

TAGGED

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TAGGED

Mary

Mary sifted through the pile of severed hands. There were limbs of every shape, size, and colour amassed haphazardly on the stainless steel counter of the morgue. Some were hacked off cursorily, while other cuts resembled something the surgeons she worked with would carefully execute. What they did have in common, however, was that they were all missing their tags.

“Nope, not this one.” Mary discarded a hairy hand and picked up another, less rugged one.

She continued her search in the pile of limbs and wondered when they would get a better system. They used to catalogue everything that came in, but recently there was just too much coming in at once and their sorting bot had broken.

“Definitely not this one.” She snickered as she put aside some digits tattooed in gang signs and weird tribal handprints with swirls and atoms in the center. Harvey would probably get a kick out of the idea of posh Mrs. Thornton with a new tattooed prosthetic.

The hands she was looking through were either found by the police or still hanging off the actual person when they came in. The hospital kept the ones delivered by the authorities for forty-eight hours. After that, the investigation was closed, and the parts discarded if the owner didn't come forward. The hospital kept the "hangers," as they called them, only until they scanned them into the replicators that allowed tissue regeneration over a mechanical prosthetic. Most people opted for the prosthetics unless they couldn't afford them. In those cases, they kept their own limbs and had them reattached. People joked that the hangers were lucky because they usually got to keep their tag. Lucky indeed.

"Gotcha!" she cried as she pulled her client's hand from the pile.

She left the morgue with a dainty little hand, red nail polish still intact. There was a massive diamond ring still on it. Even lifeless, it looked better than her own dry hands and chipped fingernails. After she scanned the hand then promptly incinerated it, she went to return the jewelry to her patient, who had been crying uncontrollably when Mary left.

"I found the ring, Mrs. Thornton."

Her patient immediately stopped wailing and lurched toward her to grab the ring. "Oh, thank heavens! This thing is worth a fortune. You'd think the bastards would have taken that as well. I fought hard enough to get it in the settlement. I'm not about to lose it now." She casually put the ring on her new mechanical hand and smiled, all traces of her earlier unhappiness completely gone.

Mary didn't have the heart to tell her it was fake. She had seen enough people have their hands taken to know that a rock of that size would be gone in an instant if it had any real value.

"Mrs. Thornton, Dr. Ross says the prosthetic should be fully integrated in a couple of weeks. Until then, please refrain from using it

as much as possible and don't forget to take your medication. It's very important if we want the tissue to regenerate. That means you'll have to put the ring on your other hand. Here are some care instructions." Mary reached for the pamphlets she needed. It was rote work for her by now, after two years.

Her patient glared at her as she grudgingly removed the ring from her prosthetic hand.

"If you need any counselling after your ordeal..."

"I'm fine. What I need now is for the police to do their job and find my tag. I can't even get into my house without it. Good thing I had the forethought to get identity theft insurance." She paused and her eyes widened. "Oh no, they're going to have to freeze all my assets. Oh god!"

Mrs. Thornton grabbed her Hermès bag, a similar shade of red to the nails on her remaining hand, and rose abruptly from her chair. "Where are my discharge papers? We're done here, right?"

"Yeah, we're done," sighed Mary, putting the pamphlet back. Yet another patron replacing a hand as if it were a tire on a car.

Mary let herself out of the pristine hospital room. She didn't think she would ever get used to the complete disregard and lack of respect they had for their bodies. Maybe that was how rich people acted. She wouldn't know. Then again, it had been years since the tags were available to the general public, immediately spurring the thefts. Had people gotten so complacent about it?

As a nurse in the tech unit of St-Julia's Hospital, Mary was required to have a microchip, or tag, implanted under her skin. Not unlike eighty percent of the North American population, this was how she got paid, performed monetary transactions, and even punched in and out of work. It was also how they tracked her in case of an emergency. If her mother had been wearing one when the accident at the Taggard

Corp. plant where she worked had happened, maybe she would be alive today. Maybe her father would not have taken his life. She felt the scar on her left hand where the founder of the tech unit himself, Dr. Harvey Ross, had made the incision, and grimaced when she remembered the job offer coming with this one stipulation.

Although he was the son of Dr. Gerald Ross, the inventor of the tags and the one she ultimately blamed for her family's misfortune, Mary found herself drawn to the handsome surgeon. They had formed a fast friendship, to the displeasure of the other nurses vying for his attention. Their back-and-forth flirting, which she always welcomed as harmless, seemed to have kicked up a notch recently. Although she told herself time and time again that the relationship should stay platonic, she lost all logic when he was near. They spent more and more time together outside of work, sharing drinks at the pub down the street. He had asked her to come up to his place many times in the past few months, but she politely declined every time. Whatever this was, even though she wanted it more than ever, it was not worth losing her job over.

Mrs. Thornton's consternation was not exaggerated, however. Everyone, regardless of status or privilege, only received a single tag. If someone had the misfortune of getting it taken, they had to wait months, sometimes years, until Taggard Corp. would engineer another one to suit their specific DNA pattern. People were told that if they tried to implant someone else's tag, their body would reject it, never mind the hassle of having to find engineers to reprogram it with unique user information. At least that was what the company was trying to disseminate. The very existence of a black market for the devices made everyone think otherwise. Still, a newly scrubbed chip was scarce, even with the underground network in full swing.

Her brother Leo had been one of the early casualties of the tag system. When he had volunteered to be one of the first human test subjects for Taggard Corp. in exchange for five thousand credits a week for life, she had been vehemently against it.

“This is the ticket, Mare. Those bots damn near took all the jobs from us. I’ll be set for life.” They had been sitting opposite each other at their favourite bakery, Tasty Sweets, when Leo announced he wanted to volunteer. He had polished off his Boston cream donut while Mary was so upset that she didn’t touch her own pastry.

“You can’t be serious, Leo. Taggard Corp. is responsible for Mom’s death!” she had scream-whispered over the table as she looked around to see who might be listening.

“Not again with that bullshit. It was an accident. They happen.”

“Machines just don’t explode like that, Leo. She’d been acting weird for months, saying they were coming for her. I’m still trying to get her medical records. We didn’t even get to see her body. You don’t find that suspicious?”

He sighed. The argument was a stale one. She would argue that the company had killed their mother and he would brush her off, saying that the accident just happened to occur when she was under a lot of stress and not doing well mentally.

“Listen, they have limited spaces and a tech that used to work with Mom said that he would get me in,” he continued.

“I don’t like it,” she said as a shiver passed through her.

“You don’t have to like it. I’m the one getting the tag.”

“Nothing good ever comes from Taggard Corp.”

She hadn’t known how right she was. The pilot program didn’t go exactly as planned. Some people’s bodies rejected the microchip in unexpected ways. Others, like her older brother, started getting attacked. When Taggard Corp. found out that Leo’s tag had been

stolen, they immediately stopped the payments. Without his tag, he lost not only his weekly credits, but his identity as well.

Walking to the nurse's station to sign out for the night, Mary saw a new patient being wheeled in. He was unconscious, his arm hanging limply from the gurney. Someone had done a poor job of bandaging up his hand. She could always tell when it was a hanger.

Doctor Ross came running to help get the man admitted. "This is the fourth one tonight. What the hell is happening out there?" he asked.

Dr. Harvey Ross commanded the room, as always. It wasn't just his imposing stature or his classically good looks. There was something about him that energized a space, regardless of where he was or who was present. And although there were at least three surgeons on the floor at any given moment, he was the only doctor that came to greet patients at the door. One would think that a founding member of the tech unit would have something better to do, but that was typical of Dr. Ross.

