:42 AM, followed by the measured, predictable crunch of Tom’s dress shoes crossing the concrete walkway to the driveway.

Mei stood barefoot on the cool oak floorboards of the half-unpacked dining room, holding a mug of tea between both palms. She wore a pair of soft heather-gray lounge shorts and a thin white ribbed tank top that clung loosely to the curve of her waist—the kind of clothes she usually changed out of before opening the blinds. Through the sheer curtain, she watched Tom’s silver sedan back smoothly out into the street, pause for a nonexistent car, and glide away toward the freeway on-ramp.

As soon as the hum of his engine faded behind the neighborhood hedges, the house seemed to expand around her, quiet and subtly charged.

Yesterday afternoon on Keiko’s redwood deck had lasted less than forty minutes, yet the memory of it had followed Mei straight through dinner and into the dark of the bedroom. Even while Tom had talked beside her in the dark about utility transfers and lawn sprinklers, Mei had remained acutely aware of the exact spot behind her right ear where Keiko’s fingertips had lingered. It was as if Keiko had left a small, warm fingerprint on her nervous system that refused to cool down.

She hadn’t even turned away from the window when a crisp double-tap sounded against the glass pane of the open back kitchen door.

Mei spun around, her heart giving a sudden, traitorously bright leap against her ribs.

Keiko stood just outside the screen, one hand resting high on the cedar frame, the morning sun catching the damp ends of her dark hair. She had clearly just stepped out of the shower after an early workout; she wore white tennis shorts and a fitted navy pullover unzipped to the sternum, revealing the sleek hollow of her throat and the clean collarbones beneath. Held lightly in her lower hand, like a baton, was a rolled-up morning newspaper wrapped in translucent blue plastic.

“He pulls out of the driveway at seven-forty-two on the dot,” Keiko said through the mesh, her voice warm and shamelessly amused. “I timed it from my kitchen window.”

Mei walked into the kitchen, suddenly conscious of her bare legs, her unbrushed hair, and the fact that she wasn’t wearing a bra beneath the thin cotton rib of her tank top. Instead of crossing her arms to hide, though, some quiet, newly awakened impulse made her keep her hands around her warm mug as she unlatched the screen door.

“You were watching our driveway?” Mei asked, a shy smile tugging at the corner of her mouth despite her attempt to sound surprised.

“I was watching to see how long it would take for the house to belong to you again,” Keiko replied smoothly, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation and letting the screen door whisper shut behind her.

She didn’t head for the kitchen chairs. Instead, she walked straight into Mei’s personal space by the counter, setting the rolled newspaper down on the quartz surface just inches from Mei’s hip. Up close, Keiko smelled of peppermint soap, warm skin, and espresso. Her dark eyes moved with unhurried appreciation from the sleep-tousled strands resting against Mei’s cheek, down the soft slope of her neck, and paused for a fraction of a second on the gentle rise and fall of Mei’s chest before coming back up to meet her gaze.

There was no apology in the way Keiko looked at her—none of the polite, averted glancing that people used in the suburbs to pretend they didn’t notice a woman’s body. Keiko looked at Mei as if she were reading a very good line of poetry that nobody else in the room knew how to translate.

“You didn’t sleep well,” Keiko observed softly, leaning one hip against the counter so they were standing almost shoulder to shoulder.

“The bed is in a different corner than at our old apartment,” Mei said quickly, looking down at her tea mug. “It takes a few nights to get used to the shadows.”

“Is that what it was?” Keiko tilted her head, lowering her chin just enough that Mei had to look back up into her face. “The shadows?”

A flush crept up Mei’s neck, warm and immediate. She couldn’t lie to those eyes; it felt like trying to hide behind a pane of clear glass. “Maybe not just the shadows,” Mei murmured.

Keiko’s mouth curved into that slow, electric grin that made the air between them feel ten degrees warmer. She reached out—not to the hair this time, but to the side of Mei’s mug, letting her warm fingers wrap directly over Mei’s cooler ones. She didn’t take the mug away; she simply held Mei’s hands in place against the ceramic, testing how still Mei would stay under her touch.

Mei didn’t pull back. Her breath grew shallower, her fingers softening beneath Keiko’s palms as a quiet wave of relief washed through her—the strange, intoxicating relief of not having to lead the dance.

“Look what landed at the edge of your grass while Tom was backing out,” Keiko said, nodding toward the blue-wrapped cylinder on the counter without releasing Mei’s hands. “The delivery driver throws mine onto the sidewalk and yours right into the sprinkler heads. I rescued it for you.”

“Tom reads the news on his tablet on the train,” Mei said, her voice barely above a whisper as Keiko’s thumb traced a slow, deliberate circle over her knuckle. “I don’t think we even ordered a paper.”

“I did,” Keiko said, her eyes bright with mischief and quiet authority. “A Sunday-through-Friday subscription, delivered to your lawn. Because I decided you and I need a morning routine.”

Mei blinked, her pulse drumming steadily against the light pressure of Keiko’s thumb. “You ordered a newspaper to our house?”

“Every morning, right after that silver car turns the corner at seven-forty-two,” Keiko said, stepping half an inch closer so the brushed fabric of her navy pullover grazed Mei’s bare arm, “I want you to walk out onto the grass, pick up my paper before the sprinklers soak it, and bring it over to my deck. You don’t even have to get dressed first. In fact, I prefer it if you don’t fuss.”

She finally slid her hands off Mei’s mug, letting her fingertips trail down the bare skin of Mei’s forearm all the way to the wrist before stepping back toward the screen door. The sudden absence of her warmth left Mei’s skin prickling in the cool kitchen air, making her want to lean forward to chase it.

“Think you can handle that job for me tomorrow morning, Mei?” Keiko asked, her hand resting on the screen latch as she looked back over her shoulder.

Mei stood by the island, her cheeks flushed and her fingers still curled around the mug where Keiko’s warmth lingered on the porcelain. “Seven-forty-five,” Mei said softly, meeting Keiko’s dark gaze without looking away. “I think that sounds fine.”

Chapter Three

By Wednesday morning, the click of the front door latch at seven-forty-two no longer sounded like Tom leaving for the office; it sounded like a starting gun.

Mei didn’t even wait by the dining room window anymore to watch his silver sedan turn the corner. Her bare feet were already carrying her across the cool oak floorboards toward the front porch while the hum of his tires was still fading down the block. Remembered instructions sat at the forefront of her mind like a quiet rhythm: Don’t fuss. Don’t change your clothes.

She wore only what she had slept in—a pale blush modal camisole with thin spaghetti straps and a pair of loose gray cotton sleep shorts that rode low on her hips. The morning mist off the lawn was cold against her ankles as she stepped into the wet grass, bent down to scoop up the blue-wrapped cylinder by the sprinkler head, and walked across the unfenced boundary between their two yards, taking the side gate that led directly onto Keiko’s redwood deck.

Over the past three mornings, the geography of that deck had changed.

On Monday, Keiko had taken the newspaper from Mei’s hands at the top of the steps, her fingers lingering over Mei’s wrists for three slow seconds before letting her go. On Tuesday, Keiko hadn’t reached for the paper at all; she had stepped behind Mei, placed a warm, steady palm against the bare skin at the small of her back, and guided her to the cushioned teak lounger under the Meyer lemon tree, standing over her while Mei sipped espresso and looked up through the leaves.

This morning, Keiko was waiting by the glass patio table with a white ceramic pour-over carafe in her hand. She wore black high-waisted running tights and a fitted emerald sports bra that showed off the taut, sun-bronzed definition of her shoulders and stomach. Her dark hair was dry and loose today, falling past her collarbones in sleek waves.

“Forty-eight seconds from the driveway to the gate,” Keiko said, not looking at a watch because she hadn’t needed one. Her dark eyes traveled slowly from Mei’s damp, grass-stained toes, up the soft curve of her thighs, to the thin modal fabric clinging to her breasts in the cool morning air. “You’re getting faster.”

“The grass was colder today,” Mei said, a breathless half-smile curving her lips as she walked across the redwood planks and held out the blue plastic cylinder.

Keiko didn’t take it. She stayed leaning back against the edge of the glass table, her ankles crossed, watching Mei’s outstretched arm with quiet amusement.

“Take the wrapper off for me first,” Keiko said, her voice smooth and unhurried. “I hate getting that cheap blue plastic on my fingers while I’m drinking coffee. And fold the business section to the back—you know I only read the arts and the

local column.”

For a fraction of a second, Mei paused. In her entire marriage—and in all the polite, cautious relationships that had come before it—men had always tripped over themselves to appear helpful, opening doors or asking what she preferred until every small decision felt like a chore she had to manage. Nobody had ever simply stood still, looked her in the eye, and given her a task purely for the pleasure of watching her do it.

Mei realized with a dizzying jolt that she wasn’t just tolerating the instructions—she was grading herself on how quickly she could anticipate them.

“Okay,” Mei murmured, lowering her eyes as a warm flush crept up her collarbone.

She hooked her finger into the knotted end of the blue plastic bag, stripped it off the newsprint, and tucked the discarded wrapper neatly into her palm. Stepping up to the glass patio table, she leaned forward from the waist to spread the broadsheet flat and sort the sections.

As soon as Mei bent over the table, Keiko moved.

Mei felt the sudden radiating heat of Keiko’s body an inch behind her before she felt the touch. Two warm, confident hands settled directly onto the bare skin of Mei’s waist, just where the hem of the blush camisole had ridden up above her shorts. Keiko’s thumbs pressed lightly into the small of her back while her fingers curved around the soft flare of Mei’s hips, holding her in place as Mei’s hands froze on the edge of the newsprint.

“Look how stiff you hold your shoulders when you’re trying to be neat,” Keiko murmured right behind her ear, her breath warm against the sensitive curve of Mei’s neck. “Let your weight drop, Mei. I’ve got you.”

A tiny, involuntary shiver ran down Mei’s spine, making her stomach tighten. Slowly, she exhaled and let the tension drain out of her back, allowing the soft curve of her hips to settle back against the front of Keiko’s thighs.

Keiko made a low, approving sound in her throat. Keeping one hand anchored firmly on Mei’s hip, Keiko slid her other hand slowly up the side of Mei’s ribcage—her palm skimming right below the outer swell of Mei’s breast through the thin modal fabric—before reaching up to the nape of Mei’s neck. With practiced ease, Keiko tugged the tortoiseshell clip from Mei’s hair and tossed it onto the table beside the coffee carafe, letting the dark strands tumble down over Mei’s bare shoulders.

“Much better,” Keiko whispered, burying her fingers into the loosened hair at the base of Mei’s skull and tilting her head back just an inch, testing her resistance. “I told you not to fuss before you come over here. Why did you clip it up?”

“I thought it looked messy,” Mei breathed, her eyes half-closed as she leaned backward into the cradle of Keiko’s palm, her heart hammering against her ribs.

“I decide what looks messy on my deck,” Keiko said softly, her thumb tracing the delicate line of Mei’s jaw until Mei turned her face up toward hers. Keiko looked down into her flushed face with dark, steady satisfaction, her lower hand tightening possessively on Mei’s waist. “Now finish folding my paper so you can sit down and drink your coffee.”

Mei swallowed hard, her fingers trembling slightly as she reached back down to align the edges of the newsprint without moving an inch away from Keiko’s hands. “Yes, Keiko,” she whispered.

Chapter Four

The idea had been planted the morning before, dropped into the conversation so casually that Mei hadn’t realized it was a command until she was already back inside her own house.

They had been finishing their espresso at the glass patio table when Keiko’s gaze drifted past the redwood railing to the narrow, slate-tiled lap pool that ran along the southern edge of her yard. The water was still and clear under the shade of the Meyer lemon tree, sending faint ripples of reflected light across the underside of the pergola.

“The heater kicks on at six,” Keiko had remarked, resting her chin in her palm while her other hand lingered casually on Mei’s bare knee under the table. “Starting tomorrow, I want you to wear a bikini when you bring my paper over. We might feel like taking a swim before the sun gets too high.”

Now it was Thursday, seven-forty-three in the morning, and Tom’s silver sedan had just disappeared down the street.

Mei stood in front of the full-length mirror in the upstairs master bathroom, her hands hovering over the thin strings tied at the sides of her hips. She had pulled out a deep plum two-piece she had packed for her honeymoon—a suit Tom had glanced at once by the hotel pool before burying his nose in a travel guide. On Mei’s compact frame, the cut was far less modest than it had looked on the department store hanger. The small triangles of fabric barely contained the soft, full swell of her breasts, and the low-rise bottoms left the entire curve of her waist and hips bare.

She reached toward the hook on the back of the door for her linen robe, then stopped, her fingers curling back into her palm.

I told you not to fuss before you come over here.

Her heart gave a slow, heavy thud against her ribs. Leaving the robe on the hook meant walking out her front door, crossing the open suburban lawn to the curb, and stepping through the side gate in nothing but two scraps of plum fabric while the neighborhood commuters were still driving past.

Mei took a shallow breath, turned off the bathroom light, and walked barefoot down the stairs.

When she opened the front door, the cool morning air hit her bare stomach and thighs like a physical touch, raising instant goosebumps along her skin. She kept her eyes fixed on the blue-wrapped cylinder lying near the wet sidewalk, acutely aware of the soft sway of her body with every brisk step across the grass. No cars passed, yet by the time she scooped up the newspaper and slipped through Keiko’s cedar side gate, her cheeks were burning and her breathing was light

and quick.

She stepped up onto the redwood deck, expecting to see towels laid out by the water and Keiko waiting in a one-piece racerback suit.

The pool cover was still closed, sealed tight from end to end.

And at the glass patio table, Keiko sat with her legs crossed, completely and impeccably dressed. She wore tailored cream linen trousers that fell to her ankles, leather loafers, and a crisp charcoal button-down shirt with the cuffs rolled neatly to her forearms. Even a thin gold watch encircled her wrist.

Mei froze at the top of the steps, clutching the blue-wrapped newspaper against her bare midriff as the realization washed over her. Nothing tilts the gravity between two people faster than one standing fully clothed while the other is stripped to the skin.

“Good morning,” Keiko said warmly, lowering her espresso cup to the saucer.

She didn’t apologize for the closed pool cover, nor did she offer an explanation for her clothes. Instead, she leaned back in her chair and let her dark eyes travel slowly, deliberately, over every inch of Mei’s exposed skin—from the damp soles of her bare feet, up the soft inner curve of her thighs, across her flat, trembling stomach, to the deep shadow between her breasts where the thin plum string pulled taut against her neck.

Mei’s instinct was to shift her weight and use the newspaper as a shield, but the steadiness of Keiko’s gaze held her in place. Under the cool morning breeze and the heat of Keiko’s inspection, Mei felt the small buds of her nipples tighten visibly against the thin swim fabric.

“I thought—” Mei started, her voice catching slightly in her throat. “You said we might go swimming.”

“I said we might,” Keiko replied smoothly, a faint, knowing smile curving her mouth as she gestured with two fingers toward the table. “The water looked a little brisk this morning. Come here and bring me my paper, Mei.”

Swallowing her embarrassment—and the strange, liquid heat that accompanied it—Mei walked across the wooden planks. Every step felt magnified by the crisp rustle of Keiko’s linen trousers and the quiet clink of her watch against the glass tabletop. When Mei reached the table and stripped the blue plastic off the broadsheet, she didn’t have to be told to sort the sections; she leaned forward automatically to fold the business pages to the back.

In the bikini, leaning over the glass table meant offering her body to Keiko’s view without a single layer of sleepwear to soften the lines.

Keiko didn’t stand up behind her this time. She stayed seated, cool and composed in her tailored shirt, and reached out with one hand to hook a single forefinger inside the thin plum string resting against Mei’s bare hip. With a gentle, effortless tug, Keiko drew Mei half a step closer until Mei’s bare thigh pressed directly against the tailored linen of Keiko’s knee.

“That color looks incredible on your skin,” Keiko murmured, her knuckles brushing the warm curve of Mei’s abdomen as she tested the tension of the knot at her hip. “Much better than those baggy gray shorts. In fact, I don’t see why you’d wear anything else when you come over here in the mornings.”

Mei looked down at the woman sitting calmly beside her—dressed for the world while holding her by a single bikini string on an open deck—and felt the last thread of her hesitation snap into pure, breathless surrender.

“Aren’t you cold out here?” Mei whispered, though it was her own bare skin that was shivering beneath Keiko’s warm knuckles.

Keiko slid her palm flat against the bare curve of Mei’s hip, giving it a slow, possessive squeeze as she looked up into Mei’s flushed face. “Not at all. Sit down on my lap while I read the headlines—I’ll warm you right up.”

Chapter Five

The screen of Mei’s phone lit up on the nightstand at seven-forty-one, vibrating once against the dark wood while the sound of the garage door rolling shut echoed up from the driveway below.

Mei didn’t even need to unlock the display to read the notification banner. Two words sat in the center of the glass, sent from the bungalow next door:

Bikini again.

There was no question mark at the end of it, no mention of the pool heater, and no polite pretense about going for a morning swim. Yesterday, Mei had been able to tell herself—at least until she reached the top of the redwood steps—that she was dressing for the water. Putting the plum two-piece on a second time meant admitting to both of them that she was dressing entirely for Keiko’s eyes.

Mei sat on the edge of the mattress as Tom’s sedan backed down the drive and disappeared into the morning mist. Her fingers went to the hem of her sleep shirt, lifting it over her head before the hum of his tires had even faded from the street. The plum fabric was still faintly cool where it hung on the bathroom hook. As she tied the thin strings behind her neck and at the curves of her hips, her reflection in the vanity mirror looked back at her with wide, dark eyes and a flush that had already crept from her collarbones to her cheeks.

She didn’t reach for the robe. She didn’t even pause at the top of the stairs.

Outside, the morning air carried a sharper chill than it had the day before, heavy with the scent of damp cedar and crushed lemon leaves. Walking across the open front grass toward the curb felt both terrifying and strangely intoxicating; every breath seemed to pull the thin triangles of plum nylon tighter against the swell of her breasts, and the wet blades of grass brushed against her ankles like tiny electric sparks. She scooped up the blue-wrapped cylinder by the sprinkler head, kept her chin lowered against the empty street, and slipped through the side gate onto Keiko’s deck.

Keiko was leaning back in the wide teak armchair under the pergola, a steaming mug of coffee cradled in one hand.

Today, the contrast between them was even more deliberate. Keiko wore dark, fitted selvedge jeans, white leather low-tops, and a soft oatmeal cashmere sweater pushed up slightly at the forearms. She looked warm, composed, and completely untouchable, watching Mei climb the steps with the quiet, focused satisfaction of a collector admiring something rare.

“Look at that,” Keiko murmured, setting her mug down on the glass table as Mei approached. “Not even forty seconds today. And you didn’t forget the dress code.”

“You texted me before his car was even out of the driveway,” Mei said softly, stepping up to the table and slipping the blue plastic wrapper off the broadsheet. Her hands moved with practiced care now, folding the business section cleanly to the back while standing close enough that her bare knee brushed the dark denim of Keiko’s leg.

“I didn’t want you wasting time opening your closet,” Keiko replied.

Before Mei could step back from the table, Keiko reached out with both hands, her palms settling warm and sure against the bare curves of Mei’s waist. The contrast between the soft cashmere at Keiko’s wrists and the cool, goosebumped skin of Mei’s stomach made Mei let out a small, involuntary breath. With an easy, unhurried pull, Keiko guided her sideways until Mei was sitting across her thighs again, the rough seam of Keiko’s jeans pressing directly against the bare back of Mei’s legs.

As Mei settled across Keiko’s thighs the rough seam of the denim pressed a warm line under her bare legs. Keiko’s left arm came around her midriff at once, palm flat against the soft skin just below her ribs, holding her pinned against the front of the sweater. The cashmere brushed Mei’s bare arm, warm where the morning air was not.

Keiko’s right hand left the bikini string. Her fingertips trailed up the center of Mei’s stomach, unhurried, and paused at the lower edge of one plum triangle. Without any shift in her posture or her tone she slipped two fingers beneath the thin nylon and closed them around the already-tightened tip of Mei’s nipple.

“Air’s sharper than it looks this morning,” Keiko said, the way someone might remark on the mist still hanging over the lawn. She gave the nipple a light, testing pinch through the fabric, then rolled it once between thumb and forefinger. “You’re answering it already.”

The pinch was not hard enough to hurt. It was only firm enough to send a bright, sudden spark straight down through Mei’s belly. She felt the nipple harden further against Keiko’s fingers; the thin nylon did nothing to hide the response. Mei’s breath caught hard. Her hands came up without her deciding to, resting on the soft shoulders of the oatmeal sweater.

Keiko released that side and moved to the other, repeating the same casual inspection—another light pinch, another slow roll—while her dark eyes stayed on Mei’s face, watching the flush deepen and the way Mei’s lips parted on a small sound she couldn’t quite swallow.

“Both of them,” Keiko murmured. “Good. I like knowing when the weather’s getting to you.”

Her hand stayed where it was, cupping the soft weight of Mei’s breast through the nylon for a moment longer, thumb stroking once across the peaked tip. Mei’s back arched the smallest amount into the touch. The cool air raised gooseflesh along her ribs, but the heat under Keiko’s palm stayed concentrated right at the tip of her breast. Keiko’s thumb circled again, slower, pressing just enough that the fabric dragged against the sensitive skin. Mei’s thighs tightened against the denim. She could feel the seam of Keiko’s jeans through the thin bikini bottom where her weight rested.

Keiko’s left arm shifted, the hand that had been at Mei’s waist sliding up to rest just beneath her other breast, supporting the soft curve from below. She did not pinch this time. She simply held, thumb and forefinger framing the tight nipple through the nylon while her other hand continued its slow, measured attention to the first one. Mei’s pulse fluttered visibly at the base of her throat. Every time Keiko’s thumb dragged across the tip, a fresh spark traveled down through her stomach and settled low between her hips.

“Still cold?” Keiko asked, voice quiet, almost conversational. Her fingers gave another gentle pinch, then released, only to return a second later with the same light pressure. “Or is it something else?”

Mei couldn’t answer. Her mouth had gone dry. She felt the heat gathering under the plum fabric of the bottoms, a slick, insistent warmth that made her shift once against Keiko’s thigh before she caught herself. Keiko’s mouth curved at the movement. She leaned in, close enough that the soft cashmere of her sleeve brushed the side of Mei’s breast, and pressed her lips to the corner of Mei’s mouth.

The kiss started there—light, almost testing—then moved fully onto Mei’s lips. Keiko’s mouth was warm and firm, tasting faintly of coffee. She kissed with the same steady possession she used for every other touch, guiding rather than asking. Her tongue slid once against Mei’s lower lip. Mei opened for her without thinking. The hand at her breast squeezed in time with the kiss, thumb still working the nipple in slow circles through the nylon. Mei’s fingers tightened on the shoulders of the sweater. She could feel the low, steady rise and fall of Keiko’s breathing against her bare side.

Keiko drew the kiss out, unhurried. When she finally eased back, only far enough to look at Mei’s face, her right hand remained where it was, still cupping, still stroking the tight tip with the pad of her thumb. Mei’s chest rose and fell quickly. The cool air moved over the damp skin of her stomach, but the only heat that mattered was the one Keiko was drawing out with that single, deliberate touch.

“There,” Keiko said softly. “That helped.”

Her thumb gave one last slow circle. Then she lowered her hand, fingertips trailing down the center of Mei’s stomach again until they reached the thin string at her hip. She hooked one finger beneath the knot and gave it a light, testing tug, watching Mei’s face the entire time.

Keiko didn’t pick up the newspaper right away. Instead, her left arm wrapped securely around Mei’s bare midriff, holding her pinned against the soft front of the cashmere sweater, while her right hand drifted lazily to the thin plum string tied at Mei’s right hip. Keiko’s forefinger hooked beneath the bow, rolling the narrow cord between her finger and thumb as if testing how little effort it would take to undo it.

“Honestly, Mei,” Keiko said, her voice dropping into a low, teasing purr right against the shell of Mei’s ear, “these two little scraps of fabric are working so hard they barely count as clothes anyway.”

Mei swallowed, her hands resting nervously against Keiko’s shoulders as she felt the knot at her hip tighten and slacken under Keiko’s playful fingers. “It’s the smallest suit I own.”

“I can see that,” Keiko laughed softly, letting her gaze drop down the open line of Mei’s throat to the deep shadow between her breasts, where Mei’s heartbeat was visibly fluttering beneath the skin. “One of these mornings, you might as well save yourself the two minutes it takes to tie these knots and just bring my paper over naked. Think how much time you’d shave off your delivery.”

She said it with a light, easy grin—just breezy enough to pass for a joke on a sunlit patio—yet her dark eyes didn’t leave Mei’s face for a fraction of a second, measuring the exact depth of the blush that bloomed across Mei’s skin and the sudden hitch in her breathing.

Mei didn’t pull away, and she didn’t laugh it off; deep down, beneath the shyness fluttering in her chest, a quiet, dizzying part of her was already wondering which morning the text on her nightstand would stop asking for the bikini.

“Someone driving down the street would see me,” Mei whispered, though it sounded less like a refusal and more like a logistical question she was waiting for Keiko to solve.

Keiko’s smile deepened, her thumb sliding off the knot to trace a slow, possessive line along the bare crest of Mei’s hipbone. “The hedges by the sidewalk are thicker than you think, sweetheart. Now hand me the arts section and stay right where you are.”

Chapter Six

It was Tom who brought it up over pancakes on Saturday morning, looking pleased with himself in the way he always did when he checked an item off an invisible list of neighborhood etiquette.

