“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.

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.

*What in the world is going on? And who are all these—*

“Have a seat, please, little miss,” Miss Everdeen said sternly, peering over the reading glasses she wasn’t wearing moments ago. “On your bottom.”

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