"Mary, can you help me get him to the OR?"

There, throwing her dark hair into a quick ponytail, she sprang into action and helped him fully remove the severed hand. The doctor often asked her to assist him, and she liked to believe it was because she was good at her job and not only because he enjoyed her company. Watching him in action was quite something to behold, and she sometimes caught herself daydreaming about her boss, although she knew nothing could happen between them.

As she prepped the scanning machine later on, he approached her, holding two disposable coffee cups from the cafeteria. She appreciated the gesture, especially since she was getting one of her killer headaches. They had been getting worse lately. The scruff around his chiselled jaw

was darker than usual, and his blue eyes were bloodshot. Despite this, her heart still fluttered at the sight of him.

“Thanks for staying past your shift, Mary. I really appreciate it. Once we get the new scanning bots installed, we’ll have more down-time for the nurses.” He handed her a cup, making sure that their hands touched.

“That’s part of the job. I don’t think any of the nurses ever just finish their shift and go home,” she joked before sipping her drink. Just the way she liked it, one milk, no sugar.

“Yeah, sometimes I feel like I live here.”

They both laughed. He actually had a condo in the building overlooking the hospital.

“No really, I had a foldout couch added to my office,” he deadpanned.

“Wow Harvey, you are the most dedicated surgeon in this place,” she gushed, instinctively touching his toned arm.

He looked at her intently, as if he were trying to reach into her very soul. His eyes locked onto hers for what seemed an eternity and then moved to her mouth. She was compelled to lick her lips and leaned in to him. They were so close she could feel his breath on her skin. This was not appropriate, but she couldn’t help herself. She was never herself when she was around him.

Realizing she still held onto his arm, she felt her entire body flush, and removed the offending hand. There was an awkward silence.

The scanning machine beeped, and she inhaled sharply.

“Well, I need to get this scanned.”

“Yes, sorry to keep you. I need to get to the next patient. See you tomorrow, Mary.” He threw his cup into the waste bin. “Next time, I’ll bring some of those donuts you like,” he said with a wink as he walked away.

She wrapped things up with the patient, scanned her tag on the presence module, and headed to her locker to fetch her coat and hand brace. The protective gear was not cheap, but still less expensive than a prosthetic if she were to lose her hand, even with her employee discount. She slipped on the pliable and lightweight metal alloy glove and secured it over her elbow. Mary always felt safer with it on and didn't understand why more people weren't wearing them.

Since her shift had ended late, Mary decided against taking public transit and called a car instead. There had been more attacks recently, so spending her wages on what she would otherwise call a frivolity hung less heavily on her at the moment.

The mechanical voice greeted her as she sat in the sole seat inside the spherical vehicle and moved her hand over the payment module. "Where to, Mrs. Mary Morgan?"

"Home, please." Then she scoffed. It was hard to kick the instinct of being polite with machines. Leo would not approve. These same driverless cars had robbed him of his livelihood.

Her brother was home when she got there, watching a show about endangered animals in Belize. It wasn't the first time she had walked in on him watching this same episode. He was obsessed with the country, primarily because they had banned tags.

Mary sighed. She counted at least three dirty plates, a couple of empty beer bottles and bags of various snack foods strewn all over the living room floor. It made their little apartment look even more shitty and cramped. Mary stood in the doorway, deciding if it was worth getting into it with him.

"Mare, look. Did you know the monarch butterfly is endangered?" he said with the enthusiasm of a five-year-old talking about dinosaurs.

"Fascinating," she deadpanned as she removed her glove and shoved him aside so that she could sit next to him on the old couch. She

removed the tight elastic from her hair and shook out her brown waves, massaging her scalp.

“Is this what you did all day?” she asked.

He had been wearing the same sweatpants all week and his beard was out of control. His old baseball t-shirt was pulled tight over his growing beer belly.

“No; I ate, and I drank, and I’m pretty sure I had a piss or two.”

“Leo...”

“Mary...” His voice was full of warning.

She decided she would leave it for today, but he had to get back on his feet eventually, or at the very least, out of the apartment.

Leo reached for the media controller with his good hand and increased the volume on the screen.

“I’m in the mood for pizza. You want some?” she asked.

“Only if it’s real pepperoni. I hate that 3D printed crap. It makes me bloated.”

She called for a pizza and watched footage of animals threatened with extinction to the soundtrack of a posh British man’s voice.

“Belize is beautiful this time of the year. Unfortunately, the Yucatán Black Howler Monkey cannot enjoy its surroundings, now that its habitat has been ravaged.”

Just once, she would love to see one of these shows narrated by a person with a southern American accent or a South Asian accent to shake things up a bit. Belize looked beautiful, though. Another place she could only dream of visiting. They had barely been getting by since losing their parents, and then that incident with Leo’s hand had happened. Her job was the only thing keeping them afloat.

“How was work?” asked Leo, taking her away from her reverie.

Mary stiffened. He never asked about her job. He had always resented the fact that he wasn’t able to get a prosthetic after his attack.

That she worked in the tech unit at the hospital funded by Taggard Corp. didn't help. They had recruited her straight out of nursing school and the money was too good not to accept. She had turned a blind eye to the company's involvement in the hospital, but her brother kept bringing it up.

"Work was okay," she answered vaguely, staring straight ahead, pretending to be interested in the program.

"Just okay, eh? Must be great, saving lives and shit."

She turned and sighed. For some reason, he wanted to pick a fight. "You know what I do, Leo. We need the money. It's a good job."

"They tagged you."

"Yeah, and I let them. We already went through this. What happened to Mom has nothing to do with the hospital."

He snickered. They knew very well that Taggard Corp. had their hands in everything involving their microchip technology. "You let them tag you even after you saw what happened to me? Jesus, Mare, it's like having a target on your back."

The doorbell rang, cutting their familiar argument short. Mary quickly rose to get the pizza. She scanned her tag over the delivery bot, paying for their takeout, then made her way to the kitchen.

"Do you think that glove is going to stop the black market thieves from getting to you?" Her brother got in her face, pointing his stubbed limb at her. His dark blond hair was the longest it had ever been, almost to his chin and, with the beard and dishevelled attire, he looked nothing like the man she remembered.

"There are barely any jobs for humans anymore. People are desperate. Do you know how much money we can get for a tag?"

Mary threw the slice she was holding into the pizza box and closed the lid. "How much we can get? What does that mean, Leo?"

He looked down.

“Leo?”

“You can get a new tag at your job. No big deal.”

Her stomach dropped. She was definitely not hungry anymore.

“No big deal? No big deal! Are you out of your mind, Leo? This is my identity we are talking about, not a simple everyday transaction. And you know it’s not that easy getting another tag.”

She stepped back, shaking her head. “You, of all people, should know what it’s like.”

“This is different. You would have the chance I never had. We can sell the tag and get new identities. We can go to Belize or anywhere we want!”

“I’m fine, Leo. I like who I am and what I’m doing. Maybe you should work on that too instead of hanging around here all day. It’s been three years!”

She turned to go to her room, but he caught her hand. He stared at it hungrily. “Think about it. We can have a new start.”

She shook out of his grip. “There is nothing to think about. I can’t believe you even brought it up. You had a chance to start fresh, Leo. I let you move into my apartment and I helped you get new identification papers.”

His shoulders slumped.

“You could have worked with Mauro, taking care of the incinerator bots. He was ready to give you a job.”

“I’m not working with bots.” He sneered.

“Well, I’m not losing my identity. I think we both know which one makes more sense.”