“We should have Keiko over for dinner tonight,” he said, wiping a drop of syrup from the rim of his plate with a paper napkin. “She’s been checking in on us all week, and we finally got the dining table cleared off. I can pick up a couple of cedar-plank salmons at the market.”

Across the island, Mei’s fingers tightened imperceptibly around the handle of her coffee mug.

Less than twenty-four hours earlier, she had been sitting across Keiko’s jeans in a damp bikini while Keiko’s mouth opened hers and Keiko’s thumb worked slow, deliberate circles through thin plum nylon. Even now, beneath the soft cotton of her Saturday cardigan, Mei’s breasts felt faintly tender, her skin carrying a phantom memory of where Keiko’s palms had cupped and held her in the cool morning air.

“Tonight?” Mei asked, keeping her voice carefully level as she looked down into her cup. “Are you sure you don’t want another weekend to finish unpacking first?”

“That’s the best part about neighbors—it doesn’t have to be fancy,” Tom said cheerfully, already reaching for his phone. “Give me her number and I’ll text her.”

“I’ll text her,” Mei said quickly—a fraction of a second too fast. She softened her tone and added, “She mentioned she usually goes for a long trail run on Saturday mornings. I know when she checks her phone.”

When Mei sent the invitation ten minutes later from the quiet of the upstairs hallway, Keiko’s reply came back in less than fifteen seconds:

Seven o’clock. Wear the black slip dress with the thin straps—the one I saw hanging on your laundry rack on Wednesday. Leave your hair down.

By six-fifty that evening, the house smelled of roasted garlic, lemon zest, and cedar smoke. Mei stood at the kitchen island chopping fresh dill, dressed in the calf-length black silk slip dress. Without a cardigan over her shoulders, the bias-cut silk skimmed the compact curves of her waist and hips like liquid, and every cooler draft from the air conditioning raised the exact same taut response beneath the thin silk that Keiko had drawn out with her fingers the morning before.

Tom walked into the kitchen wearing a pressed gingham button-down and khaki chinos, checking his watch. “Did she say if she likes red or white?”

Before Mei could answer, the front door opened without a knock.

“Red with salmon if it’s Pinot, Tom, though you really should latch your screen door if you’re going to keep all the lights on,” Keiko called out, strolling down the front hallway with the unhurried ease of someone returning to her own house after an errand.

She wore tailored black wide-leg trousers that lengthened her stride and a sleeveless ivory silk mock-neck top that showed off the sculpted curve of her shoulders and arms. She carried two bottles of dark-labeled Pinot Noir by their necks in one hand.

Tom stepped forward with his host smile ready, reaching out to take the wine. “Hey, welcome! Let me grab those for you—can I get you a glass of sparkling water while I open one?”

Keiko didn’t hand him the bottles. Instead, she walked straight past his outstretched hand into the kitchen, set the wine down on the counter beside the cutting board, and slid her left arm smoothly around Mei’s bare waist—her palm settling flat and possessive against the black silk just below Mei’s ribs, in the exact spot where she had pinned Mei against her cashmere sweater the morning before.

“Actually, Tom, grab the corkscrew out of the second drawer and open the darker bottle so it can breathe,” Keiko said, not even looking at him as she leaned in and brushed her lips lightly against Mei’s temple, right where her hair fell loose over her ear. “And check the grill—I smelled the cedar scorching when I walked across the lawn. You have the right burner turned up too high.”

Mei’s breath caught at the familiar scent of citrus leaves and warm skin enveloping her right in the center of her own kitchen. She expected Tom to laugh awkwardly, or step between them, or at least question why their new neighbor had her fingers splayed across his wife’s ribcage.

Instead, Tom stood frozen by the end of the island for three full seconds.

His eyes went from Keiko’s bronzed, muscular arm wrapped around his wife’s narrow waist to the deep flush blooming down Mei’s neck. A sudden, heavy lump formed in the center of his throat—not anger, and not quite confusion, but a hot, dizzying constriction that made his palms go damp against his khakis. Watching Keiko walk into his kitchen, ignore his outstretched hand, and hold his wife while giving him chores in his own house sent a strange, paralyzing current straight to his stomach.

“Right,” Tom said, his voice coming out half a register quieter than before. “The right burner always runs hot. Let me go turn it down.”

As soon as the patio door slid shut behind him, Keiko’s hand slid an inch higher along Mei’s side, the side of her thumb grazing the lower swell of Mei’s breast through the thin black silk.

“You listened,” Keiko murmured against her ear, her dark eyes crinkling as she looked down the front of Mei’s dress. “Black lace under this,” Keiko murmured against her ear, her dark eyes crinkling as her fingers traced the thin strap beneath the silk. “You didn’t put that on for Tom, did you?”

“You told me not to fuss,” Mei whispered, her knees feeling slightly weak as she leaned into the steady support of Keiko’s hip.

By the time they sat down at the dining table twenty minutes later, the geometry of the house had quietly inverted. Keiko hadn’t taken the guest chair across from them; she had pulled her chair up close to the corner near the head of the table, less than six inches from Mei’s right side, leaving Tom seated alone down the length of the oak planks as if he were a polite boarder joining the couple for a meal.

Throughout dinner, whenever Mei reached for her water glass or set down her fork, Keiko’s left hand remained resting underneath the table on Mei’s bare thigh where the silk dress had ridden up, her thumb tracing slow, absentminded arcs against the warm skin inside Mei’s knee. Above the table, Keiko kept the conversation flowing seamlessly, asking Mei about her favorite art galleries and refilling Mei’s wine glass while only glancing down the table at Tom when something needed to be fetched from the kitchen.

“Tom, be a dear and bring out those lemon tarts from the fridge before the crust gets too cold,” Keiko said as she took the last bite from Mei’s fork, her eyes locked on Mei’s parted lips. “And pour yourself a little more wine while you’re in there—you’ve barely said three words all night.”

Tom pushed his chair back at once, his heart thumping hard against his ribs as he carried their empty plates into the kitchen. From the doorway, holding the dessert plates in his hands, he watched Keiko drape her arm across the back of Mei’s chair, her fingers twining casually into the loose dark hair at the nape of Mei’s neck while Mei tilted her head sideways into the touch with a soft, unguarded laugh he had never heard his wife make before.

When he set the tarts down and returned to his seat at the far end of the table, Keiko leaned back, swirling the last ruby inch of Pinot in her glass while her other hand rested openly on the curve of Mei’s shoulder.

“This second bottle is far too good to rush,” Keiko said, looking across the candlelit wood at Tom with a calm, unblinking smile that dared him to object. “And honestly, walking all the way back across that dark lawn in heels after two glasses sounds like a terrible idea. I think I might just stay the night, Mei—what do you think?”

Mei’s lips parted, her thigh warming beneath the table where Keiko’s hand had returned to squeeze her knee, and she glanced down the table at her husband with wide, shining eyes. “We have plenty of room, don’t we, Tom?”

Chapter Seven

For two beats, the only sound in the dining room was the soft hiss of the candle wick settling into a pool of melted wax.

Tom looked from his wife’s flushed, expectant face to the woman seated beside her. Under the edge of the oak table, he knew Keiko’s hand was still resting on Mei’s bare leg; he could tell by the slight, inward tilt of Mei’s shoulders and the shallow rhythm of her breathing beneath the thin black silk of her slip dress.

“Of course,” Tom heard himself say, his voice sounding slightly parched as he reached for his water glass. “We haven’t set up the bed frame in the spare room yet, though. It’s still stacked to the ceiling with moving boxes, so the only other place is the—”

“Oh, I’m not sleeping on a sofa, Tom,” Keiko interrupted smoothly, setting her empty wine glass down on the wood with a crisp, final click.

She didn’t laugh to soften the statement, and she didn’t frame it as a joke. She simply leaned back in her chair, draped her bare, sculpted arm openly across the back of Mei’s shoulders, and looked down the length of the table at him with calm, unblinking certainty.

“I ran eight miles on the ridge trail this morning,” Keiko continued, her fingers idly toying with a dark strand of hair resting against Mei’s collarbone. “If I curl up on living room cushions tonight, my lower back will be tight until Wednesday. Besides, you have that huge king mattress upstairs, and Mei barely takes up a third of it. I’ll just sleep on your side tonight, and you can stretch out on the sectional downstairs.”

The audacity of the proposal hung in the warm air above the dessert plates. She hadn’t asked if he minded giving up his bed in his own house on a Saturday night; she had simply rearranged the household sleeping chart and assigned him the living room.

Tom opened his mouth, waiting for the natural reflex of protest to rise up in his chest—or for Mei to laugh nervously and remind their neighbor that they had only been married for three weeks.

Instead, beneath the table, Keiko’s palm gave the inside of Mei’s knee a slow, reassuring squeeze.

Mei looked at Keiko’s profile—so composed, so effortlessly in command of the room—and felt the familiar, heavy relief of letting someone else decide what made sense. In Mei’s mind, the geometry immediately shifted to fit Keiko’s voice: the spare room really was full of dusty cardboard, Keiko really couldn’t sleep on a narrow couch after running the trails, and the upstairs mattress was wide and cool.

“That actually makes a lot more sense,” Mei said, turning toward Tom with an earnestness that sent a fresh jolt straight down his spine. Her cheeks were bright pink, her dark eyes shining in the candlelight. “The sectional downstairs is brand new, Tom, and you fall asleep watching TV down there half the time anyway. Plus, Keiko and I aren’t even finished talking.”

Tom stared at the two of them seated together at the head of his table.

Every rational instinct told him to stand up and put a stop to it. Yet the moment he pictured Keiko climbing the stairs in her sleeveless silk top to slide between his sheets beside Mei—while he lay exiled in the dark directly beneath their floorboards—that thick, dizzying heat surged back into his throat, heavier and more insistent than before. His palms felt damp against the napkin in his lap. He felt small, displaced, and utterly unable to look away.

“Yeah,” Tom said quietly, lowering his gaze to his plate as a tremor of strange, submissive excitement tightened his stomach. “The sectional is plenty long enough for me. I’ll go grab an extra blanket out of the hall closet.”

“Bring down your own pillow from the bedroom while you’re at it, Tom,” Keiko added briskly, rising from her chair and extending a hand downward to draw Mei to her feet. “I like having two pillows under my head when I read in bed, so I’ll need the ones that are already up there.”

Mei took Keiko’s hand without hesitation, letting Keiko pull her up until they stood hip to hip beside the table. The black silk of Mei’s slip dress brushed against the tailored line of Keiko’s trousers.

“I’ll get you one of my silk t-shirts to sleep in,” Mei murmured, looking up into Keiko’s face as if Tom had already left the room.

“Don’t bother digging through your drawers on my account,” Keiko replied softly, her thumb tracing the warm hollow just above Mei’s hipbone before guiding her toward the staircase with a firm hand at the small of her back.

Keiko’s hand stayed firm at the small of Mei’s back as they climbed. The silk of the slip dress slid under her palm with every step, cool and thin enough that Mei felt the exact heat of each finger through the fabric. At the landing Keiko paused, turning Mei slightly so their hips met, and looked down at her in the low light from the stairwell window.

“You’re shaking,” Keiko said, not unkindly. Her other hand rose and rested just under Mei’s collarbone, thumb stroking once across the base of her throat. “Still deciding?”

Mei’s mouth opened, then closed. The question felt too large for the narrow hallway. She nodded, or thought she did. Keiko’s thumb pressed lightly against the pulse there and the nod turned into a small, helpless lean forward. Keiko’s

mouth found the corner of hers, brief and warm, then moved lower to the soft skin just beneath her ear. The kiss lingered until Mei's knees softened against the edge of the top step.

"Good," Keiko murmured against her neck. She guided Mei the last few feet into the master bedroom and closed the door behind them with her heel. The bedside lamp was already on, casting the same amber glow Tom would see later. Keiko walked Mei toward the bed but stopped her at the foot of it, hands settling on the silk at her waist.

"Turn around for me."

Mei turned. Keiko's fingers found the zipper at the back of the slip and drew it down in one slow, unbroken line. The dress loosened. Cool air touched Mei's spine. Keiko's palms slid inside the open fabric, warm against bare skin, and eased the straps from her shoulders until the silk pooled at her elbows and then at her wrists. Mei stood in the black lace bra and matching panties she had put on before dinner, the ones she had chosen without quite admitting why. The room felt larger without the dress. Her arms wanted to cross over her chest; Keiko's hands on her upper arms kept them down.

"Look at me," Keiko said.

Mei looked. Keiko's dark eyes moved over her without hurry—collarbones, the soft swell above the lace, the narrow waist, the curve of her hips—then returned to her face. One hand lifted and cupped Mei's breast through the lace, thumb finding the nipple already tightened against the fabric. She circled it once, the same measured pressure she had used on the deck, then pinched lightly through the lace until Mei's breath broke on a small sound.

"Still cold?" Keiko asked, almost conversational. Her other hand slid down the bare line of Mei's stomach and settled low on her hip, thumb hooked under the edge of the panties. She tugged the fabric a fraction of an inch away from the skin, then let it snap gently back. "Or is it something else again?"

Mei's thighs pressed together. The heat between them was immediate and unmistakable, a slick warmth she could feel against the thin lace. Keiko's thumb stroked once along the crease where hip met thigh, close enough that the knuckle brushed the damp fabric. Mei's head tipped forward until her forehead rested against Keiko's shoulder. The cashmere was gone; she felt only the smooth silk of Keiko's sleeveless top and the steady rise of her breathing underneath.

Keiko's hand left her breast and moved to the clasp at her back. The bra loosened. She drew the straps down Mei's arms and let the lace fall to the rug. For a moment she simply looked, then bent and closed her mouth over one bare nipple, warm and wet, tongue circling before she drew it lightly between her

teeth. Mei’s hands found Keiko’s shoulders. The pull sent another bright spark straight down through her belly. Keiko switched to the other side, slower, one hand still resting low on Mei’s hip and stroking the edge of the panties in time with the soft suction of her mouth.

When she finally lifted her head, Mei’s nipples were tight and shining in the lamplight. Keiko’s thumb brushed one, then the other, watching the small shiver that followed each touch.

“Lie down on your side of the bed,” Keiko said, voice quiet. “Face the window. I’ll be right behind you.”

Mei moved. The sheets were cool against her bare skin. She heard the soft sounds of Keiko undressing—silk sliding free, trousers folding—and then the mattress dipped as Keiko settled on Tom’s side, bare legs brushing Mei’s from behind. One warm arm came around her waist. Keiko’s palm settled flat on Mei’s stomach, fingers spread, and stayed there, holding her still while the rest of the house went quiet below them.

Five minutes later, a hesitant tap sounded against the closed bedroom door before the handle turned.

Tom stepped halfway across the threshold, needing his phone charger from the outlet beside the nightstand and his toothbrush from the master bath. He stopped dead as soon as his eyes adjusted to the low amber glow of the bedside lamp.

At the foot of the bed, Mei’s black silk slip dress lay pooled on the rug beside the discarded scrap of her black lace bra. And on the mattress, the space that had belonged to him an hour ago was completely occupied. Keiko lay stretched out on his side of the bed with both of the plush king pillows stacked beneath her head, her bare shoulders warm in the lamplight. Mei lay curled on her side facing the window, the white sheet drawn only to her waist, her bare back pressed flush against the front of Keiko’s body while Keiko’s bronzed arm rested possessively across Mei’s bare stomach, holding her in place.

Mei didn’t turn around when the door opened; she only closed her eyes tighter as her breathing hitched beneath Keiko’s palm.

Keiko didn’t move her hand from Mei’s stomach, nor did she pull the sheet an inch higher to cover either of them. She simply turned her head on Tom’s pillow and watched him with calm, dark eyes as he crept around the corner of the mattress, crouched by the baseboard to yank his white phone charger out of the wall outlet, and backed away.

“Leave the bathroom light off if you’re getting your toothbrush, Tom,” Keiko said softly, her fingers flexing once against the bare skin of Mei’s waist. “And pull the

bedroom door all the way shut until it clicks on your way out—Mei and I are done talking for the night.”

Chapter Eight

By Monday morning, the plum bikini had already served its purpose.

When Tom’s silver sedan backed down the driveway at seven-forty-two, Mei stood behind the sheer curtains of the dining room wearing only her thin white linen robe tied loosely at the waist. She hadn’t needed a text message on the nightstand to tell her what came next. After Saturday night—after waking up Sunday morning with her bare back still pressed flush against Keiko’s warmth and the scent of citrus and espresso clinging to the master sheets—the two little triangles of swimwear felt like a polite fiction neither of them needed anymore.

She waited until the hum of Tom’s tires disappeared around the corner, stepped barefoot across the dewy grass to scoop up the blue-wrapped cylinder by the sprinkler head, and slipped through the cedar side gate onto Keiko’s redwood deck.

Keiko sat at the glass patio table in the shade of the Meyer lemon tree, looking over her laptop screen through a pair of tortoiseshell reading glasses. She was dressed for the day in tailored charcoal trousers, pointed black flats, and a crisp white poplin button-down with the collar popped slightly against her neck.

When Mei reached the top of the steps, Keiko didn’t look up from her screen right away. She simply lifted one finger from the trackpad and gestured toward the sunny patch of redwood planks beside her chair.

“Wrapper off, business section to the back,” Keiko said, her voice calm and conversational in the quiet morning air. “And take the robe off before you lay it down, Mei. I’m tired of looking at knots.”

Mei’s heart gave a heavy, familiar thud against her ribs. The cedar fence shielded the deck from the street, yet the morning sky above the pergola was wide open, and the breeze coming off the lap pool was cool and sharp. Her fingers went to the linen belt at her waist. There was a dizzying clarity in realizing that her modesty had never really belonged to her—it had simply been waiting for someone confident enough to ask her to set it down.

Slowly, Mei pulled the knot free. She let the white linen part down the center of her body, shrugged the sleeves off her shoulders, and folded the robe neatly over the back of the opposite patio chair.

Keiko finally took off her reading glasses, folded the stems with a soft click, and leaned back in her chair. Her dark eyes moved unhurriedly over Mei’s completely bare frame—from the pale curve of her hips where the tan lines hadn’t quite faded, up her soft stomach, to the full swell of her breasts rising and falling in the cool shade. Without a single scrap of fabric left to hide behind, every goosebump and every ragged breath was laid out across the table like part of the morning

delivery.

“Look how well you listen,” Keiko murmured, reaching out to rest her palm flat against the bare skin of Mei’s outer thigh as Mei leaned forward to spread the newspaper across the glass. The cuff of Keiko’s crisp white shirt brushed against the curve of Mei’s hip, the contrast between the starched cotton and Mei’s nakedness sending a hot current straight down to her knees. “Stand right there between my knees while I finish this email.”

* * *

If the mornings belonged to Keiko’s deck, the evenings soon stopped belonging to Tom at all.

That night, Tom arrived home just after six, loosening his tie in the front hallway with the quiet, hopeful assumption that Saturday night had been a one-time indulgence after too much Pinot Noir. He had spent the day at his desk trying not to think about the sight of his wife curled bare-chested against their neighbor’s body in the amber lamplight, telling himself that by Monday evening their house would settle back into normal newlywed rhythms.

They had barely finished clearing the dinner dishes at eight o’clock when the front door latch clicked open without a knock.

Tom froze by the kitchen sink, a damp dish towel in his hands, as the light, unmistakable cadence of Keiko’s footsteps crossed the oak floorboards of the foyer.

Keiko walked into the kitchen wearing fitted dark joggers and a cropped slate-gray cashmere hoodie, carrying a small leather toiletry case in one hand as naturally as if she were returning from a business trip. She didn’t offer an excuse about wine or sore muscles from a trail run tonight. Instead, she walked straight up behind Mei at the island, slid both arms around Mei’s waist, and rested her chin casually on Mei’s shoulder while looking directly across the counter at Tom.

“Long day at the office, Tom?” Keiko asked lightly, her fingers splaying across the front of Mei’s thin cotton blouse. “You look wiped out. I brought my own charger over tonight so you won’t have to come tip-toeing around the bed looking for yours.”

Mei didn’t stiffen in Keiko’s arms; she leaned her head back against Keiko’s temple with a soft, involuntary sigh, her hands coming up to cover Keiko’s forearms at her waist.

Tom’s throat went dry, that same heavy, paralyzing warmth pooling low in his stomach as he looked at the small leather case in Keiko’s hand and the way his wife’s body softened instantly against her neighbor’s chest. He realized with a sudden, breathless certainty that he wasn’t looking at a guest overstaying a

weekend visit—he was watching the permanent eviction of his own marriage bed.

“I left the extra blanket folded on the end of the sectional for you, Tom,” Mei said softly, looking at her husband from inside the circle of Keiko’s arms, her cheeks flushed and her dark eyes bright with an unspoken plea for him to keep playing his part. “Is it warm enough down here, or do you want me to turn the thermostat up a degree before we go upstairs?”

Tom swallowed past the thick lump in his throat, his fingers tightening on the damp dish towel as he looked from Mei’s parted lips to Keiko’s calm, expectant smile. “No,” he murmured, lowering his eyes to the counter. “The temperature down here is fine.”

“Good night then, Tom,” Keiko said smoothly, turning Mei toward the hallway with a firm, possessive hand resting low on her hip. “Try to keep the television volume down—we’re turning in early tonight.”

Chapter Nine

By Friday evening, the cedar side gate between the two yards stayed unlatched permanently.

Keiko was hosting three friends from the city for dinner on her redwood deck—an architect named Claire, her partner Lauren, and a gallery director named Julian who had driven up from the coast. At six-thirty, while the string lights above the pergola were just beginning to glow warm amber against the twilight, Mei stood in front of Keiko's bedroom mirror letting Keiko fasten a thin gold chain around her neck.

Keiko had chosen a deep emerald halter dress for her that left Mei's shoulders and back completely bare while hugging the compact, soft flare of her hips. Keiko stood behind her in a tailored black jumpsuit with a sharp, plunging neckline, her palms sliding down Mei's bare ribs to settle possessively over her stomach.

"They're going to love you," Keiko murmured against the side of Mei's neck, watching Mei's reflection in the glass. "And Tom's already in the kitchen icing the white wine and slicing the baguette, so neither of us has to lift a finger tonight."

Mei looked at their reflection—Keiko tall, bronzed, and commanding behind her; her own cheeks flushed, her lips parted, her skin still humming from five mornings of standing naked between Keiko's knees on the deck outside. The sight of them framed together in the mirror felt so natural that the memory of her wedding photos from a month ago seemed like scenes from a play someone else had acted in.

When the doorbell chimed at seven and laughter spilled out onto the redwood deck, Tom was standing behind the outdoor bar counter in a plain white linen shirt, wiping down wine glasses with a bar towel. He looked up as Keiko guided Mei through the wide glass sliders, her hand resting low and unhidden on the bare skin of Mei's lower back.

"Claire, Julian—I'm so glad you beat the bridge traffic," Keiko said warmly, kissing cheeks with effortless grace before drawing Mei half a step forward into the circle of conversation. Keiko's arm wrapped securely around Mei's waist, pulling Mei's hip flush against hers. "Everyone, this is my partner, Mei. I've been keeping her all to myself out here in the suburbs for the last couple of weeks."

Across the patio, Tom's hand froze inside the crystal bowl of a wine glass.

He waited for the correction—for Keiko to laugh and say my new neighbor, or for Mei to blush, step back, and gesture toward the man she had married three weeks ago.

Instead, Mei felt the firm, familiar warmth of Keiko’s palm pressing against her bare spine and looked up into the friendly, curious faces of Keiko’s circle. Caught in the steady gravity of Keiko’s scent and the memory of Keiko’s fingers mapping every secret inch of her skin that very morning, the word partner didn’t register as a mistake. It sounded like the only honest word in the yard.

“It’s wonderful to meet you,” Mei said softly, a shy, radiant smile curving her mouth as she leaned subtly back into the cradle of Keiko’s shoulder. “Keiko has told me so much about all of you.”

“So you’re the reason we haven’t been able to drag her into the city on weekends,” Claire teased, raising her glass to Mei before glancing toward the bar counter where Tom stood motionless with the towel in his hands. “And who’s this keeping our glasses full?”

Keiko didn’t even turn her head fully toward the bar; she gave a light, dismissive wave of her hand while her thumb traced a slow circle against the bare skin above Mei’s emerald dress.

“Oh, that’s Tom from next door,” Keiko said brightly, her tone carrying the polite warmth one reserved for a reliable neighborhood handyman. “He was sweet enough to come over and help us out with the drinks tonight so I wouldn’t be stuck in the kitchen. Tom, Julian takes sparkling water with lime, and pour Claire and Lauren the Sauvignon Blanc—make sure it’s the chilled bottle from the bottom shelf.”

A hot, suffocating wave surged up from Tom’s stomach straight into his ears, pulsing hard behind his eyes.

He was standing ten feet from his wife, watching another woman’s hand stroke her bare waist while four strangers smiled at them as a couple—and he had just been introduced as the neighbor helping with the bar. Yet as the heat settled low and heavy into his groin, tightening the front of his trousers behind the counter, he found he couldn’t summon a single syllable of protest. The sheer brazenness of his erasure left him dizzy, passive, and aching to stay right there in the shadows of the pergola so he wouldn’t miss a second of how Mei looked at her.

“Right away,” Tom murmured, lowering his eyes to the ice bucket as he reached for the bottle.

For the next two hours around the candlelit teak table, Tom remained on the perimeter, clearing empty appetizer plates and refilling water carafes while the five of them talked and laughed beneath the Meyer lemon tree. Whenever he stepped close to the head of the table to top off Keiko’s glass, he had to look directly down at where Keiko sat with her thigh pressed against Mei’s under the table, her left hand resting inside the slit of Mei’s emerald dress on her bare knee.

