

SHANA SILVER

# MIND GAMES

*Swoon* READS

NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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To Dad,

For making me love science fiction as much as you do,  
and for planting the seed of an idea from which this book grew.

00110001

The problem with stealing other people's memories is that you start to lose the difference between what's theirs and what's yours. Luckily, I know how to exploit that—as long as the teachers don't find out, anyway. Normal after-school jobs are over-rated if you have a secret in-school business. When your last name is emblazoned on the school crest—and the school letterhead—the other students will let you get away with anything. Like stealing their memories.

On my laptop, I open up my memory-uploading app. A line of students snakes away from me, each one wanting to buy a different experience. And I have loads of experiences to choose from, indexed within the app. I bypass the cool graphic interface normal users of HiveMind see and run the hacking program I wrote back when my dad was first developing the software. It uses a variety of complex algorithms to gain backdoor access to *all* the files stored in the HiveMind cloud, not just my own.

Usually, my partner in crime, Zoey Flint, doles out numbers as though the students are waiting in line at the deli, except she texted me that she's running late today, so I'm doing it myself. Once they receive a number, they disperse across the courtyard and mill about like strangers trying to act normal before they break out in a flash mob.

“Hey, Arden.” The first customer out of thirty gives me a quick smile, buttering me up to get the goods. “Can I have the answers to last night’s Biotechnology homework?” She lifts a tablet, revealing a mess of stylus-created scribbles on top of complicated math problems. Dark clouds swirl in the washed-out sky, turning the mirrored building in front of us into a sheet of gray. Cold and clinical, more like an office building than a high school for science geniuses. Laboratory chic.

I hold out my palm, indicating fifty bucks. My standard rate.

“Oh my God, you’re a lifesaver.” The customer digs in her purse and sets the wad of bills in my palm. Once I slide them into my change purse, I get to work transferring over a classmate’s stolen memory. The app syncs directly to users’ minds thanks to cutting-edge technology my dad invented, so my customer will get an instant download of a memory that doesn’t belong to her. But once it copies, it’s hers forever, automatically added to her account via a bidirectional sync.

Someone else’s fingers cover my vision, and gardenia perfume drowns out the acrid scent of oncoming rain. “Guess who.” An excited squeal punctuates the gesture.

“Well, the giggle alone rules out an advancement in robotics. And also someone I’d be friends with.” I pause for dramatic effect, ignoring Zoey Flint’s scoff. “This mystery may never be solved.” I lift one of my best friend’s hands off my face, catching a glimpse of the scar that bulges, pink and angry, on the inside of my wrist. I flinch, heart thumping. I first noticed the scar this morning when getting dressed, but I have no recollection of how I got it. It freaks me out every time I spot it.

“Actually,” Zoey says. The skeletal trees perform a macabre dance set to the symphony of the wind. A sudden chill descends and Zoey tugs on her white cardigan. “I heard some freshman

is working on a robotics project that—” She glances over at my phone, and her eyes widen. “Whoa. Twenty-seven customers this morning! Sorry again for being late. Blame Veronica for taking forever in the shower.” She grabs the phone to take over line-control duties and crosses her pantsuit-covered legs. At our school, you never know when a lecture might turn into an important meeting, so she always tries to be prepared. Not to mention we share a parking lot with the lab techs who work on the floors above the school, who may become our coworkers one day.

Zoey handles all the parts of the job I hate: organization, money laundering, and marketing. Without her, I’d be lost. Or at least I’d be without excess cash flow, and every bit of cash helps. It’s all seed money for when I start my *own* company one day. I shoot her a big grin for keeping me organized and honest. Well, as honest as it comes when performing illicit tasks that would get me expelled if the administration found out.

I flip my arm downward, covering the scar. Out of sight, out of mind.

Except, of course, if you have HiveMind, version 1.0.

Years ago, my dad developed the cloud-based memory-uploading app. Every memory gets backed up and synced to the brain instantly, meaning nothing is ever forgotten. No more black-outs from a night of drinking. No more study sessions that jumble in the brain as you stare at the test. No more excuses.

Users are only supposed to be able to access their own files. But I never do what I’m supposed to do.

“So you’re probably wondering why I’m late.” Zoey leans over me, the ends of her blond hair dangling over my computer screen. “It’s because I have news! According to the triangular love theory, anyway.”

“I already saw the memory.” I tap my finger against the file

descriptions and thumbnail images that pop up when I hack into Teddy Day's mind. For months, Zoey's had a ritualistic compulsion to dot her *i*'s with hearts when she thinks of him and an obsessive need to know if he's thinking of her back. Which means I've seen so many of his damn memories, my knowledge extends beyond the banal, like what he eats for breakfast, and escalates into I-so-did-not-need-to-know-that territory: like what kind of boxers he wears. "Teddy called you last night. Clearly this is the first step to admitting his feelings have progressed beyond the avoid-making-eye-contact phase."

She sighs happily, not picking up on the sarcasm in my voice. After all, he only called her because he was looking for me. He never bothered to find me though.

"It's the only theory that makes sense. He's in love with me."

I laugh. "Yep, a totally logical conclusion." I scroll through Teddy's mind and find his memory of completing last night's homework. As the top genius at a school for geniuses, he's the only person who doesn't need to study but always does. When your spot on the school roster comes from an invitation-only admittance policy and a generous grant supplied by Varga Industries, you tend to only slack off in summer, when free time finally fits into your schedule. A brief preview in the software shows Teddy's view yesterday afternoon as he worked out the answers to the math problems. I drop the memory into the first customer's mind. "Don't forget to alter your answer wording and get at least one wrong."

A few months ago, Mrs. Schlissel discovered three students using the same essay wording verbatim. She gave them all detention and I gave all my customers a stern talking-to about what going to a school for geniuses really means: i.e., use your damn wits. And just in case they didn't have any to spare after their studies, I jacked up my prices to make the market smaller.

The girl instantly straightens, not even thanking me as her thumb sweeps over the keypad while she ambles away.

When Zoey texts the next customer to step up to the plate, he gives us a horsey smile with bright white teeth. “How are you fine ladies this morning? Love that yellow on you, Arden. Really makes your hair stand out.”

I wave my hand for him to get on with it. It’s never good when people lay it on this thick.

“Here’s a secret.” He invades my personal space by sitting on my other side. I scoot closer to Zoey. “I have a huge crush on Melody Clarendon. I want to get to know her better.”

Time to break out the big guns. I crack my neck from side to side. “Darwin hypothesized that spoken language evolved due to a need for reciprocal altruism, so—”

“What Arden here means”—Zoey shoots me a dirty glare from across the table that could only be interpreted as *don’t alienate the customers*—“is you should go talk to her.”

He strokes his chin. “I was thinking more like . . . biblically.”

Zoey’s face squishes like she just bit into a lemon.

“Dude, that’s creepy.” I flick my wrist, shooing him. “You know the rules.” I don’t mind violating people’s privacy when it comes to test answers, but I have to draw the line somewhere. No nudity, no revealing other people’s secrets, and no deleting memories.

As the creepy guy ambles away, the next kid in line, Simon Zajek, hurls himself at me. He leans way too close, and I arch my back to avoid his apple-juice breath. “Okay, this is going to sound weird.”

“Doubtful.” I fake a yawn. I’ve heard it all. Especially from him.

Zoey snickers, pushing blond waves behind her ear. The leafless trees sway as though they’re mocking Simon’s jitteriness. Men in white lab coats hustle from the parking lot to the Varga Industries entrance on the other side of the building.



Simon darts his head around the courtyard, knocking his Red Sox cap into my forehead. “You can’t tell anyone.”

I draw my finger across my lips. My backup dancer nods.

“Is . . . Is Veronica cheating on me?” He holds out a hundred bucks. I shake my head—this falls into category two: secrets.

We can’t show him this. It’ll crush him. And besides, I’d vowed not to give him any more memories. He asks for something new and more exhilarating every time, I’ve even noticed him going through withdrawal symptoms—jitters, irritability—when I refuse to feed his addiction. Each time, it gets harder to find a new form of glory from someone else’s mind. I got lucky last time when I found a memory of some senior’s older brother going skydiving to give him. “Simon, we talked about this. We agreed to a break from memories for a while.”

“*You* agreed.” He pulls the skin of his cheeks taut. “You’re cutting me off cold turkey?”

I swallow hard and take the analog route, the path that doesn’t violate my rules. “According to rumors, she is. With Blake.” My eyelashes flutter closed to avoid catching a glimpse of his pained expression.

“And Josh,” Zoey adds.

We don’t mention the rest of the names.