Mary left him in the middle of the kitchen and walked down the narrow hall to her bedroom. She would sleep with the door locked tonight. The next day at work, Mary seemed to do everything wrong. She forgot to turn off the scanning machine. She gave a patient the

wrong care instructions and dropped her coffee on her freshly laundered scrubs. The fight she'd had with her brother still weighed heavily on her.

Harvey seemed to notice right away when they met for lunch. "Looks like someone needs a break," he said, and pointed to the coffee stain on her pants.

"Yeah, I'm a little upset about the fight I had with my brother."

"Want to talk about it?" he offered.

"I can't, not here." She looked toward their colleagues as she took a turkey sandwich the caf-bot had prepared for her.

"Let's have lunch in my office," he suggested.

"Your office?" She balked at this unusual suggestion. "I'm not..."

They typically ate lunch in the staff room with everyone else. Did she want to go to his office? Yes. Was it a bad idea? Absolutely. Plus, now she was getting a headache. She was about to decline his offer when she experienced a pull at the back of her neck. The haze that she sometimes fell into grabbed onto her and wouldn't let go. Damn headaches. She would have to ask a doctor to examine her. The urge to agree to Harvey's request became stronger as he locked onto her with his hypnotic stare. She wasn't sure if she could say no.

"You know what? Sure, that sounds good."

In Harvey's spacious office, they settled into the plush chairs across from his desk with their respective lunches. Maybe it was the relief of having someone to talk to about her problem, but Mary felt her headache wane.

"So tell me, what's got you sending Mr. Landon home with care instructions for an amputation instead of a prosthetic?" The skin at the corners of his azure eyes crinkled with amusement.

"It's not funny, Harvey. He was very upset."

“Sorry, sorry. Tell me what’s going on.” He uncrossed his legs and leaned in to her.

She hesitated before unloading her troubles on him. Although they were friends, his station required him to report these kinds of things.

“Leo was talking about selling my tag.”

Harvey sat up straight. He didn’t say a word, but she could hear him thinking, weighing his next words.

“That’s serious stuff, Mary.”

“Yeah, he was pretty upset. I mean, we’ve argued before about me being tagged, but he never said anything like this before. He’s not the man he used to be. To tell you the truth, I’m a little scared.”

Harvey opened his mouth as if he was about to say something and then stopped and stuffed a couple of vinegar chips into his mouth.

“What?” she asked

“What? I didn’t say anything.”

“But you wanted to.”

He sighed and put down his lunch. “You can stay at my condo tonight if you don’t feel safe at your place.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I knew it was a bad idea. Forget it.”

“Yes—I mean, no. I mean, thanks for the offer, Harvey. I’ll think about it.”

His eyes crinkled as he smiled and popped another chip into his mouth.

Mary wondered what was worse: being alone in her apartment with her unhinged brother or alone with her boss at his condo.

Harvey

Harvey had decided that tonight, he would show the lovely Mary some capabilities of the mind tags. It had taken months to build up her trust in him, but now he thought she was ready to hear what he had to say. She was quite smitten with him. How could she not be? He had given her all the attention that the other nurses only dreamed of. He knew he was good-looking. Few women were averse to his charms. But Mary was the only one he wanted.

Daniel, the night watchman at the clinic, would bring the new tag he had acquired from Mrs. Thornton to his condo later that night. He had vetted Daniel himself, so he knew he could trust him. He was part of a network of people that Harvey had working for him to retrieve the original brain tags his father had worked on. Soon, he hoped to add Mary to this group.

Although it was risky, he believed he was in enough control of his own brain implant that he could manipulate Mary's memories if he needed to. Had he not been influencing her mind all this time, anyhow? He had to be careful of the frequency, however. Her headaches got worse if he pushed into her mind more than once or twice a week. So did his nosebleeds. He couldn't help himself, though. His plan was coming together so beautifully. From the moment he found her mother's old tag in his father's defunct lab, he had used his influence at Taggard Corp. not only to get her hired in his tech unit, but also to have the tag assigned to her. If his hypothesis was correct, he could use this original tag with slight modifications in order to continue his father's work. All he needed was for her to agree to his plan.

Before his death, Gerald Ross had performed his last surgery on his son, implanting the only fully controllable brain microchip he had

ever created. It had taken Harvey years to get to the level of control that some of the initial test subjects had achieved in a matter of days, but he had more command of his thoughts, thanks to the failsafe that his father had added.

Once he had gathered all thirty of the original tags, he would be able to modify them and work with his contact in the military to roll them out in the special unit they created. Then, if that was a success, he would begin manufacturing more chips based on those models. It was a shame that his father was not around to see his vision come to fruition. But he would make him proud.

Mary

Mary sat on a black leather couch that felt like it was more expensive than her rent for an entire year. As she waited for Harvey to come back with their drinks, she glanced around Harvey's living room, which was decorated in the same sparse but elegant style as his office. She kept telling herself how irresponsible it was of her to take him up on his offer. This was her boss! All kinds of wrong. What if something happened? What if it didn't? Work would be very uncomfortable for both of them in any case. He just had a way of influencing her judgment. Sometimes she just couldn't think around him. But she was clear-headed now. Making up her mind, she got up to tell him she would leave, but there was a knock at the door.

Harvey came from the kitchen with their drinks and set them down. "I'll just be a minute. I forgot that I have a delivery coming."

He opened the door and walked into the hallway. Mary thought she recognized Daniel, the night watchman from the hospital. She sat back on the leather couch, took a sip of her gin and tonic, and grimaced. She'd never liked the drink, but was so nervous that she told Harvey to

just give her whatever he was having. She heard voices in the hallway, but couldn't make out any of the words. Curious, she got up to listen in, but quickly sat back down when the door opened.

"Sorry for that."

"No worries. Was that Daniel?"

"Yes, he had that delivery for me. Sometimes things come for me to the hospital. He knows that they're important or time sensitive, so he's nice enough to bring them here."

"What is it?" As soon as she said the words, she regretted them. "I'm so sorry, Harvey. It's none of my business."

"It's okay. I've been wanting to show you this. Come."

Mary took two more long sips of the disagreeable drink before she followed him. He guided her to another room, which seemed to be his home office. She lingered in the doorway. If she went in, it would be more difficult to leave. She should go home now. Or she could just sit for a while. A familiar state of confusion enveloped her, and she felt the beginning of a migraine. Easing into the nearest chair, she told herself she shouldn't have had that drink.

Harvey opened the package and withdrew a chip, although it didn't look like the tags that she recognized. "This is an original brain chip," he said, his eyes shining. He was like a small child beholding his favourite toy.

"Brain chip? Weren't those banned after the first experiments?"

"They were. This here is one of the thirty that are still in circulation. My goal is to find all of them."

"And then what? Put them in a museum?"

Harvey laughed and placed the chip in a large metal box lined with similar objects. He pulled up a video on his computer and asked her to observe carefully. It was a surveillance camera video from what

appeared to be a gas station or corner store. A man walked up to the cash register with a couple of items that the clerk started to ring up.

“Harvey, I’m not sure what I should be...”

“Wait, it’s coming.” He smiled, almost bouncing on the edge of his chair.

The clerk suddenly stopped ringing up the items. He plunged his hand into the till and started giving all the money to the man in front of him. The man had not spoken to him, nor had he made any gestures that implied that he was robbing the store.

“What is he doing?”

“Isn’t it incredible? We think that this man has one of the original tags implanted in his brain.”

“Omigod. Is this recent? How is it possible?”

Harvey turned off the video and took a sip of his drink. Mary wanted to do the same, but realized that her glass was empty. When had she finished her drink?

“The first tests were done with brain tags when my father started the experiments. They drove most people mad, their bodies refusing the implants. But...”