As the guests finally gathered their coats by the front door near eleven, Julian smiled warmly at Mei and squeezed Keiko’s shoulder. “Bring her down to the gallery opening next month, Keiko—you two are gorgeous together.”

“Count on it,” Keiko said, leaning down to kiss the bare curve of Mei’s shoulder right in front of the open doorway while Tom stood silently in the kitchen archway holding a stack of dessert plates. Once the front door clicked shut behind the last guest, Keiko turned toward the kitchen without letting go of Mei’s waist. “Leave the dishwasher for the morning, Tom—just wipe down the counters and lock the back sliders on your way home so Mei and I can head up to bed.”

Chapter Ten

The grandfather clock in the front hall chimed midnight, its low bronze note fading into the dark living room until the only sound left was the quiet hum of the refrigerator and the shift of the oak floorboards directly above Tom’s head.

They were back under his roof tonight. Around ten o’clock, Keiko had strolled through the side gate with her arm draped over Mei’s shoulders, remarking that her own guest sheets were in the wash and that she preferred the width of their king mattress upstairs anyway. Tom hadn’t even waited to be told where to go; he had walked automatically to the hall closet, pulled out the folded spare blanket, and arranged himself on the living room sectional while their footsteps climbed the stairs together.

Now he lay flat on his back in the dark, the cotton sheet pulled up to his chest, staring toward the archway that led to the front stairs.

For the first few nights of this arrangement, the master bedroom had been sealed off once they went up—Keiko had made a point of ensuring the heavy door clicked shut, leaving only an indistinct murmur and the occasional faint rustle of linen to filter down through the ceiling joists.

Tonight, a warm, angled band of amber light lay across the carpet of the upper landing.

Tom’s eyes traced the geometry of that glow in the dark. It was coming from the lamp on his old nightstand. Keiko hadn’t bothered to close the bedroom door at all; she had left it standing half-open at the top of the stairs, turning the open stairwell into an acoustic chamber that connected the bed directly to the sofa where he lay.

It started with the slow, unmistakable shift of weight against the headboard directly above the living room bay window, followed by a sound from Mei that made Tom’s fingers curl tight into the upholstery of the sofa cushions—a high, fractured intake of breath that broke into a long, trembling sigh.

“Keiko—please—”

With no door to muffle it, her voice carried straight down the open stairwell and through the brass heating register set into the baseboard near Tom’s feet. She didn’t sound shy or hesitant anymore; she sounded unraveled, her voice pitched into a breathless register Tom had never once coaxed out of her in their marriage bed.

Beneath the spare blanket, Tom’s body went rigid, a hot, aching pulse throbbing in his groin as he stared toward the lit landing at the top of the stairs. He heard the low, assured murmur of Keiko’s voice answering her, followed by Mei’s voice rising again, clearer and more urgent as the rhythm of the mattress deepened

above him:

“I love how you touch me—God, Keiko, I love you, don’t stop—”

Hearing his wife pour those words through an open doorway for another woman while he lay exiled on his own sofa didn’t drive him toward the stairs in anger; it pinned him deeper into the cushions with a dizzying, helpless arousal that left his chest tight and his mouth dry.

The words had barely faded when Mei’s voice changed. The sentences stopped. What came down the stairwell and through the register was no longer language—only a rising chain of open, broken sounds, high and raw, each one longer than the one before it. They arrived in a steady pulse Tom could feel in the cushions under his shoulders: a sharp inhale that fractured halfway, then a trembling exhale that stretched until it thinned into almost nothing, then the next one starting before the last had fully died. The pitch climbed with every repetition. She was not trying to form Keiko’s name anymore. The sounds simply kept coming, helpless and continuous, as if whatever was happening above him had taken the shape of her breath and would not let it settle.

Between them, Keiko’s voice reached him at ordinary volume, calm and unhurried, the same tone she used when she told Mei where to stand on the deck. “Stay right there.” The phrase landed cleanly in the dark living room, followed at once by a sharper, higher break in Mei’s next sound. A few breaths later Keiko spoke again, still level, still clear. “That’s it.” Mei’s answering cry lengthened, the edges of it fraying, and the mattress answered with a deeper creak that matched the new rhythm of her voice. Keiko did not raise her tone or hurry it. “Right there. Don’t move.” Each short instruction arrived in the same even register, and each one pulled a longer, more open sound from Mei—less like words, more like the air being drawn out of her and released in shaking pieces. Tom lay rigid, counting the spaces between Keiko’s quiet directives and the helpless length of what followed them, the continuous thread of Mei’s voice filling every gap until the whole upstairs seemed to breathe in that single, rising pitch.

Then the cadence of the bed frame shifted—the headboard knocking in a steady, driving beat against the upstairs drywall while Mei’s breath caught right on the edge of the peak.

Above the rhythm of the springs, Keiko’s voice cut through the open doorway at that same calm, conversational volume:

“Who did you marry a month ago, Mei?”

“You!” Mei gasped out, bright and immediate.

Keiko didn’t hurry the pace or raise her tone by a single decibel. “Who did you marry a month ago?”

“You!” Mei cried out, louder this time, her voice ringing clear across the upper landing and straight down the stairwell.

“One more time so the whole house knows,” Keiko said, smooth and unhurried. “Who did you marry a month ago?”

Mei didn’t hold a shred of it back—her voice soared out of the master bedroom with the breathless, ecstatic triumph of a cheerleader screaming from the stands for a winning touchdown:

“You, Keiko! I married you!”

The shout itself pushed her straight over the edge—her voice breaking on the last syllable into a long, shattering cry of release above him, the mattress springs giving way beneath their tangled weight while Keiko let out a low, satisfied murmur against the pillows.

Downstairs in the dark, with that strip of amber light still glowing steadily across the upper landing, Tom lay motionless on the sectional with his eyes squeezed shut and his hand pressed hard against the front of his shorts, his ears ringing with the sound of his wife cheering another woman’s name until the house finally went still.

Chapter Eleven

In the days before the bedroom door was left open, Tom had still managed to salvage a fragile, unspoken truce with the clock.

On the rare mornings when Keiko slept in at her own bungalow before an early meeting in the city, Tom would climb the stairs at six-thirty with a cup of tea for Mei. In the quiet gray light before the neighborhood woke up, he would slide beneath the covers and reach for his wife with a hurried, almost desperate earnestness—trying to prove to himself that the marriage certificate in his desk drawer still meant something. Mei had never pushed him away during those brief, quiet couplings, though even then Tom had noticed how still she lay beneath him, her eyes half-closed as if she were waiting for seven-forty-two to arrive so her real morning could begin.

On the Sunday afternoon after the night of the open door, Tom found Mei folding laundry alone in the upstairs hallway and reached weakly for her waist, hoping for five quiet minutes before Keiko walked across the lawn.

Mei didn’t even set down the towel in her hands. She simply stepped back out of his reach with a soft, almost pitying smile, just as the front door clicked open downstairs.

“Tom?” Keiko’s voice floated up the stairwell, bright and purposeful. “Come down to the living room for a minute. I brought someone over I want you to meet.”

When Tom descended the stairs, Mei trailing two steps behind him, he found Keiko standing near the bay window beside a tall, silver-haired woman in her late forties wearing a tailored charcoal blazer, silk blouse, and narrow tortoiseshell frames. A sleek black leather medical bag rested on the coffee table beside the folded blanket Tom had slept under the night before.

“This is Dr. Evelyn Sterling,” Keiko said smoothly, draping an arm around Mei’s waist as soon as Mei reached the bottom step. “Evelyn is a private concierge specialist in the city—an old friend of mine. I asked her to stop by on her way back from the coast to give you a quick wellness check.”

Tom blinked, stopping at the edge of the rug. “A wellness check? I don’t have a doctor’s appointment. I feel fine.”

“You look exhausted, Tom,” Keiko said, her tone carrying that seamless blend of maternal concern and absolute authority that left no room for debate. “You’ve got dark circles under your eyes, your posture has been slumped all week, and Mei and I have both noticed how restless you are at night down here on the sectional. Sit down on the sofa and roll up your left sleeve for Evelyn.”

“Really, Tom, we’ve been worried about how much strain you’re under,” Mei echoed softly, leaning her shoulder into Keiko’s chest as she looked at him with wide, earnest eyes.

Under the combined gaze of all three women, Tom’s resistance evaporated into that familiar, heavy warmth at the base of his throat. He sat on the edge of the sectional—the very cushion where he had lain listening to Mei scream Keiko’s name twelve hours earlier—and unbuttoned his cuff.

Dr. Sterling moved with cool, unhurried precision. She wrapped the blood pressure cuff around Tom’s upper arm, her fingers checking the pulse at his wrist while her eyes studied the flush creeping up his neck. She listened to his chest through a stethoscope for a long, silent minute while Keiko stood directly behind the opposite armchair, her hand sliding lazily up and down the bare skin of Mei’s forearm.

“Just as Keiko suspected,” Dr. Sterling said at last, slipping the stethoscope from her ears and folding it neatly back into her leather case. “Your resting heart rate is elevated, and your nervous system is showing classic signs of sympathetic exhaustion. At your stage, trying to split your energy between a demanding career, maintaining a household, and attempting physical intimacy is completely counterproductive.”

Tom looked up, his mouth dry. “Attempting physical intimacy?”

“For a man with your constitution, marital exertion places an unnecessary burden on your cardiovascular recovery,” Dr. Sterling replied calmly, clicking her leather bag shut. “I’m prescribing complete, uninterrupted celibacy moving forward. You need to conserve every ounce of your stamina for your work at the office and your domestic chores around the house, without the stress of trying to perform in the bedroom.”

A hot, dizzying current shot straight through Tom’s groin, tightening his trousers even as his face burned scarlet in front of the stranger. He looked past the doctor toward his wife, waiting for a flicker of objection.

Instead, Mei looked noticeably relieved. She stepped forward to the edge of the coffee table, resting one hand on Keiko’s hip as she looked down at Tom with genuine, unguarded warmth.

“Please don’t feel bad about it, Tom,” Mei said earnestly, as if comforting him over a minor appliance failure. “Honestly, it takes so much pressure off both of us. You don’t have to worry about taking care of my needs anymore—Keiko already fulfills me completely.”

Keiko’s mouth curved into a slow, knowing smile as her fingers curled possessively around the curve of Mei’s waist. “Tell him why he doesn’t need to

stress himself out trying to keep up."

Keiko's fingers tightened once at Mei's waist, a small, proprietary press that settled her more firmly against Keiko's hip. Mei's blush deepened, but she did not look away from Tom. Her voice stayed soft and even in the quiet living room, as if she were explaining a household schedule rather than undoing him.

"She started with the simplest thing," Mei said. "The first morning on the deck she put her hand between my legs and found my clit in about three seconds. Not the general area—exactly where it is, under the hood, the part that actually swells. She pulled the hood back with her thumb and licked it the way you lick something you intend to finish. Slow at first, then with the flat of her tongue, then with just the tip circling the glans until I couldn't stay standing. She does that every time now. She knows how much pressure it takes before it gets too sharp, and she never misses."

Tom's hands stayed open on his knees. He did not speak.

"After that she taught me how to do it to her," Mei continued. "She sits on the edge of the bed or lies back and tells me where to put my mouth. I have to keep my tongue soft until she says otherwise. She likes long strokes from the bottom of her cunt up over the clit, then short, firm sucks right on the tip once it's out from under the hood. If I rush she puts her hand in my hair and holds me still until I match her pace. She comes that way a lot. I can feel it against my mouth when she does—the way everything tightens and then pulses."

Dr. Sterling remained by the foyer, expression unchanged.

"We scissor," Mei said. "She puts one of my legs over her hip and lines us up so our clits rub. She controls the angle. If I try to grind too fast she slows us down with her hand on my ass until the friction is exactly what she wants. It gets very wet. Sometimes she reaches between us and uses two fingers on me at the same time so I'm getting both. I come like that with my face against her neck."

She glanced up at Keiko's chin, then back at Tom.

"She fingers me for a long time before anything else. Two fingers, then three, curled so she hits the spot on the front wall. She keeps her thumb on my clit the whole time, not moving much, just enough pressure that I stay right on the edge. She doesn't let me come until she decides. When she finally does she usually has her mouth on me too—tongue on the clit while her fingers stay inside—so it lasts longer than anything I ever felt before."

Mei's voice did not waver.

"She likes me on my stomach with my hips up. She spreads me and licks everything—clit, the folds, inside—until I'm shaking, then she slides the harness in. It's thicker than you and longer. She wears it so the base sits right against

her, and she fucks me with it until I can’t keep my voice down. She reaches places that make my legs give out. She doesn’t get tired. She just keeps going, one hand on my clit or in my hair, until I’m finished more than once. Sometimes she has me lick her while she still has it on, so I taste both of us. Sometimes she puts me on my back and holds my legs up and does it that way, watching my face the whole time.”

She rested her hand more fully on Keiko’s hip.

“There are other things. She ties my wrists to the headboard with the silk scarf from her drawer and edges me for almost an hour—mouth, fingers, the harness just barely inside—until I’m begging. She uses a small vibrator on my clit while she fucks me so I come around the strap. Once she had me sit on her face and wouldn’t let me lift up until I’d come twice. She knows exactly how to hold my hips so I can’t get away from her tongue. All of it is better than anything we ever did. She already gives me everything. You don’t have to try anymore.”

Mei’s eyes stayed on Tom, clear and warm. He sat motionless, sleeve still rolled, unable to produce a single word.

“See how simple that is?” Keiko murmured, patting Mei’s hip before turning toward the front hall to walk her friend out. “Thank Dr. Sterling for making a house call on a Sunday, Tom, and then go start peeling the potatoes for dinner.”

Chapter Twelve

By Wednesday evening, Dr. Sterling’s prescription had settled over the house like a change in barometric pressure.

Tom stood at the kitchen sink with his sleeves rolled neatly to his elbows, rinsing the last of the porcelain dinner plates under warm running water before slotting it into the top rack of the dishwasher. Once the machine was latched and humming, he took a clean microfiber cloth and wiped down the quartz island in slow, methodical passes, making sure not a single ring of condensation remained.

Strange as it seemed, the restlessness that had haunted him during the first two weeks in the house had largely evaporated. Once the possibility of climbing the stairs to claim his wife had been officially removed from him—diagnosed away in front of three women on a Sunday afternoon—a heavy, docile quiet had taken its place. He no longer had to wonder if he should try to reach for Mei in the morning, or whether he ought to assert himself when Keiko walked through the front door unannounced. The scoreboard had been turned off, and all that remained was the simple, soothing clarity of his chores.

In the dining room just beyond the island, a single pendant lamp glowed low over the oak table.

Keiko and Mei had pulled two dining chairs side-by-side along the long edge of the table, pushing them back a couple of feet into the open floor space so they were clear of the tabletop’s overhang. Keiko sat angled comfortably toward the room wearing an oversized charcoal silk shirt left unbuttoned to the sternum and a pair of soft linen trousers. Right beside her, with no table leg between them, Mei sat curled sideways in her own chair with her bare legs draped openly across Keiko’s lap, wearing only a thin ivory camisole and cotton tap shorts. While Tom finished wiping the counters, Keiko’s left hand moved in slow, absentminded strokes along the bare curve of Mei’s calf and ankle, while her right arm rested on the edge of the table near a small, matte-black confectioner’s tin and a thick cream leather portfolio laid flat across the wood.

“Counters look spotless, Tom,” Keiko called out in that warm, approving alto that always made the muscles in his shoulders drop an inch. “Dry your hands and come over here for a minute.”

Tom folded the microfiber cloth over the edge of the sink and walked across the floorboards to the end of the table, standing respectfully a foot back from the open space where Mei’s bare shins rested across Keiko’s thighs.

Keiko lifted the lid off the matte-black tin, releasing a rich, herbal scent of dark roasted sesame, wildflower honey, and crushed valerian root into the warm air between them. Inside, nestled in pleated black paper, sat a row of small,

dark-glazed shortbread rounds.

“Evelyn had these sent down from an apothecary bakery she uses in the city,” Keiko said, picking up one of the small dark rounds between her thumb and forefinger. She didn’t set it on a plate for him; she held it suspended in the air just above the edge of the table, looking up into his face with calm, expectant warmth. “Think of it as a little cookie for the brain. She said a man with your sympathetic exhaustion spends far too much mental energy worrying about decisions after five o’clock. One of these after you finish the kitchen at night will help your head settle right down before you stretch out on the sofa.”

Mei tilted her head against the back of her chair, her dark eyes soft and luminous in the amber light as she watched her husband. “Try it, Tom. They smell wonderful, and you worked so hard cleaning up after dinner.”

Tom looked at the small dark biscuit held between Keiko’s fingers. There was no deception in the gesture; both women were looking at him with the gentle, indulgent affection one gives a well-behaved retriever who has just brought the slippers to the hearth. He realized that the biscuit wasn’t a trick designed to cloud his mind—it was an invitation to let go of the steering wheel entirely and be rewarded for his obedience.

Stepping closer to the edge of the table, Tom reached out and took the biscuit from Keiko’s fingers, his knuckles brushing the warm skin of her thumb.

“Eat it right here while we go over one last piece of housekeeping,” Keiko murmured, leaning back in her chair as her hand returned to stroke the bare inside of Mei’s knee.

Tom took a bite. The shortbread was dense, buttery, and intensely fragrant, melting on his tongue with a warm, earthy sweetness that seemed to coat the back of his throat and travel straight down into his chest. As he chewed, a wave of heavy, golden warmth spread through his limbs, loosening the last knot of tension behind his eyes until the edges of the dining room felt soft and safe.

While he finished the last crumb, Keiko leaned forward slightly and used one finger to flip open the cream leather portfolio on the table, turning it ninety degrees so the crisp white pages faced him. Yellow sticky flags marked a dozen signature lines across a stack of banking authorizations, mortgage management transfers, and a durable power of attorney over the household accounts.

“Evelyn pointed out that physical intimacy isn’t the only strain keeping your blood pressure up,” Keiko said smoothly, uncapping a heavy black fountain pen and laying it across the top page. “Having you sit around on weekends stressing over property tax escrows, investment sweeps, and checking transfers when I already manage a portfolio three times that size is ridiculous. I had my attorney draw up the paperwork to consolidate your and Mei’s accounts under my

management. Your paycheck will still direct-deposit right where it always does, and I'll put a weekly allowance on a debit card for your lunches and gas so you never have to balance a spreadsheet again."

Tom looked down at the flagged signature lines, the sweet, herbal warmth of the biscuit humming lazily through his veins.

"It's such a relief, isn't it, Tom?" Mei said softly from her perch beside Keiko, her cheeks flushed a delicate rose as she leaned sideways across the narrow gap between their chairs to rest her temple against Keiko's bare collarbone. "Now neither of us has to worry about complicated things. Keiko knows how to take care of everything so much better than we do."

Tom looked from the shining, unguarded devotion in his wife's eyes to the sleek black pen waiting on the paper. Every signature line on the page represented another brick of the life he had spent thirty years building as an independent man—and yet, standing there with the warm taste of honey and valerian on his tongue, the prospect of handing the keys of his livelihood to the woman holding his wife felt like setting down a lead weight he had been carrying uphill for years.

"Just sign next to the yellow tabs, Tom," Keiko said quietly, her fingertips resting lightly on the edge of the paper to hold it steady for him. "And then you can go brush your teeth and get comfortable on the couch."

Without a single question—and with a long, trembling exhale of pure, submissive relief—Tom picked up the fountain pen, bent over the edge of the oak table, and signed his name on every line Keiko pointed her finger toward.

When he capped the pen and set it back on the oak, Keiko didn't close the leather portfolio right away. Instead, she turned her palm face-up on the table beside the matte-black biscuit tin.

"Give me your wallet, Tom," she said softly.

Tom's hand went automatically to his back pocket. He slid out the worn brown leather billfold he had carried for five years and placed it into her waiting palm.

While Mei watched with her chin resting lazily against Keiko's shoulder, Keiko opened the leather fold and methodically slid out his platinum credit card, his bank debit card, and the emergency hundred-dollar bill tucked behind his receipt slot, dropping them all into the zippered pocket of her portfolio. From the front sleeve of the folder, she pulled out a single, unembossed pale-blue prepaid card and slipped it into the empty slot opposite his driver's license before handing the thinned-out billfold back to him.

"Two hundred a week loads onto that every Monday morning for gas and sandwiches," Keiko said, closing her portfolio with a crisp snap and resting her hand back on Mei's bare ankle. "If you need anything bigger than that, you can

ask Mei or me if we think it’s in the budget. Now go brush your teeth and get settled on the couch.”

Chapter Thirteen

Two weeks after Tom signed the cream leather portfolio, the morning geography of the house had turned completely inside out.

Keiko no longer walked across the lawn from her bungalow at seven-forty-two, because Keiko no longer went home at night. Instead, when Saturday morning sunlight slanted across the backyard, it was Keiko who sat lounging on the upholstered teak chair on Tom and Mei's back patio, dressed in an unfastened charcoal cashmere cardigan over bare skin, reading the morning paper while the automatic sprinklers hissed softly across the grass.

Inside the kitchen, Mei lifted the silver thermal carafe of espresso from the counter, tucked a small plate of sliced figs under her arm, and tied the belt of her white linen robe loosely around her waist.

When she pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped barefoot onto the warm patio flagstones, she stopped half a pace past the threshold.

Right beside Keiko's teak chair, occupying the sunny square of stone where the matching patio seat usually stood, was a wide, thick floor cushion. There was no mistaking what it was. Framed in bolstered saddle leather with a deep, recessed center of plush ivory shearling, it was an oversized luxury pet bed—the kind designed for a prize greyhound or a spoiled ridgeback.

Keiko didn't look up from the arts section as Mei approached the glass patio table. She simply lifted her coffee cup, waited for Mei to pour the fresh dark stream of espresso into the porcelain, and set the cup back on its saucer.

"Leave the figs by my elbow, sweetheart," Keiko said, her voice warm and unhurried in the morning quiet. "It's going to be eighty degrees by noon."

Mei set the plate down. Her eyes dropped again to the deep ivory shearling resting on the stones right beside Keiko's bare ankle.

Keiko hadn't given her a command. She hadn't told her to take off her robe, and she hadn't pointed to the floor. Yet as Mei stood there in the warm breeze, feeling the familiar, magnetic pull of Keiko's silence, she understood that a spoken order would have been an insult to how well Keiko knew her. Standing in a chair across the table meant pretending she was still a suburban hostess having coffee with a friend. Down there on the thick shearling beside Keiko's chair, she didn't have to pretend to be anything at all.

With her pulse beating in a slow, heavy rhythm at the base of her throat, Mei reached down and pulled the linen knot free at her waist.

She shrugged the white robe off her shoulders, folded it neatly over the railing, and sank down onto her knees in the center of the plush pet bed. The shearling

was sun-warmed and impossibly soft against her bare shins and thighs. Lowering her hips onto her heels, she leaned her cheek lightly against the outside of Keiko’s bare knee.

Only then did Keiko lower the newspaper an inch. Smiling softly, she reached down without taking her eyes off the page and stroked her palm slowly through Mei’s dark hair, her fingers trailing down to cup the warm curve of Mei’s bare shoulder as if Mei had been curling at her feet for years.

By five o’clock that afternoon, the heat of the day had settled into a golden hush inside the kitchen.

Mei was back in a soft cotton sundress, perched on a barstool at the island beside Keiko while they looked through fabric swatches for the upstairs curtains. Across the kitchen, Tom stood by the pantry sweeping the floorboards with slow, methodical strokes of the broom.

Over the past fourteen days, the nightly apothecary biscuits from the matte-black tin had done far more than lower Tom’s blood pressure. Day by day, the rich herbal compound had smoothed away the sharp corners of his vocabulary. At first he had simply stopped starting conversations; then his answers had shortened to single syllables; and for the last three days, whenever he opened his mouth to form a sentence, the effort seemed to dissolve halfway up his throat into a warm, placid blankness. He could still follow every instruction Keiko or Mei gave him with eager, docile precision, and his dark eyes still tracked their movements with that unmistakable simmer of submissive heat—but human speech had become a heavy coat he no longer knew how to put on.

Keiko glanced toward the stainless-steel clock on the oven, then tapped the back of Mei’s hand lightly.

“It’s five-fifteen, Mei,” Keiko said, returning her attention to the linen swatches. “It’s time for Tom’s cookie. You can give it to him tonight.”

“Of course,” Mei said brightly, sliding off her barstool with a graceful sway of her skirt.

She walked to the end of the counter, lifted the lid off the matte-black confectioner’s tin, and took out one of the dark, honey-scented rounds. Turning toward the pantry, she crooked a finger gently.

“Come here, Tom,” Mei called out, her voice pitching naturally into a sweet, sing-song cadence. “Put the broom away and come get your treat.”

Tom leaned the broom carefully against the pantry wall and walked across the tile, stopping obediently in front of his wife with his hands hanging loosely at his sides. He looked down at the dark biscuit between her fingers, his lips parting slightly as the familiar scent of roasted sesame and valerian drifted up to him.

Mei didn’t hand the biscuit into his palm as Keiko had done on the first night. Instead, she held it right up to his mouth, watching with a soft, pitying smile as he leaned his head forward slightly to take half of it between his teeth.

“Look how good you are now,” Mei murmured, brushing a stray crumb from the corner of his quiet mouth with her thumb while he chewed slowly. “You used to pace around this house making everything so tense, trying to act like you knew how to be a husband. Aren’t you glad Keiko came along and took all that silly responsibility away from you?”

Tom swallowed, his throat working silently, a deep flush rising into his cheeks as his gaze flicked past Mei’s shoulder toward where Keiko sat watching them with calm amusement over the rim of her wine glass.

