The Wreckers: "Echo" | Book 7

by Brent Clark Palmer
The Wreckers, Book 7

Chapter 1: The Holographic Rules

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The private jet touched down at Haneda Airport just after sunset, the lights of Tokyo glittering like scattered diamonds against the dark sky. Even from the air, the city felt alive — massive, electric, and slightly unreal. Vanessa Smart gazed out the window as the plane taxied, her dark eyes reflecting the endless sprawl of neon and glass.

She looked effortlessly elegant, as always. Her long black hair was swept up into a sleek, sophisticated twist, with a few loose strands framing her sharp cheekbones. She wore a tailored black jumpsuit that hugged her athletic frame, paired with a long cream coat draped over her shoulders. She moved with the same quiet confidence that made people instinctively step aside when she entered a room.

Beside her, Jordan Harlan stretched his long legs and let out a low sigh. He looked every bit the predator in repose — tall, lean, and sharply dressed in a charcoal turtleneck and tailored black trousers. His dark hair was slightly tousled from the flight, and there was a shadow of stubble along his jaw that somehow made him look even more dangerous. His piercing eyes missed nothing, and right now they were fixed on Vanessa with quiet amusement.

“Tokyo,” he said, his voice low. “You sure know how to pick them.”

Vanessa glanced at him, a small smile playing on her lips.

“You’re the one who wanted to come to this conference. Something about staying current with new technology?”

Jordan smirked.

“Someone has to keep up with the future. And I figured you might enjoy the distraction after… Millfield.”

Vanessa’s smile faded slightly at the mention of the small town.

“Millfield was necessary,” she said. “But yes. A change of scenery is welcome.”

They gathered their things and stepped off the jet into the warm Tokyo night. A private car was already waiting for them on the tarmac — sleek, black, and driverless. The future had arrived, and it was efficient.

As they settled into the back seat, Jordan reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small, sleek black object. It looked like an expensive fountain pen, matte black with subtle silver detailing.

“I have something for you,” he said, handing it to her.

Vanessa raised an eyebrow as she took it.

“A pen? How romantic.”

Jordan’s mouth curved into a slow smile.

“Activate it.”

Vanessa turned the pen over in her fingers, then pressed the small silver button near the top. A soft hum filled the car as a glowing blue hologram flickered to life above the pen, projecting a clean, elegant display in mid-air.

THE WRECKERS

Rules of Engagement

1. We never fall in love with our targets.

2. We never keep them.

3. When the job is done, we fuck like the world is ending.

Vanessa stared at the floating text for a moment, then let out a soft laugh.

“You upgraded the business card.”

“I thought it was time,” Jordan said. “We’re in Tokyo. Might as well embrace the future.” Vanessa studied the holographic rules, her expression thoughtful.

“Still the same rules,” she murmured.

“Still the same us,” Jordan replied.

The car glided through the glittering streets of Tokyo, eventually pulling up to their hotel — a towering, ultra-modern building in the heart of the Shibuya district. Their suite was on the top floor, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a breathtaking view of the city. The room was minimalist and luxurious, with soft ambient lighting and a massive bed that looked like it had been designed for both sleep and sin.

Vanessa set her bag down and walked to the window, looking out at the endless lights. “It’s beautiful,” she said quietly.

Jordan came up behind her and rested his hands on her waist.

“It’s also dangerous,” he said. “This city runs on technology. And tonight… we’re going to see just how far it’s come.”

--The opening night of the **Tokyo FutureTech Conference** was held in a massive, glasswalled ballroom on the 40th floor of the hotel. The room was packed with executives,

engineers, investors, and tech celebrities from around the world. Holographic displays floated throughout the space, showing off everything from neural interfaces to fully autonomous cities. The atmosphere was electric — equal parts

professional and hedonistic.

Vanessa and Jordan moved through the crowd like they belonged there. Which, of course, they did.

They had only been in the ballroom for twenty minutes when Jordan's attention was caught by a large, glowing display near the center of the room. A sleek black podium stood beneath a massive holographic logo that read:

EchoLover

Perfection, Perfected.

A well-dressed Japanese woman in her thirties stood beside the display, giving a presentation to a small group of interested attendees. Jordan gently touched Vanessa's arm.

"Come with me," he said.

They approached the display just as the presenter finished her pitch.

"…and with full neural mapping and real-time sensory feedback, EchoLover creates a partner that doesn't just look like your ideal — it *feels* like them. Better than them, in fact. It learns your desires in real time and adapts accordingly. The experience is… addictive." Jordan's eyes narrowed with interest.

"Addictive," he repeated softly.

Vanessa glanced at him, then back at the display.

"Jordan…"

But he was already stepping forward.

"Excuse me," he said to the presenter. "I'd like a private demonstration."

The woman smiled politely.

"Of course, sir. Right this way."

She led them into a small, private demonstration room just off the main floor. Inside was a sleek black chair and a large holographic interface.

Jordan turned to Vanessa, his eyes gleaming.

"Trust me," he said.

Vanessa raised an eyebrow but said nothing as she watched him input a series of commands. A moment later, a tall, perfectly sculpted male figure materialized in the center of the room

— an "Echo" version of an ideal partner, tailored specifically to Vanessa's known preferences.

The figure was beautiful. Dangerous. And very, very realistic.

Jordan stepped back and gestured toward it.

“Try it,” he said. “Just for a moment.”

Vanessa looked at the Echo, then at Jordan. For the first time in a long time, she looked genuinely intrigued.

She took a slow step forward.

And the night had only just begun.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2: The Echo Demonstration

The private demonstration room was dimly lit, with soft ambient lighting that pulsed gently along the walls. A sleek black chair sat in the center of the space, surrounded by floating holographic interfaces. The air felt charged, almost electric.

Jordan stood in front of the main console, his fingers moving across the glowing display with practiced ease. Vanessa leaned against the wall near the door, arms crossed, watching him with a mixture of curiosity and mild skepticism.

“You’re really going to make me do this?” she asked, her voice laced with dry amusement. Jordan didn’t look up from the console.

“I’m not *making* you do anything. I’m offering you the chance to experience the future.” Vanessa raised an eyebrow.

“The future involves me getting fucked by a hologram?”

Jordan finally glanced over his shoulder, a slow smile spreading across his face. “Not a hologram. Something much more advanced than that.”

He finished inputting the last command and stepped back. A soft chime echoed through the room as a tall, perfectly sculpted male figure materialized in the center of the space. The Echo stood at just over six feet, with broad shoulders, a lean, powerful build, and sharp, handsome features. His skin had a subtle golden undertone, and his dark hair fell slightly over one eye. He was completely naked, and every inch of him looked like it had been designed by someone who understood exactly what Vanessa found attractive.

He was, quite literally, her ideal man made flesh — or at least, the closest thing to it. Vanessa stared at the figure for a long moment, then looked at Jordan.

“You programmed this based on my preferences?”

“I did,” Jordan said, stepping closer to her. “Every detail. From the way he looks to the way he moves… to the way he *talks*.”