He brought up another video of a white room in which a woman with short brown hair and wearing a medical gown sat at a table. Her head hung to her chest so they couldn’t see her face. An orderly entered the room and apprehensively deposited a tray of food in front of her, then left hastily. The tray levitated from the table, zooming through the air and into the opposite wall. The woman turned to stare at the camera with a knowing look that was very familiar to Mary. She could almost place her face, but not quite. She felt something akin to nostalgia at the sight of the woman, mingled with sorrow. Did she know this woman? As far as she knew, this was the first time that she had seen this video. She squinted through the halo of her migraine and

looked at the woman's face again. She bore a remarkable likeness to her mother.

Suddenly, Mary sensed a pull at the very back of her consciousness. The pulsing in her head that had started when they entered the office blew up in an agonizing crescendo. Her hands flew to her temples to stop the pressure, which was beginning to actually burn, if that was even possible. She felt herself fall from her chair in agony.

And then it was gone. Mary's hands fell to her sides as she caught her breath. Harvey's gaze locked on hers as he wiped his bloody nose with a tissue. What had they been watching again? She could vaguely recall a face. She could almost place it.

Harvey's voice brought her back to the present moment. "Are you okay, Mary? I went to grab your glass to refill it and you almost passed out and hit me in the face as you went down." He crouched down to where she was sitting on the floor.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Harvey. I don't know what has gotten into me. I'll have to see someone about these migraines."

"I can have a look. We have neuroscanners on the third floor at the hospital."

He held out his hand and helped her get up from the floor. She felt a shiver go through her, but this differed from all the other ones she had experienced with him.

Mary's phone rang with the ringtone reserved for her brother. "I should take this," she said and excused herself to the kitchen to speak privately.

"What do you want, Leo?"

"I'm sorry."

"You always are."

He sighed. "Forget what I said yesterday. I was talking to some guys that had a lead on a job and they suggested less than legal means to get

what I want, if you know what I mean. It messed with my brain. I'm okay now. Come home, Mare."

All she really heard was that he was looking for a job. Finally, he was making progress. "Alright, Leo, I'm on my way. But you have to promise no more crazy talk about selling my tag."

She could hear his big, goofy smile through the phone. "I promise."

She stood there in the kitchen, trying to figure out what she would tell Harvey.

"So I don't get you all to myself after all."

Mary jumped and almost dropped her phone.

Harvey stood with his shoulder pressed to the wall, drink in his hand. "Sorry, I overheard."

"I need to get going. I'm not feeling very well. Thanks for everything, Harvey."

He called her a prepaid car, and she left, wondering what would have happened between them if she had stayed and what he intended to do with the tags that he was gathering.

Harvey

She wasn't ready. He would need to get her tag and implement the next stage of his plan. With another drink in his hand, he called Terrance and made sure that he was still tracking her whereabouts.

"Did you talk to the brother?"

"Yeah, boss. He was pretty easy to convince, like you said. He's desperate for cash and to get out of this city."

"Good. You and Ricky make sure that you get into the apartment and scare them a little. She will come to me for help right away."

"Gotcha, boss."

Harvey hung up and looked out the window at the view from his condo. It wasn't an amazing view as far as they went, but it was what he needed. He could see the hospital that he and his father had worked so hard to fund. They'd carried out most of the early testing there. His father had asked Harvey to help him every step of the way. Harvey had felt privileged to work side by side with the man that he looked up to the most in this world. This was the only time that his father acknowledged him, and it was the only way that Harvey had found to spend time with him.

Mary's mother, Faith, was one of the first ones that showed promise. She'd become increasingly capable in her abilities. So much so that they had to isolate her for her own protection and that of others. Eventually, his father got so obsessed with his experiments that he pushed her too hard.

"Father, we need to give her a break. Maybe we can let her rest for a day."

"Not now. We're too close. All the other test subjects lost their abilities or died. I want to know why she is only getting stronger. That might be the key to creating the perfect brain tag."

"Yes, she is special. But maybe just one day. She might cooperate more easily if we give her some freedom."

His father had paused. Harvey could always tell when Gerald Ross was mulling something important over. He gazed far away into the distance and pursed his thin lips.

"No, we continue with the tests. We are almost there. Go prep the lab."

Harvey never knew how to argue with his father. The man he worshipped could do no wrong. He had prepped the lab as instructed. Faith had shown she could hurl objects across the lab. Now they wanted to know if she could influence live matter. For hours, they

forced Faith to attempt the mind control of small animals. Harvey could see that it pained her to do so, but she carried on under the influence of the tag. If it were up to him, the poor woman would have been sleeping by now, but he couldn't go against his father.

"No, you can do more!" his father had cried out. "I know that you have the power to influence even the strongest of human minds. You're holding back. Why?"

Faith stopped focusing on the cat in front of her and stared at them through the glass.

"Show me what you can really do and I'll finally give your children closure over your so-called death," his father had taunted with a smirk.

Faith's expression grew dark. Her tired eyes bored into Gerald with so much loathing that it felt palpable. Harvey felt a chill, as if he knew what was about to happen. He lunged for his father, but it was too late. Gerald grasped at his chest, struggling for air.

"No, Faith. Stop!"

Blood dripped from her nose as the woman focused on his father. He had told him to give her a break. He had told him...

Harvey watched helplessly as his hero slowly suffocated at the hands of his most promising test subject. That was the last time anyone saw Faith Morgan alive.

Mary

A loud crash woke her. At first she thought it was the neighbour's dog getting into the trash again, but then shouts came from the living room. Mary rose quickly to investigate, but not before grabbing her gun from the bedside table. She usually stored it away. She hated guns and only had this one because Leo had gifted it to her on her birthday, the year she got tagged. After their fight, though, she had thought it

prudent to keep it close. She held it now, shakily, not really sure that she could use it if it came to that.

Carefully opening her door, she winced when it squeaked. She'd asked Leo many times to fix it. Yet another thing that she would have to take care of.

"So what, now you're out?" A male voice, one she didn't recognize.

"I told you, she didn't go for it," her brother replied.

"That tag is worth more than you think, moron. I have it on good authority that it's part of the first batch."

"I said the deal is off."

"Listen, my instructions were to get the tag and get out. I can make it look like a break-in and do it while she's sleeping. I don't care if you're in or out."

Mary gasped, her hand in front of her mouth, and almost fell to the floor, she was shaking so much. Was her tag really one of the thirty that Harvey was looking for? She needed to escape, but the sole exit was the front door near the living room. The only other option was her bedroom window, but she would have to climb down the neighbour's balcony.

She tried to quietly wedge the window open, but she got it halfway open and it screeched loudly. She froze.

"What was that?" the man asked her brother.

"Nothing. Probably the neighbour."

No time! She boosted herself up.

She heard someone running down the hallway as she slipped hastily through the window and onto the balcony—no more than a glorified windowsill with a railing. Tucking the gun into the back of her sleep shorts and hoping that it held there, she started her climb down to the second-floor balcony, glad that she had signed the lease to her current apartment instead of the eighth floor as initially planned.

She had enough time to see her brother tackle a larger man to the floor outside her bedroom door before she dropped onto Mrs. Fletcher's balcony with a thud that shook her whole body. The gun fell into one of the potted plants that her neighbour kept outdoors. A glance into the apartment showed that the old lady was going for an overall Amazon jungle theme.

Mary looked over the railing and realized the drop to the street was farther down than she'd thought. She looked up. The large man was sticking his head out of her bedroom window.

