

# WhIteWashed

Amy Johnson

# WhIteWashed

Amy Johnson

Copyright 2009 by Amy Johnson

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Lulu.com

First Edition: December 2009

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

ISBN: 978-0-557-21621-5

Printed in the United States of America

Sixteen-year-old Darcy Calloway wakes to foreign surroundings, scared and confused. Scientists disguised as doctors are questioning her about her last year, but fear seems to have shut down her memory. To her horror, she has no recollection of the previous year, only that she was kidnapped and is being forced to stay in this hospital-like setting.

But in this lab, is she a hostage or a patient? She is without her family, and it soon becomes clear that, as long as she remains in this lab, her memory will not return.

Who are these 'doctors' whom she knows have taken her? And why is everyone convinced that she is recovering from trauma?

In a battle of survival, her only allies are a boy too damaged by his past to confront the despair of his own situation, and her doctor's eighteen-year-old stepson Travis. Will Travis turn out to be just another betrayer, or will he factor into Darcy's rescue?

In the end, Darcy alone must brave the memory of the night that started her desperate journey and whitewashed her past.



*To my mom, dad and sister, for showing me  
the most important reason for living.*

*And to Jacqueline Danielle, because there is  
always something worth living for.*



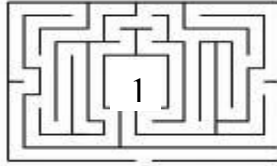
*"A Psalm for Life"*  
*by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

*Life is real! Life is earnest!*  
*And the grave is not its goal;*  
*"Dust thou art, to dust returnest,"*  
*Was not spoken of the soul.*

*Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,*  
*Is our destined end or way;*  
*But to act, that each to-morrow*  
*Find us further than to-day*







I stared at the stark white wall directly above his head. He was bent over, his clipboard resting on his lap, as he tried to get his pen to work. I concentrated on the wall, empty, windowless, scuffmarks towards the bottom from a parade of shoes kicking against it over time.

The wall resembled the other three surrounding me, and the white floor that my chair rested on. There was one window, small, at the very top of the wall to the right of me. The artificial sunlight, supplied by a very bright florescent light bulb outside the glass, glared down at the doctor, a streak of light hitting him so that he almost looked Holy. Almost.

He glanced up, still waiting for a reply.

I was panicking. I could hear my heart thudding against my chest. My head was hurting, the room was stuffy, and it was hard to breathe. I was too frightened to think, to try and explain anything. Fear was clouding my vision, casting a gray haze over the room, making everything seem dream-like. I could feel the heat of adrenaline pumping, echoing in my ears, making my stomach spasm every time I tried to think. I was terrified of this man, and he was asking me questions, the very nature of which exacerbated my fears.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” he sighed. I stared at him and nodded slightly to show that I understood him. He had told me that a hundred times, every time I paused to answer a question.

He displayed two totally different personas. I could see in his dark brown eyes a dictator-like quality and, even though he had morphed his expression into one of kindness, I knew what he was capable of doing in order to get answers.

“Why won’t you talk to me?” He asked quietly.

I looked away from him, refusing to reply. Was he expecting an answer? I didn’t have one for him. I just wanted to leave.

Attached to his clipboard was a file folder, and in that folder, I knew, was information about me- an extensive amount of information. Every time I had answered a question, he nodded and checked something off in the folder. He knew about me. Like a skilled attorney, he knew the answers to the questions before he asked them. How did he know me? Who was this man? Where was I?

“Darcy?” He started.

I looked back at him.

“Darcy, why won’t you talk?”

Finally, I opened my mouth. “Who are you?” I asked quietly, daring to take some control of the conversation.

“My name is Dr. Bram. I am your psycho-therapist,” he answered calmly, the same thing he had told me at the beginning of our meeting. I didn’t want to clarify my question, but he hadn’t revealed what I wanted to know. “I’m here to help you.”

“Where am I?” I asked. “I answered your questions; what do you want from me?”

He sighed. “I’m sorry Darcy, but I can’t tell you that.”

The tears I had been trying to contain slipped slowly down my face. I was so utterly confused and helpless, and the fear was making it hard to do much of anything.

“Why are you crying?” He asked, putting his clipboard aside.

“Please, let me go. I didn’t do anything,” I told him, wishing I could wipe my tears away. My hands, though, were bound to the arms of my chair, a choice I hadn’t been given. I had been brought out of my drug-induced sleep in this chair.

Dr. Bram got up slowly and came over to my seat. Instinctively, I tried to move further away from him. He noticed this.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Darcy,” he said.

I watched as he reached for my hand. Quickly, he untied my hands, dropping the rope by the legs of the chair. I brought my hands to my chest, flexing them to get the circulation back into my wrists.

“I’m going to bring you to a different place now,” he told me and grasped my upper arm gently. I got up, letting him lead me out the door to my left. “This doesn’t have to be hard for you.”

I only nodded slightly as the door opened automatically, and we walked through. We took a sharp left and opened the door in front of us. I found myself focusing on stairs going down so deep I couldn’t see the bottom. We walked in silence down, down, passing doors on every level, until finally, when we had gone down seven flights of stairs, we went into the door waiting at the landing.

All I could think about were the many levels between the floor I was on and the white room I had come from. What did those levels hold? Where was I? I was sure Dr. Bram could feel me trembling, but I almost didn’t mind. Maybe he would help me. I had no idea what was happening. I wished more than anything that I could find my parents. Where were they? They would certainly be looking for me, but where would they be looking? I wasn’t even sure I remembered where it was I had last been with them.

We walked across the hallway to the door opposite us, where there was another corridor. This maze of hallways confused me and only heightened my fear. What was going on?

Finally, when we came near the end of the corridor and opened the door to the right, we found civilization. People were walking down the corridor we entered. None of them, though, so much as looked at us as we continued down the hallway. Did they even notice that this man was holding me captive? Did they even care? What seemed like their lack of humanity made the nausea building in my stomach rise even further. What was happening?

We kept walking down the same long, gray corridor as every other one we had just passed through, until we reached the last door on the right. This door opened into a huge space filled

with nothing but various doors. Each wall had four doors on it. People were streaming in and out the doors, pushing past us, signaling to each other, actually talking to one another. The four doors on the wall to my left remained closed.

Dr. Bram led me towards the door all the way to the left of us, in the far corner of the room. As we got closer, I read the small sign on the door: “T.U.”

“Where are we going?” I asked quickly, stopping as Dr. Bram opened the door labeled “T.U.”

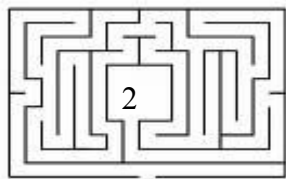
“This is where you will be staying,” he answered.

Staying? I looked up at him, but words wouldn’t form. I had been drugged, certainly not a willing participant in things I dreaded might be about to happen. The word abduction crossed my mind with blackness. I was helpless and frightened, and it seemed like Dr. Bram was deliberately hindering my access to answers.

I might have been subconsciously expecting a lot of things when the door labeled “T.U.” opened. But what I found was not at all what I had in mind. Not at all.

Dr. Bram opened the door, and when we stepped inside, my heart stopped for half a second. It was another long, dismal corridor. But this corridor was made of stone.

The stone immediately made me think of a prison. And, giving substance to my fears, the walls were punctuated with rows of doors—cell doors.



Dr. Bram's grip on my arm seemed to tighten a little as we walked by a guard standing next to the door, and continued to walk down the corridor. I looked through the bars at the occupants inside. Teenagers. There were teenagers sitting in the cells, staring at the wall opposite them, none of them talking. Dirty, uncomfortable looking teenagers inhabited the hallway, and I had a horrible gut feeling that I might be joining them.

The cells were all the same: small, cramped, with bunk beds as the only furniture.

"What is this?" I whispered, stopping in front of one of the cells that held two kids, a boy and a girl. Neither of them looked at me.

Dr. Bram sighed. "What's what?"

I managed to stutter out, "Why are they all in cells?"

"Where else would we keep our minors?" He asked, as if the answer should have been obvious. Then he turned and pulled me along.

The sight of so many cells horrified me, and I knew tears were streaming down my face. Had these teenagers been taken, too?

We stopped almost a second later in front of a cell with the number ten above it. I looked around, confused. My breath caught in my throat as Dr. Bram slowly opened the cell door. Without a word, he shoved me into the cell and slammed the door shut.

When he walked away, his footsteps echoing off the lonely, cold walls, I simply watched. And waited. Voices around me started up again, the whispers getting louder and louder until they were all a blur in my mind.

I turned around slowly, my mind in slow motion as I tried to comprehend this. What was I even doing? And then I jumped, so

startled that I almost tripped, my heart pounding a mile a minute as I realized that I was not alone in this cell.

A boy sat against the left wall, his head leaning against the stone, his eyes glued to the wall opposite him, his breathing slow, his eyes fluttering every now and then. His brown hair, unruly and slightly dirty, was mashed against the wall. He had a scowl on his face, as though he were perpetually mad at someone. His clothes were simple: a white t-shirt and dark jeans. I was guessing he was around fifteen-years-old.

My mind was churning. My head was pounding. I couldn't seem to focus. What was this place? Everything was surreal. I needed answers.

"Who are you?" I started hesitantly, just loud enough to be sure that the boy had heard me.

He didn't answer. I watched him, waiting to see if I could at least get some physical sign that he was alright.

"Hello?" I asked quietly when he hadn't even looked at me. Slowly, I watched his eyes slide over to meet mine. Still, he said nothing. "Who are you?"

He just stared me down.

I tried again. "Is...something wrong?"

No answer.

"Can you tell me what this place is?" I asked him slowly, needing a response but not really wanting to show him that I was desperate.

His eyes slid back to where they had originally been looking, and I wondered if something was wrong with him. Why wasn't he answering?

"Were you taken, too?" I asked quietly.

He didn't even look at me.

"Why aren't you answering?" I tried again.

When he didn't so much as change his breathing pattern, I realized I probably wasn't going to be getting any answers from him anytime soon. Slowly, I walked over to the wall to my right, slid down the wall, and sat, gazing at the space in front of me. The floor was hard, freezing cold, and bumpy, yet I didn't try to make myself comfortable.

There we sat, on our opposite sides, neither one of us speaking. Then, suddenly, the boy got up and walked out of our cell without saying a word to me.

“Where are you going?” I asked him.

He simply slammed the cell door after him. He was back around ten minutes later, but I didn’t try to question him. He resumed his quiet vigilance while I waited for something to happen.

Dr. Bram came back, maybe forty-five minutes later, maybe four hours later. Time was meaningless here.

“I see you are adjusting, Darcy,” Dr. Bram said mildly.

“What’s happening? Why am I—”

“Darcy, stop,” he commanded as the cell door creaked open and he stepped inside. “You are fine. You have no reason to worry.”

He paused as he sat down next to me. I didn’t ask him any questions. He wasn’t going to answer any, either.

“First of all, your roommate’s name is Donovan Reid,” he started. “He is thirteen and has been at this facility for eight and a half months. I am sure you have already realized that he is not very sociable. He has been badly affected by his situation and does not often speak.”

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked quietly, fully aware that we were carrying on a conversation about the boy as if he wasn’t in the cell.

“As I said, he has been badly affected by some of his past,” he told me, making sure that I understood that was the end of our conversation on this boy. “I did not, however, come to discuss Donovan. I came to give you our guidelines.”

“For what?” I asked quickly.

“While you are living here, there will be some rules that you must follow,” he answered vaguely. “You have been brought here to be studied, to have all aspects of your body, physical and mental, be evaluated and used as needed.”

My heart was thudding again, my face flushed with fear as I tried to think about what he had said.

“Studied? What do you mean, studied?” I gasped.



“You are one of a select few young adults whose unique history has caught the attention of the doctors here at this facility. We’ve brought you here to examine you in closer detail.”

I was staring at him. He was suddenly sitting too close to me, breathing my air, glaring into my eyes. I had caught the attention of the doctors, he had said. They had noticed me from afar.

“But...what does that mean?” I asked, choking on the words ‘unique history.’

“Please let me finish explaining the rules,” he commanded. “Now, there are four different categories of testing: Intelligence, Athleticism, Memory, and Free. Each morning, Mr. Nettcross, one of our administrators, will read off which minor will go to which station. It is up to us as to which station you will go. Based on your previous performances, or our interest in a particular aspect of your condition, we will choose which category you will go to.

“You will wake up at six o’clock. You will have thirty minutes to take a shower and get ready for the day ahead. Roll call starts at six thirty-five. If, for any reason, you are not present for roll call, you will not be given any breakfast.

“Breakfast is served at exactly seven o’clock in the main hall. You will have fifteen minutes to eat. When the bell rings, you will go to your station. You will stay there until five o’clock p.m. When the bell rings, you will be led back to your cell. At six o’clock, dinner is served in your cell. Lights out at eight o’clock.”

I must have been sitting with my mouth hanging open slightly, my eyes full of horror, because he didn’t continue.

“Is anything unclear?” He asked finally.

I shook my head, but it was not in response to his question. I was trying to sort out my thoughts, to understand what was going on. Did this prison I was going to be living in act as a school, or as a hospital? What tests? I couldn’t seem to wrap my brain around what was going on. But all the other kids were still on my mind. Were they all in the same situation I was?

I tried to form a question. “Those other kids...” I couldn’t seem to continue.

“Yes?” Dr. Bram egged me on.

“Were they...did you take them, too?” I asked quietly, praying I wasn’t overstepping my boundaries.

“We brought them here for the same purpose we have brought you here for,” he answered calmly, nodding.

Dr. Bram stood up silently, smoothed out his lab coat, and started towards the cell door. Before leaving, he turned to give me one final look-over.

“I will be back tomorrow morning to let you know whether you will be performing in the stations tomorrow. Because you will almost certainly have to partake in one of the four categories, be ready to perform,” he finished, turning to leave.

“Wait!” I said quickly, and he stopped. “How will I know what to do?”

He pursed his lips. “I would suggest following one of the other girls until you get the hang of things,” he answered and then left.

I listened to his fading footsteps, my head pounding, burning, as I took in my situation. Slowly, I buried my head in my hands. Not even caring if Donovan was watching me, I let the tears fall down my face. I wanted my parents so badly it hurt my heart. I was so confused, my wrists still ached from the rope, and I was lost. I needed one familiar face, just one. I sensed hopelessness closing in on me.

I sobbed until my throat was sore and my head was ready to explode from pain. I sat quietly, my breath catching, until I realized that there was a difference in the atmosphere. The quiet talk of the rest of the residents calmed to a whisper, then some mutterings, and then stopped altogether as if they knew something was going to happen.

Then, out of nowhere, alarms sounded. The sound bounced off the walls, echoing, coming from all over the place, from little speakers in the walls. I jumped, ready to cover my ears as I felt a massive headache coming on, when all of a sudden, they stopped.

“Lights out. Eight o’clock. Lights out. Eight o’clock,” a robotic voice said, replacing the alarm.

And just like that, I heard bustling all over as people stood and got into their beds. Even Donovan stood up automatically, walked over to the bunk bed, and plopped down on the bottom

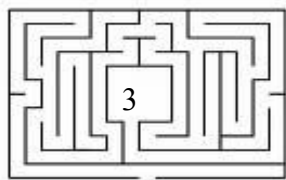
bunk. I heard the guards shuffling down the hall, locking the cell doors.

I stood hesitantly and was about to start over to the bunk beds when the voice came on again.

“Lights out in five,” I started towards the bed, “four,” and quickly inched my way up the ladder, “three,” climbed onto the hard-as-a-rock mattress, “two,” and crawled under the covers, “one.”

Suddenly, the whole world was pitch black. The lights, which had seemed dim enough anyway, were turned off, leaving the whole place in such darkness, I was afraid maybe I’d passed out.

I sighed, turned over, and was asleep even before I could think about how different my life was.



The hallways grew brighter and brighter as the lights were turned back on. I didn't know where I was supposed to go, so I followed everyone else. The group started separating into two lines, randomly, as though they all had a set door to go into. I followed a group going to the far left, down a hallway. There were so many twists and turns that I didn't know how they all remembered where to go. I guess after taking the walk so many times, they basically had memorized it.

I heard a squeak, felt a movement, and turned around to see what was happening. Instead, I came face to face with a savior.

"Aubrey, where are we?" I asked, my voice slightly slurred.

"I don't know," my sister whispered.

I shook my head. "They're bad people. We have to get out of here."

"I can't take you with me," she answered.

"What?"

"You can't come with me."

"Why not? Where are Mom and Dad?" I asked her frantically.

"They aren't here. You have to leave."

"Take me with you!" I told her. "How did you get here?"

She shook her head. "You need to leave by yourself."

"What's wrong? Aubrey, what's wrong with you?"

"You need to get out. You need to wake up. Wake up!"

"What? No, don't go!" I yelled after her as she disappeared around a corner.

I tried to run after her but ran into something solid. I looked up. Dr. Bram.

"What are you doing out of your cell?" He snapped, and his hand reached out slowly to grab my arm.

“No! NO! NO!” I screamed.

And as I sat up, still screaming, my voice was drowned out by the loud screeching of the alarm.

“Wake up. Six o’clock. Wake up. Six o’clock,” I heard the robotic voice whining.

I was out of breath, breathing in deeply. I rubbed my eyes, trying to get the sleep out of them while calming down my heart. Calm down, Darcy. Just calm down. Try not to think about it.

I couldn’t get the picture of Aubrey’s face out of my head. Where was she? Where were my parents? They couldn’t possibly know I was trapped here, but I knew they were looking for me. They had to be. When would I see them again? I could feel a sob coming up again as I thought about how much I missed my parents, but I shoved the tears back down. I couldn’t afford those at the moment.

As the guards started down our hallway, yelling at us to get up, I started down the ladder. Jumping back slightly, I flinched as I realized that Donovan had been standing, apparently watching me while I calmed myself.

I glared at him. “How long were you standing there?”

He just continued to look at me. When the guard came by and unlocked our cell, he silently opened the door and left.

I was about to follow him, remembering that I had no clue where I was supposed to go. But as I left my cell, I saw Dr. Bram weaving through the other kids.

“Darcy!” He called.

I faced him fully, trying to contain my fear as he walked towards me.

“Stay in your cell today,” he commanded.

“But—”

“My instructions have changed. Please go back to your cell,” he repeated.

Half scared, half relieved, I turned slowly and walked back to my cell. Closing the door behind me, I turned to look back at him. Now what? “What’s going to happen now?”

“Just relax for today. Someone will bring you your breakfast in a few minutes. Be ready to perform tomorrow,” he told me dismissively and walked away.

After I heard the door to the hallway slam, I sat down on the bottom bunk. I wasn't tired anymore; the alarm had wiped away my fatigue. I was left with my own thoughts, and that worried me. I knew I would go insane trying to think about what was happening.

The day passed by slowly. I had eaten my breakfast ravenously and was left with nothing else to do. Resigned, I made a choice to try and think through my situation.

As I lay on the bottom bunk, I sifted through what I knew.

Dr. Bram or his men must have taken me as I was sleeping. I couldn't remember where I had been, only that I had been drugged. The last memory I had was of playing the piano, so I must have gone to bed after that and woken up here.

Dr. Bram had questioned me for about ten minutes in that white room, asking my name, my age, little things about my past, what I remembered from last year, and random facts about my family. I hadn't had enough courage to ask why he needed those pieces of information. Now that I looked back at it, I was just as confused.

Maybe tomorrow I would be able to talk to one of the other teenagers I had seen in the cells. Maybe they would answer my questions. Donovan certainly wouldn't.

I probably slept for the rest of the day as I waited in the cell. I must have, because the next time I blinked from my position on the bottom bunk, Donovan Reid was back in the cell, sitting in his usual position. This time, I didn't bother to force him to answer my questions.

Dinner was awkwardly silent, but I knew he wouldn't answer me, so I focused on my meal.

The next morning was possibly even worse.

I woke up from a generic nightmare that soon evaporated into nothing, but left me screaming as I heard the alarms bleating. When my heart rate was back to a more normal pace, I started down the ladder. Of course, my audience was watching. Donovan was still staring at me, waiting by the cell door.

"Enjoying yourself?" I asked quietly, glaring at him. Why was he just staring at me? It was creepy, and I didn't like that every

time he seemed to be paying attention, I was waking from a nightmare.

He turned away from me and left the cell, leaving me in the silence. This time, I hadn't even gotten out of my cell when Dr. Bram met me.

"You will not be performing today, Darcy," he informed me.

I turned without a word and went back to my bed. When was I ever going to find out what was going on with this place?

I couldn't fall asleep. My mind was focused on so many other things. I needed to know what was going on, but something was telling me that it was better if I didn't. So I spent the day fighting an internal battle that ended in me accepting the fact that I was probably going to end up in a straitjacket.

This time, when Donovan came back, I was expecting him. I was a little more comfortable with my surroundings after spending two days alone in my cell, so I tried another confrontation.

"Donovan, can we talk?" I asked him, coming down the ladder.

He didn't even look at me.

"Look, I understand if you don't want to talk about whatever happened to you. That's okay. It's just, you've been here for nine months, and I really need some answers. Can you please talk to me?"

Not even a blink in my direction.

Dr. Bram hadn't said anything about him being unable to communicate. So was he just ignoring me? I felt like an idiot, trying to get him to talk when it was most likely a hopeless cause.

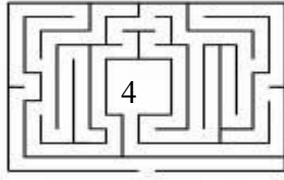
"Please?" I asked him quietly. "Can you just tell me where we are? Or what's going on? Anything? I don't know what this place is, and my memory is blurry and I can't seem to straighten things out. It's not like you would care about any of this, but I'm telling you because I don't have anyone else to talk to and thinking over this whole thing only confuses me more," I told him, trying to remain calm.

---

I waited a full twenty seconds. But when I got absolutely no acknowledgement from him, I gave up. Quietly, I moved to my side of the wall and waited for dinner to come.

When the guards picked up our dinner trays, he climbed into his bed, pulled the covers over his head, and, a minute later, I flinched as the alarm sounded.





“Stop! Shh, listen to me! Stop moving!” Someone was almost yelling at me, shaking me. I jolted up, almost hitting the face leaning over me. Before I could realize where I was, I was trying to push the person away.

My breathing was fast and uneven, so irregular that I couldn't even try and catch my breath. Tears streamed down my face, and I yanked my hands free from the person's grip to cover my eyes and try to get a hold of myself.

“Are you alright?” The person said.

I shook my head. Where was I? Who was he? I didn't uncover my eyes, trying to right myself but afraid of looking anywhere.

“You're awake now; it's okay,” the boy was saying. “Don't be scared.”

I felt like I should have known who was speaking, but I sat there, trying to figure out where I was. My cell. I was in the cell with— I looked up quickly. Donovan Reid.

“Are you alright?” He asked again, quieter this time and more resigned.

“Um...” was all I could manage to mutter. He was talking to me. “Um, yeah.”

He nodded, then started climbing down the ladder.

“Wait!”

He turned around to face me but didn't say anything.

“Did I wake you?” I asked, desperate for a conversation to form.

“You would have, if I had been asleep. But I was already awake,” he answered.

I nodded. “What time is it?”

Seeming to realize that I didn't care so much about the time, he said, “They'll sound the alarm in about five minutes.”

I flopped down onto my pillow. I would probably be having another free day, which meant that, if I could just ignore the alarm, I would be able to sleep more.

“What were you screaming about?” His voice asked from underneath my bed.

I turned onto my side so that I could see his feet. “I don’t remember,” I told him truthfully.

“Was it the same as the others?”

I nodded and then realized he couldn’t see me. “Probably. I only remember one of my dreams. I can’t remember the others.”

When he didn’t reply, I guessed he was done talking. Then, “So, what’s your name?”

“Darcy,” I answered quietly and, wanting to keep it friendly, asked, “What about you?”

“I’m Reid,” he replied. I decided he knew the reason why he had given me his last name, so I didn’t question his answer.

“So, you’re talking now?” I asked by way of answering.

“Guess so,” he told me curtly, or so I thought. But the minute the words were out of his mouth, the alarm came on so loudly this time that I covered my ears and crouched. My body shook with the sudden shock and loudness.

“Up. Up. Get up,” the guards yelled as they passed our cells, using their keys to unlock our doors.

“Are you coming?” Reid asked from below me.

“No,” I told him. “Dr. Bram is probably gonna make me stay here.”

He nodded, turned, and was opening the cell door when Dr. Bram appeared.

“You’re performing today, Darcy,” he called through the cell.

My eyebrows shot up as I heard this, but I winced as the lights turned on. I was blinded. By the time my eyes adjusted, he had turned and left.

Reid spun around, holding the door open. “Hurry up! The showers only stay on until six twenty-five, and then they’re off for the rest of the day.”

Fumbling to get out of bed, I hurried down the ladder and tried to right myself while following Reid out the door.

We were immediately surrounded by a group of kids, all heading in one direction. We followed them towards the way they had gone yesterday and the day before.

“Follow her,” I heard someone whisper. I turned to see Reid pointing to a girl about ten feet ahead of me. “Her name’s Nora. She’s been here almost as long as I have. She knows how to work the ropes around here.”

The girl, from the back, almost looked like me. Her hair was the same length and color as mine. Finding it a bit reassuring at the normality of finding another girl with the same medium length blonde hair as I had, I kept my eye on her.

After giving me a little shove in her direction, Reid started towards a different door. It was then that I realized that we were separating into sexes. I followed the line until we stopped at a door to our right. One of the girls up front opened it and most of the girls went in. Nora, though, walked past that door and went into another door immediately next to it.

The rest of the girls followed her, so, trusting what Reid had told me, I followed her into the room. Inside, instead of finding showers like I had expected, there were sinks lined up in rows. Each girl seemed to have her own designated sink, because no one hesitated in going to a certain one. I, however, did not know what to do, so I stood awkwardly to the side, waiting for someone to notice me. Nora was at her sink, brushing her teeth, but then suddenly, she paused and looked over at me.

“Are you Darcy Calloway?” She asked slowly, and everyone seemed to stop.

“Why?” I asked her warily.

“Are you?”

“Yeah. Why?” I asked again.

She motioned next to her with a flick of her head. “Your sink’s next to mine.”

Grateful, I walked slowly over to my assigned sink, picked up my toothbrush, examined it, and then turned on the water. After brushing my teeth, I started to reach for the brush next to our sinks, and then stopped.

Looking subtly at Nora to see if she had noticed anything weird about this whole situation, I started, “Do I know you?”

She looked up at me, pondering something, and then replied, "I don't think so. Why?"

"How'd you know my name?"

She shrugged. "I guessed. You're the only new girl around here, and they've been talking about a Darcy Calloway."

I thought about that. "Who's 'they'?"

As she quickly brushed her hair back, she answered, "The doctors. They gossip like old women. You can't help but overhear."

Gaining confidence from her willingness to answer my questions, I immediately had hundreds of questions to ask. But she was walking away before I could ask them.

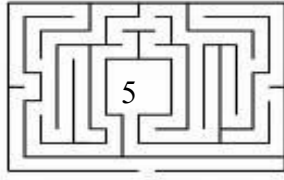
I followed her quickly. "Nora?" I called.

She didn't ask how I knew her name. Instead, she turned to look at me. "Yeah?"

I paused before going through with it, asking my most urgent question. If nothing else, I needed to know this answer. "Is this place bad?"

Nora pursed her lips, turned, and started towards the shower area. I followed her, waiting patiently for her answer. At last, she stopped, looked at me, and answered quietly, "It's a lot better than out there."

I stared at her as she grabbed a towel, turned the corner, and started up her shower. After spending a good minute trying to make sense of her words, I gave up. Maybe I'd ask her later. There had to be something I wasn't understanding. There was no way this place was better than my old life.



“Hurry up!” Nora called as I tied my still soaking wet hair up into a quick messy bun.  
“One sec!” I called back to her, running and hopping towards her as I pulled on my shoe.

The doctors had provided clothes for me: a greenish-gray tank top and gray khakis, as well as a thin pair of socks and gray tennis shoes. What they hadn’t given me was enough time to adequately prepare myself for the day ahead.

We almost sprinted back to our cells in an effort to remain punctual. Luckily, Nora knew the way, and Reid was waiting for me. When I reached the cell door, he yanked me inside with so much force that I almost toppled over him.

“You’re late,” he snapped, pushing me towards the wall.

“Sorry, I—” I started to apologize, but one look from him had me sliding down the wall and into the same position I had been in the previous nights. What was wrong with him?

What seemed like a second later, a voice sounded from far away- so loud and booming that it reminded me of the military. Mr. Nettcros was going through roll call like he had done the two days previous. It was only this time, though, when I knew I would be involved in the stations, that I actually paid attention.

“Ailey.”

“Here.”

“Anderson.”

“Here.”

And the names kept rolling off. After each name was called, a voice, sometimes close, sometimes far away, would yell ‘here.’

Until finally...

“Calloway.”

“Here,” I called back, holding my breath, hoping nothing would happen. There was a slight pause where all I could hear was my heartbeat. Why wasn’t he continuing?

“Decker.”

“Here.”

I breathed easier and then turned to look at Reid. His back was straight; his eyes glued to the wall, a sour look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered so low that it almost seemed like I mouthed it.

He shook his head, signaling for me to wait, I think. I sat impatiently as Mr. Nettcros went down the list, seeming to take forever. When he got to the r’s, I was thinking of falling back asleep, until I realized that Reid had stiffened even more, if that was at all possible.

“Reid.”

A pause. “Here.”

Why was he so opposed to roll call? He looked like he had just swallowed a lemon.

The rest of the names were called off until Mr. Nettcros reached Zimmerman. Then he was starting all over again, this time assigning what I knew were the stations.

“Ailey- Athleticism.”

“Anderson- Memory.”

While he was going down the names, I thought about the four stations. Which one did I want to go to the least? Most likely Memory, considering I didn’t like talking about anything personal. Then again, none of the stations sounded like my cup of tea. The only one I might have been okay with was Free. So, hopefully, that was what I was assigned.

“Calandra- Free.”

“Calloway- Memory.”

My heart sank terribly. I could hardly suppress my disappointment as I looked over at Reid. He gave me a sympathetic glance and then looked away. I listened as Mr. Nettcros reached Reid’s name.

“Reid- Free.”

I almost rolled my eyes before realizing that I was doing so. I hadn't been comfortable enough to use my old habit for almost four days.

When Reid finally stood up, I looked at him. "What?"

"Breakfast," he replied, motioning with his head for me to follow him.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, standing up as well. I hadn't realized roll call was over. But I was starving.

"Why were you so tense back there?"

He shook his head. "Old habit, I guess."

"Why?"

"I used to be afraid of Netteros back when I first came here," he answered, spitting his words out quickly.

We started towards the corridor, and I glanced over at him before starting, "So, since you're talking, I thought maybe we could discuss this place."

He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. "Who said I was talking?"

"Well, I figured since—"

"Look, can we talk later? I'm not a morning person," he told me. I nodded, understanding, but I had a feeling there was something he wasn't saying.

Everyone was heading in the opposite direction of the showers. We followed the group in silence. Once we were out of the corridor, we passed through the huge room with all the doors and went through a door to our right labeled 'cafeteria'.

I had to admit, I was impressed with its size. There were two long tables in the middle of the room, with chairs lining the sides of the tables, as well as two doors on the right wall. The front of the cafeteria had a stage on it, which looked oddly out of place.

"Impressive," I murmured, and Reid turned.

"Yeah. The best thing about this place is the food."

If I hadn't been so hungry, I may have noticed that his tone matched Nora's with regard to this place. He was talking about this place as though it were a safe haven. As it was, though, I was too focused on the food to realize this just yet.

"How do you know it's not drugged? Or poisoned?" I asked Reid as we headed towards the buffet table and grabbed trays.

“They rarely try to kill us,” he told me, his voice solemn but holding a bit of dry humor.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I,” he answered. “They aren’t here to hurt us. They pretty much leave us alone when we aren’t in the stations.”

But when he saw me looking suspiciously at the scrambled eggs, he sighed, grabbing a plate for himself and for me. “I’ll taste test it when we get back to our seats if it makes you feel any better.”

I gave him a half smile. “It does,” I answered, and we continued down the line. It really *did* make me feel better, having Reid with me. Something about his attitude towards the apparent monotony of his life made me a little less frightened.

“Darcy, seriously, just relax,” Reid commanded, and I looked back up at him. But he wasn’t looking at my face. He was looking at my hands. I, too, looked down at my hands. It was only then that I noticed they were trembling so fiercely that my tray was shaking.

“I don’t like this place,” I stated singly. I wasn’t feeling well. However, since I was guessing it was just my nerves acting up, I said nothing more. I didn’t want to look like a sissy. Everyone else, after all, had gone through this, and they weren’t bringing back memories of nausea.

“It’s okay,” he reassured me, his mind suddenly on something else.

I didn’t remark about the fact that he was perfectly fine with talking when it didn’t relate to the inner workings and secrets of this place. Instead, I grabbed a carton of milk and then stopped, making Reid almost run into me.

“Whoa!” He exclaimed, righting his tray.

“Reid...” I started, but the convulsing of my stomach made me stop.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“I don’t—”

My tray dropped from my hands and clattered to the floor as I reached out to grab the side of the table closest to me. The world tumbled around me as my body screamed in pain.



“Darcy?” He asked quickly, grabbing my arm. I was vaguely aware that the room went immediately silent, but I was too focused on the intolerable nausea and head splitting headache. My arms were weak, and the room spun quickly.

“Reid...help,” I gasped, trying to force the stomach acid back down.

Reid, reacting quickly, yelled, “HELP!”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Sweat was gathering on my face, my whole body clamming up, and heat waves were blowing through my body. I willed myself not to collapse as I shuddered in pain.

My breath came in spurts as my feet left the ground. I was partially able to realize that I hadn’t collapsed. Someone was carrying me.

People were rushing around me. My whole body was in absolute agony, my limbs shaking so hard, it was difficult to determine whether I still felt dizzy.

“Darcy, can you hear me?” A distant voice asked.

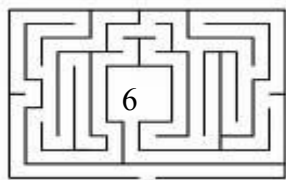
I tried to turn my head towards the voice. My eyes fluttered open, but I squeezed them shut again when the light produced another punishing headache.

“Darcy?” The voice was distorted, coming from all directions, simultaneously loud and soft.

Someone was talking. I tried to place it, tried to listen, but I was writhing in pain. “...pulse is too fast.”

More voices, scared, furious, loud, all around me. Then a dull pinch in my arm, so small compared to the gutless agony in the rest of my body.

And then I was falling, the pain more bearable, as I sank deeper and deeper until I could feel nothing, sense nothing, was nothing.



I was roughly awoken out of a blissful sleep. A harsh scratching sound was ringing in my ears, and I struggled to be rid of it.

“I’m sorry, Darcy, did I wake you?” Someone asked.

I frowned, turning towards the voice.

A middle-aged Asian man stood near where I lay, looking at me with an expression I could place only as concern.

“Where...” I started and then cleared my throat. My voice was too raspy to talk. I tried again. “Where am I?”

“In our hospital.”

I closed my eyes, trying to figure out my situation. Immediately, memories came back to me. Kidnapped, confusion, Reid, Memory, food, pain. And more confusion. *Our hospital*, he had said. I was still trapped in this place.

My pain, at least, had subsided. For now.

When the scratching noise started up again, I opened my eyes slowly. The man was lowering one of the many beds in the hospital room, taking no haste in accomplishing his task.

I moved my head to get a better view of where I was. We were in a huge rectangular room filled with more than twenty beds all with white dressings. The room looked like it could, if not for the beds, be used as a gigantic conference room. The floor was a cherry-colored wood, and the walls were a creamy white. In an odd way, the room was almost comforting.

“What happened?” I finally asked, instead of trying to pry out any more location-related questions. Even in my stupor, I knew enough to realize that I wasn’t going to be getting answers.

He moved away from the bed he had been fixing and came over to where I was resting. “Well, you seem to be having some unusual and delayed side-effects to one of our sedatives.”

I let that sink in, trying to relax enough so that my body didn’t bring back the pain I had experienced.

“Are you feeling at all better?” He asked kindly.

I nodded. “A little,” I told him truthfully.

“Would you like something to eat?” He asked.

My stomach immediately turned. “No,” I told him quickly.

“Water, then?”

Because my stomach did not react to this suggestion, I nodded again. “Okay.”

He smiled slightly and turned to leave the room.

Slowly, I did a full body examination. My toes wiggled, my legs moved, I could breathe in deeply without aching, my fingers flexed without trembling, I could shrug my arms, and I could move my head from side to side without feeling unbelievably dizzy. This was good.

Making a risky decision, I placed my hands on the mattress and pushed up with great effort. Little by little, I raised myself into a sitting position. Other than the fact that the blood rushed down from my head, I felt no hindering aches.

I turned a little to my left and took in the odd object standing next to my bed that I hadn’t noticed before. It looked like an...it was an IV.

My heart sinking, I followed the tube from its source, down, down, until my eyes rested on my hand. It was sticking out of my hand. I looked away quickly. Ew. Ew, ew, ew. Get it out of me! I had never been good with needles. This was disgusting. I knew I was getting myself worked up, but I couldn’t sit still knowing that the needle was putting fluids into my body.

Suddenly, there was a loud beep above my head. I looked up quickly, then turned my head slightly to look at the headboard of my bed. A slight tug on my neck followed.

I reached up with the hand that didn’t have an IV attached to it, and felt where my neck had been pinched slightly. I pulled my hand away quickly. Something was on my neck.

Very cautiously, I reached up again. The object was stuck to my neck. Again, I followed the wire that it was attached to until I came to see a heart monitor. Knowing enough about reading them, I saw that over the last two minutes, my heart rate had rapidly increased, which may have caused the beep. I was completely attached.

I heard a door open and turned to see the Asian man coming back into the room. "Here you go," he said in an almost cheerful voice and held the water out for me.

Again choosing to use my non-IVed hand, I reached out for the cup. I brought it to my mouth and was about to drink it when I stopped. I pulled it away from my mouth, then looked warily at the man.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"What's in this water?" I asked him.

He nodded, seeming to understand my apprehension. "Don't worry, Darcy, it's just plain old water."

I only stared at the cup. I was not going through that pain again.

He sighed. "Look, do you want me to take a sip and show you?"

My eyes moved up to his face. He looked sincere. But I didn't want him drinking from my water, either.

So I shook my head, bringing the cup up to my lips. Carefully, very carefully, I took a hesitant sip. I waited for my stomach to complain as the liquid slid coolly down my throat. It hit with an ugly sound, but I was craving more before I could decide whether my stomach would appreciate it.

The man turned away from me as I finished the water. Silently, I placed the cup on the ground next to my bed. Then I turned to the man.

"Why am I attached to an IV?" I asked him.

He turned to me. "Oh. You were asleep for quite some time, and your body wasn't getting enough nutrients."

"How long?"

"You woke and fell asleep on and off for about twenty-two hours before your body started to calm down."

I hesitated, trying not to cringe as I asked, "How many hours have I *been* in here?"

He paused, mentally calculating. "I'd say about twenty-nine hours."

Before he had answered, I knew I couldn't stay here any longer. I had to get out. I had to get answers. What was going on? "Can I leave now?"

He shook his head. "We'd like you to stay here at least until the rest of our minors are finished with their stations." I was guessing it was about noon. That left me with five hours of nothing to do. As if reading my mind, the man told me, "I'd suggest you relax and let your body rejuvenate."

It was pointless to argue. Resigned, I gradually lowered myself down so that I was in a more comfortable position.

The man left soon after he saw that I wouldn't be moving. Although I was sure he hadn't gone far, it unnerved me to be so alone in such a big room. Alone with my thoughts.

I didn't sleep. I hardly even thought. I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to the random beeps of my heart rate monitor. My senses were heightened, and I heard every little movement anyone made when they passed outside the room. I willed myself not to think about anything at all.

Miraculously, when the man came back into the hospital room, I had managed to keep my thoughts in check.

"Alright, Darcy, let's see here," he started, coming over to my bed. He squinted at my heart rate monitor and nodded. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. Fine. Great. Can I just leave?" I asked him quickly.

He smiled at me. "Of course. Let's just take this IV out," he answered.

I deliberately turned my head away from the hand that held the needle.

"Relax your hand, please," he commanded, and I forced myself to unclench my hand.

He seemed to take his time pulling the IV out, but I didn't watch. I heard a zipping sound and felt something on my hand. Turning my head slightly, I saw him pressing a Band-Aid over the spot where the needle used to be.

"Just for now," he added when he saw me watching. Carefully, he peeled the heart rate monitor wire off my neck. Then he took my upper arm and helped me sit up. "Are you okay?"

I nodded almost enthusiastically.

"Alright. Dr. Bram is waiting outside this room. He will bring you back to your cell. You aren't going to be performing

tomorrow. I've suggested that you rest up tomorrow as well, and we'll see how you are after that. Okay?"

I nodded again. I didn't even think about the boredom. I just needed to leave.

He motioned with his head towards the door. "You may leave now."

Without another word, I moved my feet off the bed. Slowly, I placed them on the floor and gradually put my weight onto them. So far, so good. I took one hesitant step after another until I was confident on my feet. Then I couldn't get out of that room fast enough.

Before I left the room, I passed a desk, which I assumed belonged to the Asian man. On his desk lay a folder. My eyes involuntarily moved towards it and paused on *Darcy Calloway* written across the top.

I automatically stopped and stared at it. Was there information on me? Before I knew what was happening, my hand was reaching towards it.

Suddenly, the Asian man was next to me, his hand around my arm, yanking me away.

"What are you doing?"

I looked up at him quickly, my brain scrambling. What had I been doing?

"That folder had my name on it," I mumbled.

"I'm aware of that. Did I give you permission to touch it?" he asked me sternly.

I looked away from him and shook my head.

"That's what I thought. It isn't yours, Darcy," he answered. Quickly and with much force, he pushed me away from the desk and towards the door. I stumbled out into the hallway, only to be met by Dr. Bram.

He backed up slightly, clearly not expecting my unintentional ambush.

"Are you alright?" he asked, slightly flustered.

I looked back at the room I had come from, but the man had already slammed the door. Then I turned back to Dr. Bram.

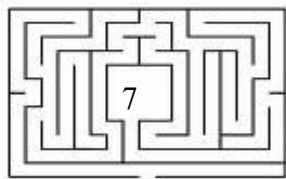
"Yeah."

“I must say, Darcy, you gave us quite a scare. We certainly were not expecting that harsh of a reaction from you.”

“Me neither,” I answered quietly. I hadn’t been expecting a reaction at all.

He chuckled slightly. “You, my friend, are one curious girl.”

I didn’t answer.



As soon as Dr. Bram's footsteps couldn't be heard from Reid's spot in our cell, he was up and next to me.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

He looked at me closely and repeated, "So. What happened?"

"The doctor said I had a weird reaction to the sedative."

"Sedative?" Reid asked. "But wasn't that like...?"

"The first day I came here. Yeah. I don't know why it went wrong. They didn't tell me anything else."

"So what happened after you left?" He asked quickly.

"I think they tranq'ed me," I answered, trying to remember. "I woke up about thirty hours later."

"You've been in the hospital that whole time?" He gasped.

"Yeah," I told him, interested in his surprise. "Where did you think I went?"

"I don't know. But you were gone for more than a day. I thought maybe...never mind," he finished lamely.

I decided to ignore his unfinished sentence. "Are you still wondering why I didn't want to eat those eggs?"

"They weren't drugged, you know," he told me almost defensively. "You can try them tomorrow and see for yourself."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not going to the stations tomorrow. The doctor said I should rest tomorrow, too."

He didn't reply to that. I waited for some kind of reaction from him. When I got none, I shrugged and turned away from him, sitting down against the opposite wall. "Let's talk."

"Alright," he answered, going to his wall. "About what?"

"This place," I told him, getting right down to business.



His eyes darkened, his attitude immediately changing. “No.”

“What?” I asked, sure I had heard wrong. His response was so immediate, I almost thought I had imagined it.

“No,” he repeated.

I stared at him. “Reid, come on! I—”

“No!” He repeated once again.

“Would you just listen?” I asked quickly, and when he turned away from me, I asked, “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to,” he snapped moodily.

“Please!” I begged.

“No!” he snapped for the fourth time. “Why do you wanna know so much?”

“Look, I just went through an intense twenty hours of pain, so pardon me if I seem a little desperate,” I snapped. When I saw his sympathetic expression, I calmed slightly. I started again, my voice low and full of desperation. “Reid, please, I’m asking you, as a friend, help me. Please.”

He looked pained. Looking away from me, he answered, his voice so low I strained to hear it, “You don’t wanna know.”

I didn’t know what made him say that. But my reply was out before I could stop myself. “Why?”

He still wasn’t looking at me. “It’s too much.”

“Too much what? Information? I can handle it; I’m not a child.”

“I know that,” he mumbled. “And it’s not the information that’s too much. It’s the...” I waited for him to finish. “It’s the pain. It hurts. It hurts to find out about this place. Trust me. You don’t wanna know,” he finally finished.

“I don’t care! Reid, I don’t care!” I repeated. “I *need* to know, do you understand me? I’m dying over here; I can’t handle this not knowing! I need to know what’s going on. Why don’t you see that?”

He sighed and then looked back at me. His face was void of emotions; I could read nothing from it. We stared at each other for at least a minute. Finally, he talked. “Not today.”

“Why not?” I snapped again.

“If you really wanna know what this place is about, I’ll tell you, I promise. Just not today. And not tomorrow either. I want you to see for yourself, through your own eyes, not mine.”

My eyes narrowed. “What’s that gonna do?”

He didn’t answer me, his eyes glazed as he moved to a different world.

“Reid?” I asked again.

He looked back at me. Breathing carefully, he answered, “It’s been eight months, two weeks, since I first came here. I haven’t seen or heard anything new for about six of those months. Humor me.”

And I knew our conversation was over.

“Can I ask just one thing, please?” I urged quietly.

He groaned. “What?”

“Do they...” I started and then stopped. How to put it? Finally, “Are they gonna hurt me?”

“No,” he answered immediately, his voice sincere. “I can tell you, without a doubt, that they will not hurt you. Does that make you feel better?”

I nodded.

When dinner came, we ate in silence. I had a feeling Reid would have been fine if I had started talking to him about anything other than our current situation. I didn’t, though. I only wanted answers.

“I’m sorry if you’re mad at me,” Reid started after I had finished my dinner.

“It’s okay,” I told him, trying to remain nonchalant.

“We can talk about something else, though,” he replied, proving my suspicion right.

“Doesn’t matter.” I wasn’t being curt; I was being brief. I wasn’t trying to be rude, but I guess that’s how it came out.

He remained awkwardly silent when he realized that I really didn’t want to talk. Every so often, I would glance over at him to see if he was hurt by my silence. In an odd way, I felt partially responsible for his happiness.

As a way of passing the time, I slowly took off the Band-Aid the Asian man had put on my hand. It ripped against my skin, but, in a sick way, I didn’t mind the pain. It proved I could still feel

even after everything I had been through. After the pad was off, I stashed it near the stone, making a mental note to put it on the next dinner tray.

When Reid moved his arm, I glanced at him, thinking maybe he was going to start talking again. He absentmindedly pulled up his pant leg to his knee and scratched at his shin. Something about his leg didn't look right, though. I turned my head, giving it my full attention, and only then did I notice his scar.

"Holy crap!" I exclaimed. "What happened?"

"Hmm?" He asked, turning to look at me. He followed my eyes down to where I was looking at his shin. "Oh. I got it when I was eleven."

"How?" I was still in awe. The scar ran from his knee to his ankle along the left side of his left leg. There were jagged little lines coming off from the long white line.

"I accidentally smashed my leg into a window. Then I tried to hide it, so it got a little infected. It wasn't good," he answered, smiling guiltily.

"Ow! Jeez, why'd you put it through a window?"

"Well, I didn't do it on purpose!" He exclaimed and then looked away, his face blushing a little. "This huge dog was running towards me. I don't like dogs. I just jumped up on this ledge, but my leg went a little too far."

"A dog? You busted your leg because of a dog?" I asked, trying not to laugh.

"A big dog, Darcy. It was a *big* dog. And I don't like dogs!"

I was laughing slightly. Something about the story made me laugh. It wasn't even that funny. I was just laughing.

He narrowed his eyes. "Alright. Fine. Now you tell me an embarrassing story."

"What? How is that fair?"

"I told you mine. Now you tell me yours!"

I glared at him. I *so* didn't want to tell him some of my embarrassing stories. And I had more stories than eight socially awkward fourth-graders. But in the end, I knew it would make everyone feel better.

"Fine. But don't laugh!" I commanded.

He nodded. "Of course not."

I sighed, thinking of the best way to start my story. “Okay, when I was ten, my piano teacher entered me in this piano competition. Now, I was feeling really arrogant that day because I was the oldest one there, and I knew I could play better than anyone else. Well, I went up to the stage, climbed the stairs, and started towards the piano. But as I got to the piano, my sandal got caught on part of my pants. I went sprawling across the stage, but I tried to stop myself from falling, so I grabbed the piano. My hands slammed against the piano keys, and the terrible sound of clashing keys accompanied my totally horrifying collapse to the ground. And everyone was laughing as I sat on the stage. Turns out I sprained my toe.”

He burst out laughing. “You sprained your *toe*? Oh my gosh, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“You said you wouldn’t laugh!” I complained, but I was smiling too. I could feel myself blushing as I thought back to that day, but I was also really happy. It felt good to think back to that.

“Sorry, but you *sprained your toe*,” he laughed, his voice breaking as he held his stomach.

“Alright. It’s not that funny,” I reminded him.

I gave him time to calm down.

“So, what, did you have to wear a special shoe for your toe?” He gasped out.

“No,” I answered, feeling slightly stupid.

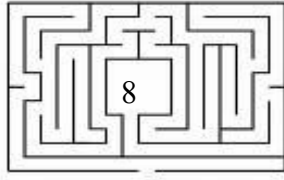
“Oh, jeez, that’s funny! Got any more?” He asked happily.

I rolled my eyes. “You obviously do not realize how clumsy I am!”

We spent the remaining time listing every embarrassing story we could think of.

When I climbed into bed and tried to forget about the total darkness, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about my family. Where were they? Where were my parents, my sister, her husband, everyone? Were they okay? Were they looking for me?

I didn’t even notice when the tears started coming. I couldn’t stop them, either. I fell asleep with my hand resting on the pool of tears forming on my pillow.



When the alarm sounded the next morning, I got up with Reid. Even though I knew I wasn't going to the stations, I still started towards the bathroom, following the other girls because I still wasn't quite sure where I was going.

As soon as I reached my sink, Nora turned to me. "Are you okay?"

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "What?"

"Two days ago. You just...dropped in the cafeteria. Are you okay?" She asked again.

"Oh. Yeah, I'm fine. I just had a weird reaction to a drug."

"The sedative?" She asked.

I nodded.

"Yeah, it's pretty powerful stuff they use."

I didn't feel like talking to her about it, so I just smiled and pretended to be occupied with brushing my teeth. She didn't question me anymore, although I got a few gawking expressions from the other girls as I started towards the shower area. I guess my reaction to the sedative was not a common one.

When I got back to the cell, I didn't bother listening to the names. I knew mine wouldn't be called out. Instead, I climbed up the ladder and lay down in my bed.

"You're going back to sleep?" Reid asked when roll call was over.

I shook my head. "No. This is just comfier than sitting on the ground."

He nodded. "Alright. Well, I'll see you at five, I guess."

"Bye," I said quietly and watched him leave.

It was after an hour of boredom that I decided I didn't want to lay and do nothing for the rest of the day. Taking my time, I slid down the ladder and over to the door of my cell. I looked both ways, hoping to see someone, anyone, I could talk to.

Stupid hope.

My mind, on its own accord, started down memory lane. I was forced to follow along. For the first time in days, I allowed myself to feel regret, guilt, to think about when I was taken hostage. It hurt to think about, but I forced myself, because I was dying, day-by-day, in this confined atmosphere of fear and confusion.

As I paced the room, I thought back to the last thing I had been doing. Slowly, I rewound the days until I came to the white room where I had talked with Dr. Bram. Before that, I had been drugged by two men. And for some reason, we had been in a forest. So, before that, I...

What had I been doing?

I remembered vaguely that unfamiliar forest. But what the heck had I been doing in a forest? I tried thinking back before that. But things got even more confusing. My mind automatically jumped to the day before my fifteenth birthday. But I wasn't fifteen anymore. I was sixteen. I knew I was sixteen. But...

When had I celebrated my sixteenth birthday? Or my fifteenth birthday, for that matter? I remembered playing the piano the day before my fifteenth birthday. I could remember playing 'Happy Birthday' the night before my birthday, a kind of pre-birthday present to myself. But the next day was...wasn't there.

It was then that I realized my breath was coming in short gasps. I had been practically running in my cell, unconsciously, as I tried to think of what I had been doing before the doctors took me. I slowed to a stop then sat down on the bottom bunk.

Remember! I willed myself to remember, forced myself to rewind until I was back in the white room and then the forest. And before that, I had...where was the forest I had been in? It wasn't near my house. I knew that.

Had we gone on a vacation? My family had been planning a trip to Montana over the summer. Was that where I was? Then how come I couldn't remember going to Montana?

"What is wrong with me?" I muttered. Why was this so difficult? I was playing the piano. I went to bed, then...? Then? Then what? God! Why couldn't I remember?

I was getting incredibly frustrated as I wracked my brain for information. My hands were tugging at my hair as though pulling at the strands would also pull out the memories I was trying to bring forth. A birthday cake, any present, the look on my parents' faces when I turned another age, anything! Why couldn't I come up with anything? When had I turned fifteen? Why couldn't I remember turning sixteen?

My parents promised me I would have a Sweet Sixteen party. I never would have let them weasel out of that promise, so why didn't I remember the party? There was no doubt that I was sixteen, I knew that, I wasn't questioning that, because it was just part of me. I was sixteen; I knew that just as I knew that my name was Darcy Eloise Calloway. But why didn't I remember my sixteenth birthday?

Had I gotten in trouble? My parents wouldn't have given me a party if I had done something really bad. But then wouldn't I remember doing something wrong? I wasn't a bad child, so if I did something wrong, I'd know, wouldn't I?

*Calm down, Darcy*, I commanded myself. Just relax. I was just nervous. It was my lack of stimulating activities that was making me forget. I mean, I couldn't just forget a year. That wasn't even possible. So why wasn't I remembering?

*I'll ask Reid. He'll know the answer*, I told myself. He'd know what was going on.

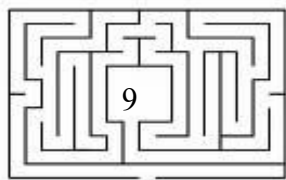
Oh! It was probably a side effect of the drug. It had messed me up a little, causing my whole world to turn weird. I'd ask Dr. Bram once I saw him.

Reid or Dr. Bram. They'd know.

I almost laughed at myself. I was turning into my mom, worrying about the stupidest things when I was just doing this to myself. I was just worried, that was it. I would ask Reid, then sleep on it, and then I'd remember the huge party I knew my parents would have thrown for me.

I was almost embarrassed at how easily I had gotten myself worked up. Why wouldn't I remember a whole year? I was so paranoid!

But I couldn't shake off the feeling that something was missing. Something wasn't right.



I had almost forgotten how worried I had been when Reid came into our cell at the end of the day. “Hey!”

“Hey,” I replied. I was thinking of the best way/time to bring up my dilemma. “How was the station?”

He shrugged. “Same old. They put me in Athleticism today, which is weird because I haven’t gone there in at least two months.”

Since I didn’t know a thing about how this whole place worked, all I did was shrug. I wasn’t going to ask him about this place yet. I had to choose my battles.

“So, what’d you do today?” he asked nonchalantly.

I pursed my lips. That would have been the perfect opening to my questions. But I wanted to wait until after dinner, when I knew I wouldn’t be disturbed. So I lied.

“Slept, mostly.”

“Lucky,” he grumbled.

“Ha! Yeah, right.”

“Like you’d rather be running for four hours?” He retorted.

“Yes! Anything but this!”

“Yeah, well, let’s see how you feel after tomorrow.”

My heart flipped. I hadn’t really thought about tomorrow, when I would be participating in the stations. I hadn’t been nervous two days ago, but my lack of things to do had given me time to think about what was going to happen. Maybe my feelings showed on my face, because Reid smiled.

“Darcy, don’t get upset again. Remember the last time you got worked up? You fainted,” he reminded me.

“That wasn’t actually my fault,” I answered. “And I’m not gonna faint.”



“Good, ‘cause that scared me. I’m only thirteen; you can’t just faint on me!” He reprimanded, but I could sense protection in his voice. It warmed my heart a little.

I had meant to change the subject subtly, but there didn’t seem to be an angle in the conversation I could use. So I got right to it. “Alright, so, here’s what I want you to do: can you give me a play-by-play of tomorrow?”

He looked confused. “What? Why?”

“I’m nervous,” I told him quickly. “So I figure if I know *exactly* what’s gonna happen tomorrow, I won’t be as scared.”

“You don’t have to be scared!” He exclaimed for what felt like the nineteenth time. “Darcy, they won’t hurt you!”

“I’m not afraid of that anymore! I just want to know what’s gonna happen.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “Alright, after breakfast, this alarm rings, and that tells us to go to our stations. I’ll let you know tomorrow who’s gonna be in your station so you can follow them. Then, whoever is in charge of the station will give you specific instructions. Seriously, they are very specific. There is no possible way you can screw up tomorrow, so don’t worry about that. Then, at five, the bell rings again, and we go back to our cells. There is *nothing* to be nervous about,” he promised me. Even his tone of voice made me feel better. “Besides, we might even be in the same station.”

I nodded. “That would be really good if we were!”

“You’ll be fine, Darcy. I would tell you if you needed to worry,” he told me, and then his voice got quieter. “I don’t want you to get hurt, either.”

I smiled slightly. “Thanks.”

His face turned a dark shade of pink, and I knew he was embarrassed. I quickly changed the subject, saving him from more embarrassment because of any awkward silence that might follow. “So, all you had to do today was run?”

He nodded. “And then we got to choose which exercise we wanted to do, so I lifted weights.”

My eyes automatically shifted to his arms. They were pretty buff. “Looking to impress any girls?”

“You never know!” He exclaimed defensively, and I chuckled.

We talked about random things, anything that came to mind. We started to play ‘Two Truths and a Lie,’ but Reid wasn’t good at that game, so we stopped after I won for the eighth time. I knew enough to keep quiet when the guards came to give us our food. For some reason, Reid did not like them at all. His face tensed up, his eyes narrowed, and he looked very mean. As soon as they were gone, he went right back to his normal self. And when I questioned him about it, he just replied, “Old habit, I guess.” Sure.

My hunger was pushed aside as I remembered that my plan was supposed to go into action after dinner. I ate quickly, not even noticing what I was eating. I was finished well before Reid, who liked to relish his meals.

“You were hungry,” he stated, looking at my empty plate.

“Yup,” was all I said, trying not to fidget as Reid took his sweet time.

Finally, he ate his last bite and pushed his tray over to where mine was waiting to be taken away. The guards came a few minutes later, collected the trays, and then left the hallway. I remained quiet for another minute, trying to make myself look calm and collected.

“Alright, spill it,” Reid started.

I almost jumped. “What?”

“You’ve been antsy the whole night! What’s wrong?”

Crap. Maybe I wasn’t such a good actress. I looked away from him, trying to think of the best way to phrase my problem.

“Look, you’re gonna end up asking the question anyway, so just spit it out,” he sighed.

I glared at him, but I was still trying to think. Finally, I started, “Reid, I have a slight problem.”

“Which is...”

“I think I’m having more side-effects of the drug.”

His eyes widened. “Are you okay? Do you feel sick? Let me—”

“No! Reid, it’s not physical!” I interrupted when he started to get up.

He relaxed. "Oh," he answered. Then his eyes narrowed. "Then what is it? Mental?"

"Well... Yeah, I guess."

He still looked seriously confused. "I don't get it. What's wrong with your brain?"

"Nothing. Well, it's kind of hard to explain."

"I bet," he answered, still looking at me like I had three heads.

"I'm just having a little trouble...remembering things."

He was trying to piece together my phrases, but he still looked a little confused. "Like what?"

"Like the day I was taken. And a little before that," I told him, telling almost the whole truth.

"Oh! Darcy, that's not the drug. That's normal," he replied, looking relieved.

"It is?" I asked, but I was already feeling much better.

"Duh! You can't remember the day you were taken because it was a horrible experience. But as you start to get used to this place, you'll start remembering, I promise."

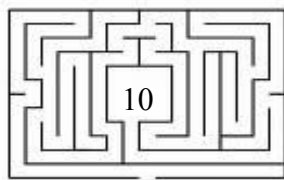
"It's not just that one day," I told him, praying that his theory worked for my lengthy lack of memory.

"I know. It can be the day before, and even as much as a week before," he reassured me. Or at least he thought he had. "Now, if you were saying like two months or something like that, then I'd be a little worried. But it's normal to not remember that day."

My heart was sinking. He would be worried if he couldn't remember. Reid would be worried. Crap. Crap. Oh, God.

"Don't worry, Darcy, you're fine. You'll get those days back. Besides, it's not really that important in the grand scheme of things. What's one or two days, right?" He asked, smiling.

I smiled back, but my face was stiff. Something was wrong with me.



I had a nightmare. I knew I would have one. I almost brought it on myself, but I was still paralyzed with fear nonetheless when I woke up.

“Are you okay?” Reid asked, watching from the door as I sat up, panting.

“I had a nightmare,” I gasped, trying to calm myself down.

“I could tell. And I’m not surprised. You probably stirred yourself up worrying about today.”

I nodded and started down the ladder as the alarm sounded. What I didn’t tell him was what the nightmare had been about. Mostly, it had been me running in circles around a forest, screaming for help. And no one came. And I couldn’t even remember why I was in the forest.

I knew my way around the hallways enough to make my way to the bathroom without needing guidance. Still, I felt better when I saw Nora at her sink.

“Hey! I didn’t see you in the stations yesterday,” she started amiably.

“Yeah. They thought I should rest after getting sick.”

She nodded. “Are you gonna be at the stations today?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. I guess I’ll see you then,” she answered and went off to take a shower.

“See ya,” I muttered, watching her leave. She didn’t seem scared. Neither did the other girls, now that I glanced at them. They all seemed comfortable, if not a little bored or tired. But that was to be expected.

I wondered how many days I had to spend here in order to feel completely indifferent about my surroundings.

This time, when I went back to my cell, I listened with care to the roll call. Diligently, I answered when my name was called. But my ears were really perked for the station listings.

“Becker-Intelligence.”

“Calandra-Intelligence.”

“Calloway- Memory.”

Peachy. Memory again. It seemed I wasn’t the only one interested in my memory, or lack thereof. Praying they also wanted Reid’s memory, I listened carefully.

“Redmond- Athleticism”

“Reid- Free.”

I frowned as I looked over at Reid. He gave me one of his comforting sympathetic glances and mouthed, “Sorry.” I sighed. Maybe this didn’t have to be so bad. Maybe someone would be able to help me with my memory.

I stood up when Reid stood and followed him to the cafeteria.

“Memory’s not so bad,” he said, trying to comfort me.

“How come you always go to Free?”

“Not always. A month ago I went to the Intelligence station for two weeks in a row. It just depends on the doctors,” he replied.

It made sense, but I really wished he could have come with me to Memory. It would have made me feel so much better.

“Alright, let’s try this again,” Reid started as we walked into the cafeteria. “Do you think this time we can at least make it to the table before you pass out?”

I glared at him and took a tray.

Still smirking at his little joke, he continued, “I tasted the eggs last time, and they were completely normal. It’s just like the food they give us for dinner. Trust me.”

My mind was split in two. I knew I should trust Reid. He wouldn’t lie to me or want me to get hurt. On the other hand, I didn’t trust the doctors at all.

In the end, though, I took the eggs. The worst case scenario: I got sick again and got to skip the station. It was a win-lose situation, really.

When we got to the end of the line and I stopped, Reid’s hand found my arm in a heartbeat. “Darcy?” He asked quickly.

I turned to him. "There's no ketchup?" I asked.

He grimaced. "*That's* why you stopped?"

I nodded, still staring at him. Truthfully, I had stopped partly to scare him a little. But I was looking for ketchup, also.

His eyebrows raised. "Ew! You like ketchup with bacon?"

I looked down at my plate before realizing that I had taken bacon again. "No! I like ketchup with my eggs."

"Seriously?" He asked, his face twisted in disgust.

"I can't believe there's no ketchup. Okay, so it's not common with eggs, but what about sausage? It's an important condiment."

He grinned, turned away from me, and said, "I think you'll live."

"They'll be bland, though," I sighed sadly, following him towards the table to our right. I glanced over at the left table, noticing that no one was there.

"Hey!" I exclaimed, seeing Nora sitting next to an empty seat.

"Hey, Darcy! You made it!" She joked.

The joke was getting old, quickly.

I sat down next to her and watched as Reid started to go around the table so he was sitting across from me. Since he wouldn't be able to hear my question, I turned to Nora. "How come no one's sitting at that table?" I asked, pointing to the vacant table.

"It's for the Lifers," she answered matter-of-factly.

I looked curiously at her. "Lifers?"

"It's kind of hard to explain," she answered. "They're in a whole different unit than us."

Choosing to save the question on the different units for a later time, I asked, "Then, have they been here a long time?"

Reid, hearing the end of our conversation, groaned. "You just *had* to bring up Lifers. As if she doesn't have enough questions. Can we please focus on one part of this place at a time?"

"Sorry! She asked!" Nora replied defensively and then turned to me. "And to answer your question, no, they aren't here for long. Most of them are pretty new, actually."

This was all so confusing. "Ah. So, calling them 'Lifers' is, like, reverse psychology or something?"

Reid half smiled but looked down at his food, and Nora turned to me. “Seriously, it’s really hard to explain. What station are you in today?”

“Memory.”

“I am, too. I’ll tell you about it later,” she promised.

Relief washed over me immediately. I wasn’t going to be alone! She, too, I noticed, didn’t have any fears about the upcoming station. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

I was almost bursting with the need to ask her every question I had, but I didn’t want to look like the clueless new kid. Or push my luck right after making a potential friend.

“Okay,” I replied and was about to ask her what we were going to do in the station today when she shushed me.

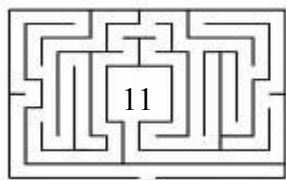
Motioning behind her, she turned to look towards the new point of interest. I, too, turned and then realized that the whole room had gone quiet. Eerie.

A group of kids was coming in through one of the doors behind us. I noticed that they avoided eye contact with all of us. They had better clothes, too. And they didn’t look hassled.

“Who are they?” I whispered to Nora.

“Lifers,” she whispered quickly, but her face stayed blank.

They all looked pretty nervous by the presence of us, and I didn’t blame them. Everyone at my table was looking at the Lifers with daggers in their eyes.



As the Lifers got their breakfast and sat down at their respective table, the people around me started turning back to their own breakfasts. No one spoke for a few minutes, though. It seemed to me like the people sitting at my table wanted the Lifers to feel as awkward as possible.

Quiet conversations stirred up after about five minutes of silence, when all the Lifers were back at their seats.

“What was that?” I asked hesitantly.

“We call it the silent treatment,” Reid told me sarcastically, and Nora nodded.

“Wasn’t that...kind of mean?” I asked Nora, but I immediately felt like an idiot after asking. Why should I have cared? Or questioned their obviously habitual actions.

“No,” she answered, and she almost looked angry.

“Is there something wrong with them?”

“In theory, no. But you’ll learn to hate them just as much as we do,” she answered.

“Why, though?” I asked. I knew the information was just going to confuse me more. But I couldn’t just not know, now that it had been brought up.

The girl sitting next to Nora had been listening to our conversation and decided to add her two cents. “They’re different.”

“How?”

“Everything about them is different. They’re even treated differently by the doctors, so why should *we* treat them normally?” The girl asked.

“I don’t get it,” I told them honestly, looking back at the Lifers. Outwardly, there didn’t seem to be anything obviously wrong with them.



Nora took over. "Look over at them. Look at their outfits. Look at their faces. Do they seem unhappy and badly dressed?"

"I guess not. But you don't look unhappy, either," I reminded her.

"Yeah, but I don't look elated like they do," she responded.

"Okay, so they're happy, and they have better clothes. What does that have to do with anything?"

"That's only half of their special treatment. They get the good clothes and the nice doctors, because they don't stay here long at all. The longest a Lifer has been here is four months, which is nothing compared to our year long stay."

"Why don't they stay longer?"

"Cause there's nothing wrong with them," Nora's friend answered simply. "I mean, it's not really fair that they're treated better when nothing even happened to them."

I looked at her. That was an odd way of putting things. "You're kind of implying that there's something wrong with *us*."

"I know," she replied and was looking at me like I was missing something obvious. Before I could answer, though, I was interrupted.

"What Casey's *trying* to say," Nora interjected, glaring at her friend, "is that Lifers had a normal life before they came here. The only reason they're here is to be compared to us. Once the doctors are done observing them, they've pretty much overstayed their welcome."

My eyebrows rose. Hesitantly, and knowing I was definitely getting even more confused than before, I asked, "Normal? What does normal mean?"

"Guys..." Reid warned and shook his head subtly.

Nora saw Reid's expression and said to me, "Nothing."

"No, tell me. What are you talking about?" I persisted. "What makes them more normal than us?"

"Darcy, I'll tell you later," Reid told me.

Now, I was frustrated. Did everything have to be so secretive? "No, now! Please, just tell me. I'm sick of everyone skirting around the truth. What does normal mean?" I practically begged.

Nora looked at Reid. Reid just shook his head. “Nora, this is not the time or the place. This is all too fast for her; don’t tell her!”

“She’s gonna find out anyway!” Nora snapped.

“What? *What?*” I practically yelled.

After a quick, slightly tentative glance at Reid, Nora started. “The Lifers are different because they didn’t have anything happen to them before this.”

At that, Reid banged his head against the table, resigned and annoyed. I was staring at them. I almost got the feeling that they were all *trying* to confuse me even more. Trying to keep my sarcasm at bay, I answered, “Like what?”

She shrugged, clearly uncomfortable. “I guess it all depends. What happened to you that hurt you?”

I was staring at her, trying to make sense of her words. What had *hurt* me? Was there some other meaning I wasn’t getting here?

Immediately, a look of guilt crossed over her face. She hurried to say, “You don’t have to answer; that’s really personal. I mean, I don’t like talking about my dad.”

Stupidly, because I was still thinking about her previous question, I stated almost nonchalantly, “Why, what happened.”

She looked away from me, and only then did I realize that I might have upset her. But she answered. “Nothing.”

I really wasn’t following her train of thoughts, and, since I could tell she was being honest, I asked, “Okay, so...”

“He hurt me, okay?” She told me. It was then that I noticed that the others around us were pretending not to listen to our conversation.

I stared at her. Finally I understood her discomfort. Why had I been so nosy? “Oh, God. Nora, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

She recovered quickly. “It’s okay. We all have something wrong with us. I’m sure your story is just as bad.”

Why did she keep referring to my life as bad? I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. “I’m sorry, maybe I’m just being really stupid here, but, seriously, what are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” she answered quickly. “I can tell this isn’t the best time to—”

“It’s fine,” I snapped through my teeth. Could I just get a fricken’ straight answer around here? “I just need to know what you’re talking about. Like, in English, very basic, what are you trying to say?”

She breathed in and quickly spit out. “Someone or something hurt you before you came here. That’s what we all have in common.”

I blinked twice, her words clouding my thoughts. Not only was I mad at everyone for getting me confused, I was mad at myself for not processing, at all, what they were saying. “Okay, well, then I’m in the wrong place,” I told her simply.

She looked at me with sympathy. Her voice was quiet and kind as she said, “It’s okay to talk about what happened. We all went through it. No one’s gonna hurt you here. They just wanna help.”

I could feel my frustration turning to annoyance and then to anger. I wasn’t the one confused; she was. “Nora, I think you’re confused. Nothing happened to me. I’m fine,” I told her. I was still focused on what she had said. Everyone had something happen to them? Where was I?

“At first, it’s hard, I know. It feels like no one is gonna understand, right? But that’s why we’re all in the same unit. We all know what it was like to go through something like that, you know?”

My head was spinning. “No, I don’t! Nora, what are you talking about?” I asked. She was just staring at me kindly. I turned to Reid. “Reid, you don’t have...what happened before *you* came here?”

He clearly had been listening to our conversation. “Darcy, I know you’re scared. But it’s okay, whatever happened to you, it’s okay now.”

Trying to momentarily forget that they were trying to comfort me for something that didn’t happen, I continued. “Did something happen to you, too?”

He nodded, and he, too, was staring at me like I had something wrong with me. “Of course, Darcy, that’s why I’m in this unit. It’s the T.U. That means I’m recovering from Trauma, hence the T part.”

My head was shaking as I started putting pieces of the puzzle together. I looked up and down the table, my eyes stopping at each face I saw. Some were laughing together, some were eating quietly, others were talking seriously, a few were trying to fall asleep. These kids, these teenagers, they all had a horrible past.

“Everyone?” I gasped, looking from Reid to Nora and back to Reid. They both nodded.

“Some are worse than others, though,” Nora told me and looked at Reid knowingly. Oh, God, please no.

Reid was looking hesitantly at me, but then he spoke. “Darcy, I know something happened to you. Something happened to me, too. My brother was in a gang. He hurt me. Remember the story about the dog? He used to sic it on me. He used to torture me with his cigarettes, all kinds of things.

“But I can talk about it with you guys. The T.U. kind of makes you feel better, knowing you’re not alone.”

I turned away from him, my eyes watering. I had laughed. I had laughed at his story the other day, the story about the dog. I had laughed when he had told me about his fear of dogs. And he had sat there and taken it, even though...

This was too much.

“Reid, oh my God, I am so sorry, I swear, I...” I couldn’t finish. Tears were rolling down my cheeks.

“Darcy, you don’t have to apologize. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

My anger and frustration finally came out. I snapped, “How can you say that? How can you say it doesn’t matter? Reid, he hurt you.”

“Darcy, listen to me. Tell me what happened,” Reid commanded, leaning forward. “You need to tell me. It’s the only way you’ll feel better.”

This was all too much. Everyone had pain, they were asking too much of me, I didn’t know what they were saying. Reid and Nora, they were in pain. And now...

“I’m sorry. This is...I can’t stay here, I can’t...”

I broke off my sentence and climbed quickly out of my seat. Blindly, I headed towards the door I had entered through. A guard

was standing there, watching us, maybe waiting for one of us to try to escape.

“No, no, stay here until the alarm sounds.”

I shook my head, trying to get by him. “I need to go back.”

“Don’t leave the room yet,” he told me calmly.

“I need to go! Please, let me leave!” I was yelling. I can’t do this. I can’t do this.

He grabbed my arm, pushing me away from the door. “Just wait until the alarm sounds, then you can go to your station.”

“I don’t want to!” I tried to yank my arm away from him. I knew the whole room was watching, and Reid was heading towards me.

The guard let go of my arm, instead pulling out a walkie-talkie. “Security, we need reinforcement in cafeteria A. Now!”

While he was busy with his walkie-talkie, I pushed the doors open quickly and ran through the huge room and into the hallway. Tears were streaming down my face as I sprinted past dozens of people, all who turned around and stared at me. I heard the guard stop Reid from leaving, and I was glad.

I had no idea where I was going, just that I needed to get out of sight, out of hearing distance, where I could think, where I could forget. All those kids, with their pain, and the T.U. and Lifers, I needed to get away from it all.

When I couldn’t breathe anymore and my sobs overtook my body, I collapsed in the hallway, pushing myself against the wall. My head was pounding as I shook with pain, sorrow, and fear. God, what was happening? What was happening to me? Where was I? I just wanted my mom, and I needed something more than this place. I needed to get out. God, please, I needed to get out!

My loud sobs were echoing off the walls, but that wasn’t the only thing I heard. Footsteps were approaching—huge, angry footsteps. I didn’t even try to avoid them. I just needed help.

“Minor is located,” someone said, nearing me. His walkie clicked and then he was bending down.

“Miss Calloway?”

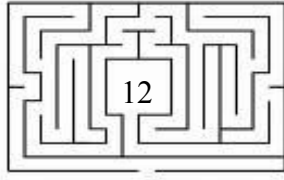
I didn’t answer. My crying was dying down, leaving a huge hole of depression in my body.

---

“Miss Calloway, Dr. Pierce is coming to meet you. Are you okay?”

I still didn't answer. I was huddled in a little ball, trying to take up as little space as possible. I wasn't here, I wasn't here, if I could just forget, I wouldn't have to think, please let me forget.

We waited in silence, my breath occasionally catching as the remnants of my tears died out. Soon, I heard more footsteps. High-heeled footsteps. A woman was coming.



“Darcy?” The sweetest voice I had ever heard spoke near my ear. “Darcy, are you okay?” I shook my head but said nothing. Who was this woman?

As if she had read my thoughts, she continued, “Darcy, my name is Dr. Pierce. I am the owner and operator of this facility. You do not have to be afraid; I am here to help you. What happened?”

This was Dr. Pierce. Through my fear, I vaguely realized that she was in charge of this whole thing. She had complete control over everything. She had brought me here.

“What happened in the cafeteria?” She asked quietly, and I felt her move until she was sitting next to me.

Slowly, I lifted my head and looked up at her.

She was pretty. Her features were soft, her face porcelain smooth, her eyes the lightest blue I had ever seen. Her hair was a perfect white blonde, held back by a clip. She was young, forty-years old maximum, and petite. Her outfit was a pinstripe work suit, and her aura gave off power. She was in control.

Her look almost forced me to put my trust in her. “Everyone...” I started but then stopped. I couldn’t think about it without hurting.

She nodded. “Your friends, the other children in your unit,” she completed, trying to help me complete my thought.

“The T.U.,” I told her.

She nodded again. If she knew about me, something about what was happening to me, she didn’t say anything.

“They’re hurt,” I gasped out and then looked away. It hurt to think about.

“Yes, they are,” she answered softly, almost like she was afraid I’d break if she raised her voice. “We are fixing them,

though. They have had problems in their lives, just like you have. But we are helping them, just like we are going to help you.”

I shook my head quickly. There it was again, the insistence that I was traumatized. What could she possibly be talking about?

This was too hard.

Dr. Pierce looked down at me, pity in her eyes. “No? Why not, Darcy?”

I just kept shaking my head. “Why are they all...?”

She waited for me to finish, but when I couldn’t seem to get out what I was trying to say, she started again. “Hurt? Darcy, these children have come from horrible situations. We take them in, give them a better life, and help them heal until they are ready to face the world again.”

“What about me?” I asked, turning to face her again.

“That applies to you, as well.”

I shook my head. Oddly, I couldn’t seem to put my frustration into words. My mind and voice didn’t seem to be connected. There was too much going on.

“Darcy, please talk to me. Why do you keep shaking your head?”

“I’m not supposed to be here,” I muttered, but she heard me.

Kindly, and as though she understood exactly where I was coming from, she answered, “It may seem like that at first, but I promise, you will start to feel better.”

“No. No, you don’t understand,” I practically spluttered. “I’m not hurt. You can’t fix what isn’t broken. I’m not hurt,” I repeated, forcing phrases to come out, trying to make her understand.

When I looked into her eyes, I could see the doubt she felt. “Darcy, we know what happened to you. It is not fair to keep lying to yourself.”

What did that mean? What did she mean? I couldn’t grasp what anyone was saying. “I’m not lying. Dr. Pierce, I’m not lying. There’s nothing wrong with me. I just want to leave. Please, let me leave.”

She nodded, her eyes measuring me, concentrating on something she was thinking about. Her expression, though, was



almost happy. She had figured something out. "Fine. How about this: I will let you leave just as soon as you tell me why you think you are in the Trauma Unit. Why are you in this unit if nothing happened to you?"

Finally, she understood. "I don't know! I swear, I don't know. Nothing happened to me; I'm not lying. I just want to leave."

"I promise that you can leave when you tell me what happened to you," she told me, but her voice was more passionate now. "Just tell me why you are here, tell me what happened to you in the past year, and then I will let you go."

This was frustrating and repetitive. We had taken one step forward just to take two steps back. She didn't understand what I was saying! "Nothing happened. Nothing happened to me. I'm fine! Please believe me. I don't want to be here." Why didn't she believe me? Why wasn't anyone listening? I didn't know what they were saying.

And then, while she was staring at me and I was trying not to cry, something abruptly clicked. She had said the past year. I didn't remember that year. I didn't remember, but she had said something bad happened. Would she lie to me? Would she put me in the T.U. just so I could go through this process? It didn't make sense. Had something happened to me? I didn't remember. Was that what she wanted to know? Or was she pressuring me to remember something that never happened to me so that she could see my reaction? What had I forgotten?

She lowered her head, making sure that her eyes were level with mine. My automatic response was to shy away, but something in her eyes made me stay with her.

"There is something you are not telling me," she replied. "Darcy, tell me what happened, tell me what you are keeping quiet, and then you can go. This is a very fair offer."

"I can't!" I burst out suddenly, and I expected her to flinch back, but she stood her ground. She wasn't leaving.

"Why not?" She asked, her face calm, but her voice betraying the beginnings of impatience.

"You won't believe me," I told her, my voice breaking as tears ran down my face.

“Darcy, we have on record what happened to you. Of course we will believe you,” she told me gently.

I knew I couldn’t win, but I couldn’t tell her. Everything was wrong. Her sweet voice was only adding to my confusion. The angry tears would not stop. I was not in control of my emotions anymore.

“It’s not that!” I sobbed.

“Then what is it?” She asked quietly.

“Nothing happened, please believe me,” I whispered over and over again.

“Then what did you do this past year?” She pressed.

In an effort to stop crying, I held my breath and looked away from her face. No. Not this. She would know I was different than everyone else. Slowly, I let my breath out and took another deep breath. That helped slightly. I focused on my breathing while she waited for me to say something.

“Darcy, answer me, please,” she commanded. She was so nice. I couldn’t do this. “Why is it so hard for you to tell me what happened?”

I couldn’t do this anymore. My brain was screaming for understanding, for help. I needed help. Maybe she could help me.

Making sure to keep my eyes off of hers, I finally gave in. “Because I don’t remember my last year.”

She was silent for a minute. Then, “Darcy, look at me.” Slowly, I moved my eyes to hers. “What did you say?”

She would believe me. I saw in her eyes that if I told her the truth, she would believe me. She wanted to believe me, and I needed help. So I whispered, “I can’t remember anything after the day before my fifteenth birthday. I tried, and I can’t bring it back. I don’t *remember*. I’m sorry. But I don’t know what’s happening, and I don’t know what’s wrong. I just need to leave this place; please, let me leave!”

Her face was almost livid with excitement. “Are you telling me the truth?”

I nodded, keeping my eyes on hers to show her that there was no lie in them.

She kept her eyes on mine, her mind searching my soul, reading into my thoughts. Then, when she blinked and her eyes

moved away from mine, I knew she knew I wasn't lying. "Thank you, Darcy. Thank you for telling me this," she told me and got up quickly. A walkie-talkie was in her hand before I could blink. "Alright, Lex, she is ready."

"Dr. Pierce?" I asked, standing up. "I can go now, right? You said I could go if I told you."

"I did say that, yes," she answered.

"So I can go? You'll take me to my family?"

Dr. Pierce spun around suddenly, her eyes on mine. "Your family?"

I nodded, my heart pounding, as I tried to keep from begging. "My mom and dad. You'll take me, right? I didn't do anything. Nothing happened; I don't know what you want from me. Please, take me back."

A man came into the hallway and started towards me. Without turning to him, she said, "Lex, take her back."

Something in her eyes wasn't right. As Lex grabbed my arm and yanked me towards the closest hallway, I turned back to her. "Wait! Am I going home?"

"No. I am sorry, Darcy, but you are not," she answered curtly, her palm pilot in her hand, already caught up in something else.

Lex was pulling me away, but I was trying to struggle against his arm. "Stop! Wait, Dr. Pierce, you promised! I told you, let me go, please!"

"I want her in her cell, now!" She snapped at Lex. "Do not let her out of your sight! If she tries to leave, bring her to me immediately!"

"No! NO! You promised! Dr. Pierce, you promised me, don't put me back in my cell! I told you what happened; I don't remember! Wait!" I was screaming after her, but Lex was dragging me away.

When she was out of sight, I turned to Lex. "Stop, please. Don't bring me back."

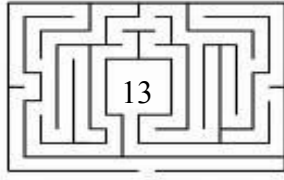
He didn't answer.

I tried to loosen his grip. "Get off! I can't go back. Let me leave!" His grip never slipped a centimeter.

---

I used all my strength against him. I didn't even realize when we were in my hallway, moving towards my cell. "She lied to me! Stop, she lied to me. I'm supposed to go home! Please, listen to me!"

"You're not going anywhere," were his first and only words to me before he slammed the door in my face. I watched him walk away and then slowly sank down to the ground.



**R**eid came back to our cell at five o'clock. I was sitting against my wall, staring into space. I couldn't think. I couldn't do anything. This couldn't be happening.

"Hey," Reid started.

I didn't answer.

"Darcy?"

No reply. I didn't want to talk to him.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

I shook my head but said nothing. He came over, sat down next to me, and waited for a few minutes before starting.

"Darcy, I'm sorry about today. We shouldn't have told you like that. It just kind of came up, but we shouldn't have told you. I'm sorry."

I didn't answer. Why should he be sorry? He was apologizing to me? Why? He had been through so much more than any person should ever have to go through, yet he felt the need to apologize to me?

"You don't have to tell us, you know. You don't have to tell us what happened. I can tell my story because I've learned that it doesn't matter anymore. Nora's learning to block hers out. But you just came here. You don't have to say a word, I get it."

"Reid..." I started.

"No, let me finish. It was a long time ago since I first came here, but I remember my fear and depression. It gets better, Darcy, I promise it does."

Before he could continue trying to make me feel better, I cut in. "Dr. Pierce visited me."

A pause. "What?"

"She visited me after I left the cafeteria," I told him quietly.

"Are you kidding me? She came to you? Oh my God, Darcy, are you okay?"

Clearly, he knew all about her.

I shook my head, trying to force down the tears that were threatening to appear. “No. No, Reid, this whole place, it’s not okay.”

“Do you wanna tell me what happened?” He asked quietly.

I shook my head. After a minute, though, I had to speak. “She came to comfort me. She tried to make me feel better. She told me about everyone in the T.U., how they all had something wrong. She made me feel like I was supposed to belong there. Then she asked me what happened in the past year.”

“Did you tell her?” He asked quietly.

I shook my head.

He looked confused. “Why not?” When I didn’t answer, he continued, “Darcy, she already knows. You can’t lie to her; she knows what happened. She always knows.”

“I didn’t lie to her,” I told him, my voice remaining level as I stared into space.

“But you didn’t tell her what she wanted to know. That’s almost as bad,” he answered.

I turned to him. His tone suggested something, something that I immediately feared. “Is *she* bad?”

His nod wasn’t hesitant. “She’s our dictator. She’s manipulative and selfish, and she pretends to be nice so that she can get answers. Don’t mess with her, Darcy, she’s not playing games.”

My heart was sinking. What had happened? Oh God, had she been nice just to get me to talk? Had I been used? “Reid, I told her the truth.”

“You just said—”

“I told her what I knew.”

“But you didn’t tell her about what happened? That doesn’t make sense,” he told me, his voice just as confused as he looked.

“Reid, I told her that I didn’t remember.”