His shoulders sink. “Please,” he begs. “I need to see for myself.”

He looks so distraught even though the gossip we just shared is practically common knowledge. I started doing this to help people, and seeing the truth might help Simon. He shouldn’t be with someone who disrespects him enough to cheat on him with multiple people.

“Fine, but . . . I’m really sorry.” I deposit Veronica’s memories into his mind. His features fold and crumble.

I have to look away, my chest tight. I focus instead on the sleek

silver silo used by scientists conducting experiments in renewable-energy advancements as jagged streaks of lightning barrel across the distant sky.

Simon stumbles backward, his face pinching in absolute heart-break. Sometimes I wish I didn't have a front-row seat to every one of my classmates' screwups.

A blast of thunder booms. "That was awful."

Zoey rubs my shoulder. "Maybe this will make you feel better about it? I overheard Veronica whispering about reporting you this morning. Consider this preemptive revenge."

I bite my lip. It could also be construed as the first strike of a war.

I spend the next twenty minutes dispensing more test answers and experiences that range from scoring the winning goal for a kid cut from the team to virtually attending a concert for a guy whose parents grounded him the night his favorite band played. Misty drops fall from the sky and plink onto the umbrella Zoey holds over the two of us. She doesn't do a very good job, and rain blends into my now-damp shirt, which clings to me in a scandalous, not-appropriate-for-school-dress-code way. I blink against the rogue drops sticking to my eyelashes. "Is that everyone?"

Zoey glances at the two piles of cash. "For this morning, yep. I'm sure we'll get a new round at lunch." She squints into the distance and points an arm lined with gold bracelets, which makes the umbrella wobble. "Wait! Looks like there's one more customer."

There's an unfamiliar boy loping toward us. He's wearing a button-down shirt and holding an arm over his forehead to combat the pummeling rain. He'd be cute if only he held himself upright. He's got eyes that can't seem to make up their mind between green and blue and golden brown, and a hunched, guarded expression. I squint at him as my brain does a poor job of emulating Google's

reverse image search. Admittance into Monica Varga High is a tightly controlled operation and no scenario admits a new student four days before our thesis projects are due.

“Who is *that*?”

Lightning slices between two clouds, drenching the sky in neon colors too ethereal to be captured in Photoshop.

Zoey throws her head back in laughter. “Very funny, Arden.”

The boy brushes beads of water from his eyes, then pats down the side part on his sandy hair, as if keeping the strands in place is the only thing he can control. He stares at his feet like he’s learning to walk for the first time.

“No, seriously. Who is that? He can’t be new here. My mom would have mentioned a new student joining. Especially someone so cute.”

Zoey’s face suddenly fills with concern. “You’re scaring me.”

My skin goes cold and the smile drops off my lips. I volley my head from Zoey to the stranger, feeling like I’ve missed a joke everyone else is in on.

Pressing her lips together, she plants her palm on my forehead. “You need to go to the nurse and lie down, stat. How many cups of coffee did you have yesterday? That stuff rots your brain. And your kidneys.”

I leap to my feet, panic clawing up my throat. “I’m not tired and I’m not stressed. Just tell me who that boy is.”

Zoey turns white. “You seriously don’t remember him?”

“I’ve never seen him before in my life.” My words sound as dire as if they were followed by a *dun dun dun* sound effect.

“He’s a student here. In fact, I’m pretty sure you guys are friends.” Her words sound equally grave. “I mean, not *best* friends, because obviously I already hold that title. But, you know, school friends. Lab partners.”

My heart's hammering so hard it feels like I just ran a marathon. "I would remember being friends with . . . someone like that."

She looks horrified, but then after a few seconds, she snaps her fingers. "Oh wait! I know what's wrong." She beams as if she just solved the Navier-Stokes equation. "Sounds like HiveMind might be glitching. I bet the server just needs a reboot."

Tension drains from my shoulders. "That makes sense." Technically, HiveMind's still in beta testing, so there are often glitches like this, though there haven't been any in quite a while. I twist my necklace in my fingers. The cool metal feels like a familiar comfort blanket. My fingertip skims over the tiny engravings etched into the rectangular pendant:

**01000001**  
**01110010**  
**01100100**  
**01100101**  
**01101110**

The binary number grooves always remind me of who I am. And what I want to do.

I suck in a deep breath of air tinged with an earthy aftertaste and let the heavy pendant drop against my clavicle.

"Hey, Bash." Zoey ushers him under her umbrella when he gets closer. "What's up?"

Bash and Zoey stand shoulder to shoulder, him rigid, her relaxed, as if they've stood this close countless times before. He blinks at her. "You know who I am?"

"See?" Zoey gives me a triumphant smile. "It's happening to him too. Totally a glitch."

Bash gives her a weird look. "What is?"

"HiveMind," Zoey says.

Bash blinks at us.

I'm still on edge, so I try to end this conversation fast. "What do you need?" I tap a few keys on my computer to run a diagnostic on my mind.

Bash hesitates. "Apparently there's a quiz in my first class. I heard you could help me cram?" The warning bell rings a second before thunder conquers it. His entire body stiffens. "Too late."

"Not if you're with me," I say. "I can help. Not help you cram, but . . ." Much to my surprise, I feel my lips curve into the telltale sign of a smile. "Help."

He hands me a crumpled piece of paper. His schedule, scribbled on office letterhead, as if he wrote it only a few minutes ago.

"Oh crap. You forgot your schedule?" Zoey shakes her head. "Better get that server rebooted fast." She pauses. "Well, maybe not *too* fast. I wouldn't mind if Ms. Kensington forgets about our essays being due this morning."

"I'm emailing IT right now." I pound out an email on my phone as the diagnostic continues to run on my computer.

After I hit send on my email, I snatch the paper out of Bash's hand. "Wait. You have Biochem Software Development first period?" My stomach hollows out when he nods. "That's my class too."

The wind howls and rustles my dark hair, whipping a few strands into my face that stick to my lipstick. Something deep in my core pulses, like a reactor coming to life. First I forget a student and now I forget about a test? This level of glitch has never happened before in HiveMind. Not on this wide a scale. Usually a glitch only results in the loss of a single memory or two. It's supposed to make sure I never forget anything. That's the whole point of backing up my memories and storing them in ones and zeroes, accessible from any device with Wi-Fi. "Zo, why didn't you tell me we had a quiz?" She has Biochem Software Development with the same teacher a few periods later.

Her smile wavers. “We studied for it on Sunday.”

Another bolt of lightning zings, illuminating the sky and tangling with an echo of thunder.

“Screw emailing, I’m marching right up to IT to make them reboot the server.” I turn to Bash. “Walk with me.”

Zoey hands Bash the umbrella. He stares at it for a moment, turning it upside down and letting rain collect in the overturned basin. When he catches Zoey and me staring at him, he scrambles to spin it upright, cheeks red. Water spills onto his head and soaks his shoulders. He moves next to me, body heat radiating, and slides the black umbrella over both our heads. Water drips onto my shirt. “Are you still going to help me?” he asks.

I nod. As we huddle together under the tiny umbrella, his gait slowing when my heels sink into the wet grass, I balance my laptop on my forearm and scroll through the files. Blood whooshes in my ears. I search for someone, anyone, to steal the memory of studying for the quiz from. Despite letting other people cheat on tests for fun and profit, I avoid it myself. But I can’t get a bad grade this close to the adversarial review. My entire future rides on the results of that review.

“What are you doing?” He scans his badge to grant access to the school and holds the school door open for me. The air-conditioning blasts in my face, making me shiver. We step into the nearly empty hallway, the click of my heels reverberating off the blue and red metal lockers.

“Helping you cram.” I find Teddy Day’s file again and set a delay on the memory for twenty minutes before I drop a copy into my brain. I’ll study hard for the next one. . . . unless I forget again. “This’ll only take a sec.” I look for his account on the server, but my search for Bash comes up empty.

He squints at my screen as he shakes out the umbrella and

closes it. “It’s Sebastian, actually. Sebastian Cuomo. I don’t really know why everyone keeps calling me Bash.”

His name pops up and my custom back-end script hacks into his mind with as much ease as everyone else’s. I click on his storage, ready to deposit the same memory into his mind, but . . . Sebastian has no memories at all. My arm stiffens.

“What?” he asks, his voice growing more panicked. “What?”

“Sorry, there’s an error. One sec.” I shut down the program and restart it. Once again, his brain is empty. . . . except for three files. One from this morning, one of our current conversation, and the copy of Teddy’s memory I just deposited.

