The Wreckers: "Withdrawal" | Book #9

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Wreckers, Book 9

Chapter 1

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter One

The restaurant was called Aurelia, and it did not advertise.

It occupied the top two floors of a narrow limestone building on a quiet cross street in the West Village, the kind of place that existed for people who already knew it existed. The lighting was low and golden, the tables spaced far enough apart that conversations could not be overheard without deliberate effort. The waitstaff moved like they had been trained never to rush, never to hover, and never to look directly at anyone for too long.

Vanessa sat with her back to the wall, as she always preferred. She wore a charcoal silk blouse tucked into high-waisted black trousers that made her legs look even longer than they were. Her dark hair was pinned up loosely at the nape of her neck, a few strands left free to brush her jaw when she moved. At thirty-two, she had reached the point where people who met her for the first time often assumed she was younger until they looked directly into her eyes. There was nothing young about her eyes.

Across from her, Jordan cut into his steak with the same precise, unhurried movements he brought to everything. He was forty-one now, though he still carried himself like a man ten years younger. His dark hair was longer on top than it had been a year ago, the silver at his temples more pronounced. The charcoal suit he wore had been cut for his shoulders and no one else's. He looked, as he always did in public, like the kind of man other men watched without realizing they were watching.

They had been eating in near silence for twenty minutes. Not the silence of people who had nothing to say, but the silence of two people who had already said the important things in the car on the way here and were now simply occupying the same space while the rest of the world continued around them.

Vanessa lifted her wine glass and took a small sip. The Bordeaux was excellent. She set the glass down and let her gaze drift across the dining room without appearing to focus on anyone in particular.

"You're quiet," Jordan said without looking up from his plate.

"I'm thinking."

"About what?"

"About how long it's going to take them to find us."

Jordan’s knife paused for half a second, then continued its work. He didn’t ask who she meant. He didn’t need to.

Vanessa watched a couple two tables away. The woman was laughing at something her companion had said, her hand resting lightly on his wrist. The man was leaning in, smiling with his whole face. They looked happy in the uncomplicated way happy people sometimes managed to look in public.

“They won’t be able to stay away from each other for long,” Vanessa said quietly. “Not after what we did to them.”

Jordan finally looked up. His eyes were a flat, wintery blue.

“They’re already sleeping in separate bedrooms,” he said. “She’s started seeing someone. He doesn’t know yet.”

Vanessa’s mouth curved, very slightly.

“Good.”

She reached for her glass again. Before her fingers touched the stem, she saw them. They entered from the direction of the bar, moving with the kind of unhurried confidence that only came from knowing exactly where they were going and that no one would stop them. The man was in his early fifties, tall and lean, with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and a face that had spent a lot of time outdoors at some point in his life. The woman beside him was perhaps ten years younger, dark-haired, wearing a black suit that had been tailored as precisely as Jordan’s. She carried a small black clutch in her left hand and nothing else. They did not look around the room. They walked directly to Vanessa and Jordan’s table. Jordan set his knife and fork down. Vanessa did not move.

The man stopped at the edge of the table. He did not smile.

“Mr. Hale. Ms. Lang.”

Jordan’s expression did not change. Vanessa’s did not either.

The woman spoke next. Her voice was low and even.

“May we join you?”

Vanessa studied her for a moment, then gave a small nod toward the two empty chairs. The woman took the seat to Vanessa’s left. The man took the one beside Jordan.

No one offered names.

The man folded his hands on the table. His wedding ring was a simple gold band, worn smooth.

“You’ve been difficult to find,” he said.

“We haven’t been hiding,” Jordan replied.

“No,” the man agreed. “You haven’t. That’s what made it interesting.”

A waiter appeared as if summoned by some silent signal. He placed two fresh glasses of water on the table and disappeared again without a word.

The woman opened her clutch and removed a slim black phone. She set it face-down on the table between them.

“We’ve been watching you for some time,” she said. “Longer than you probably realize.” Vanessa took another sip of wine. She set the glass down with deliberate care.

“And what have you seen?”

The woman’s eyes were dark and steady.

“Enough.”

She let the word sit there for a moment before continuing.

“Three marriages in fourteen months. All of them high-profile. All of them destroyed with remarkable efficiency. You don’t leave much of a footprint, but when someone knows what to look for, the pattern becomes visible.”

Jordan’s voice was calm.

“You’re not here to arrest us.”

“No,” the man said. “We’re not.”

He leaned back slightly in his chair. The movement was casual, but his eyes never left Jordan’s face.

“Once we completed our Nexus Review, we had a decision to make. We could have made your lives extremely difficult. Instead, the Director decided it would be more useful to offer you an alternative.”

Vanessa’s expression did not change, but something shifted behind her eyes.

“An alternative to what?”

The woman answered.

“To continuing as independent contractors.”

She reached for her water glass and took a small sip before setting it down again. “You’re very good at what you do,” she said. “Cold. Precise. Unsentimental. Most people who do this kind of work eventually make a mistake driven by ego or emotion. You don’t

appear to suffer from either.”

Jordan’s mouth twitched at one corner. It was not quite a smile.

“You’ve done your homework.”

“We have,” the man said. “We know about the couple in Wyoming. The one you spent six weeks on. The one where you didn’t just end the marriage — you made sure neither of them would ever trust another person again. That was impressive work.”

Vanessa’s voice was quiet.

“They weren’t special.”

“No,” the woman agreed. “They weren’t. That’s what made it interesting.”

She leaned forward slightly, resting her forearms on the edge of the table.

“The Director believes that skill set could be useful. We have an assignment that requires a certain… touch. Something that can’t be handled through conventional channels.”

Jordan picked up his wine glass and turned it slowly between his fingers.

“And if we decline?”

The man’s expression did not change.

“Then we release what we have on you. All of it. Every marriage. Every name. Every method. We have enough to keep federal prosecutors busy for years. You would spend the rest of your lives in courtrooms or in very small rooms with no windows.”

He paused, then added, almost gently:

“Or you can accept the assignment. Complete it successfully. And we forget we ever had this conversation.”

Vanessa studied the woman’s face. She was attractive in a severe, efficient way. No jewelry except for a thin gold watch. No makeup beyond what was necessary to look polished under bright lights. Her nails were short and clean.

“What’s the assignment?” Vanessa asked.

The woman picked up her phone, unlocked it with her thumb, and turned it around so Vanessa and Jordan could see the screen.

A photograph of a man in his late forties appeared. He had thinning brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and the slightly rumpled look of someone who spent too much time in front of computers and not enough time outside. He was standing at a podium, mid-sentence, one hand raised as if he had been making a point.

“Dr. Elias Foster,” the woman said. “Astrophysicist. Worked for fifteen years at a private research institute with significant government contracts. Specializes in atmospheric phenomena and high-altitude imaging. Six months ago, he began

quietly reaching out to journalists and members of Congress. He claims to have evidence of extraterrestrial contact that has been deliberately suppressed.”

Jordan’s expression remained neutral.

“And does he?”

The man answered.

“That’s not our concern. Our concern is that he’s scheduled to go public in five weeks. He’s already drafted a statement. He has documents. He has what he believes is corroborating data. If he releases it, it will create problems we would prefer to avoid.”

Vanessa looked at the photograph for another moment, then back at the woman.

“And his wife?”

A second photograph appeared on the screen. A woman in her early forties with shoulderlength auburn hair and a warm, open face. She was laughing in the photo, standing beside Elias Foster at what looked like a university event.

“Georgia Foster,” the woman said. “Sociologist. Teaches at NYU. They’ve been married eleven years. No children. By all accounts, the marriage is stable. Affectionate. They still hold hands in public.”

Jordan set his wine glass down.

“You want us to destroy it.”

The man nodded once.

“We want Dr. Foster distracted. We want him emotionally compromised. We want his credibility questioned before he has the chance to stand in front of cameras and say things that cannot be unsaid. How you accomplish that is up to you. We’re not interested in the details. We’re interested in the result.”

Vanessa was quiet for a long moment.

“And if we succeed?”

“You walk away,” the woman said. “Clean. With our gratitude. And with the understanding that we will never speak of this again.”

Jordan looked at Vanessa. She met his eyes for a fraction of a second, then turned her attention back to the two people across the table.

“We’ll need time to review the files.”

“You’ll have them by tonight,” the man said. He reached into his jacket and removed a small black card. He placed it on the table between them. There was no name on it. Only a ten-digit number.

“Call that number when you’ve made your decision. You have forty-eight hours.”

He stood. The woman stood with him.

The man looked at Jordan, then at Vanessa.

“Enjoy the rest of your lunch.”

They walked away without another word.

Vanessa watched them until they disappeared through the doorway that led back toward the bar. Only then did she reach for her wine glass again.

Jordan was still looking at the empty space where the two agents had been sitting. “They’re serious,” he said quietly.

“Yes.”

“They have real leverage.”

“They think they do.”

Jordan’s eyes moved to her face.

“You’re considering it.”

Vanessa took a slow sip of wine and set the glass down.

“I’m considering what happens if we say no.”

She looked out across the dining room. The happy couple two tables away was still laughing. The woman had moved her chair closer. Her hand was now resting on the man’s thigh beneath the table.

Vanessa’s gaze returned to Jordan.

“We should at least look at the files.”

Jordan nodded once.

They finished their meal in silence.

Outside, the afternoon light had begun to shift toward evening. The car was waiting at the curb. Jordan opened the passenger door for Vanessa without speaking. She slid inside. He closed the door, walked around to the driver’s side, and got in.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then Jordan started the engine.

Vanessa stared out the window as the car pulled into traffic.

“They knew exactly where we were,” she said.

“Yes.”

“They’ve been watching us for months.”

“Probably longer.”

Vanessa was quiet for several blocks.

“What do you think they really want?”

Jordan’s hands were steady on the wheel.

“I think they want what they said they want. And I think they’re willing to burn us if we don’t give it to them.”

Vanessa turned her head to look at him.

“And if we do what they ask?”

Jordan glanced at her, then back at the road.

“Then we find out what happens next.”

The car moved through the city as the light continued to fade. Neither of them spoke again until they reached the apartment.

Chapter 2

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 2: The Files

The car pulled into the underground garage beneath their building just after nine. Jordan killed the engine but didn't get out right away. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and removed a slim black external drive. He held it between his fingers for a moment, turning it slowly, then slipped it back into his pocket.

Vanessa watched him from the passenger seat.

"When did they give that to you?" she asked.

Jordan didn't look at her.

"As we were leaving. The woman. She passed it under the table when she stood up. You were watching the waiter."

Vanessa was quiet for a second.

"I didn't notice."

"I know."

He opened his door and stepped out. Vanessa followed without another word.

They rode the elevator up in silence. When the doors opened on the top floor, Jordan unlocked the apartment and let them in. The lights rose automatically to a low, warm level. Vanessa walked straight to the bar and poured two glasses of bourbon. She handed one to Jordan as he hung his jacket over the back of a chair.

He took it with a small nod and carried it to the safe built into the wall beside the television. He opened the heavy door, removed a sealed manila envelope, and brought both the envelope and the drive to the long glass dining table.

Vanessa sat on the couch with her drink. She crossed her legs and watched him as he plugged the drive into his laptop.

"You've already looked at it," she said. It wasn't a question.

Jordan didn't deny it.

"I went through the main files on the way home," he said. "While you were thinking." Vanessa took a slow sip of bourbon.

"And?"

Jordan opened the first folder. A series of photographs filled the screen. He studied them for a moment, then turned the laptop so she could see.

“Elias Foster,” he said. “Forty-seven. PhD in astrophysics from Caltech. Spent twelve years at a private research institute that does contract work for the government. Specializes in atmospheric anomalies and high-altitude imaging. Six months ago he started quietly reaching out to journalists and a couple of members of Congress. Claims he has evidence of extraterrestrial contact that’s being suppressed.”

Vanessa leaned forward, studying the first photograph. Elias stood at a university podium, thin and slightly rumpled, wire-rimmed glasses sitting crooked on his nose. He looked like a man who had spent too many nights under fluorescent lights.

Jordan continued.

“He’s brilliant in his narrow field, but socially dysfunctional. Colleagues describe him as difficult to work with, not because he’s rude, but because he forgets other people exist when he’s focused on something. He forgets to eat. Forgets to sleep. Forgets to answer emails. Over the last year he’s become increasingly isolated.”

He clicked through several more images until he found what he was looking for.

“Georgia Foster. Forty-three. Sociologist at NYU. Specializes in the sociology of science and institutional trust. She’s the one holding the marriage together.”

Vanessa looked at the photograph of Georgia. Auburn hair, warm face, laughing at something off-camera while standing beside Elias. Her hand rested lightly on his arm.

Jordan kept going.

“She’s socially skilled, well-liked by colleagues, and emotionally intelligent in ways her husband isn’t. In almost every photograph where they’re together, she’s touching him. Not possessively. More like she’s keeping him tethered to the moment. She manages their social life, remembers the things he forgets, and makes sure he eats and sleeps when he gets lost in his work.”

Vanessa was quiet for a long moment, looking at the image.

“She’s pretty,” she said finally.

Jordan glanced at her.

“In a soft way,” Vanessa added. “The kind of pretty that makes people want to tell her things.”

Jordan didn’t disagree.

He took a drink of bourbon and continued.

“They still share a bed. They still have sex, though not as often as they used to. She initiates more than he does. When he disappears into his work, she’s the one

who pulls him back. Most of the time he responds, but it’s getting harder for her.”

Vanessa set her glass down on the low table in front of her.

“You got all of that from glancing at the files on the way home?”

Jordan met her eyes.

“I know how to read a file quickly when I need to.”

Vanessa held his gaze for another moment, then looked back at the laptop.

Jordan didn’t push. He simply waited.

After a few seconds, Vanessa spoke again, her voice quieter.

“You think this one’s different.”

Jordan leaned back in his chair.

“I think the CIA is more nervous about this than they’re admitting. And I think they chose us because they know we won’t hesitate. Most people would pause before going after a man who claims to have proof of aliens. We won’t.”

Vanessa studied him across the table.

She picked up her glass again and turned it slowly between her fingers.

