Fog.

Thick, heavy clouds clung to Emma’s head as she cracked her eyes open the next morning. She tried to lift her head, but it dropped right back onto the pillow like it weighed fifty pounds.

*What… happened?*

Emma tried to piece together the fragments of last night, but everything blurred like a dream—one big, *strange*, shimmery dream.

If not for the crackling smell of bacon wafting under her door, Emma might’ve stayed there all day, motionless beneath her covers. But that smell—*that glorious smell*—could wake Sleeping Beauty without the prince.

With more effort than should’ve been humanly required, Emma rolled onto her side and pushed herself upright. Her bedroom tilted and swayed.

*Seriously… what the heck happened after*—

A flash hit her—Miss Everdeen’s depthless eyes staring straight into her, dark and endless, like she was standing right there in the room.

Emma shook her head hard until her vision steadied. The image vanished. Just her bedroom door again.

She lifted her fingertips to her cheek—cold, as if they’d been brushed with ice.

*Food,* she thought. *I need food.*

Like a penguin, Emma shuffled her way to the kitchen, possibly bumping into the wall once or twice.

“Well, well, well… look who the cat dragged in. I thought you might never wake.”

Emma didn’t have it in her to retort. She just pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and plopped into it.

“Woah,” her dad said, quirking his head as he unloaded sizzling bacon from the pan onto a plate piled with fluffy eggs. “No snarky response?”

Emma pinned him with a look as he handed her the plate, then shoveled food into her mouth like she hadn’t eaten in three days.

“Late night?” her dad joked, leaning against the counter with his arms crossed.

Emma’s eyes widened—but only for a second before she masked it with a dramatic sigh. “Stayed up reading later than I should have. Still shaking off the cobwebs.”

Dad narrowed his eyes. “Reading, huh?”

“Uh-huh.”

She could feel his gaze still on her. Tired of people staring through her lately, she shot him a look. He didn’t back down.

“You’re a terrible liar, you know that?”

Emma huffed. “Am not.”

Dad tilted his head. “ ‘Am not’ as in you’re not lying, or ‘am not’ as in you’re not a terrible liar?”

Emma pressed her lips together while he smiled.

“Both.”

“Right… your eyebrow twitches when you’re fibbing, you know.” He chuckled, turning back to clean the kitchen. “Just like your mother,” he murmured.

The sound seemed to vanish from the room. Emma stilled, fork halfway to her mouth. Her dad stood still for a heartbeat too long, then busied himself with the pan on the stove as time resumed.

“So, uh… any plans for the day?” Dad asked, clearing his throat like he could cough the moment away.

Emma’s fork hovered over her plate—the words sitting on the tip of her tongue.

*I could take the pain away…*

Emma pushed her plate aside, suddenly not hungry.

“I don’t know, stuff,” she said.

“Stuff,” her dad emphasized. “Sounds exciting.”

“Very.” Emma drummed her fingers against the table.

Her dad started humming—the tune he always fell back on whenever he was about to touch a topic he didn’t want to. Emma braced herself.

“Oh, I know. Why don’t you reach out to that girl you met at the library. What was her name again?”

“Gracie—” Emma started, rolling her eyes, but the memory of Gracie practically dragging her home last night flashed through her mind, followed by a sharp pang of embarrassment.

She cleared her throat and pushed her chair back.

“It was just a suggestion,” her dad said as Emma started down the hall. “It’s okay to have friends, you know,” he called after her.

Emma didn’t turn around. “Yeah, until you move us to the next town,” she muttered, not as quietly as she meant to.

The door shut. The lock clicked.

Emma threw herself onto her bed.

Food helped, but a thin fog still clung to her mind. Maybe she’d just lie there all day, let the hours slip by—

A blue glimmer caught the corner of her eye.

Her heart jumped, then settled when she saw it was only her phone glowing on the nightstand.

Emma groaned. *I need help.*

Relieved, she reached for it. Her face softened as she read the screen.

Gracie: two missed calls. Nine new messages.