“You don’t even have to try to talk anymore, poor thing,” Mei continued softly, holding the second half of the biscuit to his lips and letting him take it straight from her fingertips. She rose up on her tiptoes to pat the side of his cheek with tender, devastating condescension. “Keiko is so brilliant, Tom—she knew right from the first week that you weren’t cut out to lead a household or keep a woman like me happy. All you have to do now is chew your little cookie and let Keiko do the thinking for everyone.”

Tom stood motionless as the heavy, golden warmth of the apothecary compound began to bloom behind his eyes, a quiet, helpless whimper of pure submission catching in his silent throat while Mei wiped her fingers on a napkin and strolled back into the circle of Keiko’s arm.

Chapter Fourteen

By Sunday afternoon, the living room sectional had stopped being Tom’s bed and had returned to being Keiko’s territory whenever she felt like stretching out in the sun.

At three o’clock, golden afternoon light poured through the wide bay windows, illuminating the dust motes drifting lazily across the oak floor. Tom knelt near the fireplace hearth five feet away, methodically polishing the brass andirons with a soft rag. Since eating his morning biscuit after breakfast, his mind had settled into that familiar, cushioned quiet where words no longer formed and time moved like warm honey.

Right across the rug on the long linen cushion of the sectional, Keiko lay reclined against a pile of throw pillows in a pair of loose ivory silk trousers and a cropped black tank top. Mei straddled her lap facing her, wearing an unbuttoned chambray shirt with nothing underneath and a pair of thin white cotton briefs, her bare thighs bracketing Keiko’s hips as their mouths met in a slow, unhurried kiss.

Neither of them glanced toward the hearth to see if Tom was watching. He had become part of the room’s furniture—no more capable of interrupting them than the grandfather clock in the hall.

Keiko’s hands slid underneath the open sides of Mei’s chambray shirt, her palms gliding slowly up the bare skin of Mei’s ribs until her thumbs brushed the undersides of her breasts. Mei let out a soft, humming sigh into Keiko’s mouth, rolling her hips forward a fraction against Keiko’s stomach before her lips parted to catch her breath, brushing softly against Keiko’s jawline.

“Look at him over there,” Keiko murmured against the corner of Mei’s mouth, her voice pitched in a lazy, conversational purr as her fingers traced the warm hollow of Mei’s spine. “He’s been rubbing that same piece of brass for twenty minutes.”

Mei didn’t pull back from Keiko’s neck; she only turned her head slightly on Keiko’s shoulder, looking through her lashes at her husband kneeling silently on the bricks. While she watched him, Keiko’s hand drifted lower, cupping the curve of Mei’s hip over the thin white cotton and pulling her closer into the cradle of her lap.

“The biscuits really took all his words away, didn’t they?” Mei whispered, a small shiver running down her back as Keiko’s teeth grazed the sensitive skin just below her ear. “He looks so calm, though. Like he doesn’t have a single worry left in his head.”

“He doesn’t,” Keiko said, tilting Mei’s chin back with two fingers to claim her mouth in another deep, lingering kiss that left Mei’s breathing shallow and quick. When Keiko broke the kiss an inch away, her dark eyes were calm and practical. “Which means there’s really no point in keeping him underfoot much longer. Once the house and the accounts finish clearing escrow this week, having him shuffle around the kitchen and sleep on the sofa is just cluttering up our space.”

Mei’s fingers curled into the silk at Keiko’s waist, her chest rising and falling against Keiko’s tank top as she glanced back toward Tom.

Tom had stopped polishing the brass. He knelt motionless on the hearth rug, the rag limp between his fingers, his dark eyes fixed on the sight of his wife straddling their neighbor’s lap in the bright afternoon sun. Even through the warm, wordless fog of the apothecary compound, a deep crimson flush had crept up his neck, and the front of his chinos strained visibly against his thigh as he watched Keiko’s hand slide beneath the waistband of Mei’s cotton briefs.

“What are we going to do with him, then?” Mei asked breathlessly, her forehead dropping to rest against Keiko’s temple as Keiko’s fingers moved in a slow, deliberate rhythm that made Mei’s thighs tighten around her hips. “He can’t really manage an apartment by himself if he stays on the cookies.”

“Evelyn knows a quiet little residential estate about forty minutes up the valley,” Keiko replied smoothly, her breath warm against Mei’s cheek as she watched Mei’s eyelids flutter shut. “Private grounds, twenty-four-hour attendants who make sure he gets his little treats on time, and a nice sunny courtyard where he can sit in a cardigan and watch the birds. With the early-retirement buyout his company is finalizing on Tuesday, the dividends alone will cover his room and board forever with plenty left over for us.”

Mei let out a low, trembling sound against Keiko’s throat, her hips rocking helplessly in time with Keiko’s hand right in front of Tom’s wide, silent gaze.

“He’ll like that,” Mei gasped softly, her hands clutching Keiko’s shoulders as she tipped her head back into the sunlight. “He won’t have to—won’t have to pretend to be a husband anymore. And we’ll have the whole house to ourselves.”

“Every room,” Keiko murmured, drawing Mei’s lower lip between her teeth before kissing her deeply again. “And we can always drive up on a Sunday afternoon to let him see how well I’m taking care of his bride.”

Chapter Fifteen

By Thursday afternoon, a single navy canvas weekender bag sat neatly beside the front door, packed with three soft cardigans, four pairs of drawstring trousers, and Tom’s toiletry kit.

In the living room, Tom sat in the upright wingback chair near the foyer with his hands resting palms-down on his knees. He had eaten his afternoon biscuit twenty minutes earlier with a cup of chamomile tea, and the familiar golden quiet had settled seamlessly behind his eyes. He wore a pale gray sweater Mei had laid out for him on the laundry room counter, his hair neatly combed, his face smooth and completely untroubled by the suitcase waiting ten feet away.

Across the rug, Keiko stood in front of the bay window with her arm draped possessively around Mei’s waist, her fingers resting against the bare skin just above the waistband of Mei’s linen skirt.

“The wire from your company’s buyout cleared at noon, Tom,” Keiko said, her voice warm and conversational in the sunlit room. “Between the early-retirement lump sum and the equity sweep, the mortgages on both this house and mine are officially paid in full. Evelyn finalized your admission paperwork at The Alders this morning, and their driver will be pulling into the driveway at four o’clock to take you up the valley.”

Tom blinked slowly, his dark eyes moving from Keiko’s face to Mei’s. Not a single syllable rose into his throat—even the memory of how to shape an objection had dissolved days ago—leaving only a gentle, docile attentiveness and the faint, persistent flush along his collarbone whenever he looked at the two of them standing hip to hip.

Mei beamed at him, leaning her weight affectionately into Keiko’s side as she looked across the coffee table at her husband.

“We really are so grateful, Tom,” Mei said, her tone brimming with bright, earnest warmth. “Paying off both houses and leaving us such a generous nest egg from your retirement package is the sweetest gift you could have ever given us. Keiko and I won’t have to worry about a thing for the rest of our lives—we can travel, redo the gardens, and just enjoy being together, all because you worked so hard for all those years.”

Tom’s lips parted slightly in a silent, hazy exhale, his gaze dropping for a second to the way Keiko’s thumb stroked slow circles against Mei’s hip before rising back to his wife’s radiant smile. Far from looking distressed, the muscles around his mouth were completely slack, his shoulders settled deep into the wingback cushion as if the news that he was leaving his home forever were a warm blanket being tucked around his knees.

Mei tilted her head slightly, studying his tranquil face with genuine wonder. “Look at him, Keiko. He isn’t even sad to leave. I think he actually looks happier than the day we bought the house.”

Keiko didn’t answer right away. Her eyes lingered on Tom’s quiet, empty expression for a long beat, a look of profound, almost tender contemplation softening the sharp lines of her face.

“Of course he is,” Keiko murmured, her voice dropping into a low, intimate register she had never used with Mei before—as if she were opening a locked drawer inside her chest and letting Mei look inside. “People spend their whole lives convinced that having a busy mind is a blessing, sweetheart. Look at how most people walk around the world—exhausted, second-guessing every word they say, terrified of making the wrong choice, keeping score in their heads from the moment they wake up until they stare at the ceiling at midnight.”

Mei turned her face up toward Keiko’s profile, captivated by the quiet intensity in her lover’s voice.

“I’ve watched people tear themselves apart with their own thoughts for years,” Keiko continued softly, sliding her hand up from Mei’s waist to trace the delicate line of Mei’s collarbone with her fingertips. “The constant noise of trying to be a person—trying to hold onto pride, and schedules, and language—it’s like static on a radio that drowns out the music. People think freedom means having a thousand choices to make every day. It isn’t. True peace only happens when someone strong enough comes along, takes the steering wheel out of your hands, and turns all that static off for you.”

Across the room, Tom sat motionless in the sunlight, his eyes glassy and serene as the grandfather clock ticked smoothly in the hall.

“When you take away a person’s need to speak and decide,” Keiko whispered, turning her head to look down into Mei’s wide, adoring eyes, “you aren’t taking their life away from them. You’re finally letting them rest inside their own skin, with nothing left to do except feel good and be taken care of. It’s the purest kindness one human being can ever give another.”

A warm shiver rippled all the way down Mei’s spine. Standing there in the curve of Keiko’s arm, listening to the quiet conviction in that low alto voice, Mei felt her chest swell with an almost breathless wave of love. She thought of how anxious she used to be in this very room just a month ago, and how safe she felt now with Keiko managing their world, never once noticing the way Keiko’s dark eyes studied her parted lips and flushed cheeks as if measuring a canvas.

“You see people so much more clearly than anyone else does,” Mei whispered, rising up to press a soft, lingering kiss to the corner of Keiko’s jaw just as the crunch of tires sounded on the gravel driveway outside. “He’s so lucky he had

you to figure out what he needed."

"Everyone I love gets what they need eventually," Keiko murmured, smoothing a lock of dark hair behind Mei's ear before nodding toward the foyer. "Come on. Let's walk him out to the car so we can have our house to ourselves."

Chapter Sixteen

The first thing Mei noticed after the town car from The Alders disappeared down the street was how much larger the downstairs rooms felt once there was no one left to tiptoe around.

At eight o’clock that evening, the house held a sleek, gallery-like stillness. There was no low rattle from the dishwasher being loaded by reluctant hands, no spare cotton blanket folded at the end of the living room sectional, and no silent figure hovering near the pantry waiting to be told what to do next. Even the air seemed to circulate differently—cool, lightly cedar-scented from the candles Keiko had lit along the fireplace mantel, and completely unburdened by the history of the marriage that had bought the place.

Mei stood barefoot at the kitchen island in an ankle-length champagne silk slip Keiko had brought over from her own closet, twirling the stem of a crystal Pinot Noir glass between her fingers.

Across the quartz counter, Keiko picked up the matte-black confectioner’s tin that had held Tom’s nightly biscuits. Mei expected her to toss the remaining rounds into the trash bin under the sink now that Tom was forty minutes up the valley. Instead, Keiko pressed the lid snugly back into place and set the tin on the high shelf inside the upper spice cabinet before closing the cupboard door with a soft click.

“Strange, isn’t it?” Mei said, smiling as she took a small sip of her wine and leaned her hip against the island. “For weeks I kept thinking the house felt crowded because of all the moving boxes we hadn’t flattened yet. Turns out it wasn’t the boxes at all.”

Keiko turned from the counter, her dark eyes warm and unhurried as she took in the sight of Mei glowing in the silk slip under the pendant light. Wearing a tailored black lounge trouser and a loose cashmere wrap draped over her bare shoulders, Keiko looked less like a neighbor who had moved in and more like the woman whose signature had always been on the architectural blueprints.

“A house only has room for one center of gravity, sweetheart,” Keiko said, picking up her own glass and walking slowly around the island until she stood directly in front of Mei. “When someone stays behind after their part is over, all they do is take up oxygen.”

She reached out with her free hand and hooked a single finger under the thin silk strap on Mei’s shoulder, sliding it slowly down over the curve of her arm so the champagne fabric dipped across Mei’s collarbone.

Mei’s breath caught softly, a warm flush rising into her cheeks—not the nervous, apologetic blush of the woman who had unpacked dishes in this kitchen a month

ago, but the heady, radiant heat of someone who believed she had finally arrived at the top of the stairs. In Mei's mind, the hierarchy of the house had driven away in the back of that black town car at four o'clock, leaving the two of them behind as equals—co-owners of two paid-off properties, sharing the wine, the bank accounts, and the quiet rooms.

"Come here," Keiko murmured, taking the wine glass from Mei's fingers and setting both stems down on the quartz without asking if Mei was finished.

Taking Mei lightly by the wrist, Keiko led her out of the kitchen and into the candlelit living room, stopping right at the edge of the long linen sectional where Tom had spent his last weeks exiled in the dark.

"Sit down," Keiko said softly.

Mei sank onto the deep center cushion, the cool champagne silk pooling around her thighs where the spare cotton sheet used to lie. Looking up toward the archway of the stairs, Mei could see the upper landing—dark tonight, because neither of them had gone up yet. For so many nights, this sofa had been the place of banishment, the quiet floor where a deposed husband listened to the sounds of his replacement drifting down from above.

Now, as Keiko lowered herself onto the cushions beside her and pushed the other silk strap off Mei's shoulder, reclaiming this piece of furniture felt like the final seal on their victory.

"We don't have to leave the bedroom door open for anyone tonight," Mei whispered, her hands rising to rest against the soft cashmere at Keiko's waist as Keiko leaned her back into the corner of the sectional. "There's nobody left in the house but us."

"Nobody at all," Keiko murmured against the bare skin of Mei's throat, her hand sliding smoothly under the hem of the champagne silk slip and gliding up the warm inside of Mei's thigh. "Which means I don't have to share a single second of your attention with anyone else."

Keiko's hand stayed where it was under the silk, palm warm against the inside of Mei's thigh, not moving higher yet. She kissed the hollow beneath Mei's ear once, then drew back far enough to look at her.

"Lie back," she said. "I want your mouth first."

Mei shifted down the cushions until her head rested near the arm of the sectional. Keiko stood long enough to step out of the lounge trousers and the cashmere wrap, then settled above her, knees on either side of Mei's shoulders. The champagne slip was still on Mei; Keiko left it. She braced one hand on the back of the sofa and lowered herself until Mei could reach her.

"Start slow," Keiko said. "Flat of your tongue. Don't rush the clit yet."

Mei obeyed. She licked upward in long, even strokes, tasting the clean salt of Keiko’s skin and the softer heat beneath it. Keiko’s breath changed, but her voice stayed level.

“Good. Now narrower. Right under the hood.”

Mei adjusted. She found the small ridge with the tip of her tongue and circled it the way Keiko had taught her, light at first, then with more pressure when Keiko’s hips settled lower. Keiko’s free hand came down and rested in Mei’s hair, not pushing, only holding.

“There. Stay on that.”

Mei stayed. She kept the same small circle, then closed her lips around the tip when it swelled forward and sucked gently, the way Keiko liked. Keiko’s thigh tightened against Mei’s ear. A low sound left her, almost a sigh. Mei felt the first small pulse against her tongue and kept the rhythm exactly as it was—no faster—until Keiko’s hand tightened once in her hair and the pulses came steadier, longer. Keiko stayed quiet through it, only her breathing deepening, then eased up and off Mei’s mouth.

“Better,” she said. She stretched out beside Mei again, one leg between Mei’s, and slid her hand back under the slip. Two fingers traced the outer folds, then parted them. “Your turn. But we’re not finishing yet.”

She stroked once, slowly, from the entrance up over the clit, then stopped. Mei’s hips lifted. Keiko pressed them back down with her palm.

“Still,” she said. “I want to watch.”

She began again—two fingers sliding inside, thumb resting on the hooded tip, moving in the same unhurried circle Mei had just used on her. Mei’s breath shortened. The silk slip had ridden up; Keiko pushed it higher with her free hand so she could see the way Mei’s stomach tightened on every inward stroke. She kept the pace steady until Mei’s thighs started to tremble, then slowed further.

“Look at you,” Keiko murmured. “Already trying to chase it.”

She drew her fingers out, spread the wetness upward, and returned to the same light circles on the clit alone. Mei made a small, frustrated sound. Keiko smiled.

“I was thinking,” she said, conversational, thumb never quite giving enough pressure, “this sofa is comfortable. You could sleep right here tonight. I’ll take the king bed upstairs. Plenty of room for me. You wouldn’t even have to climb the stairs.”

Mei’s eyes opened. “No,” she said, but the word came out thin. Her hips shifted again under Keiko’s hand. “I want— I want to be with you.”

“You are with me,” Keiko said. She slid two fingers back in, curled them once, and held still. “But the idea doesn’t seem to bother you as much as you’re saying.” She watched the flush spread across Mei’s chest, the way her nipples had tightened under the remaining silk.

“Someone has to handle the house now. Floors, laundry, the kitchen. I like the thought of your little naked body moving through the rooms while I work. Busy. Useful.”

Mei’s breath caught hard. “Yes,” she whispered.

Keiko’s hand left her long enough to draw the slip the rest of the way up and off, then the thin panties beneath it. She tossed both to the far end of the sectional. Mei lay bare against the linen. Keiko settled between her thighs again, fingers returning to the same slow curl and circle.

“You don’t mind if I have friends over?” she asked, tone still easy.

“Of course not,” Mei said. Her voice shook. “You already have.”

“No,” Keiko said. She pressed a little more firmly with her thumb, then eased off again before Mei could tip. “I mean have them over to watch you. Scrubbing the floors on your knees. Or just standing in the corner of the room like a doll while we talk. Nothing covering you. They could look as long as they wanted.”

Mei’s back arched. The image landed at the same moment Keiko’s fingers curled hard and stayed there, thumb finally moving in steady circles. Mei came with a broken, open sound, thighs shaking around Keiko’s wrist, the linen cushions creaking under her. Keiko kept the touch light through the aftershocks, watching Mei’s face until the tremors eased.

“Interesting,” she said quietly. She kissed the inside of Mei’s knee, then stretched out beside her again, one arm drawing Mei against her chest. “Just trying to learn your deepest wish. We’ll keep experimenting.”

Later, when the candles along the mantel had burned down to deep pools of clear wax and the grandfather clock chimed eleven in the hall, they still lay tangled together on the wide linen cushions of the sectional.

Mei rested with her cheek pillowed on Keiko’s bare chest, her breathing slow and languid, her skin still damp and humming from Keiko’s mouth and hands. In the warm afterglow, Mei traced a lazy circle across Keiko’s collarbone with her fingertip.

“Wait until we merge the two backyards like we talked about,” Mei murmured sleepily, her voice brimming with happy, domestic plans. “We could put an outdoor kitchen along the patio wall, and maybe turn Tom’s old study upstairs into a little library or a sitting room for when we have Claire and Julian over for the weekend. What do you think we should do with that spare room?”

Above her head, Keiko’s hand moved in slow, rhythmic passes through Mei’s dark hair—the exact same unhurried, soothing cadence she had used on Saturday morning when Mei was curled naked on the shearling cushion by her chair.

“I already have a few ideas for the upstairs space,” Keiko said quietly, her voice smooth as dark glass in the dim room. “You don’t need to tire your head out designing rooms tonight, Mei. We have plenty of time for that after Miami.”

Keiko tilted Mei’s chin up with two fingers, kissing her deeply until the next sentence about patio stonework melted right off Mei’s tongue, leaving her sighing and pliant in the hollow of Keiko’s arm as they finally climbed the stairs to bed.

Chapter Seventeen

On Sunday afternoon, the forty-minute drive up the valley felt less like an errand of mercy and more like a victory lap with the top down.

Keiko drove her slate-gray convertible with one wrist resting lazily at the top of the leather steering wheel, the warm canyon wind catching the collar of her crisp white linen shirt. Beside her in the passenger seat, Mei wore oversized tortoiseshell sunglasses, a silk scarf knotted loosely around her throat, and a butter-yellow sundress Keiko had ordered for her two days earlier—cut low enough across the back that the sun warmed her bare shoulder blades against the leather upholstery. Every few miles, Keiko's right hand left the center console to rest on Mei's bare knee, her thumb tracing a slow, possessive arc just beneath the hem of the yellow skirt.

The Alders didn't look like a hospital or a clinic. Tucked behind tall cypress hedges at the end of a crushed-limestone lane, the estate resembled a private vineyard villa—whitewashed stucco walls, terracotta roof tiles, and wide lawns shaded by old olive trees where attendants in cream linen uniforms moved quietly between the patio tables.

An attendant met them under the portico with a polite nod of recognition and led them along a flagstone path toward the south courtyard.

Tom sat alone at a small wrought-iron table beneath the dappled shade of a pergola, dressed in the pale gray cardigan and soft drawstring trousers Mei had packed into his weekender bag on Thursday. On the table in front of him sat a porcelain cup of chamomile tea and a small white saucer holding the crumbled halves of a familiar dark-glazed shortbread biscuit.

His hands rested loosely in his lap, his shoulders slack and settled, his dark eyes watching the bright flashes of finches hopping through the lavender beds. He looked completely unhurried, as if the clock inside his head had been unhooked from its gears.

"Look who has the best seat in the garden," Keiko said, her warm alto cutting smoothly through the quiet rustle of the olive leaves.

Tom's head turned at the sound of her voice. As he took in the sight of the two women strolling across the flagstones—Keiko sleek and bronzed in white linen, and his wife glowing beside her in butter-yellow silk with her hair tousled from the convertible—his lips parted slightly. He made a faint, reflexive movement in his throat, as if a greeting from his old life had tried to surface, before the effort dissolved into a soft, silent exhale.

Keiko didn't pull out the opposite chair for Mei. Instead, she claimed the wide teak garden bench directly across from Tom's chair, stretched one arm along the

backrest, and drew Mei down so they sat pressed hip to thigh, with Keiko's hand settling openly against the bare curve of Mei's waist.

"Evelyn told me you moved right into your routine without a single fuss, Tom," Keiko said, slipping her sunglasses up onto the crown of her head so he could see the cool, unhurried amusement in her dark eyes. "And I have to say, the arrangement has been just as restorative on our end. You have no idea how spacious that house feels now that we aren't stepping around you in the kitchen or listening to you toss and turn on the living room sofa."

Mei leaned her shoulder into Keiko's chest, beaming across the little table at her husband with bright, unselfconscious affection.

"Oh, Tom, you wouldn't even recognize the downstairs," Mei gushed, her voice light and breathless as her hand came up to cover Keiko's fingers at her waist. "Everything is so calm now. Keiko had fresh cedar candles brought in for the living room, and we moved all your old office clutter out of the upstairs study on Friday morning. Honestly, I don't know how I lived with so much noise in my head for so long—Keiko takes care of every single detail before I even think to worry about it."

Across the narrow table, Tom sat motionless in his gray cardigan, his hands curling slightly against the soft fabric of his trousers. Even through the placid, wordless fog of his afternoon biscuit, the sight of Mei's flushed cheeks and the proprietary weight of Keiko's palm on his wife's body sent a visible current of heat straight up his neck.

"She doesn't even have to set an alarm anymore," Keiko murmured, her fingers sliding lazily down from Mei's waist to stroke the bare outside of Mei's thigh right in front of Tom's fixed gaze. "We sleep as late as we please in your old bed, Tom. Then Mei brings my espresso out to the patio, and she stays right at my feet in the sun while I read the paper. It turns out your wife was never an anxious person at all—she just needed someone who knew what to do with her."

"It's true," Mei said earnestly, a deeper rose blooming across her chest as she tilted her face up toward Keiko's jawline before looking back at Tom. "I never knew I could feel the way Keiko makes me feel, Tom. Every time she touches me—every time she tells me what she wants—it's like my whole body wakes up all over again. We stayed down on the living room sectional until almost midnight our first night alone, and I didn't want to be anywhere else in the world."

Keiko watched Tom's face with slow, surgical satisfaction as Mei spoke.

Beneath the table, the soft cotton of Tom's drawstring trousers pulled tight across his groin, a helpless, throbbing betrayal that neither the apothecary biscuits nor the quiet garden could dull. He couldn't ask them to stop; he couldn't form a single word to remind them that his name had once been on the

deed to those rooms. All he could do was sit in his cardigan with the sweet taste of valerian and honey on his tongue, trembling slightly with submissive arousal while the woman who had annexed his life stroked his wife's bare leg two feet away.

"Look at that flush on his neck," Keiko said softly, tilting her head against Mei's hair with a low, affectionate laugh. "Even out here in the country without a word left in his head, he still loves hearing how well I'm using everything he worked for."

She reached across the small wrought-iron table, picked up the remaining half of the dark shortbread biscuit from Tom's saucer, and held it out toward his mouth between two fingers.

"Finish your treat, Tom," Keiko said smoothly. "Mei and I have dinner reservations back in town, and we have a lot of paperwork to finalize this week before our trip."

Tom leaned forward without a second's hesitation, taking the biscuit directly from Keiko's fingertips while Mei watched him with a warm, indulgent smile, her head resting contentedly on Keiko's shoulder.

Chapter Eighteen

Ten days later, on a warm Friday afternoon, Keiko and Mei returned to The Alders dressed straight from the judge’s private chambers in the city.

Keiko wore a bespoke ivory linen trouser suit with the jacket buttoned over bare skin, a thin band of brushed platinum catching the afternoon sun on her left ring finger. Beside her, Mei looked radiant in a bias-cut cream silk dress that skimmed the soft curve of her hips, a matching platinum band gleaming against her knuckle as she walked with her fingers laced through Keiko’s.

Because a light breeze had blown in off the hills, the attendants had settled Tom inside the estate’s glass-walled conservatory rather than out under the pergola. He sat in a deep rattan armchair near a bank of potted white orchids, a knitted cashmere throw folded neatly across his lap and a warm mug of herbal tea resting untouched on the side table beside him.