“If we do this,” she said, “we’re not just breaking another marriage. We’re helping them bury something that might actually be real.”

Jordan didn’t flinch.

“Does that bother you?”

Vanessa was quiet for a long moment.

“No,” she said. “But it makes the job feel heavier than usual.”

Jordan nodded slowly.

“I know.”

Vanessa stood up and walked around the table. She stopped beside his chair and looked down at the screen.

“So,” she said. “How do you want to do it?”

Jordan looked up at her.

“You take Georgia,” he said. “You’re better with women who still believe in something. She still believes in the marriage. In stability. In being needed. You can get close to her without setting off alarms.”

Vanessa considered this.

“And you’ll take Elias.”

Jordan nodded.

“He’s already halfway gone. He’s been working on this for months with almost no sleep and almost no human contact outside of Georgia. He’s vulnerable to someone who appears to understand what he’s trying to do. Someone who can offer him resources. Validation. A way forward.”

Vanessa rested one hand on the back of his chair.

“You think he’ll trust you?”

“I think he’s desperate enough to trust anyone who doesn’t immediately call him crazy,” Jordan said. “And I can play that role.”

Vanessa was quiet for a while, thinking.

Then she spoke again.

“She’s going to be harder than the others,” she said. “Georgia. She actually loves him. Not in the performative way most of them do. She loves him because she thinks he’s worth loving.” Jordan looked up at her.

“You think that makes her weaker or stronger?”

Vanessa’s fingers tightened slightly on the chair.

“I think it makes her more dangerous,” she said quietly. “People who love like that don’t break cleanly. They fight. They adapt. They make it harder to finish the job.”

Jordan didn’t disagree.

Vanessa moved her hand from the chair to his shoulder and squeezed once, firmly. “We’ll do it the way we always do it,” she said. “Slow. Careful. No mistakes.”

Jordan nodded.

Vanessa leaned down and kissed him. It was slow and deliberate. When she pulled back, she rested her forehead against his for a moment before straightening.

“I’m going to shower,” she said.

Jordan watched her walk toward the bedroom.

He sat at the table for a while longer, staring at the closed laptop. Then he picked up his phone, found the number the CIA woman had given him at the restaurant, and dialed. The line rang twice before she answered.

“Mr. Hale.”

“We’re in,” Jordan said.

There was a brief pause.

“Both of you?”

“Both of us.”

Another pause.

“Understood. The full files will remain on the drive. Additional resources will be made available as needed. Do not contact us unless it is an emergency. We will contact you when the timeline requires an update.”

Jordan didn’t respond.

The woman continued.

“Dr. Foster is scheduled to go public in five weeks. You have until then.”

The line went dead.

Jordan set the phone down.

He sat in the quiet apartment for several minutes, listening to the distant sound of the shower running. Then he stood up, turned off the lights in the main room, and walked toward the bedroom.

Vanessa was already in the shower when he entered the bathroom. He undressed slowly and stepped in behind her. She didn’t turn around, but she leaned back against him when he wrapped his arms around her waist.

They stood under the hot water for a long time without speaking.

Eventually Vanessa turned in his arms and looked up at him.

“This one feels different,” she said quietly.

Jordan met her eyes.

“I know.”

She rested her forehead against his chest for a moment.

Then she looked up again.

“We still do it,” she said.

Jordan nodded.

“We still do it.”

Vanessa reached up and touched his face, her fingers tracing along his jaw.

“We’ll be careful,” she said.

Jordan didn’t answer with words. He simply leaned down and kissed her again, slower this time, his hands sliding down her back.

They stayed in the shower until the water started to cool.

Later, when they were in bed, Vanessa lay with her head on Jordan’s chest, one leg draped over his. The room was dark except for the faint glow of the city lights through the halfclosed blinds. Jordan stared at the ceiling.

Vanessa’s voice was quiet when she spoke.

“Do you think they actually have something?”

Jordan didn’t pretend not to understand.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But the CIA thinks he might. That’s enough to make this job more complicated than the others.”

Vanessa was silent for a while.

Then she said, “We’ve done worse things for less reason.”

Jordan’s hand moved slowly up and down her back.

“Yes,” he said. “We have.”

Vanessa lifted her head and looked at him in the dim light.

“Are you worried?”

Jordan met her eyes.

“I’m careful,” he said. “That’s not the same as worried.”

Vanessa studied his face for another moment, then lowered her head back to his chest.

They lay like that for a long time.

Eventually Vanessa’s breathing evened out and she fell asleep.

Jordan stayed awake longer, staring at the ceiling, one hand still resting on her back. Outside, the city continued its indifferent movement.

Inside the apartment, the only sound was the low, steady rhythm of Vanessa breathing against his chest.

Jordan closed his eyes.

Five weeks.

That was all they had.

He let the thought settle, then pushed it aside.

There would be time to think about it tomorrow.

Tonight, he simply held her and listened to her breathe.

Chapter 3

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 3: First Contact

Vanessa arrived at the university just after six.

She had dressed with deliberate care — a black dress that stopped just above the knee and a tailored charcoal blazer that suggested money and education without trying too hard. Her dark hair was pinned up loosely, a few strands left free to frame her face. She looked like the kind of woman who belonged at an academic event but wasn't quite part of the faculty. Someone important. Someone worth talking to.

The lecture was being held in one of the smaller auditoriums in the sociology building. Georgia Foster's name appeared on the program in modest type beneath the title:

Institutional Trust in an Age of Institutional Collapse.

Vanessa took a seat near the back on the aisle. She crossed her legs and opened the program, though she didn't read it. Most of the audience were faculty and graduate students. A few looked like they had wandered in from other departments.

Georgia took the podium at exactly six-fifteen.

She was smaller than Vanessa had expected from the photographs. Her auburn hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, and she wore a simple navy blouse with gray trousers. There were faint shadows under her eyes that suggested she hadn't been sleeping well, but when she began speaking, her voice was steady and warm.

Vanessa watched her without taking notes.

She watched the way Georgia's hands moved when she emphasized a point. She watched the way her eyes occasionally drifted toward the back of the room, as if checking to see who was actually listening. She watched the way Georgia smiled — small, genuine, and slightly tired — when someone in the front row asked a question.

And then, without warning, something shifted inside Vanessa's chest.

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't the sudden, cinematic feeling she had seen in movies. It was quieter than that. A soft, strange click somewhere behind her ribs, as though a lock she hadn't known existed had just turned.

She kept her expression neutral. She even smiled slightly when Georgia made a small, selfdeprecating joke about academic bureaucracy. But something had

changed. Vanessa felt it in the way her pulse had shifted, in the way the air in the room seemed to press more closely against her skin.

She didn't look away from Georgia for the rest of the lecture.

When the applause died down and people began gathering their things, Vanessa stayed in her seat. She waited until most of the crowd had thinned before she stood and walked down the aisle.

She approached from the side, not directly in front of Georgia, and waited until the last student had finished asking questions before she stepped forward.

"Dr. Foster?"

Georgia turned. Up close, the exhaustion in her face was more visible. She looked like someone who had been carrying something heavy for a long time.

"Yes?"

Vanessa smiled. Warm. Easy. The smile she used when she wanted someone to like her. "I enjoyed your lecture. I'm Vanessa Lang. I'm visiting from out of town — I work with a small private foundation that funds research on institutional trust and public skepticism. I was hoping I might have a moment of your time."

Georgia studied her for a moment. Her eyes were a soft hazel, and there was a quiet intelligence in them that Vanessa hadn't fully appreciated from the photographs. "A foundation?"

"Primarily private," Vanessa said. "We try to stay out of the spotlight. We're more interested in supporting work that challenges conventional thinking than in putting our name on things." Georgia considered this, then nodded.

"I have about ten minutes before I need to get home. Would you like to walk with me to my office?"

"I'd like that very much," Vanessa said.

They walked side by side down the hallway. Vanessa kept her pace relaxed and her posture open. She asked a few careful questions about Georgia's research — nothing too aggressive, nothing that would feel like an interview. She listened more than she spoke, and when she did speak, she made sure her questions showed she had actually been paying attention. Georgia seemed to relax slightly as they walked.

"You said you're visiting," she said. "From where?"

"Chicago, originally," Vanessa answered. "But I travel a lot for work. I'm in New York for a few weeks."

Georgia nodded.

"And your foundation is interested in institutional trust?"

“We’re interested in why people stop trusting institutions,” Vanessa said. “And what happens to societies when that trust collapses. Your work on the sociology of science feels particularly relevant right now.”

Georgia glanced at her.

“Most foundations want research that reinforces existing systems. Not many want to look at why those systems are failing.”

Vanessa smiled faintly.

“We’re not most foundations.”

They reached Georgia’s office. It was small but neat, with bookshelves lining two walls and a desk covered in organized stacks of papers. A framed photograph of her and Elias sat on the corner of the desk. In it, they were standing on a hiking trail. Elias looked more relaxed than in any of the other images Vanessa had seen.

Georgia noticed her looking at it.

“My husband,” she said. “He doesn’t usually like having his picture taken, but I managed to catch him on a good day.”

Vanessa smiled.

“He looks happy.”

Georgia’s expression softened for a moment.

“He was. That day.”

She didn’t elaborate. Instead, she gestured toward one of the chairs in front of her desk. “Please, sit. Tell me more about what your foundation is looking for.”

Vanessa sat. She crossed her legs and leaned forward slightly, giving Georgia her full attention.

“We’re looking for researchers who are willing to ask difficult questions,” she said. “People who aren’t afraid to follow evidence even when it leads somewhere uncomfortable. We’ve been following your work for a while. We think you have something important to say.” Georgia studied her face.

“And what is it you think I have to say?”

Vanessa held her gaze.

“That trust isn’t just about institutions. It’s about the people inside them. And when those people start lying — or start believing their own lies — the damage spreads faster than

anyone wants to admit.”

Georgia was quiet for several seconds.

Then she gave a small, tired smile.

“You’re very good at this,” she said.

Vanessa tilted her head slightly.

“At what?”

“Making people want to talk to you.”

Vanessa returned the smile, softer this time.

“I’m interested in what people have to say. Most people can tell the difference between someone who’s asking questions to get answers and someone who’s asking questions to get something else.”

Georgia looked at her for another moment, then glanced at the clock on her desk. “I really do need to get home,” she said. “But… if you’re going to be in the city for a few weeks, maybe we could continue this conversation over coffee sometime.”

Vanessa felt something shift again in her chest. It was warmer this time. More dangerous. “I’d like that very much,” she said. “Do you have a card?”

Georgia opened a drawer and handed her a simple white business card with her university email and office number.

Vanessa took it and slipped it into her bag.

“Thank you, Dr. Foster. I appreciate your time.”

“Georgia,” the other woman said. “Please.”

Vanessa smiled again.

“Georgia.”

They shook hands. Georgia’s grip was firm but warm. Vanessa held it a fraction longer than necessary before letting go.

She left the office and walked down the hallway without looking back. Only when she reached the stairwell did she allow herself to stop for a moment. She placed one hand against the cool concrete wall and exhaled slowly.

Her heart was beating harder than it should have been.

She stayed there for nearly a minute, staring at nothing, before she straightened and continued down the stairs.

By the time she reached the ground floor, her expression was neutral again.

She stepped out into the evening air and walked toward the parking garage, her heels clicking against the pavement.

--Meanwhile, across the city, Jordan sat in a rented sedan across the street from a nondescript research building on the edge of campus.

He had been there since just after five.

The building had minimal security — a single guard at the front desk who spent most of his shift looking at his phone. Jordan had already walked the perimeter twice during the afternoon. There were three exits. One of them was rarely used and had no camera coverage. He watched as the lights on the fourth floor stayed on long after most of the building had gone dark.

At 9:52 p.m., Elias Foster finally emerged from the side entrance.

He was carrying a worn leather satchel and a paper cup of coffee that looked like it had gone cold hours ago. His hair was messier than in the photographs. His shirt was untucked on one side, and there was a tension in his shoulders that suggested he hadn’t relaxed in days. Jordan started the car but didn’t pull out immediately. He waited until Elias had walked half a block before following at a distance.

Elias didn’t go home.

Instead, he walked to a small, twenty-four-hour diner two blocks from the research building. He took a seat in the back corner, facing the door, and pulled a laptop out of his satchel. He didn’t order food. He just sat there, staring at the screen, occasionally typing with quick, agitated movements.

Jordan parked across the street and watched through the diner window.

After twenty minutes, Elias pulled out his phone and made a call. He kept his voice low, but even from across the street Jordan could see the tension in his posture. His free hand gripped the edge of the table so hard his knuckles were white.

The call lasted less than two minutes.

When Elias hung up, he sat very still for a long time, staring at nothing. Then he closed the laptop, put it back in his satchel, and left the diner without finishing his coffee. Jordan followed him again.

This time, Elias went home.

It was a modest two-story house in a quiet residential neighborhood. The lights were already on when he arrived. Georgia’s car was parked in the driveway.

Elias sat in his own car for nearly twelve minutes before he finally got out and went inside. Jordan watched the house from down the block. He saw the silhouette of Georgia appear in the kitchen window. She seemed to be speaking to someone. A moment later, Elias’s silhouette joined her.

They stood close together. Georgia reached up and touched his face. Elias didn’t pull away, but he didn’t lean into the touch either. After a few minutes, the kitchen light went off. Jordan stayed another twenty minutes, then started the car and drove away.

He didn’t go back to the apartment right away.

Instead, he drove to a small bar a few miles from the university. He ordered a bourbon and sat at the end of the bar, away from the few other customers.

He took out his phone and sent Vanessa a single text.

How did it go?

Her reply came four minutes later.

She gave me her number. Coffee next week.

Jordan stared at the screen for a moment, then typed back.

Good.

He set the phone down and took a slow drink.

The bartender glanced at him.

“Rough night?”

Jordan looked up.

“Not yet,” he said.

The bartender nodded like that made sense and moved away.

Jordan sat at the bar for another forty minutes, nursing the same drink. When he finally left, he drove home without turning on the radio.

Vanessa was already in bed when Jordan got back, though she wasn’t asleep. She was sitting up against the headboard with her tablet in her lap, the screen casting a soft glow across her face.

