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Escaping Wonderland

Cold metal walls glinted harshly from the fluorescent lights lining the tiled ceiling. The room was as bare as winter, a square cell without a hint of warmth or comfort, and a solitary one-way mirror embellished the wall to the left. Apart from a spotless steel table and two matching metallic chairs, the only thing occupying the interrogation room was the teenage girl handcuffed to its surface. Her long, messily curled brown hair curtained her face as she sat hunched over, and her oversized coat was covered in mud. Amy Fischer knew she was in trouble, serious trouble, and yet her barely-contained fear was not for herself.

The events of that night continued to flash through her mind, like a terrible home video replaying itself over and over again. And she was the leading actress in this nightmare film; unfortunately, she hadn't been alone. After Amy had been caught at the abandoned steel mill, she'd watched Rachel and Julia escape with the books, but had they really gotten away? What if the guards had followed them back to the city, and they'd been taken as well? Her two best friends could be sitting in the room right next door and she would have no way of knowing.

Not to mention, she couldn't even think about Phillip without getting queasy. Her older brother had gotten so angry when he'd first found out about the book she'd stolen, and he was right to be. After their parents' tragic death, he'd lectured her relentlessly about the consequences of breaking the law, terrified of losing the only person he had left on the world. Looking back on it now, it made Amy doubt whether or not she'd really

done the right thing. Maybe she should have just gotten rid of it and forgotten the whole thing, just like he'd told her to...

But no. She couldn't have just forgotten what she saw. Amy wasn't the type of person to shy away and give up when faced with difficulty, it was a trait she'd inherited from her parents and she was proud of it. The government of Mathis was wrong to ban all books that weren't issued by them, and she believed it with every fiber of her being. So, when she'd found out that they were planning on destroying what were possibly the last known books in existence, she knew she had no choice but to step in.

Yes, she was only sixteen, and unlikely to make any real difference, but if there was even a small possibility that they could save some of the books, she sure as hell was going to try. The people of Mathis deserved to know the truth, and they deserved the chance to know a world outside of the one the government had forced them to accept. Her only regret was dragging her friends into such a dangerous mess, and quite possibly getting them arrested as well. The punishment for being caught with a book was severe, but the punishment for stealing them was likely much worse.

Before she could spend any more time worrying over the fate of her friends and family, the door on the opposite side of the room suddenly creaked open. In stepped a tall, thin man wearing a pressed black suit and tie, with not a single hair out of place on his perfectly gelled head. The badge clipped to his jacket indicated that he was known as Agent Meyers. In his arms he carried a clipboard holding several closed files, and Amy's familiar blue backpack was slung over his shoulder. The hard set of his face indicated that he wasn't coming in for a pleasant chat. Amy raised her eyes indignantly to meet his stony glare, and the well-dressed agent straightened out his tie before taking two long strides towards the table.

A dull clang echoed through the interrogation room as Agent Meyers dropped the clipboard unceremoniously onto the table. Setting the backpack on the ground, he slowly pulled out the chair opposite of Amy, the metal legs scraping eerily against the concrete floor. He then took a seat, remaining unspoken and seemingly disregarding her presence altogether as he began rifling through the papers in the folder. Feeling both nervous at her current situation, and mildly annoyed at being ignored, the teen fidgeted in her seat, unable to do much else with her hands cuffed to the table. After several minutes of tense silence passed, Amy felt as if she was going to go crazy, and cleared her throat loudly.

Finally the man looked up from his documents, leveling her with an ice-cold stare as he folded his hands atop the table. “Ms. Fischer.” He spoke calmly, his tone hard and even. “I’m sure you know why we brought you in.”

He paused then, his eyes never wavering as he apparently waited for the answer to his question, one that he thought he already knew. Instead, Amy raised a brow in a look of feigned confusion and when she responded her voice was drowning in innocence. “No, actually I don’t. I don’t think I’ve done anything wrong.”

It wasn’t a lie, exactly. She truly believed that she had done the right thing; it was the government who was in the wrong. Agent Meyers merely stared at Amy for a moment, before reaching down and unzipping the backpack. After a second of searching inside, he pulled out a book and slammed it onto the table, holding it upright so she could see it. The cover was worn and obviously old, and a dull, dark red that may have once been the color of a rose. The lettering of the title was decorative and painted gold, spelling out the words “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland”. The agent once again directed his attention to Amy. “Do you recognize this?”

Surprise flashed across Amy's face for a brief moment, but then she squinted and leaned forward, dramatically pretending to study the book. "Yes, I believe that is a book. But I could be wrong, since I've never been allowed to read one and all."

"Correct, Ms. Fischer, this is a book. In fact, this is one of the many books that you and your friends stole from the Government."

"Oh, those belonged to you guys? They were just laying there so I didn't think they'd be missed. My bad."

