“Are you alright, dear?”

Emma cleared her throat, hand on her chest. “Yeah, sorry—just had something stuck in my throat.”

The ghost of Miss Everdeen frowned and gave a curt nod. “Next time, I would recommend excusing yourself from the room if you feel a coughing fit coming on. Etiquette training, rule number forty-seven.” She sat down in a chair, tucking her legs neatly to the side.

*Excuse myself from the empty room? Yeah, okay, lady.*

Emma studied her—the needle-straight hair pulled tight, the modest dress, the ramrod posture. Living or dead, this woman had clearly walked around with a stick up her butt her entire life, and Emma was quickly growing tired this “etiquette training.”

“But of course,” Emma forced herself to reply, biting her tongue to stop anything sharper from slipping out.

“Thank you. Now, if everyone is ready, let’s get—wait.” Miss Everdeen’s head tilted. “Where is… your friend?”

Emma’s heart slammed in her chest. “Gracie? She, uh… she’s in the bathroom! She said we can get started without her though…”

Miss Everdeen let the silence stretch until Emma’s stomach knotted, her fingers twisting together. The ghost searched her eyes as if sifting for the lie that it was.

Finally, she nodded. “Very well. We don’t want to keep the rest of the children waiting, now do we?”

“Rest of the—?” Emma began, but stopped cold as a handful of other children flickered into view beside her.

Boys and girls, older and younger, materialized on the rug, sitting criss-cross applesauce with perfect posture, their eyes locked on Miss Everdeen.

*What. Is. Going. On?*

*Gracie needs to be seeing this…*

Some wore clothes as dated as the ghost herself; others, more recent—hoodies and sneakers beside pinafores and lace-up boots. If not for their soft blue haze and blurred edges, Emma might have mistaken them for real children. Or—rather—*living* ones.

*Who are all these—*

“Have a seat, please, little miss,” Miss Everdeen said sternly, peering over the reading glasses she hadn’t been wearing moments ago. “On your bottom.” She pointed to the floor with one finger.

*Next to the other ghost children… sure, why not.*

Hesitantly, Emma lowered herself to the ground. And while she wasn’t candid about looking from face to face, not a single one of the other children would meet her eyes. They sat still as statues, fixated on Miss Everdeen. And, strangest of all, Emma didn’t feel a flicker of cold beside them.

Not like Miss Everdeen—who was a walking freezer. Or drifting freezer. Whatever she was doing.

Miss Everdeen began the story, licking her finger with nonexistent saliva before flipping open the cover of a picture book Emma had never seen before.

Not that Emma was well-versed in picture books these days. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d even thumbed through one. But as long as it kept ghost lady busy, she didn’t care *what* she read.

“This story begins like so many others,” Miss Everdeen said. “An epic of sorrow. A tale of sadness. A song of grief.”

Emma blinked. *That’s quite a way to start a children’s book.*

“You see,” Miss Everdeen went on, “there was a girl. A young girl.” She turned the page to a drawing of a smiling child with shoulder-length brown hair and big round glasses—not unlike a pair Emma once owned.

“At first, she lived a happy life. A full life. One filled with laughter and silly-willies and a plethora of hugs and kisses. She was loved. And she loved.”

The pictures showed the girl playing with a mother and father in a sunlit field, all three laughing with unfiltered joy.

“But then one day, the little girl’s mother was in an accident. A bad accident…”

The picture showed a blue car in the middle of the night wrapped around a thick tree.

Emma blinked once. Then twice.

That car looked… familiar. The angle of the headlights. The curve of the tree—

Emma’s heart stopped beating.

“The girl was sad. Oh, so very, very sad. She didn’t understand why her mommy wasn’t coming home anymore. Why she didn’t come to tuck her in at night, or read her stories, or sing her to sleep with that lovely voice of hers…”

Miss Everdeen’s tone softened—almost kindly. “No child should have to remember such sorrow.”

The book showed the little girl crying in her bed, an empty room illuminated by a single nightlight and an unopened storybook no one was reading to her.

Miss Everdeen turned the page and glanced Emma’s way, her eyes sharp and knowing. A tear slipped down Emma’s cheek.

She had met a ghost, was surrounded by ghost children—but this was the most frightened she had felt all night. She wanted it to stop. Wanted to rip the book from Miss Everdeen’s hands.

But she couldn’t move. She was paralyzed.

“As for the little girl’s father, he was sad too,” Miss Everdeen continued. “He loved his wife oh so very much. More than life itself. He tried to be strong, to not crumble and wither away. He had a job, after all, and he was still the father to a beautiful little girl—one who looked so very much like her mother.”

The book showed a man sitting in a chair, face buried in his hands.

Miss Everdeen turned the page.

“But everywhere the father looked, he was reminded of her. Of his late wife. The job, the city, the house… his daughter… everything reminded him of *her*. So they moved. And they moved. And they moved.”

The book showed house after house after house—so many that Emma recognized.

Anger pulsed beneath Emma’s skin. And grief. And such great sadness. A single tear had turned into a flood.

And Miss Everdeen turned the page.