Jordan undressed in the dark and slid in beside her.

She didn’t ask where he had been. She simply set the tablet aside and turned toward him. “How was he?” she asked quietly.

Jordan stared at the ceiling for a moment before answering.

“Worse than the files suggested,” he said. “He’s not just working late. He’s avoiding going home. And when he does go home, he sits in his car for ten or twelve minutes before he goes inside.”

Vanessa was quiet.

Jordan continued.

“He made a phone call tonight from a diner. Whoever he was talking to, it didn’t go well. He looked like he wanted to put his fist through the table.”

Vanessa reached over and rested her hand on his chest.

“You think he’s cracking?”

Jordan turned his head to look at her in the dim light.

“I think he was already cracked,” he said. “And now something is pushing on the cracks.” Vanessa didn’t respond right away.

Then she said, “We still have time.”

Jordan looked back at the ceiling.

“Not as much as we thought.”

Vanessa moved closer and rested her head on his shoulder. Her hand stayed on his chest, fingers spread over his heart.

They lay like that for a long time without speaking.

Eventually Vanessa’s breathing slowed and she seemed to fall asleep.

Jordan stayed awake longer, staring at the ceiling, one hand resting lightly on her back. He didn’t notice that her eyes were still open.

Vanessa lay perfectly still, her cheek against Jordan’s shoulder, but her mind was far away from the apartment. She kept seeing Georgia’s face in the office — the tired eyes, the small, genuine smile, the way she had said her name like it was something she didn’t offer to many people.

She felt something warm and uncomfortable moving in her chest. It wasn’t panic. It was slower than that. Deeper.

She closed her eyes and tried to push it down.

It didn’t move.

After several minutes, she spoke quietly into the darkness.

“Jordan?”

He turned his head slightly.

“Yeah?”

Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, “Tell me the rules.”

Jordan was silent for a few seconds.

“You want them now?”

“Yes.”

He shifted slightly so he could see her face in the dim light from the window.

“You sure?”

Vanessa nodded against his shoulder.

Jordan was quiet for another moment. Then he began to speak, his voice low and steady, like he was reciting something that had lived between them for years.

“We don’t fall in love with them,” he said. “That’s the first one. We don’t let it happen. Not even a little. Not even when it would be easy.”

His hand moved slowly up and down her back as he continued.

“We don’t keep them. That’s the second. No matter how it feels in the moment. No matter what they say or what they give us. When the job is done, we walk away clean.”

Vanessa’s fingers tightened slightly against his chest.

Jordan’s voice dropped a little lower.

“And when it’s over…” He paused for a second. “We fuck each other like the world is ending. That’s the last one. We don’t pretend it didn’t happen. We don’t make it smaller than it was. We take what we need from each other and we don’t apologize for it.”

He was quiet after that.

The rules settled in the space between them, familiar and sharp.

Vanessa kept her eyes closed. She could feel her heart beating too fast against her ribs. She thought about Georgia’s hand on her husband’s face through the kitchen window. She thought about the way Georgia had looked at her across the desk — tired, but still open in a way that felt dangerous.

She thought about how easy it would be to destroy all of it.

Jordan’s hand continued its slow movement along her back.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

Vanessa opened her eyes and looked at him in the dark.

“I’m fine,” she said.

She leaned up and kissed him. It was slow and deliberate. When she pulled back, she rested her forehead against his for a moment before lying back down against his shoulder. Jordan didn’t ask any more questions.

Vanessa closed her eyes again and listened to the steady sound of his breathing. She stayed awake long after he had fallen asleep, staring at the faint glow of the city lights through the blinds, her hand still resting over his heart.

The rules echoed in her mind, steady and cold.

She repeated them to herself in silence.

We don’t fall in love with them.

We don’t keep them.

And when it’s over… we fuck each other like the world is ending.

She held onto the words like they were something she could still believe in.

Chapter 4

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 4: Infiltration

Vanessa waited three days before she contacted Georgia.

She didn’t want to seem too eager. She also didn’t want to give the other woman too much time to forget her. On the morning of the fourth day, she sent a short, professional email from the foundation address she had set up for this job.

> Georgia,

> I enjoyed our conversation after your lecture. I’m still in the city for another couple of weeks and would very much like to continue our discussion over coffee, if you have the time. > Best,

> Vanessa Lang

Georgia replied within two hours.

> Vanessa,

> I’d like that. I have a break between classes on Thursday afternoon. There’s a café near the sociology building called Holloway’s. Would 3:30 work?

> Georgia

Vanessa stared at the reply for a long time before she answered.

> Perfect. I’ll see you there.

She closed the laptop and sat back in her chair. Jordan was in the kitchen making coffee. He hadn’t asked her about Georgia since the night she had asked him to repeat the rules. He was giving her space, the way he always did when she was working.

Vanessa looked out the window at the city and tried to ignore the low, steady pulse she felt every time she thought about seeing Georgia again.

--Thursday afternoon was cool and overcast. Vanessa arrived at Holloway’s ten minutes early and chose a table near the back, where the light was softer and the noise from the street was muted. She ordered a black coffee and waited.

Georgia arrived at exactly 3:30.

She was dressed more casually than she had been at the lecture — dark jeans, a creamcolored sweater, and a long gray coat that looked well-worn. Her hair was down today, falling just past her shoulders. She looked tired, but when she saw Vanessa, she smiled.

“Hi,” she said. “I hope I’m not late.”

“You’re right on time,” Vanessa said, standing up. “I already ordered. What would you like?” Georgia glanced at the counter.

“Just a regular coffee is fine. I can get it.”

“Please,” Vanessa said. “Let me.”

She went to the counter and came back with Georgia’s coffee. They sat across from each other. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Georgia wrapped her hands around her cup and looked at Vanessa with a small, almost apologetic smile.

“I have to admit, I was surprised when you emailed,” she said. “I don’t usually get approached by foundations after lectures. Most of them already have their own people they work with.”

Vanessa tilted her head slightly.

“We’re selective,” she said. “And we don’t usually find researchers who are willing to say what you said in that lecture.”

Georgia looked down at her coffee.

“I don’t usually say things like that in public,” she admitted. “My department chair wasn’t thrilled.”

“Does that worry you?”

Georgia was quiet for a moment.

“It should,” she said. “But lately I’ve been having trouble caring as much as I used to.” Vanessa didn’t push. She simply waited.

Georgia took a sip of her coffee and continued, her voice quieter.

“My husband has been… struggling with something for the last year. It’s been hard on both of us. I’ve been trying to hold things together at home and at work, and I think I’m running out of energy to pretend everything is fine.”

Vanessa kept her expression open and attentive.

“That sounds exhausting,” she said.

Georgia gave a small, tired laugh.

“It is. But that’s marriage, isn’t it? You don’t get to tap out when it gets hard.”

Vanessa didn’t answer right away. She let the silence sit between them for a few seconds before she spoke again.

“Some people do,” she said. “Tap out, I mean. You’re choosing not to.”

Georgia looked at her.

Vanessa met her eyes.

“That says something about you.”

Georgia held her gaze for a moment longer than necessary. Then she looked away and took another sip of coffee.

They talked for nearly two hours.

Vanessa kept the conversation focused on Georgia’s work at first — her research, her thoughts on institutional trust, the ways academia had changed over the last decade. Georgia was articulate and thoughtful, but every so often her attention would drift, as if something heavier was pulling at her from the edges of her mind.

Vanessa didn’t push. She simply listened. And when Georgia began to talk more personally — about how difficult it had become to connect with her husband, about how lonely it felt to be the only one trying to hold their life together — Vanessa let her speak without interrupting.

“I love him,” Georgia said quietly, almost as if she were reminding herself. “I really do. But sometimes I feel like I’m the only one in this marriage who’s still fully present. He disappears into his work for days at a time. And when he comes back, he’s… not really here. Not the way he used to be.”

Vanessa nodded slowly.

“That must be hard,” she said. “To love someone who keeps leaving, even when he’s sitting right across from you.”

Georgia looked at her. Something in her expression shifted — a flicker of surprise, followed by something softer and more vulnerable.

“Yeah,” she said. “It is.”

They talked until the light outside began to change. When Georgia finally glanced at her watch, she looked genuinely disappointed.

“I have to get back for office hours,” she said. “I didn’t realize how late it was.” Vanessa stood with her. They walked out of the café together and stopped on the sidewalk. The street was busy with students and faculty moving between classes.

Georgia turned to face her.

“Thank you for this,” she said. “I don’t usually talk this much about… personal things. Especially not with someone I just met.”

Vanessa smiled.

“I’m glad you did.”

They stood there for a moment. The air between them felt charged in a way that had nothing to do with the job. Vanessa could feel it in her chest — that same strange, warm pressure she had felt during the lecture.

She stepped forward and kissed Georgia on the cheek, very close to the corner of her mouth. It was quick, almost casual, the way a European might greet a friend. But she let her lips linger a fraction longer than necessary.

When she pulled back, their eyes met.

Georgia’s breath caught slightly. She didn’t step away. For several long seconds, neither of them moved.

Vanessa could see the confusion in Georgia’s face — and something else. Something warmer. Something that matched the feeling currently burning low in her own stomach.

Georgia’s voice was quieter when she finally spoke.

“Vanessa…”

Vanessa held her gaze.

“Yes?”

Georgia hesitated. Her eyes dropped briefly to Vanessa’s mouth before she looked away. “I… I should go,” she said. “I’m already late.”

Vanessa nodded.

“Of course.”

Georgia took a small step back, but she didn’t turn away immediately.

“Would you…” She stopped, then started again. “Would you like to do this again? Maybe dinner next week? If you’re still in the city.”

Vanessa felt something tighten in her chest.

“I’d like that,” she said. “Very much.”

Georgia nodded. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but couldn’t find the words. After another moment, she gave Vanessa a small, slightly unsteady smile and turned to walk away.

Vanessa watched her go.

She didn’t move until Georgia had disappeared around the corner.

Then she exhaled slowly and pressed her fingers lightly against her own lips.

--Jordan had been watching the diner for nearly an hour when Elias finally appeared. It was just after nine. Elias walked in with the same worn satchel and the same exhausted posture Jordan had seen before. He took his usual seat in the back corner, facing the door, and pulled out his laptop.

Jordan waited five minutes before he stood up from his own table near the front and walked over.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asked, nodding toward the empty chair across from Elias. Elias looked up, startled. His eyes were bloodshot and there were dark circles beneath them. For a moment he seemed like he might refuse. Then he gave a small, distracted nod. “Sure. It’s a free country.”

Jordan sat down and set his coffee on the table.

“Thanks. I’ve been coming here at night to work. Quieter than most places.”

Elias glanced at him, then back at his screen.

“Yeah,” he said. “It is.”

Jordan didn’t push. He opened his own laptop and pretended to work for a while. After about ten minutes, he spoke again, keeping his voice casual.

“You look like you’re working on something heavy.”

Elias let out a short, humorless breath.

“You could say that.”

Jordan nodded.

“Anything interesting?”

Elias looked at him for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether to answer. “Atmospheric anomalies,” he said finally. “High-altitude imaging. The kind of thing most people don’t want to talk about.”

Jordan took a sip of his coffee.

“Try me.”

Elias studied him again. There was suspicion in his eyes, but also something else — a kind of desperate hunger to be heard.

“You ever hear people talk about things they’ve seen in the sky that don’t make sense?” he asked. “Things that move in ways they shouldn’t. That appear and disappear without any explanation the government is willing to give?”

Jordan met his eyes.

“I’ve heard stories,” he said. “Most people write them off as weather balloons or drones. Or they say the people seeing them are crazy.”

Elias’s jaw tightened.

“Yeah,” he said. “They do.”

Jordan leaned forward slightly.

“What if they’re not?”

Elias went very still.

Jordan continued, his voice low and even.

“What if someone had actual data? Real imaging. Something that couldn’t be explained away by conventional means. Would that change anything?”

Elias stared at him.

“Who are you?” he asked quietly.

Jordan gave him a small, calm smile.

“Someone who’s tired of watching smart people get dismissed because they’re asking questions no one wants answered.”

Elias didn’t respond right away. He looked down at his laptop, then back at Jordan. “I don’t even know your name,” he said.

“Daniel Hale,” Jordan said. “I work in private research funding. Mostly aerospace and atmospheric studies. I’ve been following some of the work coming out of this area.” Elias was quiet for a long time.

Then he closed his laptop.

“I can’t talk about this here,” he said.

Jordan nodded.

“Understood.”

Elias hesitated, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a worn business card. He slid it across the table.

“My office number,” he said. “If you’re serious.”

Jordan picked up the card.

“I am.”

Elias stood up, gathered his things, and left without another word.

Jordan watched him go.

He didn’t smile until Elias had disappeared down the block.

Then he finished his coffee, paid the bill, and walked out into the night.

--Vanessa was already in bed when Jordan got home.

She was lying on her side, facing away from the door, but he could tell she wasn’t asleep. Her breathing was too even, too controlled.

He undressed quietly and slid in behind her. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her gently against him.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then Vanessa reached down and covered his hand with hers.

“How did it go?” she asked quietly.

Jordan pressed his face into the back of her neck.

“He took the bait,” he said. “Gave me his number. He’s suspicious, but he’s also desperate. That works in our favor.”

Vanessa was quiet for a while.

“Good,” she said.

Jordan tightened his arm around her.

“You?”

Vanessa didn’t answer right away.

Then she said, “She’s lonely. More than the files suggested. Her marriage is already falling apart. She’s just trying to hold on to what’s left of it.”

Jordan was silent for a moment.

“That should make it easier,” he said.

Vanessa didn’t respond.

Jordan kissed the back of her shoulder.

“You okay?”

Vanessa turned in his arms until she was facing him. In the dark, he could just make out the shape of her face.

“I’m fine,” she said.

She kissed him. It was slow and deep, and when she pulled back, she rested her forehead against his.

Jordan didn’t push. He simply held her.

After a while, Vanessa spoke again, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Tell me the rules again.”

Jordan was quiet for a moment. Then he began to recite them, low and steady against her skin.

“We don’t fall in love with them. We don’t keep them. And when it’s over… we fuck each other like the world is ending.”

