The Wreckers: "Revenge" | Book #8

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Wreckers, Book 8

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: The Billionaire's Wife

Vanessa stood in the middle of their living room in nothing but one of Jordan's shirts, staring at her phone.

"She's in Punta Mita," she said.

Jordan looked up from where he was packing a suitcase on the bed. "Who?"

"Harlequin." Vanessa turned the phone toward him. "Honeymooning with her new billionaire husband. Look at this place. It's disgusting."

Jordan walked over and glanced at the screen. The photo showed a sprawling villa with white walls and an infinity pool that dropped straight into the ocean. In the center of the frame, Harlequin Rose stood in a tiny white bikini, one hand on her hip, smiling at the camera like she'd just won something she'd been chasing for years.

Jordan didn't say anything right away. He just looked at the photo, his expression unreadable. Vanessa watched his face.

"She can't have a billionaire," she said quietly. "Not after what she did to us." Jordan handed the phone back to her and walked over to the window. He stood there for a moment, looking out at the Manhattan skyline, his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. The morning light caught the edges of his dark hair and the sharp line of his jaw. Even in the middle of packing his emergency travel bag, he looked like someone who belonged in expensive places.

Vanessa had always thought that about him. Jordan Harlan had the kind of face that made people assume he came from money, even when he didn't. Tall, lean, and sharp-featured, with dark eyes that gave away very little unless he wanted them to. He moved through the world like he already knew how it worked and had decided it wasn't worth getting worked up over.

She, on the other hand, had learned how to move through expensive places the hard way. Vanessa crossed her arms over her chest, the hem of Jordan's shirt brushing the tops of her thighs. Her dark hair was still messy from sleep, falling in loose waves around her shoulders. Even without makeup, even standing barefoot in their apartment, she had the kind of presence that made people look twice. There was something cool and deliberate about the way she held herself — like she was always deciding exactly how much of herself she was willing to show.

Right now, she was showing very little.

Jordan turned away from the window.

“You want to go,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

Vanessa shrugged, but the movement was tight.

“I want to learn how to surf.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow.

“You hate getting your hair wet.”

“I’ll make an exception.” She looked back down at her phone, scrolling through more photos of the resort. “I’ve heard there are hot men on every corner down there. Like stray dogs.” Jordan let out a short laugh, but there was no real humor in it.

“And I’ve heard the women walk around in string bikinis like it’s a uniform.”

Vanessa finally looked up at him. She was smiling, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Good,” she said. “Then we’ll both have plenty to do while we’re there.”

Jordan studied her for a long moment. He knew that look. He’d seen it before — the particular stillness that came over Vanessa when she was deciding how much damage she was willing to do. It had been a long time since he’d seen it directed at someone specific. Usually, their work was impersonal. Clean. They picked targets, they did the job, they moved on.

This was different.

This was personal.

Jordan walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress, the suitcase halfpacked beside him. “You’re sure about this,” he said.

Vanessa didn’t answer right away. She walked over to the window and stood where he had been standing, looking out at the city. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet. “She destroyed both of our lives,” she said. “And now she’s on her honeymoon with a billionaire like none of it ever happened. Like she didn’t take everything from us and walk away clean.”

Jordan watched her back.

“You want to take something from her.”

Vanessa turned around. The morning light caught the sharp line of her cheekbone and the dark curve of her lashes.

“I want her to understand,” she said, “that she doesn’t get to win.”

Jordan was quiet for a moment. Then he nodded, once.

“Okay.”

Vanessa blinked, like she hadn’t expected him to agree so easily.

“Okay?”

Jordan stood up and walked over to her. He stopped close enough that she had to tilt her head back slightly to meet his eyes.

“Okay,” he said again. “Let’s go to Punta Mita. Let’s learn how to surf. Let’s fuck some beautiful people. And let’s ruin Harlequin Rose’s life while we’re at it.”

A slow smile spread across Vanessa’s face.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

She reached up and touched his jaw, her fingers light against his skin.

“You’re not even going to try to talk me out of it?”

Jordan caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm.

“Would it work?”

“No.”

“Then why waste the breath?”

Vanessa laughed, low and genuine, and leaned in to kiss him. It was a slow kiss, unhurried, the kind of kiss that said they had all the time in the world and nowhere else they needed to be.

When she pulled back, her eyes were bright.

“I’ll book the flights,” she said.

Jordan nodded toward the suitcase on the bed.

“I’ll finish packing.”

Vanessa started to walk toward the bedroom, then paused in the doorway and looked back at him.

“Jordan?”

“Yeah?”

She hesitated, like she was deciding whether or not to say what was on her mind. “I’m glad it’s both of us,” she said finally. “Doing this.”

Jordan met her gaze and held it.

“Me too.”

Vanessa disappeared into the bedroom, and Jordan stood there for a moment, listening to the sound of her moving around, opening drawers, pulling clothes from hangers. He looked back at the suitcase on the bed, then at the phone still sitting on the coffee table, Harlequin Rose’s smiling face frozen on the screen.

He walked over and picked it up.

For a long moment, he just looked at her.

Then he set the phone face-down on the table and went back to packing.

--They spent the rest of the morning making arrangements. Vanessa booked a private villa at one of the most exclusive resorts in Punta Mita — the kind of place where the staff was trained to notice everything and say nothing. Jordan made a few calls of his own, arranging for a car to pick them up at the airport and for a few other details that Vanessa didn't ask about. She knew better than to ask. Jordan had always been the one who handled the logistics.

By early afternoon, they were sitting at the kitchen island eating leftover takeout and drinking coffee that had gone cold.

Vanessa was scrolling through her phone again, this time looking at surf schools in the area. "I found one," she said. "Private lessons. The instructor looks like he was carved out of something expensive."

Jordan glanced at the screen.

"You have a type."

Vanessa smirked.

"So do you."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2: The Irregulars

Vanessa stood in the bedroom, folding a black bikini into her suitcase. Jordan was in the bathroom, packing his shaving kit.

“We’re really doing this,” Vanessa said, mostly to herself.

Jordan appeared in the doorway, watching her.

“We are.”

Vanessa straightened up and looked at him.

“I keep thinking about what it’s going to feel like,” she said. “When it’s done. When she realizes that she doesn’t get to just… move on. That what she did to us actually mattered.” Jordan walked over to her and took the bikini from her hands, setting it carefully in the suitcase.

“It mattered,” he said. “It still matters.”

Vanessa looked up at him.

“Why aren’t you talking me out of this?”

Jordan shook his head.

“Why?”

He was quiet for a moment, like he was deciding how honest he wanted to be.

“Because I want it too,” he said finally. “I want her to lose everything. I want her to know what it feels like to have someone take something from you that you thought was yours.” Vanessa studied his face.

“You never talk about it,” she said. “What happened. With your wife.”

Jordan’s expression didn’t change.

“Neither do you.”

Vanessa looked away.

“I don’t like thinking about it.”

“Neither do I.”

They stood there in silence for a moment, the half-packed suitcase between them. Then Vanessa reached for another bikini — this one smaller, red — and folded it on top of the black one.

“I’m going to learn how to surf,” she said, like it was the most important thing in the world. Jordan watched her hands.

“I know.”

“And you’re going to fuck some beautiful women in string bikinis.”

Jordan’s mouth curved into a small smile.

“Probably.”

Vanessa looked up at him, and for the first time all day, her smile reached her eyes. “Good,” she said. “Then we’ll both get what we want.”

Jordan reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“And Harlequin?”

Vanessa’s smile faded, but only slightly.

“Harlequin,” she said, “is going to learn that she should have stayed gone.”

Jordan nodded.

“Okay.”

He leaned in and kissed her, slow and deliberate, like they had all the time in the world. When he pulled back, Vanessa was smiling again.

“Finish packing,” she said. “Our flight leaves at six in the morning.”

Jordan watched her walk back into the closet, then turned and looked at the suitcase on the bed.

For a moment, he just stood there.

Then he walked over to the nightstand, opened the drawer, and pulled out a small black case. Inside was a sleek silver pen — the same one he had given Vanessa in Tokyo, the one that projected their rules as a hologram.

He turned it over in his hand once, then slipped it back into the drawer and slid it shut. He had a better idea.

--Later that evening, after they had eaten and the apartment had gone quiet again, Vanessa stood by the window with her arms crossed, staring out at the city lights. Jordan was in the bedroom, but she could hear him moving around. She had been turning something over in her mind for the last hour.

Eventually, she spoke without turning around.

“I want to call them,” she said.

Jordan didn’t need to ask who she meant.

“Linnéa and Aiko.”

Vanessa nodded.

“This isn’t a normal job. We’re not just going down there to fuck with some random couple. This is… different. And if we’re going to do it right, we’re going to need help.” Jordan was quiet for a moment, thinking.

“You want to bring them in from the beginning.”

“I want to bring them in *now*,” Vanessa said. “Before we even get there. I want them to have time to think. To plan. Aiko’s smarter than both of us put together when it comes to this kind of thing, and Linnéa…” She smiled faintly. “Linnéa sees things the rest of us miss.” Jordan nodded slowly.

“Okay.”

Vanessa raised an eyebrow.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

She studied him for a moment, like she was trying to figure out what he wasn’t saying. “You’re not worried about bringing them in this deep?”

Jordan met her gaze.

“I’m worried about what happens if we don’t.”

Vanessa didn’t have an answer for that.

She picked up her phone again and opened her contacts.

“I’ll call Aiko first,” she said. “You call Linnéa.”

Jordan nodded and walked into the bedroom, closing the door most of the way behind him but leaving it open enough that sound could travel. Vanessa stayed in the living room, phone to her ear.

From the bedroom, she could hear Jordan’s voice, low and steady.

“I need you in Punta Mita,” he said. “As soon as you can get there.”

There was a pause, then Linnéa’s voice came through the speaker clearly, amused and slightly sharp.

“You’re calling in the Irregulars?”

Jordan paused for half a second.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess I am.”

In the living room, Vanessa was speaking to Aiko in a quieter, more measured tone. “We’re going to need tech,” she said. “Surveillance. The works. Whatever you can bring. This one’s going to require more than charm and good timing.”

Aiko’s voice was calm on the other end.

“I figured as much when you said it was Harlequin. I’ll be there tomorrow night. I already have a few things in mind.”

From the bedroom, Linnéa’s voice carried again, lighter but no less sharp.

“Jordan, darling, if you’re dragging me into this, I expect full creative freedom. I don’t do subtle well when I’m bored.”

“You’ll have it,” Jordan said.

In the living room, Vanessa was still talking.

“I don’t want this to feel like we’re just showing up and winging it. She’s not some random target. She’s the reason we do what we do. I want every advantage we can get.”

“I understand,” Aiko said. “I’ll come prepared.”

When both calls ended, Vanessa and Jordan stepped out into the hallway at the same time. They stood there for a moment, looking at each other.

“They’ll be there in two days?” Vanessa said.

Jordan nodded.

“Good.”

Vanessa studied his face.

“You’re sure about bringing them in this deep?”

Jordan met her eyes.

“I’m sure.”

She nodded once, then turned and walked back into the bedroom. Jordan stayed in the hallway a moment longer, then followed.

--That night, after the lights were off and Vanessa had fallen asleep, Jordan stayed awake. He lay on his back for a long time, staring at the ceiling. Eventually, he slipped out of bed and went into the living room. He sat on the couch with his phone and opened a notes app. He worked for hours.

When he finally came back to bed, Vanessa stirred slightly but didn’t wake. Jordan lay down beside her and closed his eyes.

--They left for the airport at four-thirty the next morning.

The car was quiet. Vanessa sat with her legs curled under her, watching the city slide past the window. Jordan sat beside her, his hand resting on her knee.

Neither of them spoke much.

After a while, Vanessa turned to look at him.

“You’ve been different since last night,” she said. “What’s going on?”

Jordan glanced at her, then looked back out the window.

“Nothing bad.”

Vanessa narrowed her eyes slightly, but she let it go for the moment.

They rode in silence for another few minutes before she spoke again.

“You never did tell me what you were doing on your phone so late.”

Jordan was quiet for a second. Then, without looking at her, he said:

“No nos enamoramos de ellos. No nos los quedamos. Y cuando todo termina… nos follamos como si el mundo se fuera a acabar.”

Vanessa went very still.

She stared at him.

“You memorized our rules,” she said. “In Spanish.”

Jordan finally turned his head to look at her. There was a small, satisfied glint in his eyes. “I was bored last night.”

Vanessa let out a short, surprised laugh.

“You were *bored*?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said. “Figured I might as well do something useful.”

Vanessa shook her head, but she was smiling now — warm and a little impressed.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Probably.”

She reached over and took his hand, squeezing it once.

“I love you,” she said.

Jordan squeezed back.

“I know.”

They rode the rest of the way to the airport in silence, but it was a different silence than before. It felt settled. Ready.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3: Punta Mita

The first thing Vanessa noticed when they stepped out of the private car at the resort was how many women were walking around in string bikinis. Not just at the beach — everywhere. By the pool, at the open-air restaurants, even walking through the lobby like it was normal. Jordan stood beside her with his bag slung over his shoulder, watching the same thing. “Jesus,” he muttered.

Vanessa smiled without looking at him.

“Try not to get distracted before we even start.”

“I’m not the one who said she wanted to learn how to surf.”

Vanessa finally turned to him, her eyes bright with something dangerous and excited. “We’re here to have fun,” she said. “Harlequin’s just going to be a casualty of that.” The driver unloaded their bags and handed them off to a young man in a crisp white shirt who introduced himself as their villa host. He led them down a stone path lined with palm trees and flowering bougainvillea, the ocean visible through gaps in the foliage. The air smelled like salt, sunscreen, and expensive flowers.

Punta Mita wasn’t the kind of place that advertised itself loudly. It sat on a private peninsula in Nayarit, tucked between the jungle and the Pacific, and it catered to people who already had everything. There were no towering hotels here, no crowded beaches. Just low, elegant villas hidden behind high walls and gates, each one designed to feel like its own private world. The kind of place where the staff knew how to disappear until you needed them and how to reappear the moment you did.

Their villa was at the far end of the property, set back from the main resort but still close enough to walk to the restaurants and beach clubs if they wanted to. It was larger than Vanessa had expected — a sprawling, modern estate with clean white walls, dark wood accents, and floor-to-ceiling glass that opened onto an infinity pool overlooking the ocean. There were six bedrooms in total, each with its own bathroom, plus a large open living space, a full kitchen, and multiple outdoor terraces. It was more than big enough for all of them. Jordan let out a low whistle as they stepped inside.