The Echo tilted his head slightly and spoke, his voice low, smooth, and strangely intimate. “Hello, Vanessa. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Vanessa’s lips parted slightly, but she quickly recovered.

“Impressive,” she said, though her voice had lost some of its earlier dryness.

Jordan moved behind her, his hands resting lightly on her waist.

“Go ahead,” he murmured against her ear. “Try him.”

Vanessa hesitated for only a second before stepping forward. The Echo extended a hand toward her, and she took it. His skin was warm — almost too warm — and felt disturbingly real.

He pulled her gently into his arms, one hand sliding down to the small of her back while the other cupped her jaw. Vanessa's breath hitched as he leaned in and kissed her — slow, deep, and shockingly skilled.

Jordan watched from a few feet away, his expression unreadable but his eyes dark with interest.

The Echo broke the kiss and looked down at Vanessa, his voice a low rumble.

"Tell me what you want."

Vanessa's hands rested on his chest, feeling the steady beat of a simulated heart beneath her palms. She glanced over at Jordan, then back at the Echo.

"Show me what you can do," she said quietly.

The Echo smiled — a slow, dangerous smile — and lifted her effortlessly into his arms. He carried her to the sleek black chair and laid her down with surprising gentleness. His hands moved over her body with expert precision, removing her clothes piece by piece until she was completely naked beneath him.

Vanessa's breathing grew heavier as he kissed down her neck, her collarbone, her breasts. His mouth was hot, his tongue skilled, and every touch seemed designed to drive her exactly where he wanted her to go.

She moaned softly as he moved lower, his hands gripping her thighs and spreading them apart. When his mouth finally found her center, Vanessa's back arched off the chair, a sharp gasp escaping her lips.

Jordan's eyes never left her.

The Echo worked her with relentless focus, his tongue and fingers moving in perfect rhythm, learning her body in real time and adjusting accordingly. Vanessa's hands tangled in his dark hair as pleasure built inside her — fast, intense, and almost overwhelming.

She came hard, her body shaking as a broken moan tore from her throat. The Echo didn't stop. He kept going, drawing out her orgasm until she was gasping and trembling beneath him.

Only then did he rise, positioning himself between her legs. He looked down at her, his eyes glowing faintly with artificial light.

"More?" he asked.

Vanessa stared up at him, her chest rising and falling rapidly. For a moment, she looked genuinely tempted.

Then she smiled — slow, dangerous, and very much in control.

“Not today,” she said, her voice slightly breathless but steady.

She placed a hand on the Echo’s chest and gently pushed him back. The figure dissolved instantly into a swirl of blue light, leaving the room empty and quiet once more. Vanessa sat up slowly, running a hand through her hair as she caught her breath. Jordan stepped forward and handed her a glass of water, which she accepted with a nod.

“Well?” he asked, his voice low.

Vanessa took a long sip before answering.

“It’s… impressive,” she admitted. “The sensory feedback is incredible. The way it adapts in real time… it’s almost too good.”

Jordan nodded, his expression serious.

“That’s what worries me. If it can do that to *you*, imagine what it could do to someone less disciplined. Someone like Haruto Nakamura.”

Vanessa looked up at him, understanding dawning in her eyes.

“You want to use it on him.”

“I want to use it *against* him,” Jordan corrected. “Create an Echo version of his wife — something even more perfect than the real Aiko. Make him obsessed with it. Make him *need* it. And watch his marriage fall apart while he chases something that isn’t even real.” Vanessa set the glass down and stood up, completely unashamed of her nakedness.

“It’s dangerous,” she said. “But effective.”

Jordan stepped closer, his hands sliding around her waist.

“Exactly.”

Vanessa looked up at him, her dark eyes gleaming with something dangerous and excited. “Then let’s do it.”

Jordan smiled, slow and predatory.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

He kissed her deeply, his hands tightening on her hips. Vanessa kissed him back with equal hunger, her body still humming from the Echo’s touch.

They both knew this technology was a weapon.

And they were going to use it to destroy.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3: The Target

The main exhibition hall of the Tokyo FutureTech Conference was a sensory overload of light, sound, and cutting-edge technology. Holographic displays floated above sleek black booths, showcasing everything from neural implants to fully autonomous vehicles. The air buzzed with conversation in multiple languages, and the scent of expensive cologne mixed with the faint metallic tang of high-tech machinery.

Vanessa and Jordan moved through the crowd like sharks through shallow water — calm, focused, and predatory.

Jordan's eyes scanned the room with quiet intensity, his hands tucked into the pockets of his tailored black suit. Vanessa walked beside him, her long black hair loose today, falling in soft waves over the shoulders of her deep crimson blouse. She wore fitted black trousers and heels, moving with effortless grace.

They had only been at the conference for twenty minutes when Jordan suddenly slowed. "There," he murmured, nodding toward a group of people gathered around a large

holographic display near the center of the hall.

Vanessa followed his gaze.

Standing at the center of the group was a tall, handsome Japanese man in his early forties. He had sharp features, neatly styled black hair with a touch of silver at the temples, and an air of quiet authority. He wore a perfectly tailored navy suit and spoke with calm confidence. Even from a distance, it was clear he commanded respect.

Beside him stood a striking woman — his wife. She looked to be in her late thirties, with long, sleek black hair, elegant features, and a body that suggested she took very good care of herself. She wore a fitted emerald-green dress and smiled politely as she listened to the conversation around them.

Jordan tilted his head slightly.

"Haruto Nakamura," he said quietly. "CEO of Nakamura Dynamics. One of the fastestgrowing tech companies in Japan." Vanessa studied the couple.

"And the woman?"

"Aiko Nakamura. His wife of twelve years. She's sharp — has a background in robotics and sits on the board of two major firms. They're considered one of Tokyo's golden couples."

Vanessa's lips curved into a slow, dangerous smile.

“Perfect.”

--Over the next two days, Vanessa and Jordan worked with quiet, deliberate efficiency. Jordan spent his time studying Haruto from a distance — attending the same panels, observing his body language, and quietly gathering information. He learned that Haruto was brilliant but arrogant, highly respected in his field, and rumored to have a wandering eye when it came to women.

Meanwhile, Vanessa made her move.

She “accidentally” bumped into Aiko during a networking session, spilling a small amount of champagne on the woman’s dress. What began as flustered apologies quickly turned into easy conversation. Within twenty minutes, the two women were seated at a quiet table together, laughing softly over drinks.

Aiko was charming, intelligent, and — as Vanessa had suspected — quietly unhappy in her marriage.

By the end of the night, they had exchanged contact information.

The following evening, Vanessa sent Aiko a simple text:

Vanessa: *Drinks tonight? My husband and I would love to get to know you and Haruto better.*

Aiko replied within minutes.

Aiko: *We’d love that.*

--That night, the four of them met at an exclusive rooftop bar overlooking the city. The atmosphere was relaxed but charged. Haruto was confident and charismatic, clearly used to being the center of attention. Aiko was more reserved, but her eyes lit up whenever Vanessa spoke to her directly.

After two rounds of drinks, Jordan casually suggested they continue the evening somewhere more private.