Vanessa closed her eyes and listened.

She repeated the words in her mind as Jordan’s hand moved slowly down her back.

She held onto them like they were the only thing keeping her from drifting somewhere she couldn’t come back from.

Chapter 5

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 4.5: 2 a.m.

Vanessa couldn’t sleep.

She lay on her back in the dark apartment, staring at the ceiling while Jordan slept beside her. The city outside was quieter than usual, the occasional sound of a car passing far below the only thing breaking the silence.

She kept seeing Georgia’s face from that afternoon — the way she had looked at her after the almost-kiss on the sidewalk. The hesitation in her voice. The way her eyes had dropped to Vanessa’s mouth before she forced herself to look away.

Vanessa’s chest felt tight. Warm. Unsettled in a way she didn’t have words for yet. At 1:47 a.m., she picked up her phone from the nightstand.

She stared at the screen for a long time before she opened a new message and typed Georgia’s name.

Her thumb hovered over the keyboard.

She almost deleted it.

Instead, she wrote:

> Are you awake?

She hit send before she could talk herself out of it.

The reply came seven minutes later.

> Yes.

Vanessa stared at the single word. Her heart was beating harder than it should have been. She typed again.

> I can’t stop thinking about this afternoon.

Another long pause. Then:

> Neither can I.

Vanessa closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she typed:

> Can I see you?

This time the reply took longer. Nearly four minutes.

> Now?

> Yes.

> Where?

Vanessa thought for a moment, then typed the name of a hotel she knew — one that sat roughly halfway between their apartment and Georgia's house. Neutral ground. Discreet. > The Beaumont. Room 412. I can be there in forty minutes.

Georgia didn't answer right away.

Vanessa waited, phone resting on her chest, listening to the sound of Jordan breathing beside her.

Finally, the reply came.

> I'll be there.

Vanessa set the phone down and stared at the ceiling for another minute. Then she sat up slowly and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Jordan stirred behind her.

She felt his hand touch the small of her back.

"You going somewhere?" he asked, voice rough with sleep.

Vanessa didn't turn around right away.

"I need to go meet her," she said quietly.

Jordan was quiet for a moment. Then he sat up behind her and rested his chin on her shoulder, his arm sliding around her waist.

"Georgia?"

Vanessa nodded.

Jordan didn't ask why. He didn't ask what had happened. He simply held her for a few seconds, his breath warm against her neck.

Then he spoke, low and calm.

"Do what you have to do," he said. "I know you. I understand."

Vanessa closed her eyes.

She turned her head slightly and kissed his jaw.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Jordan kissed her shoulder once, then let her go.

Vanessa stood up and got dressed in the dark — dark jeans, a simple black sweater, and a coat. She didn't bother with makeup. She didn't need it.

Before she left the bedroom, she looked back at Jordan. He was lying on his side, watching her.

"I'll be back before morning," she said.

Jordan nodded.

“Be careful.”

Vanessa gave him a small, grateful smile and left.

--The Beaumont was quiet when Vanessa arrived. She checked in under a name she rarely used and took the elevator to the fourth floor. Room 412 was at the end of the hall. She let herself in and turned on the bedside lamp, leaving the main lights off.

She didn’t have to wait long.

A soft knock came twenty-three minutes later.

Vanessa opened the door.

Georgia stood in the hallway, still wearing the same clothes from that afternoon. Her hair was slightly windblown, and her eyes were wide and uncertain. She looked like she might change her mind at any second.

Vanessa didn’t speak. She simply stepped back and let her in.

Georgia walked past her into the room. She stopped in the middle of the space and turned around slowly, as if she wasn’t sure what she was doing there.

Vanessa closed the door and locked it.

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

Then Georgia spoke, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know why I came.”

Vanessa stepped closer.

“Yes, you do.”

Georgia looked at her. Her breathing was uneven.

“I’m married,” she said. It sounded like she was trying to remind herself more than she was trying to remind Vanessa.

“I know,” Vanessa said softly.

Georgia swallowed.

“I’ve never done anything like this before.”

Vanessa stopped in front of her. Close, but not touching yet.

“Do you want to leave?” she asked.

Georgia didn’t answer right away.

Then she shook her head.

“No.”

Vanessa reached up and touched her face, her fingers brushing lightly along Georgia’s jaw. Georgia leaned into the touch without seeming to realize she was doing it.

Vanessa leaned in slowly and kissed her.

It started gentle — a question more than a demand. Georgia froze for half a second, then made a small, broken sound and kissed her back.

The kiss deepened quickly. Georgia’s hands came up to grip the front of Vanessa’s coat. Vanessa slid one hand into Georgia’s hair and the other around her waist, pulling her closer. Their mouths opened against each other. Vanessa tasted the faint bitterness of coffee on Georgia’s tongue and something sweeter underneath.

When they finally broke apart, both of them were breathing hard.

Georgia’s eyes were glassy, her lips already swollen.

“Vanessa…” she whispered.

Vanessa kissed her again, slower this time, and began walking her backward toward the bed. Georgia let herself be led.

When the backs of her knees hit the mattress, she sat down. Vanessa followed, straddling her lap as she shrugged out of her coat and dropped it to the floor. Georgia’s hands moved hesitantly to Vanessa’s waist, then slid up under her sweater, palms warm against bare skin.

Vanessa pulled her own sweater over her head and let it fall. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath.

Georgia stared at her for a moment, then leaned forward and pressed her mouth to the center of Vanessa’s chest, right over her heart. The kiss was soft. Almost reverent.

Vanessa closed her eyes and threaded her fingers through Georgia’s hair.

She could feel Georgia’s breath against her skin — warm, shaky, and uneven. Georgia’s hands moved slowly up Vanessa’s back, tracing the line of her spine before sliding around to cup her breasts. Her thumbs brushed over Vanessa’s nipples, and Vanessa felt them tighten instantly under the touch.

Georgia looked up at her, eyes dark and uncertain.

Vanessa leaned down and kissed her again, deeper this time, guiding Georgia’s hands to squeeze her breasts more firmly. Georgia responded with a soft moan against her mouth. Vanessa stood up long enough to unbutton her jeans and push them down along with her underwear. She stepped out of them and climbed back

onto the bed, completely naked now. Georgia's eyes moved over her body with a mixture of hunger and nervousness.

Vanessa reached for the hem of Georgia's sweater.

"May I?" she asked quietly.

Georgia nodded.

Vanessa pulled the sweater up and over Georgia's head. Georgia's bra was simple — white cotton, unadorned. Vanessa reached behind her and unclasped it, letting it fall away. Georgia's breasts were full and soft, her nipples already stiff from the cool air and arousal. Vanessa lowered her head and took one into her mouth.

Georgia gasped, her hand flying to the back of Vanessa's head. Vanessa sucked gently at first, then harder, flicking her tongue over the sensitive peak while her hand cupped and squeezed the other breast. Georgia's breathing grew ragged. Her hips shifted restlessly beneath Vanessa.

Vanessa moved to the other nipple, giving it the same attention until Georgia was arching beneath her, soft sounds escaping her throat.

She kissed her way down Georgia's stomach, pausing to press her mouth to the soft skin just above the waistband of her jeans. Her fingers worked the button and zipper open. Georgia lifted her hips to help as Vanessa pulled her jeans and underwear down together and dropped them off the side of the bed.

Georgia was completely bare now.

Vanessa took a moment to look at her — the soft curve of her stomach, the dark auburn curls between her legs, already damp. Georgia's thighs trembled slightly as Vanessa ran her hands slowly up the inside of them.

Vanessa lowered herself between Georgia's legs.

She started with slow, open-mouthed kisses along the inside of Georgia's thighs, moving higher and higher until her breath was ghosting over Georgia's wet folds. Georgia's hips twitched. Her hand found Vanessa's hair again, fingers tightening.

Vanessa licked her once, slowly, from bottom to top.

Georgia cried out, the sound loud in the quiet room.

Vanessa did it again, slower this time, savoring the taste of her. She was already slick and swollen. Vanessa circled her clit with the flat of her tongue, then sucked it gently into her mouth. Georgia's thighs tried to close around her head, but Vanessa held them open with her hands, keeping her spread.

She licked and sucked with focused attention, alternating between broad strokes and tight, precise circles around Georgia's clit. Every time Georgia's hips

bucked, Vanessa pressed her down more firmly into the mattress.

Georgia was moaning steadily now, her head thrown back against the pillows, one hand gripping the sheets and the other tangled in Vanessa's hair.

Vanessa slid two fingers into her without warning.

Georgia's back arched hard off the bed.

"Fuck— Vanessa—"

Vanessa curled her fingers upward, stroking the sensitive spot inside her while her mouth stayed locked on her clit. She fucked her slowly at first, then faster as Georgia's breathing grew more frantic. The wet sounds of her fingers moving in and out of Georgia filled the room, mixing with Georgia's broken moans.

Georgia came with a sharp, gasping cry, her thighs clamping around Vanessa's head as her whole body shook. Vanessa didn't stop. She kept licking and fucking her through it, drawing it out until Georgia was whimpering and trying to pull away from the overstimulation. Only then did Vanessa ease her fingers out and press a final, gentle kiss to Georgia's swollen clit.

She crawled back up Georgia's body and kissed her deeply, letting her taste herself on Vanessa's tongue.

Georgia kissed her back with desperate hunger, her hands roaming over Vanessa's back and ass, pulling her closer.

They rolled until Vanessa was on her back. Georgia moved down her body with shaking hands, kissing and licking her way across Vanessa's breasts, her stomach, and lower. When she settled between Vanessa's thighs, she looked up once, eyes wide and uncertain. Vanessa reached down and gently guided her head lower.

Georgia's first lick was tentative. Vanessa moaned softly to encourage her. Georgia grew bolder, licking her with long, slow strokes before focusing on her clit. She wasn't as practiced as Vanessa, but what she lacked in technique she made up for in eagerness. She sucked and licked with increasing confidence, moaning against Vanessa's pussy like she was the one being pleasured.

Vanessa's hips rolled against her mouth. She reached down and held Georgia's head in place, guiding her rhythm.

"Fingers," Vanessa breathed. "Inside me."

Georgia obeyed immediately. She slid two fingers into Vanessa's soaked cunt and started fucking her while her tongue worked her clit. Vanessa groaned, her head pressing back into the pillows.

Georgia’s fingers were thicker than Vanessa expected. She curled them experimentally and found the right spot on the third try. Vanessa’s thighs tensed.

“Right there,” she said, voice rough. “Don’t stop.”

Georgia didn’t. She fucked her steadily, sucking on her clit with growing intensity. Vanessa could feel the orgasm building fast — tighter and hotter than she was used to. Her hand tightened in Georgia’s hair.

She came hard, her back arching, a low, guttural moan tearing from her throat as her cunt clenched rhythmically around Georgia’s fingers. Georgia kept licking her through it, drawing it out until Vanessa finally pushed her head away, too sensitive to take any more. Georgia crawled back up and kissed her. Vanessa could taste herself on Georgia’s lips. They kissed for a long time, slow and deep, their bodies pressed together.

After a while, Vanessa rolled them again so she was on top. She reached between them and slid her fingers back into Georgia’s still-wet pussy. Georgia gasped into her mouth. Vanessa fucked her slowly this time, watching her face. Georgia’s eyes stayed locked on hers, wide and vulnerable. Every time Vanessa curled her fingers, Georgia’s mouth fell open a little more.

Vanessa added a third finger.

Georgia’s eyes fluttered shut and her head tilted back.

Vanessa fucked her deeper, harder, her thumb rubbing tight circles over her clit. Georgia’s hands gripped Vanessa’s shoulders, nails digging in. Her breathing turned into sharp,

desperate pants.

“Come for me again,” Vanessa whispered against her mouth. “I want to feel it.”

Georgia came with a broken sob, her cunt pulsing hard around Vanessa’s fingers. Her whole body went rigid, then collapsed back against the bed, trembling.

Vanessa slowly withdrew her fingers and brought them to her own mouth, sucking them clean while Georgia watched, dazed and flushed.

They lay tangled together afterward, both of them breathing hard. Georgia’s head rested on Vanessa’s chest. Vanessa’s fingers moved slowly through her hair.

Georgia spoke first, her voice hoarse.

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Vanessa stared at the ceiling.

“Neither do I,” she said quietly.

Georgia lifted her head and looked at her.

Vanessa met her eyes.

For a long moment, neither of them looked away.

Then Georgia leaned down and kissed her again — slower this time, softer, like she was trying to memorize the shape of Vanessa's mouth.

Vanessa kissed her back.

They didn't sleep.

They stayed in the bed until the sky outside the hotel window began to lighten. Then Georgia got up and dressed in silence. Vanessa watched her from the bed.

At the door, Georgia paused with her hand on the knob.

She didn't turn around.

"I don't know if I can do this again," she said.

Vanessa didn't answer.

Georgia opened the door and left.

Vanessa stayed in the bed for a long time after she was gone, staring at the ceiling, her body still warm from Georgia's hands and mouth.

Eventually she got up, showered, and dressed.

She checked out of the hotel before the sun had fully risen.

When she got back to the apartment, Jordan was in the kitchen making coffee. He looked up when she came in.

He didn't ask where she had been or what had happened.

He simply poured her a cup and set it on the counter in front of her.

Vanessa wrapped her hands around the mug and stared down into it.

Jordan leaned against the counter across from her.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

Vanessa didn't look up.

"I don't know," she said.

Jordan nodded like that was an acceptable answer.

He reached over and touched her hand once, briefly, then went back to his own coffee. They stood in silence together as the city woke up outside.

Neither of them spoke again for a long time.

Chapter 6

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 5: The First Anomaly

Jordan had been following Elias for three nights in a row.

The man’s routine had become disturbingly predictable. He left the research building late, usually after ten, and went straight to the diner. He sat in the same corner booth, ordered nothing but black coffee, and worked on his laptop until well after midnight. Then he drove home, sat in his car for ten to fifteen minutes, and finally went inside.

Tonight was no different.

Jordan parked half a block away and watched as Elias’s car pulled into the driveway just after one in the morning. The kitchen light came on a few minutes later. Georgia’s silhouette appeared briefly in the window before the light turned off again.

