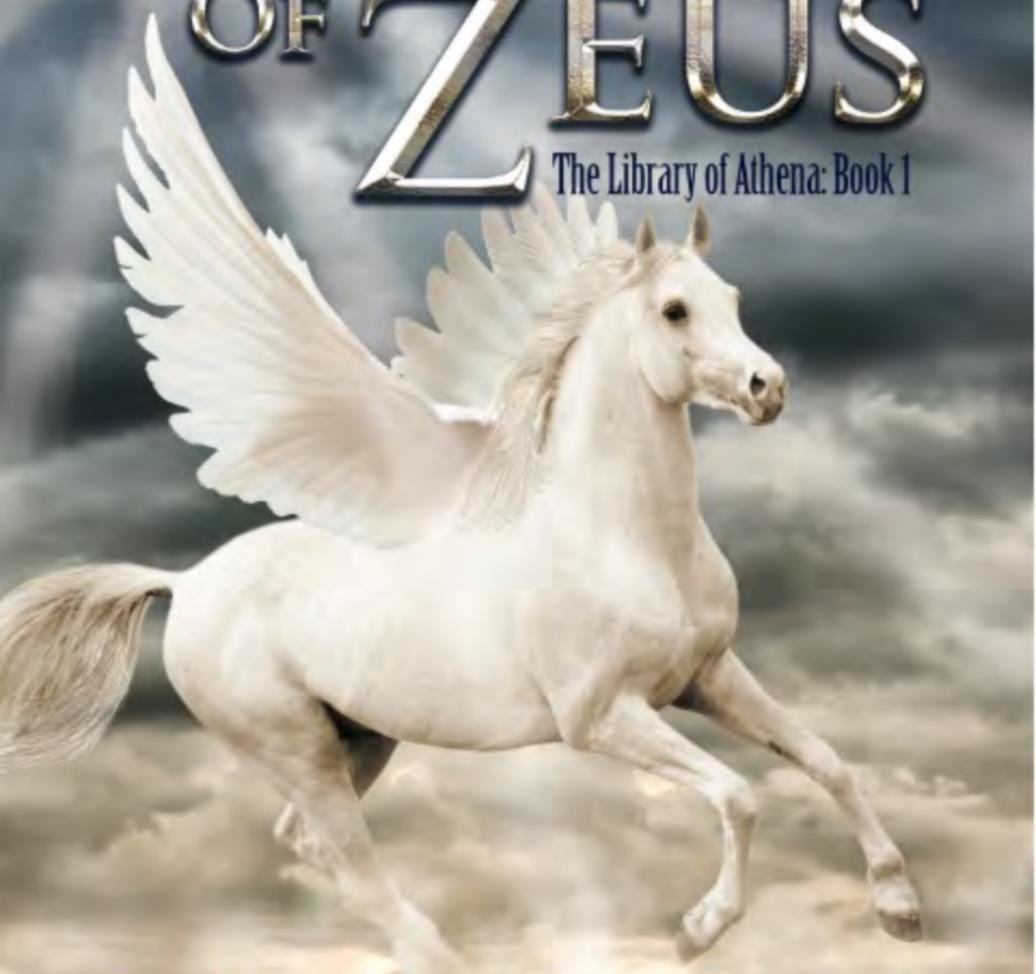


THE  
CROWN  
OF ZEUS

The Library of Athena: Book 1



CHRISTINE NORRIS

## ***Megan already had a plan in mind.***

“Here, hold this.” She handed the flashlight to Rachel, grabbed onto the owl with both hands, and pulled down. Nothing happened. “Maybe I just need a little more weight.”

She lifted her feet off the ground, but the marble arm didn’t budge.

“Let me try,” Rachel said. She pulled on the arm, her muscles straining, but to no avail.

“This has got to be it,” said Megan. “We just have to figure out how to make it work.”

Her nerves were on edge, she knew they were close. They had gotten this far; they couldn’t fail now.

Harriet stepped up to Athena; she focused on the end of the figure’s arm.

“Maybe you only have to pull on the owl?” She reached up and tugged on the owl’s head.

There was a grinding sound, and the statue’s wrist, along with the owl, spun around until the bird was upside down.

“Way to go, Harriet.” Megan clapped her on the shoulder.

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**The Library of Athena Series**

*The Ankh of Isis*

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*The Sword of Danu*

*The Talisman of Zandria*

**The Library of Athena Book 1**

**THE  
CROWN  
OF  
ZEUS**



**CHRISTINE NORRIS**

*ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS*

*AUSTIN TX*

2018

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

## THE CROWN OF ZEUS

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**IN MEMORY OF POP-POP, WHO  
TAUGHT ME THREE THINGS...**

History is cool.

Always take a nap after dinner.

Never be afraid to be who you are.

And for **JIMMY**, who has the soul of a wild  
adventurer.