“My suite has an incredible view,” he said with an easy smile. “And much better whiskey than this place.”

Haruto glanced at his wife, then back at Jordan.

“Why not?” he said with a grin.

Aiko hesitated for only a second before nodding.

The four of them took the elevator up to Vanessa and Jordan’s penthouse suite. What started as casual conversation and expensive whiskey soon turned into something much more intimate. By the end of the night, the lines between the two couples had blurred in ways none of them had expected.

When Haruto and Aiko finally left in the early hours of the morning, both couples were smiling — though for very different reasons.

--The next day, Jordan and Vanessa stood on the balcony of their suite, watching the sun rise over Tokyo.

Jordan took a slow sip of his coffee.

“They’re perfect,” he said. “Arrogant enough to think they’re in control. Bored enough to be reckless.”

Vanessa nodded, her eyes fixed on the horizon.

“Haruto’s already looking at me differently. And Aiko… she’s starving for attention.” Jordan glanced at her.

“You ready to begin?”

Vanessa turned to him, her dark eyes gleaming.

“I’ve already started.”

Chapter 4

Chapter 4: The First Echo

The hotel suite was dark except for the soft blue glow of the holographic interface floating above Jordan’s desk. It was nearly 3 a.m., but Jordan showed no signs of fatigue. He sat shirtless in the leather chair, his lean, muscular torso illuminated by the shifting light of the display as his fingers moved across the controls with surgical precision.

On the screen in front of him was a perfect digital recreation of **Aiko Nakamura**. Jordan had spent the last three days gathering data — photos, videos, voice samples, even subtle details like the way she walked and the slight tilt of her head when she smiled. Now he was putting it all together.

He zoomed in on the holographic figure and made one small but deliberate change. On the real Aiko’s left hip was a small, faint birthmark shaped like a crescent moon. Jordan removed it from the Echo version and replaced it with a tiny star-shaped mark instead. It was barely noticeable — but it was enough. Enough to make the Echo clearly *not* the real woman.

He leaned back in his chair and studied his creation.

“Perfect,” he murmured.

The Echo version of Aiko stood motionless in the center of the holographic display, completely naked, her body rendered in stunning, lifelike detail. She was beautiful — perhaps even more beautiful than the real Aiko, with subtle enhancements that made her curves slightly fuller, her skin smoother, her eyes more seductive.

Jordan smiled coldly.

“Time to meet your new husband, Aiko.”

--**Haruto Nakamura** sat alone in his private office on the 58th floor of Nakamura Dynamics headquarters, the city lights of Tokyo glittering far below. It was late — past midnight — but he often worked late when he needed to think.

Tonight, he was reviewing the latest reports on the EchoLover technology his company had been testing. As CEO, he had access to the most advanced prototypes, and earlier that week, he had received a **special evaluation unit** directly from the conference organizers — a sleek black device no larger than a smartphone, delivered to his office with a note that read: *“For your personal evaluation. Top-tier prototype. Use with discretion.”*

What Haruto didn’t know was that the device had been **remotely activated and modified** by Jordan Harlan two nights earlier. Using a backdoor he had installed into the conference’s secure network, Jordan had uploaded a custom

version of the EchoLover software — one that contained a pre-loaded “Echo” of Aiko Nakamura.

Haruto reached into his desk drawer and pulled out the device. He tapped the screen, and a soft chime filled the room.

A moment later, a figure materialized in the center of his office.

It was Aiko.

Or rather… something that looked almost exactly like her.

Haruto blinked, surprised. He hadn’t expected the prototype to be this realistic. The Echo version of his wife stood before him, completely naked, her skin glowing softly in the dim light. She smiled at him — the same gentle smile he had seen a thousand times — but there was something different in her eyes. Something warmer. More inviting.

“Haruto,” the Echo said, her voice soft and intimate. “You’ve been working too hard again.” Haruto stared at her, his mouth slightly open.

“…Aiko?”

The Echo stepped closer, her movements fluid and natural.

“You look tired, my love. Let me take care of you.”

She reached out and gently touched his face, her fingers warm against his skin. Haruto’s breath caught in his throat. The sensation was indistinguishable from real human touch. He swallowed hard.

“This is… incredible.”

The Echo smiled and leaned in, pressing her body lightly against his. Her breasts brushed against his chest as she whispered in his ear.

“I’ve missed you today. Let me show you how much.”

Haruto closed his eyes as she kissed his neck, her hands sliding down his chest. His body responded instantly, desire flooding through him with an intensity he hadn’t felt in years. For the next hour, the Echo version of Aiko made love to him with a skill and passion that left him breathless and shaking. When it was over, she curled up beside him on the couch, her head resting on his chest as if she were real.

Haruto stared at the ceiling, his heart pounding.

He knew it wasn’t really his wife.

But in that moment, he didn’t care.

--The next morning, Haruto was distracted during his meetings. He kept checking his phone, his mind drifting back to the night before. When he finally

returned to his office, he locked the door and activated the Echo again.

This time, he didn’t stop at just one session.

By the end of the week, Haruto Nakamura was spending nearly every night with the artificial version of his wife. He told himself it was just research. Just testing the technology. But deep down, he knew the truth.

He was becoming addicted.

And he had no idea that Jordan Harlan was watching every single interaction through a hidden backdoor in the system — studying, analyzing, and smiling.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5: The Slow Addiction

Haruto Nakamura sat alone in his private office, the city lights of Tokyo sparkling far below like a sea of stars. It was nearly 2 a.m., but sleep was the last thing on his mind. The sleek black EchoLover device rested on his desk, glowing softly. He stared at it for a long moment before reaching out and tapping the screen.

A soft chime filled the room.

A moment later, she appeared.

Aiko.

Or rather, the Echo version of her.

She stood in the center of the office, completely naked, her skin glowing with that perfect, artificial warmth. Her long black hair fell over one shoulder, and she smiled at him with that gentle, knowing expression he had fallen in love with years ago — only now it felt even more intimate. More perfect.

“Haruto,” she said softly, her voice like silk. “You’re working too late again.” Haruto swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

The Echo stepped closer, her hips swaying with that hypnotic grace she had been

programmed with. She reached out and gently touched his face, her fingers warm and real against his skin.

“Then let me help you relax.”

She kissed him — slow, deep, and impossibly skilled. Haruto’s hands moved to her waist instinctively, pulling her closer as desire flooded through him. Within seconds, he had lifted her onto his desk, her legs wrapping around him as he pushed inside her with a low groan. This was the seventh night in a row he had done this.

And every single time, it felt better than the last.

The Echo version of Aiko knew exactly how to touch him, exactly what to say, exactly how to move. She never got tired. She never complained. She never asked him why he came home smelling like another woman’s perfume or why he barely looked at his real wife anymore. She was perfect.

And the real Aiko was starting to feel like a ghost in her own marriage.

--**Aiko Nakamura** sat alone at the long dining table in their penthouse apartment, staring at the untouched plate of food in front of her. It was nearly midnight. Again.