Jordan was about to start the engine and head home when something made him stop. A shadow moved across the side of the house.

It wasn’t Elias. It wasn’t Georgia either. The shape was too tall, too thin, and it moved with a strange, fluid quality that didn’t look quite human. It passed beneath the bedroom window and disappeared around the back of the house.

Jordan’s hand tightened on the steering wheel.

He waited thirty seconds, then stepped out of the car and crossed the street, keeping to the shadows. He moved slowly along the side of the house, staying low. When he reached the corner, he stopped and listened.

There was no sound.

He peered around the edge of the house.

The backyard was empty. The motion light above the back door hadn’t triggered. Jordan scanned the fence line, then the dark space between the garage and the neighbor’s property. Nothing.

He was about to turn back when he saw it.

Something was crouched on the roof of the garage.

It was difficult to make out clearly in the dark, but Jordan could see enough. It was too large to be a raccoon or a cat. The shape was elongated, with limbs that looked wrong — too many joints, or joints in the wrong places. It was perfectly still, as if it knew he was there.

Jordan’s mouth went dry.

He reached for the gun he kept in his jacket, but didn’t draw it.

The thing on the roof tilted its head slightly. Even from this distance, Jordan could feel it watching him. Not just looking in his direction — watching *him*, specifically.

A cold, crawling sensation moved up the back of his neck.

Then, without any visible movement, the shape was gone.

One second it was there. The next, the roof was empty.

Jordan stood frozen for several seconds, staring at the spot where it had been. His heart was pounding harder than it should have been. He had seen a lot of strange things in his line of work, but this was different. This hadn’t felt like a person in a mask or some kind of surveillance equipment.

This had felt *wrong*.

He waited another five minutes, but nothing else moved. Eventually he walked back to his car, got in, and drove away without turning on the headlights until he was two blocks from the house.

He didn’t go straight home.

Instead, he drove to a twenty-four-hour diner on the other side of the city and sat in a booth with his back to the wall. He ordered coffee and stared out the window for a long time without drinking it.

He kept seeing the shape on the roof.

He kept feeling the way it had looked at him.

By the time he finally drove back to the apartment, the sky was beginning to lighten. --Vanessa had fallen asleep on the couch.

She hadn’t meant to. She had been waiting for Jordan to get back, flipping through channels without really watching anything. At some point she must have closed her eyes.

The dream started slowly.

She was in their bed, in their apartment. Everything looked normal at first. The city lights glowed faintly through the half-closed blinds. Jordan’s side of the bed was empty. She could hear the low hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen.

But something felt off.

The air in the room was too still. Too heavy.

Vanessa sat up.

Georgia was standing at the foot of the bed.

She was naked. Her skin looked pale in the low light. She was smiling, but the expression didn't reach her eyes. There was something vacant in her face, something empty.

"Georgia?" Vanessa said. Her voice sounded muffled, like she was speaking from

underwater.

Georgia didn't answer.

She climbed onto the bed and crawled toward Vanessa on her hands and knees. Her

movements were smooth, almost too smooth. When she reached Vanessa, she straddled her hips and leaned down.

Her eyes were completely black.

Vanessa tried to push her off, but her arms wouldn't move properly. Georgia's hands pinned her wrists to the mattress with unnatural strength. She leaned in until their faces were inches apart.

"You're not supposed to feel anything," Georgia whispered. Her voice was wrong — layered, like two people speaking at once. "That's the rule."

Vanessa's heart was hammering in her chest.

Georgia smiled wider. Her teeth looked too sharp.

"But you do," she said. "You feel everything."

She kissed Vanessa.

It wasn't like the kisses they had shared in the hotel. This one was cold. Invasive. Vanessa felt something push into her mouth that wasn't a tongue — something thin and wet and wrong. It slid down her throat and she couldn't breathe.

She tried to scream.

She woke up gasping, sitting upright on the couch, one hand pressed to her throat. The apartment was dark and quiet. The television was still on, the volume low. Jordan wasn't back yet.

Vanessa's breathing was ragged. She looked around the room, disoriented. Her heart was still pounding hard against her ribs. She could still feel the sensation of something sliding down her throat.

She stood up on unsteady legs and walked to the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of water and drank it too fast, then set the glass down and gripped the edge of the counter. She stayed there for a long time, staring at nothing.

When Jordan finally came home just before dawn, Vanessa was sitting on the couch again, wrapped in a blanket. She looked up when he came in.

He stopped in the doorway when he saw her face.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

Vanessa didn’t answer right away.

Jordan closed the door behind him and walked over. He sat down on the coffee table in front of her, close enough that their knees touched.

“Bad night?” he asked.

Vanessa nodded slowly.

“I fell asleep on the couch,” she said. “Had a dream.”

Jordan waited.

Vanessa stared down at her hands.

“It was about Georgia. She was here. In our bed. But it wasn’t really her. Her eyes were black. And when she kissed me…” She stopped, then forced herself to continue. “It felt like something was crawling down my throat. I couldn’t breathe.”

Jordan was quiet for a moment.

“You think it means something?” he asked.

Vanessa shook her head.

“I don’t know. It just didn’t feel like a normal dream. It felt… invasive. Like something was in my head.”

Jordan reached out and took one of her hands. He held it between both of his.

“You want to talk about it more?”

Vanessa shook her head again.

“Not right now.”

Jordan nodded. He didn’t push.

They sat in silence for a while. Eventually Jordan spoke again, his voice low.

“I saw something tonight while I was watching the house.”

Vanessa looked up.

Jordan told her about the shape on the garage roof. He described the way it had moved, the way it had watched him, and how it had disappeared without any visible motion. He didn’t exaggerate. He didn’t soften it. He just told her what he had seen.

When he finished, Vanessa was quiet for a long time.

“You think it was watching Elias?” she asked finally.

“I think it was watching *us* watching Elias,” Jordan said. “And I don’t think it was the only one.”

Vanessa frowned.

“What do you mean?”

Jordan stood up and walked to the window. He looked out at the city for a moment before answering.

“I went back to the diner after I left their house. Someone had gone through Elias’s things. The papers he usually leaves stacked in a certain order were rearranged. Not obviously. Just enough that I noticed. And one of his notebooks was open to a page I know he hadn’t been working on.”

Vanessa’s fingers tightened around the edge of the blanket.

“You think someone else is following him?”

“I think someone else is involved,” Jordan said. “And I don’t think they’re on our side. Or the CIA’s.”

Vanessa was quiet again.

Then she said, “We need to be more careful.”

Jordan turned from the window and looked at her.

“Yeah,” he said. “We do.”

He walked back over and sat down beside her on the couch. Vanessa leaned against him without thinking. Jordan put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. They sat like that as the sky outside slowly grew lighter.

Neither of them spoke again for a long time.

Eventually Jordan kissed the top of her head.

“Try to get some sleep,” he said quietly. “I’ll stay up for a while.”

Vanessa nodded against his shoulder but didn’t move.

She didn’t think she would be able to sleep again.

Not tonight.

Not with the memory of those black eyes still burned into the back of her mind.

Chapter 7

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 6: First Contact

It was a little after 2:30 a.m. when Vanessa woke.

Jordan was asleep behind her, one arm draped over her waist, his breath warm and steady against the back of her neck. The bedroom was dark except for the faint orange glow of the city lights filtering through the half-closed blinds. They had gone to bed not long after he came home. Neither of them had said much. They had simply undressed in the dark, climbed under the covers, and held each other until exhaustion pulled them under.

Vanessa had tried to sleep, but the dream kept returning. She could still see Georgia's black eyes. She could still feel the cold, invasive sensation of something sliding down her throat. Even now, hours later, the memory clung to her.

She was staring at the wall when the air in the room changed.

The temperature dropped several degrees. A low, strange pressure settled behind her eyes and at the base of her skull. Vanessa opened her eyes fully and stayed very still. Jordan's arm tightened around her waist. He was awake now too.

In the corner of the room, near the dresser, the darkness thickened.

It didn't tear or ripple dramatically. It simply became *more*. The space grew denser, as though something large and unseen was standing just behind the fabric of reality. Thin lines of pale, cold light appeared inside the distortion, moving slowly, like thoughts tracing themselves through the air. The shape grew taller, more defined, though it still refused to settle into anything fully solid.

Neither of them spoke.

After several long seconds, a voice rose from the air itself. It was layered, resonant, and strangely gentle.

You are both awake.

Jordan's voice was low and rough with sleep.

"You were here last night."

We were.

The presence shifted slightly closer to the bed. The lines of light inside it moved with more purpose now.

We have been watching you for a long time. Both of you. We have seen how you move through the world. How you touch others only to break them apart. And yet the two of you have stayed together. You have chosen each other, even when it would have been easier to let go.

Vanessa's throat felt tight. She thought about Georgia again — about the hotel room, about how real it had felt to want someone she was supposed to destroy.

The voice continued, calm and unhurried.

We have studied many forms of connection among your kind. Most of them are built on fear or need or the desperate hope that another person will make the loneliness stop. Yours has always been different. Colder. More honest. But even honesty has its limits. Jordan spoke.

"What do you want from us?"

We want to show you something different. Something that does not require one person to disappear inside the other. Something that does not rely on performance or possession. The air in the room grew warmer. A slow, liquid warmth began to move through Vanessa's body. It started in her chest and spread downward. Her nipples tightened against the sheet. A deep, slow throb began between her legs.

Jordan's cock hardened against her lower back. His breathing changed, but he didn't pull away.

The voice continued.

Your species clings to a form of bonding that is fundamentally unstable. You call it marriage. You build entire civilizations around it. You treat it as the highest expression of connection. And yet it is almost always constructed on foundations of performance, ownership, and the gradual erasure of one self in service of the other.

The distortion in the corner began to change.

The lines of light grew brighter. The darkness around them thickened and then began to part. From within the distortion, thick, glistening shapes began to emerge — long, dark gray tentacles with faint iridescent patterns moving beneath the surface. They moved slowly at first, almost carefully, as though the presence was choosing how much of itself to reveal. Dozens of them. More than fifty.

Some were thick as a wrist. Others were thinner, more flexible. They slid through the air toward the bed with clear intention.

Jordan's arm stayed around Vanessa, but she could feel his heart beating harder against her back.

The voice continued as the tentacles moved closer.

One person learns to shrink. The other learns to dominate, or to disappear inside the role of provider, or to resent the weight of being needed. Over time, the bond becomes a slow act of mutual diminishment. Most of your pair-bonds are held together by fear. Fear of loneliness. Fear of judgment. Fear of starting over. You destroy the connections of others for profit, yet you participate in the same fragile architecture yourselves.

A thick tentacle reached the bed and slid slowly up Vanessa's bare leg, leaving a warm, slick trail behind it. Another moved across her stomach. She didn't pull away.

The voice kept speaking.

You break what others have built while remaining inside a system that requires the same slow breaking of self. Most of the marriages you have destroyed were already hollow. The people inside them were already performing. Already lying. Already disappearing. You simply made the rot visible.

Jordan's voice was quiet.

"People pay us well to make it visible."

Because they already know, on some level, that the structure is failing.

More tentacles reached the bed. One wrapped gently around Vanessa's wrist. Another slid up Jordan's thigh. Neither of them resisted.

The voice spoke again, softer now.

Our version of bonding does not rely on sexual exclusivity as proof of commitment. It does not require one person to limit their growth to protect the other's comfort. It does not treat desire as a threat. Connection is measured by the depth of knowing, not by the narrowing of options. Two beings may bond deeply while still remaining fully themselves. They do not disappear into each other. They do not demand that the other remain static. The bond is not a cage. It is a shared space in which both beings remain sovereign.

A tentacle pressed lightly against Vanessa's lips. She hesitated for only a second before opening her mouth. It slid inside — warm, thick, and strangely smooth. At the same time, another tentacle moved between her legs and dragged slowly along her slit. She was already wet. The tentacle seemed to know it.

Jordan made a low sound as several tentacles found him. One wrapped around his cock and began to stroke him slowly. Another pressed between his cheeks and began to push inside his ass.

The voice continued as the tentacles moved over both of them.

We will not take what is not given. We will only show you what is possible if you allow it.

Vanessa turned her head slightly and looked at Jordan in the dark. His eyes were already on her. His expression was tight with arousal, but he was still present. Still with her. He gave her a small, solemn nod.

Vanessa looked back toward the presence. Her voice was quiet, slightly hoarse from the tentacle in her mouth.

“Yes,” she said.

Jordan’s answer came a second later.

“Yes.”

The tentacles began to move with more purpose.

They slid deeper into both of them. Vanessa moaned softly around the one in her mouth as another pushed into her cunt and a third pressed into her ass. Jordan’s breathing turned ragged as the tentacle in his ass began to fuck him in slow, deep strokes while another continued working his cock.

More tentacles wrapped around their bodies — around their thighs, their waists, their throats. They were being held. Opened. Filled.

The voice spoke one last time before the tentacles took over completely.

Then we will begin.

Chapter 8

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 6.5: Known

The presence had grown larger.

The lines of light inside the distortion moved faster now, more purposeful. Dozens of tentacles began to emerge from it — thick, glistening, dark gray with faint iridescent patterns moving beneath the surface. They moved with clear intent, sliding through the air toward the bed where Vanessa and Jordan waited.

Jordan stood up, at the side of the bed, naked, his cock half-hard from the strange warmth still moving through the room. Vanessa remained sitting up in bed, the sheet still clutched to her chest. Her breathing was shallow.

Neither of them spoke as the first tentacles reached them.

One thick tentacle slid slowly up Vanessa’s bare leg, leaving a warm, slick trail behind it. Another moved across her stomach and gently tugged the sheet from her hands, pulling it down to expose her breasts. She let it go. Her nipples were already tight.

Jordan made a low sound as several tentacles found him at once. One wrapped around his cock and began to stroke him with slow, squeezing pressure. Another slid between his thighs and pressed firmly against his balls before moving lower, circling his hole.

Vanessa’s eyes stayed on Jordan’s face as a tentacle rose in front of her and pressed lightly against her lips. She opened her mouth without hesitation. It slid inside — warm, thick, and smooth. Another tentacle joined it seconds later, pushing in alongside the first until her jaw ached. Saliva immediately began to spill from the corners of her mouth.