He was staring at me like a padded room would be the most appropriate place for me to stay. “And that’s a lie,” Reid filled in.

“No. Reid, I don’t remember. That’s it. I don’t remember what happened to me. I don’t remember a year ago,” I whispered,

afraid to look at him. Then I finished quietly, "And she believed me."

When I finally looked into his eyes, they were wide with shock, with horror, with anger, with so many emotions that I looked quickly away.

His voice cracked with an emotion I couldn't place. "Darcy, no. No, you didn't say that. Please say you did not tell her that."

I nodded. "I did."

He closed his eyes. "Why would you tell her that?"

It was sadness that coated his voice.

I paused, remembering Dr. Pierce's conversation with me. Her promise. "She promised me I could go home if I told her what happened."

"And you believed her?" He asked angrily.

"Of course I believed her!" I snapped back. "How should I have known that she was lying? I was hurt, Reid. It was too much information, everyone was talking to me, and I couldn't think straight. And I just want to leave. So I told her. She promised me I could leave."

"Darcy, Dr. Pierce does not care about you. Get that into your head. She doesn't care that you want to leave. She only cares about her experiments and getting new information. She's using you. Darcy, do not tell her any more," he commanded, his voice full of rage.

"You mean I have to talk to her again?" I asked quietly, my heart in my throat.

He looked at me. "Were you telling her the truth? Do you honestly not remember what happened?"

I nodded slightly, avoiding his eyes. "Yes. I can't remember."

"Then you're gonna be seeing a whole lot of her from now on."

I was picturing in my mind Dr. Pierce's face. I did not like that woman. I didn't like her at all. She had lied to me and manipulated me.

"Do *you* see her a lot?"

Reid shook his head emphatically. “No. She *never* comes down here, unless there’s a problem. She leaves the other doctors to deal with us.”

And I was the problem that forced her to come down here.

I was about to open my mouth when Reid started, “Look, I know I promised you that I’d tell you all about this place today. But can it wait ‘til tomorrow? I don’t want to tell you now, okay?”

I nodded. I didn’t want to hear about it right now, either, even though I had more questions than before Reid and Nora had tried to clear up the whole Lifers situation.

Reid left my side and sat against his wall. We waited until after dinner to start talking again. But I couldn’t seem to start a conversation. All I could think about was Reid and his life before this. *My brother was in a gang. He hurt me.* And Nora’s dad. What had everyone else gone through? And what had *I* gone through? What had I forgotten? I wasn’t in the T.U. for no reason. And Dr. Pierce knew what had happened to me. She had it recorded, both she and Reid had told me that.

Frustrated, I rubbed my eyes furiously. Stop thinking about this! Stop thinking about anything.

“Are you okay?” Reid asked for the umpteenth time.

I didn’t answer until my eyes hurt because I was rubbing so hard. “No. No, I’m not okay. I’m really sucky, actually. I’m confused, scared, and I need help. Why is this happening to me, Reid?”

He looked at me sympathetically. “I don’t know. I’m sorry, I don’t know,” he told me quietly. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

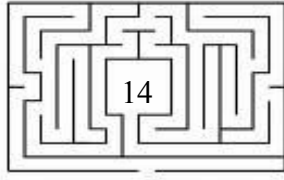
It was an empty question. What could he do?

But I knew I had to be distracted. “Can you...can you just distract me? It doesn’t matter with what; I just can’t think. Please?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

And until the alarm sounded, Reid sat by my side and told me all the good times he remembered from his childhood. And I was okay with that.





**I**t was only two minutes after I got back to my cell after taking a shower that Dr. Bram came to visit me. Reid was sitting against his wall and I against mine, when the shiny shoes of Dr. Bram appeared in front of our door.

Without a word of greeting, he opened our door and stepped inside. Slowly, he walked over to where I was sitting, squatted down so that he and I were eye level, and then spoke softly.

“Darcy, are you okay to perform today?” He asked.

I glanced quickly over at Reid. He hardly had a chance to nod before Dr. Bram’s face appeared where he had been sitting.

“You don’t need to look at Donovan in order to make your decision, Darcy,” Dr. Bram said, his face completely blocking Reid’s.

“Yes, I’m okay,” I answered sullenly.

Dr. Bram smiled. “That’s the attitude I was looking for!”

He got up and left. I waited until I was sure he was gone, and then I looked at Reid. “Are you sure I’ll be okay?”

He looked back at me. “No. I’m not sure. But you can’t stay here with just your thoughts again. You need to do something.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Roll call started, then the station listings. I was in Memory. Reid was in Intelligence. We weren’t together again. Did they plan it that way, or was it just coincidental? For the third time, I had been placed in Memory. Someone was anxiously awaiting my performance.

Reid and I were silent as we got our food. When we sat down at the right table, I remained quiet as Reid started talking to his friends.

While everyone else around us talked lively enough, Nora scooted closer to me. “Are you alright?”

Almost used to that question by now, I nodded. "Yeah. I'm fine. It was just a little much for me, you know?"

She nodded understandingly. "Reid was right. That was the wrong time to bring it up."

"No, it wasn't your fault. I'm just a little shaky, that's all," I tried to tell her, but she shook that off.

"Of course you're shaky!" She responded. "Anyway, I'm in Memory again today. What about you?"

"Yeah, same."

"Cool," she answered, smiling. "I can show you all the tricks. There's nothing to it once you get started."

I smiled back. In all my fear, depression, and confusion, I think I had just managed to make another friend.

For the first time in the three days I had been in the cafeteria, I heard the alarm sound. It was almost the same as the bell that told us the lights were turning off, only it didn't have the robotic noise and the guards didn't start yelling at us.

As soon as the bell stopped ringing, everyone at the T.U. table seemed to get up as one, filing out through the door that we entered from.

When we were out the door, Nora started talking. "The Memory station is the farthest from the cafeteria, but there's also a short cut from Memory back to the cells, so it's a win-lose situation. Now, for the first couple of times you go to the stations, listen during station listings to see whom else is going to your station. I'll help you out if I can remember, 'cause you don't know everyone's name."

She was rambling, trying to make me feel normal. She was just making me nervous, though.

"Memory is probably the second easiest station, even though it may not seem like it because Ms. Nancy, who runs Memory, is really mean. For the whole time, you basically answer memory related questions, which doesn't involve any thinking because it's just your memory. Sometimes you get biased questions, which are even easier because you can't get them wrong. However, Memory can get kind of tedious, so try and stay awake."

She continued to babble until she stopped at a door labeled "Memory", which I guessed was our destination. Nora opened the

door, and we stepped inside. The room looked pretty harmless. Actually, it looked like a classroom. A very white classroom.

There were no windows, but the designer must have wanted the room to look bright anyway, because each wall was painted a bright white and the floor was white tile. There were three rows of three wooden desks equally spaced apart in the middle of the room. Then there was a chalkboard at the front of the room, which assaulted the eyes with its pure green color.

In the right corner of the room, there was a big desk, white, with papers cluttered on it. That was where the teacher would sit if this had been a classroom.

As other kids filed in behind us, Nora motioned for me to follow her. "The key to passing this class is to know where to sit."

So maybe it *was* a classroom.

"And where is that?" I asked, following her down the rows of desks.

"In the second row. Ms. Nancy's way of thinking is that those sitting in the front row are too eager and those sitting in the last row are not eager enough. The second row is where people sit when they just want to learn. Supposedly," Nora said, correcting herself because we both knew neither of us cared in the least. But I sat down next to her anyway.

"Okay. So how many people are in this station?"

"I think around six today, which could be a good sign. When there are less people, Ms. Nancy doesn't get as hysterical."

I glanced at her uncertainly. "Is Ms. Nancy nice?"

Nora shook her head. "Not really. She's always afraid that we won't take her seriously because she's not a doctor like everyone else, so she tends to push us twice as hard. But if you're really lucky and you catch her on payday, that's when she let's us play games."

Note to self: Try to get here on every other Friday.

Before either of us could say anything more, the door behind us opened, and I turned to see a woman walking in. She was a big lady. The woman I was guessing was Ms. Nancy looked to be both big-boned and fat. She had short brown hair coming to her ears and mean brown eyes, almost hidden behind her huge glasses.

She was wearing an enormous green dress that reminded me of a camping tent.

I gulped and eyed Nora. She nodded encouragingly and then faced the front of the room. I did the same as Ms. Nancy plopped herself into the teacher's chair, which I feared might snap under her weight.

As Ms. Nancy opened the binder she had been holding, I prayed that the test I took wouldn't draw attention to the fact that I didn't have the best memory.

"Doctors Bram and Fletcher have informed me that some of you are not cooperating as you should during sessions," Ms. Nancy boomed, which startled me more than her appearance. "So they've made these tests for you to take. Those who do not perform competently will have to report to their therapist once a week until a change is observed."

As she was handing out the packets, the door behind us opened. All seven of us turned simultaneously, our eyes landing on the man who entered. Dr. Bram.

"Ms. Nancy, if I could just have a word," Dr. Bram started, holding up one finger.

"Of course," Ms. Nancy answered, slightly flustered. She quickly handed the papers to one of the kids, told him to pass out the rest, and then left the room.

"Does Dr. Bram always come here?" I whispered to Nora.

She shook her head, looking as confused as I felt. "No. Never."

A second later, Ms. Nancy's head appeared in the doorway. "Darcy Calloway? Come here, please."

I glanced at Nora, my heart pounding, fear washing over me, and then stood up. Slowly, I walked to the back of the room and slid through the crack Ms. Nancy gave me between the door and the doorframe.

"Ms. Nancy, would you mind giving us a minute or two?" Dr. Bram asked my teacher.

Ms. Nancy nodded. "Take your time."

Then she left.

I turned to Dr. Bram and waited expectantly.

“Dr. Pierce has informed me of your recent discovery, Darcy. I’ve taken the liberty of making up my own test for you, based on what Dr. Pierce has told me about you. It may be hard for you to remember some of the things, but try your best, okay?”

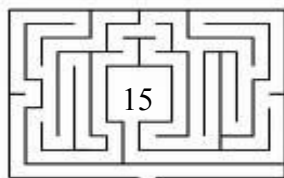
I nodded but said nothing. Silently, he handed me a much thinner packet than the one that was being handed out in the classroom. I turned without another word, leaving him alone in the hallway. When I got back to my seat, Nora was already staring at her test. She looked up at me, mock torture on her face, as she pointed to her booklet.

I smiled and was about to mouth a sympathetic comment when Ms. Nancy appeared at Nora’s side. “Miss Anderson, concentrate on your test!”

“Yes, Ms. Nancy,” Nora muttered, looking back down.

As quietly as possible, I opened my packet and looked down at the first question. *What is the last thing you remember before being brought to our lab?*

Oh yeah, this day was just gonna fly by.



I was staring at the clock, watching, waiting, as the second hand passed over the six. Only thirty more seconds of this nightmare, and then I was free to go. As I looked around, I noticed that I wasn't the only one who had stopped taking the test, instead choosing to watch the clock as well. The others were beginning to put their pencils down, close their tests, and prepare to sprint out of the classroom.

The five o'clock bell was the most beautiful thing I had ever heard. At its sound, all six of us seemed to get up as one, all of us rushing to hand in our tests and get out as quickly as possible.

"I don't know about you, but my test was impossible!" Nora sighed as we left the room. "They weren't even memory questions!"

"Ugh, I thought you said that was going to be easy! My head hurts!" I complained to her, following her down the hallway.

"It usually isn't that bad. But I guess today was review day or something, because there were so many random questions. What did your test have on it?" She asked.

"Just specific questions like what was the last thing I remembered and stuff," I told her vaguely, not really feeling like talking about it.

"That sounds exciting," she answered sarcastically.

I nodded but idly delved into a different topic. "So, what Ms. Nancy said about us having to go to our therapists? Is that true?"

"Well, mostly, she's just threatening us, but sometimes they like to check up on us. I'm guessing Dr. Bram is your therapist?"

I nodded.

She winced. "That sucks! He's totally heartless. He puts on this weird act so you think he's Mr. Nice Guy, but he could care less about us."

"Thanks for that," I told her, frowning. "Who do you have?"

"Dr. Fletcher. She's the only human here. She's also one of the youngest doctors, so she doesn't have those stupid theories that some of the doctors have, like 'Children should be seen and not heard' or whatever."

I laughed, something that sounded oddly out of place here. "They're not *that* old."

"You obviously haven't met Dr. Alden."

"No, I haven't."

"Just you wait. Pierce hired him because he's rich and it seemed like he was gonna die any day, but he didn't, so we're stuck with him."

"Okay, so Dr. Alden works for Dr. Pierce. But I can't imagine a doctor that old still being able to practice medicine."

"Did I say anything about medicine?" She asked rhetorically. "All he does is strut around, carrying this yard stick, which he says he uses when he aids the Intelligence station, but we all know he yearns to beat kids with it."

I frowned at her. "How do you know all this?"

"Months of experience."

I thought about that. Maybe it wasn't the best idea to ask her how many months she'd been here. That might bring up bad memories. And God knows *I* didn't like being asked any questions. Instead, I asked the safest question I could think of. "What's the longest anyone has ever stayed here?"

"I think only a little more than a year. I only have a few more months before they make me leave."

She sounded so sullen it almost scared me. What had her dad done to her that she preferred this place to anything in the real world? But I didn't ask her that, either. I almost didn't want to know the answer.

We walked in silence until we reached the hallway containing our cells. Before I could enter mine, she stopped me.

She was looking pensive. "There was something I was supposed to tell you," she muttered. "I can't remember, though."

She was silent for a second, and I stood there awkwardly, waiting for her to get her train of thought back. "Oh yeah! Okay, so don't get the wrong idea from this, because it might sound weird, but Reid wanted me to warn you about one of the guys you might see here, dressed all in black. Avoid him at all costs. He's Pierce's eighteen-year-old stepson, Travis. He's the devil's advocate, but Pierce does anything to please him because Travis's billion-dollar family pays for all the expenses here."

Oh. Fantastic. "Watch out for boy in black. Check," I answered.

"Yeah, so that's all," she finished.

I pursed my lips. "Why couldn't Reid just tell me?"

"Oh. I think he didn't want you to think he was trying to protect you or sway you in any way. He's huge on the whole 'everyone needs to form their own opinion' kind of thing. I don't know, he doesn't really like Travis, but he didn't want to be the one to tell you about him, so he asked me."

I nodded once. "Alright, that's good enough for me. Thanks."

With that, I turned into my cell.

Reid wasn't there yet, so I went in and sat down on the wall. I couldn't help thinking about the bed; it looked so tempting.

Even though it was Reid's bed, I went over to the bottom bunk and flopped down.

I was dreaming about mint-chocolate chip ice cream when I heard a creak. I cracked an eye open and saw Reid walking into the cell.

"Could you shut up? I'm sleeping."

Reid's chuckle filled the cell. "At least wait until dinner's over."

"Why?" I mumbled.

"Because if they see you're sleeping, the guards won't leave any food."

"Not seeing the problem," I sighed.

"You will in about an hour when the growl of your stomach wakes you up."



“I’m not hungry!”

“You have to eat something.”

I groaned, got up slowly, and then walked over to my wall, which I was growing accustomed to. “So, what’d you do today?”

“Read,” he answered almost smugly.

“A book?”

“Yeah, what else?”

“They have books here? I haven’t read in *so* long.”

“Then make sure you go to Intelligence or Free. In Intelligence, you can choose any book, and then all you have to do is continue reading until they tell you to stop. Then they calculate how many words you can read per minute. It’s actually kind of cool. And in Free, there are shelves filled with books,” he answered. “How’d you like Memory?”

I shook my head. “Don’t even ask. Dr. Bram gave me a *special* test because Dr. Pierce told him what I told her.”

He sighed and almost looked like he wanted to roll his eyes. “They’ll never stop,” he muttered.

I nodded but didn’t say anything. As I stared out of the cell, I tried to put out of my head all the questions on the test that were spinning around. Did I remember anything in the past year? Did I remember any books I had read, any activities that had seemed monotonous? No, no, and no.

“What are you thinking about?” Reid asked finally.

“Just my test,” I answered truthfully. “And this place. I just can’t seem to get a hang of it.”

“Of what?”

“Everything. Nothing is making sense.”

He didn’t answer that, but I hadn’t really expected him to, either. We sat in silence until I heard the door to the hallway open.

The cell door opened quickly and a buff guard walked in, placed the two trays between us and left. Reid waited until there were no footsteps in the hallway before he picked up the two trays and came over to sit next to me.

Reid had been right. I was starving now. “What’s for dinner?” I asked him enthusiastically, and, by way of answering, he picked up the lids on the tray.

“Tuna melt,” he replied, picking up his plate and water bottle.

“What’s a tuna melt?”

“You’ve never had a tuna melt before?” He asked incredulously.

I shook my head.

“Trust me: you’ll like it,” he answered, taking a bite of his.

I picked up my plate and studied the sandwich. The bread was toasted, and in between the two slices were tuna, melted cheese, and tomato slices, three foods I didn’t hate.

I took a cautious bite of the sandwich, chewed, swallowed, and then said, “It’s good.” As I kept chewing, I frowned. It tasted familiar. “Actually, maybe I *have* had it before.”

“I knew it. Who’s never had a tuna melt?” He speculated to himself.

I finished my meal in silence, trying to remember if I had ever had this sandwich. I didn’t remember my mom ever making me one, but my mom had made a lot of weird things for me that I didn’t remember. In the end, I shrugged it off. All that mattered was that I was enjoying it.

“That was good,” I said in my most satisfied voice when I had swallowed the last bit. Then, I turned to look at Reid. “Can we talk now?”

He stared at me hesitantly. “About what?”

“Remember? You promised you’d answer my questions,” I reminded him.

He sighed. “I don’t know. I still don’t feel like you’re ready.”

“I’m ready!” I exclaimed. “Really!”

He shook his head. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“No! You promised! Please, can you just tell me *something*?”

“I don’t want to upset you!” He answered, looking at me closely.

“Please, Reid?” I begged quietly. “Please, I need to know what’s happening. Would it kill you to answer just *one* question?”

“No, if you really did just mean one. But once I answer *that* question, you’re gonna have more questions because just one question doesn’t even begin to explain what this is about.”

“No, seriously, I’ll only ask one.”

His expression was one of resignation. He finally said, “Fine. What is it?”

I tried to think of the most confusing thing here and one that wouldn’t necessarily make me more confused.

“Am I different than everyone else?”

He looked confused. “That doesn’t have anything to do with this place.”

“Yes, it does! Is it weird that I don’t remember?” I clarified.

For a minute, he looked like he wasn’t going to respond. Then, he answered, “Yeah. It’s weird. You’re like a mix of a Lifer and T.U. minor.”

Reading off of what he had implied, I started hesitantly, “Lifers don’t remember their past?”

“Well, the drug is designed to take away bad memories. But since there’s nothing for the drug to erase, it takes away all of their memory. We call them Lifers because they think they’ve been here their whole lives.”

“The drug makes them forget? What drug? Is that what happened to me?” I asked quickly, turning to look at him. Maybe I was on the right track after all.

“Look, that was your one question, okay? You can ask more tomorrow.”

He had been right when talking of his ‘one question theory.’ I needed more. But I knew he wouldn’t talk anymore about it tonight, and I was just beginning to win his trust. I had to hold on to that.

“Okay,” I answered. We sat in silence for a minute, and then I remembered that I had wanted to ask him something else. Before he could try to avoid a question, I asked quickly, “Why don’t you like the name Donovan?”

He stared at me but not in an unkind way. “That’s a question.”

“Yeah, but it has nothing to do with this place,” I reminded him.

“It kind of does,” he answered.

“Oh,” was my only answer. Then, “Can you tell me anyway?”

He looked away from me, and, again, I thought he wasn’t going to answer. But then I heard him breathe in. “I hate my name,” he told me quietly. “I hate the way it sounded when my brother called me. I just wanna forget his voice. I like Reid better, ‘cause he never called me that.”

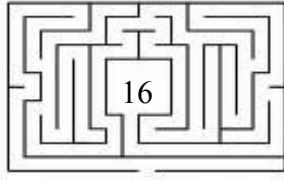
I was quiet. Why did all my questions end up making him uncomfortable? I felt like apologizing to him would make him even more embarrassed, so all I said was, “That makes sense.”

He smiled. “I thought so,” he answered. “Now, no more questions!”

“Alright,” I sighed.

He got up slowly and walked to his bunk, but his face was puzzled, and it looked like he was in a completely different place. I expected him to at least say something, because his face was so curious. But, after five minutes of nothing, I stopped waiting.

Silently, I got up, walked over to the bunk bed, climbed the ladder, and fell into a slumber so deep that I hardly stirred when the eight o’clock alarm sounded.



When roll call was finished the next morning, I immediately noticed a change in the atmosphere.

I turned towards Reid to ask him what was wrong, but with one look, Reid had me choking back my words. His expression clearly said to stay shut up.

“What’s happening?” I breathed, looking at Reid.

I thought he mouthed, “Just look straight,” but it was hard to tell. I did what my instincts told me to do, though, and stared at the wall directly in front of me.

Without anyone telling me, I could feel the stress building as footsteps grew louder. I could tell by the vibe coming off of Reid that he was angry. About what, I didn’t know. I stared straight ahead, trying not to panic as the footsteps came closer and closer. My heart was pounding with the fear of what was coming.

I unfocused my eyes and, out of the corner of my left eye, I watched as Dr. Pierce walked by our cell. Slowly, lightly, she meandered down the corridor, eyeing us each. A second before she glanced at me, I refocused my eyes on the wall. She walked away, her footsteps slowly getting softer. I breathed easier knowing that it wasn’t me she was looking for.

When I couldn’t hear her footsteps at all, I turned to Reid.

“Who’s she looking for?” I hissed quietly. When he didn’t so much as blink at me, I whispered, “Reid, what’s wrong?”

I kept staring at him. Was he really this angry with Dr. Pierce that he wouldn’t even look at me?

And then, suddenly, it kind of dawned on me that he might not be talking to me for a reason. Like, say, a presence other than myself. My heart sank a little as a feeling best described as disappointment washed over me. Maybe she had been looking for me after all.

I turned my head slowly away from him, gulping noticeably, and faced the woman whom I thought had left us alone.

"He does not talk, you know," Dr. Pierce started. She was standing outside the cell, tapping her foot not impatiently. I decided that since she had already spotted me out of the crowd, I was given permission to talk to her.

Her eyes bore into mine as though daring me to try and mess with her. I matched her stare, fully aware that I was not supposed to look so deeply into her eyes.

"I can try, though, can't I?" I asked calmly.

She smiled. "I see you are back to your normal self."

I didn't answer.

She continued. "You are not going to be performing today, Darcy. I would like you to come with me."

I glanced over at Reid. He didn't even look at me, but his fists were clenched tightly. He didn't want me to go. I looked back at Dr. Pierce. "Where are we going?" I asked her cautiously.

She breathed in deeply before stepping inside the cell, as though she wanted to take her last breath of fresh air before she plunged in. She bent down to me, grabbed my arm, and pulled me up with surprising strength.

She sighed slowly. "You must think that because I have taken a particular interest in you, you have the right to know what is going on. You would be mistaken, Darcy. You are here strictly for the purpose of observation and experimentation."

I stared up at Dr. Pierce, her words bouncing around in my head. *Observation and experimentation*. What did that mean?

"Are we clear?" She asked quietly, her blue eyes hollow.

I nodded, the only reaction I could make. I didn't want to go with her. She gave me a bad feeling, a feeling of dread and confusion. She smiled back at me and started towards the door. Dr. Bram had first lead me through, her grip tightening slightly on my arm.

I stared into the cells as we passed and noticed that every single kid was just as tense as Reid had been, which only made me feel more nauseous.

When we passed Mr. Netcross, Dr. Pierce nodded curtly at him, and he started the station listings.

“Ailey- Memory.”

“Anderson- Free.”

His voice droned on as we left the corridor. I followed her silently, trying to guess where we were going instead of her always having to pull me in the direction we were supposed to go. We went up four flights of stairs and passed through three different hallways before we got to our destination. Meanwhile, my brain was going through various scenarios of what was going to happen once we stopped.

Finally, we ended at a door labeled “Main Office,” which I guessed was her office. She fished out a key from her pocket, opened the door, and guided me through.

When I focused on the room, all I saw were a couple chairs with a boy sitting in one, a guard standing next to them, and a door in front of me.

“This is your office?” I asked warily.

“This is the waiting room,” she corrected me. “Where you will *wait*.”

“Oh,” I mumbled as she led me to one of the chairs sitting next to another door.

“Sit up straight,” she ordered the boy. He sighed, pulled himself up, and then glared at her.

She nodded, opened the door next to me, and slammed it shut after her. The boy slumped back down again.

“What are you in here for?” He asked, turning to look at me. I noticed he put a slight emphasis on ‘you,’ as if to imply that everyone came in for something different, but his case was the most unfair.

I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be talking. This boy, with his light blonde hair and lanky body, looked like an instigator.

“No talking!” The guard snapped.

As the guard turned away, the boy gave him the middle finger and then turned back to me. “Well?”

“I don’t—” I started to say, but I was interrupted by a voice.

“Peterson?” Dr. Pierce said, and I jumped, startled. I turned to look around and saw the intercom where the voice was coming from. “Bring David in.”

The guard nodded once, mostly to himself, and went over to the boy who had just spoken to me. The boy, whose name I inferred was David, stood up and moved away from the guard when the guard started to reach for David's arm. Before entering the office, he looked back at me.

"Good luck," he said, and then opened the door and went in, followed by the guard.

I smiled as he closed the door, my heart pounding wildly. I didn't want to be here at all. When the door opened again, about ten minutes later, I looked up as Peterson and David walked out of the office. They headed towards the door leading to the waiting room. Peterson opened the door, shoved David into the hallway, and slammed the door behind him.

When Dr. Pierce didn't call me into her office, I started to wonder if she had forgotten I was here.

Just as I was beginning to squirm with impatience, Dr. Pierce's office door opened.

"Darcy, you may come in," Dr. Pierce started pleasantly.

Cautiously, I got up from my seat and went into her office.

Her office itself was, in most respects, unremarkable. It was a spacious rectangular area with a large secretarial desk, two chairs in front of it and one behind it. A file cabinet was in the right corner of the room and a bookcase in the left. There was a large window on three of the four walls. It took me a while to realize what was wrong with them, and then I noticed that they didn't look outside. My guess was that they were one-way mirrors. I wasn't close enough to see what they overlooked.

"Take a seat, Darcy," Dr. Pierce offered. I took the left chair in front of her desk. "Do you know why you are here?"

I looked at her as she sat in her chair. Even though her question was most likely rhetorical, I said, "Am I in trouble?"

She chuckled. "No, no, Darcy, not at all." But she didn't continue. She was staring at me like she expected me to say something. When I just sat there, she began. "Do you remember our conversation the other day in the hallway?"

I nodded, already feeling anger coming up. Her broken promise was the only thing I could think of.



“I have been thinking very hard about what you told me. If what you say is true, you could be the answer to our prayers. This information is crucial to us, Darcy. I need to know exactly what you remember, exactly what happened.”

I shook my head and then changed the subject. “Can I have my file?”

Her eyebrows rose, and she momentarily forgot about the subject change. “Excuse-me?”

“My file. I saw it when I was in the hospital. Can I have it?”

She sighed. “No, Darcy, I am sorry, but you cannot. Now—”

“Why not?” I asked quietly.

“Because it is not yours,” she answered, already getting annoyed.

“Yes, it is. It has my name on it. It’s about me. That makes it mine,” I replied, staring at her innocently.

“No,” she answered slowly. “That makes it something about you, but it is not yours, Darcy. I am sorry, but I cannot give it to you. Forget about it, you cannot see it. Now—”

“What’s in it?” I interrupted her again.

She closed in her eyes in annoyance. “Information on you...”

“Like what?”

“Darcy, this does not have anything to do with—”

“Do you know everything about me?” I asked her quickly.

Probably seeing that I wasn’t going to be letting this go, she nodded. “I know about certain events in your life.”

“How’d you get it?”

“Get what?”

“Stuff on me.”

She glared at me. “It was a lengthy process,” she answered coldly.

“How much do you know?”

“Can we please get back to the original topic?” She snapped.

“When can I see my file?” I asked instead.

“You *will not* be seeing it,” she answered, trying to calm herself. “Moving on.”

She paused to see if I'd interrupt her, but I was through asking questions. I would never be able to see my file. That meant she wouldn't be telling me anything. I'd have to figure it out on my own. But with my memory having a gaping hole, I didn't see that working out so well.

"Tell me the last thing you remember," she commanded, getting right back on topic.

I shook my head again. "No."

Confusion was written on her face, and she almost looked like she thought I was joking. "No? Why not?"

"Because..." I muttered awkwardly.

"Darcy," she reprimanded me like I was five-years-old. "I want you to tell me what happened."

I shook my head.

"Okay, then you need to tell me why you refuse to talk to me," she told me calmly.

Her tone made me angry. "You lied to me!" I told her coldly. "You said if I told you what I remembered, you'd let me leave. You lied."

"Darcy, I *will* let you go. When we have figured out what is causing your memory loss, then you can go."

I looked at her closely. I could see her lie glaring on her face. I scowled. "That's just another lie."

She shook her head. "No, it is not. We just want to help you. Once you are healed, you do not need to stay here any longer."

I sighed, exasperated. "Nothing's wrong, though!"

Her eyebrows rose. "You do not think missing a whole year of your life is wrong?"

I opened my mouth to say something but then shut it. I was not about to tell her my theory about why I had forgotten. If I told her that I thought I had forgotten because I was here, she wouldn't believe me, and it would probably make her mad.

"I know this is uncomfortable for you, Darcy, but you have to tell me. What do you remember?" She asked intently.

"Nothing," I answered, letting her fill in what she wanted to.

“Nothing after your fifteenth birthday?” She guessed and then continued even though I hadn’t answered her. “Okay, so—”

The door opened before she could finish. I think we both thought Peterson or one of the other guards was going to walk in. It wasn’t a guard though.

He was dressed all in black, his skin-tight shirt, his baggy pants, his Reeboks, his hair was jet black and spiked, even the earring in his left ear was a black stud. A tattoo was peeking out from his shirtsleeve on the arm that toyed aimlessly with the chain hanging from two of his belt loops on his pants.

The first thing I noticed about him were his eyes, a blue so shocking that they startled me. Even as he stared at Dr. Pierce, I could see their intense color. The second thing I noticed was his sharp jawbones. His lean face gave an air of intensity, and I automatically shied away from him.

“Lorraine, there’s a problem!” He exclaimed.

Why was he ringing a bell in my head?

“Travis, we are busy.”

Oh. Maybe that was why. A boy named Travis dressed all in black. This wasn’t good.

“Alright, but—” He started, but he was cut off by Dr. Pierce.

“Shh!” She commanded, and the room went silent.

Well, almost silent.

If I focused, I could hear someone’s voice. Listening harder, I recognized the monotony of the voice. It wasn’t a person. It was the alarm. I couldn’t make out what it was saying, though.

When I turned to look at Dr. Pierce, her eyes were wide with anger and almost what I would call fear.

“What—” I started to say, but I was interrupted by the alarm again.

It echoed all over Dr. Pierce’s office. “CODE 11325 LOWER LEVEL CODE 11325 LOWER LEVEL!”

The loudness hurt my ears; I flinched, almost jumping into the air. It was only then that Travis looked over at me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d have said he hadn’t even realized I was there.

Our eyes locked for only a few seconds. His shockingly blue eyes stared into mine, trying to read what I had to say. For half

---

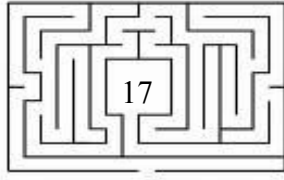
a second, the world seemed to stop as he looked into my eyes. Then, suddenly, he blinked, his eyes gave me a once over, and he was looking back at Dr. Pierce.

However, Dr. Pierce wasn't at her desk anymore. She had gotten up and was practically out the door.

"What happened?" She yelled.

"David," was all Travis had to say. Was that the same boy I had met before?

Her eyes went wide. "Watch her!" She snapped at Travis, pointed to me, and then left.



**A**s soon as Dr. Pierce's door slammed, Travis moved to her desk and plopped down in her chair.  
"Hope I didn't interrupt anything," he said, but he didn't sound remorseful.

I shook my head. "No. You didn't."

Travis looked up at me, smiled, and then looked around the room. He tapped his hands on the desk, hummed something, moved some papers on Dr. Pierce's desk, and then, as a way of finding something to do, he opened her top drawer.

"Hmm," he muttered and picked up a piece of paper. From the back, I could read enough to guess it was a schedule.

He moved his finger down the paper until he stopped at a time slot. I watched his eyes follow the line until he saw a name. Then he looked up.

His eyebrows slightly raised, he asked, "You're Darcy Calloway?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Why?"

"Are you really?" He asked, his interest peaked.

I smiled an aggravated sort of smile. "Why are you asking?"

He gave a fascinated laugh. "You really are nothing like I expected."

My eyes narrowed a little. "Do I know you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. But I know you." Very original.

"How?"

"Dr. Pierce. She talks about you," he answered casually.

I was on my guard now. "What does she say?" I asked, not bothering to hide my suspicion.

"I probably shouldn't be talking about it."

Now I was cautious. Travis hearing about me through his stepmother was not something I was necessarily okay with. "Who are you?" I asked, trying to link together some pieces.

"Travis," he answered. I noticed he didn't announce himself as Dr. Pierce's stepson. Slowly, he got up and came around to the front of the desk. I scooted back a little. "So, just out of curiosity, what were you and the good doctor talking about?"

"Me," was my guarded answer.

He chuckled. "Anything specific about you?"

My eyes narrowed. "Why do you want to know?"

He held up his hands in a defensive gesture. "Just wondering!"

I continued to regard him suspiciously.

"Any particular reason why you're majorly paranoid?" He asked calmly.

I slouched down in my chair and looked away from him, trying not to roll my eyes. Who the heck was this kid?

I changed the subject. "You don't have to watch me, you know. I doubt I'd be able to find my way anywhere in this maze even if I tried to escape."

When I looked back at him, he was staring at me with a strange light of curiosity in his eyes. For a minute, it looked like he was thinking through something. Then, he opened his mouth. "You know, your file didn't mention any adjectives like manipulative," he told me matter-of-factly.

It took me about half a second to register what he had said. Then I practically jumped out of the chair. "My file?"

He nodded, looking completely innocent, but I knew he knew I had taken the bait.

"You read my file?" I asked, scooting a little closer to him.

He shook his head. "Only the first page. But Lorraine hasn't stopped talking about you. You seemed to have made quite an impression on her the other day. When you told her about your memory, holy crap, she looked like she had been elected President of the United States. You, Darcy, are a very powerful girl."

Before he had even finished, I was out of my chair. "Do you know where it is?" I asked quickly.

“Your file?” He asked, and when I nodded, he shrugged. “It was on her desk at home the last time I read it.”

I tried to hide my immense disappointment, focusing instead on trying to get any kind of information. “Was it...what else did you read?”

“Nothing mind-boggling. The stories Lorraine told us were more interesting, anyway.”

“What’d she say?”

“Mostly just updates about you and what’s happening to you here. Why?”

I ignored his question. “She didn’t say anything about what made her take an interest in me?”

He shook his head. “She never talks about confidential stuff like that with me or my dad. Why? Is there something you’re trying to hide?” He asked, almost seductively.

I turned away from him, trying to think of how this could possibly work in my favor.

His smile dimmed a little. “Is there?”

He had said he hadn’t read much about me. But he still had read my file, had had the chance to look through it. Was he not sharing something?

“You *were* just lying to Lorraine, though, right? About not remembering?” He asked.

I didn’t answer. I was not a fan of being the questioned instead of the questioner.

“Darcy?”

If I remained quiet, maybe he would just forget about it.

“I’m just curious. I mean, Lorraine believes you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Please stop talking about it,” I said quietly. My stomach was hurting, a reaction to dealing with so many emotions at once, I guessed.

“I just wanna—”

“Travis! Stop,” I urged quietly.

“Do you—”

“Stop asking me questions!” I snapped a little louder.

“Are you serious? You can’t remember?” He asked, and I could hear the surprise in his voice. “You can’t remember. Oh my

God, you can't remember what happened?" His voice was higher as his unbelievable surprise sunk in.

"I don't want to talk about it!" I practically growled.

"You don't remember anything about—"

"Stop it!" I interrupted him. I didn't know how much he knew about my past, but I didn't want him to be the one to tell me what happened to me if he knew. "Don't talk to me about what happened! Just go away!" I snapped.

He was quiet for a minute. I felt him move towards me, and I backed away even further.

His voice was much softer when he spoke. "What do you remember?"

I looked back at him. Quietly, I asked, "Why are you asking me about this?"

He seemed surprised at my change in attitude. He shrugged. "I've never met someone with memory loss."

"It's not memory loss!" I snapped so suddenly that his face showed clearly the shock he felt. "I just can't seem to recall a few things."

He was quiet for a minute. Then, "Like what?"

I sighed. I couldn't believe I was talking to Dr. Pierce's stepson about this. Yet, I couldn't seem to contain myself. It was like I needed to talk to someone about myself. "It's weird. I can remember so clearly the day before my fifteenth birthday. Then, all of a sudden, it's like everything just disappears. If I try to think back to what happened, I can remember waking up here, and then my memory just skips back to the day before my birthday. And I know I'm sixteen, but I don't remember that birthday, either. It's like someone took an eraser to my brain and washed out a whole year and a half of my life. I don't know what happened."

He was thinking hard about that. "Well, have you tried talking to Dr. Pierce about it?"

My face darkened. "I'm not talking to her."

His eyebrows rose in response to my immediate change. "Okay!" he answered quickly. "But, if you don't mind me asking, is there a reason why you seem to dislike her more than everyone else? I know she's not very popular around here, but I sense hate from you."



I looked into his eyes. “Your stepmother lied to me. She came to me when I was hurt, and she promised me that if I told her what I knew about myself, she’d let me leave this place. Then, when I told her that I didn’t remember, she forced me back to my cell and heightened security on me. Now, she and all the other doctors are watching me too closely, and she has this sick interest in me,” I almost whispered. “I don’t even know what’s wrong with me, and she won’t tell me. I just want to leave, I just want my memory back, and she can help me with both. But instead she’s just hurting me more.”

Expecting his sympathy, I turned away from him. I didn’t want his words of comfort. I just wanted help.

When he continued to remain silent, I realized that I had probably told him too much. But I hadn’t been able to stop talking once I had started. There had been something about him that had been comforting. He had given me the same hope I had felt when I first met his stepmother. Had he lied to me, too?

Distantly, I heard him move towards Dr. Pierce’s desk. I vaguely listened to him rummaging through Dr. Pierce’s drawers and then some papers fluttering around.

When he spoke, I almost jumped in shock. “I can tell you what you want to know.”

Feigning composure, I turned to him slowly. “How?”

Before he could answer, my eyes focused on the manila folder on Dr. Pierce’s desk. *Darcy Calloway*, it read.

“Is that...” I started almost breathlessly.

“It’s your file,” he told me calmly. “I’m pretty sure it’ll tell you everything you wanna know.”

My eyes couldn’t leave the file folder. I needed it. It would talk about my parents, about what happened to me, about what was happening to me now.

Was I reading too deeply into Travis’s words? It seemed like he was offering my file to me, but I couldn’t be sure.

However, he confirmed my suspicions when he asked, “Do you want it?”

My eyes snapped up to his. It took me a minute to comprehend what he had said. He was holding the folder in the air, high enough for me to reach it. His face looked innocent.

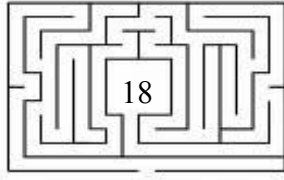
“I can...I can take it?” I asked hesitantly.

He shrugged. “Yeah. I mean, it’s yours, right? It’s not really fair that they’re keeping this from you. Just don’t tell Lorraine, okay? I’m pretty sure I’m breaking a lot of rules by giving this to you.”

I was nodding, my hand was out to grab it when, suddenly, it wasn’t there anymore. I blinked then looked at Travis. “What...?”

He wasn’t looking at me anymore, though. He was looking intently at the door. Quickly, I sat back down in my chair.

A second later Dr. Pierce’s door opened.



“Crisis averted,” Dr. Pierce sighed, looking at Travis. Meanwhile, I was panicking inside.

No! No, no, no. I couldn’t even believe what had just happened. I had been so close, *so close*, to figuring out what had happened, to getting the information I needed. Why had Dr. Pierce chosen that exact second to walk in?

“You’re going to want to keep a better eye on David, Lorraine,” Travis told her indifferently. But when I looked up at him, I saw his eyes flicker towards me. Then he was looking back at Dr. Pierce.

“Yes,” she sighed. “David just keeps finding ways to toe the line. We will see what we can do.”

Travis stood there awkwardly for a minute, glancing at me a couple times. I was scrambling to think of some way I could regain the advantage I had just had. But there was no possible way I could do so without tipping off Dr. Pierce.

Finally, after a final glance in my direction, Travis left.

I was screaming inside.

What kind of excuse could I give for running after him? Each excuse going round in my head seemed more ridiculous than the last one.

Finally, I spit out the first question I thought of. “Does he come down here a lot?” I asked, trying to remain casual.

“No,” Dr. Pierce answered, distracted, as she rearranged papers on her desk. “He does not appreciate the work we do here.”

Dr. Pierce looked up suddenly, like she had just realized she was talking to me. “I am sorry, Darcy, for that interruption. Where were we?”

I didn’t answer.

She narrowed her eyes, thinking. "Ah, yes! We were just about to talk about your memory. Correct?"

I avoided eye contact with her.

"Well, I think we should start with the last thing you remember before waking up here."

I still didn't answer.

"Darcy?"

I looked up at her. "When's Travis gonna come down again?"

She glared at me. "I have no idea," she almost snapped and brought us back to her original subject. "Do you remember where you were when you were taken?"

"Can you ask him?"

"What?" She snapped and then, when she realized I was still talking about Travis, grimaced. "No! Please, try to remain focused. What is the last thing you remember?"

"I need to talk to Travis!" I exclaimed, insistent. I was desperate. I needed to talk to him. I needed my file.

"Why do you have such a fascination with my stepson?" She snapped.

I shrugged, desperate to appear aloof but not exactly succeeding. She held something over me, and I needed it. This was the definition of power.

"Then can we please try to get back on topic?"

I looked back at her. "I want to speak to Travis."

She finally snapped. "Why are you being so difficult?" She cried.

"I don't want to talk about my memory!" I snapped back.

"I know you do not, but we need to go through this, Darcy; this is very important."

"I want to see Travis!" I remained insistent. If I could find him, he could tell me what he read from my file. The rest of this wouldn't even matter.

"You can see him after you have answered my questions," she growled.

"I want to see him *now*," I scowled.

"I do not care," Dr. Pierce raged angrily. "Pay attention!"

"But I—"

“Darcy, you are trying my patience. Now, I do not want to hear another word about him. Are we clear?”

I looked away from her. Fine. If she wouldn't help me, I wasn't going to help her.

“Thank you,” she sighed. “Okay, how about we go back to what you were saying before. You said you were not by your house?”

I didn't answer, instead staring intently at the wall with a scowl on my face.

“Answer me, please.”

I was in my own little world now. If Travis could get me my file, everything would be okay. Everything would be fine as soon as I figured out what had happened to me. I was positive that once my memory came back, I would know how to get out of this place.

“Darcy, do not ignore me. What happened?”

Was there any way I could find Travis? Maybe if I took Dr. Pierce's phone when she wasn't looking, his contact would be in there.

“Darcy!” Dr. Pierce snapped.

Travis had said that he had read only the first page of my file. But he had access to Dr. Pierce's office. He would be able to get my file for me. All I needed was to see him for ten minutes so that I could convince him to help me out.

“Do you remember anything before your sixteenth birthday?” Dr. Pierce was continuing. “Or after your fifteenth birthday?”

And as soon as I got my memory back, I wouldn't be an asset anymore. Dr. Pierce wouldn't have a use for me once I got my memory back. I would remember where my parents were and what happened to me. I would be able to go home, like Dr. Pierce had promised.

“Why are you not talking to me?” Dr. Pierce snapped. “Darcy, I do not find this amusing! Talk to me!”

Where were my parents? They would be so worried about me. Were they looking for me? That, of course, was a dumb question. They obviously were! They would probably have a whole

team of private detectives looking in every country of the world by now.

“Are you mad at me?” Dr. Pierce tried again. “I am sorry that you are annoyed, but do not make me out to be the bad guy here. We just want to help you, but you have to help us first. You have to tell us what you remember. This whole process will all make sense when you start to remember.”

Had Dr. Pierce made contact with my parents, told them where I was? Had she asked for money from them, maybe held me for ransom? That didn’t seem like the case, because if that was it, I would be gone already. My parents would definitely pay any ransom she asked for.

She made a sound close to a growl. “You want to talk to Travis? Fine. If I call him down here, will you talk to me?”

I watched her from the corner of my eye as she picked up the phone and pretended to dial a number. And then she pretended to carry on a conversation with Travis. I still didn’t look at her. Finally, she hung up.

“He is coming,” she announced.

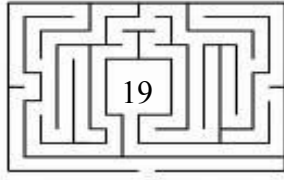
I didn’t even look at her.

“Until he gets here, can you please answer my question?”

I remained silent while she tried to trick me, force me, scare me. When it was completely obvious to everyone that Travis wasn’t coming, she got fed up.

After Dr. Pierce’s countless attempts to weasel information out of me, I tuned her voice out completely. Too absorbed in thought and too set on leaving this place, I no longer cared about what she said to me.

It was after another half-hour of Dr. Pierce’s incessant pleading, yelling, and manipulation that she finally gave up. When Peterson came in to take me back to my cell, she was so frustrated, her face had turned beet red. Promising me she would get me to talk, she slammed her office door in my face.



I was left in my cell, alone, maybe to stew over the conversation I had just had with Dr. Pierce. But really, I was planning how I could best get Dr. Pierce to cave. Would she give in to my wishes if she saw that I was not responding well to this place? Or would she just try harder?

But what had Travis said? *You, Darcy, are a very powerful girl.* If I weren't acting normally, would Dr. Pierce care? Travis had said that she was ecstatic when I told her I couldn't remember. Did I really hold that much power over her?

If I acted out of place here, completely miserable, she would try to fix that, wouldn't she? All she wanted was answers from me. She would get Travis for me if I promised her answers, I would bet.

As I thought more and more about it, my plan became clearer. All I had to do was stay quiet, act anti-social and miserable. How hard could that be? I felt like that anyway. And then eventually, she'd have to call Travis down here.

It had to work.

I was starting to nod off when I heard a bell ring in the distance and then a door open. When Reid opened our cell door to come in, I sighed with relief and was practically praising God for bringing me a distraction. I was about to greet Reid, but then I stopped.

Were there cameras in here? Was somebody watching us? I couldn't remember anyone telling me that there were or weren't cameras taping us. But maybe Reid and Nora didn't know, either. I mean, Dr. Bram had told me that Reid didn't talk, yet he talked to me when we were in our cell. Did the doctors know Reid only talked to his friends? Were they only pretending like they thought he couldn't talk to make Reid feel like he had some power over

them? Or were there actually no video cameras, and I was being paranoid? Everything was so damn confusing!

“Hey! How was Pierce?” Reid asked amiably, sitting down across from me.

Making my decision quickly, I didn’t even look at him.

“That bad?” He asked, unaware of my silence.

I still didn’t look at him.

Finally, I felt his eyes on me. “Wanna talk about it?”

I felt terrible, giving him the cold shoulder without so much as a warning. But my act had to start now if the doctors were watching.

There was concern in his voice when he spoke. “Is there something wrong? You seem awfully quiet.”

He would probably understand what I was doing, eventually. But would this hurt him, me being quiet? I didn’t want to hurt him; he was my first friend.

“Darcy? Did something bad happen today?” He asked quickly, coming over to sit next to me.

Internally, I flinched. Externally, though, I showed no sign that he was even there.

“Whatever it is, Darcy, you can tell me. I can help you,” he told me quietly.

God, stop talking! It was getting so hard for me to stay silent.

“Are you mad at me?” He asked even quieter.

That one stung. It took all my willpower not to snap back at him. Why would he think I was mad at him, excluding the fact that I was ignoring him?

I had half a mind to stop my stupid act. I didn’t even know for sure if there were cameras in my cell. Most likely, there weren’t.

Something stopped me, though. My own selfishness, perhaps. Or maybe my need for answers. Whatever it was, I remained silent.

The guards came and delivered our dinner, and Reid didn’t talk. Still sticking to my role of hermit, I picked at my meal, taking a few sips of water and a small bite of my chicken. I was almost



beginning to feel sick, whether from the lack of food or because of the situation I was in.

When our food was taken away, we sat awkwardly in silence.

Finally, Reid broke the silence. "Is this because I won't tell you about this place?" He asked, frustrated now. "Jeez, Darcy, relax. I didn't know you'd get this pissed."

Ugh. He jumped to the wrong conclusions so quickly!

"Seriously. Is it about the story?"

I still didn't answer. Waves of annoyance were almost radiating off of me. Why was he being so sympathetic today? He was making me feel like a bad person. He needed to stop putting words into my mouth!

He sighed. "Fine. Fine, alright, fine! I'll tell you the stupid story! Will that make you happy?"

I still didn't answer. My heart was pounding now. I was no longer upset about his assumptions. Was he really going to tell me? He was going to tell me about this place! My heart was thumping so loudly, it felt like it was going to jump up my throat and out of my mouth.

I shifted slightly, trying to get into a more comfortable position and relax my tense muscles. He, though, must have taken that as an affirmation.

"Once I finish, though, you owe me a big apology for making me feel bad," he told me. Great! Now *he* was feeling bad? This room was full of misunderstood feelings!

He sighed and started his story. "Since you forced this upon me, you'll have to listen through some things I've already explained.

"I don't even know where to begin. Well, I guess the first thing to say is that this whole place is about memory. Everything the doctors do is to study the memory. Our memory.

"Now, there're two main groups here. The first group is what we're in: the T.U., which stands for Trauma Unit. This means that, in our lifetime, we've had something traumatic happen to us, which affects the memory. The other group is the B.U., which stands for Basic Unit, but we call them Lifers.

“So years ago, I’m not sure how many, some scientists got together with the idea of studying the memory. You know, what affects it, what brings up certain memories, etc. But most importantly, they wanted to know about traumatic memories. And their main study was what happens when the brain can’t handle that memory, when it just closes at the memory so that we don’t have to recall it. They thought that if they could just come up with a drug that would help erase the destructive memories, there would be less pain in the world.

“That’s when they started bringing kids in with terrible lives. They took kids that no one would miss, no one would notice were gone: runaways on the streets, kids of gang members, anti-social kids living in horrible conditions, kids that were nobody’s. Those kids make up the T.U.

“The Lifers, though, are kids who had relatively normal lives. Maybe they came from middle-class societies or never really experienced true pain. But, obviously, those are the kids that are going to be missed the most in society, which is why there aren’t a lot of Lifers here. They use the Lifers as comparisons to the kids in the T.U., comparing brain waves, stuff like that. The scientists found that the medicine only worked on normal kids, but it badly affected them. Once the drug was injected into the kids, they just thought they were born at the lab. They couldn’t remember their lives before being taken or anything. That’s why they’re called Lifers. They think they’ve been here their whole lives.”

Internally, I shuddered at the horror over what it would be like to have no past to refer back to. And I thought it sucked to be missing a year!

He continued, “But since the drug didn’t work on the kids that had bad lives, the scientists decided to take in the kids, study their habits, their memories, everything. That’s what the stations are for. And that’s why they know everything about us. It takes a lot of time for them to take in a new kid, because the scientists gather every bit of information on the kid they can get before bringing them here.

“Each station is designed to work with a part of the body. Athleticism studies the heart, the mind, everything, when it’s under stress or a lot of physical endurance. Intelligence is mostly for the

brain, to learn if there's a connection between how strong the memory is in comparison to how smart someone is. Memory tests, well, the memory. The doctors see how well we can recall events, stuff like that. And then Free helps bring out personalities. The doctors carefully monitor which activity each person chooses to do. Make sense?"

I still didn't answer him, but this time, it wasn't exactly intentional. I was lost in thought. There was so much to think about. All the kidnapped kids, the drugs, each station. My plan was beginning to look stupid. Would I really be able to trick such clever doctors?

Without waiting for an answer, he continued. "Now, every so often, we'll get a bad kid. You know, they won't do the stations, or they don't answer the doctors' questions, not really dramatic things, but still abnormal. For punishments, the first offense, like not cooperating or something, is missing a meal. That may not seem like such a huge deal, but after you've gone without food for twenty-four hours, it's really bad. The second offense, like repeatedly causing trouble or even causing a fight, gets you a night in the isolation room. It's this big room, always dark, and you have to stay there until you're calm. The third offense, though, is when they get really mad. No one's ever gotten a third offense. There're rumors that they torture you, but I don't think that's true."

He didn't even bother to see my reaction this time. He was too caught up in his story. I, however, was thinking carefully. What would I get if I didn't do one of the stations. That would get me a meal taken away. I could handle that if my actions were rewarded eventually. But would they?

"Like this morning, did you hear the loud speaker? Code 11325 is used when everyone isn't where they should be. I guess someone got out of his or her cell. Probably one of the Lifers; they're always confused," he scoffed, speculating. "But I really wouldn't worry about anything like that. We've already got an instigator here. His name's David. He causes so much trouble, I'm surprised he's even allowed to stay here."

I wanted to tell him so badly that I had seen David and that I knew he was the cause for that code today. Now that everything

was making a tad more sense, I desperately wanted to ask questions, to get verifications, everything. But I held my tongue.

“Let’s see,” he continued. “What else? Well, I don’t know. What else do you wanna know?”

My guilt started up again as he looked down at me patiently, waiting for me to answer him.

“Darcy!” He whined. “I told you the story, so why won’t you talk?”

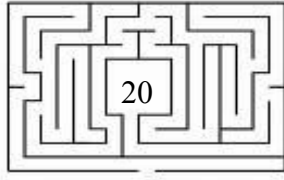
He had to stop eventually. He had to give up, and then I would feel better. But at the moment, I felt horrible. He had done a lot for me in the time that I had known him. Now I was being obnoxious and wasn’t even telling him why. He had told me about his brother, he had tried to help me, and I was being selfish.

He groaned. “Fine. *Don’t* talk to me,” he muttered, got up, and went over to sit at his wall.

I saw him look over at me furtively. His eyes searched my face, looking for some change in my expression. I voided my face of all emotions.

I shifted my position only once. Otherwise, I stayed perfectly still, gazing into space, trying to think about nothing.

When it seemed like the alarm was going to sound any minute, I got up, walked purposefully to my bed, climbed the ladder, and then lay down. Two minutes later, the alarm sounded.



**I**t was easier to wake up the next morning than most days. Maybe that was because I had an actual incentive today. Granted, it would take a while for anyone to realize what I was doing, but it gave me something to do, to keep my mind on.

When the alarm went off, I heard Reid rustling below me. I listened as his bed squeaked when he got up and watched him leave the cell.

I was still lying in bed when he came back, refreshed. He looked up at me.

“You’re gonna be late,” he told me sullenly, probably still upset from last night.

I didn’t answer.

Resigned, he sat down against his wall. I stayed in bed during roll call, although I made the choice to answer when Mr. Nettcros called my name, if only to keep most of the attention off of me. When stations were assigned, I hardly even acknowledged that Mr. Nettcros announced Memory after my name.

I watched as Reid got up from where he sat and headed towards the door to our cell. Before he left, he turned to me and stared. “Aren’t you coming?”

I shook my head. He rolled his eyes noticeably.

“Why not?”

When I didn’t answer him, he sighed and turned to leave the cell. Before he closed the door, though, he turned back. “Should I tell them you’re not feeling well?”

I shook my head once more.

“Alright. Bye,” he muttered and then disappeared.

I pushed away my guilty thoughts before it had time to intrude. Then, slowly, I sat up, climbed down the ladder, and sat down against my wall.

There, I waited. I waited for at least an hour and forced myself to think of nothing. I didn't imagine how my plan would turn out or if it would work at all. I didn't think at all about my memory or lack thereof. I wasn't hungry. It seemed as if my stomach had disappeared. I didn't feel anything when I thought of food. Vaguely, I realized that this wasn't good, but I didn't think about that, either.

Instead, I counted the number of foot-long stones that made up the wall I was staring at. I counted forty-six stones on the wall I faced. My cell was small.

When at last I heard footsteps in the hallway, I braced myself. I didn't even turn when Dr. Bram's shadow appeared in my doorway.

"Darcy," he sighed. He sounded almost relieved that he had found me.

He seemed to be waiting for me to say something to him, or to even look at him, for that matter. When I didn't do either, he opened the cell door.

"Darcy," he repeated. "Why are you not in Memory?"

I kept right on looking at the forty-six stones.

"Answer me, please," he prodded.

When he got no reply, he came over to where I was sitting, squatted down, and looked me straight in the eye. I didn't flinch away from him. My eyes remained where they would have been looking at the wall but were now on Dr. Bram's eyes.

"Are you feeling okay?" He asked quickly, but there was no concern in his voice. If there was any concern, it wasn't for me, anyway. I think maybe he was concerned about the reaction that my illness would get from Dr. Pierce.

"Darcy!" He exclaimed. When I didn't so much as start, he snarled, "What is the matter with you?"

He seemed to be waiting for me to wake up from my daze. His eyes searched my face, but my eyes stayed on his.

"Darcy, I do not find this amusing," he told me sharply. "Please go to your station."

I didn't move.

"Why are you not listening to me?" He asked.

His eyes were smoldering now, but I remained firm.

“Miss Calloway,” he said through gritted teeth. “Get up and go to Memory. *Now!*”

His eyes had turned cold, his voice warning me to listen to him. My instincts, too, pleaded with me to follow his directions. But my need for information won out, like it always did.

“Darcy, this is your last warning. If you do not stop this, there will be consequences, and believe me, you do not want that.”

He almost looked like he was taking pleasure in the fact that I wasn’t answering him. Maybe it wasn’t often that he got to hand out punishment. It was fine by me; this was going just as planned.

After a minute of silence, he gave in. His voice cruel, he told me fiercely, “Alright, that’s it. I’m sorry that it has to come to this, but you leave me no choice: If you are not up and out of this cell in the next five seconds, you will not be getting dinner tonight.”

Strike one.

In the silence of the cell, I could hear his watch ticking. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

He exhaled and stood up. “You’ve made your choice, so be it,” he told me calmly. He was thinking now. How many times had this happened to him? “You are to stay here for the day. Do not expect dinner, and do not expect this to go unnoticed by *anyone*,” he finished, stressing ‘anyone,’ which told me that Dr. Pierce was going to hear about this.

Good.

By the time half the day was over, I had successfully managed to keep my mind from wandering to different places. Instead, I pictured how great it would feel the second I got my file. I didn’t pretend to picture what was in it. All I did was think about the feeling I would get when it was in my hand. When I could finally have control of my life.

Reid tried to communicate again when he came back.

“Hey,” he said, his stance too casual.

I don’t think he was expecting an answer, but he still seemed bummed when he didn’t get one.

“Still not talking? That’s okay,” he sighed. “I went a month without talking to anyone.”

And that was the last thing he said to me until dinnertime.

When dinner came, the guards only delivered one tray. Reid looked confused at first, but when the guard shook his head at me, Reid's eyes widened.

"You got the first offense?" He gasped, and when he got no answer, he continued, "Darcy, no! It's only, like, your tenth day here. Don't get into trouble!"

He waited for me to realize what he had said. But I didn't even blink in his direction.

With a resigned look on his face, Reid took his tray to his wall and ate his meal in silence. By this time, my stomach was back to its usual hungry state. It seemed to be carrying on a conversation with itself, and it hurt to smell Reid's food. Luckily, though, Reid didn't hear the quiet growls my stomach projected.

When he was halfway through his meal, he suddenly lifted his water bottle and rolled it over to me. It stopped at my leg. I looked down at it slowly.

"You can't go a day without drinking anything. Food, you can go without; water, you can't," he told me quietly.

He was right. My plan wouldn't work if I was dehydrated and stuck in the hospital again. So, in the end, I drank the water. It did nothing for my hunger, but my thirst was sated.

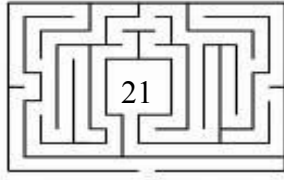
Awkwardly, I rolled the water bottle back to him. Then, trying to be as discrete as possible, I looked at him. He caught my eye quickly and smiled. And although I looked away hastily, I knew he knew I saw his smile. That made me feel slightly better.

Reid had seen enough to know my pattern. He didn't say another word the whole night. Again, I trusted my instincts and went over to my bed when I thought the alarm would sound. I was getting good at knowing when to get into bed at the right time.

I had been lying in bed for about five minutes when Reid got up from the wall and headed towards his bed. I heard a squeak that told me he was sitting on his bed. A second later, the alarm went off.

When the alarm had stopped ringing and it was pitch-black in the cell, I heard Reid whisper "Beat ya."





The alarm startled me, but it was Reid who actually woke me up. When my eyes popped open, he was leaning over my face.

“Eek!” I let out a very embarrassing girly screech and flinched.

“Sorry,” he whispered after the alarm was turned off. Then he raised his voice slightly. “You’re going today, right?”

I shook my head, resorting back to my silence.

“Darcy,” he moaned.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I lifted my hand and pushed him back away from me.

“Please, come,” he whispered.

I turned to my side so that I wasn’t facing him anymore.

He groaned and, before going down the ladder, pushed me in a childish way, a way of showing me his annoyance.

I heard him leave the cell and then come back once he was done taking a shower. I listened to the roll call and the station listings, listened to my name and Memory that followed it.

And then I heard Reid leave for breakfast.

Slowly, I sat up again and turned to go down the ladder. And saw Dr. Bram.

He was standing silently outside my cell, staring at me with harsh eyes.

“Get up,” he snarled.

With my eyes on him, I took my time going down the ladder. I started towards the door, but, instead, I stopped at my spot on the wall and sat down.

“Darcy!” He groaned.

I put on my normal blank face and waited for his reaction.

“That’s it,” he growled, opened the door sharply, stepped inside, and then strutted towards me. With one hand, he grabbed my left upper arm, heaved me up, and yanked me out of the cell.

I wouldn’t have fought him if we hadn’t been heading to the bathroom. “Where are we going?” I asked, struggling against his arm.

“You are going to take a shower, make yourself look nice,” he told me icily.

“Why?” I gasped, still trying to slow him down.

He didn’t answer me. When we reached the shower room, he opened the door and shoved me inside. “Hurry up!”

Something told me to listen to him, even if it was just for the sake of feeling clean again. I took a quick, five-minute shower, dried off, and found a new pair of clothes waiting for me where they were supposed to be.

When I was dressed, I slowly opened the bathroom door. Dr. Bram’s hand reached out and grabbed my arm.

“Why did I have to do that?” I asked him again as we headed down the hallway.

“You’re going to Memory,” was his curt answer.

“NO!” I shouted defiantly, struggling.

“Stop it!” He exclaimed hotly.

“No, no, no, I don’t wanna go! Stop, let go!” I yelled, pushing against his hand as he dragged me down the hallway.

He didn’t answer me after that. He tightened his grip and continued.

“I don’t wanna go!” I yelled. “Get off! I don’t want this!”

My vow of silence didn’t apply to this. I wasn’t going to participate, not until I could speak to Travis.

We reached the Memory classroom still in our same positions. I was trying hard to wiggle free from Dr. Bram’s grasp, but he wasn’t loosening his grip.

He opened the door quickly, shoved me inside, and slammed the door before I could react.

While I righted myself against the back desk, I heard the door lock click. He had locked us all in the room.

“Thank you for joining us, Miss Calloway,” Ms. Nancy started. “Your test is waiting for you.”

I frowned at her and followed with my eyes to where she was pointing. On the desk I had sat in during my previous class was a pack of paper.

I chose not to argue with Ms. Nancy. Instead, I walked over to the desk, plopped down, and grabbed my pencil.

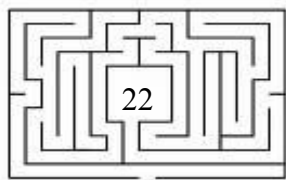
Calmly, I looked down at the first question.

*Name four awards you received in the last two years.*

I skimmed past twenty-nine questions before I came to one that I would answer. *Do you have a color preference?*

In bold writing, I answered: *Yes. Black.*

I needed to speak to Travis. And I wasn't cooperating, wasn't answering the stupid questions, wasn't doing anything more until I spoke to him, until I got my file.



I had answered only one question in the huge amount of time they had given us to finish the tests. The rest of the time had been filled with memories. I had daydreamed and brought back good and bad memories, everything I could remember. For hours, I sat in that chair, while pencils scratched against the tests, and I went down memory lane. It hadn't hurt me to remember most of the memories. Some, though, like fights that I remembered before I had time to push them down again, gave me small scars that I nursed tenderly with good memories of the beach and summertime.

When the bell finally rang, I followed the other kids silently back to our cell. Reid was already there.

I didn't even smile at him. I went over to my wall, sat down, and waited.

"Are you gonna talk today?"

No answer.

"I see Dr. Bram finally made you go today. I knew he would. He hates being defied."

I wasn't sure if he was trying to bait me, or what. But I didn't even look at him.

"I was in Intelligence. It wasn't all that bad. They gave me this really long math test today, but I actually like math. I think I like it more than reading."

He was babbling about nothing at all, testing the waters, seeing which topics would get a rise out of me. I wasn't easily stirred.

He talked about nonsense until we heard the hallway door open. The guards came, delivered our meals, and then left.

We ate in silence. Reid probably didn't see the need to make conversation when we were both preoccupied. I could have wept with delight as the creamy chicken noodle soup slid down my throat. I was starving.

As soon as I finished my meal, I got up, climbed the ladder to my bed, and flopped down. I laid there, silent, until the bell rang. When all was pitch black, I turned over and fell asleep. Dr. Bram wouldn't move me tomorrow.

When the bell rang the next day, I turned to my side and ignored it. Slowly, I drifted back to sleep. I woke up later to Mr. Nettcros's booming voice and saw Reid sitting against his wall. He didn't even look at me as I slowly descended from my bed and sat against my own wall.

When station listings was over, he got up silently and left. He didn't even turn around to question me.

It took about two minutes for Dr. Bram to find me. He marched down the hallway and didn't even pause to see if I was in my cell. He yanked open the cell door, came inside, and grabbed my arm.

"I'm not going to the station," I told him loudly as he dragged me down the hall.

"Quiet!" He commanded, heading for the showers.

"I'm not going!" I said again when we stopped in front of the door.

He pulled the door open, pushed me inside, and waited until I was done. As soon as my body appeared in the doorway, he grabbed my arm, and we continued down the hallway.

I would have started to struggle again, but I realized that we weren't heading towards the cafeteria or Memory, where I would have gone.

We were going to see Dr. Pierce.

I didn't fight against him after that. This was exactly what I had wanted to happen.

When we reached Dr. Pierce's office, Dr. Bram grabbed the waiting room door's handle and yanked it. Then he remembered it was locked.

"Christ," he muttered. For the first time in two days, I flinched noticeably.

After pounding furiously on the door for a good ten seconds, Dr. Bram stopped and we waited in silence, Dr. Bram's foot tapping the floor impatiently. Finally, the door opened. Dr. Pierce's face appeared in the doorway.

She smiled sweetly at us. "What a pleasant surprise. I trust there is nothing urgent?" She asked Dr. Bram calmly.

"She's impossible, absolutely impossible," Dr. Bram told her angrily.

Dr. Pierce looked down at me, but she continued to talk to him. "Again?" She asked, her tone abruptly changing.

"Yes. She doesn't even seem to care," he answered coldly.

"Right," Dr. Pierce replied, and then she, too, grabbed my upper arm. "I will take her from here."

Dr. Bram nodded once, let go of my arm, and left me in the care of Dr. Pierce. She led me into her office and then practically pushed me into one of the chairs in front of her desk.

"Alright, what is the problem?" She started coolly.

"I wanna talk to Travis," I answered immediately.

"Yes, I have realized this," she replied coldly.

"Let me talk to him," I commanded.

"So, you are talking now, are you?" She asked instead.

I stared at her.

She was frightfully aggravated. "What did you two talk about, anyway? I was gone five minutes, and you somehow managed to grow emotionally attached to him."

"I want to talk to Travis," I repeated.

"I understand that!" She replied harshly. "Why do you want to talk to him so badly?"

"Because!" was my flimsy excuse.

"That is not an answer! Explain to me why you need to see him so much, and then maybe I will consider it."

"No," I told her monotonously. She would never let me see him if she knew what I wanted from him.

Slowly, her head bent down and rested in her hands. "Why are you being so difficult, Darcy? We are trying to help you; why can you not see that?"

I shrugged and continued to avoid her eyes. I wasn't stupid. I knew when to stop before crossing the invisible line here. She was my superior; I knew that. She had complete power over me. But I had a little power over her, too.

Dr. Pierce got up from her desk and moved around it. Then, slowly, she sat down in the chair next to me. She bent forward so that she was looking me straight on.

“Darcy,” she started quietly. “Listen to me. We can help you. We can give you your memory back; we can make this all better. I cannot even imagine how confused and scared you must be feeling right now. We can take all that away. But we cannot help you unless you work with us. We need you to talk to us. Please.”

She was a good actress. She really was incredible. A part of me actually believed her. But that was the part that was missing a mother figure terribly, the part that I had to cram in the back of my head for fear of it taking over my dominant emotion: determination.

I think she mistook my silence for thoughtfulness. So, she continued, “Please, Darcy, everything is going to be okay, I promise. We will take this one step at a time and get through this together. This will work out, I promise you that. I can get you anything you need if it will help you to feel more comfortable.”

I looked up into her eyes. Quietly, slowly, I whispered, “I need Travis.” Wrong. I needed my file. But Travis was the closest thing I could get.

She exhaled sharply. That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. For half a second, I almost expected her to reach out and slap me. So, when she suddenly got up and walked to her door, I automatically jumped in fright.

She opened her office door, went out, and then slammed the door shut.

I sat for a minute in my chair, wondering how long she would be gone. Would I have enough time to search through her desk? Every time I got up enough confidence to try it, I thought I heard her moving towards the door. I was paranoid but with good reason.

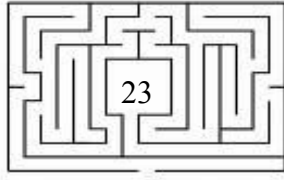
Finally, she came back in. Saying nothing, she walked over to her desk and sat down in her mighty chair. In silence, she leafed through some loose papers, signed a few documents, and typed something into her computer. I was almost afraid to say anything. Her silence scared me. She obviously hadn’t forgotten I was here, so why wasn’t she speaking? Did she think that would get me to

---

talk to her, if I sat long enough in boredom? Or was she just so frustrated with me that she didn't want to deal with me anymore? And what had she just done in those few minutes she had disappeared?

After fifteen minutes of silence, I was ready to crack. This was almost worse than not having information. My mouth was opened and I was ready to speak when her door opened.





“What the hell is wrong?” Travis asked angrily, staring at Dr. Pierce.

“This is not *my* doing,” Dr. Pierce replied defensively and then flicked her head in my direction. “She is the one who wanted to see you.”

It was only then that Travis acknowledged me. “Darcy?” He asked incredulously and then turned back to Dr. Pierce. “Are you serious?”

She nodded. “She insists.”

He turned back to me. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to talk to you,” I told him quickly. I could hardly believe he was in the same room as I was after days of trying to see him. Now all that mattered was that I be able to speak to him alone.

He sat down in the empty chair. “Go ahead.”

I glanced at Dr. Pierce and then back at him. “In private.”

He, too, looked at Dr. Pierce. “Lorraine. She wants you out of here.”

Dr. Pierce looked up sharply. “I am not leaving you alone together, not after the last conversation you two had.”

He sighed. “Alright. Just pretend she’s not here,” Travis told me.

I slouched down in my chair. No way was I going to talk to him about my file while she listened in. I shook my head.

Dr. Pierce was watching me. “Darcy, you are not in control here. I have graciously granted you pardon, even though you should be spending a day in the isolation room. Do not push me; I anger quickly.”

I still didn’t talk. This wouldn’t work out if she was here.

“Lorraine, this is wasting time. Can’t I just take her to an empty room, talk to her, and then bring her back?” Travis asked.

Dr. Pierce was looking at him thoughtfully. Finally, she said, "Alright, fine. But first, Travis, may I have a word with you outside?"

He rolled his eyes but got up and followed her out of the room. Their conversation took less than thirty seconds. Dr. Pierce quickly reentered her office.

"Darcy, go with Travis," she said sharply and pointed her finger at the door. I got up and left with haste.

Travis was waiting for me outside the office. We walked in silence as he led me to an unknown room.

When he finally stopped in front of a door, he took out a key, inserted it, and then opened the door for me. I walked in silence into the room.

It was a small room with a table and two chairs. But it was so small that it could have been used as a closet.

"What'd she say to you?" I asked him boldly as I sat down in one of the chairs.

He shrugged and sat down in the other chair. "She told me to remember everything you said and then to tell her after our conversation."

"Are you gonna tell her?" I asked him quietly.

He shook his head. "No," he answered in his 'duh' voice. "And you can help me make up a cover story."

I smiled at him. I was choosing to trust him purely on the fact that he had once offered me my file.

"Alright, before we start chatting about whatever it is that's so urgent, how did you possibly get Lorraine to listen to you?" He asked incredulously.

I hesitated before answering. It still felt weird to trust him. "You said I was important to her. So I stopped eating, talking, and performing in the stations until she agreed to call you down."

He raised his eyebrows. "Very impressive. Except for the eating part. That's stupid."

I shrugged. "It got you down here."

"Which brings us to the next interesting question: why is it so important that you talk to me?"

"Last time we talked, you were gonna give me my file. Can I have it?" I asked quickly and quietly.

He looked a little shocked. “*That’s* what this is about?”

I nodded. “Can I have it?” I repeated.

He looked at me closely. “I don’t have it.”

“What?” I asked, at first confused. What was he saying?

“I don’t have it,” he repeated. “I was reading your file that I got from Lorraine’s desk.”

“But I thought—”

“That because I was Lorraine’s stepson, I’d have access to everything she kept private?” He filled in, and I nodded. He shook his head. “Nope. Not at all. In fact, she hardly even talks about this place at home.”

That sentence alone had me weirded out. At home. Dr. Pierce at home. I shuddered unconsciously.

He continued. “She was talking about you with my dad the other day, and I just so happened to come upon your file on her desk at home. I think it was just coincidence that she had moved your file to her office down here right before I came,” he informed me. “I’m sorry, Darcy, but I don’t have any kind of special privileges that’ll get you your file.”

I was thinking desperately, trying to revise my plan. “But...but you saw it, right? Didn’t the first page say anything?”

He shrugged. It looked like he wanted to say something to help me, but he didn’t know how. “I hardly even skimmed it. I mean, I know the basics, that you can’t remember, that you’re in the T.U., you know, stuff like that. But all your memories and the detailed information on you are in the very back of the file.”

My heart was sinking fast. A sickening feeling was crossing over me.

“I’m sorry if you got the wrong impression. I would have given you the file in her office, really. But I know for a fact that she doesn’t let anyone except the elite doctors see the files, so she’d never let you have it. So, unless you straight up ask her for it, I don’t think there’s any way you can get it.”

“No, I already tried that. *You* couldn’t ask for it?” I asked, still holding on to a thread of hope.

He shook his head. “That would raise way too many heads. Everyone knows I hate this place, so why would I suddenly be

asking for a file? And conveniently right after I had a conversation with you, too.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I muttered, lost in thought. There had to be another way. I had with me the boss’s stepson. I had to use that to my advantage. “Do you remember *anything*?” I pleaded.

He pursed his lips, and I saw his eyes scanning the wall as he tried to recall my file. “Um, let’s see. Well, I know your birthday, most of your physical attributes, and the problem with you—”

“Which was...?” I interrupted.

“Well, the part about your loss of memory was bolded and starred, so that’s the one I read. I didn’t realize how important it was,” he apologized.

I tried to pretend like I wasn’t affected by that. “It’s okay. I’ll just...” I didn’t finish. I’ll just what? Suck it up? Try to move on? Ask someone else? I didn’t really have a lot of options. “It’s fine,” I finished lamely.

He was quiet for a minute. “If I hear anything more, Darcy, I’ll tell you.”

I smiled. “Thanks,” I replied, the only thing I could think to say.

“Are you okay?” He asked, almost kindly.

I nodded. “Yeah. I...never mind,” I changed my mind. I wasn’t sure I wanted to discuss my feelings with him.

“So, I guess if that’s all, you’ll be wanting to get back to the stations?” He asked, his eyes watching me closely.

I looked away from him. He had said he wasn’t working with Dr. Pierce, so I guess I would be able to tell him that I didn’t want to go back. But I didn’t know where the majority of his loyalties lay.

“I’m kidding, Darcy,” he said after I didn’t answer. “You’ve got to be insane to actually like those stations. We can stay down here, if you want.”

I looked back at him. “Really? You don’t...”

He shrugged. “As long as we have a good cover story, it doesn’t matter what we do down here.”

I was watching him closely, waiting to see any lie on his face. But I saw none. “There aren’t cameras in here?” I asked, looking around the room as if to confirm my suspicions.

He shook his head. “I’m pretty sure there are only cameras outside Lorraine’s office and in the stations. There might be some in the cells, and I guess there could be a few in the hallways, but there really wouldn’t be any point in pointing them in random rooms like this.”

That was good news. It didn’t quell my previous fears about being watched in the cells, but it didn’t fuel them either. “So, we can just stay?” I asked him again.

“Yeah. I mean, are you really gonna be missing anything back there?”

I shook my head empathically.

“Okay,” he answered casually.

“You’re not busy?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah, right!” He answered sarcastically. “When I’m forced to stay here, there’s never anything to do.”

My eyes widened. “She keeps you here, too?” I gasped. Her own stepson?

He chuckled. “No. I stay in this house three days a week as part of the custody agreement I worked out with my dad.”

“House?” I asked tentatively. I still didn’t know if this was such a good idea.

He nodded. “Yeah. Above this lab is an average, everyday house. It looks completely normal from the outside. And that’s where Lorraine and my dad live. Three days a week, I live here, too.”

Trying to comprehend everything, I continued, “And the other four days?”

“I live in my apartment.”

“You have your own apartment?” I was surprised. He seemed too young to be living by himself. And I had expected him to say that he lived with his mom. Where was his mom? I didn’t ask him that, though. That was way too personal.

“My dad got it for me on the basis that I’d spend three days a week with Lorraine and him.”

“That’s so weird,” I muttered.

“Yeah, I know,” he answered amiably. “Alright, so you know my story. What’s yours?” He asked, leaning against the table.

Something about his attitude made this whole thing seem like a casual conversation. A little more comfortable, I answered as casually as I could, “I don’t have a story, remember?” I reminded him, tapping my head with one finger.

He smirked. “What were you, born last year? You didn’t have anything interesting happen to you before you turned fifteen?”

I shrugged. “Not really. I had a boring life. I guess the best thing that was happening to me was that my sister was pregnant.”

“Really? Boy or girl?”

“I don’t know. She wasn’t going to find out until the birth,” I answered and, mentally calculating the months, my heart flipped. If I had missed a year, then Aubrey definitely had already given birth. “She already had the baby.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, looking closely at my face. “Isn’t that supposed to be a good thing?”

I shook my head and looked away. Oh God, Aubrey. Aubrey had her child. I missed her so much; I missed my family so much. This was too much to remember. Quietly, though, I answered his question. “No. I mean, yes, it’s good, but...I was supposed to be in the delivery room. She chose me to be her coach. And I missed it.”

He obviously was not used to dramatic emotions, because he made light of the situation as best as possible. “Well, if you think *that’s* bad, when my mom was pregnant with me, her water broke when my dad and she were at home. My dad was so scared that he drove right past the hospital entrance. Finally, they got to the hospital, but by that time, my mom was practically giving birth. My dad dropped her off at the entrance and went to find a parking spot, and by the time he got to the delivery room, I was already born.”

I smiled. “That sucks for your dad!”

“Nah,” he answered. “He didn’t want to be in the delivery room at all. This, at least, gave him a manly excuse as to why he

hadn't been there. See, my dad's this big CEO, but he's really just a big sissy."

"Sounds kind of like my brother-in-law's brother. He's a professional baseball player, right, but he sees a drop of blood, and you practically need to give him some smelling salts to revive him."

He grinned and changed the subject. "So, how old is your sister?"

I had to think about that. The last time I remembered seeing her, I had been fourteen, so she had been twenty-four. Her birthday was only three weeks after mine. "Twenty-six," I answered. "She got married right after college."

He thought about that. "I'm an only child," he told me, almost nostalgically. "Do you know how awkward it is to sit at the dinner table and feel like you have to start a conversation because no one else is there as a distraction?"

I did know the feeling, because most of the time, Aubrey lived in her own house with her husband. Instead, though, I asked, "Are you speaking from recent experience?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes. It's so annoying."

I tried to picture him at a dinner table with Dr. Pierce and his dad. I shuddered. "How can you even sit at the same table as Dr. Pierce?"

"I can't," he answered dryly. "That's why it's only three days a week, and two of those days, I go out with friends for the night."

"Is she anything like you?" I asked.

"Lorraine?" he asked, and when I nodded, he shook his head dramatically. "No. Holy crap, we're so different! There is absolutely nothing we have in common. Well, except, now, I guess we do."

I hadn't caught on. "What?"

"You," he clarified. "By the way, thank you so very much for giving her just one more excuse to talk to me more than usual," he told me sarcastically.

"I'm not forcing you," I reminded him.

"Right, right," he sighed.

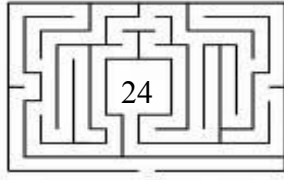
---

And suddenly, I realized where I was. It wasn't that I had exactly forgotten; I had just been caught up in the conversation. I didn't even realize we had been talking for this long. Dr. Pierce was probably sending out a search party.

"Should we start coming up with that cover story?" I asked quietly.

He nodded and opened his mouth. But, then, as an idea struck him, he shut it again. For a second, he was thinking. Then, with a smile on his face, he started, "I've got an idea."





**A**fter Dr. Bram had dropped me back off in my cell, I waited anxiously for Reid to arrive. If Travis's plan went through, and I had a feeling it would, then it meant I didn't have to keep quiet anymore. I could talk. And I knew exactly whom I wanted to talk to.

While I waited, I tried not to focus on my stomach. I had a constant feeling of sickness that was calming down as my stomach got used to the idea of no food. But I was weaker today, I noticed, than yesterday, and especially than the day before yesterday. And that wasn't good.

When Reid finally came back to our cell, I practically tackled him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I repeated, running up to him and grabbing him.

He looked startled. "Whoa! Calm down," he told me, but I could hear the excitement in his voice. "I see you've come around."

"Yeah, and I'm *really* sorry about not talking to you. I wasn't mad at you, I swear, I was just..."

"It's okay, Darcy," he interrupted. "You don't have to explain. I get it."

"No, that's not..." I started to reply but then stopped. I wasn't actually sure if it was okay to tell him all the details of my talk with Dr. Pierce and Travis. "Thanks," was my answer.

"So, was life too boring for you to stay quiet?" He teased.

"Yes!" I answered sincerely and then added even more honestly, "And thanks for talking to me, even when I wasn't talking back."

He shrugged. "I know what it's like to be lonely," he said simply.

I smiled at him, and we sat down at his wall. "I liked your story, by the way," I told him.

"I thought you would. Are you still confused?"

"Yeah, but definitely not as much."

Now I was confused about things totally different, but I knew Reid wouldn't be able to help me.

"Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm guessing you didn't get a second offense?" Reid asked hopefully.

I shook my head. "I didn't."

He sighed in relief. "Good. So, what happened? You weren't mad, right? What was with the sudden mood change?"

I looked up at him and, with my eyes locked on his, replied quietly, "I can't tell you why I was upset before. But I can tell you that things worked out today."

"Cryptic," was his reply, but he didn't seem to care that I didn't tell him anything.

"Sorry," I answered. "But it's kind of confusing."

"No worries. I'm tough; I can handle it," he told me, but I could still hear the curiosity in his voice. "So, did you have to meet with Dr. Pierce?"

"Today, I did, yeah," I answered.

"That sucks," he agreed. "But don't get the second offense, okay?"

I nodded. "I'm not looking to get that, either," I said and then, as an afterthought, asked, "Have you ever gotten a second offense?"

He shook his head. "Only a first offense, which kind of scared me into at least performing, if not actually interacting with other people. Eventually, I started to accept all this."

"Has anyone ever gotten a third offense?"

"No. Well, not in my time here, at least. There've been rumors, like I said, but no one really knows."

I thought about what he had just said about his first offense. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

He shook his head. "No. Go ahead."

I paused. Was it gonna hurt him to talk about his past? "Before...before all this—the lab stuff and everything—when you lived with your parents...did you talk a lot?"

He thought for a minute. “Well, first of all, it’s just ‘parent.’ My mom passed away when I was younger,” he told me quietly and, for a second, I thought he wasn’t going to answer my question. I was getting ready to apologize when he began again, his voice just as natural as ever, “And I wasn’t the most outgoing person in the world. I didn’t really live in such a great neighborhood, so I learned to keep my mouth shut pretty early on. When I got here, my instincts took over, and I just kind of stopped talking until the fear had passed.”

I was unintentionally staring at him with eyebrows raised.

“What?” He asked, smiling slightly.

I jumped, realizing that I was staring at him like he was a sculpture in a museum. “Nothing. Well, it’s just, you seem totally...calm when talking about...”

“It doesn’t bother me to talk about it. Not anymore, at least. When I first came here, everything made me flinch. Kind of like you,” he added, smirking. “But as the days became more monotonous, and I realized what was happening here, it got better. Then, one day, it didn’t hurt so much to think about it. And then it didn’t even hurt to talk about it. But it takes a while, so...”

“What?” I asked when he didn’t continue.

He smiled. “I forgot you don’t remember. I was about to tell you not to worry about what happened, but I guess I don’t really know about your situation.”

“Yeah, well, me neither,” I answered.

“Now, can I ask *you* a question?” He asked quietly.

I nodded. He deserved to ask one question, and he would accept a refusal to answer if I told him I didn’t want to talk about it.

“Well, it’s just, I’ve never really met anyone who couldn’t remember their past,” he started hesitantly. “Is it...weird? I mean, does it hurt to think about it?”

I paused to think about his question. How to explain this? “It doesn’t hurt to think about what happened to me, because I don’t remember. It’s like asking you if it hurt when your sister died, only you don’t even have a sister. I mean, how are you even supposed to know what that feels like, because it never even happened. It’s like that. I can’t even remember what happened, so

how do I even compare it to anything? The way I see it, there's nothing that would have caused me this pain. Get it?"

He nodded. "That is really, really odd. I can't even imagine what it feels like."

"Weird," I answered his question. Then I took another breath. "But if you're asking if I feel any pain at all, then I'd give a definite yes. The pain comes from the loss I feel for my parents; I miss them so much. I miss my family and my friends and my life so much, and I don't even have a reason for not liking my old life, because I don't remember that something happened during that time. There is nothing in my old life that I'm glad I'm away from; I don't remember that part. So all I feel is the indescribable pain," I told him quietly. I was trying to keep the tears from coming up. I couldn't cry here, not after I had pushed my emotions away for so long. "Reid, it hurts to remember them, to think about them, but I can't stop, because I miss them so much. But the searing pain, the mind numbing, terrifying pain? That comes from how unbelievably scared I am to find out what I missed in the last year, what happened that made me forget. What could have been so horrible in my life that my brain blocked out that memory? That's what hurts."