“This’ll do.”

Vanessa walked slowly through the main living area, running her fingers along the back of a long white couch. The entire back wall of the house was glass, offering an uninterrupted view

of the Pacific. She could already picture how it would look at night, with the pool lit up and the ocean stretching out into the dark.

The villa host gave them a quick tour, pointing out the main bedroom suite, the smaller guest rooms, the outdoor dining area, and the small staff quarters tucked discreetly at the back of the property. When he was finished, he handed Jordan a set of keys and a card with his direct number.

“If you need anything at all,” he said with a polite smile, “day or night. We’re here to make sure you enjoy your stay.”

Once he was gone, Vanessa and Jordan stood in the middle of the living room, looking around.

Vanessa turned in a slow circle.

“This is bigger than I thought it would be.”

Jordan dropped his bag by the couch.

“Good. We’re going to need the space.”

She glanced at him.

“You’re thinking about when they get here.”

“I am.”

Vanessa walked over to the glass doors and slid one open, stepping out onto the wide terrace. The ocean breeze immediately caught her hair. She stood there for a moment, breathing it in, then turned back to Jordan.

“We should figure out sleeping arrangements now,” she said. “Before they arrive and it gets awkward.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow.

“You have thoughts?”

“I do.” She walked back inside and leaned against the back of the couch, facing him. “The main suite should be ours. It’s the biggest and it has the best view. Linnéa can take one of the rooms on the east side. Aiko can have the room on the west side. It’s quieter and has its own little terrace. She’ll probably want the space to work.”

Jordan walked over to the open glass doors and stood beside her, looking out at the ocean. “You really want to learn how to surf while we’re here?”

Vanessa smiled up at him.

“I do.”

“Even with everything else going on?”

“Especially with everything else going on.” She reached up and straightened the collar of his shirt. “We said we were coming here to have fun. I intend to.”

Jordan leaned down and kissed her, slow and unhurried.

When he pulled back, he kept his hands on her waist.

“Then we should probably go explore a little,” he said. “See what kind of trouble we can get into before the others arrive.”

Vanessa’s eyes sparkled.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

They spent the next couple of hours walking the property and the nearby beach club. The resort was exactly what Vanessa had hoped for — beautiful without being flashy, private without feeling isolated. Everywhere they went, there were beautiful people in various states of undress. Women in string bikinis. Men with golden skin and easy smiles. It was exactly the kind of place where two attractive strangers could disappear into the scenery if they wanted to.

They didn’t try very hard to blend in.

At the beach club, Vanessa ordered a drink and leaned against the bar while a tall, tanned man with sun-bleached hair mixed it for her. He was polite, but his eyes lingered on her a little longer than necessary. She didn’t discourage it.

Jordan, for his part, was approached twice within the first twenty minutes — once by a woman in a red string bikini who asked if he was staying at the resort, and again by another who simply smiled at him as she walked past. He smiled back both times.

They didn’t go any further than that. Not yet. But the energy was there — light, flirtatious, and intentional. They were here to enjoy themselves. That part wasn’t a lie.

Still, every so often, Vanessa would catch herself scanning the crowd. Looking for a flash of blonde hair. A white bikini. A laugh that sounded familiar.

She knew Jordan was doing the same.

Neither of them mentioned it.

By late afternoon, they were back at the villa, unpacking properly and claiming their space. Vanessa had taken over the main suite, spreading her things across the large bed and the dresser. Jordan had claimed the side of the closet nearest the door without discussion. They were standing on the terrace overlooking the pool when Vanessa’s phone buzzed.

She glanced at it.

“Aiko will be here in a couple of days,” she said.

Jordan nodded.

"Same day as Linnéa."

“Good.”

Vanessa slipped her phone back into her pocket and leaned against the railing, looking out at the ocean.

“You know,” she said after a moment, “I’m actually looking forward to seeing them.” Jordan glanced at her.

“Yeah?”

“It’ll be nice to have people around who know what we’re really doing here. People we don’t have to pretend with.”

Jordan was quiet for a moment.

“Yeah,” he said. “It will.”

Vanessa turned to look at him.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go get cleaned up. They’ll be here soon enough.”

Jordan watched her go for a moment, then followed.

Behind them, the sun was starting to sink toward the ocean, painting the sky in streaks of orange and pink. The pool glowed softly in the growing dusk. Somewhere in the distance, music drifted up from the beach club.

It was beautiful here.

And in a couple of days, the rest of their team would arrive.

After that, things were going to get really interesting.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4: The First Full Day

Vanessa was already in the water when Jordan spotted her.

She was on a surfboard, laughing as her instructor — a tall, tanned, muscular man who looked like he'd been carved out of brown sugar — steadied her by the hips. The man said something that made her throw her head back and laugh again, and Vanessa's hand lingered on his forearm a second longer than necessary.

Jordan watched from the beach, a drink in his hand, while two women in string bikinis walked past him slowly, making sure he noticed them.

He took a sip of his drink and smiled to himself.

The surf instructor's name was Mateo. Vanessa had learned that within the first ten minutes of the lesson. He had an easy laugh and hands that knew exactly how much pressure to use when he corrected her stance. Every time she wiped out, he was there to pull her back onto the board, his fingers brushing the bare skin of her waist or the small of her back like it was the most natural thing in the world.

She was getting better. Not good, but better. And every time she managed to stay up for more than a few seconds, Mateo whooped like she'd just won a medal. Vanessa found herself laughing with him, the sound carrying over the water.

From the beach, Jordan could see the way her body moved — the way she leaned into Mateo's guidance, the way her wet hair clung to her shoulders, the way she kept finding reasons to touch his arm. It wasn't subtle. It wasn't supposed to be.

One of the women who had walked past him earlier circled back. She was tall, with long dark hair and a red string bikini that left very little to the imagination. She stopped a few feet away from Jordan and smiled.

"You look like you're enjoying the view," she said, nodding toward the water.

Jordan glanced at her, then back at Vanessa and Mateo.

"I am."

The woman tilted her head, studying him.

"First time in Punta Mita?"

"Second day," Jordan said. He took another sip of his drink. "You?"

"Third week," she said. "I keep meaning to leave, but the water's nice."

Jordan smiled, slow and easy.

“It is.”

They talked for a while — light, flirtatious, nothing serious. She told him her name was Camila and that she was from Mexico City. She asked what he did for work. He gave her the usual vague answer about consulting. She didn’t push. Most people didn’t, not here. Every so often his eyes drifted back to the water. Vanessa was sitting on the board now, legs dangling in the ocean, talking to Mateo. Whatever he said made her grin and shove his shoulder playfully. Mateo grabbed her wrist to steady himself and didn’t let go right away. Jordan felt something warm and sharp settle low in his stomach. Not jealousy. Something older and more familiar.

Camila noticed where his attention had gone.

“Friend of yours?” she asked, following his gaze.

“Something like that.”

Camila smiled like she understood exactly what that meant.

“Well,” she said, “if you get tired of watching, I’ll be at the beach club until sunset.” She walked away without waiting for an answer, hips swaying just enough to make sure he watched.

Jordan finished his drink and set the glass down in the sand.

On the water, Vanessa caught another wave. This one she actually rode for a few seconds before she wiped out, disappearing under the surface with a splash. Mateo was there immediately, pulling her up, both of them laughing as she coughed and pushed wet hair out of her face.

Jordan stood up, brushed sand off his shorts, and started walking toward the water’s edge. By the time he reached them, Vanessa was standing in knee-deep water, board under one arm, still grinning. Mateo had one hand on her lower back, steadying her as the waves rolled in. “Having fun?” Jordan asked.

Vanessa turned, water streaming down her body. Her bikini was black today, small and simple, and it clung to her like a second skin. She looked flushed and happy and slightly out of breath.

“I’m getting better,” she said.

Mateo grinned, white teeth flashing against his tanned skin.

“She’s a natural. Just needs to relax into it more.”

Vanessa shot him a look, but there was no heat in it.

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true.” Mateo’s hand was still on her back. He glanced at Jordan, then back at her. “You want to go again, or are you done for the day?”

Vanessa looked at Jordan, something playful and challenging in her eyes.

“What do you think?” she asked. “Am I done?”

Jordan held her gaze for a second, then shrugged.

“Up to you.”

Vanessa turned back to Mateo.

“One more.”

Mateo nodded and helped her back onto the board. As they paddled out, Vanessa glanced over her shoulder at Jordan and smiled — small, private, full of something that made his pulse kick harder than it should have.

He watched them go.

Then he turned and walked back up the beach toward the two women in string bikinis who were still lingering near where he’d been sitting.

--By late afternoon, the sun had shifted and the beach was starting to empty out. Vanessa finally called it quits after one last spectacular wipeout that left her laughing so hard she could barely stand. Mateo helped her carry the board back to shore, his hand on her waist the whole way.

Jordan was waiting for her with a towel and a fresh drink.

“You looked good out there,” he said, handing her the towel.

Vanessa took it and started drying her hair.

“I felt ridiculous most of the time.”

“You didn’t look it.”

She glanced up at him through wet lashes.

“You were watching?”

“Most of the time.”

Vanessa smiled and wrapped the towel around her shoulders.

Mateo hovered a few feet away, board under his arm, clearly waiting to see if she wanted anything else.

Vanessa turned to him.

“Same time tomorrow?”

Mateo’s grin widened.

“Same time tomorrow.”

He gave Jordan a polite nod, then headed back toward the surf shack with the board. Vanessa watched him go for a second, then looked at Jordan.

“You didn’t have to wait for me.”

“I know.”

She studied his face.

“Did you have fun while I was out there?”

Jordan took a sip of his drink.

“Enough.”

Vanessa stepped closer, close enough that he could smell the salt and sunscreen on her skin. “Good,” she said softly.

They stood there for a moment, the sound of the waves and distant laughter filling the space between them.

Then Vanessa shivered slightly as a breeze came off the water.

“Come on,” Jordan said. “Let’s get you back to the villa before you freeze.”

She didn’t argue.

They walked back along the beach path, Vanessa’s hand brushing against his every few steps. Neither of them mentioned Harlequin. Neither of them mentioned the Irregulars. For a little while, it almost felt like they really were just two people on vacation.

Almost.

When they reached the villa, Vanessa disappeared into the main suite to shower. Jordan poured himself another drink and stepped out onto the terrace, looking out at the ocean as the sun started to dip lower.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

He pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

A message from Linnéa.

Linnéa: **See you people tomorrow night. Tell Vanessa not to have too much fun without me.*

Jordan smiled faintly and typed back.

Jordan: *No promises.*

He slipped the phone back into his pocket and took another sip of his drink.

From inside the villa, he could hear the shower running.

He stood there for a while longer, watching the light change over the water.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5: The Irregulars Arrive

Jordan sat on the same stretch of beach as the day before, a drink in his hand, sunglasses on, watching Vanessa in the water with Mateo.

She was getting better. Her balance was steadier, her turns cleaner. Every time she caught a wave and stayed up for more than a few seconds, Mateo cheered like she'd just won something. Vanessa laughed — that same bright, unselfconscious laugh she'd had yesterday — and let him steady her when she wiped out. His hands stayed on her longer than they needed to. She didn't seem to mind.

Jordan took a slow sip of his drink and let his gaze drift along the shoreline.

That was when he saw her.

Farther down the beach, maybe a hundred yards away, a woman was paddling out on a surfboard. Platinum blonde hair, almost white in the sunlight, tied back in a loose knot. White bikini. Long, toned legs. She moved with the easy confidence of someone who had done this before — someone who knew she was being watched.

Harlequin Rose.

Jordan went very still.

He watched as she caught a wave, popped up cleanly, and rode it for a solid ten seconds before stepping off the board like it was nothing. Even from this distance, she looked like she belonged in a magazine spread. Beautiful. Effortless. Completely unbothered by the fact that she had once destroyed two marriages and was now on her honeymoon with a billionaire. Jordan's jaw tightened.

He glanced back at Vanessa.

She had stopped paddling. She was sitting on her board, staring in the same direction he was. Even from here, he could see the change in her posture — the sudden stillness, the way her shoulders had gone tight.

Mateo said something to her, but she didn't answer right away.

Then she turned her head and looked straight at Jordan.

Their eyes met across the water.

Vanessa paddled in.

She didn't say anything to Mateo about coming back. She just carried her board up the beach, water streaming off her body, and walked straight to where Jordan

was sitting. She dropped the board in the sand and stood there, breathing a little hard, staring down the shoreline toward Harlequin.

Jordan didn’t move.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

Vanessa finally sat down in the sand beside him, close enough that their shoulders almost touched. She didn’t look at him. She kept her eyes on Harlequin, who was now paddling back out for another wave like she didn’t have a care in the world.

“She’s good,” Vanessa said quietly.

Jordan took another sip of his drink.

“She’s always been good at things that don’t matter.”

Vanessa let out a short, humorless laugh.

They watched in silence for a while. Harlequin caught another wave, rode it cleanly, and stepped off again. A few people on the beach had started to notice her — the platinum hair, the white bikini, the way she moved. She didn’t seem to care. Or maybe she did. Maybe that was the point.

Vanessa’s voice was low when she finally spoke again.

“I hate that she looks happy.”

Jordan didn’t answer right away.

“I know.”

Vanessa picked up a handful of sand and let it run through her fingers.

“We knew she was here,” she said. “We knew we’d see her eventually. I just… didn’t think it would feel like this.”

“Like what?”

Vanessa was quiet for a second.

“Like I want to walk over there and ruin her day right now. And also like I want to pretend I don’t see her at all.”

Jordan glanced at her.

“Both can be true.”

Vanessa let out a slow breath.

“Yeah.”

They sat there a little longer, watching Harlequin move through the water like she owned it. Every so often Vanessa’s hand would twitch like she wanted to do

something — reach for Jordan, or stand up, or throw something. She didn't.

Eventually, she spoke again.

"We have to go pick up Aiko soon."

Jordan nodded.

"I know."

Vanessa looked down at her hands.

"Linnéa's meeting us at the villa around midnight."

"I know that too."

Vanessa was quiet again. Then she said, almost to herself:

"It's not like we don't know where Harley lives."

Jordan's mouth curved into a small, dangerous smile.

"It's not like we have to put a tracking device on her."

Vanessa let out a short laugh — surprised, a little sharp.

"No," she said. "I guess we don't."

They sat there for another minute, the sound of the waves and distant laughter filling the space between them. Harlequin was still out there, catching waves like nothing in the world could touch her.

Vanessa finally stood up and brushed sand off her legs.

"Come on," she said. "We should get cleaned up. Aiko's flight lands in a couple of hours." Jordan stood with her.