At the same time, a thinner tentacle pushed between her legs and dragged slowly along her slit. She was already wet. The tentacle seemed to know it. It coated itself in her slick and then pushed inside her cunt in one smooth motion. Vanessa moaned around the tentacles in her mouth as it stretched her open.

Jordan’s breathing had turned rough. A thick tentacle was now fucking his cock in steady strokes while another pressed insistently against his ass. He didn’t resist when it pushed inside. His jaw tightened and his eyes closed briefly as it began to fuck him in slow, deep thrusts.

More tentacles joined in.

Two wrapped around Vanessa’s breasts, squeezing and tugging at her nipples while the one inside her pussy began to move faster. A second tentacle pushed

into her cunt alongside the first, stretching her wider. A third pressed against her asshole and slid inside without

resistance. Vanessa was now completely filled — mouth, pussy, and ass — and still more tentacles moved over her body, stroking her thighs, her stomach, her throat.

Jordan was in the same state. Three tentacles were inside him. One in his mouth, one in his ass, and the thick one still working his cock with relentless, squeezing strokes. His hips moved in small, involuntary rolls. His expression was tight with pleasure, but his eyes stayed open and focused on Vanessa.

They looked at each other across the bed.

Vanessa's face was flushed and wet. Tears had gathered at the corners of her eyes from the stretch in her mouth and throat. Every time the tentacles inside her thrust deeper, her expression tightened and her body jerked. She was making soft, desperate sounds around the tentacles in her mouth.

Jordan's face was calmer, but his eyes were dark. His cock was leaking steadily as the tentacle stroked him. His ass clenched visibly around the one fucking him. He looked overwhelmed, but not lost.

Vanessa pulled the tentacles from her mouth just long enough to speak, her voice hoarse and wet.

"We're not going to forget this job," she managed.

Jordan let out a short, breathless sound that was almost a laugh.

"No," he said. "We're not."

The tentacles pushed back into her mouth.

They fucked them both steadily after that. The tentacles moved in coordinated, relentless rhythms. Some thrust deep and slow. Others moved faster, more insistently. Every time one of them got close to coming, the tentacles would ease off just enough to keep them on the edge. It was deliberate. They were being kept there on purpose.

Vanessa came first.

It tore through her hard. Her whole body locked up as the tentacles inside her pussy and ass drove deep and held there. The ones on her clit vibrated. She screamed around the tentacles in her mouth as she came, her cunt clenching violently around the thick shafts stretching her open. Her eyes rolled back. Tears ran freely down her face.

Jordan followed seconds later.

The tentacle around his cock tightened and stroked faster. The one in his ass pushed deep and stayed there. He came with a low, guttural groan, his cock pulsing as thick ropes of cum spilled across his stomach and chest. His hand reached out blindly and found Vanessa's. Their fingers locked together hard.

The tentacles didn't stop.

They kept fucking them through the aftershocks, drawing it out until both of them were shaking and oversensitive. More tentacles joined in, wrapping around their waists, their thighs, their throats, holding them down and holding them open.

But this time, the rhythm changed.

Instead of pulling back when they became too sensitive, the tentacles adjusted. They slowed down. They became gentler. The ones inside Vanessa's cunt and ass began to move in slow, deliberate strokes, pressing against the places that made her shiver. The tentacles wrapped around her breasts softened their grip, stroking instead of tugging. The ones in her mouth pulled back slightly so she could breathe more easily, though they didn't leave. Jordan felt the same shift. The tentacle in his ass slowed to a deep, steady rocking motion instead of hard thrusts. The one around his cock loosened its grip and began to stroke him with long, slow pulls, coaxing him rather than forcing him. Even the tentacle in his mouth eased back, letting him rest his jaw while still filling him.

They were being taken care of now.

The tentacles moved with clear intention — not just to overwhelm them, but to satisfy them. Every movement seemed designed to draw out pleasure without pushing them past what they could handle. When Vanessa's thighs started to tremble from overstimulation, the tentacles inside her gentled further, rocking slowly instead of thrusting. When Jordan's cock grew too sensitive after coming, the tentacle stroking him shifted its pressure, focusing more on the base and less on the head.

Vanessa turned her head as much as she could and looked at Jordan again.

He was already watching her.

His expression had changed. The sharp edge of desperation had softened into something heavier, more surrendered. His mouth was still stretched around the tentacle, but his eyes were half-lidded and calm. He looked… content. Like he was letting himself feel everything without fighting it.

Vanessa felt something similar settle inside her chest.

The tentacles were still moving inside her — slow, deep, and thorough. She could feel them pressing against every sensitive place inside her cunt and ass at once. Another tentacle had slipped between her legs and was gently circling her clit

with just enough pressure to keep her floating in a steady, rolling kind of pleasure instead of sharp overstimulation. She moaned softly around the tentacles in her mouth.

Jordan’s hand was still holding hers. His thumb moved slowly across her knuckles in small, soothing strokes.

The tentacles kept working them both with patient, relentless care.

Another orgasm built in Vanessa slowly this time. It didn’t crash into her. It rose gradually, warm and deep, until her whole body tightened and she came with a long, muffled cry. Her cunt and ass clenched around the tentacles inside her, but they didn’t pull away. They stayed deep and kept moving in those same slow, steady strokes, drawing the orgasm out until her vision blurred.

Jordan came again not long after. It was quieter this time. His body tensed, his cock pulsed in the tentacle’s grip, and he let out a low, broken sound around the one in his mouth. The tentacles held him through it, stroking him gently until the last tremors passed. They didn’t stop after that either.

The tentacles continued their slow, thorough work, keeping both of them in a state of constant, rolling pleasure. Every time one of them started to come down, the tentacles would adjust — pressing deeper, stroking softer, or shifting their rhythm just enough to pull them back under. It felt less like being fucked and more like being *kept*. Like the presence was determined to make sure neither of them left this experience unsatisfied.

Vanessa lost track of how many times she came. The orgasms blurred together — some sharp, some slow and deep, some that made her whole body shake. Jordan’s hand never left hers. Even when his eyes fluttered shut and his body went limp with pleasure, his fingers stayed laced with hers.

At some point, the tentacles gently pulled Jordan onto the bed with her. They arranged both of them so they were lying side by side, still facing each other. More tentacles wrapped around their bodies, holding them close while others continued to move inside them. Vanessa looked at Jordan through half-lidded eyes.

He looked back at her.

Neither of them spoke. They didn’t need to.

The tentacles kept moving — slow, deep, and attentive. They filled every part of them with steady, patient care. Every thrust, every stroke, every squeeze seemed designed to give them more. More pleasure. More sensation. More connection.

Vanessa could feel Jordan’s breath against her face. She could feel his hand in hers. She could feel the thick, warm weight of the tentacles inside her and around her, holding her open and keeping her full.

She didn’t know how long they stayed like that.

Time had stopped meaning anything.

The only thing that existed was the slow, relentless pleasure moving through both of them and the quiet, steady presence of the other person beside them.

The tentacles never stopped moving.

They stayed inside them. Around them. With them.

Chapter 9

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 7: The Offer

The tentacles had not fully withdrawn.

They remained inside Vanessa and Jordan, though their movements had slowed to a gentle, almost soothing rhythm. Thick coils still wrapped loosely around their waists and thighs, holding them close together on the bed. The presence in the corner of the room had not disappeared either. It simply waited, patient and attentive, as if it had all the time in existence. Vanessa lay on her side facing Jordan. Her breathing was still uneven. One of the thinner tentacles was still moving slowly inside her cunt, and another remained buried in her ass. She could feel the steady, deliberate pressure of both. Jordan was in the same state. A thick tentacle was still seated deep in his ass, and another rested loosely around his spent cock, occasionally giving a slow, lazy stroke as if it had no intention of letting him go completely. Neither of them had tried to pull away.

The voice returned, clearer than before. It no longer felt like it was coming from everywhere at once. It felt focused. Intentional.

You are still with us.

Jordan’s voice was rough. “We noticed.”

Vanessa let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh. She was too tired and too thoroughly used to manage anything sharper.

The presence shifted. The lines of light inside the distortion grew brighter, and the air in the room seemed to thin. For a moment, it felt as though the bedroom itself had become less solid.

Then the holograms began.

They didn’t appear as flat projections on a wall. They filled the space around the bed. Vanessa and Jordan were suddenly surrounded by them — not watching from outside, but standing inside them, as if they had slipped through a veil into another layer of reality. The first vision was vast.

They stood on a platform overlooking an enormous city that stretched across what looked like the inside of a colossal sphere. The architecture was impossible by human standards — structures that curved and folded into themselves, made of materials that shifted between solid and translucent. Beings moved through the space below. They were not human. Their forms were elongated and graceful, some with multiple limbs, others with none at all. They

moved in pairs and small groups, touching constantly. Not with urgency or possession, but with a kind of quiet, constant acknowledgment.

A pair drifted past them. One of the beings had wrapped several long, flexible limbs around the other in a slow, intimate coil. The second being leaned into the touch without hesitation. There was no performance in it. No tension. Just presence.

This is how we bond, the voice said. **Not through contract. Not through ownership. Through sustained, mutual knowing. We do not disappear into one another. We remain distinct, yet never alone.**

The vision shifted.

They were now inside what looked like a vast, softly lit chamber. Dozens of beings were connected through networks of living filaments that grew from their bodies. Some were joined sexually. Others simply touched. Pleasure moved through the connections like light through water — shared, layered, and without hierarchy. No one was performing. No one was being claimed. The pleasure was simply *there*, moving freely between them.

Vanessa felt her breath catch despite herself.

Jordan’s hand found hers again on the bed. His fingers were still slick.

The voice continued.

Your species measures connection by what is given up. By what is sacrificed. By how completely one person can be contained inside another. We measure it by how fully two beings can remain themselves while choosing to remain together. There is no fear of change. No punishment for growth. No need to break what exists in order to protect what is already failing.

Another vision bloomed around them.

This one was smaller. More intimate. Two beings — one tall and angular, the other smaller and more fluid — were entwined on a suspended platform. They were not fucking in any way Vanessa or Jordan recognized. They were simply *joined*. Filaments extended from both of their bodies, linking them at multiple points. Pleasure moved between them in slow, rolling waves. Their eyes were open. They were looking at each other with complete attention. Nothing was hidden. Nothing was performed.

This is what we offer, the voice said. **Not replacement. Not erasure. Completion without diminishment.**

The visions faded slightly, though they did not disappear entirely. The bedroom was still there, layered over the alien city like two realities sharing the same space.

Vanessa’s voice was quiet when she finally spoke.

“You’re saying our job is pointless.”

We are saying your job is incomplete.

Jordan’s thumb moved slowly across the back of Vanessa’s hand.

“Explain.”

You were sent to break the bond between Elias and Georgia Foster. That is what you were hired to do. But the bond between them is already fracturing on its own. What you are truly being asked to do is finish destroying something that is already dying. And in doing so, you will tie yourselves more tightly to the very system we have shown you.

Vanessa stared at the faint outline of the alien city still hovering at the edges of the room. “You want us to walk away from the job.”

We want you to see that there are other paths. Paths that do not require you to keep breaking what is already broken.

Jordan was quiet for a long moment.

“You’re asking us to trust you.”

We are asking you to consider that the people who sent you may not have your interests at heart. And that continuing down this road will cost you more than you have already paid. The tentacles inside them moved again — slow, deep, and strangely comforting. Not pushing for more pleasure. Simply reminding them that they were still connected.

Vanessa closed her eyes for a second.

When she opened them, the holograms had begun to fade.

The presence in the corner grew smaller. The lines of light folded inward. The tentacles began to withdraw from their bodies with careful, almost reluctant movements. They slid out of mouths, cunts, and asses one by one, leaving both of them empty and aching in the sudden absence.

The last coils around their waists loosened and pulled away.

The distortion in the corner collapsed in on itself until only a faint shimmer remained. **We will return,** the voice said. **When you are ready to see more.**

Then it was gone.

The bedroom was suddenly very quiet.

Vanessa and Jordan lay side by side in the dark, naked, slick with sweat and the residue the tentacles had left behind. Neither of them moved to cover

themselves.

After a long stretch of silence, Jordan spoke.

“Well,” he said quietly. “That was new.”

Vanessa let out a short, tired breath that was almost a laugh.

“Yeah.”

Another silence.

Jordan turned his head on the pillow to look at her.

“You buying any of it?”

Vanessa stared at the ceiling for a moment before answering.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I’m not walking away from the job just because some tentacle thing gave us the best orgasms of our lives and showed us pretty pictures.”

Jordan nodded once.

“Same.”

Vanessa was quiet for another few seconds. Then she added, voice dry, “We’re going to be laughing about this for the rest of our lives, aren’t we?”

Jordan’s mouth twitched.

“Probably.”

He reached over and found her hand again. Their fingers laced together without either of them commenting on it.

Neither of them spoke again for a long time.

Outside, the city kept moving, indifferent.

Inside the apartment, Vanessa and Jordan stayed exactly where they were — naked, marked, and still stubbornly committed to finishing what they had started.

Chapter 10

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 8: Cracks

It had been three days since the aliens left.

Vanessa sat in the passenger seat of their car, parked half a block from the Foster house, watching the front door through a pair of binoculars. Her body still felt wrong. Not in pain, exactly — though there was a persistent, low-grade soreness deep in her cunt and ass that hadn't gone away. It was more like her body had been *recalibrated*. Every shift in the seat sent a dull, lingering ache through her. Her nipples were still sensitive enough that the fabric of her bra felt like too much. She kept catching herself pressing her thighs together without meaning to, trying to relieve a pressure that never quite left.

She hadn't told Jordan how often she thought about the tentacles.

Not the sex itself — though that was hard to forget — but the way they had moved inside her like they *knew* her. Like they were learning her in real time. She kept having flashes of it at random moments. In the shower. In bed. Once, while watching Georgia walk across campus. That one had been the worst.