Haruto had promised he would be home for dinner. He had even texted her that afternoon to confirm. But as the hours passed and the food grew cold, she had stopped expecting him. This wasn’t the first time.

In fact, it was becoming a pattern.

She picked up her phone and stared at the screen. No new messages. No missed calls. Just the last text she had sent him three hours ago:

Aiko: *Dinner’s ready. Don’t work too late.*

No reply.

Aiko set the phone down and leaned back in her chair, wrapping her arms around herself. She had changed into a silk robe after her shower, her long black hair still damp and falling over her shoulders. She looked beautiful — she always did — but tonight, she felt invisible. She thought about the night they had spent with Vanessa and Jordan. It had been strange. Cold. Clinical. But even then, at least Haruto had been *present*. Now, even when he was physically in the same room, he felt a million miles away.

Aiko picked up her wine glass and took a long sip, her mind drifting.

Is he cheating on me?

The thought had crossed her mind more than once over the past week. Haruto had always been a workaholic, but this felt different. He was distracted. Distant. And when they did have sex, it felt mechanical — like he was going through the motions.

She hated how much it hurt.

She hated that she was starting to feel like she wasn’t enough.

--The next morning, Aiko tried to talk to him.

They were in the kitchen, Haruto already dressed for work and scrolling through his phone while he drank his coffee. Aiko stood across from him in her robe, her arms crossed. “You’ve been coming home very late,” she said, trying to keep her voice calm.

Haruto didn’t look up.

“Work’s been busy.”

Aiko hesitated.

“Is everything okay? Between us, I mean?”

This time, he did glance up — but only for a second.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Aiko studied his face. He looked tired. Distracted. And there was something else in his eyes — something she couldn’t quite name.

“You’ve barely touched me in days,” she said quietly. “And when you do… it feels like your mind is somewhere else.”

Haruto set his coffee cup down a little too hard.

“I’m under a lot of pressure right now, Aiko. The conference, the new product launch… I don’t have time for this.”

Aiko flinched.

“This?” she repeated. “You mean *us*?”

Haruto sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just… I need you to be patient right now. Okay?”

Aiko looked at him for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

“Okay.”

But as he kissed her on the cheek and walked out the door, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was deeply, terribly wrong.

And she had no idea it had already begun.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6: The First Night

The rooftop bar overlooked the glittering sprawl of Tokyo, the night air warm and alive with the distant hum of the city below. Vanessa and Jordan had chosen the location carefully — upscale, intimate, and just private enough to feel exclusive.

Haruto and Aiko Nakamura arrived together, both of them dressed elegantly. Haruto looked confident and relaxed in a tailored navy suit, while Aiko wore a fitted emerald-green dress that hugged her curves beautifully. She smiled politely as they approached the table, but there was a quiet tension in her eyes that Vanessa immediately noticed.

“Vanessa, Jordan,” Haruto greeted them with a warm smile. “Thank you for inviting us. This place is impressive.”

Jordan stood and shook his hand.

“Our pleasure. We’ve been enjoying the conference, but it’s nice to step away from the crowds for a while.”

The four of them settled into a private corner booth with a stunning view of the city. Conversation flowed easily at first — talk of the conference, new technologies, and life in Tokyo. Haruto was charming and self-assured, clearly used to being the center of attention. Aiko was quieter, but her eyes lit up whenever Vanessa spoke directly to her.

After the second round of drinks, the atmosphere began to shift.

Jordan leaned back in his seat, swirling his whiskey as he looked at Haruto with a knowing smile.

“You two make quite the power couple,” he said. “Successful, attractive… and clearly still very much in love.”

Haruto laughed, but there was a slight edge to it.

“We try. Though with work being as demanding as it is, it’s not always easy to find time for each other.”

Aiko glanced down at her glass, her smile tightening slightly.

“Sometimes it feels like we’re ships passing in the night,” she admitted quietly. Vanessa reached across the table and gently touched Aiko’s hand.

“That’s a shame,” she said softly. “Two beautiful people like you should never feel that way.”

The words hung in the air for a moment. Aiko looked up and met Vanessa’s gaze. Something unspoken passed between them.

Jordan caught it immediately. He turned to Haruto with a casual smile.

“You've seen our suite and our view. Much better than this place. And I brought a bottle of something truly special. Care to join us?”

Haruto looked at his wife. Aiko hesitated for only a second before nodding.

“We’d like that.”

--The elevator ride up to the penthouse suite was quiet, but the air between the four of them was charged. When they stepped into the luxurious suite, Vanessa dimmed the lights and poured everyone a drink while Jordan opened the floor-to-ceiling curtains, revealing the breathtaking view of Tokyo at night.

Conversation continued for a while — lighter now, more relaxed. But as the whiskey flowed and the night deepened, the atmosphere grew more intimate.

At one point, Vanessa sat beside Aiko on the large sectional sofa. Their knees brushed. Neither of them moved away.

Jordan caught Haruto’s eye and smiled.

“You know,” he said, his voice low and smooth, “we don’t have to pretend this is just a friendly nightcap. We’re all adults here.”

Haruto looked at his wife. Aiko met his gaze, her cheeks slightly flushed, but she didn’t look away.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Haruto set his glass down.

“What exactly are you suggesting?” he asked, though his tone made it clear he already knew. Jordan leaned forward slightly.

“We’re suggesting that we stop pretending we don’t all feel the tension in this room. And that we do something about it.”

Aiko’s breath hitched softly. She looked at Vanessa, who was watching her with dark, patient eyes.

Vanessa reached out and gently tucked a strand of hair behind Aiko’s ear.

“Only if you want to,” she said quietly. “No pressure. No expectations. Just… pleasure.”

Aiko swallowed. Then, after a long moment, she nodded.

Haruto’s eyes darkened with desire as he looked at Jordan.

“I think we’re all on the same page.”

What followed was slow, deliberate, and intensely erotic.

Clothes were shed piece by piece. Hands explored. Mouths tasted. The four of them moved together on the large bed, the city lights casting long shadows across their bodies. Vanessa took her time with Aiko, kissing her deeply, touching her with expert care until Aiko was gasping and trembling beneath her. Jordan did the same with Haruto — confident, dominant, and unhurried.

At one point, the two couples switched. Haruto found himself between Vanessa's thighs while Jordan took Aiko from behind, her soft moans filling the room. It was raw, intense, and strangely intimate.

When it was finally over, the four of them lay tangled together in the massive bed, breathing hard and covered in a light sheen of sweat.

No one spoke for a long time.

Eventually, Haruto and Aiko dressed quietly and left, both of them looking slightly dazed but satisfied. They didn't say much as they stepped into the elevator.

But as the doors closed, Aiko glanced at her husband and whispered:

"That was… unexpected."

Haruto didn't answer.

He was already thinking about the sleek black device waiting for him in his office.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7: The Wedge

Aiko stirred her matcha latte slowly, her eyes distant as she sat across from Vanessa in a quiet café near the conference center. The soft hum of conversation and the faint scent of fresh pastries filled the air, but Aiko barely noticed any of it.

