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STIFF

CHAPTER 1

BEATRICE

OUR HOUSEHOLD'S MIRROR is behind a sliding panel in the wall upstairs, and I'm allowed to stand in front of it once every three months, when my mother cuts my hair.

It's the same choreography every time. I take the stool out of the hall closet and carry it over. She brings the scissors and the comb from the drawer in the bathroom. I sit. She slides the panel back. And I stare into my own eyes, hoping I'll see something different this time.

But I'm the same. Small, pale. Bright blue eyes. Plain face. Dull blond hair. I want to keep staring, try on all my different expressions so I know what they look like. But even though I'm allowed to look at my reflection right now, I'm not supposed to revel in it. That would be vanity.

I look away.

My mother takes out the pins that are keeping my bun in place and then drags her fingers through my hair to unwind it. It would be easy to let this carry on the way it always has, this comforting ritual. But today I think of my brother, Caleb, how he's been cutting his own hair for years, and my mother's small smile and the tug of the comb make me feel like a child.

"Can I do it?" I ask her, nodding to the scissors.

She hesitates for only a moment before putting the scissors in my hand. I pinch my hair between two fingers the way I've seen her do it, and I think about shifting them higher, so I trim off more than just an inch. What if I cut my hair at my chin? Could I be someone different then?

Don't be ridiculous, I tell myself. A haircut doesn't change a person.

But I'm just so desperate to be different. To be the person I'm supposed to be.

Desperate to be the person who fits here, in our faction, in our *home*, instead of the one who doesn't.

I close the scissors over the first lock of hair, and cut.

CHAPTER 2

BEATRICE

MY MOTHER IS humming.

She only ever hums when she cooks. I never recognize the tune. Right now she's chopping carrots for the soup, and she chops in time with the music.

I slide my knife along the cutting board to get the last onions into the pot. They sizzle in the oil.

"Thank you for doing that," she says to me. "They always make me cry."

"Of course."

I wash the cutting board right away and look at the cross-stitch of our faction's motto that hangs over the sink. *Them before I*. Mrs. Black made it. The little knots are tight and even.

My father taps the door frame. "The council leader is almost here."

My mother looks up and smiles. She seems at ease, like the most important man in the city coming over for dinner is nothing to fret about. She puts her carrots in the pot and pours a jar of vegetable broth over carrots and onions both. Then we stand together at the counter to chop the herbs, rosemary for her and thyme for me.

In these moments, I think that I *can* belong here. Working side by side with my mother. A quiet song in a quiet kitchen. The beautiful simplicity of an Abnegation life spent searching for ways to help other people, in actions big and small. My mother has accomplished both. She organizes volunteers to help the factionless and to restore the worn-down parts of the city; people in our faction routinely come to her for counsel; and my father, always so convinced of his own point of view, seeks her wisdom constantly. How can I not want that for myself? A life well-lived. A guarantee of meaning.

It's not that I don't want it, I guess. It's that I'm not right for it.

"Are you nervous for tomorrow?" she asks me—quiet, like it's a secret.

Tomorrow is the aptitude test. It will tell me . . . everything. Who I am. Where I belong. It will tell me what to choose. How to untie this knot inside me that's been getting tighter and tighter for months.

Our city is divided into five factions. Each one wraps itself around a virtue like people huddled around a hearth fire. For our faction, that virtue is selflessness. For Erudite, intelligence. For Amity, kindness. For Candor, honesty. And for Dauntless, bravery. Everything we do—our jobs, our clothes, the way we speak, the way we act—has its foundation in our virtue of choice.

My mother's shoulder is warm where it presses against mine.

"Yes," I admit. "I'm nervous."

She puts an arm around me and squeezes. "Just remember: the test won't tell you anything you don't already know."

My stomach churns. She pulls away as the front door opens and the council leader's low voice fills the entryway.



Children aren't allowed to talk at the dinner table in Abnegation, and it's just as well, because I'm distracted by the last thing my mother said to me. It's only when I feel Susan's eyes on me that I realize I'm just swirling my spoon in my soup instead of eating it. I scoop some carrot into my mouth.

The council leader's name is Marcus Eaton. He looks just like my father: tall, short brown hair, gray clothes. Abnegation has a way of making all people look the same, and that's the whole point—individuals disappear, and the collective good is all that's left. But my father's face is creased in perpetual sympathy, and Marcus's is unreadable. I've known him my whole life, and I don't know him at all.

My father says grief can make people turn inward, and Marcus has had more grief than most. He had a wife once, and a son. Evelyn Eaton died from complications with her second pregnancy. I didn't know her well, but I remember being wary of her; she wasn't as warm or friendly as the other Abnegation women I knew. Her death must have broken something in their son, because, years later, at his Choosing Ceremony, he left Abnegation. I don't remember which faction he chose instead. Now Marcus is alone, because you don't stay in touch with your child if they leave your faction.

Faction before blood. That's one of our highest laws.

Marcus has been coming over for dinner once a week since his son left us—so, for two years.

"What are you growing in the garden this year, Agnes?" my mother is asking Mrs. Black. She runs the community garden that her son, Robert, was working in earlier. Our families were paired together because Robert and Susan are fraternal twins, just like me and Caleb.

"The radishes are flourishing," Mrs. Black replies. "As are the

tomatoes, which we've had trouble with in the past—Robert has been reading up on soil composition for us.”

Robert's face is already red. His complexion makes him easy to read: He gets red when he's angry, red when he's embarrassed, red when he tries to lie. Right now I think he's just red because Marcus is looking at him.