She picked up her gun, tucked it back into her waistband, and tried to open Mrs. Fletcher's window. She knew that if her neighbour had an alarm system, it would detect her tag, but she had little choice. Luckily, this window was neither locked nor as loud as hers.

Sneaking through the foliage in the old woman's bedroom, Mary realized that there was no one home. Maybe Mrs. Fletcher had gone to spend some time at her daughter's house. She sighed and took a moment to assess her situation. She was barefoot in her sleep shorts and tank top in a stranger's bedroom, and a thug was after her tag. Oh yeah, and her glove was back in her apartment.

The only person she could think of to help her was Harvey. But she couldn't go like this. She moved to the closet and grabbed one of the many oversized floral dresses inside, which she slipped over her head, then pushed her feet into a pair of flip-flops. Moving carefully through the dark apartment to the door, she continued out to the street and grabbed a passenger car.

She was thinking what she would tell the hospital staff once she got there when she glanced out the car window and saw the big man emerge onto the sidewalk, dragging her brother by the arm. Leo's face looked like it had seen the brute's fists one too many times. At least he

was alive. Although she was furious at him, he was still the only family she had left.

The car dropped her off at St-Julia's. Mary quickly ducked into the stairway off the reception area and hoped that the night watchman hadn't noticed her. She swiped her hand on the locker room door and changed into a fresh pair of scrubs, tossing the borrowed garb in the garbage chute. She hoped Harvey was still on call.

She found him in his office, looking over a client's file. He looked even more tired than when she'd last seen him, but he still gave her a smile. "Mary, what are you doing here at this time? Is it your brother? I knew I shouldn't have let you leave."

"Can I talk to you?" she asked from the doorway.

"Of course. Come in, have a seat."

She didn't know exactly how to tell him, so she decided to just go for it. "Someone is after my tag."

His eyes widened. "What? Are you sure?"

"Yes. He was in my apartment. He said something about it being one of the first tags."

Harvey's expression became hard. "He said what?"

"I know it doesn't make sense. The first tags were prototypes for brain implants. They were banned."

Harvey got up and closed the door to his office. "There are rumours that the thirty brain implant chips were repurposed. The ramifications are unthinkable if this is true," he said as he moved back around his desk.

She leaned closer to his desk and held onto the edge. "What ramifications?"

He didn't answer right away, searching for something on his computer.

Mary rubbed the back of her neck, feeling a headache coming on. "Harvey, what is it?"

He turned the screen toward her. She recognized his father's initial research on implants. There was, however, information that she hadn't seen before.

"My father designed a chip that could be implanted anywhere in the body. It's just a matter of inhibiting certain parts or activating others. After manufacturing the first few that way, they stopped because it was too expensive and unnecessary. The original tags are very rare, and dangerous in the wrong hands."

Mary sat back in her chair and let the information sink in. "But the research papers I read only indicated that microchips served a single purpose."

"You know they couldn't let that information get out to the public."

"Why would I have one of those chips? How?"

"It's possible, if they were still in circulation and were reprogrammed to be single service chips." He fell silent.

Mary's head was spinning. Did her brother know that she potentially had this rare and valuable implant? How much was it worth? Harvey was right. If it fell into the wrong hands, the consequences could be disastrous. She couldn't run. They would eventually track her down. Her only choice was to remove the tag herself before she suffered the same fate as her brother, or worse.

"Harvey, I need to ask you a favour," she said as she touched her scar.

"I think I know where this is going."

He got up without further explanation and they both headed to the small area in his office where he performed minor surgeries. The

doctor prepared his instruments and took care to sanitize the work surface.

Just before he had to inject the anesthetic into her hand, he looked at her. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. This meant she could no longer work at the hospital. Not until she got a new tag, anyway. She hadn't thought this through, and her future was uncertain. The alternative, however, was not an option.

As he plunged the syringe into her hand, someone knocked at the door.

"I'm in the middle of a procedure," he called out.

The person knocked again.

"I'm sorry; maybe it's an emergency."

He walked to the door, but Mary felt something was off. She grabbed a scalpel from the tray and held it tight, sitting at the edge of her chair. Harvey opened the door and spoke to someone in hushed tones. It was taking too long. The cold metal in her hand was becoming increasingly warm to the touch.

Harvey glanced back at her a few times while he spoke. She couldn't make out what he was saying except for "Well, it can wait."

He finally came back to resume the extraction. Mary sighed and put the sharp instrument back, some of the tension leaving her body.

"Mrs. Thornton. She says something is wrong with her new hand. I'll see her after I'm done here."

Mary's hand was completely numb as he skillfully cut into the flesh beneath her scar to remove the offending device.

"What will you do with the chip?" he asked as his scent enveloped her. It was a mixture of antiseptic and sandalwood.

"I haven't thought about it. Weren't you collecting these? Maybe you could hold onto it until I can figure it out."

He continued his work in silence until he held the tiny device between a pair of tweezers. "Here it is. I'd be glad to keep it for you," he said as he inspected it.

Mary hesitated. She would literally be trusting him with her life. For now, she didn't have any other choice. She didn't know who to contact in order to sell it and if she kept it, she remained a target. "Can you get me another tag?" she asked. She didn't want to ask for any more than she already had.

"I'll try. I can use my father's old connections. I already have your compatibility score and DNA sequence."

He finished bandaging her up and held onto her hand a little longer than he should have. "Mary, where will you go?"

"I don't know," she said truthfully.

"Wait here."

He left the office for the adjoining bathroom without hearing her protest and came back with a metal key. She hadn't seen one of those since she was a child.

"Here, take this. It's a key to my cabin a couple of hours north. No one knows about it or where it is and they can't track you if you're not holding any electronics."

"Harvey, you don't have to."

"I want to."

As he placed the key in her hand, she couldn't help but notice the rough texture of his skin against hers. His touch lingered, sending shivers down her spine. She looked up at him, and their eyes met, his smoldering gaze capturing her completely. For a moment, they just stood there, lost in each other. And then, suddenly, his hand shot up to cup her face, his touch both gentle and possessive. Before she could even process what was happening, he leaned in and kissed her. It was a dizzying, passionate kiss, filled with all the pent-up tension and desire

that had been building between them. She kissed him back eagerly, her heart racing in her chest.

As their lips parted, confusion and uncertainty washed over her. She knew that this would only complicate things further, but at that moment, she didn't have the willpower to stop. Breathless, she pulled back and looked up at him, unsure of what to say or do next. The air around them was charged with an electric energy. Where would this unexpected turn of events lead them?

"Give me your phone."

Not exactly the words she was expecting after their kiss. "What?"

"No electronics, remember?"

"I have to tell Leo I'm okay." As she said it, she knew it was a bad idea. "I don't have my phone. I left with only the clothes on my back."

And her gun, but she omitted that detail. She still had it tucked safely in the back of her pants.

They said their goodbyes.

Only once she was out on the street did Mary realize she couldn't call a car to get to the cabin. The directions that Harvey had given her were pretty straightforward, but she needed transportation. Against her better judgment, she asked a passerby to use their phone and dialed her brother's number.

"Leo, I need your help."

"Geez, Mare, you're okay. I swear I—"

"No thanks to you."

Silence. He didn't even try to argue.

"I can't explain right now. Meet me at Tasty Sweets in twenty minutes." She hung up, hoping that Leo would come through for her.

As she entered their favourite bakery, the smell of fresh donuts wafted toward her. It reminded her of Sunday mornings with her

parents, when they were kids. She found a seat and closed her eyes, letting the memories wash over her. It smelled like simpler times.

Her brother arrived, looking a mess. He started to embrace her, but as soon as he noticed the bandage on her hand, he pulled away. “Where is your tag? Did they get it? Are you okay?”