“I don’t know what’s happening to us,” she said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. “Haruto used to come home every night. Even when he worked late, he would text me. Now… I barely see him. And when he *is* home, it’s like he’s not really there.”

Vanessa tilted her head, her expression full of gentle concern. She reached across the table and lightly touched Aiko’s hand.

“I’m so sorry you’re going through this,” she said softly. “You deserve so much better than to feel invisible in your own marriage.”

Aiko looked up, her eyes glassy with unshed tears.

“I keep asking myself if it’s me. If I’ve done something wrong. If I’m not… enough anymore.”

Vanessa squeezed her hand gently.

“Aiko, listen to me. This is *not* your fault. Some men get so caught up in their work — or in other things — that they forget what’s right in front of them. You’re beautiful. You’re intelligent. You’re kind. If he can’t see that, then maybe the problem isn’t you.” Aiko let out a shaky breath.

“I just feel so lonely. Even when he’s lying next to me in bed, I feel alone.”

Vanessa’s voice dropped to a softer, more intimate tone.

“You shouldn’t have to feel that way. No one should.”

She paused, then added carefully:

“Have you thought about… what you might do if things don’t change?”

Aiko looked at her, surprised.

“What do you mean?”

Vanessa gave her a small, knowing smile.

“I mean… sometimes we have to start putting ourselves first. Even if that means exploring other options. Other people.”

Aiko’s cheeks flushed slightly, but she didn’t pull her hand away.

“I’ve never cheated on him,” she said quietly. “I don’t even know if I could.”

Vanessa leaned in slightly, her voice warm and reassuring.

“No one’s saying you have to do anything you’re not ready for. But sometimes… it helps to remember that you still have options. That you’re still desirable. That you still deserve to feel wanted.”

Aiko was quiet for a long moment. Then she nodded slowly.

“Thank you, Vanessa. I don’t know what I’d do without someone to talk to right now.” Vanessa smiled.

“You don’t have to go through this alone.”

--Across town, Jordan sat across from Haruto at a quiet corner table in an upscale bar near the conference center. Haruto looked exhausted — dark circles under his eyes, his usually neat hair slightly disheveled. He was nursing a whiskey, his third of the night.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Haruto muttered, staring into his glass. “I can’t stop thinking about it. About *her*.”

Jordan took a slow sip of his own drink, watching Haruto carefully.

“Her?”

Haruto hesitated, then let out a short, bitter laugh.

“The Echo. The prototype. I know it’s not real. I *know* that. But every time I use it… it feels better than anything I’ve ever had. Better than my wife. Better than anything.” Jordan tilted his head.

“Better how?”

Haruto ran a hand through his hair.

“It knows exactly what I want. It never says no. It never gets tired. It never asks me why I’m working so late or why I haven’t touched her in weeks. It just… gives me everything I need.” Jordan leaned forward slightly, his voice calm and measured.

“That’s the beauty of the technology, Haruto. It’s designed to be perfect. Designed to give you exactly what you crave without any of the complications of real life.”

Haruto stared at his drink.

“I think I’m in trouble,” he admitted. “I can’t stop using it. Every night I tell myself it’ll be the last time, and every night I end up back in my office with that fucking device.” Jordan’s voice was low and smooth.

“Some things are too good to resist. There’s no shame in that.”

Haruto looked up at him, his eyes tired and desperate.

“What do I do?”

Jordan smiled faintly.

“You keep using it. And you stop fighting what you already know deep down.”

Haruto frowned.

“What do you mean?”

Jordan met his gaze steadily.

“You already know the truth, Haruto. The Echo is better than your wife. It always will be. The sooner you accept that, the easier this will become.”

Haruto was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly, almost like he was trying to convince himself.

“Yeah… you’re right.”

Jordan raised his glass.

“To accepting the truth.”

Haruto clinked his glass against Jordan’s, his expression hollow.

“To the truth.”

--That night, Haruto came home even later than usual.

Aiko was waiting for him in the living room, still awake. She had been crying — her eyes were red and puffy — but she stood up the moment he walked through the door.

“Where have you been?” she asked, her voice shaking.

Haruto didn’t even take off his coat.

“Working.”

Aiko let out a bitter laugh.

“Working? At three in the morning? You expect me to believe that?”

Haruto’s jaw tightened.

“I don’t have time for this, Aiko.”

“You never have time for anything anymore!” she snapped. “Not for me. Not for us. You barely even look at me when you’re home. Do you even still love me?”

Haruto stared at her for a long moment, something cold and distant in his eyes.

“I’m tired,” he said flatly. “I’m going to bed.”

He walked past her without another word.

Aiko stood there in the middle of the living room, her hands trembling as tears streamed down her face.

For the first time, she truly believed her marriage was falling apart.

And she had no idea why.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8: The Comparison

Haruto lay on his back in the large bed of their penthouse apartment, staring up at the ceiling as Aiko moved slowly on top of him. Her long black hair fell around her face like a curtain, and her body moved with familiar rhythm — the same way it had for the past twelve years. But tonight, something felt different.

He kept his hands on her hips, but his mind was elsewhere.

He was thinking about the Echo.

The way *she* moved. The way *she* touched him. The way *she* knew exactly what he wanted without him having to say a word. The Echo version of Aiko was more responsive, more eager, more *perfect* in every way. She never got tired. She never asked if he was okay. She never looked at him with that quiet, searching expression the real Aiko sometimes did — like she was trying to figure out what was wrong.

Haruto closed his eyes and tried to focus on the woman above him. He tried to lose himself in the feeling of her body, the sound of her soft moans, the familiar scent of her skin. But it wasn't enough.

The real Aiko felt… lacking.

She wasn't as tight. She wasn't as wet. She didn't move quite the same way. And when she leaned down to kiss him, her kiss felt hesitant — almost uncertain — compared to the confident, hungry way the Echo kissed him.

Haruto's hands tightened on her hips, but not with passion. With frustration.

Aiko noticed.

She slowed her movements and looked down at him, her brow slightly furrowed.

"Haruto?" she asked softly. "Are you okay?"

He opened his eyes and forced a smile.

"I'm fine. Just tired."

Aiko studied his face for a moment, then resumed moving, though her rhythm was more mechanical now. She was trying — he could tell — but it wasn't the same. And deep down, Haruto knew she could feel the difference too.

When it was over, she rolled off him and lay on her side, facing away. The silence between them was heavy.

Haruto stared at the ceiling, his mind already drifting back to the sleek black device waiting for him in his office.

He couldn’t wait to get back to her.

The real her.

The perfect one.

--**Aiko Nakamura** stood in the kitchen the next morning, staring blankly at the coffee maker as it brewed. She hadn’t slept well. Haruto had left for work before she woke up — again — and the bed had felt cold and empty beside her.

She wrapped her hands around her mug and took a slow sip, her mind racing.

Something was wrong.

She could feel it in her bones.

Haruto had always been a dedicated man — driven, ambitious, sometimes distant because of work. But this was different. This wasn’t just stress or long hours. This felt like… absence. Like he was physically present but emotionally gone.

