

Full Circle

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CHAPTER 16

For the next several days, Mary went through the motions of her new life. She didn't act cold or distant, she just put on the show that she thought Major Garcia and the rest of them expected. Secretly, she was plotting ways to gain access to the restricted areas of the base, thirsty for information that had not been filtered through the group. She never led on to her plans, and was extremely careful not to rouse suspicions by asking questions that were out of character. As frightened, angry, and confused as she was feeling, her new approach made Mary feel strangely empowered.

Figuring that she could tap her new friend for another viewpoint into the matter, or at least dig for details about the mission, Mary invited Lt. Armstrong for an after-work drink.

"Sure, maybe around 8:00? I just need to get a couple of things done first, and then I'll come by your place," Lt. Armstrong replied enthusiastically.

"Why don't we just go to that bar?" Mary queried.

"What bar? I wish there was a bar!" Lt. Armstrong replied.

"What do you mean?" Mary said. "I thought everyone could hang out there."

"Well, maybe you've got to cozy up to the right folks, because it's news to me," Claire said with a slightly disappointed look on her face. Mary was confused why the bar would be so exclusive but, then again, Major Garcia did outrank her.

"Tell you what, why don't we just hang out by your place, okay?" Lt. Armstrong added.

"Sounds good. Do you know where my apartment is?" Mary asked casually.

"Good point – where is it?" Lt. Armstrong answered with a laugh.

Mary wasn't sure that Lt. Armstrong didn't really not know where her apartment was. Perhaps she was not as good at being undercover and forgot to ask the question. Mary seized the opportunity.

“So, where do you live, Claire?” Mary said as she handed her a piece of paper with her information on it.

“I actually live off-base, but I bunk here during the week. I’ve got an apartment in Major Garcia’s wing,” she replied.

Mary nodded and concluded her brief inquisition. She would save the meatier questions for when the alcohol was flowing.

Promptly at 8:00, Lt. Armstrong showed up at Mary’s door. She was in civilian clothes – something Mary rarely saw, even with Major Garcia. It seemed appropriate, given that she was the most laid-back personality there.

“I was thinking that we should check out that bar after all, what do you think?” Mary asked as she showed her guest inside.

“Sounds great to me!” Lt. Armstrong said as they turned towards the door.

Although Mary was unsure if the bar was exclusive to certain personnel, she figured she would plead ignorance and ask forgiveness later. Besides, it was yet another opportunity to check out some of the facilities without Major Garcia, and would make Mary feel a rare sense of independence.

“This was a great idea, thanks for suggesting it, Claire,” Mary said, pretending to be fully at ease.

“I’ll take just about any opportunity to kick back,” Lt. Armstrong replied. “All work and no play makes you lose your damn mind,” she added as they clinked their glasses.

After several minutes of pleasantries and impersonal conversation, they had each nearly finished the first drink. Mary tepidly launched into her interrogation. “Where is it you live on the weekends?”

“Sin City. It’s a very easy flight. In fact, almost all civilians on the base fly in and out on a daily basis,” Lt. Armstrong replied, not exhibiting any displeasure at the personal question.

“How come you don’t fly in every day?” Mary asked.

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"I like to let my work days dictate themselves, you know? I'm not so much a 9:00 to 5:00 person, I'm more productive when I can stay if I'm on a roll or leave early if it's a waste of time. The flights are very punctual so for me it's more trouble than it's worth," Lt. Armstrong said.

"Have you been here a long time? I mean, on this particular assignment too," Mary continued.

"I actually predate Mr. Charming, believe it or not," she replied. It was clear by Mary's expression that she didn't know to whom she was referring, so Lt. Armstrong continued, "Major Garcia. I'm talking about Major Garcia. I've been here a little over 10 years so I've been here longer than him. Sorry, didn't mean to throw you off on that one."

"No, no, that's totally fine," Mary replied hurriedly.

"I have a bad habit of calling things as I see them. Then I take it a step too far with stupid nicknames and other such highly mature activities," Lt. Armstrong added.

"That sounds like the only way to keep your sanity," Mary replied. "And to be honest, I can't tell you how refreshing it is to talk to someone here who's not always so buttoned up. You know, it's like sometimes I don't know if the person I'm talking to is real or some persona that they're assigned to exhibit just for me."

"Why just for you?" Lt. Armstrong asked as she sipped her beer.

"Well, firstly, I'm still the newbie. Or the newest member at least. And perhaps most importantly, I'm the only civilian person currently in the group and I didn't exactly apply for the position!" Mary said with a slight chuckle. She was clearly feeling a bit more at ease with Lt. Armstrong, but was still on guard.