That’s not a glitch. That’s a complete wipeout. How could anyone seriously have zero memories? How could they even *live*?

My computer dings, the diagnostic of my mind complete. I click on the file and nearly drop my computer onto the floor.

*7,694 files missing.*

I press my palm to my slick forehead, where a dull sensation throbs, barely noticeable, like the hum of a refrigerator at night. Since I last ran the diagnostic yesterday, seven thousand memories have disappeared from my mind.

I slam my laptop shut and shove it under my arm. I don’t care about class or the quiz or the way Sebastian’s staring at me with a face full of terror. All I care about is finding out why this boy—who everyone but me seems to know—and I are both missing memories.

00110010

One of the perks of being the headmistress's daughter is being able to sneak into her bedroom when she's not home and duplicate her all-access keycard. It remains in my purse at all times, always handy in circumstances just like this. The IT room resides in the basement, along with several other boring, unimportant rooms, locked away from laymen like Sebastian—and me, I suppose—without clearance. The only entrance is via a locked door in the E wing of our school.

I swipe my mom's keycard against the scanner. The light blinks from red to green. I wave Sebastian forward, but he hesitates.

“Are we allowed down here?”

I twirl the keycard at him as if it's the only proof he needs. I'm about to open the door, but it swings open toward me. I leap back, knocking into Sebastian behind me. He stumbles a few steps as I let out a small scream.

Teddy Day's eyes widen at the sight of us, looking as if he's seen a ghost.

I turn to Sebastian with a grin. “See? Everyone goes down here all the time,” I lie. “Hey, Teddy, tell Kimmel we'll be a few minutes late.” I brush past Teddy, giving him a nod. He stares at Sebastian, blinking a few times, clearly waiting for a similar hello.

Sebastian ducks his head and follows me.



As we descend the concrete stairs, the air temperature drops about thirty degrees. I rub my hands over my arms to combat the chill. The powerful computers stored down here need to be kept cool at all times. We bypass locked rooms that serve no purpose except for storage, as far as I know. The only two places I ever visit down here are the IT room and the server room.

Just before we reach the door to the IT room, my mom steps out of it.

“Arden?” Her dark bob drapes across her eyes and she pushes it aside. “The bell’s going to ring in about two seconds.” On cue, the final bell rings, making us officially late. Her eyes flick to Sebastian behind me, and she shoots him an expectant look. “How did you two get down here?”

I ignore her question and go straight for the kill. Just the facts, Mom. “My memories are missing. I need to talk to IT. I think Hive-Mind’s glitching.”

Sebastian’s eyes widen.

“Yes, yes. I’m aware. I’ve had numerous complaints.” She jerks her chin toward the IT door. “Brandon’s already working on it. It’ll be fixed in no time.”

I take a step toward the door anyway. I need to talk to Brandon myself.

Mom raises a brow and clears her throat. “Arden, sweetheart, don’t make me give you and your friend detention over something as silly as truancy.”

“Please, Mom. Give me two minutes with him. I just want to know what he’s doing to fix it.”

She sighs, and I take her silence as an invitation. I keep my gaze focused straight ahead of me until I hear the click of her heels disappear around the corner. “Listen—” I abruptly twirl around and slam into Sebastian. Again.

Sebastian lets out an “oof” as he stumbles backward. “Is this a habit of yours?” he says. “Because if so, I better get myself some protective gear.” He purses his lips. “Though I guess technically it can only be considered a habit after three or more times.”

I blink at him, trying to make sense of how calm he is during all this. “Listen, I need a favor. If you see me do anything that I shouldn’t be doing in this room, just forget what you saw, okay?”

He chuckles. “That seems in line with how this morning is going.”

When I yank open the door to the room, Brandon Chen bolts upright. Red crescent moons curve below his puffy eyes. He sniffs and drops the crumpled tissue on one of the many keyboards surrounding him in a semicircle of humming computer consoles. His lower lip quivers, but he manages to keep his emotions at bay long enough to speak. “Did Leo send you?”

“Leo? Why would he do that?”

Brandon and my brother, Leo, have been dating for years, since they both attended school here as promising students before rocketing into their careers, Brandon as the head IT guru and Leo as one of the scientists working on breakthroughs in biotechnology over at Varga Industries.

Brandon bites his wobbling lower lip. “Never mind.”

I take a step toward him. “Are—are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He straightens, buoyed by a new resolve. “Yes,” he says again as if to further reassure himself. He divides his gaze between Sebastian and me. “Are you two . . . okay?”

We must look equally freaked out. I shake my head. “Seven thousand of my memories went missing overnight. Sebastian lost more.”

Sebastian lets out a breath. “So it’s not just me?”

“Yeah, your mom told me there’s been complaints. I’m making

a backup.” Brandon flourishes his hand toward a few of the consoles. “As soon as it’s finished, I’ll reboot the server. That usually does the trick.”

“Reboot it right now.” I slide between him and the admin console, ready to do it myself if he doesn’t pull the trigger. The admin console is a laptop that’s bolted down with chains. If anyone tries to remove the chains or the laptop itself, an alarm system immediately pings several key staff members.

Memory loss has occurred a few times over the years, though not since I helped stabilize the server with new code nine months ago. Three years ago, every user lost twenty-four hours of data, but nothing that bad has happened since. When a memory is deleted from HiveMind, it’s just gone, as if it never existed in the first place, so no one got those twenty-four hours back. We like to make up stories of what transpired: random hookups, scientific breakthroughs, and secret confessions.

“It’s really best if we wait until the backup finishes. It looks like it’ll be done in”—he squints at the screen in front of him—“three days and twenty—”

I shake my head. “We can’t wait that long.” Because of HiveMind’s limitations, memories can only be copied one at a time onto each computer, even for routine backups. Though using twenty computers for backups helps speed the process along.

With a sigh, he pushes himself out of his chair and strides over to where I stand by the admin console. Only two admin computers exist: this one and another my mom keeps in a location so secure I don’t even know where it is. I circle around Brandon to watch from behind him. While Brandon’s back is turned, I fumble into my messenger bag until my fingers grasp a small SSD drive I always have with me. I shove it into the USB port in one of the monitoring consoles that are set up on the side table, where Brandon

hopefully won't notice it. As long as the drive's connected, I'll be able to monitor the reboot myself. Otherwise, these computers are off-limits. The network security key is beyond even my hacking skills.

Brandon spins around. "Reboot's in progress. Should be up in a few minutes."

"Thanks, B. I owe you one for sure." I turn toward the door.

"Wait!" Brandon shouts. "Can you tell Leo—?"

I swivel to face Brandon again as his face crumples. He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Never mind."

I squint at him. "You sure?"

He squeezes his eyes shut for a few seconds. "Yeah." He opens a drawer and pulls out two pink hall passes. "Here."

I pluck them from his fingers and give him a tight smile, making a mental note to send my brother down here to give him a great big comfort hug. The dude looks like he needs a serious shoulder to cry on.

When Sebastian and I exit into the hallway, he looks at me with big, hopeful eyes. "I don't know what you did, but do you really think it will work?"

I nod, ignoring the way my stomach clenches. "This kind of thing happened before." Sort of. "The reboot always fixes it." Sometimes.

The two of us head back up the stairs and traipse through the empty hallways. Silence wedges between us like a barrier.

Before we open the door to Kimmel's room, he breaks the silence with a question. "Hey, um." He shuffles his feet. "What do I do?" He jerks his chin toward the classroom door. "In there?"

I blink at him. "What do you mean?"

"When I go inside. What should I do?"

I think back to his account, completely empty before today, and my heart aches for his complete lack of knowledge. "Sit at a desk

and follow instructions.” I give him a slight pat on the shoulder. “It’ll be easy, promise.”

In Kimmel’s classroom, twenty heads pop up from neat rows of faux-wooden desks—the only part of the classroom on par with average schools. Behind the learning area, the room expands into a sprawling biotech lab filled with state-of-the-art equipment, glossy black tables, and computers so powerful they need their own machine room. This biochem lab is one of twenty-seven specialized labs at the school, each dedicated to a particular field of study.

“Kind of you to join us, Miss Varga and Mr. Cuomo.” Mr. Kimmel strokes his beard, bushy and lumberjack-style, as if to draw attention away from the lack of hair on his scalp. In another life, he would have made a great bouncer with his stocky frame and deadpan attitude. “Your peers were thrilled to learn they have eight fewer minutes for this test while we waited for you to grace us with your presence.”

Sebastian ducks past me and hunkers down at a desk in the very last row, a row behind every other student.