Reid wasn't looking at me anymore. He was staring at the wall across from us. I thought for a minute that he had zoned out, and I was almost ready to feel hurt that he didn't care. But then he spoke, and his voice cracked. He had been crying. "Darcy, I'm...I can't even imagine. I never...I never even thought of that. I didn't even think of that. That must be so, so horrible," he whispered.

"Yeah," I whispered back. I felt awful that I was causing Reid this pain. He had way too much to deal with without me piling on more problems. I quickly changed the subject. "So, for now, I'm clinging to those great memories I have. Like spraining my toe."

He chuckled. "Yeah, good times, good times," he sighed.

"You weren't even there!" I laughed.

"And I'll regret that all my life!"

The mood was lighter as the guards delivered our meals. I ate mine slowly, making sure to savor each bite. After my first offense, I never knew when I would be skipping a meal. Neither of

us really said much after dinner, even though we could have. Both of us seemed to be in our own little worlds.

I got up way before the alarm was scheduled to go off. As I headed towards my bed, Reid said, "It's not even close to ringing, you know."

"Yeah, I know. I'm really tired, though." My lie was only partly untrue. I really was tired. But mostly I wanted to think in my own little space.

"Yes, it must have been a tiring day, sitting around for hours on end," he responded sarcastically.

I laughed sarcastically at him before climbing the ladder. When I had gotten as comfortable as possible, I settled into my thoughts.

My mind immediately rewound to my conversation with Travis just this afternoon. Our plan had to work. It had to.

*"I've got an idea," Travis said.*

*"Well?" I asked expectantly when he didn't continue.*

*"You said Lorraine finally called me down because you weren't listening to her at all."*

*"Yeah, pretty much. Why?" I asked.*

*He was staring into space again, his mind playing through different scenarios. I could almost see the gears in his brain turning as he thought about different possibilities. "Okay. This might just work. What if...no, no, wait...okay, what if I go back and tell Lorraine that I was the only one you'd tell your thoughts to."*

*I thought that through. That might work. "What if she asks why?"*

*"Do you have to have a reason?"*

*I nodded. "I want to." While he mulled over my answer, I thought about his plan. It might work. But what would my excuse be? "How about if you tell her I only want to talk to you because...because..."*

*"Because I give you a sense of normalcy?" He guessed.*

*"Yes!" I exclaimed. That made sense. Yeah, she would buy that. "Okay, okay, so you tell her that I had been asking for you because..."*

*"The other day," he interrupted, continuing the story, "the other day, I told you that..."*

*"That you could get me my file if I cooperated!" I filled in.*

*"No. No, 'cause then Lorraine would know that I was helping you," Travis dismissed that.*

*"Unless you told her that you were pretending to be on my side so that I'd tell you all about me."*

*He thought about that. "Like a double agent kind of thing?"*

*I nodded.*

*"Hmm. That could work. Yeah, that could work. Lorraine would think I'm working with her, trying to get information for her. Meanwhile, I'd be helping you. That's a good idea, actually."*

*"Alright, so, what's our story?" I asked, trying to bring it all together.*

*He paused. "The other day, while Lorraine was tending to David, you and I got to talking. Knowing that Lorraine was so interested in your story, I started questioning you about what you remembered," he started and then hesitated. I watched as his eyes lit up when he got a new idea. "When I heard that you wanted your file, I told you that if you cooperated, I could give it to you, hoping that you would then go to Lorraine and tell her what she wanted to know. And although you wanted to cooperate, you didn't feel comfortable around Lorraine because she was too much of a doctor for you," he added quickly. Going off of his previous statement, he followed his train of thought, "I was the only normal person you could talk to. And that's why you wouldn't listen to anyone else; you needed to get your story off your chest, but you couldn't tell anyone but me."*

*He paused. "How's that?"*

*Pretty darn good! "Perfect."*

*He smiled. "Great."*

*"Oh!" I started as an afterthought. "Put in there somewhere that I'll continue doing the stations, and I'll do what the doctors say, as long as it's you I'm talking to. Meanwhile, you can find out everything you need to know, subtly of course, from Dr. Pierce."*

*He nodded. "Alright. That's manageable. I'll talk to Lorraine after you're back in your cell."*

*Before we left the room, Travis warned me, "If she questions you about our conversation, just say that you told me you didn't feel comfortable around anyone else, and that the rest of our conversation was mostly me talking, trying to make a deal between us."*

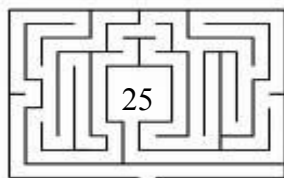
*"Okay," I answered, impressed by his plan. "Should I continue my silent treatment?"*

*He pursed his lips and then shook his head. "No. Start talking again. That'll show that I have some mysterious power over you."*

*My eyebrows rose. "You're pretty good at lying."*

*He smiled. "Thanks."*

It was going to work. It had to work. I hadn't left Dr. Pierce a choice.



The next morning, I was hardly out of my cell before Nora came running up to me. “Where were you?”

I turned around to face her. “Huh?”

“I haven’t seen you in, like, three days. What happened?”

“Oh. It’s kind of hard to explain,” I answered. I appreciated her concern, honestly, but I didn’t want to keep lying to people, so maybe people could stop asking me about what happened?

“You’re okay, though, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, definitely.”

“Good,” she sighed.

We walked in silence to the bathroom. Then, when I was going to take a shower, she called, “Don’t let me forget to tell you something really big at breakfast.”

I turned to her eagerly. “What is it?”

“It’s too long to tell right now,” she answered. “Wait ‘til breakfast.”

I hated when people were mysterious like that.

I didn’t rush through my shower like I had the day before. I didn’t take my sweet time, either, but I let myself bask in the hot water for a few more minutes than necessary. When I got back to my cell, Reid was already sitting at his wall.

“You’re late,” he reminded me.

“I know,” I sighed, sitting down across from him.

After Mr. Netcross had called my name, I didn’t listen to him anymore. When he was coming up to my name in the station listings, I listened attentively, praying that I wouldn’t be put in Memory.

“Calandra- Free.”

“Decker- Memory.”

“Esposito- Athleticism.”

I turned to Reid. “He skipped me!”



He, apparently, had noticed that. Although he looked worried, he shrugged and gave me a slightly sympathetic look.

I listened closely to the rest of the names, hoping he had just forgotten to say my name or that I was placed at the end of the list for some reason. But my name never came up.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked Reid when station listings was over.

“Don’t worry; it happens a lot. Netccros skips over names almost daily. During breakfast, one of the doctors will tell you where to go.”

“Alright,” I sighed. It may have been my own paranoia, but something about this didn’t seem like an everyday common mistake.

We were waiting in the line for food when Nora came up behind us.

“Hey,” she started, grabbing a tray and following us.

“Hey. So what’d you want to tell me?” I asked, getting right to the point.

“Oh. It’s about David,” she replied.

“Oh, you mean what happened three days ago?” Reid asked.

She nodded.

“Wait, does David have blonde hair?” I asked.

Nora nodded. “And he’s tall and thin,” she filled in.

“I’ve seen him before,” I told her.

“Really? When?”

“When Dr. Pierce brought me to her office. He was in the waiting area. And then I overheard his name after that code went off.”

She nodded. “Yeah. He started it, which isn’t a surprise but—”

“Started what?” I stopped her.

“He somehow stole the keys to the Lifers’ cells and unlocked them. They were wandering around, like, three floors above us,” she told us.

“That’s definitely a third offense,” Reid said and asked Nora simultaneously.

She shook her head. "That's the thing. Pierce totally didn't even care. He only got two days in the isolation room."

"Seriously?" Reid asked, but I was confused.

"Wait. Isn't that bad?" I asked.

"Normally, yeah, but trying to leave is, like, the worst thing anyone can ever do here. He should have been kicked out of this place," Reid said.

"So, you don't like him?" I asked as I grabbed myself a plate of French toast.

Reid shook his head vigorously, clearly stating his opinion of David, but Nora said, "It's not that we don't like him—"

"Yes, it is," Reid interrupted her.

"—it's that he causes too much trouble," Nora continued, eyeing Reid. "And when one person gets in trouble, it comes down on all of us."

"What? Why?"

She shrugged. "I guess they think that we should control one another."

"That's stupid," I said bluntly.

"Well, it's been working fine until David came," Reid muttered.

As we headed back to our table, I couldn't help thinking about David. Judging by the stories Reid and Nora told me, I could infer that this wasn't the first time David had tried to escape. "I don't get it, though. Why does he keep trying to escape? I mean, apart from the obvious reasons."

"I'm guessing what you're asking is why does he keep trying to escape even though he keeps getting caught?"

I nodded.

"I dunno. I've never really talked to him."

Casey sat down next to us. "Oh my gosh, you guys will never guess what I just heard!"

"Is it about David?" Reid guessed.

"No," she answered. "It's about Ms. Nancy."

"Oh, do tell," Nora commanded, her obvious love of gossip evident.

"Dr. Alden just totally called her out for not being a doctor."

“No way!” Nora exclaimed.

“Yeah, I’m serious! Cheyenne just told me she heard Dr. Bram telling Dr. Mong. Apparently, Dr. Alden finally got so fed up with her little tantrums that he started yelling about how she shouldn’t even be here.”

“That’s hilarious!” Nora laughed. “Ten bucks says she’s gonna leave tomorrow.”

“Nah,” Reid put in. “She won’t leave. She likes the power she feels here, even if she isn’t a doctor.”

“I’m with Nora on this one,” Casey told Reid. “Cheyenne says Dr. Bram was afraid Ms. Nancy was gonna throw something at Dr. Alden.”

While Nora, Casey, Reid, and the other kids around us started a debate over the outcome of the Alden-Nancy fight, I tried to wrap my mind around their conversation.

The situation seemed surreal. I really couldn’t believe that, with everything that had gone on in their previous lives and everything they had to deal with presently, they could just gossip and talk normally. It seemed like there was something I didn’t understand about this place. There must have been something I was missing, because how was it that my friends could act completely normal, talking and laughing, when I was a total nutcase? If it wasn’t for the fact that I knew they were brainwashed and even more confused than me because they bought into the crap the doctors told them, I would almost be envying them. As it was, I think I was kind of scared for them. I was pretty sure I was the only one at the table who had a true perspective on the horrors of this place.

As I was thinking, I took in the cafeteria. My eyes couldn’t help wandering to the Lifers.

They were all just sitting at their table, eating and talking quietly, all looking perfectly content. What was going on inside their heads? What would it be like to have no past at all? Were they scared? Did they know what was happening here? What happened to them after Dr. Pierce was finished doing whatever she did with them?

As much as the kids at my table hated the Lifers, I couldn’t help noticing the similarities between the two groups. In fact, the

kids in the T.U. were being slightly hypocritical, because they complained about the Lifers being content and normal, but weren't the kids at my table acting normally now? And, at the end of the day, the same thing that had been brought upon the Lifers with the help of the drug seemed to be happening to the kids in the T.U. without any aid whatsoever.

The kids in the T.U. were slowly losing their past at this place. And, to me, losing your past voluntarily sucked more than having it erased.

My eyes were still skimming over the kids in the room. As my eyes searched the room, they landed on Dr. Bram walking between the tables. Before I could look away, his eyes caught mine.

As if inspired by my stare, he started to walk towards me. I quickly turned back to the group of people talking around me and made myself look busy.

"Miss Calloway?" A voice said behind me.

I cringed internally and then turned to him, fully aware that everyone else was watching us. "Yes?"

Dr. Bram was standing right above me so that I had to look up in order to see his face. Highly uncomfortable.

"I'm sure that you are aware that you were not assigned a station today," he started and didn't wait to see my reaction. "Dr. Pierce and I are in the process of revising your schedule. Therefore, we'd prefer if you spent today in your cell."

I didn't know whether to scowl or to cheer. Had our plan worked? Had Travis convinced Dr. Pierce?

"Okay," I told him sullenly, choosing to show disappointment rather than excitement.

He left quickly, and I turned back to everyone else. They made a show of pretending they hadn't heard our brief conversation.

"Jeez, you spend more time in your cell than all of us combined!" Nora exclaimed, the first one to break the silence.

"Yeah, I know," I sighed.

Reid, however, was looking skeptical. "I wonder what they're doing to your schedule."

I shrugged.

When he saw that I, too, didn't know what was going on, he muttered, "You should have asked."

He was more curious than I was. Although, truthfully, I had a funny feeling that I knew what was going on. Or, at least I hoped I did.

When the bell rang, we all got up. I knew my way well enough to navigate back to my cell, so I walked alone in no hurry to get to my destination.

I knew I was going to go insane with boredom today. I could almost feel it. The need to find out if our plan had worked was overwhelming. I was restless from lack of things to do, and I didn't want to think about anything. I had no energy left to argue with myself.

Technically, I didn't have to stay in my cell. Because there was a guard standing at either end of the hallway, the cells weren't locked. The other days, I had stayed in my cell out of habit. Today, though, I took advantage of my limited freedom.

I walked the length of the hallway, going to the far right of my cell. One by one, I examined each cell, sixteen in total, eight on each side. Each cell had a bunk bed, nothing else, but I still got some entertainment in entering and looking around the different cells.

Then, I paced. I paced the length of the hallway, taking my sweet time going up and down the row.

When I was finally bored enough that even pacing wasn't doing anything for me, I went back to my own cell and flopped down onto the bottom bunk. There I stayed until Reid nudged me awake.

"You look like you had a fun day," was the first thing he said to me.

I sat up slowly, rubbing my eyes.

"So, what'd you do?" He waded into the conversation.

I walked over to my wall, sat down, and then said, "Nothing. I looked into the other cells."

He looked at me quizzically. "But they're all alike."

"Yeah, well, you try entertaining yourself for eight hours," I answered.

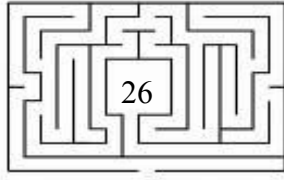
He shook that off. "Any more visits from the doctors?"

---

“Nope.”

“Well, that’s good.”

It wasn’t good. I wanted them to come to me, to tell me that they had worked out my schedule, that it was better if I talked to Travis once a week or something. Anything but this. But I answered, “Yeah, I guess.”



**A**t breakfast the next morning, I felt renewed hope. I was talking to Reid about nothing at all when I saw Dr. Bram enter the cafeteria.

Apparently, so did Nora. “Why does he keep coming in here all of a sudden? He *never* comes in here.”

We watched oh-so-subtly as he scanned the room, looking for someone. I thought I had a pretty good idea who that someone was, and my suspicions were correct when his eyes landed on mine. He started towards us.

“Crap,” Reid muttered.

“Darcy,” Dr. Bram started, and I wasted no time in facing him.

“Yes?” I asked quickly, trying to keep my hope-filled voice dimmed.

“Darcy, would you come with me please,” he commanded. It wasn’t a question.

When we had exited the cafeteria, Dr. Bram started walking in the direction of Dr. Pierce’s office. Oh, please let this be it!

“There have been some slight changes made to your schedule, Darcy,” Dr. Bram started.

I didn’t dare ask what kind of changes.

Luckily, he felt I should know about these adjustments. “Dr. Pierce will fill you in on the details, but, basically, we’ve come to the conclusion that the stations are not going to be as effective on you as they are on everyone else.”

I forced myself to remain calm, to not read into his comments. I didn’t let myself feel hope until I heard Dr. Pierce say these words herself. We walked in silence for the rest of the way. I could almost, at one point, tell where we were in relation to Dr. Pierce’s office. That probably wasn’t such a great accomplishment.

Dr. Bram knocked twice on Dr. Pierce's door. As he went to knock a third time, the door opened quickly.

"Thank you," Dr. Pierce said quietly to Dr. Bram and moved aside so that I could go through. Dr. Bram didn't follow.

Dr. Pierce closed the waiting room door and led me into her office. I sat down in my usual seat and waited for her to start.

"Well, Darcy, I must say, this has been a rollercoaster ride, dealing with you," Dr. Pierce said. "Your abilities are beyond any initial expectations I may have had."

My abilities? What abilities was she talking about? Had she found out something more about me?

"Before I delve into what is going to be happening, I feel I need to tell you something. Darcy, you have an incredible mind, you are an asset to this facility, and we would give anything to help you feel better about us. But that does not mean you can walk all over us, abusing your privileges or the doctors we have here. Yes, it is true that you are valued more highly than some of the other children here, but please do not think that you can do anything you want. There are still rules here, and, although we have bent them so that you will be more comfortable, they still apply to you. I do not want to be having these conversations with you on a daily basis, because, frankly, I have better things to do. I expect you to control yourself, Darcy, to control your emotions and your actions. I will not be lenient with you the next time you cause trouble. Are we clear?"

I nodded. As long as this plan went through, I didn't care about any of the rules.

"Thank you," she replied. "Moving right along: it has come to my attention that you no longer feel comfortable talking with anyone but Travis about your past."

I must have still been looking confused over her previous speech, because when I didn't answer, she said, "You must be wondering how I found that out. Travis told me everything you two discussed in private. And, yes, I am aware that he promised you he would not do so, but I insisted he tell me because I believed it was in your best interest. It turns out I was correct."



I tried to keep my face blank as she talked. Meanwhile, my heart was thumping painfully, and I was praying that our plan would work. So far, so good.

“Dr. Bram and I, and then Travis and I, had a long conversation about your future here at the lab, and your inflexibility. After a lengthy discussion, we have decided that it would be best for Travis to act as a makeshift mediator for you until you feel more at ease here. You can tell him what you remember and then he, in turn, will tell me what he thinks is important. I think that is a very fair agreement until you decide you would like to talk to Dr. Bram or me about what happened. Do you agree?”

I pretended to think about that, but inside, I was soaring. It had worked. We had done it!

“Darcy?” She asked, still waiting for my answer.

I nodded. “I agree.”

She smiled like she had just won some huge battle. “Great. Now—”

“Dr. Bram said I wouldn’t have to do the stations.”

She nodded. “Yes, that is correct. We would like to give you as much time as you need with Travis.”

Unbelievable. How the heck had Travis gotten her to buy this?

“Now, you are to report to my office three days a week, where—”

Thinking quickly, I asked, “Why three?” That’s right. Travis wouldn’t have told me about him coming here three days a week if we had talked about what Dr. Pierce thought we had talked about.

She didn’t like my question. “That is what we have decided would work best,” she told me sternly. “You will be met here by Travis, who will take you to a private area of his choice.”

I was only partly listening. Three days a week. That meant for the other four days, I was to be put in the stations. Who’s idea had it been for it to be only three days? If it was Travis’s, then I could see why. But if it was Dr. Pierce’s, maybe I could change that. I couldn’t voice these thoughts, though, so I nodded slightly.

She looked at me closely. "Can I trust you to find your way to my office without taking any detours? If not, I can always send Dr. Bram to guide you here."

"No, it's okay. I can walk by myself," I told her. Believe me, I needed no other incentive besides Travis.

She didn't continue to talk, so I took this opportunity to ask her about the fact that I hadn't been assigned to a station. What else was I supposed to do today after this meeting was over?

"Mr. Nettcros skipped over my name today," I told her bluntly.

"Hmm?" She asked, looking up from her paperwork.

"I wasn't given a station."

She was staring at me like she thought there was something wrong with me. "Darcy, did we not just go through this? You are going to be working with Travis," she told me slowly, like I was mentally incapable of understanding her.

Maybe I was. I was seeing Travis today? Did he get my file after talking to Dr. Pierce? I was suddenly very excited.

Trying to calm my voice, I answered, "Oh. When?"

She looked at her watch. "Now."

I soon found out that 'now' really meant 'twenty-minutes from now.' I was forced to sit for twenty minutes in awkward silence as Dr. Pierce went through papers, tons of papers. When the door finally opened, I was ready to praise the heavens.

"Sorry I'm late," Travis told Dr. Pierce, though he didn't sound sorry at all. He was, once again, in his black outfit, just like the other days. Why was I still surprised to see him like this?

Dr. Pierce smiled at him. "Take your time," she answered amiably.

He turned to me. "Ready?"

I pretended to look hesitant as I stood up and followed Travis out of the room, but I was almost afraid my eagerness was showing. Neither of us talked until we were walking down the hallway.

"You are my hero!" I exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

"What?" He asked modestly.

"Get her to believe our story! She's acting like it was her idea all along."

He shrugged. "It was actually really easy."

"I'm serious, though. You should have seen her in there. She was smiling all smugly, thinking she would finally crack me."

He smiled. "That's her first mistake."

It felt great to finally have some control over my life. I was in the best mood I had ever been in at the lab. I suddenly didn't feel like bringing up the 'three days' dilemma I had been thinking over. I changed the subject. "So, where are we going?"

"Well, I wanna take this slow with her," he started. "We don't want to look too eager. So, for today and tomorrow, at least, we'll be going to our special little closet."

"Okay," I told him amiably. "Did you find out anything new?"

He shook his head. "She's guarding your file even more fiercely now. We're gonna have to play this really subtly."

"Alright," I answered.

When we reached the closet and he unlocked the door, I stepped inside and took my seat.

"So," he started. "What are we going to talk about today?"

"My memory?" I guessed, thinking for one second that we were actually going to try to stick to Dr. Pierce's plan.

"That's boring," he answered.

"Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing, though?"

He turned and got up from his seat. "Do you see any cameras around here?" He asked, pointing to the walls. "'Cause I don't. No one's watching, and I don't have a clue about your memory, so what excuse do you have left for wanting to talk about it? Pick another topic."

"Okay...how about this lab?"

"Ugh! No, not that, either," he complained. "Look, don't you wanna talk about something normal? How about them Yankees?" He joked.

"I don't like sports," I informed him.

"There's a topic! Okay, then what *do* you like?"

"Music," I told him immediately.

Suddenly, he was interested. He sat back down and leaned against the table. "What kind?"

“All kinds. Any kind,” I answered. “Everyone in my family likes something different, so all their tastes kind of blended into me.”

“Really? What’s your favorite?”

I thought for a minute. I couldn’t believe I was actually discussing music. God, how my world had changed. “I’d have to say either *Skillet* or *Korn*.”

He laughed. “Christian rock and metal. That’s quite a difference.”

“You know them?” I asked, kind of surprised.

“Yes, I know them. Not so much a fan of *Skillet*, but I’ve heard them.”

“So, what, you’re a music connoisseur?”

“Nah, I just like music,” he answered and then stopped. “Wait. Who in your family has such different tastes in music?”

“Well, my sister loves *Skillet*, and her husband burnt me a CD of *Korn*.”

“They must be quite the couple.”

“Actually, they are completely the opposite.”

“Well, you know what they say about opposites: they attract.”

“I *hate* that saying,” I told him honestly.

He chuckled. “Why?”

“It’s so cliché!” I told him, and when he continued to smile, I finished, “Anyway, you haven’t told me what *your* favorite kind of music is.”

He pursed his lips. “Guess.”

I raised my eyebrows and smiled. “Heavy metal.”

He laughed. “That’s being prejudiced against my clothes!”

I nodded innocently.

“No, heavy metal isn’t my favorite,” he said, thoroughly enjoying himself.

“Some kind of scary, depressing, or scream-o-rama music,” I guessed, looking down at his clothes. “And that’s totally vague so I have to be right.”

He smiled and nodded. “After we’re allowed to upgrade to a slightly bigger room, I’ll play my favorite artists for you.”

“Who are they?”

“Wait and see,” he commanded.

“I told you mine!” I reminded him.

“And that was very nice of you,” he answered slyly. “But, truthfully, I probably could have guessed your favorite band.”

“Yeah, right!”

“Trust me, Darcy, you’re very easily read.”

“I am not!” I exclaimed defensively, and when he shrugged, I said, “Fine. Then tell me something about myself.”

He squinted his eyes and pretended to be thinking. Finally, he said, “You love to read.”

“How’d you... Wait, you definitely read that in my file,” I accused him.

“I told you before, I got to page one, that’s all. There was nothing about your interests on the first page. I’m just perceptive. So I was right?”

“Yes. But that’s a very easy guess.”

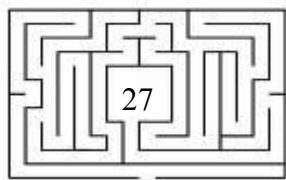
“Okay,” he sighed and then stared at me. After a second, he said, “You don’t like roller coasters.”

My eyes narrowed. “That’s right, too. Seriously, how did you know that?”

“I have talent,” he answered.

And that’s how we spent our day. We got to know each other.

When it was time to go, we made another plan. Travis was going to tell Dr. Pierce that I remembered eating a cupcake, just to keep her happy. That should do it. With any luck, things would go just as smoothly as they had today.



“What happened?” Reid asked the minute Dr. Bram dropped me off and left our cell.

I shrugged. “I didn’t have to go to the stations.”

“Obviously,” he stated. “What’d you do with Dr. Bram?”

“Nothing. He brought me to Dr. Pierce.”

His eyes widened. “Again? Isn’t this, like, your fourth visit with her?”

I nodded.

“So, what happened?” He asked again, impatient.

I wasn’t comfortable talking about Travis just yet. “We talked.”

“Ugh, not that again. You say that every time,” he groaned.

“Because that’s what we do every time,” I told him, but I felt bad about lying.

He sighed. “Alright, fine. Any more info on your memory, or lack of?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Everyone’s still clueless.”

He pursed his lips. “Weird,” he speculated but didn’t take long to think about that. “Well, when you *do* figure it out, I’ll be the first to know, right?”

I didn’t hesitate, even though what I said was a lie. “Duh. I’ll sprint to your station, pull you out, and bring you back to our cell if I have to.”

He smiled. “Good. ‘Cause I’m just as interested as you are.”

“I know,” I answered, but I didn’t think ‘interested’ was quite the word I would use to describe what I was feeling.

“You’re so weird,” Reid said suddenly.

“What? Where’d that come from?” I asked defensively.

“Okay, maybe that came out wrong,” he adjusted, smiling slightly. “What I meant to say was that it’s so odd how the doctors treat you differently. And there’s been so many weird things happening to you here that no one else has ever had happen to them.”

“Thank you for making me feel so much better,” I told him sarcastically. “But, if you’re wondering, I’ve already figured that one out. I get more stares from people than a nine-headed mouse.”

“Where do you come up with these sayings?” he mused, laughing at my recent analogy.

“Why do you keep making fun of me?” I whined playfully. “Besides, it’s from *The Nutcracker*.”

“But no one says that!” he insisted. “No, seriously, don’t you ever wonder why they singled you out, specifically?”

“I already know why. It’s because I don’t remember what happened to me.”

“Or maybe it’s *because* of what happened to you before—”

“It’s not!” I interrupted. That wasn’t an option. I didn’t want to think about that at all.

“How do you...” he started, but when he saw the expression on my face, he understood. “Oh. Sorry.”

I shrugged, trying to pass it off as nothing. “It’s okay.”

But we both knew it wasn’t nothing. That was why the air was suddenly tense. Reality was an awkward topic.

It was after dinner that Reid started up the conversation again. “So, do you think you’ll be in the stations tomorrow?”

“No. Dr. Pierce said I had to go to her office right after breakfast.”

“Doctor’s pet,” he muttered.

“Yeah, *that’s* what it is,” I told him sarcastically. “Like I really want to be spending all my time with her.”

It kind of scared me how well I could lie. If he only knew what I was really doing. But I couldn’t tell him. I wanted to be sure this wasn’t just temporary or a trick before I told anyone our brilliant plan.

“At least you get breakfast, though. It’s the most important meal of the day,” he told me.

“Thanks, Mom,” I answered.

When we arrived in the cafeteria the next morning we were immediately met by Nora. "Hey!" she answered a bit breathlessly.

"Hey," Reid and I answered simultaneously.

"David's back," she told us, wasting no time.

"Ugh," Reid groaned, but I asked quickly, "Where?"

She motioned with her head to the far end of the table where our friends were currently sitting. My eyes slowly scanned each face until they reached the blonde, scowling boy.

"He doesn't have many friends," I commented.

"Don't even think about it," Reid warned.

"What?" I asked quickly.

"Do not try and make friends with him. He is way too much of an instigator. I swear, he's gonna get us all in trouble one day. I hate him."

"Don't be shy about sharing your feelings," I told him wryly. "I just don't see why you guys have this mega hatred for him."

"Darcy, try and understand me," Reid told me slowly. "There are some punishments the doctors give out that involve all of us. His first month here, he almost made us all get dinner taken away. Do you see how that could plant that little hatred seed? Stay away from him."

"Alright, alright," I reassured him, shying away from his intense voice.

His opinions, though, confused me. As I sat down with my breakfast, I couldn't help thinking about the likeness between David and me. Although definitely not as extreme as David, I had gotten a first offense in my first week. I wasn't nuts about following the rules, although I knew when to lay low. In my eyes, David was either really stupid or really eager to leave this place. Going with the latter since I, too, needed to leave this place, I actually felt sympathy towards him.

But Reid didn't hate me like he hated David. Was that because I hadn't done anything as dramatic as David? Would he hate me if I tried to do something that drastic? He hadn't been happy when I had gotten my first offense. We were friends, though. Had something else happened between Reid and David? Or did Reid just not know David enough to form a friendship like we had?



My thoughts circled around these questions until the bell rang.

“See ya,” I told Reid, and he waved in a fatalistic manner. We separated at the door.

I walked quickly to Dr. Pierce’s office and knocked loudly on the door to the waiting room.

No one answered. I knocked again. When no one came to the door, I tried the knob. It was open.

I walked slowly into the waiting room, listening for anyone there. I heard voices coming from behind Dr. Pierce’s slightly opened office door. I walked over and was about to knock on that door when I stopped. Dr. Pierce was talking about me. I recognized the other voice as Travis’s.

“...I think I can do this,” Travis was saying. “Darcy’s just scared. But if we stick to your plan, maybe she’ll learn to trust you.”

“I just really need her to make progress! This is so important and—”

“I’m working on it. She’s hard to crack,” he interrupted, playing his part perfectly.

“Alright,” she sighed. “Today, try to get her to tell you some of her childhood memories,” she suggested.

“Do you think I should have her file, just in case she tries to lie?” He asked casually. Interesting tactic.

There was a pause, and I prayed she wasn’t suspicious. Finally, she answered, “No. I want to see if I can trust her first.”

She hadn’t caught on. Her tone wasn’t questioning.

“Will do,” he answered.

I could hear Travis shifting, so I knocked quickly on the office door. Travis opened the door.

“How long were you here?” Dr. Pierce asked.

“I just came in through that door,” I answered, trying to look innocent.

She looked like she believed me, because she nodded and said, “Alright. Travis, we will talk later.”

He smiled slightly at her and left the room. Assuming he was leading me, I followed after him.

When we were well away from her office, he asked quietly, "So how much did you hear?"

"Not much. I heard you tell her you thought I was scared," I told him.

He nodded.

I waited to see or hear his reaction. When I got none, I asked, "Do you think I'm scared?"

He shrugged. "I can't tell yet," he answered honestly. There was a slight pause before he continued, "Do you?"

I nodded. "Yes."

He looked at me quickly, searching my face for something. Then, he said, "Don't ever let Lorraine know that."

His tone was serious. I tried to read his expression, but his face had gone blank. I didn't ask why he had said that. I almost didn't want to know. Instead, we walked in silence until we got to our closet.

As I took my usual seat, I began a question in almost the same way he had asked me the first time we had met in this room. "Before we start whatever it is we're supposed to be starting, can I ask you something?"

"Sure," he answered, smiling slightly. Obviously, he had noticed.

"What's with the black?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I was wondering when you'd ask. I thought it would be a little sooner, though."

"Why?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, that's always the first thing people notice about me."

"It *is* kind of in-your-face," I replied.

"I guess," he chuckled, but he didn't continue.

"So, are you gonna answer my question?" I continued.

He shrugged. "There's nothing really to answer. I like black."

"That's not your reason," I disagreed.

"Yeah, it is!"

"But that's not an excuse!"

"Well, what do you want me to say?" he challenged.

"That you're Goth," I explained.

He was amused by that. "Contrary to popular belief, I am not Goth."

"You *so* are!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Travis, your outfit screams Goth."

"Well, I'm not."

"You dress all in black," I insisted.

"Because I like black," he repeated. "You dress all in gray. Does that mean you're boring?"

"They don't give me a choice," I reminded him.

"Who says I have a choice, either?" was his answer.

I continued to push. "Okay, well what about that chain thing?"

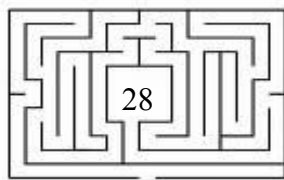
"It came with the pants," he told me, and that's when I knew this whole conversation had been a joke to him.

I was about to get frustrated, maybe bang my head on the table just because that was usually what I felt like doing. But when I looked into his eyes, I saw that they were sparkling. His eyes were dancing with laughter. My annoyance died easily.

"Travis! That's not funny! Tell me the truth!" I exclaimed.

"Well, I don't know the truth. Maybe I am Goth; I don't know. I like black; *that's* the truth."

I glared at him but said no more on his appearance. I would bring up his tattoo at another time.



“Now,” Travis started, “I told Lorraine that I’d talk to you about your memories, so I’d say if you give me four solid memories, that should make her happy.”

“Only four?” I asked hesitantly.

“Well, we don’t want you to look too eager, right?” He asked rhetorically. “And, we need to get your story straight.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?” I asked almost defensively.

“Nothing. I just feel, as your psychologist, I should be clear on some things,” he answered, clearly joking.

“Like what?” I asked, jokingly suspicious.

“Just to be clear, you don’t remember what, exactly?”

“Everything after the day before my fifteenth birthday,” I told him, even though I had already told him that the first day we met.

“And up until what?”

“Um, the day before I came here is blurry, but I remember some things.”

“Okay. So, I’m thinking one of the memories should be the first thing you ever remember doing, like say when you were four or so. Another can be the last thing you remember doing before you came here.”

“And the other two?”

He shrugged. “Random memories from your past,” he told me and, as an afterthought, continued, “But try and give me life changing memories.”

I glanced at him. “Um, okay,” I murmured, and then my curiosity got the better of me. “Why?”

“Well, it’s not like Lorraine has every minute detail from your past life. She has the important things, so stick with those.”

That made sense. “Okay. Let’s see. Oh, yeah. When I was four, I fractured my right wrist.”

He was staring at me.

“What?” I asked when he didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to need to have a story behind that memory, seeing as how we’re supposedly going to be in here discussing memories for the next six hours,” he explained.

“Oh. Right. Well, when I was four, I was kind of a daredevil, and I convinced Aubrey to teach me how to ride a bike. She, knowing nothing about teaching anyone anything, took me to the park without telling my parents or bringing any kind of pads—just a helmet. Thinking I would be able to learn by myself, she set me on the bike, pushed, and watched as I collided with a sign. There ended my daredevil stage. I didn’t learn how to ride a bike until I was eight,” I finished.

“Eight?” He repeated, astounded.

“It was a traumatic event!” I defended myself.

“Yes, but *eight*?” He asked again.

“Well, it didn’t help that my parents didn’t find the time to teach me until I was eight.”

“Oh, so they were *those* kinds of parents.”

“No! Well, wait. What kind of parents, exactly?” I asked hesitantly.

“Too caught up in their lives to notice their own kid?”

“No,” I answered. “Not exactly. They were just busy. Often.”

He nodded. “Sounds like my dad. Alright, so, what else?”

“Um, lemme think,” I murmured, but really, I was debating whether to tell him what I remembered. My instincts, which I heavily relied on, were telling me that he was okay. But this was getting kind of personal. And then there was the question of whether he was really on my side. My instincts, again, told me to trust him. But how much was I willing to risk in order to get my memory back? Finally, my instincts won over. “When I was nine, the sister of my best friend, Lacey, died in a car accident.”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. He wasn’t expecting that. “Seriously?”

I nodded, thinking back to that day. “Everyone used to call Lacey and me ‘the twins,’ because we looked and acted so much alike. Our names even sounded alike. I was always over Lacey’s

house. Her family was so funny, and it seemed like her parents liked me more than my own parents did, but that was just me feeling misunderstood. Her sister, Michaela, was like a sister to me, because she was actually nice to me, unlike Aubrey.

“The day Michaela turned seventeen, she promised Lacey and me she would drive us anywhere we wanted. She was about to take us to get ice cream when she got an urgent call from her boyfriend, Alex.” I stopped. This was hurting me. I could vaguely picture Michaela, listening to Alex complain to her on the phone, then watching as she got into her car and drove off without us. And Lacey’s face. The heartbreak when Lacey’s mom talked to the police. The funeral. I looked back at Travis. He was staring at me, his eyes piercing mine. I knew he could see the tears beginning to form. I hardly ever thought about Lacey anymore. To recall in such detail what had happened to her and her family was incredibly hard.

I didn’t know why I continued, but I did. “Three hours after she left to go meet Alex, Lacey answered a phone call from the police. They didn’t know Lacey was only nine, and she didn’t know what they were gonna say. They told Lacey that she and the other driver both died quickly. And that it wasn’t Michaela’s fault. But that didn’t matter. Nothing mattered to Lacey’s family anymore. A month after the funeral, Lacey’s family moved to Virginia. I never saw them again.”

I didn’t look at Travis for a minute. I wasn’t quite sure I wanted to see his reaction. Finally, though, he spoke. “You were only nine?”

I nodded. “Old enough to realize what had happened, but naïve enough to still be confused by it.”

He was quiet for a second. I risked a glance at him. He wasn’t looking at me. He seemed to be trying to grasp something intangible. Finally, I saw him come back to me. “Maybe it would be better if we didn’t talk about this now.”

My eyebrows furrowed as I heard this. “Why? I thought Dr. Pierce needed memories.”

He looked uncomfortable. “Yeah, she does, but...”

I looked at him closely. Was he getting upset? “Is this upsetting you?” I asked quietly.

He looked at me sharply. “Me? Darcy, I was thinking about it upsetting *you*. I mean, I brought you here to get you away from things that might be hurting you, yet, I’m making you tell me these memories.”

I couldn’t believe he was actually saying that. On the one hand, it was actually kind of...well, nice. But he was completely wrong. “Travis, you’re not making me do anything. We agreed to do this so that I’d get my memory back without going through all those stations. The only way to keep me from going back to those stations is to keep Dr. Pierce satisfied with what you tell her, and you can’t tell her anything unless I tell you first. I chose to tell you about Michaela because it’s gonna help our plan.”

He was still hesitant, but he looked back at me. “Alright. Two more to go.”

I nodded, already thinking about the next memory. Deciding to choose a story that wouldn’t make either of us uncomfortable, I chose the one I had told Reid. “When I was little, I took piano lessons with this really intense piano teacher. And even though I was really good, I had little confidence in playing the piano. When I was ten, my teacher entered me into this piano competition, but it was only when I got there that I realized it was full of, like, second graders. While I waited behind the curtains, I was acting all cocky because I knew I was the oldest and the best. I practically strutted on stage in front of all those people. But as I was getting to the piano, my too-long pant leg got tangled in the heel of my shoe. I flew across the stage face first. I tried to stop myself from falling, so I reached out for the piano. My hands smashed against the piano keys, and this incredibly loud clashing sound of mixed piano keys sounded as I fell flat on my face. Everyone was laughing, as I lay sprawled on the stage. When I went to the doctors, I found out I had sprained my big toe.”

True to my expectation, Travis burst out laughing. “You *sprained your toe*?” He gasped.

Why was that always the part people remembered?

“It was so embarrassing!” I exclaimed, blushing slightly.

“Did you get crutches?”

I rolled my eyes. “It was my toe, not my leg!” He was still laughing. I glared at him. “It’s not that funny!”

“Yeah, it is! I just can’t get over you spraining your toe on your pant leg!”

Staring at him dryly, I muttered, “Moving on.”

“Sorry, go on,” he answered, waving his hand, but he was still chuckling.

“I believe this would be the memory of what I last remember,” I reminded him. He immediately grew serious, and I nodded once in appreciation.

“Right,” he answered. “Now, it doesn’t have to be all intense. Just think back to it; try to remember bits and pieces. It doesn’t have to be clear, seriously.”

I forced my mind back to that day. I could feel Travis’s eyes on me as I rewound my days until I was back in the white room. Slowly, I skimmed past the few events I remembered and stopped when I saw myself waking up in the room.

“I was already strapped to the chair when I woke up here,” I told him quietly.

He nodded but said nothing. He looked like he was concentrating just as hard as I was. I was still thinking, staring into space as I tried to push my mind back. When it automatically went back to my fingers on the piano, I closed my eyes and thought harder.

Suddenly, the vision of a forest flashed. I opened my eyes to calm myself. “I was in a forest. I don’t know how I know that, I just do. I was alone. I think I was trying to move away from something. Maybe Dr. Pierce’s people?” I looked at him. “I don’t remember.”

“Keep trying,” he whispered.

I looked away, my mind back in time as I followed my footsteps in the forest. I tried to rewind my memory, to move back to whom or what I had been running from.

“No,” I finished quietly. “No, it wasn’t Dr. Pierce’s people. When they grabbed me, I didn’t know where they had come from. They surprised me. I hadn’t been running from them.”

I was silent for a minute as I willed myself to remember. Finally, I shook my head. “That’s all I can remember.”

Travis nodded. “That’s okay. We can try again some other time.”



I put my head in my hands, frustrated. "I hate this," I muttered.

"What?" he asked quietly.

"This not remembering thing," I answered, my voice slightly muffled by my hand. "I feel like such a freak."

"You're not," he replied plainly. "Dementia isn't all that uncommon."

"For teenagers, it is!" I exclaimed. When he didn't reply, I lifted my head from my hands and looked at him. He was staring at me intensely. "What?"

He looked away. "Nothing."

While I continued to stare at him, I asked, "Why are you being so nice to me, anyway?"

He looked back at me, his face surprised. "What?"

"You were supposed to be mean."

Now he looked amused. "Says who?"

I shrugged. I wasn't bringing up Nora's name. Instead, I said, "People. You should know I was warned about you on one of my first days."

His expression was mock shocked. "I'm insulted!"

"So you're saying you had nothing to do with starting these rumors," I asked him carefully, the beginnings of a smile forming on my face.

I knew his answer before he spoke, because he didn't answer right away. He answered sheepishly, "Well, maybe a little, but it's not like I strut around threatening people."

"What'd you do to start the rumors?" I asked, suddenly interested.

"First of all, people automatically assume I'm gonna do a Columbine just because I wear black."

"Which, if we're being completely serious here, isn't so far-fetched. All you need is a long black leather jacket and the look is complete," I told him honestly.

"Everyone is so biased," he muttered.

"Seriously, though, what'd you do?" I asked again.

"It's really not that intriguing," he responded.

"But I wanna know."

“Fine,” he sighed. “Maybe a year and a half ago, I used to come down here a lot. At first, this place fascinated me. That is, until I found out what it was really about,” he finished darkly. “Anyway, after a while, I noticed that this girl would always watch me, whenever I came to the stations. It was obvious that she had a crush on me—”

“That’s a little conceited,” I joked.

“Darcy, this girl was practically drooling over me. I can’t help it if girls like me,” he answered, teasing.

“Jerk!” I exclaimed, laughing.

“Jealous?” He asked, his smile only widening.

“Shut up!” I exclaimed, but I blushed automatically. “Just go on with your story.”

He had been staring at me, his eyes dancing, but he continued. “This girl, though, she was so annoying. She was like a little puppy dog, and it was almost like my black clothes only heightened the pedestal she put me on. On one particular day, she just wouldn’t shut up, so I gave the usual ‘I have somewhere I have to be’ excuse. She asked where I was going. I lied and said that I was on parole for stabbing someone in the gut.”

“Are you serious? You probably scared her to death, especially since you don’t know what all she might have been through!” I exclaimed.

He shrugged. “She never bothered me again. But the next thing I know, Lorraine is asking me not to come down here anymore because there were rumors going around that I was a psychopath and would pull out a knife at any moment.”

I chuckled. “That’s all?”

He nodded. “What were you expecting?”

“A dramatic showdown,” I told him honestly.

“Sorry to disappoint,” he answered sarcastically.

I smiled but avoided eye contact as I asked my next question. Quietly, I started, “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah,” he answered amiably. “What’s up?”

I didn’t know how to phrase my question without it seeming rude or blunt. Keeping my eyes on the table, I practically whispered, “Why are you helping me?”

I could practically feel his confusion. “What?”

“Why are you doing this for me? Why are you wasting your time doing something I know you don’t care about for someone you just met. You don’t even know me. You hate what’s happening down here, and I know you don’t like your stepmother. So why are you doing this? You could just forget about me, and call it a day. No one would be any the wiser.”

He was trying to put together what I was trying to say. I probably phrased it wrong. “Do you not want my help?”

“No, that’s not it at all! God, I screwed that up completely,” I told him quickly. In an effort to connect with him, I brought my eyes to his. “You’ve given me more than I would have expected. You’re the only one who’s shown me any sort of kindness here. I can’t describe to you what you’ve done for me. I hope you understand that you might have saved me. I don’t think I would have survived if you hadn’t come to Dr. Pierce’s office that day.

“What I’m asking is, why do you even care about me? I’m a nobody; I’ve already proven that by being here. Can you just tell me why you’re helping *me*, specifically?”

I thought I saw the faintest trace of a smile on his face as he said, “Can’t a guy like a girl?”

I could feel my cheeks heating up with embarrassment. And pleasure. “That’s your reason?”

He nodded reasonably. “We’re friends, Darcy. I would hope that’s enough of a reason for you. I wanna see you get through this. Maybe I can help you get through it faster. I feel like I already know you so well; I kinda wanna know who you are when you aren’t troubled like this.”

My eyes drifted away from him. No one had ever spoken to me like that, melted my heart in such a way. I had talked to him for all of four days, but I felt closer to him than I did with most of my friends. There was something about him...

“Okay,” I told him quietly, smiling shyly. “I kinda wanna know you, too.”

He matched my smile. “You know, this is the third day I’ve been here with you.”

I pursed my lips, caught a little off guard by his immediate change of subject. “Cool.”

He shook his head like I had missed something. "I meant that I'm not gonna be here for the next four days."

Then I remembered his agreement with his dad. "Oh. Right."

"Darcy, I need to know what you want to do while I'm gone. I can tell Lorraine to lay off if you just want to take it slow, or I can tell her to give you something to do. I mean, do you want to go to the stations?"

"I don't know. I didn't really think about that. I guess it's better than doing nothing all day," I told him, but my heart sank a little. I looked forward to these chats we had been having. I was sad that they would be put on hold for a while, especially after our recent statements.

"Are you sure?" He asked, looking at me closely.

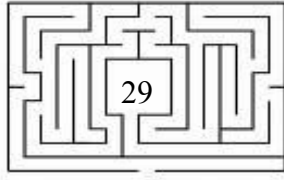
I nodded. "Yeah. It won't hurt for four days, right?"

He shrugged lightly. "You tell me."

"I'll be fine. Really," I told him carefully.

"Alright. Try not to get any offenses while I'm gone," he warned, smiling.

"Don't count on it."



Reid was waiting for me when I was brought back to my cell. As soon as the door closed, he said, “You’re not gonna tell me what you did today, are you?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t quite sure why, but I didn’t feel right telling Reid about Travis or our daily meetings. “But I’m gonna go to the stations tomorrow.”

His face brightened. “Really?” He exclaimed and then paused. “Why? What happened to those meetings with Pierce?”

I lied for what felt like the one-hundredth time. “She thinks I should take a break from her and go back to the stations.”

“For once, I think she’s right,” Reid approved. “I was in Memory today. If Pierce hadn’t made you go to one of her meetings, we would have been together.”

“My luck sucks,” I mumbled. “What’d you do today?”

“Scents.”

“What?” I asked, sure I hadn’t heard him correctly. “What kind of test is that?”

“Not all the tests are written,” he told me. “Smell is one of the most prominent senses, so sometimes, they bring in different scents, and we have to write down the memories that we associate with that smell.”

“I guess that sounds logical,” I answered, still thinking it over. Why couldn’t they have done that with me? Those kinds of tests, at least, had a chance of being productive. The written tests they had made me take really didn’t do anything for my memory.

Maybe tomorrow would be different.

I looked back at Reid, and, for reasons I couldn’t understand, suddenly asked, “Do you know a guy named Travis?”

Reid’s eyebrows rose. “Travis James?”

I frowned, realizing that I actually didn’t know Travis’s last name. “I don’t know.”

“Are you talking about Pierce’s stepson?” He tried again.

I nodded.

“Yeah, Travis James,” he corrected. “Why do you wanna know?”

I shrugged, trying to look nonchalant.

“I’m guessing Nora talked to you about him?”

Taking that as a reason to start the conversation, I nodded. “Yeah. It just confused me, because it seemed like you were a little too protective. Do you know him?”

He grimaced. “I guess you could say that.”

“What was that face for?” I asked quietly, still trying to remain calm.

“Ever met him? Because you’d have the same reaction if you did,” he responded.

Immediately, I felt myself ready to defend him. It probably hadn’t been such a good idea to bring up Travis in the first place. I had to remind myself that Reid didn’t know I knew him. Trying to ignore my instincts, I asked, “What’s wrong with him?”

“I’ve heard he’s been to prison, twice. He once took out a knife here and threatened to kill a girl,” Reid told me.

I felt the suspicion on my face. That definitely didn’t sound like the Travis I knew. I was guessing the rumors hadn’t gone over Reid’s head, either. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Yes!” He exclaimed and then paused. “Well, obviously, I didn’t see or hear those things directly, but they’re all true.”

I looked at him with wary amusement. “So, that’s just gossip.”

“No, it’s true!” He persuaded me, but with the tone of voice that a five-year-old might have when trying to sell an unconvincing lie.

“You’ve never actually met him, though?” I confirmed.

“No, but I’ve seen him,” he told me.

Just to keep both our stories straight, I asked, “What’s he look like?”

“Goth,” was all he said.

Ah, he’d finally gotten something right.

“Is he?”

“Goth?” Travis asked, and when I nodded, he continued, “Probably. Anyway, why do you wanna know?”

I partly lied. “Just in case I ever meet him, I wanna be prepared.”

He nodded. That was a good enough excuse for him.

We were mostly silent for the rest of the night.

I woke up the next morning feeling awful. I dragged myself unwillingly out of bed and followed the normal path in a stupor. I was so tired.

I was vaguely aware that I was put into the Athleticism station. I took no interest in Reid’s conversation in our cell or my friends’ conversations at breakfast.

Nora’s friend Casey was also in Athleticism, so I followed her, listening as she told me what to expect at the station. I was to do mostly running.

When we got to the gym, a doctor was waiting for us in the middle of the room. As we came closer, he threw us both gadgets that looked like watches.

“What’s this?” I asked Casey quietly.

“A heart rate monitor. We always wear one during Athleticism. This station is supposed to give the doctors a comparison between our heart rate when we’re doing physical stuff and our heart rate when they give us drugs or other stuff.”

Ew, drugs. I shuddered at the thought, but I followed her lead and put the heart rate monitor on my left wrist.

The five kids in the station, excluding Casey and me, made no haste in moving to the center of the room.

“Why are we talking?” The doctor asked impatiently. “Center. Now.”

The stragglers gathered near us, looking expectantly at the doctor, and their voices died down.

“Who wants to take a guess at what we’re doing today?” The doctor started.

There was silence. And then, “Running?” Casey asked.

He pointed at her. “Very good, Miss Lynch!” He exclaimed, but he did so with false enthusiasm. Then he turned to the rest of us. “Now, get to it!”

Casey turned and headed for the track surrounding the gym. I followed silently, and our slow trot started.

It was about a half-hour after jogging non-stop around the track that I knew I couldn't go any further. My legs probably could have continued, and my breathing wasn't as harsh as the others. But I didn't feel right. My gut was telling me to run away from this place. I didn't like it here.

As subtly as I could manage, I slowed to a walk, and then stopped. It took a minute for anyone to notice.

"Excuse-me?" A voice rang out across the gym.

I didn't look at the doctor.

"No. No, everyone else, keep running!" His commanding voice instructed, and I heard his footsteps near. "What are you doing?"

I looked up at him. "I can't run anymore," I gasped.

He squinted down at me and then squatted so that we were face-to-face. "What's your name?"

"Darcy Calloway," I murmured.

He glared at me. "Hmm," he sighed. "Well, does something hurt?"

I shook my head. "I just don't feel well."

I saw the tips of his mouth curve in what looked like condescending amusement. "Unfortunately, Miss Calloway, 'just not feeling well' does not work in my gym. I need you to get up and continue running like everyone else."

I weighed my options carefully. I didn't know where I would get the strength to continue running for more than five minutes. But I didn't want to go to Dr. Pierce's office, which was what was going to happen if I didn't listen to the doctor.

Slowly, I got up and willed myself to keep jogging. When I turned to look back at the doctor, he was writing something on his clipboard. When he looked up at me and saw that I was staring at him, he turned away.

I cheered myself up by thinking of the days in which I would be skipping the stations to meet with Travis.

I was exercising on the stationary bike when the bell rang and the doctor let us leave.



“I probably should have warned you about how boring Athleticism is,” Casey told me. “Dr. Selt likes to make it as dull as possible.”

I only smiled. I was exhausted, physically and mentally. My mind willed me to go to sleep.

We walked in silence. As I turned into my cell and saw Reid sitting against his wall, I almost wanted to cry. What was going on with me?

“Hey,” he started amiably.

I grunted, the only noise I could afford to make, went straight to the bunk bed, and collapsed onto the bottom bunk.

“Long day?” I heard Reid’s voice from far away.

I don’t think I answered. I fell asleep before I got the chance to even acknowledge that he had asked a question.

Suddenly, the bed was shaking around me.

No, wait.

Someone was shaking me.

“What?” I groaned.

“Dinner,” Reid stated, grabbing my arm.

“No!” I moaned, trying to move my arm away. “I’m tired.”

“But you’re hungry, too,” he told me reasonably, still yanking on my arm.

When I couldn’t get my arm away without sitting up, I gave in. Slowly, I walked over to the wall and waited as the guard delivered our food.

“What’s wrong?” Reid asked as we ate.

“I’m tired,” I repeated.

“I kind of inferred that when you crashed on my bed,” he answered dryly. “But normally, you aren’t *that* tired at the end of the day.”

“I was in Athleticism.” I used that as an excuse.

“Yeah, I know. Casey didn’t look dead on her feet, though.”

I didn’t answer. I put my BLT down, took a drink of water, and stood up. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

He looked at my tray. “You took, like, two bites.”

“I don’t feel well,” I told him desolately, already climbing the ladder to my bed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked again, concern coating his voice.

"I don't know," I mumbled. I could feel my body moving sluggishly, my limbs weakening.

I plopped down onto my bed so that I was still facing him. Apprehension and slight confusion covered his face.

"I guess you should go to sleep, then," he told me hesitantly. "But you're gonna be hungry."

"Stop worrying about me," I murmured, my eyes already closing. "I'm fine."

I was gone before he could answer.

I pushed myself to go to Memory the next day. I forced myself to focus on the test that Dr. Bram had hand delivered to me. But, in the end, it didn't even matter. My mind refused to cooperate, and I was having trouble remembering just about anything. The questions blurred together; they didn't make sense.

I fell asleep on my test with three hours left in the station.

The next morning, when the alarm woke me up, such a strong wave of despair passed over me that I had to squeeze my eyes shut and will it to pass. My emotions were totally twisted. I was experiencing a horrible kind of depression, and I couldn't seem to get a handle on what was going on around me.

"Come on, you have to go to Memory, Darcy," Reid commanded as soon as Mr. Netteros was finished with his list.

I shook my head. "I don't want to."

"Look, if you don't go, you're gonna have to visit Pierce again."

I wasn't too fond of that option. It's not like Travis would be here to save me. I sighed, got up, and followed Reid to breakfast.

When we got to the cafeteria, Reid left me to find a place at our table. As I grabbed a tray, I looked over at the T.U. table and saw Reid talking to Nora and Casey and some other kids that had sat with us before. Casey glanced quickly at me, and Reid shook his head. Then he came back to me.

"They said David's not here today," he announced, motioning with his head to our table. The lie was written clearly on his face, but I said nothing.

When we got to the table with our food, the conversation was dimmed, voice levels lowered slightly around my seat. I didn't

listen to the conversation, but I noticed that people were acting very cautious. What was with the sudden change?

Towards the end of breakfast, I looked around the room sullenly. Was anyone else feeling as horrible as I was? Then, my eyes focused on Dr. Bram, standing by the door. He was staring at me. Our eyes connected for a second; I looked away quickly.

I was getting paranoid.

The Memory classroom was full to bursting with kids. Each desk was occupied. Why the sudden influx of kids in Memory?

It took me ten minutes to read over the entire test Ms. Nancy handed out. Then I raised my hand.

Ms. Nancy slowly waddled over to my desk. "Yes?" She asked quietly.

"May I be excused?" I whispered.

She glared. "What? Why?"

"I don't feel well."

She put a hand to my forehead. "You're fine," she assessed.

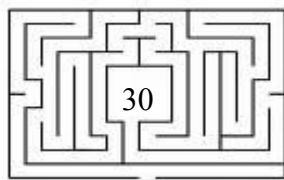
"Please? I'm tired," I insisted, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice. I was at an all-time low.

She shook her head. "Take your test."

I watched as she waddled back to her desk and then as she wrote something on her clipboard.

As soon as the cell door was closed, I climbed the ladder to my bed and fell asleep, completely disregarding dinner.

I knew I couldn't go to the stations tomorrow.



The alarm was a distant noise in my ear. It was only when Reid started shaking my leg that I showed signs of life.

“Darcy? Darcy, are you okay?” Reid asked, and, even in my fatigue, I could hear his concern.

I groaned and moved away from his hand. He took that as a ‘yes.’

“Come on. Get up,” he commanded authoritatively, and I heard him descending the ladder.

“No,” I moaned.

“Darcy, don’t be like this,” he grumbled, his voice floating up from his position at the cell door.

By way of answer, I turned over so I was facing the wall.

“You’re gonna get in trouble,” he sighed, his voice farther away. I heard the resignation in his voice and knew he was leaving. I listened for the cell door to close and basked in relief momentarily.

The next time I woke up, there was no sound around me. The lights were on, brightly shining. I gave my eyes time to adjust and then sat up slowly. I knew I shouldn’t sleep the whole day, but I was exhausted.

Why I decided to go sit against the wall, I didn’t know. It somehow felt like I was doing something more productive than sleeping. Sitting at the wall, I could pretend like I was waiting for Reid to come back from the stations.

I didn’t know how much time had gone by before I heard footsteps in the hallway. I didn’t recognize the steps, though. They didn’t belong to a teenager, or Dr. Bram or Dr. Pierce. Who was coming?

My eyes focused on one of the guards.

“Darcy Calloway,” he asked and stated simultaneously.

I just continued to watch him.

“You’re supposed to be in the Memory station,” he informed me.

I shook my head. “I don’t feel well,” I told him quietly.

“Alright, but you have to go,” he insisted.

I didn’t answer.

“Come on,” he said, making the decision for me, and motioned for me to follow him. When I didn’t move at all, he continued, “Don’t make this difficult. Let’s go!”

My body was tired. I wondered how long this would continue before I finally snapped. I’d never felt like this before. Was this one more side effect of the sedative?

The guard was getting aggravated. “Do you want Dr. Pierce to come down here?” He snapped. “No, I didn’t think so. Let’s go!”

It was about five seconds later that he realized I wasn’t going to be moving on my own accord. He was opening the door when I stood up.

“Thank you,” he told me, his voice edging on smug. I wasn’t going to him, though. Instead, I walked towards my bed. He stayed silent, confused for a moment before he understood that I was heading away from him. “Darcy!” He snapped, following me slowly.

I was on the third step of the ladder when I felt his hand on my arm. I turned to him. “Get off,” I told him.

“This isn’t funny. I’m trying to be nice here, but you’re making this hard on me! Just come with me, and we’ll get this over with,” he answered roughly, not even trying to conceal his impatience.

I shook my head and started to move up the ladder. He yanked my arm harder. My hands slipped. I was weak, my body not as strong as it normally was, and his yank pulled me off the ladder.

I barely registered what was happening before I landed on the ground. My right foot landed straight, and I was almost upright. But my left ankle twisted, and I toppled over.

A searing pain shot through my ankle, up my leg, and jolted my nerves. I grabbed my ankle quickly, hissing as the pain grew. My palms immediately started sweating as my ankle throbbed.

“Get up!” He snapped.

I shook my head. “My ankle,” I moaned, holding it tightly. My fingers were shaking slightly as I tried to ignore the intense pain. I tested my ankle by moving my big toe, but that brought on more pain.

“It’s fine. Move!” He commanded, taking my arm and pulling me upright.

I yelped, crumbling back down. I wouldn’t move my ankle. Any pressure on it sent pain up and down my body.

“What?” He grunted, sitting down. “What happened?”

“I think I sprained my ankle,” I told him, still holding on to my left foot.

“Let me have a look,” he answered gruffly.

“No!” I exclaimed, trying to scoot away from him. That only brought more pain.

He groaned and stood up. “Fine. Dr. Pierce it is. I’ll be right back,” he told me. I think he knew I wasn’t going anywhere.

Slowly, I moved one hand and then the other so I could see my ankle. I winced as I realized it was swelling. Cautiously, I tried moving my ankle. It moved half a centimeter before I couldn’t continue. This was not good.

Distantly, I heard a door open.

“...and this is how I find her?” An annoyed voice snapped. It was a familiar voice, but not the guard’s.

“I was just trying to make her go to Memory,” the guard answered the voice.

“You shouldn’t have been *making* her do anything!” The voice exclaimed, and then the two appeared.

“Travis?” I was confused. Why was he here? It hadn’t been four days yet.

“Darcy,” he sighed, opening the door and coming inside. “What happened?”

“Why are you here?” I asked instead.

“I was gonna surprise you by coming a day earlier,” he answered, sitting down next to me. “What happened to your ankle?”

“I think it’s sprained,” I told him, reaching down for my ankle again.

He reached hesitantly for my ankle and then stopped, looking back at me. "May I?"

I nodded. He wouldn't hurt me.

Gingerly, he placed his hand on my ankle, pushing down on the bone. He looked quickly at me. "Does that hurt?"

"Not really," I answered.

He moved his hands farther down my foot. "Okay, now tell me if—"

I flinched, my hands automatically landing on his hands as he tried to move my ankle up and down.

"Sorry," he breathed. "You're right, I think it's just sprained."

I exhaled. "It hurts," I told him truthfully.

"I know," he sighed and stood up. "Can you walk on it?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

He nodded, thinking. His eyes searched the cell, and he frowned thoughtfully. "Alright, I'm gonna help you up and bring you to the hospital room. There's ice there and an ace bandage."

I wasn't all too thrilled at the hospital part, but I needed the ice. "Okay."

Travis crouched down and grabbed my hands. "Ready?"

I nodded, bracing myself against his arms. Carefully, he pulled me into a standing position, making sure my left ankle didn't touch the ground.

"Still okay?" He asked.

"Yeah."

I put my arm around his waist and leaned against him. In any other circumstance, I might have felt uncomfortable, but now, it actually felt okay to be this close to him. Hobbling rather awkwardly, I reached the door with his help, where the guard was waiting.

"What should I do?" The guard asked uneasily.

Travis regarded him coolly. "Go tell Lorraine what happened. She'll decide what to do with you from there."

He nodded, almost embarrassed, and left us.

"Dr. Pierce has to know about this?" I asked, disappointed, as we moved out of the cell.

“Unfortunately, yeah. And she’s probably gonna flip out. You’ll be meeting the new guard sometime next week,” he told me, walking slowly enough so I could hop along. This, at least, wasn’t putting too much strain on my ankle.

“She’s gonna fire him?” I gasped, out of breath already.

“Yeah. He injured one of her precious minors,” he told me sarcastically.

“Well, yeah, but...” I stopped. I was feeling some kind of emotion for the guard, but I couldn’t place it. Finally, it came to me: I was jealous. Once she fired him, he was free to leave. From my perspective, it seemed he was being rewarded for hurting me.

We walked in silence for a moment. I was focusing on keeping my foot off the ground. But I was also thinking about Travis. A part of me, the very girly part of me, was wondering if he had come back just for me. The more practical part of me, though, knew there was a completely different reason. He came here to see his dad, not me.

“So,” I started, slightly out of breath. “Why’d you come back a day earlier?”

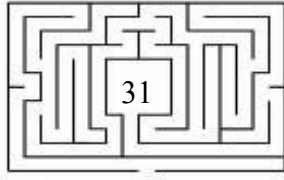
He didn’t answer right away. Finally, “Well, I *do* have a little surprise for you. But don’t even bother asking what it is, ‘cause I’m not telling until your ankle is fixed,” he answered, but I could sense there was something more.

“And...” I egged him on.

“And I was thinking a lot about your whole dilemma,” he answered quietly. “You’re getting me interested in this whole Memory thing.”

Part of me wanted to take that to mean that we might actually have something between us.





**A**s soon as we were in the hospital room, he brought me to the nearest bed. Then he began his search for an ice pack. “You’re not gonna get the doctor?” I asked, watching him rummage through the drawers.

He looked at me. “Would you prefer that I did?”

I shook my head. “No. Please don’t make this a big deal,” I almost pleaded.

“Well, as long as it’s only a sprain, I think I can manage this,” he answered wryly. “Lift your foot onto the bed,” he commanded. I paused. That didn’t sound painless.

Slowly, I lifted my foot up until it was above the bed. Then, carefully, I lowered it to the mattress. I flinched softly at the contact, but my ankle felt a little better.

Travis came back with an ice pack, two blankets, and an ace bandage.

“I’m not cold,” I told him.

He looked down at the blankets. “These aren’t for your body. I’m gonna put them under your ankle so your foot is elevated.”

“Oh. Clever,” I complimented him. He smiled.

Gently, he placed the ice pack on my ankle. I was getting ready to cringe, but it didn’t hurt when the ice was applied.

“That feels better,” I sighed.

“Good,” he answered approvingly.

Cautiously, he lifted my leg up and placed the two blankets beneath my ankle. Then he lowered my foot. “Better?”

I shrugged. “I guess. I can’t really tell the difference yet.”

“You will,” he promised and then held out the bandage. “When you’re done icing your ankle, I’m gonna put this on, okay?”

I nodded. “Gently,” I reminded him sternly.

“Of course,” he answered, amused, sitting down on the end of the bed I was lying on. “So, you wanna tell me why you didn’t go to Memory today? Last time I checked, you said you were okay with going to the stations.”

“Yeah, I know,” I answered and then looked away. “I’ve been feeling weird lately. Since about two days ago, I’ve just been feeling really tired and...bored, I guess is the word I’m looking for,” I told him honestly.

He was looking at me thoughtfully. “Were you feeling like this when you last talked to me?”

I shook my head. “No. I would have told you if I was,” I answered, still avoiding his gaze. I looked, instead, at the ice pack, which was not only taking the pain in my ankle away, but also giving me frostbite in the process. “Is it abnormal for me to be feeling like this?”

He didn’t answer. After a minute, I finally gave up and looked back at him. He was staring at me intently. “Is it?” I asked again.

Quietly, he answered, “I think this place has warped your definition of ‘abnormal.’ Why would you think it isn’t okay to feel what you’re feeling?”

His penetrating stare was making me feel vulnerable. I turned away from him, uncomfortable. I shrugged. “No one else is acting like this.”

“So? No one else is going through what you’re going through, either,” he answered firmly.

“Yeah, but—”

“Darcy,” he interrupted resolutely. “You’ve gone through hell and back with this whole lab thing. Any normal person would be worse off than you are. Your emotions are fine,” he told me quietly.

I put my head in my hands, careful not to move my leg. “I don’t know. I’m just so confused and...” I trailed off. “And scared.”

He let me wallow for a minute. Then, so quietly I had to strain to hear, “I’ll help you.”

I didn’t look up at him. “How?” I whispered. “We don’t even know what happened to me.”

“I’ll find out,” he answered. I looked up at him, about to protest, but he cut in. “I’ll do whatever I have to do to find out for you what happened.”

I looked away from him. His intensity was bringing forth emotions from me I wasn’t comfortable with. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

He shifted, and I looked back at him. “I want to.”

His eyes met mine, and they were mesmerizing. My heart was pounding fast, and it took me a second to realize why. When I did though, it surprised me that I had never even considered it.

I liked Travis. A lot. Maybe even too much.

And then, almost as though being pulled by an imaginary force, I leaned towards him, my eyes on his lips. He got closer to me and—

“Ow,” I stated dumbly, reaching for my sprained ankle that Travis had accidentally leaned on. It was throbbing again.

I felt like an idiot.

He flushed slightly. “Sorry,” he sighed, pulling away from me. “How’s it feeling?”

I looked away from him, embarrassed. Stupid, stupid ankle. “It still hurts.”

“I should probably put this on now,” he told me, holding the ace bandage.

I nodded and moved the ice pack off my ankle. Carefully, he wound the bandage around my anklebone.

“Good?” He asked.

“Yeah, it’s good,” I answered and then shifted. “Should I try standing?”

“Probably not,” he told me honestly.

“Well, I can’t very well hobble around this place for a week until it heals,” I retorted, already moving to get up.

Travis carefully took my arm and lifted me to my feet. With his hand firmly on my arm, I took my first step and fell into his arms.

I inhaled sharply, the pain jetting through my body. “Crap.”

“Hurts?” He guessed.

I nodded but tried once more. This time, I was ready and braced myself to feel the pain. I almost immediately hopped onto my other leg, took another step, and was back on my right leg.

“Any more confident?”

“Not at all,” I answered. “This sucks.”

“Here, sit back down,” he instructed, moving me back to the bed. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where’re you going?” I asked quickly.

“To get a doctor,” he answered quietly, already on his way out.

“What? No, Travis, wait,” I commanded, back up again. I hopped on one foot over to him. He caught me before I collapsed.

“I just wanna make sure it really is just a sprain,” he convinced me.

“I can tell you that it really is! I don’t need another doctor checking on me,” I told him, my voice almost a whine.

He sighed but nodded. He could see my logic. Slowly, his hand tightened around my upper arm, and he started towards the bed again. “Alright, fine. But you better be right.”

I hobbled over and sat down. He walked thoughtfully over to the storage closet near the door.

“What?” I asked him.

“I’m checking to see if we have crutches,” he told me.

“No, I don’t want crutches!” I assured him.

“Why not? They’ll help!”

“‘Cause I’ll look like an invalid,” I told him reasonably enough.

After a minute, he turned around. “Relax. We don’t have them, anyway.” Then he came over to sit by my bed. “Are you *sure* your ankle doesn’t need to be looked at?”

“Positive!”

“Fine. Then, at least take an anti-inflammatory. Like Advil or something?” He suggested.

I shook my head. “No. It’s not that bad.”

“But Advil would—”

“I don’t want any drugs!” I almost snapped, looking up at him. He looked into my eyes and read the underlying fear in them.

He nodded. "Alright, alright," he sighed. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"I've been told that," I answered amiably, sure to keep the smile off my face.

He was silent for a second. Then, "Can you at least do me one favor?"

"Depends on the favor," I answered, my eyes narrowing.

"If you feel any pain whatsoever during the night, come to the hospital. I'll tell Lorraine to keep a doctor in here tonight and to keep your cell door unlocked. If your ankle starts to cause you any more pain, please, please come here. Can you do that for me?"

I stared at him, thinking. "You could do that? I mean, she'd trust me enough to unlock my cell?"

"You clearly underestimate Lorraine's obsession with you. She'd probably push nineteen people off the Golden Gate Bridge if it meant helping her understand you better. And the only way to understand you better is to keep you as happy as possible."

I thought about that. His request wasn't such a far-fetched one. "Fine," I answered, slightly resigned.

He smiled. "Good."

While he remained quiet, I subtly brought up his surprise. "So. My ankle seems alright. Now, what was that surprise you were talking about?"

He rolled his eyes. "I knew I shouldn't have mentioned that."

"But you did, so what is it?" I continued.

He sighed. "Tomorrow, okay? You need to focus on healing your ankle."

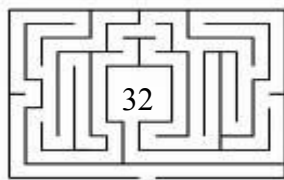
"What? Travis, come on! I'm not just gonna sit in my cell and wait for my ankle to heal! I need something to do. Please!" I begged.

He shook his head. "I still have to talk to Lorraine about it, anyway."

I groaned. "Can you at least give me a hint?"

He thought about that. "It's kind of about us, kind of about you," he answered vaguely.

That did not satisfy, but it got me thinking. Us. Something about us, and he had said it was a surprise. I could live with that.



Reid was almost as angry as Travis had been when I hobbled back into my cell after Travis dropped me off in the hallway, per my request. I still wasn't comfortable with Reid knowing about Travis.

"What happened?" he gasped, running to me and grabbing my arm. He helped keep me steady as we walked slowly to my spot against the wall.

"I got into a fight," I told him, partly truthful.

"I'm serious!" He growled, clearly not amused.

The hint of a smile that had begun to form disappeared as I took in his concerned, angry face. "Relax! I'm *being* serious! When I didn't go to the station today, one of the guards came in and yanked me off the ladder in an effort to get me to leave."

His eyebrows rose. "Frickin' guard! Are you okay?"

I nodded. "It's sprained and hurts like a mother, but I'll deal."

He eyed my ankle dubiously. "Are you sure?" He asked.

I sighed. "I'm fine," I convinced him, trying also to convince myself.

He was still looking wary, but he probably knew I wasn't going to give him a different answer, despite his persistence. Instead, he asked, "So, where'd you go after you hurt your ankle?"

Again, I skirted around the truth. "They brought me to the hospital room and put some ice on it. Now I have to wear this stupid bandage thing until it's healed."

He shook his head in disbelief. "They oughta fire that guard."

"They did," I told him without realizing what I had said.

He stared suspiciously. "How do you know?"

I thought of a lie quickly. "I heard the doctors talking about it."

“Oh.”

I honestly didn't know why I continued to lie to Reid about Travis. I really didn't think Reid would have a problem with Travis...once he got to know him. But Reid had heard the rumors and, more to the point, believed them. I had a feeling he would definitely frown upon the relationship. And Reid was my friend here; I cared about what he thought.

Did that mean I was lying to him because he wouldn't want me to be friends with Travis? I felt like it had more to do with the fact that I would be hurting Reid by being around Travis.

Lying in bed after the lights went out, I was conscious of the fact that the guards didn't lock our cell door. I was convinced that everyone would notice this, but Reid didn't even seem to realize it. I waited for a good ten minutes, thinking of a reasonable excuse as to why the guards had skipped us, just in case Reid asked. Yet, after five of those minutes, I heard Reid's snoring. Clearly, he hadn't noticed.

I didn't delve too deeply into the possibility of escaping, of trying to find a way out. With my hurt ankle and my complete lack of answers, I wasn't very sure how far I would get before someone noticed that I wasn't where I was supposed to be.

The next time my eyes opened, the cell was blurry and I was staring at a figure coming towards me. Who was it? I couldn't see far enough into the distance. My eyes squinted, and I saw the outline of a figure. As it got closer, details formed. It was a hideously deformed man, and he was staring at me. I tried to let out a scream, but I couldn't. I couldn't seem to do much of anything as the person headed towards me.

I started towards my bunk's ladder, but then I realized I wasn't on the top bunk. I was on the bottom, looking up at the person. I didn't have a cellmate here.

“Darcy,” the figure breathed.

I shied away from him immediately.

He bent down so that we were face-to-face. His eyes pierced mine, and I saw his face completely. His nose was broken, blood was bleeding from his forehead, he had a gash on his cheek, and his eyes were red. “Play my song,” he whispered.

And as I let out a terrified shriek, I could hear him humming the song I had played for my recital years ago.

“Darcy!” someone shouted.

“Get away!” I yelled, squirming away from the man.

“Darcy, stop, wake up!” the man was saying. Someone was shaking me. Someone was grabbing my ankle, yanking on it. The only thing I could see was the man’s hideous face, the darkness engulfing me and—

My eyes popped open and rested on Reid’s face.

“Darcy?” He whispered.

I was sobbing and couldn’t stop. My hands were shaking as they flew up to my face. I felt nauseous. The man’s face wouldn’t leave my mind, and I could hear the song playing everywhere. My ankle was throbbing, and only then did I realize that my leg had been thrashing around.

“It’s over, Darcy, you’re okay,” Reid was whispering.

I couldn’t stop. Something about the dream had struck a chord, and I was scared. That man, he had looked familiar. I had never seen him before in my life, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I should have known who he was. Who was he?

My heart was pounding rapidly, I was sweating, my hands were shaking, and I knew I had to leave the cell.

I pushed past Reid and started down the ladder. It took longer than usual to hobble down the ladder because I was dizzy and my ankle was hurting, but I continued down.

“What are you doing?” Reid asked, following me down. When he saw that I was hobbling towards the cell door, he followed. “Where are you going?”

“To Dr. Pierce,” I gasped.

“How will you be able to leave the...” he started but trailed off when I opened the door. “It was unlocked? It’s never unlocked! Darcy, what’s going on?” He snapped, coming after me.

“I have to talk to Dr. Pierce,” was my answer as I tried to get my sobs under control.

He left the cell and grabbed my arm. As much as I knew I had to get away, to end this, I leaned on him for support anyway. My ankle was stinging like crazy. “Look, you can’t very well hobble down the hallways all alone. Be serious!”



“I am being serious,” I whispered. “Please, Reid, I need to go. Just let me go.”

I had to know what was going on. I could no longer live with the lack of answers. I was full of desperation and couldn’t take it anymore. I needed help.

He looked at me intently. “Let me help you. I’ll walk you to her office and then leave,” he told me resolutely.

I shook my head. “If you get caught on your way back, they’ll give you a second offense. I have a slightly usable excuse if they catch me.”

“I don’t care!” He answered, his voice rising. “You can’t even walk.” With that, he took my arm and started pulling me gently towards the door leading out of the hallway.

I didn’t have much strength, physically or emotionally. “Reid...” I started quietly.

He glared at me, a look that told me he wasn’t backing down.

“Fine,” I sighed, giving in.

His presence, if nothing else, forced me to think about anything other than my nightmare. He seemed to realize that I didn’t want to recall my nightmare, so he created random conversation.

“How’s your ankle?” he whispered.

I had been mostly hopping on my right ankle, occasionally pressing my left foot to the ground. “It’s still bad. I could walk on it a little before, but now it’s hurting again.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the hospital room?” he asked, a little out of breath.

“I’m not going to the hospital room,” I told him sharply before I remembered that he hadn’t known I didn’t want to go to the hospital room. It was Travis that I told about my dislike of drugs and such.

“Alright, alright, calm down,” he whispered hastily. Then, looking around as if to find a means of distraction, he started, “Are you going to the stations tomorrow?”

I shook my head. “I need to talk to Dr. Pierce,” I answered.

“It’s not gonna take all day, is it?” He asked quietly.

I nodded but didn't say anything. I focused instead on my breathing, which was rapid and staggered because of my crying and my lack of left foot as a balance. Whenever I came close to thinking about the reason I was going to Dr. Pierce's office, I shut my brain down. I would not think about my nightmare. I would not think about my nightmare.

The minute I was in spitting distance of Dr. Pierce's door, I was banging on it. I wasn't worried about people hearing me. I needed to talk to her. She had to be in there.

"Dr. Pierce!" I called, still banging on the door with my fist.

"Darcy..." Reid started.

"Dr. Pierce, I need to talk to you!" I called through the door, hitting it firmly. The door wasn't opening. There was no sound except my calls and pounds. "Dr. Pierce?"

"Darcy..." Reid started again. "I don't think she's here."

"She—" Bang. "Has—" Bang. "To—" Bang. "Be—" Bang. "Here!" I snapped fiercely. "Open the door!"

"She's not here!" Reid repeated louder. "Stop it!"

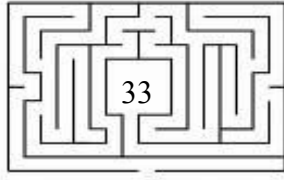
I could feel the tears coming again. My lack of sleep, my fear, my confusion, my depression, everything was mixing together, and I was too emotional to stand it. "Reid, she has to be here," I snapped, my voice catching as the first sob came. "I need to talk to her, I need to..."

I collapsed, sobbing. "I need to see her, I have to talk...she has to..."

Reid came to me and sat down, making sure to avoid my ankle. "She'll be here in the morning. I promise."

My life was disintegrating. It seemed pointless to do much of anything anymore. I would just be shot down in the end. Any progress just resulted in more confusion, and any happiness was ended quickly. This was not my life; it wasn't supposed to be like this.

I fell asleep, crying, with my head resting on Reid's shoulder.



“Darcy?” I heard a voice floating around me but couldn’t place it. “Darcy. Wake up.”

I came back to consciousness, but my eyes wouldn’t open. I was so tired. I tried to shake off the voice, but my brain stirred and, immediately, memories of my nightmare came back.

With a gasp, my eyes popped open, and I flinched. Travis was crouching in front of me, staring.

Before I could say anything, hands clenched my right arm. I twisted around and saw Reid sitting behind me, looking suspiciously at Travis.

“Darcy, that’s Dr. Pierce’s stepson. That’s Travis James,” Reid snapped quickly, instinctively pulling me back.

I was too focused, momentarily, on the presence of Travis to acknowledge Reid’s warning or the warning bells inside my own head. Instead, I flung myself at Travis and pulled my arm loose of Reid’s grip. “Travis. I need to talk to Dr. Pierce. Where is she?”

“She should be coming soon. I’m meeting with her in about ten minutes,” he answered. “What’s the matter?” He asked quietly, his hands coming to rest on my shoulders.

“You know him?” Reid asked incredulously, his face coming into my view.

“Of course she knows me,” Travis answered in a stern matter-of-fact voice. He turned back to me and repeated, “What’s the matter?”

Reid practically pushed himself between Travis and me. “She had a nightmare last night,” he answered before I could say anything, and I heard something in his voice. Anger? His eyes were on mine. “How do you know him?”

“Reid, please, just...” I started, shook my head slightly, and turned back to Travis. I had to stay on one topic for just a second.

Travis didn't even look at Reid. He was staring at me. "Are you okay?" He asked me intently.

"Obviously we wouldn't be sitting outside Pierce's office if she was," Reid snapped.

Travis regarded him coolly. "I believe I was talking to Darcy," he told Reid icily and faced me. "Are you alright?" he asked again.

I shook my head. "I need to talk to Dr. Pierce. I can't stay here, Travis, please, you need to help me," I told him urgently.

Travis nodded. "Okay. You wanna come with me?" He asked quietly, staring into my eyes.

"She needs to see *Pierce*," Reid interrupted defensively, his hand automatically coming protectively to my lower arm.

"Can you butt out of the conversation, please?" Travis snapped at him. "I'm pretty sure Darcy can speak for herself."

"She'd be able to answer honestly if a stranger wasn't crowding her!" He snarled, talking as though I wasn't in earshot.

"Fortunately, I'm not the stranger here," Travis hissed.

What was going on here? God, this was just what I hadn't wanted to happen. They were tearing at each others' throats!

"Like you really know anything about her!"

Travis stood up, taking me with him. "Can we *not* have this discussion while she's suffering?" He growled, pulling me towards him.

Reid stood up as well. His face clearly said that he wished he had been the one to suggest that. He quickly resumed his position as protector. "What are you doing?"

"We're gonna go to Lorraine," he answered.

"Then I'm coming with you!" Reid said immediately.

"No, you're not," Travis snapped.

"I'm not gonna leave Darcy with *you*!" Reid told him sharply.

"Reid," I warned. This whole thing had blown up into something terrible. This, added to my stress, was doing nothing for my emotional state. My throat was hurting with the effort it took to keep my tears at bay.

“What do you think she’s been doing for the last week?” Travis practically yelled. “I can help her! What are you gonna do, cause a fight? Just back off!”

Reid was standing there, his shoulders slightly hunched, as he took in what Travis had said. Then, he turned to me. “Week?”

My eyes automatically closed in frustration and defeat. “Reid, please, not now.”

“*That’s* what you’ve been doing? Seeing *him*?” He practically gasped.

I opened my eyes to see the hurt on his face. He wasn’t going to drop it. “Reid, I was gonna tell you, but...” What had my excuse been?

“But you didn’t,” he finished for me, his face showing disbelief.

A single tear ran down my cheek as my strength broke down. “I’m sorry, really, but I can’t do this. I have to find Dr. Pierce, please, understand,” I whispered, wiping the tear away. Then, pushing my emotions away, I asked Travis, “Where are we going?”

“Darcy...” Reid started quietly, the pain clear in his voice.

I couldn’t deal with his hurt and mine together. So I did what I had to do and turned away from him. “Travis?”

Travis glanced quickly at Reid and then said, “We can either wait for her here or go find her.”

“I can’t wait any longer,” I answered quietly.

“Then let’s go,” Travis replied decisively.

I turned with him and started hobbling away. He kept a firm grip on my arm and I on his.

“You didn’t tell your friend about our meetings?” Travis asked.

“I don’t know why I didn’t. I just...” I trailed off. I really didn’t want to add yet another problem to my life.

“There’s nothing wrong with keeping it private, Darcy. He doesn’t need to know everything,” he told me quietly.

“I know. But he’s my friend, and he trusts me. I should be able to trust him.”

“Saying it doesn’t make it easier to do.”

I sighed. “That doesn’t stop me from feeling just as bad.”

Not thinking, I placed my left foot down and practically collapsed. Travis's hands grabbed my arms before I tripped.

"Thanks," I told him, slightly embarrassed.

"Have you tried walking on it at all?" He asked me, looking down at my lame ankle.

I shook my head. "I don't want to hurt it."

"I know, but you're never going to get used to the pain if you don't walk on it," he told me as he dug into his pocket and came out with a cell phone. "I'm gonna call Lorraine and see where she is."

With a click of a button, Travis was linked to Dr. Pierce. "Lorraine, I've got Darcy with me...No, she had an intense nightmare, I found her asleep outside your office...Oh, I thought we were meeting down here...So, do you want us to come up instead?...We can test it then...Kind of, but I'm helping her strengthen it...Alright, we'll meet you there."

Then he flipped his phone shut and smiled down at me. "I'm gonna make a deal with you."

"Wait, what'd she say?" I interrupted.

"She wants us to come up to her office on the main floor," he told me, and when I started to ask a question, he interrupted, "No, no questions until I tell you my deal."

"Fine," I huffed, still hopping alongside him.

"If you try and walk on your ankle, I'll tell you about the surprise I promised you."

I considered that and then shook my head. "I *really* need to talk to Dr. Pierce. It'll take me years to get to her office if I try to walk."

"It'll take the same amount of time as if I were helping you hobble," he convinced me. After a second, he asked, "Is it a deal?"

I sighed. He was probably right about the time. And I really needed a lift in my day. "Fine. Deal."

"Alright, then stop hopping," he commanded.

I frowned at him and stopped. We stood in the hallway as I gently put my left foot on the ground and applied a tiny bit of pressure. I immediately fell onto my right foot. "Ow."

"Keep trying," Travis encouraged. "I won't let go."

I took a careful step forward on my left foot, tightened my grip on Travis's arm, and lifted my right foot. A spasm of pain went up my leg, but I didn't immediately lower myself to my right foot.

"Ta-da!" I exclaimed.

"Good. Now, try another step without using my arm as a complete support device," he commanded, slightly mocking me.

I took a hesitant step forward. It didn't hurt quite as much, but I still flinched and lowered myself onto my right foot.

"It hurts," I told Travis.