"I don't know how to break it to you, but that front they put on has nothing to do with you. So just get over yourself," Lt. Armstrong said with a smile, while getting up to get two more drinks. Mary was less put off by her blunt remark and more intrigued by what she meant. Maybe Lt. Armstrong did have some insight into Lt. Xiong and Special Agent Mackey. Of course she would, she had been working with both of them for many years. Major Garcia certainly knows, but his constant defense of all things governmental seemed to preclude him from giving

an honest answer. Perhaps Lt. Armstrong knows exactly why they behave the way they do, and perhaps she's the only one willing to say it out loud.

As Lt. Armstrong set the glasses on the table, she leaned in and said, "Now, I'm no one to gossip. Like I said, I just call 'em like I see 'em. But those two aren't quite as naturally wound up as you might think." Lt. Armstrong took a gulp of her drink while looking at Mary and winking. She continued, "It's mostly what you think – they're very career-minded people. However, even the most ambitious go-getter with the most pristine record has something they wish everyone else would forget about. You can't help but carry that with you."

"Do tell! Do tell!" Mary replied emphatically.

"Are you sure? Again, this is all just hearsay, but I'm here to say it's right on the money!" she replied with a laugh.

"Come on, out with it! If you think I'm not interested in the dirt around here you're way off," Mary said while folding her hands and putting them on the table. "I'm listening intently."

"Well, Special Agent Mackey has worked extremely hard to get where he is today. I'll give him that. However, it is difficult for a person to ever be perceived as worthy of a high-level position when your father runs the show. I'm not saying it's fair to him, because he's been forced to prove himself more so than lots of other people. However, he has made over achieving an art form. I mean, this guy will never ever be satisfied or confident in his own skin. I just can't imagine anything happening where he'd go, 'ah, that's really great. Now I can just enjoy this moment and not worry about what everyone else is doing,'" Lt. Armstrong said before pausing to take a sip.

"I guess it's even harder for him, because I heard that when he was a child he had this horrendous stammer so it was brutal even getting people to listen to him. I give him credit, like I said, for overcoming that handicap and for earning what he has. I just wish he wasn't wound so tightly so that he could take a minute and just be a person, you know?" she added.

"He's intense, let's say that," Mary replied with a laugh. "So what's Lt. Xiong's deal?"

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“That’s another unique one. Again, mad props to her for all of her accomplishments. I mean, she’s unbelievably bright,” Lt. Armstrong said. “But, I guess like most of us, she allows herself to be bound to the past, you know?”

Mary’s face looked confused, although she clearly could assume a million different scenarios where such a question would apply. “No, what do you mean?”

“Come on, you’re no spring chicken, if you’ll excuse my observation,” Lt. Armstrong said with a laugh.

“Well, I guess that beats you mentioning all of the ‘miles’ I’ve got on me or something,” Mary replied, clearly not offended by her statement.

“Everybody has some shit in their past that profoundly affects them. Some folks cling to their heyday, while others cannot let themselves get past some kind of regret, you know?” she said.

“Well, sure. But which one is she? I’m going to guess the former because she does a good job of trying to remain superior in every situation,” Mary said with a serious face.

“No, no, she’s definitely the latter. Look, I don’t want to get into all her business, but in short, she was working on another case here – before this one – and she indirectly, well, unintentionally, she sort of,” Lt. Armstrong said before Mary interrupted her.

“What? Killed a guy!?!” she said sarcastically.

“Not intentionally. Look, I can’t get into all of the details, it’s classified, but her intentions were always true. She just made a bad, bad judgment call and it did, unfortunately, end up costing someone their life,” Lt. Armstrong said with a serious expression. “She’s not bad, she’s just really terrified of leaving her eye off the prize.”

Mary’s stomach dropped. Although she had no idea what the circumstances entailed, she instantly could relate to Lt. Xiong. The feeling of regret, remorse, and anger with herself for the death of those children at the OMI was all rushing forward. She also began to see Lt. Xiong in an entirely different light. Perhaps she could be a worthy companion, even her equal.

“What’s wrong?” Lt. Armstrong said, putting her hand on Mary’s. “She didn’t do anything deliberately. I mean, don’t be afraid to be around her now.”

“No, I’m sorry, it’s not that at all. I’m fine,” Mary said before finishing her drink. “What do you say we get some more?”

Mary got up to get another round for her and her new friend. Although she would not accept Lt. Armstrong’s word as gospel, she did find it easy to believe. Mary knew all too well that the perception that one conveys is often entirely different from the person that lurks underneath. It all seemed so exhausting, everyone hiding their true selves, most often out of fear. Fear of rejection, fear of loss of control, fear of confrontation. Although this information made Special Agent Mackey and Lt. Xiong much more human in Mary’s eyes, it also forced her to acknowledge her guilt participating in the same charade. Whether in Albuquerque, or Artesia, or Area 51, she was just as phony as the rest. She may have believed her personal reasons were legitimate, but didn’t everyone?