*Just dropped u off. Idk what Everdeen did, but u were out of it girl! So much to talk about. Can’t believe that all actually happened… text me as soon as u get up in the mornin!*

*Just got home and almost knocked over a glass on the counter! Hah. That would have been a way to end the night.*

*Idk about u but I can’t sleep. What was that last night??? Craziness right??? Just. Epic. I’m still reeling…*

*Just had a thought… we should be ghost hunters, right? I mean, if the universe was trying to tell us something, it’s that, am I right?*

*OMG! I didn’t even tell you about what I found! Well, I tried to… but like I said, Out. Of. It! Seriously, tomorrow, text me IMMEDIATELY.*

*GM Crawler—you awake yet??*

*GIRL! You breathin?*

*OMG, wait seriously, are u ok? Please text me…*

*I swear, if you died—I’m gonna get Miss Everdeen to haunt you for the rest of your life. TEXT MEEEE.*

A laugh almost slipped out of her. *Nine?*

Scrolling through them one by one, her lips tugged higher with each message—half amusement, half disbelief.

Her chest ached and fluttered all at once, a strange, dizzy feeling she hadn’t let herself feel in a long time. She wanted to answer. She wanted to talk. She wanted—

The phone buzzed in her hand.

Gracie again.

Emma’s heart jumped, her fingers hesitating over the screen. For a second, she almost let it go to voicemail again.

That would be safer.

Instead, she swiped and brought it to her ear.

“...Hello?” she said softly.

“EMMA!” Gracie’s voice exploded through the receiver. “Oh my *God,* you’re alive! Do you even know how close I was to calling the *police?!*”

A laugh escaped Emma’s lips. “Sorry—I… it’s been a morning, to say the least.”

“Uh, yeah! I bet. What even happened after I left? When I came back, you looked as pale as a ghost—pun totally intended. And Miss Everdeen was *holding your face?* What was that about? Oh my god, and the ghost children? Are you serious? There were like, what, ten of them? Who *were* they? Where did they come from? You saw them, right? I wasn’t just imagining that?”

Gracie’s words tumbled faster and faster, tripping over each other until Emma couldn’t hold it back—she laughed again. “Breathe.”

Gracie snorted and took a dramatic inhale, then exhale. “Sorry. I’ve been *dying* to talk about all this—no pun intended. It was… that was…”

“Unreal?”

“Yes! Unreal. Unimaginable. Insane. *Otherworldly.*” Gracie sighed, her voice drifting like she was replaying it all in her head.

Emma cleared her throat. “So… you said you found something?”

“Oh my god! Yes! How did I *not* start with that? It’s… well, it’s a jar. But not? It’s a jar… with *stuff* inside.”

“Stuff?” Emma echoed.

“Yeah. Stuff. Ghost stuff, I think.”

“Ghost stuff?”

“Well… I *think.*”

“Where did you find it?”

“Upstairs. In a room. *Behind a freaking painting!*”

“What?!”

“I know, right?!”

“That’s—DAD! Get out!” A pillow went flying from Emma’s hand, smacking her dad square in the face.

He raised his hands in surrender. “Goodness gracious, child! I just wanted to let you know I’m leaving for work.”

Emma glared and pointed toward the door.

“Who’s on the phone?” he asked with a smirk.

Another pillow soared through the air. The door shut quickly behind him.

Emma could hear Gracie laughing on the other end.

“Sorry about that,” Emma muttered.

“Not a problem,” Gracie said, still giggling.

“So—the jar,” Emma whispered. “What does it look like?”

“It looks like a regular jar on the outside, but inside… it’s all blue and fuzzy and I don’t know—it’s hard to explain. It’d be easier just to *show you.*”

“Show me? You *took* it?”

“Heck yes I did! I was worried Everdeen would notice, but you kept your word about keeping her busy.”

*You don’t know the half of it,* Emma thought, staring off into space.

“So… can you meet up? Like, now?”

“Now?” Emma swallowed. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, I can meet.”

“Phew. Thank goodness. I think I might have exploded if I had to dwell on this any longer by myself.”

