

Project Vectus

Excerpt Two

(Continuation of the opening sequence)

by

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Context: This excerpt continues immediately from Excerpt One.

“*You’re... not... drunk?*” I whispered, as if saying it out loud might break it. “I’m not drunk?” I repeated, more clearly this time. I had no idea if my intruder understood how important those words were to me. Odd to hear them from a stranger in my house. Could I trust them?

And who was this person? How did they know me well enough to know what I was thinking? Was he—she—?

Suddenly it hit me: I didn’t know if the intruder was male or female. I guess it didn’t matter, but was this the reason I was here? Lost in my own kitchen... confused... missing a chunk of memory at least five months wide?

I started to turn toward the voice.

Footsteps rushed toward me — light, quick steps crossing the living room and into the kitchen — and then something struck me across the right cheekbone. More surprising than painful, but effective. I stopped turning and faced forward again.

Now I was angry.

“Who do you think you are?” I growled. My cheek stung sharply. I pressed my fingers against it, half expecting blood. None. Didn’t matter. I was ready to clobber this guy... girl... whoever.

Okay... pay attention, I told myself, taking a long, slow breath. Football had taught me something important: no matter how much your opponent gets under your skin, stay cool. If you play angry, you play stupid.

Think.

Light footsteps — lighter than most men.

The angle of the blow was low.

An arm reached over my right shoulder to make contact — meaning someone short.

And then... a scent.

Jasmine.

A woman? Maybe. And under the stress, my brain offered a ridiculous thought:

I wonder if she’s cute?

Then I remembered I was supposed to be angry.

I slapped the chair in front of me, shoving it into the table. “C’mon! What is this? Who are you? Is this some kind of sick joke?”

A soft hissing sound answered — like someone using an inhaler — and then the voice spoke again, still distorted and cartoon-like.

“You want answers? I need you to trust me.”

I barked a laugh. “Trust you? I don’t even know you!”

The reply was calm. Confident.

“Yes you do.”

Every muscle in my body tensed. I knew this person? Once again I started to turn. I wanted to see this lunatic — and then I wanted to smack them for thinking this was funny.

But then I heard a click.

A gun? I had no way to tell. All I knew was that I was at a tactical disadvantage. My intruder could see me; I couldn't see them. If I turned and lunged — even if I picked the right direction — they could shoot me before I took two steps.

“Who are you?” I growled.

Something flew past my right shoulder. I winced instinctively, but instead of an attack, something light landed on the table in front of me — a plastic baggie. Inside was an eye patch and a tiny hearing-aid-looking device.

“Wait... what?”

“Put them on.”

I don't know why I listened, but I unzipped the baggie, dumped the contents into my left hand, and hesitated.

“Right eye and right ear, genius.” The way the voice said “genius” made it sound like a diagnosis.

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered. “Seriously? Why?”

“Do it.”

I obeyed — grudgingly. The eye patch felt strange enough, but the moment I slipped the hearing device into my ear, something even stranger happened. It began playing soft white noise, and almost immediately the pounding behind my right eye eased. The leftover dizziness vanished completely.

Moving slowly so I wouldn't spook my intruder, I sat down in my chair.

“I don't know what you did,” I said, exhaling shakily, “but it helps.”

The mystery person responded with a series of coughs. For a moment I thought she was choking, and then the voice said, “I'm sorry about the cloak-and-dagger, but you can't be too careful, given the circumstances.”

My intruder was female — and I recognized her voice.

But... it couldn't be. What would she be doing here?

Forgetting that I wasn't supposed to turn, I twisted in my chair — and this time she didn't object. She stepped calmly out of the shadows and into my kitchen, found the light switch, and flipped it on.

It really was her.

I reached for my eye patch to make sure my brain wasn't playing tricks, but she caught my wrist gently and shook her head with a small smile. “Leave it on. Besides, I like the look.”

Her look wasn't bad either. Gorgeous, actually — the kind of natural beauty that made you stop and notice before you even realized what you were doing. But I was still ticked at her.

Her name — or the name I knew — was Vicki Tarlowe, the no-nonsense, don't-mess-with-me woman from my interview six months ago. But now she looked out of place... and out of character. She wore black slacks, a fitted light-colored T-shirt — that fit her nicely — sneakers, and a dark denim jacket. A cross-body bag hung at her side — probably the thing she hit me with. She seemed calm, relaxed, like breaking into people's homes and barking orders was perfectly normal.

I stared as she circled around me to my left, the faint smell of jasmine tracing her movements. She seemed to enjoy how completely off guard I was. Pulling a chair from the table, she dragged it

close, turned it toward me, and sat. I turned mine to face her. Reaching into her bag, she handed me a small metallic canister.

I read the label aloud. “Helium. Okay... that explains the weird voice, but not much else.” I tried to sound irritated, but even I could hear it wasn’t landing.

They say the eyes are the window to the soul. If that’s true, Ms. Tarlowe had some amazing windows. Deep brown — intelligent, mysterious. And the way she looked at me... it felt like she was looking into me, past the façade most people hide behind. It was exciting and unnerving all at once. I told myself not to let it intimidate me.

“Y’know, it’s weird having you here — and nice.”

“*And nice?*” she echoed, raising an eyebrow. “I’m always nice.”

Not the Ms. Tarlowe I remembered. “Nice” wouldn’t have cracked the top fifty adjectives I’d have used for her back then.

“You sure?” I asked. “Is everything okay?”

Her expression tightened. Not playful — serious. “That’s more a question I should be asking you.”

“Maybe. But forgive me if I can’t get past this home-invasion cloak-and-dagger routine. I guess the ‘nice’ is supposed to make up for that? Are you drunk?”

“No!” she snapped.

“On drugs?”

“No!” she said again, even more indignant.

“Well, you’re definitely acting out of character... I’ve got it — brain tumor!”

“No, Mr. Carrick!” she fired back. She leaned in, and for a moment we were close — close enough that I could see the faint spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheeks she tried to hide with makeup. I didn’t know why. They gave her a cute, girl-next-door charm that contrasted with her usual intensity. But her eyes... they held something deeper. Wisdom. Heartache. Like she could’ve been carefree once, but something in life had robbed her of it. No amount of makeup could hide that.

“I am not drunk, not on drugs, and I do not have a brain tumor. Now will you shut up and listen?”

I straightened and grinned triumphantly. “There’s the Ms. Tarlowe I know.”

She scoffed. “‘Ms. Tarlowe?’ Don’t you remember? Vicki Tarlowe was my cover. I’m Riley. Riley Dawson.”