



THE
CASTLE
SCHOOL

(for Troubled
Girls)

Alyssa Sheinmel

one

The first thing they tell me is that the school is called the Castle and the campus is called the Kingdom.

“Doesn’t that sound nice?” my mother says, her voice maddeningly upbeat.

I roll my eyes. No matter what they call it, my parents aren’t sending me to a fairy-tale charm school for aspiring princesses. Not when there are two enormous men waiting by our apartment’s front door to take me there. I glance at my dad, but he won’t meet my gaze. Mom must have told him that this is for the best. He always lets her take the lead.

A glossy brochure is spread out on the coffee table in front of me, a name printed in block letters across the top: THE CASTLE SCHOOL. The pictures show a building that looks like one of those medieval castles in the Black Forest in Germany, the kind you see on postcards and in tourism magazines and books.

They never tell you that the king who had those castles built was mad, that he tortured and enslaved people to make his pretty buildings.

Finally, I say, “You’re sending me to reform school?”

King Ludwig II. That was his name, the German king who built the castles. Mad King Ludwig.

“It’s not a *reform* school.” Mom’s voice shakes. “Teenagers get sent to reform school as an alternative to *prison*.” She recites the words as though she practiced them. “*This* place is nothing like *that*. This isn’t a jail, it’s a castle!”

Technically, there are plenty of castles that served as prisons. Take the Tower of London. But I don’t think Mom is in the mood for that kind of historical trivia. Nathan always loved my little factoids. If he were here, he’d say Mad King Ludwig’s name out loud, exaggerating the *v* sound. *Lud-vvvvvig*.

“This is a school for girls going through a rough patch. Girls whose parents...” Mom pauses, then closes her mouth. Her dark brown eyes are bright with tears even though she’s the one *choosing* to send me away.

In my head, I fill in the rest of Mom’s sentence: girls whose parents can’t handle them anymore. Girls whose parents can’t stand them anymore. Girls whose parents are at their wits’ end because their daughters might not graduate this spring. Girls whose parents are so disappointed with the way their daughters have turned out that they don’t know what to do. Girls whose parents think there’s something *wrong* with them, so they send them away, hoping for a fix.

That's not a rough patch. That's just rough.

I press my hands against the sofa, feeling the spot where the material is slightly scratchy from the time I spilled grape juice as a little kid, a stain Mom was never able to get rid of completely. An accident for which she still hasn't forgiven me.

I'm willing to bet that she's been thinking about sending me away for a while, but only made up her mind to go through with it last week, when—instead of doing the extra credit work my teachers so generously assigned me over winter break so I could maybe graduate with the rest of my class this spring—I came home after curfew with a tattoo on my arm.

Well, not that night *exactly*. I was able to hide the tattoo for the first few days.

I'd originally wanted to get a line from my left index finger to my heart, because my grandmother once told me that traditionally, Jewish women wear their wedding rings on their index fingers. She said she chose to wear hers on her left index finger because she believed that finger was the beginning of a direct line to her heart. The tattoo I'd imagined going up my arm and across my chest would have been a symbol of the space my best friend took up inside my heart.

But I knew a long line would have been impossible to hide, so I decided to get something smaller at the halfway point between my finger and my heart, on the inside of my upper arm. A little red arrow pointing in the right direction. Red for love; red for the blood beneath my skin. I'd kept it bandaged and dry for days, hidden beneath long sleeves.

And then my mother walked in on me in the bathroom. I'd taken my shirt off to check on the tattoo in the mirror, holding my arm up like a bodybuilder. She didn't even look at me, only at my reflection. She screamed like she'd seen a ghost.

It's not like I'd gotten a tattoo of Nathan's *name*. There was no need for that, since the word already felt written on my skin, into my heartbeat, coded into my DNA. But to Mom, a tattoo was a tattoo, no matter how small. As far as she was concerned, I'd branded myself.

Later, Mom assigned me chores to punish me for what I'd done. I said I didn't see why I should be disciplined for doing something to my own body, but she insisted, and my father kept quiet. So I checked the mail, took out the trash, washed the dishes. At the time, I thought Mom must have read some parenting magazine from the 1950s on how to discipline your rebellious teenage daughter.

Now, she tells me the school told her that assigning chores would help keep me from backsliding further. If I went too far into darkness, I wouldn't be eligible for the program anymore. It's not a hospital, Mom explains. Girls who are too sick can't go there.

I like the sound of that: *too far into darkness*. I wonder if it's in the brochure.

"They say he's the best." Mom brushes an invisible strand of hair away from her face. Mom always says we have the same hair—dark brown, straight, thick—but I've never believed it. My hair is always a mess. Mom never has a strand out of place.

"Who?"