"Yeah, I know. I won't let you fall though," he told me gently. "And if you take five consecutive steps without any of my aid, I'll tell you the surprise."

I looked at him warily. "Five?"

He nodded.

I slowly let go of his arm. Then, putting aside the pain, I stepped deliberately onto my left foot and carefully balanced my weight on both feet. I didn't allow myself to react to the pain as I took five steps, putting the right amount of pressure onto my left foot. When I had taken five steps and no longer felt such a strong pain in my left ankle, I turned to Travis.

"Still hurt?" He asked, coming up to stand beside me.

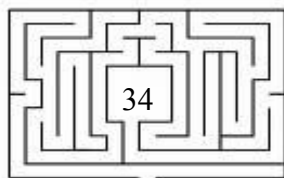
I shook my head. "Not as much."

"Good," he approved.

"So, what's the surprise?" I delved right in.

"You walk, I'll talk," he said first.

I sighed but took my next step.



“**A**lright,” he started, “Well, as soon as I got here yesterday morning, I went and talked to Lorraine. She told me that the doctors had noticed your change in attitude and that she thought you were starting to go through a depression.”

“I’m not—” I interrupted defensively.

“Let me finish!” He continued. “I subtly suggested that maybe the reason for your depression might be the stations and the dreary atmosphere down here and all the doctors. I explained that you were much less stressed when you were talking to me, and that I thought it would be better for you if you left the lower floors for awhile.”

I looked up at him quickly. “What’d she say to that?”

“She was a little skeptical at first, I’ll admit it. But I pressed it enough that I think she’s seriously considering bringing you up to the main floors for a couple days. Our meeting today was supposed to be part two of our discussion, but I think your nightmare might push her over the edge.”

He didn’t continue. Instead, we walked in silence as I thought over what he had just told me. I would be leaving this dungeon? I wouldn’t have to face all the doctors, wouldn’t be forced to do something I didn’t want to do. Just the thought of it left me feeling almost weightless.

Suddenly, Travis stopped.

“What?” I asked quickly. He was regretting his decision. He didn’t want to take me up to Dr. Pierce, didn’t want to be responsible for me anymore. Thousands of paranoid thoughts flew into my head.

“Elevator,” he answered, pointing to the right.



I backed up and stood next to him. “Oh.” I felt like an idiot. Calm down, Darcy. He’s not going to back out of this. You trust him, you like him, just relax!

Still, I couldn’t help but ask another question. “Travis, could you really get me out of my cell?”

He nodded. “I will.” While we waited for the elevator, he continued. “You wanna hear where you come in?”

“I thought I was the lab rat,” I answered.

“Well, you kind of are,” he replied. “But you’re also essential to my master plan.”

I was amused but curious. “I think there are too many plans. What’s your *master* plan?”

“Ultimately, to get you out of this place. But, for now, it’s to bring you up from the lower floors.”

His words sent another shock down my spine. He cared about me.

I tried to force these distracting thoughts from my head. “Alright, so what do I have to do?”

He took a breath and started. “Right now, we’re headed for Lorraine’s upper office. She already knows about your recent attitude change and will be expecting you to arrive full of distress. I, however, want you to act hopeful.”

Now I was confused. “I’m not, though. I—”

“I know,” he interrupted. “But when she sees that the scenery change has caused such a dramatic improvement in your attitude, she’ll be even more convinced that my theory is worth trying. Understand?”

The elevator arrived with a ding, giving me a minute to understand him. His goal didn’t seem to match up with mine. I didn’t care where I was. I only wanted answers. His plan didn’t sound like it would help me get answers any time soon.

“Yeah, but that won’t fix anything,” I told him honestly, trying my best to keep the desperation from my voice. “Travis, my main concern right now is getting my memory back. Moving a few floors up won’t get me that! Right now, the only thing that seems like it’ll help me is Dr. Pierce. I don’t wanna lie to her anymore, because lying isn’t getting me anywhere.”

He sighed and nodded. "I understand," he answered quietly. Then he pulled his cell phone out.

"What are you doing?" I asked quickly.

He held up a finger for me to wait. The elevator stopped at the floor, and the doors opened. We exited, Travis still waiting for the person on the other line to pick up.

"Lorraine, we're gonna be a little late. Darcy's ankle isn't doing so great...No, I can handle it...Yeah, okay, bye," he finished and then shut his phone.

"It's not that bad," I told him, referring to my ankle. "How far are we from her office?" I asked, confused again. He wasn't big with the details.

"We're making a detour," he answered shortly. Unintentionally, I think, his walking speed increased.

"What? Why?" I asked, trying to keep up.

"I want to show you something," he replied curtly.

"Okay, well, could you slow down, please?" I asked, slightly out of breath. My ankle was starting to hurt again.

"Oh, right. Sorry," he answered gruffly, coming to a stop.

"What's the matter?" I asked when I had caught up to him.

"Nothing," he told me quietly.

"You seem mad, all of a sudden," I told him honestly.

"Well, I'm not."

"Then where are we going?"

"You'll see," was his answer. He took my arm and practically dragged me past different doors. Finally, we stopped at the last door in the hallway. He opened the door without a word.

The room was actually a spacious library. There was a black leather couch directly in front of us. On the walls to my left and right, there were shelves filled with a mixture of books and boxes.

"What's this?" I asked him.

He walked to the huge box immediately to our right without a word. He muscled it down, and it fell to the floor with a slam.

"Come here," he commanded.

I hobbled over to his side as he took the lid off the box. At first, it looked like it was empty, the inside a manila color. Taking a

closer look, though, I realized the box was full of tightly packed file folders.

“What are these?” I asked quietly.

“Files on every kid that ever left this lab,” he answered just as quietly.

I only stared. “Why are you showing me this?” He didn’t address my question. Instead, he pulled out a handful of folders and handed them to me. “What?” I asked, staring at them.

“Read them,” he commanded.

“But—”

“Do it,” he insisted.

I sighed but took the handful of extremely thin folders. I opened the first one. It barely had a paragraph in it.

Rachael Lear

DOB: 5/18/90

Date of admittance: 3/9/06

Date of cancellation: 1/22/07

Trauma Unit- physical abuse by  
stepfather, rape by stepfather, attempted  
murder by stepfather, extreme fear of men

**Cancelled**

I looked back at Travis. “What...”

“Now the next one,” he interrupted.

I opened the next one with hesitation. It had the same print and was the same size as the previous folder.

Montgomery Loun

DOB: 12/2/93

Date of admittance: 7/29/05

Date of cancellation: 12/11/05

Trauma Unit- parents murdered on 4/8/05  
by next-door neighbor

**Cancelled**

I handed the unread files back to Travis, trying to control the rampant emotions inside me. “Why am I reading these?”

He took them, placed them on the floor next to the box, and then stood up. He held out a hand for me, and I took it. He lifted me up, and we walked towards the couch in silence.

When I was seated, I looked at him. "Travis. Why did you make me read those?"

He sat down quietly. Finally, he looked me in the eyes, and I saw the intensity they held. Then he spoke. "What did you see when you read those?"

I stared at him. What the heck was he asking? "A name, date of birth, the date that they were brought here, the date they left here, and what was wrong with them."

"Anything else that struck you as odd?" He continued.

I thought back, but I already knew my answer. "No."

He got up, went back over to the box, grabbed the two files, and came back. He opened the first one.

"Rachael Lear was beaten and raped repeatedly by her stepfather before he tried to kill her. When she came here, it was very obvious that she was intensely afraid of men. She went through a period where she would faint whenever she was in close contact with any male. Rachael stayed here for eleven months.

"Montgomery Loun's parents were killed by his next door neighbor because of some argument his dad and the neighbor had had the previous day. His parents were shot in the head right in front of Montgomery. He came here and stayed for five months.

"Dr. Pierce had never had a case like either of theirs before their arrivals. Yet, before a year was over, she cancelled their stay here, and they were brought somewhere else," he finished quietly.

I could see where he was going with this, but I willed myself to shut my brain down. I couldn't hear this, not now.

Travis leaned carefully towards me. "Darcy. Do you really think that what happened to you is worse than what happened to Rachael or Montgomery?"

I looked away from him. "I don't know."

"No, look at me. You do know," he continued intently when my eyes met his. "The answer is no. No, what happened to you is probably not as bad as what happened to either of them."

"How do you know?"

“I know,” he answered quietly. “Dr. Pierce holds more interest in you because you can’t remember what happened, but believe me, you are not worse off than any of the other kids who are here.”

He paused, maybe to think about his next words. “Listen to me,” he started slowly. “It isn’t you specifically that she’s interested in. It’s what happened to you and how it affected your brain that she wants to study. Just like the other two, and all the other kids that left this lab, when you no longer hold her interest, she will abandon you.

“Do not fool yourself into thinking she cares about you. She is in this purely to learn, and she’ll use whatever means she needs to use in order to get the information she wants.”

I was trying to take all of it in. “But...”

He interrupted. “I’m telling you this because I care about you. Maybe more than I should. You need to trust me when I tell you that she *does not* care about you,” he finished softly. “Trust me, please. You can’t give up now. I can help you. If we move to the upper floors, I’ll be able to find your file. The atmosphere in the lower levels is doing nothing for your memory; you have to understand that. You have absolutely *no chance* of getting your memory back if you stay down there. Please don’t put yourself into her hands. I can get you out of here.”

I had to look away from him. There were so many things he was saying, and I was so confused and tired of being depressed.

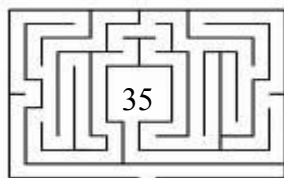
I carefully turned back to him. I could almost feel his despair. I could see his sincerity and hope that I would believe him.

I trusted him. I needed him. I knew all about him, and I knew who he was. He would help me.

Slowly, I started, “Do you promise?”

He closed his eyes in relief. Then, before I could react, his arms wrapped around me, and he was hugging me fiercely. Immediately, I was pulled into his warmth, and my arms unconsciously went around his body. This felt good, felt right. This was where I was supposed to be.

I felt his mouth next to my ear. “I swear it.”



I didn't know why I was nervous to meet yet again with Dr. Pierce. Yet, the minute we arrived on the first floor of Travis's house and stopped in front of the door I assumed led into Dr. Pierce's office, my adrenaline began pumping.

"Ready?" Travis asked quietly.

I nodded but didn't trust myself to speak. My voice would give my true feelings away. I wasn't ready. I was torn between which side of myself to trust. My dominant side trusted Travis, and why shouldn't I? He had been helping me all along, trying, ever so subtly, to break me away from the lower levels. His argument was strong, his evidence clear and concise, and his reasoning made perfect sense.

My other side, though, begged me to trust Dr. Pierce, even though all facts suggested she was evil. This side of me was the side that needed help, that needed to escape from this place and go back to my family, whatever the cost.

I was at a loss.

Before Travis had knocked a third time, we heard a loud, "Come in!" from the other side of the door. Travis smiled encouragingly at me and opened Dr. Pierce's door.

The first thing I saw was Dr. Pierce sitting pleasantly at her desk, a smile on her face, her hands folded neatly on a pile of papers. The next thing I noticed was the dramatic difference in lighting in her office. The hallway had been dark, because it was lacking windows. Dr. Pierce's office, however, had two big windows directly behind her desk. These windows allowed rays of sunlight into the room, giving it a cheerful glow.

I was almost mesmerized by the sunlight. Without actually realizing what I was doing, I walked slowly towards the windows, passing around Dr. Pierce's desk in order to get a better view. The

windows overlooked at least five acres of lush lawn. The sun was shining brightly over the land.

This atmosphere made it easy to forget what was going on in the lower levels.

“Darcy?” Dr. Pierce started. “Is there something wrong?”

I shook my head, not moving my eyes away from the window. “No.”

“How are you feeling?” She asked sympathetically.

I turned to face her, remembering Travis and my plan. “Better,” I answered, which, in actuality, was part truth. Her office, in all its brightness, was lifting my spirit slightly.

Dr. Pierce’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Really?”

I nodded. “I like the sunlight,” I answered, again, honestly.

“I thought as much,” she replied, and, when she thought I wasn’t looking, gave one enthusiastic nod in Travis’s direction.

“I like it up here,” I told her, my voice slightly hypnotized as I stared intently out the window.

“I can see that,” she answered amiably. “Now, Darcy, Travis told me you had a nightmare. Is this true?”

I turned to face her. “Yes.”

“Would you care to talk about it?”

I looked away from her. Travis and I had discussed this. I knew what I had to do. I wasn’t happy about it, though. “It scared me.”

“Why? What happened?” She asked. I could hear the strain in her voice from trying to contain her excitement. She was finally getting some information.

“A man was in my cell,” I started.

“Did you know him?” she asked intently.

I nodded.

“Who was he?” she continued, her voice rising with new interest.

“I don’t know. I just know I knew him,” I said. “He knew my name, too.”

“But you do not remember who he was?” She asked. I was expecting to hear disappointment, but her voice remained the same.

“No,” I answered, thinking back to my nightmare. “He was bleeding. And he told me to play his song. I don’t know what that means.”

“And then...?” She waited for me to continue.

“Reid woke me up before anything else happened.”

Annoyance flashed in her eyes. “Did he say why he woke you up?”

Why was she annoyed with Reid? “No. But whenever he wakes me up from a nightmare, it’s because I was loud.”

“You have nightmares often?” She asked quickly.

I shook my head. “Not anymore. When I first came here, I did. But they stopped after a while.”

Dr. Pierce looked really pleased about something. I seriously hoped that was a good sign. She turned to Travis. “We will talk later. For now, keep her up here.”

Travis nodded but said nothing. I, however, couldn’t contain my happiness. “Really?” I exclaimed.

Dr. Pierce smiled. “I want to see if the change in atmosphere helps anything.” Then she turned to Travis. “Keep her occupied.”

“Right,” he sighed.

Together, we watched her leave.

I turned to Travis incredulously. “We did it!”

He smiled widely. “And it should all be uphill from here,” he said. Then he walked over to Dr. Pierce’s desk, sat down in her chair, and started pulling out drawers.

“What are you looking for?” I asked hesitantly, walk-hopping to her desk.

“What do you think?” He asked, slightly distracted by the various drawers. “Ah-ha!” He muttered, pulling open the last drawer.

“What? What?” I gasped, practically leaning over him in an effort to see. There, in the drawer, were about twenty file folders. “That’s it!”

“Let’s hope so,” he sighed, pulling the folders out. Then he turned to me. “Do me a favor and lock her door?”

I quickly hobbled over to the door, locked it, and then came back. “Find it yet?”



“No, still...” he started and then paused. Slowly, he looked up at me. “Found it.”

With shaky hands, I took it from his grasp and opened it. I hastily read over the first paper, taking in the words. Then—

“This...isn’t my file,” I muttered, putting the folder on the desk and skimming through the papers.

“What do you mean?” He asked quickly. “It has your name on it.”

“Yeah, but...it’s not it,” I answered. I didn’t let the disappointment crawl in yet. There had to be something here. “These are just reports the heads of each station gave to Dr. Pierce about me,” I answered. “Look. Ms. Nancy: ‘Does not participate during test taking. Lack in motivation.’” I took the next paper. “Dr. Selt: ‘Does not follow directions. Lack in motivation.’ They’re just reports.”

He took the papers and the file from my hand and read them over himself. I carefully monitored his face, watching as his face fell after each paper he read.

He threw the file on the desk, frustrated. Then he pulled out the other folders and read the papers inside those. “They’re all the same. They’re all just reports,” he growled, annoyed.

Silently, he shoved all the folders back into the drawer. Then he stood up. “This is so goddamn frustrating!” He cursed.

I didn’t say anything. My silence told him I agreed.

He ran his hand through his hair and quietly asked, “What do you wanna do?”

I wasn’t sure if there was another meaning behind his question, but I took it at face value and said, “Can we go someplace relaxing?”

He smiled, the first sign of his old mood, but his eyes were still tight. “Sure.”

Then he did something surprising. He held out his hand for me to take. Carefully, I reached my hand out and took his. He pulled me to the door.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

“Someplace relaxing,” was his answer.

As he led me down the hallway we had entered through, I tried not to think about our hands intertwined. I couldn’t feel this

way about him; I had too much else on my mind. He and I were different, in different positions here, wanted different things.

Yet, I couldn't stop thinking about him.

"What are you thinking about?" Travis asked quietly as we turned the corner.

"Where we're going," I told him instead.

He smiled. "It's a surprise."

I sighed overdramatically but smiled. When we got to the elevator, he pressed the up button. The minute we stepped inside the elevator, my stomach started to hurt. Before I had time to react, my stomach growled loudly.

Travis looked down at me, our hands still together. "Please tell me you ate breakfast and *then* fell asleep outside Lorraine's door."

I shook my head, looking sheepish. "The second the nightmare ended, I was heading towards Dr. Pierce's office."

"So, you're probably starving right about now."

"Probably," I answered.

"Would you like something to eat?" he asked. The elevator stopped at the top floor.

"Yes," I answered bluntly.

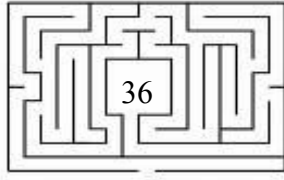
"Come on," he said instead, pulling me off the elevator and towards the only door in the hallway.

"What's this?" I asked him when we got to the door.

"My room," he answered.

My eyebrows rose. "You have your own floor?"

"Did you expect anything less?" he asked mockingly and then opened his door.



We were in a suite- a really nice suite. There was stylishly beautiful black leather furniture and a room off the front parlor that had another couch and a huge plasma TV. A piano was in the corner of the front parlor, framed by windows that overlooked a sprawling forest.

The floor was hardwood, a shiny mahogany color that reflected the room. The walls were equally as tasteful, cream colored and boasting five different modern art pieces. Perfectly placed around the room were a number of classic books, sitting casually atop expensive looking end tables.

Stunned, I managed to get out, "This is your room?"

"Yup," he answered, moving to the left, where a mini kitchen was located.

"Did you do all the decorating?" I asked, going over to sit at the island.

He nodded. "Most of it. Courtesy of my dad's wallet," he added sarcastically.

"It's really nice," I told him, a definite understatement. His suite was beautiful.

"Thanks," he answered modestly and then turned to his refrigerator. "So, what'll it be?"

"What?"

"What do you want to eat?" he clarified, still looking into his refrigerator.

"Oh. Um, I don't know," I answered awkwardly. It felt weird, telling him what I wanted to eat. "Are you gonna eat?"

"I was planning to. Why?"

"Then I'll just have whatever you're having," I told him.

He moved to his cabinet. "Pasta?" He suggested.

I nodded. "Great." Silently, he got a pan out, filled it with water, and then set it to boil. I, meanwhile, gazed around his

apartment, my eyes drawn to the hallway coming off of his living room. "What's down there?"

He turned to me. "Huh? Oh, my room and stuff."

"Can I see?" I asked quickly. I was interested in seeing where Travis lived.

He nodded. "Sure."

Temporarily ignoring the pain in my left ankle, I half-walked to the first door. Travis opened the door for me. "The bathroom," he stated.

It was large but simply decorated. The sunlight from the window made the white tile and walls even brighter. But, most surprisingly, it was clean.

We moved to the next room. "The exercise room."

He had five different machines in this room, all huge and complicated looking. There were all sorts of pulleys and weights on the machines, and they looked very expensive. Still, I was curious.

I walked slowly into the room and over to the bench press. "Can I try?"

He shrugged. "Yeah."

I tentatively eyed it. "What's it set to?"

"Right now, one hundred. But, we're changing that," he told me quickly, coming over to where I was standing and taking off a majority of the weights.

I sat down on the bench. "What's it on now?"

"Forty," he answered, moving behind me as I lay down. "I'm spotting you; don't worry."

"I wasn't," I scoffed, lying. Truthfully, I was glad he was spotting me. I honestly didn't know how much weight I could lift. I wasn't all that strong. But I didn't say that.

"Ready?" He asked, placing his hands almost next to mine on the bar.

By way of answering, I lifted the bar out of its holder. My hands shook slightly, but I brought it down slowly to my chest.

"Ha," I breathed.

"Now lift it back up," he suggested.

Cautiously, I unbent my arms, aware of the cracking of my elbows as they strained. I really needed to work out more.

When the weight was secured in its holder, I sat up. "That hurt," I stated.

"You're out of shape," he answered just as bluntly.

I narrowed my eyes mockingly and got up. "Let's see you lift one hundred, then."

He smirked, and then I realized how stupid of a dare that was. I knew he was strong. "Fine. Put the weights back on."

As he lay down, I picked up, one at a time, two twenty pound weights and two ten pound weights, pushing them on the sides of the bar equally until it was back to weighing one hundred pounds.

"There," I sighed. "Okay, go ahead," I taunted, still sticking to my dare even though I knew he was going to put me to shame.

Effortlessly, it seemed, he lifted the bar, brought it to his chest, and then lifted it back up. He did that four more times with ease. I, however, wasn't concentrating on the bar as much as his arms lifting it. I watched as his muscles contracted and expanded as he lifted the weights. He was seriously buff. And then, to my embarrassment, I could feel butterflies in my stomach.

This was not good.

I was sure my face was red from my own embarrassment. So, when he sat up after replacing the bar, I quickly thought of an excuse. "You just lifted a hundred pounds!" I exclaimed.

"I know," he answered, slightly amused.

"Can you do more?" I asked, a serious question.

"Sure," he sighed, lying back down.

I didn't want to kill him, so I put ten pounds on either side of the bar, bringing it up to an even one-hundred.

With a little more effort, he lifted it five times before sitting up again. "Happy?" He asked. His face was gleaming slightly with sweat, but he didn't seem to notice.

"You just bench-pressed more than my weight," I told him, my voice giving away how impressed I was.

He gave a seductive smile that had my heart pounding faster. I turned away quickly to hide the new blush in my face. "Show off," I muttered, leaving the room first.

I took the liberty of continuing my tour and crossed the hallway, opening the door. The room I walked into was clearly Travis's bedroom.

Under dozens of books strewn across his unmade king-sized bed, I saw a gray-ish goose down bedspread and matching pillowcases. There were two windows on the wall across from where I stood. Both windows had tangled but tasteful window shades. A huge bookcase was across from his bed, filled with books on each of the eight shelves. A desk with a flat screen computer and various books on it was next to his bedroom door.

He had some posters on the walls, but mostly, they were blank. His dresser had clothes hanging out of it, and I seriously wondered if even he had any clue as to which were dirty and which were clean. On the whole, though, it wasn't as depressing as I had imagined it would be, considering the way he chose to dress.

"Obviously, I would have straightened up if I knew I would be having company," he told me, slightly sarcastic. "As it is, this is what my room normally looks like."

"And I respect that," I answered, just as sarcastically. "But, seriously, what happened to your blinds?"

I walked over to his first window and gave it a once over.

"They weren't working right," he answered, as though this was a perfectly reasonable excuse as to why it looked like an animal had attacked his blinds.

"Did you try using the convenient string?" I asked, holding it up to show him. I knew exactly what the problem was.

"Yes," he answered. He knew I was teasing him.

I reached up, flipped some of the slats over so that they were all facing one way, straightened out the individual wooden planks, and then pulled the string. The blinds went up perfectly.

"Somehow, I feel like that was too easy," he muttered to himself.

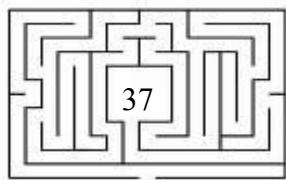
I did the same to the other blind and then opened both windows before turning back to him. "You can bench press one-hundred and twenty pounds, but you can't pull up a blind?" I was full-on mocking him now.

"It's the simple tasks that get me every time," he replied, leaving his room and going towards the kitchen. I followed him.

“And cooking isn’t simple?” I asked, sitting down at the table.

“No,” he answered plainly. “But setting the table is.” And with his oh-so-subtle hint, he handed me two sets of utensils and two napkins and smiled winningly. “Would you care to do the honors?”

“I’d love to.”



The day passed with unbelievable speed. I spent most of the day in Travis's room, looking through his huge selection of books. He had each section labeled, more or less, by genre and then alphabetically by author. However, it was the books scattered around his room that I took the time to flip through. These, Travis had told me, were his favorites. All thirty-eight of them.

The next time I looked at the clock, it was ten-thirty p.m. I was lying on Travis's bed, surrounded by some of the books I'd found, skimming through the pages, while Travis typed hastily on his computer.

"Whoa, this book is intense," I murmured half to myself, half to Travis.

"Which one?" he asked, still slightly engrossed in whatever he had been doing.

"*Of Human Bondage*," I read the title. "By W. Somerset Maugham."

He spun around in his chair. "I'm actually reading that now."

"Do you recommend it?" I asked casually, looking down at the pages. They were like onion skin. I was almost afraid I would rip a page just by turning it. The print, too, was miniscule.

"Not at all," he answered honestly. "It's really boring."

"Then why are you still reading it?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I have this weird obsession with finishing books I've started."

"Even if they suck?" I clarified.

He nodded. "Yup."

"Interesting," I murmured, turning to where he had bookmarked the page. After reading a paragraph, I put it down. My eyes were glazing over after half a page.



I spent the next twenty minutes lost in his books. When I finally pulled away from all things literary, I realized how tired I was.

I didn't want to go back to my cell, though. Today had been one of the few days I had actually enjoyed while at the lab. I didn't want it to end. I didn't want to go back to my dark pit of misery. I felt better with Travis near me.

While I was struggling with this, Travis swiveled around in his chair. "I've just realized I'm keeping you up."

"Huh?" I asked stupidly, the first thing I could think of to say. Crap, he had noticed, too.

"It's like, what, three hours past your bedtime?" He asked, but there was hardly any trace of sarcasm in his voice.

"Just about," I answered honestly, my heart sinking slightly. Back to reality.

He logged off his computer quickly and then walked over to his dresser. While I watched with confusion, he pulled out a t-shirt and a pair of mesh shorts. Then he threw them at me.

"What's this for?" I asked, barely catching them.

"Sleeping," he told me, his face showing that I was missing something obvious. "You can change in the bathroom."

Then, in one swift movement, he pulled his shirt over his head. I looked away from him, sure my blush would give me away. Instead, I looked down at the outfit he had given me and asked, "But aren't I going back to my cell?"

His movement stopped, and I looked back at him as he said simply, "No."

When I still looked confused, he stated, "I thought it was pretty obvious that our plan worked when Dr. Pierce said 'keep her busy,' but maybe you missed that part."

I could feel the surprise on my face, and I didn't bother to hide it. "I can stay up here?" I practically gasped, not ready to believe it.

He nodded and then added quietly, "I told you I'd help you."

Elated, I whispered, "You did."

He gave me a smile I could have drowned in. Our eyes locked and, although neither of us moved closer, it felt like there

was an electric force pushing us together. A moment passed between us where I couldn't breathe, couldn't blink. My mind was clouded while my heart beat faster.

Then, suddenly, a buzzing noise snapped us back into the present. I jumped slightly and, trying to calm myself, asked, "What is that?"

"My phone," he answered, moving to his desk to answer it. He flipped it open. "What?" He asked quickly. "No, I'm kinda busy right now.... Well, can it wait...So?...And what do you want me to do about it?"

While he argued with whoever was on the other end of the line, I took the clothes Travis had given me and went to the bathroom.

On the counter, there was a new toothbrush, toothpaste, a brush, and some other necessary items. If I had had any doubts that they were for me, they disappeared when I saw the pink razor.

When I got back to Travis's room, he was off the phone. He was in the process of re-shelving the books that had been lying on his bed.

"Where's your guest room?" I asked, watching as he stacked the last two books.

"Don't have one," he answered, caught up in alphabetizing his books.

I was taken aback by his answer. "Oh," was all I could say. So, where was I going to sleep? I guess I would be able to sleep on his couch. God knows it was probably comfier than my bunk in the cell. The floor was probably even better than my bunk bed.

So, I was immensely surprised when he joked, "I can guarantee, my bed is much better than those boards Lorraine makes you sleep on."

I was nearly stunned into silence. "I'm sleeping...here?"

He nodded. "That's the plan."

And, to prove his point, he took two of the many pillows lying on his bed and put them on the floor. Then he pulled three blankets from under his bed.

"You're sleeping on the floor?" I asked guiltily.

"Believe me, I've slept on much worse," he assured me.

I watched as he laid the blankets out, but soon I was distracted by his arm. I followed his arm with my eyes, trying to read what his tattoo said. Finally, when he kept moving it, I reached out and grabbed his upper arm.

Surprised, he looked at me. "What?"

"Your tattoo," I answered, slightly embarrassed. But I could finally read it. "Wait. Is it in a different language?"

He nodded. "German."

"Mein Herz Brennt'?" I stumbled over the words. "What does it mean?"

"It's a secret," he answered, amused.

I sighed, slightly disappointed, and climbed into his bed. He was right; it was much comfier than my bunk bed. It smelled like him, too. Strong and sweet. I felt the fatigue washing over me almost immediately.

It was quiet for a minute as Travis turned his light off and then arranged himself in the best position on the floor.

Then, I asked quietly, "Travis?"

"Yeah?" came his attentive voice.

I paused, not sure what I was trying to ask. He waited for my mind to form a question. Finally, "Do you think this'll ever get better?" I almost whispered.

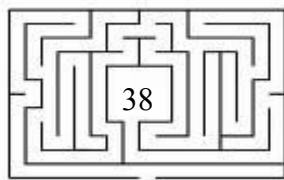
His answer wasn't prompt, but it wasn't hesitant either. "I know it will."

"How?" I asked, my voice breaking slightly.

"Do you trust me?"

For no reason at all, I could feel tears starting to form. I forced them down quickly, but my emotions were too strong. A single teardrop fell down my cheek as I whispered, "Of course."

His voice was firm now. "It will get better."



The door flung open, light washing over the room. I jumped, my eyes squinting to see who it was. Dr. Pierce.

“Now,” she snapped.

I tried to squirm away from her, farther away, towards the other end of the bed. I was shaking, the world upside down, confusion covering everything. “Travis,” my voice rang out.

He was by my side, shouting at Dr. Pierce while I cowered by his side. Then, suddenly, he dropped, and Dr. Pierce took his place. “We’re going,” she yelled.

“Travis!” I screamed, trying to reach out for his body. Was he dead? What had happened? I couldn’t move, I couldn’t breathe, the world was out of my control. I was being yanked from the room, from Travis’s safe house, away from him.

“Travis!” I screamed once more. I couldn’t stop screaming. Where was I going? What was happening? “Trav—”

I woke up screaming and crying. I sat up quickly, my breathing irregular, my sobs loud and mind numbing. I couldn’t catch my breath. Where was I? Where was I?

“Darcy,” someone sighed.

My eyes flew open, and I flinched. Then I recognized who it was. I flung myself into Travis’s arms, clinging to him as I bawled.

“It’s over now. It was just a dream,” he was murmuring.

I didn’t know why I continued to cry. Just as it seemed like I was calming down, fresh tears were rolling down my face. All I could see was Dr. Pierce’s face, frightening, horrible, standing over Travis’s body. Travis’s body. I shuddered while my tears streamed onto his bare shoulder.

“Calm down, Darcy, it’s okay,” he was whispering. I felt his hand running up and down my back, his arm wrapped just as tightly around me as mine were around him.

Slowly, I was able to calm myself. Pushing all thoughts out of my head, I let Travis's words wrap around my mind, replacing everything else. I focused on his hand's rhythmic movement, tracing my spine, up and down, up and down.

Even after the only sound in the room was my heavy breathing, we still stayed as we were.

"Travis," I whispered, turning my head so my face was to his chest.

"What happened?" He whispered, stroking my hair, very careful to keep me calm.

"Dr. Pierce was here. She hurt you and..." I couldn't continue. My breath caught, and I shuddered again.

"It doesn't matter now. I'm right here," he sighed into my hair.

"Please don't leave me," I told him so quietly, it barely left my lips.

"Never," his reply was almost quieter than mine. I fell asleep, clinging to him like he was the only thing keeping me grounded.

When I woke up, light was streaming in from the windows, and Travis was standing in front of his closet, apparently deciding what to wear. I blinked the sleep from my eyes and sat up slowly.

Travis turned. "Hey. How'd you sleep?"

"Fine, after that small interruption," I answered honestly.

He looked at me closely. "You okay?" He asked quietly.

I nodded. "Yeah. It just scared me a little."

"Understandable," he answered amiably, turning back to his closet. "I left some clothes for you in the bathroom. You can leave the stuff you're wearing in the laundry room."

"Thanks," I answered. Slowly, I pushed myself out of bed, stretched, and then headed for the bathroom.

As promised, there were clothes resting on the edge of the countertop in the bathroom. It was the same kind of outfit all of us wore in the lower level, only these looked a little newer, not as dirty. I didn't care enough to ask when he had gotten the outfit.

Following his directions, I took my dirty laundry and walked down the hallway to the laundry room. When I got past

Travis's door, there were two doors remaining. Choosing the one closest to me, I opened it.

At first, I was confused. Had I accidentally gone into Travis's room? No, this room was different. It had the same bedspread and blinds, but there were no posters on the walls and it was completely spotless. This was a guest room.

Travis had told me he didn't have a guest room. He couldn't have suddenly forgotten about the extra room in his apartment. So that meant he either didn't want me using his guest room, or he had wanted me to stay in his room.

The second the latter notion seemed a possibility, my heart did an uncomfortable flop, and the butterflies were back. This time, my mind immediately flashed to the previous night, the hazy memory of Travis comforting me.

I didn't let myself believe or hope that there was anything between us.

I said nothing to Travis about his guest room once I was back in his room. Instead, I walked over and made his bed while he did something very complicated looking on his computer. He still wasn't done with whatever he had been doing, so I glanced at the computer screen. He was watching a video. It almost looked like a security camera's video.

"What are you doing?" I asked casually, leaning over Travis's shoulder to get a look at the screen.

"One sec," he muttered, pressed a few keys on the keyboard, and then pressed 'enter.' He swiveled to face me. "You need to eat quickly."

"Huh? Why?" I asked, moving out of his way as he stood up.

"We're going on an adventure," he told me. I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic.

"No, seriously."

"I'm being serious," he answered honestly, walking towards the kitchen. "Is a bagel okay?"

"Um, yeah," I answered, distracted, and then brought him back to the more important topic. "What kind of adventure?"

He was already putting a sliced bagel into the toaster. "There's butter and cream cheese in the refrigerator. I'm gonna be

checking a few things in my room. You can call me when you're done."

"But—"

He interrupted. "Don't worry. I'll explain everything once I'm sure it'll work," he told me quickly and went back into his room.

I was left puzzled and slightly annoyed by the lack of information he was supplying. But I trusted Travis enough to know when to let it be and know that he'd work it out. Resigned, I waited for the bagel to turn golden brown and then got the cream cheese out.

I was torn on what to do: half of me begged for food, but the other was bogged down with curiosity. In the end, I decided hunger was more important. I wasn't even sure Travis's 'adventure' was going to happen.

Just as I was chewing my last bite, Travis hastily exited his room and said, "Finished?"

I nodded and swallowed. "Yeah."

"Alright, let's go," he answered, his whole aura antsy.

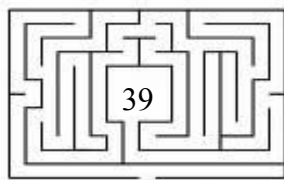
I got up quickly, not even bothering to deal with my plate, and followed him out of his apartment. His stride was quick and determined. I, though, was still in pain from my ankle. By the time we got to the elevator, I was out of breath, and my leg hurt.

"Not that I don't appreciate your intensity in whatever it is we're doing," I started as we got onto the elevator, "but would you mind walking just a tad slower? I'm still an invalid."

He smiled slightly. "Oh. Yeah, I forgot about that. Sorry."

"It's okay," I breathed. "And while we're confessing here, you wanna fill me in on the plan?"

He nodded, and I could see that he was thinking. Finally, he started, "We're on a hunt to find your file."



“I’m still a little confused,” I called after him, trying to keep up with his steady pace.

“About what?” He asked quietly.

I took his hint and lowered my voice. “What’s my role in this?”

“Well, it’s your file, isn’t it?” He asked rhetorically.

“Yes, but—”

“So, you should be there when we find it,” he answered.

“Okay, but this seems risky enough without me dragging you down. What if we get caught?” I asked quickly, trying to memorize all the twists and turns we were taking.

“We won’t,” he assured me. “Look, I told you: we go in to the camera room, turn off the security cameras, and go down to the lower level. No one’s gonna question my authority, I promise.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just...”

“What?” He urged when I didn’t continue.

I didn’t really want to voice my fear that my file wouldn’t be in Dr. Pierce’s office. What if she had moved it to another location, or it was in a file cabinet that needed a key to open? Or what if we met Dr. Pierce on the lower level? How would we explain our presence? But I couldn’t not tell Travis what I was worried about. We were being honest with each other.

“What if we don’t find it?” I asked quietly.

“We will,” he promised, the final word to our brief argument.

As we entered the lower levels and the darkness surrounded us again, I had to focus completely on putting all my faith in Travis. This place immediately lowered my spirits. My attitude visibly changed. I began to doubt we’d ever accomplish anything.

Finally, when we were nearing the security room, I voiced my complaint. “Travis, I don’t think—”



I was interrupted, physically, by his rough push into the nearest corner. Before I had time to realize what was happening, Travis's body was covering mine, shielding me from anything.

"Shh," he mouthed.

We stood there, glued together, as I tried to gather what had happened. What was Travis doing?

Then I heard voices. A man. No, it was a man and a woman. I recognized the woman's voice. Dr. Pierce. They were heading towards us. Their conversation was strained, tense, almost confused. They were going to pass us. They would see us.

Unconsciously, my breathing sped up, and I didn't notice that I was almost wheezing until Travis's hand flew up and covered my mouth.

As we stood pushed against the wall, waiting for Dr. Pierce and the man to pass or possibly realize that we were hiding there, I could only think about what was going to happen when we were caught. Would Dr. Pierce question Travis? Would Travis be able to lie well enough to convince her that we weren't doing anything suspicious? Dr. Pierce might decide I would be better off in the lower levels.

I was so wrapped up in the possible outcomes that I didn't even notice that I could no longer hear the voices. Travis's hand moved away from my mouth, and he pulled away from me.

"Are they gone?" I whispered so quietly that I almost made no sound.

He nodded. "I think so."

I breathed a sigh of relief and then looked at him seriously. "I don't think we should be doing this, Travis. It's too sneaky."

He wasn't giving up. "Don't you want your file?"

"Of course!" I exclaimed quietly. "But I don't wanna risk getting caught and then having to go back to my cell. Isn't there an easier way to do this?"

He shook his head. "Not really, no. Your file is definitely in her office down here. We just need to get there."

I couldn't wipe the skepticism from my face. "I don't know. I mean, I really want to get answers, but shouldn't we wait until..."

"Until what? Until she decides it's not worth keeping you up here?" Travis almost snapped. I could see some emotion coming

up and realized with surprise that it was defensiveness. "I don't want you going back to your cell, Darcy. And I'm gonna do whatever I can to make sure you stay up here."

I didn't know how to argue with that. He felt just as strongly about my file and well-being as I did. It was almost unnerving.

With a hesitant nod, I answered, "Okay."

He gave a small smile, took my hand, and we were off again.

The next time we stopped, it was at a door labeled 'Security.' "This is it," he muttered and then whispered to me, "Stay out here. This'll only take a minute. If you hear anyone, come in, okay?"

I nodded and watched as he went to disable the cameras, praying his plan worked.

He was out in two minutes flat.

"Done?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah," he sighed, obviously glad that part was over.

"Now what?" I asked tentatively.

"Now, we go to Lorraine's office," he answered.

This time, I was sure my face held confusion. "But she'll definitely be there!"

He shook his head. "No. Right now and for the next hour, she's having a staff meeting with the heads of each station."

My doubt began to ebb. "How do you know that?"

"She always has them at the beginning of the week," he answered certainly. "Also, I just saw the meeting on one of the security cameras."

And against my better instincts, I once again put my complete trust in him. I followed him closely, almost stepping on his feet a couple of times, so anxious for his protection. We took another set of elevators down to the floor that held Dr. Pierce's office.

Immediately, I recognized my surroundings. Fear was my first emotion.

"I don't like this," I whispered, even though our footsteps were making more noise than my voice would. I couldn't seem to shake off the fear. "What if we get caught?"

“You’re underestimating me,” he told me easily, but I saw the caution deep in his eyes. “We won’t get caught. And even if we do, what are they gonna say? That I’m not allowed to be in this place?”

His logic was making sense, really. But there was something that still made me nervous, and I couldn’t quite place it.

“If no one sees us, which I’m sure will be the case, then it’s like we were never down here. I turned off all the security cameras. We’re invisible to them,” he continued as we hastily moved towards Dr. Pierce’s door.

I knew I wouldn’t be able to put my feelings into words, so I waited silently as he dug through his pockets for something. He pulled out a key and unlocked her door.

“Where’d you get that?” I whispered.

“I made a copy of the original one,” he answered and opened the door for me. I had a feeling that he hadn’t asked her permission for a copy. Great. Now, we were *breaking* and entering.

True to Travis’s guess, there was no one in her waiting room. I could only hope he would be correct about her office, too.

Unintentionally, I held my breath while Travis unlocked her office door. It was only after the door was opened and I saw that it was empty that I allowed myself to breathe a sigh of relief. Soon after, I began gasping for air.

Travis had been about to sit down at her desk but looked back at me anxiously. “Are you okay?” He asked carefully, watching my face as I plopped down into one of the visitor chairs.

I nodded. “Yeah. Just a little nervous.”

He smiled slightly. “Once I get you out of here, we’re gonna work on our trust issues,” he told me mockingly.

I grimaced sarcastically and watched as he opened her file drawer, but my mind was soaring. So many things about his statement had made me want to smile. He was going to get me out of here. And he was going to stick with me enough to help me with my psychological issues.

I wished so much that he was being serious, that he really did care about me. But the logical part of my brain overruled my fantasy brain and convinced me that he was just making fun of me.

“Okay, let’s see,” he muttered to himself, and I heard papers turning. “Ailey, Anderson, Becker, Calandra, Decker, Esposito—”

He stopped. I heard papers shuffle faster and then a pause. I looked closely at Travis’s face. He was confused. Then I watched slowly as some realization struck him and the anger set in.

He looked up at me. “She took it with her.”

I didn’t answer. I had been trying to figure out what would confuse and then anger him. When he finally spoke, it took a minute for me to process what he had said. “Are...are you sure?”

He nodded. “It’s not here. It should have been right in between Calandra and Decker; it was there last time.”

He sat back in her chair, the anger now apparent. I could see he was trying to mentally work something out and wasn’t surprised when he started mumbling to himself. “Maybe that was what this week’s meeting was about. ‘Course, she could have transferred it to her other office. But why would she do that? She must have taken it with her. She was protective of it last time...”

I let him run off on a tangent, going through his thoughts one by one, because I knew that would make him feel better. But after five minutes of waiting and listening closely for any footsteps, I interrupted him.

“Travis?” I started quietly.

He looked up at me, his gaze far away, like he was still in his own little world. Then his eyes focused on mine. “Yeah?”

“Can we go now? It’s not here, maybe we should just...forget about it,” I finished lamely.

I couldn’t believe what I was saying. I was actually telling Travis to forget about my file, to leave my memories to Dr. Pierce. But I had a strange gut feeling that we weren’t going to find my file, no matter how hard we looked. If I were as important as Travis insisted I was to Dr. Pierce, my file would have extra protection. She wouldn’t just leave it lying around for any eyes to see.

I looked back at Travis’s face. He was frowning at me. “Darcy, are you serious? We can’t just leave. That file will explain everything! If we find it, we can get you out of here.”

He was only confirming everything I had been thinking about. “Exactly. Don’t you think Dr. Pierce has already thought of

that? It's probably just as important to her as it is to me. We're not gonna find it here."

Watching Travis closely, I could see that I was getting through to him. He was slowly understanding my thoughts. He was just more stubborn. "So, what? You're just gonna let Lorraine control your life, just waste away down here until your memory comes back? You need to leave this place, Darcy, it's killing you!" He snapped, getting up from his chair and moving to the front of Dr. Pierce's desk. "I can't just sit here and watch as you drown. If that frickin' file is the only thing keeping you from leaving, then we're gonna find it. You are *not* going to give up, do you understand?"

While he had been talking, he had moved closer to me, so close that our bodies were almost touching. His anger had touched me in a way I hadn't expected. Instead of feeling frightened by the rage he took on in my place, it almost made me feel relief.

He wasn't going to give up.

That was all I had wanted.

I turned away from him when I felt a sob coming on. I didn't know why I was crying. Maybe it was the disappointment in finding my file missing. Maybe it was because Travis had been yelling at me. But it might have been that my emotions were screwed up in the first place, and tears were the only way my body knew how to react.

Immediately, Travis backed away from me. "No, don't," he whispered, regret and sympathy covering his voice. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. Don't cry."

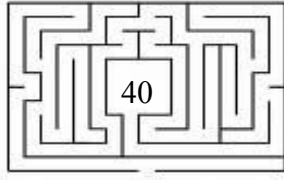
It took all my power not to let the tears flow down my face. Instead, I ended up breathing deeply, shuddering quietly as I tried to calm myself. What was going on with me? Everything seemed at an all-time low.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Travis lean forward again, bending down so that his head was almost level with mine. "Darcy," he whispered, and I turned back to look at him. With his eyes piercing mine, he continued quietly, "I'm sorry. I just...watching you struggling with this, it makes me sick. I don't know how you stay sane, Darcy, really, I don't. Maybe I care too

---

much about you, but it hurts to see you like this. I need to get you out of here, and I'm willing to try anything to do that."

Before I could make sense of what I was doing, I had flung myself into his arms. Oh God. In that second, I knew I loved him.



**W**e had just turned the security cameras back on when I decided it was the right time to ask the question that had been bothering me for a few days now.

“Travis,” I started slowly, walking after him, careful to keep my voice low in case we had visitors.

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you something?” I continued quietly.

He turned his head slightly and smiled. “Sure.”

Was this going to be a touchy topic for him? I couldn’t be sure. But I had to at least see what his answer would be. “Is there a reason why you haven’t told the police about this yet?”

I saw him falter for a second. It was a very quick second, and I would have missed it if I hadn’t been eying him so closely. He was back to his nonchalant attitude in no time, but I saw his real reaction first.

He paused for just a minute before saying, “It’s kind of complicated.”

“We’ve got time,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, I know, but...” He really didn’t seem all that eager to share his reasons.

Immediately, I backed off. I knew what it was like to be questioned about uncomfortable things. “If it’s private, seriously, don’t worry about it. I was just curious.”

“No,” he started. “Well, yeah, it’s private, but, I don’t know, it’s just...another time, okay?”

I nodded quickly. “Sure.”

If he was this uncomfortable talking about his answer, I was sure there was a perfectly reasonable explanation. I just couldn’t quite think of one. I wanted to trust him, though, so I pushed the question from my mind for the moment.

We rode the elevator in silence. When the doors opened, I instantly felt better. The sunlight did strange things to me. Or maybe it was the atmosphere in general that brought my spirits up.

"So. What are we gonna do today?" I asked casually, watching him closely to see if his mood, too, had elevated.

He pursed his lips. "How about lunch?"

"You spoil me," I teased.

He shrugged, smiling widely. "It's the least I can do."

He steered me towards the end of the main hall, in the direction of the kitchen. Suddenly, though, he jerked me back.

"Just the two I was looking for," a woman's voice started.

My heart sank rapidly as I placed the voice. I looked up quickly at Travis to see his reaction. We turned to look at her together.

"What?" He snapped at Dr. Pierce.

"You look well, Darcy," she started calmly.

I smiled hesitantly. "I feel better," I told her quietly, honestly.

"Wonderful," she stated, smiling back. Then she turned to Travis. "Travis, if I could just have a word?"

He glanced down at me quickly and then said, "Fine."

She waited for a second before saying, "In private."

His eyes narrowed, but he turned to me and said, "I'll be right back."

I nodded and watched him walk towards her. She deliberately positioned herself so that her back was to me, and I was facing Travis. I couldn't read her lips this way, and her voice didn't drift over to me. However, I could see Travis's expression, and I immediately knew something wasn't right.

"Not yet, no," he answered arrogantly.

She said something.

"I don't think that'll work."

I heard a very quiet, "And why not?"

"She's not ready yet. I promise, I'll get the memories, but I need at least another two weeks."

My heart jumped. I could stay with him for two weeks?

She said something quietly that I didn't hear.



“Okay, then we agree to disagree,” he snapped. “She’s not going back down with you.”

Her voice spiked on one syllable.

He was quick to reply, “No! I don’t care. No, it’s not gonna happen.”

She was saying something, but he interrupted her. “I’m done here. You aren’t taking her back yet. She’s staying with me until I see an improvement.”

Again, she started to argue, but he interrupted. “Screw the tests. You aren’t touching her.”

Then, he stalked back towards me before she had a chance to retort. He took my hand quickly. “Let’s go,” he muttered and practically dragged me towards the kitchen.

It was only after the kitchen door was closed that I rounded on Travis. “What was *that* all about?”

Only then did I notice his immense amount of stress. He leaned against the countertop, his head in his hands, breathing deeply. After a minute, he answered, “She wanted to bring you back down.”

Even though I had a feeling that was what the argument had been about all along, it didn’t stop me from feeling a huge rock of terror placed on me. “Why?” I whispered, hardly able to talk.

“She wants to do more tests,” he told me. If he were calm enough, he probably would have realized that I hadn’t really wanted to know why she wanted me back down in my cell.

I was almost paralyzed with fear. “Tests?” I gasped.

He looked up, quickly realizing his mistake as he snapped back to reality. “Darcy, calm down,” he started, coming over to me as I tried not to hyperventilate. “I won’t let her bring you back there. I promise, she won’t touch you.”

“What tests? What does she want?” I was gasping for air, trying to clear my head. Calm down. Just calm down.

“Don’t worry about it. She won’t touch you,” he repeated. His voice was soothing, relaxing in an odd way. Slowly, I was calmed enough to see his sense. He wouldn’t leave me; he would protect me.

I nodded and tried to smile, if only to convince him that I was fine. “I’m okay,” I told him. I willed myself to forget about that particular problem.

He wasn’t totally convinced, but he dropped it. “So. Lunch?”

While he scurried around the kitchen, I took in my surroundings. It was a huge kitchen, probably five times as big as the kitchen in Travis’s suite. The whole room was outlined with metal countertops and cabinets, and there was a refrigerator and freezer in the corner. It looked like a restaurant’s kitchen.

“Why do you need a kitchen this big?” I asked, moving around the island to where he was standing.

“I’m quite content with my small kitchen in my suite, actually. This is all Lorraine’s doing,” he answered as he pulled out green and red peppers and green and yellow zucchini. Then he looked around the kitchen. “Do me a favor? Go over to that counter and bring me that bacon.”

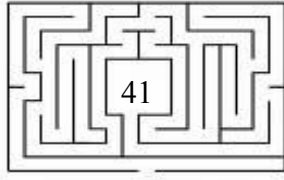
I followed to where he had been pointing and took the bacon from the other countertop.

“What are we making?” I asked, placing the bacon with all the other foods.

“Pasta carbonara,” was his reply.

The name didn’t sound familiar. “What’s that?”

“An Italian recipe. My mom used to make it for me, and now—” he took a huge knife from its container and, in one expert move, sliced a zucchini in half, “—I’m making it for you.”



For the first time in what felt like months, I was absolutely stuffed. There wasn't a morsel left on my plate. I was happy. I felt content and not just because I was full. This felt right, sitting with Travis, talking about nothing at all, relaxing. Momentarily, I wasn't filled with anxiety or fear.

We were in the process of cleaning the kitchen when I turned to Travis. "Were you being serious when you told Dr. Pierce you'd let me stay with you for two weeks?"

He nodded. "Completely. Well, actually, I'm hoping it won't take that long to find out about your memories, but the point is that you're not going back down there."

Our conversations might have seemed a tad repetitive, but I really did need the constant reassurance. He was right; I had trust issues. For some reason, something ingrained deeply inside me wasn't willing to completely trust something as stable as Travis. It was a constant battle, fighting against this instinct I knew I shouldn't trust.

We were silent for a second as he scrubbed down the pan we had used to cook the pasta, and I loaded the dishes in the dishwasher.

Finally, he started, "Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah," was my guarded answer.

"Why don't you trust easily?" He asked carefully. I heard the scrubbing stop.

"Are you kidding?" I asked, turning to face him. The answer was almost too easy.

He gave me a half-smile. "I kind of meant aside from the fact that you were kidnapped."

"Oh," I said, thinking about his question again. Was there another meaning I wasn't getting?

“It’s just, it seems like your lack of trust is from something other than the whole kidnapping thing. I mean, it’s understandable that you wouldn’t trust Dr. Pierce and all the other doctors, but why don’t you trust me?” He asked seriously. He was facing me completely now.

For a minute, I thought I had hurt him with my lack of faith. But there was no hurt in his face. He was just interested. Silently, I turned away from him, focusing on the dishwasher. This was hard.

I knew the answer to his question. It wasn’t hard for me to realize what he was asking and what kind of answer he was looking for. But, it was exactly my answer that had me refraining from replying.

I heard him put the pan down and then his footsteps, as he got closer to me. When I felt his hands on my arms, I turned to him.

“Answer me,” he whispered calmly.

That was all it took. “I’m afraid,” I whispered. “I’m afraid of what happened to me, and I’m afraid of this place, and I’m afraid of what Dr. Pierce will do to me. I don’t want you to leave me, but I’m scared that you will. I don’t know whom to trust. I don’t know anything here.”

He was looking at me with a softness in his eyes. “Trust me. Darcy, I will never leave you,” he whispered so gently that my heart stuttered.

I saw it coming, but I had no reaction. His eyes were smooth, his face willing me to trust him, to care for him as much as he cared for me. His lips found mine quietly.

Instinct told me to back up, but I was already leaning against the countertop and I wouldn’t have backed up anyway. His lips were so soft, so comforting, and I loved him.

I moved into him, the ultimate confession of trust. Reaching up, I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling myself closer to him. My lips parted for his as he slid his tongue into my mouth. A moan came from mine, whether it was because I knew nothing was ever going to be the same, or because I was finally letting go of my fear. His arms were around me, keeping me close to him, protecting me, keeping me safe.

My mind was floating, my world shaky, and all I could think about was how good it felt to be so close to him, to feel his body against mine.

Then, my world grew even shakier. One minute, I was totally focused on his mouth, his feel, the way he tasted, and the next, I was standing outside a house. It was a quick flash, gone all too quickly, but I memorized it, stored it in my brain. And it scared me.

I broke apart from Travis quickly, pushing against his arm until he let go.

I was gasping for air as I stuttered, "What was that flash?"

I could still see the glaze in his eyes as he fought the daze I had put him in. "What?" He asked quietly, looking at me like I was a little crazy.

"That picture. That house. What was that?" I gasped, forcing the words out that would describe what I had seen.

"Darcy, are you—"

I shook my head. "No, I'm telling the truth. I just had a memory flash," I told him. I was afraid I was going to faint.

He knew nothing about what I was saying, but he must have seen my change in physical appearance, because he grabbed my arm. "Darcy, calm down. Breathe, and explain what you're talking about."

I did as I was told, took a deep breath, and then started again. "One minute I was here, with you, and the next, this really vivid memory flashed in front of me. I was there, Travis. What does that mean?"

He was staring at me, trying to make sense of my words, but I knew he was just as confused as I was. "What did the house look like?"

I looked away from him as I tried to recall what it looked like. "It was white, the panels on the house were horizontal and white. There were dark blue shutters, and I think it was a split-level house."

He was still staring at me when I looked back at him. "Go on."

"That's all."

"And you're sure it wasn't a—"

“Hallucination? Why would I hallucinate a house?” I practically snapped.

“That wasn’t what I was gonna say,” he told me quietly. “I was gonna say, are you sure it wasn’t a picture you’ve seen before?”

“Oh,” I sighed and then thought back to the flash. I shook my head. “It was definitely a memory. I was once in that house.”

“Okay, then let’s go on that. Do you know where that house is?” He asked quickly.

I shook my head again. “No. I’ve never been to it. I just...I know it’s a memory flash. It has something to do with what I’ve forgotten.”

“Alright,” he sighed, turned, and sat down at the table. I watched as he thought through what had just happened.

I went over, sat down across from him, and asked in my smallest voice, “Should we tell Dr. Pierce?”

He looked up quickly. “No. No, definitely not. I wanna see if we can figure out what caused that memory flash first.”

I thought that through. “Maybe it’s because I’m up here. If we tell her about this, maybe she’ll let me stay even longer so that I can have more memory flashes.”

“No,” he said again. “She’ll only want to do more tests. That’s the last thing we need right now.”

I tried to ignore how he grouped us together even though this was really only my problem. Instead, I waited as he silently went through the different options. I knew he’d try to make the best of this situation, so whatever he decided to do, I knew it was in my best interest.

He breathed in. “Are you okay?” He asked quietly.

I looked at him, confused. He was staring at me with concern. “Yeah,” I told him. Apart from shaking me up a little, I was actually pretty relieved about the flash. I was getting my memory back, slowly but surely.

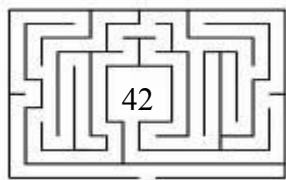
“Okay,” he muttered. “Then, for now, let’s just not worry about this. If it happens again, we might be able to see a pattern or something.”

I nodded. “Fine.”

---

He looked around the kitchen, maybe to see if there was anything left to do. “You wanna go back upstairs?”

“Yeah.”



Neither of us mentioned the kiss. I think I was embarrassed by the fact that I had interrupted it because of a stupid memory flash that probably didn't even mean anything. Maybe he thought the kiss had been an accident. I knew he cared about me, but how much?

Just one more complication to add to my life.

I tried to play it cool for the rest of the night. Travis, for the most part, was pretty mellow, but I still found myself awkwardly silent. If Travis felt this discomfort, he didn't say anything.

Since being in Travis's room, I had desperately wanted to use the computer. But, somehow, I knew this wouldn't be smiled upon. Any access to the outside world was probably forbidden and, although I knew Travis sympathized completely with me, he also wasn't calling in the police. I didn't ask to use his computer. That might be crossing an invisible line.

I had been doodling aimlessly on a pad of paper I had found on his floor when my eyes strayed leisurely around the room and stopped at Travis.

Casually, I asked, "So, are you ever gonna tell me why you wear black all the time?" Maybe he'd tell me now that we knew each other better.

He sighed. "Must there be an explanation for everything? What if it's because I just like black?"

"It's not!" I exclaimed. "Because if that was the case, you wouldn't insist on wearing it everyday."

He shrugged, smiling slightly. Instead of answering, though, he turned back to his computer.

I hadn't given up. Did he know that his lack of answers only made me more curious? Maybe, maybe not. As I thought about that, I let my eyes wander again. They skimmed over the two windows, past his bookshelf, past his closet, over his desk—



I looked back at his closet, a sudden thought creeping up on me. I was off his bed before I had finished putting my pencil down.

I heard Travis's chair swivel and knew he must have been watching what had been so interesting for me to get up.

Not even wondering if maybe I was invading his privacy, I yanked open his closet doors.

"Ah-ha!" I exclaimed triumphantly. Everything in his closet was black! "Look at that! Not one other color in here!"

He was staring at me mockingly from his desk. "Wow! You know, I never realized that," he answered sarcastically.

I turned back to him. "Why won't you tell me?" I whined. "There has to be a reason! You can't just *not* have any other colors in your closet. People just don't do that!"

Maybe my tone unnerved him, because he was now looking at me intently, trying to figure something out. "Why do you want to know so much?"

I smiled slyly at him as I told him a half-truth. "Because it's the one thing you won't tell me."

"Maybe I just wanna keep you guessing," he answered.

"Sure, let's just add one more mystery to my life. Perfect plan!"

I had meant for that to come out sarcastically, but I think Travis took it the wrong way. He looked away from me for a minute, and his face showed concentration. Then, suddenly, he stood up and came over to me. Before I could think of anything to say, he moved around me into his closet.

He reached up on his tiptoes and yanked a huge box from the top of his closet. It dropped to the ground with a loud thud. "Enjoy," he told me and went back to his desk.

I looked back at him, confused, but when he didn't even glance at me, I turned back to the box. Hesitantly, I opened the sides and peered inside.

So tightly packed that nothing else could possibly squeeze in were shirts and pants of every color. Just from giving it a once over, I saw multi-colored polo shirts, plaid khaki pants, different colored tee shirts, jeans of every shade of denim, and so much more.

I turned back to Travis, amazed. "Are these yours?" I asked hesitantly.

He nodded, swiveling around to look at me. "Is that what you had in mind as evidence?" He asked. "I'm not Goth, Darcy. I just like black."

Something still didn't sit right. Even though I hated to pry, I asked quietly, "Then why are these packed in a box?"

He didn't answer me at first. By the time I realized that it was maybe because I had pried too deeply, he had already opened his mouth. "My mom used to wear black all the time. She said it added mystery, whatever that meant. Even when she was too weak to stand, when the chemo had taken everything but her soul, she still insisted on wearing black. Like it even mattered what she wore.

"She used to laugh when I'd come out wearing a black outfit. She thought it was so funny when we'd accidentally match, but I only wore black so that she'd laugh. The week before she died, when it was too much work for her to talk, she still gave me a smile when I came to her room wearing black.

"When she died, I promised her I'd always wear black for her. I didn't care if people wondered why I was wearing black. And I didn't want to tell anybody, either. No one really deserved to know. Soon, I just didn't talk.

"Believe me, it's so much easier to be ignored when people are scared of you. People see the black and shy away from it. I grew accustomed to the dirty looks, almost wanted people to give them. I added the chain to complete the look, which frankly frightened people. Now, it's just a habit."

I had turned away from him in an effort to conceal my emotions. I let a teardrop slip down my face and then brushed it away. How had I possibly been so disrespectful?

"Travis, I never meant to—"

"Please," he started. "Please don't apologize."

"I—"

"No, don't say it," he interrupted. "Listen to me. Do not try and throw me a pity party. You're the first person I've ever told that to. If I'd wanted sympathy, I would have gotten it by now. And if I hadn't wanted you to know, I wouldn't have told you. I don't

want sympathy. I'm passed that point. It's just another part of me you've uncovered, just like everything else."

His words, having never failed to help me before, didn't fail now. There was something about him so sturdy and comforting that I couldn't help feeling better.

I turned back to him, trying to pretend that I was okay. I put on a good act. "So you really do know what it's like for me."

He gave me a small smile. He wasn't a sissy. He didn't like talking about sad things any more than the next guy. "I've never lied to you," he answered.

I took this inlet and started, "Actually, you did."

His eyebrows furrowed. "When?"

"You promised me you'd play your favorite songs." When he still looked confused, I continued, "Remember, one of the days we were in that closet, I asked you what kind of music you liked. You said that if you ever got the chance, you'd let me listen to some."

"Oh, yeah!" He answered. He swiveled back to his desk. "Any particular type you wanna hear first?"

Glad that he was almost back to his old self, I said, "The kind that won't freak me out."

He looked over his shoulder at me, a smirk on his face. "I thought you knew enough about me to realize that I don't actually like that."

"You definitely do," I told him. "Maybe it's not your favorite, but I can totally see you sitting here listening to scream-o music."

He let out a bark of laughter that was coated with sarcasm. "Oh, you mean like this?" He asked me, and I heard his mouse double click.

"Travis..." I warned half-heartedly, because his music was already playing.

To give him the benefit of the doubt, I listened to the first part. At first, the voice singing scared me, and I didn't bother to hide it. I flinched noticeably, but I didn't look to see if Travis had seen that. The voice was harsh, choppy, very creepy sounding.

I was staring into space, trying to make sense of the song, to make out the words, when I stopped. I looked at Travis quickly. He was staring at me, smiling slightly.

The song wasn't in English.

Before I could say anything, though, the room was suddenly filled with the song as the chorus played. I sat where I was, mesmerized, because, even though the voice sounded like a terrorist's and the lyrics weren't in English, I actually liked the beat.

We sat in silence for four and a half minutes until the song ended. Even when the song had stopped, I didn't say anything.

Travis started quietly, "You hate it, right?"

I turned to look at him. "It wasn't in English."

"I know. It's a German song," he told me.

"Oh," was all I could say. I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell him that I liked it. He was probably expecting me to say that it was the worst thing I had ever heard. Not to mention that it was a German—"Wait. German. Is that the same as your tattoo?" I asked suddenly.

He smiled widely. "You got that?"

"Seriously? That's what it's for? Your tattoo is..."

"The lyrics of this song, yeah," he answered.

"Cool." I was pretty pleased with myself for figuring that out. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you have the lyrics to some German song tattooed on your arm?" I clarified.

"It means something to me," was his answer.

"Is it private?" I asked bluntly. I understood all about not wanting to share memories.

He smiled. "Yeah," he told me. I nodded. "But I can tell you about it, if you want."

"Okay," I answered sweetly. "But, you know, as creepy as that music was, I never really pictured you listening to foreign music. You don't seem like the foreign-music type."

"My mom liked the songs," he answered. This time, there wasn't even a trace of nostalgia. He was stating a fact.

"Was she German?"

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“Then why—”

“Her best friend Wilhelmina—we called her Billie—moved from Germany to America with her family. Billie’s son loved Rammstein, the band who plays this song. My mom was over Billie’s house one day and heard ‘Mein Herz Brennt’ playing, and she loved it.”

“Do you like it?”

“I wouldn’t have it tattooed on my arm if I didn’t, would I?” He asked mockingly.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I reminded him, just as humorously.

“It’s okay. I’ve listened to it so many times that I’ve almost gotten sick of it, but I like what it’s about, and I like what it reminds me of.”

I didn’t realizing I was looking at him like he had a halo over his head until I blinked. “That’s...really nice,” I told him honestly.

He shrugged and swiveled away from me. He clearly didn’t like all that gooeey talk. “So, what’d you think?”

“You’re totally not gonna believe me, but I actually liked it,” I answered, unable to keep the amazement from my voice.

“Seriously?” He practically gasped, turning to look at me.

I nodded. “I know, crazy, right? But I liked the beat.”

He laughed slightly and told me sarcastically, “Well, that’s about the only thing there *is* to like.”

“Shut up,” I laughed.

“So, have I scared you too much, or are you brave enough to listen to more?” He taunted.

I rolled my eyes. “I think I’ll manage. But this time, can you play one an average person in *America* might like?”

He scrolled through his list. “I don’t think I have any of those,” he told me mockingly and double-clicked a song.

I was getting ready to ignore him completely when I paused. Then I listened closely. “Is this...” I looked at him, thinking, trying to play the song faster in my head to see if I was right. “This is *Skillet*!”

He nodded. “‘The Last Night’.”

I laughed an impressed kind of chuckle, shocked that he had remembered. “You said you didn’t have anything by *Skillet*.”

He smirked, swiveled in his chair, picked something up off his desk, and then threw it at me. I caught the square case before it hit me in the forehead.

“Luckily,” he started, “the music store did.”

I turned the case over to see the cover. Sure enough, it was the CD case for *Skillet*’s album.

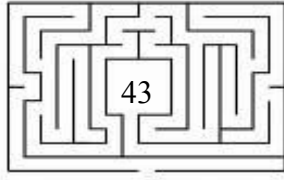
“You bought it?” I asked him quietly. Could he see that I was melting?

By way of answering, he said, “It’s not bad. Your sister has good taste in music.”

For some reason, I couldn’t seem to take in what he was saying. I’d never felt this way before.

He cared. He had cared all along. Even then, when we were just getting to know each other, he had been paying attention.

And all of a sudden, I didn’t feel lost anymore.



I was jolted awake; frightened by a noise present only in the nightmare I had been woken from. My heart still pounding, I stared into the darkness, confused at first as to where I was. I turned sleepily to seek the time from the digital clock glaring in the room. Instead, my eyes focused on the figure lying on the ground. Travis.

After my eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, I couldn't help staring at Travis. He was breathing softly, his head facing me, the covers neatly arranged on top of him. As I took in his peaceful sleeping figure, I realized that this was the first time I had studied his face unguarded. With his hair matted down and his façade lost, he looked almost innocent. The smile on my face surprised me.

I tried to lie back down and lull myself into sleep, but I knew it was hopeless. Whatever I had been dreaming about had stirred my dormant thoughts. Suddenly, my body was restless.

Sitting up again, I glanced at the clock. One-twenty.

Slowly, I moved my feet from under the comforter and placed them lightly on the floor. Holding my breath, I tiptoed out of Travis's bedroom and squeezed through the gap in the doorway.

I padded into the living area and casually moved to the window. The view was much different at night. While the sun shined over the acres of land this house rested on during the day, the forest looked almost haunted at night. Shivering automatically, I turned away from the window and went over to sit on the couch in front of the TV.

I sank into the comfortable couch, and my body immediately relaxed. It was nice to just bask in the silence of Travis's suite, thinking and doing nothing. I refused to think about what had woken me or about my current situation. Now was not the time.

I hadn't realized I was staring into space until the air conditioning turned on and I jumped. Then, more cautious of my surrounding, I glanced around, automatically making sure I was truly alone.

My eyes stopped on the remote sitting on the coffee table. Curious, I turned the TV on, muting it before any channels even appeared.

Madonna danced soundlessly in a music video as my eyes adjusted to the light. Bored, I flipped through the channels, hoping something might entertain me. I was slightly disappointed to find that he had a total of twenty channels, all of which seemed to be playing either music videos or old black and white movies.

I flipped through the twenty channels a second time, hoping uselessly that something different would be playing after two minutes. Even the news would have been better than these channels.

Settling on that thought, I blew through the channels, hoping to stop on the news. Maybe something of interest would appear. Or maybe something about me would...

I stopped myself before I even allowed myself to hope.

When I had gone through the channels at least five times, I stopped, frustrated and confused. I had always thought that at least two news channels came with every basic cable package.

Still set on finding a news channel and sure I had just missed it every other time I checked, I didn't even move to look at Travis when I saw him enter the living room. While I sat in front of the TV, hoping desperately to find any channel that might clue me into as to what was happening in the outside world, Travis waited by the doorway, watching me.

Finally, giving up, I said quietly, "How come your TV doesn't have any news stations?"

Still standing by the door, he answered, "They're blocked."

"Oh," I replied, not knowing what else to say.

"Did you need something?"

I shrugged. "It would have been nice to see what's going on in the world."

He nodded. "You're not missing much."

I glanced at him. "Any stories about me?"



He pursed his lips. "I wouldn't know." I looked away. I could tell this wasn't a favorite conversation of his. Sensing my discomfort, he said quietly, "What's wrong?"

Still looking anywhere but at him, I whispered almost in disbelief, "It just seems like I can never win. I mean, here I am with a TV, Internet access, and a link to the outside world, and I'm still just as lost as ever."

I could feel him staring at me. Quietly, he started, "Darcy, I hope you don't think I'm holding something back from you."

I chuckled humorlessly and glared at him. "I know you are. How could you not? You walk the streets every day, hearing stories, bombarded with magazine articles and TV announcements, and you're telling me you don't even know who I am?"

He breathed in deeply, like he was trying to calm himself down. Finally, he faced me again. It seemed like he was about to say something, but instead, he walked purposefully over to the TV, opened the cabinet under it, and pulled out a DVD.

Silently, he inserted the DVD and waited for it to move to the main menu. He pressed play before I had time to see what we were watching.

Suddenly, the screen blinked and a camera zoomed into a hospital room. I could tell from the quality that it was a home video. A man's voice said from behind the camera, "Hi, this is Antonella James, giving an insiders' perspective on the day in the life of a hospital patient."

The woman lying in the hospital bed laughed, although it was a tired laugh. "Turn the camera off, Max! You're embarrassing me."

"I'm just giving the people what they want, honey," the man continued.

The woman glanced at someone to the left of her. "Take that camera away from your father."

A boy appeared in the picture, sat down next to the woman, and shook his head. "It's for posterity, Mom."

My heart flipped as I recognized the boy. It was a young Travis. He was wearing a black shirt and dark blue jeans. It was only then that I noticed the black headband on the woman's head

covering her thin hair. And I remembered the story Travis had told me the day before.

“Once you get better, Antonella, you’ll be channel five’s anchorwoman again and this tape will sell for millions. Smile!”

The woman laughed, and I saw Travis’s smile in her. A woman walked into the view of the camera and the man said, “Ah, and who is this fine young lady?”

The older woman smiled at him and said, “Only the official nurse of the best anchorwoman on TV!” She turned to Travis’s mom. “Are you ready?”

Travis’s mom sighed, nodded, and looked into the camera. Her expression broke my heart. “Fun’s over.”

The movie stopped, leaving Travis and me staring at a blank screen.

“Two weeks after that, she lost her hair. Two months later, she stopped talking. And three months after that, so did I,” Travis started quietly. He turned to look at me, his face expressionless. “She had this fan club consisting of mostly older women who thought she had just the right spunk to be on television. She did, though. She brought channel five’s ratings sky-high.

“I don’t watch the news. I don’t read newspapers. I don’t have Internet access or cable at either of my houses. Listening to news stories used to make me angry at the world; now, I’m just too lazy to change my habits.”

I was staring at him. “I didn’t...I wasn’t trying...”

He came over to sit next to me. “I would never intentionally hurt you. I can’t believe you’d ever think that I wasn’t telling you everything I know. Whenever I go out, I do listen. But I haven’t heard anything, and, although admittedly, I haven’t intensely researched much on you, it’s only because I’m afraid of what I’ll find.

“The first day we met in that closet, I went onto Lorraine’s computer and attempted to find out what had happened to you. When I tell you nothing helpful came up, that’s an understatement. Articles upon articles came up about everything *but* you. I came to the conclusion that your story maybe hadn’t been all that big to begin with. But it only took one channel five article to bring me spinning back to my own reality.”

I was awestruck. “Nothing? There was nothing on me?”

“I swear, Darcy, I tried. I didn’t want to tell you that, either, but I don’t want you to think that I’m just sitting here twiddling my thumbs as you suffer. I’m trying, really. But there are a lot of obstacles, and it’s hard for me to get past them.”

“I never blamed you for not...” But that was a lie, and we both knew it. A small part of me blamed everyone because I was still in the dark. I couldn’t help it. No, that was a lie, too. I could help it. I just didn’t want to. I did, however, want to be able to lean on Travis for help. “I’m trying. I’m trying so hard not to lash out at everyone who tries to help. But I just can’t take it. I can’t. I feel like this nightmare is never going to end. Sometimes, it really feels like I’m in hell. The only time I feel okay is...”

“When I’m with you,” he completed. I nodded, and he said, “I know the feeling.”

He moved closer to me. Facing me, he said seriously, “Darcy, I want you to trust me. I *need* you to trust me. We can’t do this unless I know that you know I will try to do anything and everything in my power to get you out of here.”

I was staring at him. “What’s ‘this’?”

The corner of his lips curled up into a smile. “This.” He moved in to kiss me but then pulled away. “Trust me.”

I breathed in deeply. I knew it would be hard for me to fight against the instinct to rely on myself alone. But I needed this; I needed him. “I do.”

He kissed me.

I woke up the next morning in Travis’s bed. I couldn’t remember walking back to Travis’s room, but I remembered talking to him for at least two hours, enjoying his company and the comfortable silence that lay between us when words hadn’t needed to be said.

Travis, in keeping with the previous morning, was awake when I opened my eyes.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” He started.

I shook my head, rubbing my eyes. “No, why?”

“I’m not used to having a house guest,” he told me from his desk.

“You’re doing fine,” I answered, sitting up slowly and facing him. “So. What’s on the agenda for today?”

“I have no idea,” he told me casually. “What do you feel like doing?”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. “You’re asking me?”

He shrugged. “It’s not like I have an itinerary for you,” he told me. “What do you wanna do?”

I pursed my lips. “Let me think about it,” I answered, got up, and headed for the bathroom.

While I washed my face and brushed my teeth, I was skimming through different ideas for the day. I did have a couple of thoughts that I would run by Travis, but I wasn’t too worried about finding means of entertainment. Being with Travis was enough.

When I got back to Travis’s room, I was about to start talking when I heard his voice. At first, I thought he was talking to me. But then I realized he was on the phone.

“Yeah...No, of course...Yeah, okay, I’ll meet you there. Bye,” Travis was saying, and then he flipped his cell phone closed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as I walked into the room. Travis was already up and by his closet, pulling out a sweatshirt.

“My dad,” he said quietly, distracted. “He was...in a car accident. I have to go over to the hospital. I’m sorry, but I have to leave you here for a while.”

“It’s okay,” I told him quickly. Even when he was hurt, he still thought of me. “Is he gonna be alright?”

“I...don’t know. Lorraine said he was in surgery now. I’m gonna meet her at the hospital in ten minutes. She’s already there.” He was already leaving the room, but he stopped. “Um, could you maybe keep yourself busy for today? I’ll be home as soon as I can, but don’t wait up for me. You can go on the computer, read a book, you know, whatever,” he told me quickly.

“Don’t worry about me,” I answered. “Go be with your dad.”

He smiled a pained smile and then came over to me. In a few swift movements, he pulled me into a hug, clung to me for a second, kissed me quickly on the cheek, and then left.

I watched him leave and listened to the door slam. My heart was sinking fast. What would happen if his dad didn't make it through surgery? He had already lost his mom. This would tear him apart.

I didn't even want to imagine losing a parent. Being without my mom and dad for this long was hard enough.

Aimlessly, I looked around his room, trying to find something with which I could distract myself. My eyes found his computer. Suddenly, my heart jumped. I was alone with the Internet! I could use it to get help!

My hands shaking slightly, I ran to his computer, opened his Internet, and was just starting to type when I heard the front door open.

I didn't close the Internet. "What happened?" I called, but I didn't leave the computer. I was finally so close to contacting the police that my heart almost wasn't even beating. "Is he okay?"

Travis's bedroom door opened. I glanced up. Only, instead of Travis coming into the room, Dr. Pierce appeared in his doorway.

"Is everything okay?" I asked quickly. "Travis just left to go to the hospital. He said...you were supposed to meet him there."

My alarm went off. Something wasn't right.

She nodded. "We had to lie to him, you know. There was no other way to do this," she told me, starting her sentence like she had just finished a conversation.

I was staring at her, my heart beating wildly. "What are you talking about?" I asked quietly.

She sighed. "There is nothing wrong with Travis's dad, Darcy. He is perfectly fine, sitting in his office downtown," she told me, her smile as evil as she was.

"Then, Travis just went to the hospital for no..." I started but stopped when Peterson appeared behind Dr. Pierce. "What's going on?"

"You see, my husband, Travis's father, gives me any resources I need to fund this place, so I try to let Travis have his way as much as possible. But Travis really is not helping our cause by keeping you up here."

Screams of terror were echoing in my head, but I couldn't seem to form a thought, let alone a coherent sentence. What was happening? "I don't..."

"We need you in the lower levels. This whole plan with Travis really is not working out. So, we would appreciate it if you would come with us now."

"Where's Travis?" I snapped, backing away slowly.

"He is probably half way to the hospital by now," she answered honestly.

I shook my head as tears came up. I knew this was not going to end well, yet I almost expected an event like this to happen. It had been stupid to think that I could ever get away with something this fortunate when my life was so horrible.

"Did Travis..."

"Oh, no, Darcy, he had nothing to do with this. In fact, when he finds out we took you back, he will probably raise hell. But you are more important to me than his little tantrums," Dr. Pierce told me. Peterson inched forward. "Do not make this harder than it has to be."

"No. No, don't touch me! I want Travis. Get him here, now!" I told her, knowing perfectly well that I was only making myself more hysterical. "I want Travis. You can't do this to me! Travis has to be here. Travis? TRAVIS!"

I was screaming, going a little insane. But I knew what she would do to get me down there, and I knew none of this was right.

"TRAVIS!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, already on the other side of Travis's bed, hoping to avoid Peterson. Some strange part of me actually thought that if I screamed loud enough, he'd hear me.

I heard Dr. Pierce sigh as she pulled something out of her pocket. "I really was hoping we would not have to resort to this."

When I saw that she was holding a needle, I screamed again. "NO! GET AWAY FROM ME!"

Peterson climbed over Travis's bed, reaching out to grab me. I skirted out of his reach, accidentally knocking over a pile of books on Travis's floor and pushing away from both of them. The room seemed to blur, as my focus became simple survival, escape.

I knew that if I stopped moving, I would be paralyzed with fear. I had to get out of here.

“Grab her,” Dr. Pierce warned Peterson.

In one swift movement, Peterson had me pinned against the wall.

“NO! NO, NO STOP GET AWAY FROM ME YOU CAN’T DO THIS!” I was screaming, trying my hardest to fight against Peterson’s death grip. “NO!”

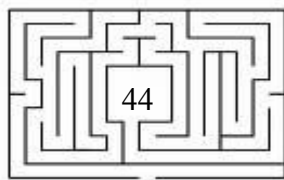
I was screaming over and over again as Dr. Pierce came closer to us. “I warned you not to do this.”

I cried out in pain as the needle injected me. Only it wasn’t a regularly thin needle. It was thick, and I felt it practically piercing my bone. It hurt so badly that the pain alone had me stop struggling.

“No, please, no, no, no, don’t do this, please,” I was sobbing as I felt the drug course through my system. “I didn’t do anything.”

My eyes were closing even as I willed them to stay open. I was breathing deeply, loudly, trying not to panic.

The last thing I felt before I passed out was Peterson lifting me up off the ground.



I could feel movement around me even though my eyes were shut and I was mostly unconscious. Since no one was disturbing me just yet, I used all my strength to wake myself up without opening my eyes.

No one was talking, but I could tell that at least three people were walking around me. I risked exposure by opening my eyes ever so slightly to see where I was. The room didn't look familiar to me. It reminded me of a hospital.

I was lying on an uncomfortable table raised high above the ground. There was a bright light above me. Next to the table was a tray arrayed with needles, all containing liquids. That was enough to make me close my eyes again. I prayed that the three people hadn't seen me open my eyes.

However, one of them spoke, and I knew he was talking to me.

"Nope, we're not ready for you to wake up yet," he said, and I opened my eyes all the way to watch a much older man come closer to me. "I'm just going to give you a little sedative to keep you relaxed."

"No," I sighed, my voice slightly slurred from the previous drug with which I had been injected.

"Shh, it's okay, Darcy, just relax," he murmured.

I squeezed my eyes shut when I saw him pick up one of the needles. Then I drew in a quick breath and let it out in a gasp as I felt the needle pierce my skin.

When he saw me wince, the man said, "You're doing great, Darcy. Just one more."

"No," I said again, already feeling the sedative starting to take effect.



“Don’t worry, it’ll be over soon,” he soothed, and I felt another needle pierce my other arm. This one was out sooner, but it hurt much more. I felt like I had been punched where the needle stuck my arm.

“That’s good, Darcy. Now, go back to sleep.”

“Wait,” I sighed, but I was already drifting back to sleep before I could remember what I had wanted to say to the man.

I had images flash through my mind, as though I was flipping through channels on a TV, but none of them made sense. Whenever I felt myself waking up, or coming out of the daze I seemed to be permanently in, I felt a slight prick on my arm and was soaring again.

When I finally woke up and knew enough to sense that no one was in the room anymore, I kept my eyes closed for a minute, trying to bring back what had happened. I forced myself to think about Travis’s phone call and Peterson and Dr. Pierce so that I didn’t fall back asleep. My eyes fluttered open, and I made myself keep them open.

Travis had been tricked by Dr. Pierce to leave his house so that she could bring me back down to the lower levels. I wasn’t sure how long I had been under, and since there were no windows, I couldn’t tell what time of day it was.

I looked around, aware that I was no longer in the same room I had been in when I had first woken up. Instead, I was in a room with only two pieces of furniture: a desk with nothing on it and the table I was lying on.

I sat up slowly, trying to remember if I had been awake when they moved me. I doubted it, since I couldn’t remember anything except waking up once. I slid off the table and tested my legs.

My stomach was making horrible gurgling noises. I hadn’t eaten in a long time, maybe even days. Time had no meaning right now.

I tried pacing the room as a form of entertainment, hoping to keep myself from going insane. Then, filled with my old curiosity, I moved towards the desk. I tried to open drawers one by one, but they were all locked. Of course. Since when was anything here open to the public eye?

In the end, I decided that sitting on the cold table was the only thing I felt like doing, occasionally shifting my sitting position so as to keep my body from falling asleep. I didn't want to lie down, because I didn't want to fall asleep. I had to stay awake. I was too confused and desperately in need of some answers to even think of sleeping, let alone trusting my subconscious to keep away the nightmares if I happened to fall asleep.

Finally, when I was almost thinking of banging on the door until someone came, the door actually opened and an old man walked in.

"Hello, Darcy," he said kindly, and I noticed that his voice seemed vaguely familiar.

"Who are you?" I asked immediately.

"My name is Dr. Charles," he replied in that same soothing voice, and then I knew where I had heard his voice: he had been the one drugging me before.

"Where am I?"

"Shh. You're just going to get yourself stirred up," he said, not even looking into my eyes.

"I'm already stirred up!" I exclaimed. "What's going on?"

"Darcy, you need to relax, okay? Now, if you can't, I'll be forced to give you another sedative. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

I shook my head, even though it sickened me to give in so readily.

"Now, I *can* tell you that it was necessary for Dr. Pierce to drug you. I don't want you to get scared, but we made a simple injection in your right arm and drew a small sample of blood from your left," he continued.

"Why?" I asked, my panic signal already starting to flare.

"It was necessary for your treatment."

"I don't—" I started, but he shook his head.

"You don't need to worry about anything, Darcy. You are in good hands," he assured me.

I looked away from him, wishing more than anything that Travis was by my side. Suddenly, I turned fully to Dr. Charles. "What happened to Travis and his dad? Did he come back yet?"

He nodded. "Yes. He came back yesterday."

“Yesterday? But—”

“You’ve been unconscious for about twenty hours now.”

“Twenty—” I started.

He interrupted me. “Are you feeling okay, Darcy?”

“What?” I asked, pushing my shock aside and thinking about his question. “Um, I don’t know. *Should* I be feeling something?”

“Well, just tell me how you feel,” he suggested.

“A little sick,” I told him honestly, automatically placing my hand on my stomach.

“You mean your stomach?” He clarified.

I nodded. “I’m really hungry,” I told him quietly.

“I suspected as much,” he answered. “I’m sorry, Darcy, but you won’t be able to eat anything until after Dr. Pierce has seen you.”

“But I’m starving! I haven’t had anything to eat in, like, a day,” I told him quickly. My stomach was churning, threatening to empty itself.

He smiled slightly. “You’re not starving, Darcy,” he corrected me, even though I had meant it to be a slight exaggeration. “But you may eat after Dr. Pierce has seen you.”

“Why? What’s she gonna do that she can’t do after I’ve eaten?”

He pursed his lips. “Just a few tests,” he told me quietly. “If you’ll just wait here for a moment, I’m going to let Dr. Pierce know that you’re awake.”

“Wait!”

“Yes?” He asked, turning around.

Not bothering to hide my fear, I asked quietly, “Am I gonna get drugged again?”

He stared at me for a minute, clearly trying to decide between lying to make me feel better and telling the truth, therefore breaking my spirit.

Finally, he nodded. “Yes, you are. And I’m sorry to say that it is not going to be pleasant.”

“What is it gonna do?” I asked, already feeling tears coming up.

“Help with your memory.”

---

I looked at him for a minute. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

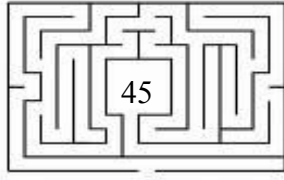
A single tear drop fell from my eye as I stared at him. He honestly seemed to feel my pain as much as I did, because he looked completely empathetic.