A loud bang suddenly caused Amy to jerk, as Agent Meyers slammed his hand down flat onto the surface of the table, a new level of fury flashing through his menacingly dark eyes. "This is not a joke! You and your friends broke into a government-owned building, which was scheduled to be torn down that very night, and stole dangerous government property. Do you not realize how much trouble you are in, Ms. Fischer?"

Amy couldn't help but laugh dryly, though her words were laced with sarcasm, not humor. "You really consider books to be *dangerous*?"

The agent leaned in across the table towards Amy slowly, folding his hands once again on the table in front of him as he tried to regain his calm demeanor. Amy scooted backwards in her chair until her hands were straining painfully against the handcuffs. "Ms. Fischer, let's agree not to play these tedious games with each other, hmm? We already know that you were there and that you were the mastermind."

Before Amy could respond, Agent Meyers reached over and opened the folder sitting in front of him, pulling out two glossy photos. He sat them face up on the table and pushed the photos across, spinning them around so that they were now facing Amy. Upon looking closer, Amy realized they were security pictures of the night she and her

friends had broken into the abandoned mill. Amy's face was clearly recognizable, but Julia and Rachel had somehow managed to remain indistinguishable. She once again started to get nervous, and began wringing her hands as Agent Meyers continued his interrogation.

"This was taken earlier tonight, when you broke into the old steel mill. There are two other girls in that photo with you, and the guards who caught you confirmed that they saw two others run away."

Suddenly the photos were being pulled away, and Amy looked up to see the agent returning them to the folder. Once they were safely secured he looked back to her, the expression on his face conveying an obvious question, yet he asked it aloud anyways. "So, Amy. Who are the other two girls?"

Amy lowered her head briefly, allowing her lengthy brunette hair to shield her face as tears began to form in her eyes. She would not let him see her cry. She shook her head meekly, and without looking back up she answered him with as strong a conviction as she could muster. "I won't tell you. They didn't do anything wrong."

Agent Meyers sighed heavily and crossed his arms over his chest. After a few minutes of silence he rose from his chair, pushing it back forcefully so that it fell back onto the floor. He slowly circled the table, not stopping until he came to stand at Amy's side, and leaned down to rest his hand on the back of her chair. He bent over slightly, until his face was a mere few inches from her own.

"The information found in those books is extremely dangerous. Why do you think we only allow government-issued textbooks in school? If the general public gets ahold of these books that you've stolen, it'll put bad thoughts into their heads. We could have an

uprising on our hands. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of innocent people would get hurt. Do you really want that?”

Amy glared fiercely up at him as he spoke. “What you’re doing is wrong, and I hope those books get out. I will *never* tell you who they are.”

Meyers shook his head in exaggerated disappointment even though he was obviously struggling not to lose temper, pushing back off the chair and meandering to the other side of the interrogation room. When he spoke to her this time, he remained facing the wall, but she heard his gut-wrenching words all the same.

“I wonder how your brother would feel about your... stubborn behavior. What was his name again? Phillip? Perhaps we should bring him in and ask him.”

Amy's head snapped up and her deep blue eyes were wide with fear. “No, please, my brother didn't have anything to do with this. He didn't even know I was there.”

The agent spins back around to face her, a cocky smirk replacing his frown. “So, you'll tell me the names of the other girls involved?”

“I...” Amy squeezed her hands into tight fists as she struggled to find the right answer. “No. I can't.”

Agent Meyers shook his head and made a disappointed ‘tsk tsk’ sound. He strolled back to the table and began collecting his things. “I'm very surprised with you, Ms. Fischer. I thought we had agreed not to play these games. But I'm sure you'll have a change of heart, once we've... well, *spoken*, to your brother.”

The tears that had begun to form in Amy's eyes fell down her face as Agent Meyers unclasped the handcuffs from the table. He slung the backpack over his shoulder and harshly grabbed her by the arm, forcing her to stand before pushing her towards the door, and together they exited the interrogation room.

The agent loped briskly down a crisp white hallway, Amy at his side as he drug her along by the arm. The walls were scantily decorated, much like the interrogation room, with only a few propaganda posters hung up here and there. The majority of them issued warnings such as, "BOOKS: ARE THEY WORTH THE RISK?" or "BOOKS ARE BANNED", with images of novels covered by the red 'no' symbol.

They passed by a few empty rooms on the way, as well as a stairway with a glowing "EXIT" sign above it, and an office with "FEDERAL BUREAU OF INFORMATION CONTROL" plastered on the door. Amy stumbled slightly as she was roughly pulled along, and she glanced down to see a set of keys hooked loosely onto Agent Meyers' belt loop. She smiled vaguely to herself before being pulled forward yet again.