"This teacher."

“No, I mean, who says he’s the best?”

She reaches for the brochure on the coffee table. “It says so.”

“Their own advertising materials say they’re the best?”

My mother clutches the brochure like it’ll protect her from my sarcasm. “The guidance counselor at your school suggested it,” she says, like that makes it official. “The food is all organic. You’ll be out of the city, breathing fresh air. You’ll have space to recover there.”

One of the men by the door tells me to pack a bag. He mispronounces my name.

“Moy-ra, not Moor-a,” I correct him. If my parents had ever met this man before, they’d have told him my name. Which means they’re about to send me off into the wilderness with a stranger, to a place they’ve never seen in real life.

I take a drink from the water bottle I keep close by at all times: hooked on to my backpack, my jeans, my wrist. I drink until the water pushes everything back down: the lump in my throat, any food working its way around my belly, the bile I taste in the back of my mouth.

Doesn’t my mother realize there’s not a shrink in the world (I know she called him a teacher, but let’s face it—places like this are run by therapists) who can make time go backward, who can turn me into the sweet little girl she always wanted me to be? The shrink would have to turn back time all the way to before my birth. He’d have to switch things around in utero.

Maybe that’s why they call them shrinks. Mom wants someone who’ll shrink me down to nothing.

When I was little, like a lot of only children, I asked my parents for a sibling. Mom said she couldn't give me one, and I was too young to understand what that meant. For a while, I walked around with my belly sticking out, like I thought I could create my baby brother or sister, having no idea how those things were really done. By the time I met Nathan in eighth grade, I'd given up on having a sibling. After we became friends, I didn't feel like I needed one anymore.

"Moy-ra," the man by the door repeats, mocking me by overenunciating. I check Mom's face for a sign of hesitation about sending me away with a man who can't say my name properly, but she looks as determined as ever. And Dad's still avoiding eye contact. Once Mom makes up her mind about something, there's no changing it. And she's clearly made up her mind about me.

What kind of parents *punish* their daughter because her best friend died?

"Just Moira will do, thanks," I say, standing. The man and his companion bend their legs into a crouch, as if bracing themselves for impact.

"There's nothing to be gained by trying to run." One of the men holds up his hands to block me, even though I'm at least six feet away from him. He bends and straightens his fingers.

"You told me to pack my bag." I point to the hallway on his right. "My bedroom is that way."

I can't help but think, as I walk past him, that he's a little bit disappointed. Surely his job is a lot more interesting when someone tries to make a break for it.

Maybe I *should* try to escape. But how? There are two bodyguards between me and the front door, and we live on the seventh floor of our apartment building. It's not like I can climb out the window and shinny down the drainpipe.

And if Nathan were here, he'd reasonably point out that I'll either be under my mother's thumb here or under some quack's thumb at this special school. I can hear his voice saying, *what difference does it make?*

So I start packing.

Mom cries when I leave. Again, I'm tempted to point out that she's the one sending me away. Dad hangs back. For a second, I think he's going to shake my hand, like I'm a business associate or something, but he ends up sort of patting my back.

Mom presses her wet face against my dry one in lieu of an actual hug or kiss. Physical affection doesn't come easily to her. Even when I was little, she didn't like me to sit on her lap or bury my face in her neck, the way other little girls did with their moms. Mom is nothing like Nathan's parents. They hugged me the first time they met me.

"You'll see," Mom says, pulling her face away. "When you get back, you'll feel better. You haven't been yourself since Nathan." She doesn't say *since Nathan died*. She never does. She's big on euphemisms. Like calling the literal fortress you're sending your daughter to a *school*. "When you get back, all of this will feel completely different. You'll see."

All of what, I think but do not say.

two

My two bodyguards won't tell me where the school is located, which is really stupid, because I could have easily seen it on the brochure if I'd bothered to look at it more closely. Plus, when we get to the airport, there are signs all over announcing the destination of our flight: Portland, Maine.

My companions wear black pants and tight black shirts, and they don't tell me their names. Both of them have their hair cropped short, and one puts on a charcoal-gray knit hat during the drive to the airport. They have to take their shoes off and empty their pockets at security, just like I do. One of them even gets a pat-down from a TSA agent. When he lifts his arms over his head, I see that he has a tattoo like a bracelet around his upper arm, much bigger than mine. I bet no one sent *him* away for getting it.

I've always thought Maine sounded like a nice place to visit: lobsters and pebbly sand between my toes, rocky jetties and

crashing waves. If we were a different kind of family, maybe we'd have taken a road trip up there one August. Maybe we'd have stayed at a bed-and-breakfast on the ocean, though the water would be too cold, even in August, to do anything but dip your toes in. I would've worn jean shorts with warm sweaters at night, the ocean breeze forcing me to bundle up, and I would have watched from my room as local teens built bonfires on the beach. If I were a different kind of girl, I might've gone down to the beach to meet them, but even in my imagination, I stayed inside.