The clicking of my black stilettos syncs with the pitter-patter of rain pounding on the glass windows that stretch across one entire wall. I pause in front of my seat, every eye still glued to me, when I notice not one empty seat but two, right next to each other. Who used to sit next to me? I try to dredge up memories the old-fashioned way, but in every one, there was no seat next to me. There was nothing at all.

My spine stiffens as I plop into my chair.

Teddy Day, who sits on the other side of the empty desk, shields his tablet screen with his muscular arm. His cheap Fossil watch gleams silver against his dark skin. His hair used to be shaved close to his scalp but now springs in little, curly ringlets that frame his chiseled face. No wonder all the girls swoon in his vicinity.

Mr. Kimmel heads down a row, placing tablets on each desk, and pauses when he reaches the empty seat next to mine. His eyes meet Sebastian's in the back. "For once, you made a good decision, Mr. Cuomo. I think your new desk location will be an excellent choice for you." He taps my desk. "Less chance you'll cheat."

The class snickers while my neck prickles. They all get the joke, but it feels like the joke's on me. They all remember him.

I turn on my tablet and suck in a deep breath that's a mixture of ripe body odor from the boy in front of me and the pungent chemicals in the back of the room. Three short essays, all information I vaguely remember tackling in class, but the details blur like a digital photograph with a weird filter.

1. Describe the process for converting DNA data into binary code.
2. Name three methods of connecting the body to a computer, and give pros and cons of each.
3. Give a brief time line of the history of mind-to-computer conversion, making sure to highlight key dates.

I press my lips together at the easy questions. I don't need those extra eight minutes to ace this. I imagine an alternate version of me sitting at a graffitied wooden desk at Wickham High, the generic town high school. My test there would include some trite paradigm I learned in third grade, like the phases of cell division. Here I get to answer questions that not only challenge me but also propel my career forward. Thanks to a modified curriculum that lets students condense four years' worth of unnecessary classes—such as English and US History—into a three-month intensive freshman year, I never waste time being subpar.

But of course, one failing grade would put me on academic probation, and that would prevent me from winning the adversarial review competition. On the morning of the annual press conference, the seniors present the thesis projects they've been working on for their entire high school careers. We each get five minutes to impress a board made up of key school officials, like my mother, the Ethics Committee, and a few outsiders chosen because of the prominence in their careers. If Einstein was still alive, he would most certainly be on the board. Steve Jobs too.

The board decides which projects get funding from Varga Industries. Monica Varga High operates on a project-based learning environment, where each student works with a scientist mentor from Varga Industries to invent new technologies that will change the world. But most projects never progress beyond a prototype. Out of the one hundred seniors, approximately ten will receive funding. But that's not even the important part. The board selects only one senior whose project will be showcased at the press conference later that night. It's a huge honor *and* a huge career booster. Two years ago, Leo's project won, and after two years of beta testing, it's finally releasing this weekend. If I have any shot at starting my own company in the next year instead of getting the hand-me-downs from my family, I *need* to win. But every other senior in this school feels the exact same way.

I can't afford to fail. Not right now. So I bang out a partial answer for the third question. Eighteen years ago, my dad successfully completed the first binary syncing of brain data with computer files, which paved the way for advancements such as HiveMind. It took him seven more years to develop the first basic prototype of HiveMind and an additional four to deem the product safe enough to hook up the first beta testers—Mom, Leo, me—to the system before expanding the number of users into the hun-

dreds. Only those associated with MVH have the privilege—and requirement—of participating in this final round of user-acceptance testing before the software releases to the general populace. Students, teachers, parents, siblings, and employees of Varga Industries are now required to sync with the software as part of a trial run to make sure everything works correctly before the software debuts . . . in four days.

HiveMind has always been a part of me. I can't wait for it to be part of the rest of the world too. But first we need to find the root cause of this glitch and update the code to ensure it doesn't happen again.

I fill in the date HiveMind was created and work my way backward to the research my dad did at MIT, where he pioneered brain mapping. I also add info about when my mom founded this school for the most gifted science students in the country, since it's relevant to the QA cycle.

Just as I tap the entry box for the second answer, a tiny *ding* resonates in my mind, indicating the start of the memory simulation I had set on delay. A notebook ghosts over the reality of my test, like two images superimposed on TV. I try to ignore the sound of fingers tapping and focus on the new scene playing in my mind like a movie.

I peer out of Teddy's eyes, watching a highlighter race across a line of handwritten text. His thoughts invade my own: *What's the point of this? I don't need to study. But I know being valedictorian would make for a great press release once my project wins the board competition. . . .*

Ugh, Teddy, get to the point. Usually, when I prep for a quiz, I read over the notes to myself for a few minutes so I can see and hear them when I replay the memory. Then right before the quiz, I simulate my own memory in my mind. So much more effective than the archaic method of cued recall via studying.



Teddy squeezes his eyes shut for a second to concentrate, creating an unavoidable black shroud over my vision. I tap my nail against my desk as if I'm thinking while trying to read Teddy's ugly, scrawled handwriting through the image in my mind. But HiveMind memory simulations aren't as vivid as real life, and his writing blurs. His thoughts come louder than my own, distracting me: *I wonder what Eliza's doing later?* Teddy lapses into a replay of kissing her and then the replay morphs into an R-rated fantasy that makes me blush. Oh, Einstein. I do *not* need to know what kinds of perverted things turn him on.

Teddy shakes his head, making the image of his notebook rock like an earthquake. *Test on Tuesday. Biochem Software. Unit twenty-four. Eliza.*

I glance at the clock in a panic. Each moment Teddy gets distracted means another minute wasted for me. The real Teddy next to me types away with his tongue poking out the side of his mouth while the Teddy in my mind picks up a stack of index cards. Finally, he transcribes the necessary information I need for my own test. If I subscribed to the notion of a divine deity, now would be the time I muttered a prayer of thanks to it.

Several minutes later, Teddy abandons studying to play video games, and the memory subsequently ends. I fill in my answers as best I can, making sure to alter my wording, and submit my test to the grade-book cloud. I blink a few times, adjusting to the single image of the bright classroom. When I glance behind me to check on Sebastian, he's hunched over his desk, wiping sweat from his forehead. He lifts his eyes to me, and the horrified look on his face makes my skin go cold.

Mr. Kimmel clears his throat. "That's it. That's all the time you get."

One girl lets out an audible gasp. "I'm on the last question!"

“Submit your answers and bring your tablets up, then resume working on your thesis projects.” He taps his wrist. “Time’s a-ticking. Only four days left before you present your projects to the school board.”

Everyone in the room perks up at the reminder of the competition. The girl a few seats in front of me spins around and eyes me with absolute contempt, then shifts her gaze to Teddy and gives him the same evil eye. She knows we’re the ones to beat.

Teddy turns in his tablet and then pulls out his laptop, but his knee bobs up and down beneath his desk. I silently curse Teddy because he must be done with his project. It’s some advancement in 3-D bio-printing to speed up the process of producing DNA-specific organs for transplants. Last year he creeped everyone out when he carried around a replica of a beating, bloody heart for a week as part of an experiment.

After I turn in my test, I open my laptop to my to-do list, only to find it empty. My mouth becomes sandpaper, and I rub my temples. All my backed-up versions: gone. Even the ones synced to the cloud storage system. What the hell? I would never have deleted them.

I search HiveMind for keywords like *to-do*, *project*, and *thesis*. A sick dread settles into me at the words staring back at me on the screen: *Your search has returned zero results.*

My pulse beats at the base of my neck. Holy retrograde amnesia, I don’t remember the project I’ve been working on for the last four years at all. I don’t have any idea who my scientist mentor was. What else have I forgotten?

I’m in full panic mode now, my leg tapping against the floor as if each revolution of my ankle could speed up time. With shaky fingers, I navigate to the SSD drive I plugged into the monitoring computer in the IT room, run a script I wrote a long time ago to

gain control of the remote computer, and use it to pull up the command prompt. This machine is only used for monitoring HiveMind from a Tech Ops standpoint, so it only provides me with a limited amount of read and write access to the software. I type a few commands in the command line to check the status of the last restore. As soon as I press *enter*, a new line pops up:

*Reboot successful.*

Thunder booms outside, loud and sinister, and I jump. I still don't remember a single thing. I check Sebastian's mind, and his is the same as well: mostly blank. My body begins to shake, skin heating up. I rummage through my messenger bag and tug out the external hard drive I routinely back up my memories onto every night, but when I pull out the case, I hear a sound like maracas shaking. Aluminum shards, twisted plastic, and pieces of a broken and smashed motherboard slide out of the case and skid across the desk.