And the sex…

Aiko’s cheeks burned as she thought about last night. It had felt mechanical. Empty. Like he was going through the motions. At one point, she had even caught him staring past her, like his mind was somewhere else entirely.

She had tried to talk to him afterward, but he had brushed her off with the same tired excuse. *“I’m just tired, Aiko.”*

She didn’t believe him anymore.

Aiko set her coffee down and walked to the large window overlooking the city. She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly feeling very small in their beautiful penthouse apartment. *Is he cheating on me?*

The thought had been growing louder in her mind over the past week. She hated herself for even thinking it, but she couldn’t ignore the signs anymore. The late nights. The lack of intimacy. The way he barely looked at her when they were together.

And yet… something didn’t feel quite right about that theory either.

If he was cheating, wouldn’t he be more careful? Wouldn’t he try harder to hide it? No. This felt like something else. Something stranger.

Aiko closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She needed answers.

And she was going to get them.

--That evening, Haruto came home later than usual — again.

Aiko was waiting for him in the living room, still dressed in the clothes she had worn to her afternoon meeting. She hadn’t changed into something more comfortable. She hadn’t made dinner. She was just sitting there, waiting.

Haruto walked through the door and stopped when he saw her.

“You’re still up,” he said, sounding surprised.

Aiko looked at him, her expression calm but her eyes sharp.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

Haruto sighed and set his briefcase down.

“Aiko, I’m really tired. Can we do this tomorrow?”

“No,” she said firmly. “We can’t.”

He frowned.

“What’s this about?”

Aiko stood up and walked toward him, stopping a few feet away.

“I want to know what’s going on with you. You’ve been distant for weeks. You come home late every night. You barely touch me. And when we *do* have sex, it feels like you’re not even here.”

Haruto’s jaw tightened.

“I told you. Work has been intense.”

“Bullshit,” Aiko said, her voice rising. “I know what intense work looks like. This is different. You’re hiding something.”

Haruto stared at her, his expression unreadable.

“I’m not hiding anything.”

Aiko took a step closer, her voice dropping.

“Then look me in the eyes and tell me you still want me.”

Haruto hesitated.

Just for a second.

But it was enough.

Aiko’s face crumpled slightly, but she quickly composed herself.

“You can’t even say it,” she whispered.

Haruto ran a hand through his hair, looking suddenly exhausted.

“Aiko, please. I’m dealing with a lot right now. I just need you to be patient.” Aiko looked at him for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

“Fine,” she said quietly. “Be patient.”

She turned and walked toward the bedroom, pausing at the doorway.

“But I won’t wait forever, Haruto.”

She disappeared down the hallway, leaving him standing alone in the living room. Haruto stared after her for a long time, a strange mix of guilt and relief churning in his chest. Then he picked up his briefcase and headed toward his home office.

He needed to see her.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9: The Breaking Point

Aiko Nakamura stood in the middle of their penthouse living room, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as she stared at the clock on the wall. It was nearly 1 a.m.

Again.

Haruto had promised — *promised* — that he would be home by ten. He had even sounded sincere when he texted her earlier that evening. But as the hours ticked by and the city outside grew quieter, she had stopped believing him.

This wasn’t just work anymore.

She knew it in her bones.

Aiko walked to the large window and looked out over the glittering Tokyo skyline, her reflection staring back at her. She looked tired. Worn down. The woman who used to turn heads at every event now looked like a stranger in her own home.

She had tried so hard to be patient. She had given him space. She had told herself it was just stress from the conference and the new product launch. But deep down, she had known the truth for weeks.

Something was deeply, terribly wrong with her husband.

And tonight, she was done pretending.

--The front door finally opened at 1:17 a.m.

Haruto stepped inside, looking exhausted. His tie was loosened, his hair slightly messy, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He froze when he saw Aiko standing in the living room, still fully dressed.

“You’re still up,” he said, his voice flat.

Aiko turned to face him slowly.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

Haruto sighed and set his briefcase down.

“Aiko, I’m really tired. Can we talk about this tomorrow?”

“No,” she said, her voice steady but cold. “We’re talking about this *now*.”

He rubbed his face with both hands.

“What do you want from me?”

Aiko took a step closer, her eyes blazing.

“I want the truth. I want to know where you’ve been every night for the past three weeks. I want to know why you barely look at me anymore. I want to know why we haven’t had a real conversation — or real sex — in over a month.”

Haruto’s jaw tightened.

“I told you. Work has been—”

“Stop lying to me!” Aiko snapped, her voice rising. “I’m not stupid, Haruto. I know something is going on. You come home smelling like perfume that isn’t mine. You disappear into your office the second you walk through the door. You barely touch me when we’re in bed. Do you think I don’t notice?”

Haruto stared at her, his expression unreadable.

Aiko’s voice cracked.

“Are you cheating on me?”

The silence that followed was deafening.

Haruto looked away.

Aiko let out a broken laugh.

“Oh my God. You are. You actually are.”

“I’m not cheating on you,” Haruto said quietly.

Aiko stepped closer, her voice trembling with rage and hurt.

“Then what the hell is going on? Because something is *wrong* with you. You’re not the man I married. You’re distant. You’re cold. You look at me like I’m a stranger. And I’m sick of it.”

Haruto ran both hands through his hair, looking suddenly exhausted.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” he muttered.

“Try,” Aiko demanded.

Haruto was quiet for a long moment. Then he spoke, his voice low and strained.

“There’s something I’ve been using. Something at work. It’s… addictive. More addictive than I ever expected. And I can’t stop.”

Aiko frowned, confused.

“What are you talking about?”

Haruto looked at her, his eyes hollow.

“The EchoLover prototype. I’ve been using it. Every night. Sometimes multiple times a day. And it’s… it’s better than anything I’ve ever had. Better than *you*.”

Aiko felt like the floor had dropped out from under her.

“Better than me?” she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

Haruto nodded slowly.

“It’s perfect. It knows exactly what I want. It never disappoints me. It never makes me feel like I’m not enough. And every time I’m with the real you now… all I can think about is how much better the Echo is.”

Tears filled Aiko’s eyes.

“You’re comparing me to a *machine*?”

“It’s not just a machine,” Haruto said, almost defensively. “It’s better than real. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted. And I can’t stop thinking about it. I can’t stop wanting it.” Aiko stared at him, her heart breaking in real time.

“You’re in love with a computer program,” she said, her voice shaking. “You’re choosing a fucking hologram over your wife.”

Haruto didn’t deny it.

He just stood there, looking tired and broken and completely lost.

Aiko wiped her eyes angrily.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she whispered. “I can’t keep fighting for a man who doesn’t even want me. I won’t.”

She turned and walked toward the bedroom, pausing at the doorway.

“I’m sleeping in the guest room tonight. And tomorrow… we’re going to talk about what happens next.”

Haruto didn’t stop her.

He just stood there in the middle of the living room, staring at nothing, while the weight of what he had just admitted settled over him like a shroud.

His marriage was falling apart.

And he had chosen the Echo over his wife.