“Yeah,” Emma breathed. “I know the feeling.”

“Can we meet at your place? My parents are like vultures—they’ll be swarming every five minutes.”

“My place…” Emma hesitated.

“Yeah, I mean—if that’s cool?”

“Uh, no—I mean, yeah. That’s cool.”

“Sweet! Say fifteen minutes?”

“That… works.”

“Great! See you soon!”

“See you soon…”

Emma ended the call and looked around at the chaos that was her room—clothes on the floor, an unmade bed, snack wrappers on her desk.

“Fifteen minutes,” she said to herself, rubbing her face. “Oh, joy.”

Making like a tornado, Emma spun around her room—throwing things into closets, shoving piles under the bed, and cramming who-knows-what into drawers. She swept the clutter off her desk with one arm, took a step back, and decided it was good enough*.*

A hair tie binding her hair, clothes that weren’t pajamas, and a deep breath.

Then—the doorbell rang.

She didn’t know what would’ve made her more nervous—the idea of paying Miss Everdeen another visit… or answering the door for Gracie.

Emma shook her head. There was nothing to fret about. It was just the first time she’d ever had anyone over to her house… well, *ever.*

Refusing to let herself overthink it—or leave Gracie waiting on the porch—Emma took a steadying breath, walked to the door, wrapped her hand around the handle—and opened it.

It took all of one second for Gracie to pounce through the opening like a lion and wrap Emma up in a hug. Before Emma could even register what was happening, Gracie released her—but keeping hold of her hands—and gave Emma a once-over like she was checking for ticks.

“Okay, good. Good, good, good,” Gracie muttered.

“Can I ask what’s good?” Emma asked, brow raised.

Making herself right at home, Gracie dropped Emma’s hands and started inspecting the living room. “On my way over here, I had this thought that maybe you—you know—ended up like Abby and the rest of them.” She turned with a bright smile. “But you seem to be the same reserved loner girl I know you for.”

Never in Emma’s life did she think *reserved loner girl* could sound cool—but somehow, Gracie made it feel like a badge of honor.

“Here and present,” Emma said, her brows knitting.

Gracie snorted, then gave the room another sweeping glance. Her hands tightened around the straps of her backpack as she mouthed, “Parents home?”

Emma shook her head. “Dad just left for work.”

“Mom?”

For a moment, Emma’s eyes flicked to the floor before she forced herself to look back at Gracie.  
“Just us.”

Gracie rubbed her hands together. “Show me to your room then, crawler. We have much to discuss.”

Emma smiled. “This way, *thunder legs*.”

Gracie tilted her head, and for a split second, Emma thought her heart might stop. *Why did you say that?*

“Thunder legs?” Gracie repeated.

*Oh boy. Why did I say that? Thunder legs? Really?*

“Uh, I—” Emma started.

“I love it!” Gracie interrupted. “Can you call me that in front of the rest of the volley-girls on Monday? We need to make that one stick.”

“Uh… yeah. Of course. I can do that.”

“Perfection.” Gracie winked again, mock dramatic, and strode ahead toward Emma’s room.

*Well. Alright then.*

Emma followed close behind as Gracie wandered into her room, watching her take it all in.

Gracie’s eyes darted from shelf to desk to window sill, her fingers brushing over random trinkets and keepsakes—a chipped snow globe from Maine, a seashell from North Carolina, a keychain from a diner back in Texas that probably didn’t exist anymore, and a little green lizard thing Emma couldn’t even remember where or when she’d gotten it.

“Are these all from the different places you’ve lived?” Gracie asked.

Emma nodded.

“Dang, girl. You really have moved around a lot.” Gracie lifted a small wooden carving, inspecting it before setting it carefully back down.

Emma shrugged. “Yeah. My dad says it *‘builds character.’”* She added air quotes for emphasis.

“Mm.” Gracie smirked. “Well, I think it builds a wicked cool collection of keepsakes.”

Emma smiled, “Guess that’s one way to look at it.”