My heart leaps into my throat, clogging my airway. I gasp so loudly that several heads turn in my direction. I hastily slide the smashed pieces of my hard drive into the case and shove it back into my bag before anyone else can see how easily someone was able to destroy my belongings. Destroy my chances. Destroy *me*.

Students scurry off to the lab in the back, but I ignore them as I rummage through my notebook—the handwritten one I only keep to prevent data loss of this magnitude—searching for evidence that I haven't failed Sanity 101. I bite back a sob. Almost every page has been ripped out, leaving only jagged remnants clinging to the spiral ring.

There are no coincidences in science. Someone erased it all deliberately.

00110011

I shove my ruined notebook in my bag with my destroyed hard drive and turn in panic toward Sebastian. Teddy's skirting around the desks and he seems anxious to go talk to him. Before he can reach him, Kimmel interrupts. "Miss Varga, Mr. Cuomo, can I have a word? It's about your project."

The boy in front of Sebastian contorts his mouth into the requisite "oooOOOooh" to denote he thinks we're getting in trouble. My pulse spikes.

Teddy rakes his hand through his tight curls and sits back down at his desk.

I push myself out of my chair, wobbling on unsteady feet. My whole body is keyed up and I must look like a feral animal as I bound toward Kimmel's desk in desperation for any information he might have about my project. It takes concerted effort to force myself to stand still even though every cell in my body continues to buzz. Sebastian positions himself several feet away from me, then changes his mind and takes a step closer.

"Have you worked out the last bug in your project yet?" Kimmel tugs at his beard. Chemistry equations and inspirational quotes about science hang on the concrete walls behind his desk. "I need to see it working properly prior to the adversarial review."

"Um." A single bead of sweat forms in the space between my

boobs. A hysterical cry itches to rip out of my throat, but I swallow it back down. *Stay calm*, I coax myself, steadying my breathing the way I have to do whenever I visit my buddy the Hypnotist. Kimmel can't know I've lost my memories. It would be enough to disqualify me from the competition. The teachers here love when you spit out scientific facts, so I do just that, hoping for the love of all things quadratic that I sound like I know what I'm talking about. "According to the expectancy violations theory, surprise increases positive responses to new data." I perform an Oscar-worthy grin. "So the best way to knock the socks off the judges is to keep it a secret."

"This is serious." He pulls at the collar of his striped shirt, loosening it. "I really think your joint project will win the competition, and if you show me before Friday, we'll have time to revise your demonstration."

*Joint project.* My mouth gapes and I can barely breathe. I place a hand against the wall to keep from tipping over, but the world turns upside down anyway. I can't remember what my project is. Or working on it for FOUR YEARS with a boy who doesn't even exist in my mind. And of course, it's not just memories missing but files and notebook pages.

Someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure I forgot everything related to my project.

My head whips between Sebastian, who wears a caught-with-his-pants-down expression, and Kimmel, who seems to be trying to invent telepathy with the way his gaze bores into mine.

"Can I see the proposal document we submitted?" I enunciate each word to sound as normal as possible. Translation: *What the hell was our project?*

Kimmel blinks. "Gave it back to you last week."

"Okay, well, I need to talk to my mentor first—"

Kimmel's mouth tightens. "That's not funny, Arden."

*Not funny? Why isn't that funny?* My skin prickles.

I fling my head toward Sebastian for help at the same time his eyes plead with me. It's up to me to rescue us. I latch onto the first thing Kimmel had said and run with it to buy us some time. "We're still trying to iron out that bug issue. I'm not really sure what the problem is or how to fix it."

"Well, you need to figure it out before Friday. Because it's not just about the competition." His tone increases in urgency. "If your project isn't ready by the day of the adversarial review and press conference, someone will die. Do you want that hanging on your conscience?"

I jolt. There's no longer any chance at tamping down the panic rising inside me. "No, but—"

"Unless this goes to beta testing, that one death will become hundreds. Thousands."

He can't be serious. . . . right? I grip the desk to keep myself steady.

"Do you understand what I'm saying? This is a matter of life and death."

My shoulders tremble with the magnitude of an earthquake. "Wh-What do you mean?"

Sebastian backs away, his face a mask of horror at this news.

"Arden, stop stalling and—" Kimmel pauses, eyes wide, mouth parted in horror. He freezes like an ancient Greek turned to stone at the sight of Medusa.

The terror projected on his face strikes me numb. I poke his arm, lightly at first. When he doesn't respond, I jab harder, unable to keep the panic out of my voice. "Mr. Kimmel?"

His face crumples in pain. Students swing their heads in our direction, a few rising out of their seats to see what's going on.

Sebastian's eyes widen. "What's wrong with him?"

I shake my head. If I had that answer, I'd know what was wrong with me as well.

A full minute passes before Kimmel shakes his head out of a daze. He spins to face the wall. The defined muscles beneath his shirt tighten as he chokes on a breath. He uses the bottom of his shirt to wipe his forehead before turning back around. The room is completely silent except for his ragged breath and the racing of my heart.

"Why are you here?" He divides his gaze between Sebastian and me. "Did you need something?" His gaze locks behind us. "Everyone! Back to work."

Goose bumps emboss my arms from the clammy chill of the air-conditioning. He doesn't remember what just happened, like the moment was erased from his mind. Did my face contort in pain when my memories first disappeared?

There's a commotion as the rest of the students scramble to look busy. My gaze never leaves Kimmel. "Did you . . . forget what we were just talking about?"

"We were talking?" Kimmel loosens his tie, pulling it so far away from his neck it's as if he fashioned a noose. "Yes, yes. I—lost my train of thought."

Something in my chest tightens. "We were talking about my project. You said if it doesn't go to the press conference—"

"Right. Right." Kimmel nods to himself. "Give me your verbal pitch." He rests one elbow on his desk and angles toward me, finally managing to perfect a casual appearance a little too late. "You'll need to practice it anyway for your speech to the school board."

"I—" I fiddle with my necklace, twisting it up and down the chain to keep calm. Kimmel claps his hands loud enough to make me snap my teeth together. "Everyone, stop working! Back to your

seats. I think we need a little refresher on the importance of your pitch.”

There’s a mad dash, students rushing across the room. I wobble like I’ve been hit by a freight train. My head spins. I sink into my seat, my knees giving out halfway.

The boy in front of me twists around. “What just happened?”

I shake my head. I’m still trying to make sense of that myself.

“It’s come to my attention that we need to go over the art of a verbal pitch. Any volunteers?” Kimmel’s voice is breezy and light, as if he just told a good joke to a fellow teacher instead of telling us our project is a matter of life and death.

Every head turns to pin the target on someone else.

Kimmel’s bald head glistens when he stands under the overhead light. “Mr. Day?”

Teddy leans back in his chair, resting his arms behind his head, elbows splayed. Wispy curls frame his face like a dusting of crops on a farm. “3-D bio-print DNA-based human organs at laser printer speed.”

“Excellent. Perfect summary.” Kimmel presses his hand to his forehead like a sailor and scans the room. “Miss Clarendon? Twitter pitch. One-forty characters or less.”

In the back of the room, Melody’s cheeks explode with color as she ducks her face behind her frizzy hair.

“Um.” She riffles through her notebook.

Kimmel snaps his fingers. “Faster, Melody. Imagine you have thirty seconds to wow the school board. It needs to slip off your tongue.”

“It’s a device that transmits streaming music directly to your ear so you don’t have to wear earphones.” She shifts in her seat. “Except it doesn’t work yet. I’ve got the transmission part, but the streaming—”



Mr. Kimmel holds up his hand to stop her. “That’s just excess information. You had your pitch down to a single line.” Kimmel rotates to the blackboard and scribbles *one-sentence pitch*. “I want everyone to write down your pitch by the end of the class period.”

Some of the students groan. A few grab tablets from the stack at the front. I sit there staring at a blank sheet of paper, trying not to hyperventilate.

I tap my pen against the paper, earning a look of death from Teddy next to me. I write down the only thing I can think of, the only thing I know: *If I don’t figure out what my damn project is, someone will die, followed by thousands of people*. I tack on today’s date as well.

But I don’t turn it in. Instead, I shove it into my pocket, where it can’t be deleted.

The bell rings, and everyone jumps up, no one faster than me. I spin around to grab my bag from the back of my chair and pivot into Sebastian. Again.

His lips quirk with the slightest of smiles. “Third time’s the charm, I guess.” I envy his ability to remain calm during all this. He covers his nose when we step into the crowded hallway, making him sound nasal when he speaks. “Look. This is going to sound weird. But what exactly was our project and how will it save lives?”