When the glass doors clicked open and the two women walked across the terracotta tiles toward him, Tom blinked slowly. His gaze dropped immediately to the bright, unmistakable flash of matching platinum on their left hands, and a look of mild, hazy confusion creased his forehead.

Keiko pulled two low upholstered parlor chairs directly in front of his rattan armchair, angling them close together so that when she and Mei sat down, their knees brushed and Tom had nowhere to look except straight at the two of them.

“We didn’t want to start our weekend without stopping by to share the news, Tom,” Keiko said, lifting Mei’s left hand where it rested on her knee and turning it slightly so the platinum band caught the conservatory light. “As of two o’clock this afternoon, Mei and I are legally married.”

Tom’s breath hitched silently in his chest. His eyes darted from the ring on Mei’s finger to Keiko’s calm, smiling face, his brow furrowing as the slow, cushioned machinery of his mind tried to piece together how such a thing was possible when Mei was already his wife.

Keiko watched the confusion move behind his eyes with cool, unhurried pleasure. Reaching into the sleek cream leather clutch resting beside her hip, she slid out two crisp, embossed legal certificates folded in half and held them open between two fingers for him to see.

“That durable power of attorney you signed at the dining table turned out to be wonderfully efficient,” Keiko explained, her tone as smooth and conversational as if she were reviewing a landscaping bill. “Between my signature on your behalf and Evelyn’s clinical affidavit confirming that your marriage was no longer physically viable, the court granted a formal annulment on Wednesday morning. Technically speaking, Tom, it’s as if your marriage to Mei never happened at all.

And an hour ago, a friend of mine on the bench married us in her chambers."

Mei leaned her cheek against Keiko's linen-clad shoulder, looking across the short gap between their chairs at her former husband with bright, glowing cheeks.

"It was so simple, Tom," Mei said, her voice soft and breathless with excitement. "I didn't have to worry about a single form. And the best part is what we're doing next—Keiko arranged the most extraordinary honeymoon for us in Miami. Two whole weeks at an oceanfront penthouse, private cabanas, and reservations at all the best restaurants on the water. And you paid for every bit of it with your retirement buyout! Isn't it sweet that you could still give me my dream honeymoon?"

In the rattan armchair, Tom's fingers tightened convulsively around the edges of the cashmere throw. Through the heavy, wordless haze of the apothecary biscuits, the sheer totality of what Keiko had done washed over him in a dizzying wave: she had taken his bedroom, his voice, his houses, his life savings, and now she had legally erased his name from Mei's life and used his own money to buy her wedding rings.

"You really shouldn't feel bad that our marriage didn't count, Tom," Mei continued earnestly, her dark eyes shining as she slid her hand up along the inside of Keiko's thigh. "Even when we were together, you never really knew how to make a woman feel the way a wife is supposed to feel. Keiko doesn't just hold me—she knows every single inch of my body better than I do. She keeps me awake for hours until I'm shaking, and she never gets tired, and she never has to stop until she decides I've had enough."

"Tell him how many times I made you come before we got dressed for the courthouse this morning, sweetheart," Keiko murmured, turning her head to brush her lips against Mei's temple while keeping her eyes locked on Tom's flushed face.

Mei blushed a deep, radiant crimson from her throat to her cheekbones, though her gaze didn't drop from Tom's. "Three times," she whispered softly. "Right on the edge of the bed while she was already wearing her suit trousers, so I was still trembling the whole ride into the city. I used to think what you and I did in bed was all there was, Tom. Now I can barely sit still next to her without wanting her hands on me again."

Tom sat pinned to the back of the rattan chair, his chest rising and falling in shallow, silent breaths. His mind was too fogged by valerian and honey to hold onto anger, leaving only the raw, exposed nerve of his humiliation—and beneath the cashmere throw across his lap, his body responded to his own erasure with a hard, aching throb of helpless arousal that made his knees tremble slightly

against the wicker frame.

Keiko’s gaze dipped briefly to the unmistakable tension under the blanket on Tom’s lap before rising back to his wide, glassy eyes.

“Look at that,” Keiko said softly, slipping the annulment papers back into her clutch and snapping it shut. “Not even legally her husband anymore, and it still thrills you to hear how thoroughly you’ve been replaced. Have a quiet weekend in the conservatory, Tom. Tonight is our wedding night, and Mei and I have a lot of Miami plans to go over in bed.”

Rising smoothly to her feet, Keiko drew Mei up beside her, gave Tom a single, lingering smile over her shoulder, and led his former wife out through the glass doors toward the waiting convertible.

Chapter Nineteen

That night, the king bed upstairs looked like the table of a boutique travel agency.

Propped against a bank of crisp white linen pillows, Mei sat cross-legged on the mattress wearing only an unfastened blush-silk kimono and the new brushed-platinum wedding band on her left hand. Spread across the duvet around her knees were a sleek silver tablet, two glossy resort lookbooks from South Beach, and a heavy cream cardstock itinerary folder embossed with the name of a private concierge service.

Across the bedroom, the double doors to the walk-in closet stood open. A brand-new cream leather weekender trunk rested on the cedar luggage rack inside, already half-filled with tissue-wrapped resort linen, strappy gold sandals, and three high-cut designer swimsuits Keiko had ordered for her earlier in the week.

Mei tapped the glowing screen of the tablet with her ring finger, pausing just for a second to admire the quiet gleam of the platinum against her skin before turning the screen toward Keiko.

“Look at this terrace, Keiko,” Mei said, her voice bright with the unguarded enthusiasm of a bride planning her first real luxury trip. “It’s a rooftop raw bar right at the southern tip of the beach. You can see the cruise ships going out past the jetty at sunset, and their stone crab claws are flown in from the Keys every afternoon. Should I have the concierge book us a corner table for Tuesday night, before Claire and Julian fly in on Wednesday?”

Keiko lay stretched out beside her on top of the duvet in a pair of black silk pajama trousers and a sleeveless ribbed tank, one arm propped behind her head as she watched Mei’s flushed, animated face.

“Book it for eight o’clock,” Keiko said smoothly, reaching out with her free hand to trace the bare inside of Mei’s calf where the blush kimono fell open. “Ask for the table on the west railing. The breeze off the water is much better there, and Lauren loves stone crab. Why don’t you move it to Wednesday night so the four of us can go together?”

“Wednesday is even better,” Mei agreed happily, typing a quick note into the concierge portal before touching one of the heavy cardstock brochures beside her knee. “Then on Thursday we can do the private daybed at the beach club. Look—they set up a four-poster canopy right on the sand with chilled towels and champagne service all afternoon. I put that emerald halter dress you bought me right on top of my suitcase for Thursday night.”

Keiko’s thumb moved in slow, hypnotic circles over the warm skin just below Mei’s knee. There was something deeply gratifying—almost exquisite—in watching how earnestly Mei threw herself into the choreography of being an equal partner. She looked so radiant sitting there with her little spreadsheets and restaurant bookmarks, completely convinced that the platinum band on her finger meant she had graduated to the side of the table that gave the orders.

“You’ve put a lot of work into the schedule, sweetheart,” Keiko murmured, shifting closer on the mattress and sliding her hand higher up Mei’s thigh until the tablet wobbled in Mei’s lap. “Anyone watching you right now would think you’re planning a corporate summit instead of a honeymoon.”

Mei laughed softly, setting the tablet aside on the nightstand while the glossy resort lookbooks and the cream itinerary folder stayed scattered across the duvet around her hips.

“I just want every single day to be perfect for us,” Mei whispered, turning into Keiko’s arms as Keiko eased her down flat against the pillows. “Tom and I only ever went to that noisy lake cabin his parents owned for four days when we got married, and I spent the whole time cooking in a tiny kitchen. Two whole weeks where we don’t have to cook, or clean, or answer to anyone… I can’t wait to wake up with you by the ocean.”

Keiko looked down into Mei’s dark, shining eyes, her palm coming up to cup the side of Mei’s jaw.

“Two weeks is a long time, Mei,” Keiko said softly, her thumb brushing across Mei’s lower lip. “Miami is loud. Once Claire and Lauren and Julian get going with the boat charters, and the late dinners, and the endless socializing at the cabanas, it never really stops. A honeymoon shouldn’t leave you worn out from trying to keep up with a crowd. What I really want for you over the next fourteen days is absolute peace.”

Mei’s eyelids fluttered as Keiko’s hand slid inside the open front of the blush kimono, cupping the warm weight of her breast.

“I won’t get tired as long as I’m with you,” Mei breathed, arching her back slightly into Keiko’s palm.

“We’ll see,” Keiko murmured against the corner of her mouth, her voice dropping into that dark, velvet cadence that always made the thoughts in Mei’s head feel slightly heavier and slower to reach. “Sometimes the greatest luxury in the world isn’t a crowded restaurant on the beach, sweetheart. It’s having a place so quiet and still that you don’t even have to choose what dress to put on in the morning.”

Keiko drew the blush kimono the rest of the way open, then slipped it from Mei’s shoulders and let it fall to the foot of the bed. Mei lay bare against the white

linen. The resort lookbooks and the cream itinerary folder stayed where they were, one of them half under Mei’s hip. Keiko shifted down until she lay between Mei’s thighs, bent, and licked once—long, flat, from the entrance up over the clit—then paused.

“Tuesday or Wednesday for the raw bar?” she asked, mouth still close enough that her breath moved across wet skin.

Mei’s hand found the edge of the nearest brochure. “Wednesday,” she managed. “With Claire and Julian.”

“Good.” Keiko licked again, slower, the tip of her tongue tracing the underside of the hood before she closed her lips around the small, swollen glans and sucked gently. She kept the pressure light and even. Mei’s hips tried to lift; Keiko’s palms held them to the duvet.

“And the daybed on Thursday,” Keiko said against her, the words muffled and calm. She drew back just far enough to speak clearly, then returned to the same unhurried circles. “Canopy. Champagne. You’ll lie still the whole afternoon.”

Mei’s fingers tightened on the cardstock. “Yes.”

Keiko’s tongue flattened and stroked upward again, then narrowed, circling the clit in the same measured rhythm she had used on the first pass. She did not speed up. Every few strokes she paused to ask something small—what time the concierge should send the car, whether Mei wanted the west or east cabana—and waited until Mei answered before she continued. The answers grew shorter. Mei’s thighs trembled against Keiko’s shoulders. The brochure crinkled under her hand.

“Quiet,” Keiko murmured, licking once more, slower than before. “No one waiting. No schedule to keep.” She closed her mouth over the clit and sucked in a steady, gentle pull, tongue moving underneath in small, precise circles. Mei’s back arched. The sound she made was open and soft. Keiko stayed exactly where she was through the pulses, palms still holding Mei’s hips down, until the tremors eased and Mei’s hand loosened on the brochure.

Keiko kissed the inside of her thigh once, then moved back up the bed. She left the kimono where it had fallen. Mei remained bare against the sheets, the lookbooks still scattered around her.

Around midnight, while Keiko was in the bathroom running warm water at the sink, Mei slipped out of bed still naked, her skin flushed and humming from their wedding night.

Padding barefoot into the walk-in closet, she stood over the open cream leather trunk for a quiet moment. With careful, loving hands, she smoothed the tissue paper over the emerald halter dress she planned to wear on Thursday night in

South Beach, tucked a pair of oversized sunglasses into the side pocket, and zipped the luggage shut so it would be ready by the front door in the morning.

When she walked back into the bedroom, Keiko was already beneath the sheet, holding the corner of the duvet open for her. Mei climbed in, pressed her bare front along Keiko’s warm side, and fell asleep dreaming of ocean breezes, white cabanas, and rooftop tables for two.

Chapter Twenty

Monday morning smelled of coastal fog burning off the hills and the new cream leather of the weekender trunk sitting in the back of Keiko’s car.

In the passenger seat, Mei sat with her ankles neatly crossed, wearing a crisp white linen travel dress, gold flat sandals, and the brushed-platinum wedding band gleaming on her left hand. Across her lap rested her woven straw cabana tote with the heavy cream cardstock itinerary folder tucked securely inside—every restaurant confirmation, sunset raw bar table, and four-poster beach daybed printed and arranged in chronological order.

Twenty minutes after they merged onto the highway toward the private airfield, Keiko signaled smoothly and took a quiet, tree-lined exit that curved inland up into the limestone canyons instead of toward the coast.

Mei blinked, glancing up from the straw tote toward the cypress trees sliding past her window. “Did they reroute the highway because of construction? I thought the aviation terminal was down by the bay.”

“It is,” Keiko said easily, one hand resting at the top of the wheel while her sunglasses reflected the dappled canyon light. “We’re making a quick stop before my flight. There’s a private facility up the ridge that Evelyn arranged for us last week.”

“Before our flight, you mean,” Mei laughed softly, reaching over to touch Keiko’s sleeve. “Do we have time? If we don’t board by ten-thirty, we’ll hit the late dinner rush in South Beach, and I promised the concierge we’d check into the penthouse by seven.”

Keiko didn’t answer. She turned the car through a pair of unmarked brushed-steel gates that slid open without a sound and followed a pale gravel drive up to a low, cantilevered pavilion of white concrete and frosted glass tucked straight into the hillside.

When the car stopped under the porte-cochère, two attendants in tailored, pristine white uniforms stepped out through the glass doors. Before Mei had even unbuckled her seatbelt, Keiko popped the trunk release. Instead of lifting out both suitcases, one of the attendants removed only Mei’s cream leather weekender trunk, leaving Keiko’s black garment bag untouched in the back of the car.

“Come inside, Mei,” Keiko said, stepping out onto the gravel and buttoning her camel blazer.

Still clutching her straw tote against her hip, Mei followed Keiko through the heavy glass doors into the lobby of Stillwater.

The room didn’t look like a hotel or a spa. There were no floral arrangements, no brochures, and no check-in counter—only expanses of seamless white terrazzo floor, acoustic plaster walls that swallowed the sound of their footsteps, and three more attendants in crisp white uniforms standing with their hands folded quietly in front of them. The air carried a faint, clean scent of warm cedar and medical-grade ozone.

Keiko walked to the center of the terrazzo floor, slipped her sunglasses off, and turned around to face her bride.

“Put her trunk in storage,” Keiko said to the nearest attendant without looking away from Mei. “She won’t be opening it.”

Mei’s smile faltered, her fingers tightening on the handles of her straw tote. “Keiko? What are you talking about? My dresses for the beach club are in that trunk. Why did you say my flight in the car?”

“Because I’m flying to Miami in forty minutes, sweetheart,” Keiko said, her alto voice completely level, warm, and conversational in the hushed white lobby. “And you’re staying right here for the next fourteen days.”

For three seconds, the words refused to assemble into a shape Mei could understand. She let out a small, breathless laugh that sounded thin even to her own ears. “Stay here? For two weeks? You’re teasing me—we just got married on Friday! This is our honeymoon, I spent all weekend booking the raw bar and the cabanas for us—”

“I know you did,” Keiko interrupted gently, taking a single, unhurried step closer. Reaching out, Keiko slipped her hand directly into Mei’s woven straw tote and drew out the heavy cream cardstock itinerary folder Mei had spent all weekend perfecting. “And you actually did a wonderful job with the reservations, Mei. I’m taking this folder with me—it would be a shame to waste that sunset table at the raw bar or the four-poster daybed on Thursday. Claire and Lauren are going to love them. Honestly, though, did you really think I was going to bring you along to South Beach?”

Mei’s lips parted, the color draining from her cheeks as Keiko tucked the cream itinerary folder under her own arm and two of the attendants in white stepped silently into place on either side of Mei.

“Think about it for a second,” Keiko continued, tilting her head as she cataloged her reasons with cool, surgical precision. “First of all, my friends are flying down to drink good champagne on a boat, stay out until three in the morning, and enjoy adult conversation. None of us want to spend two weeks babysitting a blushing suburban housewife who still looks across the table every thirty seconds to check if she’s holding her fork the right way.”

“I wouldn’t—” Mei started, taking an instinctive half-step backward, only for the two attendants in white to move simultaneously.

With practiced, unhurried smoothness, the woman on Mei’s left took hold of her upper arm and wrist, while the attendant on her right secured her other elbow and let the empty straw tote drop from Mei’s fingers to the floor.

“Let go—Keiko, tell them to let go of me!” Mei gasped, twisting her shoulders against their grip, though the attendants held her arms with firm, padded certainty that didn’t allow an inch of leverage. “What is this place? Why are they holding me?”

“Second,” Keiko went on smoothly, as if Mei hadn’t spoken at all, “you are still far too needy when you’re dressed up like a person. Ever since we sent Tom up the valley, you’ve been floating around the house chatting about curtain swatches and patio kitchens and dinner schedules, acting as if getting rid of your husband meant I wanted another noisy roommate underfoot. You talk too much when you’re anxious, you cling to my arm in public, and frankly, having you trailing behind me through five-star hotels in your little resort dresses would turn my vacation into a chore.”

Tears of sheer shock and humiliation sprang to the corners of Mei’s dark eyes as she strained against the white-sleeved hands pinning her arms to her sides. “You wouldn’t do that,” she choked out, her chest heaving beneath the crisp white linen of her dress. “You married me—you told Tom how happy we were! You wouldn’t just dump me in some place and take my honeymoon itinerary without me!”

“I’m not dumping you, sweetheart. I’m boarding you,” Keiko said softly, stepping right up into Mei’s space until the lapel of her camel blazer brushed Mei’s chest. “Do you know that when Stephen Hawking had to attend crowded receptions, he used to ask his assistants to wheel him into a narrow coat closet and close the door just so he could be completely free of the noise in the room? That’s what Stillwater is—except you don’t have to work out the laws of physics in here. For the next fourteen days, you won’t have a phone, you won’t have a single piece of clothing to choose, and you won’t have to form a single word. You’re going to be kept in a warm, soundproof room in what they call Zero-State until I come back from Miami to pick you up.”

“No—please, Keiko, don’t leave me here!” Mei cried out, her voice cracking in the immaculate silence of the lobby.

Keiko didn’t raise her voice, and she didn’t step back. Looking straight into Mei’s wide, wet eyes while the two attendants held Mei’s arms wide at her sides, Keiko slipped her right hand calmly beneath the hem of Mei’s white linen travel dress.

Her fingers glided straight up the bare, trembling inside of Mei’s thigh and slipped past the thin silk gusset of her bridal panties.

Mei’s protest broke off in a ragged, catastrophic gasp.

Despite the terror hammering in her ribs—or because of every cruel, dizzying layer of the trick—the moment Keiko had listed how useless and underfoot she was while strangers in white held her helpless and her own honeymoon folder was tucked under Keiko’s arm, Mei’s body had betrayed her completely. She was soaked, the thin silk between her legs already damp and hot against Keiko’s knuckles.

“Look at that,” Keiko murmured, keeping her voice low enough that it belonged only to the three inches of air between their mouths as she slid two fingers slowly into the slick heat between Mei’s thighs. “Your mouth is begging me not to leave you behind, Mei, and you’re dripping all over my hand right in the lobby.”

A deep, scalding crimson flooded from Mei’s collarbone all the way to her hairline. Her knees buckled slightly between the attendants’ hands as Keiko’s thumb brushed a single, lazy circle over her swollen clit, proving beyond any possible denial how hard the humiliation of being tricked and stored like a possession had hit her nerve endings.

“You built a whole fantasy about rooftop raw bars and emerald dresses,” Keiko whispered against her cheek, “when what your body actually wanted the whole time was to have your little suitcase taken away and be locked somewhere quiet to wait for me.”

Keiko’s fingers stilled inside her. The attendants’ hands stayed firm on Mei’s arms, holding them wide. Keiko waited until Mei’s breathing had roughened, then spoke in the same low, even voice.

“I’m going to have a wonderful time,” she said. “The boat, the late dinners, the cabanas. No one trailing after me. No one checking my face every thirty seconds to see if she’s doing it right. That’s what the next fourteen days are for.”

Mei’s hips shifted, chasing the fingers that were no longer moving. Keiko did not give them back.

“Say it,” Keiko told her. “Tell me you want to be boarded here so I can enjoy the trip.”

Mei’s voice cracked. “I want… I want you to leave me here. So you can have the trip.”

“And you like being held in place while you say it.” Keiko’s thumb pressed once, lightly, against the swollen tip, then stopped again. “The attendants aren’t letting go. You don’t want them to. Say that too.”

A thin, helpless sound left Mei’s throat. Her arms stayed stretched between the white-sleeved hands. “I like it,” she whispered. “I like being held. I don’t want them to let go.”

Keiko’s mouth curved. She slid her fingers deeper once, slow, then drew them back to the same shallow stroke. “I know that,” she said. “It’s your wish.”

Mei’s head tipped forward. The next breath broke into a low, open groan that did not crest. Her thighs trembled, but the rhythm stayed exactly where Keiko kept it—close, unfinished. “It’s my wish,” she repeated, the words shaking. “It’s my wish.”

“I’ll be good,” Mei whimpered, the fight draining out of her spine in a hot, trembling rush as her forehead dropped against Keiko’s shoulder. “Please, Keiko—I’ll wait for you. I won’t make a sound, I’ll stay wherever you put me, just promise you’ll come back for me when your trip is over.”

“Of course I’ll come back for you,” Keiko said warmly, drawing her wet fingers out from beneath the white skirt and wiping them unhurriedly on a linen handkerchief an attendant offered on a silver tray. “Why would I leave something this responsive behind? Bring her down the hall.”

With the cream itinerary folder tucked neatly under her arm, Keiko walked beside them as the two attendants guided Mei through a set of frosted double doors into a hushed interior corridor lined with private viewing galleries.

Mei didn’t pull back when the third attendant stepped behind her and unfastened the row of small pearl buttons down the back of her white travel dress. Standing under the soft recessed lighting with her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths, Mei let them slide the crisp linen off her shoulders and pool it around her ankles. One attendant knelt to unbuckle her gold sandals; the other two peeled away her sheer bridal bra and the damp silk panties, leaving her completely naked on the warm limestone floor except for the brushed-platinum wedding band on her left hand.

Beside them, an entire wall consisted of a single seamless pane of floor-to-ceiling observation glass looking into a softly lit, curved white sanctuary.

In the exact center of the room, angled directly toward the observation glass like a pedestal in a private museum, stood the stasis cradle. Sculpted from body-warmed ivory leather and brushed champagne steel, it wasn’t a bed or a chair, but a contoured suspension frame designed to hold a naked body in effortless, open stillness—reclining the torso at a slight backward arch while supporting the wrists above the shoulders and holding the thighs gently parted on padded rests so not an inch of skin could be hidden from the glass.

“Inside, sweetheart,” Keiko said gently, brushing the back of her knuckles down the curve of Mei’s bare hip as the attendants opened the hidden acoustic side door and guided her across the threshold.

Mei stepped barefoot to the cradle and let the two attendants ease her back against the warm ivory curve of the frame. Her breath caught softly as they guided her arms up to the contoured rests above her shoulders—where soft, seamless bands of padded leather closed around her wrists and forearms—and settled her parted knees onto the lower supports, securing her ankles and thighs so she was held completely immobile, her breasts lifted and her bare sex open to the observation wall.

The attendants stepped out, and the acoustic door sealed with a soft, pneumatic whisper that cut off every sound from the outside world.

On the gallery side of the floor-to-ceiling observation glass, Keiko paused for a long, appreciative moment. Held in the warm amber glow of the stasis cradle, unable to cross her legs or cover her blush, Mei looked exquisite—stripped of every dress, every schedule, and every human pretense, reduced to a living sculpture waiting for her owner’s return.

Smiling softly, Keiko tapped the edge of Mei’s cream honeymoon folder once against the glass in a quiet salute, slipped her sunglasses back onto the bridge of her nose, and strolled out toward her car to catch her flight to Miami.

Chapter Twenty-One

For the first forty-eight hours inside the curved white room, time did not pass in hours or minutes; it existed only as a continuous, humming ache between Mei's parted thighs.

Because Keiko had left her in the lobby right on the trembling edge of climax, the stillness of the stasis cradle felt almost unbearably intimate. Sculpted to the exact curves of her spine and hips, the body-warmed ivory leather held her in weightless suspension. With her wrists secured in the soft, seamless bands above her shoulders and her knees resting wide on the lower supports, she couldn't cross her legs to press against the throb between them, and she couldn't lower her hands to cover the flush spreading across her bare breasts.

Every time she inhaled, her chest rose into the warm, amber-lit air of the sanctuary, completely exposed to the floor-to-ceiling observation glass eight feet in front of her.

Twice a day, the hidden acoustic side door slid open with a soft pneumatic whisper.

Two female attendants in crisp white uniforms stepped inside without making a sound. Neither of them ever spoke a word to her, nor did they ever unfasten her wrists or ankles from the cradle. Moving with calm, gallery-like precision, one attendant used warm damp linens and unscented botanical oil to cleanse and massage Mei's bare skin from her throat down to her arches, keeping her muscles supple and leaving her body gleaming softly under the recessed lights.

The second attendant held a small porcelain dish of warm, pressed oat-and-almond nutritional squares to Mei's lips, feeding her bite by bite before offering cool water through a bent glass straw.

At the first feeding, Mei searched her tongue for the familiar dark, herbal bite of Dr. Sterling's valerian biscuits—half expecting her thoughts to blur into the heavy, medicated fog she had watched settle over Tom.

Nothing happened. There were no drugs in the food at all. The small squares tasted only of toasted almond, clean grain, and light honey. Her mind remained crystal clear, leaving her with zero chemical excuse for why her heart beat faster every time the attendants oiled her bare thighs and stepped back out, sealing her once again into the immaculate silence.