Jordan sat behind the wheel, one hand resting on his thigh. He hadn't said much in the last hour. Vanessa could tell he was uncomfortable too. He kept adjusting his posture, like he couldn't quite get comfortable. The tentacle that had been in his ass for so long had left him with a deep, persistent ache that made sitting for extended periods difficult. He hadn't complained once.

"Elias left the house at 6:47 this morning," Jordan said quietly. "Didn't come back until almost noon. Drove around for three hours. Didn't meet anyone. Just… drove."

Vanessa lowered the binoculars.

"That's new."

"Yeah."

They had been watching the Fosters for months. Elias had always been predictable. Controlled. Even when they pushed him, he responded in ways they could anticipate. Lately, his behavior had started to slip. Small things at first — missed meetings, uncharacteristic irritability during lectures, forgetting his own office hours. Now it was escalating. He had snapped at a student in the middle of class yesterday. Raised his voice. The student had looked stunned.

It wasn't their doing.

They hadn't pushed him that hard yet.

Vanessa’s phone buzzed in her lap. She glanced down. A message from Georgia.

Can we talk later? I’ve been thinking about some things.

Vanessa stared at the message for several seconds before locking the screen without replying. Georgia had been pulling away since the hotel. At first it had been subtle — shorter replies, less eye contact during their conversations, an excuse or two about being busy. Now it was more obvious. Georgia had canceled their last two planned meetings. When Vanessa did see her on campus, she was polite but distant. The warmth that had been growing between them had cooled into something careful and guarded.

Vanessa didn’t know what had changed.

She suspected she did.

Jordan glanced over at her.

“You good?”

“Yeah,” Vanessa said automatically. Then she corrected herself. “No. Not really.” Jordan didn’t push. He just nodded and went back to watching the street.

They sat in silence for another twenty minutes before Elias’s car pulled into the driveway. He got out slowly, like he was moving through water. His shoulders were tight. He kept looking over his shoulder as he walked to the front door, like he expected someone to be following him.

Vanessa watched him through the binoculars.

“He looks like shit,” she said.

“He does.”

Elias fumbled with his keys at the door. Dropped them once. Picked them up and tried again. When he finally got inside, he didn’t turn on any lights. The house stayed dark. Jordan exhaled through his nose.

“This isn’t us.”

“No,” Vanessa agreed. “It’s not.”

They had been in this business long enough to know the difference between pressure they applied and pressure that came from somewhere else. Elias was cracking, but the cracks weren’t forming in the places they had been pressing. Something else was getting to him. Vanessa’s mind drifted, uninvited, to the alien city they had been shown. The beings moving through that vast, curved space. The way they touched each other without hesitation or

performance. She wondered, not for the first time, what it would feel like to exist in a place where connection didn’t require strategy.

She pushed the thought away.

Jordan spoke without looking at her.

“We need to talk about it.”

Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

“I know.”

Neither of them moved to start the car. The conversation hung between them like something fragile.

Jordan finally broke the silence.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” he said. His voice was flat. Matter-of-fact. “Not just the… physical part. The rest of it too. What they showed us. What they said.”

Vanessa kept her eyes on the dark house.

“Me too.”

Jordan’s hand tightened on his thigh.

“I keep waiting for it to fade. Like a dream. But it’s not fading. I can still feel where they were. Inside me. Around me. It’s like my body hasn’t caught up to the fact that they’re gone.” Vanessa nodded slowly.

“Same.”

She didn’t tell him about the moments when her mind drifted to Georgia during those memories. About how sometimes, when she closed her eyes, she saw Georgia’s face layered over the tentacles. About how that scared her more than anything else.

Jordan turned his head to look at her.

“We’re losing control of this job.”

Vanessa met his eyes.

“I know.”

Neither of them looked away.

Jordan’s voice stayed calm, but there was something raw underneath it.

“I don’t know what they want from us. I don’t know if they’re trying to help us or recruit us or just study us. But I know we’re not the same as we were before they touched us. And I don’t know how to put that genie back in the bottle.”

Vanessa was quiet for a long time.

“I don’t think we can,” she said finally.

Jordan nodded once, like he had already known that was the answer.

Another silence stretched between them.

Vanessa’s phone buzzed again. Another message from Georgia.

Actually, never mind. I’m probably just tired. Forget I said anything.

Vanessa stared at the message until the screen went dark.

Jordan watched her face.

“Georgia?”

“Yeah.”

“She pulling away?”

Vanessa nodded.

Jordan didn’t ask why. He didn’t need to.

He looked back at the dark house.

“We should probably figure out what we’re going to do about Elias before he completely loses it.”

Vanessa slipped her phone into her pocket.

“Yeah.”

Neither of them moved to start the engine.

The car stayed parked on the quiet street while the sun dropped lower behind the houses. Elias’s silhouette moved behind the dark windows of his home — restless, pacing, stopping occasionally to look out at the street like he could feel them watching.

Vanessa and Jordan sat in the growing dark, both of them sore, both of them marked, both of them carrying something they didn’t fully understand yet.

They didn’t talk about the aliens again that night.

But neither of them could stop thinking about them either.

Chapter 11

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 9: Aftermath & Parallels

Vanessa woke up alone in bed.

For a few disoriented seconds, she didn’t know where she was. The sheets felt wrong against her skin. The light coming through the blinds was the wrong color. Her body felt heavy and strangely warm, like she was running a low fever. When she shifted, a deep, dull ache rolled through her cunt and ass — not sharp pain, but a persistent, used soreness that reminded her exactly what had been inside her less than twelve hours ago.

She sat up slowly. Her nipples brushed against the sheet and sent a sharp little spark down her spine. She was still sensitive everywhere.

Jordan was already awake. He stood by the window in just his boxers, one hand braced against the wall like he needed it to stay upright. His posture was off. Vanessa could tell he was still feeling it too — the deep, internal ache from how thoroughly the tentacles had taken him.

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

When Jordan finally turned around, his eyes looked different. Not just tired. *Changed.* Like he was seeing something she couldn’t see yet.

“You okay?” Vanessa asked. Her voice came out rough.

Jordan didn’t answer right away. He looked past her, toward the corner of the room where the aliens had appeared. For a second, his expression tightened like he was watching something move that wasn’t there.

“I don’t think so,” he said quietly.

Vanessa swung her legs out of bed. The movement made her wince. Everything between her legs felt swollen and overstimulated. She could still feel the ghost of thick tentacles stretching her open, filling her completely. It hadn’t faded. If anything, it was getting harder to ignore.

She stood up carefully and walked to the bathroom. When she caught her reflection in the mirror, she stopped.

For just a moment — less than a second — she saw another version of herself standing behind her reflection. Same face. Same body. But the other Vanessa was wearing a wedding ring. And she was smiling in a way Vanessa had never smiled in her life.

Then it was gone.

Vanessa gripped the edge of the sink and didn’t move for several seconds.

By the time she came back out, Jordan was dressed and making coffee. His hands were steady, but his eyes kept drifting toward empty spaces in the room like he was tracking movement that wasn’t there.

“We should check on Elias,” Vanessa said.

Jordan nodded. “Yeah.”

Neither of them mentioned the fact that they both looked like they’d been fucked for hours by something that wasn’t human.

--They spent the morning trying to work.

It didn’t go well.

They sat in their usual surveillance spot two blocks from the Foster house, but neither of them could focus. Vanessa kept losing time. One moment she would be watching the front door, and the next she would blink and realize five or ten minutes had passed while her mind had been somewhere else entirely.

At 10:17 a.m., it happened again.

She was staring at the house when the air in front of the windshield shimmered. For three full seconds, the street in front of them was replaced by something else — a wide, sunlit kitchen with white marble counters. A woman who looked exactly like Georgia stood at the stove, barefoot, wearing an old T-shirt that hung off one shoulder. She was laughing at something. A man’s hand reached into frame and rested on her lower back. The man wasn’t Elias. It was Jordan.

Vanessa’s breath caught.

The vision vanished as quickly as it appeared. The normal street returned.

She turned her head slowly and looked at Jordan.

He was staring straight ahead, jaw tight.

“You saw it too,” she said.

“Yeah.”

Neither of them spoke for a while after that.

At 11:42 a.m., another one hit.

This time it was longer. They were suddenly standing in what looked like a campaign office. Red, white, and blue banners covered the walls. Staffers moved around them with purpose. At the center of the room, a woman in a sharp navy suit was giving a speech to a small group of donors.

Vanessa recognized her immediately.

Elva Henderson.

She had been Lisa’s next-door neighbor back in Millfield. A quiet, mousy woman who had spent most of her time tending an elaborate greenhouse in her backyard. Vanessa remembered her mostly for the ridiculous slogan she used to put on her homemade jam labels: *“Hothouse flowers bloom brightest when no one’s watching.”* It had always sounded like something a woman told herself when she knew she was being overlooked.

In this version of reality, Elva Henderson was the President of the United States. She looked older, sharper, and completely in command. Her voice was steady as she spoke about infrastructure and foreign policy like she had been doing it her entire life. There was no ring on her left hand. No husband standing beside her. She looked free in a way the real Elva Henderson had never been allowed to be.

Behind her, on a large campaign banner, someone had stylized her old greenhouse slogan into something sharper:

“AMERICA DOESN’T NEED HOTHOUSE FLOWERS. IT NEEDS ROOTS.”

The vision held for almost twenty seconds before it faded.

Vanessa felt cold.

Jordan’s voice was low when he finally spoke.

“That was her, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

He rubbed a hand over his mouth.

“In our version, she was just Lisa’s neighbor. Quiet. Forgettable.”

Vanessa didn’t answer.

The aliens didn’t speak out loud, but Vanessa felt the thought settle into her mind anyway, quiet and clear:

In that reality, no one was paid to keep her small. So she grew.

Vanessa closed her eyes.

By early afternoon, the visions were coming more frequently.

Some were small. A version of Elias teaching a class where every student actually liked him. A version of Georgia living alone in a cabin somewhere, painting, looking peaceful in a way Vanessa had never seen her.

Others were worse.

Vanessa saw a version of herself and Jordan still working together, but older. Harder. They moved like people who had stopped feeling anything a long time

ago. In that reality, they had never been touched by the aliens. They had just kept breaking people until there was nothing left in them to break.

She hated how familiar that version of them looked.

At 3:15 p.m., Jordan's phone rang.

It was their CIA handler.

Vanessa listened to Jordan's side of the conversation. He kept his voice even, professional, but she could see the tension in his shoulders.

When he hung up, he stared at the phone for a long moment before speaking.

"They want results. Soon. They're getting impatient."

Vanessa nodded. She had expected that.

Jordan looked over at her.

"Elias is getting worse. I checked the logs this morning. He's barely sleeping. He's been sending erratic emails to colleagues at three in the morning. One of his TAs filed a complaint yesterday. Said he raised his voice at her in the middle of the hallway."

Vanessa stared out the windshield.

"We didn't do that to him."

"No," Jordan said. "We didn't."

The implication hung between them.

Whatever was happening to Elias, it wasn't entirely their work anymore.

Vanessa's phone buzzed. She looked down.

Another text from Georgia.

This one was shorter than the last two.

I don't think we should meet up for a while. I need some space.

Vanessa read it twice.

Then she locked the phone and slipped it back into her pocket without replying.

Jordan watched her do it but didn't comment.

Another vision flickered at the edge of Vanessa's vision — this one so fast she almost missed it. A version of Georgia standing on a beach somewhere, wind in her hair, smiling at someone just out of frame. She looked happy. Uncomplicated. Untouched by any of this.

Vanessa felt something twist in her chest.

She didn’t know if that version of Georgia was real or just something the aliens wanted her to see.

Either way, it hurt.

Jordan started the car.

“We should go check on Elias in person,” he said. “Make sure he’s not about to do something stupid.”

Vanessa nodded.

As they pulled away from the curb, another vision tried to surface — this one of the two of them, much older, sitting on a porch somewhere quiet. No jobs. No CIA. Just the two of them, older and tired, but still together.

Vanessa pushed it down before it could fully form.

She wasn’t ready to see what that version of them looked like.

Not yet.

Chapter 12

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 9: Aftermath & Parallels

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The implication hung between them.

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As they pulled away from the curb, another vision tried to surface — this one of the two of them, much older, sitting on a porch somewhere quiet. No jobs. No CIA. Just the two of them, older and tired, but still together.

Vanessa pushed it down before it could fully form.

She wasn’t ready to see what that version of them looked like.

Not yet.

Chapter 13

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 10: The Fracture

Elias Foster stood in the middle of the university quad at 11:47 a.m. on a Tuesday and started talking to someone who wasn't there.

Vanessa watched it happen through a pair of binoculars from the second floor of the library. Jordan stood beside her, also watching. Neither of them spoke.

Elias looked like he hadn't slept in days. His clothes were wrinkled. His hair was uncombed. He kept turning in slow circles, gesturing with one hand while the other clutched his phone like he might drop it. Students were starting to gather at a cautious distance. A few had their phones out.

"I know you're watching," Elias said loudly enough for his voice to carry. "I can feel it. I can feel *you*. You think I don't know what's happening? You think I don't see the versions of myself that keep slipping through?"

Vanessa lowered the binoculars slowly.

Jordan's voice was quiet.

"He's not talking about us."

"No," Vanessa said. "He's not."

Elias kept turning, his eyes scanning the buildings around the quad like he expected someone to step out from behind one of them.

"I saw her," he said, louder now. "I saw her in another life. She was happy. She was *free*. And you took that from me. You took *her* from me."

Vanessa felt something cold settle in her stomach.

Jordan's phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked it, then looked at Vanessa.

"CIA," he said. "They want us to move in. Now."

Vanessa didn't answer right away. She was still watching Elias. He had stopped turning and was now staring directly at the library building — directly at the window where they were standing. Even from this distance, she could see that his eyes were wide and unfocused. "He's losing it," she said.

"Yeah."

"They're going to want us to push him over the edge."

Jordan didn't respond.

Vanessa's phone buzzed a moment later. Same message. Same demand.

She slipped the phone back into her pocket without replying.

Another vision tried to surface at the edge of her vision — this one weaker than the ones from the day before, but still there. She saw Georgia standing in a small kitchen somewhere, barefoot, wearing a faded T-shirt. She was talking to someone just out of frame. She looked relaxed. Happy in a quiet way Vanessa had never seen on her face in real life.