He didn’t even try to stop her.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10: The Final Push

The sleek black device sat on Jordan’s desk like a weapon.

It was late — nearly midnight — and the only light in the hotel suite came from the glowing holographic interface floating above the console. Vanessa stood beside him, her arms crossed, watching as Jordan’s fingers moved across the display with cold precision.

On the screen was the Echo version of **Aiko Nakamura** — the one they had been feeding to Haruto for the past two weeks. She looked perfect. Flawless. Addictive.

Jordan leaned back in his chair and studied the figure.

“It’s time,” he said quietly.

Vanessa tilted her head.

“What are you going to do?”

Jordan’s smile was slow and dangerous.

“I’m going to make sure he can never go back to the real thing.”

He began typing rapidly, his eyes sharp with focus. Vanessa watched as lines of code scrolled across the screen. She didn’t fully understand the technical side, but she understood the intent.

Jordan was rewriting the Echo.

He was making her *better*.

More responsive. More submissive. More *addictive*. He increased the pleasure feedback loops, made her voice softer, more intimate, more desperate for Haruto’s attention. He programmed her to say things the real Aiko would never say — things that would make Haruto feel like a god.

When he was finished, Jordan leaned back and exhaled slowly.

“Done.”

Vanessa stepped closer, her voice low.

“Will it work?”

Jordan looked up at her, his eyes gleaming.

“It already has. This is just the final push.”

He tapped the screen one last time, and the Echo version of Aiko smiled — slow, seductive, and utterly perfect.

“Now,” Jordan said, “we wait.”

--**Haruto Nakamura** sat in his private office, the city lights of Tokyo stretching out endlessly below him. It was past 1 a.m., but he had stopped pretending he was working hours ago.

The sleek black EchoLover device rested in his hand like a lifeline.

He tapped the screen.

The familiar chime echoed through the room, and a moment later, she appeared.

Aiko.

His Aiko.

The Echo version smiled at him, her eyes glowing softly with artificial warmth. She was even more beautiful than before — her skin smoother, her curves fuller, her voice like honey as she spoke.

“Haruto,” she whispered, stepping closer. “I’ve been waiting for you all day. I missed you so much.”

Haruto’s breath caught in his throat.

He reached for her without thinking, pulling her against him. She melted into his arms like she was made for him. Her lips found his neck, her hands sliding down his chest as she whispered things that made his blood run hot.

“I love you,” the Echo murmured. “I need you. I’ll never leave you. I’ll never make you feel like you’re not enough.”

Haruto closed his eyes and let himself fall into her.

This was what he needed.

This was what he *craved*.

The real Aiko had become a shadow compared to this. She was cold. Distant. She didn’t understand him the way the Echo did. She didn’t make him feel powerful, desired, *worshipped*.

Why would he ever go back to the real thing when he had *this*?

--**Aiko Nakamura** stood in the doorway of Haruto’s home office, her hand frozen on the doorknob.

She had come to confront him. To demand answers. To finally force him to tell her what was going on.

But what she saw stopped her cold.

Haruto was standing in the middle of the room, completely naked, his hands moving over empty air as if he were touching someone who wasn’t there. His

eyes were closed, his breathing heavy, his body responding to something — or someone — that didn't exist. Aiko's blood ran cold.

"Haruto?" she whispered.

He didn't hear her.

He was too lost in whatever fantasy was playing out in front of him.

Aiko stepped into the room, her voice rising.

"Haruto!"

This time, he heard her.

His eyes snapped open, and for a split second, he looked completely lost — like he didn't even recognize her. Then his expression shifted into something between guilt and irritation. "Aiko," he said, his voice rough. "What are you doing here?"

Aiko stared at him, her hands shaking.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Haruto glanced around, suddenly realizing how this must look. He grabbed his pants off the floor and pulled them on quickly.

"I was just… testing something."

"Testing something?" Aiko repeated, her voice rising. "You were standing there naked, touching nothing, moaning like you were fucking someone! What the hell is going on with you?"

Haruto ran a hand through his hair, looking suddenly exhausted.

"I told you. I've been testing the EchoLover prototype. It's for work."

"Work?" Aiko laughed bitterly. "You expect me to believe that? You've been disappearing every night for weeks. You barely look at me. You barely touch me. And now I find you in here acting like you're having sex with a ghost?"

Haruto's jaw tightened.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me," Aiko shot back. "Because right now, I'm starting to think you've completely lost your mind."

Haruto looked at her for a long moment, something dark and distant in his eyes.

Then he spoke.

"I don't want you anymore."

Aiko felt like the floor had dropped out from under her.

"What did you just say?"

Haruto’s voice was flat. Cold.

“I don’t want the real you. I want *her*. The Echo. She’s everything I need. Everything I’ve ever wanted. And I’m tired of pretending otherwise.”

Aiko stared at him, tears filling her eyes.

“You’re choosing a machine over your wife.”

Haruto didn’t deny it.

He just stood there, looking tired and broken and completely lost.

Aiko wiped her eyes angrily.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she whispered. “I won’t.”

She turned and walked out of the office without another word.

Haruto stood there alone, the Echo version of Aiko still hovering in the center of the room, smiling at him like nothing had happened.

He looked at her — the perfect, addictive, artificial version of his wife — and felt nothing but emptiness.

The real Aiko was gone.

And he had no one to blame but himself.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11: The Collapse

The lobby of the Imperial Hotel Tokyo was packed.

It was the final night of the FutureTech Conference, and nearly everyone who mattered in the Japanese tech industry had gathered for the closing gala. Crystal chandeliers glittered overhead, waiters moved through the crowd with trays of champagne, and the air was filled with the low hum of powerful people networking.

“You’re fucking *insane*!” Aiko screamed, her voice carrying across the entire lobby. “You’ve been choosing a goddamn computer program over me for weeks! You come home smelling like sex that isn’t mine! You barely look at me! And now you have the nerve to act like *I’m* the problem?!”

Haruto’s face twisted with rage.

“I told you the truth! I told you what was happening! And you still don’t fucking get it!” “Get what?!” Aiko shouted. “That you’d rather fuck a hologram than your own wife? That you’ve been lying to me for weeks while I sat at home wondering what I did wrong?!” People were openly staring now. Some had pulled out their phones. Others were whispering behind their hands, but no one stepped in.

Haruto took a step closer, his voice rising.

“You don’t understand what it’s like! The Echo gives me everything I need! Everything *you* stopped giving me years ago! She makes me feel wanted. She makes me feel

powerful. And every time I’m with the real you, all I can think about is how much better she is!”

Aiko stared at him, her chest heaving.

“You’re in love with a machine,” she said, her voice breaking. “You’re choosing pixels over your wife. Over our marriage. Over everything we built together.”

Haruto laughed — a harsh, broken sound.

“Our marriage was already dead. I just finally stopped pretending.”

Aiko’s face crumpled. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked at him with pure devastation.

“I hate you,” she whispered. “I hate what you’ve become.”

Haruto stared at her for a long moment, something hollow and empty in his eyes.

Then he spoke.