On the third evening—what Mei's internal clock guessed had to be Wednesday night—a soft chime echoed through the sanctuary.

Directly in front of her, the center section of the observation glass darkened and resolved into a high-definition video projection, while a concealed speaker in the ceiling clicked open with the sudden, vibrant wash of ocean breeze, low Latin

guitar, and the clink of ice against crystal.

Mei’s breath caught in her throat.

On the glass before her was the exact west-railing corner table at the South Beach rooftop raw bar she had bookmarked on her wedding night. Beyond the glass balustrade, the Miami sky burned a deep, bruised violet over the water as a white cruise ship glided out past the illuminated jetty.

Keiko sat at the center of the curved banquette in a plunging black silk halter dress, her skin bronzed from the afternoon sun. To her left sat Claire and Lauren, radiant in resort linen, and to her right sat Julian in an unfastened white linen shirt. In the center of their table stood a three-tiered silver tower overflowing with cracked stone crab claws, chilled prawns, and champagne flutes.

“There she is,” Keiko’s warm alto drifted down from the ceiling speaker, clear and unhurried over the murmur of the terrace. “Look how nicely she’s settling in.”

Mei instinctively strained a fraction against the padded leather bands holding her wrists above her shoulders, a hot wave of crimson rushing from her collarbone to her cheeks as four pairs of eyes looked straight at her through the lens. She tried to say Keiko’s name, only to realize as her lips parted that there was no microphone active in her room—or if there was, Keiko had kept her side completely muted.

“God, Keiko, you weren’t exaggerating,” Claire said, leaning closer to the camera with a slow, appreciative smile as she lifted her champagne flute. “The lighting in there makes her skin look like porcelain. Look at the way she’s blushing—she knows we can all see her.”

“See her?” Lauren laughed softly, reaching across the tablecloth to dip a stone crab claw into drawn butter. “We’ve barely taken our eyes off her since we landed. Honestly, Mei, you should be flattered—Keiko’s had your live feed pulled up on the tablet all afternoon by the pool. Every time one of us reached for a drink, we checked in to see how still you were being.”

Wait—all afternoon? Mei’s pulse hammered against her ribs, her thighs tightening helplessly against the padded rests holding her knees apart. She had assumed the observation glass was dark until they called. Instead, for hours while she had hung suspended in the quiet room, anyone glancing at Keiko’s screen had been looking straight between her legs.

“Here, show her what she looks like on our end,” Keiko said easily, taking a sip of her champagne.

Beside her, Julian grinned and reached toward the center of the restaurant table. He picked up the sleek silver tablet—the exact same tablet Mei had held in her

lap on Friday night to book this very reservation—and turned its glowing screen toward Keiko's phone camera so Mei could see what sat propped between the silver crab tower and the candle holders.

Filling the tablet screen in crisp, wide-angle high definition was Mei's entire naked body in the ivory cradle. The camera angle in her room captured everything from the arch of her throat and the full, lifted swell of her breasts down to the parted V of her thighs and the platinum wedding band glinting inside the wrist cuff above her head.

"Look at that, Mei," Julian said, laughing warmly as he set the tablet back on its stand right in the middle of the dinner table so the four of them could keep watching her while they ate. "It's sort of like having a doll-sized version of you right here at the table with us! You really did pick the best spot on the beach—the breeze off the jetty is incredible."

"We're going to order another bottle of the vintage rosé and enjoy the sunset, sweetheart," Keiko murmured, her dark eyes locking onto Mei's wide, shining gaze through the glass while her fingers rested lazily beside the tablet screen. "You stay right there and keep being quiet for us. Maybe we'll leave your feed propped on the bar while we have nightcaps."

The screen dissolved back into seamless observation glass, cutting off the ocean breeze and plunging Mei back into total, soundproof silence—her bare skin burning and her sex slick and throbbing against the warm air with no way to touch herself.

The next time the glass flickered to life, bright afternoon sunlight poured across the screen.

Mei recognized the billowing white canvas drapes immediately: it was Thursday afternoon, and Keiko was stretched out on the four-poster beach daybed Mei had reserved right on the sand. The sound of rolling surf and distant laughter drifted through the ceiling speaker.

Only Keiko wasn't with Claire, Lauren, or Julian today.

Reclined against the bank of oversized white pillows beside Keiko—with one long, sun-bronzed leg draped casually over Keiko's bare thigh—was a stunning young brunette Mei had never seen before in her life.

She couldn't have been more than twenty-four, with wet dark waves tumbling over her shoulders from the ocean, high cheekbones, and the bottom half of a sleek black string bikini. Her bare breasts pressed lightly against Keiko's ribs as she leaned in, sipping lazily from Keiko's chilled champagne flute while looking down at the live feed of Mei's naked body on the tablet in Keiko's lap.

Mei’s heart gave a sharp, dizzying lurch. She waited for Keiko to explain—to say this was a cousin of Lauren’s, or someone from the resort concierge, or even just to say the woman’s name.

Keiko didn’t offer a single word of explanation.

With her sunglasses pushed up into her hair, Keiko simply slid her free hand down the bare, sunlit curve of the brunette’s waist, her thumb stroking the girl’s hip just above the black bikini string in the exact slow, proprietary rhythm she used on Mei.

“The four-poster daybed was another wonderful call, Mei,” Keiko said conversationally into the camera, while the brunette smiled softly at the screen and traced a lazy fingertip across Keiko’s collarbone. “The water is eighty degrees today, and the champagne service hasn’t missed a beat. You look very peaceful in there, sweetheart. Don’t move a muscle.”

The brunette tilted her head on Keiko’s shoulder, her dark eyes lingering with frank, unhurried curiosity on the sight of Mei’s parted thighs on the screen just before Keiko tapped the glass and ended the connection.

Chapter Twenty-Two

For a day after the beach club transmission ended, the image of the dark-haired stranger draped across Keiko's thigh lingered in the amber air of the sanctuary like a bruise trying to form.

Mei's mind did what it had been trained to do for twenty-six years: it tried to narrate the hurt. It tried to ask who the girl was, where Keiko had met her, whether Claire and Lauren liked her better, and what it meant for a bride to be locked naked in a frame while another woman drank from her wife's champagne glass.

Yet a strange thing happened inside the soundproof curvature of the room.

In the outside world, jealousy required fuel to keep burning. It needed a mirror to frown into, a floor to pace across, a telephone to check, or a sharp sentence rehearsed aloud in an empty kitchen. Held in the body-warmed ivory leather of the stasis cradle, Mei had none of those things. She could not clench her fists when her wrists were cradled weightlessly above her shoulders; she could not pace when her thighs were held gently, inexorably open to the quiet light; she could not even measure how long she had been holding onto the thought because the amber glow never shifted from morning to night.

Somewhere after the tenth feeding of warm almond-and-oat squares and cool water through the bent glass straw, the questions inside Mei's head simply ran out of oxygen.

One by oil-smoothed hour at a time, the voice that said I began to thin out like coastal fog beneath a steady sun.

When the two attendants in white stepped through the pneumatic door to bathe her skin in warm botanical oil, Mei no longer searched their faces for pity or embarrassment. She didn't think of herself as a woman being touched by strangers; she existed only as the warmth of the linen moving down the arch of her ribs, the slow, heavy slide of oiled thumbs along the insides of her parted thighs, and the quiet rise and fall of her breasts in the still air.

By the eighth day, the silence of the room stopped feeling like something that had been done to her and began to feel like a grace she had been pardoned into.

She remembered what Keiko had murmured to her in the sunlit living room while Tom sat quietly beside his weekender bag: The constant noise of trying to be a person—trying to hold onto pride, and schedules, and language—it's like static on a radio that drowns out the music.

All her life, Mei had carried the exhausting burden of trying to be someone—the dutiful daughter, the attentive wife, the woman who worried whether her dress was right or her conversation was clever enough. Now, suspended in the warm

leather frame with her body completely open to the observation glass, she realized that being looked at without having to perform was the purest relief she had ever known. She didn't have to choose a single word. She didn't have to decide what came next. She was no longer a restless mind trapped inside a body; she was simply a vessel of warm skin, slow pulse, and continuous, liquid heat, kept safe under glass for the woman who owned her.

When the observation wall chimed softly and flickered to life in the middle of the fourteenth night, the sanctuary inside Mei's chest did not break.

The projection showed the master bedroom of the South Beach penthouse bathed in the low, golden glow of a single bedside lamp. Through the open glass sliders behind the bed, moonlight laid a shimmering ribbon of silver across the dark Atlantic.

Keiko lay propped against a bank of white linen pillows, bare-shouldered with a thin silk sheet pooled lazily around her waist. Curled naked behind her in the tangled sheets was the young brunette from the beach daybed. The girl's eyes were half-closed with post-coital languor, one slim arm draped possessively across Keiko's stomach while she pressed slow, sleepy kisses along the bare curve of Keiko's shoulder and collarbone.

A week earlier, the sight would have sent a hot spike of panic through Mei's ribs.

Now, looking through the glass from the deep, cathedral hush of her Zero-State, Mei felt only a profound, swelling current of tender devotion. How foolish she had been to think that a place in that noisy Miami bed was what she wanted. The girl kissing Keiko's neck still had to talk, still had to dress for dinner, still had to wonder whether she would be invited back next month.

Mei had been given something infinitely rarer. While the brunette held Keiko's body for an evening, it was Mei's naked form glowing on the tablet beside Keiko's pillow—silent, permanent, and untouched by time.

In the warm amber light of the cradle, Mei's eyelids stayed heavy and serene. Her lips parted in a soft, noiseless sigh, and between her wide-held knees, a fresh, glistening bead of moisture gathered along her bare folds in quiet offering to the lens.

On the screen, Keiko didn't talk to the brunette. Instead, as the girl's lips brushed her throat, Keiko leaned closer to the camera, her dark eyes narrowing slightly as she studied Mei's face through the high-definition feed.

For a long beat, the only sound from the ceiling speaker was the distant hush of the Miami surf. Keiko looked at the complete absence of tension around Mei's mouth, the slow, hypnotic rise of her breasts, and the luminous, unguarded stillness in her dark eyes.

“Look at your eyes,” Keiko whispered, her low alto hushed with something very close to reverence. “You stopped counting the days, didn’t you, sweetheart?” Mei didn’t strain against her cuffs or try to mouth an answer. She simply looked back into Keiko’s eyes with soft, bottomless adoration, letting her chest rise and fall in the warm air.

A slow, breathtaking smile curved Keiko’s mouth—not the sharp smile of a trickster in a lobby, but the deep, quiet satisfaction of an artist seeing her work emerge from the stone.

“You finally found the quiet,” Keiko murmured softly into the lens. “Stay right where you are, my love. I’m flying home in the morning, and I’m coming straight up the hill for you.”

The glass darkened back into seamless reflection. Mei closed her eyes and floated effortlessly in the warm leather embrace until the next afternoon.

She knew the exact moment Keiko entered the building—not by any clock, but by the way the rhythm of her own heartbeat deepened before the pneumatic door even whispered open.

When the hidden side door slid back, it wasn’t just the two attendants in white who stepped onto the curved floor. Behind them walked Keiko, dressed in a tailored charcoal travel coat over black silk, carrying the unmistakable scent of cedar, bergamot, and outside air into the hushed room.

Keiko stopped two paces in front of the stasis cradle. Her dark eyes moved slowly over every inch of Mei—from the platinum wedding band inside the overhead leather cuff, down the oiled, rose-flushed curve of her breasts and waist, to the slick, open heat shining between her parted thighs.

“Unfasten her,” Keiko said quietly.

The two attendants stepped to either side of the frame and released the seamless leather bands at Mei’s wrists, forearms, thighs, and ankles before stepping silently out of the room and closing the door behind them.

After fourteen days of weightless suspension, gravity felt impossibly heavy and sweet. Mei’s arms floated down from the overhead rests as if moving through warm water. When she tried to slide her feet to the floor, her knees trembled so violently that she couldn’t stand—and she had no desire to stand anyway.

Without uttering a single word, Mei slid gracefully from the ivory leather cradle onto her bare knees on the warm floor right in front of Keiko’s shoes. She didn’t reach up to pull herself level, and she didn’t ask how the trip was. Instead, she leaned forward, wrapped her arms lightly around Keiko’s calves, and pressed her warm cheek against the silk of Keiko’s trouser leg, closing her eyes with a long, shivering exhale of pure gratitude.

Keiko looked down at the naked woman kneeling in worship at her feet and slid her fingers slowly into Mei’s dark hair, cradling the back of her head.

“Welcome back, sweetheart,” Keiko whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The drive back down from the limestone hills felt to Mei like surfacing too quickly from the bottom of a warm, silent sea.

Inside the cabin of Keiko’s car, every ordinary sound seemed strangely magnified and jagged. The low hum of the tires against the asphalt, the faint click of the turn signal at the bottom of the canyon road, even the rustle of her own white linen travel dress shifting across her oiled collarbones whenever the car rounded a bend—all of it pressed against her skin like static.

For fourteen days, her body had known only the seamless curve of body-warmed ivory leather and the steady, unchanging glow of the sanctuary. Now, sitting upright in a leather bucket seat with her hands loose in her lap and her knees together beneath a skirt, she felt oddly untethered, as if gravity were pulling at her from too many directions at once.

Keiko drove with one hand on the wheel, glancing over every few miles at the way Mei sat motionless against the passenger door. She didn’t turn on the radio, and she didn’t fill the car with chatter about Miami. She simply let her right hand rest warm and heavy over Mei’s bare knee, giving Mei a single anchor point in the moving world.

When they pulled into the driveway at four o’clock and stepped inside the house, the downstairs rooms greeted them with a bright, echoing vastness that made Mei stop just past the threshold.

Before Stillwater, this foyer and the sunlit kitchen beyond it had been her pride—the prize she and Keiko had won from Tom. Now, looking across the wide oak floorboards toward the kitchen island and the tall bay windows, the house looked overwhelmingly complicated. There were too many corners, too many chairs to choose between, too many surfaces asking her to be a person with habits and opinions.

The attendant had loaded her unopened cream leather honeymoon trunk back into the car at Stillwater, and Keiko set it down near the foot of the stairs without a word.

“Go on into the kitchen, sweetheart,” Keiko said gently, slipping off her charcoal travel coat and draping it over the banister. “I’ll make us an espresso, and you can tell me what you’d like to have brought in for dinner.”

Mei walked barefoot across the cool oak into the kitchen, her gold sandals left forgotten by the front door. She approached the quartz island and stood beside one of the barstools, her fingers resting lightly on the stone edge.

The refrigerator hummed a low mechanical note in the quiet room. Outside the patio glass, a breeze moved through the hedges, casting shifting patterns of light

and shadow across the floor that refused to stay still.

Keiko moved behind the counter with her usual sleek efficiency, the espresso machine hissing softly as two dark streams poured into porcelain cups. She set a cup in front of Mei, leaned her palms on the cool quartz across from her, and looked into Mei's face with calm, searching dark eyes.

"We can order from that little bistrot on Fourth," Keiko said conversationally, "or I can have fresh sushi sent over around seven. Which sounds better to you?"

Mei looked down at the small porcelain cup, then up at Keiko's mouth.

It was the simplest question in the world—the kind of question she used to answer ten times a week without a second thought. Yet as she opened her lips to choose between French food and fish, she felt a sudden, hollow dizziness behind her eyes. To choose one meant having to step back inside the restless machinery of preferences, schedules, and conversations. It meant putting the heavy coat of human language back on her shoulders after two weeks of floating naked in the light.

Her throat worked silently. Instead of answering, her hand drifted up to the top button of her white linen dress, her fingers trembling slightly against the pearl fastener as if the crisp fabric were choking her.

"I…" Mei whispered, her voice sounding strange and raspy in her own ears after three hundred hours of unused silence. "Whatever you want, Keiko. I don't—I don't know how to pick."

Keiko didn't correct her or tell her to try harder. A faint, knowing softness touched the corners of Keiko's eyes as she came around the island, took the untouched espresso cup out of Mei's reach, and unfastened the top three buttons of the linen dress herself.

"It's loud out here, isn't it?" Keiko murmured, sliding her palms inside the parted linen to rest warm against Mei's bare collarbones.

Mei let out a long, shaky breath, her eyes fluttering shut the instant Keiko's hands held her in place. "Everything moves," she breathed against Keiko's wrist. "And my hands feel so strange when nothing is holding them."

"Come upstairs," Keiko said softly.

They didn't bring the unopened suitcase up from the hall. In the master bedroom, late afternoon light slanted across the wide king bed and into the deep, recessed sitting alcove along the far wall—an eight-by-ten architectural niche framed by two load-bearing columns where a pair of linen armchairs and a reading lamp currently stood facing the mattress.

The moment the bedroom door clicked shut behind them, Mei reached behind her back, finished unbuttoning the white travel dress, and let it slide down her hips to the rug. She peeled off the thin bra and panties with hurried, almost desperate relief, kicking them aside until she stood completely bare in the center of the carpet.

Yet even without her clothes, the restlessness under her skin didn’t stop.

When Keiko stepped into the master bathroom for a few minutes to wash the travel from her hands and face, Mei walked slowly to the edge of the king bed. She climbed onto the white duvet, lay back on the center of the mattress, and stared up at the ceiling.

Without the contoured curve of the ivory leather beneath her spine, the flat mattress felt vast and indifferent. Her arms felt restless at her sides; her legs felt wrong touching each other. After a minute, almost without realizing what she was doing, Mei raised both arms above her shoulders and laid her wrists flat against the linen pillows where the overhead cuffs had held her for two weeks. Slowly, she drew her heels back and parted her knees wide to the quiet room, arching her ribcage slightly toward the ceiling as she tried with all her might to summon back the weightless, amber-lit peace of the cradle.

When Keiko walked out of the bathroom five minutes later in a loose black silk robe, she stopped in the doorway.

There on the king mattress lay her bride—naked, motionless, her wrists pinned voluntarily to the pillows above her head with the platinum wedding band glinting in the dusk, her thighs held open to the empty room, and a single tear of sheer sensory exhaustion slipping from the corner of her dark eyes into her hair.

Keiko walked silently across the carpet and sat on the edge of the mattress beside Mei’s hip. She didn’t pull the sheet over her, and she didn’t tell her to lower her arms. Instead, Keiko placed one firm palm right in the center of Mei’s bare sternum—supplying the steady, grounding pressure the empty air lacked—while her other hand glided down to cup the warm, slick heat between Mei’s open thighs.

Mei arched into the weight of Keiko’s hands with a low, broken sigh of relief, keeping her wrists pressed faithfully against the pillows above her head as if invisible leather bands still held them there.

“Look at you,” Keiko whispered, leaning down to brush her lips along the side of Mei’s throat while her fingers moved in slow, unhurried circles between her legs. “Two hours back in your own house, and you’re already trying to build the cradle out of pillows.”

“I can’t find the quiet when I’m loose,” Mei whispered, her voice trembling and thick as her hips rose into Keiko’s palm. “Out here I have to think about where to put my hands, and what to say, and everything starts buzzing in my head again. In there—when I couldn’t move, and I knew you could look at me whenever you wanted—it was so warm, Keiko. I didn’t have to be anybody at all.”

Keiko looked from Mei’s flushed, pleading face across the bedroom toward the deep recessed alcove facing the foot of the bed, her dark eyes measuring the clean lines between the columns where the two reading chairs sat.

“You don’t ever have to go back to being somebody if you don’t want to, sweetheart,” Keiko murmured against her lips, holding Mei pinned to the sheets as her fingers slowed to a deep, steady rhythm. “Why should I board my favorite possession forty minutes away when we have the perfect wall for you right here in our bedroom?”

Mei’s eyes opened wide, shining and dark against the white pillows. “Here?” she breathed.

“Right across from the bed,” Keiko promised softly, kissing the corner of her mouth as Mei’s thighs began to shake around her wrist. “Frameless glass, museum lighting, and your own cradle angled straight toward my pillows so you never have to say another unnecessary word in this house again.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

At nine o’clock the next morning, an unmarked white sprinter van glided up the driveway and stopped quietly beside the garage.

There were no logos painted on the doors and no clipboards carried up the front walk. Four technicians dressed in the exact same tailored, soundless white uniforms as the attendants at Stillwater stepped out onto the stone pavers, laying down runners of thick cream felt across the foyer oak and all the way up the staircase before a single tool was brought inside.

First to come down the stairs were the two linen armchairs and the brass reading lamp that had occupied the master bedroom’s sitting alcove since the week Mei and Tom bought the house.

Sitting barefoot on the shearling cushion beside Keiko’s leather lounge chair in the downstairs den, Mei watched through the archway as two technicians carried the chairs past the hall and loaded them into the back of a secondary disposal truck. Those chairs had been the last piece of domestic symmetry left upstairs—the polite architectural fiction that two people might sit across from each other in the evening with books in their laps and talk about their day. Watching them vanish out the front door sent a slow, syrupy warmth pooling straight into Mei’s lower belly.

For the next seven hours, Mei didn’t have to speak a word or make a single decision.

She remained curled on the shearling rug in an unfastened ivory silk robe while Keiko worked calmly at her desk, reviewing estate portfolios and answering messages on her laptop. Every twenty minutes or so, as the faint, muffled sounds of precision drilling and pneumatic seals drifted down from the second floor, Keiko reached down without looking away from her screen and stroked the bare curve of Mei’s neck and shoulder.

Each touch landed like a quiet promise. Above their heads, the noisy, cluttered world was being sealed out of their bedroom forever, replaced by a space designed around what Mei had confessed in the dark.

By five-thirty that afternoon, the felt runners had been rolled up, the front door had clicked shut, and the white van had disappeared down the canyon road, leaving the house in a deep, cedar-scented hush.

Keiko closed her laptop, stood up from the desk, and looked down at Mei. She didn’t ask if Mei was ready; she simply extended two fingers.

Mei rose gracefully to her feet, letting her fingers brush Keiko’s hand as they climbed the stairs together.

When Keiko pushed open the double doors of the master bedroom, Mei stopped just inside the threshold, her breath catching in her throat.

The eight-by-ten niche facing the foot of the king bed no longer looked like part of a residential house. The sharp drywall corners of the alcove had been rebuilt into a continuous, seamless curve of matte-white acoustic plaster that swallowed shadows completely. In the recessed ceiling above the niche, calibrated museum spotlights cast a soft, golden-amber glow that made the rest of the dusk-shadowed bedroom look cool by comparison.

Spanning the entire opening between the two architectural columns was a single, frameless wall of floor-to-ceiling low-iron glass—so clear it was nearly invisible, save for the faint gleam of its polished edges and the recessed track of the hidden pneumatic door built flush into the right-hand wall.

And in the exact center of that warm, amber-lit sanctuary stood the stasis cradle.

Sculpted from body-warmed ivory leather and brushed champagne steel, it was identical to the frame that had held her in the hills, except this one had been custom-angled toward the center of the king mattress. From the stack of linen pillows on Keiko’s bed, less than six feet of clear carpet separated the mattress from the glass. Anyone lying under the duvet—or anyone sitting on the edge of the bed with a glass of wine—would look straight into the open arch of Mei’s ribs, her lifted breasts, and the wide-parted V of her thighs.

“Go look at it, sweetheart,” Keiko said softly, leaning her shoulder against the doorframe with her arms folded loosely across her black silk blouse.

Mei walked barefoot across the bedroom carpet, her pulse beating in a slow, heavy cadence in her ears. Stopping three inches from the glass wall, she untied the sash of her ivory silk robe without being told and let the fabric slip off her shoulders, pooling silently around her heels until she stood naked in front of her own reflection and the empty cradle beyond it.

Looking at the contoured leather rests waiting for her wrists and knees, Mei felt the last residual hum of household anxiety evaporate from her chest, replaced by a profound, almost sacred relief. There was her place. She would never again have to stand in the kitchen wondering what to order for dinner, or lie loosely on a flat mattress trying to figure out what to do with her hands.

Keiko walked up behind her, close enough that the crisp silk of her blouse brushed Mei’s bare shoulder blades. Raising one hand, Keiko rested her palm flat against Mei’s lower stomach, drawing her back against her front while her other hand slid down to trace the warm, already-slick crease between Mei’s thighs.

“The glass is rated to forty-five decibels of acoustic isolation,” Keiko murmured against the shell of Mei’s ear, her fingers parting Mei’s wet folds with slow,

unhurried ownership. “Once the side door seals, you won’t hear the wind in the trees, you won’t hear the telephone ring, and you won’t hear a single word spoken in this room unless I tap the glass screen and open the audio feed for you. And see that small recessed panel in the column?”

Mei nodded faintly, her head tipping back against Keiko’s shoulder as Keiko’s thumb circled her swollen clit in a slow, measured pass.

“The climate system keeps the interior at eighty-one degrees around the clock,” Keiko whispered, watching in the faint reflection of the glass as a dark flush rose across Mei’s bare breasts. “Warm enough that your skin never gets a chill, and bright enough that even in the middle of the night, if I wake up and open my eyes on those pillows, you’ll be glowing right there in front of me like a piece of living porcelain.”

“Do you like what I did with the room, Mei?” Keiko asked softly, her fingers sliding inside her in a single, deep curl before holding completely still.

Mei’s hands came up to rest flat against the cool, seamless surface of the observation glass in front of her breasts, her forehead leaning lightly against the barrier as she stared at the ivory leather cradle waiting on the other side.

“It’s perfect,” Mei whispered, her voice trembling and hushed as her hips rocked helplessly against Keiko’s palm. “Please, Keiko… can I go inside tonight?”

Keiko smiled against the bare curve of Mei’s neck, kissing the warm skin just below her ear before drawing her hand slowly back from between Mei’s legs.

