



1.

September 15

“**W**HAT DID YOU DO?”

Streaks of rain glitter on the windows as the train races through unending bleak moorland. I didn't think the journey would take so long—night has fallen and all I can see past the raindrops are shadows, deep and full of secrets.

The carriage is nearly empty—a woman bent over a laptop, fingers tapping a staccato counterpoint to the steady rhythm of the train. A man asleep, his head against the window. Three teen-age girls, their feet on the seats. One of them stares at me from under false eyelashes, her question hanging in the air.

“What did you do?”

I always imagined British people would have posh accents, but this girl is proving me wrong. I can smell hairspray and spearmint and cherry lip gloss.

Since they got on a few stops ago, the girls have filled the carriage with their presence. Their shrieks of laughter, their cursing, the snap of their gum. I feel a stab of jealousy at their ease with each other, with the world. They inhabit their bodies so comfortably, propelling themselves through time and space with such confidence. I can't imagine how it must feel.

The girl is still waiting for an answer, but I don't know what to say. I don't know what I did.

She stands and approaches me, swaying with the movement of

the train.

She's wearing an outfit that is simultaneously casual yet completely over-the-top—camo-print tracksuit bottoms and a lurid green tube top.

Her makeup is thick and applied with painterly precision, her skin unnaturally orange, her brows like perfectly sculpted punctuation marks.

She nods down at the brochure poking out of my battered copy of *Middlemarch*. I've been using it as a bookmark.

"That school is for posh fuckups," she says. "So why are you going? Drugs? Stealing? Did you get into fights?"

I follow her gaze back down to the Agathion College brochure. Images of arched windows and turreted spires surrounded by romantic moorland grace the glossy pages. Blue-gray stone walls, wreathed in creeping ivy. Serious-looking students in wool kilts and tweed blazers bent over ancient books. When the brochure arrived in the mail, along with a full scholarship offer, it seemed too good to be true. It still does. I imagine myself there, surrounded by books and knowledge and history. I'll wander the moors like Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* and curl up in the huge stone castle with a steaming cup of tea to read Dickens and Austen and my beloved Shakespeare.

A life of the mind.

Maybe sometimes I'll engage with the other students, debating poetry or philosophy. Not *friends*, because I'm not doing that again. Colleagues, perhaps. Intellectual peers. Previous Agathion students have gone on to become famous politicians, writers, and artists, according to the brochure. There's even one former British prime minister who attended.

"Bet she killed someone," says another one of the girls, whose long fingernails are pointed slashes of teal and gold. "She looks the type."

Do I?

I stuff the book and brochure into my backpack. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tube Top Girl recoil slightly, and I know she's noticed my hands.

"Come on," the girl with the long fingernails says. "Before she puts a spell on you."

I let my gaze drift up to meet Tube Top Girl's, and see the faintest hint of fear there, behind her enormous false lashes and brash confidence. My hands curl in on themselves, obscuring my shiny pink palms.

The girl shrugs and returns to her friends.

My parents offered to come with me, but I insisted on traveling by myself. I wanted to get on board that plane and never look back. I wanted to get as far away from Lakeland, Florida, as I possibly could. From the smell of burning flesh and jasmine, and the sound of Cassidy screaming.

Agathion feels like the only way out.

A place where I can learn to control myself.

I can feel the train start to slow. We're nearly there.

I feel a twinge in my abdomen—an echo of the deep dragging pain that is so familiar to me, and my pulse quickens.

Not now.

But, I remind myself, I only just had my period. This is nerves.

I stand and head down the swaying carriage to the luggage rack. I have to pass the three girls, who look up at me as I walk.

"Loosen up a bit, hey?" the bold girl says. "Let your freak flag fly."

My cheeks feel hot and sweat prickles down my back. I am frozen in place, pinned by the casual, insolent gaze of this girl who I've never met before and will never see again. She doesn't matter, so why can't I move or speak? The dragging sensation in my belly intensifies.

Someone screams, and I'm back at St. Catherine's, my hands burning and my lungs filling with acrid smoke.

But it isn't Cassidy screaming. It's just the squealing of brakes as the train slows. I'm thrown forward against the bold girl as we shudder to a halt.

"Hey," she says, laughing. "Buy me dinner first!"

Her skin is smooth against mine; the scent of her lip gloss is overpowering.

I scramble to my feet and away to the luggage rack. I can't miss my stop.

I can't.

The doors hiss open, and I am shaking with panic. I grab the handle of my suitcase and yank, but it's stuck. I pull and pull, but it won't budge. I try pushing instead, trying to jostle it into a better position, but that only seems to make the problem worse. I kick it.

Outside, the train's whistle blows.

I'm out of time.

"Do you need a hand?" asks the bold girl.

It's too late. The train is about to leave the station.

And I realize that whatever's in that suitcase—I don't need it.

I'm coming to Agathion to live a life of the mind. I have

everything I need.

“Weirdo,” mutters the girl, turning back to her friends. I leave my suitcase behind and step off the train.

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