“I’m sorry, Darcy, really, I am, but it’s for the greater good.”

“Hurting me? That’s helping anyone?” I whimpered.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, but he had already turned towards the door. “I’ll tell Dr. Pierce you’re ready.”

I watched as he left. I let a few more tears fall before I made myself suck it up. Crying never solved anything.



**M**y heart was pounding a mile a minute by the time I heard a scraping noise at the door. A second later, Dr. Pierce appeared.

“Darcy!” She exclaimed happily, as though we were the best of friends. “I am so glad to see you are well again.”

I was already standing in a defensive position. “Why did you bring me down here? Where’s Travis? I have to go back upstairs, I have to—”

“Darcy, please, calm down,” she interrupted, her hands held in front her. “Now, what is wrong?”

I was practically yelling as soon as she had finished talking. “You told Travis I would be able to stay with him. You said I wouldn’t have to do your tests. He was helping me; you can’t just bring me back down here!”

“Darcy, stop,” she commanded. “You are getting yourself worked up over something you do not understand and—”

“I understand fine!” I snapped. “He was helping me! He was the only thing here that made me feel better, and now I don’t even—”

“Stop interrupting me!” she told me firmly. “Would you like me to explain why you are back down here, or are you going to continue arguing with me?”

Frowning, I turned and sat back down on the table. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” she answered. “Darcy, I know you are confused and scared, and that is absolutely understandable. But we are not trying to hurt you, nor are we trying to further worsen your situation.

“Originally, I had intended for Travis to act as a friend and listening ear to you. He was to stay with you, listen to your concerns and memories, and then report back to me. I was even willing to let you stay in the upper levels in the hopes of helping

you grow more comfortable. However, as days passed and we still were not getting any answers, I felt it was time to return to the tests I had originally planned for you to go through. When I asked Travis if he would be willing to bring you back to the lower levels, he responded a little too harshly and it became quite obvious to all of us that you two had moved beyond a simple friendship.”

I was staring at her, my eyes widening slightly. She had known. Was that the reason she had torn us apart? Because I was getting too close with Travis? I couldn’t believe this. I opened my mouth to defend myself, but she was already continuing.

“Dr. Bram and I spent some time discussing options as to how we were going to break you away from Travis. It was clear that he would not bring you down on his own will. I brought you back down because there are tests that I would like to do with you that I am sure Travis would not appreciate,” she finished quietly.

My stomach flipped uncomfortably, and a drop of sweat trickled down my face. “Like what? What does that mean? Why wouldn’t Travis want—”

“Travis does not appreciate the work we do here. I am surprised that I did not realize his intent immediately when he asked to help you. He obviously was thinking more of himself than of this lab and the good we would be doing for you had you stayed down here and completed our tests. I am sorry I did not realize this sooner.”

I gaped at her. She was seriously suggesting... “He wasn’t keeping me against my will!” I snapped, aggravated at her misunderstanding. “I wanted to stay with him! I still do! He was making me feel better; he’s my friend!”

She narrowed her eyes. “I think your relationship goes far past friendship. I am sure you were not aware that there are security cameras in the main kitchen. However, there are, and I am alerted whenever things are not as they should be.”

She only had to mention the kitchen before my heart squeezed, and I gasped. “You saw us—”

“I am certain that your relationship has only worsened your condition,” she answered quietly.

“Worsened it?” I practically yelled. “It was already at rock bottom, and that’s probably because, hey, I’m a HOSTAGE! *Travis*

was the reason I was getting better! When we were together, I had a memory flash. That's never happened to me before! Ever since *you* screwed up my life, I've been—"

"Do not try to blame your problems on us. We are not the reason for your memory loss. You and I both know that it was what happened before we brought you here that badly affected your memory. And as for your memory flash, that is purely coincidental. In fact, the reason you were presented with a memory flash was probably because your mind was not ready for such a dramatic turn."

"That's bull! I had the memory flash because I was finally *happy*," I yelled. "Who are you to judge what I'm feeling, what my mind is telling me? You don't even *know* me. Travis knew me, and he cared about me! We cared about each other, unlike you. You don't care; you only want my memory. You don't care about anyone! You lied to Travis, and you lied to me. I don't want to be here! I want to go back with Travis!" I snarled.

"Unfortunately, you are no longer in the position to make such choices," she responded quickly. "You will soon realize that you are beyond the point of freely communicating with us what it is that will help your mind relax. As of now, I am the one that will be making these decisions, so I suggest you control your attitude."

My teeth were clenched. "You can't do that! You can't just smother me like that! I don't want you in my brain. I don't even want you *near* me! You're not helping me; you've never been helping me! I don't care what you think you're doing here; I don't care if you think you're being a saint or the next Marie Curie. Whatever you're doing, whatever you think you're doing, leave me out of it! I'm sick of this crap! I just want to heal on my own, not with tests and drugs.

"And I never asked for your help! Why do you keep forcing it on me? You're going against my consent! I don't want you doing anything to me anymore! I won't let you; you can't make me!"

She had been staring at me throughout my tirade, a look of concerned disbelief on her face. How she was interpreting my rant, I wasn't quite sure. Finally, her eyebrows rose, and she said very sweetly, "Of course I can."

I narrowed my eyes and backed up, the sick look in her eye scaring me. “Don’t. Touch. Me. Ever. I’m telling you *no*. No, you cannot drug me or do anything else to me. You’re not allowed to do anything to me if I tell you *no*.”

She smiled slightly.

I growled. “You think I’m kidding? I’m not! I’m not kidding. Maybe everyone else is happy to be your lab rat, but I’m not. I never will be.”

She shook her head like I was a silly child. “I am smiling, Darcy, because I know that by the end of this week, you will have completely changed your mind.”

“*Nothing* you say will change my mind,” I told her darkly.

She turned away from me. Raising her voice slightly, she called, “Ronald, you may come in.”

The door opened and a lanky man in his mid-thirties walked in carrying a tray. He set it on the desk and left quickly.

I closed my eyes and turned away from her as the smell of meat wafted through the air.

I heard her walking towards me. When she was about two feet behind me, she started, “On that tray is a hamburger, cooked medium-rare just as you like, and a steaming pile of French fries. I imagine by now that you are quite hungry and that going without food for this long is making you nauseous.”

I refused to turn towards her. I was not going to give in.

“The body can go for weeks without food, you know. Your body will grow so weak that it will literally feed off of itself, but you will still be able to live and function relatively normally. I imagine you will feel even worse than you do now by the time you give in to us; and believe me, you *will* give in to us. It almost seems silly to starve yourself instead of allowing us to help you, because we will ultimately get you to perform the tests regardless.”

*I won’t give in. I won’t give in. I won’t give in. I don’t care what she says; I won’t give in. I won’t show her I’m weak, I won’t show any emotion, and then she’ll see that she can’t break me.*

“Still not convinced?” She asked quietly. Sighing, I heard her back away from me. “What a shame. I would hate to see you grow any thinner. And, I know that Travis, personally, likes girls with a little meat on their bones.”



I whipped around to face her. “Don’t you dare mention him! You know nothing about him, or me, and I swear to God, you *never* will,” I growled. “Get out! I don’t care if I starve to death; just get out!”

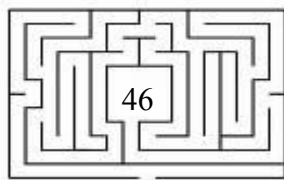
She was staring at me calmly. “Okay.”

She turned, grabbed the tray, and left without another word.

Against my will, tears started streaming down my face and the blush I had hidden was obvious. I couldn’t believe how insensitive Dr. Pierce was. I honestly felt sick to my stomach, and not just because of the lack of food. I was disgusted.

Mostly, though, I was sick with exhaustion and sadness. I was totally abandoned. I didn’t know how long it would be until I saw Travis. I was alone. I missed Travis, and I missed my family so much, it was literally like a hole in my heart.

Eventually, I couldn’t even stand. My body seemed too heavy for my emotions. Slowly, I sank to the ground. Leaning against the wall, I sobbed until I was gagging.



The next time Dr. Pierce visited, I was lying on the ground, my head against the cold hardwood floor. I looked up as the door opened.

“Good morning, Darcy. How are you feeling?” She asked quietly.

“Never been better,” I grumbled, tracing the lines on the floor.

“Have you changed your mind yet?” She asked calmly, watching me.

“I’ll never change my mind,” I snapped.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her nod and place something on the desk. Then she left.

Quickly, I looked up to see what she had left. There was a bottle of water on the desk, which I acknowledged but did not drink. I simply lay in the same spot, wondering when I would die.

It was only when I felt dizzy with thirst that I got up, drank some water, and lay back down.

I must have been asleep the next time Dr. Pierce came to my room, because a full water bottle was in the place of the empty one when I next opened my eyes.

By the time the third day broke, I was dry-heaving. By the fourth day, my fingers trembled as I reached for the water bottle.

The next time I woke up, I knew I was dying. There was nothing okay about the way I was feeling. My limbs ached and my stomach lurched and my head throbbed. A weight like no other had been added to my body, and it became a struggle to even open my eyes.

It was as I tried in vain to fall asleep that a realization slowly crept into my brain. I tried to bat it back, but it forced itself upon me, and I cringed.

My body was screaming for me to give in to Dr. Pierce, to give her my consent and let her do whatever she wanted to do. My body just wanted the pain to end. And no matter how hard my heart fought against it, my body, I knew, was going to win. I could not go for another day without eating or without any human contact. My body, using its natural survival instincts, rose up against my stubborn nature in an effort to gain back the nutrition it had lost. It craved the food that I could so easily get, if only I gave in to the doctors.

My heart was overrun. My head won out, because I was dying and it wouldn't allow that.

When Dr. Pierce came the next time, she asked the standard, "Have you changed your mind yet?"

When she got no answer, she turned to leave.

"Wait," I croaked.

She paused by the door and turned. "Yes?"

I sat up slowly, pushing off of the floor and then leaning against the wall to keep from falling over. I could feel the tears begging to roll down my cheeks as my heart gave one last plea for me to remain strong. But I couldn't live like this any longer.

"I need to eat something," I finally told her, but it sounded like a moan.

"You know my terms," she answered quietly.

I shook my head, almost disgusted with myself. "I have to eat," I whispered.

"Would you like to reconsider my offer?" She asked instead.

I shook my head again. I couldn't believe I was doing this. This wasn't what I wanted, and it certainly wasn't what was best for my mind and my brain. But, then again, neither was starving myself. Either way, I would lose.

Just as she was turning to leave, I whispered, "Okay."

"Excuse-me?" She asked quickly, spinning around to face me.

"I said *okay*," I repeated quietly.

"You are agreeing to allow me to help you, using any tests necessary?" She clarified.

I looked away from her. "I just want to eat."

“Are you agreeing?” She continued.

“Yes. Okay, yes. Is that what you want? Yes, I am giving you my consent. Yes, you can do the tests you want or whatever else you feel like doing. Now can you please give me something to eat?” I snarled, but I hardly knew what I had said. My heart refused to listen to the answer my mind gave to her.

She smiled, ignoring the hate I freely showed. “Of course.”

She left for all of five seconds and then returned with a plate of food. I got up as quickly as I could and moved to the desk where she put the tray.

Without even waiting for her to move, I grabbed the roll of bread and took a huge bite before shoving a hunk of cheese into my mouth. I forced the half chewed food down my throat and grabbed the glass of milk from the tray. But the minute I swallowed some of the milk that was in my mouth, I was ready to spit it out if not for the hand that clamped over my mouth.

“Swallow,” Dr. Pierce warned, her one hand still covering my mouth while her other hand pushed against the back of my head so that I could hardly breathe. My panic bells going off as oxygen was cut off from my system, I went against all my instincts and swallowed the milk that tasted about a year old and had the texture of warm tapioca.

“You drugged it,” I spat out the second Dr. Pierce’s hand lowered from my mouth. Betrayal immediately swept through me, because I had actually thought, for one second, that I could trust Dr. Pierce.

She smiled. “No, Darcy, we did not drug it. We crushed up an array of vitamins and mixed them into the milk. They will make it easier for your body to return to its normal digestion, which has been altered because of your lack of nutrition.”

And even though I was angry that she had so easily forced me to swallow drugs, I could already feel how the vitamins were helping. Instead of responding badly to food after a lack of it for so long, my stomach hungrily accepted anything I gave it.

After I had devoured the bread and cheese, I glanced at the milk, quickly weighing the pros and cons. The milk tasted horrible, but, in the end, I drank it. I knew where I stood with Dr. Pierce.

I was surprisingly full after such a small meal, and also suddenly tired. I went over to sit down on the table, expecting Dr. Pierce to abandon me as always.

However, when I turned to face the door, she was still standing there.

I stared at her awkwardly, waiting for her to say something, trying to force my hatred down.

“Darcy, look, I think we need to talk,” Dr. Pierce started quietly.

I looked away from her. “You already have my life. What else could you possibly want?” I asked her, my voice low and my eyes averted. My body was growing weaker as the food and my inevitable fate set in.

She sighed. “I am sorry, Darcy, that we had to take this route with you. I did not intend for you to be put through such a harsh couple of days. However, you must understand how crucial it is that we have your consent before moving forward with our tests. Although the methods we had to use in order to gain your permission were, admittedly, not the best, they were necessary. I hope you can understand that?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I understand.”

I saw from the corner of my eye that she was smiling kindly. “Good. I hope you know that you can trust us and trust in the work that we do here. I will make sure that you can one day return to your life. I will fix this for you, I promise you that. Can you trust that I am trying to do what is best for you?”

I turned to look at her. “I trust that I will get my memory back, and that’s really the only thing that matters, right?”

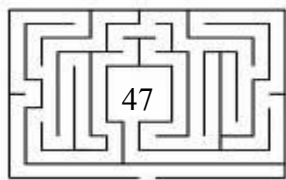
She nodded. “Absolutely.”

After Dr. Pierce left with the tray, I continued to stare at the door. Her words still echoed in my ears.

How could she think I would ever trust her? How was that even possible? She had kidnapped me. She had drugged me. She had lied to me. She had starved me.

And at the end of the day, she had guaranteed that I would *never* be able to trust her or any one of the other doctors.

At the lab, I trusted myself and I trusted Travis. That was all.



I must have fallen asleep because, when the door next opened, I was lying down and incredibly stiff.

I sat up slowly, wincing as I turned my neck.

“Good morning, Darcy,” Dr. Pierce started, smiling. “How are you doing today?”

I rolled my shoulders. “Stiff,” I answered.

“I imagine your nights have been rather rough for the past couple of days,” she agreed.

“When am I gonna be allowed to leave this room?” I asked her, sliding off the table.

“Actually, after today, you will not be returning to this room,” she responded.

“Why?” I asked slowly. “What’s gonna happen today?”

“Today, we will be putting you through some tests. If you would just come with me, we can get started.”

I tried to hide my fear as I walked towards her. I wasn’t about to argue with her, not after almost starving to death. But I didn’t trust her, either, and was intensely afraid of what she might put me through.

“What kind of test?” I asked slowly.

“I will explain everything in just a moment,” she answered. Without a word, she turned and walked out of the room. Hesitantly, I followed.

We walked in silence down hallways I had never seen before even though I had walked many different places with Travis or Dr. Bram. We must have been even farther down than the cells. Or farther up. I couldn’t even tell.

Finally, we stopped at a door to the right. There was a fingerprint scanner that Dr. Pierce used to open the door. When it opened, at first, I thought it was the same room I had been in when I first woke up.

The walls were stark white and still reminded me of a hospital. This room, however, was a little larger and had many more things in it. A desk was off to the side with a single file on it. I would have bet almost anything that it was my file. Oh God, to be so close and not able to touch it was like snatching away a one hundred dollar bill from a beggar.

I made myself turn away from it and take in the rest of the room. There was a hospital bed in the middle, with a white sheet covering it. This bed, though, had straps coming off the sides. Then there was the tray of needles next to the bed, but there was also an IV and a heart rate monitor.

The thing that confused me the most, however, was a screen on the wall. It looked like nothing I'd seen before. It covered almost the entire back wall and was completely black. It was hooked up to the IV and the heart rate monitor, which weren't yet turned on.

"What's that for?" I asked as soon as the door shut behind us.

"Examinations," was the answer, which didn't help me one bit. "Now, if you would just sit down here, we can get started."

I went over to the chair in front of the desk that she had pointed. She sat down behind the desk and took out a piece of paper that had writing on it just small enough that I couldn't read it.

"Alright, Darcy, let me see," she sighed, looking at the paper. She scribbled something and then said, "Have you ever had any seizures, spasms, or tremors?"

I frowned at the random question. "Um, no. I don't think so, at least."

"Any heart problems?"

"No."

"Major or minor surgeries?"

"Um, no."

"Taken any medication that has affected you strangely?"

"You mean besides while I was here?" I clarified, trying to keep the bite out of my voice.

She nodded.

"No."

"Any allergies to medication or drugs?"

She was unnerving me slightly with these questions. “I don’t think so.”

“Have you ever had any kidney, liver, or intestinal problems?”

“No,” I answered yet again. I was mostly sure about my answers, but my mom would usually answer these questions if I were at a doctor’s appointment.

“Does your family have a history of Alzheimer’s or any other neurological disorder?”

I thought about that. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Is there anything, medically, that you would like to mention before we continue?”

At this, I thought hard. I didn’t want to forget about something only to find out that it was crucial for Dr. Pierce to have known about it. But I came up blank with information. “Not really.”

“Okay,” she finished, closing the folder. “So, here is how this procedure is going to work: we are going to lay you down on that bed over there, where you will be injected with a sedative and then one of our own drugs, which will hopefully allow you to remember more clearly what has happened to you. Now, if you would just lie down on the bed, we can get started.”

She had spied this information so quickly that I hadn’t even had time to think it through. As she moved towards the bed, I watched her, eyes wide. I definitely was not ready for this or comfortable with what was going to happen.

“Wait,” I started, not getting any closer to the bed. “You haven’t really explained what’s gonna happen!”

Dr. Pierce turned towards me. “Darcy, I understand that you are apprehensive.”

Apprehensive wasn’t quite the word I’d use to describe what I was feeling.

“And you have every right to feel that way. Believe me, I know how hard this is for you. I admire you for staying strong through these times.”

“But I don’t really have a choice, do I?” I exclaimed, my voice going slightly panic-stricken. “Look, if you’re gonna do this, can you at least give me something more than the basics?”



She sighed but nodded. "Of course. I suppose it is the least I can do for you." Then she walked over to the tray with all the needles. "If you come over and sit down, I will explain, hopefully a little more clearly, everything that is going to happen."

I eyed her suspiciously but went over and lifted myself onto the bed. She didn't strap me in, which told me she wasn't lying. Yet.

"Okay, first, like I said, we are going to give you a very mild sedative just so that you will be relaxed for this," she started, holding up the first needle. "Then, we are going to give you this."

She held up one of the bigger needles, filled to bursting with a grayish liquid. I winced just looking at it.

"What's that?" I asked, my voice trembling slightly.

"This," she said, almost proudly, "is the drug I have been working on for more than ten years. It allows the mind to relax slightly, which gives the user access to some of the forgotten memories."

"Relax? Will it stay like that?" I asked, now almost faint with anxiety.

"No, of course not. Darcy, you have nothing to worry about. I have tested it on over thirty people, myself included. It's perfectly harmless, I promise you. Thirty-three out of the thirty-four users have successfully recovered many of their forgotten memories."

"What about the thirty-fourth?" I asked quietly.

"She was a Lifer," Dr. Pierce answered curtly.

"But..." I started, not sure how to express my other fears.

"Yes?" Dr. Pierce asked calmly.

"Look, I know why you took me. And I know I'm different than everyone else. What happens if it backfires, because I'm not like everyone you tested it on?"

She looked at me as if she was thinking about something. "You have a very good mind, Darcy. That is an excellent point but one I have already thought over. The worst that will happen is that you will not get your memory back. Nothing will change; you will have the same personality, the same qualities and quirks about yourself, and you still will not be able to remember the last year."

"Are there gonna be side effects?"

“Fatigue, heightened hunger, nothing serious; Darcy, you have nothing to be afraid of.”

“Dr. Charles said it was going to hurt,” I continued hesitantly, remembering what the doctor had said on the first day that I had been brought to the lower levels.

She nodded. “He is correct. It does hurt, more than most shots, but since I am giving you a sedative beforehand, it should take away most of the pain.”

“Most?” I asked. I was getting nauseous with terror. My palms were starting to sweat, and I knew I was going to get emotional again.

“Darcy, please relax! You need to trust me. I would never endanger you,” she told me kindly, never once raising her voice.

“You took me from my family!” I reminded her sharply.

She opened her mouth to say something, but then it seemed as though she changed her thought because she forced out, “But I did not endanger you.”

“You could have,” I told her quickly.

“That is true. I could have. But I did not. I am not one for violence. This is not going to harm your brain or your memory in any way.”

I glanced at the needle again as tears dropped from my eyes.

“Darcy, what is wrong?” Dr. Pierce asked gently.

“Please. I just want to leave. Why are you doing this to me?” I asked her the same thing I had asked Dr. Charles, only now I was crying. It didn’t seem to matter to me anymore that just the day before, I had promised her that she had my permission to perform any tests on me. This was different. This was real.

She seemed to have forgotten my promise, also. She did not seem frustrated at my lack of faith. “You are a very special person, Darcy; please understand that. With your help, we could reach a pivotal point in science.”

“I don’t want to help! I just want a normal life.”

“That right was taken from you a year ago, and I am sorry for that, but you have to make the best of your situation.”

I was still crying, scared and just wishing I were back in Travis’s room or even in the cell. Anywhere but here.

“How long will I be out?” I asked her quietly, trying to wipe away my tears, only to have fresh ones replace them.

“I have seen someone remain unconscious for up to eight hours while using this drug, but I feel confident that you will wake in no more than seven.”

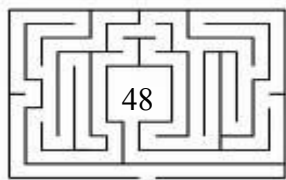
“Seven?” I gasped. “What’s going to happen in those seven hours?”

“Darcy, if you do not relax, I am going to have to give you a stronger sedative,” she told me firmly. “You need to calm down. Everything is under control. Now, I am going to call in four more doctors, okay? Is that okay?”

I nodded, trying not to think about why five doctors needed to be present during the procedure.

She smiled and went over to the intercom near the side of the door. She pressed a button, and her voice filled the entire room, as I imagined it did in every other room, too.

“Doctors Haven, Maguire, Weston, and Tamsyn, please report to Area One. Doctors Haven, Maguire, Weston, and Tamsyn to Area One.”



Dr. Pierce was seated at her desk and writing in what I was guessing was my file when the door opened again, and the last two doctors came in, one man and one woman. Dr. Pierce looked up, frowned slightly, and then looked at her watch.

“You are late,” she snapped.

The man said quickly, “We were held up.”

“I can see that,” Dr. Pierce answered disapprovingly and turned to me. “Darcy, this is Dr. Haven,” she said, pointing to the woman. Then she pointed to the man and said, “and this is Dr. Tamsyn.”

When the woman and man were next to the other two that had come in shortly before, I looked them over. Dr. Haven looked young, maybe fifteen years older than me, with fair skin and dark blonde hair. She had a kind face, but then, so did Dr. Charles, and look what he had done.

Dr. Tamsyn looked to be slightly older than Dr. Pierce, and his skin was almost a milk chocolate color. He looked a little stricter than both Dr. Pierce and Dr. Haven, although he backed down to Dr. Pierce in a heartbeat.

I stared at Dr. Weston and Dr. Maguire. Neither had said much of anything when they had come in. Dr. Maguire had walked over to Dr. Pierce, said something I couldn’t hear, looked at me quickly, and then she had gone to stand next to Dr. Pierce to read my file. Dr. Weston had gone to the corner, where he stayed until Dr. Maguire had joined him and then Doctors Tamsyn and Haven later on.

“Dr. Haven will be monitoring your drugs,” Dr. Pierce told me. “And Dr. Tamsyn will be watching over your heart rate. I will be observing your brain waves.”

I nodded, not really taking in anything she was saying. I was getting hysterical, again; I could tell. Seeing the four other

doctors made this all the more real. I already knew that Dr. Maguire would be assisting Dr. Pierce in her observations, but Dr. Pierce hadn't bothered to explain what Dr. Weston was assigned to do. I turned to Dr. Haven as three of the doctors moved closer to me.

"Please, don't make me do this," I told her quietly, wiping my palms on my pants to get some of the sweat off them.

Right away, I knew she could sense how scared I was.

"This will help you, Darcy, I promise," she told me kindly. "And I'll make sure everything goes smoothly."

I nodded once, aware that my heart was beating so fast it was making my head hurt.

"Now, I want you to lie back and relax. Think of something happy. What's your favorite ice cream flavor?" She asked soothingly as I laid back.

"Mint chocolate chip," I told her quickly. I knew what she was trying to do, and I appreciated it, but it didn't take my mind off what was happening.

"That's mine, too!" She said, strapping my right wrist down and then my left. "I like the chips best. They're so crunchy! Let's see if we have the same favorite color."

"Mine is red," I told her quietly as she rubbed an alcohol pad over the top part of my arm. I watched her pick up the first needle that Dr. Pierce had identified as the sedative.

"No, mine's pumpkin orange. I just love Halloween because of all the orange pumpkins. What's your favorite holiday?"

I didn't answer, instead watching closely as she brought the needle to my arm. My breathing was shaky and irregular.

"Darcy?" She asked, looking at me.

"I like Christmas," I told her, and as it came out of my mouth, she stuck the needle in my arm, injected the drug, and pulled it out in one quick movement. I winced, closing my eyes until the pain had gone away.

"Christmas is great," she answered, and I could almost hear her smile as she put the needle back. "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

I shook my head and opened my eyes. "No."

But I could feel the drug moving through my body, relaxing my nerves, making my brain just a little cloudy.

"How are you feeling?" Dr. Haven asked, but it seemed like her voice was coming from a muffled intercom.

"Okay," I whispered.

"Good. Now, Dr. Tamsyn is just going to hook up the heart monitor, so don't get nervous when you feel a little pinch on your wrist, neck, and chest."

I nodded and chose to close my eyes. It was easier than trying to focus on everything that was going on around me. The last thing I saw was Dr. Tamsyn coming closer to me with a set of wires and Dr. Pierce watching me closely from her desk even as she carried on a conversation with Dr. Maguire.

As Dr. Tamsyn attached the wires to me, I listened sharply, waiting for the sound of Dr. Haven picking up another needle. Only then would I open my eyes.

"You still feeling okay?" Came Dr. Haven's voice.

"Yes," I told her quietly.

"Good. Okay, if you want to open your eyes, I can show you your heart rate," Dr. Haven told me gently.

I opened one eye first, which landed on her, just to make sure she wasn't tricking me and really had the needle in her hand. When I saw that it was safe, I opened my other eye. She pointed to the heart rate monitor I had seen when I first came in.

I knew enough about the monitors to see that my heart beat was way uneven. The line was really jagged, the little lines up and down. All five doctors were looking at it, all holding surprised expressions.

"Why are you so scared?" Dr. Pierce asked quietly.

I glanced at her. "Please don't do this to me," I begged, my voice almost a whisper. "I'll cooperate, I swear, just don't do this. Please."

"You have nothing to worry about Darcy, I promise, this will be over soon."

Seven hours wasn't what I would call soon. What would happen to me during those seven hours? Would I have odd side effects? Was I going to remember? What if I never woke up? I was

scaring myself, I knew it, but I couldn't get my mind to stray from the worrisome topics.

My eyes strayed from the heart rate monitor to the huge screen on the back wall. It was no longer black. Instead, the wall flickered a grayish-green color every so often.

I turned to Dr. Haven. "What does that do?" I asked quietly, hoping she would give me more information than Dr. Pierce had supplied.

"Well, it's not turned on yet," she told me, smiling slightly. "We turn it on once you've gone unconscious. In simple terms, assuming Dr. Pierce's drug works on you, the screen will tell us which memory path in your brain has been tampered with. The screen processes your heart rate and the degrees of unconsciousness you go through and determines which part of the brain is stopping you from recalling your memories."

"It can do that?" I asked, my astonishment not quite concealed.

"Normally, yes. We are hoping that you are not the exception," she answered. "You see, in a normal brain, usually the only reason a memory wouldn't be stored is because it isn't important enough to be stored. The screen would then come back and tell us that all the paths in the brain were working fine. Your brain, however, is not normal. A year of your life is important. We hope that the screen will tell us specifically what is wrong with your memory paths. Does that make sense?"

I shrugged. "Kind of. But I don't get the screen thing."

She smiled. "It's probably because I didn't give you a very good explanation. It's much easier to explain what it does in scientific terms, but then, you wouldn't have understood that either."

I looked back at the screen. It was now turning a fuzzy blue. As I stared into it and tried not to think about what it would be doing to me in a short amount of time, the heart rate monitor kicked up again.

Finally, Dr. Tamsyn interrupted my thoughts and said, "Miss Calloway, calm down. If you cannot control yourself, we will have to give you a stronger sedative."

I looked quickly at Dr. Haven. She smiled at me and shook her head. "We won't have to do that if you'll just relax."

How the heck was I supposed to relax? That was like telling me to relax before going in for open-heart surgery. My natural reaction was to pump adrenaline. But I just nodded, closed my eyes again, and willed myself to unwind. Everything was going to be okay, everything was going to be—

"Now. I want you to keep your eyes closed, okay?" Dr. Haven started, and I heard her pick up something. The needle.

"Why?" I asked quickly. She didn't answer. My eyes immediately shot open. "Why?" I asked again.

"Darcy, you are making this very difficult," Dr. Pierce reprimanded.

"Please, no, I'm scared, don't do this, please, don't," I was mumbling, watching Dr. Haven sorting through the needles.

"Stop it, Darcy," Dr. Pierce told me fiercely. "You are making this into something it is not. There is no need for you to be scared. Now, I do not want to hear another complaint from you. Is that understood?"

Instead of answering, I closed my eyes again. I knew my anger would have flared if I wasn't in a state of complete terror, but as it was, I only felt fear. I could hear the heart monitor beeping, but I was focused on feeling how close Dr. Haven was to me.

"I'm just going to rub some alcohol on your arm to sterilize it," Dr. Haven said slowly, making sure I understood exactly what she was doing.

A second later, I felt something cold hit my arm. I winced slightly but said nothing. My skin tingled slightly from where she had rubbed but seemed number than anything.

"What is your full name?" Dr. Tamsyn asked.

I turned slightly to where his voice had come from, a frown of confusion on my face.

"Why?"

"Please just answer the question."

"Darcy Eloise Calloway," I answered.

"And how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"When is your birthday?"



“October—” I started but was cut off by a loud yelp. My own. My arm felt like it was on fire. A knife was continually stabbing where the needle was supposed to have gone. A fist was colliding with my upper arm. The nausea was rising up, my head was dizzy, I was going to faint if the pain didn’t stop.

And then it did.

“Are you alright, Darcy?” Dr. Haven asked quietly.

I didn’t open my eyes as I tried to push the tears and vomit down. I managed to choke out, “No. My arm.”

“I know. It hurts, I know. But the pain should be subsiding, right?”

I nodded slowly.

“Good. I want you to relax for me, okay? Okay, that’s great. Now, I want you to count back from one hundred.”

I tried not to think about what the drug was doing to me, how my body was starting to float as I started, “One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety...”

My world got even darker.

It seemed like forever that the pitch-blackness surrounded me. I knew I was out of it, but it wasn’t something I’d ever felt before. I was totally aware of my surroundings, only I could hear nothing. I knew I was unconscious, only I couldn’t seem to wake up. It was like I was in between conscious and slumber.

And then, suddenly, the room got lighter again. Only it wasn’t Area One. It was something completely different.

I was in a dark room, the only light source coming from the small window above the twin bed against the wall. The walls were blank, and all I could see, really focus on, was the long wall mirror in front of me. Silently, I stared at the outline of my reflection. Then I blinked, and everything was gone.

Instead, I was sitting at a piano. A man was walking towards me, holding a cupcake with a single candle in it. As I tried to move closer to it, the world shook and disappeared.

A flash, and I was watching the same man play the piano. The song sounded familiar, one I knew how to play, had heard before, but I didn’t like it. My stomach plummeted, and I wanted to run.

When I blinked again, I was outside a white, split-level house with blue shutters. It rang a bell; I knew I had seen it somewhere else, but I couldn't remember where. All I could do was stare at it. The lawn was green and healthy but looked foreboding all the same. I wanted to turn and run away; something about the house had me wishing I were anywhere else. But I couldn't move.

Another flash, and I wasn't in front of the house anymore. I was back in the dark room with the twin bed. There were some books on the bed, and I knew they belonged to me.

One more flash. What looked like the same books were being held by the man who had played the piano and given me the cupcake. He was shaking his head, his anger apparent in his eyes. Then he disappeared, and the room went black.

My eyes focused on the only light in the otherwise completely dark, huge hall. There was a door all the way at the end of it, only I couldn't seem to move towards it. I heard footsteps coming from somewhere behind me, but when I tried to turn around, I wasn't in the hall anymore.

It was the man at the piano again, only this time, he wasn't playing or looking at me. He was looking at something I was holding in my hand. I looked down at what I was holding, and it was a family picture with a woman, a man, and a baby.

I didn't know where I was. Where was I? I was so tired, so hungry, but I had to stay with this man. I had to.

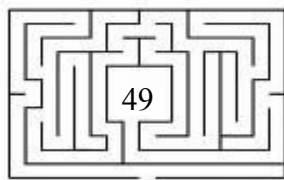
A flash. "Why won't you talk to me?" Dr. Bram was saying. I didn't respond. I couldn't. My mouth wouldn't open. I was stuck in the chair, bound, and trying not to think about anything at all.

I turned to look at the window, but I wasn't in the room anymore. I was in a cell. "He has been badly affected by some of his past." "What's wrong with him?" Reid was staring at me across the cell. "Wake up," he was saying. "I can't!"

The cell got dark, darker, and then it grew lighter. Only I wasn't in the cell anymore. I was in my bedroom, my real bedroom, the one at my house, where I lived with my parents. I was waking up from a bad dream, and my parents were standing in the middle of my room, watching me. "Mom? Dad?" But they were

just standing there, shaking their heads and looking at me with disappointed expressions. Then the door opened and my sister walked in. “Aubrey? What’s wrong?” “You need to wake up,” she whispered. “What’s wrong?” “Wake up! Wake up!”

And then, suddenly, I did. My eyes opened automatically, I breathed in deeply, and then I screamed. I couldn’t stop screaming. Something was wrong; I knew it. My whole body was aching. Something wasn’t right.



“Darcy! Darcy, calm down! It’s okay, shh, it’s okay,” someone was saying.

“No! Let me go, please, let me go!” I was crying, kicking, trying to get away from all this.

“Hold her legs down, dammit!” Another person, a man, snapped. “Darcy, stop it! Look at me. Look at me!”

“No, please, stop, I need to leave! Get off me!” I shrieked over my sobs.

“Darcy, listen to me! Stop and listen! Listen to my voice! Can you understand me?” Someone told me quickly, and I recognized the voice as Dr. Pierce.

My screams subsided a little as I nodded, but I was still jerking away from the hands holding me down. “I can’t be here, I can’t, get off me!”

Suddenly, I felt a cold hand on my forehead. I winced, but it seemed to calm my nerves a little. My screams stopped so that I was left whimpering.

“Are you alright?” Dr. Pierce asked. “Darcy, please calm down. Are you alright?”

I nodded slightly, the waves of terror fading away and leaving me helpless and weak.

“Can you look at me?” Dr. Pierce asked. Slowly, I forced my eyes to open.

When my eyes focused, I frowned at my surroundings. Dr. Pierce had taken her hand away from my forehead and was scribbling furiously on her clipboard. The other four doctors were standing around me, either glowering or trying to calm me down.

“It’s okay now, Darcy, you’re okay,” Dr. Haven was whispering soothingly. “You’re awake. Everything’s fine.”

I shook my head and closed my eyes again, praying that I wouldn’t see what had just flashed through my head. If I

concentrated on closing out the memories, maybe they would just *go away*.

"Are you alright?" Dr. Haven asked calmly.

The pain in virtually every part of my body was sinking, leaving me fragile and incredibly tired. But I was afraid to go to sleep. I didn't want to think about anything. I was scared.

I nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Good. Then we're just going to take the straps off you, okay?" She asked.

I opened my eyes, looked at her, and then nodded. While she was unstrapping me, the other doctors moved away from me, going towards Dr. Pierce's desk to discuss something, probably revolving around me.

"Please, don't drug me anymore," I whispered quietly enough so that only Dr. Haven could hear me.

"Don't worry, Darcy, that was the last test for the day," she reassured me, but I looked away. For the day? There were more?

When the straps were off, I flexed my wrists, trying to get the circulation back to a normal pace. No one spoke to me once Dr. Haven had gone back to the other doctors to talk. I didn't mind that, anyway. I didn't want them asking me questions, poking into my personal life, drugging me, anything.

Even though I knew one of the side effects of the drug was drowsiness and that it probably wasn't the best idea to fall asleep again, I could feel my eyes closing.

"Dr. Pierce?" I called, trying to fight back the fatigue.

"Yes, Darcy?" She asked.

I didn't answer her; I had forgotten what I had wanted to ask her, and I couldn't quite focus on her or the other doctors.

She could probably sense my weakness, because she said, "Darcy, if you are tired, you may go to sleep."

I nodded but felt myself drifting even before I could answer her. When I was shaken awake by Dr. Pierce, I couldn't recall if I had been dreaming.

I looked around quickly and noticed that the other doctors were gone. We were all alone. Oh. Fantastic.

"You were out cold," Dr. Pierce told me, smiling slightly.

I smiled a half smile that hardly reached my cheeks, let alone my eyes. I didn't want to be in this room any longer.

"Can we go somewhere else?" I asked her quietly. This room was creepy.

"Yes, we can. Would you like to try my office?" She asked.

I shook my head. Most definitely not.

"Then, where would you like to go?" She asked, and I noticed her voice didn't even sound impatient. I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad sign.

I thought for a minute. I didn't tell her that I wanted to see Travis, to go to his room and listen to his German music so that I could still believe I was safe with him for a while. Instead, I said the second thing that came to my mind.

"Somewhere more comfortable."

She smiled again. "Okay. We can do that."

She helped me down from the chair and led me to the door. She waved her hand over a little black dot, and a keyboard popped out of the wall. After the keyboard was back in the wall, we exited the room.

I didn't pay attention as Dr. Pierce led me down different hallways. I was so confused and full of desperation that I had to struggle to keep all the questions forming in my head to myself.

Finally, Dr. Pierce stopped quickly, as though she had almost forgotten where she was going. I almost slammed into her but halted a second before she and I collided.

Without a word, she opened a door, which I was surprised to see wasn't locked. When we walked in, I was even more surprised to see that it was a sitting room. I knew we weren't on the main floors. The rooms on the lower levels were mostly made up of cells or offices, from what I had seen. This sitting room was oddly out of place in the lower levels.

There were two very puffy tan leather couches sitting in front of an unlit fireplace with a coffee table between them. The only other pieces of furniture were two bookcases on either side of the room. There were no windows. Instead, there were nice pictures of different landscapes.

Dr. Pierce let go of my arm and moved to the couch to my left. I went to the couch on my right, refusing to sit any closer to Dr. Pierce than I had to.

"I hope the fatigue has worn off?" Dr. Pierce asked and stated at the same time.

I nodded, even though my brain still felt a little blurry. Weakly, I asked, "Where's Travis?"

She looked as though she wanted to frown, maybe roll her eyes, but in a flash, her expression of contentment was back.

"He's out with his friends," she lied.

I stared at her, trying to make sense of what she was saying. I knew she was lying, but would she give in if I put up enough of a fuss? I took a chance. "Can I see him? Can he come down here?"

"He's out with his friends," she repeated firmly.

"I want to see him," I told her quietly, but a little more boldly as my need to see Travis broke through the last of the exhaustion.

"Darcy, he's—"

"You're lying," I told her.

"Listen to me. He's not here right now."

"I know you're lying to me! He's here! He has to be here!" I exclaimed. "I want to see him!"

"No," she snapped, putting her papers aside and turning to face me fully.

"Why?" I asked quietly as the weariness I thought had left me came back again.

"You are not in the position to give me orders, Miss Calloway," she replied softly, using my last name to show that we weren't playing around anymore. "Please sit down so that we can get back to work. I assure you, if you cooperate, this will be over in five minutes."

I glared at her, decided quickly that, once this was over, I would have time to think and plan, and then plopped into my seat.

"Thank you," she said sweetly. "Now then, did you get your memory back?"

I shook my head.

"Did you get anything back? Because if you did not, then we just might have to up the dosage."

I knew she had backed me into a corner. So I nodded.

“Oh, you did get something?” She asked, mock surprise filling her face. “Please elaborate.”

“They were just flashes,” I muttered.

“That is fine,” she said lightly, picking up her papers.

I hated being so vulnerable, and I hated the fact that she had me trapped.

“I remember a cupcake,” I told her first, feeling incredibly stupid.

“Okay,” she said encouragingly, scribbling down something.

“And a mirror.”

She nodded.

“And a man playing the piano...and a house.”

“A house?” She asked, suddenly interested.

“A split-level house,” I answered.

She nodded, and I could almost see the gears in her brain spinning like crazy.

“Is that all?” She finally asked.

I nodded back at her and couldn't decide if I was lying or not. What had come back to me in my memory flashes were blurry and a little painful to remember, but I didn't want her getting anything out of me that I didn't feel confident telling her. So I said nothing and waited as she jotted down notes.

“Are you sure?” She asked after a minute.

I nodded again.

She stared at me for a second, maybe trying to decide if I was being difficult or if I really was having another memory blank. I couldn't tell what her decision was, because her expression was void of any emotions.

“Okay, that is good. Either I or Dr. Fletcher will be questioning you for the next few days, performing simple tests, nothing extreme. If you remember anything else, it would be very wise for you to tell one of the doctors,” Dr. Pierce said, standing up and straightening her coat. “Remember, Darcy, we are only helping you here.”

I didn't say anything, my expression matching hers. How she had convinced herself that what she and the scientists were



doing was helpful to anyone but themselves was beyond my understanding. In fact, it made me think she was bordering on psychotic.

“Can I leave?” I finally asked.

She nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Dr. Pierce was smart enough to realize that I would need to be escorted away from Area One, or wherever we were. I followed her in silence towards the single elevator at the end of one of the hallways.

Inside, the buttons weren’t numbered. They were lettered, and I was guessing that the doctors had to know which buttons were to which floor because the lettering didn’t make sense. The button Dr. Pierce pushed, which brought us down, said Q and the button at the top of one of the two rows read Z.

We rode in silence during the time it took to reach our floor, and then I walked behind Dr. Pierce down another hallway until she stopped at a door. She opened it with a key, stepped aside, and waited.

“You can go in,” Dr. Pierce told me, one of the only times I had heard her use any form of sarcasm.

I looked up at her, confused. “Aren’t I staying with Travis?”

She sighed heavily. “No. We thought it would be best if you stayed closer to home while undergoing these tests.”

I knew enough to realize her ‘we’ was not referring to Travis and her.

“But he...” I started quietly.

“Travis is no longer in control here,” she answered curtly. She left no room for argument.

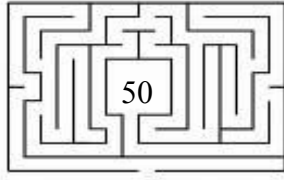
I walked past her in silence, not bothering to look at her or say anything. I couldn’t decide if I should be mad or disappointed. My emotions seemed dull, like some distant part of me that hadn’t been used in years. I was tired, my head was throbbing, and all I wanted to do was lie down.

The room was bare except for a double bed with a white bedspread on it and one pillow. At the moment, the only thing I cared about was that they were kind enough to give me a bed.

---

Briefly, I acknowledged the fact that I was most likely in the isolation room.

Strike two.



The room had no windows. It had only a lamp in the middle of the room that was so dim, it was easy to pretend that there was no light source at all. There was a bathroom connected to my room with a toilet, sink, and shower, all in working condition but definitely not as nice as Travis's bathroom.

For two days I sat in that room, alone, with no visitors except for a scrawny little man who brought me my two meals a day. He said nothing, didn't make eye contact, and gave me no sign that he could actually form a thought, let alone talk.

I had two days to do nothing, to think about nothing. The only things I could remember from the experiment Dr. Pierce had performed were the four things I had told her, and that was only because telling her about them had etched them into my brain.

I tried not to think about where my family was. I knew they were looking for me, but how close were they? Would they ever find me? Would I ever leave this place? These thoughts only added more questions.

The one thing I let myself think about was Travis, because that topic, at least, did not add any more questions.

Maybe he would come back for me. I had no doubt that he would try to see me, try to get me out of here, but it was his ability to get past security that I was not so confident about. Dr. Pierce, regardless of what Travis had told me, seemed to have a lot of power over him. I didn't want him getting into trouble on my account.

But I missed him so much it was like an ache. Right now, I just wanted him next to me so that I could at least talk to him. I would have kept my memory loss for another three months just to be in his room, listening to his music.

I didn't let myself cry, feel sorry for myself, anything. All I did was think of Travis because that was the only thing I could do without feeling anything except despair.

On the third day that I was in my room, the door opened. It was after breakfast and way before dinner, so I was getting ready to question the scrawny man, when a woman walked in. As my eyes adjusted to the light again, I saw that it was Dr. Pierce.

"Darcy, how are you?" She said kindly, coming over to sit on the bed where I was laying.

"Tired," I replied truthfully. And I was. I was wiped out every minute since I had been put through her experiment.

Dr. Pierce nodded. "Yes, I imagine you are."

I couldn't think of a reply to that, so I waited for her to tell me why she was here.

"Today," she started, "I am going to be performing more tests."

My heart sank miserably, and I shook my head. "No," I whispered.

She actually looked upon me with sympathy. "Do not look so sad. I think you are going to like this test. There will be no drugs involved."

I glanced at her skeptically. "Then, what am I gonna be doing?"

"Running," she answered, getting up and leaving the room. I knew she expected me to follow her, so I got up slowly, and walked out after her.

She closed and locked the door before leading me down a hallway. This time, she stopped and opened a door very close to the one we had just left.

My eyes widened in surprise as I saw what lay behind the door. We were standing on a circular ledge that overlooked a gym. I realized that I was looking down at the Athleticism station and could see that there were seven kids in the station at the moment. I didn't recognize anyone I knew from the brief period I had been around other people my age, but there were some familiar faces. In a strange way, I got some kind of relief knowing that I wasn't the only one in pain here.

“Okay, Darcy, what I want you to do for today is run around this ledge.”

I looked at her. “That’s all?”

“That is all.”

She dug into her pocket and pulled out an iPod. I looked at it suspiciously. Why the heck did she have an iPod in her pocket? She didn’t strike me as the music-listening type.

“I had Dr. Fletcher make up a song list for you. You had one of these at your house, so I trust you know how to use one?”

I nodded, remembering that she had my file and probably knew when and why I had gotten my first music device.

“Good,” she said, giving me the iPod. Next, she reached into her other pocket and pulled out a heart rate monitor. “You might recognize this from *Athleticism*. It is a heart rate monitor. I want you to wear this while you are running. You will not feel it, you may not even remember that it is on your wrist, but it is going to be sending every beat your heart makes to a computer at the lab.”

“Okay,” I answered, holding out my left arm so that she could fasten it around my wrist.

“Great. Now, I am not much of a runner,” she said, smiling at me, which I didn’t return, “but I have been told that it can be very therapeutic. You do not have to run at any speed; you can even walk if you want to. However, during the two hours that you will be exercising, I am going to call out a certain speed, and only then will you have to do as I say. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. You can start whenever you like.”

I turned the iPod on slowly and hoped that the songs weren’t old or boring. Luckily, just like Dr. Pierce had said, the songs were ‘running songs.’ I put the songs on shuffle and launched myself on the track.

Soon, I was sprinting. I was still really tired and my legs weren’t used to exercise, but I couldn’t stop. It was the only way I could let out the anger that was full to bursting. My legs wouldn’t stop even when my brain told them that I was exhausted. I slowed down a little but kept going.

After lap fifteen, I stopped counting how many times I passed Dr. Pierce and focused on my steps. I stared in front of me at an abstract destination. In a way, Dr. Pierce was right: running was therapeutic. I knew once I stopped, I would still feel depressed, angry, and hurt, but for a small amount of time, the pain in my legs and my lungs seemed to negate everything else I was feeling.

I ran until I saw Dr. Pierce signal to me and even then, I didn't stop. I only slowed down and took one of the ear buds out of my ear to hear what she was going to tell me.

"Sprint, only once, around the ledge," she called.

I nodded at her and sped up, going so fast that my breathing was almost as loud as the music that I was blasting.

Once I passed Dr. Pierce, I slowed down considerably, jogging for another two laps before Dr. Pierce signaled to me again.

"Walk the next ten laps."

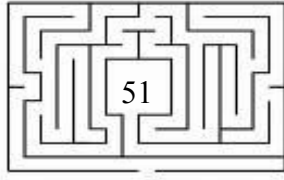
So I walked. It felt unbearably slow and I was conscious of Dr. Pierce watching me the whole time, but I continued until I passed her for the tenth time.

"Okay, that is good. Walk once more, and then you are done for today."

"Fine," I told her and walked around, taking my sweet time. I didn't want to leave this place. At least I knew that I was safe for the time being when I was here.

While I walked slowly around the ledge, I thought about my heart rate monitor. Dr. Pierce had been right: just like in *Athleticism*, I hadn't felt a thing as it read my heart rate. I was cautious, though, of why my heart rate was needed. Hadn't they taken my heart rate all during the six or seven hours I had been unconscious three days ago?

These doctors were confusing.



**D**r. Pierce had brought me back to my room and told me to wait for her there and that she would be right back.

However, that had been about three hours ago, and she was still absent. If she wasn't going to come back, she should have at least said as much so that I didn't have to act like I was waiting for her. I wanted to take a shower, maybe squeeze in some wallowing, but I didn't want Dr. Pierce to come back while I was occupied.

When my door opened, I was getting ready to snap at Dr. Pierce, but instead, the stupid scrawny man came in with a bowl of tomato soup and a glass of milk. He set it down by the door and then left.

I ate my soup in a silent fury, all the while telling myself that she wasn't coming and that I should just take a shower. But I couldn't convince myself to do it. In a sick, distorted kind of way, I think I was actually looking forward to the times when she visited. At least then, I had something concrete to fear.

Finally, the door opened again, and Dr. Pierce came in, looking extremely distracted.

"Are you ready?" She asked, already turning back to the door.

"For what?" I asked, getting up and following her, more out of habit than curiosity.

"Just a simple test," she answered and then added, "that has nothing to do with any sort of drug," when she saw my face twist.

I nodded and followed her out of the room. I recognized the path we were taking and knew where we were going before she opened the door. When we entered the room, I knew I had been right: we were in the same room Dr. Pierce had brought me in after taking that six-hour test. Well, at least it was comfortable.

“Take a seat,” she said, more focused, I noticed, as she went over to one of the bookshelves.

I said nothing as I sat in the same spot I had taken when I had last visited the room.

“Okay, Darcy, you will probably recognize immediately what kind of test this is. I like to call it my ‘cliché test’.”

“Because...”

“Because it is a very simple test present in almost every movie involving a psychologist.”

I waited for her to continue. She did so only after sitting first and placing her clipboard and a book on her lap.

“I am going to say a word, and I want you to tell me the first thing that comes to mind when you hear it. I do not care if you think it sounds stupid or if you are afraid it is not even close at all. I just want the first thing that pops into your head.”

I nodded. “Alright.”

Dr. Pierce looked down at her clipboard, positioned her pen in a writing position, and then said, “Green.”

“Money,” I answered. She scribbled it down.

“Bondage.”

“Handcuffs.”

She raised her eyebrows, maybe trying to see if I was joking, but she wrote it down anyway.

“Door.”

“Lock.”

“Reflection.”

“Water.”

“Candle.”

“Fire.”

“White.”

“Angel.”

She was scribbling furiously but looked up when I answered this word. “Angel?”

I nodded.

“That is interesting. Why do you say that?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. You said to say the first thing that came to my head. I thought of an angel.”



“Hmm,” she mumbled and then wrote something down.  
“Okay, how about note?”

“Letter.”

“House.”

“Lawn.”

“Deer.”

“Santa.”

She smiled slightly, which surprised me. “Okay, then.  
Song.”

Without even thinking, I blurted out, “German.”

She looked up, her face stretched taut. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing!” I exclaimed. I would have come up with another word that sounded just like German to cover my mistake, but what rhymes with German? Herman? Sherman? None of those really fit the context.

“Darcy, answer my question.”

“I was thinking of a German song, okay? It’s just a song. That’s the first thing that came into my head.”

She stared past me, her eyes glazed over, telling me that she was thinking deeply. Finally, she looked back at me, and her face was curious.

“Tattoo.”

Uh-oh. I saw where this was going. I hesitated before saying, “Black?”

“Travis.”

I stopped, trying to get my bearings. What the heck was she doing? “What?”

“I am just testing you.”

“What does he have to do with this?”

“I just want to know what comes to your head.”

I glared at her. “Help.”

She narrowed her eyes, trying to think about that. “Help?”

“Yup.”

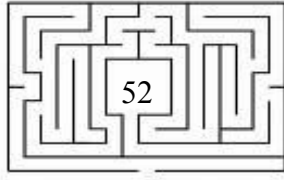
She tilted her head slightly but wrote that down anyway. I sat silently as she wrote what seemed to be the next Pulitzer Prize

---

winner on her clipboard. Finally, she looked up and stared at me expectantly.

After a second of awkward silence, I asked, "Can I go?"

"Yes, you can," she answered, got up, and led the way back to my room.



I was completely restless. My body was exhausted, my mind ready to shut down at any second, but I couldn't sleep, I couldn't think, I couldn't do anything. I was bored but didn't want to do anything. I was hungry, but nothing tasted good. I was sad but couldn't cry. My senses, my emotions, were dull. I was having trouble feeling anything, and identifying my emotions was like trying to hold water in cupped hands: every time I thought I was coming close to grasping what I was feeling at an instant, the thought would slip away.

There was no clock in the room; time was abstract. I simply existed. Even the times at which the scrawny man visited me could just as well have been at midnight instead of six o'clock, when he was supposed to come.

And the worst part was that my body was dead sore, because I had run without stretching or working out whatsoever. Smart one, Darcy!

I didn't know how long I had been in my room when, one day, Dr. Charles came to visit.

The door opened slightly, and I closed my eyes, trying to pretend like I was sleeping so that I wouldn't have to respond.

"I know you're awake, Darcy," Dr. Charles said, and I heard him close the door behind him.

"No, I'm not," I sighed, aggravated.

"And since you don't have a history of talking in your sleep, I think it's safe to say that your cover is blown."

I groaned but opened my eyes and sat up slowly. "What do you want?"

"What kind of greeting is that?" He asked, smiling slightly. He could have passed for my grandfather if I didn't know that he was completely into this whole torture conspiracy.

"A well earned one."

“Hmm,” was all he said, coming over to my bed and sitting down. “I gotta tell you, Darcy, you don’t look well.”

“That’s ‘cause I’m not,” I mumbled.

He put the back of his hand up to my forehead so carelessly that it almost felt normal. Yet, I still shied away from his touch. “Well, you don’t have a fever.”

I glared at him. “Are you serious? I don’t feel well because of that *stupid* drug you gave me.”

His face turned sorrowfully disapproving. “I hate to break it to you, but that drug you’re talking about was given to you five days ago, and the side effects should have worn off about four days ago.”

“You’re telling me this *now*?” I snapped, lying back down again. But I could feel fear creeping through me. Why the heck was I tired, then? And irritable, too?

Dr. Charles looked at me thoughtfully for a minute and then got up. “I’ll be right back.”

I nodded but said nothing, knowing perfectly well that his word was not necessarily one to be trusted.

Not too long after he left, Dr. Charles returned with a glass of something I couldn’t identify and a small pill in his hand. It was so small, in fact, that I wouldn’t have known it was there if he didn’t hold it up to show to me.

“This pill will make all your troubles go away.”

“What is it?” I asked, looking at it suspiciously.

“It’s a vitamin. I’m going to make sure that you get one of these a day, and I assure you that you will feel better in no time.”

When he saw that I still wasn’t convinced, he sighed. “Darcy, it’s not like I’d poison you, you know that. I want to see you happy again.”

I glared at him sourly. “How would you know what I’m like happy? You’ve never seen me happy.”

“Not true,” he answered but didn’t continue. Silently, he held out the pill for, then the glass with the unknown liquid in it.

“What’s this?” I asked him, looking into the glass.

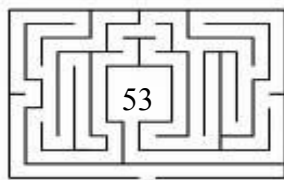
“It’s just whole milk,” he answered. “You need to put on more weight.”

That was an interesting observation coming from the person who was starving me. I felt like sneering at him. Instead, though, I swallowed the pill with a huge gulp of the milk.

I was about to hand the glass back to him, but he shook his head. “All of it.” I grimaced but downed the last of the milk. I then shoved the cup back at him and lay down.

Although I said nothing, he nodded and stood up. He was about to leave when he turned back to me and said, “By the way, you did very well on your tests.”

By way of answering, I closed my eyes deliberately, making sure he saw that I was ignoring him. Once I heard the door open and shut, I breathed easier again.



I was waiting anxiously for my morning meal. I knew I wouldn't be getting anything that I would have considered edible in my previous life, but every time I got a meal, it reminded me that the doctors hadn't forgotten me. Plus, I would have eaten just about anything at that moment. The milk had kind of worked up my appetite.

When the door opened, I was ready to pounce on the scrawny man carrying my meal. Instead, he entered with a pair of clothes.

"That's not food," I told him helpfully.

He glared at me. "You are to put these on, immediately."

I felt my eyebrows rise. "You talk?"

He didn't answer but put the clothes on the floor and walked back out.

"Alright, then," I said to myself before walking over to pick up the clothes. They were actually quite tasteful. The black sweater and black pants made me think of Travis, and my heart skipped a beat. It was really mind-boggling how much I missed him.

When I was changed, I sat on my bed and waited for the scrawny man to come back in and give me further information as to where I was supposed to go. When the door opened again, it wasn't the man, though. It was a woman.

My first thought was that it was going to be Dr. Pierce. But it wasn't. This woman was much younger, much prettier, and much better dressed. She had dark brown hair that could have passed for black surrounding a triangular face with sharp jawbones. Her tan skin complemented her kind hazel eyes. She was wearing pinstriped pants and a white sweater. She looked familiar.

"Darcy Calloway?" She asked, her voice raspy and sweet, a cool, crisp breath of fresh air.

"Who are you?" I asked by way of response.

“My name is Dr. Fletcher,” she answered. “I am a psychologist here.”

I nodded. Dr. Fletcher. Nora had spoken of a Dr. Fletcher. This must have been her. “Are these clothes from you?”

She nodded. “Yes. I thought you’d like a change of clothes. I imagine you’ve been in that outfit for a good six days.”

“Just about.”

She smiled. “If you’ll just follow me, we can get started with our work.”

“Where are we going?” I asked, but I stood. Something about her told me to follow.

“To my office. We’re just going to talk,” she said before I even asked if she was going to be performing tests.

I sighed but followed her anyway. It took us a while to get to her office. It almost seemed like she was walking in one big circle until we took an elevator down two floors.

Finally, we reached a door that said, “Dr. Claire Fletcher, Psychologist.” When she opened the door, I could feel my mouth beginning to drop open. Her office was huge, definitely bigger than Dr. Pierce’s office. It was very well decorated with pictures of winding roads and empty landscapes dotting the walls. She had a very comfy looking black leather couch in the middle of the room and two tan cloth chairs alongside. Her desk was in the corner of the room, facing the door so that, when she was on her computer, she could see the door, too.

There was a table to the right of me and on it was a plate with two eggs, sunny side up, and sausage.

“I didn’t get a chance to read through your entire file, so if you don’t like eggs, just let me know.”

“That’s for me?” I asked her cautiously.

She nodded. “Of course it is.”

“I like eggs,” I told her quickly and went over to the table, where I practically swallowed the food whole.

While I finished eating, she sat at her desk and filled out some paper work, most likely about me. When I was done, I pushed the plate a little more to the middle of the table and got up.

“I don’t mean to sound rude, but if you’re hoping to get answers out of me by bribery, you’re wasting your time. I don’t

remember anything,” I told her bluntly. Best to get that out of the way before she tried to question me.

She looked up, her eyebrows high. “I don’t believe in bribery. Either you want to tell us or you don’t. There’s no gray area in that. And I don’t think that’s rude. You have every right to be tentative.”

I nodded. “So, then, why am I here?”

“I told you, I only want to talk,” she said kindly.

“About what?”

She motioned for me to follow her over to the sitting area. “Anything you want.”

“Anything?” That was a shocker.

“Anything. You just name the topic and start talking.”

I tried to keep the hope out of my expression as I started hesitantly, “How about my file?”

Immediately, her face tightened a little. “Of course, the first thing you ask about is the one thing I can’t give you.”

I allowed my disappointment to show. “Why not?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“But...”

“Believe me, Darcy, if I thought it would help you, I’d tell you in a heartbeat. But it would only make things worse.”

I turned away from her. “Everyone keeps saying that. Everyone’s always talking about how horrible my life was and how sorry they feel for me. What happened?”

Her face held true emotions, the sadness and pain she felt for me clearly showing. Before she could speak, though, I interrupted.

“No. Don’t tell me how sorry you are or how much you want to try to help. I don’t want your sympathy! I just want answers. Do you know how hard it is for me to—” I started but cut myself off. I didn’t want to finish that sentence. “Please, I just need help.”

“I can help you if you’d just give me a chance. We can talk about anything else, anything. We can work together, try to figure out what’s keeping you from remembering.”

I looked at her. There was no use in arguing with her about my file; she wouldn’t cave. If I played my cards right, though, I



might be able to get some answers out of her using a different tactic. I nodded, devising a plan. "So, what do we do now?"

"Why don't we talk about...this place. Is there anything you aren't sure about?"

If I couldn't find out about my past, this was the next best thing. "Well, the only thing I really know about this place is that it revolves around the memory."

She nodded. "That's a good start. You're right, the main focus is the memory and its purpose. But you're going to have to ask more specific questions; there's really too much to tell."

I nodded back. I had been ready with questions since day one. "How many years has this been going on?"

"This lab? I'd say about six years, give or take."

Seven billion questions struggled to form into words. "How many kids do you take?"

"You mean Dr. Pierce?" She corrected. I hardly acknowledged her distinction but nodded anyway. "On average, about every year she takes in around thirty for the Trauma Unit and around twelve for the Basic Unit, all ranging between the ages of thirteen and eighteen."

I was barely taking in the information, too focused on sputtering out my questions. "How long do you keep us here?"

"Eight months or so."

"Where do we go after that?"

She paused. "That will have to be answered at another time."

I pursed my lips in curiosity but didn't push the subject. "Why hasn't this place ever been found?"

Again, she didn't answer right away. Her eyes shifted, landed in the corner of the room, and then came back to mine. Her eyes widened slightly, and she started meaningfully, "It's almost comical how much smarter we are than the police."

I stared at her, sure I had missed something. "What...what do you mean?"

She narrowed her eyes, and it almost looked like she shook her head slightly. But she continued, "Dr. Pierce is a brilliant woman. She is the most intelligent, most devious person I have ever met. Her plans are flawless, her methods never questioned. It

shouldn't be surprising, then, to realize that the police are almost completely in the dark about this whole facility."

No, she couldn't have been shaking her head. Because what she was saying was the real thing. I opened my mouth in surprise as a sickening feeling came across me. "You can't be serious. They don't even know where this place is?"

She was making some odd faces at me that I took to mean that she was trying to deliver some horrible news as enthusiastically as possible. "Well, we *are* in the middle of nowhere, and I mean that seriously. And, if you've ever seen the outside of the building, it looks like a normal, albeit gigantic, house. And also, there's the fact that questioning the disappearance of some runaway teens isn't first and foremost on the list of things needed to be done by the FBI."

"But why?" I gasped. I couldn't believe this, any of it.

She sighed, but I almost felt like she was annoyed or had given up on something. I couldn't understand why her actions were not coinciding with her words, but her sigh was definitely an exasperated sigh disguised as a sigh of sympathy on my part. "How can I put this as plainly as possible? The kids we take are orphans, ones no one care about anymore. They've been left to the streets or buried in poverty or gangs. Most of them have flown under the government's radar for years, because no one's bothered to look after them. Basically, the world has better things to do than track down a bunch of homeless delinquents."

"I wasn't a delinquent," I told her, quietly, defensively.

"I didn't say you were. You are quite the exception here. Truthfully, I don't think Dr. Pierce planned for you to be taken the way you were. Nonetheless, you're here to stay until your time is up."

I don't think she meant for her voice to come out quite as heartless as it did. She was giving me the facts, straight up. Yet, as I stared at her, anger suddenly filled my brain and clogged my throat so that I practically had to spit out my next comment. "And you don't find that *sick*?"

She was looking at me plainly, honestly, but her voice betrayed no emotion. "I find it disgusting. I find it to be the

---

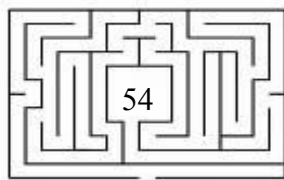
saddest, most perverse thing I've ever heard or seen, and I've seen a lot. However, it's not up to me to decide."

"Why don't you go to the police, then. Why don't you do something? Anything?" I was getting angrier. Would no one do *anything* to stop this?

"I can't."

"You mean you won't," I corrected her harshly.

"No. I said what I meant. I can't, Darcy," she told me firmly. "I'm just as much a prisoner here as you are. They won't let me leave."



I wasn't quite sure what to make of her statement, but something about what she said made me skeptical.

"Yeah, right," I told her, mostly to see if she would explain why she wasn't allowed to leave.

"I'm serious, Darcy. I haven't been allowed to leave since I first arrived here."

Her voice was honest, and that confused me. "Then why did you take this job?"

"They made it seem like something it wasn't. They told me I'd be helping future generations, that I'd be solving a medical problem, helping teenagers cope with their trauma. They didn't tell me anything about kidnapping kids, forcing them to do experiments that would hurt them. I didn't know about any of that."

"What about phones?" I asked her. I wasn't sure my question made sense, but she understood.

"There's no form of communication here. The Internet is off limits to me; they don't think I need it for my profession, but really, they don't trust me. They took my cell phone. Why would I need it? By taking this job, I had basically promised to give all my time to this facility, so why would I need to call anyone?"

I had been thinking through everything she was saying and realized that she had it almost as bad as we did.

"So, how do *you* cope?"

She was staring straight into my eyes, willing me to see something that I couldn't. I couldn't see whatever she was trying to tell me. "I'm hoping that someone will find what needs to be found."

I was trying desperately to understand her. Quietly, I asked, "And what's that?"

Her eyes moved away from mine, and she said in a now emotionless voice, "They said that once they found a drug that would work, I'd be able to leave. That was a while ago."

"How—" I started to ask, wondering how long she had been here.

"I lost count," she interrupted. Her eyes met mine again. "I'm doing everything in my power to help all of you so that we can all leave."

I was silent for a minute, still thinking about how harsh her life was. Finally, I spoke. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be insensitive."

Her face softened dramatically. "Darcy, you have no reason to be sorry."

"I know. But no one gave me an apology when I needed it, and you deserve one."

She smiled. "That's sweet."

I didn't smile back. I was still thinking. "So, how old are you?"

"I turned thirty last month."

I shook my head emphatically. "You're too young for this." Then I smiled. I sounded older than my years.

She, too, smiled. "No. *You're* too young for this."

I chose not to answer that.

"Look, Darcy, I'm not going to waste our time telling you about me and my life, because, frankly, I don't want to. I'm sure no one understands as well as you how uncomfortable it is to tell people about private experiences. I know what it feels like; that's why you're not being grilled right now.

"But, I also know what it's like to have no one to talk to. That's why you're in my office. There are many, many doctors here, many scientists, but bedside manner is not their forte. In fact, they don't see the connection between interacting with people and experimenting on people. It's not the same to them. I disagree with that. So, I'm just going to talk to you. We can talk about anything. It doesn't matter; all that matters is that you're talking to someone who cares."

I looked at her, thinking through what she had said. She looked familiar and not only because I might have seen her

walking the same halls I had been brought through to get to the different rooms. Call it a weird déjà vu, but I couldn't shake off the feeling that we had met. Maybe that's why I felt comfortable around her.

Her words touched me. They made sense. She sounded sincere, which was a nice change from every other doctor here.

"I miss Travis," I whispered before I had even realized I was doing so. Travis talked to me. Travis cared. He always cared.

"Travis?"

I nodded and looked away from her.

"Travis James?" She asked, clearly uncertain about whom I was talking about. "Dr. Pierce's stepson?"

I nodded. "He cared about me."

What happened next was completely a shock to me. Dr. Fletcher stood up, came over to where I was sitting, and sat down next to me.

"And you cared about him," she whispered, but it was also a question.

I nodded. "Yes."

"It was you," she said just as quietly.

I turned my neck so fast, I winced as I heard a crack. "What?"

For a minute, she said nothing. "I...I never would have guessed he meant you."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, no longer quiet.

"When he told me that he was afraid for someone he loved, I *never* thought it was you. He knew what was going to happen," she said, her voice still lowered and not at all directed at me. I got the feeling she probably didn't even know she was talking out loud.

"I don't know what—"

Suddenly, she interrupted me and had a totally different tone to her voice. It was urgent, hurried, and so quiet that I had to strain to hear her. "Darcy, listen to me. Listen very closely. I'm going to take you back to your room, and you are to stay there. Do not tell anyone what we've talked about, do you understand? I don't want you to tell *anyone*. Not Dr. Pierce, no one. Do you understand?"

I nodded slowly and whispered, "Why?"

“I can’t tell you, I’m sorry, I can’t,” she said quickly, getting up and going to the door. “Come on, we don’t have much time. I’m sorry.”

I followed her, hesitant and a little unsure about whether she was alright, but I didn’t want to ask her. What was going on?

We walked in silence, her steps hasty. I tried to keep up, but she was so close to running that I didn’t feel it necessary, thinking maybe if she realized I wasn’t walking at the same pace, she’d slow down some.

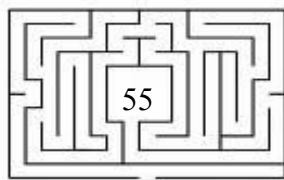
When she did slow down, it was only to remind me again that I couldn’t tell anyone what we had talked about. She was warning me so much that I was getting scared. Why hadn’t we been allowed to meet?

When we reached my door, she unlocked it, ushered me inside quickly, and then slammed the door after me. I heard the lock click and sighed. What was the use of enjoying myself anymore if I was going to be knocked back down again afterwards?

Plus, I knew I shouldn’t have told her about Travis. She was probably going to tell Dr. Pierce, who would probably use that as just one more thing against me.

And then there was the fact that Dr. Fletcher had, intentionally or not, said that Travis loved me. This was assuming that Dr. Fletcher had heard correctly, and that she was telling the truth about what Travis had told her, and that she wasn’t just setting me up to see my reaction, and that I wasn’t just reading way too into what she had said. I was putting a lot of faith into assumptions, but I hardly cared. I trusted her because I wanted what she had said to be true.

I couldn’t sort out my feelings. I didn’t even know what I was feeling. I met Travis twenty or so days ago, and more than half of those days, we hadn’t even been together. Then, when we were just starting to get close, I was pulled away from him, and I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I missed him so much, and I knew that I loved him.



The scrawny man was as quiet as ever when he brought me dinner. This time, however, he kept his eyes securely locked on the plate. He set it down right next to the door and backed out quickly before I could even open my mouth to speak to him.

Sighing, I went over to the plate and glanced down. It looked like a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, which was incredibly boring. But I noticed, too, that there was the same pill I had taken the day before and a glass of milk. I brought the plate back to my bed, ate quickly, and then took the vitamin, even though something about accepting a “vitamin” from psychotic doctors went against my better judgment.

Like every other evening, I pushed the tray off my bed, lay down, and stared into space until boredom overcame me, and I fell asleep.

I was awoken to high-heeled footsteps. My eyes fluttered open and focused on Dr. Pierce coming over to my bed.

“Good morning,” she started quietly.

I sat up quickly but said nothing.

“How have you been feeling?” She asked, sitting down at the far end of my bed.

“Okay,” I answered, partly a lie. However, I didn’t want her to question anything more about me, so I pretended that everything was alright.

She nodded. “Has Dr. Fletcher visited you yet?” She asked, but I got the feeling she already knew my answer.

“Yeah. Yesterday.”

“I assume she brought you these clothes?” Dr. Pierce asked, her eyes straying to my black outfit.

I nodded.



“Good,” she sighed. I could sense that there was something she wanted to bring up, yet she remained quiet. Finally, she spoke. “May I ask what you and Dr. Fletcher discussed?”

I opened my mouth automatically to answer and then closed it. Dr. Fletcher’s words bounced around in my head, her insistence that I not discuss with anyone what we had talked about. I muttered, “My tests.”

“What about your tests?” Dr. Pierce continued.

I hadn’t expected she would want details. “Um, what they would show about my memory...”

Her eyes narrowed. She wasn’t buying it. “Are you lying to me?”

I shook my head. “No.”

Her eyes tried to make contact with mine, but I kept my eyes focused on the bedspread. “I think you are.”

“I’m not,” I insisted.

She sighed and got up from the bed. “You should know, Darcy, that I have already talked with Dr. Fletcher about what you two discussed. She has already told me the answers you gave her.”

“I didn’t give her any answers,” I told her without thinking.

Crap. I couldn’t even believe how stupid I had been. Dr. Pierce had tricked me using the stupidest method possible, and I had fallen for it.

“Well, she says you did.”

“I didn’t,” I mumbled.

“So Dr. Fletcher is lying to me?”

I shrugged.

Dr. Pierce inhaled deeply. “One of you is lying to me. I trust Dr. Fletcher completely. That only leaves you.”

“I’m not lying! I didn’t tell her anything! I don’t even *know* anything!” Why did Dr. Pierce insist on continuing this charade? Couldn’t she tell I wasn’t giving in?

Was she actually trying to trick me? Had Dr. Fletcher lied to me and told Dr. Pierce something else? What was going on?

“Dr. Fletcher does not seem to agree with you on that. She has given me a written report of what you told her that matches accurately with what you said you lost in the past year.”

“But I didn’t tell her anything!” I snapped.

“Then how does she have this information? I have never told her anything about you, yet she has given me a detailed description of the year you lost based on what you told her.”

“I don’t know! I didn’t...” I was struggling to figure out what was going on. Dr. Pierce couldn’t still be trying to trick me. She wouldn’t carry this on for so long.

Dr. Fletcher had lied to me? Was that what had happened? Had she pretended to hate the lab just so that I would tell her about Travis? But why would she lie to Dr. Pierce and tell her that I had given her answers? Nothing was making sense.

Dr. Pierce exhaled slowly. “Darcy, I know you are lying to me. You are only hurting yourself by not telling us what you remember. I—”

The door opened and the scrawny man entered, carrying a tray of what looked like buttered toast and milk. He moved to set it down.

“No,” Dr. Pierce started. The scrawny man froze. “Take that back to the kitchen. Furthermore, until I give you direction to do so, I would like you to stop bringing meals to this room.”

The scrawny man nodded and left.

Dr. Pierce turned back to me. “You want to play games, fine. I will play along. But you will not win. If you want to keep lying to us, so be it. You can starve, for all I care.”

She turned to leave without another word. I watched with wide eyes. No. No, this couldn’t be happening again. Not after everything I had been through. How had I gotten here? How had this happened? I hadn’t even done anything.

“I’m not lying!” I yelled after her. “We didn’t even talk about my memory!”

She stopped but didn’t turn around. “You both have told me that you did.”

“I lied! We didn’t talk about my memory,” I repeated urgently. She had to understand this. She couldn’t starve me, not again. I would *not* go through that again. I knew from the previous time that all I had to do was tell the truth and give in to her. “She brought me to her office just to talk, and all I did was ask her questions about the lab.”

“Darcy, Dr. Fletcher would not tell you about the lab. I know that for a fact,” Dr. Pierce scoffed.

Why wasn’t she believing me? “She did! Then she told me about how she came here! She told me she understood what I was going through, because she was a prisoner here, too. But we didn’t talk about my memory! I’m not lying, I swear! That’s all we talked about. Then she brought me back here, and I stayed here for the rest of the day. I’m not lying to you; she is!”

She turned around slowly. When my eyes finally met hers, I instinctively moved back. Her eyes were so dark and hollow that my heart skipped a beat. With a slight smirk, she whispered, “Thank you, Darcy, for telling me this.”

Then she turned and left.

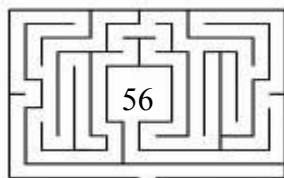
It was then that I realized the depth in which I had been tricked. The devil himself had conned me into telling what I had promised I wouldn’t.

I felt horrible. In the pit of my stomach, guilt, anger, fear, hatred roused together and created an emotion so powerful, I could hardly breathe. This was what Dr. Fletcher had been talking about.

Dr. Pierce had used what she knew I couldn’t lose in order to get the answers she needed. And I had fallen for it. Why hadn’t I just continued to trust Dr. Fletcher?

No.

In this place, it wasn’t about trust. It was about simple survival.



I woke up the next morning to the scrawny man setting down my tray. When he saw my eyes flutter open, he scampered out of my room and slammed the door. I sighed with happiness when I saw the tray. Why was I so happy?

Then I remembered the event that had happened the day before that had almost caused me to lose a meal. I groaned slightly but sat up, awake now. I dragged myself out of bed, shakily moving over to my breakfast.

After finishing my pancakes, I lay down again. It was all I could do not to think about how I would be spending the next twelve hours. I didn't know what was going to happen today. Dr. Fletcher certainly wasn't going to be visiting me. I wouldn't be surprised if I never saw her again.

I doubted Dr. Pierce would come to see me. She had put me through enough misery yesterday. However, I wouldn't put it past her to inflict more pain.

I fell asleep again after an hour or so. Some part of me knew that sleeping for so many hours wasn't doing anything for my body, but it almost seemed like I was powerless against the fatigue that was constantly present. It wasn't that I was lazy. It was just that I was always so worn out, even though, some days, I did absolutely nothing.

I heard the door open sometime later but didn't open my eyes. I was passed wanting to do something. All I wanted to do was sleep. Making sure to keep my ears open but my eyes closed tight, I listened for the person's movement. As the person neared me, I crossed Dr. Pierce's name off the list of suspects. The footsteps were almost soundless, and I knew Dr. Pierce's footsteps always gave off an echo regardless of whether the room echoed.

They might have been Dr. Charles's footsteps, but, if they were, he'd be talking pretty soon, because he could tell when I

wasn't sleeping. I could sense the person standing over me, and I kept my eyes closed, trying not to move my eyes. My senses were alert, but I really wanted to open my eyes and see who it was. I kept my cool, though.

The person stayed still, and I became increasingly restless. Who the hell was watching me so intently? I had a sudden image of Dr. Charles waiting for the right time to drug me again and almost broke my concentration right then and there.

Suddenly, I felt a hand touch my face and opened my eyes with a start, sitting up straight. What the—

My breath caught. Travis. Travis was...

"Darcy," he breathed, his face as beautiful as ever, his eyes clouded with concern. I could only stare at him, though, trying to make sense of everything. Travis was here. Travis was standing next to me, in my room, waiting for my response. He was here.

And then I flew into him, my arms wrapping around his neck so tightly I was afraid he was suffocating. But I didn't loosen my grip. I was safe. Travis was here and holding me, and I was safe.

I didn't even realize I was crying until I saw wet marks on Travis's shoulder. "Travis. Oh my God. You're here," I whispered.

We stayed like that, my grip never loosening. I was surrounded by his warmth, his smell, his strength, everything. My chest was shaking as I tried to gasp for air. I felt his hand stroke my hair, my back, trying to calm me.

"God, what did they do to you," he whispered.

I shook my head. I couldn't possibly tell him everything I had been put through. "No."

He pulled away from me and looked straight into my eyes. His were bright and electric. "What did they do?"

I hadn't stopped shaking my head.

"Did they hurt you?"

I stopped shaking my head, paused, and then nodded.

"What did they do?"

"I don't want—"

"I know you don't want to talk about it, but you have to. What happened?" I didn't answer. He closed his eyes, trying to contain his frustration. "Don't make me guess."

I looked away from him. I didn't want him to guess any more than he did.

"Did they even let you out of this room?"

I nodded slightly.

"What happened?"

My eyes wouldn't meet his.

"Darcy. Answer me."

I was beginning to wonder if maybe I should just tell him.

"Darcy."

But I didn't want him to do anything stupid. Or leave my side.

"Did they hurt you?"

"Darcy?"

"Darcy, answer me!" He yelled.

"Yes, okay? Yes, dammit, they hurt me!" I yelled back, and more tears rushed down my face.

Through my sobs, I felt the bed move, and then Travis pulled me into him and we lay down together on the bed. He was silent as I cried next to him, occasionally kissing the top of my head but never saying a word.

Finally, when I felt like I could talk again, I whispered, "They drugged me."

He breathed out, but said, "What else?"

I didn't continue for a while. He didn't push me, either. We just lay there until I could breathe, could think, without having a sob break my train of thoughts.

"They...they did this thing, this new experiment. It was supposed to help me remember, but it didn't," I told him, my breath still occasionally catching.

"And..."

"And then I had to run around a track. Then Dr. Charles gave me a vitamin, and I had a meeting with—" I stopped myself just in time. I didn't dare mention what Dr. Fletcher and I had talked about, not after the events of yesterday. I couldn't know who was listening.

"With..."

"I'm not supposed to tell you what we talked about," I told him quietly, remembering the pain from yesterday.

“Who is ‘we’?” He asked.

“Dr. Fletcher and me.”

“Well, can I guess then?”

I paused and then nodded. As I thought about it, there wasn’t anything Dr. Pierce didn’t know. If Travis did guess right, he couldn’t possibly give her any more information than she had heard from me, if she happened to be listening in.

“Something along the lines of my anxiety about what was going to happen to you,” he guessed immediately.

“How’d you know?” I asked, turning to look at him.

“Intuition.”

“Yeah, right,” I told him, trying to muster up some sarcasm for comic relief. “Seriously.”

“No, I’m being serious. I talked to her before. I told her I was worried about one of the patients, and I guess she realized I was talking about you.”

I nodded, slightly impressed, and leaned against him, wiping away some of the wet streaks on my face. “She kind of let that slip,” I told him quietly and then breathed in.

“What?” He asked quietly.

I was quiet for a minute. Then I looked back at him. “I was afraid I’d never see you again.”

He smiled gently. “I told you I’d never leave you,” he reminded me. Then his voice got harsher. “I can’t believe I was stupid enough to believe her lies. Darcy, I am so sorry. I really thought...but it doesn’t matter anymore.”

His voice alone made me so much happier. I wanted him to talk forever. “So, what happened with you?”

“Me?” He asked, a way of stalling while he thought back to our separation. “Well, obviously you know that my dad didn’t actually get into an accident. I went over to the hospital, found them clueless, and then visited my dad, who was in a very long conversation with some guy I didn’t know. By that time, I pretty much knew what was going on. I came back, saw my room in a mess, thank you very much, and could guess what went down. I’ve been trying to get down here ever since.”

“Really?” I asked quietly.

He nodded. “Yeah. Turns out Lorraine has a pretty tight security system. Every time I got close to your floor, someone was there with some reason why I had to visit one of the doctors.”

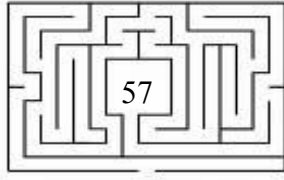
“How’d you get down here, then?” I asked, genuinely puzzled.

“Dr. Pierce is hosting one of her meetings,” he answered simply. “So, what’s your story?”

I didn’t question his answer. Instead, I paused for a moment, maybe to get my bearings straight, maybe because I just didn’t want to think about what had happened. “Well, about a minute after you left, Dr. Pierce and Peterson came up to your room. They grabbed me, drugged me, and brought me back down here. I woke up a day later, and this old guy, Dr. Charles, explained the setup. Then Dr. Pierce did this experiment on me, but it didn’t work, and she knew it after our interview. Then she just performed tests on me.”

I didn’t give him the full picture, nor did he ask for more details. He could tell I didn’t want to talk about it.





We had been lying on the bed for over an hour, just talking about nothing, neither of us ready to delve into the details. But I knew it had to come up.

“Why did they take me back?” I asked him quietly.

“You’re important,” he mumbled into my hair.

I shook my head. “That’s not it. There’s another reason.”

“Where’d you come up with that theory?”

“I can sense it. Everyone’s on edge, and it’s not because of me. Plus, you’d be allowed to see me if everything was okay.”

I felt him nod. “You’d be correct,” he answered, his voice impressed. Then he let it slip. “They think there’s a snitch amongst the team.”

I sat up quickly, looking at him. “What? How? I mean, why?”

He smiled at my confusion but continued, “The day Lorraine met us before we went to the kitchen, she got word that police were searching houses, looking for missing kids.”

“Did the police search here?” I asked quickly.

“No,” he said, his head shaking back and forth. “They didn’t. Lorraine took all the scientists, doctors, everyone, and made it look like our family was hosting a dinner party. She answered the door on their ring, calm as could be, and invited them in to quote un-quote ‘look for whatever they were searching for.’ Of course they didn’t see her as a suspect.”

“They left,” I whispered. “Why didn’t anyone tell them?”

“Because they don’t want to, Darcy. The people who work here chose to be here. They want to go through with this.”

“Dr. Fletcher doesn’t.”

“Dr. Fletcher wasn’t upstairs at the time.”

“You said everyone—”

“I should have said everyone she trusts,” he inserted.

“So, why was I brought back down here?”

He paused and then went through with his statement. “Partly because they suspect me.”

“Of what?” I asked, not catching on at first. “Of telling the police? Did you?”

He shook his head. “But I wanted to. And they know that.”

“Why haven’t you told anyone?” I asked, bringing up the question I had asked way before any of this had happened.

He sighed. “Didn’t we already go through this?”

I glared at him. “Yeah, but that was before this got serious. Travis, listen to me: they are hurting me. I know you care about me, so why aren’t you trying to help?”

His face hardened immediately. I had gotten a reaction out of him. “You think I’m not trying to help you?”

And, of course, he had jumped to the wrong conclusion. “I didn’t say that. I know you’re trying to help, but it’s all for nothing if no one ever finds out what the doctors are doing here,” I told him quietly.

“Look, I don’t expect you to understand my reasoning, but it’s a personal choice,” he told me, and I could hear the anger in his voice.

That confused me. “You’re not accomplishing anything, though! I just don’t—”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he told me, his face cool as ice but the rage easily seen beneath his façade.

“Yes, I—”

“No, you don’t, and don’t pretend to, either,” he snapped, unleashing a hidden anger. “I lost my mom. They find out about this whole thing and they’ll take my dad.”

My heart leapt. Finally, I could see his logic. And, in a strange way, it made sense. But it wasn’t the kind of logic that won arguments. “You didn’t seem to care about that before when you went against everything Dr. Pierce said. When you were going to get me out of here.”

“That was before I thought my dad had died,” he told me sharply.

“But he *isn’t* dead,” I reminded him.

“No, but during the ten minutes it took to get to the hospital and find out that my dad was fine, I realized that I couldn’t lose him. That feeling of total aloneness was horrifying,” he finished quietly.