Something tells me that the Maine to which I'm heading will bear little resemblance to the Maine I imagined.

While we wait to board our flight, I look up facts about Maine on my phone. Maine is the only state in the country with a one-syllable name. Nearly 90 percent of the nation's lobster supply comes from the waters off the coast of Maine. Maine's earliest inhabitants were descendants of Ice Age hunters. Ninety percent of the country's toothpicks are produced in Maine. The black-capped chickadee is the official state bird. Maine lies farther northeast than any other state. The average low temperature in Portland, Maine in January—today is January seventh—is thirteen degrees Fahrenheit.

On the plane, I let my hair fall across my face and drink as much water as the flight attendants will give me. Maybe my companions think my parents sent me away because I'm on drugs, that I'm trying to flush all the chemicals out of my system before I get to the Castle School, where they'll make me take a drug test. These men don't know about the lump that took up residence in my throat a few

months ago, back when the weather was still warm and the days were longer and the average low temperature in Portland, Maine was fifty-one degrees. I brought my water bottle from home, but they made me give it up when we went through security.

When we land in Portland, there's a sign with my name on it outside the baggage claim: *Moira Dreyfuss*, handwritten in black ink. The letters start out big but get small by the end because whoever made the sign ran out of space on the page. The person holding it is tall, but he looks young—not much older than I am. The boy with the sign wordlessly leads the way to a van, hefts my bag inside, and heads for the driver's seat. He has curly red hair that Nathan would say looks like a clown's wig. (It's not nearly that long or that bright, but Nathan would say it anyway to make me laugh.) On the side of the van is the name of the school and a picture of a castle. I can make out a few words beneath THE CASTLE SCHOOL that have been painted over: FOR TROUBLED GIRLS. I wonder when they shortened the name.

I blow on my hands, trying to keep warm. I have a wool hat on, but I don't think I remembered to pack gloves. My black-clad companions sign the papers the boy hands them and then nod in my direction. I wonder if other parents bring their daughters here themselves. Maybe my parents had to pay extra for a muscular escort.

"I'm Randy," the boy mumbles as I climb into the van. He's wearing a windbreaker rather than a real coat. He must be freezing, but maybe he's lived in Maine his whole life and he's used

to the cold. Or maybe his curls are better at holding in warmth than my hat is.

I look at the sky as Randy pulls away from the airport. The incoming planes are lined up brightly in the dark sky, waiting for their turns to land like a very organized constellation. I try to guess which of the planes will take my escorts away. Will they head straight to the home of some other troubled girl? Maybe she'll rush for the door, providing them with more excitement than I did.

I wonder if my parents will get some kind of report regarding my behavior on the flight so they'll think the muscled escorts were money well spent. No matter what the report says, my mother will assume I behaved badly.

Maybe I should be glad she sent me away. At least it'll be a break from seeing the disappointed look on her face every day. The thing is, Mom's right about one thing: I deserve to be punished. She's just wrong about why.

Randy slouches in the driver's seat as though he only just had a growth spurt and hasn't gotten used to being tall yet. After a few minutes, I ask, "How long have you had your license, anyway?" I add, "I only have my learner's permit." Nathan and I got our permits together, though as it turned out, we never had a chance to practice driving.

"My dad taught me to drive when I was thirteen."

"But how long have you had your *license*?" I ask again. I'm not normally particularly chatty, but I'm not normally being driven down a nearly empty highway by a total stranger.

Randy glances at me briefly. He has light brown, almost

amber-colored eyes. “Six months.” I think maybe he’s blushing, but it’s hard to tell in the dark. Randy returns his focus to the road, his hands in perfect ten-and-two position on the wheel like they teach in driver’s ed.

I’m worried that I’ve offended him, so I try for what I think will be an inoffensive question. “Is Randy short for something?”

“Randy,” he says. “Bertrand.”

“Your name is Randy Bertrand?”

“No.” He pushes his hair back from his forehead, revealing a patch of freckles just beneath his hairline, and squints at the road. “My name is Bertrand, but only my father calls me that.”

The father who taught him how to drive at thirteen.

Nathan’s father called him Nate sometimes.

“Why doesn’t your father call you Randy?”

“He likes the sound of Bertrand.”

I don’t know quite know where to put my hands, so I slide them beneath my thighs.

“My dad likes old-fashioned things,” Randy explains. “That’s why he likes the Castle so much.”

“Your father works at the school?”

Randy nods. “He runs the place.”