Without hesitation, Gracie dropped onto Emma’s bed like she’d done it a hundred times before. “All right, crawler,” she said, bouncing once on the mattress. “Out with it. Tell me what the heck happened with ghost lady. Tell. Me. Everything.”

Emma sat on the edge of her desk chair, fiddling with a smooth river stone she grabbed not to far from here, “I don’t know if there is too much to tell, unfortunately. I—I don’t remember it all. Bits and pieces.”

*Liar.*

Gracie’s brow knitted with concern, “That’s ok—tell me what you can remember.”

“She—” Emma breathed. “Everdeen started reading me a story… about myself.”

Gracie tilted her head. “Wait—what? What do you mean?”

“She sat me down on the rug in front of the chair. All the other little ghost children appeared, and she read me a book. A picture book. But the story—and the characters—were about *me*.”

Gracie leaned so far forward, Emma thought she might fall off the bed. “You’re joking?”

Emma shook her head. “I wish I was.”

“How is that possible?”

“No idea.”

“What did it say? What parts of your life did it show you?”

A cartoon drawing of her mom’s car wrapped around that pole flashed in her mind.

Emma rubbed at the back of her neck. “Just about moving a lot, and… whatnot. That’s where it starts to get fuzzy.”

Gracie frowned, thinking. “And you’ve never told Everdeen any of that before?”

Emma let out a dry laugh. “Definitely not.”

“That’s insane!”

“Tell me about it.”

“So not only are we dealing with a ghost—but a ghost that can somehow make picture books about people, with information they’ve never told her?”

“That would appear to be the case.”

“What happened after that? After Everdeen finished reading *your* story?”

“That’s when she… that’s when she grabbed me.” Emma’s gaze went distant. “She cupped my face. Her hands—they were so cold. And her eyes… they—”

The room blurred.

“They were what?” Gracie’s voice sounded far away.

“Hypnotic. Like they were pulling me in. It was like her voice was in my head, repeating over and over and—”

Icy fingers brushed Emma’s cheeks. She flinched, gasping.

“Emma?”

She blinked, and suddenly Gracie was standing beside her in the middle of the room. Emma hadn’t even noticed she was crying—again.

“Sorry,” she whispered, swiping at her face.

“You don’t have to apologize.” Gracie’s voice was soft. “We can stop talking about it if you want.”

Emma looked up, and in Gracie’s eyes she found something she hadn’t expected—comfort.

Understanding.

Dare she say, a friend.

Emma shook her head, exhaling. “No… no, I’m okay. She—uh—she said she could take the pain away. All the pain.”

Her eyes burned again, but she blinked it back. Gracie noticed—Emma knew she did—but somehow, it didn’t make her feel embarrassed the way it normally would. Apparently traumatic ghost encounters rewired your definition of awkward.

Gracie’s lips pressed into a thoughtful line. She gave Emma’s hand a squeeze. “I bet that was tempting.”

“It was,” Emma admitted quietly.

Gracie fiddled with her fingers, eyes soft. “You know… I know we don’t know each other all that well, but if you ever need someone to, you know—listen or whatever, I’ve got some pretty good ears.”

And there went those burning eyes again. Emma was having a hard time making her throat work as she said, weakly, “I appreciate that.”

Silence settled between them for a heartbeat—then Gracie’s face split into a mischievous grin. “So… wanna see the weird ghost thing I stole?” she asked, eyebrows dancing.

Emma laughed, wiping away the last of her tears. “Do I.”

Gracie hopped up and grabbed her backpack from the bed, plopping it between them. She unzipped it with exaggerated drama, locking eyes with Emma as she slowly drew out a single glass jar.

From the outside, it looked like any other ordinary jar. A gold twist-top lid, clear glass—but inside… it shimmered. A pale blue haze drifted and curled within, like smoke caught underwater.

“I—what—that…”

“Exactly,” Gracie said, not taking her eyes off the jar for a second.

“What is that?” Emma asked, more to herself, leaning in close enough for her nose to brush the glass.