They walked back toward the villa without looking at Harlequin again.

But they both felt it — that strange, uncomfortable weight sitting in their chests. The one neither of them wanted to name.

--The airport in Puerto Vallarta was busy but not chaotic. Jordan parked the rental car and they walked inside together, Vanessa in a simple white sundress, hair still damp from her shower,

sunglasses on. Jordan had changed into linen pants and a dark shirt. They looked like any other attractive couple picking someone up from a flight.

They found Aiko near baggage claim, standing with a single carry-on and a small rolling suitcase, looking exactly like herself — calm, sharp-eyed, dressed in black jeans and a fitted black top that somehow made her look both professional and slightly dangerous.

She spotted them and smiled — small, genuine.

“Hey.”

Vanessa reached her first and pulled her into a hug. Aiko hugged her back, brief but warm. Jordan stepped forward and took her suitcase without asking.

“Welcome to paradise,” he said.

Aiko raised an eyebrow.

“Is that what we’re calling it?”

“For now.”

They walked out to the car together. Aiko slid into the back seat, Vanessa took the passenger side, and Jordan drove. The ride back to Punta Mita was mostly quiet at first — the kind of comfortable silence that existed between people who didn’t need to fill every moment with noise.

Eventually, Aiko spoke.

“So,” she said from the back seat. “How’s the vacation going?”

Vanessa glanced at Jordan, then out the window.

“It’s going.”

Aiko waited.

Jordan kept his eyes on the road.

“We saw her today,” he said. “Harlequin. On the beach. Surfing.”

Aiko was quiet for a moment.

“How was that?”

Vanessa let out a short breath.

“Strange. She looked… happy. Like none of it ever happened.”

“She’s good at that,” Aiko said.

Vanessa turned slightly in her seat so she could see Aiko in the back.

“I keep thinking we should be doing something already. That we’re wasting time pretending this is just a trip.”

“We’re not wasting time,” Aiko said calmly. “We’re settling in. We’re being seen as people who belong here. And we’re waiting for the rest of the team.”

“Linnéa gets in tonight,” Jordan said. “Midnight or so.”

Aiko nodded.

“Good. Then we can start making real plans.”

Vanessa was quiet for a while after that. She watched the scenery pass — the jungle, the glimpses of ocean, the high walls of private villas. When she finally spoke again, her voice was softer.

“I didn’t think seeing her would feel like this.”

“Like what?” Aiko asked.

Vanessa didn’t answer right away.

“Like I’m jealous,” she said finally. “And angry. And… something else I don’t want to name.”

Jordan reached over and rested his hand on her knee for a second, then took it back. Aiko didn’t push. She just said, quiet and steady:

“We’ll deal with it. All of it. That’s why I’m here.”

Vanessa nodded once and didn’t say anything else for the rest of the drive.

--By the time they got back to the villa, the sun was starting to set. Jordan carried Aiko’s bags inside while Vanessa showed her around — the main living space, the terrace, the pool, the bedrooms. Aiko took it all in with her usual quiet assessment, noting exits and sightlines without making a show of it.

She settled the bedroom Vanessa showed her without hesitation.

“This one’s good,” she said. “Quiet. Easy to work from.”

Vanessa lingered in the doorway for a moment.

“We’re glad you’re here.”

Aiko looked at her, something soft in her expression.

“I know.”

She unpacked quickly — laptop, a few changes of clothes, a small kit of equipment that Vanessa didn’t ask about. Then the three of them sat on the terrace with drinks as the sky turned orange and pink, talking about nothing important. The weather. The flight. How strange it felt to be in a place this beautiful with this particular group of people. No one mentioned Harlequin by name.

Around ten o’clock, Vanessa stood up and stretched.

“I’m going to shower and change before Linnéa gets here.”

Jordan nodded.

“I’ll make sure the bar’s stocked.”

Aiko smiled faintly.

“I’ll just… be here.”

Vanessa disappeared inside. Jordan stayed on the terrace with Aiko for a few more minutes, the two of them sitting in comfortable silence.

Then Aiko spoke, low enough that only he could hear.

“You two are doing okay?”

Jordan glanced at her.

“Define okay.”

Aiko didn’t push. She just nodded once, like she understood exactly what he wasn’t saying. Around eleven-thirty, the doorbell rang.

Jordan and Aiko looked at each other.

“Early,” Aiko said.

Jordan stood up.

“Linnéa’s never been great with schedules.”

He walked to the front door and opened it.

Linnéa stood on the step in a bright pink sundress, a large sunglasses perched on her head, and a huge grin on her face. Behind her, half-hidden by Linnéa’s dramatic entrance, stood Tatum Angstrom — looking slightly dazed, slightly amused, and very much like she wasn’t entirely sure how she’d ended up here.

Linnéa threw her arms out.

“Darlings! I have arrived! And I brought a souvenir!”

Tatum gave a small, slightly embarrassed wave from behind her.

“Hi.”

Jordan blinked, then laughed — short, surprised, and genuinely delighted.

“Well,” he said. “This is new.”

Linnéa swept inside like she owned the place, pulling Tatum along with her.

“I know, I know. I was supposed to come alone. But then Tatum called me crying about her ex-husband’s new girlfriend posting yacht photos, and I thought — why should she suffer alone in Stockholm when she could suffer in paradise with us? So here we are!”

Tatum looked at Jordan and Aiko, cheeks pink.

“I can get my own room if this is too much. Linnéa kind of… kidnapped me at the airport.” Linnéa gasped dramatically.

“Kidnapped? I rescued you. There’s a difference.”

Jordan stepped aside and gestured them in.

“Come on. We’ve got plenty of space.”

Linnéa breezed past him, already heading for the terrace like she’d been here a hundred times. Tatum followed, giving Jordan and Aiko a small, grateful smile as she passed. Aiko watched them go, then glanced at Jordan.

“This should be interesting.”

Jordan closed the door behind them.

“Yeah,” he said. “It should.”

From the terrace, they could already hear Linnéa’s voice carrying — bright, chaotic, completely unapologetic.

Vanessa appeared at the top of the stairs a moment later, hair still damp from the shower, wearing a loose black cover-up over a swimsuit. She took one look at the scene unfolding on the terrace and stopped.

Jordan looked up at her.

She met his eyes.

And for the first time since they’d landed in Punta Mita, she smiled — small, relieved, and real.

“We can finally stop pretending this is just a vacation.”

Chapter 6

Chapter 6: The War Room

They gathered at ten in the morning. The curtains were drawn against the bright Mexican sun, and the air conditioning hummed quietly while five people sat around the large dining table covered in papers, tablets, and empty coffee cups.

Linnéa was barefoot, wearing a silk robe over her swimsuit, legs tucked under her like she was at a casual brunch instead of a strategy session. Aiko had her laptop open and three different phones lined up in front of her, already typing. Jordan stood by the window with his arms crossed, watching the ocean. Vanessa paced slowly behind his chair, a mug of coffee in her hand she hadn't touched yet.

Tatum sat at the far end of the table, quiet, nursing a glass of orange juice and looking slightly overwhelmed by the company she was keeping.

No one spoke for a moment.

Then Linnéa leaned back in her chair, stretched her arms over her head, and smiled like the cat that had already eaten the canary.

"So," she said brightly. "Who wants to ruin a marriage today?"

Vanessa stopped pacing. She set her mug down on the table a little harder than necessary. "Harlequin Rose," she said. "On a surfboard. Yesterday. Platinum blonde. White bikini. Looking like she'd never had a bad day in her life."

The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

Jordan didn't turn from the window.

"We saw her," he said. "Vanessa was in the middle of a lesson. She stopped paddling. Just… stared."

Linnéa's smile didn't fade, but it sharpened.

"And how did that feel?"

Vanessa was quiet for a second.

"Like I wanted to walk over there and drag her off the board by her hair," she said. "And also like I wanted to go back to the villa and pretend I'd never seen her at all."

Aiko looked up from her laptop.

"Both can be true," she said calmly. "We don't have to pick one."

Tatum shifted in her seat. She hadn't said much since she arrived last night, and she looked like she was still processing the fact that she was now sitting in a

room with four people who were openly discussing the destruction of another woman’s life over coffee.

Linnéa noticed her discomfort and grinned.

“Don’t worry, darling,” she said, reaching over to pat Tatum’s hand. “You get used to it. The first time is always the strangest.”

Tatum let out a short, slightly shaky laugh.

“I’m not sure I want to get used to it,” she said. “But I’m also not sure I want to leave.” Linnéa’s grin widened.

“See? She’s already one of us.”

Jordan finally turned from the window. He looked at Tatum for a moment, then at the rest of the table.

“We should probably be clear about what we’re doing here,” he said. “Before anyone signs up for something they don’t understand.”

Vanessa nodded.

“Harlequin Rose destroyed both of our marriages,” she said, looking at Tatum. “She slept with Jordan’s wife and my husband in the same week. We were both freshly divorced when we met. And now she’s on her honeymoon with a billionaire like none of it ever happened.” Tatum was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said, softly:

“My ex-husband destroyed me in public. Took everything. Made me look like the villain in my own story. I spent years trying to convince myself I was fine.” She looked around the table. “The idea that someone could do that to another person on purpose… it should horrify me.”

She paused.

“But part of me thinks… good. Finally someone else has to feel what I felt.”

The room was very still.

Linnéa broke the silence with a low, delighted laugh.

“Oh, I *like* her.”

Aiko smiled faintly but didn’t comment. She just turned her laptop slightly so everyone could see the screen.

“I’ve been working on something,” she said. “A competitor to my ex-husband’s product. EchoLover.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow.

“The AI companion thing?”

Aiko nodded.

“He built it to simulate perfect emotional connection. People pay thousands to have a version of someone they lost, or someone they never had. It’s disgusting. And it made him very, very rich.”

She clicked through a few screens. A sleek interface appeared — soft lighting, a calm voice prompt, elegant design.

“This is Phantom Lover,” Aiko said. “My version. It doesn’t just simulate connection. It learns what someone wants most… and then becomes it. Perfectly. Addictively. Until they can’t tell the difference between the real person and the version I built for them.” Vanessa leaned in, studying the screen.

“And you want to use it on Harlequin.”

Aiko nodded.

“She’s on her honeymoon. She’s supposed to be in love with her new husband. What happens if she starts receiving messages from someone who feels more real than he does? Someone who knows exactly what to say. Exactly how to touch her, even if it’s only through words and carefully timed calls. Someone who makes her question whether she ever really loved him at all.”

Linnéa let out a low whistle.

“That’s cold,” she said. “I love it.”

Aiko’s expression didn’t change.

“It’s personal,” she said. “My ex-husband used something like this to destroy me. I’m returning the favor. Only better.”

Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

“Does it work?”

Aiko smiled — small, sharp.

“Better than it should.”

Jordan pushed off the window and came to stand behind Vanessa’s chair.

“What’s the endgame?” he asked. “We make her obsessed with a ghost. Then what?”

Aiko closed the laptop.

“Then we let her destroy her own marriage trying to keep it,” she said. “And we make sure her husband finds out exactly what she’s been doing.”

Linnéa clapped her hands once, delighted.

“I have something too,” she said. “Less technology. More… theater.”

She leaned forward, eyes bright.

“Harlequin thinks she’s untouchable here. She’s beautiful, she’s rich, she’s on her honeymoon. People are already starting to notice her. What if we make sure they notice her for all the wrong reasons?”

Vanessa crossed her arms.

“What kind of wrong reasons?”

Linnéa grinned.

“Rumors. Carefully planted. The kind that spread fastest in places like this. That she’s not really on her honeymoon. That the man with her isn’t her husband. That she’s been seen with other people. That she’s been seen with *women*. That she has a type. That she’s been very, very busy.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow.

“And you think people will believe that?”

Linnéa shrugged.

“People believe what they want to believe. And in a place like this? They *love* a scandal. Especially when it involves someone who looks like they’ve never had one.”

She glanced at Tatum.

“And if we need a little help making it look real… well. We have options.”

Tatum blinked.

“Me?”

Linnéa patted her hand again.

“Only if you want to, darling. No pressure. But you *are* very beautiful. And very new here. People would talk.”

Tatum looked around the table, then down at her hands.

“I don’t know if I’m ready to be part of… whatever this is,” she said quietly. “But I also don’t know if I want to sit on the sidelines and watch.”

Linnéa beamed.

“See? She’s perfect.”

Aiko turned to Vanessa and Jordan.

“What about you two?” she asked. “You’ve been here longer. You’ve seen her. What do you want?”

Vanessa was quiet for a long moment.

“I want her to feel what we felt,” she said finally. “I want her to lose something she thought was safe. I want her to realize that what she did to us actually mattered. And I want her to know it was us who made it happen.”

Jordan’s voice was low.

“I want her to understand that she doesn’t get to win just because she’s beautiful and rich and good at pretending nothing ever touches her.”

He looked around the table.

“We don’t have to choose one plan,” he said. “We can run several at once. Overlap them. Make it impossible for her to tell which way the attacks are coming from.”

Aiko nodded.

“That’s what I was thinking.”

Linnéa stretched again, catlike.

“I like it when we’re all on the same page.”

For a moment, the room was quiet again — the low hum of the air conditioning, the distant sound of waves, the weight of what they were agreeing to do.

Then Aiko spoke, almost casually.

“By the way,” she said, looking at Linnéa. “Last night. Around three a.m. I heard you.” Linnéa raised an eyebrow, completely unbothered.

“Oh?”

Aiko’s expression was perfectly neutral.

“You yelled something in Swedish. Several times. It sounded like…” She paused, trying to remember the pronunciation. “*Slå mig, din jävla gud.*”

The room went very still.

Then Jordan let out a short laugh.

“‘Hit me, you fucking god,’” he said. “Roughly.”

Linnéa grinned, completely shameless.

“I was inspired.”

Tatum turned bright red and buried her face in her hands.

“Oh my god.”

Jordan shrugged, completely deadpan.

“I looked it up.”

Aiko stared at him for a second, then laughed — a real, surprised sound that broke some of the tension in the room.

Linnéa leaned back in her chair, looking extremely pleased with herself.

“See?” she said. “We’re already bonding.”

Vanessa shook her head, but she was smiling now — small, reluctant, real.

She looked around the table at the people who had come here for her. For Jordan. For this. For the first time since they’d landed in Punta Mita, she felt like they weren’t pretending anymore.

They were here.

And they were going to finish what they started.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7: The First Move

Harlequin Rose stood at the edge of the infinity pool in a white bikini that looked like it had been painted onto her body. Even from fifty yards away, she was impossible to ignore. Men and women both watched her as she laughed at something her new husband said, tossing her hair over one shoulder like she knew the entire world was looking.