**BOOKS GIVE A SOUL TO THE  
UNIVERSE, WINGS TO THE MIND,  
FLIGHT TO THE IMAGINATION,  
AND LIFE TO EVERYTHING. —  
PLATO**



# CHAPTER I

## *New Beginning*

***“But, Dad,” Megan said. “I don’t want to go. This is ridiculous!”***

“Sorry, Megums, but we don’t have a choice,” Donald Montgomery replied gently. He slurped up a chow mein noodle and patted his daughter’s hand. “I know it will be hard, but my firm is transferring me. It’s quite a big promotion, actually. We *have* to go.”

Megan slumped in her seat and picked at her chicken and broccoli. It was her favorite take-out meal, but she didn’t feel like eating. She loved living in the city—she had grown up here. Everything she had ever known was here. She was supposed to start high school in just a couple of weeks. This wasn’t just an inconvenience, it was a major disaster.

“This sucks. I don’t want to move.” She winced, aware of how childish she was acting. They’d had this same argument every night this week, and Megan had made no progress. “There won’t be anything to do.”

“Sure there will. There’s a stable full of horses to ride and all the grounds to explore. And there’s a village just

down the road. There will be lots to see and plenty to do. And don't say 'sucks'."

Megan put her head back and let her tongue hang from her mouth.

"Horses, Dad? Come on! They stink! I don't want to explore anything. Maybe you haven't noticed, but I'm not a little kid. I pretty much like to talk on the phone and shop, okay?"

She tried not to pout like the child she claimed she wasn't. She would win this argument by making her father see how much better off she would be if she stayed where she was, even if that meant *annoying* him into letting her stay.

"I'll bet there isn't any place to shop, either. There's not a good store anywhere outside Fifth Avenue. And you know there's not going to be a revival house within fifty miles of this place you're dragging me off to, is there?"

Megan loved black-and-white movies from Hollywood's Golden Age. The great actresses, like Katharine Hepburn—her favorite—and Jean Harlow, Ava Gardner, Bette Davis, Rita Hayworth, and the handsome leading men like Cary Grant, Clark Gable, and Spencer Tracy. One of her favorite things was to go to the revival movie houses tucked into the corners of the city. She loved the glamour, the simplicity of their lives and the way they lived and how it all turned out right in the end. Modern romantic comedies couldn't hold a candle to them.

They also reminded her of her mother. She and Megan had spent many rainy Saturday afternoons together, watching those movies and munching popcorn.

Right now, Megan couldn't see any way that this move, which her father was so happy about, could turn out well.

Her father reached between the white-and-red take-out cartons and took her hand.

"Aw, pumpkin, come on. The manor is just forty-five minutes outside London—a quick train ride. There are more

than enough shops *there*, and we'll make lots of trips. I'm sure there's a movie house or two in the city, and it's not like you don't have all of those movies on DVD. You can talk to your friends online, just like they were right next door. You won't miss New York, I promise."

Megan switched tactics.

"Oh, and I'll be in a new school where I don't know anyone! I have to leave all my friends, all the girls on the team. Why can't I just stay here and live with Becky? Her parents said it would be okay."

Becky Reinhart was her best friend and field hockey teammate; they'd known each other since kindergarten. She was like the sister Megan never had.

"No." He gave her a stern, warning look. "And I don't want you asking me again. We are staying together, and that is that. The Reinharts are good people, but I will not have someone else raising my daughter, no matter how nice they are. There would be too many miles between us. I cannot have that."

Megan leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms over her chest.

"What? So, I don't even get a say?"

"No."

"It's not fair. I'm part of the family, too."

"Nobody ever said life was fair." Her father went back to his dinner, a clear signal to Megan he was finished with the discussion.

Megan gritted her teeth. She wanted to scream at him, to throw a tantrum like she'd done when she was six. There was no way she was going to go without a fight.

But her father could be just as stubborn as she was. He wasn't going to budge.

So, instead, she conceded the argument for another evening. She knew how to choose her battles, and there was still a little time left to fight this one. Maybe she could get

Becky's mom to call her dad and talk to him. He might be more receptive to an adult making the suggestion.

"Sorry, Dad." Still stewing, she looked at her plate and scooped up some rice with her chopsticks.

Her father's eyes softened. "You'll make new friends, Megums. You are such an outgoing young lady. I don't think making friends will be a problem. You'll see."

"Whatever." Megan ate the rest of her dinner in silence.



Once the table was cleared and the dishwasher loaded, Megan stalked to her room and flicked on the light. She fought through the piles of packing boxes, made her way toward her bed and flopped down. She looked at all her things, separated into three piles—boxes with things to be given away, boxes with things to be put in storage and boxes of things to make the trip to the new home.

"I don't want to go, I have a life here," she said angrily to the framed black-and-white poster of Katharine Hepburn that still hung on the wall. She shook her auburn curls back from her face, reached across to her nightstand and picked up a photo in a delicate silver frame. The woman in the picture looked like an older version of Megan.

"Mom," she whispered to the picture. Her anger melted, and tears splashed onto her cheeks. "I wish you were here."

She closed her eyes and remembered the day her mother died. That had been three years ago, in a car crash on her way home from a visit with her parents upstate. For months afterward, Megan hadn't been able to look at any picture of her mother. Her father, in his usual clueless manner, had given this one to her as a birthday gift last year. It had since become her favorite picture, and she often spoke to it, hoping one day it would give her some advice.