“No idea.” Gracie shook her head. “I stared at it for way longer than I care to admit last night, and all I can conclude is: one, it’s definitely some kind of ghost-juju thing, and two, it *never* stops moving.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

As if in answer, the smoky blue haze shuddered, rattling the entire jar. Emma jerked backward.

“Oh, and it does that sometimes,” Gracie said with a grin.

When Emma was certain the jar wouldn’t lunge at her again, she leaned back in, eyes wide on the swirling haze.

“And you said there were more of these?”

“*Hundreds*,” Gracie emphasized, stealing Emma’s attention. “Most of the upstairs is just dusty old junk and locked doors. If that rug hadn’t been jutting out, I never would’ve found the room behind the picture. Who knows what other hidden rooms are back there—or what’s in them.”

A chill ran up Emma’s arms. The smoky blue haze had twisted itself into a small, trembling ball.

“I think it knows we’re talking about it,” Emma whispered.

For reasons she couldn’t explain, Emma leaned closer and pressed her ear to the jar—only to yank it away seconds later.

Gracie’s breath hitched. “What? What happened?”

“I—I thought I heard… voices,” Emma said, squinting at the glass.

“Voices?!” Gracie slapped her ear against the jar and listened. After a moment she pulled back. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Have you tried opening it?”

“Opening it?” Gracie blinked. “Are you *crazy*? I don’t know much about ghost stuff, but opening a random jar of ghost-juju has got to be rule number one on the ‘do not do’ list.”

“How else are we going to find out what it is, or what it does though? What if it’s connected to Abby and Lincoln and all the other kids acting wonky at school?”

“Or, what if it’s some evil ghost spirit that wants to feast on our brains and take control of our bodies?”

Emma weighed the options and smiled. “It’d be a story to tell the grandkids.”

Gracie looked too the ceiling, “I’ll give you that.”

Emma tapped on her chin, “What if we opened it just a little bit? Just… loosen the lid?”

“And what do you think that would do?”

“Maybe it could give us a smell to go off of. Or maybe we could hear those voices I heard a bit louder. Little extra something to work with. Science, you know?”

Gracie gave Emma a flat stare. “That’s not science. That’s how people die in movies.”

Emma sighed. “Then it’s a good thing this isn’t a movie.”

For a long second, neither of them moved. The air felt heavier somehow—thick, like it was waiting. The haze inside the jar stretched thin, pressing against the glass.

Gracie rubbed her temples, eyes shut. “Okay… maybe we open it a little. But if we get cursed or possessed or eaten by the blue fog, I’m haunting you for the rest of eternity. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Gracie stuck out her pinky finger. Emma took it in her own.

“So… who’s going to open it?” Emma asked.

“It was your idea, so I think you should do the honors.” Gracie handed Emma the jar.

“Fair enough.” Emma took the outstretched jar. “Didn’t really think that one all the way through, did I?”

“Nope.” Gracie grinned.

Emma took in a deep breath. Inch, by inch, she raise her hand until her palm rested on the lid. At first she hesitated—*was this really the best idea?*—but the haze seemed to pulse, almost like it was asking her to open it.

Slowly, she began twisting.

Gracie sucked in a breath. “Wait—”

But too late.

Emma twisted the top. Just a crack.

A faint hiss escaped, followed by a low hum that seemed to crawl through the air. The haze inside the jar brightened—then pulsed harder, once, twice—

Then the sound hit.

A screech, sharp and metallic, like a thousand nails dragged across glass. Emma and Gracie screamed, clutching their ears.

The jar dropped to the bed, shaking violently before rolling off the edge. Gracie lunged, one hand flying out to catch it—

But not in time.

It shattered against the floor.

Shards of glass rained across the room, and the blue light exploded upward, twisting through the air like liquid fire.

“Gracie—!” Emma shouted, but before she could move, the light split—one stream darting toward each of them. It hit Emma square in the chest, and the world tilted.

Her vision blurred. The room spun. Somewhere far away, she heard Gracie’s voice, thin and fading—

Then everything went dark.