Vanessa watched her from behind dark sunglasses, a drink in her hand.

Beside her, Jordan said quietly, “She really is something, isn’t she?”

Vanessa didn’t look away from Harlequin.

“She’s about to be nothing,” she said.

They stood on the terrace of one of the resort’s open-air bars, half-hidden by a cluster of palm trees and flowering vines. From here they had a clear view of the main pool area without being obvious. Harlequin’s husband — older, silver-haired, clearly wealthy — had his hand resting on the small of her back like he was showing her off. She leaned into it, smiling, playing the part perfectly.

Vanessa took a slow sip of her drink.

“I hate how good she is at this.”

Jordan didn’t answer right away. He was watching the way people around the pool kept glancing at Harlequin — the subtle double-takes, the whispered comments, the way men straightened their shoulders when she walked past.

“She’s had a lot of practice,” he said finally.

Vanessa’s jaw tightened.

“Not anymore.”

They stood there a moment longer, watching. Then Vanessa’s phone buzzed.

She glanced at it.

Linnéa: *We’re in position. Tatum’s already making friends. This is going to be fun.* Vanessa showed the message to Jordan.

He read it, then nodded toward the pool.

“Go. I’ll keep an eye on things from here.”

Vanessa hesitated.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She touched his arm once, then turned and walked down the stone path toward the pool area, disappearing into the crowd.

Jordan stayed where he was, drink in hand, eyes on Harlequin.

--Linnéa and Tatum were already at one of the shaded cabanas near the main pool when Vanessa found them.

Linnéa was stretched out on a lounge chair in a bright pink bikini, sunglasses on, looking like she'd been there all day. Tatum sat beside her in a simple black one-piece, legs tucked under her, looking slightly nervous but determined.

Linnéa waved Vanessa over without sitting up.

"Darling. Perfect timing. We've already started."

Vanessa slid into the empty chair on Tatum's other side.

"Started what, exactly?"

Linnéa grinned.

"Being noticed."

She nodded toward a group of women a few cabanas over — all of them clearly wealthy, all of them clearly interested in the new arrivals.

"Tatum here has already been invited to a 'girls' lunch' tomorrow. Apparently someone's husband saw her last night and decided she simply *must* meet his wife."

Tatum gave a small, slightly overwhelmed laugh.

"I didn't even do anything. I just smiled at someone at the bar."

Linnéa reached over and patted her knee.

"Exactly. That's the beauty of it. We don't have to do much. We just have to exist in the right places and let people talk."

Vanessa glanced across the pool to where Harlequin was still holding court with her husband. "And you think people will talk about her?"

Linnéa followed her gaze and smiled.

"Oh, they already are. I've heard three different versions of the same rumor in the last hour. That she's not really married to him. That she's his mistress. That she has a very expensive arrangement. People *love* a story."

Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

"What do you need from me?"

Linnéa pushed her sunglasses up into her hair and looked at her directly.

“Be seen with us. Laugh at the right moments. Maybe let a few people wonder who *you* are and why you’re suddenly so close to the new girl everyone’s talking about.” She glanced at Tatum. “And you, my love, just keep being charming and slightly mysterious. It’s working beautifully.”

Tatum looked between them.

“I still don’t know if I’m actually helping or just… along for the ride.”

Linnéa’s smile softened, just a fraction.

“You’re helping. Trust me.”

She leaned back again, closing her eyes against the sun.

“Now. Someone get me another drink. This is thirsty work.”

--On the other side of the resort, in a quieter villa tucked away from the main pool area, Aiko sat at a small table on a shaded terrace with her laptop open and three phones arranged in front of her.

She wasn’t alone.

A young man in resort staff uniform stood nearby — early twenties, handsome, clearly nervous. He kept glancing at the laptop screen like he wasn’t sure he should be seeing it. Aiko didn’t look up from her work.

“You’re sure about the access?”

The young man nodded quickly.

“The system they use for guest profiles isn’t that secure. Most people don’t even change the default passwords. I can get you names, room numbers, booking details… whatever you need.”

Aiko finally looked at him.

“And in exchange?”

He hesitated.

“I just… I don’t want to be involved in anything illegal. I just need the money. My sister’s in the hospital back home and—”

Aiko held up a hand, stopping him.

“You won’t be involved. You’ll give me access for forty-eight hours. After that, you walk away and never speak to me again. Understood?”

The young man nodded.

“Understood.”

Aiko slid a small envelope across the table.

“Half now. Half when you deliver.”

He took the envelope, checked the contents quickly, then tucked it into his pocket. “I’ll send you the login information tonight.”

“Good.”

He left without another word.

Aiko sat there for a moment after he was gone, staring at the screen. Then she opened a new window and began typing.

Phantom Lover’s interface glowed softly in the afternoon light.

She pulled up a blank profile and started building.

Name: *Unknown*

Target parameters: *Harlequin Rose. Platinum blonde. Currently staying in the Presidential Villa with her husband.*

Behavioral profile: *Confident. Social. Enjoys attention. Recently married. Possible dissatisfaction beneath the surface.*

Aiko paused, fingers hovering over the keyboard.

Then she added one more line.

Make her question everything she thinks she knows about love.

She hit save.

The system began to hum quietly as it started learning.

Aiko closed the laptop and stood up.

Outside, the resort continued its lazy, beautiful afternoon — people laughing by the pools, drinks being poured, music drifting from hidden speakers.

Somewhere out there, Harlequin Rose was still smiling for the cameras.

Aiko slipped her phone into her pocket and walked back toward the main villa.

The first moves had already begun.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8: The Phantom

Aiko sat alone on the balcony of her room, watching the ocean while the encrypted program ran on the laptop beside her. She had been working on the Phantom Lover for three days straight, and it was almost ready.

She kept thinking about what she had told Vanessa and Jordan that early Tokyo morning — about intelligence creating intelligence, about things being passed down instead of replaced. She wondered if this was what that looked like in practice. She was building something that would destroy a marriage, and she was doing it with almost no hesitation.

That should have bothered her more than it did.

The system was beautiful in its simplicity. It didn’t need to be loud. It didn’t need to announce itself. It only needed to be *better* than the real thing. More attentive. More intuitive. More perfectly attuned to what Harlequin wanted, even before she knew she wanted it.

Aiko had spent the last seventy-two hours feeding it everything she could find — public photos, social media patterns, the way Harlequin moved through a room, the way she tilted her head when she laughed, the micro-expressions that flashed across her face when her husband touched her. The program had learned fast. Faster than Aiko had expected. She reached over and tapped the screen.

A new message thread opened.

Unknown: *You looked beautiful today. The white bikini suits you. But I think you already knew that.*

Aiko watched the cursor blink.

Then she hit send.

--Harlequin Rose was lying on a lounge chair by the main pool when her phone lit up. She glanced at it out of habit, expecting another message from her husband or one of the resort staff. Instead, she saw the notification from an unknown number.

Her brow furrowed slightly.

She opened it.

The message was short. Simple. And strangely specific.

You looked beautiful today. The white bikini suits you. But I think you already knew that. Harlequin sat up a little straighter. She looked around the pool area, scanning the faces nearby. No one was watching her. No one seemed to be paying any special attention. She read the message again.

Then she typed back.

Harlequin: *Who is this?*

The reply came almost instantly.

Unknown: *Someone who’s been watching you. Someone who knows what you look

like when you’re pretending to be happy.*

Harlequin stared at the screen.

For a long moment, she didn’t move.

Then she deleted the thread.

She set the phone face-down on the small table beside her chair and laid back, closing her eyes against the sun. But her hand kept drifting back to the phone every few minutes, like she was checking to see if it would light up again.

It didn’t.

Not yet.

--Vanessa and Jordan were having lunch at one of the open-air restaurants when Linnéa slid into the chair across from them, looking extremely pleased with herself.

“You two are missing all the fun,” she said, stealing a piece of fruit from Vanessa’s plate. Jordan raised an eyebrow.

“Define fun.”

Linnéa grinned.

“Three different women have now asked me, very casually, if I’ve noticed anything *odd* about the platinum blonde in the white bikini. One of them even used the phrase ‘too good to be true.’ I didn’t even have to plant that one. It’s spreading on its own.”

Vanessa took a sip of her water.

“And Tatum?”

“Thriving,” Linnéa said. “She’s been invited to three different events this week. She’s playing the wide-eyed new girl perfectly. People are eating it up.”

Jordan glanced across the restaurant to where Harlequin was now sitting with her husband. She was smiling, but it looked slightly thinner than it had that morning.

“She’s been on her phone a lot today,” he said quietly.

Vanessa followed his gaze.

“I noticed.”

Linnéa leaned in, lowering her voice.

“Aiko’s been busy.”

Vanessa didn’t take her eyes off Harlequin.

“Good.”

They sat there for a while longer, watching without watching. Harlequin laughed at something her husband said, but the laugh didn’t quite reach her eyes. Every few minutes, her hand would drift toward her phone like she was expecting something.

Linnéa stood up eventually, brushing crumbs off her dress.

“I should get back to Tatum before she accidentally starts a cult or something. You two behave.”

She winked and walked away.

Vanessa and Jordan stayed at the table.

After a moment, Vanessa spoke.

“Do you think it’s working?”

Jordan was quiet for a second.

“I think she’s starting to feel something she doesn’t understand yet.”

Vanessa nodded slowly.

“Good.”

They didn’t say anything else for a long time.

--That night, Aiko sat on her balcony again.

The program had sent three more messages throughout the afternoon. Short. Precise. Designed to make Harlequin feel seen in a way her husband clearly wasn’t managing. Harlequin hadn’t replied to any of them.

But she hadn’t blocked the number either.

Aiko watched the screen as a new message appeared in the thread — not from the program, but from Harlequin herself.

Harlequin: *This isn’t funny. Whoever you are, stop.*

Aiko read it twice.

Then she typed back.

Phantom: *I’m not trying to be funny. I’m trying to give you something real. Something you’ve been pretending you don’t need.*

She hit send.

Then she closed the laptop and sat there in the dark, listening to the sound of the ocean. Somewhere in the villa, she could hear Linnéa laughing — bright, chaotic, completely unconcerned with the weight of what they were doing.

Aiko envied that, just a little.

She stood up and walked back inside, leaving the laptop on the table.

The program would keep running.

And Harlequin Rose would keep checking her phone.

Whether she wanted to or not.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9: Surfacing

Vanessa came up out of the water laughing, her hair slicked back, saltwater running down her body. Her surf instructor — Mateo — caught her around the waist before she could lose her balance on the board, and for a moment they stayed like that, her back against his chest, both of them breathing hard from the waves.

“You’re getting better,” he said against her ear.

Vanessa turned her head slightly, smiling.

“Am I?”

Mateo’s hands stayed on her waist a second longer than necessary.

“Much better.”

From the beach, Jordan watched them while a woman in a red string bikini rubbed sunscreen onto his shoulders. He didn’t look away from Vanessa.

The woman’s hands were warm and confident. She worked the lotion into his skin with slow, deliberate strokes, her fingers pressing just firmly enough to make it clear this wasn’t entirely about sun protection. Her name was Sofia. She was from Barcelona, had been at the resort for ten days, and had made it very clear over the last two afternoons that she was available for whatever he wanted.

Jordan kept his eyes on the water.

Vanessa was laughing again. Mateo had said something that made her shove his chest playfully, and he’d caught her wrist, grinning as he pulled her back toward him. The two of them were close enough now that their bodies were almost touching. Vanessa didn’t pull away.

Sofia’s hands slid down Jordan’s arms.

“You’re very tense,” she said, her voice low and accented. “You should let me help with that.”

Jordan took a sip of his drink without turning around.

“I’m fine.”

Sofia laughed softly.

“You keep saying that. But you keep coming back here.”

On the water, Vanessa caught another wave. This time she rode it almost all the way in before she stepped off, graceful and laughing, water streaming off her skin. Mateo whooped and high-fived her, then pulled her into a quick, wet hug

that lingered just a beat too long. Jordan watched the way Vanessa's hand rested on Mateo's back for a second before she stepped away.

Sofia's fingers traced the line of his shoulder.

"You know," she said, "I have a very nice room. Private. Good view. No one would bother us."

Jordan finally turned his head and looked at her.

She was beautiful. Dark hair, dark eyes, the kind of body that looked like it had been designed for string bikinis and expensive hotel rooms. She was smiling at him like she already knew how this would end.

He smiled back, small and polite.

"I appreciate the offer."

Sofia tilted her head.

"But?"

Jordan glanced back at the water. Vanessa was walking toward the shore now, board under one arm, still talking to Mateo. She looked happy. Flushed. Alive in a way she hadn't looked in weeks.

"But I'm not done watching yet," Jordan said.

Sofia followed his gaze. She was quiet for a moment, then let out a soft, understanding laugh. "Ah," she said. "I see."

She finished rubbing the sunscreen into his shoulders, then leaned down and pressed a light kiss to the side of his neck — just enough to make her point.

"If you change your mind," she said against his skin, "you know where to find me." She walked away without waiting for an answer.

Jordan stayed where he was, drink in hand, watching as Vanessa reached the shore and dropped her board in the sand. Mateo said something that made her grin and shake her head. She glanced up the beach, found Jordan's eyes, and smiled — small, private, a little wicked. Then she turned back to Mateo and said something that made him laugh.

Jordan took another sip of his drink and smiled to himself.

--Later that afternoon, Vanessa and Jordan walked back toward the villa together. She had changed into a loose white cover-up over her bikini, her hair still damp and tangled from the ocean. Jordan had his shirt draped over one shoulder, skin warm from the sun and Sofia's hands.

They didn't speak for the first few minutes.

Then Vanessa glanced at him.

“You had company.”

Jordan shrugged.

“She was persistent.”

Vanessa smiled faintly.

“Did you enjoy it?”

He looked at her.

“Enough.”

Vanessa was quiet for a second.

“I like Mateo,” she said. “He’s… easy. Fun. He doesn’t ask questions I don’t want to answer.”

Jordan nodded.

“I noticed.”

They walked a little farther in silence. The path was shaded, the air thick with the smell of salt and flowers. Somewhere ahead of them, they could hear music drifting up from one of the beach clubs.

Vanessa spoke again, softer this time.

“Harlequin wasn’t at the pool today.”

Jordan glanced at her.

“I know.”

“She’s been in her villa a lot. Her husband comes and goes. She doesn’t.”

Vanessa kicked at a loose stone on the path.