“Soil composition,” Marcus says. “Sounds very scientific.”

It's not a compliment. My faction is suspicious of scientific pursuits. The science itself isn't the problem—there are Abnegation doctors, after all, and they have to understand science for their work. But the line between pursuing it for other people's benefit and pursuing it for your own interest is a fine one, as we're often warned.

Robert stares at his plate.

“Oh, perhaps,” my mother chimes in, smiling at him. “But Robert's focus is always the communal good, Council Leader. Not a mere idle curiosity.”

Robert's returned smile is grateful.

“And your two?” Marcus asks my mother. “Still volunteering at the hospital?”

“Caleb is,” my mother replies. “Beatrice has been joining me in serving the factionless.”

“Ah, I see.” Marcus's voice softens, and he looks at me in a way that seems to measure and then approve me.

My face heats, and I look at my bowl. For most people, being looked at that way by a council leader—the final word of not only our faction but our city's entire government—would be flattering. But it just makes me feel like a fraud. The factionless—those who were cast out of their factions, or failed their factions' initiations—are in need. And yes, I've been joining my mother in her efforts to help them. But I hate every second of it.

Some of them are kind and seem to appreciate the work we're doing. Most of them just take what they need and go. And some of them are insulting. *Stiff*, they call me, which is slang for Abnegation, or *faction scum*. They snatch things from my hands and order me to bring them more. They never expect me to defend myself, and I never do. I'm not supposed to, after all; I'm supposed to be focused on doing good for others.

There are a lot of things I'm supposed to do, and be.

"Such critical, necessary work," Marcus says.

My face gets even hotter.

"Everyone has a place in our society." My mother's eyes—green like Caleb's—almost seem to twinkle. "Each one as important as the next."

"Yes. Of course."

The news brief comes on right as I'm scraping the bottom of my bowl, the screen in the wall flickering to life. We don't control the news; the morning report comes on at the same time every day, and special reports appear whenever they appear, no matter what we're doing. My father often complains about Erudite deliberately releasing special reports during the Abnegation dinner hour, like they're doing it just to spite us. Given what they're reporting these days, he might be right.

I read the words as they scroll past:

ABNEGATION LEADERSHIP STRENUOUSLY DENIES
ALLEGATIONS OF MEMORY TAMPERING.

Last week, a report issued by this office brought to light a concerning pattern of Dauntless wall guards suffering memory lapses. In each incident, these lapses were preceded by a visit to the Abnegation Memory Vault. For several years, members

of each faction have been called upon to store memories in the vault as part of an initiative by Abnegation leadership “to improve city recordkeeping,” as Council Member Andrew Prior claimed at the time of proposing it. But when asked about the connection between the concerning cognitive symptoms experienced by Dauntless officers and the visits to the Memory Vault, Council Leader Marcus Eaton—notably the only person in the city with full access to the Memory Vault’s systems—dismissed the allegations as “nonsense,” declaring that the report was “a flagrant attempt by Erudite leader Jeanine Matthews to deteriorate the public’s confidence in their leadership.”

Marcus’s face is, as ever, unreadable.

“Ludicrous,” my father says, shaking his head. He looks at my mother. “The way they phrase everything—I ‘claim’ my proposal was to improve city recordkeeping, like it can’t possibly be the truth. And you, Marcus—‘dismissing’ and ‘declaring’ things like some kind of tyrant—”

“They’re doubling down,” Mrs. Black cuts in, her voice quiet. The candlelight flickers over her cheekbones. “They’re determined to erode our reputation—”

“Reputation is an egocentric concept,” Marcus says, a mild chastisement. “My concern is who they’re getting their information from.”

And then words are bubbling out of me like boiling water teeming over: “So their information is right?”

Everyone at the table turns to look at me at once.

“Beatrice,” my mother says. A warning.

I curse myself silently. I didn’t mean to say anything, but now it’s too late.

“Are you questioning our faction’s integrity?” Marcus asks me.

He sounds surprisingly mild, despite how pointed the question is.

I swallow hard. “No, of course not—I just . . . I thought Erudite was making up all these things.” They’re all staring at me, uncomprehending. I just want them to understand. “If they’re making them up, why would they need a source?”

“*Beatrice*.” That’s my father this time, but I’m already speaking.

“And if they’re *not* making all of it up, then—”

My mother doesn’t raise her voice. She just says, “Penalty of Silence until morning.”

My mouth closes with a snap. The Penalty of Silence deprives me of my right to speak until the penalty period is over. If I break it, the consequences are dire: detainment in Abnegation headquarters for at least a day, if not more. And the shame of that, the communal *disappointment*, is harder to quantify.

I feel it now, as I stand up to gather the bowls. Across the table from me, Robert and Caleb do the same, avoiding my eyes. The back of my neck is hot; my eyes burn. I try not to slam the bowls together as I stack them—I can’t afford to get into any more trouble. So I hurry through the task and seek refuge in the kitchen, at the sink.

My father comes to stand beside me, picking up a dishrag to dry the dishes after I wash them. He bumps his shoulder into mine, and I look over to see that he’s smiling a little.

“You get it from me,” he says.

I raise my eyebrows at him to ask the question, *I get what?*

“The direct line between brain and mouth,” he clarifies. “We have a version of the Penalty of Silence in council meetings if someone is ‘contributing to a contentious environment.’”

I get the sense he would roll his eyes at that statement if he let himself.

“Guess who’s penalized with it most often?”