“Not just for tonight, sweetheart,” Keiko said smoothly, reaching toward the recessed sensor in the right-hand column until the hidden pneumatic side door glided open with that familiar, hushed whisper of warm air. “Starting right now, this is where you live.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

When the hidden pneumatic door sealed shut for the first time inside their own master bedroom, the silence that settled around Mei felt even deeper and more intoxicating than the silence in the hills.

At Stillwater, she had been surrounded by four blank walls in a stranger's pavilion. Here, suspended in the warm ivory leather of the cradle with her wrists held softly above her shoulders and her knees parted wide on the lower supports, she was looking straight out into the room that used to belong to her marriage.

Less than six feet beyond the frameless, floor-to-ceiling glass sat the king bed.

As dusk deepened into night outside the bedroom windows, Keiko didn't pull the curtains or turn off the calibrated amber spotlights inside the alcove. Moving at her own unhurried pace across the carpet, Keiko slipped out of her black silk blouse and trousers, walked naked into the master bathroom to wash her face, and came back out to climb beneath the white linen duvet.

Normally, Keiko slept on the left side of the mattress. Tonight, before turning off the bedside lamp, she arranged three pillows directly in the center of the bed and stretched out diagonally across the sheets—claiming the entire width of the mattress for herself.

Before closing her eyes, Keiko looked straight across the narrow strip of dark carpet into the warm, golden glow of the display niche.

Held immobile under the museum lights, Mei couldn't lower her arms or bring her thighs together, and she didn't want to. The eighty-one-degree air inside the enclosure wrapped her bare skin like a continuous breath. As Keiko's eyes traveled slowly from the brushed-platinum wedding band glinting inside the overhead leather wrist cuff down to the slick, open flush between Mei's legs, a quiet, weightless current of peace settled into Mei's chest.

Long after Keiko's breathing slowed into deep sleep in the dark bedroom, Mei floated effortlessly in the amber light—awake, aching softly, and watching over her wife's bed like a living marble figure in a private gallery.

When morning sun slanted through the bedroom windows at eight o'clock, Mei was still floating in that hushed, wordless stillness.

Through the soundproof glass, she watched Keiko wake, stretch her bare arms above the sheets, and smile across the room at her before dressing in tailored charcoal trousers and a crisp cream silk shirt.

Instead of heading downstairs for coffee right away, Keiko walked to the hallway, brought back four flat-packed white wardrobe boxes from the moving closet, and carried them into the walk-in dressing room.

From her suspension frame, Mei had a clear line of sight through the open double doors of the closet. In total, insulated silence, she watched Keiko systematically empty the entire right side of the space.

Down came Mei's silk blouses, her linen sundresses, her cashmere cardigans, and her coats, folded neatly into the white boxes. Into a second box went her sandals, heels, and flats; into a third went all the folded lingerie from her cedar drawers. When the closet rods on Mei's side stood completely bare, Keiko walked back to the right side of the king bed and cleared Mei's nightstand—sweeping away her reading glasses, her lip balm, her jewelry dish, and the small stack of novels she had meant to finish—until the dark wood surface was as blank and unlived-in as a hotel showroom.

Watching every trace of her wardrobe and habits erased from the room sent a slow, dizzying heat curling through Mei's lower belly. A person needed shoes and dresses and a bedside table. An object kept under glass needed none of those things. By the time Keiko stacked the sealed boxes in the hallway, the bedroom belonged to only one human being—and one naked possession displayed in the wall.

At noon, the hidden side door of the alcove slid open with a soft pneumatic whisper.

Keiko stepped inside carrying a silver tray holding a porcelain bowl of warm water, folded linen cloths, a glass bottle of unscented botanical oil, and a small dish of the pressed almond-and-oat nutritional squares.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Keiko said, her voice warm and intimate inside the curved acoustic walls as she set the tray on a small recessed shelf. "Look how rested your eyes are already. Not a single crease in your forehead."

Mei looked up at her with dark, shining eyes, her lips parting in silent gratitude as Keiko held the first almond-oat square to her mouth. Mei ate slowly, bite by bite, and drank cool water from the bent glass straw before letting her head rest back against the contoured ivory leather.

Uncapping the glass bottle, Keiko warmed a generous pour of botanical oil between her palms and began at Mei's throat.

With slow, deliberate strokes, Keiko smoothed the oil over Mei's collarbones and down the full, lifted swell of her breasts, her thumbs brushing lightly across the tight, rosy peaks until Mei's breath hitched in her chest. Moving lower, Keiko oiled the curve of her ribs, the dip of her waist, and the insides of her parted thighs—stopping right at the slick, glistening folds at the center of the frame.

"Having you right here in the bedroom is everything I hoped it would be, Mei," Keiko murmured conversationally, her oiled fingers sliding in a slow, unhurried

pass along Mei’s outer lips without giving her the pressure she was silently begging for. “Though I realized something this morning while I was clearing out your closet and answering emails downstairs.”

Mei’s thighs trembled against the padded lower supports, her dark eyes fixed entirely on Keiko’s face.

“With Tom up at The Alders and you living in here full-time, there is nobody left to run the house,” Keiko explained smoothly, picking up a clean linen cloth to blot her palms while leaving Mei’s bare skin gleaming and open under the amber lights. “Someone has to handle the floors, the laundry, and the kitchen. And more importantly, your skin has to be bathed and oiled twice a day, and someone needs to hand-feed you at noon and six o’clock even when I have client lunches or late meetings in the city.”

A faint flicker of confusion moved behind Mei’s heavy-lidded gaze. If she wasn’t going to be unfastened from the cradle to do the housework, how would it get done?

“So I called the premier domestic placement agency in the city an hour ago,” Keiko said, brushing a stray lock of dark hair back from Mei’s temple with a warm, reassuring smile. “They’re sending over a live-in housekeeper tomorrow morning. A young woman with impeccable references who can keep the downstairs spotless and take over your daily care in the cradle whenever I’m busy at my desk. That way, you won’t ever have to be unfastened to lift a finger again.”

Stepping back toward the hidden side door, Keiko picked up the silver tray and gave Mei’s bare knee one last proprietary pat.

“Enjoy the quiet this afternoon, sweetheart,” Keiko said softly as the door glided shut and sealed her back into forty-five decibels of warm, soundless stillness.

Chapter Twenty-Six

At eleven o’clock the next morning, Mei was floating in the warm, amber-lit hush of the alcove when the double doors of the master bedroom opened.

For twenty-four hours, her world had shrunk to the six feet of carpet between her glass wall and the foot of the king bed. Her muscles had already surrendered to the contoured embrace of the ivory leather cradle—her wrists resting weightlessly in the overhead cuffs with her brushed-platinum wedding band catching the spotlight, her spine gently arched, and her knees held wide on the lower supports so the warm eighty-one-degree air moved continuously across her bare sex.

When Keiko walked into the bedroom, Mei’s heart gave its familiar, worshipful lift.

Then a second figure stepped across the threshold right behind her, and the breath stalled completely in Mei’s throat.

Mei had pictured a woman in her forties wearing a tailored gray linen tunic like the silent attendants at Stillwater.

The girl who walked across Mei’s bedroom carpet couldn’t have been more than twenty-two. She was breathtaking—tall and willow-waisted, with glossy honey-blonde hair swept up beneath a delicate white lace headpiece, full parted lips, and skin that glowed with effortless youth.

More devastating than her face was what Keiko had dressed her in.

She wore a bespoke Parisian French maid uniform cut from whisper-thin black silk and sheer Chantilly lace. The plunged bodice cupped the lower swell of her full, pert breasts like lingerie, framed by delicate white lace trim that did nothing to hide the dark rose of her nipples beneath the sheer mesh. A tiny, micro-pleated black silk skirt flared over her hips, short enough that the top of her bare thighs and the delicate clasps of her sheer black stockings showed with every step she took, while a miniature white organza apron was tied in a crisp bow right above the round curve of her ass. Around her slender wrists sat matching white lace cuffs fastened with tiny pearl buttons.

Walking with light, unhurried grace in black patent-leather heels, the girl carried the silver caretaking tray—the porcelain water bowl, the folded linens, the almond-oat squares, and the glass bottle of botanical oil—right up to the edge of the frameless glass wall.

Outside the glass, Keiko stopped beside her and tapped the recessed sensor on the column. A soft click opened the interior speaker inside Mei’s sanctuary.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Keiko’s warm alto filled the curved white space. “As promised, I used the finest domestic placement agency in the city so we wouldn’t have to settle for ordinary help. I want you to meet Chloe.”

Pinned immobile in the suspension frame, Mei felt a scalding tide of crimson rush from the base of her throat all the way down to her breasts. She couldn’t lower her arms to cover herself; she couldn’t bring her knees together by a single millimeter. All she could do was hang open under the museum lights while a gorgeous twenty-two-year-old in sheer French lace stood three feet away, looking straight through the crystal-clear glass at the wife of the house. Chloe didn’t look startled or embarrassed by the sight of a naked woman displayed in the bedroom wall. Instead, her full lips curved into a warm, deferential smile, her blue eyes traveling with frank, lingering admiration from Mei’s flushed face down the oiled arch of her torso to the parted V of her thighs.

“She’s even prettier than you described, Madam,” Chloe said, her voice soft, musical, and brimming with eager compliance as she glanced at Keiko before looking back through the glass at Mei. “The lighting in there makes her look like a statue.”

“She’s very well-behaved once you take the decisions out of her hands,” Keiko replied smoothly, resting a hand lightly against the small of Chloe’s back right above the white apron bow. “Chloe is going to take over your noon and evening care starting today, Mei. Go ahead, Chloe—the panel on the right opens the door.”

Mei’s pulse hammered wildly in her ears as the hidden pneumatic door whispered open and the young maid stepped inside the eighty-one-degree enclosure.

Up close, Chloe smelled of warm vanilla, expensive soap, and young skin. Setting the silver tray on the recessed shelf, she stepped right between the wide-parted supports of Mei’s knees so she could reach her face. As Chloe leaned in to hold the first almond-oat square to Mei’s lips, the sheer black Chantilly lace of her bodice brushed within inches of Mei’s bare breasts, and the hem of her tiny pleated skirt grazed the inside of Mei’s immobilized calf.

“Open for me, Mrs. Keiko,” Chloe murmured softly, using Keiko’s name as the surname with such natural politeness that a fresh wave of dizzying heat broke behind Mei’s ribs.

Helpless to refuse, Mei parted her lips and took the wafer from the young girl’s fingers, swallowing bite after bite before sipping cool water from the glass straw. Every time Chloe leaned forward, Mei could see the bare, creamy curve of the girl’s breasts shifting inside the sheer black lace.

Then Chloe uncapped the glass bottle of botanical oil and poured a warm pool into her palms.

Starting at Mei's throat, the young housekeeper smoothed her oiled hands down over Mei's collarbones and cupped the full weight of her breasts. Chloe's touch was slower than the clinical attendants at Stillwater—attentive, sensual, and unashamedly fascinated. Her thumbs circled Mei's tight, aching nipples until Mei let out a soft, involuntary whimper in the quiet room, while through the floor-to-ceiling glass six feet away, Keiko leaned against the foot of the king bed watching every stroke.

"Look how warm her skin gets when you touch her breasts, Madam," Chloe said softly over her shoulder, sliding her oiled palms down Mei's ribcage and along the trembling insides of her parted thighs.

"Check between her legs, Chloe," Keiko instructed calmly from outside the glass. "Make sure the air hasn't dried her out."

Chloe's slender fingers glided straight to the center of the frame, parting Mei's bare folds with a slow, thorough stroke of warm oil. Mei's back arched hard against the ivory leather as Chloe's fingertips slid through the unmistakable, soaking wetness gathered there—a mortifying confession that having a young French maid tend to her naked body while her wife watched had left her throbbing with arousal.

"She isn't dry at all, Madam," Chloe murmured with a quiet, knowing smile as she blotted her fingers on a linen cloth and picked up the silver tray. "She's completely soaked."

Stepping backward out of the alcove, Chloe let the pneumatic glass door glide shut and seal with its soft whisper, trapping Mei once again inside forty-five decibels of total silence—her skin gleaming with oil and every nerve ending between her thighs aching for release.

Outside the glass, Chloe set the tray down on the dresser and walked back to where Keiko stood beside the king bed.

Keiko didn't send the girl downstairs to clean the kitchen. Instead, right in front of the observation glass, Keiko slipped her arm possessively around Chloe's narrow waist, her fingers resting openly against the bare skin of Chloe's hip where the micro-pleated skirt rode up over her stocking tops.

Keiko tapped the audio sensor on the column one last time so her voice drifted clearly down from the ceiling speaker above Mei's head.

"You did a wonderful job with her, Chloe," Keiko said, looking straight through the glass into Mei's wide, dark eyes while pulling the young blonde lightly against her side. "And Mei, since we haven't had furniture delivered to the

upstairs study yet, Chloe is going to be sleeping right here in the king bed with me.”

Keiko’s hand slid slowly down from Chloe’s waist to cup the round, bare curve of the girl’s ass beneath the tiny pleated hem, while Chloe leaned her cheek happily against Keiko’s shoulder and looked straight at Mei in the cradle.

“A girl doing heavy housework all day needs a firm mattress for her back,” Keiko added with seamless, deadpan sincerity, her eyes glinting with cool amusement as the echo of Tom’s old banishment landed across the glass. “So she’ll share my bed with me every night—at least until I can have a second bed moved in for her right here against the glass, where she can lie back on her pillows and stare up at you whenever she likes.”

Keiko tapped the sensor, cutting off the audio feed, and turned toward the bed with her hand still beneath the maid’s skirt.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

At six o’clock that evening, when the hidden pneumatic door whispered open for Mei’s second feeding, Chloe stepped into the warm enclosure wearing the exact same whisper-thin black silk and sheer Chantilly lace she had worn at noon.

Keiko never varied a uniform once she had chosen the lines she liked. Under the warm amber spotlights of the alcove, the plunged sheer bodice cupped the young housekeeper’s full breasts like bespoke Parisian lingerie, her dark rose nipples clearly visible through the black mesh as she leaned between Mei’s wide-held knees to hold the porcelain water straw to her lips.

When the feeding and the evening oiling were finished, Chloe smoothed one last warm pass of botanical oil down the insides of Mei’s parted thighs—lingering just long enough at the slick, aching center of the frame to make Mei’s hips twitch helplessly against the padded leather rests—before stepping backward out of the glass and letting the acoustic door seal shut.

Then the house quieted for the night.

Inside the eighty-one-degree hush of the sanctuary, Mei floated weightlessly in the ivory leather cradle. Her wrists rested in the seamless cuffs above her shoulders, her spine arched gently forward, and her freshly oiled skin gleamed like warm satin under the recessed museum lights.

Around ten o’clock, Keiko walked into the master bedroom wearing an unfastened floor-length robe of heavy black silk. Behind her walked Chloe, her honey-blonde hair still swept up beneath the delicate white lace headpiece, her hands clasped neatly over the miniature white organza apron at her waist.

Keiko didn’t turn off the spotlights inside Mei’s alcove, Instead, she dimmed the bedroom lamps until the only real illumination across the king mattress was the warm, golden-amber spill pouring through Mei’s floor-to-ceiling glass wall.

Before stepping to the bed, Keiko paused beside the right-hand column and tapped the audio sensor. A soft click opened the ceiling speaker inside Mei’s enclosure, piping every breath and rustle of fabric from the bedroom straight down into the soundproof niche.

“Come here, Chloe,” Keiko said softly, sitting on the foot of the king mattress—less than six feet from where Mei hung suspended behind the glass. “Turn around toward the wall so she can see you.”

“Yes, Madam,” Chloe murmured, stepping between Keiko’s knees and turning to face the glass wall.

From her cradle, Mei couldn’t look away, and she couldn’t close her thighs against the sudden, heavy throb of heat that surged through her belly.

Sitting right behind the young blonde on the edge of the mattress, Keiko reached around Chloe’s narrow waist and pulled the crisp white bow of the organza apron loose, letting the small square of white fabric flutter to the carpet. Slowly, with the unhurried precision of a collector unwrapping a parcel, Keiko unfastened the row of tiny hooks down the back of the sheer Chantilly lace bodice and slid it off Chloe’s shoulders.

The black silk and micro-pleated skirt pooled around Chloe’s ankles and were kicked aside, leaving the twenty-two-year-old standing bare in the amber glow just outside Mei’s glass—wearing nothing at all except the white lace headpiece in her blonde hair, the pearl-buttoned white lace cuffs around her wrists, and her sheer black stockings held up by thin silk garters.

Keiko’s dark hands glided around from behind, cupping the full, pale weight of Chloe’s bare breasts while her thumbs brushed slowly across the girl’s nipples.

Chloe’s head tipped back against Keiko’s shoulder with a soft, breathy sigh that echoed clearly through the speaker above Mei’s head. Yet even as Chloe arched her back into Keiko’s palms, the young girl’s blue eyes stayed wide open, staring straight through the glass at Mei’s immobilized, oil-gleaming body in the cradle.

“Look at her watching us, Chloe,” Keiko murmured against the side of the girl’s neck, sliding one hand down Chloe’s flat stomach and parting her bare thighs right at the edge of the mattress. “Three nights ago, this was her side of the bed. Now she hangs in the wall to light the room for us.”

“She’s looking right at your hand, Madam,” Chloe breathed, her knees trembling above her black stocking tops as Keiko’s fingers slipped between her legs.

Keiko drew the girl backward onto the white linen sheets, arranging her in the center of the firm king mattress directly facing the glass alcove. Slipping off her own black silk robe, Keiko climbed onto the bed beside her, her lean, golden-skinned frame a striking contrast against the white duvet and the pale blonde trembling beneath her hands.

As Keiko lowered her mouth to Chloe’s breast and slid her fingers deep into the young housekeeper’s heat, Chloe twisted the sheets in her lace-cuffed hands, her voice breaking into soft, eager cries of “Yes, Madam—please, Madam” as she worked desperately to show how responsive and pleasing she could be.

And that was when Mei noticed something that made the breath stop completely in her chest.

Even while Chloe writhed beneath Keiko’s hand on the mattress, Keiko wasn’t looking at the girl’s face.

With her cheek resting near Chloe’s bare ribcage and her wrist moving in a slow, devastating rhythm between the girl’s stockinged thighs, Keiko had turned her

head on the pillow so her dark, bottomless eyes were locked straight through the frameless glass onto Mei.

Every time Chloe gasped on the sheets, Keiko watched the way the sound made Mei’s oiled breasts rise and fall in the cradle. Every time Keiko curled her fingers inside the young maid, her gaze lingered with deep, possessive reverence on the slick moisture shining between Mei’s wide-held thighs under the spotlights.

A strange, luminous clarity washed over Mei in the warm silence of the alcove.

Out there on the mattress, Chloe was sweating, gasping, and trying with all her might to earn her place in the house—still trapped inside the noisy, anxious work of being a person who had to perform.

Inside the glass, Mei didn’t have to lift a finger or utter a sound. She was the axis the entire bedroom turned around. Chloe was merely the instrument Keiko was playing tonight; Mei was the music Keiko was looking at while she played it.

When Chloe finally arched off the mattress with a muffled cry against Keiko’s shoulder and curled exhausted onto her side, Keiko didn’t pull the girl into her arms to talk. She drew the white sheet up to Chloe’s waist, rested one hand calmly on the girl’s bare hip, and kept her dark eyes fixed entirely on Mei’s glowing, serene face in the amber light until both of them drifted to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Morning arrived across the bedroom carpet in pale, slanting bars of eight-o’clock sunlight.

From the unchanging amber warmth of her cradle, Mei watched the white linen duvet on the king bed stir. Chloe woke first. For a few seconds after opening her eyes, the young blonde looked disoriented by the unfamiliar ceiling—and then she remembered where she was.

Mei watched the girl’s posture tighten instantly with the anxious, eager energy of someone whose place in the room was still on probation. Slipping carefully out from beneath the sheet so she wouldn’t disturb Keiko, Chloe hurried barefoot across the carpet to gather her sheer Chantilly lace bodice, her micro-pleated skirt, and the miniature white organza apron from the floor. Every three seconds as she hooked the bodice behind her back and smoothed her stockings, Chloe glanced nervously toward the pillows to check Keiko’s face for approval.

Watching her through forty-five decibels of crystal-clear silence, Mei recognized that frantic little glance immediately. Less than a month ago, that had been her—checking her fork at dinner, worrying over travel folders, trying endlessly to read the weather in Keiko’s eyes.

On the bed, Keiko propped herself up on one elbow against the pillows, the white sheet falling away from her bare shoulders.

“Go on downstairs and start the espresso, Chloe,” Keiko said smoothly. “Wipe down the kitchen counters and bring my coffee up at nine. I want a few minutes alone with Mei.”

“Yes, Madam. Right away, Madam,” Chloe breathed, dipping her head in a quick, deferential nod before hurrying out the bedroom doors and closing them softly behind her.

Once the room was quiet, Keiko rose naked from the rumpled sheets and slipped into her black silk robe. Instead of walking into the bathroom, she opened the tall armoire near the hallway—where she had kept a single ivory silk robe hung on a cedar hanger—and carried it across the carpet toward the frameless glass wall.

Keiko didn’t tap the external audio sensor. She touched the recessed panel on the right-hand column, and the hidden pneumatic door glided open with its soft, warm sigh.

Stepping inside the eighty-one-degree enclosure with the ivory robe draped over her arm, Keiko stopped directly in front of the stasis cradle. Her dark eyes searched Mei’s face—quiet, unhurried, and completely serious.

Without a word, Keiko reached up and unfastened the seamless leather bands holding Mei’s wrists and forearms above her shoulders. Then she bent down and released the padded straps securing Mei’s thighs and ankles.

“Step out onto the carpet with me for a minute, sweetheart,” Keiko said gently, extending her hand to steady Mei’s elbow.

After sixty hours of weightless suspension, Mei’s bare feet met the floor with a slow, liquid tremor. Leaning lightly on Keiko’s forearm, she took three steps out through the open pneumatic doorway until she stood barefoot on the bedroom rug—right in the middle of the six-foot gap between the glass wall and the foot of the rumpled king bed where Keiko and Chloe had lain together all night.

Out here, the air was ten degrees cooler against her oiled skin. The morning breeze bumped faintly against the window glass; a distant lawnmower hummed two properties away; the scent of Chloe’s vanilla soap still clung to the twisted white sheets on the mattress. And suddenly, without the contoured ivory frame cradling her spine and holding her wrists in place, gravity felt heavy and demanding on her shoulders again.

Keiko held up the ivory silk robe, opening the shoulders so Mei could slip her arms inside.

“You watched the whole night through the glass, Mei,” Keiko said, her voice completely free of teasing, offering a genuine, level crossroads between them. “Now you see how this house works. If watching another woman in that bed hurt you—if you want to come out of the wall and practice being human again—put this robe on right now.”

Mei looked down at the shimmering ivory silk in Keiko’s hands, then up into Keiko’s dark eyes.

“I mean it,” Keiko continued softly. “We can take the cradle out of the alcove this afternoon. You can come back to the mattress as my wife, and we can live as a traditional couple at the top of this house. Chloe will clean the downstairs, cook our meals, and serve both of us—and whenever we feel like bringing her into our bed at night, we’ll share her together as equals. All you have to do is put your arms in these sleeves and tell me you want your life back.”

For a long, suspended beat, the bedroom was completely still.

Mei looked at the silk robe waiting for her arms. Then she turned her head and looked at the rumpled king mattress—the place where people had to talk, where they had to decide what to wear at eight in the morning, where a girl like Chloe had to gasp and perform and scramble for her apron strings at dawn just to be sure she was still wanted.

Then Mei turned her head back toward the open glass sanctuary.

Inside the curved white niche, the eighty-one-degree air glowed like liquid amber. There were no clocks in there. There were no dresses to choose, no words to assemble, no rival to compete with.

A slow, radiant smile curved Mei's lips—clearer and more peaceful than any smile she had ever worn when she walked through the house in clothes.

Reaching out with her bare hand, Mei gently pressed the ivory silk robe down until Keiko lowered it to her side.

"Out here, I have to try to be your equal," Mei said, her voice soft and raspy from disuse, yet ringing with absolute, unmistakable certainty in the quiet bedroom. "And trying is so loud, Keiko. When you were touching Chloe on that mattress last night, she had to work so hard to please you… and the whole time your hand was inside her, you weren't even looking at her face. You were looking through the glass at me."

Keiko went completely still, her fingers tightening slightly on the silk robe as she listened.

"She only gets to hold your body for a few hours in the dark before you send her downstairs to scrub the kitchen," Mei whispered, stepping half an inch closer so her bare, oiled breasts brushed the front of Keiko's black robe. "In the cradle, I belong to you every second of the day and night. I'm the first thing you see when you wake up, and the last thing you look at before you close your eyes. I don't want to share the mattress with you, Keiko. I want to be what you look at when you're on it."

Mei didn't wait for Keiko to answer or guide her.

Turning gracefully on her bare heels, Mei walked away from the bed and stepped back through the open doorway into the warm, eighty-one-degree embrace of the alcove.

With a long, shivering sigh of pure relief, she leaned her back into the contoured curve of the body-warmed ivory leather. All by herself, she settled her bare hips into the frame, parted her knees wide onto the lower padded rests so her slick, flushed sex was open once more to the bedroom, and raised both arms above her shoulders—laying her wrists voluntarily inside the open leather cuffs and looking at Keiko with shining, worshipful eyes as she waited to be locked back in.

Keiko dropped the ivory silk robe onto the bedroom carpet outside and stepped into the amber light.