“Aiko’s plan is working.”

Jordan didn’t answer right away.

“It’s working,” he said finally. “But it’s not enough on its own.”

Vanessa nodded.

“I know.”

They reached the villa and stepped inside. The air conditioning hit them immediately, cool and sharp after the heat outside. Vanessa dropped her cover-up on the back of a chair and walked straight to the bar, pouring herself a glass of water.

Jordan watched her.

“You’re thinking about something.”

Vanessa took a long drink, then set the glass down.

“I’m thinking that we’ve been here for ten days,” she said. “And I’m still not sure if I’m actually having fun or just pretending I am.”

Jordan crossed the room and stopped behind her. He didn’t touch her, but he was close enough that she could feel the warmth of him.

“You don’t have to pretend with me,” he said quietly.

Vanessa turned to face him.

“I know.”

She reached up and touched his chest, fingers light against his skin.

“I just… I keep waiting for it to feel like enough. The lessons. The flirting. The sun. And it does, sometimes. But then I see her, or I think about what we’re doing, and it all feels like… like we’re playing house while the real thing is happening somewhere else.”

Jordan covered her hand with his.

“It’s all real,” he said. “The fun. The operation. The way you look at Mateo. The way I watch you. None of it’s fake.”

Vanessa studied his face.

“Even when it feels like it should be?”

“Especially then.”

She let out a slow breath and leaned forward, resting her forehead against his chest. Jordan wrapped his arms around her and held her there, the two of them standing in the middle of the villa’s living room while the afternoon light poured through the glass doors.

After a moment, Vanessa spoke against his skin.

“I don’t want to stop.”

Jordan’s voice was low.

“Then don’t.”

She pulled back just enough to look at him.

“And you?”

Jordan smiled, small and real.

“I’m exactly where I want to be.”

Vanessa searched his face for a second, then nodded once and stepped away. She picked up her glass again and took another sip of water, the moment shifting

back into something lighter.

“I’m going to shower,” she said. “Mateo wants to meet for another lesson tomorrow morning.”

Jordan watched her go.

“Enjoy it.”

Vanessa paused in the doorway and looked back at him.

“I will.”

She disappeared down the hall.

Jordan stood there for a while longer, listening to the sound of the shower starting. Then he walked out onto the terrace and looked out at the ocean, the sun low and golden on the water. Somewhere out there, Harlequin Rose was in her villa, probably staring at her phone. Somewhere in the villa behind him, Vanessa was washing the ocean off her skin.

And somewhere between those two things, Jordan stood with a drink in his hand and a smile on his face that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

He took a sip and leaned against the railing.

Ten days in.

And they were only just getting started.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10: Cracks

Linnéa dropped into the chair across from Jordan at the beachside restaurant, still wet from the ocean, and stole a piece of mango off his plate.

“She’s starting to get paranoid,” she said cheerfully. “Harlequin. I’ve been dropping little comments here and there. Nothing obvious. Just enough to make her wonder if people are talking about her.”

Jordan took a sip of his drink.

“Good. Keep going.”

Linnéa tilted her head, studying him.

“You’re enjoying this more than I expected.”

Jordan smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“She destroyed both of our lives,” he said. “So yes. I’m enjoying it.”

Linnéa chewed the mango slowly, watching him.

“I thought you and Vanessa were the ones who wanted to keep some distance. Stay above it. Let the plans do the work.”

Jordan glanced out at the water.

“That was before we saw her here. Before we watched her walk around like she’d never broken anything that mattered.” He looked back at Linnéa. “Now I want her to feel it. All of it.”

Linnéa leaned back in her chair, studying him with open curiosity.

“You’ve changed since we got here.”

Jordan didn’t deny it.

“So have you.”

Linnéa grinned.

“I’ve always been like this. I’m just not pretending anymore.”

She stole another piece of mango.

“Tatum’s doing well, by the way. She’s been very good at looking wide-eyed and asking the right questions in the right ears. People are starting to connect dots that aren’t even there yet. It’s beautiful.”

Jordan took another sip of his drink.

“And Harlequin?”

Linnéa’s grin faded into something sharper.

“She’s been on her phone constantly. Checking it like she’s waiting for something. Or dreading it. She barely touches her husband in public anymore. And yesterday I heard her ask one of the staff if anyone had been asking about her. She tried to make it sound casual. It didn’t.”

Jordan was quiet for a moment.

“Good.”

Linnéa watched him for another second, then stood up, brushing sand off her legs. “I should get back to Tatum before she accidentally starts another rumor without me. You two are doing okay?”

Jordan looked up at her.

“We’re getting there.”

Linnéa nodded once, then walked away without another word.

Jordan stayed at the table, watching the ocean and finishing his drink.

--Back at the villa, Aiko was waiting in the main living room when Vanessa returned from the beach.

She had her laptop open on the coffee table and didn’t waste time with small talk. “You should see this.”

Vanessa dropped her cover-up on the back of a chair and walked over, still in her bikini, hair damp and tangled. She sat down beside Aiko on the couch.

Aiko turned the laptop slightly so Vanessa could see the screen.

A live message thread glowed softly.

Phantom: *You seemed distracted today. At the pool. You kept looking at your phone like you were hoping for something.*

Harlequin: *Who are you? Really. This isn’t funny anymore.*

Phantom: *I’m not trying to be funny. I’m trying to give you something honest. Something you don’t have to perform for.*

Harlequin: *You don’t know me.*

Phantom: *I know you better than you think. I know you’ve been pretending for a long time. I know the smile you wear in public isn’t the one you have when you’re alone. I know you’re tired.*

Vanessa stared at the screen.

Harlequin didn’t reply for several minutes. Then the typing indicator appeared.

Harlequin: *This is insane. I should block you.*

Phantom: *But you won’t. Because part of you wants to know what I’ll say next. And because no one else is talking to you like this right now.*

Another long pause.

Then:

Harlequin: *What do you want from me?*

Phantom: *Nothing you don’t already want to give. I just want to see what happens when you stop pretending.*

Vanessa sat back against the couch, arms crossed over her stomach.

Aiko watched her face.

“She’s been replying more,” Aiko said quietly. “At first it was just short answers. Deflections. Now she’s asking questions. Engaging. The system is learning her faster than I expected.”

Vanessa kept staring at the screen.

“How far is this going to go?”

“As far as we let it,” Aiko said. “Or as far as she lets it.”

Vanessa was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said, “She looked tired yesterday. At the pool. I thought I was imagining it.” “You weren’t.”

Vanessa rubbed her hands over her face.

“I keep thinking about what we’re doing to her. And then I remember what she did to us. And I don’t know which feeling is supposed to win.”

Aiko closed the laptop gently.

“Both can exist,” she said. “That doesn’t make you weak. It makes you human.”

Vanessa let out a short, humorless laugh.

“I’m not sure that’s a compliment right now.”

Aiko didn’t smile, but her voice was steady.

“It wasn’t meant to be one. It was just the truth.”

They sat there in silence for a while. Outside, the sun was starting to set, painting the ocean in streaks of orange and gold. Somewhere deeper in the villa, they could hear Linnéa’s voice — bright, chaotic, talking to Tatum about something that made them both laugh.

Vanessa finally spoke again.

“Jordan’s enjoying this more than I thought he would.”

Aiko glanced at her.

“And you?”

Vanessa looked down at her hands.

“I thought I would too. But mostly I just feel… tired. Like I’ve been carrying this for years and now that we’re actually doing something about it, I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel instead.”

Aiko was quiet for a second.

“You don’t have to feel anything specific,” she said. “You just have to keep going. The rest will sort itself out.”

Vanessa nodded slowly.

She stood up and walked to the glass doors, looking out at the water.

“She’s cracking,” she said, almost to herself.

Aiko watched her from the couch.

“Yes.”

Vanessa didn’t turn around.

“Good.”

She stayed there for a long time, watching the light fade over the ocean, while behind her Aiko opened the laptop again and the program kept running.

Somewhere out there, Harlequin Rose was staring at her phone.

And somewhere in this villa, the people who had come here to destroy her were watching it happen.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11: The Table

They were still sitting around the dining table. The plates had been pushed to one side and the wine bottle was empty. Outside, the ocean kept its steady sound against the shore. No one had moved to clear the table yet.

Vanessa had her arms resting on the wood. She looked at Linnéa and Aiko before she spoke. “We’ve been letting the two of you carry most of this,” she said. “We kept saying we were going to handle it ourselves, but we didn’t. We just—”

Linnéa cut across her.

“Yeah, well. We knew that was probably going to happen.” She shrugged, not unkindly. “The second you told us what she did to you, it was pretty obvious you weren’t going to be the ones actually doing the worst of it. And we still came. So don’t act like you tricked us into anything. You didn’t.”

She reached for her glass and turned it slowly between her fingers.

“I like this kind of work. It suits me. I’m not losing sleep over it.”

Aiko had been quiet, watching Vanessa. When she spoke, her voice stayed even.

“I didn’t expect you to do it yourselves,” she said. “Not this time. You get too close to things that matter to you. I’ve seen it before. So I planned on handling it either way.” She glanced at Jordan, then back at Vanessa. “You were there when I needed someone. This is me doing the same thing. That’s all.”

The table stayed quiet for a moment after that.

Tatum had been sitting at the far end, mostly listening. She finally spoke, her voice clear but not loud.

“You’re too close to it,” she said. “Both of you. That’s why you couldn’t do it. When something hurts that much, you stop being able to see it straight. You get stuck. And quiet about the wrong things.”

She looked at Vanessa, then at Jordan.

“It’s not that you didn’t want to. You just couldn’t. Not without it swallowing you first.” No one rushed to fill the silence.

Linnéa eventually let out a short breath and shook her head.

“Jesus,” she said. “We’re really doing this, huh?”

She looked around the table, then settled her eyes on Vanessa and Jordan.

“Look. I didn’t come here thinking you two were going to do all the ugly parts yourselves. I came because I figured you probably wouldn’t. And I was fine with

that. Still am.” She gave a small shrug. “So stop acting like you owe us some big explanation. You don’t.” Aiko nodded once, small and certain.

“Same.”

Vanessa sat back slowly. She looked at the three of them — Linnéa, Aiko, and Tatum — and something in her face eased. Not relief exactly. More like something heavy had shifted without her having to ask for help moving it.

Jordan reached over and rested his hand on top of hers on the table. She turned her palm up without thinking and let their fingers fit together.

For a while, nobody moved to leave.

Linnéa eventually pushed her chair back and stood up, stretching her arms over her head. “Well,” she said. “If we’re done with whatever this was, I’m going to go find something stronger than this wine.”

She looked at the rest of them.

“Anyone?”

No one answered right away. But nobody got up either.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12: The Quiet

Vanessa woke before the sun. She lay on her side in the dark, listening to Jordan's breathing beside her. The sheet had twisted around her waist during the night, and the air coming through the open doors carried the smell of salt and wet stone.

She stared at the ceiling for a while. Her mind kept circling the same few thoughts without landing anywhere useful. Harlequin's face in the restaurant. The way her hands had shaken around her phone. The look on her husband's face when he finally read one of the messages. Vanessa turned her head on the pillow and watched Jordan sleep. His face looked younger when he wasn't awake. She reached over and rested her hand lightly on his chest, feeling the slow rise and fall of it. He didn't stir.

After a few minutes she slipped out of bed, pulled on the thin robe that had been draped over the chair, and stepped out onto the balcony. The sky was still dark, but the horizon had started to show a faint line of gray. She leaned on the railing and let the cool air move over her skin. She didn't hear Jordan get up, but she felt him when he stepped out behind her. He didn't say anything at first. He just came up next to her and rested his forearms on the railing, close enough that their shoulders almost touched.

They stood like that for a while.

"You didn't sleep much," he said eventually. His voice was low and rough from sleep. "Neither did you."

Jordan let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh.

"Fair."

Vanessa kept her eyes on the water.

"I keep thinking about what they said last night. Linnéa and Aiko. Even Tatum." She paused. "It should've made me feel worse, hearing it out loud like that. It didn't."

Jordan was quiet for a moment.

"It didn't make me feel worse either."

She glanced at him.

"You think that's fucked up?"

"No." He turned his head to look at her. "I think it means we're not lying to ourselves about what we're doing anymore. Or who we are while we're doing it."

Vanessa looked back out at the ocean.

“I don’t know if that’s better or worse.”

“Both, probably.”

They stood there until the sky started to lighten properly. Somewhere below them, a door opened and closed. Linnéa’s voice carried faintly from another part of the villa, followed by Tatum’s quieter reply. Neither of them sounded like they were in any hurry.

Jordan straightened up from the railing.

“You want coffee?”

“Yeah.”

He touched her back lightly as he passed her on the way inside. Vanessa stayed where she was for another minute, watching the water turn from dark gray to pale blue. Then she followed him in.

--Aiko was already at the dining table when they came downstairs, laptop open in front of her. She had a cup of coffee at her elbow and didn’t look up right away when they entered the room.

Linnéa and Tatum were on the terrace just outside, both of them in robes, talking in low voices. Linnéa had her feet up on the low wall and was gesturing with one hand while she spoke. Tatum listened with her arms crossed, occasionally nodding or saying something short in return.

Vanessa poured herself coffee and sat across from Aiko.

“Anything new?”

Aiko finally glanced up from the screen.

“She’s still responding to him. The messages are getting longer. She’s asking more questions.” Aiko turned the laptop slightly so Vanessa could see the thread. “She’s starting to talk about her husband. Not in detail yet, but she’s mentioning him more. How he’s acting. How he looks at her.”

Vanessa read a few lines. Harlequin’s messages were shorter than the Phantom’s replies, but they were coming faster than they had even two days ago.

Jordan leaned against the counter with his own cup.

“How long do you think before she starts pulling away from him completely?”

Aiko considered the question.

“Depends on how much pressure we keep applying from the other side. The rumors are doing some of the work already. If they get louder, she’ll have fewer places to hide.” She looked at Vanessa. “You and Linnéa are probably going to

need to push harder soon. Right now it’s still mostly background noise. We need it to become something she can’t ignore.”

Vanessa nodded slowly.

“I’ll talk to her.”

From the terrace, Linnéa’s voice rose just enough to carry inside.

“I’m telling you, if we plant it right, people will start wondering if the husband even knows who she’s really talking to at night. We don’t even have to say it outright. Just enough implication and someone else will do it for us.”

Tatum answered, quieter but clear enough.

“You’re assuming people here actually care about her. They might just like the gossip and move on.”

Linnéa laughed, short and bright.