Thus far, the little drunken excursion was quite successful. Mary was getting some insight into things, even if it lacked hard evidence related to the mission’s claims. However, she needed to sniff out her new source and see if she was reliable.

As she handed Lt. Armstrong her drink, she said, “You so wisely said that just about everyone is clinging to or running away from something in their past, right?”

“Yep, pretty much,” Lt. Armstrong replied while chewing a pretzel.

“So which one are you?” Mary asked, her eyes locked on Lt. Armstrong’s.

“Surely you understand the danger in asking such a question, right?” she replied.

“What, that then I’ve gotta answer it too?” Mary asked.

“You got it. So, with that said, how would you like to proceed?” Lt. Armstrong asked while leaning in towards Mary.

“Maybe that’s enough heavy talk for one night, huh?” Mary answered with a smile.

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Lt. Armstrong returned her smile and the pair enjoyed their drinks over a less intense conversation. Mary was really coming to like Lt. Armstrong, especially her candor. She seemed more direct in that she would say out loud what she or another person was inevitably thinking. Major Garcia merely addressed matters, not the moment. And there, on the other end of the spectrum, were Lt. Xiong and Special Agent Mackey who were not likely to discuss anything beyond a listing of the facts.

Several days had gone by, and Mary and Lt. Armstrong were working quite well together. Sometimes she would join her for lunch or dinner, regardless if Major Garcia was in attendance or not. They had gone out for drinks one additional time, and Mary was grateful to have the excuse for continuing to distance herself a little bit from him. She was still unsure just how much Lt. Armstrong knew about their relationship, but since they were so discrete, there was never a feeling of awkwardness among the trio.

Mary and Lt. Armstrong had just commenced their third autopsy, and from a medical standpoint, there were no irregularities that would cause any of them to reject the implant. At night, Mary would sit in her apartment and review the medical records of those soldiers who had successfully ingested the device. There seemed to be nothing spectacular about the soldiers either, and what's worse, they seemed to be very much like those who had died from the experiment.

"Now, this is weird," she whispered to herself. "Delta 32 gene. Where have I heard that before?"

After a moment of contemplation, Mary realized it was the gene mutation that was the only common denominator among the survivors of the plague. More importantly, it was the same gene that, today, was capable of miraculously producing an immunity to HIV. But the odds of all of the soldiers having this gene mutation naturally were extreme. Could these soldiers be guinea pigs for much more than just the communication device?

Feeling burnt out after a long day, Mary decided she'd pay Major Garcia an unannounced visit. Perhaps he'd appreciate the company, she thought quietly to herself. Or perhaps, she could find him with his guard down. Even better, perhaps something revealing would lay exposed in his apartment.

Recalling the difficult route to his apartment, Mary cleared all of the checkpoints. She arrived at his apartment door and knocked several times. It was silent. She

continued knocking in 30-second intervals for nearly 10 minutes. There was no reply. Mary had memorized his entry code from last time, but didn't want to use it just yet. She would save that information for an emergency.

The following morning at breakfast, Mary nonchalantly mentioned that she had paid him a visit the night before.

"Mike, I stopped by your place around 10:30 last night, but I guess you weren't home," she said calmly, as she pricked her muffin and casually took a bite.

"Sleeping more like. You should've called. The phone ringing usually wakes me up," he said, equally calm.

"Yeah, I guess I just wanted to surprise you," she said with a smile.

Mary was careful to end the conversation right there. She could continue under the guise of a suspicious girlfriend – rather than a suspicious conspiracy participant – but she wanted to save that for a time when she really needed it. Playing the relationship card was a limited opportunity, as it could potentially fracture their relationship moving forward.

"So, should I stop by your place around 8:00, then?" Major Garcia asked.

"Yep, that sounds good," Mary replied.

As was becoming typical, Mary skipped her customary lunch and dinner appointments with Major Garcia and worked straight through. He never complained, clearly pleased that she was so committed to the project. She was remaining extremely focused on the government's and her own personal assignments, practicing an unusual degree of patience that she had rarely been able to maintain before.

That night on her way home from the lab, Mary decided to take a different route and see what she might happen upon. Hoping not to rouse suspicion, she walked into the same building as the bar, planning to use that as an excuse in case she was questioned.

As she approached the building, she noticed an entrance about 30 yards away where several people were exiting. Perhaps she would have an opportunity to slip in among the crowd.