“It’s safe. I’m...fine.”

That’s all she said. He didn’t need any specifics and his lack of questions indicated that he knew that was all he was going to get out of her. He was lucky she was talking with him at all.

They ordered coffee and Mary got her favourite cream-filled donut, which she devoured as they spoke.

“Mare, I’m so fucking sorry. I should have never—”

“Listen, Leo, I won’t forget what you did. But you’re the only family I’ve got left, and I need your help.”

“Name it—anything.”

Licking her fingers clean of the powdered sugar, she subtly looked around to see if anyone was paying attention to them. Everyone was engrossed in their own pastries. “I need you to ask Mauro for a car.”

Leo’s eyes widened. Well, as wide as they went after the beating he had taken earlier. “Where are you going, Mare?”

“That’s none of your concern. Can you get me the car? I’ll also need some provisions.”

“Yeah, I can get it. I need a couple of hours.”

“Okay, lend me your phone. I need credits to get groceries. I’ll meet you back here in two hours.”

He reluctantly handed her his phone.

She headed to the nearest grocery store, hoping that no one had followed either of them. It would be odd to pay with credits instead of her tag.

She was perusing the produce when she felt as if she were being watched. She tried to rationalize that everyone got that feeling once in a while as she deliberately added apples to her cart. Only this wasn't a typical grocery run. She casually looked over her shoulder.

The goon from her apartment was walking toward her.

Her heart in her throat, she pushed her cart quickly down the aisle, weaving between people, grabbing some bananas as she passed. Maybe she could lose him in one of the aisles.

She speed-walked to the cereal aisle, pushing her cart so fast that others were starting to notice. She hoped that she only looked like a woman in a hurry to get her chores done. Swerving through the cereal and bread racks, Mary took whatever she could and continued to canned foods and then the milk products. Every time she turned the corner, she was relieved to not see the man. Finally, in the frozen food section, she saw him waiting for her.

She could try running from him all day in here, but he would eventually catch up to her. She lifted her sleeve and walked straight toward him. Once she was face to face with him, she raised her hand for him to see the bandages that Harvey had so expertly applied. "Someone else got to it before you. It's over."

He grinned. "Oh, it's not over, honey."

She frowned. What did he mean by that?

Without warning, he pulled her to him. She could feel the gun on her back.

"Let me go or I'll scream!" she said as she twisted in his grasp.

He didn't listen. Instead, the brute instructed her to push her cart to the employee-only section at the back of the store. Sweat blossomed on her brow as she walked into the secluded area.

"Tell me what you did with the tag," he said, now facing her but still holding the gun.

She still had her weapon tucked away, but she would never be quick enough to use it. "I told you, someone beat you to it."

"Take it off." He pointed to the bandage.

She complied, showing him the fresh wound.

The man muttered a few expletives and waved his gun at her. "How do I know you didn't take it yourself? You better not be lying..."

His phone rang. She was surprised when he answered it.

"Yeah, boss. I got her right here. She says someone took the tag. Yes. I understand. Got it." He put the phone and the gun away in his khakis and walked away without another look at her. Just like that.

Mary held onto the shopping cart to avoid falling. For the second time today, her legs felt like jelly.

Harvey

He had the tag. The plan had worked out well. Terrance had gotten a little carried away with the theatrics with the brother, but the lazy ass deserved it. How dare he make Mary do all the work while he sat there at home? Now all that was left was to convince Mary that the chip belonged in her brain. Maybe if he showed her the amazing things he could do with his own tag?

Daniel had told him to implant it when she first got hired, but Harvey didn't want to risk her not being able to control it. The man should just stick to what he knew and continue being the good employee that he was. Just today, Daniel had interrupted a moment Harvey was having with Mary at the clinic while he extracted the tag. Daniel came to plead with him to implant the tag immediately after he removed it. What did the night watchman know? The imbecile had no insight into the woman he, dare he say it, loved.

He thought about the kiss they'd shared. He had never felt so passionate about another person. But was it all real? Was part of it the power he exerted over her with his tag? Did it actually matter? He had the tag, he had the girl, and soon he would have everything that he had worked for. His father would be proud to know that his work would live on. It was especially fitting that Faith's daughter would be the one to move everything forward when Faith herself had brought everything to a startling halt.

He picked up his phone. He should call Terrance and let him know the plan had worked.

"Terrance, are you still following the subject?"

"Yeah, boss. I got her right here. She says someone took the tag."

"Yes, I've got it. The plan worked perfectly. Come by later and I'll give you the payment I promised. You can leave her now. I've got it covered from here on out."

"Yes. I understand. Got it."

Mary

Leo showed up as promised with the car and helped her load the groceries into the trunk. She didn't tell him about being followed or accosted in the grocery store. The less he knew, the better. He touched the back of his head with his good hand as he watched her get into the driver's seat.

"I'll be fine, Leo. I got one of the doctors to help. Just don't look for me, and stay out of trouble."

"I can fix this. Let me fix this," he pleaded.

"There's no going back now. Thanks for the car."

He nodded as she shut the car door and waved feebly as she drove away with tears in her eyes.

It wasn't going to be easy to find the cabin without a GPS, but Harvey's directions looked simple enough to follow. The piece of paper she held felt so foreign to her—she was used to an electronic voice guiding her to her destination. She decided to turn on the radio after a while. The sounds of the road made her nervous. Plus, any car that followed her for more than a couple of miles seemed suspect to her. She passed a refueling station without stopping to charge the car, too afraid that someone would accost her. She didn't need to relieve herself anyway. The cup of coffee she had gotten at the pastry shop before she left sat untouched and cold in the cup holder.

Pretty soon, she noticed a car had been following her since the refueling station. Glad that she hadn't stopped, Mary changed lanes and headed toward the next exit, even though it wasn't where she was headed. The car behind her did the same. It might have been a coincidence, but she didn't want to take the chance. The radio played an old song her mother had often played. The lyrics filled the car: "One way or another, I'm going to find you. I'm gonna getcha..." Mary rolled her eyes at the fates.

She continued driving right onto the exit ramp, and sure enough, the car followed her. Her next move would be crucial, and she didn't trust that her driving skills were up to par. Deciding to go for it anyway, she swerved at the last minute, her car lurching as she got off the ramp and back onto the highway. The song played on, mocking her. "One way or another, I'm gonna lose ya, I'm gonna give you the slip..." The passenger seat was now saturated with brown liquid and her forgotten coffee cup lay on the floor.

She exhaled as she looked into her rearview mirror. The car behind her continued on up the exit ramp and disappeared. If she was being followed, she was pretty sure that she had lost them. If it was just a

random stranger, well, he was probably wondering what the hell had just happened.

She got to her destination late that night and had to use the car's headlights to light the way to the front door. Everything was enveloped in darkness and eerily quiet, so unlike what she was used to in the city.

It was a quaint little cabin. There was a kitchen and living room on the first floor, with a door that led to a back porch. Upstairs were two rooms and a bathroom. The decoration in the cabin was very sparse. Harvey was definitely a no knickknacks or pictures kind of guy. She smiled at the thought of him and wondered if anything would ever happen between them, now that they had crossed that line.

She unpacked her groceries and put on an oversized sweater she found in one of the bedrooms. It smelled like Harvey. She brought it up to her nose with a smile, then realized it quite repulsed her. *I must be tired*, she thought. She lay on the couch and fell into an exhausted asleep almost instantly.

Harvey

It had been a sleepless night spent working on Mary's chip, but he believed it was finally ready. With the help of his father's schematics, the failsafe was in place and he could easily implant it in a matter of minutes.