“That’s the beauty of it. They don’t have to care about her. They just have to enjoy watching someone else’s perfect life crack. That part’s easy.”

Vanessa listened without turning around. She took another sip of coffee and kept her eyes on Aiko’s screen, watching the newest message from Harlequin appear in the thread.

Harlequin: *I don’t know why I’m still talking to you. This is insane.*

The reply came within seconds.

Phantom: *Because no one else is asking you what you actually want. And because part of you already knows the answer.*

Vanessa set her cup down.

“She’s still fighting it,” she said quietly.

Aiko nodded.

“But she’s not walking away.”

Outside on the terrace, Linnéa laughed again at something Tatum said. The sound carried easily through the open doors.

Vanessa looked toward the sound, then back at the screen.

She didn’t say anything else.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13: The Crack

On the main screen, Harlequin’s husband was still pacing the bathroom. His voice had dropped, but the tension in it carried clearly through Aiko’s feed.

“You keep saying nothing’s going on, but you won’t even look at me when you say it. And now you’re standing here naked, taking pictures of yourself while I’m trying to talk to you about our marriage. What the fuck am I supposed to think, Harley?”

Harlequin didn’t answer right away. She was still holding the phone. Another message had come through. She read it without raising her head.

Aiko’s fingers moved across the keyboard again, calm and precise.

“I’m going to give her something she can’t ignore,” she said quietly.

On one of the smaller screens, the new message appeared.

Phantom: *He’s not asking because he wants the truth. He’s asking because he’s already decided what it is. You can hear it in his voice. He’s already halfway out the door.* Harlequin’s shoulders shifted slightly as she read it. She set the phone down on the counter but kept her hand on it, like she couldn’t quite let go.

Her husband noticed.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“I’m listening,” she said. Her voice was flat now. “You’re talking about rumors and lawyers and prenups like that’s going to fix anything.”

He stopped pacing.

“So you admit there’s something to fix.”

Harlequin looked at him for the first time since he’d walked in. She was still naked, water drying in thin lines down her skin, but she didn’t reach for the towel.

“I don’t know what you want from me right now,” she said.

“I want you to tell me the truth.”

She let out a short, tired breath.

“The truth is I don’t know what the fuck is going on anymore. People are saying things. You’re saying things. And there’s this—” She stopped herself before she said too much. Her

hand tightened around the edge of the counter.

On the feed, her husband stared at her like he was seeing something he didn’t recognize. “You’re not even trying to deny it anymore.”

Harlequin didn’t answer.

In Aiko’s room, nobody spoke for a few seconds. The only sounds were the low voices coming through the speakers and the faint hum of the equipment.

Vanessa’s hand was still resting on the back of Aiko’s chair. Her fingers had gone still. Jordan stood close beside her, his arm brushing hers. Neither of them looked away from the screens. Linnéa leaned forward, eyes narrowed slightly.

“He just mentioned the prenup again,” she said. “He’s not bluffing. He’s actually thinking about it.”

Tatum was standing on the other side of Aiko now, arms still crossed.

“She’s not fighting back the way she was five minutes ago,” she said. “She’s already somewhere else in her head.”

Aiko sent another message.

Phantom: *You don’t have to keep pretending this is working. You already know it isn’t. You’ve known for a while.*

Harlequin read it. This time she didn’t look away from the phone as quickly.

Her husband ran a hand over his face.

“I can’t do this right now,” he muttered. “I need to think.”

He turned and walked out of the bathroom. The bedroom door closed behind him a moment later.

Harlequin stayed where she was. She picked up the towel this time but didn’t wrap it around herself. She just held it in one hand while she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her phone was still on the counter. Another message came through. She picked it up without hesitation. In Aiko’s room, Linnéa let out a low whistle.

“Well,” she said. “That escalated.”

She turned to Tatum, who was still staring at the screens.

“Is it bad,” Linnéa said, “that I need to have sex right now?”

Tatum didn’t answer. She just kept watching as Harlequin stood alone in the bathroom, phone in her hand, the towel forgotten at her side.

On one of the smaller screens, another message from Phantom Lover appeared.

Phantom: *You’re not alone in this. Even if it feels like it right now.*

Harlequin read it. She didn’t reply, but she didn’t put the phone down either.

They kept watching.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

They watched in silence as another message appeared on the screen.

Phantom: *You like being told exactly what to do when you're like this. Not asked. Told. You like the idea of someone knowing your body better than you do right now.* Harlequin was still in the bathroom, standing in front of the mirror with the towel loosely around her. She had one hand braced on the counter. As she read, her free hand slid slowly down her stomach and between her thighs. She didn't hesitate. Her fingers moved in slow, deliberate circles as she kept her eyes on the screen.

Aiko leaned back in her chair, arms crossed.

"I'm letting him reply on his own now," she said quietly. "He's learned enough about what she responds to. It's better this way."

Another message came through.

Phantom: *That's it. Don't think about anything else. Just how wet you are and how good it feels to let someone else take control for once.*

Harlequin's breathing changed. Her shoulders dropped and her head tilted back a little as she touched herself. She kept reading.

Linnéa let out a quiet breath.

"Jesus."

On the feed, Harlequin's legs parted slightly. Her hand moved faster. Her back arched as she touched herself, the towel slipping further open. Her mouth opened slightly as she read whatever Phantom Lover sent next.

Tatum was still staring at the screen. After a moment she turned her head toward Linnéa, voice low.

"I haven't forgotten you, Lili."

Linnéa didn't take her eyes off the feed, but the corner of her mouth lifted.

On the main screen, Harlequin was clearly close. Her hand worked steadily between her legs while she read. Her body tensed, then shuddered hard as she came. She stayed like that for several seconds afterward, breathing heavily, phone still in her other hand.

Aiko watched with a quiet, satisfied expression. She didn't say anything, but it was obvious she was pleased with how well the program was performing.

Vanessa hadn't moved. Her hand was still resting on the back of Aiko's chair. She felt Jordan shift beside her, and when she glanced at him, she saw it in his face —

the same thing she was feeling. It wasn’t just satisfaction that the plan was working. It was something simpler and more complicated at the same time.

She was happy.

Not in a loud way. Not triumphant. Just quietly, deeply happy in a way that surprised her. Happy that it was working. Happy that Harlequin was losing control. Happy that the distance between what they had planned and what was actually happening was closing. Jordan’s hand found hers without either of them looking. Their fingers laced together and stayed that way. Neither of them spoke. The feeling sat between them, clear and mutual, and for once it didn’t feel complicated.

On the screens, Harlequin finally steadied herself against the counter. She was still breathing hard. She looked at her reflection for a few seconds, then picked up the towel and wrapped it around herself again. Her phone was still in her hand. Another message came through. She read it without putting the phone down.

Linnéa watched for another few seconds, then reached over and grabbed Tatum lightly by the arm.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Tatum didn’t argue. She let Linnéa pull her toward the door.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15: The Breakfast

They were on the terrace sharing breakfast, the dining table still messy from the night before. No one had felt like cleaning anything up.

Aiko poured herself coffee, took a sip, then said:

“Du är min hora nu?”

Jordan looked over.

“You’re my whore now.”

Linnéa let out a short laugh and shook her head. Tatum smiled confidently, blushing. Vanessa watched them for a moment before she spoke.

“I want to do this part myself,” she said. “Jordan and I both do. We’ve been letting the two of you carry most of it while we stayed back. I’m not trying to take over. But after last night… I don’t want to just watch anymore.”

She looked at Aiko and Linnéa.

“She fucked both our lives. I want to do that to her. I want to sleep with her husband while Jordan’s there. I want her to know. I want her to feel what that does to someone.” Jordan leaned forward, arms on the table.

“I want to be in the room,” he said. “I want to watch. I want to hold her hand while she does it. I want Harlequin to understand that I was part of it.”

Linnéa studied them both, then she said, "Well, the Swedish saying is true! The morning hour has gold in its mouth! Or as the Americans would say, "You go, girl!"

"And boy!," Tatum added.

“I’ll keep Phantom Lover running while you’re with him,” Ailo said. “It might make her brain break faster once she finds out.”

Linnéa reached for the coffee pot and refilled her cup.

She glanced at Tatum.

“You good with it?”

Tatum gave a small shrug, but her voice was steady.

“I’m already here.”

Vanessa sat back. She looked at the three women across from her — Aiko, Linnéa, and Tatum — and something in her face eased. Not relief exactly. Just the sense that she hadn't been carrying this alone was new for her.

She was surprised she could feel it.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16: The Seduction

Vanessa met him at the resort bar two nights later.

She had dressed carefully — not trying too hard, but enough to be noticed. A simple black dress that sat well on her body, hair loose, minimal makeup. She looked expensive without looking like she was trying to. When she walked in, she saw him at the far end of the bar, exactly where Aiko said he would be. He was alone, nursing a drink, scrolling through his phone with the bored expression of a man who was used to being waited on.

She took the seat two stools down from him and ordered a glass of wine. She didn't look at him right away. She let him notice her first.

It didn't take long.

He glanced over, then looked again. Vanessa felt his eyes on her and took her time turning her head. When she met his gaze, she gave him a small, polite smile — the kind that said she had seen him looking and didn't mind.

He shifted on his stool, angling his body toward her.

"Long day?" he asked.

Vanessa gave a soft laugh. "Something like that."

He introduced himself as Richard. She already knew his name, of course, but she let him say it. He was older than she expected up close — mid-sixties, silver hair, well-groomed, the kind of man who had spent decades getting what he wanted. There was a tiredness around his eyes that hadn't been as obvious from a distance.

They talked for a while. Light things at first. The resort. The weather. How strange it felt to be somewhere so beautiful and still feel restless. Vanessa let him lead most of the conversation, answering when he asked questions, laughing at the right moments. She could feel him relaxing. Men like him were used to women either throwing themselves at them or playing hard to get. She did neither. She was just… present. Interested without being eager. After her second glass of wine, she glanced at his hand resting on the bar.

"No ring," she said lightly.

Richard looked down at his hand like he had forgotten it was there.

"Married," he said. "But it's… complicated right now."

Vanessa nodded like she understood, even though she didn't ask for details. She didn't need to. She already knew more about his marriage than he probably wanted to admit.

They talked for another hour. By the time he asked if she wanted to continue the conversation somewhere quieter, she had already decided she was going to say yes.

--Jordan was already in the suite when they arrived.

He was sitting in one of the chairs near the window, not hiding, but not making himself the center of attention either. He had a drink in his hand and looked up when the door opened. Richard paused in the doorway when he saw him.

Vanessa stepped inside first and closed the door behind them.

“This is Jordan,” she said simply. “My husband.”

Richard looked between them, clearly trying to read the situation.

Vanessa walked over to Jordan and rested her hand on his shoulder for a moment before turning back to Richard.

“He likes to watch,” she said. Her voice was calm, almost casual. “And sometimes he holds my hand while I do this.”

Richard stared at her for a second, then let out a short, surprised laugh.

“You’re serious.”

“I am,” Vanessa said. She stepped closer to him, close enough that he could smell her perfume. “If that’s not something you’re interested in, we can stop right now. No hard feelings.”

Richard looked at Jordan again. Jordan didn’t say anything. He just watched him, calm and unreadable, one ankle crossed over his knee.

After a moment, Richard exhaled and gave a small, slightly dazed smile.

“Fuck it,” he said. “Why not.”

--Vanessa kissed him first.

She took her time with it, letting Richard pull her in, letting him feel like he was leading even though she was the one setting the pace. His hands moved to her waist, then lower, gripping her hips. She could feel the tension in him — the mix of arousal and the strange awareness that another man was in the room watching them.

When she pulled back, she looked over at Jordan.

He stood up and crossed the room without being asked. He took her hand and laced their fingers together, then brought it up to his mouth and kissed the back of it once before letting it go. He didn’t touch Richard. He didn’t need to. His presence was enough.

Richard watched the exchange with something hungry in his expression.

Vanessa turned back to him and started unbuttoning his shirt. She took her time, letting her fingers brush against his skin as she worked. When she pushed the shirt off his shoulders, she glanced at Jordan again. He was standing close now, close enough that she could feel the warmth of him at her back.

She kissed Richard again, deeper this time, and felt his hands slide under her dress. Jordan's hand found hers again, their fingers intertwining as Richard pushed her dress up over her hips.

Vanessa broke the kiss just long enough to speak against Richard's mouth.

"He's going to stay right here," she said. "And I'm going to fuck you while he watches." Richard made a low sound in his throat and pulled her closer.

Jordan didn't say a word. He just held her hand and watched.

--Later, when it was over, Vanessa lay on her back with Richard's arm draped across her stomach. Jordan was still in the chair near the window, his drink untouched on the table beside him. He hadn't moved much during the whole thing. He had just watched,

occasionally tightening his grip on Vanessa's hand when she reached for him.

Richard eventually sat up and ran a hand through his hair.

"I should probably get back," he said, though he didn't sound particularly eager to leave. Vanessa didn't try to stop him. She just watched as he got dressed. When he was finished, he looked at Jordan, then back at her.

"This was… unexpected," he said.

Vanessa smiled, small and tired.

"Most things worth doing are."

After he left, the room felt very quiet.

Jordan stayed in the chair for a while longer before finally standing up and walking over to the bed. He sat on the edge and looked down at her. Vanessa reached up and touched his face, her thumb brushing along his jaw.

"You okay?" she asked.

Jordan nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm okay."

He leaned down and kissed her, slow and deep, like he was trying to taste something that wasn't there before. When he pulled back, he rested his forehead against hers for a moment. "I needed that," he said quietly.

Vanessa closed her eyes.

“Me too.”

--Across the resort, in another villa, Harlequin was sitting on the edge of her bed with her phone in her hand.

She had been staring at the screen for almost twenty minutes.

Another message from Phantom Lover had come through while she was in the middle of arguing with her husband again. She hadn’t answered it yet. She couldn’t decide if she wanted to.

On the other side of the villa, her husband was on the phone with someone — probably a lawyer, judging by his tone. She could hear bits and pieces through the closed door. Words like “assets” and “agreement” and “options.” He hadn’t said anything directly to her about divorce yet, but it was in the air. She could feel it every time he looked at her. Her phone vibrated again.

Phantom: *You’re thinking about leaving him, aren’t you?*

Harlequin stared at the message.

She didn’t reply.

But she didn’t delete the thread either.

--Back at the team’s villa, Linnéa and Tatum were sitting on the couch in the main living room when Vanessa and Jordan came back. Aiko was at the dining table with her laptop open, though she looked up when they walked in.

Linnéa raised an eyebrow.

“Well?” she asked.