After several more moments of being pulled down the bare passageways like a petulant child, Agent Meyers once more yanked forcefully her towards him. This time, she pretended to trip forwards and reached her still-cuffed hands out in front of her, grasping at his jacket for balance. As she 'attempted' to right herself, she deftly grabbed his keys and unclasped them from his pants before he was even able to regain his balance. "Watch what you're doing! This is a new suit, I don't want your filthy hands wrinkling it."

"Oh, right, sorry." As the agent straightened out his suit jacket, Amy reached back and quietly dropped the keys into her jacket pocket. The Agent once more grabbed her by the forearm and they continued further down the hallway.

After what felt like an eternity of endless marching, Amy and Agent Meyers came

to a stop at a door labeled "Holding Cells". The door was propped slightly ajar, and the agent pushed it open fully, shoving Amy into the room ahead of him. The room, as its name suggested, was mostly taken up by three barred, empty cells. Each one contained a simple porcelain sink and a wire frame bed with a rather disgusting-looking mattress.

The agent shoved Amy forward and dropped the backpack onto a solitary desk resting near the door. He smirked at Amy before walking up to one of the cells and reached down to grab his keys from his belt. It took him a moment to realize they weren't there, and once he did he began patting himself down and rummaging through all of his pockets, trying desperately to find them. He spun around, eyes locked on the floor, before frustratedly running his hands through his hair.

"I must've left my keys in the interrogation room. I'm going to run back and grab them, and the door will lock behind me so don't bother trying to do something stupid." The agent hurriedly left the room, the door automatically locking with a soft click behind him. Amy waited a few painstaking moments before running up to the door, peering through the small frosted-glass window to make sure he was out of sight.

She hastily fumbled with her jacket to get the keys out of her pocket, her shaking hands causing her to drop them onto the floor. She let out a deep breath before picking them back up, taking her time now as she tried to free herself. She almost cried out triumphantly as the cuffs finally fell from her wrists, and immediately ran for the door. She unlocked the door with the keys and grabbed the handle to open it, but froze in place. Amy looked back over to the desk in the corner where her backpack lay, and quickly snatched it up before darting back to the door.

Amy cautiously poked her head out into the hallway, glancing around to make

sure no one was coming her way before creeping out. Quietly shutting the door behind her, she looked back one last time before taking off down the corridor. She ran as fast as she could without making too much noise, her worn black sneakers thudding against the tiled floor softly. She paused only once to remember the turns they took to get there, but quickly continued on once she spotted the anti-books posters they'd passed, lucky that the halls were empty so far.

Amy turned a corner into the hallway leading back to the interrogation room and came to a dead halt when she spotted the "EXIT" sign that indicated a stairway leading out of the building. She sighed with relief and jogged towards the door. Just as she latched onto the handle and was about to open the door, an angry shout reached her from further down the hallway, and she whirled around to see Agent Meyers sprinting towards her. "Hey, stop! Don't you dare run, Amy Fischer!"

Amy's eyes widened in shock and she bolted through the doorway, holding onto the handrail while dashing down the stairs. She managed to make it two floors down before the door above slammed open, and the agent came into view again. Amy didn't stop running, taking the stairs two at a time, as Agent Meyers shouted things at her that she couldn't quite make out. Two more floors down and she finally saw another "EXIT" sign. Not wasting any time to see how close behind her Meyers was, Amy forcefully shoved the door open, flinching as a cold gust of wind crashed into her.

Amy stumbled out of the building to find herself in pitch blackness, the only light to be seen for miles coming from the distant city of Mathis. The city was so far away, it was almost impossible to make out the pristine federal skyscrapers or the rundown wooden shacks the average people called home. Surrounding her on all other sides was a

lush, looming forest that stretched for miles in either direction. It was clear that the government had kept this building far from the prying eyes of its citizens.

Frantically glancing around, Amy spotted a group of pristine, trimmed hedges to her left and scrambled towards them. She abruptly tossed her backpack over the hedges before shoving past them herself, somehow ducking down just as the exit door was thrown open again. She carefully lowered herself onto her stomach, not even daring to breathe as she peered out through the thick branches.

Amy watched stiffly as Agent Meyers jogged down the paved road past her. Her stomach dropped as he hesitated and glanced around, but eventually he continued down the street in the direction of the city beyond. Releasing the breath she had been holding, Amy dropped her head to the ground for a moment before cautiously rising to her feet and swiftly brushing herself off. Grabbing her backpack from the dirt, she threw it over her shoulder and turned to look towards the glowing lights of Mathis.

“I can do this.” Stepping out from the hedges, Amy dawned a look of determination and set off down the path that would lead her back to her friends and family. She would get back to them before Agent Meyers could find them, and she would make sure they all stayed safe. She had to. And then, together, they could find a way to end the ban on books for good.