“The little girl began to grow. Her clothes grew shorter, her hair longer, and her understanding of the world sharper. Schools changed, schoolmates changed—everything changed—but the sadness always remained. No matter how much she willed it away or screamed into her pillow, the sadness wouldn’t leave.”

The picture showed the girl sitting in a classroom, surrounded by blurred, indistinct faces.

The tears stopped. Her face went numb. Her chest felt hollow, like someone had scooped her out from the inside.

And Miss Everdeen turned the page.

“The little girl accepted that this was her life. That she would be sad forever. That she would be lonely forever. But what the little girl didn’t know,” Miss Everdeen’s voice dipped low, “was that she didn’t need to feel that way anymore. That one day, she would meet a librarian who could take all that pain away.”

Now there were eyes on her. All of them. Emma could *feel* the other kids attention burning into her skin, but still she couldn’t look away.

Miss Everdeen closed the book and placed it on her lap.

“What did you think of our story tonight, Emma?”

Emma was shaking—violently. She wasn’t cold. Didn’t feel any pain. Nor anger, or grief. Nothing. There was only her… and Miss Everdeen in front of her—and yet, she couldn’t stop.

“How?” Her voice came out small, raw. “How did you know?”

Miss Everdeen sighed and gave a look that said the answer was obvious. “It’s written all over your face, little miss. Just as it’s written in this book.” She tapped the hard cover resting on her lap. “This is your book. Your story. I just read it.”

Suddenly, Emma couldn’t look at her anymore. Her eyes darted anywhere—everywhere—but Miss Everdeen’s direction. Her vision blurred, wet. She didn’t even remember when she’d started crying again. *Why* she was crying again.

Then, somehow, she was back—sitting right across from Miss Everdeen and the chair she sat in.

“No one should have to go through what you’ve gone through,” Miss Everdeen said with a soft intensity, a crease pinching her brow.

Tears were streaming then. Snot sniffling. And as much as Emma still wanted to, she couldn’t look away. Could only stare at the ghost woman in front of her.

“No,” Emma whispered. “They shouldn’t.”

Miss Everdeen leaned forward, her eyes steady. “That includes you.”

The ghost librarian reached out—her fingers like ice—and wiped away Emma’s tears until her face went numb.

A smile blossomed across Miss Everdeen’s pale face. She stared deep into Emma’s eyes, her voice suddenly tender and terrible.

“I can help you, you know,” she said. “I can take all that pain, all that grief, all that suffering away.”

A lump formed in Emma’s throat. “You… can?”

“I can.” Her smile widened. “Wouldn’t you like that? To not feel it anymore? To not hold on to that pain? To not even remember what caused it in the first place?”

Emma looked down at her twisting fingers. Thought of all the nights she cried alone in her bed. The anger she felt when she couldn’t quite remember her mom’s face without a photograph—how even the sound of her voice was slipping through her fingers like sand.

Wondered what it would be like to not remember the picture from the news—the mangled car her mom had been driving that night—drawn exactly like the one in the book still resting in Miss Everdeen’s lap.

Emma’s breath trembled at the thought of it.

To not feel the ache in her chest.

To not wake up with the hollow pit in her stomach.

To not feel that pang of guilt every time she smiled, like she wasn’t supposed to anymore.

But—would that mean she didn’t remember her mom? At all? Or, would the feelings of hurt be gone, and she’d have a dead mother without a care in the world?

Would that really be better?

Miss Everdeen reached out, cupping Emma’s face in both hands, drawing her closer.  
“I can remove all that pain,” she whispered again, her voice wrapping around Emma like a lullaby.

The world blurred at the edges. The ghost librarian’s eyes filled her vision—bottomless, glimmering with a strange, gentle pull.

Emma felt herself drifting, sinking. Her heartbeat slowed as the promise of peace—blissful, empty peace—pressed closer.

Closer…

Closer…

“Emma!” The word cracked through the air like lightning.

Gracie stood in the doorway, wild-eyed and out of breath. “We need to leave. Now.” she commanded, cutting through the haze.

It was like the world came barreling back all at once. All that pain, all that anger, all that grief—hitting Emma in the chest like a hammer. She would have fallen to the ground if not for Miss Everdeen’s hands still clutching her face.

“Leaving so soon? But we haven’t finished yet.”

“Emma…” Gracie pleaded, ignoring Miss Everdeen’s words and the cluster of ghost children surrounding them.

The look in her eyes shook Emma from her stupor. She blinked once. She blinked again. And then she wrenched free from Miss Everdeen’s grip, though the librarian’s hands lingered, reluctant to release her.

On wobbly legs, Emma made her way to Gracie, careful to keep her gaze fixed on her. Worried that if she looked away—looked anywhere but those ocean-blue eyes—she might tumble back down the well of emptiness she had felt herself falling into.

She must have been more unsteady than she realized, for when she reached Gracie, her classmate slipped an arm under hers, steadying her and guiding them toward the door without another word.

“Do think on our story, Emma,” Miss Everdeen’s voice cut through the night like a spear.

Emma felt her feet stumble, but Gracie caught her, guiding them out of the library and into the night.