The vision faded.

Vanessa exhaled slowly.

Jordan was still watching Elias.

“They’re going to want us to finish this today,” he said.

“I know.”

He looked over at her.

“Are we going to?”

Vanessa didn’t answer.

--They met their CIA handler in a parking garage on the edge of campus two hours later. The man was already waiting when they arrived. He didn’t look happy. He stood with his arms crossed, leaning against a black SUV, watching them approach like he was deciding whether to fire them on the spot.

“You two have been dragging your feet,” he said without preamble.

Jordan kept his voice even.

“We’ve been monitoring the situation. Elias is unstable. If we push him too hard right now, he could do something unpredictable.”

“He’s already doing something unpredictable,” the handler snapped. “He just spent twenty minutes ranting in the middle of the quad about alternate versions of his wife and something watching him. That’s not instability. That’s a liability. We need this contained.” Vanessa spoke for the first time.

“Contained how?”

The handler looked at her.

“However it needs to be contained. We hired you because you’re good at making problems go away quietly. This is starting to look loud.”

Jordan shifted his weight.

“We’re not going to push him into a public breakdown that draws more attention. That’s not what we do.”

The handler stared at him for a long moment.

“Then what *are* you going to do?” he asked. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re doing nothing. And I’m running out of patience.”

Vanessa felt the weight of the man’s stare. She also felt something else — a faint pressure at the base of her skull, like the aliens were still somewhere nearby, listening.

She didn’t mention it.

The handler pushed off the SUV.

“You have forty-eight hours,” he said. “After that, we’re taking this out of your hands. And I don’t think either of you want that.”

He got into the SUV and drove away without waiting for a response.

Jordan and Vanessa stood in the parking garage for a long time after he left.

Eventually Jordan spoke.

“We’re running out of time.”

“Yeah.”

He looked over at her.

“You’ve been having more visions.”

Vanessa nodded.

“Some of them are about Georgia.”

Jordan didn’t ask for details. He just nodded once, like he had already suspected as much. They drove back toward the Foster house in silence.

--By late afternoon, Elias had locked himself inside his office on campus. Campus security had been called twice. Both times he had refused to open the door. Through the small window,

people could see him pacing and talking to himself.

Vanessa and Jordan sat in their car two blocks away, watching the building through binoculars.

Jordan’s voice was low.

“He’s talking about parallel lives again. I heard him through the door earlier. He said he saw Georgia in another reality. Said she looked at him like she didn’t even know him.” Vanessa kept the binoculars steady.

Jordan was still watching her.

“We can’t finish this job,” he said quietly.

Vanessa didn’t answer right away.

She thought about the CIA handler's threat. She thought about Elias losing his grip on reality in ways that had nothing to do with their work. She thought about the aliens still lingering somewhere just out of sight. And she thought about Georgia — about the way she had started pulling away, about the versions of her that kept appearing in the visions, about the version of herself that had almost let something real happen in that hotel room.

Another vision flickered at the edge of her awareness. This one was brief but sharp. She saw herself and Georgia in a version of the hotel room, but the moment had gone differently. In this reality, Vanessa had pulled back before anything could happen. She had made some excuse, kept her distance, and left Georgia standing there confused and hurt. Months had passed in this version. Georgia had eventually moved on — not dramatically, but quietly. She was with someone else now. A woman who looked at her like she was something precious instead of something to be used. Georgia looked content in a way Vanessa had never seen on her face in real life. And Vanessa herself looked… emptier. Harder. Like she had successfully protected herself from something she now quietly regretted losing.

The vision vanished.

Vanessa lowered the binoculars.

Jordan was still watching her.

"We're not going to destroy her," he said. It wasn't a question.

Vanessa was quiet for a long time.

"No," she said. "We're not."

The words felt strange coming out of her mouth. Final. She had said similar things before on other jobs, but never like this. Never with this much weight behind them.

Jordan nodded slowly, like he had been waiting for her to say it out loud.

They sat in the car as the sun started to go down, neither of them moving to start the engine. The Foster house sat quiet in the distance. Elias was still locked in his office. The CIA was waiting for results they were no longer going to get.

And somewhere just beyond the edge of their perception, something vast and patient continued to watch.

Chapter 14

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 11: The Withdrawal

They didn’t go back to the apartment right away.

After leaving the car near the Foster house, Jordan and Vanessa walked for a while without speaking. The campus was quiet now. Most of the students had gone home. Elias’s office light was still on, but the building was otherwise dark. They could see his silhouette moving behind the blinds — restless, pacing, still talking to someone who wasn’t there. Eventually they ended up on a bench near the edge of campus, far enough from everything that no one would bother them. Jordan sat with his elbows on his knees. Vanessa sat beside him, arms crossed, staring at nothing.

Neither of them had suggested going back to work. Neither of them had suggested calling the CIA.

They just sat.

After a long stretch of silence, Jordan spoke.

“We’re done with this one.”

Vanessa nodded slowly.

“Yeah.”

She didn’t feel relief. She didn’t feel guilt either. She just felt… finished. Like something inside her had quietly closed a door and wasn’t interested in opening it again.

Jordan glanced over at her.

“You sure?”

Vanessa thought about the visions. About the version of Georgia who had moved on. About the version of herself that had looked emptier for having protected herself. She thought about the real Georgia — the one who had started pulling away, the one who had texted her asking for space, the one who had almost let something happen in that hotel room before Vanessa had pulled back.

“I’m sure,” she said.

Jordan nodded once and didn’t push.

They sat in silence again.

It was Vanessa who felt it first.

A shift in the air. Not cold, not threatening. Just… present. Like something large had turned its attention toward them one last time.

Jordan felt it too. She saw his shoulders tighten slightly.

Neither of them looked around. They didn’t need to.

The voice didn’t speak out loud this time. It settled directly into their minds, quiet and clear, like it had always been there.

We are leaving.

Vanessa closed her eyes for a second.

Jordan’s voice was low.

“Why now?”

Because we have seen enough.

The presence didn’t feel angry or disappointed. It felt observational. Final.

We came to study connection. To understand how your species forms bonds and breaks them. We believed there was something to learn from the way you destroy what you claim to value. But we have watched long enough.

Vanessa felt a strange tightness in her chest.

We thought we understood what you were. We were wrong.

Jordan shifted beside her.

“What changed?”

There was a pause before the answer came.

Her.

Vanessa opened her eyes.

She didn’t have to ask who.

The presence continued, calm and precise.

She does not understand what we are. She does not know we have been watching. But through you, we have seen her clearly. Not the version of her you were sent to break. The version that still reaches for connection even when she has been hurt. The version that still believes it is possible to be seen without being used.

Vanessa felt something shift in her throat.

That is not data we can use. That is not something we can measure or replicate or control. It is simply… human. And we have decided it is not worth continuing our study. Jordan was quiet for a long moment.

“You’re saying she changed your mind.”

We are saying she reminded us that some things are not meant to be studied. Only left alone.

The presence began to recede. Not dramatically. Just… withdrawing.

We will not return. Not to you. Not to her. Not to this world. Our experiment here is finished.

Vanessa felt the weight of that statement settle over her.

She didn’t thank them. She didn’t argue. She just sat with it.

Jordan spoke one last time.

“What happens to Elias?”

He will stabilize. In time. The damage done to him was not only yours. We will not repair it. But we will no longer add to it.

Then the presence was gone.

Completely.

Vanessa and Jordan sat in the sudden absence of it. The air felt thinner. Lighter. Like something that had been pressing against the edges of their perception for weeks had finally stepped back.

Neither of them spoke for several minutes.

Jordan’s phone buzzed.

He checked it, then showed Vanessa the screen.

It was their CIA handler.

We’re pulling the plug. Situation’s too compromised. You tried. That’s all we needed to know. Don’t talk about this. Ever. We’ll be watching.

Vanessa read the message twice.

Jordan slipped the phone back into his pocket.

“They’re done with us too.”

“Yeah.”

He let out a slow breath.

“So that’s it.”

Vanessa nodded.

They sat on the bench a while longer, watching the dark campus. Elias’s office light was still on. Somewhere across town, Georgia was probably in her

apartment, unaware that two major forces had just decided to leave her life alone.

Vanessa thought about the last text Georgia had sent her.

I don’t think we should meet up for a while. I need some space.

She didn’t reach for her phone.

Jordan eventually stood up.

“We should go.”

Vanessa nodded and followed him.

They walked back to the car without speaking. The night was quiet. No pressure at the base of their skulls. No sense of being watched by something vast and patient. Just the ordinary quiet of a campus at night.

When they reached the car, Jordan paused with his hand on the door.

“You okay?” he asked.

Vanessa looked at him across the roof of the car.

“I don’t know yet.”

Jordan nodded, like that was an acceptable answer.

They got in and drove away from the campus for the last time, without looking back. --**End of Chapter 11**

Chapter 15

For The Red, White & Boob

Chapter 12: The Next Target

A week passed.

They left the city without finishing the job. No dramatic exit. No final confrontation with Elias. They simply stopped showing up. The CIA didn't call again. The aliens didn't return. This one had ended differently than the others.

Their previous jobs had always finished loudly — with everything exposed, every lie torn open, and the targets left in ruins. There had always been a celebration afterward. A drink. A quiet moment between them where they acknowledged the work was done and done well. This job had none of that. It had simply… stopped. No victory. No closure. Just silence. Now they were in another city, three states away. A different hotel. A different set of problems waiting for them.

Vanessa sat on the edge of the bed in their new room, phone in her hand. She had been staring at the screen for several minutes. The message had come in twenty minutes ago. She hadn't opened it yet.

Jordan was in the bathroom, shower running. The sound of water against tile was the only noise in the room.

Vanessa finally tapped the message.

It was a photo from Georgia.

No text. Just the image.

Georgia had taken it in her bedroom, standing in front of her mirror. The lighting was warm and low. She was completely naked, holding the phone in one hand while her other arm rested at her side. She wasn't posing shyly or trying to hide anything. She looked straight into the camera with a calm, unashamed expression — like she had decided to send this and wasn't going to second-guess it. Her body was relaxed but present. There was nothing coy about it. It was the kind of photo a woman sends when she's already made up her mind about what she wants.

Vanessa stared at it for a long time.

She didn't delete it.

She saved it to a private folder instead, then locked her phone and set it face-down on the nightstand. She didn't reply. She knew she wasn't going to. There was nothing she could say

that wouldn't make things worse or pull Georgia further into something she didn't understand.

She just sat there with the weight of it.

The shower turned off. A few minutes later, Jordan came out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist. He glanced at her, then at the phone on the nightstand, but didn't ask. He got dressed in silence.

When he was done, he sat in the chair across from the bed and looked at her.

"You got another message from her," he said. It wasn't a question.

Vanessa nodded.

Jordan didn't push for details. He just waited.

After a moment, Vanessa spoke.

"She sent a picture."

Jordan nodded slowly.

"You going to answer?"

Vanessa shook her head.

"No."

Jordan didn't look surprised.

They sat in the quiet for a while. The city outside the window was loud in the way new cities always were — traffic, distant sirens, people living lives that had nothing to do with them. Eventually Jordan spoke again.

"This one changed us."

Vanessa looked over at him.

"Yeah."

He leaned back in the chair, studying the ceiling for a few seconds before continuing. "I keep thinking about how close we came to finishing it anyway. Even after everything. Even after we knew we shouldn't."

Vanessa was quiet.

"I don't think we would have," she said. "Not really."

Jordan considered that.

"Maybe not," he admitted. "But we thought about it. That's new."

Vanessa didn't argue. He was right. There had been moments — brief, sharp moments — where the old instincts had tried to reassert themselves. Where finishing the job had felt like the simpler, cleaner choice. They had both felt it.

Neither of them had acted on it.

Jordan looked at her.

“You’re different,” he said. Not accusing. Just stating it.

Vanessa met his eyes.

“So are you.”

He gave a small nod, like that was enough.

They didn’t talk about the aliens. They didn’t talk about the visions or the parallel versions of themselves they had seen. They didn’t talk about Georgia. Some things didn’t need to be said out loud to be understood.

Jordan’s phone buzzed on the dresser. He picked it up, read the message, then looked back at Vanessa.

“New target,” he said. “I found them while we were still dealing with the Fosters. Couple in their mid-forties. Married twelve years. He’s been having an affair with a woman in his office for almost a year. She doesn’t know. They have two kids. Looks like a clean, stable life from the outside.”

Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

“You want to take it?”

Jordan studied her.

“Do you?”

Vanessa thought about it. About the version of herself she had seen in the visions — the one who had protected herself so well she had nothing left. About the version of Georgia who had moved on. About the real Georgia, sitting alone in her apartment with her phone in her hand, waiting for a reply that wasn’t coming.

She thought about the quiet that had settled over them since the aliens left. About how much lighter and heavier it felt at the same time.

“Yeah,” she said. “I do.”

Jordan nodded.

“I already started putting a file together. We can leave in the morning.”

He set the phone down.

Neither of them moved right away.

After a while, Jordan stood up and grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair. “We should get going,” he said. “I want to drive through the night and get eyes on them tomorrow.”

Vanessa nodded and stood up. She picked up her phone from the nightstand but didn’t look at it again. She slipped it into her pocket and followed Jordan to the door.

They didn’t talk about what had happened. They didn’t talk about what came next. They just stepped out into the hallway, walked to the elevator, and rode it down to the parking garage in silence.

When they reached the car, Jordan unlocked it and got behind the wheel. Vanessa slid into the passenger seat. The engine started with a low rumble.

As they pulled out of the garage and merged into traffic, Vanessa looked out the window at the unfamiliar city moving past them. New streets. New buildings. New people with their own small, complicated lives.

She didn’t know what the next target would bring. She didn’t know if they would finish it or walk away from it the way they had walked away from the last one. She didn’t know if she would ever stop thinking about the woman she had chosen not to destroy.

But for the first time in a long time, she felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be — sitting beside the only person who understood what this life actually cost. Jordan glanced over at her once, then turned his eyes back to the road.

They drove on.

End of The Red, White & Boob