It was time. He couldn't foresee any reason she wouldn't want to be with him, to be like him. Together, they would be unstoppable. Their parents' deaths would not be in vain. He had all but one of the original tags now and he had promised his contact at the army they would be ready soon. If all went according to plan, the next time he and Mary were together would be the start of something tremendous.

Harvey wiped his nose with the back of his hand. Blood. He needed to rest. He had been using his abilities far too often. If his control over Mary waned even a little, his plan might not work. But he had a backup plan just in case.

Mary

The next morning, a grumbling stomach woke Mary. Running for your life could make a girl hungry. But first, she needed coffee. She ransacked the kitchen and eventually settled for the black tea she found in the cupboard. She prepared toast, cursing herself for forgetting to purchase some nut butter or jam to spread on top. Having someone stalk you around the store makes you forget stuff like that.

She plated the sad-looking piece of bread and some fruit and was about to sit down to eat when she heard a car pulling up to the house. Besides Harvey, no one else was supposed to know that she was here. Had that car followed her after all?

Leaving her breakfast, she grabbed her gun and tucked it in the now familiar spot in her waistband. Standing to one side of the front window, she slid the vertical blinds aside far enough to peek out.

She didn't recognize the car. Taking a step back, planning to run out the back door, she saw who was emerging from the vehicle and smiled, the tension leaving her body.

"Harvey!" she greeted him enthusiastically as she opened the door. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked a bit gaunt. Work was definitely getting him down.

"Mary, you made it."

"Yes, of course; why wouldn't I?"

"I was afraid that without a GPS and with my dodgy instructions..."

"Your instructions were very accurate, I can assure you." She laughed.

He walked into the cottage and embraced her, taking Mary off guard. "How I've missed you," he said as he inhaled her scent.

That she was on the run and he was technically no longer her boss should have made it easier to give in to her desire for him, but she felt something was off. He seemed agitated and not his normal, in-control self.

She gently pushed out of his grasp and sat down in front of her cold toast, inviting him to join her. "Do you want some breakfast? I was just about to eat."

"I'm not hungry, thank you." Harvey stared at her toast and tea and then at her. "You don't usually have tea in the morning," he said, almost accusingly.

"You were out of coffee. I'm okay with tea, though."

He stared at her for a moment too long, his blue eyes boring into her soul. She suddenly didn't want the tea and pushed it away.

He smiled and took her hand in his. "How are your sutures?" He remained standing, forcing her to look up at him.

"I'm fine, thanks. When we find a replacement chip, I'll be good as new and will come back to work."

"I got you one."

"Already?" She knew how hard they were to come by and reprogram.

"Being the owner of the clinic and a shareholder in Taggard Corp. has its advantages," he boasted.

"Taggard Corp.? You never told me you were a shareholder."

"Of course. I couldn't let my father's research go to waste. Being a shareholder ensures that the company stays true to his vision."

Mary recalled that the company had not been forthcoming about her mother's death. An image of her mother in a closed white room flashed before her eyes as a sharp pain in her temple made her wince. Where had she seen this before? She had a vague recollection of being at Harvey's apartment. Was Harvey involved in some way? Impossible.

Harvey reached into his pocket and slipped out a medical container holding the implant. "We can do it here if you want. I brought my surgical instruments."

She felt like something was compelling her to say yes, even though that was the last thing she wanted at the moment. Fighting the urge, she tried to focus on her breakfast.

"I'm not sure, Harvey. I need to think. So much has happened. My brother, being followed, our...situation."

He pulled a chair out and sat close to her. "Mary, there is so much I need to explain, so much that we can do together to continue my father's research."

"Of course, I'm always here to help you."

"I was hoping you would say that."

He pushed the plate aside, leaned in, and kissed her fervently. They moved closer still and Mary melted into him. There was something so right about the way he held her. And yet a nagging little voice at the back of her mind kept telling her to run.

The sound of porcelain crashing to the floor startled her back into her seat. They were silent for a while and then he rose and spoke as he paced the small kitchen, while she picked up the pieces of broken china.

"With Taggard Corp., I was able to track most of the original chips down. But after a while, it became maddening, waiting for the rest to turn up at the clinic. I had to use other means to get people in to assess

if they had the missing tech.” He stopped and looked at her, searching her face for something. She waited for him to continue, not sure if he wanted her to interject.

“When that didn’t work as well as predicted, I dispatched some of my employees to go out looking for them. Mrs. Thornton had one of the tags, it seems.”

She froze. “Harvey, what are you saying?”

“What would you like me to say, darling?”

His use of the term of endearment gave her goosebumps, and not the good kind. If Harvey was saying what she thought he was, then he could be behind the sudden uptick of robberies and dismemberments. It couldn’t be.

Depositing the last of the broken dish on the table, she sat down once more, even though something told her she should get the hell out. “What about my chip? How did you know it was one of the missing ones? Do you have it with you?”

“Yes, I have it. Funny, what we had to go through to get it.”

“Harvey, no.”

“Oh, don’t pretend you didn’t know.”

Now she was panicking. Mary rose, but he took one look at her and the urge to sit back down overwhelmed her.

“We’ve been talking about this technology and its potential since I hired you at the clinic. I showed you the videos!”

“I had no idea.”

He took her by the hand and led her to the couch. She followed reluctantly, trying to put the pieces together in her head.

“I knew we had one of the rare tags at the clinic around the time that you came to us. It was actually one that I found in my father’s lab. I had it tested, and it turns out it was your mother’s. I knew then that you should be the one to have it.”

Her mother. Mary's stomach lurched. She tried to get up, but that urge to stay seated returned. Damn, her head hurt.

"I could have waited and kept it until I could convince you to have it implanted as it was intended, but it just seemed fitting that you would have it from the get go."

Furious, Mary punched his arm off her shoulder, panting. "You sent that thug to my apartment?"

When he didn't deny it, her heart sank.

"It was you, on the phone in the grocery store." Her skin was crawling. She needed to get out. "How could you? I thought we were friends. I thought—"

"How could I not? I owe it to my father to continue the work he never had a chance to finish, thanks to your mother."

Mary froze as memories flooded her brain. Her mother in a closed room, a pained expression on her face as they performed tests on her. "My mother..."

She moved to get up again, but that pull kept her seated. Could Harvey have an implant? Her stomach roiled as she thought back to all the time she had spent with him. Was any of it real? Were her feelings real? But it made complete sense. The headaches, the memory loss... She felt violated. Everything had been a lie.

"Yes, your mother. She was amazing. It was a shame that she had to die for what she did to my father."

Tears flowed down Mary's face as she struggled to free herself from Harvey's hold. He paced back and forth in front of her, never taking his gaze from her.

"Don't cry. We can do it differently this time around. We can make it better. I have almost all the implants. We can reprogram them to be used as brain tags. I have a contact in the military that is ready

to implement them. You can help me with that, Mary. We can do it together.”

He pulled a small velvet box from his jacket pocket. If he got down on one knee, she was going to puke.

“You are out of your mind.”

“Quite the contrary, Mary.” He laughed at his joke.

Opening the velvet box, he revealed a microchip. “This is your tag. I’ve reprogrammed it to be used as a brain implant. We can start using it now. I have a patient that is rather eager to test it, but I told him that you had first dibs, since it was yours. Mary, the chips were not meant to control humanity, but to set them free. I’m about to change everything, and you can be a part of it.”

The room spun. She should have had at least a bite of the toast. “I’d rather die.”

“I’m so sorry that you feel that way.”