I admired him for being so honest, I really did, but he was missing the point. “Travis, I don’t get it. You seem to understand what’s going on here, but you’re not really getting the bigger picture. I’ve been alone all this time.”

He shook his head. “Two totally different feelings.”

“No, two totally alike feelings,” I countered.

He looked away from me, and I could see that he wasn’t seeing where I was going with this. He didn’t understand. “Don’t pretend to know what this is like for me.”

“I know what it feels like, Travis. I know what it feels like to feel abandoned, okay? That’s what I feel right now, and I’m sorry, but I really can’t sit here with you, knowing that you have the resources to save us all, and pretend like everything’s okay. Why won’t you do this for me?”

He closed his eyes, trying to control himself. When he opened them and I could see the emotions, I immediately backed off. He was in just as much pain as I was. “Please, Darcy, you know I would never, ever do anything to hurt you. You need to trust me on this, just like before. Trust me that everything will be okay. Please, if nothing else, can you do that for me?”

I was torn on this. I needed our argument to last longer, I needed him to see the mistakes he was making, but I also knew that I could trust him with anything. If he said that he’d get me out of this, I trusted him. But was I willing to sacrifice everything, all so that Travis’s dad wouldn’t get taken away from him?

In the end, my answer was clear. Yes, I would put my faith in Travis. He would help me. He always would.

So I nodded. “Okay,” I whispered.

He smiled. “Thank you.”

I laid back down on him, and we stayed silent for a minute. Casually, I started, “Travis?”

“Hmm?”

I really didn't want to ask my question. I was afraid of the answer. But I had to know the truth. "Am I...am I ever gonna see Reid again?"

He breathed in. "I don't know. I guess it all depends on your cooperation and Dr. Pierce," he told me honestly. "Why?"

"Can you do me a favor?" I asked instead.

"That depends on the favor," he started a little warily, but he didn't say no.

"Can you go down to the cells and find Reid?" I continued.

"Okay. Then what?"

"Can you just tell him that I'm sorry?" I asked. "And if you want to, and if he'll listen, you can tell him about what we had been doing. He deserves to know."

He nodded. "Yeah. Of course."

"Thanks," I whispered.

We enjoyed each others company for what felt like hours to me but was probably only a few minutes. Time was totally distorted. Finally, he sat up. "I have to go."

I sat up, too. "Why?"

He was quiet, like he was trying to hide something. Then, "They'll be coming to get me."

I looked at him, confusion apparent on my face. "What do you mean?"

"The meeting will be over soon, which means they'll know I'm here."

"How?" I asked quickly.

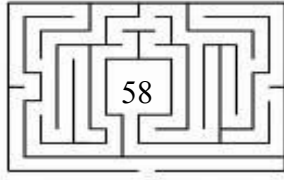
He didn't answer.

"Travis? How will they know?" I pressed. I had a sinking feeling I knew his answer.

Finally, he answered me. "Remember when I turned off those video cameras?" He started hesitantly.

"Yeah..."

He took a deep breath and then said, "I didn't turn them off this time."



I stopped and took a breath. No, this wasn't happening. "What...what does that have anything to do with..."

He looked like he wanted to save me from the knowledge he was about to divulge, but he answered, "There's a camera in here."

A flash of horror passed over me. For a minute, I stopped breathing. "*What?*"

"There's a video camera recording everything that's happening right now."

"But...I...Why...How are you here, then? They'll *murder* us!" I told him, not quite sure how much I had said was an exaggeration.

He shook his head, looking very protective now. "No, they won't hurt you because it won't be your fault. Yes, they'll heighten security and lock your doors and all sorts of things, but they won't hurt you."

"Why did you come down, then? Why didn't you just wait?" I was panicking, but I couldn't help it. Why had he been so stupid, putting us in danger? They had recorded our whole conversation!

He looked slightly hurt. "Because I had to see you, Darcy. It may not be obvious to you, but I care about you, and it hurts to even think about them touching you. I needed to be with you."

I shook my head. "No, they'll find out. You won't be able to get back!"

"I know," he answered quietly.

"No," I whispered, horrified. This couldn't be the end. I felt like I had been sentenced to the gallows. "Travis, I can't stay here and know I won't see you again. Please, don't leave me. I want to go with you! Take me with you!"

He stared at me. "I can't."

This time, it was I who was hurt. "What? Why not?"

"Because they'll find you before I get farther than this floor," he told me sharply.

"I don't care," I told him as forcefully as I could, which may have been to convince myself as well as him. "Take me with you. I don't want to be here anymore. Please, Travis."

"Darcy, God, if you only knew how much I wanted to bring you back. But I can't."

"But—"

"You'll be the one at fault if you try to escape."

"I don't care!"

"Yes, you do. They'll hurt you. They have strict policies, and they don't care about your feelings. They will find you, and they will punish you."

"Just let me leave, please." He turned away from me and said nothing. "Please."

I saw him shake his head. "I'm sorry."

Tears were rolling down my cheeks again. "I want to be with you."

"If I take you, they'll hurt you, badly. I can't let that happen. At least here, you know they'll take care of you."

"But they won't! Weren't you listening? They've been drugging me and making me take tests and—"

"And they could be doing a lot worse. Please, Darcy, don't make me do this to you."

"Then what the hell was this visit for? To show me what I can't have? To tear me down even more?" I practically yelled. How could he abandon me like this?

"To remind you that there's someone who still cares about you!" He exclaimed defensively.

"Oh, that's right. You care about me so much that you're willing to sacrifice me for your selfishness," I snapped, knowing that was a hit right below the belt.

His eyes lit on fire. "Stop it! Are you even hearing what I'm saying? They will hurt you!"

"And I already told you that I don't care!"

"Well, I do! I'm not doing that to you, I'm not."

With that, he turned and left.

“Travis!” I yelled after him, but he slammed the door shut. I didn’t even hear the door lock as the tears came flowing again. Soon, I was sobbing. I collapsed onto my bed and buried my head in the sheets. Just when I thought life couldn’t get any worse, something else knocked me down. Would it never end?

I already missed Travis. I missed him like he had taken a part of my soul with him. I couldn’t stay alone in here. I couldn’t do this anymore.

The more I thought about how terrible my life was, the more I cried. I let myself cry for a good fifteen minutes, but then stopped after my head started pounding horribly.

It was only after my head calmed down that I realized I hadn’t heard a click of the lock on the door when Travis had slammed it. It was almost hopeless to check, but I walked over slowly to the door, tried to open it, and jumped back when I realized it was unlocked. Whether Travis had done it on purpose, I couldn’t say. I wasn’t going to waste time thinking about that, though.

Quickly, I scurried out of the room, turned left just on a hunch, and tried to find the stairwell. I didn’t know how far down I was, but I was betting I was probably on one of the bottom floors.

I was running silently down the halls, trying to guess which door might have stairs behind it. I knew I was looking for a door with a rectangular window on the right side, but I couldn’t seem to find it. Finally, the last door I came upon on the left was the one.

I climbed up two flights of stairs before deciding that I would make more progress using an elevator, even if it was more of a confinement. So I opened the door on the landing and started around the hallways, looking for an elevator. When I did find one, it came immediately and I pressed floor Z, hoping that was where the building became Travis’s suite.

The doors to the elevator opened, and I braced myself, ready to barge past anyone who might be looking to stop me. Luckily, I met no one and ended up on the right floor after all.

I guess it never actually occurred to me that the reason I wasn’t being followed was because Dr. Pierce already knew where I was going. I really just thought it was my good fortune.

So, when Dr. Pierce suddenly appeared in front of me as I started towards the elevators that led to Travis's floor, I jumped back.

"Hello, Darcy."

I stared at her, trying to find something to say that would get me out of the sticky situation I knew I was in. But my mouth was glued shut. This was not good. She didn't look upset, but I could see behind her expression that anger lay dormant. I tried not to listen to my flight reflex as she came a step closer.

Smiling pleasantly, she started, "If you are wondering, Travis was right when he mentioned the security cameras. There are actually two in your room, and they pick up every little sound you make. We have your conversation on record, so it is best not to argue with me when I tell you that we knew you were going to try to escape even before you knew."

"Really?" I asked sarcastically, folding my arms across my chest to hide the fact that my hands were shaking slightly. My false bravado may have come from the adrenaline that was still being pumped throughout my body from the escape I had tried to make. I rode it until it wore off.

"Oh, yes, Darcy, because, you see, you are about as easily read as an open book."

I scoffed at that. "Then, it's peculiar that you haven't found what's keeping me from getting my memory back."

"It is, is it not?" She said conversationally. "Now, I really do not feel like calling Peterson all the way up here just so that he can go seven floors down again. That tends to upset him, and the last thing we want is to get him angry. It would be best if you just went quietly back to my office, where we will discuss this situation in a civilized manner."

I let out a mocking bark of laughter, which didn't quite hide my extreme fear. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd like to think I was stupid enough to believe that you aren't going to torture me the minute I'm locked in your office."

"Well, yes, that would make things much easier. But you see, you do not really have a lot of options here. You can keep the shred of dignity you still possess and come on your own accord, or we can bring you down forcibly. I assure you, though, the



independence and obstinacy in you would not like the latter option.”

“Don’t talk to me like you know me,” I snapped at her, backing up a little.

“I do know you, Darcy,” she told me sympathetically, subtly following my movement.

“No, you don’t. All you know is what’s written down in my file. But that won’t tell you anything about me, because it doesn’t tell you what I feel inside. And in case you’re wondering, you’re never going to be able to find a file that explains my emotions,” I continued. I really was surprised that I could still form a coherent sentence. I was scared stiff, paralyzed with fear. A part of me knew I was just digging myself into a hole, but I was past the point of caring.

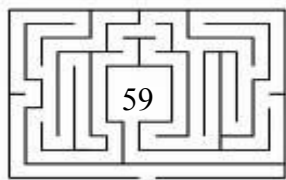
She had been staring at me the whole time. “Are you finished?”

That was one way to break me down. I knew what she was doing, though. I knew she was obsessed with my emotions and my memory, but to show me that she was, meant defeat. And she would never be defeated; that much I knew.

“Your calm-and-cool act doesn’t fool me, you know,” I told her quietly. “You can pretend all you want, but it’s killing you that everything you’ve put me through hasn’t given you any answers. And yeah, I’ll go down with you, because there’s no way to stop you, but I’m never gonna tell you anything.”

She regarded me coolly. “Yes, well, we will just have to wait and see.”

And although I would have loved to have had the last word, I knew enough to sense that keeping my mouth shut would be best.



There was no use in trying to break free from her grip, even though she was holding my arm loosely. That hopeless feeling that had momentarily left me as I was escaping was back again, and I almost felt like obeying Dr. Pierce just so that I could go back to my room.

On one of the landings—I had lost count of which one—we met Peterson, who walked behind us until we had reached our destination.

Part of me wanted Travis to arrive, to get me out of this mess, but the dominant part of me didn't want him to be here. I knew he wouldn't be able to break me free from his stepmother. And, more importantly, I didn't want him to see that I had gotten myself caught, even though he had warned me not to.

I didn't recognize the door we stopped in front of. Dr. Pierce unlocked the door and held it open for Peterson and me. I was shoved inside, and at first, I thought they were going to lock me in the dark. Then Dr. Pierce entered and flipped on the light.

"Peterson, please tell Dr. Charles to come," Dr. Pierce said, not even looking at him.

I could tell Peterson was angry. About what, I didn't know. He said nothing, only pushed himself through the door, slamming it on his way out. While Dr. Pierce and I waited in silence for Dr. Charles, I slowly took in my surroundings. That's when I felt my fight or flight instinct kick back in.

My breath caught as I turned to look at what was definitely the definition of a torture chamber. There were chains on the walls, a stove in the corner, some skewers, and a desk in the corner.

I turned to look at Dr. Pierce. "This...this isn't right."

"I agree. That is why you are being punished."

I shook my head. "No. I mean, this room. You told me..."

“Yes, yes, I told you I am not one for violence. And I am not. But certain actions do call for certain punishments. And you, my dear, have violated one of the most important rules.

“Why are you so eager to escape?”

I stared at her, giving the only excuse I knew. “Because you’re so eager to keep me here.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Fair enough. Okay, Darcy, here is how it is going to work: we will always give you the option of a painkiller. In this case, I am referring to another drug.”

“N—” I started, but she cut me off.

“Do not say anything yet. It will not put you to sleep; it will not even make you drowsy. Your body will just go slightly numb.”

“I don’t believe you,” I growled. She didn’t care about me. Travis had been right all along. Oh God, how could I have been so stupid?

“I did not think you would,” Dr. Pierce answered. “But, for the sake of the pain this causes, I *highly* recommend that you use it.”

I glared at her and moved my attention to the door as Dr. Charles entered the room. He smiled kindly at me, nodded at Dr. Pierce, and then moved towards the stove. I watched as he picked up a metal skewer, stuck it in the fire, and waited.

I turned to look at Dr. Pierce, my heart beating wildly again and my eyes wide. “Okay.”

She smiled approvingly. “Good choice. Now, if you will just sit in this chair, we can get started.”

“But...”

“Is there a problem?” She asked amiably enough.

“What is that? What are you gonna do?” I asked quickly, unable to avert my eyes from the skewer.

She looked at me wryly as she answered, “Consider it a kind of tattoo.”

My eyes widened further and my throat closed, leaving me unable to choke out a plead, let alone scream for help. What was going on?

“Are you ready?”

Finally, I found the strength to speak. “Wait!”

“I will not be answering any more questions about this,” she casually informed me, turning to check the progress of the hot skewer.

“No, I just...” My brain scrambled to come up with a question that would further stall her. Finally, I grasped one and spit out, “How long will I be at the lab?”

“As long as it takes to get some answers from you.”

“But I don’t have any,” I told her, desperately trying to buy me some time.

“I know. That is why it could take some time,” she replied, taking something out of a drawer. A needle. “I guess it is a good thing we got this ready, Dr. Charles,” Dr. Pierce joked from across the room.

“It sure is,” he joked back.

Their sick humor was the last piece of evidence I needed to convince me that something was very wrong with both of them.

I closed my eyes and looked away from the both of them. My stomach was churning horribly, and I felt more light-headed than ever.

A second later, I felt an alcohol pad rub against the inside of my right forearm. Then the prick of the needle. I gasped, focusing on my breathing and waiting for the sting and the pain to go away. I kept my eyes closed, my breathing steady.

I could feel the drug coursing through my body. Dr. Pierce had at least been right about something: other than the fatigue I had been feeling all day, I wasn’t tired. But I could feel the numbing effect it had. My limbs felt limp, and I had the out-of-body experience numbness always brought me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Dr. Charles closing the stove and coming towards me. There were numbers on the end of the red-hot skewer, and I had a flash of being branded like a prisoner on the way to the galleys. A waterfall of tears spilled from my eyes before I could close them, and I brought my hands to my eyes, crying into them like a child.

Nothing was as humbling as pain.

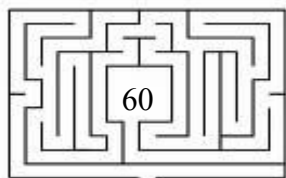
My breathing was fast, and I feared hyperventilation, but then my breath caught when I felt Dr. Pierce’s cold hand on my left arm.

“Calm down. It will be over in a minute,” she said, trying to be soothing but only succeeding in making me feel worse.

My eyes were still closed, but over my tremors and sobs, I heard Dr. Charles move to my right arm. Dr. Pierce’s hand moved from my left arm to my right, and she used both hands to keep my arm still. I kept flinching, thinking that each second was the time when I would feel the burn. My breath was coming ragged and hard, and for a minute, the only sound was my breathing and sniffing and gasping echoing off the walls.

And then, suddenly, pain erupted all over my body. Fire and acid was engulfing my body, starting from one point on my arm, clouding my thoughts, my feelings. My arm jerked violently, but something kept it in place as the searing pain continued. I lifted my left arm and moved to push away whatever was causing the pain. Something caught my hand, gripped it tightly, and forced it back down. The bile came up in my throat as the skin was ripped from my body and the numbers were branded to my skin. I screamed so loudly, my vocal cords seemed to want to snap in half.

As I lost consciousness, the last thing I remembered was the smell of burning flesh.



I was pulled back into consciousness by pain. My eyes fluttered open, and I instinctively reached for the source of pain. Suddenly, I flinched, pulling my hand away from my arm and groaning slightly. Why the heck was my arm torturously painful?

It took me a while to wake up. I was tired, but something told me to get up. Maybe it was the mysterious pain? Once I had sat up, I gingerly touched where the pain was and quickly withdrew my hand again. It hurt like nothing I'd ever experienced. Tentatively, I looked down at the spot, and suddenly, the memories of the brand came back.

I almost cried when I looked down. The whole top of my right arm was red and swollen. I twisted my arm slowly so that I could read what was on it. It took me a while to figure out what the upside-down symbol was, but I vaguely deciphered numbers. The area was too swollen to read what they said.

I was getting nauseous just looking at my arm. It was puffy and blotchy and reminded me of the blinding pain that came with it. I couldn't pull my eyes away from it, though. I almost had to think about how long the brand must have been on my arm for it to have made such a deep burn.

A tear rolled down my cheek, but I didn't bother wiping it away. I knew many more tears would soon follow.

When the door opened hours later, I automatically cringed. My body was not ready for any kind of pain just yet, and I knew Dr. Pierce's arrival meant more tests.

The person who entered, though, was not Dr. Pierce. It was Dr. Fletcher.

"Darcy?" She asked quietly.

I just stared at her. I couldn't risk trusting her, not after everything I had gone through. Then again, she had probably taken a beating after I had confessed to Dr. Pierce what we had talked

about. I wouldn't be surprised if Dr. Fletcher wanted to punish me, too.

"Darcy, did they do something to you?" She continued, coming towards my bed.

I nodded but said nothing. I figured I had a right to be wary.

"Are you okay?"

I shook my head, my hand automatically moving to hold my right elbow. "No."

"What did they do?" She asked very quietly.

I moved so that she could see my arm. My lower lip trembling, I answered quietly, "They burnt me."

She got closer to me and squinted her eyes slightly to see what I was showing her. "What?"

Instead of answering her, I sat up straighter and held my arm out to her. Even lifting it sent a shock of pain throughout my body, as though the skin was being peeled off of my arm slowly.

I knew exactly when her eyes found my arm. She gasped loudly, her hands flying to her mouth, and she retreated.

"Oh my God," she gasped, her eyes never leaving my arm. "Oh God!"

I let the tears stream down my face as I accepted the pain. Her expression alone was enough to convince me that it was as ugly as it felt.

"Darcy..." She muttered, moving closer to me. "Your arm. It's..."

"It was a punishment," I told her slowly, and then I shuddered in pain. The anguish forced me to put my arm down. I held it closely to my side and, crying, tried to explain what had happened. "Travis came to see me. Then I tried to escape. Dr. Pierce caught me and took me to this room where they branded me."

She closed her eyes. "Dr. Pierce did this to you?"

I nodded slowly. "She and Dr. Charles."

"I am *so* sorry, Darcy. Oh God, your arm is so swollen!" She exclaimed, her voice terribly upset. "Did they give you anything to help it heal?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, wiping the tears away. "I think I fainted during it."

She shook her head slowly, back and forth, but her eyes didn't leave the burn. "It's going to get infected. Did you run cold water over it?" She asked.

"No. I've mostly been sleeping," I told her drearily.

She stepped closer. "Can I...Do you mind if I look at it?"

I withdrew from her. "It hurts when I touch it."

"I'll be careful; I promise," she told me honestly.

I stared at her. I didn't think I could take another ounce of pain. Yet, somehow, it didn't seem like I could be in any more pain than I was in now.

Hesitantly, I lifted my arm again in silent assent.

She moved her hands to my arm and placed them gently above and below the wounded area. Slowly, her fingertips brushed lightly over my burn. I sucked my breath in quickly, and she moved her hands away.

"It doesn't feel too bad. They must have cleaned it while you were..." She didn't finish.

"I don't know what I did," I told her quietly.

"What?"

My lips trembling and tears rolling down my face, I whispered, "Why did they hurt me? I didn't do anything. I just want to leave. Why can't I just leave?"

She lifted her fingers to my burn. "I didn't know they would go this far; honestly, I didn't. I can't believe..."

Neither she nor I said anything for a while. Then, she asked, "If you come to my office, I can give you something to help with the pain."

I shook my head and sat back. "No."

Her concern was clear. "Why not, Darcy? I know you're in an unimaginable amount of pain and—"

"I don't want to go anywhere. I don't want to do anything. I just...I just can't, okay?" I sighed, my hand protecting my right arm as I lay down.

I knew she had recognized the lifelessness in my voice because she shook her head. "Don't say that, Darcy. Don't give up. I'm trying to help you, really, I am."

"That's what Dr. Pierce says, too," I mumbled. "I don't care what happens anymore. I'm through caring. It seems like whatever



I do just gets me in trouble. Maybe they'll just...stop if I don't do anything anymore."

She shook her head. "Darcy—"

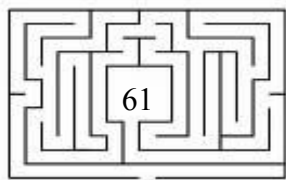
I turned my head away from her so that she would see that I was done talking. I didn't want to get my hopes up. I didn't want to be helped. I didn't want anything.

"Darcy, please listen to me: *do not* give up. As soon as you give up, you will lose everything you've been trying so hard to keep," she told me quietly, urgently.

Without turning back to her, I told her through a broken voice, "I don't even have anything else to lose anymore. They've taken everything from me. I can't do this anymore. I just...can't."

"But you have to! Darcy, don't you understand? You have to keep living, keep trying, because this will all end one day. Please, don't give up. Don't give in to them. You have to—"

She was interrupted by the presence of another woman.



“Dr. Fletcher!” Dr. Pierce snapped from the doorway. The tension in the room was almost tangible as I held my breath, waiting to see what Dr. Fletcher would do. She had been caught talking treason to me.

I heard Dr. Fletcher’s footsteps as she retreated from me and turned to face Dr. Pierce. “Dr. Pierce, I was just making sure Darcy’s arm was okay.”

Dr. Pierce’s voice was ice cold as she said, “I do not recall telling you to do any such thing. I do, however, recall telling you that Darcy’s wellbeing was not to be your concern or your responsibility while she remained in this room. May I ask, then, why you have disregarded these orders?”

There was a silence that I knew all too well. Dr. Fletcher had dug herself into a hole and could not climb out.

For this reason alone, I was surprisingly horrified when Dr. Fletcher answered, just as coldly, “I took the liberty of ignoring your orders, Dr. Pierce, because the wellbeing of Darcy, in my mind, overrules your wishes. Darcy was in pain, and you, unfortunately, were not doing anything to help her.

“You will soon find, Dr. Pierce, that there is a limit as to how far you can push her until she breaks. I would advise you not to cross that line if you would ever like her to regain herself.”

My time at the lab had heightened my senses and my instincts. As I felt the air swell with competitive hatred, I slowly moved away from them until I was on the edge of the bed. Then, gently, I pushed myself off the edge so that I landed on my knees on the floor.

Focused on survival alone, I sat on the floor, my head lying against my knees, shying away from the fight.

I winced as I heard the bite in Dr. Pierce’s voice. Her voice almost cruelly insulting, she answered, “Unfortunately, Dr.

Fletcher, you are not in the position to advise me of anything. As you are not my superior and are in no way more knowledgeable on this subject, I feel no obligation to either consult you or keep you as a staff member. I am warning you right now to heed my words.

“If you would like to remain a doctor at this laboratory, you would do well to stand down and take orders as they are given. Otherwise, I would suggest finding another location to provide your services.”

A paralyzing chill was sweeping through my body as a silence hung over the room. It lasted until I was afraid it would suffocate us all.

Since I could not see either of them, I had to assume that Dr. Fletcher had given a signal of acceptance, because finally, Dr. Pierce said formally, “Thank you.”

I breathed out slowly, my heart pounding.

Dr. Pierce’s voice was firm and superior as she said, “Darcy, would you come here please?”

A spasm of fear passed over my body. Slowly, I turned around and got up so that I was facing them.

Dr. Fletcher stood farther away from me, her beautiful face contorted in anger and defeat. She would not look at me.

Dr. Pierce, on the other hand, had me retreating even as I stared at her. Her eyes were black and empty, fiercely advising both of us to follow her command. Her stance was all-powerful.

“Dr. Fletcher, it would be most helpful of you if you would disentangle the web of lies you have so carelessly spun. Would you please tell Darcy the truth, which, it seems, you have been trying to contradict for quite some time?” Dr. Pierce commanded harshly.

Dr. Fletcher looked up slowly as I stared at her helplessly. It was all I could do not to scream. What was happening?

Dr. Fletcher’s eyes met Dr. Pierce’s and seemed to burn holes in them. She was silently pleading for Dr. Pierce to free her from this task. Why, I did not know. It certainly wasn’t that she was afraid of hurting me. At this point, everyone and anything could hurt me.

In a mild voice, Dr. Pierce said, “Either you will tell her, or I will.”

That struck Dr. Fletcher harshly. She turned to me and, swallowing, said monotonously, "I want to apologize to you, Darcy. You've been trusting the wrong person for a long time. I admit that I was lying to you. No, I am not a prisoner here. This is my job, and I freely accepted it and its terms. No, I do not hate the work we do here. I am as much a part of it as they are. I had good reason to lie to you, but they were lies nonetheless. It was my job to gain your trust in order to eventually infiltrate your memory. I apologize for that. I'm sorry for deceiving you and for deceiving Travis, but it had to be done."

I vaguely marveled at the amount of hurt I could sustain without breaking. A hole in my stomach had been drilled, and I wondered if I truly was experiencing heartbreak. It literally felt as though my heart had been ripped open.

Everyone I trusted had abandoned me. Everyone. I had no one.

I had no one.

No one.

In that moment, it seemed as though I had gained a kind of wisdom. In this place, I no longer existed. My reasons for living were gone. My past was gone. My present was gone. My future was gone. I could not live if I had no reason to live. And if I had no reason to live, no motivation, no one in the world who would help me, then I truly did not and could not exist.

They were both watching me intently. Finally, Dr. Pierce quietly said, "Darcy, are you okay?"

I turned away from them. "I really don't feel like talking anymore," I whispered.

"Are you sure?" She asked.

I nodded and lay down on the bed.

"Okay. Then I'll be back to check on you later," Dr. Pierce finalized. I heard her move towards the door and then Dr. Fletcher's hesitant footsteps as she followed.

I seemed to be living in a daze. The room felt a little too large, the bed a little too fluffy, the air a little too thick. I couldn't seem to focus on any object, and I was only partially aware of the huge trembles moving my body.

Sometime during the night, I looked down at my brand. The swelling had gone down slightly, and it didn't sting so much when I touched it.

If I looked closely, I thought I could read it. My eyes tried to focus on the numbers, but I had difficulty making out the symbols.

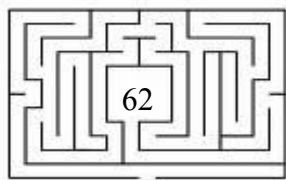
Finally, after squinting and refocusing my eyes, I made out the numbers. And then it all made sense.

11325.

Suddenly, some of the feeling came back to my body. It felt like I had been punched in the gut as the shock set in. I had a memory flash of the code David had set off. That had been when the Lifers had been let out. I had gotten the third offense.

And then, suddenly, I remembered something else. *No one's ever gotten a third offense. There're rumors that they torture you, but I don't think that's true*, Reid had said. I had been through the closest thing to torture as it could get.

Strike three.



Three days passed as I sat alone in my room.

3 days.

72 hours.

4,320 minutes.

259,200 seconds.

I felt every second, every minute, every hour of those three days as I sat alone and slowly drifted away.

I was dying.

I had nothing to do, nothing to live for, nothing to think of, nothing to hold on to. I had absolutely nothing. I couldn't seem to allow myself to think about my family, my old friends, Travis, or anyone. I wouldn't allow that. It seemed cruel to even think about having hope, so I avoided subjects like that at all costs.

I ate, I slept, and I showered. Sometimes, I altered that pattern. Sometimes, I walked. Mostly, though, I slept.

Sometimes, I would dream of waking up to find a police officer or my parents standing over me, waiting for me to wake up so that they could take me home. It would be such a tangible dream that I would wake up smiling. And then I would cry until I fell asleep again.

There were times when I allowed myself to picture my parents in my head, their smiling faces and welcoming arms giving me a warm feeling. Then, my mind would punish me and I would have a nightmare about them. Or, worse, I would dream that everything was okay and I was back with them. Waking up was sickening. Sometimes, I wished I would just never wake up.

I dreamt so often of someone coming to save me that I no longer even believed my dreams. Half way through my great escape through the hallways, following the policeman leading me to my safety, I would stop. I would realize that this had to be a

dream. And then the world would fade away and I would find myself in my dark, empty room again.

Sometimes, I would laugh at how stupid I was to believe that anything good would ever happen to me ever again. I would chuckle at my naiveté. Who would come and save me? Honestly? I had been stuck at the lab for so long that I knew no one was ever going to find this place. No one was ever going to find me. I was in a hole in a hidden floor in a hidden section of a hidden building that looked completely normal from the outside.

I had no hope.

Yet, in some deep part of me, I still expected something. If I even thought I heard footsteps or voices outside my door, I held my breath. I waited in silence as the seconds ticked by, then the minutes, until I had to tell myself that no one was coming. The human interaction I craved so much was never going to come.

I grew to know my room inside and out. There were four hundred footsteps in my room total. If the length of my foot was twelve inches, then the room was a perfect square: twenty feet by twenty feet. If not, then my room was smaller than four hundred feet.

Four feet from the east wall and two from the north wall, the floor creaked when I stepped on it.

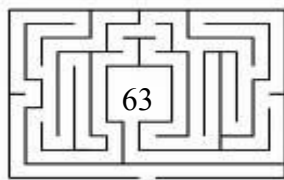
There was a tiny rip on the mattress of my bed.

There were bumps along the walls where the paint had been applied unevenly.

The part of the wall that my bed rested against was much smoother than the other parts, suggesting that the bed often rubbed against the wall.

I was going insane. I could almost picture a shrink labeling me clinically psychotic. This was sure to happen if they could only hear half the thoughts I had in my head.

I was never leaving this place. Never.



One day, though, something changed. I couldn't say what, but the atmosphere changed. The silence seemed louder, and the air felt thick with expectation. My stomach fluttered at the abstract feeling of frantic hurrying. Where I was getting this feeling, I had no idea.

And then, suddenly, I heard a noise in the distance. At first, I was sure it was my mind playing tricks on me. It certainly wouldn't be the first time I had hallucinated or heard phantom sounds. I managed to convince myself that the noise was not real. Then, it got faintly louder.

Finally, when the sound was a loud ringing in my ear, I was sure that the noise was real. And I only had about two minutes to understand what it could be. It was an alarm.

Suddenly, the door burst open.

"Darcy, come with me," Dr. Pierce started quickly.

I looked at her, alarmed. Something about her face told me to obey her order. I got up hastily and went over to her.

"What's wrong?" I asked quietly.

"Darcy, I don't have time to explain things right now. Something is wrong in the upper levels, and we need all the minors to stay in one place. I'm bringing you to the cells, where all T.U. and B.U. minors will stay until the incident is cleared. Do you understand?" She asked quickly.

I nodded. "Yeah, okay. But what—"

"Please, Darcy, now is not the time for questions. I need..."

She didn't finish. Three burly guards suddenly cut off our path, frantically running towards us.

"Lorraine, the security system has been breached. We need to lock everything down, *now*. We have to call a code black," one of them said.



I looked up at her face and retreated from the fear and anger on her face. “No! No, we can’t do that. We can’t do that, not now. What are the other options?” She snapped, walking in the opposite direction we had been heading. The guards followed her. Dr. Pierce, remembering that she had been towing me along, said to the guard, “Make sure she doesn’t leave us.”

He looked down at me and grabbed my arm so that I was forced to walk at their hasty pace.

“There aren’t any options. Lorraine, this is a code black; there’s nothing else we can do. I suggest we—”

“How far are they?” She interrupted, her face taut with emotions I couldn’t place anymore.

“Too far. We can’t right this situation without totally abandoning everything. This can’t go any further.”

“IT HAS TO!” Dr. Pierce yelled at them. “I need you to fix this. You can’t call code black; that is an order! Go to your stations, and FIX THIS!”

The guard holding my arm let go and backed away. Meanwhile, I was staring at Dr. Pierce, my heart thumping.

What was going on? What was happening? I was so confused, and everything was so hectic.

If I had wanted to, I could have tried to tell myself this was a dream. But I knew it wasn’t. I knew that this was real. The situation had the clear, fast-paced atmosphere that told me it was real. This wasn’t a dream. Something bad was happening, and it was real.

One of the guards stayed with us, following Dr. Pierce as she stalked through the hallways. I could hear hurried footsteps down the different hallways, but I was too focused on Dr. Pierce.

This wasn’t the Dr. Pierce I knew. This wasn’t what I was used to. What was happening? Was everything okay? Would I be okay? Where were Travis and Reid and Nora? Where was anyone else?

A man came running up to us, and I recognized him as Dr. Tamsyn, the doctor who had been present at one of my first tests.

His face was red. I had no trouble reading his expression: he was scared.

I faltered when I saw his face. This wasn't right. Why was he scared? Why would he be scared? Oh my God, what was going on?

"They're in. They got in. I don't know how, but they're here," he told Dr. Pierce, trembling, his face harried.

"WHAT?" She yelped, her voice rising with fear. "NO! No. No, that's not possible. How did they...where are they?"

"Searching the upper levels. They haven't yet found these floors. We need to evacuate. We need to abandon everything, everyone, and get out of here," he told her quickly, his movement jittery.

"No, we can't, we can't, I can't do that, this is..." she stopped, looking around anxiously.

Suddenly, her eyes landed on mine. She must have read my scared expression, my tear-filled eyes, my confusion, and my fear.

Her arm shot out of nowhere and grabbed my arm roughly. I winced in pain as she pulled me towards her. She turned to Dr. Tamsyn. "Go to the cells. Move them all to the cafeteria. Grab as many doctors as you can find, and tell them to help you. I want them all in the cafeteria; do you understand? If anyone tries to escape, sedate them."

He was staring at her, panicking, but he nodded and practically ran in the direction of the elevator.

Dr. Pierce turned to the guard still with us. "Go to the security room. Start deleting every tape we have on file. I don't want *anything* turning up as evidence. Make sure nothing is left behind."

He nodded and disappeared.

Dr. Pierce turned to me and looked down into my eyes. She frowned. "Are you scared?"

"Dr. Pierce, what's going on? Why is everything so—"

She jerked me towards one of the hallways before I could finish. "Darcy, you really should have learned to keep your mouth shut. Do you know how much of a risk you are to us? Do you realize how much trouble we could get into if you decide to talk? I can't have that. I can't have that at all."

Her tone of voice made me shudder. "Dr. Pierce..."

“The other kids are okay. We can make them keep quiet. They were better off here; everyone could see that. You, though, you were a mistake. We shouldn’t have taken you. You were better off just dying in the forest. But how could I have known what was going to happen? No, I couldn’t have known. Still, you won’t be the end of us, especially not after everything you’ve put us through. I just won’t allow that. I won’t allow it. It was a mistake. I won’t allow it.”

Tears were streaming down my face as I slowly gathered what she was saying. Bile rose up in my throat as her words started to make sense. She was going to make sure I wouldn’t talk. She was unstable, and she might just hurt me. I wouldn’t put it past her; I wouldn’t put anything past her. “No. Dr. Pierce, please don’t hurt me. I didn’t do anything. I didn’t do anything. I won’t tell anyone anything, I promise. I’ll forget this ever happened, just like I did after my birthday.”

She shook her head, laughing almost maniacally. “That would just be too lucky. You can’t pick and choose what you want to remember. But wouldn’t that be nice? No, Darcy, I can’t have this happening. I’ve worked too hard for you to ruin it all.”

She stopped suddenly, and I recognized that we were in front of her office door. She fumbled with the key and then shoved me through the door.

I stumbled into one of the chairs, the world blurry as I watched her unlock her second door. Then she grabbed my arm and pulled me into the room.

“Dr. Pierce, please, don’t do this. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t listen. I promise I won’t say anything. I promise,” I told her through my tears.

I could see the insanity in her eyes. I could see that she would hold true to her words. She wasn’t joking around. She was scared.

And fear did strange things to people.

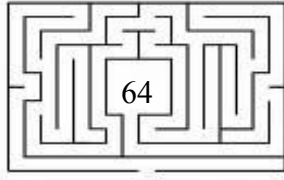
I would know.

“I don’t trust you, Darcy. I’ve never trusted you. You were always suspicious of this place, always. What makes now any different? For all I know, you could have called them in. You

---

probably did. You and your idiotic, whining boyfriend destroyed this place, I know it. I can't let that happen. I can't. I can't."

She turned towards her file cabinet, pulling out her keys to unlock one of the drawers. While she fumbled with her keys, I saw my fleeting chance of ever getting out of here alive.



In a feat of pure desperation and will, I ran towards the door. I got as far as the waiting room door when she grabbed me and flung me backwards. I tripped over one of the chairs and fell to the ground.

“No, no, Darcy, you can’t leave. You’re not leaving,” she told me, laughing slightly. “What a stupid child you are. No one will ever mourn your death, I promise you that.”

I backed away from her, pushing myself back because I didn’t have enough time to turn around and crawl. Tears were streaming down my face as I breathed heavily. I couldn’t seem to see or hear anything. Fear was my only feeling. The adrenaline was not enough to sustain me, though.

I hit the chairs leaning against the wall with a quiet *thunk*. I winced and reached up to hold my head, moaning slightly.

It was while I was distracted with my head that Dr. Pierce moved.

With reflexes I hadn’t known she had, her foot reached out. She pushed her whole body weight onto my right knee, catching just the right angle. I heard a sickening crack.

I screamed like I had never heard before. Pain spurted throughout my body and had the room spinning. The world blackened slightly and then refocused. I automatically grabbed my leg, crying in pain. The broken bone jutted out awkwardly from my knee.

As I gasped in pain, I suddenly turned to the side, heaving. Dr. Pierce watched as I emptied my stomach onto her office floor.

Whimpering in pain, I tried to move farther away from her but then cried out as movement sent punishingly cruel jolts of pain throughout my body.

“Maybe that’ll keep you in one place,” she muttered, going back to her office.

I heard her once again attempting to open her file cabinet. I turned my head to watch her struggling.

Then, gritting my teeth and forcing myself to block the pain, I placed my hands on the ground and moved forward slightly.

Sweat was dripping down my face, and I felt nauseous again. I was going to faint. I couldn't, though. I wouldn't let myself faint. Not now. Dr. Pierce was going to kill me. I knew that. I had to escape. If I passed out, I'd never wake up.

Crying silently but heavily nonetheless, I moved towards the chairs on the other side of the room.

Finally, when I couldn't move anymore, I collapsed onto the floor. My leg was screaming in pain, begging my body to go unconscious so I wouldn't have to feel the mind-numbing pain any longer.

The pain was unlike anything I had ever known. It was my brand mark magnified by five hundred. It was a bullet to the stomach. It was an electric chair, continually frying my nerves until I died from pure pain. It was a hangman's noose, slowly strangling me until I no longer breathed.

I lay on the ground, crying like never before. I was never going to see anyone ever again. I would die in this lab. I would never see my parents again. I would never see my friends or my old school. I would never see Aubrey and her husband and their child. I would never get to experience being an aunt.

I would never see Travis again. Did he know that I loved him? Did he know that I was dying? Would he mourn my death? Would he know that Dr. Pierce had done this to me?

What had I last said to my parents? Had I told them I loved them? Could they survive my death? Could I survive an afterlife without them?

I choked on another sob. Would dying hurt? Would it hurt more than my leg? Would Dr. Pierce make it quick? Would it be painful? How long would I be lying on this floor before anyone found me? Would anyone even find me? And what would happen to everyone else?

My head was pounding, but I almost couldn't feel this compared to my leg's pain. I couldn't breathe through my nose, and my head felt like a hundred pounds.

I saw, from the corner of my eye, Dr. Pierce coming towards me.

She was holding a needle.

"I hope you realize that I never wanted to do this," she started quietly. "I never meant for this to happen. But, at the end of the day, you have to know that I hold my life above yours. I might be able to make a difference in this world. What will you be able to do?"

"Dr. Pierce..." I whispered. "No, please."

"I'm sorry," she told me, bending down to my level.

"Please, no, no, no, please don't do this, please, no," I whimpered, moving my arm away from her. She grasped my arm lightly and pulled it towards her.

As I squeezed my eyes shut, I thought about all that I would be leaving behind.

I had been wrong before. I had been completely wrong. My life hadn't been over. I had the world to live for. There were people who loved me, and I loved them. My life wasn't over. It wasn't over.

I sucked in a breath, knowing it would be my last, and pictured my parents' faces, my sister's laugh, Travis's soothing voice...

And I was actually content for a single moment because I could hear Travis's voice clearly. "Her office. She has to be there!"

And I smiled at the random statement I had pictured him saying.

I braced myself for the pain, and the room exploded around me. I squeezed my eyes shut tightly, so sure that the drug was doing this to my body.

I vaguely noticed that a pressure was gone from the side of my body. Dr. Pierce had moved away from me. She knew it wouldn't be long before this would all be over.

"DARCY!" Someone screamed.

But I hardly reacted to the voice. Instead, I whimpered; the pain was not yet receding. In fact, it felt heightened. I cried in pain. The drug was working on me, and I wanted to scream in pain.

I was so afraid of death.

“Darcy, no, no, please, wake up!” He was saying. The voice sounded familiar. Was it my dad? Or was it my sister’s husband? I couldn’t place the voice.

But he must have known I was already gone. He was *my* hallucination, after all.

“Please, sir, wait outside...”

I moaned, my leg jolting in pain. I didn’t open my eyes; I knew Dr. Pierce would be standing over me, watching, and I knew my eyes wouldn’t open anyway.

“Darcy, please, wake up! Don’t do this to me. Please. I love you. God, please, don’t do this to me! Not after everything I’ve been through. Not again. Darcy, I love you, I love you, wake up,” he was pleading.

My hallucination was reciting what I would have told Travis if I had seen him one last time. Was this Travis’s voice speaking? I couldn’t tell. But I was confused.

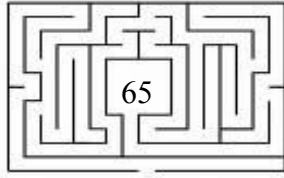
Travis sounded so close. And I could almost feel him next to me. I almost wished I could have seen him one last time before I slowly faded away, gasping in pain as I became nothing...And just as my body gave in to what I would not, my heart jolted.

*I remembered. I remembered everything.*

I knew exactly what had happened after my fifteenth birthday. I could remember everything. Every little detail was suddenly engraved in my brain.

As I screamed in heartbreak, in pain and in complete anguish over what I now remembered, I knew that the drug Dr. Pierce worked so hard to discover was absolutely lethal.





I remember it was three o'clock on my birthday. My sister picked me up from school. We were stopped at a red light.

Aubrey looked over at me, turned down the radio that she had been blasting, and said, "How's school?"

I shrugged. "Good," I muttered.

She smiled. "And your grades?"

"Eh," I mumbled.

She glanced at me again, then back at the light, then back at me. Suddenly, she reached over, grabbed the test I was keeping in my binder, and brought it to her face.

"This doesn't look like an 'eh'. This looks like an 'F'."

I tried to grab it back from her. "Physics is not my strong subject. Give it!" I snapped.

"Do the parents know you're failing Physics?"

"I'm not failing," I told her matter-of-factly.

"I'm sorry. Do they know your average is a D-?" She revised her statement, and I gazed hotly at her.

"It's none of your business."

"Actually, it kind of is."

Instead of answering, I leaned over and tried to grab it from her hand. When she moved it away from me again, I snapped, "Stop!"

She glared at me coldly. "Why are you being so bratty? I'm interested in your life."

"Well, don't be!" I retorted. "Besides, there's parent-teacher conferences in two weeks. They'll find out then. And you know what? You didn't even take physics, so don't preach to me about my grades!"

I tried to grab my paper back, but she moved it away, shaking her head. "Two weeks is too long to wait. It'll only get worse."

"God! I'm not even listening to you anymore!"

"Tell them!" She persisted.

"I'll tell them later."

"Promise?"

I grabbed the paper from her.

"Yeah, whatever," I muttered.

She glared at me then punched the gas pedal so that I slammed into the back of my seat. She was the most reckless driver I had ever met.

"Seriously," she continued.

"God, it's my birthday. I'll tell them tomorrow!" I told her, shoving the test into my binder again.

"No, today!"

"You're not the boss of me," I snapped, feeling more immature than ever. "And you can go shove it, because you don't even live with us anymore."

"Hey!" She snapped. "Watch it."

In disgust, I turned and looked out the window. It was so like Aubrey to butt into my life when she wasn't even present in it more than half the time. She was married and four months pregnant with her first child. She lived thirty minutes away. Aubrey picked me up from school when both our parents had some VIP meeting.

She was my second mother, and I hated the role she played.

As she turned around a sharp corner, she multi-tasked and blasted the radio again. She rolled down the windows and let in the cool October breeze. I was shivering in about twenty seconds, but I loved the feel of the fresh air.

Aubrey had a way of putting me to shame even more than our mom. I guess it was more of the fact that I cared about what she thought of me. Because she was so much older than me and we hadn't really lived together, she was more of an older, cooler cousin, who could annoy the crap out of me.

She had been the model student in high school, according to my parents' reports of her. Popular, pretty, athletic—a brunette cheerleader—and smart. Not genius smart, but smart enough to make honor roll when she tried and honorable mention when she didn't.

All this I learned from her old teachers who were now my teachers, and my parents, who bragged about her as though she were an only child.

So I cared about what she thought of me. I wanted to be like her. She had a super hot husband who I would have had a crush on, except, somehow, he didn't seem quite so hot when he was kissing my sister around me.

And because thinking of the traits I missed out on made me angry, I was glad when we got to my house.

"I guess I'll come inside," Aubrey said when the car was off.

"Don't bother," I snapped, grabbed my backpack, and slammed the car door shut.

"Darcy!" She yelled, getting out after me. "Stop being a brat."

"Then don't butt into my life!" I snapped at her.

"I'm your sister," she reminded me as I unlocked the front door with my key.

"Don't remind me," I said before stomping up to my room.

"Fine. You wanna be a bitch about it, go ahead. Don't come crying to me when Mom and Dad ground you for lying to them," she yelled up the stairs.

I didn't reply. Instead, I waited for the slam of the front door. Then I slammed the door to my own room just to give myself personal satisfaction and turned on my computer, ready to blast music.

The phone rang before I had a chance to start the music. I groaned, grabbed the phone, and waited for caller ID to tell me who was calling.

Out of Area. Perfect.

"Hello?" I answered, not bothering to be polite.

"Hi, Mrs. Calloway?

"No, sorry, this is her daughter. May I ask who's calling?" I answered monotonously, not even paying attention.

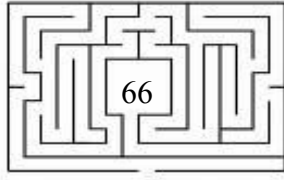
"Yes, this is Arthur from Sheer Landscaping. May I speak with your mother?"

"She can't come to the phone right now," I practically snapped. "Is there a message?"

A pause. "No, that's fine. I'll call back later."

He hung up before I could respond. "Jackass," I muttered to myself.

And with that, I continued my job of blasting away the anger I felt for my stupid, ugly, annoying sister, whose name I was not even going to think about.



Arthur the landscaper had called twice by the time my mom walked into the house.

"Hey, baby! Happy Birthday!" She practically sang up the stairs.

"Hey," I called back down, saving my homework on my computer and then going to meet her. "Presents, please."

She laughed. "I knew you'd be looking for those. Can we wait until Aubrey and Nate get here?"

I grimaced. "Do we have to?"

"Yes, we have to," she said, mocking my tone. "But I can tide you over by giving you one small gift Tony Hamilton gave me. You remember him: he's in the office next to mine."

I nodded, not remembering in the slightest but glad for the present anyway. I didn't bother saving the paper. Instead, I tore the wrapping paper away from the box and then reached inside.

It wasn't much, just a ten-dollar gift certificate to our local bookstore, but it was better than nothing.

"Sweet," I said for the benefit of my mom. "Do I have to, like, write him a thank you note?"

"Well, you don't have to, but I think one would be nice," she told me. Which meant I had to.

Before I could respond, the door opened again, and my dad came in, holding a conversation with no one.

"Yes. Yes, I'll get back to you on that one. No, I don't want anything to go wrong...because it's my daughter's birthday! No, not Aubrey. My youngest. Darcy. Yeah, okay, I'll call you later. Bye," he finished, turning off his Blue Tooth.

"Hey, Birthday Girl," he said, smiling but distracted.

"Presents?" I asked. When presents were involved, I seemed to have a one-track mind.

"Are Aubrey and Nate here?"

I shook my head.

"I think we should wait until Aubrey and Nate arrive. But I see you've already gotten something," he told me, looking over my shoulder at the gift certificate I was still holding.

"It's from Tony Hamilton," I told him, holding it up for him to see.

"Well, that was very nice of him!"

And then he got another call on his precious Blue Tooth.

"This'll only take a sec," he told us, going out of the room and already starting another conversation.

He wasn't back until Aubrey, Nate, my mom, and I were settled in the den, playing a card game my mom loved while Nate watched a football game on TV.

"Sorry, sorry! Hello everyone. I'm back; let's get on with the night," my dad said hurriedly, hugging Aubrey and shaking hands with Nate. Must be a guy thing. "Now, where were we?"

"Presents," I told him. God. Did anyone realize how much I wanted a new cell phone?

"Ah, yes," he said, smiling and standing up. "Unfortunately, you won't be getting any this year."

"Very funny," I told him sarcastically as he pulled some packages from behind the couch.

"Now, are you sure you don't want to wait until after dinner?"

"I'm sure," I said quickly, grabbing the first box in sight.

I was zealous. So sue me.

Before I could fully unwrap the paper, though, the doorbell rang.

"Who's visiting at five o'clock?" I said, mocking anger.

"The whole world doesn't stop for your birthday, Darcy," Aubrey said sarcastically.

I glared at her. "Did I ask for your opinion?"

"It was implied."

"So's this," I said and started to flip her off.

"DARCY!" my mom interjected, and I let my hand fall, so close to giving her the finger that it itched to move. "Do not use such vulgar gestures."

"No, that'll come when I'm twenty-four," I told her but glared instead at Aubrey.

"Babe, please, let's stop at this one," Nate cut in, rubbing Aubrey's belly. "I can't handle sibling rivalry."

Aubrey placed her hand on Nate's and smiled at him but then gave me the evil eye.

"Lydia!" my dad called from the foyer.

"Yes?" my mom called back.

"Would you come here for a second?"

She nodded, but she realized he couldn't see that, so she called, "Coming!"

When she had left, I turned to Aubrey. "Do you think it would be okay if I still opened these?" I was partly kidding, but I was also partly seriously asking. She could only hear the seriousness of my voice, so she glared at me.

She was looking at me like I was the most immature person she'd ever laid eyes on. "No. Wait for Mom and Dad."

I did sort of a half-moan and then shoved the presents out of my view. "Can we watch something else?"

When no one answered, I turned to Nate. "Can we?"

He sighed. "I guess."

"Thank you," I told him sweetly just because I knew he would rather be watching football than watching a fifteen-year-old open birthday presents.

I was skimming through the channels when I heard a noise from the kitchen, followed by my mom's voice. "WHAT?"

All three of our heads turned in that direction, and it was only then that I remembered someone had been at the door.

"Who was that?" I asked Aubrey.

"I didn't see," she said, shrugging, and then called to them, "Is everything okay?"

We paused to hear the response, but when we got none, Aubrey yelled, "Guys?"

"Yes," my dad's voice called back, and there was a breach in the argument.

Aubrey looked back at me, her face curious and cautious, but she shrugged. "Alright, then."

Something didn't feel right, but I let it go, instead focusing on finding something acceptable to watch while the parentals argued.

It was only when I heard someone yell, "She's not yours!" did I turn to Aubrey.

"Okay, seriously, what are they talking about?"

Nate and Aubrey seemed to be having a private conversation. Barf.

"Do you even care?" I snapped.

"Nope," Aubrey answered, not looking at me.

I glared at her. "Well, I'm gonna go listen in."



When they didn't answer, I got up angrily and took off down the hallway to the kitchen. The door was closed all the way, but my parents and whoever had been at the door were loud enough for me to hear bits of their conversation.

"This is bullshit!" I heard my dad say. I automatically winced at his tone. It was not often that my dad cursed, let alone loud enough for others to hear.

"Ethan," my mom warned and then changed her tone to talk to the other person. "Look, I really think you should just leave."

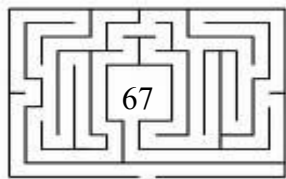
The other person's voice was much quieter. "Just listen..."

"Look, buddy, I don't know what the hell your problem is, but if you don't leave in the next five seconds, I'm calling the police."

"There's no need to..." the person started, and his voice got lower so that I didn't hear.

"GET OUT!" my dad screamed.

"Okay," the person said finally, and before I could get out of the way, the kitchen door flung open.



For a minute, no one said anything. The three people were staring at me, and I was staring at the stranger. A man, to be exact.

He looked vaguely familiar, like someone you see in one movie and then you can't quite remember the other movies he's acted in. He was really good looking, too. He was probably thirty-five or so, but he was still majorly attractive. He had dark blonde hair that was cut close to his head and an oval face with a five o'clock shadow. His clothes were dirty looking, like he hadn't washed them in a few days. He was staring at me intently.

Quickly, I thought up an excuse as to why I was standing like an idiot while my parents fought with this man. "I was just wondering when dinner was gonna be ready," I told my parents.

"In a while," my dad snapped.

I looked at him. His face was contorted with rage, and my mom's comforting hand seemed to be doing little to calm him.

"Is everything—"

"It's fine!" my dad told me. "Go back to the den."

When I didn't move, the man spoke. "Hi, I'm Arthur."

He extended a hand, but my mom moved in front of me so that I couldn't see Arthur anymore, and my dad snapped, "Don't even talk to her. Leave my house!"

I heard the man start towards the front door, but my mom had turned me around and was leading me back to the den before I could take a second glance.

"What was that about?" I asked my mom quietly.

"It was nothing, sweetheart," she told me, but her voice was strained. As we went into the den, Aubrey and Nate looked up.

"What's going on?" Aubrey asked suspiciously.

"Nothing. Everything's fine," my mom told us calmly and patted my back. "Now, how about those presents?"

"But that man—"

"Forget about him," she told me, which only made me store everything I knew about him into my memory. And then I remembered something else.

"Someone else named Arthur from this landscaping company called three times today," I told her quickly.

She glanced at me. "Three times?"

I nodded. "He was looking for you."

"What did you tell him?"

"That you couldn't come to the phone."

She nodded. "That was good. Okay, it's fine."

"What's fine? Mom, tell me!" I told her. It wasn't like my parents to keep anything from me.

"Please, Darcy, just drop it. It's your birthday. Just enjoy yourself."

"But he looked familiar."

"You probably saw him on the street somewhere. Can we please just get back to your celebration?"

I was about to say something else, but the little voice in my head told me to drop it.

There was still suspicion and a bad feeling about the man and his visit, but as my dad entered the room and pretended like nothing had happened, I tried to push it away.

"Are we gonna get back to the presents?" My dad asked as cheerfully as he could muster.

"Well, if you insist," I told them jokingly and grabbed the present I had started to unwrap.

The chuckles were hesitant and tense, as though they were laughing just to break the silence in the room.

"The one you're opening is from Dad and me," Aubrey told me as I opened the box.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed, picking up the locket from its box. "This is—"

"The best of the best," Aubrey finished. "18 karat gold, and so is the chain in the back."

I dangled it in front of my eyes, looking at it from different lights. "It's beautiful," I muttered.

"Open it," Aubrey encouraged.

My hands shook a little as I opened the little locket, and I looked at the pictures. On the left side of the locket was a tiny picture of Aubrey and Nate, and on the right side was a picture of my mom, my dad, and me all huddled together.

I smiled. "I love it."

I temporarily forgot my fights with Aubrey as I got up and hugged her. Then, I went over to my dad and hugged him. He wrapped his arms around me and stayed like that for at least thirty seconds.

"Dad," I told him. "Dad? Let go."

He chuckled slightly. "Sorry. I just can't believe you're fifteen already."

I smiled at him but said nothing. He usually wasn't this emotional.

"Ethan," my mom sighed, and he looked at her. Something passed between them, and he nodded.

He turned back to me. "What's next?"

I moved towards the rest of my presents, but there was less vigor in my step. My excitement had vanished. Something was definitely wrong.

The rest of the night went very well, presents wise. I got the new cell phone I had been wanting and a few gift certificates to clothing stores and then some cash from my relatives. It was a good stash.

I waited until after Nate and Aubrey were gone to do some snooping of my own. After the brief moment that had passed between my parents, I no longer wondered if something had happened. I knew for a fact that something definitely didn't feel right, and I always trusted my instincts.

So, I pretended to be exhausted, took a shower, brushed my teeth, praised God that I had finished my homework before my little party, and went into my room, locking the door.

I turned the lights out in my room so that if my parents were looking for clues that I was still awake, this would be one less. When I heard my parents coming towards my room, I made some rustling in my bed and didn't answer them when they called my name.

I stayed in my bed until I heard their door close. One good thing about our super thin bedroom doors was that conversations floated through them. It almost felt like I was standing outside their door with my ear to the wood as I listened to the start of their conversation.

"Lydia, I have absolutely no idea," my dad was saying. "He could have hired a team of private investigators for all I know."

"Then you think he's telling the truth?"

"Well, it certainly looks that way."

"So, what do we do?"

"File a restraining order would be my best guess, but I think we need to wait to see if he tries anything else."

"Do you think she knows?" my mom asked.

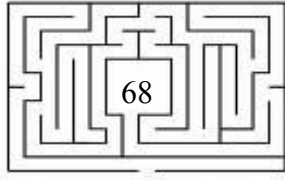
"I don't see how. But I think we're going to have to tell her."

"What? Why?"

"Because if she finds out some other way, or God forbid, he tells her, she'll hate us forever."

"Ethan, she's going to hate us no matter how she finds out!"

"That's a risk we have to take. We can't keep this secret from her, Lydia. Darcy deserves to know the truth."



The next morning, I woke up tired. Exhausted. The bags under my eyes were prominent and ugly, and no one even cared, because when I woke up, my mom and dad had already left.

That left the bus or Aubrey. Toughie.

There was a note on the kitchen table telling me that there was money on the foyer table for my lunch, that my parents were sorry they had to leave so early, that Aubrey was coming to pick me up at seven-ten, and to not answer the door to strangers.

They had forgotten the part about not running with scissors.

I brushed my teeth quickly, dressed in my uniform, grabbed the money from the table, and went out just in time to see Aubrey pulling into the driveway.

When I opened the door to the passenger seat, the first thing she said to me was, "You look like crap."

"That's 'cause I didn't sleep last night," I mumbled.

"Why not?"

I shrugged and glared out the window. I knew perfectly well why I hadn't slept. I had spent at least three hours thinking of all the possible things my parents could have been hiding from me. Now that I knew for sure that they had been talking about me, I couldn't get my mind off of it.

When I finally did get to sleep, I had strange, twisted, and creepy dreams about Arthur. What a wonderful night.

"Are you okay?" Aubrey asked through the silence as she made a sharp turn.

"I'm fine," I snapped.

"Alright, then," she replied defensively. "So, what more did you hear about that man?"

"Nothing much."

"Come on. You totally snooped as soon as Mom and Dad went to bed."

I shook my head. I could feel her staring at me.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"Nothing!"

"No, something's wrong," she replied.

"I'm just tired!"

"Yeah, okay. But if you wanna tell me the real reason, I get off of work at three today."

I didn't reply, and the silence filled our car until we got to my school. I opened the door quickly, got out, and then slammed the door before Aubrey could say anything to me. Then I stalked into school and prepared myself for a long day.

"Dee!" Someone called as I walked into the doors.

I turned just in time to stop Krista from running into me. I hated that nickname. "Hey."

"What's up?" She asked, seeing my bags, I suppose.

I shrugged. "I'm tired."

She nodded. "So, how was the birthday?"

"Good," I told her, already cheering up slightly. "I got my new phone."

"No way! You got it? Oh my God, I'm so jealous! Lemme see!" She told me cheerfully. And just like that, I temporarily forgot that I was depressed.



So the day passed with many things that I used to distract myself from thinking about Arthur, especially because there wasn't much I hadn't mulled over already while trying to get to sleep.

If my friends noticed that I was distracted throughout the day, they said nothing. Krista was focusing on Lucas, her new hot next-door neighbor, who's twin sister, Tara, went to our school. Her main goal was befriending Tara to try and get closer to Lucas. Shallow? I think not. It was a win-win situation.

"So, Dee, what'd you think of her?" Krista asked as we walked to our lockers.

"Who?"

"Tara," she told me in a 'duh' voice.

"Oh! She was nice, I guess." I hadn't listened to a word Tara had said. "What about you?"

"Eh, she was okay. Kind of dull. I just hope Lucas isn't that dull. Probably wouldn't matter 'cause he's so hot, but still."

I nodded and listened to her nonsense chatter as we gathered our books. Usually, her loquacity turned my frown upside down, but now, all I wanted to do was leave so I could talk to my mom or at least go through the landscaping information. I had established last night that the Arthur who had been at my house was the Arthur who had called the house three times. I needed to know about this man.

"Okay, well, my mom's here, but I'll call you tomorrow for more info on my new neighbor," Krista finished, ending in a provocative tone.

"I'll be waiting by the phone," I told her sarcastically and hugged her.

I felt slightly bad that I hadn't paid her any attention. Truthfully, I couldn't recall one conversation we had had after first period. Oops.

I knew Aubrey wasn't picking me up today, so I was looking for my mom's crappy black jeep. When I didn't see it after standing outside for ten minutes in the freezing cold, I went back inside. There I waited for an hour, until finally, I looked outside to see the jeep pulling up.

I stalked over to the car, threw my book bag into the back, and then got into the passenger seat.

"Why are you an hour late, Mother?" I asked hotly.

"I'm sorry, Darcy, I had to work a little late."

"That's obvious. It's almost four!" I told her.

"I really am sorry. I should have called you."

Instead of yelling at her, I empathized. She was so distracted that she forgot to stop at a stop sign. As she zoomed through and numerous cars honked at her, I grabbed the door.

"Mom! What the hell?" I snapped, not even bothering to watch my language. My empathy was gone.

"What?" She asked, turning to look at me.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I asked her. "You just totally ran that stop sign!"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," she told me for the twentieth time, but she still didn't bother to give an appropriate explanation.

I looked at her even harder, trying to find something that was out of place. Finally, I came up with the only thing that I could relate to. "Are you thinking about Arthur?"

"What about him?" She snapped so suddenly that I almost jumped.

"Calm down! I was just asking."

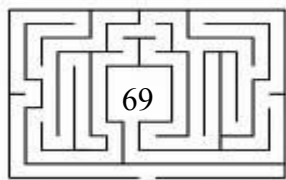
She shook her head. "I don't want to discuss that."

"But, I—"

"I don't want to discuss it," she repeated harshly.

I nodded and then turned to look out the window. "Yes, Your Majesty."

The car ride home was silent and dismal, both of us definitely thinking of the same thing, one in more detail than the other, but neither of us wanting to admit to the other that we had no idea what was going to happen.



There were five messages when we got home. My mom, still distracted, made me listen to all of them. So I had to listen to our cleaning lady explaining why she couldn't come on Monday, why my neighbor was going to be having construction done on her house, my mother's boss asking her to please return his call, my dad saying he might be a little late, and—

Ah-ha! Arthur the landscaper called to say that he would try to reach us again later.

I erased this last one, hoping that my mom would maybe forget that she was upset about him long enough to explain to me what was happening. However, the minute I told her they were all junk phone calls, she nodded and went up to her room.

There she stayed until I knocked on her door two hours later to tell her that I was hungry.

She slowly followed me downstairs. Instead of asking me what I wanted to eat, she opened the cabinet, took out a box of crackers, and put them in front of me.

"Will that fill you up?"

I couldn't even tell if she was being sarcastic. So I asked as truthfully as possible, "Are you kidding?"

She exploded, all her pent up anger and aggravation erupting on me. "If you're not satisfied with the food I offer, you can get off your butt and find something yourself!"

I stared at her but said nothing. I would never admit that she had hurt my feelings, but her reply had been like a dagger to the heart.

"Sorry for being hungry," I told her sourly.

I got up, stomped up the stairs, and then slammed my door and locked it. Then I blasted my music. That was always the best cure for getting rid of anger. Or promoting it.

Twenty minutes later, when the phone rang, I sprang up, grabbed it, and answered.

"Hello?" I asked breathlessly, not even sure who was calling. I hadn't bothered to wait for the caller ID to come up.

"Darcy?"

"Who's this?" I asked.

"This is Arthur."

"From the landscaping?" I guessed, not even bothering to let the fear in. I was so curious.

"Yes."

"Why are you calling?" I asked as politely as I could.

He took a deep breath. "Listen, Darcy, this is going to sound very odd, but "

Suddenly, a sound from another phone came on, and my mom's voice yelled, "Darcy, get off the phone."

"No, I'm—"

"GET OFF!" She yelled again.

"Okay!" I exclaimed. "God!"

The last thing I heard before I threw the phone onto my bed was my mom telling Arthur off. If my mom wanted to be in a pissy mood, then so would I.

When my mom called me down for dinner, I stayed in my room. She called me down a second time, but I didn't answer.

Finally, I heard her footsteps walking up the stairs. "Darcy Eloise, come down for dinner!"

"I'm not hungry," I snapped at her, not even looking up from my math.

"You have to eat something," she told me.

"Then I'll eat later."

She sighed. "Please, Darcy, don't do this to me."

"Do what?" I growled. "I'm not doing anything. You're in a bad mood and so is Dad, and I don't quite feel like trying to cheer you both up. I'll eat later."

"Darcy, this is one of those things that you have to be older to understand."

"Did I ask for an explanation?" I asked her sarcastically. "No, so just leave me alone."

"Baby, please—"

"Leave me alone!" I responded louder.

She said nothing for a moment. "Alright. Come down whenever you feel like it."

I didn't respond. Instead, I kept my head down until I heard my door close. Then I got up and locked the door with as much sound as I could so that she'd know I was angry.

I wasn't being bratty, honestly. My parents were going through hormonal mood swings without cause and wouldn't even tell me why. They were keeping something from me, and I knew the only way to get what I wanted was perseverance. I needed information!

It was nine o'clock before I heard anyone even come up the stairs. My dad's voice floated under my door and I heard my mom walking next to him, but they didn't seem to be stopping at my room. I listened as their footsteps passed my room, grew fainter, and then grew louder again.

Then a knock at my door. "Darcy?"

"Go away!"

"Darcy, please open your door."

"I'm not talking to you."

"Why not?" My dad asked.

"Because you'll just yell at me for no reason, and you won't tell me what's going on."

"Would you just give us a chance?"

"Nope," I told them casually, but there was anger in my voice.

"Darcy, don't be like this. Just open your door," my mom's voice came in.

"No!"

A pause. I could hear murmurings coming from behind the door. Then—

"We have something important to tell you," my dad said.

I hesitated for a moment and then got up and went to my door. Slowly, I opened it. "Like what?"

"May we come in?" My mom asked, although they were already inching closer.

I backed up to let them through as I repeated my question. "Like what?"

My dad breathed in and then out. "You might want to sit down."

"Tell me," I told them, my heart starting to pound. This was it. And if it was something stupid like they had once borrowed fifty dollars from my bank account, I was probably going to throw something.

My mom nodded. "Darcy, your dad and I have a confession to make. We've kept from you something that you should have known long ago, but it's just been too hard, and we knew you'd take it badly."

I nodded, impatient. "What is it?"

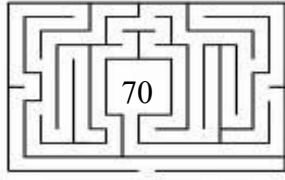
---

They didn't speak for a second. They looked at one another with pleading eyes, as if willing the other to tell me what they were holding in.

"Will someone just tell me?" I finally asked angrily.

My dad nodded, once, twice, three times, and then said quietly, "Baby girl, we aren't your biological parents."





I stared at them, just stared. I wasn't sure I was comprehending. What did that even mean?

"...What?" I asked finally, all I could blurt out.

My dad closed his eyes, rubbed them, and my mom put a comforting hand on his arm. He continued, "When you were two months old, Darcy, your twenty-year-old birth mother put you up for adoption, because she couldn't take care of you. We were looking into adoption at that time because we couldn't have any more children, and when we saw you, we knew you were perfect."

Everything was a blur. What did it all mean? What were they saying?

"You're...you're not my parents?" I asked hesitantly.

"We are," my mom said. "We are one hundred percent your parents. We adopted you, and you are ours. You belong to us."

I shook my head. "But you're not...really my parents?"

"Darcy..." My dad started to object.

"I mean, biologically!"

She shook her head, and my dad said, "No. We aren't."

I couldn't understand this. I had different parents? But my whole family looked alike. I mean, our hair color was different, but everyone said we looked the same. How could I have different parents? I was exactly like my mom and dad.

"How...Why didn't you tell me?" I asked quietly.

My mom was crying now. "We were going to, baby, we were. When you were seven, we wanted to tell you, but Grandpa died, and you took it so badly that we weren't even sure you could handle this. As the years went on, we just couldn't find the right time to bring it up."

"In fifteen years, you couldn't have found one minute to tell me about this?" I gasped in disbelief. "How could you not have told me?"

I felt like I was going to faint. I honestly felt like I had been knocked off my feet. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

"Darcy, it wasn't our fault," my mom whispered.

"Well, who's fault was it then?" I asked quietly. My disbelief and sadness was turning to anger, even against my will.

"Please, baby, try to understand, we were trying to keep you from hurting."

"And you thought keeping it from me was the best way?" I asked them. "Why would you think that? Why would you think it was better to lie to me?"

"We hoped that, given enough time, you might see it from our point of view."

"What difference would that make? Are you guys even being serious? You lied to me!"

"Darcy, you don't understand. We were trying to shield you!"

"Well, maybe you should have asked me if I wanted to be shielded!" I spat out. I was furious. Anger was exploding through my veins, pumping adrenaline and making it hard for me to process anything.

"Please don't be angry, honey. We love you so much, and you are our daughter!"

"Because you bought me," I snarled.

My mom flinched, and a fresh load of tears came down her face. "Stop it! Darcy, try to understand that—"

"How am I supposed to understand this? You kept this from me! Who the hell are you to keep something like this from me?"

"Darcy—"

"You're not my parents! My parents wouldn't lie to me," I growled.

"We thought it was for the best!" my dad told me, trying not to get emotional.

"The best for who? For you? It wasn't the best for me!" I yelled.

"Darcy, please, don't do this."

"Don't do what? React? What do you want me to do? Get down on my knees and thank you for lying to me my whole life? You're not my parents!"

My parents didn't answer me. My mom was trying to control her tears, and my dad was holding onto the smallest shred of self-control he had left. I couldn't stay in silence, though.

"Who are my parents, then?"

"We are—" my mom started.

"My biological parents!" I corrected cruelly.

My dad did a little shrug. I could see he was holding back tears, too. "We don't know."

I stared at him. "How can you not know?"

"They didn't tell us! Your birth-mother was given information on us, but we weren't given any information on her except what she was willing to give."

I shook my head, turning away from them. How could this be happening to me?

"Then why now? Why didn't you just keep lying to me? It worked so far, hell why stop at fifteen years?" I yelled.

"Darcy, language!" My dad reprimanded.

"You aren't the boss of me. You aren't even my parents," I snarled.

I was hurting them, breaking them inside, but I was almost enjoying it. I got a sick satisfaction out of watching them suffer as much as I was suffering right now. Did they not understand how hurt and betrayed I was feeling? They were my parents, and they were to me what they always had been, but I no longer held them up on a pedestal. They were simply human.

My mom, through her tears, said, "We are still your parents."

I ignored that. "Answer my question!"

For a minute, it looked like they had forgotten what I had just yelled at them. Then, finally, my mom answered, "That man who came to visit—Arthur—he claims to be your father."

There was a huge gap of silence. Finally, "What?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"Your father. He says he's your father."

"I heard what you said!" I snapped and then thought back to him. He didn't look anything like me. "Well, is he?"

"We don't know," my father answered. "We're thinking he's an imposter, but either way, he's been stalking you. Tomorrow, your mother and I are looking into filing a restraining order."

"What if he's telling the truth?" I shot back, just because I could.

"We doubt it," he answered, his voice trembling.

"But what if?"

"He still doesn't have any control over you whether he is your biological father or not," he answered as calmly as he could.

"Then what does he want?"

He paused. "To take you back with him."

"I wanna go with him," I snarled immediately, knowing this would be the final thread. Truthfully, I wanted him locked away more than anything, because he was probably lying, and because he had ruined my family.

But my heart was broken. I couldn't understand how, why I had been lied to. Somehow, it didn't feel like my parents loved me as much anymore, because they weren't mine. Did they know I was feeling this? Probably. But I was in so much pain, I needed someone to feel it, too.

"Darcy, stop it!" My mother yelled through tears.

"I wanna go with him!" I yelled back, taking the anger I now felt for my biological parents out on my real parents. "I wanna be with my family!"

"We are your family," my mom sobbed.

"MY REAL FAMILY!" I screamed.

With that, my mom broke down in tears, and my dad wrapped his whole body around her. I couldn't stand it, my pain, their pain, our lies and horrible words. It was all too much.

"Get out!" I told them. I knew I would show my true emotions if they stayed any longer. I knew I would beg to be forgiven, cry for my mom's arms if I was given the chance.

I just had to think, I had to understand, my words, my actions were too impulsive now. I just needed time to think.

"You listen to me, young lady. Where do you get off yelling at us?" My dad finally yelled at me.

I turned slightly away from him and forced the tears down. "When you decided it was okay to lie to me."

"Contrary to your belief, we are still your parents, and you have no right to talk to us like that! We did what we believed was right, and we still believe it was the right thing to do. You are ours!"

"I don't wanna talk about this anymore!" I yelled back, my voice breaking. Oh no, this wasn't good. I couldn't keep this up. I was going to cry. I wanted my parents, I wanted their arms, but I didn't even know who they were anymore. "Just leave! I don't care, just go away!"

"That's it!" he yelled. "You're grounded."

"Fine! Ground me for a year, I don't care," I yelled back. Now, this next part was so impulsive, I don't even think I knew what I was saying. It just came out. My shout had come out before I could stop it. "I wish you'd never adopted me!"

He was so angry, I thought he was going to hit me. "Well, so do I!"

My brain clouded as I heard what he and I had screamed echo through the room. I looked at him, my eyes watering. Immediately, he realized what he had said. I knew he had said it out of anger, but I didn't care.

"Darcy, I didn't mean—"

"GET OUT!" I screamed so loudly my voice bounced off the walls, and the neighbors would have yelled at us if they had even cared.

With a final glance, my dad followed my mom out of my room. I went over, slammed the door so hard it vibrated, locked it, and then played my hip-hop music as high as the volume would allow.

When my head started pounding, I didn't turn down the volume, but stared intently at the door as if willing my pain to knock down the walls. How dare they? How was this even possible? How could I have been so stupid?

They had never dropped any hints whatsoever.

Did Aubrey know? Did Nate know? Was I the only one clueless to my personal information?

The tears were streaming down my face as I realized that I couldn't stand sitting in my room, in my house. I couldn't bear the thought of sitting still, thinking about this anymore. I didn't want to. So I didn't.

I lowered the volume on my computer, got up, and put my ear to the door. I heard my parents coming towards my door.

"Darcy?"

I didn't answer.

"Can we talk to you?"

Still no answer.

"Darcy," my dad started. "Darcy, I'm sorry about what I said. I didn't mean that. I...I'm sorry. I was just frustrated. Please let me come in."

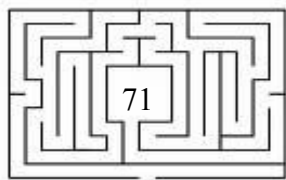
He and my mom waited outside the door for about a minute while I waited in silence. Finally, "Alright, well, Mom and I are going to bed, but come into our room if you want to talk."

"Kay," was my only reply.

"Good night. Darcy, we love you," my mom told me quietly.

By way of answering, I shut the lights off in my room and made a rustling noise near my bed. The footsteps faded and then the door to my parent's room closed. The lights in my house went off.

I tiptoed to the window, opened it slowly so that it didn't squeak, then climbed down the trellis, bracing myself against the cold. I didn't want to be in my house anymore.



The night air was freezing, stinging my lungs as I breathed in deeply. It felt incredible to be out of the house, independent in the dark, where I could go unseen for as long as I wanted. As the darkness engulfed me, I mentally shut down my brain. I wouldn't think about it, I wouldn't think about it, it would just go away as long as I didn't think about it.

Instead, I thought about Krista. I thought about whether she had spoken to Lucas, whether Tara had told him how Krista was a good friend. I thought about the upcoming math and physics tests.

I thought about Aubrey's baby. I really wanted them to have a girl. Then again, Aubrey wanted seven children, so I wasn't all too worried about the sex of the baby, but a niece would be cool. Whichever sex it was, the baby was going to be very attractive.

I thought not at all about how the baby was conceived because frankly, I would probably rather be thinking about my birth parents than—

STOP! I commanded myself. Think about something else.

I thought about my lack of boyfriend, and if I could choose anyone from my grade to date, which boy it would be. I settled on no one because I was going to join a convent, seeing as how I had only had one boyfriend, and he had been a complete jerk.



I thought about the fact that I had seen my English teacher at the local drug store the other day buying tampons. My English teacher was a man. Barf.

I was working so hard on not thinking that I didn't think when a white van drove by me for at least the third time. Either someone liked late-night driving lessons, or they were lost. Or—

Don't go there, I commanded myself.

As I walked past the different houses on my street, I wondered what it would be like to live in one of those families. The Monaghan's had nine kids, but they were all happy, loved, and had this very special bond. Why hadn't I been born into a family like that? Why had my mom given me up for adoption? Was she too poor, or did she just not love me?

I forced myself away from thoughts like that, instead moving back to my sister's baby. If she was a girl, I'd name her Julia. Nate wanted to name her Bridget and Aubrey loved the name Rose. If he was a boy, I would name him Caleb. Nate wanted him to be called Colton—don't ask. Aubrey thought the name Adam was charming. This poor child.

This thinking amused me. Happy thoughts. Think happy thoughts. That's all I had to do was...there was a noise behind me.

I spun around quickly, sure there was nothing there but scaring myself anyway. Like I had predicted, there was nothing except a very blustery cluster of leaves. Silly Darcy.

I shook my head once, trying to clear my thoughts. I was a little hesitant about walking in the dark now and had successfully managed to freak myself out. So I turned around in place and began walking the way I had come. I was tired by then, ready to plop into my bed and fall into a restless sleep.

When I heard a noise a little ways in front of me, I stopped. A second later, two squirrels chasing each other came from the bush and crossed the street. I watched them play their game noisily and wondered what it would be like to have such a carefree life. My head tilted as I watched their ascent up the tree they were climbing. I wondered what would happen if they ever fell from the tree?

I was smiling at that, picturing two very stunned animals free-falling from fifteen feet up, when a noise came from directly behind me.

Those damn—

I hardly had time to scream before a hand clamped over my mouth. My body jerked rigidly, and I tried to move away, but this man was seriously strong. The only breath I drew came through my nose, so tightly was his hand pushed against my mouth.

Something pointy was pushed into my back, and it only took me a moment, stunned or not, to realize that it was a gun.

"Don't panic," his voice whispered into my ear, but he pushed the tip of the gun into my back even harder. "It's only me."

I had no idea who 'me' was, but I was too focused on the point of the gun to even think about it. He was gonna kill me. He was gonna kill me, and I wasn't doing anything about it because I was scared and acting out of pure instinct.

The tears slowly fell down my face even though I tried to stop them. I was hardly aware of the fact that we were walking back into the woods.

"Darcy, stop crying! Listen to me: I'm not going to hurt you!" The man said, but I shook my head against his death

grip. He knew my name. How did he know my name? Who was he? "I'll explain everything to you after we leave."

We were trekking through the forest and, distantly, I remembered that I was supposed to make it as hard as possible for a kidnapper to try and attack. But it was hard enough to breathe, let alone try and scream or kick. I couldn't seem to function.

"I need you to keep quiet," he whispered, like I could make any noise with his hand smothering me. "As long as you keep quiet, I won't hurt you. Everything's going to be alright."

My fear was taking over my body, and I suddenly went limp, though he didn't seem to notice. He just picked up the pace and half-carried, half-dragged me to the van. The white van. Oh, Lord.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he whispered through the darkness as he stopped to open the van's back doors. "Trust me."

He heaved me into the back of the van, and I was thrown into more darkness as I heard the click of the door locking. I started towards the direction where I had come from and groped for the door handle, banging on the door as I went.

As I found the handle, the engine started, and, as we sped off, I was lurched backwards into the door, losing my grip on the handle and banging my head.

This was when I fully realized what was happening. And I panicked.

"HELP ME!" I screamed over and over again, banging against the door. I knew we were in the forest, but if someone heard me, they could help. "HELP ME, SOMEONE PLEASE HELP! MOM! MOM, HELP ME, PLEASE, SOMEONE HELP ME!"

I was screaming anything that came to my head as the terror penetrated and I realized that I was being kidnapped. It felt like a bad dream, one where I didn't have control over my voice or my body.

My hands felt too weak as they banged against the door; my voice sounded like a squeak as I pleaded for someone to help me. My feet made no impact as they kicked against the door, and the rocking of the van was making me nauseous.

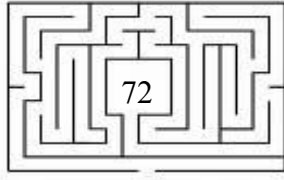
I was still pounding on the doors when we left the forest. My hands and feet were in pain from trying to get someone's attention, and my voice was hoarse. My head hurt, and I was exhausted.

Finally, after what felt like hours of trying to find help, when it was clear that we weren't stopping and there was nothing I could do to get out, I slid down and sat on the floor. My eyes were adjusted to the dark so I hastily took my first look around.

The back of the van had little holes in the ground where there were supposed to be chairs, but they had been taken out. Now it was just an empty space covered with gray carpet. There were no windows except for one that looked into the driving area, but that was covered with black paper.

My tears increased as I took in everything that had happened to me. I was sobbing in an instant, my breathing ragged and hitched as I had a full-on panic attack. Where was I? Where was I going? Who had taken me? Would he hurt me? Was this man dangerous? Would anyone ever find me?

Most of all, though, I cried for my mom and dad.



I woke to the sound of the engine turning off. The door to the front seat slammed, and then I heard footsteps coming around to the back doors. I scrambled all the way to the back of the car, pushing myself against the wall so that I was as far away from the doors as possible.

When the doors opened, I was looking away, shielding myself. I was scared stiff. Was he going to hurt me? Or rape me? The world was spinning, and I was reminding myself to breathe.

The man got into the car and shut the door. He pressed a button on the wall, and the whole back seat lit up. When I focused on his face, I gasped.

"Arthur?" I asked, unsure.

He nodded. "You remembered."

I didn't say anything. I could only stare. He kidnapped me? Was he my father? Were my parents right about him; was he just some creep that saw me on the street one day and stalked me from then on? I should have known better.

"I brought you some food," he told me, handing me a bag filled with something that looked like cheerios, and a water bottle.

I took them but said nothing. They were probably drugged.

"Do you feel okay?" Arthur asked quietly.

"What...what's going on?" I asked, now that I knew this man.

"Oh, Darcy, I have so much to tell you," he replied, sitting down across from me.

Immediately, my heart lurched. "Are you my dad?"

He stared at me, his eyes going wide as surprise came over his face. "They told you?"

"Are you?" I asked instead.

He looked at me for a minute and then nodded.

"Are you lying?" I then asked, making sure to look into his eyes.

"No. I'm not. I am your biological father."

I turned away from him.

"You don't believe me," he stated.

I shook my head.

"Is there anything I can do to make you see that I am who I say I am?"

I shook my head again.

"Can you just trust me and accept that I'm right?"

I kept still, choosing to let him make of it what he would. He looked at me for a minute.

"Why don't you trust me?" He asked.

I looked back at him. "You took me."

"And I'm sorry about that. You will understand this all in time. I promise you, though, I am not lying to you. You are my daughter. When we get to our house, I will prove it to you."

I didn't ask him how he would do so, getting the feeling that I wasn't supposed to annoy him. In fact, it was probably better if he believed that I had accepted his story.

So, I thought of the first thing that came to mind and asked, "Where's my mom?"

He knew which mother I was talking about, and he sighed. "She died. Five years ago."

I said nothing, instead staring intently at the wall. I didn't know how to act around him. If he thought I was going to cry over the loss, he was wrong. Even if I had felt sadness for the death of a woman I had never known, I wouldn't have shown my feelings. What did this man expect of me?

"God, Darcy, I so wish she could have met you. She loved you so much, but she couldn't take care of you. We were only twenty when you were born; we had so many plans. Adoption was our only option."

I still wasn't looking at him. "So why do you want me back?"

He breathed in. "I promised her I'd take care of you."

"My parents took care of me," I whispered, using all my willpower to keep the tears down.

"But you're mine. I've waited years to meet you. You look so like your mother. She was beautiful, and so are you," he told me. He shook his head, remembering something from the past. "She would spend hours looking at the few pictures we kept of you. She used to dream about what you would look like when you got older. Your mom memorized everything your adoptive parents told us about you; that was just how obsessed she was. Darcy, your mom wanted the world for you. She loved you more than she loved herself, I swear. And now, you're here."

I couldn't seem to understand what he was saying. My mind was reeling. This man was insane. He had abducted me, and he was insane. Only a crazy person would kidnap a child.

I glanced back at him slowly. He seemed calm enough. Very carefully, I asked quietly, "When can I go back?"

He looked away from me uncomfortably. "You aren't going back."

I let the tears stream down my face. "Why did you take me? Please, take me back. You can visit anytime you want, really. I'll tell my parents not to get mad at you; I can make them see it. Please, take me back to my family."

His face tightened slightly. "I'm sorry, Darcy, but that's no longer an option."

"But—"

"I'm done discussing that," he interrupted harshly.

This time it was I who looked away from him. He had drawn a line I knew I shouldn't cross if we were going to be living together.

"Please, Darcy, don't be upset. I just want to be a family again," he whispered, coming closer. I shied away from him. Immediately, I could sense his hurt. "I'm not going to hurt you. I love you."

I looked back at him. "You don't even know me."

"But I want to know you. Darcy, we have so much to talk about, so much to learn about each other, if you'd only give me a chance."

I didn't answer him. I was feeling sick again. This was all a bad dream, a nightmare I had to wake up from. This couldn't be happening.

Arthur started hesitantly, "Is anything wrong?"

I shook my head but refused to look at him. He didn't want to hear what was wrong.

In an effort to get a conversation started, he continued, "You know, my name's not really Arthur."

That interested me more than anything else. I looked back at him. "It's not?" I asked.

"Nope. It's a pseudonym," he told me.



"Where'd you get it from?"

"A book."

"Which one?"

"The Scarlet Letter. Have you heard of it?"

I nodded. "We just finished reading it in English."

"Wanna guess who I took the name from?"

I blinked and then said, "The only character whose name is Arthur?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I guess that was a stupid question."