Vanessa didn’t answer right away. She walked over to the bar and poured herself a drink. Jordan stayed near the door for a moment before finally moving to sit on the arm of the couch

near Tatum.

“It went fine,” Vanessa said eventually. She took a sip of her drink and looked at Aiko. “You can keep pushing her. It’s going to hit harder now.”

Aiko nodded once.

“I already am.”

Linnéa was still watching Vanessa with that sharp, curious look she got when she was trying to read someone.

“You good?” she asked.

Vanessa met her eyes.

“I’m good.”

She wasn’t lying. She felt strange — lighter in some ways, heavier in others — but she didn’t regret it. Jordan caught her eye from across the room and gave her a small nod. She nodded back.

Linnéa leaned back against the couch and stretched her arms over her head.

“Well,” she said. “This just got a lot more interesting.”

Tatum glanced at her.

“You say that like it wasn’t already.”

Linnéa grinned.

“Fair.”

Vanessa finished her drink and set the glass down. She looked around at all of them — Aiko at the table, Linnéa and Tatum on the couch, Jordan still watching her from across the room , and then she got an idea.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17: Flip a Coin

Vanessa was still standing near the bar when she reached into her bag and pulled out a coin. She turned it over between her fingers a few times, then looked at the others.

“Okay,” she said. “Heads Aiko, tails Linnéa and Tatum. Whichever way it lands, wins spending the night with Jordan. He’s earned it.”

She didn’t wait for anyone to respond. She flipped the coin into the air, caught it, and slapped it down on the back of her hand. When she lifted her palm, she looked at the result for a second before glancing up.

“Heads.”

Linnéa raised an eyebrow but didn’t argue. Tatum just watched quietly. Aiko didn’t react right away, but her eyes stayed on Vanessa.

Vanessa looked at Jordan.

Aiko stood up from the table without another word and walked toward her room. Jordan followed her a few seconds later.

--Aiko’s room was still dark except for the glow of the screens. She didn’t turn on any lights when they stepped inside. She walked straight to the desk, closed her laptop, and powered down the monitors one by one until the room was almost completely black. Only the faint light from the hallway slipped in through the cracked door.

Jordan closed the door behind him.

For a few seconds, neither of them moved.

Then Aiko turned around and looked at him. She didn’t smile. She just reached for the hem of her hoodie and pulled it over her head, letting it drop to the floor. Underneath she wore a simple black tank top. She pulled that off too, then unbuttoned her jeans and pushed them down her hips until she could step out of them. She stood there in just her underwear, watching him.

Jordan stepped closer. He reached out and touched her waist, his fingers spreading across her skin. Aiko didn’t flinch. She just let him pull her in until their bodies were almost touching. “You don’t have to,” she said quietly.

“I know,” Jordan answered.

He leaned down and kissed her.

It started slow. Aiko’s mouth was warm and careful at first, like she was still deciding how far she wanted this to go. Jordan let her set the pace. His hands

stayed on her waist, thumbs brushing lightly over her hipbones. When she finally opened her mouth and kissed him back deeper, he slid one hand up her back and into her hair.

They moved toward the bed without breaking the kiss. Aiko sat on the edge and pulled him down with her. Jordan braced himself over her, one knee on the mattress, and kissed her again, slower this time. His free hand moved down her side, over the curve of her waist, then lower, tracing the edge of her underwear.

Aiko broke the kiss just long enough to speak.

“You can touch me,” she said.

Jordan didn’t need to be told twice.

He hooked his fingers into the waistband of her underwear and pulled them down her legs. Aiko lifted her hips to help. Once they were off, she reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, letting it fall away. She lay back on the bed completely naked and looked up at him. Jordan took his time looking at her. He ran his hand slowly up her thigh, over her stomach, between her breasts. Aiko’s breathing changed when his thumb brushed over her nipple. He leaned down and took it into his mouth, sucking gently while his hand continued lower. When his fingers finally slid between her legs, she was already wet.

Aiko made a quiet sound and spread her thighs a little wider.

Jordan took his time with her. He touched her slowly, learning what made her breath catch and what made her hips lift off the bed. When he finally pushed two fingers inside her, Aiko’s hand came up to grip his shoulder. She didn’t say anything, but her body answered for her. He worked her open gently, curling his fingers until he found the spot that made her thighs tremble. Aiko’s head tipped back against the pillow. Her free hand fisted in the sheets. Jordan kept his mouth on her breast, sucking and biting lightly while his fingers moved steadily inside her. When she came, it was quiet but deep — her whole body tightening around his hand as she pressed her face into his shoulder.

Jordan didn’t rush her. He stayed where he was, kissing her neck and collarbone while she caught her breath.

After a minute, Aiko reached down between them and palmed him through his pants. She looked up at him.

“Take these off,” she said.

Jordan stood up long enough to strip. When he climbed back onto the bed, Aiko pulled him down on top of her. She wrapped her legs around his hips and reached between them to guide

him. Jordan pushed into her slowly, watching her face the whole time. Aiko's eyes stayed on his until he was all the way inside her. Then she closed them and let out a long, shaky breath. They moved together without speaking for a while. Jordan kept his thrusts deep and steady, one hand braced beside her head, the other gripping her hip. Aiko met him with every movement, her hands sliding up his back and into her hair. When she came again, it was harder than the first time. Her nails dug into his shoulders and her legs tightened around him. Jordan followed her a few seconds later, burying his face in her neck as he finished inside her.

They stayed like that for a while, breathing hard against each other.

Eventually Jordan rolled onto his back and pulled Aiko with him so she was lying half on top of him. She rested her head on his chest and traced lazy patterns on his skin with her fingertips.

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

After a while, Aiko lifted her head and looked at him.

"Again?" she asked.

Jordan answered by kissing her.

--They didn't sleep much that night.

The second time was slower. Jordan took his time with her, kissing his way down her body until he was between her legs. Aiko's hands stayed in his hair the whole time, guiding him without words. When she came on his tongue, she pulled him back up and kissed him hard, tasting herself on his mouth.

The third time, she pushed him onto his back and climbed on top of him. She rode him slowly at first, then faster when he gripped her hips and thrust up to meet her. Jordan watched her the entire time — the way her breasts moved, the way her mouth fell open, the way her eyes stayed locked on his even when she started to come apart again.

Afterward, they lay tangled together, sweat cooling on their skin. Aiko's head was on his chest again. Jordan's hand rested on her lower back.

"You don't have to stay," she said quietly.

"I know," Jordan answered.

He didn't move.

Sometime after the fourth time, Aiko finally fell asleep with her leg thrown over his and her hand resting on his stomach. Jordan stayed awake a little longer, staring at the ceiling in the

dark. He could still feel her on his skin. He could still hear the small, broken sounds she made when she came.

He closed his eyes eventually.

When he woke up a few hours later, Aiko was already awake and watching him.

She didn’t say anything. She just reached for him again.

Jordan rolled her onto her back and slid into her without hesitation. This time it was slower, almost lazy. They moved together like they had all the time in the world. When Aiko came, she pressed her face into his neck and held onto him like she didn’t want to let go. Jordan followed her, burying himself deep and staying there until the aftershocks passed. They didn’t speak after that either.

Jordan stayed inside her until he softened, then carefully pulled out and settled beside her. Aiko turned onto her side and pressed her back against his chest. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer.

Neither of them mentioned the night before. Neither of them mentioned what was still happening with Harlequin. For a few hours, none of it existed.

By the time the sun started to rise, they had lost count of how many times he had been inside her.

Jordan didn’t leave until morning.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18: The Reckoning

As the team settled in together after a lavish breakfast was delivered, it was Linnéa who spoke first.

“Motto hageshiku shite?”

Vanessa replied with an erudite tone, “Do it harder.”

Linnéa grinned and reached for the coffee pot. No one seemed particularly surprised by the exchange. The mood around the table was loose but focused, the kind that came after a long night and a shared understanding that things were finally moving.

Aiko had her laptop open at the end of the table, but she wasn’t looking at the screen. Instead, she had Phantom Lover’s phone in her hand, scrolling through the messages that had come in overnight. She set it down in the middle of the table so the others could see.

“She knows,” Aiko said simply.

Linnéa leaned forward to look.

“Knows what?”

“That Vanessa was with her husband last night.” Aiko tapped the screen once. “She hasn’t said it outright yet, but she’s circling it. Phantom’s been feeding her just enough to keep her off balance.”

Vanessa didn’t reach for the phone. She just listened, her expression calm.

Jordan sat beside her, one arm resting along the back of her chair. He didn’t speak either, but his attention was on Aiko.

Tatum was the one who asked the obvious question.

“How bad is it?”

Aiko glanced at the phone again.

“Bad enough. She’s already spiraling. Phantom’s been pushing her hard since last night. She’s barely slept. Every time she tries to get her feet under her, he sends something that knocks her sideways again.” She looked around the table. “Our plans are colliding whether we meant them to or not. The rumors, Phantom Lover, and now this. She’s getting hit from every direction at once.”

Linnéa sat back in her chair, crossing her arms.

“So what do we do?”

Aiko didn’t answer right away. She picked up the phone again and read the newest message that had come through.

“She just asked him if he was with someone last night,” she said. “Phantom told her the truth.”

The table went quiet for a moment.

Vanessa finally spoke.

“Let her see it,” she said. “All of it. I’m not hiding from this anymore.”

Aiko nodded once and set the phone back down where everyone could see the screen. They watched the messages come in.

--Harlequin was sitting on the floor of her bathroom when the next message arrived. She had been there for almost an hour, knees pulled up to her chest, phone gripped tightly in both hands. Her husband was somewhere else in the villa — she could hear him moving around, talking on the phone again. She hadn’t gone looking for him. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know what he was saying.

The screen lit up.

Phantom: *He didn’t even try to lie to you. That should tell you something.* Harlequin stared at the words until they blurred.

She typed back before she could stop herself.

Harlequin: *Who was she?*

The reply came almost instantly.

Phantom: *Does it matter? You already know what kind of man he is. You’ve known for a while. You just didn’t want to say it out loud.*

Harlequin’s hands started to shake.

She could feel it happening again — that slow, sickening drop in her stomach, the same feeling she’d had the first time she realized people were talking about her. The same feeling she’d had when her husband started looking at her like she was already gone.

Another message appeared.

Phantom: *He let another woman touch him last night. While you were here, losing your mind over him. And you’re still sitting on the floor like you’re the one who did something wrong.*

Harlequin pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead.

She didn’t want to believe it. She didn’t want to picture it. But the images came anyway — her husband with someone else, someone younger, someone who

wasn’t falling apart in front of him every day.

She typed again, slower this time.

Harlequin: *I don’t know what to do.*

Phantom: *Yes, you do. You’ve known for weeks. You just keep waiting for him to choose you. He’s not going to.*

Harlequin’s vision blurred.

She could hear her husband’s voice somewhere down the hall, low and clipped. He was still on the phone. Still talking about lawyers. Still talking like their marriage was already a business deal he needed to unwind.

Another message came through.

Phantom: *You don’t have to stay and watch him leave you. You can leave first.* Harlequin didn’t answer.

She just sat there on the cold tile, staring at the screen, while the messages kept coming. --In Aiko’s surveillance room, the team watched in silence.

The feed from Harlequin’s villa showed her sitting on the bathroom floor, phone in her hands, shoulders hunched. On another screen, they could see her husband in the living room, pacing while he talked. His voice was too low to make out clearly, but his body language said enough.

Linnéa leaned forward, elbows on her knees.

“She’s breaking,” she said quietly.

Aiko didn’t look away from the screens.

“She’s been breaking for days. This is just the part where she stops pretending she can put herself back together.”

Vanessa stood near the back of the room, arms crossed. Jordan was beside her, close enough that their shoulders touched. Neither of them spoke.

On the main screen, Harlequin finally stood up. She walked out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, still holding the phone. Her husband was still on his call. She stopped in the doorway and watched him for a long moment.

Then she spoke.

The audio was clear enough to catch most of it.

“Are you seriously on the phone with a lawyer right now?”

Her husband turned around. He didn’t look surprised to see her standing there.

“I’m handling things,” he said.

“Handling things,” Harlequin repeated. Her voice was shaking. “Is that what we’re calling it now? You fuck someone else and then you ‘handle things’ like I’m a line item on a spreadsheet?”

He didn’t deny it.

He just looked at her like he was already tired of the conversation.

“You’ve been checked out for months, Harley. Don’t act like this is coming out of nowhere.” Harlequin took a step into the room.

“Who was she?”

He didn’t answer.

On the feed, Harlequin’s hands were shaking. She still had the phone in one of them. “Was it worth it?” she asked. “Was it worth throwing everything away for one night with some woman you don’t even care about?”

Her husband finally spoke again.

“You don’t get to ask me that. Not after everything you’ve done.”

Harlequin stared at him.

“What have I done?” she asked. “Tell me. Because from where I’m standing, the only thing I’ve done is try to hold this marriage together while you’ve been pulling away for months.” He let out a short, bitter laugh.

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

On the screens, Harlequin looked like she had been slapped.

The team watched as the fight escalated. Voices rose. Accusations flew. Harlequin’s husband didn’t try to hide what he had done. He didn’t apologize. He just kept talking like the marriage had already been over for a long time and she was the only one who hadn’t noticed. Harlequin stood in the middle of the bedroom, phone still in her hand, while her husband told her exactly how little she mattered to him anymore.

Aiko didn’t say anything. She just kept the feed running.

Vanessa watched without blinking. Jordan’s hand found hers in the dark. He didn’t squeeze it. He just held it.

On the screen, Harlequin’s husband finally walked out of the room.

Harlequin stayed where she was.

She looked down at the phone in her hand like she had forgotten it was there. Another message came through from Phantom Lover. She read it without moving.

Phantom: *He’s already gone. You’re the only one who hasn’t accepted it yet.* Harlequin didn’t reply.

She just stood there in the middle of the bedroom, alone, while the phone screen went dark in her hand.

In Aiko’s surveillance room, no one spoke.

They just kept watching.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19: Aftermath

The team didn’t leave Aiko’s surveillance room for a long time after the feed went quiet. Harlequin was still standing in the middle of her bedroom when they finally shut everything down. She hadn’t moved since her husband walked out. She just stood there, phone hanging loosely from her hand, staring at nothing. On another screen, they could see her husband in the living room, already on another call. He looked calmer than he had any right to. No one said much as they filed out of the room.

They ended up in the main living area of the villa, the same space where they had eaten breakfast that morning. It felt different now. The dishes were still on the table. Someone had left the coffee pot on. The whole place smelled like cold food and old coffee.