This had been her mother's home, too. Leaving here would mean leaving part of her behind.

“I know you would be here if you could. None of this is fair, is it? You’re gone, and now it’s just me and Dad, and I guess I should just go with him to England and be quiet about it, huh? It wouldn’t be fair to leave him alone, half a world away, would it?”

She already knew the answer.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Parthenon*

***Four days and an eight-hour plane flight later, they*** emerged from Heathrow Airport under gray and gloomy skies. Megan let out a small groan and shook her head.

“Great.”

Her father ruffled her curls.

“Come on.”

She brushed his hand away.

“Dad, don’t, you’ll mess up my hair. It probably looks like bedhead already.”

He gave her a crooked smile. “You look fine, dear. The firm was supposed to send a car to pick us up. Let’s go find it, okay?”

He walked toward a line of shiny black cabs idling at the curb. Megan picked up her carry-on bag and trudged after him. At the end of the line was a sleek black Town Car. The man next to it held a card with *Montgomery* written on it.

Megan’s father held open the door, and she climbed in. The driver, a pudgy, pale man with pudding cheeks and

twinkling eyes, put their bags in the trunk and got behind the wheel.

“Are we all set, then?” he said in a smooth British accent, and tipped his cap. Here was a surprise—many of the drivers in New York were rude.

“You know where we’re headed?” Megan’s father asked.

The driver nodded. “Surely do. We’ll be there in no time at all.” He put the car in gear and steered away from the curb.

It was a strange sensation to be traveling on the left-hand side of the road. Megan watched the airport slip away and the long highway stretch out ahead. Rain spattered the windows as they drove away from London and into the countryside.

The road was banked high on both sides, blocking the view. Once in a while there was a hint of a building—some tall trees, a house or a church’s steeple. The driver talked as he steered through the traffic, telling them interesting tidbits about the towns that passed by unseen.

Megan wasn’t really paying attention, and she really didn’t care. She was still thinking about the city she’d left behind.

Soon, the rain ended, and the sun peeked through the clouds, lying low in the west. Almost an hour after leaving the airport, they turned off the highway—the driver called it a “motorway”—and onto a small two-lane road.

After miles of dreary scenery—empty hills, fields and livestock mostly—they drove into a small village. It was quaint, with narrow, cobbled streets and a mix of stucco and stone buildings. A bakery, a bookshop, a pub, a coffee shop, and a butcher’s shop lined the main street. At the end sat the town square, filled by an ancient stone church with colorful stained glass windows and a small cemetery. Several people rode by on bicycles, packages in baskets on the handlebars or strapped onto back.

Megan was almost impressed.

*Okay, it's cute. But I'd bet nothing interesting has happened here since Queen Elizabeth the First.*

On the far side of the square was a train station. People scurried along the platform, getting on and off a waiting train.

"That's how we'll get to London," her father said. "Just jump on the train, and we'll be there. Quite an adventure, huh?"

Megan leaned her face on her hand. "Yeah, sure it is, Dad," she muttered.

"We're nearly there, folks," the driver said in a cheery tone. "Not far now."

*Good. Much farther, and we'd drive off the face of the earth.*

Beyond the village, a low wall of piled loose stones separated the road and an empty field. On the opposite side, a row of cottages sat close to the road, each with its own little gate that guarded stone walkways and tiny squares of front yard.

The low wall ended, and a higher one of block began. The car slowed. There was a break in the wall, and they turned onto a gravel drive. A tall wrought iron gate stood open, and the car pulled in.

Her father gave the driver a puzzled look.

"Are you sure this is the right house?"

"Yes, sir. This is the place."

"This just seems so...grand. The big drive, the wall, the gate. And we haven't even seen the house yet. The girl at the firm said it was a country house. But if you say so, I guess this is it."

Megan looked at the top of the gate and snorted a laugh.

"What's so funny?" her father asked.

"Is that, uh, the name of our house or something?"

He looked at the letters of scrolled iron above the gate as they passed beneath them. *The Parthenon*, it said.

He scratched the back of his balding head.

“I guess it is. It’s not uncommon to name estates. But you’re right, Megums, it is a strange name.”

*Who*, Megan wondered, *would name a house in England after an ancient Greek temple?* A mystery, one she wasn’t sure she cared enough about to solve, but it *was* curious.

The driver guided the car up the tree-lined drive, and Megan got her first glimpse of The Parthenon.

The house was enormous. Three stories of rough gray stone rose from the ground like a fortress. It was longer than it was tall, at least hundred and fifty feet. More chimneys than Megan could count grew from the many peaks of the blue-gray slate rooftop. Hundreds of windows winked at her as they reflected the sun.

The car glided into the driveway turnaround. In the middle of the loop was a marble fountain. A sculpture of a Greek woman, her stone dress draped over her, stood in a circular basin. Water poured into the basin from the pitcher she held under one arm.

The driver stopped at the entrance. Wide stone steps led up to the heavy oak front door.