Someone smacks into my shoulder, so I pull him into a nearby empty classroom and shut the door. The cacophony of the hallway dulls to the buzz of the heater. I’m still shivering from what Kimmel told us. “I don’t remember either.” I don’t remember and people could *die* because of it.

He gazes at me with haunting eyes that seem to be permanently set to *smolder*. “But the server reboot. That’s going to fix it, right?”

I shake my head, trying to keep my face as calm as Sebastian’s. It takes all my effort to keep my voice steady through gritted teeth.

“Didn’t work. I just checked your mind again. You’re still missing everything before this morning.”

He steps away from me and crashes into a desk. “You looked into my head?” The words sound more like an accusation than a realization. I cringe. “You violated my privacy.”

*That’s his biggest concern?* Not all the people who might die because of us? “Only because I’m trying to help you.” I take a few steps toward him, hands raised in the air to prove I have no weapons. His clean soap scent instills a weird mix of familiarity and longing. “Here’s the deal,” I say, trying not to inhale. “Something weird is going on. As far as I can tell, it’s only affecting you and me. Well, maybe Kimmel too.” I’d need to search his mind to confirm. “What else do you remember?” I laugh at how stupid that sounded. “I mean, how do you know English?” His scrawled schedule pops into my mind. “How’d you know to come to this school today?”

“I don’t remember anything specific before today, but I know general things. Like how to speak English, that good hygiene requires brushing your teeth, that my bathroom is the second door on my left according to the house schematics, and that my mom is my mom even though I can’t recall any conversations we’ve had. Stuff like that.”

“Procedural memory, that makes sense.” His mouth parts, so I explain further. “You’re remembering only how-to memories, things ingrained in you, like tying your shoe or riding a bike. Actions and knowledge but not moments. That type of stuff is harder to forget.” Or more accurately: harder to delete in HiveMind because it’s not tied to a specific moment.

“Yeah, but I found out I have a test on *The Illustrated Man* in my creative-writing elective today, and I remember the book verbatim even though I have no recollection of reading it. I can even recite what’s on the copyright page. That’s not procedural memory.”

Weird. “Any other strange bits of knowledge?”

He thinks for a moment. “I’m not taking any graphic design classes, but I can tell your skin tone is #F8E4CC. Your eyes are #593E1A. Your hair—”

“Whoa.” I hold up a hand. “I meant any other bits of knowledge that help you”—how do I say this politely?—“function like a human? As opposed to a vegetable.”

He laughs and then bites his lip. “Well, the word *human* wasn’t even used as a noun until the early sixteenth century. Before then, it was an adjective meaning ‘of or belonging to man’ and originally in Latin it meant ‘earthly being’ to differentiate from gods, so . . . Yes, the etymology of every word in the OED seems to help me act *human*, if you’re referring to its modern usage.”

I blink at him. “So you know every word ever used in the English language. Good to know.”

“*Na kila lugha nyingine.*” He winks. “That’s Swahili for ‘and every other language.’”

I sputter-cough. “Holy shit. That’s not normal.”

He nods. “I take it you’re not experiencing the same breadth of knowledge?”

“Nope.” Suddenly I feel inferior, an unfamiliar notion to me. “Any chance you’re good at coding?”

He taps his chin, thinking for a second. “I know all the concepts and commands of most coding languages, but I think I’d still have to practice putting them to use. Same with chemistry and physics. I’ve got the equations memorized. Just not quite sure how to apply them.”

“Well, then at least I have you beat in all things computers,” I say. “So just to be clear . . . You don’t remember our project. Who our mentor is. Or me?”

Sebastian rakes a hand through his dirty-blond hair. “I don’t

even remember who my friends are. Or what I like to do.” He lowers his voice. “Or who I am.”

If someone really did carve our minds deliberately, why would they remove all of his memories but only a few specific ones of mine? And why would he know all this stuff but I wouldn't?

Watching his chest heave in and out, I stifle the overwhelming urge to throw my arms around him and comfort him. Instead, I keep my lips in a straight line, offering nothing but the answer we both need. A scientist deals in facts, absolute truths. Not emotions. “I'll fix this. I'll find a way to get our memories back.”

His hazel eyes soak me in, desperate. Pleading. “How?”

“By finding out who did this.”

00110100

As I approach the cafeteria, a figure paces back and forth in front of the door. My gait slows as I approach, my stomach knotting when Simon Zajek lifts his head and then beelines straight for me.

“Arden, you have to help me.”

“Whoa. What are you doing here? You don’t have lunch this period.” I shift my laptop to one arm.

“Waiting for you. Help me. Please, Arden!” Simon grabs my wrist, his jagged, bitten-down nails digging into my skin. “Take the memories back. Please.” His bloodshot eyes dart around the hallway squirrel-fast, like a drug addict. But I’ve investigated his mind; the only drug he’s high on is love. Well, that and other people’s memories. He drags his hands over his face. “I don’t want to know. I—I love her. I never should have asked you for this.”

“Y-you want me to delete your memory?” A pit forms in my chest at the idea of removing a vital part of him, lobotomizing him one memory at a time with a laptop-shaped scalpel. It’s one thing to be a god socially, every student worshipping you because of your brains and your connections. But it’s another to play God. “That’s against the rules. My rules.”

I can practically see his heart beating out of his chest. “You have to! It doesn’t matter if she cheats on me. It hurt less when I didn’t

know.” His steel-blue eyes plead with mine. “Delete everything! Even this conversation.”

*Delete everything.* My skin goes cold.

A few days ago, I cut him off cold turkey from his extreme memory addiction. Until today, anyway. Maybe last night he tried to make me forget I ever gave him a firm no and then took it a step too far, using a digital hacksaw on other parts of my mind. This morning could have been a test to see if I remembered severing his connection to his main source of thrills.

“Do you know how to delete memories?” I fire questions at him without taking a breath in between. Only HiveMind admins and talented hackers like me have access to the deletion controls in the app. “Were you just messing with me this morning? Trying to throw me off your scent?”

He holds up his hands in surrender. “I—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Playing dumb won’t work.” I stab a finger into his chest. “I know what you did. I’m going to find evidence and then get you expelled.”

Simon wipes a line of sweat from his brow, stepping backward. “Okay, okay. Sorry, Arden. Forget I asked.” He darts his head left and right, then lowers his voice. “Just don’t get me in trouble, okay?” He lets out a puppy yip and stumbles away down the hallway before breaking into a run.

I suck in desperate gulps of air. I’m losing it. Accusing anyone I can. Simon doesn’t have the balls for this kind of sabotage. I push open the cafeteria door and stomp toward my table, heart pounding. Zoey straightens when I slam my laptop down. I sink into the chair and count to ten until my breathing evens out. Heavy rain pounds against the glass, robbing the room of brightness. The high ceilings magnify the acoustics, blending all the chatter and jingle of silverware into one unified sound.

Zoey snaps her fingers in front of my eyes. “Did the server reboot work?”

“No. And neither did the data recovery software I ran. Or defragging the disk. Or the scan for corrupted DLL files. Or the—” I sigh. There’s no point in listing every worthless strategy I tried instead of paying attention in my last few classes. The only thing I managed to do for sure was confirm that several minutes were removed from Kimmel’s mind during first period. The exact moment when he seemingly blacked out.

I thought the best course of action was to try to recover the deleted data before I tried to find the culprit, but I’m starting to think I’ve got it all backward.

Zoey’s features crinkle in horror. “Yikes. This is bad.”

In paranoia, I look around before dropping my voice. “Someone’s messing with HiveMind. They deleted everything related to my project, including my notes and my precious hard drive.” I slap the case onto the table, the pieces rattling.

Zoey gasps in that dramatic way of hers. “And Bash’s too, I gather? Who would do that to you guys?”

“I’ve got some suspects in mind. First, though, it would be awesome if you could tell me what my project was or even who mentored me.”

“It was . . .” Zoey squints and presses a palm to her forehead. “Oh my God. I don’t remember.”

I swallow past a lump in my throat. “I was afraid of that.” I open up my laptop. “I need to do recon, stat.” I was so busy trying to fix HiveMind during the last few periods that I didn’t have a chance to try to investigate.

Zoey taps the side of her head. “Ooh, I want to see too!”

I do a quick keyword search in HiveMind for project reviews or presentations and select all on the ones that include me as a partic-

ipant. We usually have to do a class review once a semester. I select a few of the memories and set them up in a playlist for both of us to watch.