I remember that Mom said they called the campus the Kingdom, so I ask, “Does that make you a prince?” It’s supposed to be a joke, but Randy scowls.

“You’re not supposed to be sitting up here, you know.” He points to the rows of seats behind us. “You’re supposed to sit back there. And you’re not supposed to talk to me.”

I unclick my seat belt and climb into the back seat.

I don't know how long we drive. I don't have a watch, and my phone is in my backpack, which I left up front. It feels like it's been hours since I've seen anything but trees along the side of the road. Even longer since we passed another car.

Finally, some light appears in front of us. I lean to the side, looking around Randy's head. I can make out the silhouette of a turret. Randy stops in front of twisted metal gates lit on either side by old-fashioned-looking streetlamps. He hops out of the car, keys jangling in his hands. He leaves his door open, and cold air fills the van as he unlocks the gates and pulls them open.

Flickering gas lamps line the driveway, which curves around the Castle like a moat. It's not *huge*, as castles go. (Not that I'm an expert on the subject.) But it's unmistakably a castle: three stories high, gray stone walls, arched windows, a single round turret. A flickering light hangs over an enormous wooden front door. Randy puts the car into park and jumps out.

I try to open my door, but it's locked, and I can't unlock it. It must have one of those safety locks they use for little kids. And in the back seats of police cars. Randy walks around the van and opens the door for me.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"At the Castle."

"But where in *Maine* are we?"

Randy grins and holds out his arms, gesturing to the woods around us. "This is all part of the campus."

“But we’re still in the state of Maine, right?” I want the question to sound like a joke, no big deal, but my voice is shaking.

I’ve never felt air this cold. At home in Manhattan, the snow usually melts into slush almost as soon as it falls. Here, it looks frozen solid. And the stone walls rising up in front of me don’t exactly look warm and inviting.

“Come on,” Randy says. He sticks a key into the center of the enormous wooden door. It looks like it was built to accommodate horse-drawn carriages, rounded at the top, made of planks of wood so raw that I’m scared I’ll get a splinter just from standing close to it. I half expect it to lower vertically like a drawbridge. But much to my surprise, the door Randy opens is regular-sized, cut into the wood of the bigger door. Under other circumstances, it might strike me as funny that the door is locked. Judging by the darkness around us and the distance we drove from the airport, this place is so far in the middle of nowhere that there’s no need for locks and keys to keep people out. Or in.

Seriously, *where* have my parents sent me?

“Everyone else is asleep,” Randy explains, closing the door behind me. He flips a switch, and the front hallway lights up. There are narrow fluorescents overhead, like the ones in my school back home, and they make the stone walls and floor look alternately blue and green. “What time is it?” I ask. It’s dark enough outside that it could be the middle of the night. But I don’t think it’s been that many hours since I left New York. Because we’re so far northeast, the sunset here is even earlier than it is in Manhattan.

From behind Randy, a voice says, “What do you need to know the time for?”

I turn around. The man must have been standing behind the door when we came in.

“Moira,” he says, pronouncing my name correctly. “I’m Dr. Prince.”

I almost laugh—his name is Dr. Prince, and he owns a castle? No wonder Randy scowled when I asked if he was a prince. Dr. Prince continues, “I’ve heard so much about you from your mother.”

“I haven’t heard anything about you,” I say, “and I would like to know the time. It helps me, you know, get myself oriented.”

“Whatever oriented you before you arrived clearly hasn’t been working. Maybe you should try being disoriented for a change.” Dr. Prince chuckles, but the laughter doesn’t reach his eyes. He’s wearing a tweed jacket over a vest and a flannel shirt, like he’s a college professor rather than a therapist. Maybe he believes he can trick the girls here into forgetting that this is an institution for troubled teens if he dresses like it’s a regular boarding school.

Then again, I think, shivering in the cold of the front hall, maybe that’s just how he keeps warm.

“It must be late,” I try. “Randy said everyone was asleep.”

Dr. Prince nods. “Exactly. Here at the Castle, you do not need to know the time.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need to know only when it is time to sleep and time to wake. Time to eat and time to work.”

“How will I know when those times come and go?”

The doctor smiles another smile that doesn't reach his eyes. “I will tell you.” I'm not sure I've ever heard anyone speak with so few contractions.

After a beat, he adds, “I think I will turn in. Bertrand, show our new guest to her room, will you?”

If there was any doubt in my mind that this was Randy's father, it disappears when he says his son's name, even though there's no resemblance between them. This man has straight black hair and light blue eyes. His skin is white and freckle-free.

I can't believe my parents shipped me off to the middle of nowhere with this weirdo in charge.

Actually, that's not true. That part is easy to believe.

Mom's probably glad to be rid of me.