I frowned. "But wasn't he the cowardly minister?"

"It's symbolic, Darcy. I thought you'd appreciate it."

"You're a minister?" I asked, surprised.

He smiled. "No. I'm your father, and I finally admitted it. For fifteen years, I've repented for my sin."

"But he dies in the end," I reminded him.

"True. I admit, there are some minor glitches in my theory, but this is the kind of thing you will be learning while living with me," he told me, still smiling.

"What?" I asked for clarification.

"Literature, allusions, culture, and art. I want to teach you so much. I want to spend time with you, get to know you, bond with my daughter," he explained. "I've been waiting so long to have a conversation like this with you!"

There were no words to describe what I was feeling, the sick anguish, fear, and depression that were settling over my entire body. My mind had seemed to close in on itself.

"Do you need to use the restroom?" He asked suddenly. I looked around automatically for any sign of a toilet. He chuckled. "You won't find one in here. However, we are deep in the woods."

I stared at him, my heart sinking. "Seriously?"

He shrugged. "It depends on how badly you need to go."

I groaned inwardly, immediately thinking of twenty-five thousand things I'd rather be doing right about then, but I got up anyway. He opened the doors for me.

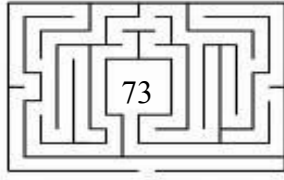
"There's a clearing right over there. I promise I won't look."

Conjuring up all the strength I had and the last shred of dignity I still possessed, I started towards the bushes.

"And Darcy?" His voice called. I turned around. "If you try and run, I will find you. You know that, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I whispered, but he heard.

I saw him smile. "Okay, then."



I hardly noticed the embarrassment of squatting in the bushes. I could only think of what was happening to me. Where were we? The woods extended for miles, the only gap a small road that we were driving on. The whole place was completely dark; the only way I was seeing was because of the light from the van.

If I had half a mind to escape, now would have been the perfect chance. And even though part of me was screaming to run, I knew I couldn't. We were in the middle of nowhere, and I didn't know how long it would take me to get to the nearest safe haven.

Furthermore, although I would have liked to think that Arthur would never hurt me, I couldn't say this safely. I had no idea what Arthur was capable of. He had, after all, kidnapped me. His claim to be my father could very well be an act; I couldn't know this either.

I was trapped here.

I made my way slowly back to the van, focusing completely on placing my feet steadily on the ground. At the moment, I seemed to be having trouble controlling my body. It was almost like I was having an out-of-body experience, but I fought against it. I couldn't lose myself now.

When I was finally standing at the back of the van, I saw that Arthur's back was still turned. "Is that you, Darcy?" He called.

"Yeah."

"May I turn around?"

"Yeah," I said again.

He turned and then extended a hand for me so that I could climb back into the truck.

Arthur watched as I scurried to the back of the van, pushing myself into the farthest corner, making myself as small as possible.

He was quiet for a minute, and the only sound in the van was my labored breathing.

"Darcy, why are you afraid?" He asked quietly, looking at me closely.

My shoulder jerked up and down in a shrug-like manner, but I said nothing.

"Please talk to me," he urged gently. "I won't hurt you. Why are you so scared of me?"

I shook my head slightly. His voice, meant to comfort me, actually filled me with more fear. How much of this was an act for him?

"Darcy, you need to talk to me. Please, whatever it is, tell me. I want to know what's wrong. Why do you shy away from me like that?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw him shift slightly so that he was sitting down. He wasn't leaving. He was determined to fix this problem.

Slowly, I looked back at him. The truth, which would have to come out eventually, was not something he wanted to hear. But our first argument wouldn't be because I had refused to tell him how I felt. "I don't know you. I don't know who you are; I don't know what you want. All I know is that you kidnapped me. And you say you're my dad, but you're not. My dad is asleep right now. He's sleeping next to my mom, and they

don't know I'm gone yet. Even if you are my biological dad, it doesn't matter. I'm not yours anymore. You took me from my real family, and I don't know what's going to happen. You seem nice, but you could be lying. You held a gun to my back, so what else are you capable of doing to me? I don't want to be here, Arthur, I just want to go home. Please."

He looked away from me. When he said nothing, I actually thought I had gotten through to him. Finally, he breathed in and said, "Is that really how you feel?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I whispered.

He was glaring intently at the wall. I waited in silence for his answer. Did he realize how hurt I was, how much I wanted to go home? Did my answer somehow give light to the situation?

He turned back to me suddenly. His eyes were on fire. "Well, you're wrong," he snapped, got up, opened the van door, and then slammed it shut.

I listened to his footsteps moving around to the front of the van and then felt the slam of the door again as he got into the driver's side.

Slowly, I seemed to realize that my answer had angered him. I leaned my head back against the wall, letting the tears stream down my face.

Nothing was ever going to be the same.

The van didn't move for the next couple hours. From what I could tell, Arthur was thinking just as hard about my answer as I was. Finally, just as my eyes were beginning to drift shut, I heard the driver's side door open and then slam shut. I listened with baited breath as Arthur came around to the back of the van and then opened the doors.

He climbed into the back without saying a word. I knew he was still mad, and I was afraid of what he would do or say.

Without making any noise, I tried to squeeze myself even further into the corner of the van.

We stayed in silence for a few minutes. Arthur seemed determine to break the walls down with his thoughts alone. I watched him from the corner of my eye as he breathed in and out, staring at the wall across from him.

I was getting used to the silence when he said quietly, "Before we get back on the road, do you have any questions?"

I started, looking at him automatically. After the shock of his voice, I thought over what he had just said. Had he just asked me that? As I thought about it, I figured he was just going to pretend like I had never told him how I felt. I decided to do the same. Hesitantly, I quietly asked, "If your name isn't Arthur, what should I call you?"

Glad for an easy question, he answered automatically, "I was thinking 'Dad'."

I looked away from him. I wasn't going to tell him no, because after his last display of emotions, I wasn't sure what kind of reaction that would get from him. But I wasn't going to call him Dad. He was no more of a father to me than a random man on the street. What hurt, also, was that I had just finished, only hours before, telling him how I felt about him. Had he forgotten so easily?

"Is there a problem?" Arthur asked quietly, but he avoided eye contact with me.

After a moment of silence, I began, "It's just..." I didn't finish.

He sighed. "I'm your father. What else would you call me?"

I didn't answer. Was he deliberately making this as hard for me as possible?

"Alright," he started. "What if...we changed Dad a little bit?"

I looked back at him, my face showing my confusion. "Like how?"

"Well, what if we pronounce it more like a British teenager."

I thought back to British movies, and then, feeling completely stupid, I stuttered, "Dod?" so that it rhymed with God.

He nodded. "Yeah, exactly. So, is that good?"

I shrugged. I didn't want to get him upset again. "I guess." But he was always going to be Arthur to me.

He smiled, glad that task was over. "Okay, then. Well, I'm going to continue driving, but while we're moving, I want you to memorize this," he continued, pulling something out of his back pocket.

I took it and looked it over. It was a schedule. "What's it for?"

"This is going to be your day-to-day schedule once we arrive at our house."

I looked back at it. Odd.

He continued, "You will follow this schedule throughout the week, changing only for Saturday and Sunday, which are much simpler." When I still didn't answer, he got up. "I'll leave you to that. I expect it to be memorized by the time we get to our destination, times included. I also expect you to stick to those times. If you don't, you will be punished. Are we clear?"

I marveled at how casually he had said that but nodded all the same. He smiled slightly. Then he left. So I had been right. He was willing to go farther than his fatherly act suggested.

For a minute, I watched the door, as if willing him to come back. Then, giving in to my stomach, I ate the cheerios that could very well have been poisoned. It was a risk I was willing to take.

They might have been drugged, they might not have been, but I fell asleep quickly afterwards.

The next morning, I awoke to the truck starting again. Apparently, Arthur had chosen to sleep that night, which wasn't strange, but I still found it a little weird. Somehow, I had envisioned him staying awake all night. Like a sci-fi character.

I had no sense of the time, because the only light supply came from an artificial source. I wasn't tired anymore, which told me that either I had slept for long enough or I was too riled up to sleep. Probably both.

Instead, I waited for my eyes to adjust and then felt my way over to the area where Arthur had turned the light on. When I found the light, I pressed it, then cringed at the suddenness of it.

When my eyes were used to the light, I crawled back to where I had been sitting and picked up the schedule, skimming it over once. It wouldn't be that hard to memorize. My problem was that it was completely sick. It had, to the minute, exactly what I was supposed to do each day.

By the time the van stopped again, I had read over the schedule so many times that I could have recited it backwards. I listened to Arthur's footsteps coming around to the back, and my heart automatically started pounding.

The doors opened and Arthur climbed in, but not before I saw that it was pitch black out. Scary.

"How are you today, Darcy?"

"Good," I answered curtly.



"I'm glad," he replied, smiling. "Now, I assume you've looked over your schedule?"

I nodded.

"Let's hear it, then," he said, rubbing his hands together as though I was going to perform some play for him.

I took a deep breath.

"I wake up at seven-thirty and get ready for the day. Breakfast is at eight o'clock sharp. From nine until two, I do my schoolwork that you will assign ahead of time. At two o'clock, I stop my work and clean the house until three. After that, from three-fifteen until four, you and I will talk about our day and our lives," I recited, mentally seeing the words typed up on the paper.

I caught my breath and continued, "My piano lessons are from four to four-forty five and my exercise sessions are from five to five-thirty. At five-thirty, I start cooking dinner, which is served at six o'clock sharp, and lasts until six-thirty. After, I will clean up the kitchen, and, at seven until eight, I will read you a book of your choice," I told him. God, this was sick. "I will be given half an hour to get ready for bed, and then my lights have to be out by nine o'clock."

"That's very good," he told me, his voice sounding impressed. "And when will I get back from work?"

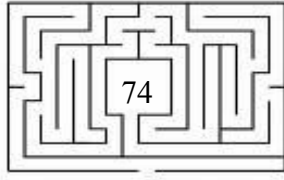
"Two-fifteen at the latest," I answered monotonously.

He nodded. "Excellent." Then he stood up. "We have about an hour left, but I want you to keep thinking about the schedule and any other questions you might have for me."

I watched as he left, then turned away from the door, staring intently at the wall and trying not to cry. I was overcome with such sadness and confusion that I almost felt like jumping out of the moving van and running away.

I thought back to what Arthur had told me, calculated the amount of time I would have to cry and then make sure my tears didn't show. I realized I had just enough time. So I let my tears fall.

I cried. I cried for reasons I didn't understand, and because I was locked in the back of a van going to No Man's Land. The tears fell for the life I had left behind, and because I was selfish and wanted a form of entertainment. But mostly, I cried because I was scared and just wanted my parents back.



By the time the doors opened again, my tears were gone and I had regained my composure enough to be annoyed by the sudden influx of light.

"Ow," I growled, shielding my eyes.

"The sunlight won't bother you for long," Arthur's voice came in. "I want you to put this on."

I peeked out from behind my hand to see a bandana. "For my hair?"

He chuckled. "I meant for over your eyes."

And then it made sense. He didn't want me to see my surroundings or what the house we were going to be living in looked like from the outside.

I forced the fear into the farthest corner of my mind, got up, and turned so that he could fix it over my eyes. As soon as it had darkened my vision, though, it wasn't as easy to control my emotions. I felt more nervous than before. It wasn't that I was afraid of the dark as much as afraid of my surroundings.

Maybe Arthur could sense my tension, because he said, "Don't worry, I won't let you trip."

Tripping wasn't what I was worried about.

Slowly, he helped me down from the van, making sure every step I took was safe. I took baby steps towards the direction Arthur was pulling me while I listened for any sounds of movement that weren't coming from the man directing me.

I could sense the house before Arthur told me that we were right by the door. Once we were inside and the sun wasn't shining through the bandana, I removed it and then looked around.

We were standing in a small foyer. It was nice but very male. There were no decorative pillows or feminine touches, which made the whole thing seem much colder.

"Shall I give you the grand tour?" Arthur asked, smiling at his own joke.

I shrugged slightly, trying my best to keep my face void of emotions. "Sure."

It was a split-level house we were going to be living in. He showed me the three bedrooms; my room was decorated pink. I hoped he remembered I was fifteen. It was a very small room with only a twin bed, a dresser, and a long wall mirror in it. There was one window, but it was high above my bed and way too small for me to do anything except get a little sunlight. Maybe that was his intention.

His bedroom was larger and had a king bed, desk with a computer, and a bathroom connected to it. The guest bedroom was the smallest with only a bed in it.

The kitchen was small and so was the den. The dining room had a huge table in it with eight chairs around it, which seemed out of place in such a modest house.

"So, what do you think? Is it up to your living standards?"

I smiled at him and nodded, but I was thinking more about my future. How tedious was my life going to be?

"Great! Well, I hate to be a terrible host, but I've got a lot to finish up, so maybe you'd like some alone time?" He asked, already walking back to his bedroom.

"Yeah, I guess," I answered, going into my room. And just what was I supposed to do?

As if he had read my mind, Arthur poked his head through the door. "I would suggest catching up on your rest. I run a tight schedule, as I'm sure you've already realized, so times of respite are few and far between."

I nodded. "Okay."

He smiled. "I'm going to be in my room. If you need anything, just holler."

"Okay," I said again. I sat down on my bed, waited to hear the slam of Arthur's door, and then looked slowly around my room.

Somehow, christening my room made this whole thing all the more real, all the more tangible.

Arthur had taken me from my neighborhood, driven me cross-country, and forced me into this living space. I was to be living in this pink room, with no apparent chance of human interaction beyond my captor.

Was this really happening?

How had any of this happened? I hadn't done anything wrong. I had been walking along the street, and then I had been ambushed. Why me? Why was this happening to me?

I hadn't done anything. Why was I being punished like this?

I turned to look at myself in the mirror. In my reflection, I saw not only my face, but the faces of my mom, my dad, and my sister. I would never see Arthur's face in there.

Never.

How long would it be until my parents found me? Had Arthur written a ransom note? Probably not. He hadn't mentioned anything about money, or giving me back, for that matter. How temporary was this living arrangement going to

be? Did my parents even have any clue as to where I was? It had been late at night when I had been taken. Had anyone seen the van or written down its license plate? Anything? Did they know I had been taken? Or did they think I ran away?

My heart lurched as I thought of that. I had been angry, yes, but would my parents know enough to realize that I would never run away from them, no matter how angry I was? Would they notice that none of my stuff was gone? Would they put together that Arthur, who had been stalking me for days, might actually try to take me away from my family?

All these questions bounced around in my head, and my mind literally felt like it would implode. What if I was never found? That possibility made me positively sick.

I couldn't just sit here, staring at myself in the mirror. I couldn't do nothing. I had been paralyzed with fear when Arthur had grabbed me, but that was because I hadn't known who he was or what was happening. Now that the action had died down and I knew exactly what was happening, I had some control over my life again.

I had to help myself. I had to tell someone, let someone know that I was in trouble. Wasn't that what those stranger danger videos always said? Most of the time, the stranger is only bluffing, so try to get help, yell, or get someone's attention. That was what I had to do. I had to.

I stood up slowly, tiptoed quietly out of my room, down the stairs, and towards the front door.

If I was quiet enough, it might be an hour before Arthur realized I was gone. That could give me enough time to alert someone that I was being held hostage. It was a plan with many holes in it, but it was the only plan I had.

I hadn't seen Arthur lock the front door, but I bent down and examined the door first. It looked unlocked.

Slowly, quietly, I reached out, and turned the knob. Little by little, it twisted, slowly, slowly, slowly until finally I inched the door open and—

An alarm so loud I literally jumped a foot in the air sounded. Before I could even blink, Arthur was downstairs, grabbing my arm.

"What are you doing?" He snapped. I was still in shock over the alarm, which had stopped suddenly as soon as Arthur had grabbed my arm. I couldn't seem to formulate a sentence. "Darcy! What are you doing?"

"I...I was..."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," he answered caustically. "I didn't take you to be one to try to escape. Or at least with quite so little effort put into your plan. You think I'd just let you leave through the front door?"

He was pulling me up the stairs, dragging me almost, with much strength.

"Ow! Let go!" I stammered.

"Why would you try to leave? Why? I've given you a new life here, a new room, a new home, a new everything. Why would you leave?"

I was crying now. "Please, take me back! Please take me back. I don't want to be here. I want my family back!"

"I am your family!" He snapped. "This is your home now!"

"No, I wanna go home! I wanna go back to my house; I want my mom and dad," I was sobbing.

He pushed me onto my bed.

"Listen to me, Darcy; listen very closely. You are never going back to your old life. This is your life now, so get used to it. The next time you try to escape, you won't eat for a week. Do you understand? You. Are. Not. Leaving. Me.

"If I hear any more talk about anything in your old life, you're gonna get a lot more than a slap on the wrist. Do I make myself clear?"

I was choking on my tears, my body shaking with sorrow, my head throbbing, my sobs gut-wrenching. I was going to die. I was going to die with anguish here, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

"Answer me!" He yelled.

I nodded but couldn't seem to force out any words.

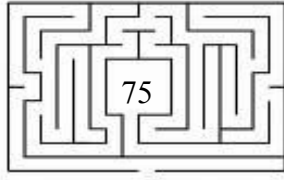
"Good," he snapped, turned, slammed my door, and locked it.

I flipped onto my stomach and cried until I could feel bile rising, and my head felt like someone had taken an ax to it. I could no longer see out of my eyes because they were so puffy.

I missed my mom and dad so much, I couldn't even think about it. That only brought fresh tears. I wouldn't think about my life; I couldn't think about anything because my life no longer existed.

I cried myself to sleep. Arthur did not wake me up for dinner. I knew he wanted it understood that this was punishment for my attempted escape.





The schedule went into play the next morning when I was awoken at seven-thirty by a knock on my door.

"Darcy, it's Dad. Wake up now," he called calmly through the door.

I was so tired, I felt like staying in bed until he was forced to come in and get me. But I decided against it. Even in my lethargic state, I still remembered what he had said about being punished.

Slowly, I dragged myself out of bed and into the bathroom. I didn't quite care about what I looked like, so I brushed my hair quickly, splashed some water on my face, and brushed my teeth.

Back in my room, I pulled out the first shirt and pants I found, pulled them on, and then went down to breakfast.

Arthur was still in the kitchen, so I sat down at the table and waited. I was still tired, but I was also hungry, and the smells from the kitchen woke me up.

Arthur came out moments later with two plates full of eggs and bacon.

"Eat up," he said cheerfully as he placed my food in front of me. Apparently, he had forgotten about yesterday's events.

I, however, was less forgiving. I didn't even look at him as I started on my food. The eggs needed ketchup, but I didn't feel like asking Arthur for any, so I ate them plain.

Breakfast was awkward, but I was almost too absorbed in my own hunger and fatigue to really notice it.

"Alright, Darcy, what's first on today's agenda?" Arthur asked after he had finished his breakfast.

I thought back to my schedule and then said, "School."

"Good. After you clean this up, I want you to go back to your room, where you will find your first assignment on the bed."

When had he placed it there? No matter, I thought, focusing back on him.

"What subjects will I be doing?" I asked.

"Wait and see," he said, smiling, and then stood up. "Well, I've got to get ready for work. If you need anything, you better ask me now."

He looked at me, waiting for something from me, but when I said nothing, he nodded and then went back to his room.

I knew I was expected to clean up the breakfast plates. I hated cleaning up after people.

I was wiping down the counters when Arthur came out of his room. He sauntered into the kitchen and dropped something on the table. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that it was a stack of loose-leaf paper.

"I get the feeling that you might be a little tightlipped about what you do here everyday," he started. "So, every night, I want you to write down everything you've done for the day. I want every little detail; I don't care how minute. I want to know exactly what you did. Understand?"

I nodded, still looking at the lined paper. I didn't ask him what the point of recording my days was.

Once he had slammed the front door shut, I ran to the front window. I watched in hiding as Arthur's gray Honda pulled out of the driveway and drove away. I counted to sixty

and then moved to the door. Of course, it was locked. But for the next hour, I searched everywhere for a key, any key, or even a tool to try to escape.

The knives in the kitchen were all butter knives, not even able to cut a steak. The house didn't have a telephone, and I couldn't even figure out how to turn on Arthur's computer. I couldn't find anywhere any kind of alarm system, but I knew there had to be one. After I had scoured the house, I came to the conclusion that the alarm system must have been accessible on Arthur's computer. Arthur must have kept the key with him at all times.

There was absolutely no way out. Immediately, a huge weight was placed on my shoulders. I couldn't get out.

I went slowly to my room and collapsed onto my bed. I was tired again, and I lacked any incentive to do anything at all. Grumbling, I pulled my assignments over and looked at them. I had work to do in History, English, Latin, and...Physics. Crap. But Physics wasn't even my problem. I looked back at the English assignment:

Please write a three-page paper on what you think makes a house a home.

A three-page paper? Was he serious? Then again, Arthur didn't seem to be one for jokes. I sat down on my bed and started thinking about my old house that was a home before I found out that it wasn't mine.

I was still working when Arthur knocked on my door.

"Darcy, what are you doing in here?" He asked, coming in and looking at me suspiciously.

"Finishing my school work," I told him, though I didn't look up.

"Are you aware of what time it is?"

I shook my head. "I dunno. I'm almost done with Physics," I told him. I had spent an hour on my Physics homework, and I knew I had done well.

When he didn't move or speak, I looked up. His eyes were blazing with anger. "What?" I asked quickly.

He came over to me. "Where's your report?"

I moved over so that I could get my report, and he snatched it from my hand.

"And your physics?"

I lifted my paper for him to see, and he grabbed that, too.

"Did you complete anything else?"

I nodded and gave him my history.

"This is all?"

I nodded slowly. What did he mean, all? That had taken me hours!

He looked them over once, twice, and then back at me. "Did I not tell you that all your homework had to be completed by two o'clock?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then why is it not completed?"

"You gave me too much!" I exclaimed.

"Did I?" He asked innocently.

Slowly, he bent down so that we were eye to eye. I backed away a little, recognizing the anger in his eyes as something to fear.

"Let me tell you something," he whispered, sending a chill down my spine. "I have given the amount of work I know you can accomplish in one day."

He was staring at me. Then suddenly, the papers were in front of my eyes, and he was tearing them up. Tearing up the English paper I had worked so diligently on, tearing up the

History homework I had spent two hours completing, tearing up the physics work I was so proud of. They were in millions of tiny pieces by the time he was done.

"That work was a piece of shit. When I tell you to do something, I expect it done!" He yelled into my face. "This? This is worthless. You expect to get an extension on an important project in your adult life just because you didn't have enough time? I don't think so, Darcy."

I was staring at him, and I couldn't help the tears that came to my eyes. He had completely destroyed me. "It wasn't my fault."

"Then whose was it? It certainly wasn't mine," he answered, his eyes so dark and cold, I shied away from him. "Now, I want that homework completed by tomorrow morning."

I turned back to my work and got out another piece of loose-leaf paper, my hands shaking slightly from Arthur's reprimand. As I reached out, though, he grabbed my wrist and twisted it. I yelped in pain. "Oh no, Darcy, you aren't doing it now. There are other things to be done."

"When am I supposed to do it?" I gasped, clenching my teeth in pain.

He shrugged. "At night? Maybe you should have thought of that before you decided to take your sweet time with this work."

With more strength than I had given him credit for, he yanked my arm so that I went flying off the bed. "Now, get to work," he snapped. "And don't expect dinner tonight."

While I cleaned his Majesty's stupid room and did his stupid dishes, I envisioned the best way to kill him. I hated him. How could someone so cruel be my father? He didn't even care about me. He was a completely different person than the one I had met the first morning.

I worked in silence, avoiding him whenever I could. As I started his disgusting laundry, he came into the room.

"You have fifteen more minutes," he told me curtly.

I didn't answer.

"Darcy, did you hear me?" He snapped.

"Yes!" I retorted.

He nodded and left.

In that time, I vacuumed his room and the dining room and unloaded the dishwasher that I had started that morning.

"Darcy, please come in here," I heard Arthur call, and I went into his room. "Sit," he commanded.

I plopped down on his bed, which was much comfier than mine, I must say. He was sitting in his desk chair, and I was glad.

He exhaled. "It seems we have much to discuss."

No, not so much.

"You don't seem to be understanding what I expect of you. Didn't I tell you that I wanted everything to be done on time?"

"Yes, but—"

"I don't want to hear it. I gave you more than enough time to complete your work. It wasn't difficult, and it's all things you've been given by your teachers before, I'm sure."

I glared at him.

"You're angry with me," he stated.

I said nothing.

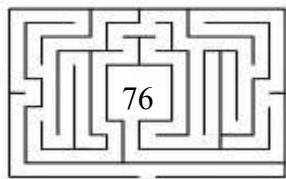
"It's okay; you can tell me. I won't get mad."

But he was lying. I knew he would get mad. He was testing me. So instead, I just shook my head.

He smiled. "A wise decision. I don't want to hear your pouting because you think I've been unfair. You will realize, one day, that I've done what I know is right."

I glanced away from him, so afraid my anger would come out in my expression that I couldn't even look at him.

"Now. Because I won't be reading your essay until tomorrow, why don't you tell me what you wrote about?"



I spent five hours working on the homework Arthur had ripped up, and then I spent another twenty minutes recording each detail of my day. When I was woken up at seven-thirty, I had only managed to get about five hours of sleep.

"Darcy, it's Dod. Wake up now," he called, and I sat up quickly before I could think about going back to sleep.

At breakfast, I didn't talk to him. I was not only mad, but I was incredibly grumpy. He probably sensed that I didn't want to talk, because he didn't bring up any conversation topics.

"Now, may I see your homework from yesterday?" He asked the minute he was done with his food.

I nodded, got up, and retrieved my finished homework and description of the previous day from my room.

"Is everything done?" He asked, taking the papers from my hand.

"Yes," I said quietly, waiting for him to find fault in them.

He flipped through them casually before setting them down. "This is much better, Darcy. I hope you've learned your lesson?"

"Yeah. I have," I told him automatically.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said, and indeed, he did sound glad.



I gave him a half smile, got up, and cleaned the kitchen. That day, I did my school work quickly, not even caring that it was sloppy or that the work was inadequate. I did it solely to get it done.

Arthur, however, wasn't pleased, which didn't surprise me in the least.

"This is much sloppier than I asked for," he told me.

"You didn't tell me it had to be neat," I replied, fed up with all his implied rules.

"It was—"

"Implied, I know, but that makes it sound like you gave me hints, only you didn't. All you said was you wanted it done by two o'clock."

He glared at me with the look of a dog about to attack. Then he, once again, ripped up my papers. I didn't even flinch this time. I just watched, as the little pieces of paper fluttered to the floor, much like the way my life was going.

"That's for your attitude. I want it redone by tomorrow morning and you, again, won't be getting dinner tonight," he sneered.

Clenching my teeth, I turned away from him. I could feel myself shaking with anger. While I brought his plates to the sink, I hardly allowed myself to breathe in fear that I'd start yelling at him. I didn't make eye contact with him and only allowed myself to breathe audibly after he left the house.

Half way through finishing my schoolwork, my stomach growled. I moaned but continued with my work; Arthur wouldn't understand that I hadn't finished my homework because of hunger.

But when my stomach continued to growl and I remembered that I wouldn't be having dinner that night, I

got up and went to the kitchen. I was home alone and starving. There had to be something for me to eat.

Quickly and quietly, even though Arthur wasn't even close to coming home, I went to the cabinets. I tried to yank the first one open, but it was locked.

Frowning, I went to the next one. It was locked, too. All of them were locked. Panicking slightly, I went to the refrigerator. Even though I saw a padlock on the bottom of the refrigerator, I still tried the door. I couldn't even open it a crack.

Groaning, I stomped back upstairs. This was insane. I was literally a prisoner, starving and being punished for the stupidest things.

As I thought more about my situation, my anger only increased. I stayed mad at Arthur throughout the day, even as he tried to talk to me during one of his stupid father-daughter chats.

Playing the piano wasn't cheering me up either, especially after he yelled at me for not paying attention. I hated this man.

"Look, let me show you one more time," he told me, motioning for me to move away from the piano seat.

Elegantly, he played the song I had known how to play since I was twelve. I didn't tell him this, though. It was much easier to pretend to be bad at playing the piano than showing him I was good and having to move on to harder pieces.

I loved this song he was playing, but he was ruining it. This song, meant to fill the heart with a longing for something that wasn't there, was played by a horrible man and now filled me with a hate so deep, it almost blurred my vision.

When he had hit the final note, Arthur turned to me. "I want you to play that."

I shook my head. I was angry, and that song only filled me with more hate. I hated him. "No."

"Why not, honey?"

My face was definitely turning red, and I couldn't stop it. How dare he ruin this song for me? How dare he take away from me the life I had known? I loathed this man who was my father.

"No. I hate you. I HATE YOU!" I screamed, backing away.

He was staring at me, and I watched his eyes turn black as I backed away even more.

"What did you say to me?" He whispered, frightening me more than anything.

"I hate you," I told him bravely. "I hate being here, and I hate that I'm related to you, and I hate everything about you!"

He stared at me for a minute more. Then he stood up, slowly, and his anger looked to be subsiding. Maybe.

When he was close enough to me that I could reach out and touch him, I realized that it only looked like he wasn't mad anymore because he had made his whole face stone cold.

With lightening fast precision, his hand reached out and slapped me across the face with such force that I was pushed backwards.

His voice was scary calm as he said softly, "Don't you ever talk to me like that. You speak to me like that again, and I'll do more than give you a wake-up call."

I stared at him, my face burning with the pain of his slap. The tears in my eyes were more for the pain present internally than externally, but both blurred together to form a gaping hole in my chest.

"You think you can put on this false bravado and strut around like you own the place? I own you. Do you understand? You are my daughter, and you are never leaving this place. Whatever the hell your problem is, you better work it out because things don't change around here. If you can't change your attitude, I'll be more than happy to do it for you," he growled, staring me straight in the eye. "Are we clear?"

I looked away from him, hoping he couldn't see my mixed emotions.

"ANSWER!" He roared.

I looked back at him. "We're clear," I muttered. "But for the record, I'll never belong to you," I told him quietly.

He smiled a cocky smile. "Yes, well, we'll just see about that. Now, get to your room until I decide what to do with you."

He didn't need to tell me twice. I ran to my room, closed the door (although I didn't slam it; I wasn't sure how well that would go down with him), and buried my head deep into my pillow to stop the tears from coming.

I wasn't going to cry over Arthur. I would do anything to express my anger except cry. Crying was the ultimate defeat. But it didn't matter what I thought, because I ended up crying.

I couldn't help it. I was angry and depressed, and nothing was there to cheer me up. Hope was gone, replaced by despair. Why was this happening to me? What had I done to deserve this? It was day three, and I was afraid I was going to commit suicide. This life was going to be the end of me.

A knock on my door had me flinching.

"What?" I called, trying to make my voice sound like I wasn't crying.

"May I come in?" Arthur called.

"Yeah," I said, trying to dry my eyes quickly.

When Arthur entered, he looked at my face but didn't say anything. I knew it was obvious that I had been crying, so it must have been that he just didn't want to talk about it.

Instead, he came over to the side of my bed and breathed in slowly.

"Look, Darcy, I want to talk about what happened today and yesterday. I'm sorry if I've been a little short with you. I'm a perfectionist, so, for me, everything has to be perfect, hence the name."

"Like OCD?" I told him bluntly. Or bipolar? He had slapped me and insulted me, and now he was back in my room to try and make amends. I detested this man.

He shook his head. "Not so much. It's more like I just need everything to be in a certain way. It's almost more like spoiled than anything else, if that makes sense."

Even though I was sure he had picked the wrong word, I nodded. "Okay."

"So if it seems like I'm being testy or temperamental, it's just because I want everything just so. Because you are my daughter, I guess I expect the same from you. And, though I realize that you aren't my clone, I want you to try and live by my rules. Do you think you can do that?"

I nodded automatically. I understood what he was saying, but I wasn't really thinking about why I was nodding. I guess I was nodding just to make him happy.

"Thank you," he told me and then smiled. "Anyway, I found this and thought you might like to see it."

He pulled something out of his pocket and held it out for me. It was a picture.

I took it and looked closely. Then, I looked back at Arthur. "What is it?"

"Your mother, you, and me. This was taken two weeks before she gave you up," he said quietly.

I looked back down. The woman, my mom, had almost platinum blonde hair and a stunning face. She was holding an adorable little girl with the biggest green eyes, and they were both being hugged by a very attractive young man with the same eyes as the baby. This was my family.

"She was beautiful," I told him, glancing up at him to see his reaction.

He nodded. "She was the most gorgeous woman I had ever met. We both loved each other and you so much.

"Darcy, she never wanted to give you away. I promise you that."

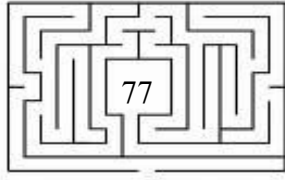
I stared at the picture instead of at him. I still hated him, but this was my mother, and I loved her even though this was the first I had ever seen of her. She was a part of me. She was my mother. I came from her. This was my mom.

"Can I keep this?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Of course," he replied and then stood up. "I will call you down to start cooking when I'm ready."

I watched him leave and then looked down at my mother. She was just like Aubrey: related to me, yet we did not share the same features. At least Aubrey had an excuse; this woman was beautiful and I was her child, but we looked nothing alike.

Carefully, I touched her face. "Mom," I whispered, trying it out. "Mom. Mom. Mommy. What happened to Dad?"



The days passed, and then the months. After a while, it didn't matter what the day was. I knew the schedule based on what time Arthur woke me up each morning. Eventually, I got so used to the repetitive cycle that Arthur and I stopped getting into fights. I knew what he expected from me, and he knew what I was capable of.

The tension was present only at mealtime, when we were forced to sit in close proximity and pretend we cared about what had happened to the other person that day. Arthur, at least, cared enough to still carry on conversations from three-fifteen to four o'clock, but only because it was according to schedule.

The days blended together so that one month felt like one long day and recalling an event that had happened to me could have been in January or June. Dates and days didn't matter anymore. Fulfilling my duty and working towards an abstract goal were all that I cared about. My detailed descriptions of my days were indistinguishable. Each resembled the next. There was no variability.

Then one day, when I was still doing my English paper, Arthur walked into my room. I jumped up, startled. I was so used to cleaning by the time he came home that his presence was enough to make my heart stop.

"God, you scared me!" I gasped, automatically touching my heart.

"Sorry," he told me, smiling slightly.

"It isn't two yet," I reminded him helpfully.

"Yes, I know," he told me, coming in to sit down.

The one thing that had changed was that he was more of a friend than a father now, only because we both found out quickly that he lacked essential father-like qualities. This did not mean he was my friend; only that he was not so much a father anymore. I thought of my principal as a pal, so to speak.

"Then do you mind me asking why you're home so early?"  
It must have only been twelve o'clock.

He sighed. "Darcy, I have something very important to tell you."

I didn't let myself think that the police had finally found us. I had learned long ago not to hope. The last time I had heard that statement my life had changed. What was he about to tell me?

"What is it?" I asked him, watching his face. He looked worried.

He exhaled. "I lost my job."

A pause. "What?"

"The company I had been working for closed down last week. I was hoping I'd be able to find a job by this time, but I'm having a terribly hard time."

I sat up and moved a little closer to him. "Are we broke?"

He shook his head. "We have enough money to last us at least a year, which should get us by until I can find another job."

"Is this bad?" I asked him quietly.

"I don't want you to worry about this. I will make sure everything works out. I just wanted you to know this because



the hours that I will be coming and going will be a little different."

"I can get a job if you want," I told him quickly.

"No, no. Your only job right now is to learn all you can."

I had a feeling that what he really meant was that my only job was to stay away from people who might recognize my face from a newspaper.

"Are you sure?" I asked him anyway.

"Positively," he answered and then got up. "I'm going to be in my room for most of the day, but I want you to continue with your schedule. I don't think we'll be able to talk much today."

No father-daughter chat!

I nodded, watching him leave. Oh God, we were running out of money. It was evident from his tone of voice. I only got two meals a day as it was, and I was always hungry. Cutting down to one meal a day, if necessary, seemed impossible. This was not good.

The day Arthur told me about our fiscal problem was in September; I knew this only because about a month later, Arthur knocked on my door at nine o'clock.

"Hey, Birthday Girl!" He exclaimed, and my eyes fluttered open. There was a huge ray of light coming from the window on top of my bed.

"What time is it?" I asked groggily.

"Nine," he answered.

I sat up quickly. "Why didn't you wake me?" I knew for a fact that it wasn't the weekend.

"Because it's your birthday!" He said cheerfully.

My heart lurched. I was sixteen. When had a year snuck by me? "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! I was there the day you were born. I wouldn't forget this day for the world."

I got out of bed slowly. Somehow, I was even more tired than I usually was when I woke up at seven-thirty.

"As a birthday treat, you don't have to cook or clean at all today."

I looked at him. "Really?" He nodded. "Sweet!"

He chuckled. "You do, however, have to complete your schoolwork. But, other than that, you have no obligations today."

I could deal with that. As I got ready for the day, I decided that I wasn't going to be getting any presents. I wasn't surprised at all about that; we had been saving pennies, and frankly, I knew Arthur wasn't the present-giving type.

I made myself avoid thinking about my fifteenth birthday. Instead, I put all my attention into finishing my homework as fast and meticulously as I could. At one thirty-two, I had finished my assignment.

"Dod?" I called, walking down the hallway with my work. "Dod!"

"Don't come in here!" Arthur's voice came from the kitchen. "What is it?"

"I'm done with my assignment."

"Great! Just leave it on your bed. I'll come and get it in a bit."

"Kay," I said, going back to my room.

For the rest of the afternoon, I spent my time doodling aimlessly on empty pieces of loose-leaf and writing intricate summaries of my days at Arthur's house. I managed to write a three and a half paged entry about my sixteenth birthday, my thoughts on it, and my birthday wishes.

I hoped Arthur never read that paper. It came too close to revealing the truth about my inner thoughts.

Arthur called me down when it was time for dinner. He ceremoniously placed a plate in front of me. I looked down at it, frowning.

"What is it?" I asked, sizing up the sandwich.

"It's a tuna melt," he told me. When I still didn't seem to recognize the meal, he said, "You've never had a tuna melt before?"

I shook my head. "No. What's in it?"

He sat down next to me. "Tuna, tomato, and cheese in between toasted bread. You'll like it; trust me."

I picked up the sandwich speculatively. Its ingredients weren't bad separately, but I wasn't too fond of trying new foods, especially at Arthur's house. But, to make him feel better, I took a bite of it.

He was watching me intently as though his whole world revolved around whether I liked his meal. I smiled. "It's good."

He smiled a toothy grin. "You like it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it's good."

"Great!" He sighed.

I took another bite, chewed, swallowed, and then hesitated. "Where's yours?"

"Hmm?" He asked, slightly distracted.

"You're not eating," I pointed out.

"Oh...I'm, uh, I'm not hungry," he fumbled.

I pressed on. "Why not? You're always hungry at the end of the day."

"Not today," he told me quickly.

I let the subject drop and focused on eating my meal. But my heart hurt. His actions alone told me that he had used up a lot of our food to give me a nice birthday meal. He would

never admit that, but I knew it was true. That was the only reason he wouldn't have eaten with me, as well as the reason why he would have been so eager for me to enjoy my meal.

Arthur had given me, for my sixteenth birthday, my first real fear of what was to come of our future.

Arthur insisted that I not help him clean the kitchen after dinner. After a very silly argument that left both of us feeling slightly immature, I caved.

Instead, I went to the piano. I hated playing during my lessons, but it didn't seem quite so annoying now that I wasn't being forced to play.

So I played "Happy Birthday," a very appropriate song, but I added a few little note twists so that it sounded happier and more like a dance than a song. I heard movement outside the door and turned when I saw Arthur enter holding a chocolate cupcake with a candle in it.

"Ha!" I laughed. It was so small but so cute!

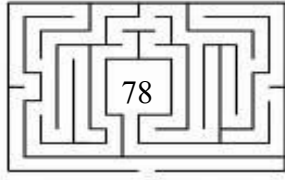
"Keep playing," he urged, so I started over.

"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear Darcy, Happy Birthday to you!" He sang horribly, and I laughed more. For all our disagreements, anger, and sometimes hate, I had still grown used to him.

"Make a wish," he said me, holding the cupcake.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and, for a minute, there was silence in the room. Although I wasn't very religious, I let God make of my wish what He wanted to, and worded it as broadly as I could:

I wish to be back with someone who loves me.



Maybe a month after my birthday, give or take a few days, I went to make dinner and realized that something was off.

"Dod!" I called.

"Yeah?" He yelled back from his room.

"Can you come here?"

"One sec," I heard him say. A minute later, he was standing beside me. "What's up?"

"Where's all the food?" I asked him.

"What?" He had only misheard me.

"The food. We have one box of pasta. That's it," I told him and opened the cabinets as proof.

The cabinets were full of things like Mexican Rice left open to go stale, a half opened bag of bread, an empty and a full box of pasta, some clam sauce that neither of us wanted to eat, and a can of Spaghetti O's that had been there since I first came. The refrigerator was full of condiments but not much else.

"Oh," he started and couldn't come up with an excuse fast enough.

"Dod, how much money do we actually have?"

"Enough," he assured me. "I must have forgotten to go grocery shopping."

"You never forget," I reminded him.

"Darcy, please don't argue with me on this. Just make us some pasta, and I'll go shopping tomorrow."

The next night, we didn't have food, but I didn't say anything. Instead, I cooked up the Spaghetti O's.

A week later, though, we were completely out of food. Even the ketchup had somehow disappeared. "Dod, listen to me: you need to find a job! We're broke! There's no food here, and I'm seriously hungry!"

"I know, I know," was all he said and left the kitchen. We went without food that day.

Two days later, he came back with a loaf of bread and some ham.

"How long will that tide us over?" He asked almost desperately.

I looked at his meager groceries despairingly but put on a smile as I said, "At least a week."

What a liar I was.

He sighed in relief. "Okay. That's good."

I just smiled.

But after a week, we were both hungry. It was actually Arthur who pointed it out to me.

"Darcy, I don't want you exercising anymore," he began.

"What? But I always exercise. It's part of the—"

"I know! But I'm telling you not to. You're getting too thin and with one meal a day, we can't afford for you to lose any more weight."

I looked down at myself. I hadn't even noticed that I was losing weight, not being able to compare myself to anyone or even weigh myself.

"If you say so," I told him.

His smile was so fake that it hurt my heart.

A week later, I woke up on my own accord. I got up slowly, walked to the kitchen, and checked the time. Ten twenty-seven!

I skidded towards Arthur's door.

"Dod? Are you okay?" I yelled.

His muffled voice came through the door. "I'm fine, Darcy. Please just leave me alone."

I paused. "Do you want anything to eat or drink?"

"I'm fine," he repeated.

"Okay. Well, tell me if you do."

I got no reply. It was probably just the flu, I convinced myself. Only he stayed locked in his room for three days straight. I stayed in mine, too, for lack of anything better to do. There were no assignments for me to do, which always took up five hours of the day. I couldn't exercise, and I didn't want to wake Arthur by playing the piano.

So I cleaned. Only there was nothing that was dirty. Because Arthur stayed in his room, the house remained uncluttered. Which meant I was scrubbing the toilet and dusting random corners.

I filled up most of my time with journal entries, which were much more interesting than detailed descriptions of my days. I began to write notes to myself, to talk about my feelings instead of what I had been doing that day. I started taking note of the differences between my life now and my life a year ago. Arthur's retreat from civilization somehow made me nervous, like something bad was going to happen. Suddenly, it seemed of paramount importance to write down everything I was thinking at every exact moment.

On the fourth day of Arthur's hibernation, I knocked on the door. "Dod, let me in!"

"Darcy, do not disturb me!"

Instead, I turned the handle, which I knew didn't have a lock on it, and let myself in.

"What did I tell you—" He started to reprimand, but he stopped when I gasped.

His room was filthy, clothes strewn all over his floor and dishes with flies around them from the last time he had eaten in his room, which was at least a month ago.

The whole place reeked of body odor and urine and dirty air.

"Dad, you're killing yourself!" I exclaimed, going over to where he was lying in his bed. "I'm opening a window!"

"Darcy, no!" He told me, but I was already shoving open the nearest one. The cool, crisp breeze swept into the room, immediately giving both of us breathing air. When the alarm did not go off, I took it to mean that Arthur hadn't bothered to turn it on in the first place, which was a warning flag in and of itself. He always turned the alarm on, because he never trusted me. Never.

Like a machine, I moved around his room quickly, gathering his dirty clothes and putting them in the clothes hamper, and then stacking his dirty plates.

"Please, Darcy, I need to be alone!"

"You've been alone for four days. Now, tell me what's wrong," I told him, feeling more like a mother than daughter.

He shook his head.

"Yes! Dad, what's gotten into you?" I snapped and then played the cards I had been saving for later. "If you don't care about yourself, at least care about me! You're responsible for my health. We have no food, and I have nothing to do around here. Start taking some responsibility!"



When I looked back at him, I expected him to yell at me for back-sassing, like he always did. Instead, I saw that his eyes were moist.

"Darcy, I am so sorry."

I was suddenly embarrassed. I hadn't meant to be quite so harsh. Maybe he was just sick.

"It's okay," I muttered.

"No, Darcy, you don't understand. I'm so sorry, I never thought it would come to this."

He was starting to worry me. "Look, this can all be fixed! We can get you cleaned up, and then we'll get you looking for a job in no time. You just need to have a little faith in yourself."

He sat up, then, the first sign of activity in him for at least four days. "Please, Darcy, stop it."

"What? You're scaring me," I told him, and he was. If he was truly sorry for laying in bed, I had forgiven him once I saw the state he was in. But something told me there was more. "Dad, what's wrong?"

A single tear trickled down his cheek. "Darcy, baby, please forgive me."

"I do. Just tell me what's the matter," I told him, going over to his bed and sitting down.

He shook his head. "I never thought we'd go broke. It all seemed like a good idea once I found out where you lived and who you were. Please, honey, believe me, I only wanted to be with you. I love you!"

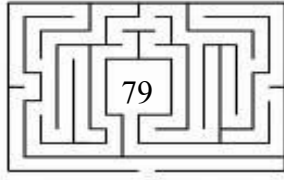
"I know, Dad," I soothed him, saying the words I knew he wanted to hear. But he wasn't taking it.

He was still shaking his head.

"Seriously, just tell me what it is!" I exclaimed, getting more than anxious now. Something wasn't right.

---

"Baby girl," he started, and he looked away from me.  
"I'm going to hold you for ransom."



I was sitting at the dining room table, staring at the piece of paper. How was this happening?

I didn't know what to feel. I had grown fond of Arthur enough to know that I was going to miss him. He was my dad, and I had grown to accept that. We had formed some kind of a bond, if not love, than certainly a kind of kinship. I wanted to trust that he was right about this, but I couldn't.

Once the transaction went through, I was never going to see Arthur again. He had to go into hiding, using only the money he was going to get from my parents to support himself. So, what was going to happen with my life? Was I just going to go back to living in my old house and pretend like nothing happened? No, I couldn't, because my life would never be the same. God, why was this happening?

My eyes focused on the letter Arthur had instructed me to write:

Dear Mom and Dad,

It's Darcy. First of all, I'm okay. I'm not hurt. But I have a problem. My kidnapper, who has asked me to refrain from mentioning names, is willing to bring me back to the both of you. The only thing is that my kidnapper wants you to pay \$250,000 in order to get me back. My kidnapper has been very lenient in the price, because my kidnapper knows how much money you both make. If you are willing to pay this price, please meet us at the area designated on the attached paper. On the top right corner of that page will be the date you and we will meet. We will be waiting for you there at exactly eight o'clock p.m. Please don't bring the police! My kidnapper will know if you have and will leave with me, and I won't be able to see you again. Please, I'm asking you to do this for me. I don't want anything to go wrong, and I miss you so much! Please, Mom and Dad, I want to be back with you. I love you both so much!

Love your daughter, Darcy

I looked up as Arthur entered the room.

"Darcy, I've read it over twice. It's fine!" He told me. He was acting more like his old self now that I had agreed to help him out of his money problem.

"I know! It's just...I'm wondering if this really is the best idea," I finally told him.

"Why?" He asked suspiciously, sitting down in the chair next to mine.

"I dunno. What if they trace this letter back to us and find out who you are?"

"They won't," he assured me.

"But what if?"

"I'll handle it. Darcy, you have nothing to worry about. Trust me."

"Yeah, I know." That didn't stop me from worrying, though. In fact, putting this whole thing into Arthur's hands right as he was recovering from a mental breakdown seemed very stupid.

He looked at me. "Is there something else bothering you?"

I shook my head but then said, "Dad, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

I took a breath. "If my mom were alive, would she have let you do what you did in order to see me?"

He paused for a minute and looked away. I knew I had probably offended him, but I wasn't going to be with him much longer, and I needed to know.

Finally, he shook his head. "No. Emma would never have let me do something like this. She would have asked to meet you, but she never would have taken you away."

"Her name was Emma?" I asked.

He looked surprised. I don't think he understood that he had said her name first. When he remembered that he had, however, he nodded. "Yeah. Emma." He whispered her name like it was honey on his tongue. "She loved you like no other."

I looked at him, and a teardrop fell down my cheek before I could stop it. "Do you love me?"

He looked at me. "Darcy, what kind of question is that? Of course I love you!"

I looked away from him.

"Baby, please talk to me. What's wrong?"

I shook my head, refusing to look at him. I couldn't tell him how I really felt.

"Are you upset with me?" And just like that, he realized the root of our problems.

I slowly looked back at him. "Why did you do this to me? Didn't you realize how much it would hurt me? I'm not gonna be okay. You can't just leave me; everything is changed. I won't know what to do anymore. Why did you take me?"

His eyes were glistening. He wasn't mad; he was just incredibly sad. "Darcy, please—"

I shook my head, stopping him. My voice was calm, almost soothing, as I started, "You can't undo it. I know you tried, really, I do, but you messed up. You hurt me. You really hurt me, Dad, and I don't know if I'm okay. And I know you really want to apologize, but I don't want you to right now. I'm sorry, but I can't, I just...can't."

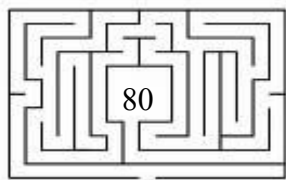
A tear dripped down his cheek. I saw his hand reach out to touch mine, but I got up quickly. Leaving the note on the table, I turned and went back to my room. I closed the door quietly and let the tears freefall down my face. Arthur knew enough not to disturb me.

Quietly, I took out our family picture. Focusing all my energy on my mom, I named her Emma. This one name, this one thing about my mom, was the only thing I was confident about right now.

"Emma," I whispered. "My mom's name is Emma. Emma. Emma."

I said it over and over again, elongating the syllables and stressing them differently until the name itself sounded weird to say.

Emma. Emma, Darcy, and Arthur. One big, happy family that was no more.



I didn't know how Arthur had mailed the letter, expecting no one would discover our whereabouts from the postmark.

The day after he announced that the letter was mailed, we set off in the white van he had used to take me away. I packed a change of clothes, two water bottles, some cheerios that I had found in Arthur's room ("For emergencies," he told me), and a flashlight.

Because of the destination, I was hoping that the journey didn't take quite as long as the previous one had. Fairly certain that I wouldn't be able to sleep at all during the trip, I brought one of the books I had found in Arthur's room as a means of distraction. Arthur had recommended it to me, but I couldn't quite convince myself that it was going to be good. Any book called *Of Human Bondage* did not sound quite as riveting as I would have liked. But I brought it.

I was ready by the door at seven-thirty in the morning, as we had planned the night before. Arthur was busting around, trying to get everything he needed, which wasn't much, but still caused him to worry about forgetting something.

"Dod!" I finally snapped. "You're not going to need six months worth of shaving supplies!"

He looked sheepish and put them down, trying to find an excuse. "You never know. I might have to shave really badly."



I rolled my eyes. "Can we just go already? Staying here is making me nervous!"

"I agree," he answered and ushered me out the door.

However, he stopped before we closed the door.

"What?" I sighed, exasperated.

He hesitated before taking something out of his bag. Silently, he handed me a thick manila envelope.

I stared at it, confused. "What's this?"

He wasn't looking at me. "In there is every piece of homework, every assignment, and every description of your day that you ever wrote for me. I kept all of it, because I thought either you or I would think it funny to look back on them in twenty years. But I want you to take it now. I want you to remember me with these. Okay?" He asked quietly.

Now I knew why he wasn't looking at me. Our emotions must have been similar. Suddenly, this was all too real. Was this really happening? Was I really leaving him forever?

I knew the tears would start to fall if I didn't push them down. So I said a quick thank you and turned away from him.

I made sure not to think about anything at all as I walked towards the back of the van. Then, I stopped suddenly. I turned to Arthur and then to the house. "I just realized that I've never seen what the house actually looks like."

"I trust you," he told me, although I wasn't sure if he had just forgotten to put my bandana on. In any case, I turned to take a good look at the house I had been living in for more than a year.

The house was a split-level, which I knew. It was painted a very bright white and had blue shutters. What I didn't expect to see was how nicely kept the outside looked. The

lawn was green and healthy looking, and the cool breeze made the house seem almost welcoming. Odd.

"Yup, that's it," Arthur said, his final hint that we should get going.

"Alright, alright," I sighed, taking one last look at the house just as the sun hid behind the clouds. My last glance at the house was when it was in shadows. Just as easily as it had given me a good feeling, I now had a bad feeling. It looked foreboding in the shadows.

Slowly, I climbed into the back of the van, with Arthur lending a supporting hand. I threw my bag into the back and then settled down with the pillow I had brought along.

"Comfy?" He asked as he got ready to close the doors.

"As comfy as I'm gonna get," was my answer.

"Good," he said, smiling, and then he closed the doors. I hoped that he was locking the doors more in fear that they would fly open and I would tumble out than the fear that I might try to escape.

Because, really, where was I going to go? I didn't know where we were, and it's not like I would just jump out of a moving van.

What I was thinking about the most, though, was what I had seen poking out of the back of Arthur's pocket: a gun. In fact, I was almost positive that it was the same gun Arthur had used to get me to go with him a year ago.

Don't think about it, Darcy. Just don't think about it. It's probably just a safety precaution in case someone tries to rob our truck or if we meet up with a bear in the forest or—

I made myself change the subject.

So I settled down, stretching myself out, and waited until the van started moving to see if I could sleep. I didn't know how in the world I was going to sleep when there was so

much to think about. What would happen if the police actually came? We had lied, kind of, in the note. How the heck was Arthur supposed to know that the police were there? If they came, they would arrest Arthur and all this would be for nothing. I knew him; he would not do well in prison.

I fell asleep picturing Arthur in the universal outfit of prison: the orange jumpsuit.

Something woke me up. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but my eyes flew open, and my senses were peaked. It took me a minute to remember where I was, but once I identified the white van, it was easier to imagine what had woken me. We had probably gone over a bump or something. In any event, I wasn't tired anymore.

I sat for maybe half an hour, daydreaming about nothing in particular. The van was completely dark, so it was easy to close my eyes and pretend I was in a Porsche, driving next to a really hot surfer guy. My brain was working too hard, though, and I couldn't quite hold on to that daydream.

Instead, I thought back to the last time I had been in this van. I had been totally afraid, hurt by the last fight I had had with my parents, and a year younger. A whole year. It was incredibly hard to imagine myself a year younger. I didn't feel sixteen, but maybe that was because my life hadn't changed all that much from when I was fifteen.

And then I remembered Aubrey's baby. The child would be about a year old right now. I was an aunt, and I hadn't even acknowledged it. I was still praying for a little girl. I would be the best aunt in the world, because I knew what it felt like to be bossed around by an older female.

Suddenly, my heart yearned for my family. Not Arthur and Emma. I wanted to be safe in my house. My home.

I remembered my first English essay ever. I remembered I had been raging mad at Arthur for ripping it up. That had happened twelve times since that day, and each time, it had made me absolutely furious. But I had gotten over it. I understood where he was coming from. I also thought he had some serious OCD issues.

Finally, when my brain couldn't take thinking about so many things, I crawled over to where I knew there was a light, pressed it, and immediately cringed from the light. As my eyes got used to it, I moved back towards my pillow and took out *Of Human Bondage*. The pages were thin and the words were really small, but I gave it a chance just because there was nothing else to do.

I skipped past the introduction after trying to read the first sentence, because it was incredibly boring and my eyes glazed over after the first paragraph.

I could tell it was a boring book, because after chapter six, the author was describing everything in too much detail, and I was thinking of other things as my eyes skimmed over the page. I had to make myself snap back to the page so that I could comprehend what I was reading. I wanted more than anything for Arthur to see that I cared enough about him to read what he had recommended, even if it did suck.

After chapter eighteen, I gave in to my inner feelings and put the book down. Maybe I'd read it another time. When I am ten years older, lying in the hospital, and pregnant with my first child. Then, I wouldn't have thoughts coated with fear and desperation racing through my head and distracting me.

But for now, all I could do was worry about my current situation. And more importantly, convince myself that everything was going to be okay in the end.

I must have slept for most of the time, because I couldn't recall what I had used to pass the hours as we sped down the street, catching an occasional bump in the road.

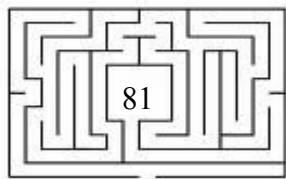
All I remembered was waking up, remembering that I was still trapped in the stupid van, and hoping that, for my sake, we arrived at our destination in the next twenty minutes.

I somehow convinced myself that the boredom I felt while reading *Of Human Bondage* was all in my mind and that if I tried it again, I could make myself get into it. So I started reading again, picking up where I had left off with dear Philip.

Moments later, though, the truck stopped. We were making a pit stop, or so I thought.

Arthur's footsteps came to the back of the van, and then the doors opened. He poked his head in.

"We're here."



"What time is it?" I asked quietly, trying to ignore the tumbling of my stomach. All of a sudden, I felt nauseous. I was nervous.

"Seven-fourteen," he answered.

"What do we do until eight o'clock?"

"We won't be doing anything. You will be waiting in this van until I come to get you, and I will be participating in the transaction."

He said this as though I was an inanimate object. I sighed. "Fine."

Before I could say anything more, he had climbed into the back and was next to me. "Darcy, have I told you that I love you?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Well, I'm saying it again. I love you. I'm so glad I got to meet you," he told me, and I saw that his eyes were gleaming.

"I am, too. And I'm sorry it ended this way, Dad," I told him quietly. A tear slipped down my cheek.

"It's okay, honey," he told me, and, with his thumb, he wiped away my tear.

"I love you, Daddy," I whispered, and he hugged me tightly.

"I love you, too," he said for the umpteenth time, but I didn't even tease him about it. I didn't even think about teasing him. My heart was breaking.

All too soon, he was out of the van, the doors were closed, and I was listening to his footsteps walk away.

I could count on one hand how many times I had prayed to God for something to go my way, but I felt now was the time.

"God," I whispered, "Please, God, help us all through this. Make this all okay. I just want it all to be okay."

I let the tears flow freely. "Please, God, please," I whispered over and over again. I couldn't believe this was happening. How was this happening? Were we going to get through this? Was everything going to be okay?

I sobbed until my head hurt, and my eyes were swollen, and I could hardly blink. My breathing was hitched, and I had to remember that my nose was too stuffy to breathe out of it. I was trying to catch my breath, but every time I thought about what was happening outside, the tears started coming down again.

After a good half hour of crying, I forced myself to stop. My head was hurting so much, it felt like I had hit it repeatedly against a wall. My splitting headache was enough to stop me from crying. Each time I took a breath, my head would pound harder. Eventually, my body learned that crying made headaches, so my tears dried up and I was able to get myself together.

I tried to wait until Arthur came to get me. Honestly, I tried. But after almost an hour of sitting and waiting, I couldn't take it anymore. My mind was playing tricks on me; I was hearing gunshots and odd noises in the wind when there was nothing there.

I allowed myself, finally, to feel excitement and hope. I was going to see my parents today. I was finally going to see my mom and dad after a year of being without them. I missed them so much, and I had dreamt of this day for so long, that it almost felt like just another dream. I would be seeing my parents in only a few hours. We would at last be together again. I promised myself we would never have another fight, ever. I would be the best daughter in the world. I would clean the house for them every night, and I would treat them with the respect they deserved. All I wanted was to see their faces again.

As I sat listening for any movement outside, though, my excitement died and made room for the fear that had gripped me a year ago. What was taking so long? What was going on outside? Were they fighting? Would they know where to look for me? Had my parents brought the police anyway? What was happening?

Finally, when I had all but convinced myself that Arthur had died and my parents were lost, I got up, packed my bag—including the book and the manila envelope—slung it over my shoulder, and started towards the doors. I was bracing myself for the doors to be locked, and I was mentally thinking of different ways I could try and unlock them. So, when I turned the handle just to check, and they opened, I almost fell out, catching myself just in time before I hit the ground.

As it was, I still had to straighten up and regain my balance once I was on the steady ground. It felt odd to walk around. My legs were stiff, and my eyes weren't properly adjusted to the darkness.

Once they were, however, I looked around quickly. I had no idea where we were. And I was afraid of the dark. I wanted



more than anything to cuddle up in the back of the van and wait for Arthur or even the police.

But I knew I couldn't do that, so I forced myself to think rationally about what my next step was going to be.

I quieted my breathing so that I could hear every little sound and waited until my eyes were adjusted to the dark.

From far to the right, I heard voices. Someone was yelling to another person, and the other person must have been speaking very softly, because I couldn't hear the other voice.

I followed the voices, walking so slowly, I was hardly moving. I didn't want to make any sound whatsoever. But, because there were dead leaves everywhere, there wasn't much luck in that. I settled with making as little noise as possible. Of course, every step I took sounded like an avalanche.

As I neared the site of the voices, my eyes found an inkling of light. When I got closer, the light grew brighter, and, pretty soon, I realized that I was seeing the flashlight Arthur had packed.

I let the pang of sadness course through me but then shut it down. I was here for one purpose, and that was to watch the 'transaction'. I wouldn't allow myself to feel any emotions whatsoever for what was going on. I needed to concentrate on not being seen.

When I got close enough to see what was going on, I almost gasped.

Arthur was in the middle of what looked like an already designated area, and my parents were standing across from him. They looked extremely mad. Listening to their conversation, I could tell that it had been my dad yelling and Arthur talking softly.

The thing that worried me the most, though, was that Arthur's gun was pointed at my parents. I had a gut feeling I knew the reason why, but I didn't let myself believe it. Something wasn't right.

I wanted to scream out, to tell them all that I was here, to tell Arthur to put his gun away, that my parents weren't armed and wouldn't hurt him. I wanted them to know that this could be settled peacefully. They had to understand this. I couldn't be the reason for this violence. I would never survive if he accidentally shot them, or if anything bad happened to any of them.

But at the same time, I was confused. Why would Arthur be pointing a gun at my parents? He already held something over them. He didn't need another weapon. He knew that, too. So why did he have a gun to my parents?

Before I could stop myself, I was moving even closer to the scene, trying to see whether something or someone was prompting Arthur to point a gun at my parents.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw people- people hiding in bushes. Policemen. And they had their guns pointed at Arthur. My heart lurched, and a wave of fear passed over me. Did he know? Was that why he was holding a gun? Or was he in the dark about them?

My need to alert them all of my presence became overwhelming, and I used all of my strength to quiet myself. I wouldn't ruin this transaction. I wasn't even supposed to be here. But something wasn't right.

Automatically, it seemed, my foot moved in front of me as I tried to take in the rest of the scene, to see if there were any more police.

One policeman, specifically, heard my movement. I moved out of the way just in time. A second later, though, I heard a

man shout. The policeman had seen me. Suddenly, it seemed as though the whole forest was moving. In confusion and fear, I screamed. Then, several things happened at once.

Arthur was stirred up. He had seen the cops. He knew they were there. Another shout rang out in the night, and I ducked, hiding from the policemen. What was going on?

But that was too much for Arthur. Footsteps echoed all around me, and everyone was shouting. And then, Arthur made a mistake.

His finger slipped. He was so frightened that he had fired by accident. He thought it was my parents who were shouting to the policemen. He thought my parents had a gun. He wanted to warn them that he was armed, too.

All possibilities. But none of them mattered.

The next thing I knew, I was watching my parents drop. As if in slow motion, they dropped to the ground. From the wounds that had been caused by the bullets from Arthur's gun, blood was pouring from their bodies. My parents' blood was swirling into a pool, while I watched.

Another gun shot, and I was staring as Arthur went down. His head was gushing blood. He dropped to the ground, like my parents.

I watched as my three parents died.

"NO!" I screamed, starting towards the ditch.

Three gun shots. Three bodies. Dead. Lying there, dead, on the ground, blood, so much blood, police running towards the ditch, and I was watching. I needed help, and someone was coming for me.

I stopped suddenly when I saw that people were starting towards me.

"Darcy, stop!" A woman yelled. A cop. She was screaming something, and I heard my name, and I wanted to take

comfort in the fact that she knew me, knew about my parents and me, but I couldn't, I couldn't, so I didn't.

Out of instinct, I turned and ran the other way, sprinting as fast as I could, running as though the devil were chasing me.

My parents were dead. Arthur and Lydia and Ethan and Emma were dead, and I was alone. Where was I? Where was help?

The whole forest, the whole world, it was all completely dark. It was pitch black, and I didn't know where I was going, and I just wanted to get away from it all.

It was my fault. I moved, and it was my fault, and they were dead, and their blood was all over the place.

Flashes.

Arthur's tuna melt.

Mom's shrill laughter.

Dad's science jokes.

Aubrey's locket.

Stumbling through the forest, I ran, but I didn't know where I was going. I had to get away, because of the 'transaction', and it was their fault, and it was my fault, and my parents were dead.

"HELP ME!" I burst out.

I was making too much noise. The noises were all around me, coming closer to me, and there were so many footsteps. I knew I should be quiet, but I couldn't because the other footsteps were drowning out my own footsteps.

Then suddenly, I wasn't alone.

"Shh, Darcy, it's okay," someone said as a hand clamped down on my mouth, and an arm wrapped around me so forcefully that I felt my lungs screaming for air. Arthur. This was what Arthur did.

But it wasn't Arthur.

It was two men. Two strong men taking me away from where I was going, dragging me, while I watched, while I did nothing, because I didn't know where I was or what was going on.

And my parents were dead.

"Does she need it?" The one holding me asked. Was he talking to me? I didn't know what he was saying.

"Hold her still," was the other man's reply, and distantly, from the corner of my eye, I saw the man pull something from his pocket.

What was going on? What was happening? Why was he coming closer to me and—

I yelped in pain, but the hand muffled my sound. Someone was sticking me with a needle. My arm was screaming, and I was screaming, but then suddenly, it stopped. I looked up at the person holding me, but already, I was growing tired.

"Shh, it'll only hurt for a minute," he murmured.

I was drifting off to sleep, not even sure what was happening. I heard one of them sigh so distantly, I was sure they were leaving me to die.

"You think she'll remember this?" someone said, his voice so far away that my ears hardly picked it up.

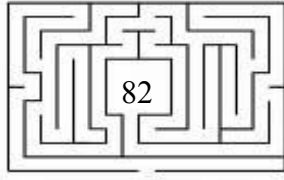
"Dr. Pierce thinks she will, but I guess we'll just have to see," the other one replied. "Let's go before..."

I was gone before I even realized this wasn't supposed to be happening. I was gone, but I would have tried to struggle if one of the men had bothered to tell me that I wouldn't remember the last year. That I wouldn't remember Emma and Arthur, and writing my English essays, and trying to get Arthur to not give up on me, and having to write my own ransom note, and watching my three parents die. I would have

---

tried to make myself remember. But I didn't. I willed myself to forget.

And I did.



I couldn't believe I was doing this. How could I do this after a year and a half of being forced to forget? Why had I let them convince me into doing this? I thought that having my memory back would show me how sacred it actually was, but now I almost wished I could forget again. At least then, I wouldn't have to deal.

"Maybe we should go back," I said. "We can do this another time, when I'm not so worn-out."

Travis's car pulled through the gates, following the path until we reached where the others were gathered, but didn't say a word.

"Travis," I started again.

He turned the car off, put his keys into his pocket, then turned and kissed me lightly. "You're ready."

He got out of the car.

Slowly, I unbuckled my seatbelt, unlocked the door, and got out. Travis was standing, waiting for me, and I walked towards him, trying to avoid looking anywhere except straight ahead.

He could sense how uncomfortable I was, and he reached out, took my hand, and pulled me into him. "It's okay to be nervous," he whispered into my hair, and we walked slowly towards the very small crowd.

"I'm not nervous," I muttered defensively, and I felt his smile.

"I can feel your heart pounding, smart one," he told me sarcastically and, despite everything, I smiled.

"So. How's this gonna work?"

"Well, you're gonna go up, maybe say a prayer, maybe mingle with the people who've come to mourn, and then we can leave."

"What am I supposed to say?" I asked quietly.

He sighed. "Anything. See, at things like this, no one expects anything from you. If all you do is smile and say hi, they'll take it. Right now, these people just want to see you here."

I looked at him. I could see in his eyes that he was in pain. "Was it this bad for you?"

He looked straight ahead, but his head shook once. "Worse."

"Why?" I asked quietly.

Then he glanced down at me. "I had no one else."

I could manage to get by without my parents' at my side; that wasn't what was the most painful for me. Their absence was mind numbingly heartbreaking to cope with, but it wasn't necessarily foreign, I guess is the word, after remembering a year without them, living only with Arthur.

No, what ripped at my heart, tore me to pieces every single minute of every day, was the memory of them dying. I struggled everyday with the images of them collapsing, and at night, the nightmares, the instant replays of that moment. That was what killed me, what I feared above all. That, and their gravestones, literally felt like a punch in the gut every time I thought of them.

We walked in silence, the cool April air blowing at us as we trudged up the hill towards the gravesites, towards the people watching us. I didn't think about what was coming; I thought only about what Travis had said. I wasn't alone.

"Hey, girly," Aubrey whispered when I got close to her. She pulled me into a hug, and I felt her shivering against me, maybe from fear, or maybe from standing in the cool air for so long. Maybe it was a little of both.

Although Aubrey had known about our parents' deaths, had attended their actual funeral however many months ago it had been, she was still partly in denial. She was holding up only for her family, for me, for Nate, and for their almost two-year-old daughter, Amaya.

I wasn't even sure if she was okay. She had, after all, a completely different bond with my parents. She had been an only child, had had nine years alone to bond with my parents before I came into the family. Not to mention the fact that they were her biological parents. I had lost my parents, my friends, my protectors,



my reason for being here, but Aubrey had lost a part of her soul. No, I really didn't know if she was okay.

"It's okay," I whispered as I pulled away from her. Whether she heard me, I wasn't sure, but I was proud of myself for saying it.

Next, I turned to Nate. I gave him a small smile.

"Come here," he murmured, pulling me into a hug.

Nate had become the foundation for my family now. He was the rock that held us up. He had been strong through all of this, had taken care of absolutely everything. His love for my family kept us strong.

"It's gonna be okay," he whispered. I nodded into his chest.

"I know," I whispered automatically. When we separated, he moved back to Aubrey, unconsciously putting a hand around her waist.

As I stared at the two of them together, I couldn't help thinking about how naïve I had been about their relationship only a year and a half ago. Only after everything I had gone through did I understand their love, their unity. They truly were one person in two bodies, especially after the recent events. Not one day did any of us take love for granted anymore. We had all changed.

It was so unreal to be standing with my sister next to my parents' graves. Two years ago, everything was normal.

No.

It wasn't normal.

Normal is relative to everything else. My life was normal because there were secrets that were kept from me so that I lived in a fake world. It was only normal because the people around me had made sure I thought it was. As soon as Arthur came into my life, my definition of normalcy had been warped.

Nonetheless, I never could have imagined this was how it would end. At the lab, at Arthur's, I had had some vision that my life would be alright just as soon as I could get back to my normal life. But normal existed no more.

I did not enjoy talking to random people who thought it would be polite to meet me, talk to me about what had happened to me, and then talk about how wonderful my parents were. It hurt my heart in the most literal sense.

Dr. Hobbs, my psychiatrist, was waiting for me. She was fifty-three, a down-to-earth woman with conservative morals and a liberal husband. Yet, she understood me better than most and listened without interrupting. That, I guess, was all I really needed in a psychiatrist. That, and a friend.

“Good morning,” she said quietly.

I smiled a half smile just for her benefit. “Fancy seeing you here.”

She smiled back. “I could say the same to you. Running a little late?”

I shrugged. “It took some convincing on his part to get me to come,” I told her, motioning with my head to Travis talking quietly with my neighbors.

“Ah,” she sighed. “I’m glad he finally convinced you.”

“He could convince me of just about anything with enough wheedling,” I chuckled.

She smiled. “So, tell me, Darcy, how are you?”

“Alright, I guess,” I answered vaguely. “This isn’t exactly what I’d call a feel-good outing.”

She turned to the crowd of people. “It’s a nice turn out,” she told me conversationally. “You’re loved, Darcy, you really are.”

“Yeah, but not when it counts, right?” I asked almost sarcastically, mostly talking to myself.

She stared at me, maybe waiting for the sentence I was trying to form to come after the odd rhetorical question I had asked.

“It’s just...something doesn’t feel right,” I finished, and when she nodded, I quickly added, “I mean, I’m through expecting that my life will just go back to the way it was before. But there’s something else I’m trying to adjust to, only I don’t know what it is. God, that sounds weird, doesn’t it?”

She smiled slightly, a sympathetic smile. “No, Darcy, not at all. What you’re missing is normalcy.”

I chuckled a humorless laugh.

“What?” She asked, a smile still on her face just to keep the conversation light.

“I had an internal battle with myself just two minutes ago over that exact topic,” I told her. She had already heard my

strangest conversations and seen me at my craziest. Who cares if she knew I argued with myself?

"And I probably know exactly what you were trying to figure out," she replied. "I'm sure you know that there is no such thing as 'normal.' I mean, what is normal, anyway? What are you comparing it to, and what makes *that* normal? You see, you could go around in a circle trying to figure it out, but there is no answer."

"So, then how am I missing what doesn't exist?" I asked her quietly, although I had a feeling I knew where she was going with the conversation.

"The normalcy you're used to comes from schedules. Rigid, no nonsense schedules. You've adapted to them, because they've become your life. You knew what to expect, for the most part, at the lab, and you knew how Arthur's mind worked. Before that, you always went to school, came home, did your homework, and repeated that as necessary. And there was always an authority figure telling you what to do. There was no room for any doubt that another schedule may have worked. Now that it's gone, it is absolutely understandable that you don't know what to do with yourself."

I looked away from her, thinking about what she had said. Her words were only that: words. They were powerful, comforting, and yet, I still didn't feel right.

"When will I stop hurting?" I whispered, looking up at her.

Her eyes filled with sadness, but she said, "Do you want the honest answer or the nice answer?"

I knew what was coming, but still, I sighed, "Honest, I guess."

"You'll never stop hurting, Darcy. You'll just grow immune and eventually, all this will live in the background. But it'll lurk, and there's really no way to fix that."

I nodded slowly. "And the good news?"

She smiled. "Your life will become better. I promise."

I gave her a weak smile. "Thanks."

She pulled me into a hug, and we stood there until some of my less polite neighbors came to talk to me. Aubrey and Nate, for the most part, took a lot of the heat so that the only people I had to

talk to were my ancient neighbors who couldn't even hear my responses to their questions.

"How are you doing?" Mrs. Sterling asked loudly.

"Fine," I told her, trying to smile.

"I would be doing bad, too, sweetheart, you don't have to be ashamed," she told me, again mishearing me.

"Thank you," I said anyway and turned towards Travis. "Get me out of here."

"Patience," he told me, and the corners of his lips curved up slightly. I sighed, but turned towards the next couple I could have sworn died three years ago.

Slowly, one-by-one, the people left, leaving Aubrey, Nate, Amaya, Travis, and me to stare at the gravestones. I thought about the mock-burial we had just been through and wondered if anything in life was going to be that hard, that painful, that mind-shattering.

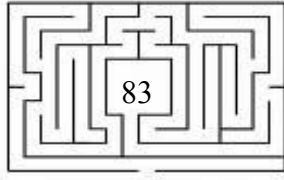
I was the first to turn away from the gravestones.

"I can't do this," I told Travis quietly, trying to keep my voice under control.

He nodded. "Okay."

"You know, we're going to go," Aubrey told me, and Nate turned away from the gravestones with Amaya. "Someone needs a nap."

She took Amaya from Nate's arms, and they backed away slowly. I could tell they were watching me from a distance, waiting for my next action.



“Anything you wanna do before we leave?” Travis asked me, putting his arms around my shoulders as I turned back towards the gravestones.

I stared at them for a minute, not really reading the words. “They’re dead,” I whispered.

“I know,” Travis whispered back, kissing my neck and leaning into me.

I continued to stare. “They’re dead.” It didn’t fit.

“It’ll get better, Darcy, I swear it will,” I heard Travis whisper.

“How?” I asked just as quietly. I was only vaguely aware of the single teardrop trailing down my cheek.

“You’re not alone,” was the only thing he said.

We stared at the gravestones together until the wind had tangled my hair around his shoulders, but still, I said nothing.

“What are you thinking about?” Travis asked quietly.

I paused. My mind had wandered, and I was no longer thinking about my parents. It was something else. Finally, I said, “Arthur. He kidnapped me for his own selfish reasons then... killed my parents. And he was my father,” I told him, trying to keep the emotion from my voice. “What does that say about *me*?”

Travis looked down at me. “That you got your mom’s genes instead.”

I turned, smiled at him, leaned in, and kissed him on the cheek. “Can I just have a minute?”

He nodded, let go, smiled slightly, and then backed down to where I could see my family waiting. Slowly, I walked back to the gravestones, knelt down on the rock hard, leafy ground, and reached out. Softly, I traced the epitaph on my mom’s gravestone. Lydia Calloway. Wife, Mother, Friend.

“Hey, guys. It’s Darcy. But you knew that,” I whispered, smiling just because I knew they would smile. “We have a lot to talk about. I know the last words we said to each other were mean, and I’m sorry that I told you I didn’t want to be with you. I was just mad, because you didn’t tell me the truth. But you guys were right. My dad turned out to be not so great of a guy. And I’m more like you than him, in case you’re wondering.”

I was crying now, almost sobbing, as I whispered, “Mostly, though, I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry I killed you. I’m sorry I caused all this, and I know you’d forgive me anyway, even if I just thought it, but it feels better to tell you face to face.”

“I had a pretty rough time at the lab, but I know you were watching. And I’m sorry that I forgot about your deaths. They were important, but you were so important to me that this all was too hard for me to handle. I’m sorry. I know you’re sitting up in heaven, and you’re trying to tell me not to cry and not to worry, but we aren’t on the same frequency, so this is all just guesswork.”

The tears had coated my cheeks and the wind made me shiver slightly. My head was pounding incessantly, but the tears kept coming. “Mom, I know you always wanted to have a lot of grandkids. It sucks that you aren’t going to meet them. I guess we won’t be having those weekly Sunday dinners we always dreamt about, but then again, you’d probably be sick of me by the fourth week. I’ll make sure to tell my kids all about you and how great you are and how much you’ll always love them.”

“And, Daddy,” I paused, nervous even though he wasn’t going to respond anyway, “you should know that I’m dating a boy named Travis James, and even though he’s two years older than me, don’t worry, he’s safe, and I’m happy.”

I bent down so close to the gravestone that my nose was practically touching it. “And since you don’t have a rebuttal for this one, I’m telling you now that I love him,” I whispered and then smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll be careful.”

I stood up slowly as I wiped away the tears that had not yet dried. Quietly, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a locket. “On my fifteenth birthday, Aubrey gave me a locket just like this one. I wear it everyday, because it reminds me of you. I want you to wear this one.”

As gently as possible, I placed the locket right underneath all the flowers left by people.

"This way," I continued, "we'll always be connected."

I stared at the locket, the sun gleaming on it from all different angles. Inside were two pictures: one of Aubrey and me, and one of Nate, Aubrey, and Amaya.

"I guess I'll see you later," I whispered, touching the gravestone, willing myself not to think that my parents were underground.

I didn't turn around right away. I wanted to get my bearings before I faced my family and Travis, whom I knew had been watching me.

A pain so deep and hollow was forming in my stomach, and a part of me wanted to break, collapse, sink down into the ground, where I would be comforted by my parents. I would have given anything for just one look at my mom or dad, just one more minute to talk to them, just to hear their voices. It hurt so much to think about them. How would I survive? I couldn't survive without them. They were all I knew, all I had been brought up to be. How could they be gone?

I was aching, my body dying, my mind swirling, my stomach tossing, my heart crying, screaming for the ones I loved. I needed them. I needed them.

And then suddenly, I was gasping in pain, collapsing to the ground, holding on to my mom's gravestone, willing it to break.

"Why? Why did you leave me? How could you do this? You knew I couldn't take it, why did you go?"

The choking sobs, the horrible tremors, they were shaking my body as I huddled over the gravestones, screaming, weeping, choking on the air that was trying to get to my lungs.

"Come back! Please, God, don't do this to me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please, don't leave me. I love you. Please, I can't do this, please, I'll do anything, just come back..."

I wanted to shriek in pain, rip at my hair, make myself feel the pain I was trying to block as the tears came so fast that I could see nothing. My surroundings were a blur, the cool air a distant breeze; the only thing I felt was the hard stone of the grave.

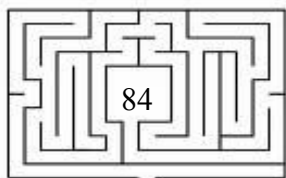
---

Something heavy came down on my shoulder, but I took no notice of it. The hideous moans coming from my chest were all that filled the air, filled my senses, the pain of my loss the only thing I felt.

Vaguely, I could feel my hands being pried from the stone by a gentle touch and warmth surrounding me. As I took in the shape of Travis, the way his body formed around mine, kept me safe, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, drew myself into him, and let myself wallow in pain, in sorrow, in anger and hate and horror.

The tears I shed were for everything and nothing, for the feeling and lack of feeling I would feel and had felt, the numbness, the pain, the absolute darkness I was surrounded in. How long Travis and I sat like that, huddled in each other, I didn't know. It could have been an hour, or it could have been a day. My only perception was the fracturing of my heart.





**M**y alarm clock rang out loudly through the darkness and comfort of my room. I groaned, reached out, and slammed my palm onto the off button.

I sat up slowly, glad that I had pulled my shades down the night before. I hated sunlight in my eyes when I first woke up. I wasn't sure if I would ever feel comfortable waking up to brightness. I was used to the dark greeting my eyes in the morning. Ever since...

I climbed out of bed groggily and padded down the hallway. Kicking one of Amaya's toys away from the top stair, I went downstairs and turned the coffee pot on. I depended on my cup of coffee in the morning. I didn't trust myself to get through the day just yet, not without a caffeine jolt first.

Combing my hair back with my fingers, I stumbled over Amaya's Barbie doll and groaned. The day Aubrey decided to clean up after Amaya would be the day when Amaya finally learned how to pick up her own toys. Amaya, I scoffed, had an excuse. She was only two years old. Aubrey, however, was just lazy.

As the coffee slowly trickled into the pot, I went back upstairs and turned on the shower. Then I lifted the shades in my bedroom and let the afternoon sunlight shine onto my tidy room. Admittedly, I had slept later than intended. The snooze button was so tempting, though.

It was now ten-thirteen, and I was running a tad late. I hopped quickly into the shower, leaving almost no time to bask in the hot water, and was out in eight minutes.

I threw on an old pair of sweatpants and a tank top, pulled my wet hair into a bun, and turned to get a cup of coffee before I started my daily makeup endeavor.

Suddenly, I yelped back in fright. Travis was standing in the doorway to my room, a half-smile on his face and my usual coffee cup in his hand.

"I let myself in," he told me by way of greeting.

"You scared me," I muttered, going over to him. "How long were you standing there?"

He shrugged. "Long enough," he smirked.

I smiled and wrapped my arms around his waist. I felt him set my cup of coffee on my dresser. With me still holding him closely, he shifted so that I was leaning against the doorframe.

Looking straight into my eyes, he said, "You look beautiful today."

I leaned my face into his neck. "You always say that."

"It's always true," he answered, his arms pulling me so close to him that I could feel his muscled stomach against mine.

My lips curved as I kissed his neck lightly. For just a moment, we stayed like that, neither of us wanting to pull away from the warmth that love brought us.

His left arm loosened around my body. I moved us closer to the doorframe, and he leaned over me, his forehead touching mine.

His hand traced down my leg until it stopped at my right knee. I felt his fingertips lightly brush the spot where he knew the scar was. Like he did several times a day, he pressed his fingers gently above the scar, and he breathed in. His eyes closed slowly, and I watched as he struggled to compose his beautiful face.

I wasn't sure if he had ever truly gotten over what had happened to me that last day. He always seemed to run his fingers over the scar, a kind of personal torture that seemed to make him feel better. He hated that he hadn't been there to stop it. And I think that was the one thing he regretted most about the lab.

When he exhaled, he opened his eyes. His hand came back up to my face, and, stroking my cheek, he said, "How are you?"

"I'm alright, I guess," I sighed. "Glad this is all gonna be over soon."

He nodded. "I know."

My eyes shifted subtly to the coffee cup, steaming and calling to me from the dresser. Still leaning into him, I said, "Did you have some of my coffee?"

He smiled. "Only to make sure it was good enough for you."

"And was it?"

"Of course," he answered.

Chuckling, I let go of him and picked up the cup of coffee. Slowly, I inhaled the scent and then brought the cup to my lips. I basked in the rich, glorious taste of my lovely caffeinated beverage.

I was swallowing a gulp of coffee when I brought the cup down from my lips and placed it back on the dresser.

Travis had been staring at me. "What?" I asked, glancing back at the cup.

He took one large step towards me, pulled me into him, and brought his lips down to mine. His arms came around me fiercely and he held me, his lips forming mine, moving with them, loving them.

When he lifted his head, I saw that he was smiling. "You taste like coffee."

"Good," I whispered.

"God, I love you so much," he told me quietly, kissing my forehead but releasing me from his tight grip.

I turned away from him but then looked back over my shoulder. I smiled at him. I didn't need to tell him I loved him. Even without my constant reminders, he always knew. After everything that had happened after that last day, I was constantly telling him and showing him all the ways I loved him.

I took another sip of coffee, handed the cup to him, and said, "I'm stuck between two choices."

"Clothes?" He asked, going over to sit on my bed.

I nodded. "I've been wearing a lot of blue lately. I'm thinking I should change it up since it's the last day?"

I was partly talking to myself as I searched through my closet for the dress I had pictured in my head the night before.

"Ah-ha!" I muttered, grabbing the dress I had stuffed in the corner. I turned to Travis, holding the dress out.

He swallowed the coffee that was in his mouth and nodded. "Wear that today."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yeah. I like it," he answered.

Since that was about as far as his fashion compliments ever went, I accepted it. “Cool,” I answered. “Is it cold out?”

He shook his head. “Nope, it’s a perfect spring day.”

As I got the hair dryer from my bathroom, I called out, “What time is she coming to pick us up?”

“Half an hour, I think,” he called back.

“Great,” I sighed sarcastically, plugging in the hair dryer next to my mirror. I undid my bun and started the tedious process of drying my hair.

After ten minutes, my hair was straight and dry, and I hastily unplugged the dryer. I went over to my makeup drawer, pulled out green eyeliner and some mascara, and began applying it conservatively.

Aware of how close I was cutting it, I scurried over to my bed, grabbed the cup from Travis’s hand, took a sip, gave it back to him, and then got the dress from its place. I yanked my tank top off, pulled my dress on and then took off my pants. Then I stood in front of the mirror, adjusting the dress as necessary.