The first one starts. I peer out of Veronica's eyes as she stands in Kimmel's classroom and presents her progress on her project to the room. Despite her loud blabber in my mind, I do my best to ignore what she's saying and instead focus on her view of me, sitting in my usual seat in the classroom. And directly next to me is Sebastian, in the exact seat he should have occupied this morning. In the HiveMind memory, Bash's face seems a little thinner, his hair shorter and spiking upward instead of neatly brushed to the side, but he wears the same smirk I've come to recognize after only an hour. The sweaters everyone wears and the calendar on the wall indicate this took place in January.

"Good work, Veronica," Kimmel says. "Next time, it would be great if the prototype actually worked."

The class chuckles. Veronica seethes.

"Okay, Bash and Arden. Up you go."

I hold my breath as I watch myself hop out of my seat and stride with confidence toward the front of the room. Through Veronica's eyes, I watch as Past Me opens my mouth to speak—

And then the image jerks and all of a sudden Blake Sanders stands at the front while Bash and I make our way back to our seats. I whisper something in his ear and he giggles. That's it. The memory ends.

Holy shit.

The next memory begins. This one comes from Melody Clarendon's perspective from her seat two rows behind me. Same scene, different angle. I study the cafeteria table and watch an image overlay of Veronica sitting down and Kimmel calling Bash and me up to the podium. And exactly like before, the memory jumps forward



before we utter a word about our progress. When the scene replays from another student's perspective, it's more of the same.

Their minds have been tampered with too. The details of my project have been removed from not just my mind but also everyone else's.

Zoey breathes in sharply, air whistling through her teeth. I grip the edges of the table with white knuckles.

A boy heads toward us, and before he even has a chance to stop at my lunch table, I snap, "Shop's closed." He drops his head and shuffles away. I hastily scrawl out a sign that says *SHOPS CLOSED* and fold it in half. I can't deal with anyone else asking for a memory right now.

"Arden, I'm scared." Zoey clutches my wrist in a tight grip. "That was awful to watch. What if you can't get them back? What if it's not just you? Oh my God." The corners of her mouth tremble. "What if I lose my favorite memory?"

I lift my chin. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this before that happens."

"Please, Arden. I need to watch my favorite memory again." She bats her eyelashes and gives me her best pout. "Please. It's the only thing that calms me down!"

I quickly navigate to her HiveMind account and scan her list of favorited memories to make sure it's still there. "You already have it. Just think about it."

She waggles her fingers at me. "It's so much more vivid when it comes to me brand new. Pleeeeeaaaaaase." She belts out the last word like the chorus to a song.

I sigh and drop the memory into her head again, overwriting the file that already exists in her mind. I know how awful it is to lose a memory, and if this can ease her mind, I want to help. I stole this memory from one of the sophomore's older sisters who goes

to Wickham High down the road. Last year, the sister was crowned homecoming queen and spent the evening relishing in all the glory of a tiara, a spotlight dance, the tug of the hot king's arms wrapped around her, and the thrill of two thousand of her closest classmates voting for her.

Zoey's eyes glaze over and her shoulders relax. She lets out a happy little sigh.

Some people find comfort in thinking of a cherished memory when things get rough. Zoey's most cherished memory just happens to be someone else's.

I get the appeal. This memory must make her feel normal. I've watched it myself a few times because it gives me a glimpse into all I missed out on by coming here. Pulsing DJ beats. Clutching my best friend's hand as I wait to see if my name's announced. A spotlight making my satin dress shimmer. A hundred eyes watching me sweep across the dance floor. Don't get me wrong, it's not like I'd rather cry into my false lashes over some high school guy at a dance than go to Varga. But there's something about this one memory that allows me to sum up the high school experience I never got to claim. I imagine Zoey feels the same way.

While Zoey zones out and my computer runs a scan on the HiveMind server, I glance around the cafeteria at every face, every suspect who might have reason to sabotage my project. Immediately, I spy several promising candidates. Veronica Ackerman—Zoey mentioned earlier she wanted to report me, and she'd have good reason to. After all, I got her put on probation earlier this year when I exposed the memory of her rigging the student election that got her nominated for school president. And I probably didn't help matters today when I gave her boyfriend proof of her infidelity.

Or maybe Teddy Day finally exacted revenge for all the test

answers I've stolen from him. He seemed to be purposefully avoiding me in class, though he was trying to talk to Sebastian, so maybe not. Then, of course, there's the possibility it's someone desperate to knock me out of the running for the project contest. The girl who glared at me in Kimmel's class comes to mind. Hell, maybe it was Kimmel trying to steal my brilliant concept for himself and he was just covering his tracks this morning. It could be anyone.

"Ah." Zoey looks so peaceful and content when the memory finishes playing in her mind. "Best night of my life."

Well, maybe not *anyone*. My best friend swooped in to help me solve the issue. Sebastian's in the same boat. The students in the lower grades would have no reason to stab a knife into my back. And half the people who work at Varga Industries are just names on an org chart and have no beef with me.

"It's Veronica. It's got to be." When I glance over at her, I discover she's already staring at me, her jaw clenching.

Zoey spins around to follow my gaze. "I'm with you on the Veronica thing, but can we switch topics for just a second to discuss Eliza's new haircut? Maybe Teddy won't be able to find her and he'll fall in love with me instead."

My eyes shift to the girl beside Veronica. Eliza Shaw's haircut involves too much bangs and not enough face. My vision catches on someone behind Eliza. Sebastian, burrowing between the recycling bins. He scans the tables in the center of the cafeteria, clutching a tray like a life raft. "Hey, what do you remember about Sebastian?"

Zoey raises her eyebrows a few times in succession. "I know the real reason you're asking, but I'm choosing to believe it's because of a massive crush you're starting to harbor for him. Say the word and I'll sit you down in my vanity chair; grab my trusty, old holo-stick; and give you that makeover I've been begging to do on you for years now. He'll fall head over heels in no time."

I ignore her and her incessant attempts to cover me in holographic makeup. My temples throb in tune to my heart. I need to talk to him. Maybe if I get to know him, it'll trigger my memories again, the way the scent of wintergreen always reminds me of my dad and his obsession with Tic Tacs.

"Be right back," I tell Zoey, and veer toward Sebastian, who still lingers between the garbage cans, now with his tray propped on the edge of one. He attempts to eat standing up. I grip my binary necklace to keep me grounded as I place one stiletto in front of the other. "What are you doing later?" I ask in lieu of a greeting. "Because we need to figure out what our project is. And where our memories went."

He lets out a relieved breath and lifts his lunch off the trash bin. A portion of the black garbage bag attempts to hitch a ride as it sticks to the bottom of his plastic tray. "I might have plans." He chuckles. Fluorescent beams overhead drop spotlights of color on his pale cheeks. "No idea."

I laugh too. Even though I just met him less than two hours ago, we already have inside jokes. It's nice to find a moment of hilarity amid all this chaos.

A wrinkle indents his forehead when a guy knocks into Sebastian's shoulder and points a finger gun at him. "Looking good, Bash! Feeling okay?"

Sebastian just stares at the guy until he ambles away.

"Do you remember your address?" I sidestep around a guy tossing a heavy brown bag into the trash with a *thunk*.

"That, I do. Only because I wrote it down before I left my house."

I can't help it. I smile. A real smile that stretches my lips from ear to ear, not the cheap half smiles I reserve for all the important people my mom makes me meet with. "Great. Then I'll stop by after dinner and we'll try to figure this out."

He looks heartbreakingly hopeful. “It’s a school night.” He pushes his lips to the side, distorting a dimple. “I think.”

“Why aren’t you freaking out? I’m over here snapping at anyone that even dares to look at me wrong.”

He shrugs. “I guess it all seems relatively normal to me when I have nothing to compare today to.” He cocks his head, sandy blond hair falling into his eyes. “I think your friend wants me to join you guys.”

“Come on, then.” I stride past him toward my table as wind screeches through the windowpanes. I don’t want Zoey to get her hopes up here, not when my invitation to Sebastian was more of a science experiment than the kind of evening that begins with roses and ends with a kiss.

He follows me and plops his tray next to Zoey’s. I slide onto the aluminum chair across from him and study his face beneath my eyelashes, trying to spark cued recall for any latent memories lurking in the recess of my mind.

Zoey swivels in her chair to face him. “So. Bash—”

“I’d prefer Sebastian, actually.” He swirls his fork around his truffle mashed potatoes.

“Ooooookay, *Sebastian*.” She emphasizes the word. “Kind of random that you’re reinventing yourself on a Tuesday in April. I would have at least waited until fall. You could have cited seasonal affective disorder as your excuse.”

