

EXTRACTION

Total recall.

BY REBECCA ROLAND

Gwen hated this part of the job: getting a memory extraction from a fresh witness.

The woman sat on the other side of the table inside the tent the Chicago PD had hastily erected near the shooting in the park. She was silent, stunned, covered in blood spatter. A cup of coffee sat untouched in front of her, its smell only somewhat covering the tang of blood, the sour stench of terror. Gwen glanced at the paperwork. Meghan Johnson. Young. Pretty. Meghan's hands curled around the cup. She wore a plain wedding band.

The extractor sat on the table, the steady green light indicating it was primed and ready. It looked like a mesh helmet equipped with a tiny pack that would nestle over the forehead.

Gwen cleared her throat. Mrs Johnson? No, no need to remind her of the man who should've been sitting next to her, and too formal besides. "Meghan?" she said softly.

The woman could have been a statue, she sat so still.

"Meghan," Gwen said louder.

The woman twitched, looked up. She swayed in her seat. "Yeah." Flat.

"It's time." Gwen lifted the extractor and carried her chair around the table so that she sat beside Meghan.

The other woman leaned back, eyes widening. "N-now?"

"I'm afraid so. The quicker I retrieve your memory of the crime, the better the quality. It will make all the difference when it comes time for the trial." She laid a hand on Meghan's. The other woman was frigid. "And you won't have to relive this again. I retrieve the memory, and then I erase it." The erasure was the only decent part of this whole process. Who wanted to recall being brutalized, or watching someone hurt a child, or seeing a loved one die?

"Does it make it easier?" Meghan asked. "Erasing it?"

"It helps."

"You speak from experience?"

Gwen hesitated. She'd gone through it once, as every extractor did: to know what it was like, to better sympathize with victims, she'd erased a memory of her getting a speeding ticket.

But then she'd erased other things, like bits of high school when she was shunned and

most conversations with her mother, who felt the overwhelming urge to criticize everyone. She understood that those things had happened, but she didn't have to carry them around like she used to, and when she spoke with her mother, or had a bad day at work,



she consoled herself with the fact that she could just make it all disappear. Using the extractor left her with the same feeling as a couple of glasses of wine: pleasantly sleepy and numb, with all the bad feelings shoved far down where she didn't have to deal with them. "Yes."

Meghan's eyes shimmered behind unshed tears. "Do it."

Gwen had her sign the paperwork, then fitted the extractor over Meghan's head. She pulled out her tablet and keyed in the instructions. She watched every extraction to ensure it was a useful memory for prosecuting the bastards later. Then she usually erased them from her memory. She didn't want her own baggage, much less anybody else's.

In Meghan's memory, she sat beside a handsome Latino man on a blanket in the park, only a dozen feet from the stage where a band played jazz. The details were sharp, from the quality of the sound to the way Meghan recalled the two women just in front of them swaying slightly with the music, to the lights glowing yellow in the distance along the path. She was a great witness, and she had the perfect view of the gunman as he approached and opened fire. Gwen winced. No wonder the poor woman was a mess.

Then came the moment when Meghan

hovered over her husband. Blood bubbled from his mouth and covered a wide swathe of his white dress shirt.

He reached for Meghan. She grasped his hands. "Love . . . you," he gasped.

"I love you," Meghan sobbed, over and over, until his eyes turned glassy.

The extraction stopped. Gwen was amazed at how calm her hands remained as she saved the images and sounds.

Meghan shuddered violently as if chilled to her bones.

Gwen's finger hesitated over a key. "Are you ready to remove the memory?"

She hesitated.

"You don't have to see him shot ever again. Not in your memories, not in your nightmares."

Her hands closed, opened, closed in her lap. "You remove everything?"

"Everything."

"Can you leave his last words to me?"

"I can't. I'm sorry."

"I'll keep it."

"What?" Gwen nearly hit the button out of surprise.

"I'll keep it," she whispered. "Otherwise his last words will be about our stupid mortgage. I'll keep it."

"There's no need to live with that memory."

Meghan met her gaze. Her green eyes were red-rimmed and determined. "It's worth some suffering to know that he spent his last breaths letting me know that he loved me."

Gwen's hand shook as she shut off the program and removed the extractor. Nobody had ever refused an erasure before. "I'll show you to a counsellor, if you'd like."

"I would."

Gwen led Meghan out of the tent. She held her chin high, hands steady, the complete opposite of the wreck she'd been when she'd entered. Gwen passed her to a waiting counsellor, then turned the extractor over in her hands. This was normally the time she'd erase her own memories of the scene, of the witness's testimony. *So I can stay sane*, she always told herself. Nothing good ever came from bad moments.

Except, a moment of love could sneak in. Maybe she'd been erasing good along with bad all this time. She went back into the tent and packed the extractor carefully away. ■

Rebecca Roland is the author of *Shards of History* and the short-story collection *The King of Ash and Bones*, and *Other Stories*. Find out more at rebeccaroland.net.

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