Megan’s father looked at her, eyes twinkling. “Pretty nice digs, huh? Almost like living in the middle of Central Park.”

It *was* like the park, except there was no bustling city on the other side of the gates. Just a big bunch of nothing.

The front door opened, and a tall, thin, bald man in black tails marched down the steps and opened her father’s door, then stood back and bowed deeply.

The man straightened.

“Welcome, sir. My name is Bailey. I am the butler and custodian of The Parthenon.”

Her father got out of the car and nodded.

“Thank you, uh, Bailey. We’re glad to be here.”

*Uh, wrong. We're not glad about anything.* Although the big house was impressive, she still would rather have been home in New York. There would be no walking to the store or a friend's house here. She was stranded.

Her father motioned to her as she climbed out of the car.

"This is my daughter, Megan."

Bailey tilted his head toward her, and Megan felt a cold shiver run up her back. The butler's face was long and thin, his hair a fringe of white around a bald top. Creepy.

He looked down his nose at her.

"Miss." He turned back to her father. "I will see to the driver and your bags. If you would, please wait for me in the entrance hall."

Megan and her father walked into a cavernous entrance hall. A floor of marble, white swirled with black, gleamed beneath vibrant Persian rugs. A rectangular mirror in a gilt frame reflected Megan's look of surprise from the wall on the right. Next to the mirror was an archway beyond which was a cozy room with a huge fireplace. Shelves of books stood on either side, like sentries. In front of the fireplace sat two low, overstuffed armchairs of burgundy leather.

Beneath a multi-paned window that looked as if it belonged in a cathedral, a wide staircase with oak banisters swept up the center of the room to a landing. More steps led upward, off to the left and right. On the landing stood another sculpture of a woman, this one much bigger than the one in the fountain. Her left arm reached toward them, an owl perched on her hand. Her other arm was at her side, a long spear in her grip.

Megan couldn't take her eyes off it. The woman was so beautiful, and at the same time strong.

"Cool."

"Cool, indeed," her father said.

A large painting in a heavy frame hung on the left-hand wall. Megan took a closer look. It was beautiful, depicting

several young ballerinas standing at a practice barre. It looked familiar.

“That was painted by Degas.”

A petite woman with skin the color of coffee now stood in an archway to the right. Megan wondered how long she had been standing there.

“Excuse me?” Megan said.

“The picture. It was painted by Degas,” the woman said in a thick French accent. “The French impressionist.”

“*That’s* why I recognized it. I know who Degas is. We went to an exhibit, on a class trip to the Metropolitan Museum.”

The woman gave a sad sigh. “This painting was one of Sir Gregory’s favorites.”

Bailey entered behind them, bags in hand. He placed them on the floor and closed the front door.

“This is Miranda,” he said, indicating the woman. “She is the head housekeeper.”

Megan’s father extended his hand.

“I’m Donald Montgomery, and this is my daughter Megan. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Yes, sir.” Miranda did not take his hand, but dropped a small curtsy. “When you are settled in your rooms, tea will be served in the parlor.”

Megan’s father pulled his hand back, looked at the palm as if he expected to see some bit of dirt, and wiped it on the leg of his pants. There was an awkward silence.

“Miranda, please have these bags taken to Miss Megan’s and Mr. Montgomery’s rooms as soon as possible.”

Miranda gave a small nod, then turned and walked away, her footsteps noiseless. It made Megan a little nervous that the woman could be so quiet.

“Please, follow me.” The butler led them across the entrance hall and up the staircase. When they reached the landing, Megan’s father stopped to inspect the large statue.

“This is beautiful. Where did it come from?”

Bailey’s face remained stony. “I believe, sir, this particular sculpture was discovered by Sir Gregory on one of his expeditions to Greece. It is the goddess Athena. It was Sir Gregory’s particular favorite. His pride and joy, if you will.”

Megan raised her hand, as if she were in class.

“Uh, okay, question. Who was Sir Gregory?”

“He built The Parthenon,” was all Bailey said in reply.

“Sir Gregory traveled to Greece a lot, did he?” her father asked as they continued their climb to the second floor.

“Yes, sir. He was a noted archaeologist as well as a collector of fine art and antiques. Every treasure within the house, he discovered himself.”

Megan stopped at the top of the stairs to look at a portrait of a young man. His brown hair was short and neat, his head erect, but his eyes twinkled impishly, and he wore a crooked, rakish grin on his face.

“Who’s this?”

Bailey pulled his shoulders back.

“That is Sir Gregory himself. In his younger days, of course. He was only about thirty-five when this was painted, I believe. I had not yet come into his service.”

“He doesn’t look like an art collector,” Megan’s father said. “Or an archeologist, for that matter.”

“He liked to think of himself as an adventurer.”

Megan thought she saw a flicker of a smile cross Bailey’s lips, but before she could be certain, he turned and walked away.

“This way, please.”

## CHAPTER 3

### *Home Sweet Place*

*The upper hallway was long and dreary, with dark wood and a red Oriental runner.* Bailey stopped at the third of six oak-paneled doors on the right.