“What’s wrong with the nickname Bash?” I start to unwrap my sandwich, momentarily jarred again when my sleeve rides up and I glimpse the red puffy line that snakes from my palm to halfway up my elbow, where it slices across the veins.

He shrugs. “Didn’t seem to fit me anymore.” He slides a forkful of mouthwatering *sous vide* chicken covered in artichoke foam from the cafeteria, chewing slowly in a clear attempt to avoid say-

ing anything more. At most schools, the paid lunch is inedible; at ours, it's avant-garde. Some of our classmates experiment with molecular gastronomy.

"Okay then." Zoey leans back. "Why aren't you sitting with your usual table?"

"Didn't feel like it." He swallows a heap of chicken. One guess: He doesn't know where it is.

"But it looks like Teddy misses you." Zoey points a spoon, pink yogurt dripping off the concave basin.

I spin around to see Teddy Day standing up several tables away and giving Sebastian a *what gives* expression.

Zoey waves him over and then squeals when he actually obliges. I finish unwrapping my turkey sandwich, the tinfoil crinkling.

"Hey, man, whatever happened to bros before hos?" Teddy slaps Sebastian on the back, but then watches him in a weird way, almost as if he's studying him.

"There would need to be *hos* for that to apply." Zoey waggles her finger between us. "Only good girls here."

"Considering the word *good* didn't actually mean 'well-behaved' until the sixteen nineties," Sebastian says, "by etymology standards, the girls at this table clearly embody the original meaning of 'desirable.'" Sebastian peels the label off his water bottle and then shoves it into his mouth.

Silence sweeps through the table as everyone blinks at him. Teddy's eyebrow lifts and Zoey's smile wavers. Sebastian slowly pulls the water bottle label out of his mouth and sets it on his tray. I rush in to rescue him. Maybe he forgot how to eat properly. And speak. "So we're desirable, huh?" I bat my eyelashes for emphasis.

Sebastian turns red.

Teddy eyes him weirdly for a second. "I just came by to see how you're feeling?"

“Um. Fine?”

Teddy’s shoulders relax. “Good. Glad to hear it.”

“I second that,” Zoey says in the sugary-sweet voice she uses on classmates she wants to experiment on. “Really glad you’re feeling well.”

Sebastian squints at her.

Teddy cups his shoulder. “Let’s hang this afternoon, okay, man?”

Sebastian and I exchange glances. I nod my encouragement. “Sounds good . . . man. I’m free until dinner.”

Teddy starts to walk away, but Zoey shouts, “Wait!” Teddy stops short and pivots back to her.

She bites her lip, batting her eyelashes. “You still mad at me?”

A muscle in his jaw feathers. “That depends. You still want credit for my project?”

Zoey’s face falls, and when she doesn’t say anything further, he nods to himself and lopes away.

“I did just as much work as him in terms of planning,” she mumbles under her breath. “It’s only fair.”

I place my palm over hers. “You should talk to my mom about it. Plead your case.”

She nods. “Yeah. You’re right.” And then she straightens. “I will.”

Freshman year, Zoey had trouble passing classes and presenting a project proposal that didn’t get rejected by the board. She submitted thirty-five ideas, and each one was turned down either for being not innovative enough or because the board lacked faith that she could complete them. Thanks to a generous donation from Zoey’s parents, my mother agreed to let her remain at the school under the condition that instead of working on her own project, she’d float from project to project among students and Varga Indus-

tries faculty, acting as a pinch hitter wherever needed. In addition, my mom started providing her with one-on-one instruction. Since then, Zoey's GPA has shot up to nearly 4.0.

My computer makes a beep and Zoey flourishes her hand as if to tell me to go ahead. She opens her own laptop to catch up on homework while Sebastian studies his food with a curious expression, as if he's never before seen a carrot. When he pops it into his mouth, he chews with extra gusto, using the full force of his teeth with every chomp. After a moment, he starts coughing and clutching his throat before swallowing down the rogue carrot. He eyes the rest suspiciously, then plucks them off his tray one by one and lines them up on the table in front of it like soldiers guarding the rest of his food.

My var log scan completes without picking up any errors in the HiveMind software. I start another diagnostic scan on my mind. On a whim, I do one on Sebastian's too, ignoring the new sensation of guilt spreading through my abdomen over the idea of spying on him after he freaked out about it earlier. When I glance at his account, I notice several new files have been logged since this morning, all from earlier today. That's a good sign at least.

The diagnostic scan of my catalogued memories from today unfolds in short headers thanks to HiveMind's automatic tagging feature. The contents display like the sidebar on YouTube, with little thumbnail previews that automatically play back the video and automatic tags beside each video memory. No sound plays in the previews, just the images. To hear the sounds from the scene and the recorded inner monologue, I'd have to drag the memory from the archive into the live folder, which is essentially the same as dropping it directly into my mind. Our brains are synced so thoroughly with HiveMind that there's no clear indication where one ends and one begins.



*Get ready/Breakfast/Drive to school*—HiveMind automatically lumps the boring stuff together.

*Courtyard business*—the thumbnail is of Sebastian walking toward us, as if HiveMind knows this was the most important part of my day.

*Visit IT*—HiveMind catches me sneaking the SSD drive into the computer via the thumbnail.

*Test in Kimmel's class*—a 1021 MB dose of smack-me-in-the-face reality.

*Try to fix HiveMind in Business and Project Management class*—Why couldn't I have forgotten this unnecessary form of torture?

*Bathroom break*—Nothing to see here, move along.

The catalogue continues up through the cafeteria. Everything seems to be in order. But then my eye catches movement on one of the file's data details. My lips part in a gasp that sends Zoey swiveling toward me.

The file from when Sebastian and I discussed our joint project in Mr. Kimmel's empty classroom is rapidly reducing in file size. The hair at the back of my neck stands at attention. What the hell?

1007 MB

983 K

875 K

I jerk my arm on the track pad to click on the file and knock my elbow into my water bottle in the process. The bottle careens to the table like a soccer player who just got his feet swept out from under him. Water splashes on my arm and across the corner of the keys. I yank the laptop and hop to a standing position. Zoey screams and throws a napkin on the puddle of water while Sebastian sets my water bottle upright. My heart rams.

459 K

"Arden? You okay?" Zoey shakes out her sopped notebook. I

hold up a finger to them and balance the laptop on my forearm, gritting my teeth as I click on the file.

327 K

The preview expands to full screen, showing my perspective as I smack right into Sebastian after taking our test. Did something come after the test? I rack my brain but I can't even remember walking out of class even though the next file in the list shows my view as I chat with Sebastian in an empty classroom. Why did I think this file contained something about talking to Mr. Kimmel when I haven't spoken to him after class in months? Something important happened after that test. I know it. Or at least I knew it a second ago.

My eyes lock on Veronica's, but she's laughing and smiling with her friends, no tech devices in front of her. Teddy's making his rounds to his adoring fangirls. Simon's MIA. I sweep my vision from one person to the next, noting all the open laptops, tablets, phones. All the items that could give someone the opportunity to delete my memory while also having a solid alibi. Though theoretically, someone could have set in motion a deletion script that takes a while to run—they wouldn't need to be on their laptop *right now* if they executed it within the last hour. That means it could be anyone.

201 K

I hit CTRL+S to save, but the file size keeps decreasing. The ESC button mocks me without obeying my command. My pulse races.

113 K

After class? "Hey, did we talk to Kimmel after class today?"

Sebastian's mouth parts and he fixes a grave expression on me. "I have no idea."

Zoey lifts her head as she mops up the water with her napkin. "Oh my God. You're forgetting more?"

The file blinks once before graying out like an expired link with a file size of 0 K. My stomach lurches. When I click on it, an error pops up. *This file does not exist.*

And just to prove itself right, the file itself disappears from the list completely.

I slump into the nearest dry seat and press my palm to my forehead. I'm forgetting something. What is it? And more important, what memory will I lose next?

Sebastian slides over to the seat across from me and mouths, "What happened?" Zoey watches with an extremely concerned expression.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "I just watched a memory disappear. It's not the first one, obviously."

Sebastian blinks a little too hard. "Then it's probably not the last." He studies me for a moment. "We should go to the police."

I shake my head. "They don't know the first thing about Hive-Mind. No one outside the Varga conglomerate does."

A horrible weight settles into my gut. I frantically click over to last year's files. To the one where my dad looped his fingers through mine and told me he loved me and he believed in me. He believed my talents would take me far. That was the last thing he ever said to me.

874 K. It's still all there. A breath rattles out of my lungs and I press a hand to my chest to still my heart.

I already lost my dad once. I can't lose the precious memories of him too.