*Hurt. Angry. Scared.*

*Alone.*

*A cocktail of emotions bubbled beneath the surface.*

*It was dark. The cement beneath her arms—pulled tight over her head—was rough and gritty. Scrapes burned across her knees as she pressed into the corner of the wall.*

*It hurt. It was uncomfortable. But she would have gladly taken ten times this pain if those boys would just leave her alone.*

*If someone would just—help.*

*“Little Lincoln! Little Lincoln!” The boys’ voices echoed down the alley, mocking.*

*Tears slid down her cheeks despite her efforts. She couldn’t let them see. If they saw, it would only make it worse.*

*“What’s the matter, Little Lincoln? Why are you hiding in the corner? Don’t you want to play with us?”*

*Go away. Please, just go away. Why don’t they ever go away?*

*Something struck her side—hard.*

*A small, round shape.*

*A ball.*

*They were throwing it at her now.*

*That’s right… the boys were playing wall-ball. And when she turned the corner earlier, she’d walked straight into their game.*

*“Come on, Lincoln! Play with us!”*

*Go away. Please. Just go away.*

Emma gasped—air tore into her lungs like she hadn’t breathed in hours. Her eyes flew open. The ceiling above her spun, warped, and slowly came into focus.

For a moment she couldn’t remember where she was—then the smell of dust and the faint hum of her desk lamp anchored her back to her room.

Her chest heaved. Her palms were slick with sweat. The sound of those boys’ voices still rang in her ears.

*Little Lincoln.*

She jerked upright, heart hammering. Across from her, Gracie lay crumpled on the floor beside the shattered remains of the jar, motionless—face in anguish.

“Gracie?” Emma crawled toward her, glass crunching beneath her knees. “Gracie, wake up.”

Emma shook her shoulder gently, then harder. “Come on, please—”

Gracie sucked in a sharp breath and shot upright, almost headbutting her.  
Both girls froze—eyes wide, chest heaving in unison.

“I… him…” Gracie started, voice trembling.

Emma swallowed hard. “Lincoln?”

Gracie nodded. Her face was pale, her hands shook in her lap. “Lincoln… but it felt like… *I* felt like I was him.”

“Me too.” Emma began, voice small, “Wall-ball?”

Gracie squinted, her brow furrowing. “Wall-ball…? No. No, I—he just got home from school. And I—he…” She shook her head, trying to untangle the memory. “Lincoln runs to his room. Locks the door. His pants are wet—but not from him. Some kids doused him with water and then mocked him for peeing his pants. His mom came, banging on the door, telling him to open up. He refuses, but she gets a key and comes in anyway.”

Gracie’s voice wavered. “She grabs a towel, starts trying to clean him up even though he’s begging her not to. Says she’s going to talk to those boys’ parents again—Travis, I think. But Lincoln pleads with her not to. Says it only makes things worse.”

Her voice broke. “He felt so—”

“Helpless?” Emma whispered.

Gracie nodded, tears spilling over. “I knew Travis and some of the others picked on him, but I had no idea it was *that* bad.”

Emma bit the inside of her cheek, guilt coiling in her stomach. “Me neither. I saw them picking on him so many times… and I just stood there. Didn’t do a thing.”

“Me too.” Gracie’s lower lip quivered.

Neither of them spoke for a while. The room felt heavier now, like the air itself carried the sadness they’d just felt. The jar sat between them on the floor, its shards glittering faintly in the lamplight.

Gracie wiped at her eyes. “We have to help him somehow.”

Emma blew out a breath. “I don’t know if he needs much of our help these days.”

Gracie shook her head. “No. No, if anything he needs it more. These are his memories—obviously—they *belong* to him—” She froze mid-sentence, eyes widening as something clicked. “Wait. Do you think this is what Everdeen meant?”

Emma frowned. “What do you mean?”

“When she offered to take your pain away,” Gracie said quickly. “Maybe she meant *literally*. What if she’s been taking people’s pain—memories, feelings, everything—and putting them in jars? Maybe we’re not the only ones who found her. Maybe Lincoln did too. And maybe…” She hesitated, swallowing. “Maybe he said yes.”