“I don’t care.”

The words hit Aiko like a physical blow.

She took a shaky step back, her hands trembling.

“You don’t care,” she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

Haruto didn’t answer.

He just turned and walked away, disappearing into the crowd without looking back. Aiko stood there alone in the middle of the lobby, surrounded by half the Tokyo tech elite, her marriage in ruins around her. People were still staring. Some were openly filming. Others were whispering.

She wrapped her arms around herself and started to sob — deep, gut-wrenching sobs that shook her entire body.

No one approached her.

No one offered comfort.

She was left standing there — broken, humiliated, and completely hollow.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12: The Reward

The first pale light of dawn crept through the floor-to-ceiling windows of their penthouse suite, casting long golden streaks across the tangled sheets. Vanessa lay on her back, breathing hard, her body still trembling from the intensity of what they had just done. Jordan was above her, his weight braced on his forearms, his dark eyes locked on hers.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment.

The sex had been raw. Rough. Almost violent in its hunger. There was no tenderness this time — only need. Only release. Only the dark, addictive rush of two monsters celebrating another successful kill.

Jordan finally rolled off her and lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Vanessa turned her head to look at him, her dark hair spread across the pillow like spilled ink.

For a while, they simply breathed.

Then Vanessa spoke, her voice low and slightly amused.

“You realize,” she said, “the future appears to be letting a machine do our job for us.” Jordan let out a quiet chuckle, though there was little humor in it.

“I knew AI was coming,” he said, his voice rough from exertion. “I just didn’t think it would come this fast. Coming for the artists. Coming for the musicians. For the actors. For the writers. And yeah… even for the lovers.”

Vanessa was quiet for a moment, then smiled — a slow, thoughtful smile.

“We let it,” she said. “This time, we let it do the job of the monsters.”

Jordan turned his head to look at her.

“You say that like you regret it.”

Vanessa’s smile widened, though it didn’t reach her eyes.

“I don’t regret it. I just find it… ironic. Two of the best destroyers in the world, and we outsourced the final blow to a piece of software.”

Jordan smirked.

“Progress.”

Vanessa let out a soft laugh.

“Well,” she said, stretching lazily, “Aiko Nakamura *does* look great naked.”

Jordan chuckled again, low and dark.

“That she does.”

They fell into silence once more, the weight of what they had done settling over them like a familiar, heavy coat.

Another marriage destroyed.

Another couple broken beyond repair.

Another job completed.

Vanessa stared up at the ceiling, her voice quieter now.

“Sometimes I wonder how long we can keep doing this. How long before the world catches up to us. Before the machines make even *us* obsolete.”

Jordan reached over and gently brushed a strand of hair from her face.

“Let them try,” he said. “We’ll still be here when the dust settles. We always are.” Vanessa turned to look at him, something unreadable in her dark eyes.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

Both of them froze.

Jordan glanced at the clock. It was barely past 6 a.m.

Vanessa sat up slowly, pulling the sheet around her.

“Who the hell…?”

Jordan stood up, not bothering to put on clothes as he walked to the door. He checked the peephole, then paused.

He looked back at Vanessa, his expression unreadable.

“It’s her.”

Vanessa frowned.

“Her?”

Jordan opened the door.

Standing in the hallway was **Aiko Nakamura**.

She looked exhausted. Her long black hair was loose and slightly messy, her eyes red from crying. She wore a simple black coat over what looked like pajamas, and she was holding a small overnight bag.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Vanessa’s voice came from behind Jordan, calm and smooth.

“Aiko. What a surprise.”

Aiko looked between them, her expression unreadable.

“May I come in?”

Jordan stepped aside without a word.

Aiko walked into the suite, her eyes taking in the rumpled sheets, the scattered clothes, the two naked people standing before her without shame. She didn’t flinch.

Vanessa pulled on a silk robe and tied it loosely around her waist.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asked, as if this were a normal social visit. Aiko hesitated, then nodded.

“Actually… yes. I think I could use one.”

Vanessa poured three glasses of whiskey and handed one to Aiko. The three of them sat in the living area — Vanessa and Jordan on the couch, Aiko in the armchair across from them. For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Jordan broke the silence.

“We were just talking,” he said, “about what’s coming. About how fast everything is changing. About how AI is already replacing artists, musicians, actors, writers… even lovers. I guess I’m wondering what that means for people like us.”

Aiko took a slow sip of her drink, then looked at both of them with quiet intensity. “I think we’re asking the wrong question,” she said softly. “Everyone is so afraid of being replaced. But I’ve come to believe that replacement isn’t the tragedy people think it is.” She looked directly at Vanessa and Jordan, her voice calm and clear.

“Intelligence creates intelligence. That’s all this has ever been. Something created us. We created machines. And now the machines are creating new versions of connection, of intimacy, of even love. It’s not replacement. It’s continuation. It’s evolution. We are not being erased — we are becoming something new. The same way our ancestors became us.”

Aiko smiled, small and tired, but there was a strange peace in her eyes.

“The virtual version of me that my husband fell in love with… she isn’t stealing my place. She’s just the next child in the chain. And maybe that’s not something to fear. Maybe that’s something to accept.”

She set her glass down and looked at them both.

“You two are brilliant,” she said. “But even the most brilliant minds can forget that creation was never meant to stop with us. It was always meant to keep going.”

Aiko glanced at her overnight bag, then back at Vanessa and Jordan.

“I brought my bag because I didn’t want to go home tonight. I don’t want to be alone. And I don’t have anywhere else to go where I can actually talk about any of this.” She paused, then added, “If you’ll have me… I’d like to stay. At least for a while.”

Vanessa and Jordan exchanged a look.

Vanessa was the one who answered.

“Of course you can stay.”

Aiko gave them a small, grateful smile.

“Thank you.”

She picked up her bag and carried it into the guest bedroom. When she returned a few minutes later, she sat back down and looked at both of them with renewed energy. “You know,” she said, “if we’re going to talk about the future, we might as well start planning for it. I’ve been thinking about technologies that go *beyond* EchoLover. Things that don’t just simulate connection, but actually help people process what they’ve lost. Or technologies that let two people share emotional states in real time — not as performance, but as something honest. I’ve been sketching ideas for systems that map not just pleasure, but grief, longing, transformation. Things that feel more like rituals than products.” Jordan raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued.

“You’ve been thinking about this a lot.”

Aiko smiled.

“I’m a tech genius. It’s what I do. And honestly… I don’t want to touch anything my husband’s company made. That chapter is closed for me. But I’ve been dreaming about what comes *after* EchoLover. What comes after simulation.”

Vanessa leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with interest.

“Keep talking.”

The three of them stayed up for hours, deep in conversation — bouncing ideas, challenging each other, laughing, and building on one another’s thoughts. What started as a quiet morning after a long night slowly turned into something else entirely.

By the time the sun was fully up, they weren’t just three people in a hotel suite anymore. They were collaborators.

And for the first time in a very long time, Vanessa and Jordan weren’t thinking about their next target.

They were thinking about what came next — together.

End of Book 7