I saw Travis get up and come over to me. He picked up the beige underwrap I used to cover my brand and began unraveling it. He came around to my right side and gently wrapped the long piece of cloth until it was secure over my scar. Meanwhile, I continued to dot my face with makeup.

His hand came up and stilled my busy fingers. “Relax. Please.”

I sighed, placing the makeup back in its case. He knew me too well. “Alright, fine.”

I glanced back at the mirror, making sure I looked okay, but then stopped. I took in our reflections and had to smile.

I was looking healthy again after a period of time where I looked completely gaunt. I had gained back most of the weight I had lost. My hair was golden and shiny again. My eyes had life in them.

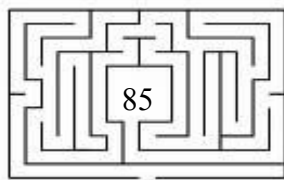
Travis and I, though not on purpose, were matching today. I was wearing a black and white plaid dress, and he was wearing his signature black, although not as casual. He had taken to wearing form-fitting clothing so that his muscles were quite a bit more obvious. He hoped this would keep back some of the more

---

obsessive fans we had accumulated. If they could even be called fans, that is.

He smiled at me in the mirror. "Ready?"

I shook my head. "No," I answered, but took his hand and led him back downstairs.



She was parking her huge black SUV in the driveway as I slipped my shoes on. A second later, the doorbell rang. “Could you...” I started, but Travis was already heading for the door.

I listened to their muffled greetings as I scurried around in the kitchen, throwing a few dishes in the sink in an effort to finish the chores I had promised Aubrey I would complete.

I spun around to face them as three people entered the room.

“I know, I know, I’m coming,” I told them breathlessly.

“Darcy, you can do this later. We’re going to be late,” Travis replied, leaning against the table.

“Well, she can just drive really fast,” I answered, although I abandoned the dishes and grabbed my purse off the table, allowing Travis to pull me through the door.

Special Agent Claire Fletcher and her partner Detective Knox followed, their heavy footsteps a comforting sound.

I was glad they were with me. They had been present, escorting Travis and me to and from the trials, for all eight days of our court visits. They had made sure that we were always watched, always protected, and never alone.

Claire was unbelievably protective, but that might have been for a whole different reason. She had once been Dr. Fletcher to me. Before she had been Dr. Fletcher, she had been the woman calling out to me in the forest, begging me to come to her instead of running into the arms of the lab.

It had taken me a while to understand Claire’s elaborate part in my story. And even after she had explained her role in my life, it had taken me weeks to recover from the shocking news.

Because how could I have known that she and the FBI had secretly been watching my every move? How had she expected me

to guess that the FBI had been biding its time, waiting for the right opportunity to infiltrate the lab? She was not, in fact, a doctor, but a Special Agent placed in charge of my case, of returning me to my family way back when Arthur had first taken me. The FBI had originally had her working undercover at the lab, but they had reassigned her to my case when her job at the lab seemed to coincide with my life.

She had asked the lab for a leave of absence the minute my parents had contacted the FBI after receiving Arthur's letter. This was at the same time that she had realized Dr. Pierce had taken a special interest in me and was looking to add me to her collection of minors. Claire had wanted to make sure she was at the transaction so that there was no way Dr. Pierce's people could take me away. Yet, she had failed. So her mission had become to care for me and make sure that nothing happened to me at the lab. She had failed again and had been forced to call in her men when I had been branded.

It had taken me some time to understand everything, because I couldn't seem to grasp why the FBI had not immediately come to my rescue. They had waited until I was in immediate danger. Because of this, she and I were on speaking terms and I trusted that she would do what was best for me, but I did not feel comfortable being with her alone. This was why she had suddenly been given a partner.

Knox was possibly even more protective than Claire. He had two teenage daughters himself, so he seemed to treat me as he treated them. He was a burly family man and mostly serious.

"Is your scar covered?" Knox asked quietly, coming up next to me.

I lifted my arm to show him and then opened the backseat door.

Claire adjusted her rearview mirror. "You doing okay?"

I glanced at her reflection. "I guess. I'll be doing even better when this is all over."

"I know, Darcy. This is the last day, though. After this, you're free," she answered.

I nodded but turned away from her, staring instead out the window, squinting against the afternoon sun.

Since I had left the hospital two weeks ago, I had basically spent the entire time entertaining those who came to mourn for my parents and for me. Between visits from friends, I had gone to trials.

There had been many trials, where the court had called up to the stand every single doctor, guard, and handy man that had worked at the lab. They had conducted the trials that had not required my presence during the three weeks I had stayed at the hospital, healing physically and mentally.

However, most of the minors called in as witnesses had all come to the same conclusion that I would be the main witness for the trial of Dr. Pierce. Somehow, they had all known that she and I had had a different relationship than the rest of the minors did with Dr. Pierce. So, I had been one of the witnesses for several other trials, but I was the main witness for this last one: the trial of Dr. Pierce.

And because of this, I was unbelievably scared. Not just nervous, but scared. Only Travis knew this, because I hadn't wanted to tell anyone else. I wasn't okay with sharing my fear. But Travis would have noticed this even if I hadn't have told him.

I was afraid. I was afraid of what I would see in her, and I was afraid that she would win this case. I remembered that she was conniving and intelligent, and I was afraid that her public speaking skills would outweigh the truth.

Mostly, though, I was scared of what she might do to me. I was scared I would clam up at the sight of her, that I would be too afraid to speak the truth. Because, in my heart, I knew there was a chance that this would happen.

Point blank, I was afraid of *her*. She had done to me what no one else would have dreamt of doing. She had hurt me, physically and emotionally, and I really was scared of her. I didn't know how to show this fear, but it came out at the oddest times.

For instance, sometimes Travis and I would be watching TV in my living room and Aubrey or Nate would walk in. Automatically, I would shrink into Travis, my heart pounding, until I convinced myself that there was no need to fear anything. Still, my breathing would remain heavy. I was afraid of who would come into the house. For this reason, I didn't like being alone.



“Hey,” Travis whispered, reaching over to me. I glanced at him, my breath trembling as I realized that I had been working myself up. He unbuckled his seatbelt and moved over to me. “You’re gonna be okay.”

I bit my lower lip, nodded, and leaned into him. I took small breaths, closed my eyes, and squeezed his hand.

I hated when this happened. I hated when my fear got the better of me. But I wasn’t okay. I had been damaged, and it took all of my strength to quell my constant instinct to run. This was why I was afraid of Dr. Pierce: she had put this fear in me. She had added to my flight instinct and used it against me. Now, I couldn’t seem to escape from it.

We pulled up to the courthouse, and I cringed. We were late; the reporters were already gathered outside, waiting for our entrance. This was a huge news story, after all.

I moaned as the cameras started flashing. Even as we continued to drive at about five miles an hour, they swarmed around our car. I knew they couldn’t see through the tinted windows, but it still seemed as though they were looking straight at me.

This publicity had followed the other minors at the lab as well, but somehow, it always seemed as though the reporters harassed me more. As if I needed any more of that.

Agent Fletcher laid on the horn, but they didn’t seem to move.

“Claire,” I murmured. I didn’t want to do this. I had been through this at least eight times, but I couldn’t and wouldn’t get used to it. I seemed to get physically sick during the days the trials went on.

Claire turned to Knox. “Bring them inside. I’m going to park the car and ward them off,” she told him.

He nodded once and then turned to us. “Ready?”

I glanced out the window at the inhuman faces ready to attack. My stomach turned. “Can’t we park in the garage and sneak in?”

He shook his head sympathetically. “You know they’ll only follow us,” he replied.

I sighed but then nodded. “Okay,” I mumbled.

Knox got out first. Immediately, the reporters moved over to him, almost swallowing him whole. Then, when Travis opened the door and stepped out of the car, we were blinded by the camera flashes. The whole world seemed to pulse as one as the reporters choked us.

Travis put his arm around me protectively and pushed through the crowd of reporters, following Knox.

“Are you excited to see Dr. Pierce finally behind bars?”

“What do you think about the recent trials?”

“Do you want to give the world a statement?”

“What do the numbers on your arm mean?”

“How do you feel about the rest of the children that were taken into the lab?”

“If your parents were alive, what would they say to you?”

Questions flew out at Travis and me, but I did my best to ignore them. They were always the same questions, and I tried to tune out the carnivorous reporters.

Thankfully, the hordes of people were not allowed into the courthouse, as established on the first day of trials. The noise immediately stopped when we closed the heavy entrance door on their faces.

I breathed a sigh of relief and immediately went over to one of the chairs in the corners to wait while Knox squared away our trial information with one of the secretaries.

Travis came over to me, knelt down in front of my chair, and took my face in his hands. Looking into my eyes, he said quietly, “You’re okay. You’re going to be fine, do you hear me? I will be sitting right in front of you. I will make sure nothing happens. Trust that I will let nothing happen to you. Do you trust me?”

I nodded. “With my life,” I muttered, like I always did. And I did. I absolutely trusted him with my life. He had saved my life once, and he would save it again, always.

“I will never let anything happen to you, Love. Never,” he whispered.

“I’m scared,” I whispered back, reaching my hand up to place it over his hand.

---

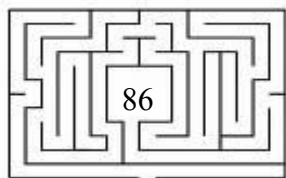
He stood up and then pulled me up into him. “We are going to win this case, Darcy. And then you will *never* see her again. This *will* be over, I promise. And then we’ll go away somewhere, just you and me, and we’ll forget about her. Okay?”

I smiled slightly and nodded. “Okay. I love you,” I whispered into his neck.

Knox came over to us. “Alright. Let’s go,” he told us quietly.

I breathed in, took Travis’s hand, and followed Knox down the winding hallways. My heart pounded in time with my footsteps, but I focused only on Travis standing next to me.

I was not alone.



The doors to the courtroom squeaked loudly as we entered. I breathed in quickly as all eyes seemed to turn to us. Slowly, we began our walk down the aisle. My eyes first landed on Nate, off to the right, like he always was.

He smiled at me and gave a thumbs-up. I couldn't help but smile back. He had been present at every one of the court cases I had attended. He took off work during the hours the trials were scheduled, standing in as guardian and closest family member because Aubrey could not. As much as Aubrey wanted to support me and help me heal, she could not force herself to attend the trials. It was too much for her. I didn't hold it against her, either; it was too much for me, as well. She, at least, had a choice. Because of this, Nate had become the one constant I could always count on in the courtroom.

I had become skilled in ignoring every face in the courtroom except the face of the prosecutor, Jimmy Simms. Mr. Simms had become an almost-friend of mine, professional in the courtroom and friendly in private. He had made all the minors, including myself, feel more comfortable talking. He had even sent me flowers during my time at the hospital. Then he had come to discuss details of my time at the lab. It was a win-lose situation.

I say 'almost friend' because the fact still remains that he had to wheedle information out of me in order to pursue his case.

He glanced at me, lifted his hand in greeting, and turned back to his paperwork. That was just like him.

I was walking to the left of Travis, ready to slide into my usual bench, when I froze. My eyes had accidentally wandered over to the defense stand, and I had taken in the sight of the devil.

Dr. Pierce sat beside her lawyer, and both of them were staring at me. As much as I begged my eyes to turn away, they were drawn to Dr. Pierce's face, and I winced as our eyes met.

Her eyes were a light blue, but now they seemed like a black hole from which I would never escape. She was wearing a blue sundress that accented her eyes, and her hair was pulled into a half ponytail. She looked completely harmless and completely normal.

*Do you realize how much trouble we could get into if you decide to talk? I can't have that. I can't have that at all.* Her words echoed in my head. She was never going to let me win. She wouldn't let me. I couldn't win this.

And suddenly, it seemed pointless to even try to fight this. I could never win. She had so much more power.

I wasn't breathing. I had been holding my breath for so long that my chest hurt, and then finally I exhaled.

Travis slid into the bench behind Mr. Simms, and I sat next to him. His fingers were laced with mine, and I knew he could feel my hand trembling.

He said nothing, only moving closer to me.

I focused on my breathing and nothing else while the Judge and jury entered, while we stood and then sat, and while Mr. Simms got up to deliver his opening speech.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury..."

And as much as I wanted to hear everything he said about the atrocities Dr. Pierce had committed, I couldn't listen. I couldn't seem to take in his words. I didn't want to hear what she had done. I didn't want to see the faces of the Jury members as they listened to Mr. Simms's words. I didn't want to see the doubt or terror on their faces as they either believed or dismissed Mr. Simms's claims. I didn't want anything.

"The Court calls to the stand Ms. Darcy Calloway," Mr. Simms announced.

At the sound of my name, it seemed as though the whole courtroom went quiet. The world had stopped breathing as I stood up slowly and made my way to the front of the courtroom.

I held up my right hand, swore the oath, and stepped into the witness box.

"Please state your name for the record," Mr. Simms started formally.

"Darcy Calloway," I answered quietly.

“And how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Are you acquainted with Mrs. Lorraine James, also known as Dr. Lorraine Pierce?”

I nodded. “Yes,” I answered.

“Would you please identify her for the Jury?” He asked.

I breathed in and then pointed to her. “That’s her.” I didn’t allow our eyes to meet. I looked away as soon as I said this.

“And how did you come to know her?” He asked quietly.

“She sent two men to kidnap me. They brought me to her lab so that she could experiment on my memory,” I told him.

There were some whispers from the Jury, but Mr. Simms continued. He asked questions that only required short answers and manipulated his words so that I told him the worst of what Dr. Pierce did to me. I was beginning to breathe a sigh of relief. It looked like his interview was coming to a close, and he hadn’t yet asked me about my last days at the lab or the brand on my arm.

When we came to the point where I thought he was done with the questions, he came closer to me. “I noticed you have some kind of bandage over your right arm.”

I looked down at it, but that was just to buy me some time. This was what I had feared above all. I hesitated, and then I looked back at him. “It’s to cover my scar.”

His expression suggested surprise, as if he had never heard this before- like I hadn’t told him every detail about my brand when I spoke to him privately. “Scar? What scar?”

“At the lab, Dr. Pierce branded me as a punishment,” I told him quietly, avoiding the eye contact of everyone.

“Branded? As in pushing a hot metal stick into your arm, like farmers do to their cows?” He asked, still playing confused.

I nodded. “She branded the code I had broken on my arm, because I had tried to escape from my room.”

There were a few gasps from the Jury and crowd in the courtroom. Still, though, I didn’t look up.

“Could you please show us the brand?” Mr. Simms asked.

My heart dropped in shock and anger. He had said he wouldn’t ask that. He had promised he wouldn’t. I had made him

promise, and he had agreed, he had sworn. I thought I had been safe because the defense certainly wouldn't have asked this.

I looked up at him, anger and fear in my eyes. "No."

There were louder voices in the courtroom, all blurring together to form one voice. The Judge brought his gavel down to the block of wood. Mr. Simms turned back to me.

"Ms. Calloway, I'm afraid I have to insist on this. If you refuse, you will be withholding evidence. Would you please show us your right arm?" He commanded.

I waited for someone to call 'objection' like they did in the movies. But the court remained silent as they waited for my next move.

My eyes met Nate's. I saw him nod once. He and I both knew what I had to do; for him, though, it was an easier decision to make.

Very slowly, I reached up to my right arm and began unraveling the underwrap. Amid the deafening silence, I uncovered my scar and then held it out for Mr. Simms to see.

The court gasped as one as all eyes fixated on my arm.

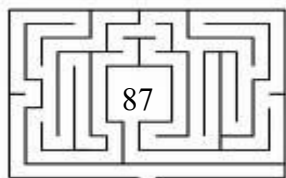
"And you said Dr. Pierce did this to you?" Mr. Simms asked quietly.

I nodded. "Yes."

"No further questions, Your Honor," Mr. Simms said. Then he turned to me. "You can put your bandage back on."

But at this point, it seemed pointless to do so. Shaking with rage, I rolled up the bandage and looked at the Judge.

I breathed in quickly when he called the defense to cross-examine me. A thin, gangly man, George Velt carried himself with an air of superiority and pompousness. He was, apparently, God's gift to the world. I hated him as soon as he stood up.



**M**r. Velt sauntered over to me, eyeing me closely. “You’ve had it pretty rough, haven’t you?” He started. I said nothing. I was pretty sure his question was rhetorical.

As I thought this, he continued, “When the police found you, you had a broken leg, which you blamed on Dr. Pierce?”

I nodded. I already knew the tactics he would employ. His beginning words hardly fazed me. Yet.

“I’m curious, though,” he finished arrogantly. He came over, put his hands on the witness box, and looked me straight in the eye. “You were found with numerous injuries, correct? Why do you think you sustained these injuries, but everyone else at the lab remained unscathed? None of them had any noticeable signs of harm.”

“She—”

“She? Who’s she?” He interrupted.

“Dr. Pierce,” I started again. “Dr. Pierce took a greater interest in me because I had lost my memory of the year after my fifteenth birthday. I was always around her. I had seen some of the horrible things she had done. And I knew what she was doing wasn’t good. She was afraid I would tell someone about what she was doing after we were rescued. She wanted to make sure I wouldn’t tell what the lab had been doing.”

“She wasn’t afraid anyone else would talk? If what you say is correct, then wouldn’t everyone else be convinced that she was a bad person?”

I shook my head. “No. They were brainwashed into thinking that the lab was good.”

“Ah. They were brainwashed,” he repeated sarcastically, like I had told him that aliens giving birth to a six-headed unicorn was the reason I was in this courtroom. “So, she brainwashed the



kids, but didn't brainwash you because you had already lost your memory. Is that right?"

"No," I almost snapped. "That's not right. She kidnapped kids who had had horrible lives and brought them to the lab, where she fed them and kept them away from harm. In exchange for her hospitality, they were supposed to answer her questions so she could find out about their memories. She had planned on doing that to me, but since I didn't remember that I had had a horrible past, I didn't want to stay at the lab. When she found out that I had forgotten everything after my fifteenth birthday, she became more interested in me. When I didn't listen to her, that's when she started hurting me."

He chuckled. "I gotta admit, Darcy, this has got to be pretty confusing for the Jury," he told me honestly.

"I don't agree," I told him just as honestly. "What's so confusing about kidnapping? The details are hard to explain, but that's just icing on the cake. She kidnapped me and hurt me. That's all."

He raised his eyebrows. "But amidst all this pain and injury, you still managed to fall in love with Travis James?"

I stab of pain shot through me that he would dare bring up Travis.

"Objection!" Mr. Simms called. "What does that have to do with Darcy's relationship with Dr. Pierce?"

"He's the stepson of the defendant, Your Honor. It has everything to do with their relationship," Mr. Velt retorted.

"Overruled," the Judge agreed.

Mr. Velt turned back to me. "So, then, Darcy, tell me about your relationship with Travis James. It has been explained numerous times that he helped you escape and had nothing to do with Dr. Pierce. How, then, did you manage to meet and mingle with him?"

I glanced over at Travis automatically. His eyes narrowed slightly, and he nodded.

I breathed in. "We met by accident. The alarm had gone off because one of the minors—"

"Minors?" He interrupted.

I refrained from sighing. "That's what Dr. Pierce and the other doctors called all the kids at the lab."

He nodded. "Right. Continue."

"One of the minors, David, had done something wrong, so the alarm went off."

"What had David done?" He asked, feigning interest.

"I think he tried to escape."

"You think? So, you're just guessing?" He asked, surprised.

I glared at him. "No, I'm not guessing. The alarm that went off was the same code that I had broken, so it's logical for me to assume that he tried to escape just like I did."

He nodded, waving his hand for me to continue.

"Travis heard the alarm and came to tell Dr. Pierce that it was going off. While she went to fix the problem, she told him to stay with me in her office. We started talking because he knew who I was. Dr. Pierce had been talking about me at home, and he knew that I was different than everyone else. I think that he offered to help me, originally, because it would be going against Dr. Pierce's wishes. Then, we just kind of went from there," I finished quietly.

"So he actually did help you with your memory?"

I nodded. "Indirectly. He made me happy, and that's what helped my memory."

"Then how do you know he wasn't working with Dr. Pierce?" Mr. Velt jabbed. "How do you know he wasn't involved in an elaborate plan to hurt you, since you think Dr. Pierce also hurt you?"

"Because I trust him," I told him quietly.

"That's all?" He asked, smiling. "You put your life and your mind into his hands all on the basis of trust?"

I looked closely at Mr. Velt. "Have you ever trusted someone on instinct and faith alone, Mr. Velt? Have—"

"Ms. Calloway—"

I spoke over him. "—Have you ever lost everything and everyone, and then met someone who you knew, without a doubt, cared for you? Because unless you have, then of course you wouldn't understand my answer. I trusted him, and he never once failed me. That's what love is, Mr. Velt, and I don't care if you don't know what I'm talking about. I do, and excuse-me, but I'm

really the only one capable of declaring that. Whether you believe me is none of my concern.”

“I’m only asking the necessary questions, Ms. Calloway,” he told me calmly, but he was flustered. He hadn’t expected that from me.

Staring him straight in the eyes, I asked quietly, “Is there anything else?”

“Yes. Just one more thing,” he answered. “After all this, I’m assuming you feel nothing but dislike for Dr. Pierce. Is that correct?”

I shook my head. He had worded that wrong. “No. I don’t *dislike* her—”

“Really?” Mr. Velt asked, the first sign of actual surprise on his face.

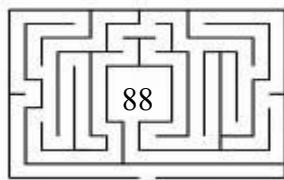
I paused for a moment, trying to force out what I had to say. I guess I had been trying to calm my face, but when I spoke, I felt the rage in my voice and in my expression. “I *hate* her. And Mr. Velt, there’s a *huge* difference between the two. I dislike you, but I would not want to see you hurt, because as humans, we are mostly compassionate. But I can’t say the same for Dr. Pierce. She lost my compassion long ago. And for that, I hate her.

“Are there any more questions?”

He was stunned into silence. Finally. “No. That’s all.”

I got down from the witness stand after being given permission to do so and walked back over to Travis.

I took my seat, closed my eyes, and leaned my head against Travis’s shoulder. There was nothing more for me to do.



Mr. Simms, Claire, and Knox had all told me countless times that I wouldn't have to stay for the whole trial, that once I had spoken as a witness, I was free to leave.

I had convinced myself beforehand that I would be strong enough to listen to Dr. Pierce testifying and that I wouldn't have to leave. I was strong enough. I was.

However, as Mr. Velt started speaking and then Dr. Pierce began her story, I found that I couldn't take it.

"I don't know how this happened. I never meant to do anything wrong. I just wanted to help them. These children, they were being starved, beaten, drowned in poverty, and I had to help them. I just wanted to help. I took them in so that they could escape from their horrible lives and start a new one. I didn't know..."

She rattled on, her voice pleading, her expression sympathetic, her eyes turned towards the Jury.

She looked completely innocent. She was completely believable.

I turned to Travis. "I can't listen to this," I whispered.

He looked down at me. "You wanna leave?"

I nodded, my heart pounding, my breathing heavy. This was too much.

Even though Mr. Simms had warned me not to just up and leave the courtroom, I felt I had nothing to lose. We got up slowly and tiptoed out of the room, leaving Dr. Pierce and Mr. Velt alone to plea her innocence.

As soon as the doors closed, I let go of Travis's hand and walked quickly away. When I was literally breathless, I leaned against the edge of the wall, my back to the world, and let the tears fall down.

Soundlessly, I cried. How had I let myself become this? Had she destroyed me so completely that I was incapable of

anything anymore? I couldn't even go out in public anymore. There was nothing that didn't remind me of my past. I was a mess. I was completely broken.

I hated her so much that it was almost more powerful than my sadness. I wanted more than anything for her to feel half the pain she had forced upon me, just so that she could understand an inkling of how much she had hurt me.

Dr. Hobbs and I were working through my anger and hatred and pain, but it hadn't subsided, not in the least. I was a walking pit of despair and withheld emotions.

Travis came up beside me, leaned against the wall, and acted as a bodyguard, simply standing and protecting. He said nothing and did nothing while I cried. He simply watched and waited.

I heard footsteps approaching and automatically turned inward.

Nate came up beside me. "No, Darcy, don't cry," he murmured, his hand coming up to smooth down my hair.

"I'm fine," I mumbled, wiping my eyes. "Really. Don't make a scene, please."

"Do you want me to call Aubrey or something?" He asked quietly.

I shook my head. "No, please, that's the last thing I need. I don't want her seeing me like this, not again."

He sighed. "She doesn't mind comforting you, no matter how many times you need it," he reminded me.

"Don't call her," I repeated. "I'm okay, I promise."

He nodded. "Alright," he answered quietly. "Do you need anything?"

"No, it's okay. I'm just going to wait for Claire to pick us up. Thanks, though," I told him as sincerely as I could.

He gave a small smile. "You're going to be okay, kiddo," he told me, pulling me into a hug.

I chuckled half-heartedly. "Thanks, Nate."

After he left, Travis and I found a bench where we could wait for Knox to come out. We were careful to avoid topics that would bring up any unnecessary discomfort.

Travis was laughing at something I had said, and I pushed him lightly.

“Don’t laugh at me!” I exclaimed jokingly.

He looked down at me. His eyes were sparkling. “Why not?”

He bent down to kiss me, but I pulled away. Instead, I sat up on my knees, moved closer to him, and took his hand.

“Wanna do me a favor?” I asked him lightly.

He pulled me to him. “Kiss me,” he told me instead, his lips landing on my ear.

I struggled against him. “First listen to me.”

He sighed. “Alright. What is it?”

“Remember my friend Krista?” I started.

He pursed his lips. “Vaguely. Short brown hair?”

I shook my head. “That’s Valerie. Krista had the longish brown-dyed-blond hair. You said she seemed kind of superficial?”

He was thinking back, but then he remembered. “Oh, her. Yeah, okay, what about her?”

“She asked me if we would go on a double date with her and—”

“No,” he interrupted, stressing the word so that it sounded long and unwilling.

“Travis! Why not?” I asked quickly.

“First of all, I don’t double date. I don’t even get the point of it. If you’re too nervous to go on a date yourself, then don’t go. Second of all, if I didn’t like her, then why would I want to go on a date with her and someone probably equally as annoying?”

“Krista is my friend!” I exclaimed.

“Then I’m sorry for you,” he answered.

I groaned. “Please? I told her I would!”

“Well, tell her something came up,” he replied.

“No, I can’t lie to her!”

“Look, you’re very busy, Darcy. I know something will come up. When does she want to go?”

“Next Friday.”

“Nope, can’t. You and I already have plans,” he told me cunningly.

“We do not! Please, please, please,” I begged. “It’ll be fun, I promise.”

“For who?” He exclaimed, rolling his eyes.

“For you,” I told him and then, moving closer to him so that our lips were almost touching, “Afterwards.”

His lips curved into a smile. “Alright, I’m listening.”

“If you do this for me,” I began, leaning my forehead against his, “then I’ll let you pick a night when you and I can do something. Anything. Just you and me. I promise.”

I hadn’t meant for it to sound quite as open of a promise as it did, but he smirked. “Anything?”

I couldn’t help but smile as I said, “Within limits.”

He stared into my eyes and held the gaze. Then slowly, he shut his eyes. I felt his finger graze my right knee until it landed on the scar. He breathed in, his habit giving him comfort. His eyes opened and he said, “You owe me. Big time.”

I smiled widely and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Don’t worry; you’ll get your reward.”

“I better,” he muttered, kissing my nose and hugging me against his chest.

We waited for about thirty minutes, talking on and off, while the trial continued. Finally, I heard the doors open and could tell that the trial had adjourned momentarily.

Knox rounded the corner and saw us sitting on the bench. “The Jury is making its decision. Do you want to wait it out?”

I glanced at Travis and then said, “I’d rather not. Can we just leave?”

Knox thought for a second before saying, “If that’s what you want. Are you sure you don’t want to hear the sentence?”

I shook my head. “No. Please, that’s the last thing I need.”

He nodded. “Alright. Let me just get Agent Fletcher and then we’ll leave.”

We stood up and watched him leave. Travis stretched. “I guess we’ll have to catch the verdict on the news.”

“*You* can. I, for one, am ready to forget this whole thing,” I muttered.

He smiled. “Nah. We’ll make some popcorn and watch it together.”

“Yeah, we’ll just see about that,” I joked, starting to walk away.

He grabbed my arm and yanked me back. Staring into my eyes, he told me quietly, “You were amazing back there.”

My heart melted slightly. “I was scared,” I told him honestly.

“But you did better than anyone would have expected,” he answered. “You’ll be the reason she stays behind bars for the rest of her life.”

“That’s comforting,” I told him, slightly sarcastic.

“Isn’t this just a perfect picture?” someone said behind us.

We both spun around to come face to face with Mr. Velt. My heart flipped uncomfortably.

“I just wanted to come over and congratulate you, Darcy,” he began, coming closer to us. Travis automatically tightened his grip around my waist. “You put on quite a show in there, I must say. You didn’t fool me for a second, but you had the Jury convinced alright.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry, Mr. Velt, but I really don’t feel comfortable talking to you.”

“Of course you don’t,” he answered. “But we’ll talk anyway. I bet you’re feeling pretty good right about now, eh? Think you’ve won the war? Maybe you feel like you’re doing the world a favor. You think that because you’ve won this minor victory, the world will be better for it.

“You’re wrong,” he whispered, coming even closer. Travis pushed me behind him, but Mr. Velt moved so that I could still see his face. “This isn’t over. Oh no, it’s just begun. Have you ever considered that maybe your boyfriend’s father wasn’t the only connection she had?”

His words hit me painfully. Their meaning forced itself into my mind, and I trembled. “You’re part of...”

“That’s right,” he whispered. “I am. She has a corporation of lawyers and all the money in the world to spare. You can’t put her away. You’re just a child. When we’re done—”

It happened before I had time to blink. Mr. Velt was standing in front of me, spitting his words out, and then, suddenly, he wasn’t.



Travis's fist whipped out and smashed into Mr. Velt's face with a terrifying force and a sickening crunch. He went down immediately.

I gasped as I fell forward slightly and saw Mr. Velt lying on the ground, groaning, as his nose spurted blood. I looked from Travis to Mr. Velt and then back to Travis. He...

I had hardly drawn in a breath when Travis reached down, grabbed Mr. Velt by the collar, and lifted him up. Pushing him against the wall, Travis spat out, "Can you hear me, you son of a bitch?"

Mr. Velt's eyes widened as he focused on the angry face of Travis. He nodded slowly.

"Good. Then listen closely: you won't mention any of this to anyone, ever. You won't mention Darcy's name, you won't write it. You won't even think it. You do so much as breathe within a ten-mile distance of Darcy or her family ever again, and I'll make sure I kill you as slowly and painfully as possible. I'll chop off your fingers first, then your arms, then your legs, and then I'll carve out your eyes so that you'll bleed to death, little by little, screaming in pain, begging me to slit your throat. And you'll know that your pain could have been so easily avoided if only you'd have listened to me in the first place. If you, or Dr. Pierce, or anyone associated with anything to do with the lab ever comes close to us again, I'll break a lot more than just your nose. Do you understand me?"

He nodded his head, his motion slightly hindered by Travis's hands around his neck.

*"I asked if you understood me,"* Travis hissed, pushing harder against his windpipe.

"Yes," he gasped out, struggling to get air. "Yes, I understand. No one hears of this."

"Good," Travis replied and moved his hands. Mr. Velt collapsed onto the floor, holding his nose as the blood dripped through his fingers.

Travis came over to me. "Let's go."

I had been standing there, stunned, as Travis threatened Mr. Velt. Now, I couldn't seem to move.

"Darcy?" Travis asked quietly, staring into my eyes.

I blinked and nodded. We left Mr. Velt moaning on the floor, too scared to get up in the presence of Travis. We rounded the corner quickly.

We walked in silence, my heart pounding and my senses dull. What had just happened? When we got to the front door, Travis leaned slowly against the glass and breathed in. His left hand tenderly massaged his right, and he didn't seem to be paying attention to me.

Meanwhile, I had my own issues to sort through. Had that really happened? I had never thought Travis would do something like that. I hadn't thought Travis would have gotten that angry, or that aggressive. I was also confused. Should I be mad, or scared, or thankful? Or a little of everything? I wasn't sure if I was okay with Travis attacking Mr. Velt. Then again, I was glad that Travis had stood up for me, and that Mr. Velt had been knocked down.

Finally, Travis pushed off from the wall and came back over to me. Quietly, he apologized, "I'm sorry you had to see that. That was totally uncalled for. I got a little out of control, and, for that, I apologize."

I said nothing. I think I was in shock. What could I say?

Travis stopped and turned to me. "Are you mad at me? I'm sorry, Darcy, really. He just struck a cord, and I couldn't help myself. Don't be mad at me."

His eyes showed his sincerity. He didn't understand that I wasn't actually mad at him. Once I got past my surprise and confusion, I was amazed. And I was impressed. No one had ever protected me with such fervor before. And although his anger had scared me, and I knew he had done something completely stupid, I was glad that he had done what I could not do. I felt no sympathy for the man at the other end of Travis's punch.

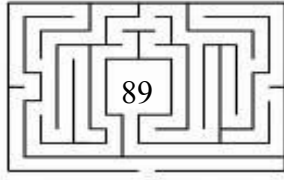
"Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you for protecting me."

His eyes crinkled. "You're not mad?"

I shook my head. "I would have done the same thing if I could punch at all."

He smiled, glad that I hadn't reacted badly. "Maybe I'll teach you sometime."

"Yeah. Maybe."



**I**t took me a long time to get to the point where I could accept what had happened to me. The lab felt completely like a dream, so weird and just uncomfortable to think about, and painful, that I kind of stored it in the back of my mind, not forgotten, just not quite subconscious.

My parents were always on my mind. I would see them everywhere, feel them watching me, hear their voices even though I knew they weren't here anymore. A day didn't go by when I didn't think about them, didn't mourn for them. Slowly, the hole in my chest, the aching pain, healed so that I could at least go through a day and not feel as though my whole world was crumbling.

And then it finally got to the point where my whole life didn't revolve around my suffering. I was learning to cope, but it was possibly the hardest thing I would ever have to do in my life.

As the nightmares diminished and my life became gradually more normal, I would occasionally think about the lab. A part of me wondered what would have happened if no one had ever found out about the lab. Would Dr. Pierce have ever found the cure to whatever she was trying to fix?

But I didn't really let myself think about the lab. I was trying to put it behind me. I was trying to heal.

The publicity I had gotten the first two months after I had been freed was enough to make me crazy. I, as well as Travis, Claire, and about ninety-nine percent of every kid that had ever been in the lab, had refused to give interviews, pictures, or even comments about what had happened. Besides the trials, we had tried to remain silent about what had happened. The story, though, naturally became known as soon as the trials began, as well as the fact that it had been with Travis and Agent Fletcher's help that all had finally been revealed.

Shortly after the case went to trial, it became nationally known that I was, some how or another, the turning point for the lab's demise. The lawyers had exercised no subtlety in letting this be known: Mr. Simms used it as evidence in my favor, and Mr. Velt used it against me. Question after question had been thrown at me, until Mr. Simms had sensed enough to realize that I was at my breaking point.

My story, everything about Arthur, my parents, my time at the lab, everything, had been exposed. Somehow, someone had uncovered what I refused to tell. Dr. Pierce had been right: we—all of us—were famous.

Infamy, actually, had been associated with my name even before our trial went to court. The whole state, the whole country, the whole world, had been alerted of my absence. The amount of money Arthur had asked for in exchange for my return seemed like pocket change compared to what my parents had been willing to pay for any sort of tip as to my whereabouts. In an effort to help the FBI, CIA, and John Q. Public identify my whereabouts, pictures and crucial and trivial information about me had been posted worldwide. It was amazing what could be done with money and the right connections, and fortunately, my parents had had much of both.

At the lab, when I had asked Travis if he had heard anything about me in the news, he hadn't been lying when he had said no. The only news he had allowed himself to gain access to was on Dr. Pierce's computer. Her computer, though, had been blocked of any story with the words 'Darcy Calloway' in them. She had done so shortly after it became known to her that I couldn't remember my past. I guess she had sensed enough that someone, maybe me, would use her computer to understand what had happened to me.

So, although Travis tried to overcome his own fears in order to help me overcome mine, he had chosen the wrong database to try to locate the interviews, pictures, and headlines regarding me.

And how did I come to know about this infamy that had laid itself on me? Aubrey.

Aubrey didn't say much about the time during my absence. Whenever it was mentioned, whenever anything on the topic came up, she got a look on her face, one that matched the look on a deer's face when a car is about to hit it. It was through her actions alone that I realized her love for me.

I unraveled what had occupied Aubrey's time while I had been held captive. She had taken on some very obsessive-compulsive qualities, which Nate said was in an effort to control this horrible situation our family had been forced into. That made sense. Aubrey always was one for control.

So Aubrey spent every waking minute of every day documenting every effort of every person trying to find me. She recorded interviews of our parents and every policeman working on my case, photocopied every piece of evidence she could find, no matter how small, gathered newspaper articles which spoke of my or my family's name, and stored all this in my bedroom. Together, her, my mom, and my dad tried to figure out this logic puzzle. If the pieces would fit together just so, maybe I would be found.

She had cried when we had finally been reunited. Later, Nate told me that she had cried harder when she saw me, alive and well, than when she had gone to Mom and Dad's first funeral. For the next day or so, she hadn't let me out of her sight. She was a constant presence, always in the same room as I was, sometimes randomly coming over to me, sweeping a piece of hair out of my face, and then going back to what she was doing. She needed reassurance that it wasn't all a dream. In all honesty, though, I did, too.

And for the first week after I had been released from the hospital, Aubrey and I had lived together in our old house. It hadn't been sold yet; Aubrey and Nate hadn't known what to do with Mom and Dad's stuff, and they weren't willing to consider doing anything with everything I owned.

So, Aubrey and I had spent the nights in my parents' bed, watching old black and white movies that our parents had forced us to watch when the four of us had lived together all those years ago. We managed to complete three picture albums with the help (or, in Amaya's case, hinder) of Nate, Amaya, and Travis.

That house, though, suffered along with us. We flooded it with our continuous tears, but it kept our secrets safe within its walls. The rooms expanded for the many people who visited after the funeral and then contracted when we needed a place to heal.

As my sleep and eat pattern returned to normal, and my house wasn't constantly hounded by neighbors, I lacked distractions. It was during my times of boredom that I was forced to think about everything that was different about my life. I think it was the third week after my return that the walls threatened to come down when the anger came back.

Then one day, sitting in my house, with nothing to do, felt too much like sitting in my cell at the lab. Suddenly, my emotions were too much, I was restless and angry, and I couldn't control what I was feeling. And, as though a demon had taken over my body, I grabbed the first thing I could find, a flower vase, and threw it as hard as I could against the wall.

And then I was throwing everything, willing them to break down the walls of the house, begging them to take away my pain. I got a sick pleasure in destroying my living room, so prim and proper. Glass shattered onto the floor, and the room grew blurry as the tears started up again. I was so angry, I felt like I was going to explode. Honestly, I didn't know if I was going to make it. I let out a scream of rage, picked up the table lamp, and chucked it at the mirror hanging over the fire place. Both shattered into a million pieces, falling to the ground simultaneously.

"Darcy!" Aubrey yelled.

I spun around to face Nate and Aubrey staring at me from the stairs.

"What the hell are you doing?" She yelled.

"Leave me alone," I snapped, turning around and picking up a book from the bookshelf.

I could hear her footsteps crunching over the glass as she came towards me. She grabbed the book from my hand, threw it to the floor and grabbed my arm. "You just destroyed this room! What are you doing?"

She was looking at me like I had some kind of mental illness. Then she saw that I was crying. "Are you okay?" She asked quietly.

I ripped myself out of her grip and started towards my bedroom. Nate moved in front of me. "Darcy, what is going on?" he asked just as quietly.

I tried to sidestep around him, but he moved with me. I groaned, turned around, and headed for the front door. Aubrey flew towards me. "Talk to us!"

"Let me leave!" I screamed, scaring all three of us.

"No, Darcy, what is wrong with you?" Aubrey snapped. "Please, just tell us. Did something happen?"

I was growing tenser. If I didn't leave, I, myself, was going to shatter into a million pieces. "Aubrey, please, I need to be alone. I can't..."

She stared at me as I tried to form a sentence. Finally, when I simply shook my head, she whispered, "You can't what?"

Suddenly, my anger evaporated at the look on her face. This wasn't her fault. This wasn't any of their faults. It was Arthur's fault and it was Dr. Pierce's fault, but I could scream at neither.

Overcome with fatigue and sadness, I sank to the floor. "I can't do this anymore."

Aubrey came over to me and knelt down so that our eyes were level. "Do what?"

"This. This living. I just...can't. Every day is so hard, and I'm so sick of it," I whispered. I choked out, "I hate them for doing this to me. They ruined me; they ruined us."

A tear slipped out of Aubrey's eye, and she gathered me into her arms like a baby. "Do not say that. Do not *ever* say that. You're going to get through this. We are *all* going to get through this. Together.

"You can't do this alone, Darcy. We need to help each other. Talk to me, please. I lost you for a year and a half. I won't lose you again. I will never forgive them for what they did to us, but you're home, and that's the only thing I care about now," she finished quietly.

"What about Mom and Dad?" I asked, my voice cracking as I tried to suppress another sob.

"All they wanted was for you to be safe. You're safe," was her answer.

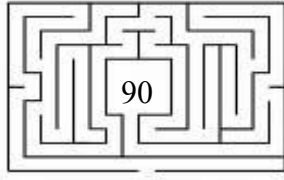
---

While Nate went back upstairs to check on Amaya, Aubrey and I cried on the floor until the echoes of our sobs gave life to the walls, and they cried with us.

It took us three hours and eighteen minutes to clean up the mess I had made, a lifetime compared to the amount of time it had taken me to destroy this room's perfection.

My moment of anger had made our living room a little more resilient. There was nothing left to break. I had destroyed everything. All that was left to do was add, little by little, to the foundation.





**N**eedless to say, we had won the Pierce-Psyche case, as it became known. Every doctor, minus Dr. Fletcher, had been given a life sentence. Travis's dad, just as Travis had feared, had been tried as an accomplice.

But Travis had saved me.

I never once forgot all that he had given up to rescue us all. Not one day passed when I didn't think of all that Travis had done for me. All that we had been through together, everything he had done for me, all the people he had saved, it was all constantly on my mind. And he had given up everything. He had nothing left. He was never going to be with his father. He had no other family members save a few cousins. He had no one. Except me. He had me, and I had him.

I had opted not to accept the medication the local hospital had offered to prescribe me. I wasn't in denial; I knew there were many things that I needed to fix. I was working with Dr. Hobbs, and that was enough. I was never going to be forced to fix myself through medication. I was fine with my family and friends.

The government, with the aid of Dr. Pierce's carefully filed reports, was able to relocate every child ever taken into the lab. Three months after I had left the lab, the government sponsored a get-together for all the kids. Upon Travis's urging, I forced myself to go. We decided it was probably best if Travis stayed at home. I wasn't quite sure what image Travis would conjure up for everyone else when they saw him. Located at an incredibly nice hotel and broadcasted on CNN, NBC, and FOX news, this meeting was, if nothing else, strange.

I cried when I saw Reid and Nora. So many memories came with their faces that it was impossible to keep my emotions at bay. Reid, being the kind of person I had known he was, of course forgave me for everything I had put him through. Although I

probably didn't deserve his forgiveness, I took it with haste. That was all I needed, really: acceptance, love, belonging. I only needed that after a year and a half of horror.

The meeting wasn't horrible, but I left after seeing Nora and Reid. Everyone was out of context, and they reminded me so much of the life I had escaped from. It hurt to look at everyone and not think of what they had all gone through.

Of course, I stayed in contact with Reid, and Nora, too. They had kept me saner than I would have been without them during a time when I had needed a tether to reality. I loved Reid like a brother, and Nora had been one of my only friends. They couldn't be forgotten even though their significance in my life had decreased.

Nora and Reid, and I assume all the other kids, were given the choice to return to their families. Both Nora and Reid had opted not to. I didn't know what everyone else chose. With all the national attention on recent events, though, Reid and Nora had no trouble finding families who were willing to care for them. I guess they got their happily-ever-after. I liked to think that.

Life was never the same, but I hadn't really expected it to be. I went to school, came home to Aubrey, Nate, and Amaya, continued to love Travis like I knew I always would, lived my life, but it was never the same. I was broken.

I could be mended, but I would never be fixed. It hurt; it was a physical, mental, emotional, every day, every second kind of pain, but I was never alone, and that made all the difference. Love in the present was the only real thing I could trust. Everything else had been tampered with.

It took a while for my paranoia to be quelled. For some time after I had been rescued, I had needed a constant presence at my side, whether it was Travis, Aubrey, or Nate. I never wanted to feel exposed or alone.

I found I got scared more easily. Weird things startled me. I wasn't afraid of horror movies or the dark, or anything like that. It was the subtle things that made me jump.

Amaya and Nate would be playing, and Amaya would scream with happiness. Automatically, my hands would come up to cover my ears before I even realized I was doing so.

I would be sitting in the car, listening to music with Aubrey, and someone would honk at us. It would take five minutes for my heart to return to its normal pace.

I would be helping Nate take out the garbage, and a car would drive slowly by our house, its driver clearly lost. I would freeze, watch the car with wide eyes, and hold my breath until Nate snapped me out of my daze.

Many of these times, my reflexes and instincts would take over, and there seemed to be nothing I could do to stop it.

The morning I felt my body aching to leave the house, to go out in public without anyone tagging along, I knew exactly where I needed to go. I grabbed my wallet, left a note for Aubrey on the kitchen table, knowing that was the first place she'd look when she got back from her walk, and left the house. I took the bus downtown. This wasn't the first time I had taken this route, so I knew my way pretty well. When I stepped off the bus, I made my way hastily through the streets, stopping at the apartment building.

The doorman knew me. He nodded once. "Ms. Calloway," he greeted me politely.

I smiled. "Can I go up?"

He nodded. "I don't see why not."

"Thanks," I answered.

I didn't bother taking the elevator. Instead, I took the stairs two at a time until I reached the ninth floor. By the time I was knocking on the apartment door, I was out of breath.

A man answered the door. He was shirtless, showing off his slightly hairy chest, and wearing only boxer shorts. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, and handsome. I didn't recognize him.

He stared at me, and I stared at him.

"Oh," I started. This was very awkward. "I didn't know..."

"Who is it?" Her voice called from the background.

"Um..." he started to say, but he didn't know my name.

"Darcy," I called back. I could hear Mozart playing softly in the background. Suddenly, I realized that this was mostly likely a date I had interrupted.

"Oh!" Her voice exclaimed, and I heard footsteps coming towards the door. A second later, Claire appeared. "Darcy! Hey!"

I smiled uncomfortably. "I didn't know you were...I should have called. I can come back."

"No, no, no, it's fine. Stay," she replied, moving aside. "Please, come in."

"Seriously, if you're busy, I can—"

"I'm not," she interrupted. "I would tell you if I was; you know me."

I nodded, smiling slightly, and followed her inside.

"Darcy, this is my fiancé, Rich," she continued, pointing to the man in the background, now heading down the hallway.

He gave me a slight wave before closing a bedroom door.

"I didn't know you were engaged," I told her. Truthfully, she and I didn't really discuss her personal life. We were friends, yes, but there was always a fine line I drew in our conversations that she knew not to cross.

I was trying so hard to forgive her. I was trying to put behind me what the both of us had been through. It was hard, though. It was an everyday battle I was working towards overcoming, just like everything else.

We were sitting in her tastefully furnished kitchen, and I watched as she put the teakettle on the stove. She turned to face me, holding her left hand out. My eyes were immediately drawn to the huge ring on her ring finger.

"Oh. Wow!" Was the only thing I could think to say.

"That was my response, too," she answered and turned to grab some mugs from the cabinet.

"Have you always worn that?" I asked, embarrassed for my own sake that I hadn't noticed it.

She shook her head. "I still don't feel comfortable wearing it out in the field."

"Oh," was all I could say.

Attempting to start a conversation, she began, "So, Darcy, how have you been?"

I shrugged. "Alright, I guess. You know, kind of the same. Healing, I think."

She turned to face me. "I'm really glad to hear that. And how's Aubrey?"

“She’s good. She’s already thinking about having more kids, but I always knew she was insane,” I told her, smiling at that last part. “She’s better, though. Not as protective. Of course, she’ll kill me when she finds out I came here by myself, but I guess that’s love, right?”

Claire smiled kindly at me. “Ah, yes. I noticed you were alone. Moving forward?”

I nodded. “I guess you could say that.”

She pursed her lips, thinking. “You wanna tell me why you’re here, since you’re risking your life in the process?”

I looked away from her, choosing instead to stare out the window. “I guess I’ve been thinking lately.”

“About what?” she asked calmly.

“You,” I answered truthfully.

“Really?”

I nodded but didn’t continue.

“Be a little more specific?” She recommended.

I was trying to find the right words. I didn’t want this to come across as an inquisition, nor did I want to yell at her in front of her fiancé. But I knew that my feelings were too strong to express them any other way than through yells.

I breathed in slowly. “The trials were harder than I ever thought they would be.”

She nodded but said nothing.

“I mean, I just couldn’t seem to get a break. I went from Arthur’s to the lab to the hospital to the trials, and it feels like I never really had time to breathe. It was like something out of a nightmare.”

She looked like she wanted to say something, but I shook my head, determined to continue. “Do you know, I can’t even tell which part of my life sucks the most: the part with Arthur, the part at the lab, or the part I’m living through right now.”

“Darcy—”

“And I can’t help but wonder,” I interrupted loudly, “why I was forced to go through everything at the lab when the FBI could have helped me,” I snapped. “Please don’t try to lie to me. If you care about me at all, *don’t lie*. I’ve had more than enough time to think this all through, and it’s just really hard for me to understand

this, because I feel like I was the victim every single time. I suffered every day for almost two months, and it could have been avoided. I just need you to explain to me why I did this, because I can't see it."

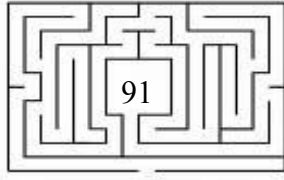
She must have seen that my eyes were almost red with fury, because she did not try to lie to me.

"Darcy, please, listen to me. You don't understand this. Do you really think we would have left you in the hands of those doctors for one second if we didn't have it all under control? Do you think us so horrible that you would believe the lies other people have thrown around so carelessly about the FBI's undercover work? Answer me, because, if you do, then you aren't the girl I thought you were."

"I didn't say—"

"Answer my question. Do you think we would do that to you, to any of you? Do you?"

I looked back at her slowly. Staring into her eyes, making sure I could see her expression clearly, I whispered, "Maybe that's the reason I'm here."



**I**mmediately, I knew I had been wrong. Agent Fletcher and the FBI hadn't been lying.

Because Claire wasn't an actress, she couldn't fake that shock and pain when I responded to her question.

In a moment, Agent Fletcher had built up a façade. Carefully, she slipped it over her exterior, and, in a flash, she was calm and nonchalant. Slowly, she ran her fingers through her hair and then looked at me coolly. "And tell me, Darcy, do you think I'd do that to you?"

Mozart's Requiem seemed to echo off the walls in the seconds it took me to answer. "No."

"Do you think I'd let anyone work for me if they didn't have the same morals as I did?" She asked.

Again, I answered. "No."

"Are you questioning my judgment?"

And then, I knew why her façade looked so familiar: it was the cop in her coming out. My words had transformed her.

I shook my head and answered a third time, "No."

She leaned against her counter and stared at me. "Have you ever doubted for a second that I care about you?"

Softly, I whispered my honest answer. "Yes."

Her features seemed to melt as her façade slipped off her face and fell to the ground. "Why?"

Never once taking my eyes off hers, I spoke softly, "Why would you let this happen to me? You couldn't save me from Arthur, why didn't you try twice as hard to help me escape from the lab? Why did you leave me to suffer? At any point, you could have brought me home."

She looked away from me, and I could no longer read her emotion. "Darcy, I'm so sorry. Please—"

“Don’t,” I interrupted. “I don’t want an apology. I want an explanation. The last two years of my life destroyed me. Do you understand what I’m saying? Arthur killed my parents. He took away from me the only thing I lived for. And you were there to see it happen. You called my name, you watched me as I watched them die. You knew what was happening to me; when I ran from you, you knew exactly why I was running. And then I came to the lab. You watched as they tried to break me, as they tortured me, as they almost killed me. And it was only when *Travis* warned you that you actually helped me.

“You say you care for me. You say you never lied to me. You’re telling me not to believe what everyone else is saying, but they’re telling me the same thing that I saw. Who’s lying to me, Claire? Who left me to fend for myself when I didn’t even know what was happening?

“You stood there, watching, waiting for God knows what, as I *drowned*.” I spoke slowly and quietly, enunciating each word. “That’s why I’m here. Why did you do this to me?”

I hardly acknowledged my surroundings, the dozens of papers strewn across the table, the perfectly matching teacups, the flowers on the windowsill, the rubber band lying in front of me, begging my hands to hold it so that they wouldn’t lie at my side, trembling. My eyes stayed on Agent Fletcher. Her eyes were glued to the window I had chosen to look out of before.

She sighed. “You came here for answers. Of course you did. You deserve anything you ask for, and more,” she started. Slowly, she turned to face me fully. Her eyes held sadness, telling me she was going to be the bringer of bad news. “I’ll tell you the truth. I’ll tell you why we did what we did and what it accomplished. Then I can answer any questions you have, and you can yell at me all you want, if that is what you want.

“But listen to me closely: I’m telling you right now that you probably won’t like the truth. You probably won’t even understand why we chose to use this method, and I’m pretty sure the answer won’t satisfy you. But it’ll be the truth, and that’s all I can give you.”

I watched her closely. “Tell me.”



In an effort to postpone the inevitable, she turned to the teakettle, fixed it over the burner, and moved the mugs closer together. Quietly, she started, "By risking one, we saved many." She looked back at me. "We had no idea what Dr. Pierce was capable of. Before we could expose her, we had to ensure the safety of each one of the kids at the lab. If I took you, any of you, out of the lab without consent from Dr. Pierce, the whole operation would have been blown, and who knows how Dr. Pierce would have reacted. We were biding our time, Darcy, and we couldn't take you out because that could have risked everything we had been working towards."

The tea water was boiling. With only Mozart filling the silence, Agent Fletcher poured us each a cup of tea. While she fixed my tea to my liking, I tried to sort through my thoughts. "You make it sound like I was a hero, risking my life and sanity for everyone else just so that you could save us. No one asked me if I wanted to be a hero, though. I didn't agree to sacrifice myself! I just wanted to leave."

She quietly set the teacup in front of me. "You're right. It was forced upon you, and I'm sorry for that. But you have to understand that we were working for the safety of every child at the lab, not just for you. And yes, it may seem like you got the worst of it, but we were always watching out for you. I promise you that."

I was staring at her. Her words made sense, all of them. But I was hesitant, and I knew why. "What about this?" I asked quietly. Slowly, I pulled my shirtsleeve down so that the top of my arm was showing. My scar glared angrily at both of us. It said what I wouldn't.

She couldn't draw her eyes away from my scar. "We risked one to save many," she repeated quietly. "Darcy, I swear to God, we had no idea she would do something like that. That wasn't her pattern; it wasn't what we expected. We thought she was, for the most part, passive. We could never have imagined she would torture you like that. After she came to you while I was talking to you, I alerted my superior, and that's why the FBI came when they did. At that point, it didn't matter that we might have blown our cover; torture changed everything."

“I just...” I started and then stopped. Something just didn’t make sense in her plan. “Something isn’t right. Your plan wasn’t good. The flaws outweighed the good it brought. Why did you let her starve me? Why did you let her tamper with my mind like that? She was torturing me emotionally; isn’t that just as bad?”

She shook her head. “This is why you’re not going to understand our method. Darcy, from your point of view, of course it looks like the flaws overpower the good. But, really, that’s only because throwing you to the lions, so to speak, was the flaw. Our plan wasn’t perfect; I didn’t say it was. It worked, though. It got us to our main goal, which was to bring down the lab and rescue everyone in it. The flaw in the plan was that we couldn’t immediately save you from Dr. Pierce. And yes, the other children were relatively safe, but we couldn’t risk throwing them to the lions as well just so that we could save you. That’s why you can’t understand this. You don’t want to understand it.”

I looked away from her and took a slow breath. I wiped one of the stray tears from my cheek and exhaled. “I just don’t see why I had to go through all that. Everything you’re saying makes sense. I just can’t seem to make it sound okay to me.”

She nodded and turned away from me, focusing her attention on the teacup. “That’s because any sixteen-year-old in her right mind would choose home over hell. What you were forced to do was the ultimate selfless act, and there are few people in the entire world who would willingly choose to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of total strangers. Our logic cannot make complete sense to you because your dominant thought will always be to protect yourself first.

“If you get nothing from this conversation, at least realize that you were never truly alone. We were with you each step of the way. Hate us if you want; that’s understandable. But we are sworn to protect the United States as a whole. We did what we knew was best. That’s not the answer you wanted to hear, but it’s the only one I can give. I’m sorry.”

Finally, after so many weeks and months of wrestling with everything that had gone wrong in my life, one thing made sense. Claire’s words were spoken out of truth and love, and I understood where she was coming from. For just a second, I could see,

objectively, her point of view. It didn't change the fact that I felt betrayed and hurt by the FBI, but it helped that I knew Claire had never meant to hurt me.

In my moment of silence, she continued. "And in case you're wondering, Darcy, even if you had never been forced into the lab, you still would have been suffering just as much now as ever, maybe even more. The lab forced you to confront your fears, your pain, everything you wanted to forget. Even if you don't realize it now, you're better off for it."

She was staring at me intently, waiting for a response from me. While I stirred my tea, I couldn't help thinking about all she had said. In a way, she was right. I don't think I actually ever really doubted that she had been right. But I was constantly searching for answers, for justice, for essential truths, something to fill the hole inside of me that refused to be filled.

"Babe, where're my gray socks?" came Rich's voice from the bedroom.

"Check the laundry room," Claire called back, turning away from me.

We stayed quiet for a minute, focusing on Mozart's rising and falling instruments. Rich's question rang out in the air, waiting to be absorbed by helpless ears. His words, so simple and innocent, sent a rush of pain through my body.

This was the beginning of a family. I was in the presence of a couple ready to start their lives together, ready to move on from their difficult pasts. Was I really about to taint their new start in an effort to hold on to something that was no longer controllable? The Dr. Fletcher I had once known just wanted to forget what we had both been through; as much as I hated her truth, I couldn't do the same thing to her that I had been forced to go through. She would never again be Dr. Fletcher. She was Special Agent Claire Fletcher, and she had a new life to start.

It was very clear to me what needed to be done. But did I really have the courage to do something this final? Finally, when I felt like I should say something, I started quietly, "Agent Fletcher?"

"Yes?" She asked, turning to me.

Before I could think about what I was about to do, I blurted out, "Thank you, Claire, for everything. You don't deserve to have your motives questioned. I know you want to move on with your life just as much as I do. I guess you're just the only one I can yell at and feel like I'm yelling at the lab. But thank you for answering my questions anyway. I asked for the truth, and you gave it to me. That's all I can ask for. I don't think I'm ever really going to be okay with what the FBI did, but thank you for explaining it to me, and for helping all the other kids."

She opened her mouth to say something, but then she stopped. Her mouth closed, and she sighed. "You're welcome."

Four harsh knocks on the door made both of us jump. She looked at me. "I'm not expecting anyone."

It took me all of about two seconds to stay confused. When I jumped to the right conclusion, I almost hid under the table. "Crap, it's Aubrey! I completely forgot about her! She's going to be so angry!"

Even Aubrey's knocks sounded ominous, foreshadowing the anger I was about to experience.

"Darcy, remember, she's doing this out of love," Claire reminded me as she went to open the door.

I heard the door open and sat glued to the kitchen chair as I listened to Aubrey's worried voice. My heart pounded in time with Aubrey's footsteps stomping against the floor as she and Claire appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Darcy Eloise Calloway, what the hell are you doing?" Aubrey snapped.

I shrunk down in my seat. "I needed to see Agent Fletcher."

"Since when would I have had a problem with that?" Aubrey practically yelled. "I would have taken you here!"

"It was kind of private," I answered quietly.

"I would have left, then!" She sighed, exasperated. "Do you know how worried I was? Do you have any idea how—"

"I know. I'm sorry; it was just really important."

"I don't care, Darcy. You know you're not allowed to travel that far without telling anyone first! You almost gave me a heart attack!"

“I’m not five, Aubrey! I’m old enough to drive. I can go places by myself if I want to.”

“Not without telling me first,” she snapped through gritted teeth. “Look, I don’t ask for much, and this request is not far-fetched in the least. I just need to know where you are. Please, can you tell me before you go out?”

I sighed. I wasn’t going to win this battle. Before my fifteenth birthday, anything would have slid by her. Maybe that was why I still wasn’t used to her strict rules. Now, however, I was practically living under a martinet.

In a way, though, I didn’t mind so much. It was a constant, sometimes annoying, sign that she loved me.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry,” I muttered.

She nodded, still slightly annoyed. “Are you done here? I left Nate and Amaya in a hurry.”

“Yeah, I think I’m done. Are you?” I asked Claire.

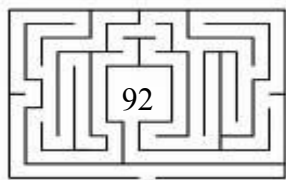
“Yes. Do we understand each other?” She asked quietly.

I nodded. “I think so.”

She smiled and pulled me into a hug. “Good. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Yup.”

As Aubrey and I closed her apartment door, I heard Rich’s voice float out from the bedroom door. “Who were they?”



I pulled open the doors to the main entrance of the hospital and breathed in the comforting air of security. I smiled at the ladies at the front desk, senior volunteers whose shifts always seemed to be during my sessions with Dr. Hobbs.

“Hello, Dear!” The older sister called. I think her name was Margaret. “How are you doing today?”

“Good. How are you?” I responded automatically. This conversation never altered.

“I’m well, thanks,” she called cheerfully.

As I walked away, smiling at them, her sister called, “Have a nice day, now!”

“You too,” I called back.

I liked to take the long way to the children’s wing, mostly because that gave me a chance to see the sisters. They were so sweet; I almost wanted them as grandmothers.

This scenic route required me to take an elevator to the lowest floor and then walk down several hallways in order to get to Misdary Children’s Hospital, an offset of the main hospital.

The hallways leading to Misdary were tan wall upon dreary tan wall until the main hospital walls morphed into Misdary hallways.

Suddenly, the walls were painted with stars and clouds, monkeys dancing next to elephants, and fish swimming along the ceiling. Purple borders lined the edges of the walls and chairs were red, blue, and yellow cushioned. The gift shop boasted its newest products, everything from stuffed animals to baseballs to potato chips.

Children up to age twenty-one were welcomed in this section with open arms. There were greeters walking around, smiling, playing with the youngest kids, and brightening the already bright atmosphere. Security guards subtly hid in corners,

ready to chastise any adult who unintentionally interrupted the happiness that was constantly present in Misdary.

This section was for the promotion of life, as opposed to the main hospital, where men entered and never left, and women prayed that their mammograms came back clear. Unlike the seven dreary floors of the main hospital, this section had five pleasant floors.

The first two floors were for outpatient use: psychologists, pediatricians, speech therapists, physical therapists, MRI and CAT scanning, and the occasional puppet show or dog trainer come to entertain the frightened children.

The remaining third floors were for the residents: the pediatric intensive care unit, the surgical unit, and the children's ward, where kids with pneumonia, appendicitis, and other childhood illnesses were nursed back to health.

I had been, just two months ago, a lucky member of the pediatric ICU club. I spent a week in there, and then two more weeks in the children's ward, recovering from malnutrition and various other physical and mental bruising.

Today, however, and every other Monday and Thursday since I had been released from the hospital, I had been visiting this same hospital for psychological treatment with Dr. Hobbs.

The funny thing about Misdary, though, was that I lived for the moments when I passed through this wing. The childish-ness of the atmosphere didn't bother me at all. In fact, I loved it. I loved that this place was purely in the business of improving and saving children's lives. It upheld everything I wished I could have had during my time of dying.

It was the complete opposite of the lab. And that was why I loved it.

Here, it seemed as though we, as children, were united together, leaning on each other, seeing each other living and thriving, pushing for health again. There were no divisions here. We were just children, and we couldn't fix ourselves alone.

The doctors here helped. They performed work with smiles on their faces, and the parents thanked them graciously at the end of the day. This was the promotion of innocence, and I thrived in it.

I weaved through the maze of toddlers and IV poles in an effort to reach the elevators safely. The Misdary elevators were notoriously slower than molasses in January, and they did not fail me this time. I waited for a good two minutes, lazily choosing to remain in front of the elevators rather than take the stairs. Finally, I had to admit that they were probably broken or stuck, so I took the stairs up one flight.

Once on the second floor, I turned right and found myself in front of Lizzie, the secretary I had come to know pretty well.

“Hey, Darcy,” she greeted me amiably.

Lizzie was a sophomore at a little-known college practically five feet from the hospital. The poor thing had no trouble admitting that she cared way more for her looks than her brains. She was a natural blonde, but she had long ago dyed her hair dark brown, giving her pale skin and blue eyes an almost translucent color.

“Hey. What’s up?” I asked automatically.

“Finals in two weeks,” she sighed, tapping her pencil against a math textbook hidden below a hospital chart.

I grimaced. “Say no more.”

“So, how’s the family?” She asked.

I smiled. “They’re good. Aubrey’s pregnant again,” I told her, rolling my eyes.

“Congrats!” She exclaimed.

I shook my head. “No, thanks. This wouldn’t be good news. The way Amaya’s acting lately, she should remain an only child.”

Lizzie chuckled, shaking her head. “I’ll tell Dr. Hobbs you’re here,” she told me instead.

“Thanks,” I answered, going towards the waiting room chairs. Since Dr. Hobbs and her partner, Dr. Marks, shared a waiting room with two other doctors, the room was a bit crowded with restless children.

I went to my usual seat in the far corner, where the curiosity of the toddlers wouldn’t touch me. I unwound the ear buds to my iPod and secured them in my ears.

Not bothering to choose a song, I pressed play and allowed the music to tune out all other noises, so that the lyrics and beat was the only thing I was aware of.



I waited for five minutes, staring at Dr. Hobbs's door. I didn't close my eyes, like I usually did when I listened to music. In this public place, I had to be aware of my surroundings at all times.

Dr. Hobbs opened her door and, smiling, walked over to me. I pulled the ear buds out and wound them around my iPod.

"What are you listening to?" She asked, coming over to sit next to me.

I thought back to what I had just turned off and then smiled. "You're gonna think it's weird."

She raised her eyebrows. "Try me."

I glanced down at my iPod. "It's a German song."

Her face held no surprise, but she said, "And how in the world did you come across a German song?"

"You know the tattoo on Travis's arm?" I asked. When she nodded, I said, "It's lyrics to this song."

"Got it," she answered. "I guess that makes sense. Now I know why I couldn't read what it said."

I got up and led the way to her office. "It said 'mein herz brennt'. It's 'my heart burns' in German."

"Hmm," was all she said. "Well, I hope there's a story behind that."

I laughed. "There is."

She sat down on one of the sofas in her huge office. I sat down across from her, slid off my flip-flops, and tucked my feet beneath me. Good naturedly, she started, "You seem to be in a better mood today. How are you feeling?"

"I feel alright. I'm not unhappy," I told her, my eyes shifting to the portrait of the ocean behind her head.

"That's good. Anything new going on?"

I shrugged. "I only have a month left of school."

Her eyes brightened. "That's exciting! Are you caught up in all your classes yet?"

"For the most part. Most of my teachers gave me pardons on homework assignments, and..."

I trailed off.

"...And?" She egged me on.

"And I think I did with Arthur a lot of the stuff we're learning now," I finished quietly.

“Well, that can’t hurt, right?” She asked amiably.

I smiled and shook my head. My good feeling had diminished slightly. Here, I could never stay away from unpleasant topics for too long.

Dr. Hobbs watched me for a moment. In an effort to give my hands something to do, I slowly traced the scar above my knee, its shape so familiar to me.

“Is it bothering you?” She asked quietly.

I glanced up at her. “This? No, not really. It rarely ever hurts. It’s just...you know, there.”

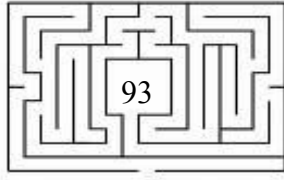
“What about your brand?” She continued.

I looked down at it for a second. “Um, no. It kind of twinges when I think about how I got it. But that’s just my mind playing tricks.”

She moved her eyes to my arm. “Does it hurt you to think about how you got your brand?”

I shrugged. “If I catch myself thinking about it, it’s not like I force myself to think about something else. The memory of getting branded reminds me of pain, but I guess I’ve learned to control my thoughts. I don’t really mind thinking about it. It’s not like I spend every second mulling it over, but there are worse things to think about.”

She nodded. “That makes sense.”



Dr. Hobbs and I chatted for a little bit about nothing at all, just as we always did in the beginning of our sessions. I had found the little foam ball I liked to throw when things got uncomfortable, and I was aimlessly throwing it in the air.

Her eyes drifting from the ball to my brand, Dr. Hobbs said, “I see you haven’t covered your arm today. Any reason why?”

“I guess I forgot,” I answered honestly, pulling my sleeve down so that it covered the top half of my arm. “Besides, it’s really hot out today.”

I had learned long ago to wear long sleeves in public so that my scar didn’t show. The only question I got asked more frequently than my relationship with Travis was the question about my scar. I longed for the day when I could wear short sleeves in public on a ninety-degree day and not have to worry about a photographer waiting to get a glimpse of it.

Yes, that was just how sick people were, waiting to catch a peek of the physical evidence of my living nightmare.

“It makes you all the more appreciative of air conditioning,” she answered.

“Except that my house is currently at a comfortable eighty degrees during the day,” I complained.

A curious expression formed on her face. “What? Why?”

I gave her a dry look before saying, “Aubrey. She’s pregnant, and we all know what *that* does to her hormones. Right now, she’s itching to turn on the heat, but that’s where Nate and I draw the line.”

Dr. Hobbs’s face lit up. “She’s pregnant! Oh my goodness, that’s such great news! Oh, you all must be so excited!”

I shook my head. “Well, Nate and Aubrey are. I think Amaya and I are on the same side with this one. She’s looking

forward to sharing the attention about as much as I am to having another screaming child in the house.”

She chuckled. “You like kids, Darcy!”

“Kids, I like. Toddlers and infants, not so much. The screaming is too much for me, especially since Amaya is going through the longest and worst stage of terrible two’s I’ve ever seen. Her moods swings are about as disturbing as Aubrey’s.”

She was smiling widely. “Amaya’s two, Darcy. She’ll grow out of it. You aren’t getting used to the tantrums at all?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s not that I’m not trying to get used to it. It’s just...I don’t know. I guess it’s taking me a while to get used to Amaya.”

Dr. Hobbs nodded wisely. “Ah.”

“Don’t get me wrong, she’s cute and I love her. Most of the time. But sometimes, I’ll be sitting in my house and she’ll come up to me, and I’ll just get freaked out. It kind of feels like she was just thrown into my life. Maybe that’s because, actually, *I* was the one thrown into *her* life. Her being here is still kind of new. It probably would have been easier for me to warm up to her if I had been there when she was born and seen her through her first year.”

Dr. Hobbs continued to nod. “Darcy, I think you’re absolutely correct.”

I looked down. “So, that probably makes me the world’s worst Aunt, right?”

“Of course not, Darcy. Everyone has trouble adjusting to new things, *especially* a new child. What you’re going through is completely normal. I’d be surprised if you *weren’t* feeling like this. You’ve got a lot on your plate, Darcy, and I so admire you for staying strong through these times.”

Her words made me a little sad. Avoiding her look, I told her quietly, “Sometimes I don’t feel so strong.”

She leaned forward slightly, her expression deepening. Her voice passionate and sad at the same time, she started, “Oh, but you are, Darcy. You don’t even realize how much will power and determination it takes to overcome something like this. You are one of the strongest people I know. I know it’s hard for you to see it right now, but by struggling through the past few months and trying to get back to your life, you’ve made life easier for yourself

in the future. You've been through the worst of it, and you've stayed stronger through it than anyone would have thought possible."

I exhaled slowly. Glancing up at her, I said quietly, "I'm afraid I'm going to lose my memory again."

She frowned. "Why in the world would you think that?"

"Because the last time I begged God to make me forget what had happened to me, I lost a whole year of my life. There are times when I pray that I could just forget everything, that things could just go back to the way they were before...sometimes, I feel like the only thing keeping me sane is my family and Travis."

She shook her head. "You aren't going to lose your memory again."

I looked at her. "How do you know?"

"I know because, if you were going to lose it, you'd already have lost it. I remember when you first came into my office. I remember how lost and depressed you were. You've changed, Darcy, and even though you can't see it in yourself, trust me: you've changed. The fact that you can come in here and have a normal conversation with me is proof enough. You *will* get through this; you will heal.

"Darcy, it's okay for you to not want to think about what happened to you. That's absolutely okay; I even recommend it when you're having a rough day. The problem becomes when you can only survive if your memories are constantly blocked. Blocking your memories may give you instant gratification, but it will not help you heal. One day, Darcy, you are going to have to face your fears. It's better if you slowly but surely face them from the beginning."

I sighed. "I'm trying. I'm trying so hard that sometimes I feel like I'm gasping for breath at the end of the day. But it just doesn't seem to be getting easier. I'm not expecting it to happen overnight; I just want some kind of relief that will show me that I'm doing okay. I just want to be okay," I finished, practically whispering.

"You *are* okay, Darcy. If you would let yourself believe that, let yourself remember everything you've gone through and

---

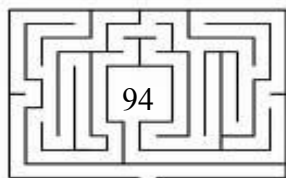
realize that you're doing it, that you're really getting through it, then you'd know that you're doing okay."

I chuckled a humorless laugh. "It's hard enough to think about my memories. Now you want me to analyze them against my life?"

She smiled. "No, Darcy, I want you to be able to think about your past without shying away from it. Answer me honestly: how often would you say you think about the lab, about what happened to you?"

"I don't know. It depends on the day. I can think about certain parts of the lab, but others, I tend to avoid," I told her honestly.

"Okay. Then maybe we should start there," she replied.



I breathed in, my head resting against the edge of Dr. Hobbs's sofa as I tried to think of the best place to start. She had told me to start from the place where I usually stopped thinking about the lab. But where was that? The day they had abducted me? I wasn't quite sure where that began.

Instead, I focused on the days in the isolation room after Dr. Fletcher had visited me.

Again, I breathed in. "After they branded me, I think I fainted. I woke up in the isolation room, which I told you about before. When I woke up, I didn't know why they had branded me, or what the brand meant. And before I could find that out, Agent—well, I guess Doctor—Fletcher came to me. The last time I had seen her before they branded me was when she told me that she was a prisoner at the lab, too. But Dr. Pierce tricked me into betraying her."

My mind was back in the isolation room. Automatically, my heart thrummed painfully and started to force my thoughts away from that room. I fought against that urge, though. I had to do this. I had to.

"I was afraid Dr. Fletcher was going to be mad at me. And I didn't know if I could trust her. But she came in, and she saw my brand, and she was really upset. When I told her I was going to give up—because I was, I really was starting to believe that my life was over—she begged me not to say that. She was starting to tell me something when Dr. Pierce came in and yelled at her. Dr. Pierce forced Dr. Fletcher to tell me that everything she had told me at our first meeting was a lie. I didn't know what to believe, and I don't think I knew who was telling the truth anymore. I was just so upset and scared that I prayed for it all to be over, for everyone to just go away."

I was coming to the part where I usually stopped remembering. I didn't want to think about this. I didn't want to think about the cracking of my knee, the feeling of deadly fear, the loss, and the confusion...

But I continued. I continued if only because Dr. Hobbs had said I was strong. "I went insane inside that room. They left me there for three days, I think, and I was going insane. I started hearing things, seeing hallucinations; nothing was real. Then, one day, I heard an alarm in the distance. I didn't trust my senses until finally, it was loud enough that I knew it was real. But by that time, Dr. Pierce was in my room. I knew something was wrong immediately. The air was tense, and she was talking oddly. But I followed her because I had nowhere and nothing left to choose.

"She told me she was bringing me to the cells where I used to be. But as we were going downstairs, different guards and doctors started running towards us. I didn't understand what they were saying; they insisted that someone had come, that someone had gone too far. They were scared; I knew that much. I didn't know at that time that they were referring to the FBI. I wasn't sure what they meant because everything was so unreal. Dr. Pierce knew something was very wrong. She told one of the doctors, Dr. Tamsyn, to bring all the kids to the cafeteria. I couldn't seem to grasp anything, because they were being elusive in their fear. It all seemed too dream-like, except that I knew it was real.

"When Dr. Tamsyn came to us, something changed in Dr. Pierce. I think something snapped in her. I think when she got scared, her façade slipped. She seemed to realize for the first time what she had done and the consequences for it. She saw what I would do if they rescued us. She knew I was the only one who had ever truly given her trouble. She told me that she couldn't let me tell anyone anything. She had to do something about me."

I wasn't looking at Dr. Hobbs. I wasn't looking at anything. I was stuck in the memory of my last days at the lab, forced to replay them against my will. There was no way I could get out except through the end.

"Somewhere inside me, I knew what was she talking about. But it didn't really click until we came to her office. She pushed me inside. While she was going to her file cabinet, my fear kicked



in and I knew I had to run. So I tried to get out of there. I wasn't fast enough, though. Fear does amazing things to the reflexes, and the senses. She grabbed me as I was getting to the door, and she pushed me down. As I was backing up, she stepped on my leg, and broke my knee."

I bit my lip as I tried to forget the pain, but my leg was throbbing as I remembered the anguish. My body seemed to ache with the knowledge of what was to come.

"Everything after that is a blur. I couldn't stand the pain. I knew she was going to drug me, and that it would kill me. But I couldn't move; my body was hurting so much. I think I closed my eyes, and I felt Dr. Pierce next to me. I remember the room suddenly got really loud, and I cringed because I was sure it was the drug going through my body. I remember thinking that I didn't want to die. But I could hear Travis's voice, and I thought that was a good last thing to hear before I died. That was the last thing I remembered before I went away."

I breathed out slowly, forcing the last of the memory to leave my mind. Somehow, I felt a little lighter. I didn't feel as tense. I moved my shoulders slightly, and I felt a little better now that the story was done.

"When I woke again, I was in the pediatric intensive care unit. There were cards around my bed and flowers on the countertops. Aubrey was holding Amaya in the chair by my bed, and Travis was reading in the corner. I could hear Nate's voice talking to one of the nurses. And I smiled because the CD player was singing *Skillet*. I thought I was in heaven. But when I moved, my body cried in pain, and I came crashing down to earth.

"For the next couple of weeks, as I recovered from the surgery it had taken to fix my leg, and from malnutrition, I had to take in everything that had happened to me. My brand, surprisingly, had been the least of the doctors' concerns, injury wise. Most of them seemed to be concerned with the fact that I was having trouble breathing even though there wasn't anything wrong with my respiratory system. It was indescribably painful to just lay in that bed, day in and day out, and recall everything that I was forced to remember. For the first couple of days, I almost wished

that Dr. Pierce had been able to inject me with that drug; as it was, the FBI had gotten to her before the needle pierced my arm.

“The police were in my hospital room almost as often as my family. They almost became my family. Their presence forced me to remember, in detail, everything that had happened for the past two years. When I finally left the hospital, I was weighted down with everything I remembered. And it took me a while to escape the horrendous depression that threatened to drown me.”

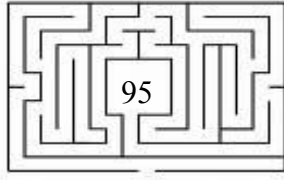
I looked back at Dr. Hobbs, my heart pounding but my mind clear. “You’re right, Dr. Hobbs. Looking back, I realize how strong I was. I honestly don’t know how I did it. Because, if you were to tell me that I had to go through that amount of pain again, I wouldn’t be able to make it.”

She was staring at me, sympathy in her eyes, and she remained quiet. Finally, she started quietly, “You never know how much weight you can bear until bearing that weight is the only option you have.”

I looked away from her. “It was never the only option.”

She was staring at me intently. She knew I was talking about the fact that, for the first week out of the lab, I had been vaguely thinking of just...ending it all. “But you knew it was the only option you would choose.”

I nodded. She was absolutely right. She and I both knew that I would never have done anything to hurt myself or the ones I loved, especially not after the recent events. “It was the only option I would choose. Because when it all comes down to it, life is what I want to live for.”



By the time nine o'clock rolled around that night, I was feeling noticeably different, and it almost scared me. I kept shrugging my shoulders in an effort to try to feel the weight that no longer seemed to be there. I was fidgety because I felt lighter. I was restless because I seemed to be thinking of less than I usually did. I was eager to do something because there seemed to be nothing that was in urgent need to be done.

Something was very different. I just couldn't place my finger on what that something was.

It was nine-fifteen, and the house was silent. Nate was out with a few of his co-workers, and Amaya was fast asleep. We had eaten already, and I had showered. Unlike all other nights when there always seemed to be something abstract that I felt needed to be done, tonight was empty. This unnerved me.

I could hear the TV playing in Aubrey's room. Looking for something to fill the lack of things to do, I padded down to her room and knocked on the door.

"Yes?" She called, lowering the volume of the TV.

I opened the door, slipped inside, and shut it. She was lying on her back above the covers, her huge king sized bed engulfing her in its body, the pillow she was laying on molding to her back. Her stomach was beginning to show her bump just enough that people didn't ask if she was pregnant in fear of mistaking pregnancy for simple fat.

I moved silently to her bed, climbed up, and lay down in Nate's spot. It smelled just like him: strong and masculine, the epitome of how Nate would always be pictured in my mind.

"What's up?" She asked, moving her eyes from the cooking show she was watching.

I shrugged. “Nothing,” I muttered, scooting closer to her. We lay there for some time, watching the chef make some elaborate vegetable dish.

Her arm came around my shoulder to land on my brand, but she continued to say nothing. She was just enjoying my company, and I hers.

There was something I felt I should say. There were words that hadn’t been spoken between us. I had long ago convinced myself that she couldn’t handle what I wanted to tell her, what I wanted to speak about in the comfort of she whom I loved most in my life. Really, though, I think it was I who couldn’t handle speaking what needed to be said. With my newfound feeling of levity, I felt that now would be the time to speak, if only to take advantage of the feeling before it passed. If it passed. I wasn’t sure how long feelings like this lasted; depression, though, could last forever.

Very slowly, I started quietly above the low sound of the TV. “One of the first times I met Travis, I told him about you.”

She remained quiet for a minute, her breath drawn and her movements ceasing. Slowly, she turned to look down at me. “What?” she whispered, unable to believe what I was saying.

“Travis asked me what kind of music I liked, and when I told him, he couldn’t believe how drastically different my taste in music ranged. I told him you and Nate had influenced me in my likes and dislikes,” I told her quietly.

She paused for a moment, her breathing quiet and even, like she was afraid if she were too loud, I’d realize that I was telling her information I had never mentioned before. “What else did you talk about?” She asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

I shrugged. “Anything. Travis was trying to make it so that I didn’t have to think about anything I didn’t want to. So, we got to know each other, instead. While I was with him, I really felt like I was healing.”

She was absorbing this information like a dried out sponge absorbs water on contact. I could feel her desperation, her need to hear what I hadn’t said before.

Besides the basic outline of my stay at Arthur’s and then the lab, she didn’t know the details, because I had never supplied

them. It had been hard enough reciting them for Mr. Simms; I hadn't been willing to speak of them to those who would need the full story. It was okay talking with Travis, because he basically knew everything. But I hadn't been able to talk with Aubrey, because I was afraid of what she would ask, or what she would conclude.

"So, was that how you got your memory back?" She asked quietly.

"Partly. When I was with him, I recovered a little bit of my memory. But Dr. Pierce took me away from him before I could get any more. I got the rest of my memory back when my body realized I wasn't in danger anymore."

She nodded but didn't continue. I knew she couldn't trust that I would tell her more.

"I remember telling him about your pregnancy," I told her, smiling slightly at the memory of talking with Travis. "I was guilty and upset because I had missed the birth."

Her hand lightly brushing my brand, she said quietly, "Of all the things to be worried about..."

"It was important to me," I assured her. "And it was hard for me to picture you as a mom. You just seemed too...cool," I told her, laughing. "Was it hard for you to adjust?"

She shook her head. "Not once I held Amaya in my arms. But, before that, I was actually depressed about giving birth."

I looked up at her. "Why?" Now it was she who was confessing thoughts she hadn't yet divulged.

She shrugged. "I felt like I was betraying you, that I was moving on to another younger person in my life. It felt like Amaya would be replacing you. You were gone, but I was still going on with my life."

My throat hurt as I tried to control my emotions. "Aubrey, I never would have thought that..."

"But I did," she whispered. "Darcy, when you were gone, I thought I wasn't going to make it. I really didn't know if I could live anymore. You have no idea what it was like to be here, without you. And then, when Mom and Dad...I think I would have just drifted away if it hadn't been for Amaya and Nate. They kept me grounded when nothing else could."

I didn't look at her. "I'm sorry," I whispered, feeling the need to apologize to her and to myself, for all the wrongly held emotions we were keeping pent up. "I'm so sorry that..."

She pulled me closer to her, my unsaid words enough for her. "When you came back, it felt like I was waking up from some horrible dream. I could breathe again, I could move again without feeling like I was going to break. I'm okay, now, really. There are some nights when I'll wake up and think that this life we're living together is just a dream, but once I reassure myself, I'm okay. We're all okay," she answered quietly.

I laid my head calmly against her shoulder, desperate for human contact and for comfort. For a minute, I said nothing. Then, quietly, I said, "Tell me what it's like being a mom."

She sighed. She and I both knew what I was craving. "It's like nothing in the world. It's like discovering yourself again. You see that baby in your arms, and the whole world, your whole perspective of the world, just changes. You suddenly feel like every action you ever made in your life was completely pointless, because this child is the only thing that matters. The hole in you that you didn't even know was present in your body fills. It's like a part of you was always saved for the moment when your baby enters your life and fills you whole. It's indescribable. It makes you want to be a better person. And I am. You and Amaya, and Nate, and this baby growing inside of me, you all make me a better person, more whole, more alive. I'm living life; I'm living for life. That's all anyone ever wants, right?"

I nodded, saying nothing. She had voiced the feeling that had been building inside of me since my last conversation with Dr. Hobbs. She knew what I was feeling; I didn't have to say anything.

Instead, I curled up closer to her and put my hand on her stomach, where I could feel her little baby bump, the life she was growing, the legacy she would pass on. I drifted off to sleep, basking in the contentment I felt for the life I was living.



## ~ About the Author ~

Amy Johnson is a recent graduate of The Academy of Saint Elizabeth in Convent Station, New Jersey. She lives in the New York metropolitan area with her parents, sister, and cat, Maggie. While in high school, she served as Editor-in-Chief of her school magazine and Executive Officer in the National Honor Society. She is the recipient of the St. Michael's College 2009 Book Award. She volunteers at a local hospital, where she collected material for her first novel, **Whitewashed**. Amy enjoys traveling, and spending time with her best friends, known as "The Square." She is currently a freshman at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD. Amy is pictured at home on the back-cover.