As Harvey produced a gun from his jacket, Mary instinctively leapt up and ran for the front door, but tripped on the living room rug. Her own gun went flying. She would need to find a better spot for it.

She got up and moved toward her gun, her eyes on Dr. Ross. “You don’t want to shoot me, Harvey.”

“No, I don’t. But I will if I have to.” He took a step forward.

“This is insane. You don’t need me. You can go about your business. I swear, I won’t tell anyone.” Her gun was within reach now.

Harvey moved quickly, kicking her gun out of the way on his way to block the front door. “I don’t want to sound too cliché, but you know too much.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty cliché,” she sighed.

“I told you.” He smiled.

“Just let me go, Harvey. Please.” She walked slowly back to the kitchen, keeping her eyes on him. Maybe she could make a run for the

back door. He watched her intently, not saying a word. *This can't be how I go*, she thought. *I never got to see those endangered animals in Belize*. She decided to just go for it.

Mary bolted forward, running as fast as she could to the back door. A searing pain in her right temple stopped her in her tracks. She fell to the floor, holding her head.

Harvey still had the gun in his hand, but he wasn't pointing it at her. Instead, his eyes were focused intently on her. His nose was bleeding. "I really thought that you would come around, once I explained everything to you, Mary. It's really a shame. I rather liked you."

He hovered over her, holding the gun loosely in one hand, a piece of toast in the other. "Mary, Mary, quite contrary." Harvey squatted over her and took a bite of the toast. Crumbs fell onto her face. He grimaced and threw the toast toward the table, watching it fall short and flop onto the floor.

The pressure in her head suddenly eased up when he looked away. Seizing the opportunity, she kicked her leg up as hard as she could between his legs. He hollered and rolled over onto the floor next to her, dropping his gun.

Mary picked herself up, tears flowing down her chin. Leaving through the back door, she made her way around the house to her car. But she hadn't planned it through. When she got to the car, she found it locked. Of course. The fob was in her purse. Her mind raced frantically for alternatives. She couldn't go back to the cabin. If she tried to escape into the woods, she wouldn't get very far before he caught up to her and there didn't seem to be any sign of neighbours for miles.

Hot tears kept making their way down her face. She was tired of all of this. If only she hadn't taken that job. If only she hadn't trusted Harvey. She wiped the wetness from her eyes. It wouldn't help her.

She made it to Harvey's car and miraculously, the driver's side was open. Laughing through her tears, she jumped in, but the car wouldn't start. It was DNA activated. Just her luck. She slumped over the front console just as a bullet broke through the glass of the front window and lodged itself in the passenger seat.

"Harvey, no!" she screamed. But another bullet tore through the side window as she ducked.

"Mary, don't hide from me," Harvey called as he approached the car. "I know you. You share my passion for helping humans better themselves. Look how much I've bettered myself. Mary, I know that you love me. I'll forgive your small transgression. Come out and we can work this all out."

Mary felt bile coming up in her mouth. She looked around for a weapon and came up short until she saw his briefcase. She opened it and grabbed the scalpel, the same one she had held in her hand in his office.

"You don't know me at all, Harvey," she said as she opened the car door and stabbed him in the leg. She tried to grab his gun, but he held on tight to it. She howled in agony as he slammed the car door on her arm. Throwing it open again, he yanked her from the front seat and onto the ground.

"You fucking bitch," he shouted as he pointed his weapon at her head.

She shook, hiccupping through her words. "Please Harvey, don't."

"You're right," he said as he threw his weapon to the ground and let her go.

Mary looked up at him, confused but grateful.

"I don't need a gun, Mary. I have the power of my mind."

The pressure in her head returned, and to her horror, she got up and embraced the psychopath in front of her. His eyes were wild and

webbed with red veins, and his breathing had become ragged. He pulled her close. Her face in the crook of his neck felt wrong. She wanted to bite his flesh and kick him, anything to get out of his grasp and end the intrusive pressure in her brain.

“Don’t resist me, Mary,” he said through clenched teeth. She could feel the muscles in his body seize up. The sweat generated by his exertion ran down the column of his throat and mixed with the blood from his nose to wet her face, making her shudder.

“Harvey, you’re not well. Your body is rejecting the implant.”

“Nonsense. I’m just getting used to using its full potential. I haven’t controlled someone for this long before. I need more practice, that’s all.”

“Tell me something, Harvey. You and me: was any of that real, or were you in my head since the beginning?”

There was a noise not far from them and Harvey turned toward it, his attention wavering and his grasp on her mind slipping. She pushed out of his embrace just as a popping sound split the air. Harvey’s eyes grew wide, and he fell forward with a grunt, pulling her down with him. Blood spilled out from his chest. Instinctively, she tried to put pressure on the wound to stop the flow.

“I guess you’ll never know.” He smiled through clenched teeth. And then his body went limp and his eyes closed.

Shaking, Mary looked up, trying to register what had just happened. Harvey lay still on the ground, blood pooling on the ground under him. A figure stood over them, backlit by the sun. She tried to shield her eyes to see who it was, but she couldn’t move her arm.

Too tired to deal with anything else today, she sighed and asked, “Who’s there?”

“Aw, come on, you don’t recognize your own flesh and blood?”

“Leo?” she almost cried.

He shifted to help her up and she could see him now. His face was still banged up pretty good, but he had combed his hair. He was even wearing his old leather jacket, although the zipper strained against his belly. "Only family you have left, right? Who else is going to be there for you when your sicko boss-slash-boyfriend is trying to kill you?"

"Not my boyfriend," Mary replied vehemently as she looked at Harvey's body. She turned back to Leo. "Where did you come from? How did you find me?"

"I had Mauro chip the car."

"You *what*? Ha-ha, sonovabitch!"

"Relax, I was the only one with access to the frequency. I was here all night, parked a few miles away, and slept in the car. You really shook me when you pulled that little maneuver on the highway, though. Nice moves, sis."

"That was you! I'm so glad you ended up being my tail." She laughed nervously, shoving him.

"I was coming to check on you when I heard the commotion."

Mary hugged her brother tightly. He hugged her back, a big bear hug that almost took her breath away. She was glad that the events of the past few days, although she could have done without them, had brought them closer together.

"Okay Leo, that's enough," she gasped with a laugh.

"I can't," he hissed.

"What do you mean? Just stop. You're hurting me."

"I can't," he repeated.

Mary turned to see Harvey, eyes barely open, focused on her brother.

Leo's hands moved to her neck, and she shook her head, gasping for air. His eyes were glistening with unshed tears. No, this wasn't how she was going to go, either. There was no way.

She reached around Leo and pulled his gun from the back of his pants, then swung her arm toward where Harvey lay dying. She fired as many shots as she could, hoping that one of them would reach their intended target.

The hands around her throat eased off, and she inhaled loudly, immediately turning to make sure Harvey was finally dead. This time she gave her brother a proper hug, and they both shed tears, standing alone in the wilderness, a gory scene before them that only they and the animals would ever see.

She walked shakily over to Harvey's body and rummaged in his coat pocket, roughly extricating a small velvet box. Inside, her tag lay nestled in a small groove. She knew they would eventually be able to get one of Leo's contacts to sell it for them on the black market. But first, they needed to go back and destroy the implants that Harvey had been gathering.

She snickered as she pocketed the implant. Leo would finally get what he wanted. Only now, she shared in his eagerness to leave all of this behind. She could take her implant and go back to work as if nothing happened, but she was done with tags and all that came with them.

"Now what?" Leo said as he wiped some blood off his face.

"Now, we disappear. I hear Belize is nice this time of year."

The End