“This will be Miss Megan’s room. Yours, sir, is down here.” He led Megan’s father down the hall to a door on the opposite side.

Megan put out her hand and turned the polished brass knob. She stepped into a room that was roughly half the size of their apartment in New York. In the middle of the room was a queen-sized four-poster bed, its headboard carved with a delicate rose motif. A squat, two-drawer nightstand stood next to the bed. Against the far right-hand wall was an antique vanity. A silver framed trifold mirror sat atop it, showing the room to Megan in triplicate.

Beside the entrance were a desk and a chest of drawers, also both antique. A fireplace was set into the fourth wall, on the far side of the bed. Four long windows dressed in sage green took up the last wall.

Megan looked at the twelve-foot-high ceiling and sighed.

“Well, it could be worse,” she commented to the plaster roses in the center. “I could be in Newark.”

Two doors led from the room—one on the right next to the vanity, and one on the left not far from the fireplace. She crossed the room and opened the one on the right. Behind it was a bathroom with an enormous tub and gleaming brass fixtures. It was the most beautiful bathroom she had ever been in, even better than in the Ritz-Carlton, where she had stayed once with her dad.

Behind the other door was a walk-in closet that easily could have held her old bedroom. It smelled of cedar. Megan took a deep breath—it smelled like her mother’s hope chest, clean and musky.

After a thorough inspection of the many shelves and drawers, she stepped out and went to the windows. The two in the center were actually a pair of French doors. She pulled them open and stepped onto a small balcony with a wrought iron railing. She leaned over, feeling like a princess in a castle, like those in the fairy tales her mother had read to her at bedtime when she was little.

*More like Rapunzel, trapped in her tower.*

Megan peeled an errant leaf off the railing and looked out over her new kingdom. Fields and gardens as far as she could see, bordered by an overgrown wood at the far end. The house was shaped like a U, with a wing that extended back from each end of the main building, forming a courtyard in the center. She looked straight down.

“Wow.”

Below lay a rectangular reflecting pool of white marble. Columns, the kind she had seen in pictures of Greek temples, ran around the edge, placed at regular intervals. Sculptures stood between the columns—men in short, dress-like things and women dressed like the lady in the fountain. A classic English garden surrounded it; a path of white stone

cut through the flowerbeds, running between the pool and the rest of the grounds.

“That’s weird.”

The pool looked out-of-place against the house’s stoic façade. She looked around her at the huge, plush estate she and her father suddenly found themselves thrust into.

“This whole thing is weird.”

She pushed off the railing and went back inside. Someone had come in while she was on the terrace and delivered her bags.

*Probably Miranda—that woman moves like a cat.*

Megan picked up her suitcase and laid it on the bed, ran the zipper all the way around and flipped the cover open. She had just picked up her favorite sweater and was headed toward the closet when the door opened and her father poked his head inside.

He grinned. “Hey, there. Can I come in?”

She nodded.

He looked around. “How do you like your new room?”

Megan gave a noncommittal shrug. She didn’t look at him, afraid of what her face might reveal.

“I don’t know, Dad. The house is really nice, but...”

“But it’s not New York.”

Megan shook her head slowly and walked across the room. She appreciated the house—who wouldn’t want to live in a place like this? But she still wished for the comfort and familiarity of her city apartment. It was so quiet here. How would she be able to sleep without the city noises to keep her company?

She went to the window and looked down at the reflecting pool. It was like looking out from a jail cell.

“No, Dad, it’s not. It’s so...empty. So quiet. I’m going to hate it here.” She fought back tears.

Her father tilted his head to one side. “I know, I know, it’s a big change. But can you at least give it a chance?”

Megan put her forehead against the cool glass of the windowpane. She closed her eyes, and saw her mother's face. Like it or not, she had to suck it up, for his sake.

"Yeah, all right, Dad." She turned to him and smiled. "My room. It's nice."

"Just nice? Is that like saying New York is 'a quiet little town'?"

"Oh, all right. It's very nice. Happy?"

"Only if you are."

Megan shook her head. It wasn't worth arguing about anymore. They were here, and nothing she could say would make her father go back to New York.

Donald reached into her suitcase and pulled out the carefully-wrapped picture of her mother. He sat on the bed and pulled off the wrapping, his eyes glued to the face that peered out from the photo.

"She would have loved this place." His eyes misted over. "She was always ready for adventure. You look so much like her."

In that instant, Megan realized how immature she had been. It was easy to forget her mother had left both of them behind.

"Yeah, Dad, she would have." *I'm sorry I'm such a brat.*

Her father put the picture on the nightstand and ran a finger along the upper edge of the frame. He wiped away a tear as he turned around, and she quickly studied the contents of her suitcase.

He put on a smile. "You can finish unpacking later. Let's explore for a while, okay?"

Megan laid her sweater on the bed. Clearly, her father needed her more than she needed to unpack.

"Yeah, sure, that'd be cool. Did you see what's out back?"

"No, my room looks out the front. What is it?"

She led him over to the window and pulled back the curtain. He raised an eyebrow.