Moving with a quiet, almost reverent slowness, Keiko fastened the seamless leather bands around Mei's ankles and thighs, then reached up to close the overhead cuffs around her wrists, letting her fingertips brush the platinum wedding band gleaming against Mei's skin.

“You really don’t want the robe anymore, do you, sweetheart?” Keiko whispered against Mei’s parted lips.

“Never again,” Mei breathed, closing her eyes for a second as the leather bands took the weight of her arms away. “Please, Keiko… close the glass.”

Keiko kissed her forehead once, stepped backward out of the sanctuary, and let the hidden pneumatic door glide shut—sealing Mei back into her silent, golden paradise for good.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

At seven o’clock that evening, after Chloe had finished bathing Mei’s skin in warm botanical oil and hand-feeding her the evening portion of almond-and-oat squares, Keiko did not let the bedroom settle into its usual twilight quiet.

Instead, while Mei floated freshly oiled and breathless behind the frameless glass wall, the double doors of the master suite swung open again.

Keiko walked in first, wearing tailored black lounging trousers and an unbuttoned silk shirt. Right behind her came Chloe, using both lace-cuffed hands to carry the unopened cream leather weekender trunk that had sat untouched at the foot of the downstairs banister ever since their return from Stillwater.

Outside the glass, Keiko tapped the recessed sensor on the column. The ceiling speaker inside Mei’s eighty-one-degree sanctuary clicked open, bringing the subtle sounds of the bedroom straight into the curved white enclosure.

“Set it right there on the bench at the foot of the bed, Chloe,” Keiko instructed smoothly, gesturing toward the upholstered bench less than four feet from Mei’s glass wall.

“Yes, Madam,” Chloe said softly, lifting the heavy cream trunk onto the bench so it sat directly between the king mattress and the observation pane.

From the warm ivory leather of her cradle, Mei looked down at the brass clasps of the luggage she had packed with such tender excitement on her wedding night. Her wrists rested weightlessly in the overhead cuffs; her knees stayed parted wide on the lower supports, her bare sex open to the amber spotlights.

Keiko stepped up to the trunk, flipped the brass latches open, and unzipped the lid all the way around.

Inside, the crisp white tissue paper hadn’t shifted an inch since midnight on Friday. Resting right on top of the folded resort linens—exactly where Mei had smoothed it with loving hands before going to sleep—was the liquid emerald silk halter dress she had bought for Thursday night in South Beach, paired with the strappy gold heels tucked into the side pocket.

Keiko lifted the emerald dress from the tissue paper, shook out its long, fluid lines, and looked straight through the glass into Mei’s dark eyes.

“It seemed a shame to leave this trunk gathering dust in the foyer when you made it so clear this morning that you’re finished with fabric, sweetheart,” Keiko said conversationally. Without looking away from Mei, she held the shimmering green silk out toward the young blonde standing beside her. “Take off your uniform, Chloe. Let’s see how Mei’s honeymoon dress looks on you.”

Chloe’s blue eyes widened with a sudden flush of pleasure. “On me, Madam?”

“Go ahead,” Keiko said, leaning back against the edge of the king mattress with her arms folded loosely across her chest. “Right there in front of the glass.”

Standing three feet from where Mei hung immobilized in the wall, Chloe untied the crisp white bow of her organza apron and set it neatly beside the trunk. Reaching behind her back, she unhooked the sheer black Chantilly lace bodice, slipped it down her arms, and stepped out of the micro-pleated skirt and sheer black stockings until she stood completely bare on the carpet save for the ruffled white lace headpiece in her honey-blonde hair.

Taking the emerald silk halter dress from Keiko’s hand, Chloe slipped it carefully over her head and let the bias-cut fabric glide down over her full breasts, her narrow waist, and the long curve of her hips.

“Turn around so I can tie the neck,” Keiko murmured.

Chloe pivoted to face the glass wall entirely. As Keiko stepped up behind the girl to fasten the silk halter strap at the nape of her neck, Chloe’s eyes met Mei’s through the invisible barrier.

The dress fit the twenty-two-year-old as if it had been cut on her body in Paris. The deep emerald silk caught the warm amber spill from Mei’s spotlights, clinging to the young housekeeper’s waist and baring the smooth skin of her back as Keiko’s dark hands glided slowly down from Chloe’s shoulder blades to span her hips.

“Mei packed this for Thursday night after the beach club,” Keiko said against Chloe’s bare shoulder, her eyes lifting to watch Mei’s chest rise and fall in the cradle. “Take the gold sandals out of the side pocket too, Chloe. Tomorrow night, after you finish oiling and feeding her at six, I’m going to take you into the city for drinks at the rooftop lounge. A pretty girl shouldn’t be cooped up scrubbing floors all week without a night out.”

“Thank you, Madam,” Chloe breathed, smoothing her palms down the emerald silk at her thighs with a radiant, breathless smile. “It’s the prettiest dress I’ve ever worn.”

Inside the warm hush of the alcove, Mei waited for the old human reflex of pain to arrive. She waited to feel robbed as another woman stood in her bedroom wearing the honeymoon dress she had chosen for herself, promised the candlelit rooftop evening she had once dreamed about.

Instead, as Mei looked at the halter strap tied around Chloe’s neck and the tight silk hugging her waist, a profound, syrupy rush of heat pooled straight between her parted thighs.

How tight and binding that dress looked from inside the eighty-one-degree air. Looking at Chloe standing there in emerald silk, all Mei could see was the

exhausting weight of tomorrow night—having to walk in high gold heels across noisy marble lobbies, having to sit upright across a table, having to think of clever things to say over cocktails so Keiko wouldn’t grow bored.

Chloe was being taken out into the noise like a girl still auditioning for her keep. Mei had been relieved of every dress inside that trunk forever.

Watching her last piece of clothing claimed by the housekeeper didn’t feel like losing her place; it felt like watching the last heavy stone untied from her ankles so she could float completely free in the light. Between her wide-held knees, a fresh, glistening bead of wetness gathered along her bare folds, catching the spotlight right in front of Keiko’s appreciative gaze.

Three hours later, the bedroom lamps were out, the emerald dress was hung in Chloe’s side of the closet, and the house was wrapped in midnight quiet.

Only the calibrated museum spotlights inside Mei’s sanctuary remained on, casting their steady, golden-amber glow across the foot of the king bed.

Keiko lay naked in the center of the mattress with the white linen sheet draped across her hips, one arm resting behind her head on the pillows. Beside her, freshly spent and flushed from Keiko’s hands and mouth, Chloe lay naked on her stomach—yet the young blonde wasn’t sleeping.

Propped up on her elbows on the mattress with her chin resting lightly in her palms, Chloe was staring straight across the six feet of dark carpet into the glass wall.

For nearly ten minutes, the girl didn’t move her eyes from Mei. She looked at the effortless arch of Mei’s oiled torso in the ivory leather frame, the soft leather bands holding her wrists above her shoulders so she never had to decide where to put her hands, and the deep, luminous serenity on Mei’s face.

Because Keiko had left the audio feed open on the column, Chloe’s soft whisper drifted clearly down from the ceiling speaker above Mei’s head.

“She looks like she’s floating on warm water in there, Madam,” Chloe murmured into the dark bedroom, her voice hushed and almost wistful.

Keiko didn’t close her eyes. She slid her free hand lazily up and down the bare curve of Chloe’s spine on the sheets. “She is, in a way.”

“All afternoon while I was downstairs steaming the curtains and polishing the espresso machine, I kept thinking about her up here,” Chloe confessed softly, her blue eyes reflecting the amber light of the glass. “Downstairs, I’m always worried I’ll miss a spot on the floor, or say too much when you’re working at your desk, or do something wrong tomorrow night when you take me out in that green dress.”

Chloe shifted slightly on the mattress, pressing her bare thigh against Keiko's hip as she kept staring up at Mei's suspended body.

"In there, she never has to worry if she's doing it right," Chloe whispered, a quiet ache of unmistakable envy threading through her voice. "She doesn't have to clean, she doesn't have to dress up, and even when you're touching me right here on the bed… you still look at her like she's the most precious thing in the world. Sometimes I think Mrs. Keiko has the best place in the whole house."

Inside the glass, Mei's heart gave a slow, exquisite throb against her ribs. Even the twenty-two-year-old sharing Keiko's mattress could feel the gravity of the sanctuary pulling at her.

On the pillows, Keiko's mouth curved into a slow, purring smile in the half-dark. Her fingers slid into Chloe's loose blonde hair, stroking the back of the young girl's neck with patient, hypnotic tenderness while her dark eyes met Mei's glowing gaze through the glass.

"It takes a very special temperament to earn a frame like that, Chloe," Keiko murmured softly. "Not every girl is ready to give up every dress and every word for good. Besides…"

Keiko drew Chloe down against her bare shoulder, kissing the girl's temple while keeping her eyes locked on her silent bride in the wall.

"Right now, sweetheart, I still need someone to keep the house."

Chapter Thirty

On the Friday evening that marked exactly one month since their wedding at the courthouse, Keiko gave Chloe the night off.

At five-thirty, from the warm amber hush of her alcove, Mei watched the young blonde finish her evening care—oiling Mei's bare breasts and parted thighs until they gleamed under the recessed spotlights—before slipping into a tailored black coat over the emerald silk honeymoon dress and heading out into the city until midnight.

When the front door clicked shut downstairs, the house settled into a deep, resonant stillness.

In the master bedroom, Keiko took her time dressing. Mei watched through the crystal-clear glass as her wife stepped out of the master bath and slipped into a floor-length evening gown of heavy, bias-cut black silk that left her shoulders bare and hugged the lean line of her hips. At her ears glinted a pair of simple diamond studs; around her wrists, she wore nothing at all.

At seven-thirty, instead of turning down the bed or leaving for a restaurant, Keiko walked across the carpet to the right-hand column of the alcove and touched the recessed sensor.

The hidden pneumatic door glided open with its soft, warm sigh.

Keiko stepped inside the eighty-one-degree sanctuary and stopped directly in front of the ivory leather cradle. The scent of her—dark cedar, bergamot, and warm skin—wrapped around Mei before Keiko even lifted a hand.

"Happy anniversary, sweetheart," Keiko murmured, her low alto brushing across Mei's skin like velvet. "Tonight, you and I are having dinner downstairs."

Reaching up, Keiko unfastened the seamless leather bands holding Mei's wrists and forearms above her shoulders, then bent to release the padded cuffs around her thighs and ankles.

After weeks of continuous, weightless suspension, stepping out of the frame felt to Mei like stepping off the edge of a cloud. Her muscles had grown softer and less accustomed to supporting her own weight; as her bare feet touched the limestone floor, her knees trembled so violently that she would have sunk straight to the carpet if Keiko hadn't caught her smoothly around the waist.

Mei didn't reach for a robe, and she didn't open her lips to speak. Even outside the glass, the silence of the Zero-State stayed wrapped around her like an invisible veil. She simply leaned her bare, oil-gleaming shoulder against the black silk of Keiko's gown as Keiko guided her slowly out of the bedroom and down the wide oak staircase.

The downstairs had been transformed.

All the overhead lights in the house were off. In the dining room, twelve tall ivory taper candles burned in low silver holders down the center of the dark walnut table, their flames reflecting in the darkened patio glass and casting a rich, flickering gold across the walls.

At the head of the table, Keiko's place was set with crisp white linen, heavy silver flatware, a crystal goblet half-filled with a dark, garnet-red reserve Cabernet, and a heated porcelain plate holding a thick prime ribeye steak seared rare with rosemary and buttered asparagus.

Directly to Keiko's right, the second chair had been drawn close to the corner of the table and draped with a thick cushion of warmed ivory velvet.

In front of that chair, there was no knife, no fork, no napkin, and no wineglass. Sitting alone in the candlelight was a deep, heavy porcelain bowl filled to the brim with a thick, steaming ivory-white cream that smelled faintly of sweet almond, vanilla blossom, and warm milk. Resting beside the bowl was a single mother-of-pearl spoon.

"Sit down, my love," Keiko said softly, guiding Mei onto the warm velvet cushion.

Mei sank onto the chair, completely naked in the candlelight save for the brushed-platinum wedding band gleaming on her left hand. Because her body had grown so used to the posture of the cradle, she didn't even try to cross her legs or fold her hands in her lap; she let her thighs rest slightly parted on the velvet cushion and laid her wrists calmly along the polished edge of the walnut table, her dark eyes fixed in quiet adoration on her wife.

Keiko took her seat at the head of the table, unfolded her linen napkin across her black silk lap, and lifted her crystal goblet.

"To the first month of your wish," Keiko said softly, touching the rim of her glass lightly toward Mei's bare collarbone before taking a slow sip of the dark wine.

Setting the goblet down, Keiko picked up her steak knife and fork, cut a tender piece of the rare ribeye, and ate with unhurried pleasure. Then she set her silverware down, picked up the mother-of-pearl spoon beside Mei's bowl, dipped it into the thick ivory-white cream, and held the spoon to Mei's parted lips.

Mei didn't hesitate for a heartbeat. Leaning forward an inch into the candlelight, she closed her lips around the cool mother-of-pearl spoon and swallowed.

The cream was extraordinarily rich—warmer and denser than anything she had ever tasted, coating her tongue with notes of sweet almond, heavy cream, and a subtle, velvety botanical warmth that lingered at the back of her throat long after it went down.

For the next ten minutes, no words broke the hush of the dining room.

The only sounds were the faint crackle of the taper candles and the quiet rhythm of their meal: Keiko cutting another bite of prime steak or sipping her dark red wine while dressed in evening silk, and then turning in her chair to spoon another warm, heavy mouthful of the white cream between the lips of her naked, silent bride.

Chapter Thirty-One

By the time the porcelain bowl was half empty, a slow, unmistakable change had begun blooming beneath Mei’s skin.

At first, she thought it was simply the heat of the twelve taper candles or the hypnotic intimacy of being hand-fed naked at her own dining table. A lush, syrupy warmth radiated outward from the center of her chest, flowing down into her belly and pooling heavily between her parted thighs.

Her breasts—gleaming with botanical oil in the candlelight—began to feel strangely heavy and swollen, the skin tightening with a delicate, pressurized fullness that made even the faint draft of air in the room feel like a palm brushing across her nipples. Between her legs, the velvet cushion grew warm and slick with a continuous, effortless wetness that didn’t require a single stroke of friction to sustain.

Yet when Mei looked across the table at the candle flame reflecting in Keiko’s crystal wineglass, something much stranger happened inside her head.

She looked at the flickering yellow light at the top of the wax taper and tried, out of old habit, to think the word candle.

The word wasn’t there.

She knew the light was warm; she knew it was pretty; yet the mental syllable that named it seemed to slip smoothly out of reach, like a pebble dropping into deep, milky water.

A sudden flutter of surprise moved behind her dark eyes. She looked up at Keiko’s face and tried to repeat the proud, quiet sentence she had held onto inside her sanctuary all week: I am the music she looks at.

I am…

The rest of the sentence dissolved into a warm, golden hum before it could finish forming. Her eyelids grew heavy and soft; her lips parted in a silent, bewildered sigh as she stared at Keiko, realizing that the quiet inside her skull was suddenly deepening into something vast, bottomless, and irreversible.

Keiko didn’t look surprised at all.

Setting her wineglass down on the walnut table, Keiko reached out with her thumb and gently brushed a tiny drop of ivory cream from the corner of Mei’s lower lip, tracing the swell of her mouth with slow, tender ownership.

“You can feel it starting to work, can’t you, sweetheart?” Keiko asked softly, dipping the mother-of-pearl spoon back into the porcelain bowl and lifting another full, warm spoonful to Mei’s mouth.

Unable to form a question—and flooded with such a dizzying wave of physical heat between her thighs that she couldn't have pulled back if she tried—Mei parted her lips and swallowed the cream around the spoon.

"When you stepped out of the alcove on Wednesday morning and pushed that silk robe away," Keiko continued, her calm alto wrapping around Mei's fraying thoughts like a warm current, "you proved to me beyond a shadow of a doubt that you never wanted to be a person in this house again. You gave up your clothes, you gave up your freedom, and you gave up your voice so you could live in the wall as my treasure."

Keiko leaned a fraction closer, her dark eyes holding Mei's wide, glassy gaze in the candlelight as she lifted another spoonful to her lips.

"There is just one more thing to being on display, Mei. Objects don't have thoughts."

A silent, electric tremor went through Mei's spine at the words, her bare thighs pressing down against the slick velvet cushion as the truth broke over her in a slow, devastating wave.

"Even inside the cradle this week," Keiko murmured, feeding her another slow spoonful of the sweet white cream, "there was still a little voice talking inside your pretty head, wasn't there? You were still noticing when morning came. You were still comparing yourself to Chloe. You were still thinking about how good and quiet you were being for me. And as long as you can still form words inside your own mind, sweetheart, a part of you is still working."

Mei's chest rose and fell in shallow, shivering breaths. Every word Keiko spoke landed straight on her nerve endings with blinding clarity, even as her own ability to answer—even silently to herself—melted further away with each swallow.

"This warm cream is going to replace your almond squares starting tonight," Keiko explained gently, scraping the last rich spoonfuls from the bottom of the porcelain bowl and sliding the mother-of-pearl spoon between Mei's lips until the bowl was completely empty. "Dr. Sterling formulated it specifically for long-term display. Twice a day, when Chloe opens your glass to oil your skin, this is all you are going to be fed."

Setting the empty bowl aside, Keiko slid her chair back half a foot, reached out, and cupped the full, heavy weight of Mei's right breast in her palm, her thumb brushing slowly across the tight, hypersensitive peak.

Mei let out a low, wordless whimper, her head tipping back as a hot wave of pleasure rolled straight from her nipple down to her clit.

“The first thing this regimen does is soften and ripen your body for the frame,” Keiko whispered, watching the deep rose flush spread across Mei’s chest. “Over the next few weeks, it’s going to make your breasts and hips much fuller, softer, and heavier while relaxing your muscle tone so you hang completely slack in the leather cuffs. And it keeps the nerve endings between your legs in a permanent, gentle bath of heat so you stay wet and responsive twenty-four hours a day without anyone even having to touch you.”

Keiko’s hand glided up from Mei’s breast to cradle the side of her warm cheek, turning Mei’s face back toward hers in the candlelight.

“And the second thing it does is happening right now behind your eyes,” Keiko said softly. “It quiets the language centers of your cortex for good. By Sunday, you won’t remember what a calendar is. By next week, you won’t remember who used to live in this house, or what a dress felt like, or even that your name was ever Mei. You won’t have memories, and you won’t have a single word left inside your head. You will only know warm light, the leather holding your wrists, the oil on your skin, and how good it feels whenever I look at you.”

Inside Mei’s dissolving mind, the sheer magnitude of what Keiko had done—taking away the very last hiding place of her humanity so she could literally never think a single thought again—struck the deepest, darkest chord of her desire.

With the last flickering spark of language she would ever possess, Mei tried to hold onto a single thought as Keiko’s hand slipped down between her parted thighs on the velvet chair.

She didn’t feel fear. As Keiko’s fingers glided into the soaking, syrupy heat between her legs and pressed a single, slow stroke against her swollen clit, the last human words inside Mei’s head broke apart into pure, blinding white sensation—and she climaxed silently around Keiko’s hand, shuddering helplessly as the final doors of her mind clicked shut forever.

When the tremors finally subsided, Mei sat slumped and glowing against Keiko’s arm. She looked at the flickering yellow lights on the table and didn’t know what they were called. She looked at the dark-haired woman in black silk wiping her fingers on a white cloth, and she didn’t have a name for her—only a profound, animal pull of worship and warmth that filled her entire chest.

“Look at those eyes,” Keiko whispered tenderly, standing up and drawing the warm, pliant weight of her bride to her feet. “Not a single ripple left on the water.”

Guiding Mei gently up the oak staircase and back into the master bedroom, Keiko stepped into the eighty-one-degree amber glow of the alcove.

Mei didn’t have to think about what to do; her body knew the shape of the ivory leather the way water knows the shape of a bowl. Leaning back into the warm contour of the frame, she let Keiko lift her wrists into the overhead cuffs and fasten her parted knees onto the lower supports.

As the hidden pneumatic door glided shut and sealed with its soft whisper, Keiko stood outside the frameless glass in her black evening gown, looking in at what she had made.

Suspended under the warm museum spotlights, her breasts already flushing fuller and softer, her thighs parted and glistening in the eighty-one-degree air, hung a masterpiece of warm porcelain—breathing, aching softly, and finally, completely free of a single human thought.

Epilogue

Three years later, on a warm Saturday evening in October, the sound of laughter and crystal champagne flutes drifted up the wide oak staircase as Keiko led her guests toward the second floor.

Downstairs in the kitchen, a new twenty-one-year-old housekeeper in sheer black Chantilly lace and a crisp white organza apron was quietly clearing away the espresso cups—glancing up toward the ceiling every few minutes with the same wistful, lingering fascination that had once belonged to the girl before her.

When Keiko pushed open the double doors of the master suite, Claire, Lauren, and Julian stepped across the threshold and stopped on the carpet, their conversation hushing into appreciative silence.

The eight-by-ten sitting alcove was gone. In its place, the entire far wall of the expanded bedroom had been rebuilt into a sweeping, museum-grade crescent of seamless white acoustic plaster spanning thirty feet from column to column. Divided by slender ribs of brushed champagne steel, five separate floor-to-ceiling enclosures of crystal-clear low-iron glass curved around the foot of the king bed like a private pantheon.

Inside each eighty-one-degree sanctuary, bathed in calibrated golden-amber spotlights, stood a contoured ivory leather stasis cradle angled directly toward the center of Keiko’s pillows.

And suspended weightlessly across the wall were five naked women.

In the outer frames on the left and right hung three twenty-somethings of striking, contrasting beauty—including, in the far left niche, the long-legged, sun-bronzed brunette who had once shared Keiko’s four-poster daybed and penthouse sheets in South Beach.

In the enclosure immediately to the right of the center hung Chloe. Her honey-blonde hair tumbled loose past her shoulders, her French maid uniform and anxious morning glances long since retired. After two years on Dr. Sterling’s twice-daily porcelain bowl of warm ivory cream, her figure had ripened into lush, heavy softness, her wrists resting slack in the overhead leather cuffs and her parted thighs gleaming with botanical oil in the warm air.

Yet every eye in the bedroom went straight to the center frame.

Directly opposite the center of the king mattress—the sole figure wearing a brushed-platinum wedding band inside her overhead wrist cuff—hung Mei.

Three years of complete stillness and the rich botanical regimen had transformed her body into something breathtakingly plush and ornamental. Her breasts had grown noticeably fuller, heavier, and rounder, lifting gently with every slow

breath while her waist and hips curved with soft, slack abundance against the ivory leather. Under the museum lights, her oiled skin glowed like warm satin, and between her wide-held knees, the continuous, syrupy heat of the compound kept her bare folds glistening like a freshly cut orchid.

“God, Keiko,” Julian murmured, taking a slow sip of his champagne as he looked from one glowing enclosure to the next. “And to think we thought it was impressive when we had her on a ten-inch tablet screen next to the stone crab tower in Miami.”

“It completely changes the energy of the room, doesn’t it?” Claire said, walking slowly across the carpet with her glass in hand to admire the seamless glass wall. She paused in front of the fourth enclosure, tilting her head at the honey-blonde suspended in effortless peace. “How long did it take your little housekeeper to ask for a frame of her own?”

“Almost eight months,” Keiko replied smoothly, resting one hand in the pocket of her tailored black trousers as she stood beside the foot of the bed. “By the end of the summer, every time I had her in bed with me, she spent the whole night staring through the glass at Mei. Finally, one morning while she was oiling Mei’s legs, she got down on her knees beside the tray and begged me to hire another girl for the kitchen so she could start eating from the white bowl too.”

Lauren laughed softly, glancing back toward the hallway. “And the new blonde we saw pouring champagne downstairs? If she looked up the stairs any harder tonight, she’d pull a muscle in her neck.”

“She’s very attentive,” Keiko said with a faint, knowing smile. “Though five is the right symmetry for this wall. Any more would crowd the sightlines from the pillows.”

Leaving her friends to admire the outer frames, Keiko walked unhurriedly across the carpet until she stood three inches from the center pane of glass.

Inside the warm amber hush of the central sanctuary, there were no words left behind Mei’s dark eyes.

She did not know that three years had passed. She did not know the names of the people holding crystal glasses in the room outside, or that the blonde floating in the wall beside her had once worn her emerald honeymoon dress. She did not remember what a dress was, or what a house was, or that she had ever answered to the name Mei.

Her entire universe consisted of eighty-one-degree warmth, the soft leather holding her wrists and knees open, the sweet warm cream smoothed onto her tongue twice a day, and the continuous, liquid ache humming between her thighs.

Yet the instant Keiko stepped in front of the glass, something deeper than memory stirred inside Mei’s chest.

Though she had no word for wife or owner, her body knew the silhouette of the woman in black the way a flower knows the sun. As Keiko raised her hand and rested her palm flat against the outside of the glass, Mei’s heavy eyelids fluttered. Her full, oiled breasts rose in a long, shivering inhale, a dark rose blush bloomed across her collarbones, and her head tipped back against the ivory leather in silent, mindless rapture—offering every inch of her lush, open body to the dark eyes watching her.

“Look at her,” Lauren whispered from beside the bed, her voice hushed with genuine awe as a fresh bead of moisture caught the amber spotlight between Mei’s parted thighs. “Three years in the wall, and she still lights up the second you walk up to the glass.”

Keiko didn’t look back at her guests. She kept her palm resting lightly against the invisible barrier, her dark eyes drinking in the serene, thoughtless perfection of her centerpiece.

“Of course she does,” Keiko murmured softly. “She’s living her wish.”