Linnéa dropped onto one of the couches and let her head fall back against the cushions. “Well,” she said. “That was ugly.”

Tatum sat beside her but didn’t lean back. She kept her posture straight, like she was still processing what they had just watched.

Aiko moved to the kitchen without saying anything and started making fresh coffee. The sound of the machine filled the quiet.

Vanessa stood near the windows, arms crossed, looking out at the ocean. Jordan stayed close to her, not touching, but close enough that she could feel him there.

After a while, Linnéa spoke again, her voice quieter this time.

“She’s done. You know that, right? Even if she doesn’t leave him tonight, that marriage is over. She’s not coming back from this.”

No one argued with her.

Aiko brought the coffee over and set the pot on the table. She poured a cup for herself and sat down across from Linnéa and Tatum.

“She won’t be the same after this,” Aiko said. “Not for a long time. Maybe not ever.” Vanessa finally turned away from the window. She looked at all of them — Aiko, Linnéa, Tatum — and then at Jordan.

“I thought it would feel different,” she said. “When it was over. I thought I’d feel… lighter. Or angrier. Or something.”

Jordan glanced at her.

“What do you feel?”

Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

“Empty,” she admitted. “And tired. But not in a bad way. Just… done. Like something that’s been sitting on my chest for years finally got up and walked away.” She looked at him. “You?”

Jordan didn’t answer right away. He moved to the couch and sat down, resting his elbows on his knees.

“I feel like I got something back,” he said eventually. “Not her. Not the years we lost. But something. Like I finally got to answer what she did to us. Even if it doesn’t change anything for her.” He looked at Vanessa. “I needed that. I think we both did.”

Vanessa walked over and sat beside him. She didn’t lean into him, but their shoulders touched.

“I’m glad we did it together,” she said. “I don’t think I could have done this without all of you. Especially you two.” She looked at Aiko and Linnéa. “You carried us through a lot of this. I know that. I won’t forget it.”

Linnéa gave a small shrug, but there was no teasing in it this time.

“You would have done the same for us,” she said. “That’s how this works.”

Aiko nodded once, quiet but certain.

“You were there when I needed it,” she said. “This was me returning the favor.”

Tatum, who had been quiet through most of it, finally spoke.

“You all feel different now,” she said. “All of you. Not just Vanessa and Jordan. It’s like… something shifted.”

No one disagreed.

They sat there for a long time after that. The coffee got cold. The sun moved across the sky outside. Every so often someone would say something small — a comment about the plan, a question about what came next — but mostly they just existed in the same space without needing to fill the silence.

At some point, Linnéa stood up and stretched.

“I’m going to go check on Tatum’s stuff,” she said. “We should probably start thinking about when we’re leaving this place.”

She looked at Vanessa and Jordan.

“You two staying here tonight?”

Vanessa nodded.

“Yeah,” she said. “I think we need one more night.”

Linnéa didn’t push. She just nodded and headed down the hall with Tatum.

Aiko stayed where she was for a while longer, then eventually stood up as well.

“I’m going to go through the feeds one more time,” she said. “Make sure everything’s clean.” She paused before she left the room.

“You did what you needed to do,” she told Vanessa and Jordan. “Both of you. Don’t carry it like it was something else.”

Then she was gone too.

Vanessa and Jordan stayed on the couch.

After a while, Vanessa leaned her head against Jordan’s shoulder. He didn’t move, just let her rest there.

“I don’t know what this makes us now,” she said quietly.

Jordan was quiet for a long moment.

“Different,” he said. “But still us.”

Vanessa closed her eyes.

“That’s enough for me.”

Outside, the ocean kept moving. Inside, the villa was quiet. For the first time in a long time, none of them felt like they were waiting for something to break.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20: The Circle

They stayed at the villa for three more days after everything ended.

No one rushed to leave. There were no urgent calls or sudden departures. The work was done, and for the first time since they had arrived in Punta Mita, there was nothing left to plan or execute. The days passed slowly, filled with quiet mornings on the terrace and long evenings where the conversations came and went without pressure.

Harlequin had left the resort the day after the final confrontation. Her husband had filed for divorce within forty-eight hours. The rumors Linnéa and Tatum had helped spread had already taken on a life of their own, moving through the resort's wealthy circles faster than anyone could contain them. By the time the team checked the feeds one last time, Harlequin's name was already being spoken like something that had already happened.

No one celebrated it.

On the fourth morning, they gathered on the terrace again. The table had finally been cleared. Fresh coffee sat in a carafe between them, and the ocean moved steadily in the background like it always had.

Linnéa was the first to speak.

"I keep thinking I should feel something bigger," she said, turning her cup slowly in her hands. "But mostly I just feel tired. The good kind of tired."

Tatum nodded from beside her.

"It doesn't feel like winning," she said. "It just feels like it's over."

Aiko sat across from them, quieter than usual but present in the way she always was. She looked at Vanessa and Jordan.

"You two are different," she said. It wasn't a question.

Vanessa didn't deny it. She leaned back in her chair and looked out at the water for a moment before answering.

"I think we are," she said. "I don't know if it's better or worse. But it's different." She glanced at Jordan. "We got something back. I don't know what to call it yet, but it's ours again."

Jordan was quiet for a few seconds. When he spoke, his voice was low but steady. "I spent a long time carrying what she did to us," he said. "Both of us did. I don't think I realized how much space it was taking up until we came here." He looked at the others. "You

all helped carry it when we couldn’t. I won’t forget that.”

Linnéa gave a small, crooked smile.

“You would have done the same for us.”

“I would have,” Vanessa said. She meant it.

They sat with that for a while. The sun moved higher. Someone refilled the coffee. The conversation drifted and came back, never forcing anything.

At one point, Aiko looked at Vanessa and Jordan and said, almost gently:

“You don’t have to keep doing this forever.”

Vanessa met her eyes.

“I know.”

Jordan nodded once.

“We know.”

Later that afternoon, they walked down to the beach together. No one suggested it. It just happened. They took their time, letting the conversation come and go as it wanted. Linnéa and Tatum walked ahead for a while, talking quietly between themselves. Aiko stayed beside Vanessa and Jordan, not saying much, but there in a way that didn’t need words.

At one point, Vanessa stopped and looked back at the villa on the hill.

“I don’t think I’ll miss this place,” she said.

Jordan stood beside her.

“Me neither.”

Aiko glanced at them.

“But you’ll miss this,” she said, meaning all of them.

Vanessa didn’t answer right away. She just looked at Aiko, then at Linnéa and Tatum further down the beach.

“Yeah,” she said eventually. “We will.”

They didn’t make any big declarations about the future. There were no promises about working together again or staying in touch. But when they eventually made their way back up to the villa, it was clear that something had settled between them. Not just the job. Not just the revenge. Something quieter and more lasting.

That evening, they ate dinner together one last time. It was simple — grilled fish, rice, vegetables someone had picked up earlier in the day. They didn’t talk about Harlequin. They didn’t talk about what came next. They just existed in the same space, the way people do when they’ve been through something that doesn’t

need to be explained anymore.

Before they went to bed, Vanessa stood on the terrace with Jordan. The ocean was dark now, but they could still hear it moving.

“You okay?” she asked him.

Jordan thought about it.

“I think I will be,” he said. “You?”

Vanessa nodded.

“Yeah. I think so.”

She reached for his hand and laced their fingers together. They stood there for a long time without saying anything else.

Inside, the others were still awake. Aiko was on her laptop, but she wasn’t working. Linnéa and Tatum were on the couch, talking in low voices. The villa felt lived in. It felt like theirs, even if only for a little while longer.

Vanessa and Jordan stayed outside until the air grew cool.

When they finally went in, no one asked where they had been. No one needed to.

The next morning, they would start packing. Flights would be booked. The villa would be returned to whoever owned it. Harlequin’s story would continue somewhere else, without them.

But for now, in this small stretch of time, they were still here.

Together.

And for the moment, that was all any of them needed.

End of The Wreckers: Revenge

Chapter 21

Appendix: "Heads It's Linnéa"

Linnéa was the one who found the coin this time.

She pulled it out of her pocket during breakfast like she'd been carrying it around for days, waiting for the right moment. She flipped it once in the air, caught it, and slapped it onto the table without even asking.

"Heads, it's me and Tatum," she announced. "Tails, it's Aiko again."

Aiko, who was sipping her coffee, just raised an eyebrow. Vanessa looked between them, then at Jordan, and gave a small, tired smile.

"You don't have to keep doing this," she said.

"We want to," Tatum answered quietly.

Linnéa grinned and lifted her hand.

Heads.

"Ha!" Linnéa slapped the table. "I knew it. The universe wants me to ruin him."

Jordan didn't say anything. He just looked at Linnéa, then at Tatum, and gave a small nod. That night, they didn't go to Aiko's old room. They went to the master suite instead — bigger bed, better lighting, and, as Linnéa put it, "more room to be disrespectful."

The second the door closed, Linnéa was already pulling her shirt over her head.

"Alright, rules," she said, tossing the shirt onto a chair. "I'm in charge of the talking. Tatum's in charge of making sure nobody dies. Jordan, you're in charge of not being boring." Tatum rolled her eyes but was already stepping out of her pants.

Jordan stood near the bed, watching them both with a quiet kind of focus. Linnéa noticed and grinned wider.

"Oh, he's already in that mood," she said to Tatum. "Good. I was hoping he wouldn't be gentle."

She crossed the room and grabbed Jordan by the front of his shirt, yanking him down into a kiss that was all teeth and heat. When she pulled back, she was breathing harder. "On the bed," she ordered.

Jordan went.

Tatum followed more slowly, climbing onto the mattress and settling beside him. She leaned in and kissed him properly — slower, deeper, her hand sliding up his chest. It was a sharp contrast to Linnéa's energy, and it made something in

Jordan’s shoulders relax even as Linnéa started unbuttoning his shirt with impatient fingers.

“God, you’re both so serious,” Linnéa muttered, yanking his shirt open. “It’s sex, not a funeral. Relax.”

Tatum pulled back just enough to give Linnéa a look.

“You’re the one who said you were going to ruin him.”

“I am going to ruin him,” Linnéa said cheerfully. “But I’m going to have fun doing it.” She shoved Jordan’s shirt off his shoulders and pushed him onto his back. Before he could say anything, she swung a leg over and straddled his hips, grinding down once, slow and deliberate.

Jordan’s hands came up to her waist on instinct.

Linnéa leaned down until her mouth was right by his ear.

“I’ve been thinking about this since the night we all watched her fall apart,” she whispered. “Since the night you held Vanessa’s hand while she fucked that man and still looked at her like she was the only thing in the room.” She nipped at his earlobe. “I want to see what you look like when someone’s doing that to *you*.”

Tatum moved up beside them and kissed Jordan again, slower this time, her hand sliding down his stomach. When her fingers wrapped around him, Linnéa made a pleased sound and rolled her hips again.

“See?” Linnéa said. “He’s already hard. Good boy.”

Jordan let out a low breath that might have been a laugh.

“You’re insane,” he muttered.

“Extremely,” Linnéa agreed. She sat up, reached between them, and guided him into her in one smooth motion. Her head tipped back as she sank down, a low, satisfied sound escaping her throat.

Tatum stayed beside them, one hand on Jordan’s chest, the other sliding between Linnéa’s legs to touch her while she moved. Linnéa’s rhythm stuttered for a second and she let out a breathless laugh.

“Fuck— Tatum, you’re supposed to be the nice one.”

“I am being nice,” Tatum said calmly, fingers moving in slow circles. “I’m helping.”

Jordan’s hands tightened on Linnéa’s hips as she started moving again, faster now. Tatum leaned down and kissed him while Linnéa rode him, and for a while the only sounds in the room were skin and breath and the occasional sharp, filthy thing Linnéa muttered in Swedish when she got close.

When Linnéa came, it was sudden and loud. She braced her hands on Jordan’s chest and rode it out with a string of breathless curses, her whole body shaking. Tatum didn’t stop touching her until Linnéa finally slumped forward with a shaky laugh.

“Jesus Christ,” Linnéa panted against Jordan’s neck. “Okay. Your turn.”

She climbed off him on shaky legs and flopped onto her back beside him, grinning up at the ceiling.

Tatum looked at Jordan, then at Linnéa, and raised an eyebrow.

“You want to switch?”

Linnéa waved a lazy hand.

“Go ahead. I want to watch anyway.”

Tatum moved over Jordan and kissed him again, softer this time. She took her time, letting him catch his breath, letting the intensity shift. When she finally sank down onto him, it was slow and deliberate. Jordan’s hands came up to her waist automatically.

Linnéa propped herself up on one elbow and watched with open appreciation.

“Look at you two,” she murmured. “So pretty. So serious.” She reached over and ran her fingers lightly down Tatum’s spine. “Make him come, baby. I want to hear it.”

Tatum didn’t answer with words. She just moved, rolling her hips in a steady rhythm while Jordan thrust up to meet her. His hands slid up her back, one tangling in her hair, the other gripping her hip hard enough to leave marks.

Linnéa didn’t stay quiet for long.

She leaned in close to Jordan’s ear again, voice low and filthy.

“You like this, don’t you?” she whispered. “Being used after everything. After watching Vanessa take what she wanted. After helping her ruin that woman’s life.” She bit his earlobe gently. “You’re allowed to want things too, you know. You’re allowed to be selfish.” Jordan made a rough sound and thrust up harder. Tatum gasped and braced her hands on his chest, riding him faster.

Linnéa smiled against his skin.

“There it is.”

Jordan came with a low, broken groan, his hands locking tight on Tatum’s hips. She followed him a few seconds later, her forehead dropping to his shoulder as she trembled through it. For a long moment, the only sound in the room was their breathing.

Then Linnéa flopped onto her back dramatically and let out a long, satisfied sigh. “Well,” she said to the ceiling. “I’m definitely winning every coin flip from now on.” Tatum let out a tired, breathless laugh against Jordan’s chest.

Jordan didn’t say anything. He just lay there, one arm wrapped loosely around Tatum, the other hand resting on Linnéa’s thigh like he needed the contact.

Linnéa turned her head to look at him, her expression softer than usual.

“You good?” she asked.

Jordan nodded.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I’m good.”

Linnéa reached over and brushed his hair off his forehead with surprising gentleness. “Good,” she said. “Because we’re not done with you yet.”

Tatum lifted her head and gave Linnéa a look.

“Give him five minutes.”

“Five minutes,” Linnéa agreed. She grinned. “Then I’m flipping that coin again just to be sure.”

Jordan let out a low, rough laugh — the first real one any of them had heard from him in a long time.