“That’s different. We have to go have tea, but after, wanna go and see it?”

It took some time to figure out which room was the parlor, and by the time they did the tea was cold. So, instead, they grabbed a couple of scones from the tea tray and went exploring. They visited the reflecting pool and the gardens. The pool was still as glass, and just as pretty from the ground as from the window. Megan still couldn’t help but think it didn’t match the house, and wondered why Sir Gregory had put it here.

The stone garden path she’d see from the window eventually led them to the stables. The horses weren’t as smelly as she’d thought they would be; and Stephan, the stable manager, puffed up with pride as he showed them around the barn. He introduced them to Thunder, a beautiful gelding the color of storm clouds.

“Looks like a right beast, don’t he?” Stephan hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. “But he’s gentle as a kitten. I think you and he will get along famously, miss.”

Bailey, seemingly very put out by having to search for them, tracked them down and announced that dinner was ready. They were ushered into a huge, empty dining room and sat at a long, gleaming wooden table. Bailey served them a creamy soup that smelled delicious. Megan didn’t remember the last time she’d had a home-cooked meal. Her father worked so much, most of the time their meals came by delivery.

“Tomorrow we have to go into the village.” Her father took a warm roll from a basket and passed it to her. “They’re not expecting you at school until the beginning of next week, and in the meantime we need to get you some school uniforms.”

Megan nodded, focus more on the soup than school.

“I hope they’re nice uniforms and not something dorky-looking.”

Her father laughed. "Don't worry, dear. Even if they are, uh, 'dorky-looking', everyone will be wearing the same thing, so it won't matter. You'll all look like dorks together."

"Gee, thanks." Megan took a bite of her roll, thinking about what had been on her mind since she'd looked out of her balcony. "Dad, I've been wondering something."

"What, sweetie?"

"Why are we in this big house, just the two of us? Your firm didn't rent this big old thing just for us, did they? They could have put us in an apartment in London. Or flat, or whatever it's called."

Her father set down his knife and fork.

"I've wondered that myself. It does seem strange." He picked up his utensils and returned to his meal. "I'll have to ask when I go to work on Monday."

"Maybe it's haunted," Megan pondered aloud. "And nobody else wants to live here, so they got it cheap and pawned it off on the unsuspecting Americans."

"Hmm." Donald gave her a mysterious look. "Perhaps you're right."

They both burst out laughing. It was the best Megan had felt since her father had first told her they were moving.

Perhaps this place wasn't going to be so bad after all.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Schedules and Secrets*

*Megan slowly put on her uniform—a blue-and-gray plaid kilt, white knee socks, white button-down shirt, and navy-blue tie. She picked up her blazer, also navy blue, with the crest of St. Agatha’s College for Girls embroidered on the left breast. She pulled it on.*

She leaned down in front of the vanity mirror to adjust her hat, a wool beret the same color as the blazer. She looked at herself and sighed.

*Ick. I hate uniforms.* She already missed wearing whatever she wanted to school. Uniforms, in her opinion, stifled individuality. Little drones that all looked alike, marching along like good little soldiers.

“I suppose it’s not that bad,” she said to her reflection.

The uniform didn’t really flatter her figure, but it didn’t make her look dumpy, either. She pushed her hat so it sat at an angle.

“At least it’s a nice color.”

Not really convinced the uniform was in any way better than wearing something from her closet, she grabbed her bag off the chair and went downstairs.

Twenty minutes later, her father dropped her off for her first day of school at the front entrance of a building that looked like a castle from the Middle Ages. Hundreds of girls, all dressed like she was, streamed in the front door.

*Drones.*

“Don’t forget, you’re supposed to stop in and see the headmistress first. Have a nice day, Meg,” Donald said. He raised his hand as if to muss her hair, stopped, and patted her on the shoulder instead.

“Thanks, Dad. You, too.” She kissed him on the cheek, opened the door and dove into the sea of bodies headed inside.

After being jostled and bounced down the halls, she finally found her way to the headmistress’s office and knocked.

A women’s voice called out, “Come in.”

Megan opened the door. The room was small and neat. Three walls were covered with portraits in heavy wooden frames—men and women dressed in black robes, mortarboards on their heads. The fourth, opposite the door, was taken up by a large window that arched upward toward a peak, like the window of an ancient cathedral.

In front of the window sat a desk. Behind the desk sat a middle-aged woman. Her dirty-blond hair was pulled back in a severe, sensible-looking bun. She was hunched over the desk, engrossed in paperwork but looked up when Megan entered. She had a thin face with a small, pointed upturned nose, delicate cheekbones, and round blue eyes.

“Can I help you?”

“Uh, yes.” Megan squared her shoulders and tried to stand up straight. “I’m Megan Montgomery. I’m a new student, and this is my first day. They said I had to report to you.”

The woman shuffled through the papers on her desk and pulled out a manila folder.

“Yes, of course. The girl from America. Well, come in, child, don’t lurk in the doorway. Please sit down.”

A thick burgundy rug muffled Megan's footsteps as she walked to one of a pair of high-backed chairs in front of the desk. She tried to look graceful as she sat down.

"Welcome to St. Agatha's." The woman gave a smile that reminded Megan of a cat who has just found a juicy mouse. She folded her hands on the desk, straightened, and looked Megan in the eye. "I am Miss Spencer, the headmistress."

"Nice to meet you."

Miss Spencer nodded. "Since you are from America, you are probably not familiar with our British education system. You are thirteen, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am." Megan had never called anyone "ma'am" before, but Miss Spencer looked like someone whom she should. "I'm in the eighth grade."

Miss Spencer's smile widened a bit, but it was still a smile that looked put on for company.

"It's 'Yes, *Headmistress*'. And we don't have 'grades' here. You are in third year." The headmistress picked up the file and walked around to Megan's side of the desk. "I've looked over your transcripts, and everything appears to be in order. But I must warn you, Miss Montgomery. Here things are going to be much tougher than they were at your old school. This institution is a tradition among many families from all over the world."

"The world?" Megan asked. "Do their families all move here so they can go to school?"

Miss Spencer laughed like a parent whose small child just did or said something cute and silly.

"No, no, of course not, dear. Some, like you, are day students, while others live in our dormitories. We pride ourselves in turning out the finest young ladies. To that end, you will be taking more subjects than you are used to, including Latin."

"Latin?" *Who speaks Latin?*

"Yes. As well as music, math, world history, science, literature, philosophy, geography and art. You will also be in

a House.” She flipped open the file. “I’ve placed you in Whitmore. Your House contains about twenty girls from each year. Your Head is Professor Livingston—she teaches history. If you have problems in school, academic or personal, go to her. Each house also meets twice a week for tutoring and study.”

“I see.” Megan’s stomach felt as if it would drop out at her feet at any moment. All those classes, plus forced study? She had held her own at her old school, but she wasn’t exactly a straight-A student. *I’m in trouble.*

“I notice you played hockey at your old school as well,” Miss Spencer continued, oblivious to Megan’s nervousness. “You might try out for the House team. It’s one of the best in the county. If you enjoy horses, we also have an exceptional equestrian team.”

*I’ll run right out and sign up for that. Not.*

She handed Megan a sheet of paper.

“Here’s your schedule. I suggest you get to class. The late bell is about to ring.”

Megan took the paper and looked it over.

“Thank you, Headmistress.”

She slung her bag over her shoulder and walked to the door. She wondered what would happen if she just kept running, right out the front door.

Her first class was literature. She found the classroom and opened the door. A stern-looking man with slicked-back dark hair turned and stared at her with small black eyes.

“May I help you?” he drawled. His pasty face wore a look of utter distaste, as if he were wondering who dared interrupt his class.

“Uh, yes, sir. My name is Megan Montgomery. I’m new.” She handed him her schedule.

He glanced, sniffed, and handed it back to her.

“Ah, yes. Very well, take a seat. And do not be tardy to my class again.”

Megan felt her cheeks get hot and thought about telling him it wasn't her fault she was late, but decided against it. She found a desk at the back of the room and took out her textbook. From one of the desks to her right, she heard a snicker.

"Miss Montgomery?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do not expect special treatment because you are new. Or because you are from America. I expect you to keep up with your classmates."

"Yes, sir." She slumped into her seat and tried to make herself as small as possible.

The rest of her first day was much the same. The classes were certainly different than at her old school. For one thing, students were expected to stand when they gave the answer to a question. Her teachers were not "Mrs." or "Mr." but "Professor." Most of them were very strict, and demanded much more than her previous teachers.

Her schedule was packed. The first day alone she had world history, intermediate maths, Latin, and philosophy in addition to literature. Most of the teachers referred to her as "The American Girl" several times before remembering her name.

They all piled on the homework.

At lunch, she sat alone because, of course, she didn't know anyone, and no one offered to sit with her. She saw the pointing and whispering that went on; most didn't even try to hide it.

Megan worked to hold it together, but it was hard to ignore the fact she was on display like some kind of freak show. She picked at her lunch, unable to eat and sympathizing with every new kid she had ever seen at her old school.

*I want to go home.* She meant to New York.

After school, she stood on the front steps of St. Agatha's waiting for her ride home, wondering how much a one-

way ticket from Heathrow to JFK cost. She was miserable and had a ton of homework; her backpack felt like it was going to rip her shoulder off.

She shifted her bag to the other shoulder and watched a group of six girls clustered nearby. She had seen a couple of them in her classes, and was pretty sure they were in her year, but didn't know any of their names.

She watched out of the corner of her eye as they whispered intently among themselves and sent furtive glances in her direction. She couldn't hear what they were talking about, but she sure knew who. *Just like at lunch. Don't they have anything better to do?*

She allowed this to go on for a few minutes, pretending to be oblivious to their whispering. Finally, she'd had enough. She whipped her head around and marched over to them.

"Excuse me." She walked right up to the tallest girl. "Is there a problem?"

Three of the girls turned bright red, took a few steps back, and slunk away, their heads down, leaving their three co-conspirators behind.

*Proper English girls don't gossip, do they?* Megan gave a wide smile that dripped with sugar.

"There's no problem, is there, girls?" the tall one said in a flat tone, still toe-to-toe with Megan.

"Well, I think there is." Megan's smile was gone. "You've all been giggling and talking about me behind my back. Care to share?"

The girl licked her lips. "We were just wondering..."

"About what? My accent? My shoes? Or my hair, maybe?"

The other girl pushed a lock of her own straight black hair behind her ear, unfazed.

"Ah, no, actually, we were wondering about your house."

It was Megan's turn to step back.

“My House? Oh, I’m in, uh, Whitmore, I think?”

The girls giggled. Megan felt like she had missed the punchline of a joke, and her cheeks burned.

It was the girl with short brown hair and glasses who replied.

“No, not your academic House, your house house. You know, where you live?”

Megan lifted her eyebrows, confused.

“You want to know about...my...house?”

The third girl, a pretty blonde with loose, shoulder-length curls, pulled her Burberry purse up higher on her shoulder.

“You *do* live in the big manor house on Knapford Road, right? The Paragon?”

“The Parthenon,” Megan corrected. “What about it?” It wasn’t the conversation she’d expected, but she was kind of happy they were actually talking to her.

The dark-haired girl pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes, seeming to choose her words carefully.

“We wanted to know...er, whether or not you’ve seen anything...anything *strange* since you’ve been there?”

“What do you mean, strange? Like African artifacts strange? Or like bad decorating strange?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that,” the second girl said. She pushed her thick glasses up her long nose and gave a furtive look around. “Like ghosts. Unhappy spirits roaming about the halls at night.”

Megan almost laughed out loud.

“No. Why would you think that?”

“The stories about that house are sort of a local legend,” the tall girl said. She gave the other two a superior look. “I never believed them, but...”

“Oh, Rachel, come off it,” said the blonde. “You were scared witless when my gran told you the story.”

“What story?” Megan crossed her arms over her chest and relaxed.

Rachel hesitated. “The one that says the ghost of that crazy old man who used to live there haunts the place.”

“Sir Gregory? You think the ghost of Sir Gregory haunts my house? Why would you think that?”

*These girls are nuts*, Megan thought. *Out of their minds. But hey, they’re talking to me, right?* She wondered for a moment if they were keeping her busy long enough for someone to tape a “Kick Me” sign on her back. It was what the kids at her old school would have done to a new kid. In a heartbeat.

“They say he was murdered, right there in his own bed,” the blond girl said. “And that his spirit walks the halls all night, looking for the killer. My gran says he’s guarding something—something no one has ever been able to find. A great treasure hidden in the house or on the grounds. That’s why he was killed in the first place—his ghost keeps people away.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Megan didn’t believe in ghosts, of course, and she didn’t know how Sir Gregory had died. But it was nice to have a conversation with someone her own age. If she could keep the conversation going, maybe they could talk about something less...weird.

Rachel’s face was serious. “That’s why the house has been empty for so long.” She smiled then snorted a laugh. “It’s all a right bunch of rubbish, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, it is,” Megan said. “I’ve been there for days and haven’t seen a ghost.”

“Honestly?” the blonde said.

“Really. How ridiculous is that? Ghosts—there’s no such thing.” Megan clucked her tongue, and the words came out before she really thought about them. “But if you want to see for yourselves, you’re welcome to come and visit.”

The invitation served two purposes; first of all, she wanted to see their reaction to being invited to a “haunted house.” Second, she had surrendered to the fact she was

not going back to New York any time soon. She couldn't take another day like today, so maybe if she was friendly she'd have someone to hang out with.

The girls paled. The one with the glasses was suddenly interested in something on her shoe. Rachel, however, kept her gaze steady with Megan's.

"All right, then, I'll come." She pushed out her chin. "Just tell me when."

"How about this weekend?" Megan said. "Uh, just let me clear it with my dad."

"Fine. I'm Rachel Cuthbert, by the way." She extended a hand. "This is Claire McIlhenny." The girl with the glasses gave a nod. "We're both in Whitmore, by the way. This is Harriet Darrow." The blonde raised her hand and wagged her fingers. "She's in Benson."

"And you're Megan Montgomery," Claire said.

"That's right. So, do all of you want to come over this weekend? We can make it a slumber party." She tried to look serious, but a giggle in her voice gave her away. "Maybe we can have a *séance*."

Rachel gave Claire and Harriet a look that said they'd better not refuse.

"Yes, we'd love to come," Claire said. "Thank you."

There was an awkward silence.

"Look, we're sorry about all that, before, you know," Rachel said. "The whispering and all. It was rude."

A car horn beeped; Megan glanced over her shoulder. Her dad sat behind the wheel of their rental car, waving.

She turned back to the girls. If she was going to do this—make friends—she couldn't hold a grudge. She swallowed her pride.

"It's okay. Forget it. That's my dad over there, so I gotta go. I'll let you know tomorrow about this weekend. It'll be fun."

Rachel smiled. "See you tomorrow, then."

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